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“Unfinished Business of Democracy”: Transcultural Confrontations in the Portraits of the German-American Artist Winold Reiss

The Munich-educated German American Winold Reiss (1886–1953) was an enormously versatile artist of American modernism and continues to be a fascinating figure in transatlantic encounters. In addition to poster art and interior designs, his oeuvre is unique in its artistic attention to the people of all races. However, Reiss’s rich work of ethnic portrait paintings has been relegated to the footnotes of American art history. Reiss entered the United States at a time when his plea for racial tolerance was measured by his German background. Later, in the wake of the Nuremberg racial laws, the deplorable connection between the Ku Klux Klan and Nazi ideology made Reiss’s efforts to promote the recognition of African American culture particularly problematic. Instead, many African American scholars celebrated the paintings of Reiss’s African American student Aaron Douglas and other black artists. The rich oeuvre of Winold Reiss has received comparatively little attention both in Germany and in the United States. Reiss’s national identity does not fit in the picture of ethnic pride. What could a German artist who emigrated in 1913 to the United States possibly have to say about ethnic minorities, racial pride, and the future of American democracy?

I would like to follow Wanda Corn’s and Sieglinde Lemke’s recommendation to rethink Reiss’s part in the visual representation of ethnic American identities. The European artistic background, which Reiss brought to the American scene, demands more scholarly attention. Philip McMahon suggested in his review of Reiss’s book You Can Design (co-written with Albert Charles Schreier in 1930) that even in the works of his students appeared to be echoes of Europe, “transformed and diluted by time and distance in their transmission from the Old to the New World.”1 Reiss’s visual narrative of American ethnicity has a German element woven into its fabric that is crucial for understanding the scholarly neglect and the political implications within his portraits.

In this article, I will examine the cultural context in Germany and the United States in order to come to terms with the style of Reiss’s oeuvre and its political undercurrent. I will show how the African-American concept of “double consciousness” represents a crucial element in Reiss’s American experience. While travel literature and anthropological exhibitions shaped his American views in Germany, the American experience proved to be disconcerting in many ways. Reiss’s paintings offer a unique perspective on questions of cultural hybridity, processes of cultural translation, and dissent in the name of democracy. In order to understand the cultural and political implications of Reiss’s portraits, I will contextualize his artistic “plea for color” with intellectual thinkers such as...
Horace Kallen, Randolph Bourne, and Alain Locke who struggled with similar challenges at the time.

1. Visualizing “Double Consciousness”

The seizure of Reiss suggests that his cultural and political expectations regarding the promise of American democracy collided with the reality of racial inequality. According to Jeffrey Stewart, Reiss’s images resonate with “the idealistic notion that art can transform the world, by showing the beauty and dignity that exists in all people.” What is the function of ethnic portraits drawn by a German immigrant in a democratic environment that is decisively different from the political and cultural sphere of Germany at the beginning of the 20th century? I argue that the concept of “double consciousness” and what W. E. B. Du Bois described as the problem of the 20th century, namely the color-line, became a driving force behind Reiss’s artistic endeavors. Du Bois explained in Souls of Black Folk (1905) that African Americans developed a “double consciousness” regarding their position in American culture.

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s self by the tape of a world that looks on in arnrous contempt and pity. One ever feels his two souls, — an American, a Negro, two冷冷冷冷两灵魂, two untinged emotions; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose de-
ged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Winold Reiss was struggling with similar challenges albeit with different cultural parameters. Entering the United States shortly before the beginning of World War I, Reiss’s German cultural background made him keenly aware of ethnic xenophobia and racial stereotypes.

When Reiss arrived in New York, his status as a German immigrant and later as a naturalized foreigner was likely to cause transcultural frictions. During the neutrality period between 1914 and 1918, xenophobia and anti-German sentiments peaked. Anglo-Americans questioned the national loyalty of “hypenated Americans” and demanded that they identify themselves as “100 percent Americans.” These campaigns triggered an anti-German panic producing widespread suspicion of German immigrants as potential spies and enemies. In its most drastic form, the “anti-hyphen” movement became an assault on German ethnic culture in general. Winold Reiss was no exception.

Those immigrant citizens, who displayed, in one way or another, their former national background, were stripped of their legitimacy to express their opinion on issues related to American culture or politics. War propaganda intensified a response pattern regarding the “other” as potentially subversive immigrants. These questionable assumptions can be traced back to the early 19th century. As a consequence, German-American societies dissolved, the instruction of German in public schools was forbidden, sometimes xenophobia turned into mob-like scenes. References to German ethnicity became virtually impossible and continued to be highly problematic in the decades to follow. Military and ideological clashes cemented the notion of a turning point among German émigrés and the tradition of their national background. They diminished the recognition of German language publications in the United States and questioned the loyalty of those who still referred emphatically to German culture. According to the State Department, the change of secretly serving the Kaiser or later the Nazi regime as “a fifth column of the German Reich” could only be disqualified by complete disconnection from all things German in the United States.

Randolph Bourne was among the first to critically assess the frictions German émigrés produced by presenting themselves as model Americans. While pressures mounted for the United States to intervene in the European war, Bourne turned his spotlight on what he called “unpleasant inconsistencies” in his groundbreaking essay “Trans-National America” (1916). Bourne criticized that patriotism had been limited to cheering at Anglo-Saxon traditions. By reducing American national identity to such a perspective, the visionary idea behind the motto’s pleasurable notion would be turned upside down. By calling for a new sense of cultural pluralism, émigré patriotism emerged as a test case of transnational America. “The discovery of diverse nationalistic feelings among our great alien population has come to most people as an intense shock. It has brought out the unpalatable inconsistencies of our traditional beliefs.” Bourne particularly criticized moral finger pointing to Germans as an excuse to address openly questions of national identity formation and patriotism among naturalized foreigners. The answers to cultural conflicts both within the United States as well as in the transatlantic arena appeared to be all too simple. “We blamed the war, we blamed the Germans.”

Bourne gets to the heart of a conflict, which has been neglected in favor of celebrating the achievements of German assimilation and contributions to American culture. The socio-political integration and dedication of German immigrants to American democracy did not wash out memories of Europe. Rather, it “made them more and more intensely real.” This intensity of ethnic and national heritage caused frictions which in most cases were unintentional on the side of the émigrés. The origin of these frictions harks back to notions of “America” as a set of values and cultural codes, which critics such as Samuel P. Huntington recognize in the ruling class and descendants of British stocks of “pilgrims.” Bourne called for a readjustment of America’s attitude and ideals to the changes immigrant populations bring to American culture and politics. With reference to Horace Kallen’s article “Democracy and the Melting Pot” published in the preceding year in The Nation, Bourne attacked the Anglo-Saxon dominance of American culture and their inability to recognize American identity as a construct based on many ethnic backgrounds. The task of a new, younger intelligentsia was to enhance cosmopolitan notions of “America” by discarding the genteel elite and a latent British colonialism in favour of discovering “authentic cultures.” Bourne located this kind of authenticity in culturally distinctive minorities. Rejecting the claim of Anglo-Saxon pre-eminence, Bourne came to a radical conclusion: “There is no distinctly American culture.”

Bourne’s perspective differed from German émigrés who set their hopes on becoming American citizens. They had a clear idea of what it meant to be part of the American dream. They believed that there, indeed, was a distinctly American culture. By insisting...
to become part of it, they also set out to re-shape it and accept democratic responsibilities. The acquisition of citizenship provided the basis for proudly declaring one's Americanness. The following analysis will contextualize Winold Reiss's construct of "America" and the importance of the process of naturalization for his immigrant experience. Reiss's son Tjark remembers the difficult situation for German immigrants at the time.

These years were not easy for a German national. Not that he [Winold Reiss] was pro-German, but having only come to this country in 1913, the year before war broke out in Europe, he had a strong German accent and his English was not very good. The prejudices of some of the local people at that time were unforgivable. One next-door neighbor in Winstock was a doctor who would catch me outside the house and tell me what horrible people I had for a mother and father, who was German, and the Germans were doing ghastly things like cutting off women's breasts and torturing people.19

Similar problems occurred after the United States had entered World War II, when Reiss was falsely accused of being a friend of Adolf Hitler. Allegedly, Reiss had even "gone to school with him in Austria".20 Despite his disillusionment with the shortcomings and failures of American democracy, he did not become cynical about the American experiment or retreat into inner emigration. The crises strengthened his belief that he needed to use his talents to make "America" live up to its promise.

In a climate of anxiety and chauvinist patriotism, Reiss developed a "double consciousness" in his struggle to become a model American. This specific African American pattern of finding one's identity through one's cultural "other" has been productively applied to the "Black Atlantic" and the formation of modernity by the cultural critic Paul Gilroy. I will transfer these patterns to the experience of the German émigré Winold Reiss. Gilroy concluded that the "problem of weighing the claims of national identity against other contrasting varieties of subjectivity and identification has a special place in the intellectual history of blacks in the west."21 To what extent does Reiss's construction of his own American identity resemble claims African Americans have brought forth during different stages and periods?

The American side of the German immigrant experience has often been neglected in favor of accentuating the German element in the United States. In the work of Winold Reiss we encounter a strong sense of fashioning himself into a representative American. With his focus on ethnic minorities, he challenges the promise of American democracy, or, to use the words of Alain Locke, the "unfinished business of democracy."22 In a letter to his son Tjark from 1931, he explains his long-lasting dream of being able to identify himself as an American. "There are a lot of important news. First, you have to congratulateme—I am now a newly baked citizen of the United States, which makes you automatically the same. After long and hard fighting I am where I wanted to be 8 years ago."23 Thus, Reiss's desire to become a representative American produces patriotic dissonance. By addressing the discrepancies between principle and practice, he did not shy away from confrontations.

2. Cultural Fault Lines: American Vistas in Germany:

Considering his keen interest in folk culture and fascination with travel accounts we can assume that Reiss probably saw the large exhibition of Pablo Picasso's works in Munich in 1913 that took place at the Moderne Galerie Heinrich Thannhauser. The exhibition featured two head studies from 1907 and 1908 (Cat. nos. 16 and 46) that are obviously related to Picasso's African inspired "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" (Paris, 1907). In this seminal work, a visual break bisects the picture into two parts.24 The visual fault line marks a break in aesthetics. While the left part harks back to 19th century realism, the right side ventures into new representational forms of human anatomy. In Picasso's case, African masks provided the most striking material to introduce unusual perspectives. By employing proto-cubist elements and the playful use of sexuality, geometrical shapes, and elements from primitive cultures, "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" emerged as a corner stone for the "Tart negro" movement in the following decades. The painting has been hailed as a revolution in the history of art. With its bold break with conventions, it represented an aesthetic "shock" to audiences at the time.25 Picasso's inspiration can be traced back to a visit to the ethnography museum in the Palais du Trocadéro in Paris. The encounter with African masks created an epiphany for his remarkable venture into new representational styles. By treating the masks as a form of artistic weapons, Picasso performed what he called an "exorcism" on European style. African art helped Picasso to find his own distinct artistic voice. At the same time, the fascination with African art spread across the European art scene. German Expressionists like Emil Nolde and Paul Klee incorporated Carc sogre under the banner of Negerwesen in their works. Writers like Yvan Goll and Bertolt Brecht were as much inspired as were composers such as the French Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Darius Milhaud, or Arthur Honegger in the 1910s, the German Ernst Krenek, Kurt Weill, and Paul Hindemith in the 1920s, as well as the Russian Igor Strawinsky, Dimitri Shostakovich, or Sergei Prokofjev in the 1930s. Winold Reiss is unique among these Americanphilistheir transatlantic perspective and experience in the United States is linked to two World Wars.

Reiss had already been exposed to more modern art than most American artists before he emigrated. One might ask: why did Reiss not follow the stylistic innovations of Picasso, the German expressionists Emil Nolde and Paul Klee, the approaches of Giacometti and Brancusi, Gauguin or the Brücke Group? The oeuvre of the German-Ameri- can painter marks a striking departure from the very European and German developments, which had been so prevalent during his studies in Munich. With their mixture of abstraction and naturalism, Reiss's ethnic portraits seem to suggest a return to styles preceding Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon." At the same time he uses color and ele- ments of German Art Deco to render the cultural and historical otherness. How is this surprising phenomenon to be accounted for?

Born on September 16, 1886 in Karlshude, Reiss began his artistic career under the gui- dance of his father Fritz Reiss who specialized in German landscape painting and peasant portraits. He continued his education in Munich where he enrolled on 15 October 1912 in the Kunstkademie (Royal Academy of Fine Arts), studying with Franz von Stuck.26 He also attended the Kunstgewerbchule (School of Applied Arts) with Julius Diez. Among
the contemporary European developments which left traces in Reis’s artistic approach were Cubism, Fauvism, German Expressionism, the Blue Reiter, and the modern decorative arts movement. Like many other young Munich modernists, Reis was surely attracted to ethnography. The city’s famous ethnographic museum, the Völkerkunde-Museum, offered opportunities for Reis to encounter folk art forms as a means to translate his visions into a modern style. Reis must have been captivated by the creative possibilities he was discovering in primitive and non-western art.

Despite Reis’s later interest in primitivist modernism, his paintings cannot be subsumed under the four types, which Robert Goldwater identified as the “primivism of the subconscious,” “romantic primitivism,” “emotional primitivism,” and “intellectual primitivism.” I will show that Reis’s approach to portraiture can be described as “anthropological primitivism.” For example, in the unfinished rendering of his portraits of African Americans and portraits of ethnic minorities with Art Deco backgrounds, we can detect a fault line that is not so much related to art history, as is the case with Picasso’s groundbreaking “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon.” In Reis’s portraits, there is a cultural and political agenda encoded. The American promise of democracy and equality is a story which is still incomplete. Reis’s ethnic portraits comment on the gaps of American democracy. Instead of merely criticizing the discrepancy between American principles and practice, his portraits represent a persuasive effort to re-interpret the American motto. Thereby, “we the people of the United States,” as mentioned in the opening paragraph of the Constitution, comes closer to the fulfillment of its motto e pluribus unum.

Towards the end of the 19th century, sensational displays of cultural otherness became a professional venue and an influential product of mass culture. It is likely that the year-old Winold Reis was among the thousands of people who attended one of the shows of “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West,” when it stopped in Krefeld on April 23, 1891 for four days. Reis, however, was not satisfied to learn from books and images. The American frontier and the American “Wild West” emerged as an alternative space between German dream and mythic American memory. Reis intended to see, experience, and internalize the essence of other cultures in order to convey his own impression to canvas. His father, Fritz Reis, espoused this attitude within less exotic dimensions. Like Picasso, Winold Reis developed a keen interest in ethnological and anthropological studies. However, his interest was not merely artistic; in the sense of trying to find new styles of representation and to overcome artistic paralysis. His interest went deeper.

Reis’s paintings function as a critical socio-political commentary adding a German visionary component to the American dream. Reis inherited from his father a remarkable appreciation of peasant life and an acute consciousness for social problems. When the Reis family moved to the little village Kirchzarten in the Black Forest, not far away from the city of Freiburg im Breisgau, Fritz Reis documented issues of poverty, generational conflicts of families living closely together under one roof, and peculiar rules of heritage which allowed only the eldest son to take over the farm from his parents. Fritz Reis’s painting “Vernunftfreie” (“Marriage of Reason,” 1892) shows a young man who recognizes his only chance to escape extreme poverty by marrying a much older woman. Instead of emotional bonds, the marriage is built upon rational considerations. Another detailed rendition of an elderly woman with a breadbasket emphasizes the healthy work ethic, physical as well as mental strength. The drawing showcases Fritz Reis’s keen eye for clothes and tools of trade in remote corners of the Germany.

Winold followed his father’s interests and style. Particularly striking is a series of portraits he produced in 1907 of residents of the village of Grischwiler in the Black Forest. Each of the carefully rendered pencil drawings identifies the person’s name and shows Reis’s signature and date (figs. 1–2). When he returned to the Black Forest 15 years later for a short visit, he explained his interest in the climate and deep shadows typical for the area, which create its remarkable ambience. His portraits convey the particular blend of ethnic background and also the brooding atmosphere, which has left its mark on people’s faces. “The people are mostly dark-haired and dark-eyed, which comes from a large admixture of Celtic blood, and some of the mellowness of the atmosphere seems to have attached itself to their temperament. They are a sturdy, hard working race, getting what they can by hard labor out of a stony soil.” Ultimately, Winold Reis wanted to take his father’s philosophy beyond the confines of German peasant life. He searched for folk elements in more remote corners of the western hemisphere. Crossing the Atlantic promised to feed his appetite for field trips. Eventually, Reis traveled all across the United States. The first of many trips to the Blackfeet on their reservation in Browning, Montana was in January of 1920. The portraits he created capture the essence of their spirituality. He came face to face with Mexican revolutionaries on his trip to Mexico in 1920. Reis produced intimate portraits such as...
3. Unfinished Business of Democracy

The portraits of Winold Reiss challenge the idea of America as the cultural product of European immigrants. Displaying the great variety of ethnic minorities fills in a blank spot of American identity during the inter-bellum era. His portraits and exhibitions function like a visual pendant to similar tendencies in anthropology. The German-American anthropologist Franz Boas held that cultural contacts are a source of creative growth in regard of self-culture and art. Instead of insisting on a traditional concept of western civilization following a singular evolutionary plan, Boas called for cultural pluralism. He realized that all cultures are mixed and constantly undergo transformations. These ideas opened new perspectives on American contributions to modernity, its ongoing process of cultural dehierarchization, cultural hybridization, pluralization, and individualization. Boas and his followers believed in the promise of the Declaration of Independence. They cherished the American motto e pluribus unum as a truly democratic vision of a nation where all are created equal and all are endowed with the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Reiss focused, in particular, on the pluribus, less on the unum. In his very own way, Reiss visualizes what anthropologists referred to as cultural relativism.

As a resident in New York, Reiss became intimately aware of the challenges of ethnic and racial confrontations in the United States. As early as 1914, he co-founded the Arts and Craft Studio and opened it to African American artists. A photograph shows Reiss with his colleagues and students in the studio in downtown Manhattan (fig. 3). Among them, an African American features prominently standing next to and in front of Winold Reiss. Not surprisingly, his German colonial perspective on African culture acquired the stigma of racial degradation exemplified in the stereotypical caricature of large red lips, protruding eyes, and skin color in the blackface tradition. A case in point is the oversize painting of an African “tea boy” created during his time in Munich, which he had brought to the United States (fig. 6). A reproduction of this image appeared in the second volume of his magazine The Modern Art Collector in 1915 to illustrate techniques of innovative German poster art. While Reiss considered the stylistic approaches still valuable, he felt compelled to add an explanatory note regarding the degrading racial feature: “This poster is quite a revelation to the American, who, with his pince nez, sees the colored man every day under very ordinary circumstances. In European centers these boys are often employed by fashionable tea-rooms and cafés for serving round little extra luxuries, such as cigarettes, bon-bons, etc. Mr. Reiss designed this poster prior to coming to America.”

The apologetic nature of the disclaimer documents the change of perception, which the American experience had brought to Winold Reiss’s vision of the cultural “other.” The encounter with African Americans had far-reaching consequences for his artwork. In the 1920s, he established close ties with artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance. The African-American artistic movement set out to counteract negative stereotypes by promoting positive visual and literary representations. The intellectual Germanophiles and leading African American spokesperson of the fin de siècle, W. E. B. Du Bois, had already built transatlantic bridges to Germany during his visits in 1881 and several trips in the following decades. Commitments of anthropologists to overcome traditional
stereotypes regarding physical and intellectual inferiority of African cultures provided some of the ideological groundwork for political organizations and African-American intellectuals. In the German-American anthropologist Franz Boas, Du Bois recognized a seminal figure in the challenge to overcome the color line.

Frances Boas came to Atlanta University where I was teaching history in 1906 and said to a graduating class: You need not be ashamed of your African past; and then he recounted the history of black kingdoms south of the Sahara for a thousand years. I was too astounded to speak. All of this I had never heard and I came then and afterward to realize how the silence and neglect of science can let truth utterly disappear or even be unconsciously distorted.

With Franz Boas’ concept of cultural relativism, a German element was already part of the Harlem Renaissance. The collaboration between an African American intellectual from Howard University and a painter and designer from Germany, who developed a deep appreciation for non-European cultures, was thus not as unusual as it may seem in the first place. Alain Locke invited Reiss to produce the cover for the special edition of The Graphic Survey magazine entitled “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro” in 1925; in the same year, he created the cover of Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life (figs. 7–8). Here, Reiss had a chance to present a progressive face of “America” and the richness of African American culture. Thus, he reintroduced ethnic and racial elements to the American promise of democracy, which had been written out of Jefferson’s original draft of the Declaration of Independence.

Both magazine covers show the richness of Reiss’s approaches to the theme of ethnic pride. They offer a unique gaze at African American self-awareness through the eyes of a German immigrant. For the Survey Graphic, Reiss offers a portrait of the tenor Roland Hayes who was among the first black artists to gain international fame. The image zooms in on the head to emphasize the intellectual powers and individual features like the facial lines. The stylized vertical borders on the left and right side seem to radiate from the center creating associations oscillating between modern machinery and jungle scenery. Reiss used a bright blue color to create a powerful counterpart to the dark profile on white background. The triangular design of the letters resonates with the Opportunity cover. Here, Reiss works with strong contrasts using a two-dimensional mask with highly geometrical forms. A striking choice of color brings great dynamic and power to the image. Lines of triangular shapes create a powerful frame around the mask in the center. The red and orange colors surrounding the mask disrupt the mechanical borders and counterbalance the monotony of repetitive triangular shapes. The color scheme is a direct reference to Reiss’s favorite poster designs he encountered in Munich. By comparing Munich to Berlin he emphasized the warmth emanating from the use of colors typical for the artistic center in Southern Germany. Referring to a particular forceful poster of Ludwig Holbein, he emphasizes the choice of colors: “three colors and black – red, orange, black and gray. [...] This poster was the first poster which gave me (I studied at the time in Munich) the first strong impression.” His reference to Holbein shows how Reiss translated his German impressions to the demands in the United States and the particular situation in “black Manhattan”.

5 Winold Reiss’s Crafts and Art Studio in New York City, Sept. 1924. Detail from photograph. The Reiss Archives
6 Winold Reiss, Tea Bag, ca. 1917–1919. The Reiss Archives
7 Winold Reiss, Cover Survey Graphic, March 1925
8 Winold Reiss, Cover Opportunity, February 1925
Alain Locke, the editor of the special issue Harlem Revue of the New Negro and the anthology The New Negro, teamed up with Reiss and two other artists with a German background. Apart from Max Skvogt, Locke used Walter von Ruckteschell’s “portrait of Has- sun Bilal” to provide visual keys to his article “Negro Youth Speaks.” Locke revisited Ruckteschell’s portrait as “Young Negro”, while Winold Reiss’s graphic design elements with contrasting associations of the machine world and the jungle are set above Alain Locke’s article. When Locke argues that the “Negro youth speaks out of a unique experience and with a particular representativeness” the visual clues for the articulation are seen through immigrant eyes. Thus, Locke productively uses Du Bois’s concept of “double consciousness” to include (naturalized) foreigners who have also developed a special sensitivity to the unfinished business of democracy. Locke’s interest in German perspectives on ethnic cultures can be traced back to his appreciation for both Franz Boas and Felix von Luschan. Locke explained his decision for using the work of Winold Reiss in his edition on The New Negro in 1935:

The work of Winold Reiss [...], which has supplied the main illustrative material for this volume has been deliberately conceived and executed as a path-breaking guide and encourage- ment to this new form of the young Negro art. In its idiom, technical treatment and objec- tive social angle, it is a bold iconoclastic break with the current traditions that have grown up about the Negro subject in American art. It is not meant to dictate a style to the younger Negro artist, but to point the lesson that contemporary European art has already learned – that any vital artistic expression of the Negro subject and subject in art must break through the stereotypes to a new style, a distinct fresh technique, and some sort of characteristic idiom.13

By the time Reiss created his portraits of African-American intellectuals and writers (fig. 9), the “jazz craze” hit Europe. Compared to the illustrations of Paul Colin for the Revue Negre with Josephine Baker in France or the blackface tradition of Ernst Kieneck’s jazz opera Jonny Spielt auf (1926) in Germany, Reiss moves away from clichés of the 19th century minstrel traditions. In his portraits, African Americans emerge as proud and dignified representatives of American cultural life rather than being objects of colonial fantas- ies. In the United States, the issue of race and color hardly fit into in the concept of those who argued for cultural pluralism, as for instance Horace Kallen in his famous essay “The Melting Pot” from 1915, Americanness at the beginning of the 20th century basically meant naturalized Euro-American in-migration.18 It was, after all, the African American poet Langston Hughes, who in his powerful lament “Let America Be America Again” (1938) questioned Kallen’s dream of a European melting pot in the United States. While warning of ill-guided patriotism, Hughes inscribed himself as a patriot when he celebrated the notion of liberty and equality in the third verse of his poem.

Let America be America again [...] 0, let my land be a land where Liberty Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath, But opportunity is real, and life is free, Equality is in the air we breathe.19

Hughes builds his poem on the African American tradition of call-and-response patterns. However, the “choir” does not break out into a patriotic “Hallelujah.” Instead, a new dis- course on the American promise of democracy is initiated. The poetic response addresses a significant gap in the democratic dream of equality: “There’s never been equality for me./ Nor freedom in this homeland of the free.”19 Hughes does not limit his plea to African Americans, who were left out of the concept of the American dreams of liberty and equality. In addition to the descendants of black slaves, his poem “Let America Be America Again” also gives voice to the American Indian, to desperate immigrants, to farmers, and to all the people, who cannot share the dream.

Reiss early on recognized that the contact zones of black and white culture produced hybrids rather then separate entities. African American music, dance, literature, and lan- guage entered into the mainstream. In turn, African American artists collaborated with and appropriated elements from American or European traditions they found useful.
Reiss's portrait of Langston Hughes (fig. 10) is one of the most striking examples how Reiss worked a cultural fault line into his portraits. The painstaking delineation of Hughes's face, the reflective mood over a manuscript with a pensive gaze into the futures of the "New Negro" emerges from a complex Art Deco background. The cubistic elements of elaborate curtains, a lamp, musical notes, a flower, bedroom, stairs, and roof tops resemble the Germanized visions of the Harlem jazz craze. Reiss encodes a transcultural confrontation in the foreground-and-background. The promise of democracy and equality in America is counterbalanced by a stereotypical representation of a black person on the left side. Hughes looks away from this (white and Germanized) image of black inspiration. Like a "rhapsody in blue", distorted memories of the past give way to a different leitmotif about representations of African Americans.

Reiss's understanding of Americanness can hardly be harmonized with a notion of democracy's triumph "over every enemy—over the English king, over the American Indian, over the uncivilized Mexican, over the champions of slavery betraying American freedom, over everything, to the very day of the history lesson" as described by Horace Kallen, when he pondered on the power of the Declaration of Independence. For Reiss, being an "American" meant commitment to the Declaration of Independence. Terms like "democracy" and "conquest" were incongruous. "Democracy's triumph," which Kallen recognized in the suppression of minorities such as the Indians and Mexicans emerges as democracy's greatest failure considering the attention Reiss dedicated to their portrayals.

When the United States intervened in World War II to defend the ideals of democracy on the European continent, Reiss and Locke continued their productive cooperation. Reiss's contribution to Alain Locke's 1942 special edition for the Survey Graphic entitled "Color: Unfinished Business of Democracy" provides a key to Reiss's artistic vision. The cover combines discourses on racial differences, anthropological types, ethnic distribution, and cosmopolitanism. Reiss produced four sketches, which exemplify the importance of the project in its cultural and political implications. Ultimately, Locke and he agreed on a fifth version. In chronological order, they document the process of adding ever more layers to the nexus of racial constructions and the promise of equality. All sketches feature a global perspective expressing the need to go beyond national boundaries. The first approach employs a five-part color scheme as racial codes is unusual. For more than twenty-five years, Reiss had endeavored to bring out the broad spectrum of skin colors in his portraits of African Americans, Mexicans, Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, and European immigrants. Despite the German anthropological revisions of the likes of Laskian and Boas to move away from stereotypical skin classifications, as well as Reiss's claim in a newspaper article that "Indians are not red," Reiss uses a red block shaped figure to depict Native Americans in Central America and various areas in North and South America. Similarly, the colors yellow, white, black, and brown are related to different regions on the globe.

The second approach abandons the idea geometrical body constructions with corresponding colors to distinguish between five races. Reiss draws on Picasso's revolutionary use of masks to redirect attention to African culture. The sketch uses five masks with frontal profile and color codes which link the five races with various regions on the five continents. Instead of a flat world map, Reiss introduces the globe. The masks appear around the outer rims of the globe with the white profile in a central position at the top. Reiss transfers the simplified colors to the letters and introduces lines and ribbons to structure the cover.

The third sketch achieves a greater sense of harmony by creating a circle within a circle. The outer circle represents the earth marking the five continents. The inner circle features five distinct male profiles facing right. The consecutive order from white to black implies racial hierarchies with blacks at the very end of the story regarding "the unfinished business of democracy." Again, the simplified skin color scheme relates to regions on the continents where the corresponding race can allegedly be located. The fourth sketch comes closest to a visual narrative of racial equality and cosmopolitanism. Reiss substitutes the idea of the globe with a view on a rectangular map of the world. This time, the function of the red lines is inverted. While they represented water in the preceding sketches, they now delineate the continents. There are no hints at regional distributions of races. The idea of the profiles is turned into a set of layers. Instead of following a
consecutive horizontal order from left to right, the new approach provides depth moving from center to margins. This time, the center is represented by a red profile followed by the colors black, brown, yellow, and white. It is crucial to draw attention to the alternative framing device in order to understand the cosmopolitan message encoded in the sketch. Reiss adds a sixth profile surrounding the last of the color schemes consisting of those lines, which delineate the continents. The profile belongs to a world citizen composed of all the races and connected to all continents. At the lower left, the profile is broken up by wedges of different colors. This visual breakup creates connect zones between the races and the lines of the world citizen. The distinctions implied in Locke’s subtitles “Negroes: USA, New World Old World” stand in contrast to the unifying perspective suggested by Reiss. Indeed, Reiss places the vision of the world citizen over the Atlantic connecting the New World with the Old World. With its global perspective, the new cosmopolitan profile is not only a transatlantic contact zone but also a hemispheric one of interconnecting lines. The “mumbo,” however, has become part of a democratic narrative that transends racial discourses and demarcation lines.

Conclusion

Reiss’s portraits convey two key messages for American citizens, which extend beyond his own ethnic background and its complicated history in American culture. First, the beauty of America’s rich ethnic background has not yet been recognized to its full potential. Second, immigrants do not need to Americanize themselves to a degree that they lose all of their former identity. Instead, the portraits call attention to the possibility of America as a land of equality in the truest sense of the word as far as all immigrants and their cultural backgrounds are concerned. The “types” of immigrants in the anthropological sense are still clearly distinguishable. Assimilation and acculturation should offer opportunities to retain parts of the immigrants’ native culture. Such a visual narrative of the unfinished business of “America” was an affront to attitudes fostered by President Roosevelt’s campaign during World War I to create “100 percent Americans” or the State Department’s patriotic propaganda during World War II. The cultural frictions, which Reiss encoded in his portraits of non-western ethnicities in the United States, showed the limits of the “melting pot” as envisioned by White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Identity constructions that opened up a transcultural space within a transnational America became stigmatized as un-patriotic, its proponents unwelcome aliens. Reiss’s portraits resemble a guidebook to transnational America, which jettisoned the European focus of Randolph Bourne’s essay of the same title in 1916. In addition, the portraits provide the visual narrative to the kind of cultural pluralism which Langston Hughes called for in his joyful lament “Let America be America again.” The transcultural confrontations underlying Winold Reiss’s portraits tell of a democratic America whose history has in the sense of Walt Whitman’s Democratic Vistas (1871) not yet been written. By visualizing the unfinished business of democracy, Reiss offered an alternative “text” to come closer to the promise and the potential of American democracy.

“unfinished business of democracy”

References

1 I would like to thank the Terra Foundation for their wonderful support of this project. A postdoctoral grant from Terra allowed me to trace back sketches, drawings, prints, and other documents of Winold Reiss in the United States. This essay is part of a larger research project on transatlantic confrontations of German singularity and the promise of American democracy from the end of July 1917 to 1920 which will include a comprehensive biography of Winold Reiss.
8 Bourne, “Trans-National America” (see note 7), 107.
9 Bourne, “Trans-National America” (see note 7), 107.
10 Bourne, “Trans-National America” (see note 7), 108.
12 Bourne, “Trans-National America” (see note 7), 105.
14 Reiss, “My Father Winold Reiss” (see note 12), 76. This accusation was, of course, unfounded.
17 The letter is dated March 30, 1919. Reiss had originally written “5 years ago” but corrected it to “8” Conceiving his dedication to American culture and his efforts to inaugurate a genuine American design distinct from European efforts as expressed in the lectures in the first edition of the Modern Art Gallery in 1919, Reiss must have ausuereated the idea of becoming an American even before 1919. Unpublished. Quoted with kind permission of the Reiss Archives.
18 See Lurie, Postmodern Modernism (see note 12), 12.
25 See Reiss’s letter to his wife Henriette Reiss, Mexico City, 10. Oct. 1921. The Reiss Archive.
26 Reiss explores his striking sense of beauty and drama in his diary, which he composed during his trip to Mexico. See Reiss’s diary of his trip to Mexico from 1920. The Reiss Archive.

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It is noteworthy that the Anderson show did not have any Indian portraits. This may be related to the fact that the entire production from January 1910, which had been exhibited at the Hanfstaengl Gallery in New York right after Winold Reiss’s return to New York City, had been sold prior to the exhibit.

We do not know the name of the black person and whether he was a member of the students.


Leake, Color Unfinished Business of Democracy (see note 81), 166–7.


Hughes, Let America Be America Again (see note 34), 1.
