

Assimilated Inhabitability: (Black Bodies) Floating in the (White) Fog

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Abstract

This article examines the socio-spatial conditions surrounding Black foreign women in Zurich from the 1980s to the early 2000s, a period shaped by the slow transformations of Swiss feminist emancipation following women's suffrage in 1971, and by increased African migration to Europe in the wake of liberation movements across the continent. While Switzerland cultivated an image of neutrality, progress and order, these decades were also structured by diffuse racial-sexual hostilities. Drawing on Christina Sharpe's notion of 'the weather' as an anti-Black climate, I introduce 'the fog' as both metaphor and materiality to describe the ecology of hostility shaping Black women's lived experiences in Zurich. Through oral archives, biographical accounts, and feminist spatial theory, the article traces three operative phenomena of the fog: condensation, through which racial-sexual violence thickens around Black womanhood; floating, describing states of suspension and disorientation within everyday spatial and juridical encounters through which Black women's presences unsettle hostile environments; and grounding, visible in

collective formations such as the *Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen* (1993–2010). These practices reveal how Black women's geographies in Switzerland emerged through improvisations of survival, refusal and relation within hostile urban atmospheres. The fog thus operates as a spatial and conceptual frame for apprehending anti-Blackness in Switzerland while foregrounding Black feminist strategies of endurance and world-making within its lingering climate.

Keywords

Blackness, spatiality, inhabitability, world-making, Switzerland, geography

One sentence summary

This article theorises 'the fog' as a spatial metaphor for anti-Blackness in Zurich, tracing Black women's strategies of survival, grounding, and world-making within hostile socio-spatial conditions.

Entering the fog

In the fog, one floats: fearful, cautious, slowed. Orientation becomes unstable and distance collapses. Movement is governed less by sight than by hesitation, touch, and an acute awareness of other bodies nearby. Fog disrupts the assumption that space is immediately legible or that movement unfolds along clear trajectories. Instead, it produces suspension: of direction, of certainty, of arrival. Yet within this suspension, and particularly in the conscious presence of others moving through the same atmospheric condition, new modes of relation become possible. Fog, in this sense, does not merely exist as background or setting; it operates. It structures how bodies move, how they encounter one another, and how they endure space.

This understanding of fog as an operative socio-spatial condition was sharpened for me through an encounter

with artist Olafur Eliasson's *Din blinde passager*.¹ Entering the installation involves moving through a 39m long, 1.5m wide corridor saturated with dense mist, where visibility is reduced to less than two metres. [Fig. 1] Silhouettes emerge and dissolve; proximity oscillates between comfort and eeriness. Vision no longer governs orientation, and the body is compelled to navigate through other sensory registers. The work does not explain fog; it subjects the body to it. In so doing, it offers a momentary but visceral sense of how atmosphere can function as a spatial force; one that disorients, suspends, and yet remains relational. It is this sense of fog as an active condition – one that shapes perception, movement and sociality – that I take up in this article to think through the socio-spatial environments surrounding Black foreign women in Zurich from the 1980s to the 2000s. Fog is mobilised here not solely as an illustrative metaphor, nor as an aesthetic device, but as a way of apprehending how hostility, opacity and disorientation are materially and spatially organised in the city. 'The fog' names an ecology of racial-sexual violence that operates across scales, from everyday encounters to administrative and juridical structures, producing conditions in which Black foreign women are held in states of suspension and uncertainty.

African American Black studies academic Christina Sharpe's phrase 'the weather' offers critical language for naming the conditions that render Black life perpetually vulnerable in the afterlives of slavery and colonialism. In her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Sharpe develops the weather as a conceptual register for understanding how anti-Blackness operates as an ongoing atmospheric condition rather than a series of discrete events.² For Sharpe, the weather is not something one passes through, nor an external environment that can be escaped. It is the total climate produced by histories of racial violence; a condition that saturates social, political and intimate life, shaping what is possible, perceptible and survivable. The weather insists on duration. It names how anti-Blackness is sustained not only through spectacular acts of violence, but through slow, ordinary, and often imperceptible forms of attrition.

In this article I take Sharpe's conceptual offering as a point of departure to think with – and through – what I propose to call 'the fog'. If the weather names the broader atmospheric condition of anti-Blackness, the fog allows for a more spatially and situated specific articulation of how this condition is lived, navigated and endured in Zurich.³ Fog condenses. It limits visibility without enclosing. It produces uncertainty without clear boundaries. It suspends bodies in space rather than forcibly expelling them. As both metaphor and materiality, the fog becomes a way of apprehending how racial-sexual hostility in Switzerland operates

not through overt racial regimes alone, but through opacity, administrative diffusion, social coldness, and the spatial management of presence and (not) belonging.

From afar, Switzerland has long cultivated – and continues to maintain – an image of holistic flawlessness. Over the last century, its national brand has been shaped by consolidated and punctual infrastructures, a fair and sober social life, and a politics of neutrality. While elements of this image hold some merit, its persistent and totalising force functions as a mask. It obscures the conservative and regressive socio-political conditions that have historically structured life in Switzerland and that continue to hinder social progress, particularly for those subjected to racial-sexual violence. These conditions are rarely announced. Rather, they are embedded in everyday spatial practices: in bureaucratic procedures, inaccessible housing markets, gendered labour regimes, selective migration policies, and the quiet disciplining of bodies deemed out of place. In this contribution I focus particularly on the socio-spatial conditions surrounding Black foreign women in Zurich from the 1980s to the 2000s, a period marked by intensified African migration to Europe, and in the Swiss case, increasing feminist initiatives and demands, following the remarkably late 1971 achievement of Swiss women's suffrage.⁴

During the colder months, Zurich is recurrently enveloped in dense fog – an ordinary meteorological phenomenon that slows movement, blurs orientation and dampens perception.

Fog occurs mainly in the cooler months in the low-lying areas on the northern side of the Alps. The weather-station location of Zurich-Kloten is a typical example from the region. Here, the autumn months top the charts when it comes to fog. It is not unusual to see fog every three to four days in October.⁵

Read alongside Zurich's global reputation as one of the safest and most stable cities in the world, this fog becomes instructive.⁶ It exposes how, even within a context celebrated for order, security and liveability, violence against Black women has persisted, not always through overt exclusion, but through forms of suspension, attrition and slow suffocation that unfold within the very infrastructures of safety. By situating Black women's experiences within this context, I join broader scholarly efforts to nuance dominant narratives of Swiss history by accounting for racialised and gendered lives that have been rendered peripheral, temporary or invisible.⁷

My positionality frames this analysis. I am a Black woman from South Africa, now living, rooting and making a home in Zurich. I write from within an institute for the history and theory of architecture, engaging oral archives and

biographical accounts of Black women whose trajectories resonate with my own insofar as they too arrived at a similar age and lived as foreign bodies in the fog. At the same time, their lives unfolded within distinctly different generational, political and socio-spatial conditions that demand careful attention. Writing from this position, I attend to the spatial operations of the fog in Zurich – both as a literal atmospheric phenomenon and as a conceptual device for apprehending racial-sexual violence – and to the everyday improvisations through which Black foreign women navigated these hostile environments. By attending to what I call the condensity of the fog surrounding Black foreign women during this period, I seek to expand feminist histories of Zurich, while foregrounding the spatial world-making practices that emerged from within conditions of suspension.⁸ Rather than imagining a lifting of the fog, the analysis traces how Black foreign women lived with it: floating, haunting and grounding the spaces that sought to suspend them. In this sense, Black women take on the figure of shadowed ghosts, floating in white fog.

In this article I approach the socio-spatial conditions of anti-Blackness experienced by Black foreign women in Zurich from the 1980s to the early 2000s through fog as an operative socio-spatial phenomenon. It is structured around three interrelated operations of the fog. I begin by theorising how the fog is spatially organised in Zurich and introduce condensity as a way of naming the compounded yet often diffuse and difficult-to-name forms of racial-sexual violence that thicken around Black womanhood in uneven ways, depending on class, legal status, education, language and access to social networks. The second section turns to floating as a tactical mode of inhabitation through which Black women navigated space without secure ground, remaining active, responsive and improvisational within conditions of suspension. Reading the distinctly different biographies of Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli, Paula Charles and Dinahlee Obey Siering, I show how such suspension was differentially lived and negotiated. In the final section I examine grounding through the *Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen* (1993–2010), a self-organised site of political, social and affective gathering that cultivated proximity, recognition and collective presence within hostile urban conditions.⁹ Moving across these operations does not lift the fog. Rather, it offers a spatial vocabulary for tracing how Black foreign women endured, negotiated, and at times reworked the conditions that sought to suspend them.

The condensity of the fog: structural violence and everyday life in Zurich

Sharpe conceptualises ‘the weather’ as the total climate produced by anti-Blackness – a climate in which premature

death is rendered normative rather than exceptional.¹⁰ The weather does not describe discrete acts of violence, but the environments in which Black life is lived and constrained: environments structured by repetition, accumulation and duration. It is within this framework that Black suffering becomes spatially organised, historically sustained and often rendered ordinary. I propose ‘the fog’ as a Zurich-specific condensation of Sharpe’s weather. The fog does not replace the weather. It specifies – as metaphor and situated materiality – how that climate is spatially and atmospherically articulated in a city that disavows racism through narratives of neutrality, order and humanitarianism. The fog is situated in and specific to Zurich, in that it socially and spatially limits visibility without enclosure, produces uncertainty without spectacle, and suspends bodies rather than immediately and explicitly expelling them. It is within the fog that the biographies introduced in the next section become legible not as isolated experiences, but as patterned encounters with a hostile socio-spatial environment.

Sharpe insists that the weather produces its own ecology. In this context, ecology denotes the relational field in which bodies, institutions, and spaces are mutually constitutive.¹¹ The fog’s ecology in Zurich is composed of innumerable particles: migration policies, gendered labour regimes, controlling images, bureaucratic procedures, and everyday encounters in public and domestic space.¹² These particles do not operate independently; they accumulate, thicken and linger. The question, then, is not whether racism exists in Switzerland – feminist scholar Noémi Michel has spent much time highlighting the ‘raceless’ denial logic the Swiss state upholds while paradoxically and simultaneously exercising racial violence through racial profiling – but how it becomes spatially organised and lived as atmosphere.¹³

Sharpe reminds us that the weather encompasses the totality of our environments – a climate structured by anti-Blackness that determines what can be seen, acknowledged and lived. As mentioned in the introduction, Switzerland is frequently cast as the poster child of a progressive and transparent state with its international image carefully curated through alpine landscapes, crystal-clear lakes, punctual infrastructure, political neutrality, cultural-linguistic diversity, and the moral authority of the Geneva Convention. This postcard image operates as a surface of clarity. Yet, like fog, it obscures what lies beneath: the storage of Nazi gold in Swiss banks during the Second World War; the financing of South African apartheid-era extraction economies in the 1970s; and the reliance on racially stratified, seasonally restricted Italian labour to construct Switzerland’s pristine infrastructure in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Switzerland’s



Fig. 1: Olafur Eliasson, *Din blinde passager*, 2010. Photo: Thilo Frank / Studio Olafur Eliasson.



Fig. 2: *Yearnings for Homeplace*, from *Within the Nuclear Family House*, 2024. Image: author.

self-presentation as an exemplary modern nation is inseparable from these entanglements. Its political neutrality functions not as absence, but as a strategy of externalisation where colonial and racial violence are displaced elsewhere, allowing the internally and externally projected image of order, cleanliness and transparency to remain intact.

This double face of modernity and coloniality is central to understanding the spatial conditions analysed in this article.¹⁴ The fog, in this sense, does not contradict Switzerland's politics of clarity; it enables them. Ironically, entering the fog becomes a way of demystifying the postcard, rendering visible the infrastructures of concealment through which injustice is kept out of sight and out of mind. As mentioned, many Swiss scholars have shown that racism in Switzerland functions precisely through its public denial. The editors of *Racial Profiling* argue that racialisation operates through institutions and everyday practices because 'race' is officially disavowed as a meaningful category.¹⁵ The contributions in the volume further demonstrate how this disavowal enables structural racism to persist through policing, border regimes, and the regulation of movement and visibility. Racism appears not as ideology, but as procedure – as something that happens routinely, politely, and often without acknowledgment. The fog names the experiential register of this procedural violence, which sustains an anti-Black ecology.

This ecology suspends Black bodies within it, holding them above the ground – some at a greater distance than others. While the fog does not distribute its effects evenly, it engulfs the Black body without exception. What varies is not exposure, but condensity: the degree to which hostility thickens around a life depending on class position, legal status, education, language and proximity to social networks. This understanding of racism as an atmospheric and structural condition resonates with Swiss scholars who have shown how racialisation in Switzerland operates through institutions and everyday practices precisely because it is publicly disavowed as racism.¹⁶ Rather than appearing as overt ideology, racism is routed through administrative procedures, policing, migration regimes, and the regulation of belonging. Swiss scholars in *Un/doing Race* insist that racism in Switzerland must be understood as a structural phenomenon – one that organises space, movement and visibility, while remaining largely unnamed within dominant narratives of neutrality and order.¹⁷ This insight is crucial for thinking about the fog as a socio-spatial condition: hostility does not announce itself, but accumulates through routine bureaucratic encounters and everyday spatial governance. The fog, in this sense, is not simply metaphorical. It names how anti-Blackness becomes atmospheric: felt as uncertainty, exposure and isolation rather than as a single identifiable event.

Floating in the fog: suspensions in Black women's biographies

Black women in Switzerland have developed a range of responses to endure the fog. These responses do not necessarily confront or dispel it, nor do they always produce forms of resolution or escape. Rather, they function as survival mechanisms – ways of getting by within an atmosphere from which one cannot simply exit. I conceptualise these practices as floating. This departs from the common understanding of floating as a state of being 'not settled permanently; fluctuating or variable'.¹⁸ This conceptual move draws on Black feminist geographic thought, particularly gender studies scholar Katherine McKittrick's insistence that Black women's lives are produced through uneven spatial possibilities through what she terms 'cartographies of struggle', in which domination and invention coexist.¹⁹ Floating names a condition in which Black women inhabit space without secure ground, yet remain active, responsive and improvisational within that suspension.

Floating also resonates with Swiss social anthropologist Serena O. Dankwa's work on Black women's everyday negotiations of intimacy, labour and belonging in Switzerland, which foregrounds how gendered racialisation is lived through ordinary social relations rather than exceptional moments of violence.²⁰ Building on this insight, floating describes not passive drifting, but tactical inhabitation: a way of remaining present within hostile environments that do not allow for full settlement. It is a spatial condition shaped by constraint, but also by the ongoing labour of endurance. Black foreign women floated in Zurich with varying degrees of proximity to the ground, determined largely by their conditions of arrival. Those who arrived poor, uneducated, without situated language or local social ties were often suspended further upward, held in heightened states of isolation, exposure and precarity. For those who arrived with education, financial stability or access to Swiss social networks, the fog still surrounded them, but their feet remained closer to the ground. This intersectional – to use critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw's term – differentiation echoes analyses and reflections in the work of Swiss feminist scholars and activists Rahel El-Maawi and Jovita dos Santos Pinto, who show from a second generation diasporic perspective, how racialisation in Switzerland is unevenly distributed across classed and gendered lines, producing differentiated experiences of vulnerability rather than uniform exclusion.²¹

With the increase of Black populations in Central Europe during the 1970s, the presence of Black foreign women in Switzerland also grew. These arrivals were shaped by distinct and often overlapping migration pathways. As sociologist and gender studies scholar Sarah Schilliger has demonstrated in her work on migration and labour regimes,

these pathways were deeply entangled with gendered expectations, economic dependency and state control.²² Some women arrived through marriages to white Swiss men, at times consensual and at other times embedded in racialised gender economies. Others arrived through educational programmes that afforded limited social mobility. A smaller number migrated by choice in response to a globalising labour market. Many more arrived under conditions of catastrophe and displacement, seeking asylum. What unites these trajectories is not sameness, but suspension. Conditions of arrival shaped how Black foreign women floated in Zurich, determining the condensity of the fog they encountered and the strategies they developed to endure it. Drawing on a brief qualitative reading of three distinctly different biographies of Black women who arrived in Switzerland from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, the following section foregrounds floating as part of a broader spatial vocabulary for understanding safety, exposure and the absence of secure ground in Zurich.

Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli arrived in Switzerland in the late 1970s; she was from Kenya with a relatively middle-class background. Zurich was a study destination, and her relocation was facilitated by education, mobility and later marriage to a Swiss man. Yet despite this proximity to institutional access and cultural familiarity, her everyday life was marked by profound isolation. Living in the agglomeration of Zurich, embedded in a conservative suburban landscape, her cultural and social needs were not met. She recalls:

Where I came from, there were no housewives. Now I was suddenly sitting there, in the Zurich suburbs of the 1980s, and I was a housewife. I spoke German, took part in flea markets organised by the women's association in the village and always greeted my neighbours with a hearty *Grüezi*. But there was a loneliness inside me that kept spreading. When I gave birth to my daughters, I was alone. My husband had been given just one day off work for the births. There was no room where I could sit and talk with other women: about our lives, the children, everyday life, the men. I missed the exchange of information about the village, family, friends and girlfriends. Yes, I even missed the gossip. I was sitting there with a husband who worked outside the home every day, two small children, polite neighbours and a very clean flat. As a young Black mother and wife in the countryside near Zurich, I lived completely isolated from the Black community. I had to find other Black women in whom I could mirror myself in order to survive in this foreign territory and for the sake of my mental health.²³

Zeedah's experience illustrates how the fog suspends not only through material deprivation, but through the social exclusions embedded in everyday suburban life; spaces

that appear orderly, clean and hospitable, yet function as sites of profound isolation for racialised women. [Fig. 2]

Around the same time, in the late 1970s, Paula Charles arrived in Switzerland from St. Lucia via decades spent in London. Her arrival was marked by extreme precarity. Poor and determined to escape an abusive life, she entered Switzerland legally on an 'artist's visa', believing she had secured work as a performer. Instead, she became one of many women who were unwillingly duped into working as go-go dancers and coerced into performing sex work. She had no local ties, no money, no language, and no formal education. Throughout the 1980s, she was thrust into the fog; rendered invisible to educated and elite society, while simultaneously hyper-visible through racialised and sexualised controlling images of Black foreign women. As defined by African American critical race theorist Patricia Hill Collins, controlling images are produced by media and institutions, and are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal and inevitable forms of everyday life.²⁴

In her autobiographical book *Soul Stripping*, Charles recalls one of her early journeys through Switzerland:

One of the first small villages I recall working in was called Lomiswil. I had to take the train there from Zurich. Back in those days there were very few Black people. I sat on the train, shy and not knowing where I was really going. I had to ask the conductor to tell me where to get off. He punched my ticket and seemed happy to have someone of another colour on the train. There was a man sitting next to me and a couple across from me. The couple stared at me without blinking. I felt like sticking my tongue out at them. Later I was angry with myself for not changing my seat. But I figured it would just be the same shit. Never have I been able to sit in comfort on a bus or train in Switzerland. I sat there, not knowing what to do with myself, moving my hands nervously and trying to get rid of other passengers' attention by looking out the window at the beautiful snow scenery going by. But my neck started to hurt from keeping my head turned for so long. I wanted to turn my head back but didn't know how. I was so conscious of that staring couple.²⁵

Unlike Meierhofer-Mangeli, Charles's suspension reveals how infrastructural efficiency – punctual trains, seamless mobility – can coexist with suffocating hostility. Movement through the city was possible, yet never neutral or comfortable. The fog here condensed not through isolation, but through exposure.

A decade later, in 1992, Dinahlee Obey Siering arrived in Switzerland from Liberia via several years in the United States. Her trajectory was shaped by catastrophe and displacement, following the outbreak of the Liberian civil war in 1989. After precarious periods in Sierra Leone and Guinea,

she travelled to the United States as an asylum seeker before relocating to Switzerland with her Swiss-resident husband. Her legal status was tethered to marriage. Since 1992, Swiss citizenship is no longer granted automatically through marriage; instead, applicants must meet residency and duration requirements, namely, they must have been married to a Swiss citizen for at least three years and have resided in Switzerland for five years.²⁶ Dinahlee recalls a decisive rupture:

In 1996, the marriage broke down and I was deported. My residence permit was linked to my husband's employment. Anyone who had been married for less than three years had to leave the country after the separation. We divorced six months before the three years were up – we just couldn't be together anymore. We were angry with each other and couldn't stand it anymore. I was very lucky. I was one of the very few who was able to stay despite being deported. I knew people who hired a good lawyer. My lawyer was knowledgeable about immigration issues. It was terrible to receive those letters from the immigration police. Letters with cold words.²⁷

Dinahlee's account exposes the juridical dimensions of suspension. Immigration law, gender dependency and racialised state power converged to hold her life in limbo, suspending her between belonging and expulsion. Returning to Liberia in 1996 would have resulted in possible death, given that more than 250 000 people were killed during the wars between 1989 and 2003.²⁸ That she was able to remain in Switzerland was contingent not on protection, but on exceptional access to legal support. Her narrative demonstrates how the fog condenses through law, producing prolonged uncertainty rather than immediate removal.

Taken together, these biographies reveal suspensions in the fog – moments of disorientation, exposure and precarious survival. Floating, however, names not passive drifting, but tactical improvisation: a way of navigating atmospheres thick with hostility while still searching for kinship, mobility and belonging. These vignettes are not offered as representative in a statistical sense, but as spatially and historically situated accounts that foreground how some Black women's lives in Zurich were shaped by uneven access to ground. Paula Charles's account of moving through Switzerland's rail infrastructure – punctual and efficient yet suffocating – illustrates how mobility can coexist with hostility. The train, often celebrated as an emblem of Swiss order, becomes a site where Black presence is rendered hyper-visible through staring, surveillance and discomfort. Similarly, the suburban domestic spaces described by Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli – clean, quiet and socially regulated – operate as zones of isolation rather than refuge. In both cases, the fog is produced not

through overt exclusion, but through spatial arrangements that restrict relationality and belonging.

The ecology of the fog is further sustained by controlling images. In Switzerland, these images circulate powerfully in public space. The Swiss People's Party (SVP) campaign poster from 2007 advocating the deportation of 'criminal foreigners', visually encoded through the expulsion of a black sheep, is exemplary.²⁹ Plastered across streets, train stations and bus stops, the image collapses Blackness into criminality and foreignness, saturating everyday space with racialised suspicion. That this initiative was successfully passed in 2010 – ten years after state-commissioned reports documenting racism – demonstrates how the fog persists even when its effects are publicly acknowledged.³⁰ The recent (2023) SVP campaign, which was deposited as a printed flyer in the mailbox of every resident in Switzerland, demonstrates the racist narrow-minded perspective the state upholds and propagates through controlling images and spatial imaginaries of urbanity and countryside. These images suggest that Black life is crowded, chaotic, poor, and that it exhausts urban infrastructure, against an idealised Swiss life that is spacious, orderly, clean and reflected in the endless pastures of the countryside. The latter is imagined and imaged as normative and aspirational for people who are white, Swiss, heterosexual and conform to the nuclear family.³¹ [Fig. 3]

The first national study conducted from the perspective of Black researchers, *Schwarze Menschen in der Schweiz: Ein Leben zwischen Integration und Diskriminierung*, documents repeated experiences of anti-Black hostility in public space: seats left empty on public transport, glances charged with suspicion, assumptions of illegality.³² These accounts resonate directly with Charles's description of bodily self-surveillance on the train, and with the hesitation and avoidance she describes as routine. Such encounters are not episodic; they accumulate, forming an ecology in which everyday movement becomes affectively and socially constrained. The fog thickens further at the intersection of race and gender as evidenced by critical Black Swiss feminist scholars in *Un/doing Race*. For Black foreign women, this unevenness is intensified by gendered dependency embedded in migration and family law. Dinahlee Obey Siering's account of receiving deportation letters after the breakdown of her marriage exemplifies how juridical space functions as a site of suspension. The letter – cold, administrative and spatially distant – becomes a socio-spatial device of control, holding her life between expulsion and conditional belonging.

These racial-sexual violences unfolded within a broader gendered infrastructure that structured women's lives in Switzerland during the 1980s to 2000s. Despite the introduction of the right for women to vote in 1971 and the



Jetzt 10-Millionen-Schweiz stoppen!

Das sind die Folgen der masslosen Zuwanderung:

- ▶ Kaum mehr bezahlbare Wohnungen
- ▶ Klassenzimmer mit Schweizer Kindern in der Minderheit
- ▶ Noch mehr importierte Kriminalität
- ▶ Milliarden teures Asylchaos
- ▶ Überall Baustellen und noch mehr Beton
- ▶ Immer noch mehr Staus auf den Strassen
- ▶ Explodierende Krankenkassenprämien
- ▶ Schlägereien zwischen rivalisierenden ausländischen Gruppen

Jetzt ist der Moment zum Stopp sagen! Wir wollen keine 10-Millionen-Schweiz. Mit einer kontrollierten Zuwanderung schützen wir uns, unsere Kinder und unsere Natur. Ihre Wahl entscheidet!



**Am 22. Oktober SVP wählen!
Jede Stimme zählt!**

Mit einer Spende auf IBAN CH83 0023 5235 8557 0001 Y unterstützen Sie unsere Kampagne. Herzlichen Dank!
SVP Schweiz, Postfach, 3001 Bern, www.svp.ch



Fig. 3: Schweizerische Volkspartei der Schweiz (SVP). 'Jetzt 10-Millionen-Schweiz stoppen!' ('Stop 10-Million-Switzerland Now'), 2023.

proliferation of feminist organising that followed, the nuclear family remained the dominant spatial and economic unit. Drawing on Silvia Federici's critique of reproductive labour, it becomes clear that domestic space functioned as a site of extraction and confinement.³³ Limited parental leave, prohibitive childcare costs, and the shockingly late criminalisation of domestic violence in 1990, rendered the home a precarious space – particularly for foreign women without access to extended kinship networks.³⁴ Zeedah's isolation within the suburban household must be read against this structural backdrop. McKittrick's work on Black women's geographies helps clarify the spatial stakes of these conditions. She argues that Black women are repeatedly positioned within spaces deemed uninhabitable, in other words, spaces where presence is denied ontological grounding.³⁵ The fog's ecology produces precisely such conditions. Floating therefore names the way Black women survived within this environment: not by resolving the fog, but by improvising modes of inhabitation within suspension. The operations and ecologies traced here thus constitute the structural conditions that make floating necessary, uneven and enduring.

Grounding in the fog: strategic essentialism at the *Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen*

If the fog operates to obscure vision – of buildings, objects and other people – then it is not surprising that practices of grounding emerged as spatial responses to this condition. Against the disorientation traced earlier – of Paula Charles on the train, Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli in the suburban home, Dinahlee Obey Siering confronting the cold temporality of juridical deportation letters – Black foreign women in Zurich in the 1990s created pockets of retreat in which clarity of self and relation could re-emerge. These were not exits from the fog, but spatial interruptions within it: sites that refused suspension by cultivating proximity, recognition and collective presence. Many of these pockets were grounded in community formations that countered the isolating effects of the fog. They were not novel inventions, but continuations and adaptations of African diasporic practices of homemaking shaped by mobility, memory and displacement. Across diasporic life, belonging is often produced through hybrid rituals of care, conviviality and shared survival rather than through stable territory. In Zurich, these practices materialised as what I call Black hybrid improvisations of social survival, which centred well-being as a form of spatial retreat away from expectations to assimilate. These spaces were at once reclusive and gregarious: they offered relief from exposure while enabling confidence-building, sociality and collective affirmation.

Scholars have offered different vocabularies for understanding such formations. Nancy Fraser's concept

of counterpublics describes parallel arenas in which subordinated groups generate oppositional discourses and social practices outside dominant public spheres.³⁶ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's undercommons names fugitive spaces of Black study and social life that persist despite material constraint.³⁷ What unites these formulations – and what is most salient here – is their grounding function. These spaces allow othered people to locate themselves within hostile environments, countering the condensity of racial-sexual violence descending upon them through the fog. From a Black feminist perspective, such formations can be understood as world-making practices, describing spatial interventions that reconfigure how life is lived within constraint, without presuming universal safety or belonging. In the words of African American speculative science fiction writer Octavia Butler, 'you got to make your own worlds, you got to write yourself in, whether you were a part of the greater society or not, you got to write yourself in.'³⁸ [Fig. 4]

The Treffpunkt exemplifies this form of grounding. Founded as an improvisation of social survival, the Treffpunkt functioned as both a meeting place and a resource centre for Black foreign women in Zurich who were otherwise dispersed and isolated across the city and country. Located at Manessestrasse 73 in the neighbourhood of Wiedikon, the Treffpunkt occupied a ground-floor space with large storefront windows – an architectural condition that mattered. Every Friday, the space was populated exclusively by Black women and on the last Friday of each month, it opened to a wider public through food and social programmes. According to the women who frequented the space, the decision to leave the storefront windows uncovered was deliberate.³⁹ As a result, Black women's presence was made unapologetically visible within the urban fabric, mediated through the storefront onto the street. Inside, women shared cultural references through music, food, garments, tapestries, books and conversations. Social services circulated informally through the pro bono professional labour of women within the community – among them the founder of the Treffpunkt, Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli, whose earlier isolation within suburban domestic space was directly answered here by a collective spatial practice. The Treffpunkt offered an interior atmosphere in which women could breathe differently – away from the fog – and ground, or in bell hooks's words, touch the earth.⁴⁰ [Fig. 5]

The Treffpunkt's spatial effects extended beyond its walls. For those moving through the city outside through the fog, the sight of Black women simply being together had transformative resonance. It disrupted controlling images of Black womanhood inherited from the 1970s and 1980s by making alternative modes of presence visible.

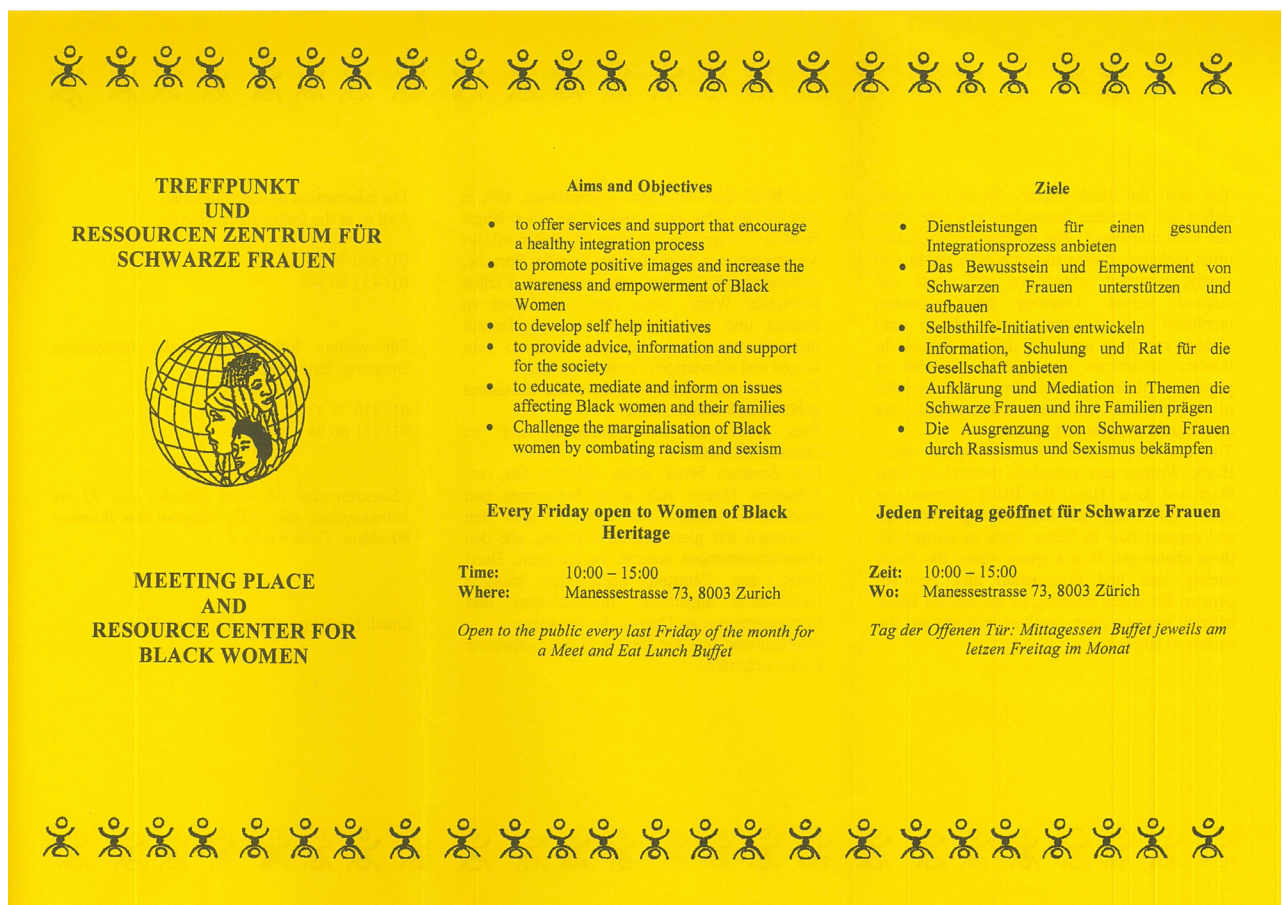


Fig. 4: Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen brochure, 1990s. Source: Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen Archive, Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli.



Fig. 5: Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen (with Yvonne Wirz, Sefa Dänzer-Agyeman and Anisa Sherif from left to right), 1990s. Photo: Silvia Luckner.



Fig. 6: A typical Friday at Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen, 1990s. Source: Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen Archive, Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli.

For those inside, the Treffpunkt functioned as a hyper-visible interior that simultaneously deflected the white gaze lingering outside in the fog. This reversal – visibility without exposure – had tangible effects on confidence-building and mental health.⁴¹ Dinahlee Obey Siering reflects on this socio-spatial impact:

The Treffpunkt was like a second home to me. There were people there who had similar stories to mine. Paradoxically, I have learned a lot about Africa and the women of my continent since I have been here in Switzerland. We have similar stories, but we are so different, so diverse. At the Treffpunkt, we learned from each other – those were really wonderful years when we still had a room! We were able to share experiences that gave us strength. It was a safe space.⁴²

The Treffpunkt's strategic essentialism forged solidarity without denying difference. Feminist scholar Spivak conceptualises the term 'strategic essentialism' to describe how marginalised groups might temporarily adopt simplified, essentialist categories – in this case 'Black' and 'woman' – as a strategic political move to make their collective voice heard.⁴³ However, Spivak has cautioned on multiple occasions that this is not an endorsement of essentialism as a metaphysical truth, as it is a momentary tactic in political struggle. In this sense, we can consider the Treffpunkt as having employed strategic essentialism to mobilise, gather and convene Black women around their common needs during a time when they were perceivably a minority, alienated and isolated in the fog. [Fig. 6]

Yet grounding was not universally accessible. While the Treffpunkt functioned as a space of respite for women such as Zeedah and Dinahlee – whose lives were already tethered, however precariously, to forms of societal legibility, by way of their access to culture, social networks, education and legal status – it did not provide relief for all Black foreign women. The fog was not evenly distributed, and neither were the possibilities for breathing within it. For women positioned at the most acute intersections of racial, sexual and class-based violence, the Treffpunkt was often physically and socially inaccessible. Paula Charles was one such woman. Arriving poor, uneducated, without situated language, and coerced into sex work, Charles inhabited a vastly different condensity of the fog.⁴⁴ Her labour rhythm – working nights along Langstrasse – collided directly with the Treffpunkt's operating hours (Fridays, 10:00–15:00).⁴⁵ This temporal mismatch was not incidental; it was spatial. The Treffpunkt's grounding was structured around a daytime lifestyle of availability that implicitly presupposed distance from (nocturnal) labour, from its sexualised violence, and from the exhaustion that followed. For Charles, whose survival depended on

navigating work and its dangers at night and resting during the day, the space could not be entered. The negative impacts of the fog increase the longer it lurks.

Access was also socially mediated. The Treffpunkt emerged through networks of women whose proximity to stability – often through marriage to Swiss men, education, or professional mobility – made collective organisation possible. Charles's position, shaped by stigma and extreme precarity, did not align easily with these networks. In interviews, she has remarked that during the 1980s and 1990s it was often white lesbians – rather than other Black women of higher class position – who offered her solidarity, protection and recognition.⁴⁶ This dissonance complicates any assumption of automatic racial kinship and foregrounds how class stratification within Black communities can reproduce distance, even within shared exposure to the fog. The Treffpunkt was also less frequented by upper class elite Black women in the Women of Black Heritage group, which one former member of the group Nicole Vögeli-Montjean remarks was too politicised for her.⁴⁷ This highlights the nuanced nature of counterpublics and how their inclusion and (often uncontrollable) exclusion address specific class-based needs even when their members have commonality in culture and historical struggle.

In this sense, this exclusion is not a failure of the Treffpunkt, but a diagnostic of the fog's severity and the Treffpunkt's limitations in being able to address the needs of all Black foreign women. That would problematically presuppose a homogeneity that such spaces ultimately try to counteract through self-definition. This demonstrates that space, even when carefully made and collectively sustained, cannot resolve all the layered violences that structure different lives. The fog suffocates unevenly. Anna Tsing reminds us that such atmospheres are patchy: uneven in their density, sometimes overwhelming, sometimes thin.⁴⁸ Some bodies are held just close enough to the ground to gather breath together; others are suspended too high, too precariously, for such grounding to be possible. Charles's survival strategies unfolded elsewhere, underscoring that for some, safety could not be spatialised into a stable interior at all. In this regard, the relevance of architecture as a category for constructing cultures of belonging must always be questioned and situated. Sharpe writes with precision about breath as a political and bodily register under conditions of anti-Blackness. In hostile climates, breathing itself becomes strained. The fog, materially and metaphorically, restricts air. Hostility enters the lungs and endurance becomes exhausting. As Sharpe reminds us, aspiration is not only the intake of air but a reaching toward possibility, and 'one can only hold one's breath for so long'.⁴⁹ Within the Treffpunkt, women could exhale – laugh, sing, rest – and momentarily aspire. These

moments did not resolve the fog but enabled some freedom of movement within it.

Acknowledging the Treffpunkt therefore requires reflexivity. I do not claim to speak for it, but to situate it as a place and a practice. What it did matters as much as what it was. The Treffpunkt grounded some women within hostile atmospheres, countered controlling images of Black women, and enabled relationalities across diverse experiences of Black womanhood in (German-speaking) Switzerland. At the same time, its limits reveal the fog's persistence and peril. Grounding and floating are not opposites, but unevenly distributed responses to the same hostile climate – the fog. These groundings in the fog show one example of how collective survival was enacted spatially without promising resolution.

The Lingering Fog

In this article I have proposed the fog as a way of apprehending how anti-Blackness becomes spatially organised and lived in Zurich. Thinking with Christina Sharpe's weather, I have approached fog as a situated condensation of a broader racial climate: one that limits visibility without enclosure, produces uncertainty without fixed edges, and suspends bodies in space rather than simply casting them out. What the fog names, then, is not only an atmosphere of feeling, but a spatial condition through which violence is distributed, normalised and made difficult to grasp. Across the three operative phenomena of condensity, floating, and grounding, I trace how Black foreign women in Zurich from the 1980s to the early 2000s moved through a city whose infrastructures of order, safety, domesticity and legality did not secure inhabitation equally. Suspension appears across multiple sites and scales: in suburban housing, in juridical procedures, in transport networks, in the street, and in the social organisation of visibility itself. Read in this way, the city emerges less as a neutral container of racial-sexual violence than as one of its active mediums.

The spatial contribution of this article lies in approaching the fog as an operative concept for architectural and urban analysis. It offers one way of reading how hostile conditions accumulate not only through discrete events or bounded sites, but through atmospheres, routines, thresholds, interiors and arrangements of proximity. At the same time, I suggest that space is never only regulatory. The Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen, in particular, indicates how modest and improvised spatial formations can cultivate relation, recognition, and temporary ground without resolving the wider climate that necessitates them. To remain with the fog, then, is not to seek conceptual clarity at all costs, but to stay attentive to the suspended, uneven and often fragile spatial conditions through which Black women endured and, at times, remade Zurich.

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Notes

1. Olafur Eliasson, *Din Blinde Passager*, 2010, installation. I experienced the iteration at the Tate Modern in London in 2019.
2. Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake : On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2016).
3. Ibid.
4. Bearing in mind that Appenzell Innerrhoden was the last canton that granted the right for women to vote in 1990.
5. *Federal Office of Meteorology and Climatology Meteowiss*, 'Fog in Autumn', *MeteoSwiss* website, <https://web.archive.org/web/20260611010947/https://www.meteoswiss.admin.ch/weather/weather-and-climate-from-a-to-z/fog-in-autumn.html>.
6. According to The Economist Intelligence Unit, from 2020–2025, Zurich has remained in the top five most liveable cities in the world. 'The Global Liveability Index 2025', *Ranking the World*, 2025, <https://download.rtl.lu/2025/06/17/543eec5f5ab81d-ba3379d742d5858001.pdf>.
7. Swiss-based scholars Noémi Michel, Jovita dos Santos Pinto, Serena Dankwa, Stefanie Claudine Boulila, Patricia Purtschert, Rohit Jain, among others, have published on this topic. See: Rohit Jain, *Schwarzenbach Geht Uns Alle an! Gedanken Zu Einer Vielstimmigen, Antirassistischen Erinnerungspolitik* (Zurich: Seismo, 2022); Patricia Purtschert, *Kolonialität Und Geschlecht Im 20. Jahrhundert : Eine Geschichte Der Weißen Schweiz* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2019); Jovita Dos Santos Pinto Pamela Ohene-Nyako, Mélanie-Evely Pétrémont, Anne Lavanchy, Barbara Lüthi, Patricia Purtschert and Damir Skenderovic, eds., *Un/Doing Race : Rassifizierung in Der Schweiz* (Zurich: Seismo, 2022), <https://urn.ub.unibe.ch/urn:ch:slsp:9783037772522:ihv.pdf>; Mohamed Wa Baile, Serena O. Dankwa, Tarek Naguib, Patricia Purtschert and Sarah Schilliger, eds., *Racial Profiling: Struktureller Rassismus Und Antirassistischer Widerstand* (Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839441459>; Stefanie Claudine Boulila, 'Race and Racial Denial in Switzerland', *Ethnic and Racial Studies Review* 42, no. 9 (2019): 1401–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1493211>; Noemi Vanessa Michel, 'Sheepology: The Postcolonial Politics of Raceless Racism in Switzerland', in *Postcolonial Studies* 18, no. 4 (2015): 410–26.
8. 'Condensity' refers to the condensed nature of the fog encompassing the density of social, political and economic layers.
9. Referred to as the 'Treffpunkt' from this point forward.
10. Sharpe, *In the Wake*.
11. This definition departs from and develops the common understanding of ecology as 'the branch of biology that deals with the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings'. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'Ecology', https://www.oed.com/dictionary/ecology_n?tl=true.
12. Take, for example, the Swiss Red Cross campaign portraying a variety of racially diverse recipients of Swiss aid. [Fig. 3] However, what is striking is how all of the Black women are portrayed visibly as African, rural, traditional, poor, as mothers or as caretakers. Elke Frietsch writes about these types of media images that perpetuate poverty, lack of education and poor health in former colonial states and developing countries, yet at the same time, when analysed, reveal Western empirical involvement in producing these very conditions. Elke Frietsch, 'Ich Bin Fan Vom Roten Kreuz', in *Terra Incognita? : Der Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen in Zürich*, ed. Simone Prodoliet, Shelley Berlowitz, Elisabeth Joris and Zeedah Meierhofer-Mangeli (Zurich: Limmat-Verlag, 2013).
13. Noémi Michel, 'Racial Profiling und die Tabuisierung von "Rasse"', in *Un/doing Race*.
14. Anibal Quijano and Michael Ennis, 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America', *Nepantla* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–80.
15. Wa Baile et al., *Racial Profiling Und Antirassistischer Widerstand*.
16. *Becoming Black in Switzerland*, documentary film, directed by Julianna Fanjul and Rachel M'bon (RTS Radio Télévision Suisse, 2022), 50 minutes, <https://www.akkafilms.ch/en/becoming-a-black-woman>; Wa Baile et al., *Racial Profiling Und Antirassistischer Widerstand*; Dos Santos Pinto et al., *Un/Doing Race*.
17. Wa Baile et al., *Racial Profiling*; Dos Santos Pinto et al., *Un/Doing Race*.
18. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'Floating', https://www.oed.com/dictionary/floating_n?tl=true.
19. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds : Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
20. Serena O. Dankwa, Christa Amman and Jovita dos Santos Pinto, 'Profiling Und Rassismus Im Kontext Sexarbeit: Overpoliced and Underprotected', in *Racial Profiling*, 155–72, <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839441459-009>.
21. Coined in 1989 by Crenshaw, intersectionality describes a framework for understanding how multiple social identities – such as race, gender and class – overlap and interact to create unique, compound experiences of discrimination, inequality or privilege. Kimberle Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics*, in *Feminist Legal Theory: Readings in Law and Gender*, ed. Katherine T. Bartlett and Rosanne Kennedy (Abingdon: Routledge, 1991), 57–80, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429500480-5>. Rahel El-Maawi and Jovita dos Santos Pinto, 'Handwerksgeschichten: Schwarze Frauen Im Gespräch' (craft stories: Black women in conversation), in *Racial Profiling*, 109–38, <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839441459-007>.
22. See among other texts: Sarah Schilliger, 'Challenging Who Counts as a Citizen: The Infrastructure of Solidarity Contesting Racial Profiling in Switzerland', in *Inclusive Solidarity and Citizenship along Migratory Routes in Europe and the Americas*, ed. Helge Schwietz and Helen Schwenken (London: Routledge, 2021).
23. Frauen', in *Terra Incognita?*, 43.

24. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).
25. Paula Charles, *Soul Stripping: Autobiography of Paula Charles* (Basel: Bergli Books, 1995), 146.
26. Ibid., 'Afterword'.
27. Shelley Berlowitz and Dinahlee Obey Siering, 'Ich Bin in Einem Land Aufgewachsen, in Welchem Die Hautfarbe Kein Thema War', in *Terra Incognita?*, 135.
28. Dounard Bondo, 'Thousands Dead but No Prosecutions - Why Liberia Has Not Acted', *BBC* website, 23 February 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56128139>.
29. Schweizerische Volkspartei der Schweiz and Goal Advertising Company, 'Sicherheit Schaffen', 2007, poster.
30. Georg Kreis, *Tangram: Bulletin der Eidgenössische Kommission gegen Rassismus* 8, *Farbige Schweiz/La Suisse de Couleur/La Svizzera a Colori* (2000).
31. Schweizerische Volkspartei der Schweiz, 'Jetzt 10-Millionen-Schweiz Stoppen!', 2023, poster.
32. Carmel Fröhlicher-Stines and Kelechi Monika Mennel, *Schwarze Menschen in Der Schweiz: Ein Leben Zwischen Integration Und Diskriminierung* (Bern: Eidgenössische Kommission gegen Rassismus, 2004). This study was qualitative and not quantitative, assembling responses from a range of twenty-seven Black people from across the country.
33. Nicole Cox and Silvia Federici, *Counter-Planning from the Kitchen: Wages for Housework: A Perspective on Capital and the Left* (New York: Wages for Housework Committee, 1976).
34. Since 2021, women are still entitled to only three months of paid maternity leave, whereas men are entitled to two weeks of paid paternity leave, instead of the former one official day they were entitled before 2021. Federal Social Insurance Office FSIO, 'Paternity Leave', <https://www.bsv.admin.ch/bsv/en/home/sozialversicherungen/eo-msv/grundlagen-und-gesetze/eo-vaterschaftsurlaub.html>. 'As parents have to foot about 80 per cent of the bill, one full-time place in a city costs them up to CHF2 500 a month, or close to CHF 40 000 a year'. Chantal Britt, 'Counting the Cost of Childcare', *SWI Swissinfo* website, 4 June 2013, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/aging-society/counting-the-cost-of-childcare/36026662>. Domestic violence was criminalised through the 'Federal Act of the 4 October 1991 on Assistance to Victims of Crime', following a demand for the recognition of the presence of gender-based violence by associations and groups in the feminist movement. See: Bundesgesetz über die Hilfe an Opfer von Straftaten (1991), https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/1992/2465_2465_2465/de.
35. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 133.
36. Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', *Social Text* 8, no. 3 (1990): 56.
37. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013).
38. Octavia Butler and Charlie Rose, 'Octavia Butler', 6 January 2000, video, <https://charlierose.com/videos/28978>.
39. Information retrieved from conversations between the author and various women who frequented the Treffpunkt between 2024–2026.
40. bell hooks, *Touching the Earth* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 34–40, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203888018-4>.
41. Information retrieved from conversations between the author and various women who frequented the Treffpunkt between 2024–2026.
42. Berlowitz and Obey Siering, 'Ich Bin in Einem Land Aufgewachsen', 136.
43. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Criticism, Feminism and the Institution', *Thesis Eleven* (Clayton, Australia, 1984), 175.
44. Charles reflects on this further in her second book: Paula Charles and Chudi Bürgi, *Schwarze Frau, Weisses Prinz* (Basel: Limmat, 1997).
45. This is noted, generally with regard to sex workers, in: *Terra Incognita?*, ed. Prodolliet et al.
46. Information retrieved from an interview between the author and Paula Charles on 18 July 2025.
47. During the 1990s, Women of Black Heritage was 'a vital platform for Black women, organizing cultural events, conferences, discussion evenings, and fostering regional, national, and international networks. Their work provided a critical space for dialogue and advocacy within Switzerland's Black communities.' The group did not have an official address or designated space. 'Afro-Swiss Spotlight: Carmel Fröhlicher-Stines', *Afro Swiss Families* website, <https://www.afroswissfamilies.com/embracing-diversity/afro-swiss-spotlight-carmel-frhlicher-stines>. Prodolliet et al., *Terra Incognita? : Der Treffpunkt Schwarzer Frauen in Zürich*.
48. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400873548>.
49. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 111.

Biography

Khensani Jurczok-de Klerk is an architectural researcher and designer. She is the founder and creative director of Matri-Archi(tecture), a network of intergenerational African diasporic women working across architecture, art and curatorial practice to engage questions of history, spatiality and imagination. As a doctoral fellow at gta, ETH Zürich, her PhD examines how Black foreign women in Zürich have constructed forms of kinship to create liveable geographies in the wake of racial-sexual violence since the 1980s. Khensani works across visual, written and sonic media to remember untold histories and envision new spatial futures. Her practice frames architecture as a storyteller of place, memory and possibility. She sustains a practice grounded in the geographies of both Switzerland and South Africa.