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Bin ich ein Berliner? Graffiti as layered public archive and socio-ecological methodology

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we discuss the role played by graffiti in representing, fomenting and studying binary and non-binary sentiments of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Through asocio-textual analysis of examples of public anti-gentrification and anti-touristification protest graffiti in Berlin, we consider the complex layers of history, identity, mobility, community and environment which have been folded onto one another throughout the city over the past decades. By investigating the textual politics of belonging and self as shown through the lens of graffiti, we argue that representational analyses of so-called banal public texts can help to comprehend the complexities that lie behind binary socio-cultural categories (e.g. local/non-local). In exploring some of the defining characteristics that distinguish ecocritical from environmental humanities approaches to critique, the article posits how multiple disciplines—even those well outside humanities subjects—might well be able to benefit from the humanities’ distinct approaches to cultural, or indeed social, analysis.

INTRODUCTION

‘Ich bin ein Berliner.’ Several years ago, these four words were spray-painted on the eastern side of a section of the Berlin Wall in the city’s district of Prenzlauer Berg. The phrase, intoned by US President John F. Kennedy in a call for unity from the balcony of the Schöneberg Rathaus some 55 years earlier, had since become something of an international catchphrase, both in English and German. But here, on the wall, two further words had been added just afterwards: ‘Du nicht’. The addition radically altered the inclusive sense of Kennedy’s initial statement. The new phrasing seemed to call for, in something of a Dantean retaliation, a new enclosure, one that would establish fixed distinctions between Berliner and non-Berliner, between always-already-local and never-yet-of-here. The graffiti aimed to argue for putting a stop to the purported invasion of ‘new Berliners’ said to be gentrifying the city. Here, in the heart of the post-hip Kollwitzkiez, a few hundred metres from what remains of the original Berlin Wall, new intangible walls have been rising up: the walls of gentrification.

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Since the fall of the Wall, Berlin has opened its gates to a growing number of German and international tourists, investors and residents. The demographic changes which have resulted from this influx have radically transformed the city’s central districts, forcing out many of the areas’ original inhabitants on account of skyrocketing rents. This article seeks to explore, through the spray-painted word, the notion of what it means to be ‘a Berliner’ at a time when new practices of mobility (Valisena 2016; Faist 2013) in the EU and globally (Krätke 2004) are changing old paradigms of citizenship and ushering in new processes of place-making and identity construction. The post-unification history of Berlin is a key entry point for observing those present-day processes, helping scholars to problematise the category of local/non-local in a post-Schengen Europe. At the same time, the European citizenship narrative peddled by EU policy-makers and municipal governments, deemed self-indulgent by many, has been challenged by multiple forms of public, visual contestation visible across a number of global cities (Krätke 2004). Despite damage to building façades approaching some 50 million euro per year (Tzortzis 2008), murals and graffiti have proliferated across Berlin (Pugh 2015; Dembo 2013; Richardson and Skott-Mhyre, 2012). Exploring the collective imaginary to which this visual practice of dissensus (Rancière 2004) appeals can uncover the more-than-human entanglements that populate Berlin’s socio-ecological trajectories of inhabiting (Ingold 2000), from squatting to gardening to grocery shopping. Although contradictory and partial, these sprayed-on counter-narratives are foundational in revealing and broadcasting the contradictory and unequal political ecologies of living and dwelling in Berlin. In graffiti’s dialectical complexity, we can also observe how processes of exploitation, segregation and uneven appropriation continue to affect old and new citizens in Berlin. Such subaltern narratives are key in defining the German capital, particularly since

Figure 1. Stenciled graffiti in Schillerkiez, Neukölln supporting the 100% Tempelhofer Feld movement. Photograph by Daniele Valisena.
they are often neglected and hidden (or romanticised) by the shabby chic, poor-but-sexy narrative that former mayor Klaus Wowereit and the denizens of his era have built up. What does it mean to make space for these subaltern and alternative counter-narratives? What kind of imaginaries and social ecologies do they appeal to and support? And what is the place of the environment (built or natural) in those urban stories?

In order to answer such questions, this article adopts a walking methodology (Richardson 2015), which allowed the authors to ambulate around and through several central neighbourhoods in Berlin. This psychogeographic method enables researchers to sensorially and haptically experience the visual and socio-ecological trajectories borne by graffiti, highlighting some of the most significant urban political ecology struggles embedded in gentrification, tourism development and urban identity construction. While such a discursive method cannot claim to encompass the entire range of voices or counter-narratives that traverse the city, we do believe that it lets us speak to important stories that ‘speak’ on Berlin’s walls.

**From city of freedom to gentrification spiral**

Gentrification has been a defining factor behind the growth of numerous Western European cities, of which Berlin is one standout example. While gentrification’s socio-historical particularities differ from city to city, the oft-told narrative of gentrification tends to follow a common structure: 1) sprawling urban neighbourhood lands on the map with affordable real estate; 2) neighbourhood becomes magnet for young creative types; 3) young professionals and pioneering investors, drawn by the lure of hip living, move in; 4) international property developers take notice; 5) rents swiftly increase, leading to eviction of previous denizens; 6) slow violence is repeated in the shabby-chic barrio next door. It is a fate that recent years have befallen districts in numerous cosmopolitan capitals such as New York, Oslo and Shanghai (see e.g. Arkaraprasertkul 2018; Huse 2014). What is unique about the Berlin experience is the complete re-negotiation of the centre-periphery spatial ordering which the city has experienced twice during the past 70 years and which still affects the city’s socio-spatial dynamics at present (Bernt, Grell and Holm 2013, 14).

Berlin’s gentrification has become a focal point of local and national debates, and is today much a topic for everyday conversation around the city (Holm 2014, 2013, 2010). As of late 2018, nearly all of Berlin’s central neighbourhoods, as well as some areas outside the centre of the city, have been markedly gentrified in some fashion. The former inner neighbourhoods of Mitte, Prenzlauer Berg, Kreuzberg and Neukölln quite suddenly became the central areas of re-unified Germany’s new capital, a process which resulted in the subverting of the peripheral statuses that had subsumed those mostly poor areas for half a century. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the actions of the squatting movement led the emptied houses of the central districts to be inhabited by migrants, artists, punks, drug addicts, homeless people and an otherwise multifarious ensemble of citizens who seized the opportunity to appropriate and transform those neighbourhoods, and in so doing re-valued their peripheral nature. Then, when the Wall fell, everything changed. Gentrification first hit the city in a clockwise, wave-like movement: Mitte in the 1990s, Prenzlauer Berg in early 2000s, Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain in the early and late 2000s, then Neukölln and its newly invented Kiez, Kreuzkölln, over the past several years (Holm 2013, 174). Now, Mitte is home to corporate employees and big brand storefronts;
Prenzlauer Berg draws hipsters with family in tow; Neukölln and Kreuzberg are hubs for creative invasions. But gentrification rarely takes the form of a homogenous colonisation by English-speaking turtlenecked expats or a swift, uniform descent of Pal Zileri shops into multiple neighbourhoods. Islands of resistance co-exist alongside every slab of hipster pavement, forming collections of juxtapositions and non sequiturs, such as occupied houses in Mitte, Prenzlauer Berg and Kreuzberg that sit just alongside penthouses and shining residential complexes. To be sure, gentrification is complex, layered and processual. And as such, it should be studied as a multiplicity of gentrifications and social re-shuffling, and with a critical eye towards its historical embeddedness. The process is nothing new in large European cities, least of all Berlin, which over the past centuries has seen multiple groups move in and out of (and around) various porous and shifting neighbourhoods. Indeed, Berlin’s most recent gentrification has metastasised in and around districts which had already become gentrified in previous times and following previous processes. While there is no space here for a comprehensive historical overview of Berlin’s gentrification processes, suffice it to say that these uneven geographies have been shifting for well over a hundred years (Reick 2017).

Das graffiti, globally

A socio-cultural consideration of graffiti seems an apropos place to situate an ecocritical analysis of urban textual production. Indeed, it is often said that the history of graffiti is as old as the history of humanity itself (Lovata and Olton 2015). Scribbled drawings and paintings on rock walls were the first (recorded) form of human artistic expression, and indeed have a rich history in Europe, as much archaeological work on Northern Fennoscandia can attest. In fifteenth-century Rome, under the rule of the Church, the *pasquinate*—political satire and denunciations of social discontent—were disseminated via writings on a Hellenistic statue, becoming one of the era’s main political acts of dissent. This bold mocking of the eponymous hero Pasquino lasted for several centuries...
and became so embedded in the collective memory of Romans that the word is still used in modern Italian, referring to all visual forms of anonymous, bottom-up dissensus (Marucci 1988). During the French Revolution, many graffiti and satirical affiches appeared all around Paris, embellishing even the city’s aristocratic palaces (Vovelle 1985). In the twentieth century in many parts of the world, graffiti became a common means of expressing social discontent and drawing awareness to local socio-political issues and problems. Following the Mexican Revolution, the works of local muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros conveyed strong political and radical messages, helping mural dissensus to become recognised globally as a form of militant counter-narrative (Lee 1999; Rivera 1979). During the events of May ‘68 in Paris, graffiti was widely used, sprayed or drawn on all the most important symbolic buildings of the city, such as the Sorbonne and the Assemblée Nationale (Gasquet 2007; Besançon 2007). The sixty-eighthers used the street as a bottom-up political stage, transforming its walls into a laboratory for critical thinking and new imaginaries while undermining the old places of power legitimated by the repressive State apparatus. During the 1970s in Northern Ireland, graffiti and murals became visual manifestations of political support or contestation amidst bloody battles between loyalists and unionists (Rapp and Romberg, 2014). The walls, symbols of division, became spaces where groups could develop their own mis-en-scènes of their political role in a highly symbolic and spectacular way.

Within the context of Germany, and Berlin in particular, graffiti has played a large (if paradoxical) role as social protest art. In the former GDR, the use of posters, graffiti, and one-page Blätter (leaflets) became one of the most visible acts of social contestation—and, indeed, a petulant act of insubordination to GDR control; the Umweltblätter produced by the activists of the Umweltbibliothek in Prenzlauer Berg are one memorable example. Graffiti also plays a key role in the history of that edifice of segregation and discontent, the Berlin Wall. What began during the 1960s and 70s as a complex security system of barbed wire, guard towers and concrete walls that separated East from West—and embodied the anxieties of the Cold War in the process—was rebuilt and raised during the 1980s into a four metre high wall. This expanded surface area, intended to discourage refugees from the East, enabled it to become a canvas for dissidents, artists and others from the West to express their opinions and affiliations. Interestingly, too, because the first generation of Berlin-based graffiti artists were not Berliners per se but

Figure 3. One of the murals on the wall of the East Side Gallery in Berlin. Photograph by Matteo Bonazoni.
settlers in the American sector comprising punks, draft resisters and the children of US servicemen, the city’s initial graffiti writings were heavily influenced by the then burgeoning New York graffiti scene (Trotin 2016). While graffiti on the west side of the Wall blossomed, the (inaccessible) east side remained untouched and blank, the soulless colour of concrete. After the fall of the Wall in 1989, however, when the entire city became a haven for artists from both sides (and abroad), the graffiti and street art scenes flourished amidst the energetic atmosphere of newly found freedom—and free rent. The Eastern neighbourhoods of Mitte, Friedrichshain and Prenzlauer Berg turned into vibrant art districts in the post-Wall years on account of the spontaneous forms of artistic expression that had begun to germinate in the city. In 1990, artists from all over the globe were publicly invited to paint on the Wall’s empty east façades, celebrating reunification and expressing hopes for brighter future. Now known as the East Side Gallery, this is one of the largest open-air museums in the world and an important tourist attraction in Berlin. However, a number of the East Side murals were defaced over the years by graffiti tags and ‘illicit’ art, raising questions about the legality and cultural significance of street art. Despite graffiti being technically illegal in the city, Berlin is still often referred to as ‘the graffiti Mecca’ (Jakob 2015; Reinecke 2012), an accolade that surely contributes to the more than five million tourists who descend on the city each year (Visit Berlin 2017). As we aim to demonstrate in the four cases which follow, the manifold stories told through these spraypainted words and images are far more complex than the ‘anomic’ (Durkheim 1893) acts of a few outcasts or urban vandals. We argue that graffiti in Berlin, in particular the graffiti of anti-touristification, bears the power to make visible alternative (and at times subaltern) politics of dissensus. Such one-line manifestos evoke multiple imaginaries of locality and trans-locality which can be co-opted to aid political ecology scholars and policy-makers in formulating new forms of urban, local and global citizenship (Heise 2008).

Case 1: Berliner/innen: the right to the city and the invention of autochthony

The social processes of belonging and identity formation are often closely associated with place-making. Furthermore, one’s relationship to place is fundamental in defining belonging and self-representation in relation, or in opposition, to an ‘other’ (Sayad 1999). In nineteenth-century Germany, the concept of Blut und Boden (Germ. ‘blood and soil’) evoked the idealisation of a racially defined national body (‘blood’) united with a defined settlement area (‘soil’). In such thinking, rural, agricultural lifestyle forms are juxtaposed with industrialised, urban ones, as are notions of a sedentary and hegemonic German peasantry with ideas of progressive (and latterly, Jewish) nomadism. ‘Blood and soil’, which was co-opted by Nazi leaders as a core ideological slogan, is conceptually linked to the more contemporary German notion of Lebensraum, the belief that the German people must reclaim historically German areas of Eastern Europe into which they, and thereby the nation, could expand.4 The notion of an original, autochthonous connection to a specific locality, in relation to a presumed primacy—whether temporal, racial, divine or otherwise defined by senses of national belonging—is integral to defining communities’ imaginaries of citizenship and its space. In other words, it is key in deciding who can be considered a citizen and who a non-citizen. ‘Identity,’ as
Bourdieu (1980) has written, ‘is constructed in antithesis to alterity’, and yet it is at the same time a ‘life process’ (Sartre 1953) that is generated in a necessary relation to societal dynamics. The figure of the migrant, with its ‘double absence’ status of unfitting/foreigner (Sayad 1999), constitutes at once a permanent threat and a vital constituent in the ecology of citizenship. We argue that in order to fully understand the socio-spatial trajectories of citizenship in an urban space such as Berlin, scholars should also include environmental and socio-ecological analysis based on everyday life practices and livelihood strategies that spur from gardening and commoning to squatting and activism. Graffiti and visual representation constitute key cultural markers of those practices, revealing the manifold forms of dissensus that subvert the distribution of the sensible (Rancière 2004) in the political scene of Berlin. Borrowing from Swyngedouw and Ernstson (2018), the ob-scene of Berlin gentrification struggles may—albeit in an unsystematically and sketchy way—be revealed through the mise-en-scène of social, cultural and political dissensus.

One of the most important feats of a re-unified Berlin was its openness and inclusivity. In the years after die Wende, the city had been deserted by hundreds of thousands of people, who literally abandoned their apartments in Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg. That wave of out-migration left a myriad of spatial possibilities for artists, young professionals and various adventurers who saw value in otherwise precarious livelihoods—and in the opportunity to get a foothold on cheap real estate rentals—as a possibility to start anew. Many pre-Wall Berliners had preferred the job stability and comfortable housing units of West Germany, while the squatters had chosen Berlin, a city somehow stuck in between East and West with an uncertain future. Berlin became a destination where every person could find her own place. Just as the Normans staged and eternalised the conquest of England in the Bayeux Tapestry, the first wave of new Berliners who arrived in the aftermath of die Wende (the Peaceful Revolution) used the façades of buildings to establish their right to the city. The wir bleiben alle writing long stood on the façade of a building in Mitte on Brunnenstraße, a few hundred metres from Rosenthaler Platz (see Figure 4). In November 2009, the former occupants of this building, who had squatted there in the early 1990s, were evicted by a spectacular municipal action that brought in more than 600 armed policemen (Asmuth 2014).

The former occupiers tagged the line and adorned it with the deadly muzzle of a ghost-like snake about to devour a scapegoat. The voracious serpent has its mouth wide open; it does not see what it will ingest, but its appetite knows no obstacle. In this more-than-human allegory, the snake is the real estate market, which inexorably pursues its hunger for more investments in the city centre. The scapegoat figure represents the local dwellers, the heirs of the squatters’ movement which in the early 1990s repopulated many semi-abandoned buildings there. If we were to see this as a Berlinesque rendition of the Norse saga of Ragnarök, the blind snake which once slowly grew in the periphery of the world (e.g. former West Germany) is about to fulfil its destiny of re-unification by devouring Midgard (here, reunified Berlin), thus bringing to an end the order of things as they stood immediately following re-unification. Here, West German real estate investors become the dark army of Loki, the devious character who at the saga’s end provokes Ragnarök, the fall of the gods and ‘the end of the world’. In Berlin, this is the dark world of spatial, anti-
establishment freedoms inhabited by squatters, social movements and collectives in the 1990s.

In the case of Berlin, the imagined community of Berliner/innen (Berliners) can be seen to be a result of socio-historical processes of continual mobility that have characterised the city after each one of its historical cleavage points, from the construction of the Reich capital in the late 1800s, to the wall partition in 1961, then following die Wende in 1989. According to the Berlin and Brandenburg Census, one out of every three Berliners has a migrant background, which is to say that 1.24 million people in the city have a non-German close relative (ASBB 2018). While it is nearly impossible to locate consistent historical data about Germans who emigrated from another part of the country to Berlin, scholars have estimated that roughly another third of Berlin population is composed of Germans not raised in Berlin. The ‘everybody stays’ slogan (wir bleiben alle) reset the clocks of Berlin temporality, thus demarcating a new beginning for the city, legitimating post-Wende Berliners’ presence as a constituent part of the change brought by the Peaceful Revolution. It was indeed the invention of a new tradition (Anderson 1983) for post-1989 Berliners who, in one way, legitimated their own presence in the German capital as newly autochthonous. Theirs was a performed autochthony, one ascribed in situ via the squatting—or the re-appropriation—of a city that had been rejected by many of its former inhabitants. It

Figure 4. A no-longer-existent graffiti along Brunnenstraße. Photograph by Jotquadrat, distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license.
was, moreover, an inclusive autochthony: anyone who shared and performed the vision of freedom which Berlin embodied could become a Berliner.

Berlin’s unique history shapes and informs its present-day socio-ecological trajectories in distinct ways. The very definition of the local Berliner requires socio-spatial and temporal specification: a Berliner born and raised in Charlottenburg or Steglitz may have completely different family backgrounds from a Berliner from Lichtenberg, Marzahn or pre-wall Prenzlauer Berg. Similarly, Turkish or Vietnamese (or second and third generation German) migrants raised in Moabit, Neukölln or Kreuzberg may share the same socio-economic struggles and anxieties of their former east Berlin neighbours. Nevertheless, the arrival of hundreds of thousands of new Berliners from 1990 onwards—primarily from other parts of Germany, but after the 1993 Schengen free movement agreement, from other parts of Europe as well—has resulted in the creation of an opposition between native-born and long-term dwellers on one side, and the newcomers on the other. This rather simple dualistic narrative makes it difficult, however, to pinpoint a singular moment at which the incorporation process of a critical mass of local Berliners ended and in its place began a new era in which newly arrived Berliners are considered either foreigners or migrants. Moreover, the current state of affairs is one in which people who moved to the city a month ago are dismissive of those who did so two weeks ago. One might use ‘national belonging’ as a category, but EU free movement legislation, along with the arrival of thousands of Germans from the former West Germany, contribute to the most recent process of gentrification which began around the time of the Bankgesellschaft Berlin (BGB) crisis in 2001.\(^5\) That event, together with the 2008 global economic crisis, may well have accelerated the gentrification that began with the arrival of the first squatters in Prenzlauer Berg and Mitte in the early 1990s.

The \textit{wir bleiben alle} ‘transcorporeal’ (Alaimo 2010) graffiti tells the story of resistance and struggle for housing, but it also tells a story of despair and ruination. Berlin once was—and to many newcomers still is—a city of freedom, a freedom made possible by the city’s liminal role as a frontier space and by its impermeability to capital interest due to the socialist ruling of its eastern zones. The collapse of the GDR broke apart the inner frontier within the old German capital, prying open new spaces that appealed to various freedom-seekers. The lack of services and job opportunities was considered a disgrace by many east Berliners, who, unfamiliar with the capitalist market, simply opted for moving to former west Germany in order to improve their living conditions. The empty houses and streets they left behind meant new possibilities for squatters, artists and other people looking for their own space to claim. The return of capital interest, which followed the reverse path taken by former Berlin companies such as Siemens and Lufthansa post-1945, swallowed their dreams alongside their living spaces. This recurring historical cycle has been propagated by contemporary social groups empowered by new forms of mobility, such as that of the so-called Swabians, a consideration we turn to next.

**Case 2. Not in my bäckerei: Schwabenhass, the creation of an otherness**

The transformation of the inclusive ‘everybody stays’ message became manifest through the personification of a new ‘other’, a novel social category which incorporated a radical political
message distinct from the partaking of the city space which occurred in the early 1990s. This new character on the Berlin imaginary was the wealthy Southern German, the champion of private property and material affluence, a category which was defined as Swabians. In German, *Schwaben* (Swabians) refers to a region in southwest Bavaria. Synecdochally, however, the term represents all southern Germans who have played a key role in the shifting dynamics of real estate in the reunited German capital. Many arrivals from southern Germany contributed to the displacement of local residents by buying up property in Berlin at low prices, then either selling it to large real estate development conglomerates, renting it to the growing numbers of expats and tourists, or keeping it for occasional weekend use—thereby leaving many residences to sit empty for much of the year. Prenzlauer Berg, in particular the bohemian area of the Kollwitzkiez, has experienced a major re-population shift between 1990 and 1995, during which more than half of its residents moved out, replaced by new denizens. This figure has reached up to 80% in recent years (Peeters 2013). Many of the people who have moved in during this shift have origins in southern Germany. One of the visual markers of this *Schwabenisierung* of certain areas of Berlin is the sprouting up of *Schwäbische Bäckereien*, South German bakeries holding strong symbolic and material representations in a country where bread plays a key role in everyday identity. Changing up a window display from presenting a *Schrippe* (Berliner dialect for a small loaf of bread) to a *Weckle* (the Swabian version thereof) might be an innocent marketing practice, but to more historically sensitive Berliners, this simple commercial operation is tantamount to a colonial act. As Feuerbach, a Swabian philosopher who moved to Berlin to study with Hegel, put it, ‘we are what we eat’.

The renowned ‘Schwabenhass’ (hatred for Swabian people) and the boycotting of Swabian shops, which befell areas of Berlin (in particular during 2013 in Prenzlauer Berg), was a cause célèbre in the German press at the time. Posters, stickers and graffiti began to appear around the former squatters’ districts in East Berlin—places which have only recently become known as ‘Little Sweden’ on account of the Nordic young professional couples who have settled there. Slogans such as ‘Welcome to Schwabylon’, ‘Ostberlin wünscht dir eine gute Heimfahrt’, 6 ‘Schwäben raus!’ 7 and ‘Wir sind ein Volk. Und ihr seid ein anderes’ 8 have been spray painted onto these buildings, reproducing, contesting and undermining national stereotypes in order to produce a space considered proper for Berlin—and for Berliners. For example, adorning the side of one Prenzlauer Berg building was the phrase, ‘Don’t buy from the Swabians’ (see Figure 5), a boycott imperative that also was posted on the façades of Jewish businesses in 1933 following Hitler’s rise to power (Wilder 2013). The phrase was also tagged with ‘TSH’, ostensibly an acronym for ‘Total Swabian Hate.’ The contraposition with die Schwaben, portrayed as colonisers, works as a space- and identity-building narrative, deconstructing the Berlin freedom story and thereby unveiling another story of homogenisation and inner-colonisation which becomes silenced in the nationality-informed criteria of data gathering operated by German census and economic statistics.

The constructed antagonistic social group *die Schwaben* functions in Berlin as the oppositional character—an Other—in the self-identification processes of Berliners. It is not, in point of fact, a geographically defined reasoning which has created the Southern German, but rather a socio-economic dynamic, one that undermines the right to the city for long-time Berliners via the enforcement of market-oriented housing acquisition by economically well-off Germans. And, indeed, it is in southern Germany, namely the
Länder of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg (along with the city-state of Hamburg), that most of the wealth of the modern-day Germany is concentrated.

Case 3: Hipsters, green spaces and German identity

As we suggested in the two previous sections, spatial and socio-ecological practices are key in structuring place-bound linkages which help contrast precariousness and detachment in high-mobility urban contexts such as in the case of Berlin. Green spaces in urban environments are particularly open spaces—both figuratively and literally—which however engender environmentally cognizant practices but may also contribute to gentrification processes on account the aesthetic values they embody. As important spaces of inclusion, urban gardens have become a defining characteristic of many contemporary cities, environments in which distinct knowledge and cultures materially merge in a shared practice of space (Tornaghi 2014). In Berlin, Prinzessinnengarten, a participatory community urban agriculture experiment at Moritzplatz (Kreuzberg) was begun in Summer, 2009 by area residents and gardening enthusiasts. Today, some 500 different crops are grown there, with particular attention given to heirloom and rare varieties. But the garden has recently been accused of fostering gentrification, much to the dismay of the neighbourhood’s older inhabitants, many of whom are of Turkish extraction. The urban garden came into being as something of a mobile gardening process, taking over an area that had remained unbuilt since World War II (in large part due to zoning complications and its proximity to the Berlin Wall) but which had been earmarked for possible urban development (Müller 2011). Both Tempelhofer Feld and Prinzessinnengarten are paradigmatic examples of the contradictory power of socio-ecological imaginaries. Urban gardening, food and environmental justice, trans-national conviviality, commoning and degrowth perspectives, while embedded within practices at stake in these two green spaces, can lead to contested political ecologies, attracting capital interests and affecting housing and neighbourhood social dynamics. The booming of greening projects all across Europe and North America is only the latest of the gentrification strategies adopted by various municipal governments (Cole et al. 2017). The positioning and the personal and group situatedness of Berliners is revealed by the
Figure 6. The entrance to Prinzessingarten, Kreuzberg. Photograph by Daniele Valisena.

Figure 7. A building façade in Bergmannkiez. Photograph by Daniele Valisena.
relationships such actors develop with such spaces. The difference between the regeneration and colonisation of an area is rather more subtle than what one might imagine; the figure of the hipster, mobile, de-rooted urban users who reify urban trend(ines)s, can become the best—albeit involuntary—supporters of gentrification and touristification. The case of Tempelhofer Feld shows that greening imaginaries are not necessarily drivers of equitable or positive outcomes for the actors involved (Genz 2015), yet they respond to the same uneven geographies and practices that inform political ecologies of urban organisation.

In a manner similar to Prinzessinnengarten, but on a wider city-scale, Tempelhofer Feld has long been discussed as an ambiguous space within Berlin’s urban landscape. In a city so diverse and mobile, areas such as Tempelhof are key spaces of encounter—social and societal crossroads where a shared sense of place can be built among people from very different backgrounds and cultures. From a Turkish family barbequing at the weekend to urban gardeners, skaters or joggers, Tempelhof brings together a wide range of Berliners (Lachmund 2013). Schillerkiez, a long-time working class and poor neighbourhood—and one holding populous refugee camps—lies just adjacent to the park’s main entrance (Genz 2015). Among its many hip restaurants, bars, Turkish social clubs and old shops is the image of a green whale (see Figure 1), a survival of the 100% Tempelhofer Feld campaign. In 2014, a referendum sanctioned the non-cementification of the former airport area, thereby cementing its place as one of the largest urban parks in Europe. The referendum process was a political success for hundreds of bottom-up social movements and for the thousands of routine users of the park area, which on account of its unique position at the crossroads of the inner neighbourhoods of Neukölln, Kreuzberg, and Tempelhof constitutes a fundamental waypoint of aggregation and sociability (Bidart 1988) for the city. The image of the Tempelhof whale embodies the fragile condition and the overwhelming importance of the space, which is depicted as a commons, a shared space which does not belong to or follow any private corporate interest. Cetaceans have long embodied and been used to refer to various socio-environmental imaginaries (Huggan 2018). As with the whale, the park is free—in German Freiheit means both liberty and political freedom—but it also remains free of any looming neoliberal or otherwise economic development plan. At the same time, it is this very allure of freedom which has turned the nearby areas hip, provoking speedy gentrification process nearby in districts such as Schillerkiez in southwestern Neukölln.

**Case 4: The one-week stand and the Berlin hates you campaign**

In Europe, the rise of the year-round, so-called ‘city break’ has followed a decline in the traditional two-week holiday and the growth of budget airlines across Europe. Youthful mobile types of the so-called ‘Ryanair generation’ (Giorgi and Raffini 2015) are the most prominent among the wave of low-cost tourists who squeeze in long-weekend jaunts across Europe. Primarily under the age of 40, these short-time city users are prone to following seemingly unconventional trajectories, fuelled by a desire to experience the city ‘like a local’. This living-like-a-local verve that informs contemporary tourist practices is particularly pernicious for cities such as Berlin because of the slow violence (Nixon 2011) with which it undermines the social and economic landscape of residential neighbourhoods. The not-a-tourist aesthetic has also been co-opted by tourism providers such as Airbnb into their
marketing campaigns. While such enterprises purport to offer precarious denizens a means of earning some pocket cash, they have ended up being Trojan horses in residential neighbourhoods such as Prenzlauer Berg, Kreuzberg and Neukölln. Landlords quickly recognise the advantages of renting apartments to tourists via Airbnb rather than to people staying for longer periods via standard rental agreements. This is the terrain on which the Berlin Hates You campaign was formed (see Figure 8).

The geographical centre of the Berlin Hates You movement has been Friedrichshain (Novy 2017). The former east Berlin neighbourhood was officially amalgamated with Kreuzberg in 2001 to form the city’s second largest Bezirk (administrative area). Unlike long-multicultural Kreuzberg, Friedrichshain had never experienced an onslaught of foreign or tourist arrivals, and the huge descent of young creative types in the 2000s served a major shock to the neighbourhood. In this change, the distinctive differences that often exist between tourists and migrants became more and more blurred (Costa and Martinotti 2003). This was particularly the case in the eyes of east Berliners, who were denouncing the lack or the disappearance of many of their traditional gathering spaces, from Kneipen to squares to other areas for cultural events. At the same time, those who initially might have been tourists in many cases ended up staying put, thereby significantly shifting the very social structure of many Kieze. Parallel to this, the municipal government openly encouraged tourist arrivals while embedding the private sector more and more in the city’s tourism policies. For instance, the Visit Berlin tourist city portal itself is now a public-private legal entity that promotes the city on behalf of the municipality. Such moves are the result of this liberal shift in tourism policy embraced by the city in the early 2000s (Novy 2017).

One of the main drivers of the gradual dispossession affecting newer and older residents has been Airbnb. As with other tourist destinations across Europe and the US, Berlin has seen the spectacular rise of Airbnb housing offerings. The platform has radically shifted the housing market of the city, leading to a legal ban by the municipality in April 2016—which was then revoked two years later. While overnighting at an Airbnb is known for being light on the pocketbook, bringing two-to-three-day infusions of foreign, urban and touristic influences into the city (Hunt 2017), the problem in Berlin is that too many people end up

![Figure 8. A sticker made by Berlin Hates You to support its Rollkoffer (rolling luggage) anti-touristification campaign.](image)
doing exactly the same things at exactly the same time (Font 2017). Professional real estate businessmen then saw the opportunity to control the housing market even more, negatively affecting it twofold: by reducing the number of free apartments, and by simultaneously raising the rental prices of the apartments which escaped Airbnb. According to Deutsche Welle, during the summer of 2017, there were some 139,000 beds available on Airbnb in Berlin (Knight 2017). Entire blocks were turned into tourist reservoirs right in the heart of the city, forcing locals—but also ‘new Berliners’—to move to more peripheral areas such as Lichtenberg and southeast Neukölln. Moreover, large, digital economy companies such as Zalando and Google have bought up entire apartment blocks for housing their employees. The process set off a chain reaction that pushed even further in the city’s outskirts, and has even been linked to the socio-political effects of Europe’s recent so-called ‘migration crisis’ and the recent rise of neo-nationalist political movements such as AfD (Reig and Norum 2019). As in other countries, the political and humanitarian efforts of the German government to materially sustain and house refugees has been perceived as an anti-patriotic and unjust practice by marginalised Berliners and those dependent on social benefits. These (sometimes former East German) citizens have been forced out towards the outskirts by increasing rents, and perceive the federal and municipal governments to have neglected them while favouring ‘foreigners’, whether they be southern Germans, European young professionals or Syrian refugees. Thus, the once-localised gentrification of Berlin can be seen to have far-reaching consequences across the entirety of the German national landscape, and beyond.

Conclusion

Hypermobility, housing policy and the constant influx of tourists, as well as the ambiguous role played by greening spaces and translocal (e.g. food) ecologies are among the main signifiers of present-day gentrification processes globally. We have attempted in this article to tackle these various processes by relying upon mural forms of textual and visual dissensus in the German capital. By unfolding the openness of the migrant figure in the context of Berlin, we have sought to emphasise the limits of reductionist categories such as local/foreigner, us/them, etc., showing how temporal and spatial processes concerning identity construction are always in the making, and subject to continuous transformation and signification. Shifts in food ecologies such as those linked to bread typologies and consumption trends in connection to regional and local alimentary cultures are interesting in that they reveal the place- and identity-making power of food understood as an important recipient of material and cultural assemblages. Similarly, the everyday life practices concerning the relationship locals have with green spaces, and their transformative power within a dialectic of urban regeneration (e.g. greening gentrification), have been underscored through the contested nature of parks and urban gardens such as Tempelhof and Prinzessinnengarten. Finally, our brief reflection on the opaque frontier between urban users and citizens, analysed by enlightening the role of Airbnb in its entanglements with housing and tourist hospitality policies, shows how urban environments and imaginaries are continually mobilised by both citizens and speculators.

As the introduction to this special issue sets out, the environmental humanities as a field have contributed to new forms of academic enquiry which seek to address multiple crises across both environmental and academic climates (Huggan, this issue).
Human responses to environmental change, multiple and manifold as they are, may indeed be best served by scholarship that considers both the practices and representations of socio-cultural interventions. Furthermore, in a climate of institutional cost-cutting in which the humanities are increasingly being called upon to justify their relevance to society, perhaps humanistic research methodologies which have been developed and honed by scholars seeking to address pressing socio-environmental concerns may also be used by scholars outside the humanities in order to bring depth to their own scholarship, thereby remind non-humanists (and academic administrators) of the critical nature of such approaches and frameworks. In other words, it is not just studies of environmental crises which can benefit from multidisciplinary frameworks, methods and analyses, but indeed research across a multitude of socio-cultural phenomena. Indeed, scholars working outside studies of the environment might look to the toolkits being used by colleagues from multiple disciplines who are working on environmental issues. While it is true that a single narrative may not be able to speak for all of humanity (Huggan, this issue), nor is a single narrative necessarily a single narrative. As the cases of graffiti we have analysed have shown, even seemingly simple, singular textual exemplars or statements themselves consist of layers of meaning, intentionality and socio-cultural histories. By mobilising an environmental humanities perspective, then, we have aimed to show how human and more-than-human storying and imaginaries concur in shaping urban ecologies in a contested way. Green spaces and the category of ‘locality’ are some of the most ambiguous elements of the right to the city (Lefebvre 1991 [1974]) and the struggle of touristification, and both can mobilise the same spaces and similar narratives. Gentrification and touristification are two of the most evocative and urgent struggles within urban political ecology, but their polymorphic and ambiguous natures and manifestations require, we argue, the evocative and imaginative power of storying (Van Dooren and Rose 2012) in order to be better grasped and understood. A walking approach inspired by recent work across the environmental humanities has helped us trace back and summon the material and immaterial narratives of contestation surrounding gentrification and rights to the city which persist to this day in Berlin.

Finally, this article has sought to make evident not just the importance of material texts or the necessary textual emphases of socio-cultural production, but also to draw attention to the fact that the production and consumption of social and cultural texts must include the layered meanings and histories of the texts themselves, as well as the embedded cultural context in which they exist. While an ecocritical approach might, for example, question or contest the prototypical relationship between literature and the environment (or a political or aesthetic focus to a text), a socio-ecological analysis might lay bare the contestations and complexities of ongoing political and societal processes that take place beyond mainstream voices or frames. Just as Heise’s (2008, 2016) ecocritical work shows extinction to be an ongoing process rather than merely a set of final ends, the material complexities and the complex materialities of commonly reproduced dichotomies such as nature/culture, insider/outsider and local/non-local may be best understood via multiple forms of contextualised analyses that are at once textual and social.
Notes

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2. The fabled ‘jelly doughnut’ interpretation of this phrase (‘I am a Berliner’), which often supersedes discussion on the actual substance of Kennedy’s speech, has been addressed thoroughly elsewhere (see Eichhoff 1993).

3. Wowereit coined the slogan ‘Berlin is poor but sexy’ in 2003 as a response to the rising debts and the change in demographics, cultural and economic activities (Landler 2006).

4. As scholars such as Frank Uekötter (2006) and Jens Lachmund (2013) have shown, an ecological scientific reasoning had a key role in defining those narratives, albeit in perverse and necropolitical (Mbembe 2003) ways. Similar work has been carried out by environmental historians, as in the case of Spain under Franco dictatorship (Gorostiza 2018), and also Italy (Biasillo, 2018; Von Hardenberg and Armiero 2018).

5. The city’s state-owned banking house that, before becoming insolvent, fostered indiscriminate real estate development in Berlin during the 1990s and which originated much of the city’s debt, amounting to over 30 billion euro. See Krätke, op. cit., 2004.

6. East Germany wishes you a pleasant journey home.

7. Swabians go away.

8. We are one people; and you all are another.

9. The refugee crisis, with the arrival of over 6000 people in Berlin within just one week following Angela Merkel’s decision to open German borders in 2015, was used by the municipal government as a way to modify the urban planning of Tempelhof, in order to build new temporary housing for the refugees, and, at the same time, re-opening the possibility to develop commercial and housing planning on the area of the former airport. The controversial management of the crisis, as well as the concentration of so many people in the old hangar space, have been strongly contested by activists. See Valisena, D. 2016. 100% Tempelhofer Feld. An Urban Political Ecology of Spatial Freedom in Berlin, presented at Undisciplined Environments Conference, Stockholm; and the documentary by Brazilian director Karim Ainouz, Zentralflughafen THF, 2018.

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