Paul M. Farber, *A Wall of Our Own: An American History of the Berlin Wall*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020. xvi + 246 pp. ISBN 978-1-4696-5508-6.

In mainstream American thought, the Berlin Wall stands as a symbol of division between East and West and is bound up in narratives of neatly divided categories of liberty and oppression. Its view as a black-and-white demarcation line has been reaffirmed by its use in political rhetoric (such as Reagan's "Tear down this wall" speech) and its fall as a hallmark of American triumphalism. Breaking from this bipolar view, Paul Farber's *A Wall of Our Own: An American History of the Berlin Wall* places the Wall in a transnational space by following a group of artists and writers on their journeys between the United States and the two Germanys.

For this small cohort of cultural producers, the Berlin Wall was a site of pilgrimage that provided a reckoning with the physical and social partitions (the "wall of our own," in Robert F. Kennedy's words) they saw and experienced in the United States. These "American Berliners" viewed Cold War Berlin as a place where they could view America's fractured society from a critical distance, and in the Wall they saw America's social divisions reflected back at them. For Farber, the Berlin Wall was a crucial site for these American cultural producers, a place where they weighed the legacies of American segregation, racism, and the limits and possibilities of American democracy. *A Wall of Our Own* follows the stories of four particular cultural producers: Jewish-American photojournalist Leonard Feed, activist Angela Davis, Japanese-American sculptor Shinkichi Tajiri, and black American poet Audre Lorde. In their own ways, each interacted with the Wall through their art and writings as a way of grappling with their own identity, experiences, and thoughts on Cold War geopolitical discourses. For Farber, these and other artists were engaged in "circuits of alternative cultural diplomacy," (7) or overlapping and

interconnected networks and practices of American culture in divided Berlin that led to ongoing visits to the city over the course of several years.

Each chapter recounts the journey of one of its subjects with a brief biographical sketch that reveals their reflections on the Berlin Wall over the rampart's twenty-eight-year lifespan. Freed's photojournalism compared the Wall's transnational character with antiblack segregation at home. Davis used her experience in both Germany and the United States (including her time as a prisoner) to contest the walls of the U.S. prison system. The written works produced by Davis and her supporters utilized the "evolving symbol and lexicon of walls" in order to write about prisons in the United States and she spoke from the shadow of the Berlin Wall, which she never named to maintain her allegiance to East Germany (79). Through the circulation of her autobiography and her ability to move through Checkpoint Charlie with relative ease, Davis turned the Berlin Wall into something viewed from the West as a symbol of oppression into something akin to Western repression.

Tajiri's photographic essay was a way of remembering his family's history in an internment camp during World War II as well as his own experiences confronting anti-Japanese racism in the army. Lorde's poetry expressed her frustrations with U.S. military adventurism as well as social divisions at home. Her works situate the Wall alongside other global sites of division throughout history and geography, comparing it to "Johannesburg Alabama" in her poem "Diaspora," which she wrote while in West Berlin (156). Each chapter is put against the context of the Cold War, such as Freed arriving just after the wall was erected or Lorde writing on the Wall just as détente ended and Cold War tensions reaccelerated in the early Reagan years.

In putting together this transnational history of the Berlin Wall, Farber engages with the personal papers and published works of his four subjects, ranging from the more familiar (Davis'

autobiography) to the more novel (Tajiri's *The Wall, Die Mauer, Le Mur* and Freed's *Black in White America*). The author provides a lively description of his close reading and analysis of these works, including the visual sources. He relates the importance of factors such as focus, distance, space, scale, and gaze to the reader in ways that are illustrative.

A Wall of Our Own builds on the work of Maria Höhn and Martin Klimke, who describe how the experiences of black GIs in Germany and their encounters with East German solidarity movements shaped their understandings of American democracy and civil rights. It expands this analytical framework to these transnational "circuits of alternative cultural diplomacy." (7)

Farber's method of closely reading visual and literary sources, which often involves reading between the lines and searching for unuttered meanings, is not without drawbacks. His chapter on Tajiri leaves open significant questions. After asserting that Tajiri's Berlin Wall project related strongly to his family's internment history and his own experiences in a segregated army, Faber concedes that Tajiri never explicitly connects the Wall to these experiences. Coupling this acknowledgment with a reliance on a deep reading of visual mediums, Farber's interpretation remains open to criticism and dispute. This stands in stark contrast to his more convincing chapter on Lorde, whose poetry, journals, and letters made explicit linkages between the division of the Berlin Wall, transnational identity, and other global sites of division and difference.

Throughout Farber's work, the status of these four producers as cultural diplomats is ambiguous and unclear. Though they may move through "circuits of alternative cultural diplomacy," the place of both Germanys in the work is minimized. As they teach, visit, or write in Berlin, these Americans are primarily reflecting back on the domestic sphere and critiquing American democracy. While their experiences are influenced by their movements abroad, their

networks (“circuits”) aren’t fully fleshed out, and it is uncertain if this rises to the level of cultural diplomat, or if Farber intends it to.

Overall, *A Wall of Our Own* is an engaging and thought-provoking study that enriches our understanding of how the Berlin Wall held manifold meanings for those who carried their experiences to the barricade. Its analytical framework promises additional opportunities for research into the hundreds of other cultural producers who made this pilgrimage to Berlin. Readers of cultural history and a transnational approach to race will find it a valuable addition.

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