

The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory.
Susanne C. Knittel. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. Pp.364. USD55 hardback.

Susanne Knittel's substantial work is organized along two axes: Grafeneck, a castle located in southern Germany is the first site of memory that she explores. Prior to the war it served, and does once again, as a home for the mentally ill and disabled. Under the Nazis, Grafeneck became a killing center where people with disabilities were murdered as part of the Nazi euthanasia program. The history of the site opens the way for Knittel to explore more expansively – and to challenge – how euthanasia itself has been treated within the larger Holocaust discourse, and how people with disabilities, victims of the racial ideology of National Socialism, have been marginalized in processes associated with memorialization and historical justice. The second axis of the text concerns a very different context, namely the site of the Risiera di San Sabba, the only death camp located in Italy. While most Jewish prisoners deported to the Risiera were later transferred to death camps in Germany or Poland, Yugoslav partisans and civilians, seen by many Italians fascists and nationalists as posing a particularly menacing threat to Italian irredentist ambitions, were victims of mass killings at the Risiera itself. The site thus provides Knittel the opportunity to explore broader questions regarding identity, ethnicity and the fiercely debated question of Italian complicity and victimhood during the war, a binary that continues to inform and complicate Italian memory culture of this period.

As a literary scholar, Knittel's analysis of these two sites and the cultural production that surrounds them present the organizing principle for the text. As Knittel remarks, "I read memorials and literature together as dual facets of a single site. This approach allows me to show how these sites fit into the broader framework of the cultural production and dissemination of memory and to identify patterns that lead to the exclusion and marginalization of certain minority memories"(25). Thus, while Knittel's discussion of Germany and Italy remain quite separate from one another, her ability to weave together analyses of text and place creates a comprehensive commentary on the evolution of memory, albeit in two very different contexts.

In chapters 1 through 3, after providing the reader with a historical contextualization of Grafeneck and an overview of the Nazi eugenics program, the author explores the challenges of remembering and coming to terms with the violence that the Nazi euthanasia program embodied. Within Germany, the marginalization of victims of Nazi euthanasia was evidenced by the fact that medical personnel in the camps were rarely brought to trial or even banned from practicing medicine, and that former victims seldom received compensation for their suffering. But the reluctance to acknowledge the atrocities of the eugenics program was not simply an issue of monetary redress and legal justice; rather, the lack of acknowledgement, as Knittel rightly points out, speaks to society's attitudes toward disability: to the stigmatization that disability continues to embody for many, and to the challenges of acknowledging victims who may not be able to speak for themselves, particularly in political contexts and scholarly fields where survivor testimony holds a privileged place.

With this observation, Knittel expands her analysis of the treatment of the euthanasia program to include the challenge of redress and dealing with the past in cultural and literary terms. Her criticism of both the field of Holocaust studies and disability studies for marginalizing the Nazi

euthanasia program undeniably points to lacunae in both fields, but it also illustrates ways in which these fields, like German society itself, may be changing. This argument is enforced by Knittel's reading of 1950s German texts, such as Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, and the tendency on the part of critics and readers to ignore the author's treatment of disability therein. More contemporary texts speak to how this trend is changing. In her discussion of the recently erected Monument of the Gray Buses and other "sites," Knittel documents the increasing interest that has emerged with regard to the Nazi euthanasia program. Not only does this evolution in the memory of a marginalized aspect of the Holocaust point to the ways in which our perceptions of the past are constantly renegotiated; as Knittel writes, the growing number of sites of memory that take up the topic of disability are important in that they engender "a critical engagement with and reevaluation of the assumptions about what the Holocaust was and how it relates to broader historical and contemporary mechanisms of othering, exclusion and prejudice" (132-133).

The second half of the book, chapters 5 through 7, moves from southern Germany to northeastern Italy and the city of Trieste in particular. Trieste's proximity to the former Yugoslavia and its history as a port for the Habsburg Empire have made it a place where topics of history, memory, and national identity continue to spark intense debate. With this backdrop, Knittel analyses the memorial at the Risiera di San Sabba, which began its life as a contested site of memory almost immediately after the war's end, in 1945, when the Communist Counsel on the Liberation of Trieste organized a ceremony at the Risiera that, despite the attendant controversies, established the Risiera as "an icon of the Communist resistant" (193). This battle marked the first attempt of many to control the narrative of the Risiera. In 1965, when the site became a national monument, it was reframed as a site of memory for the anti-Communist wartime resistance. In 1975, the ceremonies accompanying the resurrection of the Risiera memorial emphasized the sacrifice of all victims, describing all as war heroes. The ahistorical nature of these narratives meant that there was no differentiation between victims of racial persecution and political persecution, making the issue of Italian complicity in war crimes as fuzzy as always, and leaving the site vulnerable to repoliticization. In this era, and particularly after the 1976 war crimes trial in Trieste, the site of the Risiera was used to perpetuate an anti-Communist narrative that emphasized the deportation of Jewish prisoners to death camps in Germany and Poland and portrayed Yugoslav partisans as "non-innocent" victims. In other words, the trial contributed to the image of Italians as contributing only minimally to the maintenance of the camp and to the atrocities committed there.

Knittel makes a compelling argument that links the memory wars at the Risiera with the growing prominence of other sites of memory in the region, such as the Foiba di Basovizza, a site that further complicates the perpetrator-victim binary. Basovizza commemorates the mass killing of Italians by Yugoslav partisans from 1943-1945. (The bodies of victims were thrown into deep crevices common to the region, called *foibe*.) Once again, a narrative of victimhood, this time at the hands of Yugoslav partisans – precludes a critical engagement with the past. "Contemporary Italian memory discourse," writes Knittel, "is founded on a rhetoric of victimhood and mourning, which privileges emotional engagement over critical reflection..." (217-218). In other words, the Basovizza memorial, like the Risiera, does not engage critically with the past, and with Italian complicity with regard to atrocities that are remembered at both sites.

As Knittel's analysis expands from physical sites to cultural ones, her discussion touches on other important modes of production that speak to the politicization of memory in the region, and in Italy more generally. Indeed, Knittel argues that such sites go further than previous narratives that affirmed the myth of the Italians as *brava gente* (good people) by including Fascists as well: "in comparison to the Nazis and the Yugoslavs," explains Knittel, "the Fascists were the lesser evil" (212). Analyses of popular television dramas such as *Perlasca* and *Il cuore nel pozzo* are relevant not for their artistry or historical accuracy but because of the way in which they both reflect and help shape this collective identity that, as Knittel states, is "based on a shared narrative of heroism and victimhood in the face of an external aggressor" (235). In this analysis, as in her subsequent discussion of literary representation, Knittel displays ways that narrative itself can and should be considered a site of memory, and how such representations are illustrative of the relationship between past and present, and of the evolution of the memory of the violent past.

The major challenge that Knittel's work presents lies in her attempt to create a comparative framework for such complex and different issues. From an analysis of memory, disability and euthanasia in Germany to an exploration of memory, identity, and victimhood in Italy, this book could easily have been two separate monographs. In this sense, Chapter Four, which seeks to connect the first half of the book to the second, falls short of its mission. Yes, there are ways in which the histories of Grafeneck and the Risiera intersect, but the fact that the perpetrators at Grafeneck were later transferred to the Risiera, like the liminality of both sites in the larger national memory discourse that they occupy, does not make an adequate connection. Knittel does suggest that both sites speak to the broader question of European memory, which may indeed be a good framework in which to situate a comparison, but the author only fleetingly explores European memory as such. Likewise the concept of the 'historical uncanny' does not meaningfully connect the two axes of the text. Indeed, the concept seemed unnecessary in an otherwise rich discussion of the ways in which representation and memorialization say as much about the communities who construct them as they do about the individuals and acts they commemorate.

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