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BLACK GERMANS AND TRANSNATIONAL IDENTIFICATION

by Carmen Faymonville

I think that an international network is absolutely essential, and I think it is in the process of being born.

—Audre Lorde

The patriotism of the German . . . is such that his heart becomes narrower and shrinks like leather in the cold. He hates foreigners and no longer wishes to be a citizen of the world, but a mere German. (237)

—Heinrich Heine

People of color have migrated to all corners of the world: we find black diasporas not only in traditional immigrant societies such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, but almost everywhere, including all parts of Europe. Reasons for the global dispersal of black people can readily be found in the legacy of slavery, colonialism, war, and laissez-faire capitalism, central to the history of almost all European powers. Yet Germany in particular is still identified both internally as well as abroad as a central European homestead populated by a “settled” white population with age-old traditions which has secured a unique cultural status in world history. The fact that Germany, in contrast to Britain, France or the Netherlands, is home to a significant population of Germans of African or Afro-diasporic heritage and individuals who identify as “Black” for political reasons has been ignored by the German and international media, as well as the academy until very recently. And while Black Germans now receive some, although generally sensationalistic, media attention, there is little serious critical engagement of the kind found in the Anglo-American or British context of the social, literary, and cultural questions raised by the presence of Black Germans—most of whom are not foreigners and can thus not be dealt with in terms of the so-called “foreigner problem”—in the newly unified Federal Republic.¹ Thus, in this essay, I focus precisely on the important questions diaspora studies and transnational politics raise for Germany’s cultural and geo-political location.
While it is only a symptom of a general lack of interest in postcolonial identity politics and multicultural resistance and not a cause, it is noteworthy that in the Federal Republic there exist no official statistics or public recognition of German-born or “naturalized” Black Germans. In 1991, Der Spiegel conservatively estimated the number of Black Germans at roughly 200,000 (“Ansprache”). While this number may appear high to many white Germans, who number about 90 million, this number seems vanishingly small from a minority perspective. An earlier 1955 German federal survey estimated the number of Black German children fathered by mostly African-American allied forces at 68,000, but historians agree that this number might indicate an underrepresentation of the actual numbers including non-citizens (Fehrenbach 108n2). The inarticulateness of both the German government and the dominant culture regarding the substantial presence of Black Germans in the Federal Republic must be attributed, in part, to the complex definition of what constitutes the category of Black German, as well as to German personal privacy legislation concerning the collection of data on citizens which explicitly prohibits data collection with regard to race or skin color. In addition, German public perception lumps the various postcolonials and exiles who happen to be Black and happen to live in Germany as citizens, legal residents, refugees, workers or students into a single category: the *foreigner.* Yet even everyday observation shows that the Black German population is becoming increasingly more visible despite their statistically low percentage in the total population, since as pioneers of Black German research, Oguntoye, Opitz, and Schultz, note, “Fifteen years ago one could find perhaps one or two Black children in a Berlin school, whereas now there may be between five and ten such children; at least one Black child can be found in most preschool groups” (Oguntoye xv–xvi). Given the relatively small size of the Black German population, does it make scholarly sense, then, to foreground this phenomenon in contemporary German culture in terms of its socio-political and literary significance? How should we define this emerging group of proud Black Germans in light of recent multicultural developments in Germany such as the red-green coalition government’s attempt to change citizenship law? While it is not possible to attend to all these questions in this essay, the first of these two questions I would like to address as a definitional issue.

For my own purposes, I define the group of Black Germans as including people of color living in Germany regardless of whether they are of African, Asian, or other non-European heritage. Looking at the cultural productions of people of color in Germany through the lens of 20th-century colonial and postcolonial migration, the phenomenon of Black German identity must be analyzed not only in the binary of “Black” and “German” but must be examined more forcefully in the context of a growing transnational black diaspora in which Germany—despite its historical aspiration to monoculturalism—also has a historical stake and present interest. German transnational Blacks such as Sheila Mysorekar and May Opitz-Ayim question and redefine what to be “Black” means in their particular communities and in a larger cross-cultural context in which familial and economic relationships to relatives and friends abroad are sustained across time and space. Outspoken and politicized Black Germans like Opitz and Mysorekar also raise novel questions about connections between German colonialism and national identity, which puts into a new perspective Germany’s
internal and external focus on the Holocaust and its erasure of its own colonial history. In other words, these Black German cultural critics are forging links to the work of scholars such as Edward Said and Paul Gilroy, who have shown that colonialism has been a major cause of increased world migration and international conflict.

20th-century global migration has fostered the creation and maintenance of transnational diasporas in all western societies, including Germany. As a result of this historical process, western nations can no longer maintain their formerly territorialized, spatially-bounded, and culturally homogeneous status. Yet despite its increasing transnationalization, Germany continues to think of itself as culturally homogeneous and spatially-bounded despite the fact that migration and postcolonial history have fostered and intensified global interconnections of people, ideas, and economies across borders. The exclusion of Black Germans from mainstream culture in Germany in particular has led many Black Germans to (re)discover their connections to the more than three quarters of the world population considered neither white nor “western.” Through that (re)discovery, Black Germans participate in contemporary global processes of reconfiguring nation spaces encouraged also by new circuits of cultural exchange, which themselves are enabled by the rapid transformation and implementation of technologies of transportation and communication. The political and cultural organization Initiative Schwarze Deutsche [Coalition of Black Germans], in particular, has fostered the building of connections across borders. It is precisely the group members’ residence in western centers of global capitalism that helps foster transcultural and transnational interaction, for Germany’s major cities, like Berlin and Frankfurt, have become most identifiably cosmopolitan through their international business interests. ISD members’ identification as “Black” thus follows from the newly developed transnational spaces of identity that allow them to find political and personal connections by emphasizing the similarities of their experiences of race, despite national and ethnic differences within that identity position. Underlying this position is, as Molara Ogundipe-Leslie argues, the concept of “race through oppression,” as well as shared experiences of racial positioning and discrimination that link all Black diasporans in “the crucibles of captivity, displacement, and oppression” (16).

But apart from the issue of visibility, as part of a global Black diaspora, Black Germans—both as members of formal political and cultural organizations such as Initiative Schwarze Deutsche or ADEFRA (the title of this organization is an acronym for Afro-Deutsche Frauen) and as individuals—engage the development of transnational diasporas and postcolonial identities in Europe in new and important ways. Whereas transnational diasporas in other migrant and settler societies have begun to gain scholarly attention, the word “postcolonial” in German discourse bears little identification value. Unaffected by recent postcolonial discourse in English and French print cultures, many Germans wonder: “How ‘Black’ can a German be?” and in what way, and to what extent, do Black Germans actually share the “crucibles of captivity, displacement, and oppression”? Does this not necessarily depend on the extent of their integration and social positioning within Germany? Similar questions have also been raised by German intellectuals as to whether the economic and historical situations of Black Germans in Germany are compatible with experiences of colonial oppression or even comparable to the situation of many third world populations?
While these objections to their recognition may derive some force from a traditional German-centered point of view, oppression for German Blacks is devastatingly real. Dark-skinned people, whether or not they are perceived as foreign, have been victims of racist attacks under the rising influence of nationalism and neo-fascism that has mushroomed in the recent period of economic decline. A number of smaller German cities were sites of attacks on foreigners and people of color. Moreover, despite increased visibility on the one hand, on the other, due to the Schengen agreement and Germany’s strict immigration laws, the Black German movement has witnessed limited expansion. As the borders of “Fortress Europe” are made less permeable, few Black refugees or immigrants are allowed into the country.

Further, the solidarity of German progressive groups committed to left and human rights causes clearly has its limits as they do not engage a racial analysis but concentrate instead on problems based on an analysis of the “foreigner problem,” by which they largely mean acts of violence against the Turkish resident and other migrant populations. Sheila Mysorekar, a Black German activist, poet, and journalist whose work I will explore at length later in this essay, describes the lack of diaspora visibility as follows: “As Black Germans, we are painfully aware that in times of danger we have no community to turn to . . . There is no area in town where we can feel safe . . . There does not even exist an older generation who could teach us how to survive in a white society. The prominent feature of Black German life is its complete isolation” (“Pass” 82).

The isolation Mysorekar speaks of is in fact double because “Germans with Black skin” are not treated as Germans even when they identify as such, were born in Germany, and have been German citizens all their lives. Thus, while they are not foreigners, their skin color and cultural markers make them more visible than many assimilated Turkish or other guestworker citizens, who sometimes are allowed to pass as “German.” In this way, the situation of Black Germans is paradoxically similar though not entirely equivalent to that of other Black diasporic communities in Britain and France. In Britain, for example, the term “Black Briton” emerged as a post-World War II label for British ex-colonials mostly from the West Indies and other parts of the Commonwealth. As a category of identity Black Briton confers a sense of community and belonging missing to date from the German connotation of Black Germans. Black Britons have created a distinctive culture and communities in Britain through their pre-existing historical links to an extensive colonial empire, a fact that also distinguishes the British Black community from that of Black Germans both in size, diversity, and social cohesiveness. One might imagine that Black Germans’ lack of numerical strength would necessarily locate their place of cultural reference primarily in German culture and identity. Yet as I will show, the political and psychological pressures of minority existence tend to produce transnational identification. While Black Britons, for instance, may also be part of a growing international diaspora, they identify primarily with local, established diaspora communities in Britain. Black Germans, on the other hand, are forced even more than their British neighbors to seek transnational identification across Europe and the globe, most often to English-speaking communities.
Aside from such demographic issues of Black German specificity, it is also necessary to address important conceptual and political differences specific to the German case, particularly Black Germans’ developing diaspora consciousness in light of the historical repression of diaspora identification in Germany. Given the events of German history, diaspora consciousness differs in important ways from the British and French cases. In contrast to Britain and France, where local immigrants of diasporas have become an accepted and self-evident part of public life through increasing cultural visibility, the only equivalent in Germany is the large Turkish enclaves in certain major cities. Elsewhere, diasporic formations are actively discouraged in Germany by the governmental distribution of refugees and immigrants across the country and their placement in small towns disconnected from large metropolitan centers—a conscious political measure intended to facilitate assimilation.

In order to arrive at a fuller understanding of the specific circumstances that link the German context to recent theoretical articulations in postcolonial studies, I will address three areas of analysis. First, I interrogate the concept of blackness as it is being played out discursively in the Black German movement. Second, I introduce the theoretical concept of diaspora in the context of postcolonial theory as it is relevant to the German context. Finally, I present a critical analysis of the work of Sheila Mysorekar whose work is central to the questions I raise with regard to each of these issues.

I. Terms of Blackness

Visiting Germany and participating in the early stages of a Black German political movement, Audre Lorde often stressed the transnational dimensions of Black experience. She regarded the Black German women she worked with in Berlin as a community of “women within particular environments” and stressed that they “don’t exist in the abstract” (129). In defending the usefulness of a transnational Black category, Lorde echoes African-American critic Carole Boyce Davies who defends the political value of the term “Black” despite its relative abstractness and possible essentialist theoretical underpinning. Like the editors of Showing Our Colors, Boyce Davies regards “Black” identity primarily as a “Pan-Africanist” symptom. “Politically, the term ‘Black’ is linked essentially and primarily with a vision of a (Pan-African Fst) Black World which exists both in Africa and in the diaspora. But ‘Blackness’ is a color-coded, politically-based term of marking and definition which only has meaning when questions of racial difference and, in particular, white supremacy are deployed” (Black Women 7). Exploring the transnational nature of Black identity in the context of Germany necessarily involves interrogating a form of national identity that by definition deploys questions of racial difference and, historically speaking, a form of white supremacy that is not restricted to anti-African sentiment or African diasporas. I will be examining more closely the use of the term “Black” among a much more heterogeneous community of Blacks in the contemporary Federal Republic. Indeed, as Lorde observed, Black women residing in Germany exist in very particular
environments based on their heritages which represent a variety of different cultures. That variety warrants further analysis of their common sense of blackness. Clearly, what connects these women to other Black diasporic communities and to each other is a political project of resistance against marginalization, discrimination and silencing, and not merely the color of their skin or ancestral origin outside Europe.

Particularly in a society in which whiteness enjoys the privileged status of normalcy, blackness represents not merely a biological category but a political strategy and a location from which to speak. While some Black Germans are forced to articulate their blackness based on negative encounters with whites, a large number of them also recognize the political and discursive power of this signifier. Currently two terms signifying both the rhetorical and political power of Otherness are competing in what I refer to as Black German diasporic discourse. Initially, the term Afro-German enjoyed more widespread use, but as the movement has progressed, the dominant term has become Black German, with each term bearing different political and conceptual connotations. Thus, “Afro-German” designates “a population native to Germany, raised and enculturated as Germans, with little or no actual contact with their African cultural heritage” (Oguntoye 236). It came to be acknowledged by members of the Black German coalition that African cultural heritage was a restrictive category that failed to recognize the fact that dark-skinned non-Africans are subject to the same sort of discrimination as those of African ancestry. In addition, restricting the definition of this category to native German citizens excluded important political allies such as immigrants and refugees. While the use of the term “Afro-German” by the editors of Showing Our Colors was intended to create a point of identification for a diverse group of individuals of different cultural, national, and ethnic heritages predicated on the model of “Afro-American,” they often use Black and African interchangeably and link blackness solely to the African continent. The latter disregards the complex processes of colonization and decolonization that have contributed to the global migrations of Black people and the different ways of defining blackness cross-culturally. In defense of their hyphenated choice, Oguntoye, Opitz, and Schultz explain that

“Afro-German” seemed appropriate to us since many of us have an African father and a German mother. In using this term, our point is not to emphasize that we have a Black and a white parent. Our essential commonality is that we are Black and have experienced a major part of our socialisation and life in confrontation with West German society—a society that is not ninety-nine percent white but that always has behaved as though it were, or should be. By the term “Afro-German” we mean all those who wish to refer to themselves as such, regardless of whether they have one or two Black parents. Just as with the similar name “Black Germans,” our intent is not to exclude on the basis of origin or skin color . . . We want to propose “Afro-German” in opposition to more commonly used names like “half-breed,” “mulatto,” or “colored,” as an attempt to define ourselves instead of being defined by others. (xxii–xxiii)
While the term Afro-German emphasizes German cultural heritage and African heritage as a legacy of racial difference as well as a “Black” difference through its emphasis on Africa, the prefix “Afro” also calls attention to the effects of discourses of national differences. Clearly, many postcolonial and Black residents of Germany are not from Africa. However, in terms of discrimination, national difference matters little in Germany, where people of color and individuals perceived as foreign are subject to discrimination regardless of national distinctions. Unlike the neologism, “Black German,” the politics of “Afro-German” identity stress geopolitical specificity and national boundaries rather than supra-regional or political definitions that transcend geographical origin.

On the other hand, “Black German” represents to many a more inclusive designation that encompasses a broader range of people of color, including Asians and Caribbeans since it transcends national boundaries and incorporates various diasporic contexts. This now dominant designation in German Black discourse advocates the use of the term “Black” relationally, provisionally, and based on location or position. Indeed, such a political strategy also allows for the creation of non- or even anti-nationalist discourses, more appropriate to the German context given the resurgence of nationalist violence that has erupted in the last decade. Boyce Davies reminds us that as an oppositional category the term “Black” “necessarily emerges as whiteness seeks to depoliticize and normalize itself.” Whites often regard their cultural identity and skin color as the standard, “normal” condition against which all other identities or skin colors are defined. Thus, the category of “Black” is necessarily oppositional, even if Black Germans sometimes seek to depoliticize and, instead, to re-culturalize their identities. Black Germans’ discursive practice of contesting whiteness as normal is based on the recognition that whiteness in itself is also a racial location and by no means a neutral or unmarked category except when naturalized and normalized in dominant discourse. Yet counter to a reading of Black German identity that reverses the equation of “white = normalcy” into “Black = oppositional otherness,” the Black German movement adopts an anti-modernist stance that acknowledges that “‘Black’ is only provisionally used as we continue to interrogate its meaning and in the ongoing search to find the language to articulate ourselves” (Black Women 8).

II. Different Diasporas?

Recent postcolonial interventions in the academy have questioned universalist representations of diasporic peoples and global manifestations of nationalism by examining the politics of specific cultural locations. Looking at Germany as a specific cultural location rather than a globalized generalization of migrant and diasporic identities makes it necessary to examine how the politics of globalization and transnational migration specifically affect Black Germans. What kinds of diasporic identifications have they constructed in the newly united Germany? Whereas many scholars have documented the emergence of postcolonial diasporas in Britain, Cana-
da, Australia, and the United States, in Germany, the concept of diaspora outside the rhetoric of an Auslanderdialektik (a dialectic of native and foreigner) remains largely unexplored at home and abroad. It is a situation that led African-American feminist poet and activist Audre Lorde to wonder, “Who are the Black German women of the diaspora?” Or, as I would prefer to phrase her question: How do these women’s experiences mirror or diverge from other postcolonial diasporas of women of color?

The concept of diaspora offers, at least initially, an attractive backdrop for Black German identification because, as Paul Gilroy argues, diasporas produce “an alternative to the different varieties of absolutism which would confine culture in racial, ethnic or national essences” (There Ain’t 155). In “Identity, Meaning, and the African-American,” Michel Hanchard more explicitly defines the political potential of the diasporic alternative, arguing that discourses on diaspora are inherently capable of transcending both narrow cultural definitions and the politics of the nation-state: “Embedded in the tale of the diaspora is a symbolic revolt against the nation-state, and for this reason the diaspora holds a dual significance. It suggests a transnational dimension to Black identity . . . with little regard for national boundaries” (40). In the case of Black Germans, the symbolic challenge that diasporas pose to the German nation-state bears particular significance as it enables Black Germans to contest the more limiting and exclusionary frames of reference available to them within German national discourses. The latter are largely based on a romantic notion of “unity of blood” and, following from that, an amorphous feeling of national unity despite ethnic differences between, for example, Bavarians and Prussians. Hanchard’s description of the power of a “transnational dimension to Black identity” through diaspora holds promise for Black Germans precisely because it encourages an examination of forms of community beyond and in opposition to the exclusionary narratives of the nation-state. Black German writing must therefore be read as a form of theoretical boundary crossing and not simply as an ethnic or national category of writing. Linking the cultural productions of Black Germans with those of other diasporic Black communities creates political alliances that make the multicultural Other more visible in Germany precisely through the connection to English-language diaspora discourse. To view Black Germans’ transnational identification as part of a larger postcolonial condition in which Others become visible in world-wide diasporic communities allows readers to understand the German concept of nation as much less rooted in the now dominant rhetoric of the democratic political determination of the population inhabiting the territorial borders of Germany and, to an even lesser extent, in the discourse of assimilation prevalent in German Integrationspolitik. More important, Black German diasporic identifications allow for an alternative construction of Germanness in and of itself, at a moment when Germany becomes part of a network of locations in which diasporas have grown geographically, spatially, and politically to challenge the equation of heritage, place, and citizenship.

However, the appeal of a “Black diaspora” as a basis for identification to Black Germans is fraught with tension. Even the term “diaspora” is itself rife with contradictions. Postcolonial critic William Safran is helpful in charting some of the diverse meanings of the term “diaspora,” from its historical origin in the Jewish diaspora to its subsequent applications to other dispersed ethnic groups. Safran theorizes several
characteristics of diasporic experience: dispersion from an original home, a collective myth of return, an experience of rejection in the host country, a belief in a future continued relationship to the homeland, and the construction of the homeland abroad (83–84). Yet, Black Germans share no unifying origin or home (such as Africa) and, at least from the perspective of one dominant faction of the Black German movement, share no desire to return to such an imaginary or real homeland. Whatever the terms of their arrival in Germany, a return to a point of origin located in their parents’ past is often legally or practically barred to them. In almost direct contradiction to Safran’s analysis of the diasporic experience, Black Germans do not display a desire to create a “Little Africa” in Berlin or any other German city. Indeed, their collective identity of German blackness allows them to disrupt the notion that identity is necessarily tied to geographical space. Thus notwithstanding the appeal of the concept of Black diaspora, its relevance remains limited in very specific ways as regards the Black German community.

Problems of Colors and Homes

In the preceding sections, I have outlined the positive, enabling conditions of diasporic identification. Yet the question remains as to the usefulness of these alternative models of subjectivity, since this new collective identification also potentially erases historical, cultural, and experiential differences between and among Blacks in Germany by reinforcing an alliance based on skin color. Such essentialism, expressed through a reliance on the biological essence of skin color, is rendered increasingly problematic by sociological and scientific arguments that race as such, or even “blackness,” does not exist given the distribution of racial features across a wide continuum. Seen through the lens of some recent poststructuralist theory, the category of race as such represents at most a fiction and not a “real” category of experience. Beyond the problem of essentialism that elides different national contexts, there are also different perceptions of race in Germany’s past and present that complicate a Black German position on the continuity of racism in Germany. While this discussion is beyond the scope of my essay, two short remarks may suffice. First, even if cross-cultural and transnational connections are taken as the ground on which Black collectivity is founded, the term “Black” necessarily confers a problematic collective identity on a highly disparate group of people in Germany. Second, one could certainly argue that oppression through race in the 1990s is not identical to the Fascist racism adopted during the Hitler years.

Further, although Black Germans are importing transnational diasporic discourse into the German context, some details perhaps get lost in that translation, since some concepts imported to Germany suggest a simple adoption of an existing discourse specific to certain regions or a particular history of colonialism. Situated quite differently, for example, from Black Britons, Black Germans should perhaps be more cautious when adopting definitions utilized in constructions of diasporic identities in Britain largely because Germany does not have a comparable history of Black
diasporic community. In addition, Germany’s colonial history also betrays very important differences when compared to that of France and Britain. With the Versailles Treaty, Germany lost its colonies and thus experienced little post-independence migration as a result of post-World War I decolonization. Another area of German specificity is connected to the Holocaust, generally taken to be a specifically German historical experience. Because the dominant notion of diaspora in Germany is still publicly linked primarily to the Jewish diaspora, there is no existing narrative of a Black diaspora arising from the effects of colonialism in which Black Germans could participate. Yet many Black German writers, among them journalist and poet Sheila Mysorekar, whose work I engage in the following section, are trying to establish the continuity of diasporic narratives to link past and present forms of oppression in Germany.

III. Home/Community/Identity in the Writing of Sheila Mysorekar

Sheila Mysorekar is a contemporary Black German author who has recently gained prominence through her writings on the experience of growing up Black in Germany and being conditioned by the physical and social spaces she inhabited. Although she was born in Germany, her birthright as a citizen was not necessarily acknowledged in her environment. For Mysorekar, the relation of Black Germans to the larger German society has been determined by the ways in which they are able to negotiate, mediate, and (re)position themselves according to race, class, and gender. As Mysorekar relates in her writing, more so than in the United States, Germany enforces what Audre Lorde calls “the mythical norm” through which certain individual qualities and majority traits are privileged over others—in this case, whiteness, “German behavior” (i.e., the exercise of regional and national customs), and Christian values. According to Mysorekar, it is increasingly difficult to destabilize these categories of authority for Blacks in Germany. In her public engagement as a journalist, Mysorekar, a woman of Indian and German heritage, “participate[s] in the formation of counter-hegemonic practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of revision” (hooks 15). In trying to explicate the beginnings of this process of revision, I will now undertake a very short analysis of Mysorekar’s poetry and essays, exploring the principal paradigms she uses to describe her place in transnational diasporas, her location in a “postnational” Europe, and finally, her bicultural existence in a united Germany.

Born in Düsseldorf, Germany, in 1961, the daughter of a dark-skinned South Asian father and a white German mother, Mysorekar was educated in Germany and received an M.A. in Theater, Cultural Anthropology, and English/American Literature from the University of Cologne. Currently, she lives in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and travels widely in her profession as a journalist. As a political writer, the author indict her compatriots quite directly for their active and passive silencing of people like herself: “As Black Germans, we are surrounded by silence; surrounded by a society that denies our existence and negates the fact of racism; surrounded by white
peers who shut their mouths in incomprehension when we talk about humiliation and anger; surrounded by a wall of silence when we start to ask about our roots” (Mysorekar 82).

Affirming on the one hand an international network of Black people, and on the other the undeniability of her German identity, Mysorekar demands recognition of the myriad locations of Black Germans in German society and the variety of strategies they use as they speak to fellow Germans across differences. Mysorekar herself managed to develop her own transnational German identity by connecting with Black British activists and literature, Third World literature and culture, and African and Asian American political thought. In this way, Marcus Garvey and Toni Morrison, as well as Bharati Mukherjee, were all formative authors for Mysorekar. Works by Pan-African and diasporic Black writers from across the globe helped construct her identity, for as she explains, initially no German models of Black identity were available to her: “Black Europeans . . . died in German concentration camps, [their] presence was wiped from the European history books” (83). Mysorekar describes the suppression of bicultural identity in German culture as a process of Othering, where, for most people, Black Germans are a paradox, something impossible, “a concept that cannot really exist” (80). Mysorekar found entry into a globally identified “Black identity” through cultural points of reference acquired during trips to Britain and through literary study: “Isolation was broken by the books that reached us, that connected us to the international Black community” (83). Her transnational identification, expanded through her residence in Jamaica and Argentina, is based on “the most popular traits of other cultures, those that are exported or are of some value to white societies, reach us first and give us the chance to connect” (81). In her poetry, Mysorekar recounts the instances in which African-American music and Asian cuisine offered her the possibility of “leaving the surrounding all-white culture for a moment, and taking a little, solitary walk towards our roots. Through Muddy Waters or Lester Bowie or Public Enemy, Afro-America is talking to us; with spicy Indian Masala or Vietnamese lemon grass, Asia is feeding us” (81).

Anglo-Black cultural productions, including film and music by Black women in particular, served “as a spiritual connection with other Black people, breaking the silence and isolation of the individual” and “taught us to assert ourselves as Black German women” (83). Speaking from a German Black perspective, Mysorekar, however, stresses the transnational and cross-cultural diasporic locations available to people of color even in Germany. Yet although Mysorekar’s articulation of a transnational Black identity opens up all these positive and necessary trajectories, her notions of the “transnational” and the “black” require further inquiry and analysis.

In her writings, Mysorekar asserts that it became important for her process of diasporic identification to highlight the historic legacy of Germany’s violence against cultural others. As the object of German condescension and exclusion, Mysorekar’s claiming of her German identity is a gesture that necessarily condemns manifestations of violence which she sees as an integral part of that very identity. In her 1995 poem “Black Rage,” she distances herself from the “bad Germans” and parts of the national psyche she finds destructive:
At the beginning
news of individual attacks
more graffiti on the walls
The fear grew
as life changed:
be ready for defense
buy weapons;
to banish this feeling from your throat
that's squeezed up tight from all the screams
which never leave

A new everyday life
life in the new Great Germany
Somebody spit in my face
I wiped the muck away with my sleeve
and fear was joined
by cold hate.
but I won't wait
until they come to get us
until our bones burn to ashes
not this time!

Linking her oppression as an Indo-German woman in a transnational Black community to other oppressed groups, Mysorekar identifies with the ultimate German Other, the Jew. In “Black Rage,” her rhetorical strategy of vigorous indictment provokes the reader to recall previous attacks on Germany’s Others during the Nazi era and offers a vocabulary of resistance that vehemently affirms in Malcolm X’s words, “Freedom by any means necessary.” She continues:

Before my face suffers burns
I’ll lay fire myself
Times have changed: It’s the Black rage
that catches fire

While the direct connection between Nazi atrocities and the histories of colonialism that produced black diasporic formations remains unexplored in Mysorekar’s work and in the larger discussion of Black Germans’ literary production, Mysorekar clearly identifies the historical link between fascist and contemporary liberal democratic racisms. The connection between forms of racial oppression suffered by Jewish and Black people in Germany is transposed by Mysorekar into a different cultural arena—one that invites transnational scrutiny of German politics from a viewpoint outside of this country: namely, international diaspora communities and the world community. Yet the basis of Mysorekar’s definition of blackness in relation to a violent replication of the Holocaust goes largely undefined in the poem’s final lines. Historians might legitimately question whether it is only the times that have changed.
The basis of Mysorekar’s definition of blackness in terms of a violent replication of the Holocaust remains unexplored in spite of the fact that she links her own situation of diaspora and anti-nationalist resistance to the earlier Jewish resistance to German articulations of whiteness as Aryan during Fascism. In her linking of diaspora and anti-racist discourses, Mysorekar seems to raise more questions than she answers. Can one claim, for example, a direct historical link between anti-Semitism and contemporary forms of xenophobia and racism in Germany? Is the violence wrought on black bodies in Germany a result of the same biology of “race” that wrought violence on Jewish bodies in the past? Is the 1930s–1940s vision of a Nazi German state related to the official identity politics of modern Germany?

In an attempt to circumvent a political split between Black and Jewish positions based on racial segregation and questions of historical continuities and discontinuities, Mysorekar offers the possibility of a transnational diasporic existence as an alternative political space where people of color in Germany can construct positive forms of identity and protect themselves communally against violent interventions by the state and its citizens. This is an important response to dominant discourses of racial homogeneity linked in Germany primarily to the Holocaust. Like members of the international Jewish diaspora, Mysorekar finds comfort in a shared international outsidership which provides her with a supportive social fabric, thereby celebrating the capacity to “see Blacks everywhere.” While she seeks solidarity with all German others, she is also casting her net outside the German context altogether. In Mysorekar’s poem, “It’s Nation Time,” she writes: “But now / . . . now is the time / too long / we have been waiting / we are everywhere,” referring to the current moment in contemporary cultural politics—a moment which she sees as a crucial opportunity for common action against racism. This moment of collective potential is rendered through the rhymes she creates between “The same kind of understanding / in the Supermarkets of / Leicester Liverpool Notting Hill” and “In the metro / in Paris in Marseille in Lille.” Here, she indicates, is where Black Germans can find like-minded people: “Kinky hair with glittering gel / slow smile and hands slapping / there we are / we are here.” Here Mysorekar implies that Black resistance must now be organized through Black Europeans’ recognition that strength lies in supporting and affirming one another and in solidarity across borders.

Despite her criticism of mono-culturalism and racialism, in poems like “It’s Nation Time” Germany also emerges as an unquestionably multicultural society in which there is “Rumba in Dresden / and in the crucible of the Ruhr / spicy sauces are being mixed.” Mysorekar finds a more viable and politically empowering identity that is slowly expanding multicultural hybridity within Germany itself. As the Federal Republic is changing only very slowly, she and other Black Germans understandably seek alternative identifications in the interim. Her transnational identification must thus be understood as a tactical assertion and as a counterpoint to an overwhelming “whiteness” or Eurocentricity, assumed to function as an unmarked category, but which is historically linked to technologies of destruction and not simply a personal choice of taste.

Critics hostile to Mysorekar’s project have raised the question whether she operates in a framework of binary oppositions in which black and white still appear as
counterpoints, while Germany is in the midst of working through multicultural integration. In particular, certain sections of the German left consider “race” a divisive category that splits solidarity and creates “special interest” politics that threaten community consensus on other issues such as class and gender reform. Their critique responds to Black Germans’ use of notions adapted from contemporary poststructuralist and postcolonial discourse, traditionally alien to the liberal humanism of German politics and current public policies of multicultural inclusion. However, because Mysorekar in the end uses Black provisionally and strategically, rather than nostalgically or as a reaction to whiteness, her use of blackness opens itself up for new areas of political intervention.

As an Asian-German, Mysorekar could situate herself in a quite different postcolonial history by identifying with individuals involved in a growing Asian diasporic consciousness movement similar to the Pan-Asian movement in the United States. There, Asian opposition to dominant forms of white, Anglo-centric Americanness is formulated outside linguistic denominators such as “Black.” From the vantage point of these Asian diasporic perspectives, Mysorekar’s Indo-German heritage places her in a complicated position vis-à-vis Blackness, in particular given the attempts of some Black people, for instance African and African-American black nationalists, to reserve the political power of the image of blackness for political ends that might differ from an Asian diasporic political agenda or Mysorekar’s own. Asian American critics have also problematized the political usefulness of labels such as “Black” that erase difference in order to oppose a dominant group whose center politics often drive a wedge between marginal groups to weaken their political efficacy. They argue that while it is useful to present a united front, that front also marginalizes important differences that the dominant culture would in fact erase altogether. Thus, the erasure of difference by ethnic groups themselves actually threatens their overall political efficacy.

While I would not argue that Mysorekar is participating in an oppressive blurring of differences through her use of “blackness,” from an Asian diasporic perspective there are other political aspects to consider. Asians have historically faced a different form of discrimination specifically as Asians, and not Africans, while the overall dimensions of racism have nevertheless had similar detrimental effects. This differentiation applies to the different yet similarly unequal treatment of Asians in the United States, as well as German interactions with Asians that are beyond the scope of my argument here. Moreover, in African postcolonial history, blackness and negritude represented a rallying cry that significantly excluded Asians. In Uganda, for instance, Asian Indians were expelled when Idi Amin took power, because they were not Black Africans in spite of the fact that after generations of residency much of the Indian population considered itself African. In the United States, the recent conflicts between Black and Asian communities in Los Angeles show that we cannot assume the pre-existence of a racial or a political coalition of Asians and African Americans. Indeed some Asians in the United States are quite outspoken in their resistance to being identified as “black.” It is noteworthy that the designation of South Asians as Black has fluctuated widely, particularly in the United States, but also in European perception of Asians as well. In 1910 and 1913 U.S. federal court rulings, for example,
Indians were declared Caucasians, i.e., racially white, and thus entitled to American citizenship (Hess 118). Yet such forms of racial entitlements and privilege were highly contested, in particular by the Justice Department. Eventually, American xenophobia led to a reversal of categorizing East Indians as “white,” when in the 1923 Supreme Court case, *U.S. v. Bhaghat Singh Thind*, the court applied the quite different and populist definition of the “understanding of the common man” ruling that in public perception Indians were not racially white.¹⁴

In light of these historical differences, which, I emphasize, do not erase common forms of oppression experienced by Blacks, Asians, and other nonwhites, Mysorekar positions herself in a different, though by no means lesser, relation of “Otherness” to the dominant culture than Africans in Germany. But the fragmentation of communities can also be advanced through the divisiveness of exaggerating small differences, and it is important to point out that despite its unifying power the term Black also has divisive discursive potential with respect to Asian diasporic perspective. Thus, given the presence of a growing Asian diasporic consciousness movement in the United States, Canada, Britain, and Australia, Mysorekar might also potentially find a second political and cultural identification as an Asian-German in a globally developing *Asian diaspora*, thus further supporting Mysorekar’s provisional use of the term “Black.”

Given the dynamics of German location and current globalization, the extent to which this choice is, has been, or ever will be made available to Mysorekar is open to question. Another by no means prescriptive option for an alternative terminology would be the use of a phrase currently used synonymously with “Black” in the United States: “people of color.” This term has been successfully employed to signify cross-ethnic solidarity without adopting a notion of blackness as a unifying construct usually reserved for the specific economic and social position of African Americans. Yet one problem with the use of “people of color” lies in the issue of translation. The most direct translation in the German context would be “Farbige,” a term which carries clearly negative and racist overtones in German. Other possible less direct translations, such as *farbige Deutische* on the other hand, illustrate the inherent difficulty of relying on “color” as a social categorization.

While one might criticize Mysorekar’s adaptation of a British model of blackness in the construction of her identity as a Black German in response to what she terms a “divide and conquer” mentality along color lines, one cannot fault the author for that choice in strategic terms. Despite the fact that separate communities of Asian diasporans now exist in many societies and demand rights for their members, this is not yet the case in the Federal Republic.

In her writings, Mysorekar repositions Black women in German cultural politics, the German language, as well as in German identity politics by resisting processes of “Othering” and “silencing” enforced by dominant discourses of Germanness. This is indeed an enormous accomplishment since, as Gayatri Spivak points out in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” the postcolonial or Black woman (the “subaltern”) is always already represented and spoken for. Most often she is positioned as silent or completely absent. Mysorekar’s articulation of her Black German identity inherently challenges constructions of German Blacks as foreigners without a voice. Perceived as
foreign throughout her life, Mysorekar points to the negative effects of internalizing voicelessness and being assigned positions which rendered her a perpetual outsider: “In spite of never having been outside Germany, in spite of carrying a German passport, in spite of having German as our mother tongue, many of us grow up calling ourselves “Nigerian” or “Pakistani,” or whatever nationality our fathers may have” (“Pass” 80). In most cases, what appears an identification of choice is in fact externally imposed and complicates the formation of an independent diasporic consciousness. While the negation of their German identities is also in part self-imposed, cultural pressures and the internalization of difference is often so powerful that many tire of defending their birthright. Those who mute or deny their ethnic and cultural hybridity often find it easier to respond to the essentialism of German self-perceptions. To be both Black and German is to challenge a system of binary oppositions that are deeply ingrained in the German cultural and national psyche. In this national imaginary there still lurks the shadow of purity and physical and linguistic uniformity as the mark of the true German.

Indeed, there are many Germans who are quite comfortable with such purist definitions and anti-multicultural sentiments and define their identity by enforcing strict lines of separation between the foreigner and the “real German.” Such absolute demarcations discourage those who see their heritage rooted in other cultures from asserting their own alternative forms of Germanness and their bicultural or multicultural heritages. For Mysorekar, the historical convergence in Germany between “race” and “nationality” must be challenged as the prerequisite for coalitional organizing around shared agendas, in particular within the German left. Hence the appropriation of “blackness” as a political tool prevents the privileging of various races and cultures despite shared political goals in other areas.

Finally, it remains to be seen how Black German activists’ conception of “blackness” as an alternative identification will fare in the face of the emerging social policies of the new German left coalition and the European Union. It is at least conceivable that European integration will introduce Germans to a new concept: the Black European. But in a time of nationalist resurgence, the fight for a Black German identity will continue. The notion of a Black Germany allows for a refiguration of German “Grund und Boden” [ground and soil] as a site of numerous constructions of cultural identity. In this way, Germany can become a site of change and a productive place of questioning of German identity in the 21st century.

NOTES

1. In her article, “Rehabilitating the Fatherland: Race and German Remasculinization,” Heide Fehrenbach notes that children of the allied forces, so called Besatzungskinder (occupation children), were granted German citizenship “only after Allied military government officials made it clear that they would neither entertain paternity suits nor readily grant citizenship to their troops’ illegitimate offspring abroad” (114).

2. The category of the Black German as German citizens rather than foreigners is even more difficult to define since until the 19th century relatively few Africans or non-whites came to settle in Germany. Yet, as a recent article in Die Zeit on the Black German by Theodor Wonja Michael demonstrates, the Black German community has a longer history that has remained
invisible for some time. During German colonial expansion, African scholars, students, and missionaries traveled to Germany and some remained. With the end of German colonial rule in Africa as a result of Germany’s defeat in World War I and the Versailles Treaty, Black colonial soldiers of the allied forces were stationed in Germany, leaving behind several hundred Black German children. The post-WWII occupation of Germany by allied military forces, however, was the most significant factor in expanding the Black German populace. Other Black Germans trace their heritage to interracial and bicultural marriages between foreign citizens from all over the world and white Germans. Following the decolonization of several former African colonies, many post- and neo-colonial people have found their way to the Federal Republic, resulting in the continued growth and diversification of the Black German community.

3. Issues of terminology are vexing and complex. Overlaps between definitions complicate precise definitions, and some linguistic or rhetorical constructions are officially recognized while others are not. Usually, the term “ethnicity” is used to signify the distinguishing feature by which population groups are labeled. Ethnicity is assigned or attributed on the basis of various characteristics which include ancestry, race, language, culture, national heritage, color, and even religion. In Germany, attention most often focuses on skin color and blood, which more strongly link ethnicity to race. Of course, ethnicity has different connotations for different groups. Yet as German history and contemporary politics make clear, for non-whites race is a defining characteristic whose impact differs in the level of intensity with which non-whites face discrimination. Yet, as post-structuralist theory has made clear, it is questionable to what extent any human being can and should be classified only, or even primarily, by racial categories. There has been a shift from community identification based on race to strategic coalitions. While race and ethnicity can be seen as primary to one’s identity, each of us also has multiple identities among which ethnic or racial identity may or may not be primary. In fact, post-structuralists posit that race and ethnicity are not simply the result of biological attributes but of cultural, political, and social processes that define groups in relation to dominant white majorities. Surely race is also a relative rather than an absolute concept, since racial identification may be more fluid than hitherto assumed. Although it is not necessarily universally the case, racial identification has become increasingly open to self-definition even in the face of continued oppression. In addition, cultural diversity and heterogeneity have become a growing reality even in homogeneous societies such as Germany. See also Juanita Tamayo Lott’s Asian Americans: From Racial Category to Multiple Identities (87–90).

4. For a concise description of transnational developments and movements, see for instance Arjun Appadurai’s “Patriotism and Its Futures” and “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” and Homi Bhabha’s Nation and Narration.

5. Philomena Essed’s "Wahrnehmungen und Erfahrungen von Geschlecht und Rassismus in Europa" [Perceptions and Experiences of Gender and Racism in Europe] and M. Ayim’s (formerly Opitz) essay, “Rassismus und Verdrängung im vereinten Deutschland” [Racism and Repression in the Unified Germany] give many examples of the persistent everyday violence perpetrated on Black people, particularly women, in modern Germany.

6. See Paul Gilroy’s There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation (3–4). Caribbeans, Africans, and South Asians who came as guest workers were a later addition to this contingent of former colonial subjects who claimed rights to residency under the Commonwealth arrangement. “Black Briton” has since become a more general designation for the generations of Black people born and raised in Britain as well as recent migrants.

7. Large populations of specific ethnic and national groups within British metropolitan centers have created ethnic enclaves and secure niches to which recent migrants have added in numbers. The situation in France is similar to the British one, based on a shared history as major colonial powers. In contrast, Germany, like Italy, has for the most part repressed its colonial legacy.

8. See William Safran’s “Diasporas in Modern Societies; Myths of Homeland and Return,” Rey Chow’s Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies, James Clifford’s “Diasporas,” and H. Bhabha’s “Introduction: Narrating the Nation.”

9. Also see Paul Gilroy’s “Nothing But Sweat Inside My Hand: Diaspora Aesthetics and Black Arts in Britain” and “It Ain’t Where You’re From, It’s Where You’re At: The Dialectics of Diasporic Identification.”

10. Under the Nazis in particular, racialized conceptions of German identity came to be institutionalized and codified into law. Here the German state was represented by a German “Volk” which shared connections of blood. Other scholars explain that there existed no territorially
uniting Germany until unification under Bismarck but instead a variety of feudal units. Hence German identity had to be construed via language or genetic ancestry. See H. James’s Deutsche Identitat 1770–1990, L. Snyder’s Roots of German Nationalism, and N. Rathzel’s “Germany: One Race, One Nation?” J. G. Fichte, on the other hand, sought to define Germanness by the use of a shared language and rejected the notion of a “blood” base, since Germans are undeniably of mixed racial origins.

11. In “Race and Ideology in America History,” however, Barbara Fields argues that transposing one race or ethnic community with another is rarely directly linear: “It is easy enough to demonstrate a substantial continuity in ‘racial attitudes.’ But doing so does not demonstrate a continuity of racial ideology . . . Although there was no appreciable decline or mitigation of racialist thinking, there was a decisive shift in its character” (154). As Fehrenbach also agrees, the racism directed against Black people in Germany was, in fact, not a facile extension of the Nazi racism directed at Jewish people (121).

12. Interestingly, Germany attempted to challenge its old enemy Britain by supporting the Indian Nationalist movement in its anti-colonial struggle against British imperialism. The German government financed the anti-British activities of Indian nationalist C. K. Chakravarty in the United States. In 1917, New York City police and British secret service agents exposed and took Chakravarty into custody. In the same year that the United States entered the war against Germany, over a hundred anti-colonial activists were charged in U.S. courts with conspiracy to “violate the neutrality laws” (Hess 116). Indians residing in the U.S. were publicly portrayed as traitors.

Yet, ironically, Indians residing in the United States actually supported the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, which supported the British war effort against Germany (Hess 117). For more information on this interesting case, also see Don K. Dignan’s “The Hindu Conspiracy in Anglo-American Relations during World War I.”

13. See Lisa Lowe’s “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences.”

14. “In a unanimous decision,” American social and immigrant historian Gary Hess writes, “the Supreme Court held that the . . . ‘white person’ in the naturalization statutes was not to be defined simply on the basis of race (as the Ozawa case suggested), but rather in accord with popular definition. Thus, it was argued that the Congress of 1790 associated ‘white persons’ with immigrants from northern and western Europe, while the 1870 legislators assumed that ‘white persons’ included immigrants from all parts of Europe. Moreover, the ‘barred zone’ provision of the 1917 immigration [law] provided additional evidence that East Indians were not regarded as fit for naturalization; in denying immigration privileges to East Indians, Congress was also expressing opposition to their naturalization. Through this reasoning, the Court concluded that the public and Congress never intended that East Indians be given naturalization privileges. ‘Hindus’ and their children ‘would retain . . . definitely the clear evidence of ancestry’” (119).

WORKS CITED


