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Date of deposit	22/05/2024
Document version	Author's accepted manuscript
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Citation for published version	Smith, T 2021, Whiteness and nostalgia: Twenty-First-Century German representations of Techno's beginnings in Berlin and Detroit. in U Schütte (ed.), <i>German pop music in literary and transmedial perspectives</i> . Studies in modern German and Austrian literature, vol. 11, Peter Lang, Berlin, pp. 93-114.
Link to published version	https://www.peterlang.com/document/1140502

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Whiteness and Nostalgia: Twenty-First-Century German Representations of Techno's Beginnings in Berlin and Detroit

Tom Smith

Nostalgia for Berlin's booming techno scene in the 1990s is visible across the city's music scene today. Many clubs recreate the abandoned, empty spaces after unification in their more permanent venues. Tresor retains ruined portions of its buildings at the Heizkraftwerk Mitte [Berlin-Mitte Power Station], while venues like Sisyphos maintain outdoor spaces and semi-permanent structures. Nostalgia also influences emerging historical narratives about the scene's beginnings in potentially lasting ways. Fond memories underpin many high-profile accounts, including Felix Denk and Sven von Thülen's *Der Klang der Familie* (The Sound of Family, 2012) and Ulrich Gutmair's *Die ersten Tage von Berlin* (The First Days of Berlin, 2013).¹ Wistful recollections even shape acts of collective memory. Official commemorations of the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall included DJ Westbam, a DJ who became prominent in the late 1980s and early 1990s, showing how inextricable early techno is from memory of unification. This chapter argues that this nostalgia is also inseparable from the construction of whiteness through the act of looking back. In today's Berlin, many musicians and promoters are making inroads fighting racism and decentering whiteness in the club scene, not least Kikelomo, a Black British DJ who headlined the after-party after the main thirtieth anniversary celebrations. Yet in many public contexts, the telling of techno's history in Germany contributes to an association between techno, whiteness and Germanness.

This chapter investigates nostalgia for the 1990s as a cultural practice of whiteness in Germany's techno scene. While scholarship on Detroit techno focuses on constructions of Blackness, German representations of nostalgia for techno's beginnings explore an unmarked whiteness associated with Berlin's techno scene. These representations reveal some of the structural effects of whiteness: techno is set apart from racially marked genres such as hip-

¹ Felix Denk and Sven von Thülen, *Der Klang der Familie: Berlin, Techno und die Wende* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012); Ulrich Gutmair, *Die ersten Tage von Berlin: Der Sound der Wende* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2013).

hop, and Blackness is associated with early Detroit techno in ways that neglect the identities and experiences of Black musicians and other artists of colour in Germany. Studying the scene's nostalgia means studying whiteness critically, the power structures it legitimizes, and the advantages it confers. I analyse the exhibition *nineties.berlin* (2018–9) alongside Thomas Meinecke's novel *Hellblau* (2001; *Pale Blue*, 2012). These contrasting representations by white creators explore two distinct but connected forms of nostalgia: reimagining early techno as a more homogenous, racially unmarked movement and mourning techno's supposedly lost Black past in Detroit. Both forms idealize techno's origins and preserve racialized power asymmetries. Yet *nineties.berlin* and especially *Hellblau* suggest that emotional attachment to the past can also motivate change, inspiring self-scrutiny and imagination as first steps in marking whiteness and combatting its effects.

Techno's Nostalgic Whiteness

Ruth Frankenberg describes whiteness as 'a location of structural advantage', 'a "standpoint"' and 'a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed'.² Nostalgia is just one such practice in Germany's club scene, and analysing its role in constructing whiteness adds to a substantial field of scholarship on race and racialization in German techno.³ As scholars have shown, white people are socialized to overlook the structural advantage we gain from our racial identity and mistake our specific standpoint for something universal or individual.⁴ This strategic blind spot, Maisha-Maureen Auma argues, builds consensus among white people and excludes others from power structures.⁵ Frankenberg's emphasis on whiteness as a 'standpoint' is a reminder that white scholars and participants in the techno scene have specific and limited viewpoints, and this chapter views

² Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1.

³ E.g. Alexander G. Weheliye, "'White Brothers with no Soul': Untuning the Historiography of Berlin Techno', interview with Annie Goh, in *UnTune: CTM – Festival for Adventurous Music and Art* (Berlin: CTM, 2015), 40–3; Melanie Schiller, *Soundtracking Germany: Popular Music and National Identity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); DeForrest Brown, Jr., *Assembling a Black Counter Culture* (New York: Primary Information, forthcoming 2021).

⁴ Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1–4; Aretha Schwarzbach-Apithy, 'Interkulturalität und anti-rassistische Weis(s)heiten an Berliner Universitäten', in Maureen Maisha Eggers, Grada Kilomba, Peggy Piesche and Susan Arndt, eds, *Mythen, Masken, Subjekte: Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland* (Münster: Unrast, 2017), 247–61 (253).

⁵ As Maureen Maisha Eggers, 'Rassifizierte Machtdifferenz als Deutungsperspektive in der Kritischen Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland', in *Mythen*, 56–72. See also Fatima El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch: Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016), 20–2.

nostalgia as a cultural practice that frequently elevates this standpoint and overlooks others. Because of these limitations, Peggy Piesche emphasizes the impossibility of critical whiteness studies without Black perspectives, and bell hooks argues that people of colour have specific expertise in marking and challenging white standpoints and cultural practices.⁶ Musicians and activists have been combatting whiteness in techno since its beginnings, as Luis-Manuel Garcia has shown.⁷ Hengameh Yaghoobifarah's 2016 article on cultural appropriation at Fusion festival and the ambivalent response of Berlin's techno industry to 2020's Black Lives Matter protests show that this work remains essential.⁸ Investigating nostalgia reveals one further way in which whiteness as structural advantage works in the telling of techno history: white people's emotional attachments influence the stories we tell and shape techno's present and future.

Nostalgia describes an emotionally charged relationship to the past or a feeling of loss rooted in dissatisfaction with the present. The term's association with feelings and sentimentality often brings negative connotations, especially in debates around *Ostalgie* and forms of ironic nostalgia for East Germany.⁹ Nostalgic emotions vary substantially, from pride and longing to sadness, frustration or anger, with differing degrees of sincerity, self-awareness or irony. The precise emotional content or political effects of nostalgia therefore depend on context.¹⁰ These feelings respond primarily to the present, so need not recall an actual loss or lived experiences. Pavithra Prasad even suggests that nostalgia fundamentally 'involves inventing and (re)experiencing loss, not only of a past, but also of the (lost) possibilities of the present'.¹¹ Nostalgia thus entails imagination and invention, again with varying effects in different contexts. Svetlana Boym divides these contexts into two categories. Restorative nostalgia mistakes an imagined past for tradition and tries to reconstruct what has supposedly been lost. Reflective nostalgia attends to the dynamics of longing and is aware of the

⁶ Peggy Piesche, 'Das Ding mit dem Subjekt, oder: Wem gehört die Kritische Weißseinsforschung?', in *Mythen*, 14–17 (17); bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End), 165–78.

⁷ Luis-Manuel Garcia, 'Whose Refuge, This House?: The Estrangement of Queers of Color in Electronic Dance Music', in Fred Everett Maus and Sheila Whiteley, eds, *Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), unpaginated.

⁸ Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, 'Fusion Revisited: Karneval der Kulturlosen', *Missy Magazine* (5 July 2016); Peter Kim, 'No Love Parades This Time: In the Midst of Crisis, an Image of Tondeaf Ravers in Berlin', *CDM* (1 June 2020), <<http://cdm.link/2020/06/crisis-and-racism-in-berlin/>>, accessed 4 August 2020.

⁹ Claire Hyland, "'Ostalgie doesn't fit!'" Individual Interpretations of and Interaction with *Ostalgie*, in Anna Saunders and Debbie Pinfold, eds, *Remembering and Rethinking the GDR: Multiple Perspectives and Plural Authenticities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 101–15.

¹⁰ Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko, 'The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices', *Ab Imperio* [5] (2004), 487–519.

¹¹ Pavithra Prasad, 'Paradiso Lost: Writing Memory and Nostalgia in the Post-Ethnographic Present', *Text and Performance Quarterly* 35 (2015), 202–20 (204).

ambivalence of nostalgic feelings.¹² Boym suggests that the ironic self-scrutiny of reflective nostalgia can have important political and ethical functions.

Techno music has long explored inventive, reflective forms of nostalgia. Many German musicians drew on music from 1980s Detroit, which acquired the name ‘techno’ around 1990. Early Detroit producers drew on sci-fi to create alternative histories and imagined futures as part of an artistic philosophy later named ‘Afrofuturism’.¹³ Juan Atkins, for instance, named his aliases, partnerships and records after space travel, robots and cyborgs: Cybotron, Model 500, ‘Cosmic Cars’. Artists embedded their focus on the future in critical reflection on Detroit’s segregated, postindustrial past and reimagined African American history.¹⁴ The collective Drexciya, for example, envisioned a powerful underwater civilization descended from African women killed at sea during the Middle Passage.¹⁵ Early techno musicians had eclectic influences, from disco, funk, Chicago house and Yellow Magic Orchestra to Kraftwerk’s music of the early 1970s. This fascination included a retro interest in vinyl records as artworks themselves.¹⁶ This nostalgia was ‘reflective’, recasting musical traditions and difficult histories to imagine utopian futures. Gayatri Gopinath emphasizes that such creative nostalgia can be ‘a means for imagining oneself within those spaces from which one is perpetually excluded or denied existence’.¹⁷ For Gopinath, taking nostalgia seriously helps ‘attend[] to the ties that have bound differentially racialized populations to one another, and that may ultimately provide the conditions of possibility for conjoined futures’.¹⁸ Detroit techno artists’ turn to the past envisioned such collective futures and endowed techno with political and utopian potential.

While Detroit techno’s founders explored Blackness and racialization, German techno generally remains racially unmarked, concealing forms of structural advantage connected to whiteness. The unmarking of whiteness creates a binary of racialized versus non-racialized

¹² Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic, 2001), xviii.

¹³ Mark Dery, ‘Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose’, in Dery, ed., *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 179–222 (180–7). See Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 2013); Priscilla Layne, *White Rebels in Black: German Appropriation of Black Popular Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 177–88.

¹⁴ Dan Sicko, *Techno Rebels: The Renegades of Electronic Funk*, 2nd edn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 33–9.

¹⁵ Drexciya, *The Quest*, Submerge SVE-8 (Detroit, 1997), CD sleeve.

¹⁶ Sicko, *Techno Rebels*, 109–11.

¹⁷ Gayatri Gopinath, ‘Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion’, *positions* 5 (1997), 467–89 (485).

¹⁸ Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 130.

identities, which obscures artists' complex individual connections to musical genres and to Germany. Black musicians from Detroit living in Germany, for example, like Jeff Mills (Underground Resistance, UR) or Gerald Donald (Drexciya/Dopplereffekt), have been central to German techno. Black German musicians, by contrast, have often distanced themselves from techno, preferring to affiliate with genres like jungle, house, Eurodance or drum 'n' bass.¹⁹ As Alexander Weheliye argues, studying techno in isolation from closely related, more racially marked genres reinforces its whiteness, as does focusing only on Berlin.²⁰ Frankfurt-based techno magazines from the 1990s advertise collaborations and celebrate techno's interaction with other genres, frustrating binaries like Black/white or German/non-German. Sven Väth collaborated with Black German rapper Zyon (later Germ), for example, while Westbam worked with Frankfurt-based African American artist Deskee on projects including 'Let There Be House' (1989).²¹ Each project is shaped by specific local dynamics and individual influences. Iranian-German producer Ramin Naghachian drew inspiration from Frankfurt's Dorian Gray club, yet distanced his 'Flamenco-House' and 'Technorap-Crossover' from its resident DJs Talla and Nouri.²² Woody, a Tunisian-German resident DJ at Berlin's E-Werk in the mid-1990s, incorporates hip-hop influences into his techno, drawing on his breakdance background in Munich.²³ These examples show that artists in Germany adapted and reworked Detroit techno in many different ways. Defining Berlin techno too narrowly can obscure its early stylistic and cultural diversity.

German literary writers show that nostalgic depictions of 1990s Berlin as a place of freedom and hedonism are also too narrow. Many turn to the past to depict the techno scene, but for their non-white characters, backward glances tend to be painful or traumatic.²⁴ Unification brought renewed focus on German nationhood and increased violence against those perceived as foreign, including asylum seekers and guest workers as well as Germans of colour.²⁵ These

¹⁹ Daniel Oeding, 'Just Another Street Thing, oder: The Talking Drums of the Urban Cities – Afro-deutsche Künstler und die Kultur der elektronischen Club-Musik', in AntiDiskriminierungsBüro Köln and cyberNomads, eds, *The Black Book: Deutschlands Häutungen* (Frankfurt am Main: IKO, 2004), 350-6.

²⁰ Weheliye, "'White Brothers'".

²¹ Stefan Kloos, 'Positiv sollten sie ihren Tag beginnen: Zyon rappt sich durch sein Leben', *Groove* 15 (1992), 18; Deskee, *Let There Be House* (Black Out, 1989).

²² Ramin [Naghachian], 'The Essence of Ecstasy', *Frontpage* [3].10 (1991), 11.

²³ 'Woody: Biography', *Resident Advisor*, <<https://www.residentadvisor.net/dj/woody/biography>>, accessed 4 August 2020.

²⁴ E.g. Sudabeh Mohafez, *brennt* (Cologne: DuMont, 2011); Jackie Thomae, *Brüder* (Berlin: Hanser, 2019).

²⁵ May Ayim, 'Das Jahr 1990: Heimat und Einheit aus afro-deutscher Perspektive', in Ika Hügel et al., eds, *Entfernte Verbindungen: Rassismus, Antisemitismus, Klassenunterdrückung* (Berlin: Orlanda, 1993), 208-14. For a literary portrayal that also engages with Berlin's club scene, see Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, *Ministerium der Träume* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2021).

attacks included the murder of Amadeu Antonio Kiowa in Eberswalde in 1990, the pogrom in Rostock-Lichtenhagen in 1992 and the arson attack in Solingen in 1993.²⁶ Uncritical nostalgia for the 1990s can therefore contribute to the structural advantage of those for whom national belonging is unproblematic and their own racial identity unmarked. I will explore two forms of nostalgia: one that perpetuates this unmarked quality of whiteness in techno's past and one that mourns diversity that has supposedly been lost. Both forms demonstrate links between Berlin's techno scene, ideas of Germanness and constructions of whiteness in Germany. Yet *nineties.berlin* and *Hellblau* also point to the political potential of nostalgia in contemporary Germany. *Hellblau* even suggests nostalgia could encourage awareness of how limited individual perspectives are, build dialogue and invite investment in political change.

Imagining Whiteness, Creating Germanness

Sara Ahmed discusses the 2006 BBC programme *The Happiness Formula*, which holds up a French village with limited demographic change over time as a model of happiness. She argues, 'This nostalgic vision of a world of "staying put" involves nostalgia for whiteness'.²⁷ For Ahmed, the village represents a fantasized past free from, and implicitly before, migration or mass-displacement. This unstable, stylized image shows how idealized whiteness depends on nostalgia: the past can never live up to present fantasies. Because techno's emergence in Berlin coincided with unification, it frequently becomes part of a narrative of nationhood culminating in the 1990s.²⁸ This narrative does not erase techno's African American heritage, but focuses on Kraftwerk's influence on Detroit artists. As Weheliye argues, 'for Berlin techno to be imagined as something specific to Berlin and to Germany, it had to separate itself from Blackness'.²⁹ For Weheliye, this narrative leaves out Black Germans and other Germans of colour in electronic music, and ignores the racist violence that accompanied unification. This nostalgia bolsters whiteness by imagining unification as a euphoric event and denying fears and anger caused by resurgent nationalism.

²⁶ See El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch*, 120–4; Bianca Ludewig, 'The Berlin Techno Myth and Issues of Diversity', in Anita Jóri and Martin Lücke, eds, *The New Age of Electronic Dance Music and Club Culture* (Cham: Springer, 2020), 29–53 (39–42).

²⁷ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 121.

²⁸ As Melanie Schiller has explored: *Soundtracking Germany*, 181–220.

²⁹ Weheliye, "'White Brothers'", 41.

nineties.berlin uses nostalgia to critique Berlin's gentrification and commercialization. The exhibition by the team behind the DDR-Museum opened at Berlin's Alte Münze from 4 August 2018 until 28 December 2019. Critics praised its innovative design, but questioned whether its view of the 1990s lacked nuance.³⁰ Its focus on unification, gentrification and loss has a generalizing effect, as it contributes to a racially unmarked, almost exclusively white image of techno tied to German nationhood. The exhibit 'Berlin Island' shows a panoramic video installation by astronaut, documenting the 1990s in four sections: 'Politik' ['politics'], 'Kiezleben' ['neighbourhood life'], 'Kunst' ['art'] and 'Musik' ['music']. Using collage, the projection places squats and clubs alongside national symbols, including the refurbished Reichstag with flags flying, so that subcultures themselves become symbols of the openness and creativity of Germany's new capital. The video separates techno from hip-hop, presenting the latter as a non-white coded genre and leaving techno racially unmarked and implicitly white. Under 'Musik', the projection uses photographs, flyers and footage to portray the club scene and Love Parade. These images are set apart from hip-hop, which appears under 'Kiezleben'. The video associates the 'Kiez' [neighbourhood] with Turkish-German communities by placing footage of rappers and breakdancers alongside stereotypical images of Berlin-Kreuzberg and Döner kebab shops. German hip-hop was established by Black and Turkish-German artists, who provocatively adapted American models to challenge racially coded ideas of Germanness and foreignness.³¹ Techno grew up alongside Berlin's hip-hop scene, and clubs like E-Werk and SO36 experimented with both genres. 'Berlin Island' does not take up the hip-hop or techno scenes' challenges to narrow concepts of Germanness. The projection shows hip-hop in small neighbourhood venues and uses it to symbolize Berlin's cultural and ethnic diversity. Under the racially unmarked, universalizing category 'Musik', techno comes to represent German nationhood and music as a whole, associated with geopolitical events like the end of the Cold War and with the Love Parade as an immense party-cum-protest.

The exhibit 'Lost Berlin' links this unmarked, generalizing portrayal to techno's earliest venues. A labyrinth designed by Stefan Schilling und Gustav Sonntag, decorated with street art and information screens, encourages both restorative mourning for lost spaces and

³⁰ Vanessa Prattes, 'Raves und rechtsfreie Räume', *die tageszeitung* (6 August 2018); Hannah Beitzer, 'Das Geschäft mit dem Mythos Berlin', *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (8 August 2018).

³¹ Fatima El-Tayeb, 'Medien, Machos und Mädchenrap: *Tic Tac Toe* und deutsche Debatten um *race* und *gender*', in *The Black Book*, 308–12; Kate Zambon and Didem Uca, 'Patriots and Pedagogues: Cultural Institutions and the Performative Politics of Minority German Hip-Hop', *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016), 726–47.

reflective critique of Berlin's gentrification. The online 'Guide Bot' describes clubs that opened, boomed and closed again:

Das denkmalgeschützte Umspannwerk Buchenhof, erbaut zwischen 1924 und 1928, bildete die archaische Kulisse für den Technoclub E-Werk, der zwischen 1993 und 1997 in der alten Industrieruine residierte. Schnell entwickelte sich das E-Werk zum Innclub [sic], zu dessen Stamm die DJs Paul van Dyk, Woody oder Jonzon zählten.

[The listed Buchenhof substation, built between 1924 and 1928, formed the historic backdrop to the techno club E-Werk, which took up residence in the old industrial ruin between 1993 and 1997. E-Werk soon developed into a destination, whose regulars included DJs Paul van Dyk, Woody or Jonzon.]³²

The Guide Bot occasionally lists DJs like this, but does not draw out distinctions between artists' music. Paul van Dyk, known for his trance-influenced style, will be familiar to many visitors and Melanie Schiller has discussed whiteness in his work specifically.³³ Woody, by contrast, brings techno together with funk, hip-hop and other genres with African American origins. He has since founded the party Heideglühen, which is still creating music during the pandemic.³⁴ E-Werk was a destination for musicians of colour like Woody and its music was highly eclectic. The guide texts give little space to how different individuals experienced the clubs featured, emphasizing dates and facts rather than what was distinctive about venues. The focus on what was lost also means there is little sense of how today's scene builds on iconic early venues. In mobilizing nostalgia for a pre-gentrified cityscape, 'Lost Berlin' directs attention away from the lasting personal, emotional and professional impacts of these spaces.

In the labyrinth, interactive screens invite visitors to uncover lost histories, including the party Tekknozid and the artists' commune Tacheles. The club Tresor, still operating today at a different location in Berlin-Kreuzberg, has a screen devoted to its original venue, the abandoned vault of the destroyed Wertheim department store in Berlin-Mitte. The screen introduces Wertheim with a turn-of-the-century image, evoking a revival of past decadence.

³² '801: E-Werk', Guide Bot, *nineties.berlin* (4 August 2017–28 December 2019), <bot.berlin/de>, accessed 4 August 2020. My translation.

³³ Schiller, *Soundtracking Germany*, 186–210.

³⁴ ATEQ, Woody, Sevensol and Eli Verveine, 'Heideglühen', *United We Stream* 33 (24 April 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUnhcDOIKSw&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1BI2IR0-WTuzrUtVQtw9ZJ4S_h9gJt_A_sGetiUNj-v3DuW2re9SUPKE>, accessed 4 August 2020.

A 1994 poster shows how the club retained safe deposit boxes and metal grilles from the Wertheim vault. It advertises releases on the Tresor label, including from African American artists Atkins and Mills. Another poster advertises UR's 1991 record X-101 and the exhibition caption explicitly mentions Detroit:

Der Legende nach wurde Techno in Detroit erfunden, der Tresor bot den Künstlern aus Amerika nicht nur eine Bühne, sondern auch die Möglichkeit auf dem Label Tresor Records ihre Musik zu veröffentlichen und bekannt zu machen.

[Legend has it that techno was invented in Detroit. Tresor offered artists from America not just a platform, but the opportunity to release and publicize their music on the Tresor Records label.]

This caption echoes the language of legend used by Detroit's techno producers in their nostalgic imaginings. In this context, though, this language obscures techno's origins, especially as a Berlin-focused exhibition that does not discuss Detroit artists' music or their use of legend to decentre whiteness and imagine Black futures. Berlin's clubs are portrayed as offering chances for artists to reach a European audience, rather than as venues that were substantially influenced by Detroit musicians and owe their success in part to the collaborations advertised in these posters. The caption centres Tresor, and does not seem to recognize the limitations of its standpoint. The language of legend instead taps into nostalgia, mythologizing Tresor's past and paying little attention to its continuing influence and dialogue with Detroit. The exhibition uses nostalgia to encourage active engagement with the past, but stops short of imagining the futures that Gopinath describes. Feelings of loss could motivate action to support independent venues and freelance musicians threatened by gentrification. Yet this nostalgia also centres Berlin and an unmarked whiteness and, with the labyrinth following on from a room devoted to the Berlin Wall, the exhibition ties techno to unification as a symbol of Germanness.

Mourning Blackness, Seeking Realness

Whereas the first form of nostalgia imagines a whiter past, its second manifestation mourns a time when techno was Black, before this Blackness was, supposedly, lost in Berlin's

commercialized scene. Nostalgia for techno's Detroit origins especially resonates with Renato Rosaldo's concept of 'imperialist nostalgia', wherein 'agents of colonialism long for the very forms of life they intentionally altered and destroyed'.³⁵ bell hooks argues that imperialist nostalgia shapes the investment in African American culture by white people, who present their interest as a sign of tolerance while overlooking histories of resistance: 'it is not African American culture formed in resistance to contemporary situations that surfaces, but nostalgic evocation of a "glorious" past.'³⁶ In Germany's techno scene, this nostalgia requires greater knowledge of techno's history, so is more prominent among scene insiders. Nostalgia for techno's Black origins allows influential white scenesters to appropriate and change Detroit techno, assert progressive credentials, but without necessarily incorporating Detroit artists' critique of racist power structures.

hooks's ideas help explain how fascination with techno's African American history is compatible with the unmarked whiteness of Berlin's scene. This form of nostalgia works temporally and spatially. In spatial terms, it projects Blackness onto the United States and mythologizes techno's Detroit origins. Priscilla Layne charts the history of German appropriation of African American popular music, showing how music is used to express white masculine rebellion.³⁷ In techno, this rebellion takes the form of countercultural connoisseurship or, as Luis-Manuel Garcia argues, 'a sense of subcultural "realness"'.³⁸ Identifying with Detroit techno creates distance from commercial aspects of Berlin's scene and associates authenticity with techno's Black origins. Temporally, this nostalgia detaches Blackness or discussions of race from techno's present, ignoring continuing innovations by Detroit artists and denying visibility to Black German musicians and clubbers. Garcia cautions that idealizing DJs of colour 'enables more privileged electronic dance music fans to view their tastes as proof of their progressive values, leaving unexamined the workings of patriarchy and white supremacy within their own scenes'.³⁹ In these ways, nostalgia can encourage mourning and inaction, rather than provoking action to stop the active assertion and reinforcement of white structural advantage.

³⁵ Renato Rosaldo, 'Imperialist Nostalgia', *Representations* 26 (1989), 107–22 (107–8)

³⁶ hooks, *Black Looks*, 26.

³⁷ Layne, *White Rebels*, 1–2.

³⁸ Garcia, 'Whose Refuge'.

³⁹ Ibid. On racialized and gender power dynamics, see e.g. Damani James Partridge, 'We Were Dancing in the Club, not on the Berlin Wall: Black Bodies, Street Bureaucrats, and Exclusionary Incorporation into the New Europe', *Cultural Anthropology* 23 (2008), 660–87.

Hellblau stages this nostalgia for techno's Black origins.⁴⁰ It follows narrators Tillmann, Yolanda and Cordula as they research and discuss music, gender and race. Tillmann and Yolanda are co-writing a book on interactions between African American and Jewish musicians. Tillmann is white, German and is staying in Ocracoke on North Carolina's Outer Banks. His girlfriend, Vermilion, is writing a thesis on Hasidic communities in Brooklyn.⁴¹ Yolanda grew up in the Western German town of Bitburg as the daughter of a US soldier and now lives in Chicago. The novel suggests that Yolanda is African American only through oblique references to her hair, as Claudia Breger has observed.⁴² Her braids and the fact that her hair is difficult to straighten are mentioned from Yolanda's perspective, free from the irony she usually turns on Tillmann's comments (45, 127). Meinecke thus creates an implied author compiling the three voices who is no less susceptible to stereotyped thinking than his narrators. Tillmann's ex-girlfriend Cordula and her boyfriend Heinrich are experiencing Berlin's techno scene first-hand. Both are implicitly white, which Breger associates with the structural advantage of one's racial identity not being explicitly marked.⁴³ In fact, all three white German characters are marked through names associated with Germany's educated middle classes. The novel combines the narrators' reflections with sources from their research, and this play of quotations and intertexts drives the novel's sparse plot.

All three narrators are nostalgic for techno's Detroit origins and are avid record collectors. Tillmann's mix of in-depth knowledge and nostalgia means he is simultaneously vague and meticulous as he describes the provenance of his recordings:

Plankton von Kenny Larkin alias Dark Comedy, circa 1993. Durchsichtiges Vinyl, wenn ich mich recht erinnere. Cordula und Heinrich haben mir das Stück, neben vielen weiteren Klassikern aus Detroit, auf CD gebrannt. (116)

[Plankton by Kenny Larkin, a.k.a. Dark Comedy, circa 1993. On transparent vinyl if I remember correctly. Cordula and Heinrich burned the piece to CD for me, along with many other classics from Detroit. (103)]

⁴⁰ Thomas Meinecke, *Hellblau* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), hereafter referenced in the text. Translations: Thomas Meinecke, *Pale Blue*, trans. Daniel Bowles (Las Vegas: Amazon Crossing, 2012).

⁴¹ On Meinecke's engagement with antisemitism and philosemitism: Sebastian Wogenstein, 'Topographie des Dazwischen: Vladimir Vertlib's *Das besondere Gedächtnis der Rosa Masur*, Maxim Billers *Esra* und Thomas Meineckes *Hellblau*', *Gegenwartsliteratur* 3 (2004), 71–96.

⁴² Claudia Breger, 'Pop-Identitäten 2001: Thomas Meineckes *Hellblau* und Christian Krachts *1979*', *Gegenwartsliteratur* 2 (2003), 197–225 (204).

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Here as elsewhere, records' material qualities – sleeves, appearance and paratexts – take precedence. Characters rarely describe tracks or styles, showing not a musicologist's interest in form or sound, but a collector's interest in music's cultural significance. This collector's nostalgia extends to a fondness for Detroit's earlier musical history:

Der Unterschied zwischen dem extrovertierten Glamour des inmitten einer auf Hochtouren laufenden Automobilindustrie florierenden Soul Labels Motown und den heutigen, unter der gespenstisch leergefegten Oberfläche des postindustriellen, sprichwörtlich postfordistischen Detroit operierenden Techno Labels könnte ja nicht größer sein. (74)

[The difference couldn't be greater between the extroverted glamour of the flourishing soul label Motown amid an automobile industry running at full steam and today's techno label operating under the eerily emptied surface of postindustrial, proverbially post-Fordist Detroit. (63)]

Tillmann's comparison draws on stock images of Detroit, which the implied author ironizes through involved syntax, excessive adjectives and the bathos of the comically short, clichéd predicate, 'könnte ja nicht größer sein'. The narrators oscillate between wistful, stereotypical images and incomplete factual sentences, as if Tillmann is skimming through his notes: 'No UFO's 1985 als einer der frühesten Titel der Detroit Techno Music. Von Juan Atkins alias Model 500.' (108) ['No UFO's, in 1985, was one of the earliest titles of Detroit techno music, by Juan Atkins, a.k.a. Model 500.' (96)] Tillmann invests in a stereotype of Detroit as a postindustrial wasteland, at once empty and full of history and significance. Their nostalgia for techno's beginnings directs attention away from Berlin – its scene mentioned only a handful of times – and imagines Detroit as a ghost town, with no attention to its culture in the present.

Cordula and Tillmann fixate on the connection between music and the racial identity of its producers. Echoing Tillmann's image of postindustrial Detroit, Cordula writes:

Was mich nach wie vor nicht losläßt: Afrodiasporische Amerikaner im desolaten postindustriellen Detroit machen sich ihren revolutionären Reim auf die alten Platten der Düsseldorfer Gruppe Kraftwerk. Ist Detroit Techno Black Music?' (21)

[What I simply can't get out of my head: Afro-diaspora Americans in desolate, postindustrial Detroit are making their own revolutionary sense out of the Düsseldorf group Kraftwerk's old records. Is Detroit techno black music? (14)]

Cordula links techno to Detroit's decline, despite the middle-class backgrounds of its earliest producers. She contrasts them with the white group Kraftwerk from Düsseldorf, a prosperous financial centre. The Anglicism 'Black Music' sums up both the cachet afforded to African American culture in Germany analysed by Layne, and the fetishizing attitude to Blackness described by Garcia. The term is less common in Germany now, but when *Hellblau* was released it was used for club nights or in music shops featuring genres derived from African American music. This imprecise term merges different and often competing genres and creates an undifferentiated image of Blackness, in contrast with more precise genre categories used for music by white artists.⁴⁴ Perhaps most problematically, the narrators' racializing discussions of music extend elsewhere in the novel to quotations of racist language, demonstrating that their fascination does not prove their tolerance and progressive values. Meinecke uses his narrators to show, as Garcia's essay implies, that fascination and racist stereotyping are two sides of the same coin.

Nostalgia as Reflective Process

Meinecke's novel stages the assumptions that underpin nostalgia for techno's supposedly lost Black past, as Tillmann and Cordula repeatedly fall back on stereotypes. Just like nostalgia for an imagined white past, this second form of nostalgia also distracts from continuing musical innovation. However, *Hellblau* explores how combining fondness for the past with careful research, dialogue and discussion can facilitate critical understandings of whiteness and implement the political potential of nostalgia that Gopinath describes. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay suggests that nostalgia's potential to counter official histories is essential for 'unlearning imperialism'. She suggests we 'rewind' to past moments of resistance and work with others as 'cocitizens' to 'unlearn' our assumptions and standpoints. 'Who would dare to say "yes,"' she asks, 'that the arrow of history *can* be reversed, and that a wistful recovery of

⁴⁴ See Olivia Wenzel's narrator's exasperation at this term: *1000 Serpentinien Angst* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2020), 145–6.

the past is not nostalgia but justice'.⁴⁵ Nostalgia plays an ambivalent role for Azoulay: it is an accusation hampering those seeking social and historical justice, while providing the necessary emotional connection to the past for achieving this justice and refusing to take received histories for granted. Meinecke's narrators attempt such a rewinding. They investigate techno's history, scrutinize their assumptions, centre others' work and use nostalgia to reveal and analyse whiteness. *Hellblau* reminds us that these results will always remain imperfect: Meinecke's characters still draw on stereotypes, even fetishes, and demonstrate the ambivalence of nostalgia.

Tillmann's nostalgia for techno's origins is partially motivated by its shifting collectives, uncertain authorship and refusal of conventional modes of celebrity. Collectives like UR and Drexciya reject demands for music to be rooted in producers' racial, class, gender and other identities.⁴⁶ Yet Tillmann cannot suppress his urge to categorize musicians' identities and find correlatives in their music. Yolanda exposes and challenges Tillmann's dependence on racializing assumptions:

Sogar Tillmann macht hin und wieder fragwürdige Bemerkungen wie: [...] Sind die Mole People eigentlich ein schwarzer oder ein weißer Act? Eigentümliches Wort: Eigentlich. Zumal im Zusammenhang dieses das sogenannte Eigene, das vermeintlich autonome Subjekt, nicht selten sehr raffiniert dekonstruierenden Genres namens Techno. (101)

[Even Tillmann makes questionable comments now and again like: [...] Are the Mole People essentially a black or a white group? Funny word, that: essentially. Especially in the context of this genre called techno, that not seldom so ingeniously deconstructs so-called essence: the supposedly autonomous subject. (88–89)]

Yolanda criticizes Tillmann's essentializing belief that he hears Blackness or whiteness in techno tracks. Her tone suggests exasperation at his expectation that she guide and teach him as he reckons with his own white standpoint. By playing with 'eigentlich' [actually or essentially], she compares Tillmann's question to the 'Wo kommst du eigentlich her?'

⁴⁵ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 16, 38–40.

⁴⁶ See Joshua Kwesi Aikins, 'Wer mit Feuer spielt... Aneignung und Widerstand: Schwarze Musik/Kulturen in Deutschlands weißem Mainstream', in *Mythen*, 283–300; Eckhard Schumacher, 'Underground Resistance: Anonymität und Adressierung im Detroit-Techno', in Ludwig Jäger, Gisela Fehrmann and Meike Adam, eds, *Medienbewegungen: Praktiken der Bezugnahme* (Munich: Fink, 2012), 285–301.

[Where do you really come from?] so often asked of Germans of colour.⁴⁷ She shows how Tillmann's questions ignore artists' nuanced engagements with selfhood and subjectivity. Tillmann is aware of Yolanda's frustration, yet cannot shake his assumptions: 'Insgeheim finde ich nach wie vor, daß John Tejadas Platten total schwarz klingen.' (208) ['I [still] secretly think John Tejada's records sound totally black.' (188)] *Hellblau* shows that change is not as simple as correcting individuals' conscious attitudes, as these just reflect how profoundly the music industry is structured around race. Tillmann's inability to address his small part in these structures shows that though his nostalgia motivates research and awareness, it does not necessarily change his behaviour.

Whiteness itself is a frequent subject of the narrators' research, which situates and invites scrutiny of their positions and that of the implied author. For their book, Tillmann and Yolanda are rewinding history as Azoulay describes. Yolanda focuses on the construction and fetishization of whiteness in the Ziegfeld Follies, revue shows in early twentieth-century New York: performers' exposure to the sun was limited and they were forced to take milk baths (277). Tillmann researches skin whitening and hair straightening in the American cosmetics industry around the same time (52). This attempt to historicize how whiteness has been constructed to legitimize inequality in the US also changes how the narrators view German history. For example, Yolanda reads the biography of Hans-Jürgen Massaquoi, a Black German-American journalist who grew up under Nazism. She quotes Massaquoi's feelings of difference and exclusion focused on his attempts to straighten his hair to show resistance to Nazism by emulating the long-haired style of the Swing Youth (183). Tillmann relates this German history of whiteness to racist violence in the 1990s, criticizing the German state's 'nicht nur bagatellisierende, sondern auch exkulpierende' (107) ['not just trivializing, but also exculpating' (94)] rationalizations of attacks on asylum seekers. The narrators' analyses of whiteness refuse the temptation to focus only on American racism, and insist on writing about the specific effects of unmarked whiteness in Germany.

Hellblau is structured around reading and research: quotations from authors, scholars and musicians disrupt the narrators' words and viewpoints. Meinecke structures the novel's motifs around concepts like Kodwo Eshun's 'sonic fiction' or Paul Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic'. Tillmann's explorations of German history, for example, focus on Atlantic submarine

⁴⁷ See Mithu Sanyal, 'Zuhause', in Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, eds, *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2019), 101–21.

warfare, inspired by his location on Ocracoke Island. Led by Gilroy's argument that the Atlantic is the centre of interlinked African, European and American cultures, Tillmann describes the violence and interconnections that have shaped both German and American cultures.⁴⁸ Eshun's concept of sonic fiction links electronic music to sci-fi and Afrofuturism, and sci-fi motifs structure the diffuse writings of Meinecke's narrators.⁴⁹ Planets, for example, appear throughout, from Vermilion's nickname for Tillmann, Venus, to the early twentieth-century term 'Uranian' for sexual or gender deviance, and Pharrell Williams and Chad Hugo's duo The Neptunes (86, 263, 266). In the absence of a conventional plot, these motifs structure the novel around theories by Black scholars. Tillmann, Yolanda and Cordula are denied a sovereign standpoint that they can take for granted; their nostalgia always acknowledges its debt to others. Their approach recalls Azoulay's: they avoid privileging their own voices and position themselves as 'cocitizens' with other scholars who have investigated these questions.

Ultimately, Meinecke's characters do not overcome their assumptions. Yet for white readers these persistent stereotypes may encourage scrutiny of our own standpoints.⁵⁰ Tillmann and Cordula's search for techno's origins remains bound up with the desire to signal connoisseurship. However, their nostalgia motivates extensive research, rewinding history to investigate how musicians and scholars have challenged racial categories while celebrating Blackness. Tillmann does not change his racializing fixations, but dialogue and historical study ensure he recognizes the whiteness of his perspective and never takes it for granted. Meinecke's style similarly demands that readers actively engage to identify who is speaking, a difficult task even for the author, so that attempts to distinguish the narrators' standpoints structure any reading of the novel.⁵¹ Nostalgia for techno's Black origins in *Hellblau* never overcomes the problems of its instrumentalization by white characters. Yet Meinecke also highlights alternative forms of nostalgia, including those of early techno artists, who turned to past traditions to imagine utopian futures and contest racist structures in the present.

⁴⁸ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

⁴⁹ Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet, 1998).

⁵⁰ On engaged reading in Meinecke: Florence Feiereisen, *Der Text als Soundtrack – der Autor als DJ: Postmoderne und postkoloniale Samples bei Thomas Meinecke* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011), 73–95.

⁵¹ Thomas Meinecke, *Ich als Text: Frankfurter Poetikvorlesungen* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012), 103.

Conclusion

nineties.berlin and *Hellblau* reveal the impossibility of generalizing about positive or negative effects of nostalgia by dominant social groups. *nineties.berlin* challenges us to consider whether the dialogue and historical study in *Hellblau* is sufficient to challenge whiteness in the techno scene's ongoing nostalgia. Meinecke's novel, alongside theories by Gopinath and Azoulay, adds an important caveat to Boym's investigations of reflective nostalgia's political potential. Tillmann's development reveals that challenging whiteness requires sustained dialogue, openness to challenge and long-term study. Meinecke's protagonists interact through their reading, and their discussions unsettle their individual perspectives. Nostalgia and emotional attachments to the past drive their explorations, although their work never achieves the imaginative futures of Gopinath's theory or early techno music. The characters do not overcome stereotypes, which tempers their efforts, in Azoulay's terms, to 'rewind' and recover modes of resistance. Their obsession with certain symbols and especially hair shows that their study does not negate their complicity in racist structures. Yet *Hellblau*'s open reflection on the limitations of characters' standpoints makes it useful for considering the challenges of critical whiteness studies. The questions raised by characters' imperfections make the novel a space for readers and scholars to reflect on nostalgia as a cultural practice of whiteness.

nineties.berlin tempers the optimism of Meinecke's novel that nostalgia can be easily re-evaluated in this way. The exhibition avoids discussion of how race and racism shape the scene, as with other German narratives about techno that look back selectively and position it as racially unmarked. The exhibition also shows, though, that nostalgia is not an apolitical emotional connection to the past, and attempts to mobilize it to challenge gentrification. This form of nostalgia is entirely commensurate with Boym's reflective nostalgia or Azoulay's call for resistance to narratives of progress. Yet comparison with *Hellblau* shows that attempts to harness nostalgia politically in this context must also address how whiteness shapes public memories of the early techno scene. Recognizing the structural advantage of whiteness and the limitations of a white standpoint is only a first step, but a necessary one. As Azoulay suggests, nostalgia and emotions can serve the ends of justice, but Meinecke's protagonists show the difficult and uncomfortable work that this requires.