

What are Postcolonial Food Studies?

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Justus Liebig's meat extract has been a key condiment in German pantries since its creation in the mid-19th century. Food scholars rightfully made it the canonical example of a modern foodstuff.¹ The product offers a condensed portion of animal proteins and salt, which livens up the taste of any dish while bringing essential nutrients. It was developed using the most modern chemical theories, combined with industrial engineering and marketing on a scale never seen before. In many ways, it heralded the profound changes to European food systems that took place in the first half of the 20th century.

Mentions of how Liebig's meat extract was produced are inexistent in the scholarship, with very few exceptions.² The factory producing the stuff was set up by Justus Liebig's associate Georg Giebert in 1859 near Fray Bentos, Uruguay. By the 1890s, it could kill and process over 200,000 heads of cattle a year.³ By contrast, Germany at the time had about 17 million cows.⁴ Liebig would have needed about one in every hundred German cows, each year, for its production. That such volumes were only possible in South America was obvious for all men involved in the trade, then, and for many scholars, now. The continent was seen as „pristine“⁵ and free for the taking. The territory around Frey Bentos was, indeed, ‚free‘ of inhabitants,

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- 1 Cf. Hirschfelder, Gunther: *Europäische Esskultur. Geschichte der Ernährung von der Steinzeit bis heute*. Frankfurt a.M./New York 2001, p. 194; cf. Spiekermann, Uwe: *Künstliche Kost. Ernährung in Deutschland, 1840 bis heute (Umwelt und Gesellschaft 17)*. Göttingen 2018, pp. 130ff.
 - 2 Cf. Hund, Wulf D.: Advertising White Supremacy. Capitalism, Colonialism and Commodity Racism. In: Wulf D. Hund/Michael Pickering/Anandi Ramamurthy (ed.): *Colonial Advertising & Commodity Racism (Racism Analysis 4 – Series B: Yearbooks)*. Wien/Zürich/Berlin 2013, pp. 21–68, here p. 56.
 - 3 Cf. Pereda, Setembrino E.: *Río Negro y Sus Progresos (Union Patriótica de Río Negro 1)*. Montevideo 1898, p. 298.
 - 4 Cf. *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich* 14 (1893), p. 18.
 - 5 Denevan, William M.: The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492. In: *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82 (1992), pp. 369–385, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1992.tb01965.x>.

because the *white*⁶ Uruguayan military massacred and exterminated the local Indigenous population, the Charrúas, in the early 1830s.⁷

The link between colonialism, racism, genocide and Liebig's meat extract may not be direct (Justus Liebig did not kill the Charrúa people), it is nevertheless instrumental to the product's existence (the meat extract factory would never have been possible on German soil).

Postcolonial Studies are an informal grouping of research that shares a common assumption that „the world we inhabit is impossible to understand except in relationship to the history of imperialism and colonial rule.“⁸ Food scholars did explore colonialism. Some foodstuffs directly came from colonies, and some colonies were created for the sole purpose of growing or collecting foodstuffs such as sugar, tea, coffee or quinine.⁹ These authors, however, often limit their focus to official colonies. As a result, some end up following in the footsteps of the colonial lobby. For instance, historian Loren Janes' „Colonial Food in Interwar Paris“¹⁰ deals at length with colonial exhibitions and the attempts to introduce Indochinese rice in France in the 1920s but spends no word on palm oil or peanuts, which were consumed in much greater volumes but considered normal – leaving little trace in the public discourse. This approach leads to serious mistakes. Matthew G. Stanard, a scholar of colonialism, concluded, for instance, that „one group that was not as affected by the colonial experience or imperialistic culture was women.“¹¹ This might be true when looking at the

6 In line with many postcolonial authors in Germany, I write *white* in lowercase italics and Black with a capital B in order to show that the former is a construct that is not simply the pendant of the latter. Cf. Arndt, Susan/Ofuately-Alazard, Nadja (ed.): *Wie Rassismus aus Wörtern spricht: (K)Erben des Kolonialismus im Wissensarchiv deutsche Sprache; ein kritisches Nachschlagewerk*. Unrast/Münster 2011, pp. 278, 332.

7 Cf. Picerno, José E.: *El Genocidio de la Población Charrúa: Documentación y Análisis*. Montevideo 2008.

8 Elam, Daniel J.: *Postcolonial Theory*. In: *Literary and Critical Theory*, Oxford Bibliographies, <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780190221911-0069>.

9 Cf. Mintz, Sidney W.: *Sweetness and Power. The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York 1986; cf. Krieger, Martin: *Geschichte des Tees. Anbau, Handel und globale Genusskulturen*. Wien/Köln 2021; cf. Hackenesch, Silke: *Advertising Chocolate, Consuming Race? On the Peculiar Relationship of Chocolate Advertising, German Colonialism, and Blackness*. In: *Food and History* 12/1 (2014), pp. 97–112; cf. Boumediene, Samir: *La Colonisation du Savoir: Une Histoire des Plantes Médicinales du 'Nouveau Monde' (1492–1750)*. Vaulx-en-Velin 2016.

10 Janes, Lauren: *Colonial Food in Interwar Paris. The Taste of Empire*. London 2017.

11 Stanard, Matthew G.: *Learning to Love Leopold: Belgian Popular Imperialism, 1830–1960*. In: John M. Mackenzie (ed.): *European Empires and the People*. Popular

public of official colonial authorities. However, women were confronted with imperialism daily when buying groceries.

The broader concept of „colonial situations“ provides a much better analytical framework. A colonial situation occurs when a society (not simply a group of men) imposes a domination on another society „in the name of a dogmatically asserted racial (or ethnic) and cultural superiority.“¹² The „colonial“, in this case, is not limited to *de jure* colonies but applies to any domination justified by race. In this process, which Colette Guillaumin called „racialization“,¹³ the dominating group attributes a ‚race‘ to the dominated persons, sometimes loosely based on ethnographic characteristics. In this understanding, races are invented to justify a given social order. They are a product, not a cause, of racialization.

Applying postcolonial lenses to Food Studies reveals how colonialism intertwines with food systems. Following Anneke van Otterloo’s definition of a food system as a series of steps,¹⁴ it appears that colonial situations play a role all along the chain:

Primary Production (Farm)

Colonialism remodeled countless ecosystems and societies to grow crops. Planters routinely killed and replaced entire populations and burnt the primary forest to make way for sugar canes, tea trees or oil palms. The appropriation of arable land was often justified by the absence of registered private property. Colonists, by virtue of establishing a cadaster and cultivating fields, explained that they turned deserts into productive land, in the process essentializing all native ways of farming as worthless.¹⁵ Even in the 21st century, commercial deals in farmland require the imposition of private

Responses to Imperialism in France, Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Italy (Studies in Imperialism). Manchester 2011, pp. 124–157, here p. 151.

12 Balandier, Georges: The Sociology of Black Africa. Social Dynamics in Central Africa, trans. by Douglas Garman. London 1970, p. 52.

13 Cf. Guillaumin, Colette: L’Idéologie Raciste. Genèse et Langage Actuel. Paris 2002.

14 Cf. Otterloo, A.H. van: Voeding in Verandering. In: J. W. Schot et al. (ed.): Techniek in Nederland in de Twintigste Eeuw. Deel 3: Landbouw, Voeding. Zutphen 2000, pp. 237–248; quoted in: Scholliers, Peter: Twenty-Five Years of Studying *un Phénomène Social Total*. Food History Writing on Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. In: Food, Culture & Society 10 (2007), pp. 449–471, <https://doi.org/10.2752/155280107X239881>.

15 Cf. Laurent, Sylvie: Capital et Race. Histoire d’une Hydre Moderne. Paris 2014.

property. This automatically destroys any kind of farming which is not compatible with the capitalist order (for instance by making any common space impossible) to the benefit of large landowners, at the expense of indigenous communities.¹⁶

Farm work is equally linked to colonialism. Racial thinking justified the enslavement of the indigenous Caribbean population and the deportation of Africans who worked and died in sugar cane plantations. Landowners ever since argue that some populations are ‚naturally‘ made for field work and that their ordeal is actually an education into becoming ‚proper‘ members of society, here again justifying a situation of oppression with racial thinking.¹⁷

Secondary Production (Factory)

The logic leading to the appropriation of land and the exploitation of workers extends to agro-industrial factories. Liebig’s meat processing plant in Uruguay was one example. More recently, German slaughterhouses faced criticism when it was revealed that they were hotbeds of Covid in the first weeks of the pandemic. Factory managers argued that their Romanian workers were to blame, due to an ‚inborn‘ preference for crammed accommodation and unsafe behavior such as visiting supermarkets while sick. That workers had no alternative choice and lived in the conditions imposed by the slaughterhouse and its subcontractors was never discussed. This process of racialization was made obvious when one slaughterhouse manager used the national-socialist concept of „Fremdarbeiter“¹⁸ when talking about his workers.¹⁹

16 Cf. Schutter, Olivier De: How Not to Think of Land-Grabbing: Three Critiques of Large-Scale Investments in Farmland. In: *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 38 (2011), pp. 249–279, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2011.559008>.

17 For some examples, see: Chatterjee, Piya: „Secure This Excellent Class of Labour“: Gender and Race in Labor Recruitment for British Indian Tea Plantations. In: *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 27/3 (1995), pp. 43–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1995.10413049>; Glenn, Evelyn N.: *Unequal Freedom. How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor*. Cambridge 2004.

18 „Fremdarbeiter“ means foreign workers, but the current term is „ausländische Arbeiter“.

19 Cf. Birke, Peter: *Fleischindustrie in der Coronakrise: Eine Studie zu Migration, Arbeit und multipler Prekarität*. In: *Sozial. Geschichte Online. Zeitschrift für historische*

Distribution (Market, Retailing)

What food is presented to whom depends on economic and cultural factors, such as distance from the production site, tariffs or consumer preferences. Racial thinking probably plays a role, too. There is ample evidence from public health scholars that advertising directed at Black and Hispanic populations in the United States promotes foods that are much more harmful to health than advertising directed at *whites*.²⁰

Advertisements targeting *whites* routinely relies on racist stereotypes since the late 19th century.²¹ Brands such as *Uncle Ben's* (renamed *Ben's Original* in 2020 following the Black Lives Matter protests), *Banania* in France or *Sarotti* in German show that this trend never abated.²²

More directly, public authorities sometimes encouraged parts of the population to consume a given foodstuff explicitly to nurture its racial stock. In majority-*white* US-American schools in the 20th century, for instance, milk was promoted because of its association with whiteness.²³

Analyse des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts 29 (2021), pp. 41–88, <https://doi.org/10.17185/du-epublico/74351>.

- 20 Cf. Grier, Sonya A./Kumanyika, Shiriki K: The Context for Choice: Health Implications of Targeted Food and Beverage Marketing to African Americans. In: *American Journal of Public Health* 98 (2008), pp. 1616–1629, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2007.115626>; cf. Fleming-Milici, Frances/Harris, Jennifer L.: Television Food Advertising Viewed by Preschoolers, Children and Adolescents: Contributors to Differences in Exposure for Black and White Youth in the United States. In: *Pediatric Obesity* 13 (2018), pp. 103–110, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijpo.12203>; cf. DuPont-Reyes, Melissa J./Hernandez-Munoz, Jose J./Tang, Lu: TV Advertising, Corporate Power, and Latino Health Disparities. In: *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 63 (2022), pp. 496–504, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2022.04.017>.
- 21 Cf. Ciarlo, David: *Advertising Empire. Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany* (Harvard Historical Studies 171). Cambridge/London 2011.
- 22 Cf. Hinrichsen, Malte: *Racist Trademarks. Slavery, Orient, Colonialism and Commodity Culture* (Racism Analysis – Series A: Studies). Wien/Zürich/Berlin 2012.
- 23 Cf. Cohen, Mathilde: Of Milk and the Constitution. In: *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender* 40 (2017), pp. 115–182, here pp. 157–168.

Preparing (Kitchen)

The choice of ingredients and their preparation into dishes is often linked to identity, as food scholars demonstrated.²⁴ The strength of racial identities in this process appears clearly when researching disgust, which is often linked with the fear of miscegenation, or race mixing. In a colonial situation, race is understood by rassifiers to be biologically determined. Therefore, for a person to even try to eat the food of the racial Other could imply that they belong with them. Marguerite Duras, a French novelist who was born in Indochina, wrote that her mother was terrified that she, by eating mangoes and rice, would turn into an „Annamite“ (the racialized Other subjected to French power in the colony). She was to eat bread to remain French, the mother argued.²⁵

Consumption (Table)

Eating lends itself to the reenactment of the colonial order, for instance by naming concoctions with racial epithets (usually linking sugary and brown sweets or drinks to Blackness). Some scholars argue that eating some racially connoted foods symbolize the ingestion of the body of the racial Other, a carnal way of „performing race“.²⁶

Even without resorting to psychoanalysis, the setting in which food is consumed often bears clear links with colonialism. In the early 20th century, the racial division of work in particular in the restaurants aboard steamers provided an education of sort for soon-to-be colonists, who learned at the table how they were expected to behave with people seen as racial Others.²⁷

In the 21st century, the ethnonyms used as food categories usually descend in straight line from the colonial order. Restaurateurs engaging with

24 Cf. Mintz, Sidney W./Du Bois, Christine M.: *The Anthropology of Food and Eating*. In: *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002), pp. 99–119, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.32.032702.131011>.

25 Cf. Drissi, Hamida: *L’Orient fantasmé de Marguerite Duras: figures du métissage et influences des philosophies asiatiques*. In: *Analyses. Revue Des Littératures Franco-Canadiennes et Québécoise* 4/3 (2009), pp. 270–293.

26 Cf. Hooks, Bell: *Black Looks. Race and Representation*. Boston 1992; Tompkins, Kyla W.: *Racial Indigestion. Eating Bodies in the 19th Century*. New York/London 2012.

27 Cf. Alexanderson, Kris: *Subversive Seas. Anticolonial Networks across the Twentieth-Century Dutch Empire*. Cambridge u.a. 2019.

these categories (‘African’ food, for instance) adapt to what their patrons consider ‘authentic’. For some, the meaning of authenticity is derived solely from books or films that contribute to othering and rassifying. For these patrons, an authentic restaurant must fit with colonial stereotypes. Cooks, of course, have a choice, and some cater to people who appreciate other definitions of authenticity. However, the choice is not made in a vacuum. Not all patrons have the same wealth, and high-end restaurateurs might face difficulties if they refuse the colonial version of authenticity.²⁸

Waste (Dunghill)

Environmental racism has been a focus of research since the 1970s. There is no doubt that some of the waste produced by consuming food (especially non-recyclable plastics) ends up affecting racialized people.²⁹ But the rating of food itself as edible or waste can be made dependent on the racial status assigned to the eater. Salted cod in the early modern Atlantic world had different grades. The best fish went to Europe, and the worst pieces went to the Caribbean to feed the enslaved population.³⁰ Currently in poultry farming, necks, legs and wings are considered inedible by Europeans. These pieces are sent at rock-bottom prices to Africa, thereby preventing the development of a homegrown poultry sector (which could provide chicken breast to the local population).³¹

What are Postcolonial Food Studies? In a tautological way, a postcolonial food scholar applies a postcolonial frame to investigations of food systems. By definition, two total social phenomena are bound to intersect in every aspect.

28 Cf. Ray, Krishnendu: *The Ethnic Restaurateur*. London 2016.

29 See for instance: “It’s As If They’re Poisoning Us”. *The Health Impacts of Plastic Recycling in Turkey*. Cf. Human Rights Watch, 21 September 2022. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/09/21/its-if-theyre-poisoning-us/health-impacts-plastic-recycling-turkey> (18.08.2025).

30 Cf. Francis, Shrinagar I.: From “Slave” to “Poor People” to “Traditional” Food: The Journey of Saltfish across the Atlantic to the West Indies and its Movement through the Culinary Landscape of Trinidad and Tobago, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.21427/5B4E-JF82>.

31 Cf. Rudloff, Bettina/Schmiege, Evita: More Bones to Pick with the EU? Controversial Poultry Exports to Africa: Sustainable Trade Policy as a Task for the G20. In: *SWP Comments* 57 (2016), pp. 1–4.

However, some of these intersections are especially relevant, if not endemic, to Food Studies. The three areas of investigation below are especially relevant to Food Studies but are by no means a comprehensive overview of what the postcolonial approach could yield.

History

Christopher Columbus brought sugar cane to the Caribbean during his second voyage, in 1493. Food played a major role in colonial expansion ever since.³² This does not mean that colonialism emerged from the eating habits of Europeans. Cooks and eaters reacted to supplies from overseas as much as they demanded them, and colonists were certainly driven much more by economic interests than by taste. Nevertheless, the history of colonialism cannot be told separately from the history of European foodways, and European foodways cannot be understood without colonial history.

The Myth of the Happy Native

For literature scholar George Boulukos, the key to making slavery fit with the ideals of freedom and equality of the 18th century was to create the image of the „grateful slave“.³³ He studied a vast array of literature where writers depicted Blacks happy to serve *white* masters, under the assumption that this servile condition was adapted to their intrinsic nature. The myth allowed for bridging what Boulukos calls the „transatlantic gap“ between colonists, who knew that enslaved people were humans and worked under the constant threat of physical violence, and people in Europe who benefited from their labor in the form of sugar but did not have direct experience of life in a plantation.³⁴

Since then, the food industry relied on this figure in advertisements that evoked the farm or the plantation. Unlike other cultural artifacts that use a wide array of racist stereotypes (such as theater plays, songs, books

32 Cf. Nützenadel, Alexander/Trentmann, Frank: *Food and Globalization. Consumption, Markets and Politics in the Modern World* (Cultures of Consumption Series). Oxford/New York 2008.

33 Cf. Boulukos, George: *The Grateful Slave. The Emergence of Race in Eighteenth-Century British and American Culture*. Cambridge u.a. 2011.

34 Cf. Boulukos: *Grateful Slave* (2011), p. 13.

or movies), the food industry seemingly focused solely on the grateful, happy servant, such as *Miss Chiquita*, a smiling Latin American woman representing the successor company to *United Fruits*, a company famous for colonial exploitation.³⁵

The smiling faces of peasants printed on the packaging of ‚fair trade‘ produce can only function under the same essentializing assumption: that racialized workers consider it ‚fair‘ to work for very low wages. (Even after accounting for the 15 % premium over market prices required by *Fair Trade International*, the organization managing the largest fair trade label, wages paid to farmers remain often a fraction of the minimum wage in Germany).³⁶ It also explains why *Fair Trade International* does not offer to label farms as ‚fair‘ in Europe.³⁷

Boulukos argues that novels played a major role in justifying slavery in the late 18th century. Representations of food workers might be playing a similar role today, communicating to consumers in Europe that the colonial conditions of production are adapted to the needs of workers, who are presented as essentially different.

Silencing

The myth of the happy native is the explicit way of bridging the continuing version of Boulukos’ „transatlantic gap“, the space in representations between the violence of the colonial exploitation in the fields, factories or kitchens and the tranquility of eaters of the majority group in Europe. Its obverse is silencing. Although it is not as visible as other techniques, silencing can be considered an action, „like putting a silencer on a gun“.³⁸ At all steps of the food systems, a diversity of agents participate in creating

35 Cf. Galeano, Eduardo: *Open Veins of Latin America. Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent. 25th Anniversary Edition*, trans. by Cedric Belfrage. New York 1997, pp. 100ff.

36 For a critique of fair trade, see: Sylla, Ndongo S.: *The Fair Trade Scandal. Marketing Poverty to Benefit the Rich*, trans. by David Clément Leye. Athens/Ohio 2014.

37 This is not to say that consumers of fair trade products are ‚racists‘ – such an assertion would be meaningless – but that the bulk of the fair trade movement draws on the history of colonialism. Just like critics of slavery had to choose between a radical agenda (freeing all enslaved people now) and a reformist one (making life on plantations less insufferable), the moral implications of buying fair trade products are outside of the scope of this contribution.

38 Trouillot, Michel-Rolph: *Silencing the Past. Power and the Production of History*. Boston 2015, p. 48.

an alternative reality disconnected from any colonial entanglement. The farms depicted in children's books, the many TV shows featuring *white* farmers, the omnipresence of the concept of *terroir* all contribute to the idea of a pristine, traditional and autarkic way of producing food. This idealized version of our food systems is the exact opposite of the colonial reality under which large parts of foodstuffs are grown. Few if any of those participating in silencing do it consciously, which changes nothing to the outcome.

Ralph Trouillot, who researched silencing in history, writes that history is both what happens and what is said to have happened.³⁹ In a parallel way, food is both what is eaten and what is said to be eaten. The silencing taking place at all steps of European food systems largely determines what people consider food to be.

Here again, silencing colonial situations is not limited to food and foodways. Movies and novels routinely romanticize colonialism, for instance. However, the silencing that takes place at the table (and in the agro-industry) is different because speaking up provokes disgust. Mentioning that the person who picked up the tomatoes about to be eaten might have died of heatstroke will dampen the appetite of your guests.⁴⁰ Because eating is a communal action, respecting the codes of civil behavior forces everyone to actively silence discourses that could put others ill-at-ease.

Sylvie Durmelat noted that Postcolonial Food Studies help understand the dynamics of imperialism and globalization.⁴¹ While this is true, the reverse holds too: Postcolonial Food Studies help understand the dynamics of food consumption. Much as Liebig's story cannot be abstracted from its colonial roots, many research questions in Food Studies require an inquiry into the colonial past. Without colonial history, it is impossible to account for the popularity of the döner kebab in Europe, to explain why most *white*

39 Cf. Trouillot: *Silencing the Past* (2015), p. 2.

40 The number of tomato pickers who die of heat each year is unknown, cf. Prandi, Stefania/Parent, Deepa/Levitt, Tom: 'Working Here is Hell': Latest Death of Farm Worker in 40C Heat Shocks Italy. In: *The Guardian*, 27.08.2024. Scholars largely agree that work in southern Italy's agricultural industry is slavery, see for instance: Marcucci de Vincenti, Antonella/Salinari, Pietro: Réinvention du Caporalato: Extension et Développement de Formes Criminelles d'Esclavage dans l'Agriculture en Italie. In: *Nouvelle revue de psychosociologie* 27 (2019), pp. 141–155, <https://doi-org-1qvuw59b30470.erf.sbb.spk-berlin.de/10.3917/nrp.027.0141>.

41 Cf. Durmelat, Sylvie: Introduction: Colonial Culinary Encounters and Imperial Leftovers. In: *French Cultural Studies* 26 (2015), pp. 115–129, here p. 118, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957155815572572>.

people consider palm oil disgusting or to explain why ‚gypsy‘ music exists while Romani restaurants do not.

This is not to say that the postcolonial framing should be applied to answer each research question at the expense of other histories and identities. The wide body of literature across disciplines, of which I only showcased a fraction, nevertheless demonstrates the richness of this path of investigation. European social scientists rarely use racialization as an analytical concept, either out of personal conviction or out of fear of being punished for doing so.⁴² This is unfortunate, as it skews research on postcolonialism towards US-American and British literature and leaves many corners of European colonialism in the dark. Only by fully grasping the extent of colonialism in the past and present will we be able to further our understanding of food systems.

42 Cf. Roig, Emilia: Uttering “Race” in Colorblind France and Post-Racial Germany. In: Karim Fereidooni/Meral El (ed.): *Rassismuskritik und Widerstandsformen*. Wiesbaden 2017, pp. 613–627, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-14721-1_36; cf. Belkacem, Lila et al.: *Prendre Au Sérieux Les Recherches Sur Les Rapports Sociaux de Race*. In: *Mouvements: Des Idées et Des Luttes*. URL: <https://mouvements.info/prendre-au-serieux-les-recherches-sur-les-rapports-sociaux-de-race/> (18.08.2025).

