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COMING IN FROM THE COLD

The Black German Experience, Past and Present

By Marion Kraft

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Fighting Racism

Black people have lived in Europe for centuries, but their experiences in different countries have followed different trajectories. Immigration from the (former) colonies has reshaped French, British, and Dutch society, but the situation in Germany is somewhat distinct. Germany's colonial period ended early, after World War I, and until recently, there has been little opportunity to immigrate. As a result, Blacks comprise only about one percent of the German population.

The presence of fewer Black people has not, however, meant less white racism. In fact, Germany has a long history of anti-Black racism. During the German Empire (1871-1918) and the Nazi era (1933-1945), widely accepted "race theories" portrayed people of African descent as sub-human. Racism has long been deeply embedded in German society. The main pillar of racist discrimination in German society is the widely held assumption that Germany has an ethnically homogenous population. In the early 20th century, this belief was even written into the law: By definition, only people with "German blood" could be German citizens (*ius sanguinis*). Therefore, until recently there was a dominant belief that Blacks cannot be German, in other words that by definition there cannot be any Afro-Germans. As a result, discrimination (both behavioral and structural) and even physical violence are still a part of Blacks' everyday life.

Generally speaking, there are two main groups of Black people in Germany. Black Germans, or Afro-Germans, were mostly born to white German mothers and African (or African American) fathers after World War I and – in particular – World War II. African immigrants arrived in Germany more recently. The last decades have seen an awakening within both groups as well as increasing collaboration between them. African migrants have organized protests opposing laws that discriminate against them, such as the *Residenzpflicht*, which requires them to live in communities they have not themselves had a say in choosing. At the same time, Black Germans, inspired by the late African American poet and activist Audre Lorde, have self-organized and formed the Initiative of Blacks in Germany (ISD) and are making themselves heard in German society.

In this study, Marion Kraft outlines the history of Black Germans as well as the persistent racism of German society. She herself has been active in the Afro-German movement, and as an educator and literary critic she has worked to analyze and acknowledge Black women's writing. In this text, Kraft analyzes the historical trajectory of Black history in Germany, and she contributes to the discussion of how we can move forward in the fight against racism and for the full liberation of people or African descent in Germany and beyond.

Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg
Co-Directors of New York Office, July 2014

Coming in from the Cold

The Black German Experience, Past and Present

By Marion Kraft

Like the dead-seeming cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say. So you will have to know something about the time and place where I came from, in order that you may interpret the incidents and directions of my life.

Zora Neale Hurston, Dust Tracks on a Road, 1942

Black people in Germany have a long history that can be traced back to the nineteenth century and beyond,[1] and there are a growing number of Africans and people of African descent living in Germany. Today's Black Germans, the majority of whom are of African American or African and white German descent, still figure as the "other," as strangers in their homeland. Their struggles against racism, for identity, and for recognition by Germany's white mainstream are not only a matter of self-determination but also raise serious questions about the formation of identity in a multicultural and multiracial society.

Current estimates of the number of Black Germans living in Germany vary between 500,000 and 800,000, or about 0.6 to 1 percent of the population. The different forms of discrimination they face are largely based on the impacts of historical conceptualizations of "race" and nation in Germany. Racial politics during World War II and the postwar years, in particular, have reinforced the notion of a racially homogenous society. The study of Black history in Germany and the self-definition of Black Germans began in the 1980s, and the visions and actions of the generations born after World War II have had a profound influence on the development of a Black German cultural and political consciousness.

This is especially notable considering the fact that growing up Black in postwar Germany often meant a traumatizing experience—given that Afro-German children were considered a "national problem." Despite these obstacles and exclusions, many Black Germans have assumed important roles in education, arts, media, politics, and social movements. Among the younger generation, there are a number of artists, writers, and other cultural workers that have gained international recognition.

In spite of these achievements, racism in everyday life, in the German language, and in the media and even racial violence are still widespread. Following German unification in 1990, some areas in Eastern Germany have become so unsafe for People of Color that they have been declared "no-go areas." Meanwhile, the unique experiences of Black Germans born and raised in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) have contributed new perspectives to the development of an Afro-German consciousness.

1 For more comprehensive outlines see May Opitz, Katharina Oguntoye, and Dagmar Schultz (eds.), *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1992); in German: *Farbe bekennen. Afro-Deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (Berlin: Orlanda, 1986); Patricia Mazón and Reinhild Steingröver (eds.), *Not so Plain as Black and White: Afro-German Culture and History 1890-2000* (Rochester: Univ. of Rochester Press, 2009).

Other crucial influences came from cross-cultural and transnational connections as well as from theories, literatures, and arts by the African diaspora. Particularly, the various Black women's movements and research on the history of Africans in Europe were pivotal for the forging of a Black German identity. In view of persisting stereotypes of Black people, redefining racial and national identities continues to be a great challenge.

The Silencing of History

It is largely forgotten today that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Germany was a colonial power in Africa. Between 1904 and 1907 German colonial military forces committed a brutal genocide against the Herero and Nama in their African colony *Deutsch Südwest* (German Southwest), which is now Namibia. Four years later, a German journalist of a liberal newspaper wrote: "The Negro is half child and the other part beast."[2] Germany's defeat in World War I, which entailed the loss of its colonies in Africa, triggered notions of *Schmach* (disgrace) and *Schande* (dishonor) in mainstream political and military conscience. In recent years, German politicians have expressed their regrets regarding the brutal repression of the Herero and Nama uprising, but have failed to recognize it as genocide and to assume responsibility by agreeing to material compensation.[3]

This part of German history not only remains at the margins of academic and political discourse in Germany but is entirely absent in school curricula. When, a few years ago, I taught a class on colonial and postcolonial history at a German college, students were able to gather some information on websites, but nothing was to be found in German schoolbooks. This eradication of Germany's colonial past is a result of persistent assumptions that Germany had no colonies and that there are no Black Germans: unlike France or Britain, Germany does not really regard itself as a former colonial power. Due to Germany's defeat in World War I, there was no mass immigration from its former colonies.

Contributing to the humiliation (*Demütigung*) felt by Germans after the war was the fact that the victors' troops comprised Black soldiers—and even more so since their children with white German women were a visible result of the defeat. Under Nazi rule, these Afro-Germans were called *Rhineland Bastards* and were discriminated against, forcibly sterilized, and sent to concentration camps in high numbers.[4] The children of white women and African diplomats or African-American professionals who came to Germany during the Weimar Republic faced similar threats.[5] Some Black Germans were recruited to appear in propaganda films, meant to entertain the white German masses and to reinforce their sense of supremacy by ridiculing and humiliating Black people in the

2 Quoted in: Martha Mamozai, *Schwarze Frau, weiße Herrin. Frauenleben in deutschen Kolonien* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1989), p. 57.

3 Compare Rachel Anderson, "Redressing Colonial Genocide Under International Law: The Hereros Cause of Action against Germany," in: *California Law Review*, Vol. 93, No. 1155 (2005), http://faculty.unlv.edu/anderson/publications/hererogenocide.html.

4 Compare Opitz, Oguntoye and Schultz, op. cit, pp. 40-42; Tina Campt, *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender and memory in the Third Reich* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2005).

5 Compare, e.g., Hans-Jürgen Massaquoi, *Destined to Witness: Growing Up Black in Nazi Germany* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999); Gert Schramm, *Wer hat Angst vorm schwarzen Mann. Mein Leben in Deutschland* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2011).

roles of inferior, funny, and exotic aliens.[6] This chapter of German history is equally absent in contemporary curricula and schoolbooks.

It is, therefore, a great challenge for researchers, educators, and political activists to unveil such historical facts and to analyze and convey in what ways the silencing of history is connected to the silencing of the Black German experience and conceptualizations of race and nationality in Germany. Interestingly, research on the Black German experience has become an important issue of scholarly work in history, German studies, and diversity studies departments in the United States. By contrast, in Germany this part of history has attracted little attention—with the notable exception of the research conducted by Black Germans.

Black Children in Postwar Germany

In July 2013 the Department of the Interior in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia launched a naturalization campaign. Promotional posters showed People of Color, mostly actors and actresses. A liberal local newspaper advocating for progressive integration policies commented that "very often neither their names nor their outer appearances are typically German."[7] The underlying assumption is that "typically German" equals whiteness based on the construct of a German "race." The widespread notion that Germans can be phenotypically distinguished from non-Germans contradicts the German Basic Law that states (in article 116) "a German within the meaning of this Basic Law is a person who possesses German citizenship." Until legislation in 2000 made naturalization procedures for foreigners residing or born in Germany somewhat easier, German citizenship was primarily based on the descent from a German parent. Despite a growing number of German citizens who are Black or other People of Color, in mainstream consciousness the "typical" German continues to be white. This prevailing attitude leads to various forms of everyday and institutionalized racism, questioning Black Germans' identity and demanding that they explain their very existence.

Such constructs of "race" and notions of the "other" were even more prevalent in the early postwar years. In 1937 the Nazi regime changed German nationality laws "into a tool of the National Socialist population policy that was reshaped to serve the exclusion of legal citizens such as Jews, national minorities, and political dissidents from the race and the community."[8] Less than a decade later, the Nazi regime was defeated, and the initial fraternization prohibition notwithstanding, children fathered by members of the allied troops were born. Far from being accepted as children of liberators, many Germans regarded them as a *Schande* (dishonor) manifesting Nazi Germany's ideological and military defeat—especially if the children were Black.

In the 1950s and 1960s, studies in social science bloomed that analyzed the situation of Black German children, sometimes claiming to contribute to inclusion and the reduction of

6 Compare Doris Reiprich and Ngambi Ul Kuo, in: Opitz, Oguntoye and Schultz, op cit., pp. 69-76.
7 www.nw-news.de/owl/bielefeld/mitte/mitte/8840292_Gesichter_einer_Kampagne.html.
8 Dieter Gosewinkel, "Staatsangehörigkeit, Inklusion und Exklusion. Zur NS-Bevölkerungspolitik in Europa," Discussion Paper SP IV 2008-401, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB).

prejudices. However, in her extensive study of Afro-German "occupation children," Yara-Colette Muniz de Faria has analyzed the large extent to which social and anthropological studies in postwar Germany were explicitly rooted in the German tradition of "race anthropology" and "race hygiene."[9] The following quotation indicates how biased some of these research works were:

> *If we [...] talk about "colored children" or sometimes instead of "mixed-race children" we mainly refer to those, who in their outer appearance clearly differ as strange from other German children. This strangeness (*Fremdartigkeit*) is more important for their position in society than their more or less strong belonging to one race or the other. However, most of them, approximately 75 to 80 percent, are descendants of more or less Negro members of the American armed forces. The degree of strangeness of these children is not homogenous. Whereas some of them, immediately, even from a distance, make the impression of a little Negro, different racial features in others can only be seen if closely observed. In very few cases we have met children of fathers called "Negro," in whose appearance we could not discover anything strange.*[10]

Due to their assumed *Fremdartigkeit* (strangeness), Black children were considered a "national problem," which is also evident in a committee deliberation in the German parliament in 1952 as reported in *Das Parlament*:

> *For years, the authorities of independent youth welfare agencies have been concerned about the fate of these mixed-blood children, for whom the climatic conditions alone in our country are not even suited. The question has been raised whether it wouldn't be better for them if they were taken to their fathers' countries.*[11]

In fact many mothers were "convinced" by German authorities to have their children adopted by African-American families. According to Christian Führer,[12] by 1954 more than 500 so called "Brown Babies" had found new homes in the United States. Heide Fehrenbach points out that these adoptions were much more a political than a social issue, since both sides regarded them as an opportunity to propagate the humanity of their postwar societies.[13] For the children this often meant being separated from their birth families, and being dislocated to a country in which Blacks were still struggling for civil rights. For many this separation resulted in a difficult search for their identity in later years. Rosemarie Pena, President of the Black German Heritage and Research Association, states that for "the adoptees this meant that their actual origin was legally erased and their original birth records were permanently sealed. All birth kin were replaced with fictive kin and personal and medical histories were hidden. Immigration to the U.S. also meant the loss of the language and culture of the country of origin."

It is clear that the main concern of the German authorities was not the children's well-being but simply to get rid of them, since adoptions of Black German children to Denmark outnumbered those to the U.S. by the early 1960s. Curiously enough Denmark was not regarded to be too cold and was chosen by the authorities because allegedly "racial prejudice was nonexistent."[14]

Of the children sent to the U.S., many have as adults searched for their roots to claim all

9 Yara-Colette Lemke Muniz de Faria, *Zwischen Fürsorge und Ausgrenzung. Afro-deutsche "Besatzungskinder" im Nachkriegsdeutschland* (Berlin: Metropol, 2002), pp. 46-48.

10 Klaus Eyferth, Ursula Brandt, and Wolfgang Hawel, *Farbige Kinder in Deutschland. Die Situation der Mischlingskinder und die Aufgaben ihrer Eingliederung* (München: Juventa-Verlag, 1960), p. 13.

11 *Das Parlament*, March 19, 1952, quoted in May Opitz, "Afro-Germans after 1945: The So-Called Occupation Babies," in: Opitz, Oguntoye and Schultz, op. cit., p. 80.

12 Christian Führer, "Von Besatzungs- und Mischlingskindern," in: *Memories of Mannheim. Die Amerikaner in der Quadratstadt seit 1945* (Mannheim: Verlag Regionalkultur 2013), p. 199.

13 Compare Heide Fehrenbach, *Race after Hitler. Black Occupation Children in Postwar Germany and America* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton Univ. Press 2005), pp. 135-136.

14 Ibid., p. 163.

parts of their identity and have hereby built connections to the Black community in Germany. Yearly conventions of the Black German Heritage and Research Association have been pivotal in documenting the shared experiences of Black Germans on both sides of the Atlantic. Other Black German organizations, mainly present in social networks, include The Society of Afro-Germans in America and Germany and the Official Black German Cultural Society.

The majority of Black children born in the postwar period, however, remained in Germany and continued to be regarded as a "national problem." Another way the state authorities and welfare officials sought to solve this "problem" was by persuading the children's mothers, sometimes with the support of their white German stepfathers, to put them in orphanages or children's homes. In her autobiography *Invisible Women*, Ika Hügel-Marshall vividly depicts the daily challenges and survival struggles of these children, but also the empowering strategies they developed.[15] Some Black children were even sent to segregated homes,[16] like the so-called *Haus der Verstoßenen* (house of castoffs) in a remote region close to Lake Edersee. However, in 1960 more than 70 percent of the so-called Black "occupation children" lived with their mothers—a fact that counteracts the once common assumption that these women were irresponsible and not able to raise children.[17] In most cases, living at home provided more shelter and a safer environment; Bärbel Kampmann describes how the home and the close neighborhood were like a safe island.

The outside world, on the other hand, was different.[18] For Black children, it often meant the confrontation with pejorative remarks, insults, or strange looks. In school, many had to deal with hostile teachers, who had been trained in Nazi Germany, and latent or open discrimination. Consequently, the percentage of Black children who were allowed to move on to secondary higher education was startlingly low.[19]

Another aspect of the "national problem" that concerned German officials was the professional future of Afro-German children, girls in particular, who were seen fit only for minor jobs, like servants, cooks, or factory workers. Ironically, this false assumption was justified with existing prejudices in German society. In later life, many of those who were designated as a social problem were able to disprove these racist assumptions against all odds. This is all the more remarkable since young Black people in the Federal Republic of Germany were not only confronted with racist stereotypes about themselves, hurtful depictions, and assaultive language, but also with racist images of Black people and Africans generally.

The Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. and the liberation struggles in Zimbabwe and South Africa—which received broad support by the students' movement and part of the political left in Germany—were an opportunity for Afro-Germans to consider themselves as part of the African diaspora and to have role models of Black people refusing to be victims.

In the following decades, an increasing number of Africans came to Western Germany, many of them as students or professionals but also as on-the-job trainees. In the 1960s and 1970s approximately 1,000 students, skilled

15 Ika Hügel-Marshall, *Daheim unterwegs. Ein deutsches Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2001); Id., *Invisible Woman: Growing Up Black in Germany* (New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 2008).
16 Compare Fehrenbach, op. cit., pp. 157-159.
17 Compare Eyferth, Brandt and Hawel, op. cit., p. 36.
18 Harald Gerunde, *Eine von uns. Als Schwarze in Deutschland geboren* (Köln: Peter Hammer, 2000), pp. 24-28.
19 Compare Eyferth, Brandt and Hawel, op. cit., pp. 53-72.
20 Compare Ilona Schleicher, „Elemente von entwicklungspolitischer Zusammenarbeit von FDGB und FDJ", in: Hans-Jörg Bücking (ed.), *Entwicklungspolitische Zusammenarbeit in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der DDR.* Schriftenreihe der Gesellschaft für Deutschlandforschung, Vol. 62 (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1998), pp. 134-135.

workers, and trade unionists received public funds in Eastern Germany for their further education.[20] Whereas GDR officials heralded their recruitment of Africans as "international solidarity," West Germany considered it to be development aid for Africa.[21] Although the African "guests" were expected to return to their home countries after a certain period, some of them stayed. As a result, another generation of children with African fathers and white German mothers was born in both parts of Germany. The discrimination these children faced both in the West and in the East differed little from that of earlier generations of Afro-Germans.[22]

In later years, the number of Africans living in Germany increased rapidly. In the West this was mainly due to the recruitment of students and professionals, as well as alluring job opportunities and the admission of refugees. In the East, based on international economic agreements with Cuba, Angola, and Mozambique, the number of contract workers from these countries had risen to 17,000 in 1990.[23] Current estimates of Africans in Germany vary between 300,000 and 400,000. Many of them live in bi-national partnerships or have meanwhile become German citizens. At the same time, African cultural and educational centers have developed in various larger cities.

An Ignorant Educational System

While Black children were still an exception in German classrooms during the first few decades after World War II, today's student bodies reflect the diversity of German society. These changes are not adequately represented in schoolbooks and syllabi; hence students of color rarely see themselves and their experiences reflected in classroom materials. Images of Africa and Black people are mostly connected to images of poverty, wars, refugees, hunger, and crime. English classes, at least to a certain extent, include aspects of colonialism, slavery, racism, and multiculturalism, mainly dealing with the U.S., India, and the United Kingdom. By contrast, German and history courses habitually omit Germany's colonial past, the presence of Black people in Germany, and their achievements as writers, artists, activists, and politicians. Even when there is useful teaching material covering these issues available, it takes well-informed, conscious, and dedicated teachers to apply them. This is a great challenge for teacher training programs.

In 2012 the German Union for Education and Science entitled their monthly journal "Human Rights Instead of Racism" and published several articles about the racist discrimination against Black children by classmates and teachers. It included several useful web links for teachers with additional information and teaching material.[24] That same year, members of the *Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland* (Initiative of Blacks in Germany) founded the *Each One Teach One Media Archive* in Berlin, which extends their library of works by Black Germans and members of the African diaspora, focusing on books written in or

21 Compare Website of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development/Countries and Regions.

22 Compare Peggy Piesche, „Black and German? East German Adolescents before 1989: A Retrospective View of a 'Non-Existent Issue' in the GDR"; ManuEla Ritz, *Die Farbe meiner Haut* (Freiburg: Herder, 2009).

23 Compare Wolf-Dieter Graewe, „Entwicklungspolitische Zusammenarbeit in der DDR,", in: Bücking, op. cit., p. 88; Wirtschaft und Statistik, 8/1990, p. 544.

24 *E&W – Zeitschrift der Bildungsgewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft,* 12/2012.

translated into German. The goal is to make this material available in schools and other educational institutions. To be sure, such initiatives are desirable and necessary, especially given the backlashes in official political and historical education, condensed curricula and severe cutbacks in public funds. Ideally, however, in a public school system the local and federal administrations should be responsible for this task (albeit seeking guidance and expertise from Black teachers, scholars, and activists).

I taught German, English, and Women's Studies at schools, colleges, and universities in the United States and Germany with a focus on (Black) women writers and have personally experienced how empowering it is for Black students to see their identity and history reflected in coursework. Such a shift of perspective also broadens the knowledge of white students and compels them to reflect on the diversity in their own and other societies, thus improving the skills necessary to interact in a changing world.[25]

In general, teaching the Black experience can best be performed by people who have had this experience. While there are many Black educators today, mainly working in the humanities in fields like education, literature, and psychology, it is a challenge to make their research work and publications available to a larger audience outside the university, in particular in public schools. Following a general current trend, many of these publications are written in English. This way, the Black German experience is conveyed to a larger English-speaking audience, and Black German scholars can participate in international discourses. At the same, language barriers are obstructing the discussion and application of these works in German society. Almost two decades ago, I published my own research work on African-American women writers[26] in English to facilitate international discourse. Another reason was that in the 1980s the literature by Black women in the U.S. and corresponding literary research was blooming, whereas in Germany it remained marginalized even in feminist discourse. Scholars and students working on this subject in Germany were oftentimes not taken seriously.

In a paper given at an antiracist conference in Munich in 2010, Afro-German literary scholar and activist Modupe Laja recalls:

> *I was the only Black student of my subject and year and had to be told in the presence of my fellow students by a professor of English Studies with a focus on Afro-American literature that the N-word was an adequate expression for Black people like me in Germany. His explanation, "because in contrast to America you belong to a minority here," not only is beyond any logic, but disqualifies him as an expert of his discipline.*[27]

The white feminist movement was neither very concerned about the issue of racism nor interested in works by Black women. As a result, the Black German women's movement emerging in the 1980s was more connected to Black feminists in the United States. The Black lesbian writer, poet, and activist Audre Lorde was particularly active in forming transatlantic bridges.

25 Compare Marion Kraft, "Kulturelle und fremdsprachliche Kompetenz im Literaturunterricht. Black Women Writers – Ein Unterrichtsbeispiel für die Sekundarstufe II", in: *Englisch-Amerikanische Studien*, 2/86; see Gisela Feurle, Marion Kraft and Ellen Thormann, "Kompetenzerwerb im fächerübergreifenden Unterricht am Oberstufen-Kolleg," in: Das Zusammenspiel der Fächer beim Lernen (Immenhausen: Prolog-Verlag, 2011).

26 Marion Kraft, *The African Continuum and African-American Women Writers. Their Literary Presence and Ancestral Past* (Frankfurt/Main; New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

27 Modupe Laja, "Wie Rassismus betrifft," closing Remarks at the AMIGRA (Anti-Discrimination Bureau for People with a Migration Background) conference "Alltagsrassismus und rassistische Diskriminierung. Auswirkungen auf die psychische und physische Gesundheit" (The impact of everyday racism and racist discrimination on psychological and physical health), held in Munich, October 10, 2010.

The Emergence of a Movement

African-American activism, music and literature provided numerous role models for Black Germans in the 1970s and 1980s. The popular music charts of those days in West Germany were dominated by English speaking bands and African-American musicians such as James Brown, The Supremes, and Aretha Franklin. Positive images of Black people were also conveyed in African-American literature and films. In the translated works of authors like Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, Black Germans, perhaps for the first time, read about Black people that weren't merely victims but fighters, survivors, and creators grounded in a rich cultural tradition. However, the growing self-consciousness that resulted from such positive images and their international recognition did not automatically lead to a sense of community. In most cases, Black individuals were isolated, challenged to position themselves within predominantly white surroundings, fighting against racist attitudes, and counteracting false assumptions about their abilities.

Audre Lorde, who lectured in Germany in the early 1980s, gathered a group of young Black German women of different origins in Berlin and in this cross-cultural dialogue instilled in them a sense of community, a feeling of belonging, and a new sense of self awareness. She encouraged them to make their voices heard. The groundbreaking publication of the book *Farbe bekennen* (Showing Our Colors)[28] that resulted from this transatlantic connection marked the beginning of a Black German movement and has been a crucial reference in analyses of the Black German experience ever since. In this book, the different stories of Black German women are introduced by and embedded in the eminent research work of May Opitz (May Ayim) on the historical presence of Africans and people of African descent in Germany. The publication of this book was followed by the founding of Black activist groups, the *Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland* (ISD; Initiative of Blacks in Germany) and *ADEFRA e.V. – Schwarze Frauen in Deutschland* (Black women in Germany). The film *Audre Lorde - The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992* traces back the origins of this movement and of these organizations.[29] In a recent publication that juxtaposes essays, poems, and speeches by Audre Lorde with essays, poems, and interviews by Black German women, Peggy Piesche underscores the importance of the transnational legacy of Audre Lorde and her empowerment of the Black German women and lesbians movement.[30]

This cross-cultural discourse was based on an awareness of both the commonalities and differences of the African-American and the Afro-German experience as well as on Lorde's visions that these differences had to be acknowledged and used creatively in order to bring about positive changes,[31] and in order to learn from each other and from the reality and achievements of Black women worldwide. Consequently, in 1991 the author; Helga Emde, one of the contributors to *Showing Our Colors*; Ria Cheatom; and several other women of ADEFRA organized the fifth *International Cross-Cultural Black Women's Studies Institute* in Germany. It convened Black women and other women of color from around the world to exchange experiences, research, and visions on various

28 Op. cit.

29 Documentary film produced by Dagmar Schultz in cooperation with Ria Cheatom and Ika Hügel-Marshall, Berlin 2011, www.audrelorde-theberlinyears.com.

30 Peggy Piesche (ed.), *Euer Schweigen schützt euch nicht. Audre Lorde und die Schwarze Frauenbewegung in Deutschland* (Berlin: Orlanda, 2012).

31 Compare Marion Kraft, "The Creative Use of Difference," in: Joan Wylie Hall (ed.), *Conversations with Audre Lorde* (Jackson: Univ. of Mississippi Press, 2004).

issues.[32] In the following years, the experiences of Black Germans who had been brought up in the GDR contributed new dynamics to the movement, and people of the younger generations added their experiences, skills, research, and activism. The ISD has established groups in several larger cities and closely cooperates on political and cultural levels with different organizations of African immigrants and people of African descent, as well as German anti-racist organizations and institutions. Members of the ISD and other individuals are present in the media and conduct workshops, readings, film screenings, and art performances.

Outside of these organizational structures, Black Germans are also becoming increasingly visible in German society. To name a few: The recent performance by actress Miriam Goldschmidt, who is of Spanish-Jewish and African descent and grew up in Düsseldorf, in Peter Brook's production of Beckett's *The Lost Ones* at the theater festival *Ruhrfestspiele* was highly acclaimed in the media. Nisma Cherrat, who was born in Morocco and grew up in Germany in the Black Forest, played the leading role of an Afro-German police woman in search of her roots in Eastern Germany in Branwen Okpako's film *Tal der Ahnungslosen*. The young gifted actors Thando Walbaum, Steve-Marvin Dwumah, and Luka Kumi played young Hans-Jürgen Massaquoi in the German film version of *Destined to Witness* (2006).[33] Xavier Naidoo, whose parents are of Indian, South African, Irish, and German descent, and who grew up and lives in Mannheim, has assumed a leading role in the charts of German popular music. Kevin John Edusei, born in Bielefeld of Ghanaian and white German descent, has recently been appointed Chief Conductor of Munich's Philharmonic Orchestra.

Black Germans have risen to the top in many sports, including track and field, basketball, and Germany's No. 1 sports soccer. Jerome Boateng, born in Berlin of German and Ghanaian descent, plays for the leading German soccer team Bayern Munich as well as for the national team. Celia Okoyiono da Mbabi, born in Berlin of parents from Cameroon and France, who is often referred to as the "sunshine" in women's soccer, is the German national team's leading scorer. In politics, Karamba Diaby, a social democrat from Halle, became the first Black German to be elected to the federal parliament, the *Bundestag*, in 2013.

These examples prove that Black Germans of different generations and backgrounds today have positioned themselves in many ways in mainstream society and demonstrate the diversity of the Black German community. Despite the presence and achievements of Black Germans, racist notions and conceptualizations of nation and "race" have not vanished from the mainstream German collective consciousness.

Fighting the N-Word

"Where are you from? When are you going back? How come you speak German so fluently?" These are just some of the questions people who do not look "typically" German, in particular Black people, are expected to answer almost on a daily basis. These questions denote them as foreigners and exclude them from what is generally understood as the German

32 The conference took place in Frankfurt/Main, Bielefeld, and Berlin and received great recognition and support. Major contributions were later published in Marion Kraft and Rukhsana Shamim Ashraf-Khan (eds.), *Schwarze Frauen der Welt. Europa und Migration* (Berlin: Orlanda, 1994).

33 Massaquoi, op. cit.

nation. When confronted with the underlying racism of such questions, most white Germans defend themselves arguing they are not racist and that they didn't mean any harm—a consequence of their lack of awareness about the historical conceptualizations and political implications outlined above. It is in this context that education continues to be an important task and great challenge.

An even more severe problem is the assumed superiority that shows through when white people, even educated liberals, claim the right of the signifier in discourses on racist language. Prompted by initiatives of Black Germans, the publishers of popular children's books written in the 1950s[34] substituted pejorative expressions like the N-word with more neutral terms in 2012. This small, long overdue step caused a nation-wide debate in the media about political correctness, in which People of Color were accused by white Germans of wanting to deprive the German language of cultural traditions, of exerting censorship, and of endangering the freedom of art. Once more, the historical colonial context underlying the racist words and images in these books was ignored. The sometimes bizarre debate that evolved over the use of the N-word can perhaps only be understood when considering that the term "race" is something of a taboo word in mainstream German discourse because of its connotations of racial politics in Nazi Germany. Racism is usually regarded as xenophobia, which in turn constitutes the paradigm of "we" and "them." Nowadays, when white liberals are being challenged about their racist attitudes, they tend to immediately become self-defensive and try to prove their objectivity and unprejudiced attitude towards "the other." Offensive language is justified as "historical" language, and racist practices such as "black facing" in German theatre productions are defended as neutral and non-historical cultural or artistic expressions. At the core of such attitudes is a widespread unawareness of the difference between art and literature on one hand, and expressions of racism on the other. What is more is the ignorance, arrogance, and self-righteousness by which some white Germans with powerful positions in the media exert their power to define "the other." To be sure, there are institutions and initiatives challenging such attitudes, nor does it mean that Germany as a whole is a racist society. However, until the fact that being German no longer equals being white has reached the core of mainstream German consciousness, all assertions that Germany is an anti-racist, multicultural society will be mere lip-service.

Racial Profiling and Violence

Racism in everyday life and in the media corresponds with institutionalized racism. For example, racial profiling is a common practice of the Federal Police: Black people are subject to frequent unfounded passport controls due to color of their skin. Recently, a young Afro-German won his second court case against police officers who testified they had controlled and arrested him on a local train simply because his skin color had made him "suspicious." In the first case the judges had ruled that the officers' action had been justified. Prompted by this case, the ISD launched a campaign with the goal of a petition to the German *Bundestag* to ban racial profiling. In this and in other cases, the organizers of the campaign

34 For instance, Ottfried Preußler, *Die kleine Hexe* (The Little Witch), first published in 1957.

received large support from different individuals and groups in German society. However, many white people stated they had not even been aware of the existence of such police practices.

An even more serious problem is the lack of awareness among white Germans that Black people in Germany have often been targets of racist violence and even murders in recent years. The most notorious cases are those of Antonio Melis and Oury Jalloh, both aged 37. Melis was attacked, beaten, and drowned in the river Havel by three right-wing extremists in 1997. Jalloh burnt to death in a police prison cell in Dessau in 2005. The officers on duty were found not guilty. Sadly, these are just two names on a long list.[35] The Black community in Germany has protested against this violence and brought it to the attention of a larger public through publications, social media, workshops, and public discussions.

These incidents attest that Black people in Germany are confronted with similar problems regardless of their national or ethnic backgrounds. Being born in Germany, having a German passport, or being in a privileged position does not save one from being the victim of racist assumptions or racially motivated violence. Afro-Germans may have white family members, be integrated in a white neighborhood, and be accepted and respected by white friends, students, and colleagues—but as important as this part of their world may be, the outside world is often discriminating, hostile, or even dangerous for them. Moreover, as Audre Lorde addressed her white audience more than twenty years ago: “Racism in Germany must become an issue, and the fact that you are not People of Color does not mean that you are safe from it. In fact, it affects every part of your life.”[36] Broad coalitions in Germany are therefore necessary to fight all forms of discrimination and, in particular, all forms of violence based thereon.

Forging Cross-Cultural Identities

Germany’s Black community is an important catalyst in fighting racism on all levels and bringing about change. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that we cannot speak of a Black Community as we do with respect to the U.S., Britain, France, or the Netherlands. In Germany, there are diverse Black cultural centers but no Black neighborhoods, and organizational structures mainly exist in a few large cities. Moreover, Black Germans come from diverse cultural backgrounds and have made different experiences in different times in different parts of Germany. Some consider themselves merely as Germans, some as part of the African diaspora, and some—like scholar, poet, and activist May Ayim—emphasize their dual heritage. These differences are apparent in the literature by Black Germans, not only in autobiographical writings but also in poetry and fiction. In her poem “borderless and brazen: a poem against the German ‘u-not y’”, May Ayim writes:

> *i will be African*
> *even if you want me to be german*
> *and i will be german*
> *even if my blackness does not suit you.*[37]

She thus claims her African heritage *and* her Germanness. The London-based Nigerian-German playwright and novelist Olumide Popoola

35 See Noah Sow, *Deutschland Schwarz Weiß* (München: Bertelsmann, 2008); ManuEla Ritz, op. cit.
36 In the film Audre Lorde – The Berlin Years, 1984-1992.

37 May Ayim, *Blues in Schwarz Weiß* (Berlin: Orlanda, 1995), p. 61.

publishes in English, dealing with more diasporic themes that geopolitically span Africa and Europe and are—to borrow a term from Taiye Selasi—"Afropolitan" in a broader sense. By contrast, Afro-German poet Raja Lubinetzki[38] writes exclusively in German, addressing themes such as alienation, speechlessness, and isolation, while playing with the German language and deconstructing common notions of homeland and identity.

Although the term has been used in this paper, we must also consider the problematic nature of speaking of an "African diaspora." This term can lead to the false assumption that Africa is not a continent of different nations, histories, and diverse ethnic groups but a homogenous country with one culture, religion, and history. It not only adds to existing white European stereotypes of Africa, but contributes to the negation of the variety, diversity, and richness of African cultures. It is this richness of African cultures that different people of African descent have incorporated in their self-understandings, thus counteracting European racist notions. At the same time, however, particularly for Black Germans this does not mean that Africa automatically becomes the basis of their self-definition. "Shared African origins do not in themselves constitute African diaspora. Rather, the presumption that Black people worldwide share a community is based primarily on a geopolitical orientation rather than portable cultural retentions."[39] Moreover, as has been outlined above, Afro-Germans and Black people in Germany have different family histories and trace their ancestry back to different cultures in Africa, the Americas, and Europe. Numerous Black Germans have established connections to the African homelands of their ancestors, but many other Black Germans have no connections whatsoever with Africa. There are, of course, also differences in age, gender, class, family situations, cultural preferences, political points of view, and political engagement. The acknowledgement, acceptance, and the creative use of such differences will not only enhance mutual understanding but also facilitate action towards common goals and positive changes.

Issues of and discourses on racism must also be seen in a global perspective. As has been outlined above, this contextualization started in Germany on a larger scale in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Since then, student and scholar exchanges of Black academics between Germany and the U.S. and the acknowledgement of Black German writers and researchers in the United States and the United Kingdom as well as their presence at international conventions have made it possible to share experiences and ideas across national borders. Black German Studies have meanwhile become a recognized discipline in U.S. and European academia, and a growing network of Afro-European scholars, activists, writers, and artists has developed in recent years. One sign of this is the yearly *AfroEuropes* convention, which in 2013 took place at the University of London, bringing together people from Africa, individuals of African descent, and People of Color from various European countries, Russia, the U.S., and the Caribbean. They shared their research, writings, and various forms of art and negotiated redefinitions of racial identities and representations across cultures. In German academic discourse such studies are still exceptions, and there are no syllabi or courses on the Black German experience. It may, however, well be that the burgeoning academic work in this field in the U.S. and various European countries will have an impact on Germany.

Despite the growing self-consciousness of Afro-Europeans in recent times, the fight for recognition by predominantly white European societies is still a necessity. On both sides of the Atlantic, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream that

38 See Raja Lubinetzki, *Das leidige Hindernis* (Halle/Saale: Edition Cornelius Art, 2013).
39 Mazón and Steingröver, op. cit, p. 226.

one day his children would be judged by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin, is far from being fulfilled more than fifty years later. Individual success stories of Black people shaping their society and being elected to parliament and even the U.S. presidency have not eliminated existing racist sentiments, violence, and obsolete conceptualizations of "race" and nation. Individual, organizational, and institutional efforts to combat discrimination and racism, political action, academic research, and the varied cultural contributions of Black people are all further steps to achieve real democracy in German society and the recognition of difference as something positive.

Acknowledging difference, however, is not only an issue concerning Blacks and whites. In Germany, the Black experience is the sum of a multitude of experiences based on various factors. It also makes a difference whether as a Black person one lives in Germany's metropolitan centers, in particular Berlin, with growing Black communities, or whether one lives in an almost exclusively white neighborhood in a smaller town or even in a rural area. And it certainly makes a difference whether one is in the privileged position to have German citizenship or to be an African refugee in Germany. In the ongoing Black German and Afro-European discourses, acknowledging these differences has become a prerequisite to recognize and embrace commonalities in order to realize positive changes—both within the Black community and within the larger society.

A vision of a future without racism and without any form of discrimination is to a large extent based on the achievements and abilities of Black educators, writers, artists, and activists to create shared spaces, to bring about change, and to communicate their views and works across existing boundaries of "race," gender, sexual self-definition, ethnicity, and class. Such a vision of a future society in Germany is also grounded in the hope that the white majority will be able to learn and to understand how constructs of "race" are rooted in German history and how racist attitudes and violence affect the entire society. This vision is based on the optimism that Germany, in recognition of its non-white citizens, will be able to embrace the positive and empowering effects of "racial," cultural, and ethnic diversities.

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