

Michael, Butter; Franke, Astrid; Tonn, Horst (Hrsg.): *Von Selma bis Ferguson. Rasse und Rassismus in den USA*. Bielefeld: Transcript – Verlag für Kommunikation, Kultur und soziale Praxis 2016. ISBN: 978-3837635034; 316 S.

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In the 21 November 2016 issue of *The New Yorker* magazine, Toni Morrison offered a succinct assessment of contemporary racism in American society in light of the recent presidential election: „The comfort of being ‘naturally better than,’ of not having to struggle or demand civil treatment,” she asserted, „is hard to give up. The confidence that you will not be watched in a department store, that you are the preferred customer in high-end restaurants – these social inflections, belonging to whiteness, are greedily relished.”<sup>1</sup> Morrison went on to diagnose „a political platform that supports and translates violence against the defenseless as strength”<sup>2</sup> as evidence of many Americans’ apparent dread of the purported demise of structural racism. While Morrison is arguably wrong in her assertion that racism as a unifying societal force is unique to the United States and does not apply to Europe, her diagnosis of the deep-seated fear of a racialized other finds resonance and relevance in contemporary rhetoric on both sides of the Atlantic. A recently published edited volume of nuanced interdisciplinary scholarship on the marginalization of black lives in the United States offers insight into the history of American racism.

„Von Selma bis Ferguson. Rasse und Rassismus in den USA” is a rich assessment of both the thwarted promises of the civil rights movement and the viability of the movement’s myriad afterlives. The book’s authors take to heart Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s 2005 call to complicate the narrative of a „natural progression of American values” and the widespread tendency to „simplify, appropriate, and contain” the history of the struggle against racial oppression in the United States (p. 17). The editors begin with a translation of Hall’s appeal to scholars to recalibrate their efforts in the production of knowledge in light of what Hall deems the politicized sanitation

and appropriation of civil rights history by the New Right. Following a brief overview of the history of chattel slavery and (black/white) race relations in the United States from 1770 to 1945 by Georg Schild, the volume’s remaining authors explore two primary historical trends: the continuation of legal and extralegal forms of structural racism since the Second World War, and the emergence of protest movements from MOVE to Black Lives Matter.

The fourteen authors of „Von Selma bis Ferguson” convincingly problematize the persistent narrative that the ‘classic’ phase of the civil rights movement (from 1954 to 1968) achieved its primary goals of overcoming racial segregation, realizing black social and economic advancement, establishing a fair system of criminal justice, and guaranteeing black Americans’ right to political participation (p. 76). Manfred Berg provides an empirical analysis of counterevidence to the narrative of indisputable racial progress over the past 50 years while emphasizing the continued salience of „the language of the American civil religion of freedom, individualism, and equality of opportunity” (pp. 88–89).<sup>3</sup> Deftly examining legal and economic discourses, Christine Knauer details the white supremacist tactic of changing public perception of the word „lynching” in the postwar South by decoupling the word from both its racial and corporal connotations. The white press supported Southern politicians in their redefinition of lynching, Knauer writes, through such rhetorical tactics as equating the „strike mob” with lynch mobs during Congressional anti-lynching law debates, thereby sanctioning the persistence of extralegal violence against black Americans (pp. 103–104).

Postwar race relations in the United States, the volume’s authors convincingly argue, were neither static nor linear. Continuing in the vein of Knauer’s analysis, Katharina Motyl and Luvena Kopp explore the criminalization of black lives and the related practices of civil death, dehumanization and state-sanctioned violence in racialized contexts

<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison, Mourning for Whiteness, in: *The New Yorker*, 21.11.2016, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> Toni Morrison, Mourning.

<sup>3</sup> In this review, quotes from „Von Selma bis Ferguson” are my translations from the original German.

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from the „War on Drugs“ to former „Sun-down Towns“ such as Ferguson, Missouri. Expanding on existing scholarship on segregated space during the Jim Crow era, Benjamin Houston (published in translation) investigates the ways in which „physical proximity and social distance“ (pp. 118–119) between black and white residents of Nashville, Tennessee were perpetuated despite court-mandated civil rights-era integration. Houston places particular emphasis on the combination of changing social etiquette and malleable laws governing the use of public space. Michael Butter further calls into question narratives of static race relations. Butter details evidence of increasingly numerous, complex depictions of mixed-race romantic couples in television, though not in film, since the late 1960s – a phenomenon he attributes in part to television’s comparatively less risk-averse investors.

After the authors of the first several chapters of the volume problematize the narrative of linear racial progress and establish the existence of continued legal and extralegal forms of structural racism in the post-World War II United States, the remaining authors of „Von Selma bis Ferguson“ investigate the subject of racism in America via the trajectories of various protest movements. Movements such as Black Lives Matter highlight the tension between activists’ explicit fight against the tenacity of racialized structures of oppression and their implicit request for inclusion in the (persistently racist) American civil religion. Nicole Hirschfelder analyzes the emergence and significance of the Black Lives Matter movement in light of this historical tension, juxtaposing Black Lives Matter activists’ strategy of disrupting the nexus of white civic and economic privilege in „white spaces“ (p. 247) such as cafes serving brunch in Midtown Manhattan with the movement’s more theoretical foregrounding of humanity.

Admirably, the volume does not espouse easy answers to either historical or historiographical questions. Yet the absence of a thematic meta-structure for the book’s fourteen chapters detracts from the significance of each author’s contribution. More effective grouping of the authors’ research would have highlighted the continuity of argumen-

tation: Astrid Franke’s nuanced analysis of Colson Whitehead’s „John Henry Days“ explores the precarity of access to historical narratives on the part of marginalized groups, just as Horst Tonn investigates the American city as a segregated site of exclusion and perennial protest. Christa Buschendorf underscores the feminist, socialist, collectivist activism of Ella Baker; Thomas W. Gijswijt explores the political realignment of Americans along racial lines since 1968, highlighting the fear-based populism that appeared to inspire voters in the 2016 election (pp. 134–135).

While the editors’ focus on the era following the Second World War lends the volume temporal consistency, the reification of the postwar era hampers the historiographical potential of an even longer perspective on the struggle for civil rights in the United States. The analysis of societal structures so meticulously documented in the volume suffers from its nominal adherence to the iconography of the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama as well as from an actual adherence to the artificial analytical starting point of 1945. The volume’s editors are aware of this shortcoming; Benjamin Hedin (published in translation) concludes the book with a call for scholarship portraying the civil rights movement as a „continuum“ (p. 291). Toni Morrison’s recent assessment of white Americans’ persistent fear of a perceived loss of status speaks to both the durability of structural racism in America and the timeliness of a book dedicated to its understanding.

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