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A Heritage of Evil

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Three books dealing with memory and historical witness

Reviewed:

Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil

by Susan Neiman
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 415 pp., \$30.00

Spying on the South: An Odyssey Across the American Divide

by Tony Horwitz
Penguin, 476 pp., \$30.00

Remembering Emmett Till

by Dave Tell
University of Chicago Press, 308 pp., \$25.00



Laura Buckman/AFP/Getty Images

Workers removing a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee from Robert E. Lee Park (now Turtle Park), Dallas, Texas, September 2017

The small Bavarian city of Landshut sits on the Isar River about an hour northeast of Munich. It's an absurdly pretty place, with the blue and pink buildings on its main street so pristine that it looks like a postwar reconstruction. But it's not: Landshut wasn't big enough to be a target of the Allies' strategic bombing, and it lay out of the

way of any advancing army. This does not mean that the war left no traces. I broke a long drive there one night twenty years ago, and in the morning, as I walked toward the city center, I noticed a sign that pointed me to a path along the river. *Mahnmal*, it said—memorial—but what I saw when I followed it wasn't at all what my earlier visits to memorial sites in Hamburg and Berlin had led me to expect.

Hidden in the trees I found a three-sided hut of whitewashed brick; inside was a bronze map of Europe in which Germany was given its 1914 borders, including much of present-day Poland. Above it a plaque bore an inscription that began, “1939 lebten 18,7 Millionen Deutsche in den Vertreibungsgebieten”—In 1939 18.7 million Germans lived in territories from which they would be expelled—and it went on to say that between 1944 and 1946 they were thrown out, displaced, murdered, or went missing. Twelve million, the plaque added, would live to arrive in Germany, and other tablets listed some thirty provinces, regions, and countries as their places of origin. A few were as close as Silesia, others as distant as the Volga, but the map with its old borders suggested that many of those places should by rights be German still. There was a wrought-iron wreath, made of several loops of intertwined wire, fixed to the ground in front of all this. Or no, not a wreath, for it was pronged with metal briars that made it into a martyr's crown of thorns.

I'd never seen anything like it, though I knew what it commemorated. Millions of ethnic Germans—*Volksdeutsche*—had been expelled from Eastern Europe in the aftermath of World War II and resettled in the West. In their new homes they formed fraternal societies and insisted they had a claim to their old ones; their sense of aggrieved nostalgia played a major part in the conservative politics of Bavaria in particular. *We suffered too*, the Landshut memorial claims, *we too were victims*. I got out my notebook to scribble down the inscription, and a man walking by with his dog looked at me oddly, as if wondering who I was. It all made me shudder—the map, the way the numbers had been made to come out higher than six million. And those thorns. If the people commemorated here were martyrs, then who had pounded in the nails?

“Nothing I ever learned in Berlin surprised me more than the recognition that most Germans once put their own misery front and center.” So Susan Neiman writes in *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil*, but the story she tells isn't about the self-pity behind that Landshut memorial. A philosopher by training, Neiman first went to Berlin as a graduate student in the 1980s, and later wrote a coolly cerebral memoir of life in the divided city; she is now, after teaching at Yale and Tel Aviv, the director of the Einstein Forum, a Potsdam think tank. *Learning from the Germans* wants to show how the country's schools and intellectuals, its ordinary people and its politicians too, have worked “to acknowledge the evils their nation committed.”

That work has been hard and slow, fitful in its progress, and yet in many ways successful; and if the Germans, of all people, can do it, why can't we? For that's the burden of her argument. How might Germany's example help the United States in its ever-ongoing attempt to confront the legacy of slavery and the memory of those who fought to preserve it? She knows that her title might seem a cruel joke, and writes that almost every German to whom she mentioned it burst out laughing. A friend of mine simply stared, until I showed her the book's cover, with its photograph of a Confederate monument. Then she chuckled, bitterly.

There are no statues of what Neiman calls "Hans Wehrmacht"—Johnny Reb—on Germany's streets, let alone of Nazi generals. The *Volksdeutsche* may like to remember themselves, but the German victims that the nation's official memorials now commemorate are those murdered in the Holocaust, and in particular German Jews. A church in my old Hamburg neighborhood has a plaque near its entrance begging forgiveness for its silence and inaction during the Third Reich; a sign near the KaDeWe department store in Berlin provides a list of a dozen concentration camps. Such places engage in what Neiman calls *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*: a portmanteau word in which the term for "past"—*Vergangenheit*—finds itself fused with that for "work," *Arbeit*, thus "working through the past"; a related and more commonly used word is *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, in which the past is mastered or overcome. That's the one I've always used, but Neiman's has an extra shade of meaning. It implies that this is a process, and unfinishable, rather than a task at which one might succeed.

Yet it took many years for that work to begin in earnest. Prosperity helped, and so did the student movements of the 1960s, with their demand to know exactly what had happened. New war-crimes trials reached below the top levels of the Nazi command, and concentration camp guards went into the dock; even when those trials resulted in acquittals, they revealed the enormity of what had been done. There were popular TV series on the subject, including the American-made *Holocaust*, which ran in Germany in 1979, and beginning in 1995 an exhibition on the wartime atrocities committed not by the SS but by the Wehrmacht, the regular German army, traveled to thirty-three German and Austrian cities. It helped, moreover, that there was a state ban on the display of Nazi regalia, and that even in a divided country the problems of memory were not restricted to a single region. Nor was there any German equivalent of the many once-respected American historians who wrote on behalf of the Confederate cause.

Nevertheless, the mood in West Germany in the first decades after the war was closer to that of the Landshut memorial than one likes to remember. Denazification was a hasty and often lenient process; it proved almost as easy for a party member to get cleared as it had been for a Confederate officer to regain the right to vote. Rebel generals became governors, and in Germany former Nazis clogged the upper ranks of the professions, the judiciary included. Many people argued that those soldiers who

died defending their *Heimat* deserved to be remembered as patriots and heroes; and as for the camps, they said, how could ordinary Germans have possibly known about them?

Still, it's not the German material that makes Neiman's book so powerful. She recounts it with a lucid, masterful brevity, but what really matters here is the juxtaposition contained in its first sentence: "I began life as a white girl in the segregated South, and I'm likely to end it as a Jewish woman in Berlin." Neiman wants us to use each place to think about the other, but she's finally more interested in America, for we are the ones with something yet to learn about the business of facing the past.

She's not, of course, the first to make that link. W.E.B. Du Bois saw a parallel between the color line and the Warsaw ghetto, and Ta-Nehisi Coates has recently suggested that the reparations Germany paid to Israel in the early 1950s might serve as a model for this country. Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, has been explicit in appealing to the example of Germany as a way to understand our own history of systemic racism, and Neiman's visit to the lynching memorial he's established there provides her book with a climactic moment. But none of the Americans who've seen the connection has had Neiman's comprehensive knowledge of how the Germans have worked to overcome their past; none has pursued it so tenaciously, so originally.

What would an American *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* look like? How would it affect our schools and cities, "which streets should be renamed, which statues dismantled," what textbooks rewritten, what notions of heritage or home or an ancestor's courage discarded? Americans like "narratives of progress. Call them happy endings." We don't like to look at our failures, don't understand them, don't want to think about them; and our ideology of radical individualism works against any thought of collective responsibility. Germans have been given no choice, and not only by the international community. That scrutiny is also mandated by a national culture of "relentless self-questioning," with its deep roots in the rigors of German philosophy and poetry alike. It may in the 1930s have gone into exile, with Theodor Adorno and others, but it returned after the war, having survived the Third Reich's attempt to destroy it.

After decades in Berlin, Neiman has a relentlessness of her own, but perhaps her Americanness remains in her claim that *Learning from the Germans* "is about comparative redemption, not comparative evil." So her goal is at once modest and grand: "To encourage a discussion of guilt and responsibility as serious as the German one."

Neiman poses questions, but rather than answering them she educates her readers by thinking through their implications. Sometimes she raises an objection to her own position, setting it down in italics—“*Reparations look backward. It’s more important and healthier to look to the future*”—and then exploring what other thinkers have said on the subject. One of her earlier books is a rather technical study of Kant, but she doesn’t see philosophy as a library-bound inquiry. Ethics has its place on the street, it can clarify what you feel, and in this book she often approaches her material as a reporter might, visiting a site, conducting an interview.

In Berlin, that meant a phone call or a walk, and was sometimes as simple as sitting down with a friend, the two of them thinking aloud with the tape recorder running. Her work in the American South required a sabbatical at the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation in Mississippi. “Everybody Knows About Mississippi”—the words are from a song by Nina Simone, and Neiman takes them for a chapter title. But the institute wants to change what they know, and its offices at the state university in Oxford provided her with a base for her travels.¹ She goes to the Confederate monument at Stone Mountain in Georgia, part of a state park where she played as a child; she visits Natchez for the hoop-skirted fantasia called Pilgrimage, a celebration of the antebellum past; and then travels down to the Whitney Plantation outside New Orleans, where the tour stays away from the usual mansion and focuses on the conditions of slave life instead.

Some of her encounters are tense. In Holly Springs, Mississippi, a Confederate reenactor stares down at her from on horseback to ask if she’s “on our side,” and at that moment he’s not playing dress-up. Holly Springs is also, however, the starting point of a project called “Behind the Big House,” a biracial coalition dedicated to recovering the homes and stories of the enslaved, the almost forgotten history that lies in the backyards of the town’s pre-war houses. That’s the kind of reparative work Neiman admires, and at the center of the book is a series of conversations, fully realized scenes with historians, museum curators, local activists, and even, over pizza, with James Meredith, the civil rights activist who in 1962 became the first African-American admitted to the University of Mississippi. These conversations seem less important for their conclusions than for the process they dramatize. Often they have no conclusions, no final point that’s easily summarized; what they offer instead is *work*.

Yet books take a long time to write, and the America Neiman hoped to address when she began *Learning from the Germans* isn’t the one in which it is now published. That earlier America was a country in which the killings at the Mother Emanuel church in Charleston were met with a president’s eloquence and a national revulsion against the symbols of white supremacy. This America is one in which a different president has called white supremacists “very fine people.” Neiman writes that she wants to explore the tremendous gap between “historical scholarship and ordinary public memory,” but

her work inevitably looks to the gap between the country's regions and political parties as well, and in that it resembles other recent books about what Tony Horwitz calls the "American Divide." His own new book, *Spying on the South*, retraces the journeys that the young Frederick Law Olmsted made through the region in the 1850s, during which he sent a series of travel letters to the recently started *New York Times*. Olmsted later rewrote those letters into a book called *The Cotton Kingdom*, and though he began with no firm convictions about slavery, he finished as a firm abolitionist.

Horwitz's best-known book remains *Confederates in the Attic* (1998), an often funny and penetrating piece of reporting about the world of Civil War reenactors. Most of its subjects wear Rebel uniforms, though none is as scary as the man Neiman met in Holly Springs, and while its pages are fully alive to absurdity, they are marked by generosity too. *Spying on the South* has many of the same strengths, but reading it is a melancholy experience: Horwitz died in May of cardiac arrest, at sixty, just after its publication. I say "the same strengths," and yet that American divide feels far more consequential here than it did in *Confederates*. Horwitz rarely talks politics with the people he meets, almost all of them white, but he started following in Olmsted's footsteps well before the 2016 election and finished after it, and its results are never far from his mind.

Olmsted made three separate journeys—one through the "seaboard" states, a second to Texas, and a third in the Appalachian highlands. Horwitz's itinerary begins in Washington, D.C., where he boards a train to West Virginia and then hops a barge for a trip down the Ohio, and it ends on the Rio Grande; in a coda, he visits Central Park, where Olmsted began work as a landscape architect almost immediately after finishing his southern travels. He rearranges Olmsted into linearity, moving north to south, and letting his own interests dictate how long he stops where in "Ruby-Red America."

As a traveler, Horwitz is ready to talk and listen to anyone, and to laugh with them too. Some of that's a reporter's skill in making himself liked, but a lot is a matter of temperament, a warm, open ability to suspend judgment and take people at their own valuation. And his method often relies on chance, the accidents of the road; a barmaid's tip leads to the book's best set-piece, an account of a distinctly regional spectacle called the Louisiana Mudfest. "Mudding" involves riding over the swampiest ground possible in monster trucks or ATVs, preferably without a seatbelt and after a tasting of local moonshine that would "disinfect gangrene"; the event draws 15,000 people and has a sign reading "White Trash Only" at the entry gate. Horwitz enjoys it all, and then feels guilty about it. He sees himself as an "infiltrator" in accepting the hospitality of men and women who gleefully conform to "a garish stereotype of the rural white South," liking them individually but repelled by what they stand for. Yet he doesn't build on that discomfort, that paradox, and the more I read, the more questions I had.

In Crockett, Texas, he sits down for coffee with a table of white men “unapologetically...slinging around the N-word,” and is then introduced to the town’s one known Democrat, an accountant who tells him that “the divide is so wide I don’t see anything that will bridge it.” Maybe so, but such statements only name that gap. They don’t help us understand it, still less work through it; and soon enough Horwitz is out of town and headed for Austin.

I enjoyed every diverting page of *Spying on the South*, but we need something more now. Arlie Russell Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016)² asks some of the same questions in exploring the distrust and suspicion with which many white southerners view the government on which they depend. But she concentrates on one corner of Louisiana, living with her subjects for months and listening to the “deep story” they tell about themselves, the explanations they offer for their world and beliefs even when they’re contradicted by the material facts around them. Her immersive fieldwork allows for a depth of analysis, a rootedness in long-tested detail, that Horwitz’s kind of high-spirited travel writing can’t approach.

Neiman’s best chapter offers that depth as well, and something more besides: a sense of gravity. “Faces of Emmett Till” is a meditation on the life and the memory of the Chicago schoolboy who in 1955 was tortured and murdered after he supposedly whistled at a white woman in the tiny hamlet of Money, Mississippi. “For it is always the face that matters,” she begins:

When his mother, Mamie Till Mobley, insisted on leaving his body unretouched, his casket open, what everyone remembered was the face. What was left of the child’s visage after hours of vicious torture is so gruesome I will not describe it in these pages. If you really need to see it, you can find it on the web. If you have seen it already, you never want to see it again.

Till’s two killers were acquitted—the wonder, in that time and place, is that they even faced a jury—and then felt free to sell their story to *Look* magazine. The trial was held in the town of Sumner, one of the two seats of Tallahatchie County in the Mississippi Delta, the poorest region of what has historically been the nation’s poorest state. Neiman herself spent some weeks in Sumner, talking about the case to everyone she could. It wasn’t easy for many of them, and she writes that for many years after the murder nobody in the Delta wanted to talk about it at all, in a way that reminds her of “the silence that reigned in Germany in the first decades after the war.” The region’s black and white communities each had reasons to keep quiet, in talking to their children especially, just as Germans and Jews did, “one side afraid of facing its own guilt, the other afraid of succumbing to pain and rage.”

By now, though, the story of Till's murder has become something of an industry, one whose workings are traced with extraordinary detail in Dave Tell's *Remembering Emmett Till*. The killers' confession was partial at best. They had accomplices to shield, and in consequence many of the case's facts have never become entirely clear: where exactly Till was murdered, whether his body was dropped into the Tallahatchie River or into a tributary bayou, where exactly it was found. Three different counties in the Delta now have a part in the story—they *claim* a part because there have been government dollars available for the business of commemoration. The courthouse in Sumner has been restored with those dollars, museums founded, roadside markers put in place. Neiman writes that such efforts may seem “a way to commodify suffering, but they are also a major source of income for the rural black community.”

And for some in the white world too, in ways that make one profoundly uneasy. Tell's best chapter describes the fate of Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market, where Till was said to have whistled at the owner's wife. It has become a stop on the Mississippi Freedom Trail, but the building is now owned by the descendants of a juror who voted for acquittal, and they have allowed it to fall into ruin, as if trying to expunge or ignore its importance. The same family also owns a neighboring gas station, however, and happily accepted a grant that allowed them to restore it as a piece of mid-twentieth-century Americana; people following the Freedom Trail need somewhere to stop.

Tell sees the grocery store as powerful precisely because of its ruined state—its crumbling suggests the degree to which “Till's story [has] not been well tended.” The market is a ghost on the landscape, its meaning doubled, pointing both “to the murder and its willed forgetfulness.” Neiman finds herself similarly troubled. She meets a local *macher* who thought it acceptable, half a century later, for his white community to express regret over the murder but not to apologize for it. She works at the distinction between collective guilt and collective responsibility: theory holds that we should say no to the one and yes to the other, but she isn't sure they can be “entirely separated.”

Finally, she thinks about the Holocaust, which she knows she cannot comprehend the way a survivor might, and here she considers Dana Schutz's much-criticized 2016 painting of Emmett Till in his coffin. A bad painting, she says—bad in its vague abstraction, but not because it seems an act of “cultural appropriation,” a white artist's depiction of black pain. For isn't some form of appropriation necessary, some attempt to think one's way inside a radically other experience, if we are to “begin to understand each other's worlds,” to imagine and to recognize the duty we have toward one another?

Neiman's act of historical witness refers throughout to a number of predecessors, evoking books by James Baldwin and Hannah Arendt, or her favorite, Jean Améry's *At the Mind's Limits*, about his experience at Auschwitz. But I thought of another as I read: Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, her long account of a journey

through the land and history of the Balkans. Neiman isn't the ironist that West was, but she too believes that history has lessons, and that if we think hard enough, carefully enough, we can learn them. We can fail better, at least, at the endless job of getting straight with our past. *Race and the Memory of Evil*—there's not a corner of this country untouched by that evil, and it endures precisely because of the way we misremember it.

This amnesia touches us all, largely because the white South chose to recall the wrong history. The states of the former Confederacy littered their public spaces with memorials to their ruined cause and statues of those it called heroes. The perpetrators of evil mastered the rhetoric of victimhood and wove themselves a crown of thorns. About this Neiman is very clear: Germany has recoiled

from the thought of honoring men who fought for the right to eradicate other human beings. As a matter of value, we should recoil from a monument to honor men who fought for the right to own them. So much for Robert E. Lee.

There may be practical and political questions about the removal of Confederate monuments. There are no moral ones.

One of the more powerful memorials I've ever stumbled upon is a chipped and eroded block of stone that sits at a downtown corner in Fredericksburg, Virginia. It was probably set in place as a carriage step for a neighboring hotel, but before the Civil War the crossing was the city's usual spot for slave auctions, and in later years some freedmen recalled being made to stand on that stone when they themselves were up for sale, or seeing those who were. Other townspeople have disputed those memories. Still, it's always been known as the "slave auction block," and there's now an explanatory plaque in the sidewalk before it; a found object, as it were, that has become a place of witness in spite, or maybe because, of the city's uneasiness with its presence. In 1924 the Chamber of Commerce tried to remove it; more recently there have been proposals to put it in a museum or encase it in plexiglass. Some people want it gone, seeing it as a reminder of past hatred and injustice. Others want it to stay, for just that reason.

The debate is a healthy one, and the longer it goes on and the more people involved the better. I am not a Virginian, but if I lived in Fredericksburg I too would want it to remain, as an acknowledgment of how omnipresent and ordinary the evils of slavery once were, and of how much their memory haunts us yet. I doubt that many African-Americans need to be reminded of that. Most white people still do.

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1.

In 2018 the institute relocated to the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum in Jackson, after nineteen years at the University of Mississippi. ↩

2.

Reviewed [in these pages](#) by Nathaniel Rich, November 10, 2016. ↩

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