

2015

Maria Stehle. Ghetto Voices in Contemporary German Culture: Textscapes, Filmscapes, Soundscapes. Rochester: Camden House, 2012. 205 pp.

Gizem Arslan
University of Michigan - Ann Arbor, ga56@cornell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [German Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Arslan, Gizem (2015) "Maria Stehle. Ghetto Voices in Contemporary German Culture: Textscapes, Filmscapes, Soundscapes. Rochester: Camden House, 2012. 205 pp.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 39: Iss. 1, Article 13. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1827>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Maria Stehle. Ghetto Voices in Contemporary German Culture: Textscapes, Filmscapes, Soundscapes. Rochester: Camden House, 2012. 205 pp.

Abstract

Review of Maria Stehle. Ghetto Voices in Contemporary German Culture: Textscapes, Filmscapes, Soundscapes. Rochester: Camden House, 2012. 205 pp.

Keywords

Germany, 20th and 21st century, inner cities, multiculturalism, contemporary cities, hip hop, minority literature, film and culture

Maria Stehle. *Ghetto Voices in Contemporary German Culture: Textscapes, Filmscapes, Soundscapes*. Rochester: Camden House, 2012. 205 pp.

Maria Stehle's *Ghetto Voices in Contemporary German Culture* is a welcome contribution to the vast and growing body of scholarship on transnational, comparative, and interdisciplinary approaches to German literature and culture after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The study takes as its focus tropes of the ghetto in German literature, film, and music and ways in which these forms of cultural expression address questions of race, minority culture, performance, gender, and authenticity. Stehle concedes that the ghetto is not an analytical term but a search term that can stand for immobility, confinement, and exclusion. As such, Stehle uses the ghetto "to describe a changing political landscape from the perspective of minority cultural production" (12). She argues in addition that the ghetto of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century Germany is a contingent, fragmented space that can invert ideas of center and margin and subvert antiquated notions of spatial, national, and ethnic unity. Stehle's authors, filmmakers, and musicians resist and transform the position of the marginal and racially marked Other into one from which they "claim space and agency and foster social and political change" (5).

In the first chapter, Stehle investigates the search for new kinds of identification allowed by the ghetto trope in the works of the Turkish-German author Feridun Zaimoğlu's novel *Abschaum* (1997), as well as *Kanak Sprak* (1995) and *Koppstoff* (1998) (the latter two a series of protocols based on interviews with Turkish-German youth). Zaimoğlu's texts evince a "citational and performative approach to language and identity" (41) and include a variety of translocal references to African-American hip hop culture. As such, they counter neoliberal and racist undertones in German media discourse in the early and mid-1990s in the wake of Neo-Nazi arson attacks on immigrants. Zaimoğlu defies reductive images of the Other as silent victim, claiming voice and agency for himself and the Other in the German urban landscape where provincialism and nationalism persist.

Chapter 2 addresses the politics of narrative, identification, and representation in six ghetto films. Stehle convincingly contrasts two films that delineate the ghetto as coherent space and four that depict it as "fragmented, amorphous, and ambiguous" (66). The coherent images in the former confine and define, while fragmentation and ambiguity in the latter work against a history of radical excision of the Other. These latter films imitate, parody, and transform stylistic and narrative tropes from American "hood films," shedding light on the processes that construct the ghetto and the Other in post-Wall Germany. While existing scholarship deems these latter films politically unproductive, Stehle

argues that their search for alternative structures of authority and space constitutes their intervention in the German media and cultural spheres.

In Chapter 3, Stehle extends her analysis to urban space in the soundscapes of German hip hop culture and rap music in twenty-first century Germany. This terrain proves much more difficult to navigate than text and film; the voices are motley, often contradictory, and have varied and at times ambiguous agendas. In her analysis of gender dynamics, nationalist imagery, and the evocation of a transatlantic imaginary in the German hip hop scene, Stehle argues that German rap music translates various histories of racial and gender exclusions to the German context. On the one hand, performances of authenticity in German rap deconstruct and challenge racialized spaces and open up multiethnic ones. On the other hand, these performances risk glossing over racial, economic, and political exclusions still operative in twenty-first century Germany.

Throughout the work, Stehle's detailed discussions of the trajectory of political debates in German media on ghettoization and multiculturalism are particularly informative and effective. These reveal the neoliberal and nationalist undertones in German media discourse. They thus contextualize and clarify the political stakes of the interventions made by the works in question. More pointedly, however, Stehle reveals how German media outlets can become a performance and parody of themselves, at times unwittingly complicit in the very artistic projects they dispraise. Her chapter on ghetto filmscapes too is compelling in its choice of contrasting two cliché films with four that manifest a more chaotic negotiation of ghetto space. Here, Stehle's critical attention to the films' very search for alternative spaces and messy contact zones offers a nuanced corrective to existing scholarship's narrower focus on the ultimate success of this search.

What remains insufficiently defined and developed is Stehle's use of the term "third space" in the German context since 1989. "Third space," attributed to Homi Bhabha, is a prevalent concept in postcolonial studies and scholarship on Turkish-German migration and often refers to alternative spaces for cultural production and intercultural communication. Stehle refers to it continually as a possible alternative to spaces of exclusion and othering. However, she does little to define this apparently crucial term. A more thorough definition would have helped delineate the contours of the alternative spaces of cultural production that she embraces. She also neglects to engage with existing scholarship on "third space" that reveals the schema of separate worlds implicit in this concept. As it stands, Stehle's terminological choice of "third space" does not adequately account for contextual interlinks and interrelationships, particularly in the realms of race, minority culture, and gender. This is particularly puzzling, given her investment in messy contact zones and in the ghetto as contingent space.

Another theoretical lacuna resides in the term "authenticity" in the context of German hip hop. Stehle astutely refuses dichotomous and static definitions of

ghetto authenticity in German rap music and concedes that claims to authenticity can confirm clichés and fuel social paranoia about ghettos. However, her analysis does not sufficiently address or acknowledge the commercialization of German rap music and financial pressures to “keep it real.” Instead, Stehle generally regards the music and videos as artistic and not as commercial projects. Especially given Stehle’s insistence on German hip hop’s translocal links with American hip hop and urban cityscapes, her analysis would have benefited from some engagement with American and British scholarship on the interlinks between hip hop, authenticity, and commercialization.

In sum, *Ghetto Voices in Contemporary German Culture* is a well-researched and informative study that explores text-, film- and soundscapes in compelling constellations. It argues convincingly for the German ghetto as a contingent and fragmented space that holds enormous potential to intervene in the neoliberal, nationalist, and racist premises of German culture and media discourse. Undoubtedly, this study would be of interest to a wide spectrum of readers with interests in contemporary cultural production in Germany in particular, and transnational approaches to the study of literature and culture more broadly.

Gizem Arslan
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor