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Reading the “Schwarz” in the “Schwarz-Rot-Gold”: Black German Studies in the 21st Century

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“Noch alle Tassen im Schrank?” tweeted Timm Klotzek in response to *Focus* magazine’s black-and-white cover photo depicting a naked white woman with black handprints all over her body (“Rassistische Titelbilder”). The image accompanied the lead article from 8 January 2016, which purported to document “die Straftaten eines enthemmten Mobs” on New Year’s Eve in Cologne and thereby disclose the full truth which, the magazine claimed, had been withheld from the public (“Die Nacht der Schande”). Hence the irony that Klotzek’s own publication, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*’s weekend magazine, came under fire the very next day for its own choice of visual representation of the events in Cologne: a graphic *Kippbild*, or reversible figure, a black-and-white image depicting the lower half of a woman (white) defined by a (black) arm and hand reaching upwards to create the illusion of legs and genital area.

The question of what was actually being represented and how it was being read became the subject of hot debate in the days that followed. Sonja Álvarez of *Der Tagesspiegel* argued that *Focus*’s choice of a black and white photo “offensichtlich stellvertretend für das schwarz-weiß Denken der Titel-Gestalter steht. Keine Hautfarbe färbt ab! Die ‘Focus’-Darstellung bedient deshalb das rassistische Klischee vom bösen, schwarzen Mann, der sich an der weißen Frau vergreift.” In his apology from 11 January, the editor-in-chief of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* appeared to agree with this reading. Posting on Facebook, where the image had appeared as a title image (rather than the small insert it had actually been in the print edition), Wolfgang Krach conceded that the graphic “‘bedient stereotype Bilder vom <schwarzen Mann>, der einen <weißen Frauenkörper> bedrängt’” and thus could be construed as correlating “‘sexuelle Gewalt mit Hautfarbe’” (Álvarez). In contrast, Ulrich Reitz, editor-in-chief at *Focus*, defended his publication’s choice of cover image, maintaining that the intention had been “symbolisch darzustellen, was in Köln geschah” (“Seximus-Vorwürfe”). However, as “Heiko” asked on 22 January, 2016 in response to a blog entry on *Design Tagebuch*, would the effect have been the same had the color scheme been reversed? (Schaffirinna).[1]

Sometimes we wish that a particular past did not have a future. Moreover, as the symposium “The Future of the Past” demonstrated, more often than not, the future of the past is ambivalent, multi-faceted, and occasionally volatile. Certainly for those who believed that images such as those that came to represent the events of 31 December, 2015 in Cologne belonged solidly to Germany’s past, this debate merely underscores the

[1] Achim Schaffirinna points out that the graphic used by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* appears to have been an altered and unacknowledged image commissioned by Gegen Missbrauch e.V. for its 2007 campaign against child abuse in which “[e]ine Konnotierung im Sinne ‘Schwarz=dunkle Hautfarbe’“ is not present.

continuing need to pay close attention to discourses of race, nation, and gender. The dangers that Melissa Eddy cited in her report in *The New York Times* on 5 January 2016 were not merely those "associated with accepting huge numbers of migrants." A major danger lay in the unreflected resuscitation and replaying of deep-seated cultural memories stemming from Germany's colonial past, most particularly evident in the use of the key word "Schande." The deployment of French colonial soldiers from Senegal to the Rhineland in the early 1920s ignited an international hate campaign dubbed "die Schwarze Schmach/die Schwarze Schande am Rhein." This narrative was subsequently embraced and exploited by the National Socialists, who used it to justify the forced sterilization of many of the so-called *Rheinlandbastarde*. And although the soldiers of color in Germany after the Second World War were predominantly American rather than African in origin, their presence nevertheless led to debates—both public and private—about the identity, and appropriate location, of Black German children. As such, the racist overtones of the *Focus/Süddeutsche Zeitung* debate also recall the reasons underlying the establishment of a Black German Studies, and the role that this trio of discourses—race, nation, and gender—played in its birth.

According to a 2012 essay on Deutsche Welle, over half a million of Germany's population are Black Germans ("Afrodeutsche"). The diasporic populations in today's Germany are more diverse than ever before. Many are immigrants and asylum-seekers whose relationship to Africa and other "landing points" in the diaspora differs profoundly from those who founded Black German Studies thirty years ago. And while the questions of inclusion and exclusion that occupied the group of women who initiated the inquiries upon which Black German Studies was established still remain relevant, there is also a need to expand perceptions of race and nation to include religion, cultural habits, and language—a point that Susan C. Anderson made in response to the revision of laws governing German citizenship in the year 2000 (144). Recent events, including the rise of PEGIDA (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes) and AfD (Alternative für Deutschland), have a particularly German history and underscore the urgent need for German Studies, as well as Black German Studies, to continue to rethink the dominate tropes of race and identity. In what follows, I propose looking both to the past and to the future in order to examine how Black German Studies imagines itself today and where it might be going.

Dagmar Schultz' 2012 documentary film *Audre Lorde—Die Berliner Jahre, 1984-1992* provides a good starting point because it is very much of the past insofar as it reinforces what has become the dominant narrative of Black German Studies' origin: the meeting of Afro-Caribbean-American poet and activist Audre Lorde and Black German women in West Berlin during Lorde's guest professorship at the John F. Kennedy Institute for American Studies in 1984. Coinciding with the 20th anniversary of the poet's death in 1992, Schultz' film testifies to the power of Lorde's image, words, and voice by layering video and still images, recorded lectures and poetry readings, public discussions and private meetings with interviews with Lorde's friends, colleagues, and partner Gloria I. Joseph. The editorial hand develops a panegyric narrative that celebrates and enshrines the impact that Audre Lorde had on the creation and development of a community of Black West German women in the 1980s. At the same time, as Frank Mehring has incisively demonstrated, the film is as much an autobiography of the filmmaker Schultz as it is of Audre Lorde and the origins of Black German Studies. Schultz herself had

become involved in both the feminist and the Civil Rights movements in the United States during the 1960s and early 1970s (Schultz 241-42). This double ancestry—of second-wave activist feminism and US-American narratives of the Black Atlantic—has long dominated the field of Black German Studies.

As is the case with all narratives of origin, the one that has defined Black German Studies, also needs, periodically, to be questioned and examined for blind spots. Thus, for example, in her review of Schultz’s film, historian Tiffany Florvil notes the absence of men’s voices in Schultz’ account of the birth of Black German Studies. “Although the documentary is a powerful tribute,” she muses, “one wonders if there were tensions that emerged during Lorde’s time in Berlin. Were the relationships that she cultivated in Berlin without problems? Did all Afro-Germans adopt her ideas? Did Afro-German men, in particular embrace them?” (203). And indeed, from its inception, Black German Studies was dominated by a feminist/womanist focus (based primarily on a US-American paradigm). Furthermore, as a white, US-American *Germanistin,* I am myself acutely aware that, although Schultz’s film invokes the transnational dimensions of Black German Studies, this particular iteration of transnationalism remains solidly grounded in the idea of the Black Atlantic. As George Hutchinson has argued,

> approaches to black transnationalism, from early in the twentieth century to today, have been profoundly shaped by specifically North American assumptions about race and by American economic and institutional power. Issues of racial identity as understood in the United States dominate the semantic field of what we call “black internationalism” obscuring other forms of internationalism as experienced and practiced by black people. (687)

From the encounters between Lorde, self-defined “Black woman, poet, activist, lesbian, mother,” and Black German women was born the virtual Bible of Black German Studies: *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte*. A collection of historical essays, autobiographical narratives, and literary texts, upon its publication *Farbe bekennen* was justifiably hailed as a groundbreaking volume. Of particular importance was the recognition on the part of the authors and editors that “plötzlich entdeckten wir, daß unsere Geschichte nicht erst nach 1945 begann. Vor unseren Augen stand unsere Vergangenheit, die eng verknüpft ist mit der kolonialen und nationalsozialistischen deutschen Geschichte” (Oguntoye, Opitz 9). The most dramatic revelation of *Farbe bekennen* was thus its demonstration that the post-Second World War occupation of Germany was not *the* defining historical moment for all Black Germans, but, rather, that their origins were geographically disparate and historically diffuse. The volume thus effectively displaced the Second World War as the origin of Black German identity and replaced it with excavations of German colonialism, the First World War, and the Weimar Republic.

Autobiography, or “life writing,” was the primary narrative venue through which Black German women expressed themselves in these early years. As the subtitle of the volume announces, it is the search for origins that characterizes most of the narratives of *Farbe bekennen*, and autobiography continues to be the dominant form of expression for many Black German authors. While a powerful tool for the women around Lorde, this focus has also had unforeseen exclusionary repercussions, as it took almost twenty years for the stories of Black German *men* to be heard. With the publication of Hans-Jürgen Massaquoi’s autobiography, *Neger, Neger, Schornsteinfeger* in 1999 (originally

published in English as *Destined to Witness*), Black German men began to tell their stories, much as the women around Lorde had done. Born in Hamburg in 1926, Massaquoi was the son of a Liberian businessman and a German nurse. The publication of his two autobiographies paved the way for other men's narratives, among them Cameroonian-German Theodor Michael's *Deutsch sein und schwarz dazu* and *Wer hat Angst vorm schwarzen Mann* by Buchenwald survivor Gert Schramm. It is striking that all three of these authors, who were born between the World Wars, tend to emphasize their acceptance by their white German communities more than the autobiographical texts by women such as Ika Hügel-Marshall and May Ayim who grew up in Germany during the postwar period.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the unification of East and West Germany, questions about the inclusiveness of German identity re-surfaced with a vengeance. As May Ayim pointedly wrote in her 1992 poem "deutschland im herbst," for Black Germans, unification was not a cause for rejoicing (Ayim, *Weitergehen* 72-74). At the same time, the unification of the two German states also introduced new voices, perspectives, and experiences to Black German Studies, calling upon the field to re-examine its focus and its scope. One example in particular, namely the experiences of the children "rescued" from the former German colony of Namibia in 1979 during the civil war and educated in the German Democratic Republic until 1989, lays bare the limitations of the identification as German only to those born in Germany to a least one German parent. Indeed, texts such as Lucia Engombe's *Kind Nr. 95*, which chronicles her life as one of the "Namibia kids," also engage the idea of culture and habit, in addition to national origin and birth, as aspects of identity and identification. In addition, the stories of Black Germans from former East Germany, such as Abini Zöllner's *Schokoladenkind* which chronicles her growing up Black in the final years of the German Democratic Republic, strikes a very different tone from the one that characterizes the autobiographies of Black German women in the 1980s and 90s, as it asks us to compare her experiences in East Germany to those of Black people in West Germany. Most dramatically, however, the violent attacks on racial "others" in the early years of unification—including the murder of Mozambiquan-German Alberto Adriano in Dessau in 2000—brings into focus the position of contract workers and students from Africa and Asia in the GDR. These stories further expand the scope of the history of the African diaspora in Germany and highlight previously unacknowledged transnational, global connections, which may or may not be linked—directly and indirectly—to Germany's colonial history.

Perhaps the most crucial issue currently facing Black German Studies is one that looks to both the future and the past: who is a Black German today? Unlike the Black Germans who initiated the search for a history of Black Germans, and who were children of previous African diasporas, the new diasporic communities are neither isolated nor do they necessarily identify as German. How do we interpret the writings of today's immigrants to Germany who have left their home countries for a variety of reasons, who are not searching for origins, but who bring their home, at least in part, with them? What does it mean that so many of the texts by Black Germans are now written in English rather than in German? How do we incorporate such texts into a "German Studies" archive? The rise of immigration to Germany, the formation of culturally- and ethnically-grounded immigrant communities within European countries, rather than the presence of a few, isolated individuals born and raised there, and shifting notions of diaspora: these

are the forces and the realities challenging Black German Studies today. While there are scholars such as Dirk Göttsche who are actively seeking out these voices, their incorporation into the archive of Black German Studies has been slow and sporadic.

In the context of new diasporas and migrations, Michelle M. Wright offers a compelling alternative to—rather than a replacement of—what she terms the Middle Passage Epistemology (MPE), that is, a narrative of identity based on the Black Atlantic and the legacy of slavery. Wright describes the Middle Passage as a “necessary epistemology, not least because it lastingly marks the horrific journey and equally horrific enslaved survival,” one that “structures itself as a progress narrative, moving from enslavement toward freedom” (218). However, she also critiques the MPE as being too limited—and limiting—due to its persistent focus on Black American experience to the exclusion of other Black diasporic experiences, black difference, and black agency. Rather than focusing exclusively on the patterns and legacies of the African diaspora to the Americas, particularly to the US, Wright offers a new perspective on the African diaspora with what she calls a “Post War Epistemology” (PWE) that has “no one starting point, nor one geographical centre, nor one overarching interpretation” (221).

Wright’s conceptualization of a Post War Epistemology takes the Second World War as its *axis*, rather than as an originary event. The PWE understands that particular war as itself a projected future of the past, a legacy not only of 1914, but also of the 1884 Berlin Conference. Wright enumerates the advantages of the PWE over the MPE thus:

> By taking wartime as its mediating point—and a global conflict at that—the PWE at once offers an analytical frame that (1) unlike the Middle Passage, includes almost all African and peoples of African descent; (2) offers a broad and decentring range of geographic locations so that, unlike the MPE, looking at blacks in Japan does not strike one as odd or marginal; (3) establishes an amoral space of great complexity that can resist easy moralising and simplification as one is surrounded by victims of all shapes and sizes as well as victims who are also perpetrators, and vice versa; (4) provides a greater focus on the role of economics, especially in the post-war space where blacks who fought for the victorious Allies are returning to penury while post-Nazi Germany is receiving billions in aid to ensure a smooth economic recovery; and (5) enables a more relevant framework for many contemporary issues that the MPE cannot speak to [. . .]. (222)

Wright argues that such an approach would prove useful to Black German Studies in part because “Germany is the one country whose black population achieves a critical mass through the humiliating defeat of the nation in two world wars—where most other nations achieved their black citizenry through colonialization and the slave trade” (227). Furthermore, she notes that “the contemporary black German population is a mix of the successors to these earlier ‘communities’ as well as the children of white Germans and black African immigrants” (228).

The rejection of the Second World War as *the* defining moment for Black German identity represented a crucial and necessary break at the beginning of Black German Studies, one that enabled a re-reading and re-envisioning not just of Black German history, but of German history as a whole. Wright’s choice of the Second World War as the axis of a Post War Epistemology should not be viewed as an attempt to rescue that war as a defining moment, but rather as a way to think about the ways in which diasporas

transcend the boundaries of national history, just as it troubles the idea of specific historical "events."

As it enters its fourth decade, Black German Studies must continue to develop what Sigrid Weigel called, in another context, a "schielender Blick" or double focus, such as that being developed and employed by scholars such as Susan Arndt, Tina Campt, Dirk Göttsche, and Michelle Wright. At once invested in searching the past to chronicle the present, it is also looking forward and outward to acknowledge and to cast a critical gaze on the transnational implications of migration, immigration, and globalization. The questions of inclusion and exclusion are no less urgent than they were in 1984: They are simply metamorphosing into their next phase.

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