

BOOK REVIEWS

STOETZER, BETTINA. *Ruderal City: Ecologies of Migration, Race, and Urban Nature in Berlin*. Duke University Press Books. 2022. 243 p. Part of the book series, *Experimental Futures: Technological Lives, Scientific Arts, Anthropological Voices*, edited by Michael M. J. Fischer and Joseph Dumit. ISBN 10: 1478018607 (softcover) ISBN 13: 9781478018605 (hardcover).

‘Berlin is poor but sexy’. This quip—or marketing slogan—is attributed to the city’s former mayor Klaus Wowereit, on page 114 of *Ruderal City*. Although it comes across as tangential to Stoetzer’s argument, the idea that something exciting or at least lively can emerge from something severely disturbed lies at the heart of this book. Yet, whilst even those with a passing familiarity with Berlin might indeed endorse this view, Stoetzer’s analysis points above all to what that cheerfulness hides: a range of interrelated, well-researched but unevenly experienced contemporary ills exceptionally noticeable in Berlin. In particular, the book examines the legacies of racism and colonial extractivism upon which European life is still based, using them to develop the idea of urban life as ruderal. She deploys this ecological term—that is, a ruderal plant is one that grows and even thrives in poor soil and disturbed landscapes—to contribute to the swelling literature on social–material relations and multispecies theorising. Regardless of how a reader might approach this topic, this book is well-researched, ethnographically rich, and conceptually ambitious.

Organised under sections on rubble, gardens, parks, and forests, the book offers ample examples of how racial inequality is reproduced through mundane practices and unremarkable environments. In doing so, it puts the landlocked city of Berlin and its

fascinating political history into a far larger natural historical context of migrating people and plants. Thus, although this is above all a book about Berlin, it is also about how violence as well as happenstance are embedded within urban historical processes that throw people, flora, wider ecologies, and topographical features together. Furthermore, the book shows that for all that there is much thrown-togetherness, complexity, and contingency in anything urban, there are important aspects of this urban-but-still-natural world that can be rather precisely and insightfully studied. Berlin is well endowed with opportunities to pursue this kind of scholarship. Long constructed as a city at the centre of world history, Berlin is arguably also a city of numerous new beginnings as well as hugely violent interludes. Perhaps most significantly for this book, the city is marked by and somehow explicitly preoccupied with displacements and efforts to make sense of and cope with them.

In Berlin, anyone caring to notice can identify all kinds of hybrid products of ecological and political processes. In Stoetzer’s telling, it seems almost necessary as well as quite intuitive to merge human history with natural history. After all, Berlin is famously a city of parks as well as no-go areas, many of which have been organised and reorganised according to high-level and often war-inflected geographies. It is these geographies, in turn, that have generated

the unplanned and unnoticed forms of nonhuman life with which the book begins. As novel communities of plants flourished in fields of post-war rubble, a community of scientists and hobbyists emerged who turned this urban botanising into a field of study, which is as fascinating to contemporary social scientists as it is to natural scientists. For instance, British geographer Matthew Gandy (2017) made a film telling the story of post-war Berlin through its plants, featuring the ecologist Herbert Sukopp, who also appears in *Ruderal City*. Botanists working in a city of rubble were drawn to paying attention to the ecologically formative histories of trade, migration, and war. Sukopp's and others' explorations of the war-torn landscape thus support ongoing work elsewhere, in the critical social sciences, for example, which challenges simple contrasts between the idea of the urban as culturally controlled versus the assumed naturalness and separateness of the rural.

Ruderal is certainly a suggestive metaphor for a study regarding how race, the politics of austerity, and natural resources are articulated. It was, however, research on antiracist activism that initially drew Stoetzer to the forests in and around Berlin. While the book focusses specifically on racial politics and capitalist and colonial forms of violence, it approaches racialised life in Berlin through people's engagements with the land, such as through gardening or outdoor eating, an approach foregrounding above all the impulse to thrive and create liveliness where it might not be expected. This clearly supports the use of the term *ruderal*; yet, Stoetzer's ethnographic treatment of whiteness, like the treatment of migration as a problem, is less nuanced, almost caricatured in places. Thus, the question of how migrations, colonial forms of violence, and dislocations have been racialised in Europe (and

anthropology), and how these histories have co-evolved with (understandings of) ecological processes and economic world-systems is only partly addressed.

The text runs to 243 pages with extensive notes at the back of the book, many of which I read with interest. Yet, as a whole, the scant attention that Stoetzer grants questions of political economy highlights a missed opportunity. It may be that readers are expected to know how German—and, by extension, European—economies and imaginaries became racialised exploitation so firmly built into them. Yet, some indications of the economic relations between the people she describes making homes and generating novel human–nonhuman ecologies in Germany would help the reader and strengthen the analysis. The book offers many, many ethnographic accounts, accounts I would call vignettes, about how variously marked and diversely positioned people create and sustain life-affirming and place-based practices in Berlin, and, thus, connect to the city's heterogeneous ecologies (of people and natures) across multiple differences. The structures and tendencies that sustain and possibly entrench inequalities receive only passing mention or are taken as understood.

The book can feel repetitive, with the writing often resorting to lists (of bads) and rehashing, sometimes at length, a familiar vocabulary of indignant remarks on capitalism or anthropology. Although it grants much space to hitherto invisibilised migrants, characters appear in the narrative in such an abundance that it becomes hard to see how they link to each other and to the wider ecologies—that is, the interconnected processes—the book seeks to highlight. Intentionally or not, many actors are also, on the whole, so fleeting a part of the narrative that they do not allow for much of an affective reading. The idea that what needs

analysis and problematisation the construction and maintenance of white identity no doubt remains important politically and analytically, but also stated more than demonstrated. Ultimately, although the idea of the ruderal as a new tool is highly interesting, *Ruderal City* does not quite offer the conceptual framework needed to study the twenty-first-century's hybrid and geographically complex environments that I, at least, expected.

Still, for anyone interested in contemporary cities 'from the ground up' and in their ecological connectedness, this book contains a wealth of inspiration. Perhaps it is unfair to expect one book to erect a conceptual framework. After all,

at its heart, we find experiences emerging from a structural condition that promotes an inability to make sense—a cognitive dissonance—of a world being upside-down.

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