By Damani J. Partridge

What does it mean to think about a global future when one looks at the world from the vanishing city of Berlin?

When non-Berliners think of Germany, they do not usually think of Berlin. They definitely don’t think of the real livable Berlin, the Berlin that includes passionate reggae scenes, electronic music, river beaches, schools with a majority of children whose parents are not originally from here,blick art universitäten, major film schools, boîtes, salsa music, swing, and club scenes in which white German women go to meet black men and vice versa. Even the Holstentor, designed by Peter Eisenman, completed in 2005, or the Jewish museum, with architecture designed by Daniel Libeskind, are not a significant part of the global vision of this “German” city. If they are, it is not widespread.

Berlin is not a global city in the sense of being a financial capital. It is not a fast-paced, high-stakes environment like New York or London. It is not a city that can be reduced to love like Paris, nor is it a city of intense populations like London, but it is a city one can think of as being in the process of post-industrial decay like Detroit, or as a city of the new, being comfortable being a part of the future of what Americans think of as inevitable. If consumption and travel were at the center of the call for “freedom” that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall, then the city of Berlin would now be a teeming metropolis of the future.

In fact, because it is so close to the history of an alternative socialist moment, Berlin seems reticent, resistant, and reluctant to embrace the future of what Americans think of as inevitable. If travel and tourism serves as evidence, one doesn’t seem permanently to read “available for rent.” The cities of the world do not want to drive a VW to experience the city, as they are similar to Los Angeles in that it has multiple centers. The city is similar to Los Angeles in that it has multiple centers. When one goes to a new neighborhood, it feels like a completely new city, not part of the rest of the world.

Along these lines, many East Germans, particularly those who have stayed in the territory of the former republic, see themselves as descendants of a devalued history and a marginalized present. It is not that most didn’t want the wall to fall, but many have argued that unification should have been slower or even that socialism could have been reformed.

Berlin’s current economic situation, a result partially of unification and partially the Cold War split, means that almost all people move into the city as move out of it each year. The unemployment rate approached 20 percent as recently as 2005, not unlike much of Eastern Europe. The current mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit, has famously called the city “Arm aber sexy” (poor but sexy). In 2007, when I was in Berlin on Christopher Street Day, I noticed the rainbow flags of gay pride Flaggen in union in front of the Red City Hall. Considering the Love Parade, the Carnival of Cultures, the club scenes, and Christopher Street Day, sex, pleasure, and pride seem to be constant themes in this city. The mayor, who is openly gay and married, shows an acceptance of this sexual orientation.

“And it’s also good that way.” The city hall is red because “And it’s also good that way.” The city hall is red because it’s a so-called special path, but a European path (toward the future) that is very much related to a reconfiguration of the “politics of freedom” after the Berlin wall in which African children, men, and women are dying in sinking boats on the Mediterranean just trying to get in.

For me, Barack Obama’s recent visit to Berlin is a moment that I have found particularly useful to think about and to try to explain these relationships—particularly with the future, noncitizenship, cultural production, and Berlin.

Citizenship and the new global world

If Obama’s candidacy is one that professes change and a look toward the future, the decision to come to Berlin to make his first major international speech is quite astounding, particularly given Berlin’s global position in the world’s imagining as past and not future, not only in reference to the history of World War II, but in relation to the Cold War as well.

Even though he is now out of the limelight, Donald Rumsfeld’s notion of “old” and “new Europe” also comes to mind. If, according to Rumsfeld, Western Europe is old and Eastern Europe is new, by featuring Berlin over Paris or London (not to mention New Delhi or Shanghai), how is Obama claiming new stakes and a different vision from the perspective of Berlin? How does Berlin fit into the post-Rumsfeld world? Why would Obama choose Berlin as the space in the world from which to imagine the future? Furthermore, what does his choice reveal about this city? What does it mean to think about the future of the world, as well as the contemporary condition, when one looks at it from Berlin?

On July 24, 2008, the day of the event, it is clear that the Berlin press is infatuated with Obama. The Berliner Morgenpost leads with a large picture of John F. Kennedy on its cover and the headline: “What Does Obama Have to Say to Berlin?” The Tagespiegel has a picture of the victory column, with an Obama campaign balloon in front of it. Bild (literally, “picture”), an extremely popular tabloid, tans the complexities of Germany’s most famous politicians, shortens, curts, and darkens their hair; and gives them Obamanized versions of their names, including

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“I’m a second-generation migrant kid. My parents came to Germany as guest workers. And I’m quite sure, if [Obama] wins the election in the U.S., it will affect the debates in Europe. It will open doors for us.”

Ankra Omerker, “Barak Steinhauer,” “Horst Oköhler,” and so on. The top headline reads: “Give Us Back the Pelosi” and “Barak Steinmeier,” “Horst Oköhler,” “German (multiply) great-grandfather who went to “America” in 1749.”

According to the tabloid, Obama will visit the Holocaust Memorial, and 700 police officers have been deployed to be simulcast on ARD (Germany’s most watched station), because then we can, on the one hand, tell the majority, “Look, Obama is president, and it’s good; he is a good president.” Why can’t we become part of the decision-making process?” On the other hand, we can talk to our own people and say, “Look, he did it. We can do it as well. We have to work hard. We have to struggle.”

From another perspective, Carl Camurca, a former president of the Berlin chapter of the Initiative of Black Germans would make should Obama win the elections. It would read: “Wir sind Presi- dent!” (We are president). On the other hand, Berlin-based Turkish German film- maker and theater director Neco Celik was more skepti- cal about the universality of the feeling for Obama ex- pressed in part by the 200,000 people at the rally at the T-shirt the national organiza- tion of Black Germans, mentioned the T-shirt the national organiza- tion, suggesting, “Everyone is interested in background.”

The extensive government function of the Marshall Plan and promotion is typically structured in terms of art to be funded as part of the high cultural form. (I have been told that Berlin’s art budget only to the budget of the National Endowment for the Arts.) The other funding, at a much lower rate according to Celik as well. While many career care were also implicitly being connected to what Obama imagined for Iraq and perhaps Afghanistan. While many Berliners have been critical or silent about the Afro-German part of Obama’s speech, the Marshall Plan and the airlift as the visions of a future Iraq are versions that Ber- liners can embrace.

When I spoke with Philippa Ebéné, the director of the Werkstatt der Kulturen (Workshop of Cultures) in Berlin-Neu Kölln, she told me that she too had been excited about Obama’s visit. She talked further about the promise of Berlin in thinking about the future, not a future that continues to be based on the salience of the nation-state as a site of primary identification, but a future based on what she called “transcultural production.” She went on to talk about children and potential artists whose parents were not from Germany but who were also not from the same country, and who were therefore forced to speak to each other and to their children in a third language (i.e., German). What kind of art and, implicitly, what kind of future would this growing population produce?

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