

For more than a decade now, a generation of Poles born into families of African immigrants from the communist and early transformation era has been entering adulthood. They grew up in Poland and were educated in Polish schools, Polish is their first language and they are saturated with Polish culture. Despite this, their countrymen on the street regularly address them in English, compliment them on their use of Polish, and at times vulgarly send them back "to where they came from". Men have been involved in dozens of fights and surprisingly many of them train in martial arts. Women report being harassed by being told sexual fantasies related to their skin colour. In a seemingly mono-ethnic and mono-cultural country until recently, the appearance of Afro-Poles remains a stigma of otherness and foreignness, carried with them constantly.

However, contemporary Poles of African descent – as reported in the press and as my first interviews show – not only consider themselves Polish but want to change Polish culture and society, based on their and their families' difficult experiences. They speak publicly about their condition in numerous interviews and press reports. They associate, organize large-scale media actions, intercultural workshops and street protests, and write petitions. They write memoirs, novels and essays about their experience. They publish popular books about the history of Africans in Poland. In recent years, they have produced at least five plays, a major contemporary art exhibition and a research group at an important art institution dealing with the Black experience and racism in the Polish context. They have already succeeded in making a lasting impact on Polish linguistic culture by condemning the word „Murzyn” [Negro], hitherto defended as neutral. Finally, a milieu emerged in which Afro-Poles can meet, share experiences and support each other.

In the same last decade, an unprecedented wave of newcomers arrived in Poland – incidentally under the supervision of a right-wing government declaring strong scepticism towards migration (similar phenomena occurred in other Central Eastern European countries). The vast majority are from culturally and ethnically proximate countries of the former USSR, but almost 30 per cent are newcomers from non-European countries. At least some of the latter are likely to stay in Poland, start families and raise their children here. The experiences of adult Afro-Poles provide a unique insight into the potential problems of these families and the young people raised in them. They can also highlight related opportunities, such as the potential multicultural infusion into Polish culture.

Within the scope of the study, I want to address issues of race and racism in the Polish context through a multi-level description of the experience of being a Pole of African descent.

I will be conducting multi-hour biographical interviews and so-called photo interviews. After the first part, usually during a follow-up meeting, I discuss with the interviewee a collection of private photographs from their childhood and youth from the family archive, which provides new stimuli for the narrative. I also make photographic documentation of their private surroundings and environmental portraits (depending on their consent, after discussing and agreeing on possible forms of publication).

All the material obtained will be read and discussed multiple times within a small research team, but also with a wider group of specialists, in a workshop format. The material will then be analysed as a whole to identify common threads, but also the dissimilarities, ambivalences and contrasts between the stories.

Sometimes, more than one sign of otherness intersects in one life history. One prominent figure in Polish public life is a Beskid highlander, raised in a rural village, son of a black Mauritanian, a gay rights activist and owner of an avant-garde club, an attorney and Warsaw city councilman from a post-communist party, who publicly endorsed a right-wing presidential candidate in the 2015 Polish elections. I am especially interested in such life histories, marked by various, seemingly contradictory identities. Therefore, I would like to include interviews with women, inhabitants of small cities, LGBT+ persons, but also public figures (activists, artists, celebrities, and renowned professionals) who succeeded professionally despite racism.

The cultural studies part of the project, based on systematic archival research, will involve the analysis of newspaper articles, TV news clips, but also the growing number of cultural texts produced by Afro-Polish people themselves or with their collaboration.

Among my sources of inspiration are American and Western European discussions on race and racism, migrations, multiculturalism, integration of immigrants, educational and cultural mobility, visual studies, as well as the debates on islamophobia, the migrant crisis, the rise of new authoritarianism and mainstreaming of the far-right agenda.

This research project offers the possibility of findings that could resonate with each of these interrelated academic debates. This, in turn, offers opportunities for publications in European and global journals. In addition, the visual and photographic component of the study could become a valuable tool for popularising the findings. As long-term outcomes of the research project, I am planning a series of English-language articles, a monograph in Polish or English and a photographic exhibition.