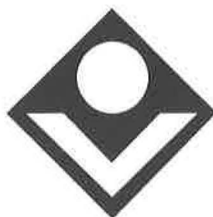
LITERATURE AND BELIEF

Guest Edited by Victoria Aarons



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"We Carry that History": an Interview with Nora Krug

Tahneer Oksman
Marymount Manhattan College

The cover of Nora Krug's *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* (2018) features an illustrated young woman dressed casually in jeans and high boots, superimposed over a photograph of a lush, green countryside. She looks contemplatively at the landscape ahead of her, legs planted on a small boulder, hands gently resting on her thighs. This is one of just a few images readers see of our narrator/author, in a book that is as much about looking outward—carefully investigating one's history and circumstances, as well as the history and circumstances of one's upbringing and family—as it is about the subjectivity and reflection inevitably tied to any such exploration.

As hinted on the cover, the book is a visual experiment of sorts, combining photography, clean and careful prose narration, short comics, and an archive of various objects presented through photographs and illustrations. It is also a book very much tied to what it means, two generations after World War II, to be German. (The cover image, which appears in a related form in the second chapter of the book, is an adaptation of German Romantic landscape artist Caspar David Friedrich's famous 1818 painting, *Wanderer above the sea of Fog.*)

Born in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 1977, Krug's visual memoir was written after she had moved to New York City and, as she explains in this interview, started to experience, in a more pronounced way, a deep cultural connection to her home country and also a continued sense of confusion and discomfort in relation to its past. Though at school she had been taught the perils and effects of Germany's fascistic, genocidal history—one powerful page in *Belonging* shows an excerpted speech by Adolf Hitler, which she had to carefully annotate and interpret for an eleventh grade assignment—she had never learned much by way of her own family's history. In the book, comprised of fifteen expansive chapters plus an introduction and epilogue, Krug returns to explore her own hometown and her father's hometown, to dig deep into her family's past. Of course, as in any such investigation, many aspects of her family's and her country's history remain mysteries. But the experience of the search, as any reader of the book will quickly see, is one of intensive, thoughtful investigation.

I interviewed Krug over a video chat call on an afternoon in early August of 2020. We were both at home, in our respective Brooklyn apartments, less than a mile from one another. As the grandchild of a Jewish Holocaust survivor, I was surprised at how deeply attached I felt to Krug's narrator from the very opening of her book. In fact, what struck me in reading the visual memoir, as well as over the course of our conversation, were the parallels in the frameworks surrounding our family histories, though we were coming to the story from different "sides." For both of us, a silence, like Friedrich's thick fog, surrounds our family's pasts. Each of us was raised with a domestic taboo against speaking of, or asking about, our family's histories—though for very different reasons—even as we were both deeply embedded in learning about the subject at school and via other, unfamiliar people's narratives.

Talking to Krug, who was born just two years before I was, made me realize how much a book like this one would have been a salve for me in my youth, when I was first learning the history of the Holocaust and reading one personal story after another. To know that the aftermath of the Holocaust haunts not just its victims, and

their descendants, but also perpetrators as well as those more indirectly involved—including "followers," and *their* descendants—was something of a belated revelation, and an oddly comforting one, at that.[1] As cartoonist Amy Kurzweil—also the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor—wrote, in an illustrated review of Krug's book, "Reading *Belonging* was like reading my own history's shadow."

As Krug pointed out in the interview, many books have been written and published, especially in Germany, by and about children and grandchildren of Nazi perpetrators. What makes hers stand out—besides its brilliant design—is that she was looking to uncover the history of family members whose involvement was, like so many, less clear or traceable. The careful manner with which Krug engages with the many layers of historiography and autobiographical representation is one reason that the visual, collage-like format of the book is eminently suitable to the subject at hand. Krug mentioned, toward the end of our interview, that, since the publication of her book, many German readers have come to her for advice in researching their own family histories. In *Belonging*, and in Krug, they have found a skilled and sensitive guide.

Tahneer Oksman (TO): Your memoir begins with an image and description of the *Hansaplast*, a German bandage brand that you describe in the book as "the safest thing in the world" besides your mother. This is followed by a powerful scene in which you are on a New York City rooftop, and you encounter a Jewish Holocaust survivor. She recognizes your German accent and asks you where you are from. You ask if she has been to Germany, and she tells you her story of survival. The scene ends when, sensing your discomfort, she tells you, "That was a long time ago," and "You seem like someone who was raised by loving parents."

[1]Of course, a number of relevant books and films on the subject have long been in circulation, including, for example, the 1990 West Germany film *The Nasty Girl* and Gerald L. Posner's 1991 book, *Hitler's Children*, or, more recently, Katrin Himmler's 2007 *The Himmler Brothers*, Tania Crasnianski's 2018 *Children of Nazis*, and Angelika Bammer's 2019 *Born After*.

Could you talk about why you chose to pair this object with this scene, as a way of opening your memoir?

Nora Krug (NK): Like most of the objects I feature on the pages in the book that I entitle "Things German," it's an object that I associate with a sense of security. The experience of falling, and your wound being tended to by a parent, is a common childhood experience. It's essential for any child to experience this feeling of being anchored and sheltered.

The book also addresses the conflict of growing up in a sheltered way in your family, while also feeling deeply culturally disoriented and confused as a German. How do you negotiate that contrast between wanting to love where you came from—because it represents your family, your home, your friends, the food you grew up eating, and so forth—while at the same time deeply questioning it? It's a very painful thing to do.

One of the main things I learned from writing and illustrating the book is that it's important to look at the scars; it's important to uncover the wounds. The goal should not be to make them invisible. The scars left by wounds will always be there, although that's not necessarily a bad thing.

TO: In chapter 1, "Early Dawning," you describe a number of childhood experiences in which you learned bits and pieces about what happened during the war in Karlsruhe, the city in the south of Germany where you grew up, and about the Holocaust more generally. These experiences are all in some ways linked through strong visual elements.

So, for example, you include a copy of a school exercise that you did in eleventh grade, carefully analyzing and annotating a speech that Hitler once gave. Another page includes photographs of your classmates after a class visit to the concentration camp Birkenau. Could you talk about these early, formative experiences, and why you chose to include them in the book? In what ways did they lead to your wanting, years later, to go back and research your family history?

NK: Often you make sense of things in retrospect, as you grow older, and you see connections that you didn't see before. As a teenager, the whole process of learning about this history was a difficult one. It coincided with a feeling of insecurity about what kind of girl I wanted to be, who I wanted to be as a person. As a teenager, you already have to deal with going through an identity crisis of sorts, and for Germans of my generation, it meant having to deal with a cultural crisis on top of that. It was a challenging thing to experience. Our education about the Nazi period was very intense and thorough, but at the same time, we weren't particularly encouraged to engage with the subject on a personal level. I knew nothing about what happened in my hometown, on the streets familiar to me, and I had no idea who my hometown's prominent Nazis had been.

It was very moving for me when, as an adult, I went to the library here in New York City, and, for the first time, and in a foreign country, sought out and found books on the wartime history of my own hometown. One of the books, which I found at the New York Public Library, was about the bombing of my hometown, and it was written by my former physics teacher. There I was, twenty-five years after being in his class, finding my physics teacher's book. I remembered then how he had occasionally talked in class about how he had experienced the war as a child. He had described the impact that the bombs left on him emotionally, but also their physical impact on the cityscape. The way he talked about the moment when a bomb was dropped, the way he imitated the sounds of the bombs, made it feel almost humorous, and caused us students to chuckle in response. But when I read his book at the Public Library, I suddenly understood why and how deeply he had been impacted by the subject. This personal narrative of the wartime experience was exactly what's missing in our regular curriculum. It would have made our understanding of the war more tangible.

TO: I find it compelling how you say that as teenagers you all found it humorous, almost surreal, to hear of these things that had happened in your town before you were born. Throughout the memoir, what I kept sensing was that, on the one hand, nobody in your family was

actively talking about your history before you started asking questions, nobody around where you grew up seemed to be willingly talking about the past. But at the same time, it almost felt like, underneath, everyone—or, at least, the older generation, like your physics teacher—was always wanting to talk about it, trying to open up. Like in a way, they were all deeply mired in the past, even as it seemed to the contrary.

I was thinking about this especially with regards to a later scene, in Chapter 15, "Shaking Hands," when you meet your aunt Annemarie for the first time. She seems, oddly, to be both eager and hesitant, all at once, in terms of discussing the past with you.

NK: I think there were many reasons for different people not to talk about the past. For instance, my parents didn't talk about it not because they didn't want to but because their parents hadn't talked about it. It had been a taboo subject in their homes, so my parents just didn't have any information they could share with me. And when I started digging, my parents were as interested and excited to find out about our family's past as I was.

In the case of my aunt Annemarie—my father's sister—I think the memory of the Nazi era was painful because she had experienced firsthand the loss of her brother, my uncle Franz-Karl, and she had felt a sense of not being allowed to mourn that loss. At the same time, she witnessed her own mother mourning his loss all her life.

I think for my aunt, it probably took a stranger—me—to come by and ask those questions that would otherwise have been difficult to answer. I don't think she would have been as open, or would have taken all of my uncle's photographs and mementos out of her cabinet, if it had been her own children addressing the subject. Sometimes it takes a complete stranger to come by to allow for a deeper access.

TO: In Chapter Two, "Forgotten Songs," which is another sort of introductory chapter, you write about how one of the events that compelled you to make this book was your move to the United States. There's something of a familiar narrative there—of the immigrant moving to a new country and suddenly discovering her differences from

people around her, suddenly realizing her connection to her native country. Could you talk about the factors that led you to this book?

NK: It was not one key moment but several that drove me to write the book. One of them was the encounter with the elderly Jewish woman on the rooftop in New York City not long after I had moved to New York City to study. I had met survivors before, back in Germany, survivors who had come to my school to talk to students about their experiences. But this encounter with the woman on a rooftop of a friend's apartment was unexpected. It was an emotional encounter because it was so intimate, and she was so frank about her experiences without being reproachful towards me as a representative of Germany. I felt a sense of inherited guilt while listening to her story, but she didn't mean to make me feel guilty, and that freed something up in me.

That encounter was very instrumental. At the same time, I often felt myself being confronted with negative stereotypes about Germans and Germany while living in the US—some of them justified, others ill-informed and therefore hurtful. I wanted to write a book exploring the gray zones a bit more, a book that would not stereotype either the victims or the perpetrators, because I felt that that perspective was often lacking in people's understanding of WWII.

As Hannah Arendt once wrote, "Where all are guilty, no one is" (65). The experience of being a German amongst non-Germans allowed me for the first time to confront my sense of guilt on a personal, rather than a collective, level.

TO: Throughout the book, in addition to the "Things German" that pop up in various places, you include different series of objects that you find in thrift shops, in Germany and elsewhere. You also include "field notes," as well as objects—photographs, documents, and other things—that you find in personal, familial, and more public archives. What roles do you think objects play in your book?

NK: Objects are carriers of history and histories. They can convey stories and emotions in a different way than a textbook does, for instance. When you go to flea markets in Germany or other countries—

in Italy you can find a lot of WW2 era items, too—and you see, for instance, a cigarette box made by a German prisoner-of-war made out of the scrap metal of a crashed airplane, it gives you a different insight and access into that period because it's so personal, so intimate. A person carried this object around in their pocket and now you're carrying it in yours, and you're bringing it into your home. It establishes a strange connection that is also often uncomfortable, because you don't want to be associated emotionally with this stranger whose involvement in the war might have been morally fraught.

The flea market objects reflect both a personal and collective narrative. Even though they are personal items once owned by somebody I don't know, they say something collectively about the war experience. I interspersed the pages featuring these objects into the main narrative of the book because I wanted the reader to occasionally step back from my family story and look at it from a different perspective, a more collective perspective. I also wanted to convey that this is not only a book about my own family or my own personal experience. It's not even just a book about Germany or the Germans, but about anybody's responsibility in facing one's country's past.

I hoped that those less personal pages—including the ones entitled "Things German" that feature objects that represent a sense of German cultural identity to me—would remove the reader from the narrative for a short period of time, and then allow them to reenter it in a different way.

I wanted to free myself from the more traditional graphic novel style, i.e. panels and speech bubbles. I wanted the book to feel more like a scrapbook or a diary. I also wanted to reflect on the idea of memory as something fragmentary that we make sense of in retrospect, and acknowledge that history cannot be neatly summarized from A–Z, or chronologically retold from 1933–1945. History can also be understood as a series of chaotic incidences or personal experiences and memories that evolve over decades and generations. Memory isn't as reliable as we want it to be.

Of course, I'm not debating historical facts—there is no alternative reality or truth. But I think there are many different entry points into what we think of as history. And we have to be able to reflect on it

not only as historians but also as writers and artists, not only as scholars but also simply as humans. We should learn about history not merely through numbers and facts.

TO: Could you say more about the comics you include throughout the book, and how you decided when to tell parts of the story in that way?

NK: I chose the comic format when I told a narrative that took place in the past and was able to stand on its own—uninterrupted by a verbal reflection of my own feelings or thoughts. I chose the format to illustrate the realities of my grandfather's life under the Nazi regime, for instance.

Because I was working in a multitude of visual styles, I wanted to make it easier for the viewer to recognize those moments in the narrative that talk about my family's life in the past. I thought that if I always return to this specific format whenever I talk about my grandparents' or uncle's lives, then people would immediately recognize where they are temporally and spatially. I used different visual formats for different categories of narratives throughout the book.

The word *illustration* literally means to shed light on something, to enlighten, to manifest. Illustrating means clarifying things, allowing for a new perspective. That's what I was trying to do. To me, drawing is also an exercise in empathy because it forced me to confront my family members' lives and the decisions they made in a more tangible way. It was a way, not necessarily of understanding, but of trying to figure out how they felt as they found themselves in these difficult situations.

TO: As someone who reads and writes a lot about memoir, I'd be curious to know whether you think of your book more as memoir or more as biography?

NK: The book is a book about my family, but of course their lives and experiences are all filtered through me and my own reflection. The book isn't only about the past and about what my family did, but

also about what this particular past means to me as a German. How has it impacted my cultural identity, my human identity? Would I be a different person if my family had made different decisions?

In a way, the book is a physical manifestation of me. It carries my family's narratives.

TO: You end up writing about both sides of your family—your mother's side and your father's side—by switching back and forth in different chapters. Could you say more about why you chose this structure?

NK: Initially I thought about making two books and then selling them as a set. But then I thought it would be more interesting to intertwine the two narratives. Because all of these stories and all of the people that we grow up with or encounter in our lives are intertwined within us, too. Even though the two family histories are separate, what we consequentially learn from them is connected within us.

I wrote the stories separately and then divided them into chapters. I thought about which moments would make for good chapter endings and allow the reader to reenter the other family narrative from a different perspective. I assigned a different color range to each of the two family narratives. For my father's story, I used mostly warm colors, and for my mother's story mostly cool colors. This was not for an emotional reason but just to make it more recognizable which family I was talking about at a given point.

TO: Did putting these stories side by side help you see or understand something about the different family histories that you hadn't thought of before?

NK: What was interesting to me was the juxtaposition between city versus countryside. The war was perceived differently in the city than it was in the countryside. The countryside wasn't bombed. Usually people were better off there because many were farmers, so there were fewer food shortages.

Changes happen much more slowly in villages. People don't come and go as much as they do in cities. Memory is preserved in a different way. Everybody in the village of Külsheim, where my father is from, still knows exactly whose father or grandfather was a Nazi, or which houses belonged to Jewish people. These memories don't go away.

TO: You tell two very different stories of familial loss—of death during the war—in your book. The first is of your uncle, Franz-Karl, whom your father was named for. He died in Italy, as an SS infantryman, before your father was born. The second, on your mother's side of the family, was your grandfather's brother, Edwin. He also died in wartime, on the frontline at the Sworbe peninsula.

Could you address these two narratives of loss, and whether grief played a role in telling these stories about relatives who had died in the war?

NK: As a German, you grow up feeling like you're not supposed to grieve German loss. There's obviously a good reason for that because many Germans were involved in atrocities.

With Franz-Karl, I'm not sure if I ever actually allowed myself to grieve because I couldn't get a full sense of the person he really was. I don't know if he believed in the Nazis' ideology, because I don't have any proof that he did or didn't. But I don't think I could grieve for someone who was a supporter of the Nazi ideology.

With Edwin, the brother of my grandfather, Willy, who wrote those heartbreaking love letters to his wife in Switzerland that I included in the book, it was different. He didn't want to be a soldier. He wanted to become a Swiss citizen and live in Switzerland with his family. His letters are warm and there is no single mention of the Nazi ideology or acts of atrocity. When I read his letters, for the first time, I actually allowed myself to feel sadness over his death. Here's a man who did not want to experience any of this, and he was forced into a situation that was inhumane, and that he himself referred to as inhumane in his letters.

Obviously, that can't be said for every German soldier. That's why it's so important to look at each individual case.

TO: The book opens and ends with mentions of your present life: how you are married to a Jewish man; interactions you have had with his family. You also close the book by mentioning yourself as pregnant with your daughter. I wonder if you could talk a bit about how these present-day roles and relationships shaped your explorations of your family's story.

NK: I wanted to bring my daughter into the book because children always represent the possibility of a new beginning, the possibility of a clean slate. This book addresses the question of whether guilt can really be measured, whether innocence can ever be proven, or if it is just a utopian idea. Growing up as a German, I experienced a sense of taintedness, even though I myself hadn't lived through the Nazi period.

My sense is that in the U.S. it's the other way around. Here, you grow up with a strong and positive origin story, a story that is easy to accept as your own. It's a story that lacks a crucial and critical in-depth confrontation of America's past failures, and it doesn't confront appropriately and in depth the history of slavery and the mistreatment of Native Americans.

In Germany, on the other hand, you grow up with a negative narrative and there's no state of innocence or accomplishment that marks its beginning. The question becomes whether there is actually such a thing as innocence? Because we are all deeply impacted by our country's pasts, not only collectively, but also as individuals. We carry that history in us, and we have a responsibility to keep it alive. We can't separate ourselves from it, nor should we.

I include some visual motifs in the book to reflect on this problem. For instance, I feature an image of a glass of milk where I talk about the dispossession of my grandmother's milk business by the Nazis. I put the drawing in the chapter that talks about Willy's post-war attempt at defending his actions under the Nazi regime in front of the U.S. military government.

And towards the end of the book, I feature a photograph of him standing in a snowy landscape. I used these images as a way of reflecting on the concept of innocence. Can guilt ever be measured?

Can innocence ever be proven? Should we strive for it, or just accept it as a utopian concept? And what does all this mean for my daughter? She's obviously not guilty of anything but she carries that history within her. And now, as an American, she also carries the history of slavery within her. She, too, will have to take responsibility and defend our democracy and human rights when she gets older. I think that was the reason for why I decided to bring her into the book. I wanted to look both into the past and into the future.

TO: There's a moment early in the book when you mention getting your first period and learning about the Holocaust in school at around the same time. I thought a lot about gender as I read through the memoir. So many of your investigations into your family's pasts had to go through men because they were the ones connected to the military and to various establishments. With the women in your family, it's much harder to discover their feelings about anything.

Could you say something about the role of gender in this story?

MK: I worried that people would ask me where the women are in the book. But the truth is that it used to be mostly men that held key positions in the war. Of course, there were women who committed atrocities under the Nazi regime, women who chose to do terrible things. But they did not in my family—at least based on the information I was able to find.

My aunt Karin—Willy's other daughter—my mother's sister, who recently passed away, was the person in that family who actually remembered details about my grandparents' lives under the regime. She was deeply tied to that history, maybe because she herself experienced the bombings as a child, which my mother did not because she grew up after the war.

Maybe that's the role that women play in my book—women as the carriers of our family's histories. Perhaps men of that generation were less apt to open up about those narratives.

TO: When you were writing the book, did you have a particular audience in mind? Were you thinking that you were writing for other

Germans like yourself, or were you writing for Jews, like the woman from the rooftop?

NK: Because the book came out of my experiences living in America, I had an American audience in mind first. I wanted to write a book that presented less of a stereotypical view on the war, to move away from the narrative of losers versus winners, culprits versus victims. I felt that a more subtle perspective is often overlooked in the America media and entertainment industry. And that bothered me because it's dangerous to only learn about history from such a black-and-white perspective. If we don't try to look under the surface and understand what drove people to make wrong decisions then we're much more likely to make them again.

I worried very much that the book could be read as a justification of why Germans acted the way they did, or as a story of self-victimization, or as an apology. You can't and shouldn't apologize for atrocities like the ones Germans committed, because they are unforgivable, and we shouldn't expect atonement.

The book was never meant as an attempt of overcoming my feelings of guilt. I was worried that people might think that, especially Holocaust survivors and their descendants. But when I've given talks at Jewish institutions, I've only been met with openness and curiosity. I'm thankful that the book was not misunderstood in that way. I also had a group of sensitive and reasonable people looking over the text to make sure that the way I wrote—about German loss, for instance—couldn't be misunderstood in that way.

I was also careful about how I weighed the images with the text. When I wrote about loss in my family, I tried to write about it in a very stripped-down way. I was worried about creating a sense of sentimentality. A book about WWII written by a sentimental German would be the worst kind of book on the subject. It was very difficult at times to balance those narratives with the right image because images can convey an idea of sentimentality, too. I had to find the right images in order not to allow for ambivalent interpretations of what it was that I wanted to say.

TO: I think you succeeded.

NK: Thank you.

When the book was sold to Germany, I became very nervous. I somehow hadn't thought about writing it for a German audience because I thought, "Why would they find this interesting? They already know all about this." And I also thought, "Nobody in my family was a major Nazi. Who cares about a story of a 'follower'?"

But Germany was the country where the most publishers made offers, where there was the strongest interest in the book. I think that's because, first of all, it's a visual book. There are so many books in Germany on the subject, but not many graphic memoirs or graphic novels. Also, I think this idea that we actually have to look more critically at our family members who were "only" followers is also important and often overlooked, even in Germany. It's easy to fall into the trap of saying: "My grandfather was a follower, just like everybody else." There were different ways of being a follower. There were Nazi party members who hid Jews. There were people who did terrible things who refused to join the party. You have to look at every individual person, and I, personally, think this level of introspection should happen in every German family.

What has been satisfying to me is that when I do events in Germany, people often come up to me and ask my advice as to how they can embark on their own family research. In a way, at least in Germany, I feel like the book has fulfilled its purpose.

TO: There are obviously many graphic narratives about the Holocaust, most famously Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Were you influenced by the graphic novel, or the graphic novel memoir? Do you see yourself in this vein?

NK: There's not really a term for the type of book this is, though it is in the graphic non-fiction realm. Graphic memoir, visual memoir, perhaps.

The book is obviously visual, but it's also more text-heavy than most graphic novels. When I pitched it, I hoped that it would be

primarily understood as a memoir rather than a graphic novel. Because my previous audience had been mostly visually oriented—illustrators, designers, fine artists, comics readers—I wanted to broaden the audience a bit, to move beyond the graphic novel world. The book has a variety of audiences. Historians read it. Graphic novel and memoir enthusiasts read it. Holocaust scholars read it. It fits into many different categories.

In terms of influences, there are graphic novelists whom I greatly admire. Chris Ware is a wonderful storyteller. I also like Belgian graphic novelist Olivier Schrauwen. But when I worked on the book, I wasn't really paying too much attention to graphic novels. I was focusing more on reading non-fiction and memoir books of prose. For example, Alexandra Fuller—I'm a big fan of her work. I also watched a lot of documentaries, but documentaries with an essayistic point of view. Those are the two mediums I was most engaged in looking at when working on my book.

TO: Are there any particular documentaries that stand out, in terms of influence?

NK: I love Joshua Oppenheimer's related films *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*, about the genocide in Indonesia. The way he uses images is powerful but never sentimental. When I watch documentaries I always think about how they use words in relation to images. I also like the films of Werner Herzog, the German filmmaker. They are always as much about him as they are about his subjects. That's in part because of his personal, essayistic voice and the way he looks at the subjects.

TO: It sounds like at some point you were planning to be a documentary filmmaker?

NK: Yeah. And I have to say, I really felt like I found myself with this project *because* I have a history in documentary. I abandoned that professional pathway because I felt like I had to focus on just one thing. As an illustrator, you don't depend on grants, you don't

depend on equipment or on other people to help you. You have everything under control, and you don't need a lot of money. So I pursued that as a profession but realized later that I was missing a lot of aspects of documentary filmmaking: interviewing people, getting to the bottom of things, reporting what's happening in the world and learning from what's happened previously. I realized with this book that visual narrative is my preferred format, and it allowed me to combine my interest in documentary film and illustration.

TO: How do you feel now about the book's afterlife—the audiences it has been reaching?

NK: What's really wonderful is to see that the book is still being translated into other languages. It just came out in Korea; it will come out in China. We just signed with Russia. Eastern Europe is going to be another important audience for me because they were so deeply affected by Germany's actions. It's satisfying to see that many different countries feel that it's important to look at this subject from a different angle and to engage in a dialogue. You have to be able to talk about the subject in order to break down cultural barriers.

TO: The book concludes with a recognition about a German word you introduce early on, which is *Heimat*. Roughly translated as "home" or "homeland," you note by the end of the book that this sense—of familiarity, of identity—that you have been searching for "begins to exist once you've lost it." What are your thoughts now on *Heimat*, with the book's publication now two years behind you? Do you feel like you've been able to move on from this past history, in a way? Does it still haunt you?

NK: In terms of *Heimat*, I've come to recognize that, like "identity," "culture," and "belonging," it's not a static term. It's something that evolves over time. It would be unnatural if our idea of culture and belonging remained static even though we, as humans, evolve.

The extreme right—its recent development is as concerning in Germany as it is here in the US —claims that there's only one way

of looking at the concept of *Heimat*, or only one way of being a German, or an American. That's a very dangerous position to take, but also very unrealistic. I think *Heimat* should be allowed to mean anything to anybody. Anybody has the right to interpret it in a different way.

For me, *Heimat* is as much an attempt of embracing what I love about it, but also a continued effort of looking at it from a critical angle. Both should be possible together.

I think that most Germans either have a hard time embracing their cultural heritage or they feel like they want to "move on" and shy away from looking critically at its past. I think Germans need to learn how to confront their country's past while at the same time feeling like they're allowed to articulate their positive feelings towards their cultural identity. If we leave the latter only to the extreme right, we have a problem.

A lot of people in the U.S., too, are afraid of talking about America's own troubled past. I think there's a worry that you won't be able to love your country as much if you look at it from a critical angle.

During this current Covid-19 crisis, I've come to realize how much I miss Europe. It's the first year that I haven't been back at all ever since I moved here in 2002. This crisis has caused me to rethink my idea of *Heimat* yet again, and I think it will continue to change going forward as well.

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