

## Elijah Anderson’s “Iconic Ghetto” as Transatlantic Template? Problematic Traveling Imaginaries, Future Scripts, and Postindustrial Ruhr Cities

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the presence and function of American templates of the stereotypical “ghetto” in the transnational urban imagination, taking the cities of the German Ruhr region as an example. I argue that this space is significantly influenced by the model of American postindustrial cities, where many of the traveling imaginaries of urban problems that have taken hold in former industrial cities in Europe seem to originate. In a first step, I inquire into the workings of the problematic template of the “iconic ghetto,” a concept I borrow from Elijah Anderson and extend transnationally, tracing its influence on urban development narratives in the Ruhr. In a second step, I discuss how social-educational reform initiatives respond to and intervene in such problematic imaginaries in their work. I assert that their activities aim to rewrite or “re-script” the prevalent narratives of this European postindustrial region, which are all too often negative. The alternative development narratives, or “scripts,” these reformers construct and propagate instead imagine cities of the future in a positive light, envisioning how inequality and segregation can be replaced by equality and social inclusion.

**KEYWORDS:** Urban Imaginaries; American “Ghetto”; Transnationalism; Postindustrialism; Social Change

### Introduction

*It is a weekday afternoon in December 2019, in a neighborhood dominated by corporate headquarters, banks, and cultural institutions near the city center of Essen, Germany. I am sitting in a back-room office in one of the upper floors of a large former residential building that now houses shops and office spaces. The room is small but well-equipped and overlooks a construction site, currently little more than a hole in the ground, but set to become a nice mixed-use/residential high-rise. Sitting in front of my computer, I scan online news headlines for relevant developments for the internship I am currently completing with a local non-profit called RuhrFutur, a subsidiary of the Mercator foundation that works to increase social equality in the surrounding area through educational collaboration and reform, taking their inspiration from similar US projects.*

*One issue I try to stay informed on for my internship are extensive new studies about social data, either about the region—the office is in Germany’s primary postindustrial region, the Ruhr—or the national context, all in relation to American developments. On this day, there is no shortage of relevant news: A significant German anti-poverty association, the Paritätischer Gesamtverband, has just published its poverty report for 2019. The highest poverty numbers and the least favorable economic development are reported for the western state of North*

*Rhine-Westphalia, a finding the authors largely attribute to the statistical weight of the Ruhr region within it, which they characterize as both the largest urban agglomeration in Germany and its most impoverished one (Pieper et al. 2).*

*Looking through various newspaper reports that engage with this study, my eyes drift to one of the articles in the recommended section: a Berlin newspaper headline from 2018 claims that a “Social Study Proves Ghettoization” in German cities (my translation, dpa/Berliner Zeitung). Reading the article clarifies that this study by the Berlin sociologists Marcel Helbig and Stefanie Jähnen measured levels of segregation in 74 German cities from 2005 to 2014, finding a significant increase in income segregation in cities in the East and West (see Helbig and Jähnen I-II). Helbig is quoted claiming that this growth is “historically unprecedented” in German cities. To find a yardstick of comparison, he extends the frame of reference across the Atlantic: such segregation levels, he claims, “we have so far only known from American cities” (my translations, dpa/Berliner Zeitung).*

This statement lines up with numerous regional and national-level news articles and broader debates that often seem to turn to American models of urbanity when it comes to evaluating new, potentially problematic developments in European cities. In discussing urban inequality, mentions of “ghettoization” never seem to be far away, frequently in implicit, occasionally in explicit reference to its American form. But how wide-spread and insightful are such transatlantic references and comparisons to the “ghetto” really, and how do they work symbolically? To address these and further questions, I discuss the role of American “ghetto”<sup>1</sup> templates in the transatlantic imaginary of postindustrial urbanity in this article, theorizing them as variants of Elijah Anderson’s “iconic ghetto” (“Iconic” 8). Specifically, I ask how this problematic template functions both in the narrative framing of urban development discourses and the interventions made by social-educational reform initiatives. I argue that such organizations, like *RuhrFutur*, attempt to re-script<sup>2</sup> the dominant narratives of these former urban industrial centers, which have tended to rehearse generic storylines of a

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “ghetto” in parentheses throughout to highlight that it is understood here, following Anderson, as referring to an imagined space and its broader imaginaries. I do not employ it as a neutral label for a specific type of neighborhood that could exist in some cities but may be absent in others. Centrally constructed through processes of Othering, marginalization and control based on race, ethnicity and class, the so-called “ghetto” is always in danger of functioning as a homogenizing anti-Black, anti-poor, anti-immigrant and anti-Other stereotype. It has, however, also been used to deflect and counter such tendencies by activists and scholars, a project that I hope to contribute to in some small manner, while keeping in mind how my perspective may be colored by my privileged status as a white, male, German-born member of the middle class.

<sup>2</sup> My thinking on urban “scripting” starts out from the collective work with my colleagues in the graduate research group *Scripts for Postindustrial, Urban Futures: American Models, Transatlantic Interventions* (2018-2022) at the American Studies Departments of the Ruhr Universities Bochum, Dortmund, and Duisburg-Essen: In writing this paper, I have greatly profited from the joint discussion, encouragement and support in this group. I am also indebted to the productive feedback I received on previous versions of this paper at the Postgraduate Forum 2019 conference at the University of Passau and the PhD Forum 2020 symposium at the universities of Dortmund and Bochum.

troubled recovery and limited future potential. Instead, the initiatives' re-writings envision the future city as a place of equality, formulating "city scripts" of inclusion (Buchenau and Gurr "Development" 12), texts that construct persuasive scenarios of urban transformation in an attempt to bring them about.

I will first introduce the broader analytical context of this paper, before focusing on the role of the "ghetto" templates in the construction of a transatlantic urban imaginary in the German Ruhr metropolitan region.<sup>3</sup> To this end, I will assess some essential scholarship on the conception of the "ghetto," postindustrial cities, and scripting, which will serve as a theoretical framework for my analysis. The main body of this article then analyzes a range of textual materials to assess the functioning of the "ghetto" templates. In a second step, I will highlight regional attempts at their inversion, drawing both on reform-oriented publications and ethnographic field research I have conducted with the *RuhrFutur* reform initiative. Among social change projects in the Ruhr, *RuhrFutur* stands out to the Americanist because it uses an American model called "Collective Impact" (CI) to script the intersections of education and the social in order to further the transformation of the region. They foster the reform-oriented collaboration between various educational institutions in the region—from pre-kindergarten to university—and supporting social organizations such as the child protective services (*Jugendämter*), to increase their collective social impact.

My discussion of the "ghetto" template here may be integrated into a broader assessment on the defining background discourses of transatlantic Rust Belt regions:<sup>4</sup> These dominant regional imaginaries constitute the generic narrative setting in which the re-writings of city scripts intervene. Such diffuse yet powerful discursive formations are not only part of the raw material that re-scriptings draw on, but often also form the foils they fight against. Besides the "iconic ghetto," other common problematic discourses include the region's lingering past, with echoes of both its industrial days and decades of deindustrialization (cf. Linkon, Berger and High) as well as imagined future scenarios insinuating limited potential for positive economic, demographic and cultural development (cf. Bogumil et al.). The latter is a common feature of "shrinking cities" discourses in the US, Germany, and beyond, which often depict

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<sup>3</sup> The Ruhr metropolitan region, hereafter simply Ruhr, is the largest contiguous urbanized area in Germany, with more than five million people living and working in a high-density, built-up space of over a thousand square miles. No single metropolis forms its center. Rather, the region is centered around several smaller centers, all large cities with multiple hundred-thousand inhabitants. These cities are spread out over the Ruhr territory, but linked by a number of medium-sized cities located in their proximity. Historically, the Ruhr was an important center of European heavy industries. The Ruhr valley grew into this role in the wake of the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution, with coal mines and steel mills coming to shape the area. This development brought with it migration, population growth and an accelerated urbanization, creating an industrial region that existed for about 100 years, with manufacturing plants later coming in as well. In the second half of the twentieth century, the region came into crisis, much like the American Rust Belt. This ushered in a period of structural change from an industrial to a post-industrial regional economy; a slow, conflictual, at times painful process that is still not fully complete.

<sup>4</sup> On the applicability of the term Rust Belt and its imaginaries to not just American, but transatlantic contexts, see Tracy Neumann's *Remaking the Rustbelt*, where she coins the similar concept of the "North Atlantic Rust Belt" (4, 1-13).

cities that struggle to replace lost industries and thus seem to have irreversibly fallen behind in the race for capitalist investment and growth. Conversely, some established regional discourses may offer useful precedent to reform initiatives seeking to develop plausible narratives of an inclusive future: The region's long history of ethnic diversity due to work migration in the industrial period is frequently invoked in this context, although its conflicts are rarely included in the narrative. Reformers also call on the Ruhr inhabitants' supposed proclivity for transformative change built through years of incisive economic restructuring, hands-on work—an at times romanticized call-back to mining and industrial labor—and collective solidarity—a reference to the long regional history of unionization, protests and social movements.

### **Theorizing “Iconic Ghetto” Imaginaries and/as Transatlantic Urban Scripts**

The educational reforms that *RuhrFutur* facilitates ultimately address specifically those regarded as the cities' most disadvantaged inhabitants, as well as the segregated, dilapidated neighborhoods they supposedly live in. Conversely, the central, if problematic, position of these groups and spaces within the dominant narrative framing of Ruhr postindustrial urbanity is, in part, what motivates and justifies reforms in the first place. I posit that the basic semiotic dynamics of ethnic, raced, and classed Otherness and exclusion at work here may be theorized with Elijah Anderson's concept of the “iconic ghetto.” In a 2012 article, the urban ethnographer defines the concept as follows: He argues that to many Americans who live outside of it, “the ghetto is where ‘the black people live,’ symbolizing an impoverished, crime-prone, drug-infested, and violent area of the city” (8). For Anderson, the Black American “ghetto” has at least two meanings: First, it is understood as a real urban space, characterized by deprivation (8). As such an “imagined neighborhood,” it is not unique in the city, but merely the most extreme among a “patchwork of racially distinct” areas that still mostly make up American cities (*Cosmopolitan* 28-29).

But for Anderson, the “ghetto” also extends beyond these physical boundaries, functioning as a larger societal stereotype about the nature of this space and its clichéd inhabitants. In this sense, the “ghetto” has achieved and retains an “iconic status” within the imagined American city- and landscape (“Iconic” 8). It is a spatial representation of America's history of racism, serving as a vehicle of its present symbolic reproduction: as such, it turns “anonymous blacks” into presumed “ghetto” dwellers. Even as they increasingly move, work, and dwell in areas of the city outside of the “ghetto” borders, entering “white spaces” or mixed “cosmopolitan canopies” (8, see also: Anderson *Cosmopolitan*, Anderson *White*), the “spatial stigma” (Wacquant 163-98) associated with a “ghetto” residence follows them around. To some extent, this happens regardless of the alleged “ghetto” dwellers' class affiliation (Anderson “Iconic” 10-15).

As Anderson highlights in his book *Cosmopolitan Canopies*, spatial distance to and inexperience with the so-called “ghetto” and its inhabitants are central to its imaginary

creation—its pejorative uses, at least, seem to imply an outside and supposedly superior perspective (*Cosmopolitan* 29). Yet, this stereotype is not held exclusively by white Americans. Black people that have moved elsewhere and up the social ladder since “ghetto” borders became more porous in the wake of the Civil Rights movement are, according to Anderson, prone to this stereotype, too (“Iconic” 12-15).

### **From “Americanization” to “Advanced Marginality”: A Transnational Critique of “Ghettoization” Discourses**

Anderson is, of course, not the first or only scholar to describe the homogenizing, stereotyping template of the “ghetto”—plenty of critical writing exists on this issue. Take, for example, the sociologist Loïc Wacquant, another prominent scholar, who offers a poignant summary of the dominant “ghetto” symbolism in his 2007 monograph *Urban Outcasts*. It supplements Anderson’s account with a transnational perspective and bears quoting in full:

[T]he societies in North America, Western Europe and South America all have [...] a special term for designating those stigmatized neighborhoods situated at the very bottom of the hierarchical system of places that compose the metropolis. It is in these districts draped in a sulfurous aura, where social problems gather and fester, that the urban outcasts of the turn of the century reside, which earns them the disproportionate and disproportionately negative attention of the media, politicians and state managers. They are known, to outsiders and insiders alike, as the ‘lawless zones,’ ‘the problem estates,’ ‘the no-go areas’ or the ‘wild districts’ of the city, territories of deprivation and dereliction to be feared, fled from and shunned. (1)

Wacquant describes a common Othering narrative, reproducing it in order to deconstruct it. Much of his comparative research on urban marginalization in the transnational arena has been devoted to developing a more balanced scholarly account as a corrective.

Based on his ethnographic work with marginalized urban communities, originally in parts of Chicago’s Southside, Wacquant opposes the popular thesis of a “transatlantic *convergence*” (5), which claims that disadvantaged city neighborhoods worldwide have increasingly come to resemble American “ghettos” since the 1990s (5, 272-279). He argues that the mechanisms which produce the marginalized social spaces of racialized American “ghettos” and decaying former working-class neighborhoods of European cities are, in fact, very different. Hence, instead of modeling Europe on America, he posits the “*emergence*” of a new kind of “advanced marginality” (5-7). He locates it in the wake of the post-Fordist deindustrialization and the world-wide spread of neoliberal capitalism that followed, with divergent outcomes across the Atlantic, developing “*hyperghettos*” in the US and “*anti-ghettos*” in Europe (227-56).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Regarding the differences of European urban marginality from the American ghetto, he argues in summary: “French cities have become more mixed, not more separated; their social profile and opportunities are becoming more similar to those of native French people, not more different, even as they suffer higher rates of unemployment. They are becoming more diffused in space, not more concentrated. It is precisely because

Despite the ongoing popularity of transatlantic “ghetto” references in the media and everyday culture, Wacquant is far from alone in making this argument. There is an emerging consensus among urban scholars that while disadvantaged, run-down inner-city neighborhoods with notable levels of socioeconomic and ethnic segregation today certainly are commonplace in Europe, Germany, and the Ruhr, they should not be conflated with the American Black “ghetto”, and hence described as “ghettos” in its likeness. For German cities, Tobias Terpoorten’s 2014 study *Räumliche Konfiguration der Bildungschancen*, which discusses educational disparities in the Ruhr, may serve as an indication of both the popularity of this idea and its decisive rejection by many researchers: Summarizing scholarly literature on increased segregation in German cities, he states categorically and in an almost caustic tone that “the ghettoization after the model of some big American cities often proclaimed by the media is not happening” (*my translation*, 31). Like him, many scholars view European urban spaces as too different in the intensity of their problems and disadvantages, their structures of opportunity and mobility, the porousness of their borders, the ethnic and especially racial make-up of their inhabitants, their historical development as well as the institutional forces at work for the American understanding of the “ghetto” to be an insightful borrowing. The risk of blurring inner-city challenges, opportunities, and their causes through a transatlantic lens appears to outweigh possible gains from comparative sociological thinking.<sup>6</sup>

And yet, despite these manifold arguments against making the American “ghetto” the yardstick of comparison, Wacquant, like others, concedes that the dominant (popular) cultural discourse of urban marginality in much of the Western world has de facto become “Americanized,”—and thus “ghettoized”—however misleading this perspective might be (“Ghettos” 113, *passim*; see also Nightingale 386-402). This aligns with well-established insights German American studies research has provided on the “Americanization” of global popular culture in the twentieth century, to which Wilfried Fluck is probably the most notable contributor (Fluck “California Blue”; “Americanization”; for a transnational perspective from American historiography, see Wala). Assuming the ongoing reproduction of “ghetto” imaginaries correlates with the global spread of American popular culture, most notably film and music, goes some way toward explaining why such references remain familiar despite years of scholarly efforts to rebut them. Locating the reproduction of the “iconic ghetto”

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they are now more ‘integrated’ into the mainstream of national life and compete for collective goods that they are seen as a menace, and that xenophobia has surged forth among the native fractions of the working class threatened by downward mobility.” See El-Mafalaani *Das Integrationsparadox* (2018) for a popular-scientific account on the development of marginalized urban minorities in Germany that argues similarly, also considering Ruhr cities.

<sup>6</sup> For a general assessment on this complex issue, see: Nightingale 390, Häussermann and Kronauer 171, Andersson et al., Musterd, Musterd and Van Kempen, Musterd et al.; for a similar assessment for the Netherlands, but in favor of a more abstract transatlantic use of “ghetto” for shared “spatial expression[s] of exclusion,” see: Blokland 373; for critical assessments on racialized (non-)belonging and racism in Germany, see, for instance: Sow, Ha et al. 9-22; for critical perspectives on the category of whiteness in Germany, see: Eggers et al. *passim*, Arndt and Ofuatey-Alazard 15, footnote 5 provides a substantial list of relevant scholarship; for issues of racism and white privilege in German education and academia specifically, see: Njeri and Sawallisch 55-71, Arghavan et al. 9-42)

template also in popular culture helps further explain the considerable appeal such imaginaries seem to retain for some.

Needless to say, the “ghetto” as a term, idea, and urban phenomenon did not start with these popular cultural representations and is also much older than the late-twentieth-century urban debates described by Wacquant and Anderson. The word was coined to designate the Jewish neighborhood of fifteenth-century Venice, after a copper foundry located there. Since then, it has always been constituted in and through transcultural travel and has undergone frequent redefinition (Duneier ix-x, *passim*). Yet, despite this complex history, today’s Western “ghetto” discourse is overdetermined by the US-American Black “ghetto” stereotype, which is in turn dominated by the (mis)representations of a few cities’ so-called “ghettos,” most notably those of Chicago, New York, Los Angeles or Detroit, so that such nuance is usually lost in everyday references to it (Duneier x-xi, Nightingale 395-6).<sup>7</sup> To take account of this paradoxical situation—ready adoption despite limited compatibility—in what is a cultural studies rather than a sociological analysis, I will thus employ the term “ghetto” in my study, but with Anderson’s addendum of “iconic” to stress that the referent is more symbol than material urban reality.

To mark the importance of the transnational travel of meanings for the historical formation and current functioning of this imaginary template, understood as a transformative cultural and interlingual translation that yet retains some core meanings, I will refer to the concept in full as the “transatlantic iconic ‘ghetto’.”

Finally, it is essential to note that the “transatlantic iconic ghetto” is not reducible to the active use of the term “ghetto” alone: there is a large array of related alternative terms that change depending on context and register, which may nonetheless activate some or all of its logics of Othering and stereotyping.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For the US context, Mitchell Duneier traces the ascent of the “Black ghetto” to the term’s dominant usage in the period from the 1940s—when the descriptor was first used to describe Black neighborhoods in a way that drew attention to parallels to the forced ghettoization of Jews under the National Socialists that shocked the world at the time, and was still a controversial neologism—to the 1960s, when it became standard usage in civil rights debates about Northern US cities, overshadowing references to the Jewish ghetto (Duneier 82-84). For the German context, the history of use seems somewhat different and is shifted later: In the leading foreign language dictionary for German, references to “ghetto” in the US sense are recorded since the mid-twentieth century (“Ghetto, N.”).

<sup>8</sup> German-language synonyms for the social spaces that are problematically associated with the “iconic ghetto” resemble the items on the international list compiled by Wacquant quoted earlier. Even if a number of these German terms seem to be coined with neutrality in mind, reductionism, disparagement but also euphemism remain common undercurrents: “Problemviertel/-quartier” (problem neighborhood), “sozialer Brennpunkt” (social ‘burning’ or focus point), “No-Go-Area”, “rechtsfreier Raum” (lawless space), “sozial benachteiligtes Quartier” (socially disadvantaged neighborhood), “Stadtteil mit besonderem Entwicklungs-/Erneuerungsbedarf” (city district in special need of development/renewal), “überfordertes Durchgangsviertel” (overburdened transition district), “Zuwanderungsquartier”/“migrantisches Viertel” (immigration neighborhood, migrant district).

**And yet: American “Ghetto” Templates in Transatlantic City Scripts**

I now want to embed Anderson’s theorization of the “iconic ghetto” within a broader framework that tries to make sense of influential urban imaginaries, tropes, and stories that come to shape city space and city life: Together with my colleagues in the *City Scripts* research group, I term such prevalent, persuasive discourses “city scripts.” In adopting this perspective, we build on recent work by the American and Anglophone studies scholars Barbara Buchenau and Jens Martin Gurr, the group’s principal investigators. They conceptualize such “scripts” as “cultural tools” that attempt to shape the future of urban locales by using figurative language, deft medial framing, and persuasive narrativization to “suggest, accompany, frame,” or make plausible “specific paths” of development for cities (Buchenau and Gurr “Development” 12, Buchenau et al. *Futures* 5). They argue that habits of the cultural imagination, aesthetic norms, and principles of “persuasive storytelling” (Throgmorton 127-30) influence not only how cities and their inhabitants are represented in literature, non-literary pragmatic texts, and the media, but also how these representations feed back into the material city, coming to model and shape urban forms and urban lives. In short, they claim that scripting “texts can, and have been, used to build” and “bring [...] down” cities (Buchenau and Gurr “Textuality” 2-3). With Buchenau and Gurr, I further posit that certain aspects of American urbanity today have the status of powerful scripting templates or prototypes, both when it comes to narratively constructing dominant discourses of urban problems spawned by deindustrialization and restructuring, and in developing response strategies (Buchenau et al. *Futures* 5; see also Buchenau and Gurr “City Scripts,” Buchenau and Gurr “Textuality”).

Hence, I understand the transatlantic “iconic ghetto,” an American-dominated generic template of the urban with global reach, as one of these “city scripts.” Notwithstanding its formative American influence, this template is transnational, or more concretely transatlantic, in at least two senses: First, it extends beyond the American national context in its geographic reach as an imaginary of urban inequality and ascribed Otherness. As such, it has established itself in Europe in the last decades in an instance of “Americanization” despite frequent scholarly comments denying the American “ghetto’s” fit for what is imagined as a different kind of urbanity, one not following the American model in its greater deployment of state measures against inequality and unfettered capitalist impulses. This may be a side effect of a common belief in the existence of two distinct models of capitalism in the post-Cold War world, “the liberal capitalism of the American way and German-style coordinated capitalism,” a near canonical idea among political economists, according to Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore (732).

Second, as shown above, the “iconic ghetto” has been a transcultural hybrid of imaginaries and symbolisms crossing space and time throughout its history, from its travel from fifteenth-century Venice to other Jewish enclaves across Europe, to Nazi Germany, to the mostly African-American city neighborhoods of the US, whose symbolisms then crossed back into European cities. In truth, even constructing such a linear historical itinerary verges on simplification. Thus, labeling any instance of the “iconic ghetto” symbolism, even in the US,



purely American is, at best, a partial truth. For the “transatlantic iconic ghetto” imaginary in the German Ruhr, this is truer still: It is clearly not informed by American models alone. Rather, it seems to be a hybrid of German cultural memories of the domestic “ghettoization” of Jews, the American “iconic ghetto” template and further, related imaginaries borrowed from elsewhere. Hence, it is intrinsically transnational, though American influences remain central.

With this in mind, it makes sense to return to Wacquant’s introductory passage on “ghetto” symbolism to theorize one final aspect of city scripting. There, Wacquant actually points into the direction of what might be described as the scripted and scripting logic of the “ghetto” himself: Supposed “ghettos” come to be seen as problematic social spaces since “they are—or such is their reputation, but in such cases perception contributes powerfully to fabricating reality—hotbeds of violence, vice and social dissolution” (my emphasis, 1).<sup>9</sup> Here, perception and the perceived, fiction and fact are shown to be inextricably intertwined to produce an ambiguous material-symbolic terrain. It is unclear to what extent ubiquitous representations and narratives of the “ghetto” have shaped and continue to shape social realities in this marginalized urban area. From another perspective, to what degree do “ghetto” narratives ‘merely’ depict what was already there before, with little practical consequences for the future of the places and people described?

This dualism is reminiscent of what Buchenau and Gurr refer to as the “prescriptive” and “descriptive” sides of any scripted cultural text or practice, two facets which always seem to coexist (“Scripts” 405). Note, finally, how for Wacquant, due to this scripting “ghetto” symbolism, inner-city life as seen from the outside “appears to be everywhere the same: barren, chaotic and brutish” (1). In other words, heterogeneous urban realities are homogenized and symbolically reduced to the short-hand figure of the transatlantic “iconic ghetto”. This figure then can function as a synecdochic stand-in for, and distraction from, many of the complex, often divisive issues that underlie the very fabric of the city and larger society, from systemic economic inequality to pervasive prejudices and privileges related to ascribed identities like ethnicity, race, and class.

### **Analyzing the “Iconic Ghetto”: Transatlantic Templates and Their Inversions in the Postindustrial Ruhr and the Rust Belt**

Let me now trace this template in a range of recent cultural texts about the Ruhr that not only demonstrate its wide spread, but also present possible responses aimed at re-scripting the space. I will start with examples of how German social and news media discourses utilize the “iconic ghetto” to frame the postindustrial urban spaces of the Ruhr.

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<sup>9</sup> On this also see Talja Blokland, who finds that “ghetto” discourse in the Netherlands mixes “descriptive and moral aspects” so that “statistical truth is not necessary for social facts to become true—in their consequences” (376-7).

In Social Media and Regional News Media

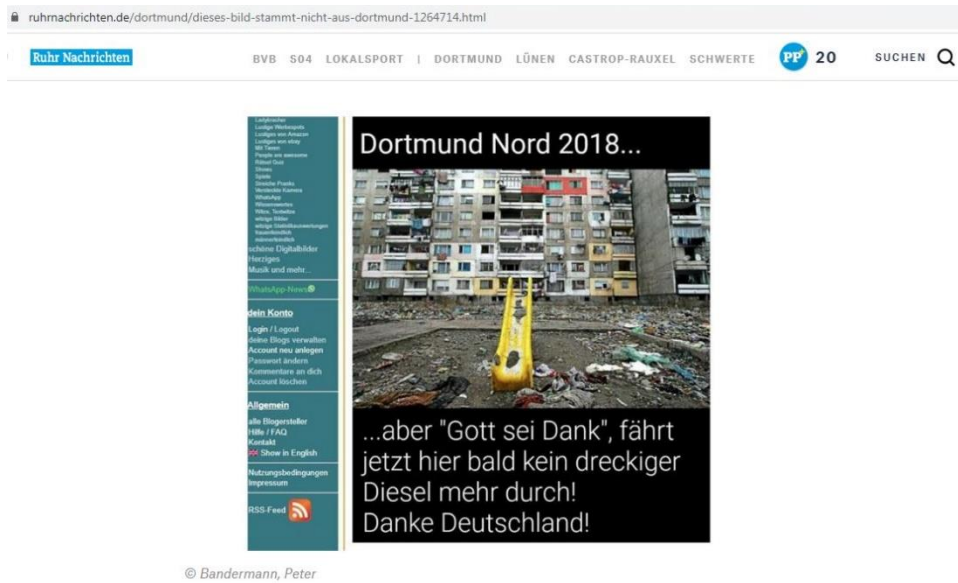


Fig. 1. Photo by Peter Bandermann; Social Media Meme qtd. in Bandermann.

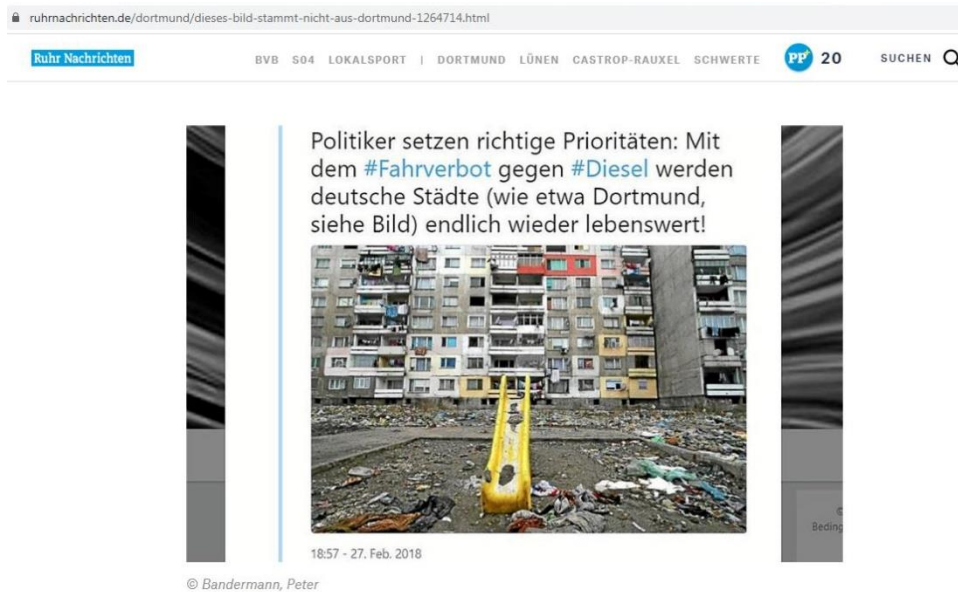


Fig. 2. Photo by Peter Bandermann; Social Media Meme qtd. in Bandermann.

Shown above are two transnationally dense, multilayered examples from the beginning of 2018, when a ban on diesel cars in German city centers was being debated (Bandermann). In some circles, this generated protests, as expressed in this series of memes that spread on various social media channels, especially on the instant-messaging service WhatsApp, on Twitter and Facebook. Both examples center on a striking photo of a hole-ridden yellow children’s slide in front of a dilapidated high-rise building; the ground is covered with trash and debris.

The scene invokes many of the features of the “iconic ghetto” in the realm of the built space and its generic photographic representations: we see a blighted housing unit in drab colors; its inhabitants, if any, are absent—the building’s style is reminiscent of photos of social housing projects in Chicago’s South Side like the former Cabrini-Green Homes, while the rubble in front of it reminds of pictures of ruined houses in the 1980s Bronx. Finally, the photo resembles Detroit ruin photography in its carefully crafted visual composition, combining a gritty aesthetic appeal with the conspicuous absence of local inhabitants (cf. Kinney 41-43, 38-64). The accompanying texts vary in detail, but always establish the setting as the city of Dortmund—either the “Nordstadt,” its inner-city districts north of the central train station, or synecdochically the city as a whole, with the second meme treating the city as a representative stand-in for all German cities. Rife with irony and sarcasm, the rest of the description suggests that someone, either politicians or just society in general, has developed a misguided focus. While ruined urban spaces are posed to proliferate, the supposedly minor issue of fossil fuel emissions dominates the policy discussion.

This meme generated enough attention in the spring of 2018 that fact-checking websites and regional media began reporting on it (Bandermann, Wannemacher). They found the picture was, in fact, not shot in Germany, but in the Stolipinovo neighborhood of the Bulgarian city of Plovdiv, a place with significant Roma populations that has long suffered from exclusion, disinvestment and stigmatization as a dangerous “ghetto” of the marginalized (see Kurtenbach et al.). Bulgaria is also one of the places where recent immigrants to Germany and the Ruhr originate from (Walther 82-87): In another transnational parallel, it is often synecdochically represented by the figure of the poor, uneducated, out-of-work Romani “poverty migrant” in the German national and regional media, with varying intentions (Landmesser, Bandermann, Wannemacher).<sup>10</sup>

All of this makes the meme an example of the problematic post-truth style in which some popular discourse on postindustrial cities has referenced generic elements of the transatlantic “iconic ghetto” in recent years. Already a hybrid, they get mixed with further transnational “ghetto” imaginaries like that of the Roma “ghetto” discussed here. Users freely assemble these fragments from disparate contexts to fit their own ideological needs, using them to make broad claims, vague yet familiar, and relying on stereotyping and prejudice to fill in the blanks, just as much as they count on readers’ willingness to suspend disbelief.

Given this populist mode, it is difficult (by design) to determine what the memes’ authors mean with their misleading identification of Dortmund as a city with “ghetto”-like, ruined spaces: While they clearly express discontent with potential urban reforms that point away from the car-centric city of the past, they do not offer a clear counterargument, but rather divert attention away from the proposal. They give their readers much leeway to read their

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<sup>10</sup> For an up-to-date overview of migration numbers to German cities that however clusters together countries of origin, see the Federal Statistical Office’s interactive online map: “Migration.Integration.Regionen.”

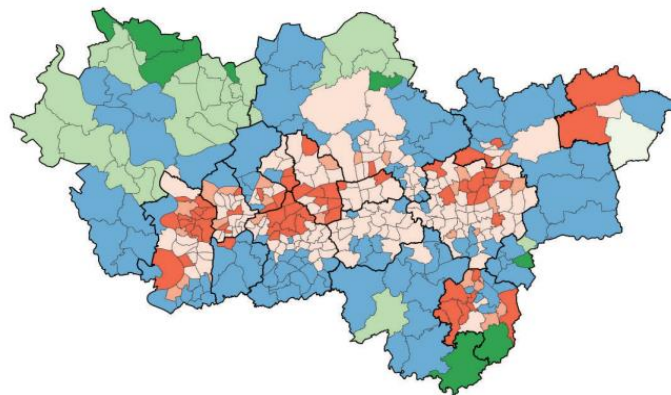
own political priorities into the memes while subtly reassuring them that their worldview is obvious and widely shared. Such authorial strategies require a context-sensitive analysis to arrive at plausible readings: Given discussions in politics and the media in the Ruhr at the time, it seems plausible to assume that the memes' visual references to the "iconic ghetto" mean to call for the aggressive management and removal of purported "no-go areas" in cities like Dortmund. By extension, they would promote the containment of these spaces' stereotypical immigrant inhabitants, who, Othered and potentially even racialized, allegedly pose a danger to dominant white urbanites. At the very least, the Othered inhabitants face the suspicion that they let the spaces they dwell in fall into disrepair. This reading would suggest strong parallels to victim-blaming, vicious-cycle logics within the American "iconic ghetto" template: These allege the existence of a racialized "culture of poverty" among "ghetto" dwellers and are particularly popular with American conservatives—and, as the meme would suggest in this reading, they are not foreign to some Germans, too (Duneir 223; compare also Hackworth 74-76 for the use of visible urban decay for conservative political messaging in the US).

### **In Scholarly Reports and Studies for a Wider Public**

Scholarly discourses assess the status of the Ruhr in strikingly different terms, but, I would suggest, potentially to a similar effect. One recent study by a team of Bochum sociologists led by Jörg-Peter Schräpler analyzed government data from all Ruhr districts between 1970 and 2011 to sketch out their social development since the beginning of deindustrialization. Clustering districts in various ways, the authors also identify "socially disadvantaged, family-rich spaces" (my translation, 115) in what they term cluster 7 areas.

Through processes of "social," "ethnic" and "demographic segregation," these areas, which are largely located in the northern parts of the cities that stretch across the center of the region, have changed from "original workers' districts" to "socially disadvantaged districts with a high proportion of migrants and above-average amounts of families" (all my translation, 115-18). They have the highest unemployment rate and the most housing vacancies, the least home ownership and the most young people. An illustrative regional heat map marks them in a dramatic bright red (115-18, figure 3): The "Dortmund Nordstadt" district is among them, and is, in fact, one of only a handful of areas mentioned by name (106).

The color-coding of various areas on so-called heat maps is a wide-spread phenomenon in research on social data, but may also be criticized. Color-coding implicitly assigns areas with the values associated with certain hues: warmer tones like yellow and red usually suggest that a space holds high concentrations of negative properties, is dangerous, or at best in need of concern, while cold colors like green or blue construct mapped areas as less problematic and not requiring the map reader's attention.



(a) Klassierung der zeitinvarianten kleinräumigen Bezirke für 1970 und 2011 im RVR

Fig. 3. Map of the Ruhr with nine social cluster types, cluster 7 in darkest red (Schräpler et al. 118).

The Ruhr study uses a color range that includes various shades of blue and green, as well as lighter and darker salmon colors and red. Even though the colors as well as the associated numbers, from cluster 1 to cluster 9, are not directly mappable on a gradient of increasing “problematicness,” the colors do seem to be getting warmer in proportion to the negative assessment of clusters: more prosperous, often rural spaces at the fringes of the Ruhr region appear in blue, the aforementioned “socially disadvantaged, family-rich spaces” with more migrants in the inner city are predictably colored in red, which may lead readers to notice them first and to quickly interpret them as particularly problem-prone. Hence, even if the Ruhr sociologists stay far away from the lexicon of “ghetto” slurs, reporting empirical data in a scientific register, they cannot help but activate imaginaries of poverty, dilapidated buildings, segregation, and racialized/ethnicized Otherness here. By suggesting that some urban spaces face more challenges than others in text and image, they inevitably allow readers to interpret these assessments within established imaginary frameworks of urban problems, where the reductionist, stereotyping script of the “iconic ghetto” holds outsized influence.

The depiction of inequality in the city with the help of visually coded maps has a long history reaching back to the pioneering urban sociologists of the Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s (Heise forthcoming). Scholars like Clifford Shaw already created maps where city blocks were marked with various patterns to visualize specific neighborhood characteristics, allowing readers to assess spaces on a city map at a glance (for example maps, see: “Social Scientists Map Chicago”). Shaw’s 1929 monograph *Delinquency Areas* laid important groundwork for modern American scholarship on “neighborhood effects”—research which the aforementioned German study references via another journal article applying the concept to Europe (Schräpler et al. 34). Shaw used maps to graphically showcase his findings on neighborhood characteristics like “delinquency, disease, and poverty,” which were then first studied in America’s modernizing cities (Heise forthcoming). Like many of his Chicago colleagues, he utilized this medium to argue that the place where people lived was a

significant influence on their behavior, a central assumption in the Chicago School’s theory of “human ecology” (Gottdiener and Budd 1-4, 140; Duneir 34-36).

Today, the arguments social scientists make about American cities may have changed. However, scholars still employ similar forms of mapping to visualize their data: One interesting current example is “The Opportunity Atlas,” a collaborative project between researchers at Harvard University, Brown University and the US Census Bureau started by the economist Raj Chetty in 2018. At the core of this project is a website that offers an interactive map of the United States overlaid with social data (Chetty et al. “Opportunity”). It provides users access to information on the social mobility of people in specific geographical areas; data compiled for the group’s research project on the connection between children’s socioeconomic opportunities and their neighborhood surroundings (for details on the research project, see: Chetty et al. “Mapping”). The Opportunity Atlas, for instance, allows users to compare household incomes between different spaces within a specific city like Chicago, visualized through color-coding.

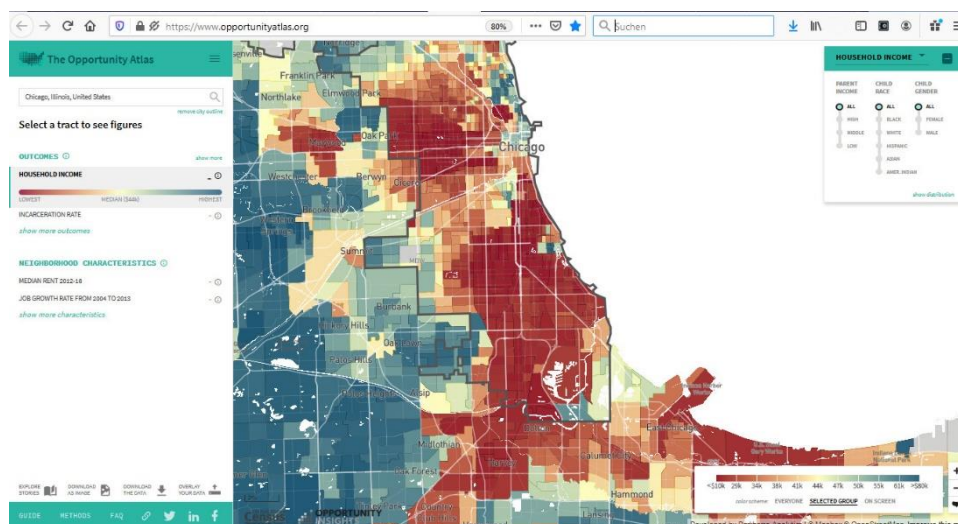


Fig. 4. Opportunity Atlas map showing household incomes across Chicago, IL: lowest in red, highest in blue (Chetty et al. “Opportunity”).

The generated map (figure 4) visually resembles Schräpler’s map in its gradated color scheme moving from blue to red, where blue once more signifies the arguably best outcome (the highest income), and red again the seemingly worst one (the lowest income). Interestingly, this color palette changes when users visualize the distribution of white or non-white residents across a city map, where the color white, signifying a low population share of any selected group, gradually fades into purple, for a high one. It seems plausible to interpret this as an anti-racist representational strategy that seeks to avoid the potential negative normative implications of the color red, as critiqued in the Ruhr map. The color change could thus be understood as a modification of the map’s medial form with the goal to impede discriminatory readings of certain urban communities as supposed ‘problems’—and hence an attempt to avoid activating in readers the familiar discriminatory urban imaginaries of the “iconic ghetto.”

Returning to Germany, similar kinds of regional problem narratives and strategic re-scripting can be found in popular-scientific writings on the Ruhr region for a broader educated public. This is the case regardless whether they aim to mainly inform or convince their audiences, as two brief examples published last year may illustrate: In early 2019, the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (German Federal Agency for Civic Education) published a topical volume on structural change in the Ruhr in *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte (From Politics and Contemporary History)*, its long-running weekly journal of informative essays for a general audience. In the editorial, the series' editor Anne Seibring provides a brief summary of the state of the region at the time, when the last coal mine had just been closed—a highly publicized symbolic milestone. In identifying prevalent concerns of planners and developers for the region's future, the editor repeats by now familiar templates that recall the imaginaries of the “iconic ghetto” in its more attenuated, scholarship-adjacent forms seen in the last study:

For regional strategies, economic development and local politics, the connection between an often folklorized past and a much invoked future sometimes seems ambivalent. Pride [...] mixes with concern that the label “coal scuttle” and the region's persistent association with unemployment, debt and social segregation could damage its quite successful departure toward establishing it as a location for innovative products and services. (my translation, Seibring 3)<sup>11</sup>

The editor reports concerns that the current association of the region with joblessness, municipal deficits, and social segregation may prove hard to leave behind. The key problem with this projected future, in Seibring's account, would be the chilling effect tenacious problem discourses may have on the budding economic development of the region. What is addressed here are large-scale societal processes of structural change, taking on a distanced perspective that focuses on what seem to be hard economical facts. This may suggest scientific objectivity to some readers. Yet, the negative influence the Ruhr's problem narratives could continue to exert on a smaller scale, affecting the lives of those marginalized city dwellers most directly hit by poverty, a lack of work, and exclusionary urban spaces do not feature in this admittedly brief attempt at forecasting plausible regional futures. The scholarly essays that follow provide a more comprehensive perspective than this editorial suggests, though, and do, for instance, discuss social divisions in the context of the recent upsurge of right-wing populism in the region (Dinter 31-38).

The study *Ruhr: Vorurteile, Wirklichkeiten, Herausforderungen (Ruhr: Prejudices, Realities, Challenges)* published in late 2019 by the Mercator foundation, whose German headquarter is in Essen, approaches similar issues of structural change in the Ruhr, but from a different

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<sup>11</sup> “Für Regionalstrategien, Wirtschaftsförderung und Lokalpolitik nimmt sich die Verbindung von oft folklorisierter Vergangenheit und viel beschworener Zukunft mitunter zwiespältig aus. Stolz [...] mischt sich mit Sorge, das Etikett ‚Kohlenpott‘ und die fortdauernde Assoziation der Region mit Arbeitslosigkeit, Verschuldung und sozialer Segregation könnte dem durchaus erfolgreichen Aufbruch zu einem Standort für innovative Produkte und Dienstleistungen schaden“ (Seibring 3)

angle. Synthesizing earlier statistics and studies, its authors produce a text more strongly skewed toward advocacy than the previous example, so that the foundation's study is best read as an image campaign for the region by popular-scientific means, a form of regional marketing. In addition to the issue of unflattering statistical rankings against other German regions, the text's introduction identifies a "partially home-grown problem of perception and communication" in the Ruhr, where supposedly "prejudices overshadow realities" all too frequently (my translations, 7).<sup>12</sup>

About a quarter of the publication is devoted to identifying such commonplace templates about the Ruhr that the authors deem misleading. These are then refuted more or less effectively with statistics and studies (Roters, Seltmann, and Zöpel 57-78). The range of supposedly common "prejudices" ("Vorurteile") the study addresses extends well beyond what I discuss here in the context of the transatlantic translation of the "iconic ghetto" template, into the broader set of problem narratives of the region. However, several of the elements of this "ghetto" template do appear. Unsurprisingly, their wording is more closely related to the last two examples than the memes discussed at the start: There are subchapters on the Ruhr as a "space without work" ("Raum ohne Arbeit" 60-61), a "space of impoverished cities" ("Raum der verarmten Städte" 63-64), and, most problematically, what the authors controversially call "Überfremdeter Ballungsraum," which literally translates to an "over-foreignized urban agglomeration" (59), an urbanized area that supposedly has too much ethnic diversity and migration.

In some sense, these labels are unremarkable and form part of the standard repertoire of anti-urban slights in the region and beyond. As such, the authors repeat them only to quickly debunk them. The third label, however, stands out in its proximity to populist right-wing discourses, as it builds on the right-wing buzzword 'Überfremdung,' which goes back to eighteenth and nineteenth-century German nationalists, was adopted by the Nazi regime and after World War II was taken over by neo-Nazis, always to imply an imperiled national and/or racial purity (Wilke 1-14, Schmitz-Berning 615-7). Hence, the rhetoric strategy employed in answering to it demands closer scrutiny:

The authors begin with a clear statement that the Ruhr has been characterized by migration since the beginning of its industrialization in the nineteenth century. From this follows its established perception as a region with a high portion of what the text refers to as "foreigners" ("mit hohen Ausländeranteilen") (59).

While this can be a technical term—though even in this capacity it has been criticized—it is employed here in its wide-spread colloquial German usage that lumps together all those considered to have a history of foreign migration in contrast to a supposedly homogenous, native German populace. The term is mostly applied to marginalized visible minorities,—who are thus Othered in and excluded from dominant (white) society and its urban spaces, often

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<sup>12</sup> The German original refers to this as a "teils selbst erzeugtes Wahrnehmungs- und Kommunikationsproblem: Vorurteile überdecken Wirklichkeiten" (Seibring 7).



regardless of their actual legal status and time spent in Germany (for an anti-racist critique of the term, see, for instance: Alexopoulou; for its German use more generally: *Alba Strangers No More* 1-18, 89-117; Ha et al. 11; concerning legal and statistic categorization: Schmitz-Veltin).<sup>13</sup> Instead of addressing this history, the study cites statistics which report that the Ruhr has a significantly lower percentage of inhabitants with a migratory background and of foreigners (“Einwohnern mit Migrationshintergrund und von Ausländern”) than other large cities in Germany, like Munich or Frankfurt, do.

Despite the fact that this is a more scientific statement than the pernicious right-wing claim of “Überfremdung” that the authors are trying to refute, their response fails to address the core sentiment behind this “prejudice”: the assumption that there is an appropriate, namely low or non-existent, amount of foreign Others that should ideally live in German cities. This kind of response, which is a deflection of this criticism rather than its refutation, is perhaps believed to be better suited to changing this regional template. It may well be more convincing to those conservative groups that might gravitate to such a prejudiced regional stereotype in the first place. Yet, when exploring this rhetorical tactic in the context of an analysis of the transatlantic “iconic ghetto” template, the effectivity of such a technical response to displace hardened xenophobic imaginaries seems highly questionable.

### **In Reformist Responses: Re-Scripting the “Iconic Ghetto” as a Regional Problem Trope**

As I have begun to show in a range of materials, a transnationally mobile set of problematic narrative templates organized around the “iconic ghetto” contributes centrally to the discursive framing of postindustrial urban settings in the Ruhr. It also prestructures the textual interventions reform initiatives develop in response, which showcase a strategy of inversion, where sparse references to the “ghetto” discourses launch attempts at positive re-writings: The following is an exemplary description of the Ruhr region; similar versions have appeared in various publications of the *RuhrFutur* reform initiative. In this excerpt, you can read how *RuhrFutur* self-described the state of the Ruhr region in print publications and on the internet until the late summer of 2019:

“The Ruhr area is an example of succeeding integration. Nowhere else in Germany do so many people live in such close proximity—people of different origins, with different social backgrounds and with different life plans. What they all have in common is the

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<sup>13</sup> A group of scholars around the political scientist Kien Nghi Ha plausibly summarizes the use of terms for Othered, racially discriminated minorities in Germany as follows: “‘migrant’ is often used as an overarching category in order to emphasize the central level of marginalization of racism in this country, based on the distinction between ‘Germans’ and ‘foreigners.’ For a long time, this made sense against the background of the ‘guest worker recruitment’ from the Mediterranean region, which revealed racist tendencies and the failed denazification of post-war German society. Nowadays, however, structural, institutional and everyday racism is directed primarily against Islamic communities, illegalized migrants from Latin America and Asia, German-Turkish ‘unwilling to integrate’ and criminalized African refugees. The current images of the enemy are additionally promoted and cemented by traditional stereotypes against non-European people rooted in colonial racism and orientalism” (my translation, Ha et al. 11).

desire to lead a self-determined life, to make independent decisions and to participate actively in society. Equal educational opportunities are among the central prerequisites for this to succeed. Much has been achieved in the Ruhr region over the past decades in terms of educational justice. Nevertheless, there is still a lot of untapped potential, because a comparatively large number of children and young people in the Ruhr Area still have difficult starting conditions due to the social situation of their families.“ (my translation, RuhrFutur: Über die Initiative)<sup>14</sup>

In the beginning, the Ruhr is labeled as a role model for “succeeding integration” processes, marking it as an unusually inclusive space. The following sentence tries to underscore this claim by constructing the region as unparalleled in the density of people living within its borders. These people are characterized above all by their diversity in terms of their origins and their social backgrounds. These diverse urbanites are then symbolically unified by stipulating that they have shared desires in life, want to be self-determined, and have a wish for participation in society.

The familiar scripting claim that “equal educational opportunities” are central to achieving these goals follows. Supposedly, much in the direction of such “educational justice” has already been achieved in the Ruhr, yet significant untapped potential remains. This ostensibly positive statement is an oblique reference to some of the region’s current problem templates: there is growing childhood poverty, especially among recent immigrants, which in turn make up an increasing portion of the young people in the education system (see Terpoorten).

I would argue that this text must be understood as a response to aspects of the “iconic ghetto” imaginary: how it is framed marks it as an attempt at inverting this script within the dominant narrative of the region. The text suggests that present problems are a remnant of past injustices on their way to be overcome in a projected urban future of inclusive social change, where diversity is turned from a socio-political challenge into a generative force. This narrative is representative of a broader logic of inclusive re-scripting that informs *RuhrFutur’s* regional reform work, as I will now show in the context of the professional everyday practices I observed and participated in during my internship.

### **In the Field: Precarious Positivity, Tenacious Problems, Re-Scripting Practices**

The initiative’s backbone office performs a range of tasks on a daily basis: Its staff finds and connects partners, manages networks and reform processes, mediates between interests and

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<sup>14</sup> “Das Ruhrgebiet ist ein Beispiel für gelingende Integration. Nirgendwo sonst in Deutschland leben so viele Menschen auf so engem Raum—Menschen unterschiedlicher Herkunft, mit unterschiedlichem sozialem Hintergrund und mit unterschiedlichen Lebensentwürfen. Gemeinsam ist ihnen der Wunsch, ein selbstbestimmtes Leben zu führen, eigenverantwortliche Entscheidungen zu treffen und aktiv an der Gesellschaft teilzuhaben. Zu den zentralen Voraussetzungen, damit dies gelingt, gehören gleiche Bildungschancen. Zwar ist im Ruhrgebiet, was das Thema Bildungsgerechtigkeit angeht, in den letzten Jahrzehnten viel erreicht worden. Gleichwohl gibt es noch viel ungehobenes Potenzial. Denn nach wie vor hat im Ruhrgebiet eine vergleichsweise große Zahl von Kindern und Jugendlichen aufgrund der sozialen Lage ihrer Familien schwierige Ausgangsbedingungen“ (RuhrFutur: Über die Initiative)

institutions, organizes events, or provides small-scale funding. Further, the office produces various kinds of cultural texts about and for these activities. These range from tweets to professional good-practice guides to documentary photography and film, from official reports for funders and commissioned academic studies to informational brochures and a thematic practitioner magazine.<sup>15</sup>

During my six-month internship-cum-fieldwork, I was able to move through all of the departments of the initiative's backbone office to gain an overview: *RuhrFutur's* work revolves around three core fields of action with an educational focus—early childhood, school, university—each with a team that initiates, manages, evaluates and documents regional collaborative projects. These activities are flanked by the work of the data analysis and the communications departments, as well as the administration.

In the everyday practices I observed during my time with the office, I mostly witnessed work toward slowly but steadily bringing together and reforming the region, a productive atmosphere reflected in the predominance of self-narratives of motivation and progress. However, the underlying problem discourses of the region, including the transatlantic template of the “iconic ghetto,” rose to the top from time to time. This can be seen in situations like the following:

*One sunny morning, I find myself at a local venue where RuhrFutur is hosting a day-long training event for officials in regional city administrations and educational institutions focused on managing educational reform processes. During the day, a number of group tasks, which both the officials and RuhrFutur staff participate in, alternate with input presentations by an external expert moderator. In all this, the attendees try to develop a better understanding of the institutions and processes involved in making changes in the education system of the region more effective.*

*In the afternoon, the event ends with a group work in scenario-drawing for the mid-term future of regional educational development. While this exercise focuses on detail-oriented project management, the final group discussion shifts that lens. Participants—taking cues from the moderator and RuhrFutur staff—re-contextualize these technical changes as one strand within a larger, more ambitious and normative education-led process of regional social transformation. Their shared hopes for better futures shapeable by those present and their allies are grounded in the very brief, but explicit reference to the unifying need to overcome the challenges of the present: That a number of pressing, complex problems exist in the Ruhr today appears to be the underlying, implicit consensus of all present—it almost goes without saying.*

*Yet, when one of the attendees nevertheless briefly alludes to this difficult situation, vaguely expressing frustration with the kinds of all-too-familiar problems that everyone in attendance is expected to already know, there is an immediate change in the room—silence replaces*

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<sup>15</sup> The initiative offers many of its publications for download on its website: <https://www.ruhrfutur.de/publikationen>

*discussion and chatter, gazes are cast down, people stare into the distance. For a brief moment, the atmosphere is no longer full of energetic and hopeful possibility but dominated by frustrated exhaustion—then the moment passes, and the productive discourse and enthusiasm for reform that dominated the event return.*

Despite its brevity, this moment indicates that the former absence of negative assessments about the Ruhr does not mean that its problem narratives are not on peoples' minds. Instead, it affirms that they may be understood productively as the region's dominant, synecdochic figures, always in danger of overpowering new alternative scripts, like the hopeful yet pragmatic scenarios the group had developed earlier. The "iconic ghetto" forms an important narrative template within this discursive frame, functioning as an established figure of thought or trope within the self-descriptions of the region that has by now been repeated so often that, for regional experts like those present at the event, it is unspokenly familiar, but also seemingly inescapable. The attached stigma and associated practical problems like poverty and segregation negatively affect the lives of many of the regional urbanites they serve in the education system, and, hence, at least through their work, the professionals themselves. In this context, the transatlantic "iconic ghetto" overlaps, competes, and conflicts with a number of other negative clichés about the Ruhr that impede or discourage regional reform work toward a more socially equitable future, including those mentioned at the beginning of this article. This makes it virtually impossible to isolate with certainty a single cause for pregnant pauses and silences heavy with meaning such as the one I observed here. However, based on my experiences during the six months of fieldwork, it seems more than plausible to assume that it played a role in this situation, especially given the type of work in education and the social services the workshop participants perform.

Yet, however diffuse this moment's exact causation may remain, the silence was real and had a real emotional impact on the group: It seems grounded in a shared implicit understanding of the problems the attendees encountered in their daily work, eliciting a common affective response. As such, the silence functioned as a testament to prior community formation among members of the *RuhrFutur* reform network. The situation further enacted the network's performative (re-)production—in a collective sigh, the attendees were linked for a moment, before turning back to the collective construction of more positive narrative futures for the region. The tension described here between reform optimism, pragmatic re-scripting, and the continuous pressure of slow-to-change social problems, exacerbated and occasionally brought to the fore by powerful problem narratives, was one I frequently observed during my field work in the Ruhr region.

### **Conclusion: Transatlantic Templates, Transatlantic Re-Scripting**

This paper has analyzed the American-influenced but deeply transatlantic "iconic ghetto" imaginary as one problematic template within the discursive framework of postindustrial cities in the German Ruhr and beyond, and has provided a first glimpse at how the imaginary

is re-scripted there. I have attempted to show a range of narrative strategies in the re-scripting processes that seek to invert the “iconic ghetto” template: one approach omits the problematic imaginary to talk about positives instead, as seen in the regional description from *RuhrFutur’s* website and in parts of the event vignette. Another strategy instead names some or all of the issues associated with “iconic ghetto” more or less explicitly, situating them somewhere between real pressing problems and pernicious myths—this is how I interpret the disruptive statement itself in the event vignette. By naming what is at stake, this strategy might gather the sense of urgency needed for a collective call to action, but may also bring up overwhelming negative associations that could derail re-scripting attempts, a danger that the drained silence that followed the statement at the event may point to. Further, the choice to bring up the problematic template may risk what the choice to keep silent about the “iconic ghetto” imaginary seems to above all want to avoid: the inadvertent reproduction and perpetuation of the many racist, classist undertones that often go along with its use (on the well-intentioned but not unproblematic “silencing” of racialized discussions in German contexts see also: Alexopoulou 45-47). It is perhaps telling that among American urban social workers, the strategic omission of the terms “ghetto” and “slum” to avoid stigma has a history that reaches back into the nineteenth century (Heise forthcoming).

In contrast, my analysis of examples of the hardened transnational imaginaries of postindustrial cities’ problems that these re-scripting attempts intervene in has demonstrated the grim effectiveness of the “iconic ghetto” in the context of urban exclusion and marginalization: As a symbolic short-hand, the transatlantic template provides highly concentrated, highly emotionalized imaginative fuel for those who want to actively employ it to disparage, or readily accept such Othering as long as it helps further their own, different ideological goals. The social media memes discussed earlier employ the “iconic ghetto” accordingly, arguably becoming more effective by being latently, but not explicitly, discriminatory, a familiar post-truth strategy.

It would be possible to expand the scope of the analysis to materials from American Rust Belt cities, where Donald Trump’s inauguration remarks about the “carnage” that supposedly still reigns America’s inner cities surely are not much more apropos than elsewhere (Farley and Kiely, Riquier), but where his rhetoric’s parallels to what Anderson critiqued in the context of the “iconic ghetto” are perhaps particularly clear. In fact, Jason Hackworth has recently advanced a compatible argument in his monograph *Manufacturing Decline* (2019), proposing that the American conservative movement has contributed to the downfall of Rust Belt cities like Detroit since the 1970s not only by political but also by rhetorical means: Through the fashioning and strategic deployment of racialized discourses that paint the picture of an Othered “pathological inner city,” he contends, conservatives have built an influential coalition of American voters in favor of the Rust Belt’s ongoing managed decline through disinvestment and the cutback of state interventions (Hackworth 1-32, *passim*). It seems plausible to argue that when candidate Trump first made his calculatedly anachronistic call-back to the urban crises of the 1970s to 1990s in the 2016 presidential race (Farley and Kiely,

Riquier), he was trying to reactivate such racist, anti-urban resentments that have been politically expedient in the past (cf. Heise forthcoming). In 2020, he has adopted this rhetoric again in his 4<sup>th</sup> of July speech at Mt. Rushmore to decry the ongoing protests against police brutality and systemic racism: In both instances, it may be interpreted as an appeal to the assumed prejudices and fears of his base of supporters, although political commentators in the press are now more doubtful about this approach's effectiveness than before (Baker and Shear, Karni and Haberman).

The Ruhr-area memes discussed earlier and the prejudices concerning the number of so-called foreigners in Ruhr cities display a similar sentiment. In this, they perhaps point to attempts by Germany's populist right to emulate the politics of resentment that helped Trump come to power on the other side of the Atlantic. At the very least, they alert us to the fact that white, nativist prejudice against minorities retains currency in Germany, too, and readily finds expression in medial forms, narratives, and figurative short-hands that follow the transatlantic template of the "iconic ghetto."

In any case, instances of the "iconic ghetto" imaginary on American soil and the problems they point to and conceal are among the urban issues dozens of Rust Belt social-educational initiatives based on the same American model of "Collective Impact" used by *RuhrFutur* are currently addressing. In fact, its original user in the field of education, the *StriveTogether* project from Cincinnati, operates there: This was the project that *RuhrFutur*, the Ruhr-area initiative analyzed here, took some of its early inspiration from.

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