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Thomas Meinecke's German Fictions of Multicultural America: Model or Admonition?

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Whereas the United States has had at least two centuries to shape a national narrative about itself as an immigrant country formed from diverse components (foregrounding some groups at the expense of others), Germany stumbled into the definition of itself as an immigrant country only in the second half of the twentieth century.¹ Already by 1909 the demographic composition of the United States had given rise to the slogan “melting pot” in the title of a play by Israel Zangwill. In Europe, however, just as the end of WWII and the beginning of the Cold War had precipitated the flight of ethnic German populations from the East into the new (“Bonn”) Federal Republic, the end of the Cold War saw a merging of two diverse German populations in the second (“Berlin”) Federal Republic, as well as an infusion of others from the East after the dissolution of the USSR and the Balkan conflict. Even before unification West Germany was facing the complex unresolved legacy of *Gastarbeiter* policies in the years following the Berlin division. The social and economic pressures of unification compounded the demographic pressures that an influx of *Aussiedler*, refugees, and asylum-seekers brought to the state and social infrastructure.² Across the Atlantic the heated debates about “multiculturalism” as centerpiece of the “culture wars,” beginning in the late Cold War years and continuing to the end of the century, attracted German attention, even to the extent of enriching the language with a new word, “multikulti,” without counterpart in the US.³ Among the German literary works of the 1990’s informed by these developments, two novels of Thomas Meinecke set in the US, *The Church of John F. Kennedy* (1996) and *Hellblau* (2001), engage in a particularly relentless debate with the American model of multiculturalism seen from the vantage point of newly united Germany. In adumbrating a model of cultural “hybridity” suitable for both Germany and the United States, these novels playfully juggle variations of ethnicity, race, and gender in the US to show both the bright and the dark sides of American pluralism. Meinecke avoids the rhetoric of both the discredited “melting pot” and the “Leitkultur” in Germany or “Anglo-Protestant” dominance in the US, and celebrates instead inevitable and invigorating cultural mongrelizations, striving to resist what Paul Gilroy calls “the closure of the categories with which we conduct our political lives” (xi).

Each of these novels, like the author’s 1998 *Tomboy*, can be described as “eine Art Zeitgeist-Bewußtseins-Unterhaltungsroman” (Kunisch 160). Both of them also fall in the tradition of “ethnographic” novel, a genre often associated with Hubert Fichte, largely thanks to the subtitle of his *Explosion: Roman der Ethnologie*. Indeed, *Hellblau*, though set in the United

¹ Arguments such as Zank’s for the historical heterogeneity of German society as a mixture of Celts, Romans, Saxons, Franks, Poles, Mazurians, Sorbs, Kashubians, Pommeranians, Polabians, Czechs, Frenchmen, Italians, Croats, Turks and others, depend on a chronology covering centuries, even millennia, and thus are of limited relevance to current discussions about the modern state.

² The expansion of the society to include formerly alien elements included in 1991-92 alone 200,000 ethnic Germans (“Aussiedler”) entering from the former East Bloc countries. Between 1990 and 1994, 238,000 ethnic Germans became new citizens. Other immigrant groups, for example, refugees from the Balkan wars, posed different problems. Between 1980 and 1993, Germany’s extremely generous asylum policy produced an 8000% increase in the number of applicants for asylum (Gibney, 98-99, 86). At the same time, Germany has had by far the lowest naturalization rate of any European country, creating another set of social and political pressures. Rätzzel, 33.

³ In 2000 the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* was already predicting the demise of this term in Germany as “zu schwammig:” “‘Multiculturalism’ ist ein wissenschaftlicher Topos aus dem USA der 60er Jahre, der in den klassischen angelsächsischen Einwanderungsländern eine Absage an die Anpassungszwänge einer hegemonialen, also weißen Kultur ausdrückte. In den achtziger Jahren wurde ‘multikulturell’ zum Kampfbegriff der deutschen Linken gegen eine restriktive Bonner Ausländerpolitik. Heute aber erscheint er vielen, die ihn einst im Munde führten, inhaltlich zu schwammig – und so könnte ‘Multikulti’ bald zum sprachlichen Museumsgut der Ära Kohl gehören.”

States, pays homage to Fichte by ending at his grave in Germany. Meinecke's novels share common features with the work of Fichte and also with the "ethnographic novels" of Michael Roes: the ethnographer's self-conscious position in an 'in-between' realm and thus his abandonment of claims to scientific "objectivity," an acknowledgement that the culture he describes is a construct, a recognition of the "hybridity" of culture as an impure mixture not contingent on boundaries of a given nation (Honold 71-75). Structurally, though, Meinecke's two novels are very different, one a "picaresque," the other more akin to a "blog."

Cast as an episodic trek through a multicultural America, Meinecke's *Church of John F. Kennedy*, written in 1992 but not published until 1996, stands in the tradition of Kafka's *Amerika*. In this modern picaresque, the New World appears as a mosaic of incompletely merged European immigrant groups.⁴ Readers recall that in Kafka's novel the unsettled ambivalence of "white" Americans toward their home and their European roots resonates in Uncle Jakob's self-introduction: "Ich lebe seit allen den langen Jahren meines amerikanischen Aufenthaltes—das Wort Aufenthalt paßt hier allerdings schlecht für den amerikanischen Bürger, der ich mit ganzer Seele bin—, seit allen den langen Jahren lebe ich also von meinen europäischen Verwandten vollständig getrennt..." (Kafka 25). Among the various European nationalities Kafka's protagonist Karl Rossmann encounters are a Romanian (Schubal), an Irishman (Robinson), a Frenchman (Dellamarche), and an Italian (Giacomo). In this world native-born Americans are so rare that the character Rennell is introduced explicitly as "ein geborener Amerikaner" (Kafka 116). The co-existence of these nationalities causes more discomfort than pleasure for Karl when Robinson confirms negative stereotypes he has heard about the Irish: his fellow "Germans," Grete Mitzelbach from Vienna and Therese Berchtold from Pommerania, turn out to be, albeit briefly, the most consoling characters he encounters. His peremptory choice of the name "Negro" in the "Großes Naturtheater von Oklahama" signals, among other things, the finality of Karl's separation from his European roots.

In a nod to Kafka's anti-hero Karl Rossmann, Meinecke's *picaro*, Wenzel Assmann, a 30-something *Privatgelehrter* from Mannheim, owes the inspiration for his trip to Austrian origins: his ennui during a stint as summer actor in the Bregenzer Festspiele drives him to the New World, where he takes up the research on German-Americans documented in a *Magisterarbeit* by a *Vorarlberger* at the University of Innsbrück. At one point, Assmann risks becoming a "Verschollener" when he loses all contact with his friends back home. Assmann laments: "In Mannheim, Braunschweig, Hamburg, München werden sie mich für gestorben halten" (148). Moreover, like Karl Rossmann, he sees an America marked not as white and black but as a conglomeration of many ethnic identities with often ambiguous interaction, some of them firmly rooted in New World soil, others—like the German-Americans who buy his regional German telephone books—held more in an "amerikanischer Aufenthalt" with a view to Europe. The telephone books themselves, lists devoid of substantial information, posit a geographical and historical connection to the Old Country as illusory as any that Kafka's American immigrants, Uncle Jakob or Karl, could hope for: "Meyer, Muller, Shultz; heute war wirklich ein großes Gedrängel um Wenzel Assmanns Kofferraum. Die Städtchen Boerne und Bergheim schienen geradezu heim ins Reich zu drängen" (22). Assmann, moreover, finds in American musical traditions peculiarly American non-élitist art forms akin to the new genre of populist spectacle that Kafka adumbrates in the "Großes Naturtheater von Oklahama": the inclusiveness ("das Theater von Oklahoma schien wirklich jeden brauchen zu können!" 234), the prominence of

⁴ Hans-Peter Kunisch claims that this novel has made Meinecke "zum humoristisch-intellektuellen Erneuerer des deutschen Schelmenromans" (157).

trumpets and drums, the open-endedness (Fanny's claim that it is "fast grenzenlos," 221), the apparent spontaneity of instrumentalists playing without a score, and the blending of performance traditions in Kafka's *Großes Naturtheater* echo qualities of American jazz that Meinecke emphasizes in both his novels about the US.

Like Kafka's anti-utopia with its Statue of Liberty at the entrance to New York Harbor holding a sword instead of a torch, the world of *The Church of John F. Kennedy* interrogates the German vision of the "Land der unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten." Meinecke's title caricatures utopian visions in referring to a Texas sect that venerates John F. Kennedy as "endlich zurückgekehrten, abermals für die Menschheit gestorbenen Erlöser" (31). Kennedy as the last representative of American utopianism points towards the text's other references to individuals and immigrant groups pursuing quixotic variants of utopia in the New World (217-8). German communitarian settlements along the Missouri River in the 1830's, Mexicans heading north to the Freddy Fender song "There's a land that I've been told where every street is paved with gold, and it's just across the borderline" (159), and the "utopian" Pennsylvania Anabaptists all suggest to Assmann "die traditionell utopische Kondition der Vereinigten Staaten schlechthin" (217). Assmann also finds utopian tendencies in non-immigrant contexts (Louisiana politician Huey P. Long as "fortschrittliche[r] Sozialrevolutionär" (88)). Anticipating the preoccupation with sexual identity that will form the core of his novel *Tomboy*, Meinecke also lets his protagonist discover a utopian bent in the gender fluidity marking American multiculturalism. For example, two minor characters, a transsexual couple named Cherry and Jack in a Georgia trailer park, engineer their own mode of "sozialrealistische Revolte" (138) in forays to New York, where they pose as a man and woman calling out random numbers on the floor of the Stock Exchange. These two profess a cheerfully American belief in progress: "Bei aller tatsächlichen Ambivalenz des Fortschritts, nickte Jack...können wir doch nichts besseres tun als an ihn zu glauben; und uns, ergänzte Cherry, in den beschleunigenden Dienst seiner quasi kybernetischen Kräfte zu stellen" (138-139). Although Assmann's own anarchic tendencies enable him to sympathize with such quirky idealism, he makes it clear that J.F. Kennedy's political successors in Washington have replaced utopian dreams with zealotry. Thus, his contemplation of Pennsylvania Amish and Mennonites elicits the following comments:

Während im alten Europa jegliche Macht, auch die kirchliche, stets auf das erbitterte Bekämpfen aller Utopien ein-, ja ausgerichtet war, konnten die utopischen Sekten auf nordamerikanischem Boden, gleichsam im Einklang mit dem nicht weniger schwärmerischen Selbstverständnis der Regierung zu Washington, an ihrem höchsteigenen Himmelreich auf Erden basteln... wengleich George Bush, seines Zeichens WASP, weißer angelsächsischer Protestant, mit der lautstarken, telekratisch gerechtfertigten Niederschlagung des Irak nicht unerheblich davon abzulenken verstand, daß große Teile des Sozialgebildes USA längst in den elendigen Status einer Vierten Welt abgesunken waren." (217-8)

The passage associates Bush's WASP identity (his severance from his country's multicultural heritage) to the failures of his social and political policy, implying that ethnic homogeneity creates bad politics in a complex modern society like the US.

For Germans, however, Kennedy is more than a contrast with George Bush, more than a spokesman for New World idealism; he is also inevitably the Kennedy of June, 1963, whose words at the Berlin Wall, "Ich bin ein Berliner," in the recent words of one scholar, "gave

expression to the Cold War bargain between a divided Germany and the United States” as guarantor of West Germany’s security (Janes). Implicit in Meinecke’s novel is the question of what Kennedy’s words mean for post-Cold War unified Germany, where this bargain no longer holds sway. Has the US as a reliable partner in *Realpolitik* given way to a chialistic cult, the Church of John F. Kennedy? In the context of the novel, Kennedy appears less as an icon of international solidarity (e.g., the inspiration for statements like Chirac’s September 2001 words “nous sommes tous des américains”) than as an early postmodern exemplar of fluid identity. At one point Assmann recounts (or alleges) that the twenty-two year old Kennedy in 1939 posed for a Polish sculptress preparing a religious work now in the Vatican (31). Thus he is memorialized as a blonde-haired angel, turned American president (both idealist and *Realpolitiker*), turned jelly-doughnut, turned native of Berlin, turned Texas savior. Meinecke makes this fluidity of identity—extended to ethnic groups, races, and gender (this latter category explored at length in Meinecke’s three subsequent novels)—the cornerstone of American “multiculturalism” in the work.⁵

Meinecke’s focus on fluidity and hybridity permits his novels to avoid German clichés about American racist persecution of Native Americans and African-Americans which have often served as facile validation of German cultural superiority or as relativization of the Holocaust. The ambivalent post-unification identity of his German characters obviates for them the Karl May tradition of celebrating a German/Indian alliance against the inferior Yankees. In the *Church of John F. Kennedy*, Wenzel Assmann’s skepticism toward his recently unified homeland, (“[das] Neue Deutsche Reich,” 92), “[das] Vierte Reich,” 209) leads him to cast East Germans as the new Indians, who will receive as citizens of “des frisch einverleibten Territoriums nur die Hälfte der versprochenen Warenmenge” (30). Or similarly, “Was dem Indianer nämlich das Feuerwasser war...ist heute dem Ostdeutschen der Viertakter. Verraten, gedemütigt und verkauft rumpelt er im Audi oder Opel durch sein demontiertes Reservat und weiß beim besten Willen nicht, wie ihm geschieht” (27). Assmann does not expect Osis to become Wessis any more than he expects to find a generic “American” identity. Instead, he seeks out in the New World the strains of ethnic legacy, which he tends to exaggerate, as when he calls his Texas girlfriend a “Halbblut” by virtue of her mixed German-Czech-Indian ancestry.

In questioning the melting pot ideal, Meinecke’s book emphasizes something between maintaining national heritage and assimilating into a society. In seeking to finance his travels by selling German telephone books in American communities settled by Germans, he hopes to capitalize on genealogical interest rather than encourage any real telecommunication between the two countries. But the German-American community reveals a broad diversity of ethnic identities, from Texans who retained their language into the late twentieth century and others who intermarried with Mexicans and became Spanish-speaking, to Pennsylvanians who communicate in a quaintly archaic dialect, to French-speaking Cajuns whose German roots have left faint traces only in their often bizarrely (mis)spelled names.⁶ The question posed early in the novel, “Waren die USA nicht tatsächlich kaum etwas anderes als eine Variation auf Europa?” (20) thus receives a gradual but resounding “no.”

⁵ Of these, *Tomboy*, is perhaps the most successful as a novel and has attracted the most attention by virtue of its comically ironic engagement with Donna Haraway and Judith Butler, among others. Claudia Breger remarks that this book is “streckenweise als Einführung in zentrale Themen und Thesen der Gender Studies geeignet” (103).

⁶ Kampfhoefner documents early examples of Spanish-German hybridity in Texas school records and pupil rolls from the 1870s and 1880s, 130-131. Names that appear there, such as “Alwina Diaz” or “Paulita Wulff,” lend historic context to Werner Assmann’s fictional observations.

Werner Assmann's encounters with individual Americans uncover a colorful palette of "mongrel" peoples and of social interaction among ethnic groups: the black Creole policeman, Eraste, in Louisiana giving German commands to his German-trained police dog; the Chevrolet repairman, Adolphe Weber, in French-settled Lafayette, Louisiana; the white art student in Richmond and her anti-Semitic black Muslim boyfriend. From local archives, other documents, and his own observations Assmann also accumulates massive information about the German diaspora in the United States -- the growth and demise of breweries, the German influences on Cajun music, Mae West's Bavarian ancestry, Carl Schurz's role in US history, the continuing publication since 1934 of the New York German-Jewish newspaper *Aufbau*, etc. This episodic assembly of anecdotes, historical trivia, and political reflection does not yield a single coherent picture of the United States, even of the US as an *Einwanderungsland*. Paradigmatic for the erasure of boundaries within this society is the story of Sally Müller, an Alsatian immigrant sold into slavery in 1818 after her parents die en route to New Orleans. She is a girl who thus grows up "black" while all the time believing herself to be "Indian" and returns to "white" society twenty-four years later when another German woman identifies her by a birthmark (77-79).⁷ Such examples undermine the fixed sense of race and ethnicity underlying Germany's *jus sanguinis*. At the same time, the multifaceted quality of American society evinces turbulence and often negative dynamism: racism, violence, depression, suicide, poverty, eccentricity bordering on madness, political paranoia all form part of this world. Are these qualities the inevitable result, the trade-off for a mixed heritage? Meinecke's protagonist seems to imply as much when he tells the Texan, Barbara Kruse:

Tatsächlich läßt sich...reist man einmal quer durch die USA, immer wieder feststellen, daß dieser Staat das Ausland und damit auch das Fremde und Bedrohliche auf eine Weise inkorporiert hat, wie man es in Europa gar nicht kennt... (54)

Although set mostly in the South and ending within thirty miles of the Mason-Dixon line, *The Church of John F. Kennedy*, with its cast of oddball characters and its comparatively weak attention to racial violence and class warfare, resembles Southern gothic fiction more than other German accounts of the US. The increase in ethnically motivated hate crimes in Germany of the 1990's may have curbed Meinecke's inclination to locate racism exclusively in the US: Assmann concludes a brief survey of European politics in the 90's with the remark, "und in Dresden an der Elbe schubste man gleich den erstbesten Exil-Neger vor die klapprige Straßenbahn" (92). (On the other hand Michael Roes' *Haut des Südens: eine Mississippi-Reise* from 2000, similarly an "ethnographic novel" covering some of the same geographical territory as Meinecke, devotes considerable space to lynchings and other racial violence as integral components of Southern history).⁸ *The Church of John F. Kennedy* also mentions rumors that organized racist groups in Germany were receiving direct financial support from the American Ku Klux Klan (171), establishing a further proximity of the two cultures, both of which harbor fringe groups that respond destructively to ethnic minorities. Meinecke, however, prefers to look beyond simple instances of clear racial conflict and seek instead socio-economic and racial realities that defy stereotypical expectations. Walking through a poor neighborhood in New Orleans, "kein reines Schwarzengetto," Assmann notes, "aber was nützte es dem dunklen Mann, wenn er sein Elend

⁷ Herminghouse mentions this same historical anecdote in the context of German attitudes toward slavery in the South. It entered the American popular imagination in 2005 in a popular treatment by John Bailey.

⁸ Claudia Breger discusses Roes in conjunction with Meinecke from the standpoint of gender.

mit dem Irishman teilte und beide von demselben piekfeinen, hellschwarzen Kreolen regiert, das heißt, im Endeffekt, nichts anderes als niedergehalten wurden?“ (108) This approach avoids self-righteous finger-pointing, underlines specifically American problems of urban deterioration, and leaves the door open for hypothetical hybridity in a multicultural Germany.

Such passages make it clear that American multiculturalism has meaning for Assmann specifically in his position as a German coping with new demographic patterns at home. The novel's ambiguous opening sentence announces a pressing concern of contemporary Germany—population loss: “Jedenfalls nahm die deutsche Bevölkerung nach den fünfziger Jahren recht deutlich wieder ab” (7). The ensuing passage clarifies the reference to the German-American community in New Orleans in the 1850's, establishing the immigration theme with a new twist since few readers will associate New Orleans with German settlement. The proximity of the motifs of immigration and population decline resonates with contemporary Germany, where immigration is hotly debated as a means of halting population loss. However, rather than stressing an openness to new demographic groups in Germany here, Meinecke is playing with the idea of Germany as a “colonizing” power in both worlds. His text at least hints at a continuity between German settlement of 19th century America—a country where even today “genauso viele Menschen deutscher Abstammung leben wie in Europa” (36), where “die Deutschen...das Number-One-Blood waren” (80)⁹—and late 20th century Europe—where German unification appears as a “quasi negativer Kolonialkrieg” (29). In presenting this view of German-American immigration history, Meinecke's novel implements in a fictional mode proposals such as those made by historian Kathleen Conzen for interpreting German America as a colonizing venture whose consequences for the land colonized continue to reverberate in contemporary US values.¹⁰

Meinecke's examination of German traces in the US also moves in the direction of Conzen's argument for “contributionist” immigration historiography, an engagement with “explicit questions of immigrant impact upon the receiving nation” (Conzen, “Phantom,” 9). This tendency of the text justifies the otherwise intrusive inclusions of historical documents by German-Americans from the period of greatest German immigration in the second half of the nineteenth and first quarter of the twentieth centuries. These passages, usually less than half a page in length, ostensibly represent Assmann's gleanings from archives—the novel includes a list of sources at the end. They range from simple, literate commentary to garbled mixtures of English and German to, finally, a barely intelligible response to World War I: “hier in Amirüka viel man jest nichts hieren als was von Deutschland komt nemlich von dem Krieg die Deuschen sind ganz bekeisert für Deutschland es werden hier Dausenden von Dalern auf gemacht und nach Deutschland geschükt für Widwen und Weisen und Krübel oder verwundeten” (238). Also included are a page of Pennsylvania German dialect and, throughout the book, the imagined but plausible running commentary of an immigrant host shepherding German visitors around New Orleans for an early twentieth-century German folk festival. Out of this panorama emerges a sense of pervasive German influence on American everyday history, particularly in the culture of eating, drinking, commerce, family and place names, and perhaps “Vereinswesen.” Although Meinecke's novel does not go as far as the historian Conzen in claiming that “American

⁹ Conzen confirms these demographics. See “Germans” in Thernstrom, Stephen. *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*. Cambridge: Harvard UP 1980, 405-25. These claims about Meinecke's writing admittedly blur the distinction between “colonizing” and “settlement,” the latter a more appropriate designation for Assmann's topic of investigation in the US.

¹⁰ Conzen sees these values as generally anti-statist and influencing such initiatives as farmland preservation, anti-abortion movements, and Christian politics. Conzen, “Phantom,” 16.

'heartland values' today are largely German-derived (Conzen, "Phantom," 16)," the Texan Barbara concludes a conversation with Assmann with the remark "daß der sogenannte Amerikanische Traum sein Aggressionspotential direkt aus germanischen Feuerköpfen bezogen hatte und deutsche Tüchtigkeit, Gründlichkeit oder auch Funktionsharmonik sich selbst in der kaschierenden Ummantelung englischer Grammatik nicht gleich verflüchtigen würde" (80-81).

With his later novel *Hellblau* Meinecke leaves German colonization of the US behind and broadens his lens to examine the influences of the African and the Jewish diasporas in the United States. He looks primarily at the role of these ethnic groups in the development of a native musical, theatrical, and cinematic tradition, especially in the first half of the twentieth century. Just as unification had been the main German point of reference for Werner Assmann in *The Church of John F. Kennedy*, Ronald Reagan's visit to Bitburg in 1985 anchors the German characters' attention in *Hellblau*. The demographic issues intensified by unification, however, shape the later novel's concern with ethnic identity and its place in the shaping of a national culture. The text's first references to Europe consist of two incidents in which asylum-seekers are forcibly repatriated, sent back to Congo and Sudan, respectively, on Swissair and Lufthansa. Similar incidents, including the suicide of one unsuccessful asylum-seeker, occur later in the novel. Xenophobic attacks and anti-Semitic vandalism punctuate reports from contemporary Germany, with retrospective remarks on the Bitburg ceremony bringing the Third Reich and the Holocaust explicitly into the novel's field of view.

In contrast to the earlier road novel, *Hellblau*, composed of discussions, e-mails, telephone calls, and projected writings, reads more like a "blog" or online chat room dominated by three main characters in conversation with each other and with various peripheral acquaintances. More than Meinecke's other novels, *Hellblau* fixates on documents in various stages of completion. The German protagonist, Tillmann, renting a summer cottage on the Outer Banks with his American Jewish girlfriend, Vermilion, communicates regularly with African-American Yolanda in Chicago about a study they have begun to write on the evolution of American blues music, with the various possible titles *Wasserflugzeug* (126), *Displaced Persons* (126), or *Downtown Atlantis* (261). The narrator's remark on the size of this work comments wryly on the author's own tendency toward verbosity: "Noch im November, glaubt Tillmann, werden seine und Yolandas Aufzeichnungen eine vierstellige Seitenzahl erreichen. Um Himmels Willen, ruft Heinrich, der bei gerade eben erst zweihundert Seiten angelangt ist, aus" (112). By the novel's end Yolanda expresses dismay at the "noch immer viel zu umfangreichen Anmerkungsteil" (331). These comments underline the inexhaustibility of ethnic cross-fertilization in the arts as a topic of contemplation. They also highlight Meinecke's fixation on documentation of many kinds and his mode of composition, noted by many readers, as a form of bricolage. Although such a mode of writing may be appropriate in writing about improvisational genres like jazz and blues, it makes *Hellblau* less successful as a novel than as a long essay.

Dominated by characters involved in various kinds of academic writing, the book overflows with references to dozens of works, mostly in English, pertaining to the history of American jazz, Jewish/African-American political and cultural interaction, and ethnic self-definition. Yolanda, who has grown up as an American army brat in Bitburg, now works in the Regenstein library of the University of Chicago and mines its archives. Their main German correspondent, Tillmann's former girlfriend, Cordula, studies at the Humboldt Uni and reports about her current boyfriend, Heinrich's, research through newspaper articles, scholarly studies and interviews on his own native Bitburg. This city runs through the text as site of problematic German-American interaction: Reagan's May 1985 visit to the military cemetery, the ceremonies

for the withdrawal of US troops from the military base there in 1994, and a 1997 rave held in a building of the former US base. Through their sometimes tedious transatlantic conversations Meinecke's over-educated characters reflect on definitions and boundaries of race, ethnicity and gender posited by the new intellectual disciplines of cultural studies, postcolonial, diaspora, and gender studies.

The novel's title points in many directions while linking the two cultures, the US and Germany. On the most obvious level, it echoes the blues as a specifically American musical style. The color *hellblau*, however, also characterizes the warm water of the Atlantic, which serves as an icon for the legacy of violence and trauma in both German and US history: Tillmann, hunkering down in the path of hurricanes on the Outer Banks, researches German submarine warfare in these coastal waters, which he documents with details about individual U-Boats, their wartime engagements, and their ultimate fates. Cordula, a diver, plans to visit and explore some of the wrecks. Scuba diving here entails a revisiting of the past—exploration of wrecks from German submarine activity in World War I—and the drawing of boundaries separating historical probing and desecration, since some of these wrecks also contain human remains and thus have the status of burial sites.¹¹ For the United States, however, the Atlantic plays a more distant historical role as site of the Middle Passage, suggested in the novel by recurrent references to a cryptic 1990's Detroit techno duo Drexciya. This group built an entire repertoire around the mythology of the Black Atlanteans, a utopian underwater people descended from pregnant slaves thrown overboard during their transatlantic crossing. The motif of Atlantis, however, also runs through the book, a lost world that nevertheless continues to fire imaginations about an ideal future.

Tillmann precedes his first mention of Drexciya early in the book with a reference to Paul Gilroy (13-14), whose *Black Atlantic* resonates through Meinecke's text. Much of *Hellblau*, for example, is an examination and extension to other ethnic groups of Gilroy's statement that "the unashamedly hybrid character of ... black Atlantic cultures continually confounds any simplistic (essentialist or anti-essentialist) understanding of the relationship between racial identity and racial non-identity, between folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal" (Gilroy, 99). *Hellblau* probes the embeddedness of African-American, German, Jewish, and "American" cultures in an "Atlantic" community and questions the relevance of such a community at the turn of the millennium.

In a work so preoccupied with race, the color "hellblau" also refers to the stereotypical eye color of Germans and to America's dominant northern European population group. Pigmentation as an unreliable racial marker, established by a reference to an 1886 study by Rudolf Virchow and by allusions to Nazi experiments with eye color (154) runs throughout the book in references to numerous Americans of mixed race: "RuPaul sagt: Who says black people have to be black?" (11). In the opening pages, Tillmann leaves a long-winded message on Yolanda's answering machine which leads up to the single question, "Welche Farbe hat Mariah Carey?" (10). Mixed-race Mariah Carey ("[ihre] Mutter war eine weiße irische Opernsängerin, ihr Vater ein schwarzer venezolanischer Flugzeugingenieur," 11) provides a leitmotif in the novel's remaining 300 pages, joined by references to numerous other Americans of indeterminate race, for example, Slim Gaillard, "Sohn eines afrikanischen Amerikaners und einer

¹¹ Charlotte Melin has pointed out to me how Meinecke's focus here invites readers to ponder a broader German context for the U-Boats in such other literary shipwrecks as the *Titanic* (one thinks of Enzensberger's 1976 epic poem) and the *Wilhelm Gustloff* (in Graß's *Im Krebsgang*, 2002). One wonders whether the discovery of the *Titanic* hulk in the late 1980's and the popular film of the 1990's contributed to Meinecke's use of this motif.

jüdischen Amerikanerin in Detroit geboren” (30). This focus enables Meinecke to emphasize the creative interaction among different ethnicities in the formation of new cultural hybrid identities with their own art (musical) forms.

Whereas in *The Church of John F. Kennedy* this creative interaction involved the contribution of European immigrants to American society, *Hellblau* is concerned largely with the African-American/Jewish symbiosis, especially in the history of American popular music. The destruction of the German Jewish community and Germany’s incomplete *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (de-nazification policies of the late 1940’s, inadequate maintenance of memory sites, mishandling of the Bitburg observances, continuing desecration of Jewish sites, debates about compensation for camp victims) compel Tillmann’s commitment to the project. Yolanda, as an African-American living in a city with a legacy of racial conflict, introduces a perspective informed about contemporary American racial tension. Vermilion’s simultaneous dissertation research on *The Chassidim of Williamsburg, Crown Heights, and Borough Park* from the standpoint of gender builds on material from gender studies that had driven *Tomboy* and expands the view of diverse Jewish cultures in the US.

Unlike *The Church of John F. Kennedy*, which emphasizes ideological (cultural and political) differences between the US and the Federal Republic, (for example, the lapsed Catholic Assmann approvingly contrasts the vital presence of the devil in the American public imagination with the bland secularism of German Social Democracy), *Hellblau*’s portrayal of the US underlines connections between the two countries: a legacy of anti-Semitism (from Henry Ford, to whom Hitler approvingly refers in *Mein Kampf* (83-84), to Louis Farrakhan) and other racism (the tensions of Crown Heights and of the Chicago area); the intertwining of US and German industry in the Third Reich; the reciprocity between 1990’s Detroit techno music and the German techno music of a decade earlier (for example, in Cordula’s remark, “Afrodiasporische Amerikaner im desolaten postindustriellen Detroit machen sich ihren revolutionären Reim auf die alten Platten der Düsseldorfer Gruppe Kraftwerk. Ist Detroit Techno Black Music? Was will uns Marc Floyd alias Chaos, GI zu Heidelberg UR [Underground Resistance] Recording Artist, mit seinem sensationellen Titel Afrogermanic sagen?” (21), to cite only one of many textual examples). For Meinecke, however, these areas of proximity between Germany and the US, rather than reflecting a blandly “global” notion of world culture, underline darker undertones and fissures in the execution of “multiculturalism” coming into prominence at the turn of the new century.

In the general discussions around multiculturalism, the debate about a German “Leitkultur”¹² proved no less fractious than American discussions unleashed a few years later by such works as Samuel P. Huntington’s *Who Are We: The Challenges to America’s National Identity*¹³ and in the ethnic polarizations laid bare by the 2004 presidential election. An examination of Meinecke’s novels clarifies the fault-lines shaping debate about “multiculturalism” and illuminates the inadequacy of the American “melting pot” model for contemporary Germany.¹⁴ The novels also make it clear that integration of immigrant groups

¹² For example, Friedrich Merz’s remarks on the “freiheitliche deutsche Leitkultur.”

¹³ Huntington’s insistence on an essential, dominant Anglo-Protestant heritage, which has drawn fire from different political and demographic groups within the United States, challenges the “multicultural” society encountered by the characters of both Meinecke novels.

¹⁴ Geißler’s proposal that Canada provides a more suitable model of an Einwanderungsland for contemporary Germany than the United States does derives in part from his rejection of the “Schmelztiegel” metaphor in favor of the “ethnisches Mosaik” that he finds in Canada. This latter metaphor is, however, more suitable for Meinecke’s vision of the US with its conglomeration of distinct cultures than “Schmelztiegel” would be.

poses challenges for both societies. It is significant that *The Church of John F. Kennedy* ends in an eighteenth-century Pennsylvania Moravian town with references to the “polylinguelle Christianisierung der Indianer:” “Nicht nur, daß die Herrnhuter ihr gesamtes Gesangbuch in deren gänzlich unbarocke Sprache übertragen hatten; auf ihren Ölgemälden ließen sie die Missionierten gleich reihenweise neben Jesus Christus auf dessen braungetönter Schäfchenwolke schweben” (244). Wenzel Assmann follows this observation with a note about the origin of the name “America” in Martin Waldseemüller’s 1507 map, a German inscribing an Italian’s name on a land where peaceable German Pietists will abet the erasure of native cultures. The book concludes with the terse mention of other settlements founded by the German Moravian Count Zinzendorf with the names Nazareth and Salem, introducing names from yet another foreign culture into the New World (245). This map, however, yields an image more like a mosaic or a palimpsest than a stew, each successive group leaving recognizable traces.

This disunity sets Meinecke’s America apart from the country described by those European travelers who emphasize its materialism, militarism, and philistinism. His picture of America deliberately excludes those segments of the US population that support the mainstream power élites—whether governmental or economic—that might represent a “Leitkultur.” Moreover, like many of his characters, the author, as a pop musician and disc jockey, cherishes a pluralistic notion of what constitutes art and culture. In his America travelers never get anywhere near a well-manicured suburb, nor do they encounter the driver of an SUV or even a speaker on a cell phone. How “realistic” or convincing, then, is the USA that the reader experiences in Meinecke’s novels? In rejecting traditional German stereotypes about the US that have persisted throughout the twentieth century (primacy of technology, hypocrisy and bigotry of everyday life, destructive populism of the “Massengesellschaft,” absence of “culture,” (Lüdtke 10-13)) has Meinecke merely produced a phantasmagoria nurtured by disenchantment with post-unification Germany? The two novels discussed here have returned to the German notion of the US as a “Land ohne Kultur” to examine what constitutes “Kultur” and how it develops. Because this stereotype arose partly from associations of the US with fixation on material and commercial success, economic globalization in the late twentieth century has diffused its usefulness for any one country—no matter how wealthy—and challenged writers like Meinecke to explore critically the German idea of “American culture” or American “Kulturlosigkeit.” One outcome of this critical examination has been to re-evaluate the idea, voiced even in the twentieth century, that the US lacked the “heimatgebundenes Volkstum” necessary for the emergence of a national culture and that it could at best aspire to a “Zivilisation.”¹⁵ Even though World War II, developments in modern ethnography, and deconstruction theory have weakened such distinctions, they continue to exert influence on politicians and the popular imagination. Tilting toward a staid exoticism, Meinecke’s novels replace such hegemonic ideas of culture with a plea for seeing US society as an agglomeration of subcultures constituting a nation that remains “immer auch ein bißchen Dritte Welt;” the interaction of these distinct subcultures, however, provides a source of dynamic, artistic creativity where some degree of “otherness” or Außenseitertum is both unavoidable and desirable. Wenzel Assmann savors his own position as

Excellent background on the debate about the American model of multiculturalism for Germany can be found in the 1994 anthology edited by Bernd Ostendorf and in the 1998 volume edited by Milich and Peck.

¹⁵ Cf. Joseph Roth’s remark “Amerika hat kein Volkstum und damit keinen Mutterboden für geschichtlich wollende Gedanken; alles ist hoffnungsloser Diener einer bürgerlichen Zivilisation geworden.” “Die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika.” *Gelbe Hefte. Historische und politische Zeitschrift für das katholische Deutschland* 3/1 (1927), 349. quoted in Lüdtke, 14.

“Ausländer” when early in *The Church of John F. Kennedy* he contemplates writing an article for a Munich newspaper titled “Der Deutsche als Ausländer”(48) and again at the end when the novel’s narrator queries, “In welcher Hinsicht fand der Deutsche nur als Ausländer zu positiver Selbstbestimmung?” (240) Far from espousing a vapid humanism of the “wir sind alle Ausländer” variety, the German visitor, like the Louisiana Creoles, Texas Germans, Chasidic Jews, Chicago blacks, Detroit techno musicians, even perhaps Southern Jews (Vermilion is from rural North Carolina), values marginalization as a way to prevent the erasure of ethnic self consciousness and thus to avoid what Assmann refers to as “Der Weg ins Globale KZ” (241).

The end of *Hellblau*, however, leaves open the question of whether the United States will sustain a multicultural population, and the novel’s main characters return to German soil with ambivalent expectations. As “der auf das Exekutieren afrikanischer Amerikaner versessene George W. Bush” (332) prepares to assume the presidency, Yolanda books a flight to Frankfurt to meet with a publisher and see Heinrich for a visit to Bitburg, in a reconnection with her own personal past and with a freighted site of German-American debate about cultural identity. With Cordula preparing a series of interviews for the fifteenth anniversary of Hubert Fichte’s death, Tillmann himself returns to Germany. The novel’s final paragraph finds Tillmann on a train to Hamburg reading Fichte’s *Geschichte der Empfindlichkeit*, Vol XV, and preparing to visit the writer’s grave as he contemplates various translations of its Greek epitaph. Just as Kafka has cast a long shadow on *The Church of John F. Kennedy*, Fichte, another of German literature’s multiple outsiders (bastard, gay, half-Jew), has left his mark on *Hellblau*. Through his development of “Ethnopoésie,” his exploration of gender ambiguity, and his probing of New World enclaves outside the mainstream, Fichte is an appropriate godfather for Meinecke’s ultimately open-ended text, a writer who “strove in his prose to open up narrative space for cohabitation by diverse marginal and insurgent subjects, privileging techniques like the interview, dialogue, and collage that displace and disperse authorial control” (Sieg, 193). Even within their categories of “multiculturalism” and “hybridity,” however, the subcultures of the United States that Meinecke explores certainly stand closer to modern Germany than does much of Hubert Fichte’s exotic subject matter.

Generationally, Meinecke stands between the ethnographic writer Fichte and the younger “pop” writers of the 1990’s, who fled the ennui of post-unification Germany to trot among various four-star hotels and VIP lounges around the globe, following Meinecke’s “Weg ins Globale KZ.”¹⁶ Meinecke rejects the model of a global consumer-driven culture represented by these writers. They participate in what Peter Berger calls “Davos culture,” the internationalized world of a unified, globalized corporate élite. Nor do Meinecke’s characters with their sense of national and subnational identities represent the “new breed of Eurocitizen [that] transforms the national subject into a multiculturalized microcosm, a miniaturized state without borders or a postnational vector of cultural crossover.... an internationalized élite society of ‘flexible citizens,’” analyzed at a 2000 MLA Panel on “Mobile Citizens, Media States” (Apter 80). Leery of the “Dandyismus”(JFK, 31) entailed by such a society, Meinecke, like his character Tillmann, may be fleeing the “wachsender Terror postfordistischer Ökonomie” into his writing projects, again in Tillmann’s words for his work with Yolanda, “marginale bohemistische Baustellen... an der ich...herumbastele” (*Hellblau*, 288).

¹⁶ This style of globe-trotting is a motif in such works of 1990’s German Pop Lit as Bessing, et al, *Tristesse Royale*, the collection *Mesopotamia*, edited by Christian Kracht, and Kracht and Nickel’s collection of travel pieces, *Ferien für Immer*. Illies includes passages about the prevalence of such travel among the (West) German bourgeoisie, for example 167-168.

September 11, 2001, may have signaled an end to the assimilationist “melting pot” ideal and forced both the US and Germany to ponder other models for their respective identities as *Einwanderungsländer*. Although his novels rarely mention Turks or *Gastarbeiter* explicitly, both *The Church of John F. Kennedy* and *Hellblau* probe the question now urgently challenging Germany and other nations of northern Europe, as well as the US: what degree of ethnic individualism versus assimilation is desirable or sustainable in modern developed nations? Can concepts like “Leitkultur” or “core Anglo-Protestant culture” accommodate the creative synergy of hybridity that has produced American jazz or the rich literature of recent immigrants to Germany? It is Meinecke’s merit as a knowledgeable disc jockey and musician to paint “culture” as a richer entity than these political concepts allow. The rift opened in the US by the 2004 Presidential election in part polarized those believing in a unified, primarily Christian culture like that envisioned by Huntington and those clinging to hopes of a peaceable, multicultural, multiracial society. Post 9/11 Germany, on the other hand, in drifting toward a definition of itself as “America’s ‘Other,’”¹⁷ may still find inspiration for multiculturalism in its own society in Meinecke’s encounters with the United States of the 1990’s. Both of these novels illuminate the creative potential inherent in what Paul Gilroy insists on in the history of the Black Atlantic as the “instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade” (Gilroy xi).

¹⁷ On this topic, see Borneman and Ostendorf.

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