

Changing Demographics: Migration Flows from or to Germany

Musical (African) Americanization: Hip Hop and Minority Identity in Berlin

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On January 27, 2007, four months into a yearlong fieldwork project examining the racial politics of hip hop in Berlin I attended a concert presented by the hugely popular German hip hop label Aggro Berlin in the city's Columbiacub. Across the street from the club looms the monumental façade of the Tempelhof Airport, today best remembered as the center of operations for the Berlin Airlift. Sensing the prolonged engagement that the nascent Cold War would bring, the U.S. Air Force began construction on nearby recreational sites in the early fifties. As the Columbiacub website points out, it was one such venue "where GIs assuaged their 'Homesick Blues,' with the latest Hollywood films and local girlfriends."¹ The Columbiacub, then, is a monument of sorts to American cultural influence in Germany.

The underlying goal of my fieldwork 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 that I hoped to support my thesis about the effects of American music on German racial politics with on the ground observations and interviews with members of local hip hop communities. This thesis proposes that minority youth in Germany have adopted the identity politics associated with hip hop and aligned themselves with African Americans in a struggle for equality through difference, not assimilation.

In one interview that I conducted with two rappers in early February 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 black people 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

¹ "Our History," Columbiacub website, columbiacub.de/main.html. Translations by the author.

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?’”²

The other interviewee—an Afro-German rapper—continued, focusing on another angle of these recent developments with reference to Aggro Berlin:

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 dipset shit. And they just copied it and everyone’s talking about how: ‘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 distinct 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.³ But while Americanization is commonly understood through the language of commercial homogenization, a look at the identity politics of Berliner hip hop offers us a chance to interrogate a less discussed side of the larger process. In brief, I am describing this transaction as (African) Americanization to keep us mindful of the complicated relationship between African American culture and American consumer culture.

The Aggro Berlin concert at Columbiacub was headlined by the ethnically German rapper SIDO and his hype man Alpa Gun, a Turkish German known for his track “*Ich bin ein Ausländer*” [I am a foreigner]. The supporting performances featured Tony D (aka “*Der Vollblut-Araber*” [The Full Blooded Arab]), the self-consciously white German rapper Fler (whose logo incorporates the nationalist Deutsche Adler), and the Afro-German rapper B-Tight

² Interview, 6 February 2007.

³ Paul Gilroy describes this side of the process in his “Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a ‘Changing Same,’” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Autumn 1991), 124.

(aka *Der Neger*).⁴ As the racialized descriptions, symbols, and alter egos of the label's artists indicate, Aggro Berlin is in the business of capitalizing on government and media fears in a racially hypersensitive nation. Indeed, the independent label has become the most influential and commercially successful hip hop imprint in Germany through this 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."⁵ By transgressing the civilized boundaries of racial discourse, the Aggro Berlin musicians have dug up an issue most Germans would rather leave buried. But in doing so they have built themselves a vast audience of young people that both understand and identify with 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 and providing a platform for questions about identity, difference, and inequality. Most importantly, Aggro's voices of difference come from within not without—they are *of* Berlin. Unlike the imported films at the Columbiacub in the 1950s, this show featured Germans, albeit Germans whom previous generations would hardly have recognized as such.

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 in West Berlin an Afro-German. On his signature track "*Der Neger*," B-Tight articulates a diasporic linkage to the African American experience. The track is a send up of Afro-German stereotypes that segues into a scratched turntable solo on a sample of the track "Not Yet Free" by the U.S. rap crew The Coup. B-Tight's decision to conclude with this sample is particularly noteworthy as it not only clarifies his intention to translate the German word "*Neger*" as the Ebonics "nigga," but to translate social meaning as well.

⁴ "Aggrostarz," Aggro Berlin Official Website, <http://aggroberlin.de>. Last accessed October 1, 2007. While "*Neger*" can also be translated as "Negro," B-Tight's intention is clear as we will see.

⁵ Daniel Haas, "HipHop Star SIDO: German Head Trauma," Spiegel Online <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/musik/0,1518,452883,00.html>, 7 December 2006. Last accessed 7 May 2007.

The highlight of the show, for me, came when B-Tight performed this signature track. “*Der Neger*” begins with a six-note motive of diffuse bass tones doubled by a piercing moog synthesizer line—production values reminiscent of classic West Coast gangsta rap. After the first iteration of this loop concluded B-Tight moved to the front of the stage, asking the audience:

Who smoked all the grass?
Who rammed the penis in your stomach?
Who always gets down with more than one woman
Who always sticks out because he rolls a joint?”⁶

Not missing a beat, the crowd of mostly white 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 is echoed in countless German hip hop recordings today. In contexts such as this the musical dramatization of racial stereotypes provides a sort of exorcism in which all can participate. While the common denominator in this musical politics is the African American protest model, B-Tight is far from the only one to have made such gestures with hip hop. The musical identity politics of the Aggro artists of Turkish and Arab backgrounds attest to recent developments across the country wherein minority people of all backgrounds are using the media of hip hop to articulate their dissent from the national mainstream. African American cultural politics were on full display that night at Columbiacub as Alpa Gun, Fler, Tony D, and the rest of the Aggro Berlin crew dramatized their diverse ethnic backgrounds giving musical voice to their respective outsider identities.

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. The example of B-Tight at Columbiacub is important first because of the very real resonance that he has as a symbol of U.S. economic intervention and military occupation in a place such as this where American soldiers once sought comfort from their “Homesick Blues” with their “local girlfriends.” But I also offer a brief cultural excavation of Columbiacub to argue that the

⁶ B-Tight, “*Der Neger*” (Aggro Berlin 2006).

difference between B-Tight's practice of diaspora and that of the self-defined "Ausländer" sharing the stage with him is growing indistinguishable.

In his 1906 article "The Color Line Belts the World" W. E. B. Du Bois explained how "The Negro problem in America is but a local phase of a world problem."⁷ It is worth note that in the transactions surrounding minority hip hop in Europe the African American example has become iconic and universally assimilable to a degree that the modalities in which minority identities are now lived are largely American ones. In his pathbreaking study *The Practice of Diaspora* Brent Hayes Edwards argues that: "the possibility of black internationalism is heard to be a matter of music."⁸ I submit for your consideration the possibility that minority identity in Germany today is increasingly heard to be a matter of African American music.

⁷ Du Bois, "The Color Line Belts the World," in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: H. Holt, 1995), 42. See also Robin D. G. Kelley's "'But a Local Phase of a World Problem': Black History's Global Vision 1883-1950," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (Dec. 1999), 1045-1077.

⁸ Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 68.