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Sarah Gensburger, *Memory on My Doorstep: Chronicles of the Bataclan Neighborhood, Paris 2015-2016*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019. Trans. Katharine Throssell. 252 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography. €29.50 (pb). ISBN 9789462701342.

Review by Charles Rearick, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Only two short opening paragraphs of Sarah Gensburger's book provide any details about the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015: first, the slaughter in the office of the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in January and then, in November, the massacre in the Bataclan concert hall and shootings in cafés in the eleventh and tenth arrondissements. The rest of her book recounts the memorializing acts that she observed in the aftermath of those events. As a "sociologist of memory," Gensburger began her study in December 2015--about a month after the Bataclan killings--and continued through most of 2016. Focusing on an area of the eleventh arrondissement near the Bataclan, she wrote journal notes that appear now in print as her "chronicles." She also took more than a thousand photos, recording what she observed. Sixty of those chronicles and 157 color photos appear in the book, which is a translation of the French edition, published in 2017. [1]

Gensburger is a CNRS senior researcher who has made numerous scholarly contributions to memory studies, but for this recent project she chose *not* to undertake a standard academic study. [2] Instead she has tried a personal-narrative ethnographic approach, bringing her own everyday life into her work. The personal begins with her decision to concentrate on memorials right in her neighborhood. She lives on the Boulevard Voltaire between the Place de la République and the Bataclan, and so she regularly passed by two of the locales under study and took notes on observable changes in the days and weeks after the attacks. Her early chronicles report on tributes left at the sites as well as the influx of journalists, tourists, and police not seen before. The chronicles also record bits of conversations she had with her neighbors and visitors around the Bataclan and, above all, in the Place de la République nearby. She often brought her two children with her, and she cites their comments and reactions. Above all, she takes note of homages and messages that she observed on the statue of Marianne in the Place de la République, which became the largest and most important site of public memorializing.

The methodological rationale for this work is the premise that memory is formed in a defined spatial and social framework, such as the neighborhood. With that in mind, Gensburger set out to examine the exchanges she had with people she knows or just encounters in the vicinity of the attacks. Several questions about that neighborhood life are central to Gensburger's work. How did locals respond to the attacks, not just immediately, but over weeks, months, and years? How

was their neighborhood affected over time? And what have they done to keep the victims in memory (or not)?

First of all, the attacks immediately gave her “neighborhood” a new identity. A local association quickly formed under the name “Charlie’s neighbors,” and ten months later, another section of the eleventh arrondissement became, in media coverage, “the residents of the Bataclan district.” The author asks whether she and her neighbors could be both “Charlie’s neighbors” and also “residents of the Bataclan district” (p. 34). In fact, the sites are not close, nor tied together in any clear way, but she herself refers to the two as in “the same neighborhood” (p. 223). The newspaper office was tucked away on a small quiet back street, the rue Nicolas Alpert, where a sense of neighborhood could more easily exist than for residents living close to the Bataclan on the busy boulevard. On March 1, 2016 residents near the *Charlie Hebdo* office came together for a picnic and painted their local street posts bright cheery colors. Nothing similar happened with the Bataclan neighbors. Although “the Bataclan neighborhood” appears in the subtitle, unfortunately the book does not provide any background information on the social networks and relations that go into making her “neighborhood” (her *quartier*).[3]

Overall, what was the effect of the attacks on residents? No one could ignore what had happened, but there was no single collective reaction, definitely not a “collective trauma” (p. 176). Gensburger comes away with the important conclusion that the people closest to the attacks were not just victims or traumatized or resilient survivors. They were residents who had led a Parisian-normal local life before and, in many respects, afterward. The events of 2015 did not transform the neighborhood as a whole. The impact varied greatly from one individual to another. The author notes, for example, that while one stressed neighbor decided to move away, another became more involved in local activities. Gensburger herself acknowledges having developed “a hypersensitivity to all signals of any kind of connection with the attacks” (p. 206). The author’s children left candles on the evenings of January 7 and November 15, but none of the neighbors “has ever mentioned leaving a tribute” (p. 181).

The most immediate, grassroots acts of memorializing came in the form of written tributes to the victims, flowers, drawings, flags, and candles left on the sites of attacks and on the statue of the Republic. Initially these were expressions of mourning, solidarity, and resistance to the terrorists (“we’re not afraid”). By March 2016, messages about current political conflicts near and far began to eclipse the initial consensus on the Place de la République. A stream of conflictual postings about Israel, Iraq, the French government’s proposed labor legislation, and many other questions elbowed their way in amid the somber messages of memorializing. References to attacks in other cities (Brussels, Nice, Magnanville—where two police officers were killed) and other countries (Tunisia, the U.S., Bangladesh), glommed onto the memory of local attacks, altering the local perspective in one way or another. Historical references added other perspectives: the Holocaust, the Paris Commune. The “Je-suis-Charlie” expression of initial solidarity inspired other versions: “Je suis Orlando” and “Je suis Charlie Martel”—a right-wing anti-Islam rejoinder that the author saw on a t-shirt during her August vacation in the Alps.

The grassroots messages pose many problems for researchers. Who left the texts and the drawings? Where were the memorializers from? To what age and gender categories did they belong? Further, the meanings were often unclear and difficult to interpret with any certainty. Were the French flags in view in June 2016, the author asks, expressing national solidarity against terrorism or support of France in European cup soccer?

The writings were so numerous—and many of them ephemeral—that it was not possible to keep track of them all. A colored chalk drawing on the sidewalk in front of the Bataclan disappeared quickly. Texts written on paper were gone within a day of rain and wind. An effort to protect the homages was undertaken by an association named “17 Never Again.” Long-term preservation was a more difficult undertaking. Personnel from the Archives de Paris took the first steps at the end of December 2015 by collecting tributes left in front of the Bataclan. Later the Archives mounted an exhibit of some of the saved artifacts—but only some—on its website. The author raises fundamental questions about the work of archiving primary sources: what should be preserved, and by whom, and how to select them?

Tensions around the statue of the Republic mounted over days and weeks. City officials wanted to clean up, while others wanted to keep memorial messages in place. More complications arose when *Nuit Debout* and its multiple meetings came onto the Place de la République in April and May 2016. Some activists in that movement clashed with others who were on the Place for memorializing purposes.

By May 2016 the quantity of items had noticeably diminished. The local school’s large banner “*Même pas peur*” disappeared. Political demonstrations regularly drew attention to an array of current issues—from a show of support for France’s “security forces” (police, firefighters, military) to support for Greece against the European Community’s financial powers. A return to normal, yes, but also a sign of the fading impact of the attacks.

Official commemorative acts receive scant attention in the author’s chronicles. In January 2016 the President of the Republic and the mayor of Paris presided over ceremonies dedicating plaques to the memory of the victims: one plaque at the Charlie Hebdo site, another in memory of the policeman (Ahmed Merabet) killed nearby. Officials also dedicated a “memory oak” on a corner of the Place de la République and a plaque that included other places attacked, beyond the ones in the eleventh arrondissement. The plaque read: “In memory of the victims of the terrorist attacks in January and November 2015 in Paris, Montrouge and Saint-Denis.” On the anniversary of the November 13 massacre, a small monument with a plaque listing all the names of the people killed in the Bataclan was inaugurated. Unfortunately (I think), it is located not on the concert hall or in front of it, but across the boulevard on an easy-to-miss edge of a small park. About the same time, the Paris Archives put up its memorial in cyberspace—its digitized collection of messages.<sup>[4]</sup>

Have the efforts to memorialize fulfilled their intended purpose? What has been most effective? In a city with so many historic plaques (most of them relating the Second World War), new ones marking the events of 2015 easily go unnoticed. To this point Gensburger cites her earlier study of responses to a plaque marking the 1982 attack on the Jo Goldenberg restaurant: most passersby did not stop to look at it and “very few actually read the inscription” (p. 48). Similarly, in the rue Nicolas Alpert in front of the Charlie Hebdo offices, the author counted the number of passersby in a half hour on January 6, 2016 and found that only a handful (out of about 50) even looked at the plaque. We are left to wonder how much lower that count was days or weeks later.

The book’s conclusion adds brief follow-up notes on memorial acts during the two years (2017–2018) after her study and her chronicles. Most notable are city and state projects for a monument and President Macron’s proposal for a museum devoted to the victims of terrorism. The

conclusion also offers a concise summary, cast in the lingo of the author's discipline: "The polycentrism of the sites and the polysemy of their memorialization are ... accompanied by a polymorphic community mobilization" (p. 229). And it makes some comparisons with other attacks and commemorative responses, above all 9-11 in New York City, where the visible destruction was so enormous in contrast with the Bataclan viewed from outside.

Many of the thoughtful reflections in this book take the form of questions and hypothesis-like partial answers, complicating matters in a potentially fruitful way. The reflections will make future studies of memorialization anything but easy. A stumbling block at the outset will be that the preserved source materials are inevitably only some part of the whole. Further, commemoration as process can go on indefinitely, making any study of the subject incomplete. The processes cannot be neatly delimited in either space or time. And the interpretation of the surviving traces will ever remain uncertain.

All in all, the eye-witness testimonies and photos in *Memory on My Doorstep* are useful primary sources documenting the local-grassroots aftermath of the attacks. But the book is probably even more useful for the many questions it poses. Those can be read as suggestive prompts for new studies, adding more chapters to the story. For, as the book's last sentence notes, the memorialization of the 2015 attacks is "still ongoing."

## NOTES

[1] *Mémoire vive: Chroniques d'un quartier, Bataclan 2015-2016*. (Paris: Anamosa, 2017).

[2] Gensburger has carried out her "autoethnographic" (p. 10) work as an alternative to the more typical scholarly studies that have already been done on memory of the 2015 events; she lists several good ones in her lengthy bibliography. One example is a team research project, carried out with a questionnaire-based survey of a population sample: Sandra Hoibian, Lucie Brice Mansencal, Charlotte Millot, G r me Truc, Groupe 13-Novembre, Francis Eustache, Denis Peschanski, "L'empreinte des attentats du 13 novembre 2015 sur la soci t  fran aise," *Bulletin  pidemiologique hebdomadaire* 38-39 (2018): 772-81. [http://invs.santepubliquefrance.fr/beh/2018/38-39/2018\\_38-39\\_5.html](http://invs.santepubliquefrance.fr/beh/2018/38-39/2018_38-39_5.html)

[3] Sociologists as well as historians of Paris have made it clear that a Parisian's notion of his or her *quartier* is almost always utterly subjective. That is, its definition in everyday usage is unrelated to the official administrative *quartiers* of Paris. See (among others), "Le quartier des Parisiens: repr sentations et attachement" in Catherine Rhein et al., *Regards sur les quartiers parisiens: Contextes spatiaux, usages politiques et pratiques citadines*,  tude pour le compte de la Ville de Paris, UMR G ographie-cit s, 2008. <http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00474789/fr>

[4] Can any plaque or physical monument to the 2015 victims have the emotional impact of an excellent documentary film? I ask that question with one film in mind: *November 13: Attack on Paris* --a three-episode series (2018) directed by G d on Naudet and Jules Naudet. It's available on Netflix.

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