

BGHRA CONVENTION

August 19-21, 2011



German Historical
Institute DC

1607 New Hampshire
Ave NW
Washington DC
20009

+1.202.387.3355

Fax +1.202.483.3430

First Annual Convention Report Black German Heritage & Research Association

By Priscilla Layne and S. Marina Jones

The First Annual Black German Heritage & Research Association Convention was an important opportunity for scholars, students, and individuals personally affected by Afrogerman history and culture, from both sides of the Atlantic, to come together. Participants included numerous members of the Afrogerman community, many of whom are themselves scholars, authors, filmmakers, and activists.

UWE SPIEKERMANN, Deputy Director of the German Historical Institute, and PIA BUNGARTEN, the Friedrich-

Ebert-Stiftung Representative to the U.S. and Canada, welcomed participants to the pre-conference program on Thursday evening, a screening of the documentary film *Roots Germania* (2007) directed by Afrogerman filmmaker MO ASUMANG, followed by a lecture by ASUMANG herself and a Q&A session. In *Roots, Germania*, ASUMANG traces her German and African roots and interrogates notions of German identity and belonging.

HARTMUT BERGHOFF, Director of the German Historical Institute, introduced

the first session the next evening, in which DAVID ROWLAND, a board member of the Humanities Council of Washington, D.C., presented the “Champion of the Humanities Award” to HANS J. MASSAQUOI, JR., on behalf of his father, HANS J. MASSAQUOI, SR. The award honored HANS J. MASSAQUOI, SR. for his lifetime achievements, including working as the editor of *Ebony* magazine for thirty years and writing a seminal novel about growing up Black during Nazi Germany, *Destined to Witness*.

NOAH SOW then delivered the keynote, “Geteilte Geschichte:

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Germany and the US,” in which she reflected on the ties between Afrogermans who were displaced and sent to live in the U.S. via transnational adoptions and the Afrogermans who remained but were “internally displaced” – that is, they felt they did not belong to the German community. SOW stressed the sense of loss younger Afrogermans feel from the older generation’s absence: they could have served as role models and helped confirm that Afrogerman history goes “way back.”

Presentations then began on Saturday August 20th with the panel discussion “Black Experiences before WWII.” Both WILLIAM STRICKLAND and ALMICAR SHABAZZ focused on W. E. B. DuBois’s fascination with Germany and his experiences there as a student of Humboldt University in Berlin from 1892 to 1894. STRICKLAND’S paper unearthed evidence of Du Bois’s growing interest in Germany and respect for Bismarck’s successful unification of the nation in his work at Fisk University. Intrigued by German immigrants to the South who were not supportive of the discriminatory laws towards African Americans, DuBois believed Germans treated African Americans like human beings and judged them by their character and not their race. Seeking a higher degree from Germany’s renowned universities, DuBois appealed to German statesmen for support, believing that he could prove “Negroes” equal standing to white men with his academic achievements. Reflecting on DuBois’s middle-class dress, education, and mastery of the German language, SHABAZZ suggested these characteristics may have helped him integrate into German society so well. SHABAZZ’S presentation included an introduction to Credo, an online repository launched in July 2011 that features published and unpublished texts written by and about W. E. B. DuBois (<http://credo.library.umass.edu/>). The panel concluded with DAN LEE’S discussion of the limits of comparing Jim Crow segregation to the policies implemented in the German Empire’s African colonies in the nineteenth century. While whites in both situations used developing legal means to legalize racial discrimination, the purpose of such discrimination laws was different in the two countries. In German South-West Africa, they were introduced to control white men’s sexual relations with Black women, whereas Jim Crow laws sought to secure the gender and racial superiority of white men.

The second panel carried forth the topic of “Black Experiences before WWII.” Continuing with LEE’S discussion of Germany’s African colonies, JAMES K. BLACKWELL addressed the construction of Blackness in Friedrich Meister’s *Muherero riKarera* (Herero Watch Out, 1904), a children’s colonial novel. BLACKWELL interpreted the novel as a training guide intended to prepare German children to conquer their fears by learning to dominate the Black man. Meister’s practice of associating Black men with evil, darkness,

danger, and barbarism helped plant the seeds of racism in children early on. ROBERT WESLEY MUNRO then considered the overwhelmingly positive accounts of Germany relayed by African American intellectuals who visited during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. MUNRO investigated whether these lesser-known Black intellectuals actually encountered no racism or whether they simply failed to perceive it in their accounts. MUNRO concluded that Germany was perhaps more welcoming of African Americans because those present were often middle-class, entertainers or students, and transient, so that their presence would not alter the physical appearance of Germany nor challenge the assumption that Germany was inherently white.

In the afternoon, there were two panels on “Race and Gender in Postwar Germany” focusing on the significance of intersectionality for the experiences of Black Germans and African Americans. S. MARINA JONES examined “Afro(americo)philia,” which found its strongest expression in 1960s and 1970s’ West Germany and whether it extended to Afrogermans. While the West German student movement embraced Blackness and sought to align itself with the African American Civil Rights struggle and Black liberation movements in general, this “Afro(americo)philia” did not translate into an increased acceptance of “domestic blackness.”

Like ROBERT WESLEY MUNRO, KIRA THURMAN raised the concern that many issues pertaining to the cultural transfer between African Americans and Germans remain unexplored. While she acknowledged the wealth of research that has addressed the reception of Black popular culture in Germany, THURMAN specifically looked at representations of Black female artists who participate in “high culture,” i.e., opera and classical music. Examining the discourse around African American opera singers like Camilla Williams and Leontyne Price who performed in Vienna in the 1950s, THURMAN found that their negative or positive reception depended on whether the role they played was considered appropriate for a Black woman.

The panel closed with TIFFANY FLORVIL’s paper “‘A Covenant on Women-Bonding’: Kinship, Friendship and Belonging,” which focused on the emergence of an Afrogerman movement in the 1980s and female bonding as an essential aspect thereof. Afrogerman women, inspired by the African American feminist poet and writer Audre Lorde, established an Afrogerman movement by bonding and forging a sense of shared identity, belonging, and community they had never before experienced.

The second afternoon panel began with PEGGY PIESCHE’s paper “Without the Master’s Tool: Audre Lorde’s

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Black Internationalism and Black German Feminists –

A Transnational Shift of Diaspora.” PIESCHE stressed the importance of African American women getting beyond an American-centered way of thinking and to looking beyond their borders to see what they could learn from their sisters abroad in Lorde’s perspective. Lorde coined the term “connected differences” to demonstrate that, despite the common experiences women of the African diaspora share globally, there are also relevant local differences and histories that cannot be ignored.

NKECHI MADUBUKO’S paper, “The Importance of Race in the German Labor Market: Acculturative Stress of/in Afrogermans,” presented some results of the research she did for her dissertation. MADUBUKO interviewed two groups, Afrogermans and people of European descent (Turkish, Italian, Spanish). All of her interviewees were highly qualified with university degrees, thus countering the assumption that people in Germany with a background of migration were generally uneducated and could not easily integrate into the German labor market or society at large. Based on her interviews, MADUBUKO created a typology for acculturation stress and found that its causes were often white German prejudices towards foreigners but especially towards Africans, the preferential treatment of white German employees over

“Geteilte Geschichte: The Black Experience in Germany and the US”

employees with an African migration background, and the lack of an ethnic network or relatives who could provide support.

In the next panel on “Transatlantic Adoption,” YARA-COLETTE LEMKE MUNIZ DE FARIA presented some results of her empirical study of 188 transatlantic adoptions that took place from 1945 to 1960. Specifically, she reflected on the irony inherent in scholars having general access to such files while the subjects they study do not. She stressed the importance of scholars sharing their research and making it more accessible to the community, so that it can benefit both parties.

Connected to YARA-COLETTE LEMKE MUNIZ DE FARIA’S call for more research and for accessibility to research studies, SILKE HACKENESCH’S and NADINE GOLLY’S presentations focused on the adoptees’ fate in the U.S. and Denmark. The panel thus illustrated the lacunae in scholarship on the so-called brown babies and with them the need for scholars to address adoptions of Afrogerman children by citizens of other countries and look into whether there were also adoption campaigns for “brown babies” born in Japan, Korea, or Italy.

In cooperation with the Humanities Council of Washington, DC, the convention featured an award ceremony for Hans J. Massaquoi, who was given the “Champion of the Humanities Award” in honor of his lifetime achievements as an author, journalist, and cultural ambassador. Accepting the award at the convention on behalf of Mr. Massaquoi was his son, Hans J. Massaquoi Jr.



The second conference day began with a panel on “Civil Rights in Transatlantic Perspective.” REBECCA BRÜCKMANN examined Germans’ reactions to the desegregation crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, which ranged from condemnations of segregation that appealed to Christianity or moral grounds to articles that mocked African American leaders and letters that supported governor Orval Faubus’s actions. BRÜCKMANN emphasized that a degree of paternalism, racist undertones, and the failure to acknowledge the voice and agency of Black people characterized even the German comments that supported desegregation and Blacks’ constitutional rights.

Both PRISCILLA LAYNE and KIMBERLY SINGLETARY addressed a German fetishism of African Americans that is closely tied to the Soul culture of the 1960s and 1970s. LAYNE did a close reading of the portrayal of Black men in Lothar Lambert’s film *I Berlin Harlem* (1975), which follows the tribulations of an African American GI who decides to stay in Berlin after he is discharged from the army. She argued that, although the film itself is guilty of racial fetishism to a certain degree, it is also critical of Germans’ fascination with Blacks and Black culture and their failure to recognize their own white privilege. SINGLETARY analyzed instances in the German media where African American women are hypersexualized and marked by a “retro” aesthetic of the 60s and 70s. SINGLETARY argued that this transforms them into objects to be collected and devoured, and that their confinement to a specific time makes them both “safe” to consume and incapable of change.

During the convention, participants had the opportunity to hear the experiences of Afrogermans born in Germany and raised in the U.S. as well as learn about Afrogerman lives in



“This event is evidence that the Schwarze Deutsche Bewegung (Black German Movement) continues and I am certain that this is only the first of many conventions. “

**Remarks of
The Honorable Congressman
Alcee L. Hastings
Ranking Member, Helsinki
Commission Delivered by Dr. Mischa
Thompson**

Germany. While the keynote addressed the latter part, the second panel on Sunday, “Sharing Our Stories,” gave rare insight into personal histories of Afrogermans who came to the U.S. at an early age. DEBRA TANNER-ABELL relayed her truly transnational family narrative as well as pictures of her parents and siblings and their lives in both Germany and the U.S. in a slideshow. VERA INGRID GRANT then presented a fictionalized version of her transnational experiences in an excerpt of a novel she is currently writing entitled *Paper Girl: A Novel*, in which a young girl explores her past while writing an imaginary story of papermaking. Both TANNER-ABELL’S and GRANT’S stories demonstrated the need for personal accounts of and insights into the histories of Afrogermans born after World War II.

In the next presentation, “The African Identity in Germany Today,” ADETOUN KÜPPERS-ADEBISI argued that there are three identities in Germany: mainstream (= original

Germans), minority (= Turkish community), and marginalized (= Black Germans, for example). According to KÜPPERS-ADEBISI, Turks are accepted as a minority in Germany and were awarded a prize by ENAR (European Network Against Racism) for referring to themselves as People of Color (POC). But in doing so, they rendered the marginalized identity of Afrogermans invisible as it became subsumed by the minority identity, especially since members of the African Diaspora in Germany—both with and without German citizenship—are not officially recognized as a minority. Numerous publications and web initiatives by African migrants attempt to provide more in-depth information about the African continent in general and life in Germany in particular.

However, the term Afrogerman is too narrowly defined because it does not include African migrants. In her view, the term “Afropean” better reflects the identity of African migrants in Europe.

COVER IMAGE

On Friday, August 19, 2011, on the invitation of Dr. Mischa Thompson of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, a delegation of Black Germans met on Capitol Hill to discuss issues of concern to Black Germans.

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Closing the panel, CLAUDIA SEELE presented the results of her M.A. thesis, “Young Children’s Ethnifying Practices: An Ethnographic Research in a Daycare Center in Berlin.” The four- to six-year-old children interviewed were born and raised in Germany, yet most of them would be regarded as “migrant children” or “children with a background of migration” in the dominant discourse in German society. SEELE argued that these children thus come to function as “the Other” in the construction of a normative understanding of “German children.” Family origins, language, and physical appearance act as important criteria in this practice of ethnifying children. She averred that ethnicity is not a pre-determined fact but practically accomplished and negotiated in children’s social interactions.

The conference concluded with a panel on “Organizing Ourselves,” in which several participants shared how they have helped bring German Studies to more African American students and helped raise issues pertaining to people of color within German Studies. CLAUDIA BECKER relayed how German studies has thrived at her home institution, the historically black college North Carolina Central University in Durham, beginning with its founding in the 1940s by German-Jewish émigré Dr. Ernst Menasse. Over the past four years, the German Program, which attracts majors from History, Sociology, Psychology, and Criminal Justice, saw an increase in student enrollment in the basic German language classes of more than 200 percent. This success is largely thanks to the efforts of BECKER, who, in 2011, became the first tenured full professor of German at NCCU and strives to keep the curriculum aligned with students’ needs.

The panel closed with BECKER, LEROY HOPKINS, and JANICE MITCHELL introducing the committee “Alle lernen Deutsch.” “Alle lernen Deutsch” is an arm of the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG) and seeks, among other things, to increase the number of African American students taking German, encourage these students to study abroad, and provide them with more curricula that address the Afrogerman experience. Among the committee’s accomplishments, “Alle lernen Deutsch” established a 3-year grant seminar in Berlin that was open to twenty high school and university educators seeking to improve their intercultural competence in order to teach German language and culture courses that better acknowledge Afro-Europeans and other minorities often marginalized in German courses. MITCHELL, HOPKINS, and BECKER stressed the interdisciplinary nature of their efforts and the need for more outreach across the Atlantic, including sharing scholarly work, personal stories, and strategies for dealing with racist attitudes.

Well attended, the conference boasted renowned scholars in the fields of Afrogerman and African American culture and history and several artists, journalists, and local residents, some of whom were Afrogermans or had served in the US Army in Germany. The wide range of participants, activities, and subjects addressed reflected the goal of bridging the gap between scholarly work about the Afrogerman community and activism and personal experience within it. The lively discussions sparked throughout the weekend testify to the importance of such transnational and interdisciplinary inquiry and the continuing need for further investigations into Afrogermans’ rich history and the impact the Afrogerman community has had on both sides of the Atlantic.





“Let us listen and learn.

And testify.

And respect each other.

And you cannot explain me.

And I will not explain you.

It is still as crucial as always that we tell our own stories.

That is what we came here for, after all.”

Noah Sow



“Geteilte Geschichte” Irmgard and James W. Tanner Memorial Lecture

I am happy to be here today and very proud to be a part of this historic event. I will speak about our geteilte Geschichte.

The German word *geteilt* has different meanings, some of which are actually opposites. *Geteilt* means shared and at the same time it also means divided, separated. The word *Geschichte* means history.

Geteilte Geschichte. There couldn't be a better term to sum up how and why we wound up here together, why this congress is taking place, and why I love the German language. It is our *geteilte Geschichte*, our shared history, which also divided us.

Now, what exactly are the things we share? This is not quite as easy to answer as it may seem at first glance. “We're all Black, and we're all German,” you could say. Yeah. Well.

Who is Black? What is Black? This discussion is so old that I'll keep it real short. Every person can call themselves whatever they like to call themselves.

I can call myself Hildegard Princess of Power. But this does not give me the experience of an actual Princess let alone a Princess of Power. It is not about what I'd like to be or what somebody thinks I am.

The way I use the word Black is: as an experience. And a global standpoint. A political term. All I have to know is: am I Black? And I think I know that already.

What and who is German? That is even more complicated because you can be German without having any German experience.

When you look to the German constitution, it is only the passport that makes you German.

When you ask the Germans who live in Germany, they'll find what makes you German is the passport and the language and to be white. One of those not happening, you're not German. This belief prevails to the extent that some even have the opinion that there can't be racism in Germany as no Black Germans exist.

I, too, grew up with this German preconception. Of course, I knew that you can be German and Black at the same time, but the passport and the language thing—I had simply never thought about it.

Then a funny thing happened. This was in 2004, when I lived in New York. I went to the Steuben Parade for the first time. With me was a white German friend.

A young guy came up to us who was really enthusiastic about being German. "You guys also German?" he asked us.

I said, "Yeah, and you?"

He said, "I'm SO German!"

I said, "Cool, was geht ab, was machste hier, studieren oder Urlaub oder was?" He said, "Come again??"

I said, "You ... do speak German, right?"

He said, "No. But I want to learn it!"

I said, "Wow! Were you adopted or something? What brought you here? Where are your parents?"

He said, "Naw, my great-grandparents were German, so I'm German, and I'm proud of it. I started a group of young Germans in New Jersey. Why don't you come join us?"

I thought to myself: this guy may be a lot of things. But not German.

At the same time, I was aware that this was the first time I had a white kid who was "proud to be German" (I'm sure you all know about the connotations of this phrase) invite me to a meeting of young ... Germans? instead of suggesting that I can not be German because I'm Black.

And I was thinking about him, "You don't know the language, so you can't be German." I wasn't thinking.

But the most interesting reactions were from the people around us. The Germans with me said, "This guy's a loonie and clearly not German." They had been brought up with the same preconceptions as I. Some other Germans from Europe who were not my friends started laughing at me for claiming to be German.

And the Germans from the United States asked me all kinds of questions about Germany, what's it like, are there forests, and so on.

If you asked me today who's German, I'd say, "It depends on your personal history."

You can clearly belong to several places, several countries, several families at the same time. We all know that.

You can belong—even if it goes against a whole nation's definition and understanding of itself.

To belong is a very private thing.

I can live all my life in this country and belong to another country—where my parents came from. Or I can live all my life in this country and not belong because I'm just not feeling it.

Or I can move some place and feel after a few years, or even instantly, that now, I belong here.

What I am trying to say is: Nobody gets to determine where you belong.

You can be refused a passport, a nationality, a place to live,

acknowledgment of your history, denied human rights, all of that. And we have all personally experienced this.

But you cannot be refused belonging.

There is no certification for belonging.

Oh, I could draw something and hand it out to you, no problem, but I am not the authority on where you come from, or where you belong.

And can nobody else determine where I belong.

Those times are over.

Let me tell you a few things about Germany that you possibly haven't heard yet. It is easy to learn the good things about Germany; everybody will volunteer to tell you the positive stuff, the nice buildings, the high living standard for some people, and so on. There are many good things about Germany. But I'm not here to brag about. I'm here to put our experience into context. And the Black German Experience goes—as you probably figure—beyond gingerbread houses, beer gardens, and hiking.

Germany has a long history of conquering and being conquered, and as it is a country in the middle of Europe, with buoyant harbors and strong trade, it has never been an isolated country.

So of course there has always been extensive migration and cultural exchange from inside and outside of Europe into and from Germany.

Moreover, Germany is a federation of 16 states, roughly based on the biggest local tribes. These states are called Bundesländer, which literally translates as federal countries. So Germany is intrinsically multi-ethnic, and it always has been.

Unfortunately, however, the majority likes to think even today that Germany and the Germans are something homogeneous. Incidentally, white. Germany likes to imagine itself as white. This fantasy overrules logic, law, history, and reality to this day.

A common feeling among Germans is: "I

“Geteilte Geschichte”

don't know who we Germans are! But certainly not Black!” And in perpetuating this fantasy, this image, Germany is very successful.

Most people in the world do not know that Germany is not and never was entirely white. Today, cautious estimates come to the conclusion that more than one percent of Germans are Black. A million people. A lot of people—not counting the ones who live in Germany with another passport. 20 percent of all Germans have direct ancestors from outside Germany. Moreover, most people around the world cannot believe what they hear and see when they first learn about how far back Black German history reaches.

Germany has a severe and hurtful colonial past—and issues acknowledging this past, or dealing with its cause and effects. In the early colonial times, as well as during the Nationalsozialismus, Black people were institutionally dehumanized and killed, put in concentration camps, robbed of their human rights. Germany still has a hard time tackling the underlying racism on which the ideologies behind these acts could build. The United Nations had to reprimand Germany, twice in the last five years, for its insufficient engagement against racism and for its insufficient acknowledgement that racism actually exists.

Colonial images and stereotypes remain intact, untackled, and continue to spread. To this day, we are exposed to Jim Crow-like and other racist images and stereotypes on a daily basis. In schoolbooks, in childrens' books, in nursery rhymes, in the media—as part of the German tradition. The core of structural racism is not being fought on an institutional level. People of Color in Germany continue to be attacked and killed by racist mobs—and those crimes are not even considered hate crimes.

There are No Go Areas for us in our own country.

Here's a quote from a paper by the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung: “The histories, culture, and political struggles of black foreign nationals in Germany today are tolerated ... by the liberal, white German Left; however, the recognition and acceptance of an Afrogerman legacy among the German Volk is a much harder task for white Germans. Blacks are still perceived as interesting guests at best, but increasingly they, like other

perceived foreigners, are seen as guests who have worn out their welcome. This is the backdrop against which Afrogermans announce their identity and assert their history.”

There are certain spaces that are assigned to me based upon goodwill. The rooms in which I am welcome in Germany are generally remote from intellect, any kind of control, power, or self-determination. If I want any of that, I'll have to fight hard for it and may or may not succeed. To this day, Black people in Germany are conspicuously encouraged to pursue a career in show business or the service and catering industry, kept from the academic path if possible. I was strongly advised to become a seamstress when I was in high school. Nothing wrong with becoming a seamstress, but believe me, this is not where my talents lie. I would make a terrible seamstress. There is no institutional support, no institutional empowerment network for us in Germany. No university program, no scholarship to try to soothe or counteract a history of oppression.

Many Afrodeutsche in my generation grew up with a single white parent—mostly the mother—and many with hardly any other Black person around or even in sight. Not in their family, not in their school, not in their town. Of course, this influences a child's focus, self-perception, and identification.

Hundreds of thousands of Black kids in Germany had to—and many still have to—find out for themselves where they belong, how they can define themselves, if they have to define themselves in any way—would they rather not define themselves at all or maybe only say, “This is me.” And not as an imposed exotic identity, or an allegiance to a nationality that is considered paradoxical to their appearance and has an exclusive conception of who can actually belong at all. And how can they stop constantly being defined as wrong, other, inferior?

Thandie Newton recently said in a speech, “I was other before being anything else. Even before being a girl.”

I'm afraid this sentence rang a bell for some of us.

I am constantly being told what I am and what I am not; therefore, it is indispensable, it's crucial that I correct and dismiss all these external attempts at defining me.

I say what and who I am.

And for one, I am a Black German Woman.

So much about Germany. And about me.

Now, I cannot tell you what it is like to grow up in the United States because I didn't grow up in the United States.

I cannot describe your history, your experience, your present.

If I want to find out more about you, then I can only read up on your stories, and maybe ask you to share your thoughts, your knowledge. I can listen. And learn. I have no idea what it's like to have been solidly, physically displaced from your own country, your own town, your own family of birth.

I owe it to Rosemarie Peña and the openness with which she shares her life story that I was able to get a first glimpse into one of the biographies of the Black Germans who grew up outside Germany.

You Black Germans outside Germany have distinct biographies. But you also have something in common in your personal history: you went away.

Some of you were lucky enough to leave the country of your own accord.

Some of you were displaced, abducted, taken against your will from your home country when you were little children.

Germany decided after (!) World War II—with right- and left-wing political parties in agreement on this point—that it did not want Black children in its new model democracy. You were expelled from your own country because Germans cannot be Black, and you just happened to be: Black Germans.

Had you been tourists, you could have stayed. Had you been white, you could have stayed. But your flaw was that you DID belong. Germany would not tolerate this, and still has a hard time tolerating it today. Some of you remain staatenlos to this day, without nationality, without constitutional rights.

Some of you, of the Black German children in the 1950s and 60s, were given away for adoption to Scandinavia, and some were brought to the United States of America—depending, among other things, on how dark or light your skin was.

The United States' reaction to the German wish to get rid of the Black German children was not a unanimous one. There were different opinions in the US. One was: “No way. It is racist and cruel to take Black children away from their mothers and give them up for adoption to a faraway land. We should not play a part in this arrangement!” Another reaction was: “This country Germany is so obviously racist that no Black child can safely grow up there; you send us those kids alright and we'll take good care of them.”

Today, fifty years later, I'm thinking maybe they both were right.

This is the history we share.

I will not try to compare tragedy.

Let us never try to compare pain.

Even though we have different experiences, we now know that they are closely connected.

We have all been displaced.

Some of us were physically abducted from our own country. Some of us were expelled from the country, internally. We have been divided so forcefully, ruthlessly, that even most of us, Black Germans, are not aware, or are just now beginning to realize, that our whole history, including our own personal history, has been obscured.

But what lies hidden will not go away by not looking.

It will stay.

We are well aware that it is there.

Some of us, in fact more and more, are summoning the courage to carefully take a look.

One piece of the puzzle at a time.

This is the work you are doing right now. Right here.

It is very personal and intimate work.

The work we Black Germans in Germany do is another piece of this puzzle. Step by step, we are coming to understand that there is a reason, a link to why our older generations in Germany grew up isolated, alienated from other Black people—with the same pain and the key question that could not and cannot be safely enunciated, “You all do not identify with me. Where can I find somebody who does? And whom I can identify with?”

We are coming to understand why this has been so. Why most of the Black German kids in the 1970s and 1980s didn't have anybody to turn to.

Because they had taken you away.

You would have been our sisters, our mothers, our aunts. Our teachers, our deans, our doctors, our librarians, our social workers, our judges, our pilots, our nurses, our neighbors. We've been missing you a great deal.

There are younger Black generations in Germany who are growing up with Black parents, relatives, role models, teachers. Thank God. But you know what? That doesn't change the fact that you're missing, and that we miss you.

Now, we did not learn any of this in school, right?

There's a universal knowledge gap going on.

Yeah. And some of us are fighting hard to change that.

But all of this is only a part of our history.

I read something very smart and relevant in the blog of a Black German teacher named Patrick: “Black History

He's so right!

Of course, the Black German experience is not solely a painful one.

There is something else we do not learn at school, and it's not something sad and depressing, but something exciting and uplifting. It is the fact that—you'll have to stay strong now; I hope you're sitting firmly in your seats—it is the fact that Black people in Germany go way back. Way longer than the arrival of American armed forces in WWII or French armed forces in WWI. So many people think and like to think that the Black European presence is something relatively new, owing to aviation, American GIs and all that modern stuff.

So wrong.
We go way back.

Let me give you a handful examples. I hope you enjoy them as much as I do. Here's a little gallery of Black Europeans going way back.

[picture of Septimius Severus statue on screen]

In the military of the Roman Empire, there was a considerable number of Black soldiers. Legions from as early as the year 36 B.C. were comprised of African soldiers, among others. The Roman Emperor Septimius Severus was a Black man. He was born in the year 146, in the city of Leptis Magna, in the Roman province of Africa, now Libya. He became the head of a family dynasty that led to more emperors among his descendants—for example, the Emperor Caracalla—who governed in Europe and far beyond.

Another brother: Alessandro De Medici, Count of Florence, Italy, in the early sixteenth century, was one of the first Black heads of a European state, if you don't count the three African popes that lived before him.

[picture of Alessandro De Medici portrait painting on screen]



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Noah Sow

Another man from Germany who can't remain unmentioned is the Black lawyer and philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo from the University of Halle. He wrote a scientific paper about the legal status of Black Europeans in the year 1729.

He clearly was not the first one.

Because there was no first one.

We have always been there.

[picture of Charlotte Sophia portrait painting on screen]

Meet sister Queen Charlotte Sophia, born the princess of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, a German woman in the eighteenth century. She is related to a Black family of the Portuguese Royal House, one of her ancestors being Margarita de Castro y Sousa. This Charlotte Sophia married George III of England in 1761. And she became the Queen Of England. She was an amateur botanist and introduced the Christmas tree to England. She is the great-great-great-grandmother of Queen Elizabeth II of England. You can even see a

resemblance in some portraits... The City of Charlotte in North Carolina was named in her honor.

Right now, this summer, is the 250th anniversary of Charlotte Sophia's coronation. The German Bundesland of Mecklenburg is celebrating, and proud of her heritage. Her German heritage, that is. No word of her Black ancestry. Although this would mean so much to many Afrogerman children today. I'd say 99 percent of all people don't know about this royal ancestry.

We go way back. All the examples that I just mentioned were Black Europeans or Germans even before Germany was called Germany. So how can one think that our nationality is or ever was purely white.

One of the publications of the German Historical Institute is a book called Germany and the Black Diaspora: Points of Contact, 1250–1914. I would say there's a reason this forthcoming publication will first be issued by an American press and not in Berlin, Munich, or Frankfurt, Germany.

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There is work to do. We are uncovering our own history, slowly, each generation anew. Black European historians and scientists have been doing this work over and over again, for centuries.

To compensate for all that has been effaced from the history books—concerning our history—there is an exhibition called “Homestory Deutschland,” which I strongly suggest you visit or get the catalogue for. It is the first exhibition that puts Black German biographies from multiple centuries into context, along with a historical timeline of Black presence in Germany.

I learned so much from this exhibition. I have seen it in Germany, in several cities, as well as in Dakar, Senegal. Reactions to it have always been the same. “Can this be true? We go way back!”

Yes it's true. We are no incidents, coincidences. We have roots there. We have folks there. We belong. We always have. And we ourselves, as we sit here today, are living proof. No matter where we've been taken, or where we choose to live. I cherish this exhibition and its timetable so much that I asked for permission to include it in my book *Deutschland Schwarz Weiß*. I'm grateful that it worked out. But you're not going to find the portraits of the people over the centuries in my book—only in the exhibition's catalogue, so do check it out.

Of course, there is also a lot about Black North American history that we're not taught in school. For example, that the Black North American experience is not a homogeneous one either. I have an aunt from Mali who moved to New York several years ago. She is American now. Her experience is different from Puff Daddy's experience. Barack Obama's experience, coming from a multicultural family with a Kenyan father, is different from that of my friend Tuli who hasn't stepped out of Brooklyn for twenty years. Or of my friend Sabin, who is Moroccan and Swedish and from Los Angeles. Or of you, the Black Germans who were brought to the US as children.

There is no universal Black experience in the US. But there are communities. There is a present that we share. There are some experiences that we share.

Please let's admit and embrace the abundance of our histories. The Black German heritage and experience have always been diverse.

What other things are there that we Black Germans can be proud of? I know something.

In the 1980s, Afrogerman people in Germany started meeting up with an agenda. They exchanged experiences, formed a community, teamed up for a mutual movement. This was mostly upon the initiative and under the guidance of Afrogerman women. There has also been some exchange and contact with sisters from the United States, for example, Angela Davis.

We owe the Black civil rights movement in Germany after WWII predominantly to strong women. You have no idea, or maybe you do, how many issues of domination and oppression this has spared us. We did not even begin a struggle for heterosexual men's rights. We fought for every Black person's rights. This turned out to be a big advantage. We still cash in on the multiple benefits that derived from the fact that it was a group of empowered and empowering, emancipated women leading the German Black Rights movement. We profit from this on an academic level, in our community, and in our families! It makes such a difference.

Thank you, Ladies, many of whom joined in the organization of ADEFRA.

More good stuff: we keep creating safe places, and more and more of them.

There is a Black Community weekend retreat in Germany every year called the *Bundestreffen*. It's been going on for over twenty-five years now. Let me show you a short clip for you to get an idea.

[VIDEO 25 Jahre Bundestreffen]

If you haven't been to Germany yet, but you'd like to visit, this would probably be a good place to start. That's what Grace Armstrong did. She visited in 2008 for the first time, together with Rosemarie Peña. She'll tell you in her own words.

[VIDEO: GRACE interview at Bundestreffen]

I know grown-up people whose parents met at a *Bundestreffen* more than 20 years ago. That makes for a whole generation with a whole new somebody else said it better than me, in his own words.

[Statement from Video trailer for the film “*Mein Viertel 100*” from Julie Rivera] I would call this an achievement.

This last short statement was from the trailer of the new documentary called “*My Quarter Century – Mein Viertel 100*” by Julie Rivera; the premiere was just last week. And I think Sebastian, the man from the video clip, is so right.

Today, I no longer need an external reference to understand who I am, what is my history, what is my heritage, where I belong. I am not a child anymore.

I choose my environment.

I do not need to wait outside the house of an oppressor and ask him pretty please, why won't you accept me as an equal, why do you discriminate against me... because I do not need his acceptance. I couldn't care less about why he doesn't like me or what he thinks of me at all.

I have a whole group of people that matter.

It is the achievement of the people who have built the Black community in Germany since the 1980s that this feeling of belonging is even possible for me.

Yeah, I have been displaced. But I've also been retrieved.

Plus, I have another definition for displaced—a positive one.

It says: I am no longer dependent on a place.

Because I take my space with me.

This is my house tonight.

My place is potentially everywhere.

In a chatroom. At a convention. At Roscoe's. At the Bundestreffen.

At certain universities. In some galleries. At many concerts.

And isn't that a typical Black German strategy?

Because we are so diverse, we have direct access to multiple perspectives.

So many places.

The tools we use for empowerment, for expressing ourselves, come from all over the world. And these tools we learned firsthand.

Spoken word traditions from Bavaria. Poetry in West-African meter. Science and research from Timbuktu, Addis Ababa, Accra, and London. Hip Hop from the US. Creative writing from

Algeria and Sudan. Children's games from Cameroon and Nigeria. Strategies of resistance from Togo and South Africa. We learned so much from our grandparents, uncles, cousins, and best friends.

Of course, being Black is not just about adversity.

It is also about diversity, history, and an incredible richness of cultures and perspectives.

So what should we do with each other now?

Well what do you think? We've already begun. We're talking. And listening.

And learning from each other.

Before we can educate others about our history, we must educate ourselves.

This is what we're doing at this convention. And hopefully thereafter.

There is much to learn about the Afrodeutsche Civil Rights Movement.

Read May Ayim's books and learn about ADEFRA and ISD.

There are great theories and works about civil rights in the US.

We all should read bell hooks!

With all due respect. These books, these works, are important.

Our stories are being told and written by all kinds of people, and nowadays you can get a fancy degree if you try to tell my story. (You'll get your degree alright. But it won't mean much. It will not count where it really counts.)

There is a lecture I frequently hold. It is called "Seven Indications of Suppressive Discourse." The indications apply everywhere. And also here. Among our two countries, the US is the dominant one. Compared to Germany, the US has prevalence, more worldwide attention, more power.

With this comes a side effect that is often ignored. And I want to talk about it openly.

Incidentally, we can create suppressive systems for each other.

Out of our own pain, out of our own want, we are capable of running over the pain and want of the next person. The dominant group much more so than the group who is being listened to significantly less frequently.

We must not exoticize each other.

We are not each other's native informants.

We cannot invade each other's experience and interpretation thereof.

Because experience is not negotiable.

I do have a suggestion for how to solve this, how to prevent us from running over each other.

You know the saying, "Nothing about us without us is for us"?

I'd love to make a deal with you all tonight. It goes as follows.

Let us listen and learn.

And testify.

And respect each other.

And you cannot explain me.

And I will not explain you.

It is still as crucial as always that we tell our own stories.

That is what we came here for, after all.

Now, in order to make the Geteilte Geschichte a shared history, for the future:

I think right now we are at the point where we've been meeting a long lost sister for the first time, and now we'll have to decide how and where the relationship should go. Of course, I have an idea about how I want it to go. And hopes and dreams about us in the future.

“Geteilte Geschichte”

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Noah Sow

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Through whose eyes do we see ourselves.
Or, more accurately for our situation: Through what kind of eyes do we see each other?

While we hope for appreciation and understanding, from our countries, communities and families, we need to accept ourselves. And learn to understand each other.

Which is actually the same thing.

Black German Heritage & Research Association (BGHRA)

Rosemarie Peña,
Founder & President

www.blackgermans.us
bgcsinc@gmail.com

