crosscurrents
American and European Music in Interaction, 1900–2000

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Musical (African-)Americanization: The Case of Aggro Berlin

On 27 January 2007, four months into a year-long fieldwork project examining the racial politics of hip hop in Berlin, Paris, and London, I attended a concert presented by the record label Aggro Berlin in that city's Columbioclub. Across Columbiadamm from the club looms the stark neoclassical façade of Tempelhof Airport. The airport was built by the newly installed National Socialist government in 1934 as a symbol of Germany's rising power in the European community. The monumental structure was the largest in Europe and its semi-circular design was conceived as an abstraction of the Deutsche Adler—an eagle with its wings outspread—a symbol of the Nazi republic.

Today Tempelhof is best remembered as the center of operations for the Berlin Airlift. After World War II the airport in the U.S. sector became a highly visible and literally concrete example of the American occupation as well as a symbolic font of Marshall Plan redevelopment funds and reeducation efforts. Sensing the prolonged engagement that the nascent Cold War would bring, the U.S. Air Force began construction on nearby recreational sites for "US military personnel and their guests" in the early 1950s. The Columbioclub was one such venue "where GIs assailed their 'Homiesick Blues,' with the latest Hollywood films and local girls during the fifties." The Columbioclub, then, is a monument of sorts to the oft-debated issue of American cultural imperialism.

The underlying goal of my field work in Berlin—as it was in Paris and London—was to offer an explanation of how the "soft power" of American culture had changed in the last twenty years. Here was a site, I thought, that spoke to the complexity of that ubiquitous and divisive, yet nebulous term "Americanization." It was in just such a place as Columbioclub that I hoped to support my thesis about the effects of American music on European racial politics with on-the-ground observations and interviews with members of local hip hop communities. This thesis proposes that minority youth across Europe are adopting the highly mediated musical politics of American hip hop and aligning themselves with African-Americans in their struggle for equality. At the heart of this process is a seeming paradox pitting the sinister corporate icons of a soulless and demeaning Americanization in relation to an equally iconic image of the righteous struggle of black Americans.

In an interview that I conducted with two hip hop MCs in the spring of 2007, a Berliner rapper of Turkish descent explained:

Turkish people who are the biggest minority they didn't have a voice. No one was talking about them or their problems [...] It's like in America they talk about how they live in ghettos and so we say "hey man I'm feeling it." So this side of Germany has come out suddenly, and now they talk about these things more in the media, and in politics they say: "oh integration is so important." But they missed ten years ago, you know? It was the same problem but no one knew it. So now because of this hip hop thing, it's more prominent in the media. So they say: "oh no, what's happening?".

Referring to the recent riots in the Parisian suburbs, he concluded his thought: "it's developing like in France."

The other interviewee—an Afro-German MC—continued, focusing on another angle of these recent developments:

But I also think that much of the stuff that people are doing now with music and all this gangsta stuff—it just comes from the States [...] In the States they started to do all this pimp, gangsta, and dispe shit. And they just copied it and everyone's talking about how "Oh, Aggro Berlin's takin' hip hop to the next level." They're on MTV and selling many CDs, but for me they just copied it. It's like they started to be an image.

Following from these two very different views of the same process, I use the term "(African) Americanization"—not only because of the cultural and political alignment with black Americans, but also because of the way that these cultural critiques are packaged and marketed through electronic media. This second position reflects the reading of Americanization we are all accustomed to as a commodifying process. But while Americanization is commonly understood through the language of commercial homogenization, a look at the cultural politics of Berliner hip hop through the critical lens of (African) Americanization offers us a chance to interrogate a less discussed side of the larger set of processes. Indeed, the theoretical apparatus keeps us mindful of the complicated relationship between African-American expressive culture and American consumer culture. Further, by drawing out the often-occluded blackness of American culture we can unpack the racial contradictions inherent in that set of commercially available cultural forms known collectively as "black music" and come to a new understanding of hip hop's global resonance.

In the pages that follow, I argue that European hip hop gives voice to the ideal of equality through a non-assimilative expression of minority difference, a creative strategy that also exposes problematic national connotations of race and citizenship. By using racialized...
discourses and sonic markers of difference, hip hop youth are challenging conventional distinctions between sameness and difference as a way of bringing into form the antinomies of inclusion and exclusion that structure national identities. For while hip hop tends to be read as a "resistance vernacular," it is also a form of assimilation into both national discourses and national economies. The example of hip hop in Europe is thus instructive as a cultural form that is ostensibly about militant opposition and resistance, but which functions in structures of linguistic and cultural inclusion, is widely commercially available, and circulates publicly through the national body politic. In the end, the term (African) Americanization will serve not to define the processes at play in European hip hop, but rather function as a heuristic device with which to analyze the seeming paradox of a commercialized resistance music.

Racializing Aggro Berlin

The Columbia Club concert was headlined by Aggro’s star rapper SIDO, with supporting performances by Alpa Gun, a Turkish-German known for his track “Ich bin ein Ausländer” (I am a foreigner), as well as performances by Tony D aka “Der Vollblut-Arab” (the full-blooded Arab); the self-consciously white German rapper Fleer, whose logo incorporates the nationalist Deutsche Adler; and the Afro-German rapper B-Tight aka “Der Neger,” to whom we shall return shortly. As the racialized descriptions, alter egos, and stereotyped caricatures of the label’s artists indicate, Aggro Berlin is in the business of capitalizing on government fears and media sensationalism in a racially hyperseparate nation. The independent label has become the most influential and commercially successful hip hop imprint in Germany through its marketing strategy of racial branding. As a recent article in Der Spiegel put it: “Aggro Berlin functions like a comic book: for every taste there is a suitable hero; simply pick out the one you most identify with.” Indeed, one promotional caricature pictures Tony D as a comic book villain, exploiting from the page and screaming “AAAGH!” To give a racial valence to the character, the Lebanese Berliner is depicted with an Islamizing beard, deep-set eyes under a furrowed brow, and a sharp, phallic nose.

By transgressing the civilized boundaries of racial discourse Aggro Berlin’s recording artists have dug up an issue most Germans would rather leave buried. But in doing so they have built themselves a vast and diverse audience of young people who both understand and relate themselves to the forbidden language and politics of Rasse [race]. While Aggro Berlin’s racialized characters may seem little more than ugly tropes to most Germans, they are speaking to a generation of youth — of both minority and majority backgrounds — and providing a platform for questions about identity, difference, and inequality. Most importantly, Aggro’s stereotyped voices of difference come from within, not without. They are Berlin. They are of the German nation.

In her Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany Ute Poiger describes in detail how American culture represented a serious threat to bourgeois racial and gender norms in 1970s Germany. In a section dedicated to the reception of Elvis Presley in Germany Poiger cites a 1966 Berliner Zeitung article that describes such American “nonculture” as primitive, as well as a Der Spiegel article from the same year that likens Elvis Presley’s audience to entranced members of a “jungle tribe.”

Getting to the heart of this lowbrow and uncivilized threat, an article appearing in Berlin’s Tagespiegel went so far as to hypothesize that Elvis must have “black blood” — a gesture laying bare the biologized logic of miscegenation at the heart of fears about this American (non)culture. To be sure, these reactions mirrored the early minglings about rock and roll in the U.S. as well, but for German audiences in the 1970s these threats were external, as populations were overwhelmingly homogenous (despicably so in the wake of the Holocaust).

I cite Poiger at some length here to make another point about my terminology: the parenthetical construction I'm using in the figure ("African") Americanization speaks to the imminent hybridity of American (popular) culture. It is a culture that is always already creolized. To speak of American culture — especially music — is to speak of African-American culture. As Ralph Ellison wrote in a 1970 piece for Time Magazine provocatively titled "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks":

(...few have been able to resist the movies, television, baseball, jazz, ...) comic strips (...) or any of a thousand other expressions and carriers of our pluralistic and easily available popular culture. (...) At this level the melting pot did indeed melt, creating such deceptive metamorphoses and blending of identities, values and lifestyles that most American whites are culturally part Negro American without even realizing it.

Following from Ellison, the heuristic (African) Americanization speaks directly to melting pot discourses and American exceptionalism vis-a-vis African-American particularity to understand how a critical mass of minority citizens from the former colonies and peripheries of Europe are finding national subjectivities decidedly outliers.

In her literary study of racial identities in Berlin, Paris, and London entitled Becoming Black, Michelle Wright describes how black European writers have struggled to voice subjectivities at the margins of national cultures. She dubbs Afro-Germans "The Impossible Minority" to highlight the racial ancestry requirements that were until recently part of German citizenship. Indeed, the idea of Afro-German as a demographic category was inconceivable to most Germans until the postwar coupling of German women and occupying soldiers of African descent produced children. Even then, the preferred term was Bezugskinder (occupation children), which suppressed the possibility of expressing Afro-German subjectivities through its implication of rape.

8 I'm thinking specifically of the way Ronald Radano discusses the national circulation of black music in its commodity forms. See Ronald M. Radano, Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
9 "Aggrotwist," Aggro Berlin Official Website, https://aggroberlin.de (accessed 1 October 2007). While "Negers" can also be translated as "Negroes," B-Tight’s intention is clear; as we shall see.
11 Notes of Tony D’s promotional photographs feature the rapper in a brown. The comic book caricature, but in fact, have been produced by Aggro Berlin’s art department in direct response to the Spiegel article.
12 Ute G. Poiger, Jazz, Rock, and Rebels Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 668.
13 Poiger, Jazz, Rock, and Rebels (pct. 2006, 12), 173.
B-Tight: "Der Neger"

A generation after the Berlin Airlift, B-Tight was born Robert Edward Davis to an African-American serviceman and an ethnically German mother and raised an Afro-German in West Berlin. As a member of the Aggro Berlin family, his alias "Der Neger" positions him in an important role as the record label's only black member. Through his character, B-Tight employs a strategic form of racial essentialism that articulates black identity through the stylistic contours of hip hop and through his translation of the African-American experience into his Afro-German context. Indeed, his cultural politics finds its most poignant expression through musical sound and in the dramatic communities formed in live performance. As such, his blackness is not only sounded by, but is premiered upon, black music. Despite the localizing factors that scholars of European hip hop have taken pains to highlight, his creative output is quite audibly black American music. This fact became abundantly clear that night at Columbia Club as each successive artist took to the stage with propulsively swinging bass drum beats, syncopated snare lines, extravagantly loud and funky bass lines and – most of all – highly cultivated styles of phrasing and vocal modulation that evidenced the continued processes of Americanization at work in this hall that once housed Hollywood films.

But the highlight of the show, for me, came when B-Tight performed his signature track: "Der Neger" begins with a six-note motif of diffuse bass tones doubled by a piercing Moog synthesizer line three octaves above – production values reminiscent of the classic G-Funk beats composed by the U.S. West Coast producer Dr. Dre. After the initial four-bar loop concludes, a continuous stream of electronic beats enters, providing an eight-note pulse and midrange support for the E minor melodic hook. The pulse accentuates the syncopated structure of the hook and helps the track gain steam as a bouncing hip hop drum track of bass drum, snare, and shaker joins the pitched material. Together, the midrange eighth-note loop and the three distinct percussive lines focus the energy of the heretofore lazy loop, giving the track its syncopated and ultimately propulsive character.

On hearing the initial bass line and Moog hook, the crowd at Columbia Club applauded and cheered wildly. They knew the simple gesture well. But when the drum and eighth-note line entered, their knowledge was activated as their recognition gained musical structure and performative materiality. Anticipating the downbeat of the fifth measure of "Der Neger," the young crowd raised its open hands in concert and proceeded to outline the quarter-note pulse, nodding their heads and lowering their outstretched arms to the swinging syncopated beat.

After the first iteration of the full loop B-Tight stepped into the spotlight and delivered the following lines of the chorus. Using vocal modulations dripping with irony, he asked the audience:

Wer hat das Gras weggeraucht?
Wer rammt dir den Penis in den Bauch?
Wer ist immer down mit mehr als einer Brust,
Wer fällt immer auf, weil er gerade baut?

(Who smoked all the grass)
Who rammed the penis in your stomach?
Who always down with more than one woman,
Who always sticks out because he rolls a joint?

Not missing a beat, the audience of mostly ethnic German and Turkish Berliners responded in rhythm to each question with fingers pointed in mock accusation at the rapper: "Der Neger!"

The rehearsal of racial difference exemplified in this call and response between B-Tight and his audience is echoed in countless European hip hop recordings today and is employed by many of the rappers with whom I spoke in Berlin – as well as in Paris and London.

In all of these contexts the musical dramatization of racial stereotypes provided a sort of exorcism in which all could participate. The dialogue and its act of pointing here serve both to mark racial difference and to critique it. Most importantly, the performative musical structure of the call and response activates a racial dialectic that implicates B-Tight and his multi-racial German public. Through the racialized forms of hip hop they create this difference together. While local and national contexts inevitably inform rappers' messages from city to city and neighborhood to neighborhood, the common denominator of this difference can be found in the contours and discourses of black music that sound a history of contest between African America and America. The dialectic between B-Tight and his audience thus finds its originary impetus in the well-rehearsed tension encoded in African American music – a term and a music that are both packed with the antinomies and social contradictions of national inclusion, exclusion, and occlusion. Despite its long reliance on a racialized definition of citizenship, the German nation has always been a country of dynamic shifts and migrations. The Aggro concert at Columbia Club simply offered a platform for expressions of this historically elided dynamism.
Although the term Neger is usually translated as the antiquated English "nigger" and still appears unproblematic in German dictionaries, B-Tight's use of the term is clearly marked as a stand-in for the more racially charged and controversial "nigger." In fact, the word Neger as spoken by B-Tight is phonetically indistinguishable from the standard US hip hop usage "nigga." B-Tight's African-American usage is made clear in the conclusion of his signature track "Der Neger" - a send-up of Afro-German stereotypes that segue into a scratched turntable solo on a recorded sample of the Ebonics word "nigga." In the turntablism solo, Aggro Berlin's DJ Ward scratches calls of "ni, ni, nigga," to which B-Tight and the chorus of overdubs responds: "Der Neger." As the call and response continues, DJ Ward's solo on "nigga" grows more complex and convoluted, eventually subsuming the German responses. After the syncopated rhythms produced on the two syllables subside, Ward lets the record spin, revealing the source of the line, the original call: "Niggaz, thugs, dope dealers, and pimps/basketball players, rap stars, and simpletons/fake pimps! That's what little black boys are made of." The sample's source turns out to be the American rapper Boots on the track "Not Yet Free" by the Oakland-based hip hop group The Coup. In this call and response, B-Tight and the overdubbed countrymen are answering an American call. What was once a dialogue between the rapper and his audience here becomes a call and response between an Ebonics sample and the chorus of Germans. B-Tight's decision to conclude with this sample is particularly noteworthy, as it clarifies his intentions not only in the translation of language but in the translation of social meaning. In short, through hip hop he relates his own Afro-German experience to the African-American experience and claims membership in a global black diaspora - a strategy that further authenticates the U.S. form. Also notable here is the eventual elision of B-Tight's response with the (African)American call. As the sampled scratch solo grows more complex and syncopated, it also starts extending into the (Afro-German) half of each measure. By the third measure of the solo call, there is no rhythmic space for his multi-voiced response. In giving the American sample the privilege of the last word, B-Tight defers to the original (African-American) English, "nigger," rather than the German, "Neger." By establishing this diasporic connection through the use of the Coup sample, his Afro-deutsch subjectivity seems to be subsumed by a now hyper-authenticated US form.

As the beat fades away and disappears, however, we are treated to a comic demoune that re-establishes B-Tight's local context through the exaggerated contours of a typically rough old Berliner accent performed by Sido. The entrance of the stereotypical (antiquated white) Berliner voice performing the chorus serves not only to recontextualize the track, but shows that B-Tight's anti-racist critique has been absorbed by his object of critique - the supposed local perpetrators/ perpetuators of the anti-black stereotypes that the track catalogues. In the end, the track's narrative establishes a dialogue with German society that is intended to show how B-Tight's statement is not lost on its intended targets. B-Tight's reference to The Coup in particular on the "Der Neger" sample is also telling. While the cultural politics of stereotype repetition and inversion are by no means uncommon in hip hop, The Coup holds a particularly prominent spot in the pantheon of black militant hip hop coming out of an early 1990s milieu of Afrocentric rap music. On the sampled track the MC, Boots, deforms a seemingly innocent nursery rhyme to account for what he sees as the depths of American racial attitudes about blacks. On the 1993 track he argues that the futures of black children are entirely proscribed by American racism. As the deformed rhyme above suggests, whether they fail or achieve success, little black boys have only a handful of options. B-Tight in fact uses Boots's black nursery rhyme mode of critique on a later track from the album entitled "Zehn kleine Negerlein" (Ten Little Niggers). In this stereotyped critique B-Tight again employs a sample, this time from an antique recording of a German children's choir singing a racist nursery rhyme of the same name. In so doing, he is indicting German society via a material artifact from its past that finds comedy in a story of the imminent death of black children. Importantly, however, the lyrics and basic structure of the song are translated and borrowed wholesale from a nineteenth-century blackface

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18 The stereotyped voice may, in fact, be intended to represent Hitler. Thanks to Karen Cush of the Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies for suggesting this reading.
minstrel song by the Philadelphian Septimus Winner—a track that was first published as "Ten Little Indians" and later appeared as "Ten Little Niggers." B-Tight's translational references to American hip hop and black identity politics on the album are thus part of a longer history of cultural exchange and borrowing. What is new in this musical call and response that spans almost two hundred years and half the globe, however, is B-Tight's voice. The "impossible minority" is now possible in Germany and he speaks back to the racist past and present it has produced through a form descended from American "black music" of times past.

In the case of B-Tight, the global and local, past and present converge in particularly poignant ways, throwing the complexity of (African) Americanization into high relief. I use the example of B-Tight at ColumbiACLub first because of the very real resonance that he has as a symbol of U.S. military occupation in a place such as this where American soldiers once sought comfort from their "Homiesick Blues" with their "local friends." But I also offer a brief excavation of this place to argue that the difference between B-Tight's practice of diaspora and that of the self-defined outsiders sharing the stage with him is growing indistinguishable.

"The Fantasy of a Benign Amputation"

Europeans of African descent are not the only ones to have called upon the symbols of African-American difference, oppression, and struggle to make their case. The sounds, sights, and symbols of this musical (African) Americanization were on full display that night at ColumbiACLub as Sido, Alpa Gun, Fler, Tony D, G-Hot, and the rest of the Aggro crew dramatized their diverse ethnic backgrounds, giving musical voice to their respective outsider identities and to their roles in the German national imagination. The musical identity politics of the Aggro artists of Turkish and Arab backgrounds attest to recent developments across Europe wherein minority people of all backgrounds are using the medium (and media) of hip hop to articulate their dissent from the mainstreams of their respective nation states. In so doing, however, they also carve out a space for their inclusion into their nations. Indeed, Algerian Parisians, South Asian Londoners, and countless others that I have both interviewed and seen in concert claim membership in a contingent but puerile racialized global underclass that gains its political force through its use of the iconic African-American model of opposition. In this study, I argue that the relationship between European and U.S. hip hop is more akin to diaspora than to appropriation—less we are like those people than we are those people. Despite the racialized modes of critique and the particularity of American blackness, in European hip hop we see a reassertion of historicity locating the origins of racism in the shared legacy of European national, colonial, and imperial projects.

Yet, before we embrace these more recent developments, we must note that the often disturbing imagery that Aggro Berlin uses to articulate this model falls into the double bind that Paul Gilroy describes as "the oscillation between black as a problem and black as a victim"—a dichotomy that he suggests is "the principal mechanism through which race is pushed outside of history and into the realm of natural, inevitable events." Our keynote speaker for the "Crosscurrents" conference, Berndt Ostendorf, has written cogently on this dual tendency to celebrate or pathologize in an article for Black Music Research Journal. Additionally, in her Race Against Empire, another "Crosscurrents" contributor, Penny Von Eschen, has written with searing insight on the ways that racism was naturalized during the Cold War—arguing that racism was likened to a disease rather than understood as a direct effect of structural inequality.

Perhaps my favorite example of how we all fall prey to this unproductive binary is the example of a 2007 symposium at Berlin's Wissenschaftszentrum für Sozialforschung (Center for the Social Sciences) that was arranged by Harvard's Center for European Studies. While the panel discussion proved quite illuminating—bringing American, German, and Turkish experts together to discuss German hip hop—the symposium hosted by Alexander Redding was titled, "Hip-hop Culture in Germany and the US: Righteous Anger or Self-Destruction?" The title was one that piqued my interest by getting right to the dilemma that Gilroy, Ostendorf, and Von Eschen outline. But, of course, it fell into this classic conundrum, echoing and reifying the binary that Gilroy rightly casts doubt upon. I am instead interested in learning how these processes work, rather than examining European hip hop's racializing valences in terms of ethical values and strategic goals. Instead of inquiring whether the ends justify the means, I wonder what hip hop's political negotiations can tell us about its contexts. Indeed, hip hop artists are well aware of the debates about their music, and are actively and reflexively engaging the multivalent power of these polarizing discursive binaries to craft supple political statements and dynamic music.

Aggro Berlin and its artists are particularly astute at mobilizing images of victimhood and aggression. In one particularly striking—but not isolated—example of Aggro's racialized promotional strategy we see Sido, B-Tight, Tony D, G-Hot, and Fler pictured together, heads in nooses (see Figure 1, p. 482).

On first inspection the metaphorically charged image is understood in its Berlin context as a way for the oft-scoped Aggro artists to assume their role as the bad boys of the German music industry—public enemy number one, so to speak. Indeed, the image recalls the iconic logo of the New York rap crew Public Enemy, which featured a beret-clad Black Panther in the crosses of the (white) mainstream "public." But on a deeper level, this album cover for Aggro's sampler album Anlage Fünf (accusation five) articulates a racialized victimhood through the image of a group lynching. Both the image and the album's title function in the same mode of African-American critical inversion as the Public Enemy logo, Boot's deformed black nursery rhyme, and B-Tight's catalogue of stereotypes. By representing themselves as the accused, they instead claim victimhood and redirect the guilt at a German society that they perceive to have falsely sentenced them to death. Surely the noose has innumerable meanings as a cultural signifier in different contexts—especially in Berlin—but here the symbolism is clear: the referent is the African-American experience of racial terror.

22 Penny Von Eschen, Race Against Empire (New York: 2003), 201.
In her landmark study *Exorcizing Blackness* Trudier Harris examines the social psychoses of lynching in the American context. She demonstrates how hate and guilt, sex, and fear lay the contradiction-laden foundation for such racial brutality. Although Harris reads the lynching ritual as a form of racial exorcism, she also notes how the inhuman process often concluded with the collection of horrific “souvenirs”—namely the genitals and other parts of the deceased’s body. Amy Louise Wood builds on Harris’s work, suggesting that: “In this way, the black ‘criminal’ was not ritually expropriated from the community. Indeed […] the rituals surrounding the lynching ensured that the (now disintegrated) black body was integrated back into that community.” In her study Wood thus focuses on the collection and fetishization of photographs in relation to the collection of human remains as part of this ritual reincorporation.

I cite these details to suggest that the images from the Aggro Berlin catalog not only draw on the contradictions of “love and theft” to use Eric Lott’s evocative formulation—but to argue that through the production of such images the record label is producing a fetish item that in fact incorporates racial otherness back into the German national body politic. This image is a disturbing one to be sure, but I feel that an attempt at understanding the cultural logic behind such images is a better course of action than allowing them to continue circulating privately as fetish objects without comment. Wood offers a thoughtful reflection on both the benefits and the pitfalls of re-circulating such images, writing:

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operative wherever the nation grows weary of the struggle toward the ideal of American democratic equality. Both would use the black man as a scapegoat to achieve a national catharsis, and both would, by way of curing the patient, destroy him. 38

Could it be, then, that by obtaining himself B-Tight is reinscribing himself into the German body politic? Could it be that through acts of segregation these MCs are in fact assimilating themselves into mainstream society? Getting back to the imagery of the noose, we might readily accept its symbolic argument in the case of B-Tight, and for Tony D and G-Hot, the sons of Middle Eastern guest workers in Germany. For in their cases the imagined coalition with African-Americans is premised on a form of racial marginalization also rooted in histories of dispersion, manual labor, and tenous citizenship. However, the inclusion of the ethnic Germans SIDO and Fler in this image surely raises some eyebrows. The cultural logic at work here pits the working class, housing-project identity of SIDO and the ethnic Germanness of Fler against a broader enemy that all pictured can feel united in confronting—that is, mainstream (white universalist) bourgeois society. In a nation where ethnic pride is viewed with much alarm, Fler’s use of the Deutscher Adler and the German flag is perceived as a provocation, a violation of civilized norms. Like Aggro’s rappers of minority backgrounds, Fler is declaring himself an outsider and asserting his independence from the race-free public sphere of politically correct Germany—an authentic alternative to the universal but seemingly soulless EU citizenship he sees on the horizon. In short, these Aggro artists of both majority and minority backgrounds are militating to preserve and re-inscribe racial difference. Perhaps crudely, but by no means thoughtlessly, these racialized images draw upon the iconic example of African-American struggle in order to imagine a coalition premised on equality through difference.

In her study of jazz ambassadors during the Cold War, Penny Von Eschen shows us how American cultural imperialism is fraught with slippages, and is much more complicated than a simple top-down transaction. 39 As she demonstrates, American jazz musicians brought with them a host of countermessages that were not always in tune with the U.S. State Department’s intended foreign policy goals of combating the view of race as “America’s Achilles heel internationally.” Today the set of processes known collectively as Americanization continue to be highly dynamic hegemonic contests rife with antinomies and paradox, most remarkably because American culture is so deeply informed, indeed largely defined, by African-American culture. But, as is evident from the Aggro Berlin concert at Columbia-club, musical Americanization no longer requires foreign actors—the ambassadors are now within.