



NERVOUSNESS IN BERLIN
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The Wissenschaftskolleg and the city of Berlin were fitting locations from which to complete a book on nervousness and colonizing processes. Elias, ever quick, came straight to the point on day two: “We are living in a boarding school.” Julie giggled. So, too, did most

of us gathered for early morning introductory German lessons in the first weeks of October. Giggling and nervousness went together with kindness, wonder, and more meals in those first few weeks and months. All five elements were still present, it seems to me, in deep July.

“Berlin is a skeleton which aches in the cold.” These are some of Christopher Isherwood’s words from 1932 or 1933. His *Goodbye to Berlin* was one of a dozen or so books that formed a small, special library on the high shelf in the kitchen of my apartment in the old part of Villa Walther. I read these books intermittently, passages here, passages there. Over the months, Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood*, Joseph Roth’s *What I Saw*, Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, some Brecht, and *A Woman in Berlin* found their way up and back down from that shelf. I would peek in them once again, especially after another trip with a visiting friend to Gleis 17 or a long bike ride or another wander beyond Max Klein’s 1891 sphinx sculptures guarding the Bismarckbrücke and out along the gorgeous wooded paths beside the Herthasee. “Oh, what kind of Jewish life in Berlin was that particular one?” I came to ask myself. (And how can it be, I wonder now, that we did not have a full seminar before those sphinxes wondering about those hybrid icons and their maker, once a humble watchmaker who became a celebrated sculptor of Berlin public art in and outside of the new villa colony, much of it celebrating Bismarck, including the sphinxes on the bridge carrying his name and establishing the villa colony in 1891?)

By June, as the year seemed to slip away too quickly, I went walking and jogging along those same gorgeous paths along the water beyond the sphinxes almost every day. I discovered no place more beautiful in all of Berlin, and it became my favorite – and also closest – place to walk. I would feel like I had entered the nineteenth century as I looked out on the water and the beautiful, natural fencing with gorgeous Grunewald homes across the way, until I would reach the back side of the Jewish school, distinctly indicated with its forbidding security barrier. Isherwood’s haunting words would combine in my mind’s eye with the stark, camp-like feel of that 21st-century metal fence, tightly enclosing around many of Berlin’s Jewish schoolchildren today, setting me to wonder – a time too many, I am afraid – about who had used these dense crannies of woods and foliage to hide or huddle when others were waiting or boarding on Gleis 17.

I did none of the major Holocaust sites during my ten months in Berlin. The Bismarckbrücke and the Jewish school security fence were my chronological bookends. And Gleis 17, the many *Stolpersteine* spotted in Grunewald and Mitte, many a long conversation over Wiko meals, the extraordinary permanent exhibit on art produced in Berlin,

1880–1980, at the Berlinische Galerie, and the irony of Max Stein’s still proudly guarding sphinxes, together produced enough ironic historical reminders to keep me going, exploring less monumental – and I imagine less hackneyed – traces of death, genocide, and camps in this sprawling, mischievous, delightful, and eerie city.

I also did quite a bit of quite serious work during my ten months in Berlin, including a huge amount of new reading and final revisions for *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies, and Reverie in Colonial Congo*, which Duke will bring out in late 2012 or early 2013. The book marries colonial biopolitics with the securitization of power and health, and it juxtaposes these forms of state power with feisty public healing by African colonial subjects. The Belgian colonial state was born from nervousness; and Congo became a nervous state. The state, its persons, and its technologies had two faces or moods important for this history – one nervous and full of dread, one more humanitarian and moved by pity. Five long moments when state power and vernacular healing came to loggerheads are elaborated; they begin in a time of atrocious violence in the 1900s and close with widespread female sterility in the 1950s. By 1953, the state’s humanitarian “face” was constructing an infertility clinic enclosure in Equateur, located not at all far from a special penal camp built to “concentrate” therapeutic, religious rebels, and founded by the state’s nervous “face” in 1939. There are no heroes or villains in this history. Rather, the event and structure of violence, and its duration and reproduction across generations, through bodies, imaginations, and intellects, is my subject. This historical process entailed forms of somatization across time and generations, mediated through biomedical research and African public healing.

Without the opportunity to discuss this book with my research group and to present some of its main lines and spilling stories before quizzical Wiko colleagues (as well as before Berlin’s “History of Emotions” Max Planck Fellows and colleagues at Leipzig’s African Studies program), I would not have as succinctly clinched some of its main arguments about nervousness, reproductive disruption, and somatization during and following the iconic imperial violence that made King Leopold’s Congo a “heart of darkness”. Moreover, my documentary trails on nervousness in Germany and Europe, and on public healing in Africa, grew much thicker during the year as colleagues fed me new ideas and citations.

Working in a focus group?? Ours was superb for its flexibility, irregularity, and fragilities. We adopted some new people as we went along and shed some others. Mostly, we met when we liked, often for lunch, and especially when a visitor was around, and other-

wise worked much more one-on-one and in pairs or trios, rather than as a whole. I especially learned from Steve's visiting students, from reading Julie's wonderful new book in manuscript, and from the special conference that Julie and Steve organized with all of us and some of Africa's clinicians. I shall forever be grateful for being able to invite Patricia Hayes for a two-week residency in our midst, and for being so warmly encouraged and graciously assisted to organize an African history workshop for doctoral students with Humboldt's Andreas Eckert, with all of Wiko's distinguished Africa Fellows involved as discussants.

A year at the Wissenschaftskolleg was also grand for how often and how deeply it allowed me to escape from the "Africa box". Conversations with Karl Schlögel, Albrecht Koschorke, Kamran Ali, Petra Gehring, Thomas Pavel, Tanja Petrović, and Yojada Verrips spilled into many others over meals and in seminars, and all had me thinking about narrative, history, and writing in new kinds of ways. I came to realize more clearly than ever before how I clutch fascinating, awkward, or unseemly bits and then seek to *suture* them in somewhere, and not at all seamlessly so. It was during my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg that I came to realize how strongly surgical (and film) metaphors for suturing may be productive for me, and my *Nervous State* book in particular. After all, a surgeon's seam-like joints and stitches tackle wounds and enable scars. And my history of Congo's Equateur must grapple, more than most African histories and colonial medical histories, with injuries and disfigurement.

A Nervous State is about war, violence, and suffering, states of exception and bare life, and humanitarianism and its medical technologies and effects. While in Berlin, I also launched new research on PTSD (Posttraumatic Stress Disorder) expertise and therapeutic technologies in post-genocide Rwanda and the bordering provinces of Congo, a region enmeshed in violence, war, and war-related rape since 1996. This new project will begin by collecting life and work histories with mental health care specialists, from experts in Geneva, Germany, and North America who began developing new low-cost trauma therapies for war and rape victims during the war in Bosnia; to those who have researched the efficacy of such therapies in Congo and other locations; to the Swahili-speaking counselors who do the frontline work with patients in Congo's rape hospitals, surely modifying and tailoring as they go. During preliminary field research in this transnational region in September 2010, just before I arrived in Berlin, I began to document how a post-1994 "trauma sector" coincides with a new "heritage sector" in this transnational region. The two sectors encompass genocide memorial sites in Rwanda, two rape hospitals in the

Kivus, and other projects in witnessing, memorialization, and mental health care, including trauma care methods and tangibles emerging from them (such as autobiographical testimonial books produced by therapists using “Narrative Exposure Therapy”, developed in Constance, Germany). I spent my first six weeks at the Wissenschaftskolleg producing a background paper on this new research for Richard Rottenburg and Vinh-Kim Nguyen’s Dahlem Conference on experimentality in Africa in March. I also thought these same themes through Europe and Berlin, and through my small library of books gathered on that same high kitchen shelf. *A Woman in Berlin* kept tugging at me, and I have not set it down for good yet.

My year *in Berlin* was about history, the contemporary, the arts, and the material traces of violence in the past. Its biggest experiment was to get me back on a bicycle as a way to take in a place and study, but mostly enjoy, its many worlds. My year *at the Wissenschaftskolleg* was about friendships developing among about 150 persons between four buildings in a tiny corner of Grunewald. This part of my year felt like a human experiment of an unusual order from day one. Clearly the staff had seen similar experiments played out many times before, and enjoyed watching and steering our particular brew of chemistry and idiosyncrasies.

By the time some serious snow had arrived, most of us had relaxed into the basic ground rules of this posh residential institute for adult scholars, novelists, memoirists, and contemporary composers. Somewhere along the way, we had tacitly declared and accepted our own guidelines for managing this unusual assemblage of alternative kinships, embracing all kinds of families, couples, children, and needs, and always five meals and one seminar a week. Never written down or explicitly declared, these rules were about kindness, generosity, gratitude, and humor. They were about honoring the staff and each other, and making our lives and moments in common as stimulating – and fun – as possible, while making plenty of room for strangeness, eccentricity, and awkwardness, with affection and teasing.

Never have I had an experience that combined such a deepening intellectual intensity with human affection embracing so many individuals, families, and their material and psychic stuff. From children to cooks, with philosophers and biologists, nightmares and phobia, dogs and bicycles, Christmas cookies and a wry gift of an Oriental carpet, with Vikram chanting, Toshio inviting, Julie and Behrooz tittering, Elias scoffing, the German girls adoring, and Vera watching and listening, it was a complex medley of ages, personalities, and simple pleasures found in and through repetition. Monday lunch, Tuesday

seminar, Wednesday salad, Thursday dinner, Friday lunch, another weekend, while the seasons carried us along. The Fellows and staff grew more relaxed, the giggling never stopped, and at least some children had grown by leaps and bounds. As far as I know, we had not a single nervous breakdown. But even if we did, it is no matter. Our year worked so well because, when all was said and done, by the end of the year as we said thank you and goodbye to each other, there was not only a raucous dance party with unexpected bodies on the floor. There was much tender love in the room and out in the garden beyond.

What enabled this human experiment? Why did we not falter? The exceptional graciousness of a few surely set the tone and made a strong mark. We know their names, just as we know who cooked the saffron rice that had Herr Nettelbeck going back for seconds during our fellows-cook-for-the-staff luncheon. But the giggling played no mean role. Sometimes nervous, sometimes infectious, laughter was one of the repetitions. Whether at mealtime or seminar time, during outings, receptions, or impromptu encounters on the M19, the laughter kept us gentle – and gently nervous – in ways salutary for all. Since laughter is also a subject in my histories, let me suggest the following: a sense of being at risk of ridicule may linger in a situation where laughter is so intense, fond, and everyday, deployed to include and embrace, while still unsettling and keeping alert. At least, I never stopped being a shade nervous, even after I had mastered all the names, seminar question styles, table manners quite particular to Wiko seating configurations and the day of the week, and the observational and interrogative modalities of the staff. The unexpected was always about to happen, and it did.

My favorite evening during my year in Berlin was a cold, wintry night at the Sophien-säle, where Dieter and I had arrived to discover that there were no more tickets to be had for one of the last events in their contemporary dance festival. And then as we wondered what to do next, we turned around and *whom* did we spot? Also disappointed, the ever elegant Ilma was standing there, just steps away from her home. Undeterred by the snow falling outside, she said: “Come Nancy, come Dieter, why don’t you let me show you some of *my* Mitte?” And for the next hour and a bit, she took us in hand and gave us an intimate tour of her haunts and Mitte’s historical haunts in her little neighborhood. From favorite courtyards to the synagogue, from public art works to searing memory pieces speaking to history, she shared with us, so it seemed, little bits of her Berlin diary project, forming paragraphs around her, with these concrete destinations, and through her – our – long, special year in Berlin.

When August approached, after packing my little kitchen bookshelf of Berlin memoirs into cardboard crates, I asked Ilma for one more go with her around her Mitte. I had had her nocturnal winter tour. Before we parted, I wanted her spring daytime tour. So the afternoon before we went to Wolfgang's party for live piano music, Ilma took me to her favorite galleries and shops, back to her favorite courtyards and the most searing work of public memory art. We ate cake and shared stories of lives long lost and others still in the making, before joining all the others for a beautiful party. There is so much to hold dear from these memories about friendship and learning and sharing in a magical city with a history as dark as they come.

May the dear Wissenschaftskolleg and its marvelously perceptive rectors, administrators, intermediaries, staff members, Fellows, and emeriti of all sorts keep all of their traditions of fellowship, care, and reflexive scrutiny going for centuries to come. I thank you, one and all.

P.S. for those who come after us, here is Nancy's unsolicited list of pointers: Be sure to do the full Grunewald villa walking tour early: it is fascinating; and then slowly across the months, bike all the streets, near and farther afield from the Wiko. Forget about a renting a heavy bicycle from the big tourist shop. My only regret is that I did not buy my very own earlier. Head over to Peaks, the small bike shop very close to the M19 stop on Westfälische and buy yourself a light, fast Stephens bicycle (it is all they sell), and it will come equipped with everything you need and more. And, then use the beautiful Paulsborner Straße to get out of the Grunewald and over to Westfälische, Olivaer Platz, and beyond. You will easily sell your Stephens at a flea market at the year's end (if you do not ship it home), and it will enable fast, light cruising everywhere, including deep within the gorgeous Grunewald, including right along the lake, where you can swim or stop for a meal in the charming, old, two-story boat on the shore. Search for events by location as much as anything else, and do not miss taking in something at Radialsystem, the Konzerthaus, and Sophiensäle. Finally, go to the amazing Modulor store at Moritzplatz when your kids need art supplies or because you need some spiffy new office stuff with which to think and write, and consider purchasing one of the gigantic, wall-size, aerial photographic maps of Berlin.