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German Cultural Studies

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Cultural Memory through Spaces:

An Analysis of A. Mitgutsch's *House of Childhood* and J. Erpenbeck's *Visitation*

Anna Mitgusch's *House of Childhood* (2000) and Jenny Erpenbeck's *Visitation* (2008) are contemporary German novels that explore cultural memory and the idea of places – houses, in these two novels – serving as historical witnesses. Cultural memory, as described by Jan Assmann, is when collective memory, the memory of a group, shifts “out of a biological framework into a cultural one” (Assmann 125). Cultural memory is constituted by the objectivation of collective memory. When collective memory is held or manifested by an object such as a piece of art or a building, rather than passed from generation to generation as in traditional memory, it becomes cultural memory. In *House of Childhood*, the holders of cultural memory are the remnants of Jewish life in the protagonist's hometown. In *Visitation*, the holder of cultural memory is a house. Both novels have a house at the center of their narrative; *House of Childhood* follows Max Berman back to the Austrian town his Jewish family fled in 1928 as he tries to reclaim the titular house, while *Visitation* looks at different inhabitants of a German house over many years, before, during, and after the Nazi period. Besides being holders of cultural memory, the main settings of Mitgusch's and Erpenbeck's novels serve as witnesses to both violent and mundane historical events, even if such events are not remembered by the novel's characters. The concept of a place as a historical witness goes hand in hand with the notion of cultural memory. In *House of Childhood*, Max's hometown, referred to only as H., has few people who remember or are willing to talk about the town during the Nazi years. Max, determined to assemble a chronicle of the town's Jewish history, finds clues in lingering traces of past Jewish life, like a forgotten prayer house on the edge of town. In *Visitation*, people suffer painful personal experiences in the house that they share with no one, like the rape of the architect's wife by an occupying soldier after the second World War. By viewing the idea of places as historical witnesses through the lens of Assman's theory of cultural memory, the

function of Max's village and the house is revealed: these places see and retain everything that occurs within them, standing as monuments of cultural memory, even if those memories are not passed on by people.

In their novels Mitgutsch, born in 1948, and Erpenbeck, born in 1967, both explore the Nazi period and the years after it, reckoning how the violence of the time and the Jewish history of places were later buried and even forgotten. *Visitation* also examines the forgotten impacts of other periods of German history, such as the division of Germany by the Berlin Wall. The novels convey the idea of *heimat*, or homeland, being something unfamiliar, even alienating, because of the ignored histories their homelands hold. *House of Childhood*'s protagonist, Max Berman, is a Jewish man living in New York, where his mother and father fled with him and his siblings from the threat of anti-Semitism in their Austrian village, H. After his mother's death in 1974, Max returns to H. to reclaim the family home, which was occupied by members of the Nazi party after the Bermans were driven out. Before returning, Max thinks of H. as a "distant place of serenity" (Mitgutsch 36), where he will reconnect with his heritage, a traditional view of *heimat*. What he finds in H. is far from his expectations. His efforts to reclaim his house are stopped at every turn, and the town has only a small Jewish population while the rest of the inhabitants have forgotten or ignore its Jewish history. Max cannot forget H.'s Jewish history because it is undeniably tied to his own present. He lingers on whether the people he sees on the street would have hidden him or reported him during the Nazi era, and their faces "filled him with an indefinable fear" (67). Max does not feel remotely at home in H., even after he is able to regain ownership of his childhood house. He is unable to connect with his *heimat* because the people there deny his history. It is not until Max discovers the ruins of a Jewish prayer house and begins researching the history of the town's Jews that he finds a place for himself.

The subversion of *heimat* in *Visitation* is less direct but still crucial to the novel. Almost every chapter of *Visitation* is told by a new narrator, from a different time period, but in the same house; the chapters are connected by short, in-between chapters that follow the property's gardener as he works the land. The shifting narration and time period, spanning from the land's creation by glaciers in the prologue to the house's destruction in the epilogue, with the Nazi years and fall of the Berlin Wall somewhere in between, emphasizes the idea that the house cannot exist outside of time or untouched by history. The constantly changing political and social environment around the house impacts the house itself, leading to events like the Jewish family's leaving the property prior to the Holocaust and the architect's wife being raped by a Red Army officer during WWII and upending the character's concepts of the house as *heimat*, or "a closed and self-sufficient world" (Cosgrove 69). Since the house is not isolated from the events of history, neither is the occupants' *heimat*, making the homeland less a physical, familiar place and more an understanding of the past. However, the house holds memories that each new owner is unaware of, making it difficult for them to truly understand the history of their land and find their *heimat*.

This interpretation of *heimat* as somewhere uncertain can be described by the term "terrain vague," which was initially used to "capture the psychotopographical confusion caused by the fall of the Wall," but later reimagined to mean "the unused spaces of postindustrial urban settings" (Cosgrove 63). Essentially, "terrain vague" encapsulates territories on the fringes of urban society, areas absent of the intense drive and purpose found in postindustrial cities, like the rural villages where *House of Childhood* and *Visitation* take place. These sites are often presented as having freedom and possibility beyond that of urban areas but are also rife with vagueness and uncertainty. In more recent thought, the unique experience of *heimat* in the small

rural areas that constitute “terrain vague” has been discussed, alongside the idea that *heimat* is constituted by history as well as location. Mary Cosgrove asserts in a journal article for *New German Critique* that “terrain vague” encompasses not only a physical location but a temporal one, a place that is inextricably linked to its history. Cosgrove defines “terrain vague” as “space that first and foremost bears the mark of time and history” (Cosgrove 66) and writes that the house in Erpenbeck’s *Visitation* embodies this definition in its subversion of the traditional idea of *heimat*, which is especially strong in a rural setting. *House of Childhood* similarly reinterprets the concept of *heimat* in a rural setting, Max’s childhood village, H., which therefore also exemplifies “terrain vague.” Cosgrove says that the concept of *heimat* in “terrain vague” can be used “to question the relationship between Germans and the territory they inhabit” (Cosgrove 67), which Mitgutsch (in Austria rather than Germany) and Erpenbeck do in their novels, asking how an area’s history influences those who call it home. Cosgrove’s idea of “terrain vague” as a place in time is quite similar to Assmann’s theory of cultural memory since both argue that places can act as keepers of memory.

Assmann’s theory of cultural memory builds on the ideas of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and art historian Aby Warburg, who in the 1930s each independently developed theories on collective or social memory. Halbwachs and Warburg shifted the discussion of collective memory away from being seen as a “racial memory” or inherited memory and posited that collective memory was tied not to biology, but to culture. They argued that “the ‘survival of the type’ in the sense of a cultural pseudo-species is a function of the cultural memory” (Assmann 125-26), that the distinct character of a society that remains the same over generations is maintained by a shared culture of customs and socialization. In his article “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” Assmann develops these theories on culture’s link to collective memory

into a new form: cultural memory. Assman argues against Halbwachs' and Warburg's notion that everyday communication is necessary in forming collective memory and that when such communication is objectivized—solidified in buildings, art, texts, etc.—it becomes history rather than memory. Assmann's theory posits that when collective memory relies on objectivized culture rather than everyday communication, it still retains the “contemporary reference” (Assmann 128) to constitute memory. He writes that “objectivized culture has the structure of memory” (Assmann 128), meaning that groups derive knowledge about their past that directs their identity from items or places, and such use of objectivized culture transitions collective memory into cultural memory. A crucial distinction between collective and cultural memory is that “cultural memory is characterized by its distance from the everyday” (Assmann 129); since through objectivation it does not rely on everyday communication, cultural memory is unchanged as time passes. Assmann goes on to identify six key characteristics of cultural memory: cultural memory preserves the knowledge a group uses to understand its unity and distinction from other groups (concretion of identity), relates this knowledge of the past to a contemporary situation (capacity to reconstruct), crystallizes this shared knowledge (formation), depends on the cultivation and communication of this knowledge (organization), educates and provides rules of conduct (obligation), and conveys the self-image of a society through their specific body of preserved places, objects, and rituals (reflexivity). Max's childhood village in *House of Childhood* and the house in *Visitation* fulfill these characteristics, further demonstrating their function as placeholders of cultural memory.

In both novels, the concretion of identity is found in the preservation of the town's history, which helps people living in the town understand their unity and distinction from others. *House of Childhood* features a history that has been glossed over by most of H.'s residents, that of the

town's Jewish population. The H. Max encounters in 1974 is not at all the one he remembers from childhood. Spitzer, the secretary of H.'s Jewish congregation, explains that H. is not as Max remembers because "most people here don't know any Jews" since "only a few have come back...and everyone here claims not to remember" (Mitgutsch 54). The key phrasing in Spitzer's sentence is "claims," as everyone in H. does know about the town's painful history but does not acknowledge it publicly, even the Jewish population. Despite the Jewish history of H. being "forgotten" by much of the town, it is still a source of unity for the Jews. While spending time with members of the congregation after services, Max observes that "they all had similar life stories" (158), that he and the rest of H.'s Jews are connected by their struggles and by the struggles of their ancestors. The central house in *Visitation* and the land it is built on experiences and preserves the history of the town, beginning with the area's creation by glaciers before it was inhabited. In each chapter of *Visitation* Erpenbeck provides a snapshot of what life was like in rural Germany during a specific time period. On the same land, we see the early pastoral life, full of superstition, of the wealthy farmer and his four daughters; the experiences of the house's architect, forced to move to West Germany after being caught smuggling screws into the East; the blissful memories of the cloth manufacturer before he flees to South Africa and his parents and sister are murdered by Nazis; the rape of the architect's wife by an invading Red Army soldier; the Communist writer's struggle to feel at home again in Germany after returning from exile; the illegitimate owner's surrender of the house to the state in a legal battle years after German reunification. Together, these chapters contain a robust picture of German experiences and emotions in the town throughout history, leading to an understanding of German history and the concretion of a German identity for the characters.

The self-understanding in *House of Childhood* and *Visitation* that comes with the knowledge of the past demonstrates the capacity to reconstruct, the second facet of Assmann's cultural memory. Max and Diana, the daughter of a Jewish father who was raised in H. by Catholic foster parents, both grapple with not feeling at home in H. and with a disconnect from their roots. Max has difficulty reconciling the town he loved as a child with the current reality of a Jewish minority with buried history. Diana, already alienated from the Jewish community because her mother was not Jewish and she was raised by Catholic foster parents, married into a Catholic family, further removing herself from Jewish life. Publicly, Diana presents herself as a pious Christian: her son is an altar boy at the parish church, where "every Sunday she sits...in the first row" (Mitgutsch 179). But "when she can get away without attracting attention" (Mitgutsch 179) she attends services at the Jewish synagogue, desperate to find a feeling of acceptance, which she never really achieves. Max's research and writing on the Jewish history of H. helps him and Diana understand their roots and their struggles to find comfort and security in H. Max calls his chronicle "the story of the Jews' love for this unworthy town" (200), a description which perfectly captures Max and Diana's current problems. Through the knowledge of their Jewish past, which informs their identities, they are able to better understand their contemporary situation and realize that their mixed feelings of love and discontent toward H. are rooted in their history.

Similarly, the residents of the house in *Visitation* are informed by their German identity, which comes from understanding their history. Though the capacity to reconstruct is not as clear-cut in *Visitation* as in *House of Childhood*, it is still present in how each stage of life in the house is informed by and connected to the past. One example comes in the chapter on the subtenants, a couple who live in the small boathouse on the property of the main house. The male subtenant

talks about the present, when his wife has just discovered she has a long-lost sister, and the past, when he and a friend tried to swim across the Elbe into West Germany, which ended with his friend drowned and him imprisoned. The subtenant's failed escape attempt informs his current situation, because he knows that "sooner or later he must turn back" (Erpenbeck 114) and comfort his crying wife about her newfound family, just as he knew to turn back before he was too far out in the Elbe. More broadly, the fact that he cannot forget his past in East Germany connects to the chapter about the architect, who also (successfully) tried to flee to the West and was deeply affected by the experience, a link which reflects how the experience of living in a divided Germany impacts the German identity. The Berlin Wall is part of the collective German past; the history of the Wall contributes to the concretion of identity, which then informs the way people live in the present, like the subtenant who cannot move on from his friend's death and applies the knowledge that running away will not serve him to the situation with his wife. The capacity to reconstruct is demonstrated in the way that the residents of the house experience similar emotions and situations through the years, shared experiences which stem from their shared German identity.

Formation, or the crystallization of this shared identity, is the crucial element of cultural memory. Without formation, where memory becomes objectivized, memory remains communicative, reliant on everyday communication to be passed from one generation to the next. In *House of Childhood* and *Visitation*, formation is especially key because places hold memories that are not passed on by people. As discussed, the residents of H. largely ignore its Jewish history, and the tenants of the house in *Visitation* have experiences that they choose to keep to themselves or are unable to share. But there are remnants of Jews in H. that are evidence of the past, and the house witnesses and recalls the experiences of its inhabitants. Assmann's

cultural memory's characteristics of formation and organization go hand in hand in the novels; the Jewish and German identities are crystallized and the cultural knowledge they impart is cultivated. In *House of Childhood*, the objectivized memory has little significance or impact without cultivation. The cultural memory of H.'s Jews really only takes shape when Max begins researching his chronicle. Since no one in H. truly understands or recalls its Jewish history, its Jewish landmarks and heirlooms, the holders of cultural memory, are largely forgotten until Max discovers them. Though his childhood house is a holder of cultural memory, the house has been so changed since Max left it in 1928 that he can barely recognize the history it holds, and thus pursues evidence of Jewish history elsewhere. While exploring H., Max actively searches for traces of Jewish life, wondering if the "illegible characters" scratched into an old passageway could be "a stolen headstone from a razed Jewish cemetery," if the dilapidated house with the "bold windows" (Mitgutsch 163) could be an ancient prayer house. He scours flea markets for Jewish objects, finding a set of kiddush cups and a *besamim* casket. Max is determined to find evidence of H.'s Jewish history because he is frustrated with the way it has been pushed aside. He maintains that though the Jewish history of H. has been largely driven out alongside the Jews, "things [are] indestructible" (168) and can tell him the truth of his history the way people can't. The objects Max finds serve as the formation of cultural memory; they are physical, crystallized proof that Jews had a life in H. Max realizes that "only memory, even if it were only conjectural or invented" makes objects "come alive" (Mitgutsch 167), and sets out to translate the memories he finds in these objects into a form everyone in H. can understand. He therefore serves as the cultivator of the town's cultural memory, communicating the Jewish history and identity held in the objects to the town through his chronicle.

In *Visitation*, German history is held by the house, which crystallizes the collective memory and identity of the German people. The house witnesses every significant period in German history until its demolition, which likely takes place sometime in the 2000s. It retains both the brutal and mundane moments of the past and serves as an objectivization of German cultural memory. The entire house is a placeholder of cultural memory, but the little bird room is especially significant. The little bird room, so named because it has a balcony with a bird forged to its railing, has a closet with a false back and a hidden space. Early in the novel, the architect of the house's wife is raped by a Red Army soldier in this closet, a trauma which she never discloses to anyone or fully processes. The image of the architect's wife hidden in the secret closet, terrified and only biding her time until her inevitable discovery by the soldier, mirrors the image of the cloth manufacturer's niece Doris, a Jewish girl who secludes herself in a "black chamber" (58), a tiny, secret room, to hide from the Nazis. Like the architect's wife, who is discovered and raped by the Russian soldier, Doris is eventually found and sent to a concentration camp, where she dies. Though Doris' chapter does not take place in the house and she and the architect's wife do not share a religion, their situations have striking similarities which underscore the fear and isolation German women experienced during WWII. The connections between Doris and the architect's wife demonstrate the house's function as a holder of cultural memory; the red bird room is witness to a horrible and disjointed time in German history, a period which undeniably influences German identity moving forward. At the end of the novel, we return to the bird room with the house's illegitimate owner, who has lost her legal claim to the house and wants to see it "one more time" (Erpenbeck 137). While a real estate agent gives tours of the house, the illegitimate owner remains undetected in the secret closet of the little bird room, a situation far less dire than that of the architect's wife, but still similar. Even

with decades between them, the architect's wife and the illegitimate owner are connected by the house, by their shared German history. The illegitimate owner thinks that "as if with ropes, time was tying [the house] down right where it was" (Erpenbeck 145) and wonders how she can lock the house when "everything she is locking away lies so deep within the interior" (Erpenbeck 147). These quotes speak to the house's function as a holder of cultural memory, since they describe how the house is imbued with the history of the time periods it experienced and passes this history to everyone who lives in it. Unlike in *House of Childhood*, the organization of this history does not come through a written source, but in the literal organization of the house and grounds. The gardener seems to aid in the cultivation of cultural memory. Between the chapters detailing each resident's experiences in the house, Erpenbeck writes about the duties of the gardener, who is impossibly long-lived, working on the land even before the house is constructed. The gardener helps to build the house and helps each owner, doing the typical work of a gardener and handyman: landscaping and repairs. He is the only constant presence around the house, as the ownership changes quite often, and he works to keep the house in livable condition, ensuring it can be passed on to the next resident. By keeping the house nice so people can continue to inhabit it, the gardener enables its accumulation and passage of memory; in cultivating the grounds and the house, he unwittingly cultivates cultural memory.

Assmann's fifth facet of cultural memory, obligation, is perhaps less precise in the novels than it would be in a real-life manifestation of cultural memory. Obligation is the characteristic of cultural memory to educate and provide rules of conduct. Though the histories of H. and the house do not provide clear-cut rules of conducts for their residents, they certainly educate about the past and function on a more individual level, allowing people to form their own rules of conduct based on the knowledge conveyed by their cultural memory. Assmann writes that

historicism, the theory that cultural and social phenomena are determined by history, is rooted against the idea that “there are important and unimportant” (Assmann 131) pieces of historical knowledge. He argues that “everything” is important “because it all belongs to the subject that you want to understand, and you cannot leave anything out” (Assmann 131). The concept that all history, no matter how seemingly insignificant, should be preserved in cultural memory helps inform the obligation in the novels, since H. and the house preserve history that is not always acknowledged. The cultural memory preserved by the remnants of Jewish life in H. clearly educates the town’s living Jews on their history and many of their own mixed feelings of anger toward H. and desire to belong, and this knowledge of their past helps the Jews to form their own rules of conduct. In *House of Childhood*, obligation functions similarly to the capacity to reconstruct in that it relates the knowledge of the past to a contemporary situation. Once Max has begun his chronicle illuminating the Jewish past of H., it can no longer be ignored. He has shown physical proof of Jews in H. and reawakened the town’s cultural memory, forcing them to acknowledge the history that was always in front of them. At the end of the novel, the synagogue in H. is remodeled, and at its opening people of the town take turns speaking, calling “for dialogue and more tolerance toward everything foreign” (Mitgutsch 293), demonstrating that knowledge of H.’s history, which came through cultural memory, has changed their attitude of denial. This new view of the past illustrates the construction of rules of conduct; the people of H. have shifted from stoically denying the town’s past to accepting and discussing it, which will become the norm for future generations.

In *Visitation*, the sense of obligation also becomes clear at the novel’s end. The final chapter follows the illegitimate owner, who must surrender the house in exchange for compensatory payment because her family did not acquire it “in good faith” (Erpenbeck 136)

meaning that it likely became theirs after it was abandoned or forcibly given up by Jewish owners, and now the descendants of those Jewish owners have filed a claim for restitution of the property. The illegitimate owner has been ordered by law to return the house, a ruling which shows that knowledge of the German past has been translated into a code of conduct for the German present. That the law mandates her return of the house highlights that the German people have used their history to create rules that will help to rectify past wrongs and prevent such atrocities from occurring again. The clear rules of conduct in this chapter give insight into the obligation present in other chapters. Though not every chapter features a legal battle, German laws must have evolved with time, informed by the preserved knowledge of the past. *Visitation* also demonstrates the smaller-scale obligation in the formation of personal rules of conduct. After her escape to West Berlin, the architect's wife "will always keep everything one might need urgently in an emergency on hand in her purse" (Erpenbeck 56). The writer says that when they returned to Germany after exile, "it was a long time before she and her husband could bring themselves to shake hands with people they didn't know" (Erpenbeck 92) because they were repulsed by the idea that people had willingly remained in an oppressive Germany. These personal rules of conduct can be magnified to demonstrate how history influenced the actions of the German people, in their daily lives and beyond, like the eventual creation of laws to return illegitimately possessed houses to their true owners.

The final characteristic of Assmann's cultural memory, reflexivity, is a cumulation of the other five characteristics. Assmann enumerates three ways that cultural memory is reflexive: it is practice-reflexive in its interpretation of common practice or customs, it is self-reflexive in that it "draws on itself to explain" (Assmann 132), and it reflects the self-image of the group. Reflexivity provides the basis for a group's self-awareness and understanding of its unity. By

examining the concretion of identity, capacity to reconstruct, formation, organization, and obligation of the house in *Visitation* and the Jewish remnants of H. in *House of Childhood*, the self-image of the groups they describe can be understood, demonstrating reflexivity. In both novels, the fact that cultural memory resides in the unsteady “terrain vague” and encompasses events that are forgotten or ignored is quite important. The cultural memory itself takes on these characteristics of uncertainty and instability, reflecting the mentality of the group. In *House of Childhood*, cultural memory resides in the physical evidence of past Jewish life and informs the identity of H.’s current Jewish residents. These current Jewish residents are united by their religion, but also alienated in a town that denies their history, and the fact that their monuments of cultural memory are lost until Max rediscovers them is evidence of this alienation. The memories of Jewish life in H. have been pushed aside, just as the Jews themselves have. As Max researches the history of Jews in H., the contemporary Jewish population becomes more self-aware and known, and their holders of cultural memory more obvious. The construction of a new synagogue, which will serve as a monument of cultural memory for this and future generations, reflects the Jews’ newfound surety in their self-image, which is rooted in their knowledge of the past.

The house in *Visitation* similarly reflects the German self-image. The final chapter ends with the words “we request acknowledgement” (Erpenbeck 147), a phrase from the claim for restitution served to the illegitimate owner. In addition to being a prompt for the legitimate owner to respond to the restitution claim, the request of acknowledgement speaks to the forgotten histories the households. The house and the land witnessed every period of German history and therefore contain all the knowledge that informs German identity. The plea for acknowledgement that the novel ends with reflects a desire for understanding and discussion of

the painful parts of history, likely the desire of each of the house's previous inhabitants. Reflexivity is present throughout the novel, as each owner represents the German identity during their time period and uses the history the house holds to understand what this German identity means. In the novel's epilogue, the house is demolished after being relinquished by the illegitimate owner. By gutting the house instead of having it remain standing as a monument of cultural memory, Erpenbeck ends the novel the way it started: with a parcel of land. The destruction of the house reflects a change in German identity, not a rejection of history, as the land itself holds history as well, but a new start, built on the knowledge of what came before.

Building on the knowledge of what came before is precisely what Assmann's theory of cultural memory entails, and this conclusion helps to answer the question raised by Cosgrove's writings on "terrain vague:" what is the relationship between Germans and the land they inhabit? With the addition of Cosgrove's idea that "terrain vague" encompasses a "place-in-time" (Cosgrove 65) rather than simply a place, her question becomes: what is the relationship between Germans and their history since history is tied to the land. Assmann's theory of cultural memory seems to argue that the relationship between groups and their history is somewhat a mirror: the identity of a group is informed by their shared history. Cultural memory is the crossroads of memory, culture, and society (Assmann 129), and what a group preserves through their body of cultural memory, which includes art, writings, architecture, and more, reflects how they see themselves. This theory is clearly expressed in *House of Childhood* and *Visitation*. Both novels explore the ways memory, culture, and society intersect, especially during times of confusion and uncertainty as described by Cosgrove's "terrain vague." The novels demonstrate that memory is not held or preserved solely through communication, especially in areas of "terrain vague" due to their instability. The use of cultural memory in the novels also highlights that

though everyday communication is not crucial to the preservation of memory, cultural memory is strengthened when a society cultivates rather than disregards it.

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