Julie Chamberlain

WILHELMSBURG IS OUR HOME!

Racialized Residents on Urban Development and Social Mix Planning in a Hamburg Neighbourhood
From:

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In a neighbourhood facing massive redevelopment, racialized residents speak about stigma, social mixing, and what the island community means to them. Based on rich interviews, photographs, and archival research, Julie Chamberlain rejects the usual silence in German urban studies around racialization and examines how constructing some groups as »not belonging« has shaped Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg’s past and present. For racialized long-time residents, it is Heimat, a space of belonging in the context of exclusion. As social mix policy threatens that belonging, residents explore their hopes and their fears for the future of an urban space where gentrification looms.

Julie Chamberlain, born in 1978, is an assistant professor in urban and inner-city studies at the University of Winnipeg, Canada. She did her doctorate at York University, Canada. Her research focuses on anti-racist and decolonizing approaches to urban and community development and planning, and on how residents of stigmatized neighbourhoods in Germany and Canada experience planning processes.

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Unless otherwise noted, all photos and translations from German are by the author.
Introduction

Locating Wilhelmsburg

Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg has seen some major new developments over the past 15 years. The historically working class and immigrant neighbourhood in the south of the city-state of Hamburg, Germany, had struggled for decades with intense stigmatization. Headlines about the island as anything other than a space of “poverty, unemployment, and foreigners” (Gipp, 2001, translation by author) had been few and far between for quite some time. In recent years, the image has diversified somewhat, so that alongside stories about poverty, unemployment, and foreigners, there is news of music festivals, environmental organizing, basketball games at the new arena, and debate about the transformation of old factories into centres for artistic production (cf. Binde, 2019; Riebe & Röer, 2019). Where Wilhelmsburg had barely been on Hamburg’s map, both literally and figuratively (Schultz & Sieweke, 2008), it now features in tourist guidebooks as a place that is well worth a visit.

This shift has been both feared and celebrated as a process of gentrification, as has also been reflected by the headlines. Articles in local and national media outlets have asked whether gentrification is taking place in Wilhelmsburg and have debated whether it is good or bad for the island (cf. Greven, 2014, 2015; Yenirce, 2017a). The media flurry has been accompanied by a deluge of scholarly research on the neighbourhood, authored by students and professors seemingly from every possible academic discipline including architecture, geography, sociology, social work, urban studies, planning, and design (cf. Birke, 2013; Christmann, 2013; Dörfler, 2014; Eckardt, 2017; Hohenstatt, 2017; Lutolli, 2021; Rinn, 2018; Schaefer, 2013b; Schlünzen & Linde, 2014; Schmidt, 2012; Vogelpohl & Buchholz, 2017; Wiedemann, 2018; Wildner & Holtz, 2015).

When I first visited Wilhelmsburg in 2011, I did not know that I would contribute to the deluge. As part of a group of Canadian graduate students on a study tour of Hamburg, I noticed that the island was a hot topic. Two massive redevelopment projects cum events had already broken ground at that time, the International Building Exhibition and International Garden Show, and we were treated to
walking tours and presentations in and about Wilhelmsburg. What struck me most was how, in a talk about Hamburg’s urban development and renewal strategy and priorities, the then head of planning, Oberbaudirektor Jörn Walter, told our study group that in order to solve Wilhelmsburg’s problems, the population needed to be transformed. I walked away wondering “who precisely is this ‘population’? And why did they need to be ‘transformed’?” I then walked into a month-long internship at a community organization in Wilhelmsburg, and there began to find unsettling answers to my questions.

I found that the racialization of Wilhelmsburg and its residents, which is to say the production of its residents as racial “others,” and the naturalization of the island as their place, were central to how they were depicted and problematized, particularly by the biggest redevelopment project at the time, the IBA Hamburg. In my master’s study, I used Foucauldian discourse analysis to analyze IBA Hamburg’s books, websites, pamphlets, and videos, looking at how the space and its residents were represented. I argued that the racialization of people and place, and the framing of them as in need of integration into the metropolis of the future, provided a basis on which to legitimize development interventions (Chamberlain, 2012, 2013). I later also looked more closely at how the island was framed as a “laboratory” and the IBA Hamburg as an “experiment” to justify a planning strategy that represents a risk specifically to racialized residents (Chamberlain, 2020). That research remains, to my knowledge, the only research that addresses, directly and in detail, the role of racism in the redevelopment of Wilhelmsburg.

While the image of Hamburg as Germany’s so-called “Gateway to the World” is one of cosmopolitanism and openness, the image obscures how racism and the control of racialized people are part of Hamburg’s landscape past and present (Della et al., 2018; Schepers, 2018). Hamburg is the country’s second-largest city and its most significant port, and the structuring of the city around the production of wealth from the arrival and departure of goods and people has been central to Hamburg for essentially as long as it has existed (MacFarlane, 2019; Meyer-Lenz, 2016, 2018). The oft-celebrated diversity of Hamburg as a port city is long-standing, but has always involved differential rights, and to greater or lesser extents the control of racialized “others” in and through city space (MacFarlane & Mitchell, 2019).

Black and People of Colour scholars and activists in Hamburg have argued for decades that this is the case, and that the city’s cosmopolitan image obscures the colonial logics and legacies that continue to shape urban space and development in the city-state. Profits from colonial extraction, colonial violence, and slavery enabled Hamburg’s growth into the wealthiest city in Germany, with its highest per capita income and greatest number of millionaires by income (Handelskammer Hamburg, n.d.; Seukwa and Della, in Schepers, 2018). The central logic of colonialism, which “stands fundamentally for some people being worth more than others,”
continues to be reflected in city space through monuments and naming practices, and through the treatment of racialized people by the state and its institutions (Adjei, in Della et al., 2018, translation by author; Afrika-Hamburg.de, n.d.; Hengari et al., 2018; Mancheno, 2016). This has also been noted by Black German scholars and German scholars of Colour writing about Berlin, Amsterdam, Paris, and other European cities, and has led to a call to take colonialism and racism seriously in urban research (El-Tayeb, 2011, 2012; N. Ha, 2014a, 2017; Haritaworn, 2015).

Recent events on Wilhelmsburg’s doorstep illustrate the urgency of this call. In December 2017 a neo-Nazi placed a bomb in a shopping bag filled with screws on the platform of Veddel S-Bahn station. The station is a busy gateway both to Wilhelmsburg and to Veddel, its similarly racialized and stigmatized neighbour. It was sheer luck that just one person was injured in the bombing and that no one else was close by enough be killed or seriously injured (Prozessbeobachtung zum rechten Terroranschlag auf der Veddel, 2018). Police and media coverage trivialized the attack, however, as “just a small explosion” that had nothing to do with the specific location where it happened (Kirsche, 2018, translation by author). The attacker, who had been convicted in the 1990s of killing a man for insulting Hitler, was characterized as a former neo-Nazi and a “drinker” with no apparent political motives (Hamburger Abendblatt, 2017). Not until he was convicted of attempted murder and bodily harm was the attack characterized in more serious terms as likely “xenophobic” and committed by “a fervent supporter of Hitler” (Prozessbeobachtung zum rechten Terroranschlag auf der Veddel, 2018, translation by author).

Direct, violent attacks committed by neo-Nazis have long been the only form of racism that were legible as such in Germany (Barskanmaz, 2011, 2012). Yet this attack was still trivialized and minimized, in a prime example of the willful logical acrobatics used by the state and by mainstream media to avoid connecting the dots when it comes to racist violence in the supposedly progressive city of Hamburg (Mobiles Beratungsteams gegen Rechtsextremismus, 2018). While this kind of attack is relatively rare in Hamburg in comparison to the country as a whole, which is seeing an explosion of racist and anti-migrant violence and failing to adequately address it (Amnesty International, 2016), it raises disturbing and urgent questions for the city and thus for this book. As the flyer for a demonstration that was held by local anti-fascist and anti-racist organizers shortly after the Veddel bombing asked: “Haven’t you learned anything?!” (Figure 1). If a convicted neo-Nazi sets off a bomb in a well-known immigrant neighbourhood and it is not understood as a racist attack, what hope is there that the state and media are substantially engaged in identifying and dismantling the more insidious, everyday, structural, and systemic forms of racism that undermine the well-being of racialized people in the city?

The global and local events that unfolded as I prepared to defend the doctoral dissertation on which this book is based further increased the urgency of these
questions. In February 2020, a mass shooter targeted racialized people in two shisha bars in Hanau, Germany, killing nine, plus himself and his mother. From the killer's writing as well as the targets, the racist motivation of the mass murder was made abundantly clear, and even the Chancellor was moved to call out “the poison of racism” in Germany (Connolly & Oltermann, 2020; Sanyal, 2020). In April, a man who attacked a synagogue in Halle during Yom Kippur in 2019 was charged with double murder and the attempted murder of 68 people (Deutsche Welle, 2020a). In the same time period, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed deep inequalities into the spotlight, illuminating how vulnerability to surveillance, infection, and death is shaped by how people are differentially valued and positioned in societal structures and systems. High rates of Coronavirus infection in Germany's slaughterhouses and meat packing factories, for example, illuminated the miserable, exploitative working and living conditions faced by the mainly Eastern European workers in the industry, leading to outcry and promises of reform (Deutsche Welle, 2020b; Nack, 2020). Yet they also highlighted the quickness with which the public will associate “looking like an outsider” with a risk to their health, and that local officials knew about the unsafe housing and working conditions for years and took no action (Soric, 2020).

During the Coronavirus pandemic, widespread uprising against systemic anti-Black racism also arose in the United States and has echoed around the world. Sparked by the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis, protests against racist police violence and systemic inaction in the face of persistent racial discrimination and oppression grew and multiplied. Germany has seen massive demonstrations held in solidarity with Black people in the US, and in protest of institutionalized anti-Black racism and police violence in Germany. Both in Hamburg and Berlin, Black and People of Colour protesters reported being targeted by police, and harassed and detained immediately after demonstrations (Black Lives Matter Berlin, 2020; Neuber, 2020). In Hamburg, bystanders described how the police attacked en masse without warning, kettling protesters and taking 36 young people into custody.” The Hamburg police justified the operation based on violations of the distancing rules that apply during the Corona pandemic. Observers and those affected speak of racist police violence: all detainees had a ‘migration background’ (Neuber, 2020, translation by author). Activists against racial profiling in the city have noted that police profiling tactics overlap with COVID-19 regulations to intensify the targeting and sanction of Black and racialized people in public space (Copwatch HH, n.d.). In June 2020, a non-profit coalition also published a list of the 159 known cases in which racialized people have died in police custody in Germany over the last 20 years (Weiermann, 2020). Systemic racism and institutional racist violence have thus been prominent in public debate as I prepared this book for publication.
This research takes its cue from the scholarship and activism of Black people and People of Colour in Hamburg and in Germany, and picks up where my master's research left off, to ask what the effects of planning that is steeped in the logic of racialization are for the residents of Wilhelmsburg. I framed the study as an intersectional and anti-racist public ethnography, with the explicit goal of challenging racism in its various forms while investigating and communicating the typically marginalized perspectives of racialized people to academic and non-academic audiences (Bailey, 2013; Crenshaw, 1991; Dei, 2005; Hunting, n.d.; Tedlock, 2005). From 2016-2018 I conducted a qualitative study in Wilhelmsburg, using semi-structured interviews, participant sensing, and photography to explore how racialized residents of Wilhelmsburg experienced and engaged with recent planning and development interventions by the city-state, and how those residents figured in local planners’ and politicians’ decision-making. To produce this book, I brought together the resulting textual, visual, and sensory data with extensive readings of local historical, government, and media archives.

At times I have thought of this study as a qualitative evaluation of city-state planning where none was planned by the city-state itself. In response to public outcry about the prospect of gentrification, consultants conducted an annual “structural monitoring” in the last years of the IBA Hamburg, but that ended in 2013 (see Analyse & Konzepte, 2013). Today the only form of evaluation comes through the reading of census data and the city-wide ‘social monitoring’ report that Hamburg produces with the help of researchers at Hafen City University. I have come to understand, and this dissertation will demonstrate, that the city is intent on “mixing” the population of Wilhelmsburg as the central spatial solution to social and economic problems, and from that perspective it suffices to track demographics as the sole measure of neighbourhood change.

Wilhelmsburgers, in contrast, often framed my study as a snapshot of a moment in time – a moment in which, from their perspectives, a change had undoubtedly begun, but in which it was not yet clear where it would lead, and what it would ultimately mean for the lives of long-time residents. The fundamental changes would play out over a period of decades rather than years, and thus it was suggested to me more than once that this should be a series of studies, and that I should come back to the island in another five, 10, or 20 years, to see what had happened.
Figure 1: “Haven’t you learned anything?! Fight right-wing terror and institutional racism!” In this flyer for a demonstration at S-Bahn Veddel local activists name the racism that police and media did not

Goals of this book

The contribution that I aim to make with this book is to the body of knowledge about Wilhelmsburg, about development and planning in German cities, and about how racialization and racism function and affect the people that they target in this present moment. I see four main parts to this contribution. Firstly, I analyze the development of Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg within the framework of racial capitalism as it connects in particular to Hamburg’s colonial past and present and has produced racialized devaluation and environmental racism in Wilhelmsburg. This conceptual framework emerged from Cedric Robinson’s (1983) work Black Marxism and from Black and People of Colour environmental justice organizing and scholarship (Bullard, 2018; Gosine & Teelucksingh, 2008), and has been elaborated by critical race (Melamed, 2015) and geography scholars (Pulido, 2016, 2017). It is uncommon to the German urban literature (for a partial exception, see Raddatz & Mennis, 2013). I offer an articulation of the local specificity of particular racializations and racisms, as Stuart Hall (1986) advocated, and connect them to broader patterns and systems that span the globe (Roy, 2018). I respond to the shortage of race-critical work in urban research about Germany, and write in solidarity with the struggles of racialized people and migrants in Germany for self-definition in the context of racialized citizenship.
Secondly, this book contributes an analysis of the city-state's planning policies and development projects in Wilhelmsburg as driven by the racial common sense of social mixing. This provides a critical addition to the local research and activism that often acknowledges differential targeting for displacement over time, but does not address the specifics of how that displaceability is produced. I bring analysis of racialization in Germany together with local research, residents' experiences, and the better- and lesser-known aspects of city-state interventions on the island, to demonstrate the centrality of the racialization of “migrants” to mixing and thus how “displaceability” (Yiftachel, n.d.) is racialized in this context. This also contributes to the ongoing scholarly critique of the logic of social mix in German planning.

This book also contributes a complex picture of how racialized people who are treated as displaceable in the logic of social mix conceptualize and rearticulate mix as an illusion and as a potentially useful tool for the community. The residents I interviewed viewed social mix in ways that both challenged and accepted hegemonic understandings of it, notably making space within the notion to advocate for the (re)integrated white Germans into spaces that they have fled and avoided. These are the ‘mixed feelings’ to which the title of one chapter refers: conflicting emotions and feelings in which residents support the prevailing notion of mixing, while also rejecting many of the premises on which it is based. The title draws from Jin Haritaworn’s (2012) use of the phrase in *Biopolitics of Mixing*, in which they approach mixing and feelings about it from the perspectives of people with part-Thai heritage in Britain and Germany. Their work informs my understanding of social mix, and of the tension in Wilhelmsburgers' analyses, in which the problems with which they are most concerned are not perceptibly solved by the logic of mix, but rather are exacerbated by it. I argue that this presents a challenge to residents and resident activism. The book offers a potential point for critical reflection both for Wilhelmsburg residents and for politicians and planners in Hamburg beyond. It asks why planned mixing is not only tolerated but embraced, when the evidence on it is conflicting and debated, and when it plays upon exactly the kind of discrimination to which Wilhelmsburgers object in other aspects of their lives.

Finally, this book documents and communicates counter-narratives about Wilhelmsburg and contributes a valuation of the space and its residents that is different from and that subverts the dominant discourse. For research participants, this was one of the main things that my study could offer the neighbourhood, in the spirit of reciprocity that I will describe in Chapter 2. I aim to share stories and perspectives that are normally missing or marginalized in urban planning and in urban research. Residents painted a powerful picture of a close-knit neighbourhood that accepts people who are excluded from Germanness and that offers a deep sense of belonging and well-being for long-time residents. This valuation both resists and has been forged by the racism that has defined Wilhelmsburg as a “ghetto”
and as a “problem neighbourhood” for as long as many people can remember. This represents a strength and potential basis for resident organizing, in the context of ongoing neighbourhood change.

Overview of the book

The organization of this book reflects what racialized Wilhelmsburgers told me were the most important themes and developments in the neighbourhood. It flows according to the priorities as residents identified them, in particular narrativizing the history of the island according to their analysis rather than simply reproducing the dominant story about ‘how it came to be how it is.’ As a result, the historical and development context are located in both Chapter 3 and Chapter 5, both of which draw extensively on my archival research as well as on my interviews in the neighbourhood, findings from which are woven throughout the book. This results in an unconventional structure for an academic text, as I ask the reader to first consider the meaning of the neighbourhood to long-time residents before I introduce the policies and developments that drew my attention to Wilhelmsburg in the first place. With this organizational choice I assert, as residents did, that the former is important context for understanding the latter.

The book is organized as follows. In Chapter 1, I outline the theoretical and conceptual framework that guided the study and my analysis. I anchor the anti-racist commitment that I have touched on in this introduction in a citational practice that centres the work of critical Black German scholars and German scholars of Colour. Starting from the insight that cities are produced by and themselves reproduce the structures and relations of which they are a part, I sketch out key discourses and structures of “race” and racism in the German context. I outline how I understand the process of racialization and what I see as key concepts for understanding my study and its findings, including the notions of migration background, migranti- zation and externalization, and integration. I then define racial capitalism as a global system that has local significance in the devaluation of racialized people, and I link racial capitalism to environmental racism and white supremacy. I argue that there are various spatializations of race and racism that prove relevant to Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg, including segregation, “the ghetto,” racialized displacement, and social mixing. These spatializations share an interest in the control of racialized people in and through urban space, whether through containment or dispersal.

In Chapter 2, I describe in more detail how I came to the project, answering a local journalist’s question about how a Canadian ended up researching Wilhelmsburg. I describe how I, as a straight, white cis-woman who was born and raised in Toronto became aware of and uncomfortable with how Wilhelmsburg was talked
about in Hamburg's planning and politics. By starting from how I came to the research, I situate the study as an anti-racist, intersectional public ethnography that explores racialized residents' experiences and analyses of recent developments in Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg, and how racialized people figure in local planning. I articulate the study as the production of knowledge through my embodied experience as an outsider researcher (ethnography), starting from an explicit critique with the intention to reach multiple audiences (public). I describe how anti-racist and intersectional methodologies inform the project's structure and goals, and how my methods and research practices, particularly of accountability, reciprocity, and disrupting relations of power and authority within the research itself, reflect these methodologies. I conclude by describing the methods that I used: ethnographic interviews, participant sensing, and photography, complemented by an interim report to participants and a community event that used visual and textual tools to prompt discussion. I outline who I spoke to in particular, and reflect on some of the opportunities and challenges that my methods presented.

This is followed by four data-based chapters. In Chapter 3 I trace out the negative image that has been so central to recent attempts to redevelop and revalue Wilhelmsburg, drawing on the full breadth of data from this study, including government documents, secondary historical sources, participant sensing and photography, as well as interviews with residents, planners and politicians. Wilhelmsburgers trace the island's “bad reputation” to a combination of racist discourse about the presence of migrants and material conditions in which people of low socio-economic status were deliberately concentrated on the island. I argue that Wilhelmsburg has long been approached from the outside as not-quite-Germany, in keeping with ghetto discourse and the racialization of space. The long-term process of devaluation of the island, underscored by the planning of it as a space for work and waste, is consistent with the normal functioning of racial capitalism and its production of environmental racism. Chapter 3 explores this history within the context of Hamburg as a colonial metropolis, and thus as a city with long-standing investments in racialized devaluations.

Chapter 4 focuses on Wilhelmsburgers’ perceptions of their island home and in particular their appreciation of it as a space of beauty, warmth, and acceptance in the context of societal exclusion and racism. Drawing primarily on interviews with residents, I explore a side of the neighbourhood that Wilhelmsburgers argue is rarely perceived from the outside, including residents’ assessments of it as a space of conviviality, where cohabitation and engagement across difference makes multiculture a part of ordinary life. Racialized residents specifically call Wilhelmsburg Heimat, a concept that links belonging, identity, and space. I sketch out a genealogy of the concept of Heimat as fraught and contested in the German-language context, where it has often been taken up in racist and exclusive ways, and where German scholars and journalists of Colour have argued for reshaping or abandoning the
concept. Wilhelmsburgers use Heimat to assert a sense of being at home in the neighbourhood as immigrants and racialized people. Residents' sense of belonging and attachment demonstrates that there are multiple, alternate valuations of Wilhelmsburg in the context of racial capitalism.

I see these valuations as threatened by the logic of “social mixing” that prevails in the city-state's strategies to redevelop the island. In Chapter 5 I build on the context established thus far to explore the recent planning interventions that research participants suggested had been most important and impactful in Wilhelmsburg. Drawing mainly on government archives, I outline a subsidy for student housing, social mix policy in public housing, and twin event-projects – the International Garden Show and International Building Exhibition – that Hamburg has implemented since 2005. The strategies share a central goal of social mixing, through a shift in outside perceptions of Wilhelmsburg, attraction of middle class (white) Germans to the island and restriction of access to housing for racialized people. The content of the strategies demonstrates that the common sense of social mixing is race- as well as class-based, though this has been largely missed in research on the island to date. I draw on the work of local scholars and activists, media archives, interviews, and participant sensing to highlight protest and debate and in particular the critique of the event-projects as tools of state-led gentrification in Wilhelmsburg. I find that the analytical frame of gentrification does not fully capture the racialization of displaceability in this instance, where racialized people and their attachment to Wilhelmsburg as Heimat is devalued. The policies of Hamburg city-state, underpinned by whitesupremacy that is built into an exception to German equality laws, threaten the processes of emplacement, attachment, and spatialized identification of racialized Wilhelmsburgers, putting them at particular risk of unhoming.

Yet the Wilhelmsburgers I interviewed were hopeful about the prospects for continued and increased conviviality through the mixing of more white Germans into the neighbourhood. From their perspectives, mixing is desirable if it challenges the long-standing stigmatization and marginalization of the island and produces greater conviviality and connection across difference. In Chapter 6 I draw on interviews, participant sensing, and media archives to explore these perspectives as being in tension and conflictual, even as they open space around the common sense of mixing to see it another way. I demonstrate that many of the recent changes that residents describe in the neighbourhood are creating hardship and increased vulnerability specifically for racialized people and people with low incomes. Housing has become more expensive, scarce, and less accessible for people with “migrantsounding names,” which traces back to the planning and development strategies that I describe in Chapter 5. Residents’ accounts of space-related tensions and contestations between different groups on the island also underscore that mix is not necessarily leading to the kind of close living-together rather than alongside one
another that some Wilhelmsburgers said they long for. In the Conclusion, I identify some of the questions that remain open from this study, particularly around the future of conviviality in the changing neighbourhood. I summarize the ground that the book covered and identify several areas for future research.
20 Wilhelmsburg is our home!

Figure 3: Map of Hamburg showing Wilhelmsburg and other parts of the city that I mention in the following chapters

(© OpenStreetMap contributors, under Open Database License, with additional tags by author, 2020)
Figure 4: Aerial view of Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg. To see a companion street map with tagged locations mentioned in the book, go to https://juliechamberlain.org/map-of-wilhelmsburg

(Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg, Landesbetrieb Geoinformation und Vermessung, 2022)