

On November 13, 2014, American Studies Leipzig organized the American Space symposium *Black Leipzig* at [Grassimuseum](#). In her opening address Prof. Anne Koenen hinted at the broad range of topics that are related to racism and Black culture in Leipzig and emphasized the current quality of the debate: Two days earlier *Süddeutsche Zeitung* had [published an article](#) in which a Black author from Leipzig described his experiences with racism in everyday life. The ubiquitous 'invisibility' of Black people and Black culture addressed by the article is of essential significance for the problematization of *race* and the identification of racism. As an example Koenen referred to the announcement of the symposium which, due to its title, evoked immediate associations with the *Wave Gotik Treffen*. Also, she pointed to the annual *Internationale Wochen gegen Rassismus* in which Leipzig takes part regularly. Their [announcement](#) completely blinds out Black people in Leipzig. Prof. Koenen said, racism was, in fact, "fundamentally stupid" as it ignores that elements of African and Afro-American culture, such as rap, several popular dance styles, or forms of protest, which emerged in the *Civil Rights Movement*, are closely entwined with everyday culture in Germany.

The category of *race* Prof. Koenen characterized as problematic in every respect. How are *race* and *blackness* being construed? Which criteria facilitate the decision about who is Black? Does skin color suffice? During the 19th century, according to the *one drop rule* a person was considered Black if she had "a single drop of African blood in her body." As a result a person was considered Black even though her complexion was unsuitable as an indicator for attribution. Consequently, Prof. Koenen addressed the audience straightforwardly: "Would you think that I am Black? If yes, why? If not, why not?"

Constructions of *race* as a category of difference tend to being absurd. "If in doubt," Koenen pointed out, "racism does not rely on difference but on the hunch of difference." In her story "[Recitatif](#)" the Afro-American Nobel laureate in literature Toni Morrison demonstrates that *race* is based on individual attribution. The two protagonists are described as being "of a totally different race." However, the decision who is White and who is Black is left to the reader. Hence, the story works as an indicator for the readers' own perspective on constructions of *race*.

The following presentations addressed very distinct examples of Black culture in Leipzig and of constructions of *race* which can be found in Leipzig's history and which continue to have an effect to this day.

The first presentation was given by Kathleen Rahn, who writes her dissertation at Leipzig University about "Prisons and Forced Labor in the Colony German South-West Africa". She spoke as a representative of the [AG Postkolonial](#) [5] about „Traces of German Colonialism in Leipzig“ . According to Rahn's hypothesis inhumane sentiments are deeply rooted in Leipzig. That can be shown with the example of Leipzig's 'Völkerschauen'.

Between the late 19th and the early 20th century around 40 of these ethnological exhibitions took place where people of predominantly African origin were displayed like zoo animals as 'exotic human beings'. The year 1897 marks an early climax. On the occasion of the 'Saxonian-Thuringian Industry and Trade Exhibition' the first large-scale 'Völkerschau' was organized in Leipzig. On an area of over 20,000m², that would later become the Clara-Zetkin-Park, the organizers arranged the re-construction of several original buildings and a trading road. The goal of the exhibition, as the accompanying [newspaper](#) put it, was to "put the highly developed, modern European culture into relation with the curiously molded African one." [6] The exhibition was supposed to attract a big audience and advertise the colonial idea to the industry and the public. As a special thrill a rumor was spread that the 47 exhibited men, women, and children who were tribesmen of the Wadoe from German East Africa were actually cannibals. In fact, in line with the goals of the 'Völkerschau' cannibalism served very well to mark 'the other', who was depicted as uncultivated, savage, and dehumanized in opposition to European civilization. Debasing the indigenous African peoples in German colonies was a justification for subjugating them and a legitimization for the colonial rulers' claim to power. Thus, the 'Völkerschauen' in Leipzig represent German colonialist

propaganda.

Next to the exhibition of living animals 'Völkerschauen' used to be one of the pillars of the Leipzig Zoo. In the opening year of the Zoo the first ethnological exhibition took place. It featured predominantly representatives of colonized societies. Up to the time of the last 'Völkerschau' in 1931 several venues had been built especially for this purpose, such as the 'Völkerwiese' and the 'Völkerbühne', which were popularly known as 'Hotel zum wilden Mann'. They made the Leipzig Zoo an important venue for ethnological exhibitions in Germany. In this case, too, the audience was lured by the thrill of the exotic which was produced with stereotypical imagery and the creation of otherness. To this day, the Zoo has not completely given up this voyeuristic perspective. The 'Kiwara-Lodge' for example is [advertised](#) with "African specialties while enjoying a spectacular view of the Savannah". [7] However, on its website the Zoo does not deal with the role of exhibiting human beings throughout its history. While exoticizing clichés and stereotypes are still being used, there is a lack of reflection on and differentiation of colonial imagery. Through the connection with 'savage nature' those who are described by it become the counterpart of the allegedly civilized Europeans and, thus, the projection screen for labels of otherness. The Leipzig Zoo is one example among many for the highly problematic commemorative culture in Leipzig where Ernst Pinkert, founder of the zoo and initiator of the 'Völkerschauen', is being honored through recent naming of streets and [schools](#).

In summary, Rahn pointed out that racism is a product of human culture and, thus, a historical phenomenon, which cannot be regarded a thing of the past in present-day Leipzig. That inhumane sentiments and racist violence are part of everyday life in Leipzig today is shown by how the city deals with its role in German colonial history as well as with debates about homes for asylum seekers and the case of Kamal K.

Anna Rapp, the second speaker, writes her doctoral thesis at the University of Münster about Afro-American Literature in publishing houses in Leipzig and their assessment for the board of censors in the GDR. She formulated the hypothesis that for citizens of the GDR America was relevant only through the realm of imagination, because American culture could only be experienced through consumer goods such as literature, music, and films. According to Rapp it was the imagination of the individual that created a image of 'the other'. Especially in the area of literature, officials favored a very specific, ideologically compatible selection of depictions of the Afro-American other.

The construction of 'the other America' in the GDR can be described with Lenin's thesis of the two cultures: In every society there is a constant struggle between a reactionary and a progressive culture. In the USA a dominant capitalist class oppressed the progressive working class, to which Afro-Americans were attributed. In accordance with policy GDR officials determined that solidarity had to be declared with the working class in the US. Hence, books by Afro-American authors obtained a propagandistic potential which made them preferable for publication.

The publication of any work of literature in the GDR was preceded by a process of approval for printing. The so called 'Zensurbehörde', the board of censors, based their decisions on assessments written by experts who scrutinized the respective text regarding its political suitability. The American German studies scholar Sara Lennox states that the experts on American literature in the GDR only knew two perspectives on Afro-Americans: from the viewpoint of class struggle as allies, whose protest must be supported, or with a paternalistic attitude as victims, who need help as they were unable to help themselves. During production, the contents of these assessments for printing entered the accompanying texts of the books.

Consequently, Rapp inferred, the concept of *race* became politically significant as an expression of oppression and resistance. As such, race was used to establish and conserve politically favored ideas. Rapp illustrated this ideological exploitation of literary texts with the example of a collection of short

stories by Langston Hughes, which was published originally in the 1930s and 1940s. During this period, the so called 'Red Decade', a considerable number of Afro-Americans was close to the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). When the texts were published by Reclam Leipzig 25 years later, the experts still wrote about the struggle for liberation in the US neglecting to reflect the changes of this struggle that had occurred in the meantime. They concealed the fact that in the 1940s during the McCarthy-Era many Afro-Americans had disappointedly turned away from the CPUSA, and they omitted the climax of the *Civil Rights Movement* at that time, which was characterized by a fundamentally different culture of political protest. The experts in the GDR focused solely on the theme of solidarization with the oppressed class and, consequently, stuck to an outdated narrative of the social relations in the US. A further example are the memoirs of Richard Wright, which were published by Reclam Leipzig as well. In this case the epilogue mentioned Wright's turning away from the CPUSA, which was, however, not attributed to free will but to a neurosis. This time, the victim role served as an excuse. Furthermore, genetic predispositions were pointed to as an additional cause. Wright's unique biography, the authors claimed, derived from the fact that he was a "thoroughbred negro."

The essentialistic biological conception of *race* expressed in this example shows that despite numerous publications of Afro-American literature in the GDR a reflection of this category did not take place. On the one hand, Rapp indicated, this can be interpreted as evidence that such a reflection was not considered politically significant. On the other hand, it can be assumed that a vague concept of *race* was favored, as it allows various interpretations and argumentations which can be adapted to any given political situation. In any case, the conservation of outdated narratives and stereotypes prevented a reflected debate about the concept of *race in the GDR*.

In the third presentation, Leonard Schmieding, who has written his doctoral thesis at the University of Leipzig about Hip Hop in the GDR and who currently is a research fellow at the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC, formulated the hypothesis: In the GDR Afro-American culture could have been apperceived and acquired only through media. Because direct interaction with Afro-Americans was impossible, the imagination of the other culture was exclusively based on media contents. At first, these contents were received through West German media, such as the TV show 'Na Sowas,' where breakdancing crews like the Rock Steady Crew and the New York City Breakers performed. Their breakdancing was imitated by teenagers in the GDR. As a result, in the early 1980s the first breakdancing crews were founded. The scene really boomed in 1985, when the movie *Beat Street* came to GDR movie theaters. It displayed the fundamental elements of hip hop culture – DJing, Rap, B-Boying / B-Girling / Breakdance, and Graffiti – and became the central information source for its acquisition.

In the 1970s, Hollywood movies had come into view of the GDR culture importers, because through film noir certain elements had entered, that were suitable to criticize the exemplary capitalist society in the US. Hip hop as *Beat Street* represented it was interpreted as the anti-capitalist criticism and form of protest of a ghettoized class with which the GDR demonstrated solidarity. The movie was a phenomenal success. Over three million tickets were sold. It connected the teenagers directly to the stars of the hip hop scene: Africa Bambaataa, who stood in the tradition of King's 'Non-violence'; DJ Kool Herc, who had invented the mixing; MC Melle Mel, who performed together with Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five; the Rock Steady Crew and the New York City Breakers, the two antagonistic breakdance crews who engaged in 'battles'; the rappers Kool Moe Dee and Doug E. Fresh; as well as graffiti artist PHASE 2.

However, most importantly *Beat Street* was the model for acquiring hip hop culture in its different forms. Teenagers in the GDR painted clothes, for instance with brand names and logos, and staged photographs in order to express their sentiment of being relocated to the Bronx. Thereby, they created a 'third space' between the GDR and New York true to the motto "one leg here, the other one there, and somewhere else with their thoughts," as Schmieding put it in his presentation.

However, the acquisition was not limited to a faithful imitation of the idols. Graffiti, found in New York in

the public space, generally moved to sketchbooks (so called 'black books') in the GDR. The names of the key figures in New York's hip hop scene were frequently captured in sketches and, thus, ascribed a symbolic meaning. Also, a special relation to Harlem was created, a part of Manhattan which is one of the centers of Afro-American culture in the US. The hands, faces, and characters that often occurred in these sketches had a black skin color.

This process of acquisition was equivalent to the cultural blackening of the teenagers in the GDR. It showed a thriving for authenticity, which became particularly clear in the case of breakdancing crews founded in the 1980s. Many groups had a member with dark complexion and African roots.

Just after the publication of *Beat Street* in the GDR the *Leipziger Breakdance Workshop* was founded. It was originally supported by the socialist culture institutions who eventually took over in order to stop the development of an autonomous subculture. In the official language of the GDR breakdancing was called 'akrobatischer Volkstanz' ('acrobatic folk dance'). Little by little, breakdancing was replaced with folk art performances at the *Workshop*.

Towards the end of his presentation Schmieding put some emphasis on Alexander Morawitz, who under the artist name *TJ Big Blaster Electric Boogie* was dedicated to spreading hip hop culture in the GDR. Morawitz tried to re-enact Africa Bambaataa's Zulu Nation with his own Universal Hip Hop Family. However, the project was canceled after the Reunification. Up to that point, Schmieding summarized, the lyrics of GDR hip hop had become a platform for anti-racist criticism and criticism of socialism. The orientation towards American role models, the re-location of their own culture to the Bronx in New York, the usage of the English language, and the striving for authenticity characterize the culture transfer from Leipzig into Black New York and emphasize the cultural blackening of the teenagers in the GDR.

Ali Himpenmacher, Leipzig native, antiracist activist, and doctoral student at the Global and European Studies Institute at Leipzig University, opened his presentation with the remark that he would be talking mainly about his experience in everyday life in Leipzig. Unerringly he asked the audience to observe their own reactions: Which impulses would they have when confronted with reports of everyday racism? Relativization, denial, rejection? In three examples Himpenmacher offered his typology of *derailing* – typical reactions that lead to collapse of the discussion and prevent discourse: 1. "Yes, but women experience discrimination, too." – "That's right," Himpenmacher said, "but this is beside the point when we are talking about racism." 2. "Yes, but I was checked by the police once, too." – "Yes, ONCE." 3. "Yes, but when I was on vacation in Africa, I as a White person had to pay higher admission fees than the Black people." – "Right, tourists usually pay more – Black tourists also."

As a central element of everyday racism Himpenmacher identified strategies of blinding out, which he compared to children who cover their eyes: "If I don't see the monster..." The example from his experience sounded utterly absurd: At a tram station a woman came his way. Upon seeing him she froze, whipped out her keys and started sorting them. As soon as he had passed her she stopped and continued walking.

And yet, the association with children is merely a rhetorical device. Grown up people who react to others like that because of their skin color, are not cute. They openly show their racism for which Himpenmacher found an easy formula: *Prejudice + Power = Racism*. Prejudice, Himpenmacher explained, is a definition of otherness which is charged with a judgement. The otherness emerges through distinction from a perceived 'we', based on which every person's affiliation is judged within a split second.

One consequence of this 'we' and the judgement about affiliation are questions like "Where are you from?" They contain the insinuation of extraneousness. It is impossible for the respondent to defend herself. Himpenmacher gave an account of how his explanation about his German mother and his father from Chad is responded to: "See? I knew it, you little rascal! You're not entirely German!"

In the following, Himpenmacher characterized racism as a phenomenon of everyday life which can be identified both in common social interactions and in institutional structures. That is why it usually remains

unrecognized: Black customers are ignored in shops. At school Black students are systematically disadvantaged. People frequently neglect rules of social behavior, such as keeping physical distance, when dealing with a Black person, and touch her without her consent.

White people are used to being addressed and represented. They do not know that they are thinking and acting racist. Hence, they are convinced that they are not racists. This can easily be identified in forms of public communication such as advertising. There are many examples in which blackfacing is used – in some cases even associated with dirt. The symbolism of colors frequently suggests that black is negative. Regularly, Black people are treated as objects. Experiences from a Black perspective, however, are being blinded out because they are not represented by the definitory power: They do not play a role in answering the question what is racist and what is not.

In many cases when Whites are criticized for their behavior towards Blacks, typical reactions occur: mob formation, specifically utilization of the majority in order to negate criticism or justify polemic responses; non-apology as a strategy for reducing cognitive dissonances; refusal. As a direct result of this kind of conflict behavior Black people are refused benefits, crimes against Black people are underrepresented in public media and discourse, Black people encounter exceptional problems when looking for jobs and apartments, and Black people are denied access. Because of that even children often struggle with psychological problems. In his blog Himpenmacher has collected and described numerous examples of racism in everyday life in Leipzig: Trollbar.de [9]

The thematic scope of the presentations showed vividly that racism in Leipzig is both a historical and an everyday life phenomenon. A closer look at constructions of *race* can be useful for a discussion of Black culture in Leipzig specifically and of racism in general. Corresponding debates about this topic are already taking place in Leipzig, but an awareness for the creation of otherness in society becomes established only very slowly due to considerable resistance. Theoretical and historical debates about racism occur only rarely in public, although they can provide crucial and valuable indications for understanding discrimination and the constitution of society. In this sense *Black Leipzig* was aimed at a broader public audience. Prof. Koenen emphasized: "I hope this symposium will not be the last."

Report by Christopher Köhler