



Fig. 1. Balconies on West Tenth Street.
(photo Mariette Pathy Allen)

Résumé

À New York, de grands défilés comme ceux de l'Action de grâce ou de la Saint-Patrick parcourent les avenues de la ville, remémorant les routes et les monuments importants. Pourtant, dès son origine, le défilé de l'Halloween de Greenwich Village se faisait contre la trame de la ville : il partait de la colonie des artistes à West Beth, sur la rivière Hudson, et suivait un méandre de rues de Manhattan datant du dix-huitième siècle, pour aboutir au Washington Square, site longtemps associé à la résistance civique. Traversant le cœur du Greenwich Village, cet événement a rapidement gagné en popularité au sein de la communauté gaie post-Stonewall qui y a contribué par la flamboyance tant des participants que de l'auditoire. Cet article propose que l'itinéraire transurbain et l'interruption de la circulation qu'il provoquait se voulaient une manifestation très visible de l'identité gaie vis-à-vis les cultures sexuelle et politique majoritaires. Le défilé se frayait un chemin dans la Mecque gaie du Village ; les balcons et les perrons des appartements devenaient le décor de rencontres orchestrées ou impromptues qui faisaient écho tant à la culture des groupes qu'au mouvement de théâtre environnemental de la période.

Alors que le nombre des participants et des observateurs atteignait les centaines de milliers, les organisateurs du défilé se devaient d'explorer d'autres itinéraires, qui amèneraient les participants dans les avenues. Nous analysons les répercussions de ce changement selon le concept de célébration liminale et liminoïde de Victor Turner, c'est-à-dire en tant qu'événement marginal et oppositionnel basé sur une extériorisation transgressive d'un événement qui a finalement évolué pour connaître un (presque trop) grand succès, tout en espérant garder sa marginalité en mémoire. Ce changement reflète une acceptation générale de la culture gaie dans la ville, mais il a un prix. Tant les touristes que les participants jouissent en toute sécurité d'un spectacle de transgression où aucun n'a à questionner son identité sexuelle.

Sarah Bonnemaison and
Christine Macy

Queering the Grid: Transgression and Liminality in the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade

Abstract

In New York City, large parades like Macy's Thanksgiving Day and the Saint Patrick's Day parade descend the avenues, re-inscribing the major routes and monuments of the city. The Greenwich Village Halloween Parade however, from its earliest years, cut across the grain of the city, beginning at the artists colony of West Beth on the Hudson river, and following the meandering streets of eighteenth century Manhattan to culminate in Washington Square, a site long associated with civic resistance. Traversing the heart of Greenwich Village, this event quickly gained a following in the post-Stonewall gay community, which contributed enthusiastic and flamboyant paraders and audience. This paper proposes that the cross-town routing, and its attendant interruption of avenue traffic, was a highly visible manifestation of gay identity in opposition to mainstream sexual and political culture. Weaving its way through the gay mecca of the Village, apartment balconies and stoops became settings for staged and impromptu encounters that echoed both club culture and the environmental theatre movement of the era.

As the numbers of participants and observers swelled to the hundreds of thousands, the parade organizers were required to explore alternative routings, which would take the event onto the avenues. We investigate the implications of that change in terms of Victor Turner's concept of *liminal* and *liminoid* celebration—that is, as a marginal and oppositional event based on transgressive self-expression evolved into a highly, almost too, successful event that nevertheless wished to keep the memory of its marginality alive. That change reflects a more general acceptance of gay culture in the city but it has come at a price. Both tourists and participants enact a "safe" spectacle of "transgression," where neither need question their sexual identity.

Sarah Bonnemaison and Christine Macy teach at Dalhousie University Faculty of Architecture and Planning and share a collaborative design practice, Filum Ltd., which specializes in festival architecture and temporary urbanism. They have lectured widely on their design work and on the rhetoric of architecture in public spaces, and have been awarded for their critical and creative practice.

We all know what Halloween is: the 31st of October, a night when children trick or treat, indulging in a perverse disruption of daily life. They dress themselves up in scary costumes, meet all the neighbours and threaten them, and then come home to eat candy for the following three weeks. We will describe this tradition as it happens in Greenwich Village, a historic quarter of New York City.

In the early 1970s, the puppet-maker Ralph Lee decided to walk around the streets of his neighbourhood of Greenwich Village with some of his large puppets and asked his friends to join him in a small procession. Every year the procession grew until it became a major city event. In 1984, 60,000 people marched in costumes and 300,000 watched the event. That parade became successful because it celebrates a 3,000 year-old tradition and, at the same time, the particular character of Greenwich Village.

As the parade grew more popular, it changed. First, groups of people participating were organized and choreographed. Buildings in the neighbourhood were transformed with drops and giant puppets into backgrounds for the celebration. Soon the city required police participation to block the streets from traffic. As the crowd grew, the organizers used barricades to keep spectators from crowding the paraders.

In 1985, the Parade had hit a kind of threshold and its organizers had to change its route. The small streets of the Village could no longer hold the half a million people wanting to come. That change in route also changed the meaning of the Parade—what people saw and what they could take from the event. As architects, we are interested in the relationships that were taking place between the spaces of the city and the content of the festivity.

The Form of the Route is Significant

The route that parades and processions take has more layers of meaning than one might at first think. We can consider them as types.

A procession can be circular, moving around a sacred building, monument or open space. In making a circle, such processions establish a sacred space in archetypal time—whether seasonal time or the cyclical time of the religious year. The yearly procession around the Ka'aba in Mecca is of the latter type, as are the rituals of city-founding described by Joseph Rykwert.

A parade can also make a return-trip, ending where it started. That type of procession starts with a point of communal gathering and moves somewhere to accomplish a specific task, after which it returns home. This is a parade of heroic community action. It is oriented to the task. The French Revolutionary Parades followed that type. To celebrate the unification of countryside

and city, young women gathered in a city plaza, paraded out of the city to cut down a tree (symbol of freedom), and brought it back to erect it in the ruins of the Bastille.

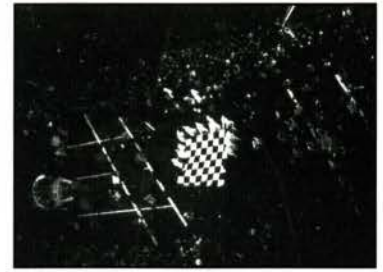
Lastly, a parade can start at one place and end at another. That is a linear, directional parade, a collective journey towards a goal. A conservative version is a military procession, like a triumphal entry in a conquered city or a royal procession through a country. A radical version may also have a destination, as when the *sans-culottes* of revolutionary Paris dressed as women and marched to Versailles to demand the presence of the king. In times when revolutions are commemorated rather than realized, such “demanding” assumes symbolic forms, as when Jessye Norman sang the Marseillaise for the French bicentennial in the very plaza where Louis XVI had lost his head two hundred years earlier. Here, it is renamed the “place of agreement”—*Place de la Concorde*—and the paraders filing in are meant to symbolize a democratic, not a revolutionary crowd.

Halloween, of course, has assumed the form of a collective journey. At the scale of the body, each trick-or-treating child makes a journey from house to house to demand a favour, threatening retaliation if left unsatisfied. At the urban scale, the people of Greenwich Village—whether they are actual residents or their counterparts in spirit (i.e. would-be residents of the Village who identify through sexual orientation or artistic temperament)—journey across the daily and regular pattern of Manhattan, making their “demands” on the city by stopping traffic, making noise and acting out against the structure and limitations set by everyday life.

Some festival theorists have called this a “pressure-valve,” or release mechanism, and argued that by releasing mounting tension against unacceptable circumstances, such practices in fact **legitimate** the status quo. Others argue that carnivalesque festivals like the Halloween Parade present images of alterity that ultimately empower those disenfranchised or oppressed by society. They distinguish between **spectacle** (which is imposed from above by the state or corporation) and **festival** (which is a grassroots and liberatory phenomenon). Guy Debord's criticism of spectacle, like most Marxian critiques, sees all state- and media-supported spectacle as inevitably oppressive.¹ Television is a technique for people to “buy into” this hegemonic world-view.

The historian Natalie Zemon, Davis on the other hand, argues that some festivals, by presenting images that are multivalent, can put into the public realm potentially liberating representations. An example of this is the freedom that the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade gives some people to show

Fig. 2. Moving across Sixth Avenue
(photo Mariette Patry Allen)



themselves as sexual, critical or transgressive.² We'll look into this later in the paper.

The Itinerary of the Old Route

The route in 1984 started at West Beth Artist's Colony on the Hudson river. The parade lined up on both sides of the block-wide building, along Bank and Bethune Streets. From the river's edge at West Beth, the parade moved down Bethune Street to Abingdon Square where a group of witches stirred their cauldrons. Continuing down the commercial corridor of Bleeker Street, the parade turned onto West Tenth, a quiet residential street that spans Manhattan. On West Tenth, the parade cut across Seventh and Greenwich Avenues, Sixth Avenue, and finally, with a triumphant turn, marched three blocks to its finale under the Marble Arch in Washington Square Park.

Most parades in New York City march up or down the major avenues. The Greenwich Village Halloween Parade was unique, and strongly identified as a neighbourhood event, in that it followed the small and circuitous residential and commercial streets and only cut across the avenues. By ending at Washington Square—the terminus of Fifth Avenue—that abnormal and wilful cross-town parade is finally back on the grid.

The Itinerary of the Parade in 1985

In 1985, the parade took a new route. The parade organizers felt they had to do this to accommodate the half a million people that were expected to be in the Village streets that year. The parade might have been able to split up and take several routes through the Village, multiplying the capacity of the streets for the viewers, but the police were strongly behind a move of the route out of the small streets onto the avenues.

The 1985 route started at the corner of Sixth Avenue and Houston Street. From this intersection, paraders moved up the avenue to West Tenth Street where, as in the earlier parades, they had proceeded across West Tenth and down Fifth Avenue to Washington Square. Once at the Square, the parade had achieved such momentum, it continued around the Square back to Houston Street where it disintegrated for lack of focus.

That change in context also changed the meaning of the parade. In the first route, the meaning of the parade depended equally on the Halloween tradition and the buildings and places of Greenwich Village. In that new route, the form of the itinerary, the intensity of the streetscape, and the "places of memory" that were touched on had changed.

Originally, the route linked the residential complex for artists, West Beth, to Washington Square. On the new route, the

parade started at the corner of an avenue and a street with no particular history, no distinct meaning. That new origin was just a place in the abstract grid of Manhattan. The end (the de facto goal) of the new route also changed, continuing back to Houston Street. The parade was no longer a journey from one meaningful place to another; it became instead a round-trip from anywhere to nowhere.

Experienced viewers watching the 1985 parade did not recognize the event. Although the costumes and floats had not changed much from the previous years, they could not be seen well in the large avenues. When the parade moved from the small, intimate streets of the Village to the large avenues, it had to make a change in scale, like a play that moves from an Off-Off Broadway venue to a Broadway house where everything must get bigger in order to be seen. Costumes had to get bigger and more colourful, groups won out over solo acts; larger floats and puppets were needed.

The uniformity of the street lighting on the avenues flattened the event. The sporadic lighting of the smaller streets—coming in equal parts from people's houses and from city lights (and even from paraders)—lent a mysterious, intriguing and surprising quality to the procession down the small cross streets.

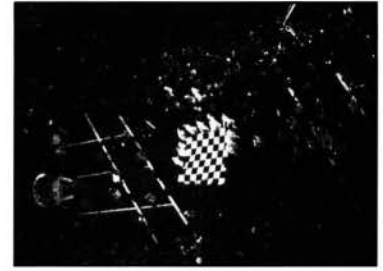
On the small streets, activities on balconies provoked responses all around, bringing the celebration up onto the higher levels of the city and even onto the roofs (Figure 1). That way, the festival expanded from a one-dimensional line of processants into a three-dimensional volume of celebration. On the avenues by contrast, that interaction stayed within the two-dimensional plane of the street. The distances between paraders and audience, celebrants and buildings, were greater. The avenue parade could not build up a sufficient density of interaction—a critical mass—between the city fabric and the people, in order to give them the immediacy and intimacy of contact they desired (Figure 2).

Five Themes in the Halloween Tradition

Now that we've looked at the relation between the paraders and the city, we're going to enter into the parade itself and explore the uniqueness of this event that draws from very old traditions and, at the same time, brings these traditions into contemporary concerns of politics, gender and disempowerment.

Halloween, as we know it, is a Celtic creation. It flourished in Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and parts of England long after it had become a dull prelude to All Saint's Day in the rest of Europe. It was brought to the United States by Irish immigrants in the 1830's. In the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade, five themes

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have endured from the traditional festival. That can be seen in the floats, costumes, and the type of buildings chosen to be decorated that night.

The first theme is *Samhain* or summer's end—a celebration of the end of the Celtic year. This "New Year's Eve" festival was an occasion for feasting, when the winter's food supplies were first opened. Great bonfires were lit to frighten away evil spirits. It was a communal festival of warmth and plenty in the face of approaching winter. In the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade, we see Ralph Lee's "Hags of Winter" lead the parade, sweeping away the bad spirits and preparing the way for all who follow.

The costumes and the warmth of New Yorkers radiate energy in an effort to banish winter. We see feasting and plenty brought into the modern era—with group costumes that depict clusters of charge cards, pieces of pizza, people dressed as party favours. This is a collective potlatch which prizes outrageous expenditures on costumes and celebrations of display which poke fun at consumption.

At the climax and the finale of the parade, everyone gathers in Washington Square Park. It becomes a giant block party. The traditional *Samhain* bonfire is recalled by the great light display on the Marble Arch, and little fires are simulated by small lit areas around the park. Even celebrants glow with lights hung around their necks in phosphorescent rings. Just as the bonfires scared away cold winds and lost souls whirling about, the lights and music in the park transform its scary sides, lightening the shadows of the modern dispossessed who panhandle. The park reasserts itself as a welcoming spot for artists, musicians, and the young.

In his costumes for the choreographed groups that provide the backbone of the parade, Ralph Lee continues to express the agricultural roots of Halloween. As a puppet-maker, he is interested in re-presenting ancient myths in modern contexts. Artists like Robert Danton in Manhattan and Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre share Lee's interest in puppets, politics and myths. And other New York artists (documented by Lucy Lippard in her book *Overlay*)¹ have also explored prehistoric spiritual practices related to agriculture, seasonal time, and ritual. So we see that many of the first costumes tapped into this interest in agricultural ritual. One example is Lee's "Jonah and the Whale" float, where an enormously fat man—a gluttonous creature—is swallowed up by the whale which may regurgitate him into a new cycle of life and growth.

In the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade, both artists and "audience" participate. It is a popular event in the grassroots sense, in which people make their own costumes. We can com-

pare it to Macy's Parade, which is also a popular event, but one in which popular imagery is combined with techniques from mass-production to make huge floats. It would be interesting to discuss the issues around the use of popular imagery—the relation between popular imagery and commercialization.

The underside of *Samhain* is the second theme we see in the parade. That is the battle with darkness and cold, and it is exemplified in the raising of the "Ghost of Tom", a giant skeleton that is carried through the parade face-down, to a rhythmic chant accompanied with clappers and rattles. Tom is the honoured guest of the Parade—its Grand Marshall.

This triumphal march down Fifth Avenue (the avenue that divides Manhattan into east and west and from which all numbers begin) is a solemn procession to what can only be called the most sacred spot in the parade—the centre of Manhattan and the gateway to Washington Square. At this spot, the Halloween Parade again does the unexpected. Instead of a triumphal entry, the "Ghost of Tom" is strung up from the Arch to preside over the ceremonies in the most ghoulish way.

By hoisting the "Ghost of Tom" up to the centre of the arch, the parade declares that the underworld rules at least for that night. As a symbol of death, the skeleton also calls on the particular history of Washington Square Park: during the Civil War, runaway slaves that were captured in New York by pro-slavery sympathisers were lynched on the trees of the Park, some of which are still standing today. We might see this hanging effigy as an effort to exorcise those ghosts.

The battle against winter is, of course, also a battle against evil. In the modern world, that battle is waged against greedy politicians and rapacious landlords (both of which are lampooned in costumes), as well as the meat industry and the world of commodities that make both tender chickens and tough men (a tableau about Purdue chickens).

In San Francisco, the *Día de los Muertos*—also a Halloween type celebration—is an occasion for protests and actions by the AIDS activist group Act-Up, as well as by political activists in Central America. In the Basel Faßnacht (a Swiss carnival that occurs in November), the memory of a historical event—the city's recapture of granaries during a time of great famine—is used as a vehicle for criticizing the city government. The ruling elites of Basel exploited the populace back in the sixteenth century, and that recurring annual event is a way for the citizens of Basel to remind their politicians that the same thing is going on today, albeit in different forms. An essential part of those events is allowing the participants to connect what has happened before with what is happening today.

Fig. 3. Parader
(photo Mariette Pathy Allen)



The third theme in the Parade appears in the imagery of devils, witches, and other underworldly creatures, such as werewolves with their brides, Dracula, and Dorian Gray. These kinds of figures are medieval descendants of the demons and ghosts of the pagan religions—which have assumed forms rebellious to the early christianizing influences on Halloween in the Middle Ages. Wild men, green giants, and satyrs become devils with pitchforks and horns. As with any image, these figures can be popularized, or infantilised; in fact, part of their power lies in their flexibility to that kind of appropriation. We see the parade supporter Ken Allen, for example, dressed up as a Mardi Gras-type Lucifer, accompanied by angels and their demon-babies. Whether it is in pagan, Christian, secular, or commercial context, the imagery of evil is threatening but necessary for the continuation of the whole tradition, positive and negative aspects together.

In New York, those images infest the Jefferson Market Library, the building in the Village most like a haunted castle. The Library was originally designed as a courthouse in the 1880s, and uses the vocabulary of the day, a kind of Richardsonian Gothic, to express power and law. The building has a turret and cathedral roofs, and one could well imagine a dungeon. After its conversion into a library, only one night each year does the building imagery mesh perfectly with its use—the night of the Halloween parade.

The fourth theme in the Parade is subversion. Probably the major theme of Halloween, and certainly the dominant characteristic of the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade; subversion questions and overturns the normal order of things. It can take the traditional form of elves and fairies who trick and play pranks.

The Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin was interested in carnival practices in Europe exactly because of their subversive qualities.⁴ He felt that they represented a powerful voice of popular culture and an arm of resistance to political or economic oppression. In the Halloween Parade, we see gender inversions in the many examples of cross-dressing and in the inversions of power, as in the carnivalesque portrayals of politicians and mock “Royal Weddings.” These kinds of costumed tableaux work within the older tradition of Mock Masses, Mock Investitures, or Kings for a Day. We also see blurred boundaries and hybrids, as cultural boundaries become indeterminate in face-painting which uses both African and Australian aboriginal styles, and costumes which blur of species boundaries between alien and human—or is it high culture and pop culture?

So when the paraders disrupt city traffic for that one night of the year—and especially when they block the major arteries of

Manhattan—they are following ancient tradition. According to Ralph Lee, “there are no other parades that go across town, as we do in our perverse fashion. Halloween is a night for the streets to be turned over to the people.”

In Manhattan, stopping traffic is upsetting the normal order of things.

The fifth theme found in Halloween is the game-playing between the sexes. Gender games are part of the general subversiveness of Halloween but—since the Parade began in Greenwich Village—, as the Village became more openly gay, so did the Parade. We see high camp, transvestites, sexual role-playing, fun and games between sexes and about sex and sexuality. There are, of course, older reasons for this as well. Halloween was a time when the world of the spirits was close to the everyday life. And since spirits could foresee the future, games of divination were played in all seriousness. Questions about future mates, prosperity, and death were asked. By the eighteenth century, these games were being played with some scepticism and, eventually combining with pranks and masquerading, they give us the Halloween custom of cross-dressing, jokes about sexuality, and outrageous behaviour (Figure 3).

People act out all along the route, but the best architecture for these games about teasing, flirting, and being flamboyantly sexy is the architecture halfway between the public and private realms. On the edges of buildings, on fire escapes, and on balconies, people can display themselves and act out almost anything, and yet feel protected. Along Bleeker Street, the fire escapes are full of men acting out the roles of both sexes. Along Tenth Street, where stately brownstones face both sides of the street, the stone balconies hold staged scenes—people spilling out from parties held inside and lots of impromptu celebrating.

The Halloween Parade celebrates the tradition of Halloween. But it does more. It also celebrates the urban context of Greenwich Village and greater New York—a city famously accepting of different peoples and cultures. By beginning at the West Beth Artist’s Colony, the Parade emphasizes its roots in New York’s creative community. By ending in Washington Square, it commemorates a historically significant place to New Yorkers—a site for political expression in the heart of the university community.



Fig. 4. Descending Fifth Avenue
(photo Mariette Pathy Allen)

The Use of Memory to Create a City

For the United States, New York City is an old city. The Greenwich Village Halloween Parade brings up to the present things that have been forgotten, reaffirms New Yorkers' image of their city by using familiar pieces of the environment in a way that means something today.

The streets of the Village trace the old roads of the eighteenth century Manhattan. They are paths with beginnings and endings. By walking this kind of street, one remembers an older way of life. The narrow cobblestone streets and small-scale houses with stoops have made the Village a retreat from Manhattan's energetic urbanism. This has made the Village traditionally a haven for families, artists, and people wanting the life of a small community in the middle of the city. Now, of course, property has become so expensive that there are many more people who want to "live the Village life" in Manhattan but can only afford Brooklyn or Queens. The Parade works with the memories and expectations of both groups to present—or experience—the "Village" as a mythic place.

A city is full of "places of memory," to use an expression of Pierre Nora.³ The parade brings certain pieces of the Village into focus—so you can see them as if for the first time, full of personality and significance. For example, the Tenth Street balconies come to life in the parade. Wild parties, people hanging over the railings—this is more the Village than the Village could ever be.

The Library, normally a place where one gets books, becomes again the courthouse with a tower and maybe even a dungeon. That magnification of the Village personality—that caricature—stays with the residents even after the parade is gone. A spider crawling up the Library tower, wild parties in the brownstones and the giant skeleton dangling from the Marble Arch—these objects, real only that night, become memories that haunt their locations throughout the year. One can remember even the wild parade itself, sexuality exercised, as one walks down the streets it passed along.

The preparations for the parade link residents to the event. They see "behind the scenes" and they like the fact that this activity will be transforming the neighbourhood. The Parade re-centres the Village as a creative neighbourhood of Manhattan. Artists may no longer be able to afford its rents, but they come to West Beth to costume themselves and prepare for the line up. In that way, the Parade makes the Village more like itself. And

every year since 1972, that cyclical event has established itself as a memory in the minds of the people who live there.

The Route Changes what is Remembered of the City

The old route celebrated the Village by magnifying its remembered past. The new route celebrates something else. Crossing Manhattan from west to east, the old route cut the north-south avenues and subverted the normal order of things, as Halloween should. The new route celebrates the grid. To be in a parade that marches up a Manhattan avenue orients one differently to the city than to be in a parade winding through cross-town streets. The avenues are, in theory at least, infinitely extensible on the American grid; an avenue is a street of the entire city, or even more: Avenue of Americas, Madison Avenue, Fifth Avenue (Figure 4).

The 1984 route was a Greenwich Village block party overlaid on an ancient ritual. Using the architecture as a meaningful backdrop, it satisfied the cultural demands of the Villagers. The 1985 route satisfies the cultural needs of a much larger group, the residents of metropolitan New York City. Those people come as tourists to experience the Parade, and with their cameras, they take home that adventure to the outskirts of the city. They come with an open mind, curious and alert. They come to participate in an active culture—to be part of a crowd recreating a ritual. The tourists come to this chaos and wildness to look for a catalyst for their own creativity—to feel alive.

We have seen that the relationship between the Parade and the route it takes through the city is not accidental. As rituals take place, they construct "sacred" sites, which in turn give meaning and layers to the ritual. As artists and as critics, this serves as a reminder to us of the impossibility of autonomy in social and cultural practices. The Greenwich Village Halloween Parade reminds us that cultural richness comes from the layering of intention and interpretation, history and geography, accident and memory.

Notes

1. Debord, Guy (1977), *Society of the Spectacle*, Detroit, Black and Red.
2. Zemon Davis, Natalie (1975) « Women on Top », In *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: eight essays*, Palo Alto, California, Stanford University Press.
3. Lippard, Lucy (1983), *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, New York, Pantheon.
4. Bakhtin, Mikhail (1968), *Rabelais and His World*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press.
5. Nora, Pierre (1984), *Les lieux de mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard.