

My aim in this brief article is the introduction of a new transnational and interdisciplinary project on Black Europe, which could be of some interest to German Studies for a variety of reasons that will hopefully become evident.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, though, I would like, initially, to focus on one particular aspect of this project, one that might seem less than fascinating at first sight: the attempt to re-discover and re-contextualize archival materials on the black presence in Europe. My central argument here is that a rethinking of the uses of archives could open up a number of promising possibilities going beyond this particular subject; such rethinking could make history usable and relevant for people who would not normally go near an archive, for students who have abilities in information processing that their teachers often fail to tap into, for activists linking worldwide through internet-based networks, and for new readings of existing, but largely unknown or ignored materials.

Archives and their uses are admittedly not among the hottest topics currently debated, academically or otherwise. More accurately, they are frequently perceived as dusty, dry, unwelcoming places, housing little more than dead knowledge, of interest only to a small group of experts. The scholarly community certainly displays a more complex view, but the difference frequently seems gradual rather than fundamental. While archival research is often essential, few of us consider it to be the most exciting part of our job, and even if we do enjoy it, that joy usually lies in the contemplative, reclusive nature of the work, away from the world, offering a break from the here and now rather than a way of intervening into pressing contemporary discourses.

In their best-known role, archives are places that house “facts,” knowledge that has already been accepted as such and thus is deemed worthy of being incorporated into a space designed for the purpose of conserving relevant materials. The concept of the archive, unlike that of a museum, usually does not include a public component. Because of their position as exclusive centers of dominant wisdom, archives often play an ambiguous role for minorities. For them, archives are sites of exclusion, a manifestation of the minority’s irrelevance to their nation’s history, rather than taken-for-granted containers of established history. Archives can have a different function though, above and beyond this admittedly polemic description, both in regard to the way they are perceived and accessed and in regard to their part in defining and distributing past and present knowledge.

Alternative possibilities of archival resources have been explored in the U.S. since the Civil Rights movement, which, among many other things, led to a re-assessment of the official representation of slavery, which, until the 1960s, was largely shaped by the apologetic views of the Dunning School.<sup>2</sup> Completely missing from mainstream historical analyses was any adequate representation of the slaves’ perspective, despite the fact that the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s had collected thousands of former slaves’ narratives, which had, however, remained

---

<sup>1</sup> The project, initially conceived as *Black Europe: (Forgotten) Past and Present of a Continent—A Comparative Interdisciplinary Study of Identities, Positionalities, and Differences*, now called (less ambitiously) *Black European Studies (BEST)*, is a German-U.S. cooperative endeavor funded by the Volkswagen foundation, and initiated by Drs. Peggy Piesche, University of Leiden, Prof. Sara Lennox, University of Massachusetts, Prof. Randolph Ochsman, University of Mainz, and myself. See: <http://www.best.uni-mainz.de> (under construction).

<sup>2</sup> See William A. Dunning’s *Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865-1877* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907). While Dunning’s apologetic position was challenged by a number of black authors such as W.E.B. DuBois, Carter Woodson, and John Hope Franklin, it was shared by a majority of U.S. historians until the publication of Kenneth Stampp’s *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* in 1965.

virtually untouched for decades.<sup>3</sup> The “history from below” approach, aimed at both utilizing ignored materials within existing collections and at recording ignored voices through oral history projects, was used subsequently by various groups excluded from the dominant academic discourse, particularly women, queers, and ethnic minorities. Their activism, in turn, slowly created inroads into U.S. academia, helping to establish disciplines such as African American, Women’s and Ethnic Studies.

The attack on traditional notions of knowledge and history in the United States inspired similar activities in Europe, among them the *Geschichte von unten* movement in Germany, not only collecting the everyday histories of “average people,” but also at making them accessible through neighborhood-focused *Geschichtswerkstaetten*, which, since the 1970s, featured regular exhibits of the collected materials.<sup>4</sup> In theory the “everyday people” whose stories were to be rediscovered could have included German ethnic minorities, who had almost completely been written out of mainstream history. It turned out, though, that the leftist, union, gay, or feminist activists behind the *Geschichte von unten* movement did not differ much from their more conservative compatriots or from professional historians in their views on the potential ethnic diversity of the German population.<sup>5</sup> The only incarnation in which non-majoritarian ethnic subjects entered the “history from below” was that of the *Gastarbeiter*, who appeared within the context of workers’ histories. The *Gastarbeiter*’s representation<sup>6</sup> differed from those of other groups in a fundamental way though: while the movement aimed at breaking down the barriers between the powerful, authoritative “expert” on the one hand and the powerless, passive object of research on the other (intending to return agency to “the people”), the *Gastarbeiter* was still assigned the role of the mute, oppressed object that needed the enlightened German to tell/translate his story. All good intentions aside, what was collected thus inevitably reflects the bias of dominant society. This situation was mirrored within migration studies, which, while challenging the exclusion of migrants from German history, nevertheless left untouched the barrier between white, majoritarian scholars and ethnicized migrant objects.<sup>7</sup>

The very limited integration of migrants into any form of collected knowledge/history, problematic as it is, still went far beyond the representation of ethnic minorities such as Sinti, Asian, or Afro-Germans. The concept of the “guest worker” is in accordance with accepted notions of German national and racial politics and could thus be integrated into dominant as well as alternative discourses without demanding any major adjustments. German society externalizes questions of diversity and ethnic exclusion; whoever does not fit a biologist’s image of Germanness is ascribed the status of foreigner, implying a position outside of society, without historical roots or an impact on the ‘host’ culture. Until the recent change of citizenship law, this process was not restricted to social mechanisms of exclusion as the status of migrant was legally

---

<sup>3</sup> See the Library of Congress website for information on the history of the collection:

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/>

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the movement see: Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte, Galerie Morgenland / Geschichtswerkstatt Eimsbüttel, *Geschichtswerkstätten gestern—heute—morgen. Bewegung! Stillstand. Aufbruch?* (Hamburg: Dölling and Galitz, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> The largely failed racism debate within the academic and non-academic German left has been widely discussed, for an overview see Mark Terkessidis, *Die Banalitaet des Rassismus. Migranten zweiter Generation entwickeln eine neue Perspektive*. (Bielefeld: Transript, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> It is significant that it is not the representation of the *Gastarbeiterin*; the history of female labor migrants remains largely unwritten until the present day.

<sup>7</sup> See Terkessidis (footnote 5). See also the extraordinarily low number of scholars with a minority or migrant background employed by German universities—especially since the number of publications on the subject by such scholars shows that the problem is clearly demand rather than supply.

hereditary, creating a permanently disenfranchised native population. Such a marginal, temporary existence, of course, could not possibly have left any lasting traces in German society; it thus seemed entirely unnecessary to look for them. And when historians did stumble upon such traces, they often either ignored them or treated them as isolated curiosities without larger implications or meaningful ties to the rest of German history.<sup>8</sup> This persistent (non)perception makes it rather difficult to create an adequate methodological framework or even the basic knowledge necessary to contextualize minority histories in Germany, which, in turn, would allow an informed debate about their place in canonic German history as well as an analysis of the motivations and strategies behind their exclusion.

It is against this background that archives could gain a key function in current German discourses on national as well as European identity. In the struggle for a shift towards a cultural and political, rather than ethnic, definition of “German,” allowing the possibility of a “multicultural”/multiethnic German citizenry, the need to establish the historical presence of marginalized populations is evident. A rediscovery of the suppressed history of migrants and minorities would help to introduce them as subjects into contemporary debates not only by emphasizing that minorities, and their systematic exclusion, are not a new phenomenon in Germany, but also by weakening arguments of a supposedly insurmountable cultural Otherness of particular groups. The latter is a form of cultural racism that has successfully replaced (or rather, coated) more explicit forms of biologist racism after the 9/11 attacks and again after the recent assassination of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands.<sup>9</sup> It reflects an attitude that threatens to crystallize into a clash-of-civilizations truism, implying an inevitable, ahistoric opposition between Occident and Orient, North and South.<sup>10</sup> This increasingly acceptable scenario does not only need to be replaced by visible signs of the entirely illusionary nature of this supposedly invincible opposition but also by an understanding of the historical circumstances under which it was conceived and continues to thrive.

Equally, if not more important though, is the role that a restored, accessible history could play for contemporary ethnic minorities in Germany (and Europe in general) through creating a sense of belonging, of a continuity of resistance against marginalization. So-called second and third generation migrants, born and raised in Germany, are constantly confronted with discourses denying any form of continuity (beyond the absurdly continued state of migration), creating a

---

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Rainer Pommerin, *Sterilisierung der Rheinlandbastarde: das Schicksal einer farbigen deutschen Minderheit, 1918-1937* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1979), based on the author’s discovery of sources on the forced sterilizations of Afro-Germans in Polish archives. The disconnect between the German academic community and international discourses on race and diaspora on the one hand and a younger generation of activist-scholars of color on the other is also reflected in the 2002 controversy around the “Besonderes Kennzeichen: Neger” exhibit at the NS Dokumentationszentrum in Cologne. See, for instance, Julia Grosse, “Der Designer war schuld,” *die tageszeitung*, November 16, 2002, 14.

<sup>9</sup>The very near unanimity with which both Dutch and international media and politics framed the van Gogh murder as symptomatic for a conflict between Western tolerance and Muslim fundamentalism is striking, especially when compared to the very different reactions after the assassination of right-wing politician Pim Fortuijn by a white Dutch environmentalist in 2001. As far as I know a compilation of reactions is not yet available, but a *Google* search will give a fairly accurate impression of the tenor of reactions.

<sup>10</sup> Within German academia, senior social historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler might be the most prominent proponent of this position. See, for example, “Muslime sind nicht integrierbar”, Interview with Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *die tageszeitung*, September 10, 2002, p. 6 and H.-U. Wehler and Hasan Ünal’s “Das Verhältnis der Türkei zu Europa enttabuisieren!” <http://www.medea.be/?page=&lang=&doc=1318>. See also the massive success of Oriana Fallaci’s *La Rabbia e l’Orgoglio*, published in German as *Die Wut und der Stolz* by LIST in 2002.

permanent limbo of hybridity, a hipper version of older “lost between two cultures” tropes.<sup>11</sup> Recognizing the power of the past over the present, political/cultural activists like *Kanak Attak* and *Cybernomads* have started to recreate the lost history through their performances and web-based projects. It is this performative character that remodels archival information into accessible, entertaining, and educational material primarily addressed at an audience of the second and third generation, though explicitly inviting mainstream participation. The academic background of some of the key members of *Kanak Attak* and *Cybernomads* thus appears of importance as it granted them access to archival information whose existence is known only to those who learned how to search for it.<sup>12</sup> But the importance of those strategies notwithstanding, the process of selection and transformation inherent in such an agitprop use of historical texts and images follows specific rules not necessarily useful in creating broader access to the sources themselves.

The scattered materials reflecting the existence of German minority communities still offer a huge and largely untapped source for subversive readings, not only allowing to reconstruct the material living conditions of these groups, but also showing economic, political, and cultural continuities of exclusionary strategies. In order to find and make accessible materials relating to these groups in a way that goes beyond the dominant, static perceptions of national and European identity and avoids the recreation of established power dichotomies, it is not enough to merely parallel existing structures and to create a centralized but traditional archive. Rather, it seems necessary to adapt to the circumstances of both the process of external-knowledge-gathering-and-maintenance affecting those groups and of their current position within political discourses and movements increasingly influenced by globalized communication structures and new media technologies. If seen in this context, archives can be spaces of intervention into current processes, political as well as scholarly tools, rather than places where information is collected “after the fact” i.e. when the struggle for recognition has been successful. Such a re-appreciation of history could thus give new impulses to comparative studies of minorities in Europe as well as forge bonds between different groups who have been confronted with similar strategies of exclusion, both nationally, e.g. the Turkish, Jewish, and Polish German minorities, and on a continental level, for example through a comparison of the history and present of black populations in various European nations.

It is this latter group on which the aforementioned Black European Studies project focuses. Within Anglophone Postcolonial Studies, the African Diaspora has long been recognized as an important concept. The history and culture of African populations, violently transported to the “New World” via the slave trade, as well as their commonalities and different trajectories, are the subjects of vigorous scholarly debates. The history of black Europeans, however, still remains largely unknown. This is a consequence both of the reluctance of many European nations to deal with the “shadow side” of their colonial history and of the widespread belief that the scientific racism of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries exercised its full force outside of Europe and was long ago overcome within the continent itself. Due to the widespread notion that Europe indeed consists of many different ethnicities, who however, all belong to the same “white race,” black Europeans are often consigned to the role of “foreigner” instead of being conceived as part of the plurality of a new united Europe. Their marginalization is additionally difficult to

---

<sup>11</sup> For a critical analysis of this discourse, see Hito Steyerl & Encarnacion Gutierrez Rodriguez, eds., *Spricht die Subalterne deutsch? Migration und postkoloniale Kritik* (Muenster: Unrast 2003).

<sup>12</sup> For an introduction to the activities of these groups see their websites: [www.kanak-attak.de](http://www.kanak-attak.de) and [www.cybernomads.net](http://www.cybernomads.net).

problematize because, in contrast to the Anglophone debate, where “race” is grasped as a socially constructed category, many continental Europeans, including scholars, consider the identification of racial constructions (and the inequalities they occasion) to be “racist.” Though the resulting “color blindness” may be well-intentioned, it de facto negates centuries of black European history.

As a consequence of colonialism, the strategic maneuverings of the superpowers during the Cold War, and new migrations in the wake of a growing globalization, more black people than ever are at home in Europe. Although black Europeans are increasingly organizing politically, these new populations are neither taken into account, nor are the political and social consequences of their presence analyzed. Since the various black populations of Europe are subjected, more and more, to the same conditions (and confront an ever more homogeneous image of a Europe which up to now has excluded its non-white residents), a comparative study of these populations is of crucial scholarly importance and urgently demands a transnational approach. As most European countries lack any consciousness of the existence of their own indigenous black minorities, academic exchange has been possible to date only in connection with U.S. studies of the African Diaspora. It remains a problem that fundamental works on (national) Black European experiences merely exist side-by-side, defining themselves with respect to U.S. research instead of entering into scholarly dialogue with each other, thereby initiating a European discussion.<sup>13</sup>

It is for this reason that, despite quite a number of important individual studies, a field of scholarly study focused on black Europe has failed to emerge. This also has led to a dependence on U.S. research paradigms, which initially provided an important scholarly impetus. But there are important historical differences between American and European experiences that necessitate the development of a research methodology specific to the investigation of black history in Europe. Of course it is possible to utilize many of the approaches developed in the U.S., but, since the black European population, in contrast to the U.S., did not originate in a violent mass removal and the specific group experiences that removal occasioned, a total appropriation of U.S. methodology will inevitably lead to a dead end. Americans still regard the European experience as a divergence from the question central for their own research, the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Yet if one considers the history of Black Europe in its totality, along with differences that derive from the specificities of national history, it is possible to discern important commonalities which, on the one hand, contradict the thesis of divergent experiences and, on the other, define colonialism as central also for history inside of Europe. Additionally, the exclusive focus on the dichotomy of “white” and “black” against the backdrop of slavery is suitable neither for the analysis of European national identities nor for the development of historical models that address Europe in its entirety. Rather the common experiences of colonialism, as well as those of post-colonial migration create dynamics between communities of color in Europe that differ significantly from the U.S. experience.

Thus the goal of this project is the elaboration of scholarly tools adequate to the history, the present-day experience, and the future perspectives of the black populations of Europe. Afro-Europeans are often presented as exotic and ultimately “foreign” elements within their own national history. But since racial identity, like national identity, history, and origin, does not consist of “facts,” but is instead a result of complex historical and contemporary constructions, the project will develop theoretical paradigms that permit the requisite investigation of these

---

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of relevant literature on the subject see the project website cited above (footnote 12).

constructions. Cooperation among an international group of experts, especially from those countries where research on the black population is most advanced (Britain, Germany, the Netherlands) will be central to this project. It is conceived from the outset as international and interdisciplinary and demands the participation of scholars from a great variety of fields. To this point the methodological frameworks most commonly employed to contextualize black history in continental Europe have been those of Postcolonial Theory, Diaspora Studies, and Ethnic Studies. Both the relevance of these theories, and the problems that arise when they are employed uncritically, are obvious. From the outset the participants in the project will attempt to answer fundamental methodological questions in order to develop the framework necessary for subsequent scholarship. Although individual foci of investigation cannot be distinguished in scholarly practice sharply from one another, heuristically we can divide them into various categories. In each case it is a question of interrogating the models of identity developed by the group in question as well as constructing explanatory models which will be able to discern fundamental similarities and differences from a pool of apparently disparate facts. The following subjects will establish our initial framework of investigation: Diaspora / Race and Racialization / History / Identity / Community / Visibility.

In early October 2004, the Study Center “Black Europe” was inaugurated in Mainz. The Center will conduct empirical studies focused on the often neglected history and present of black people in Europe; it remains in close contact with the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where a sister project on Black German history is located.<sup>14</sup>

Regional working conferences in Northwest, East, and Southern Europe will offer a forum of exchange for scholars and activists, establish long-term regional and interdisciplinary networks and create an inventory of existing scholarship.

And finally, an archive will, for the first time, bundle sources on black Europe, up until now scattered within holdings on a variety of disparate subjects and, frequently, in private collections. Such a centralized archive is essential for breaking the rather vicious circle black European studies has confronted thus far: black Europeans are ignored both as national and continental subjects; this is reflected in the lack of any archival collection focusing on their experience; this lack of accessible resources makes it nearly impossible to get an idea of the wealth of materials actually in existence unless one possesses an inordinate amount of time, skills, and personal connections; the inaccessibility of the material in turn seems to support the assumption that there is indeed no significant historical presence which would otherwise be reflected in material sources; therefore, there is no need to create a place for these merely peripheral experiences, both literally in the form of a central archive or discursively in considerations of national or European identity.

But while an archive collecting and “proving” traces of the black European existence is essential, it is equally important that it will not be restricted to a largely symbolic function, i.e. known to exist by many but actually used only by a small group of scholars.<sup>15</sup> The material will thus be digitized and made available through an online portal, offering the greatest possible accessibility and an ability to swiftly and flexibly respond to new developments, thus confronting two of the greatest weaknesses of the traditional archive. The online format, with its multi-media

---

<sup>14</sup> Funded by the Alexander von Humboldt foundation and initiated by the organizers of BEST.

<sup>15</sup> This is in no way meant to minimize the importance of scholarly work on archival sources. The aforementioned use of the Federal Writers’ Project collection of slave narrative is a case in point. But it is also true that the FWP collection only became widely used or even known when the Library of Congress began to digitize it and projects like *Unchained Memories* presented it in “non-traditional” ways.

options, allows for an adequate representation of the varied nature of materials, including texts as well as images, often postcards, films, and audio sources, reflecting what Paul Gilroy called the soundscape of the Black Atlantic.<sup>16</sup> The portal will also link the digital archive with a number of other features, a searchable database; a comprehensive bibliography; abstracts of conference papers, calls for papers, etc. The non-hierarchical, non-linear, interactive structure of the portal itself will thus reflect the fractured, non-linear but certainly interactive landscape of the African Diaspora in Europe, tied in many ways to interrelated contemporary communities, debates and discourses, making use of strategies developed in response to the exclusion from dominant centers of knowledge production and preservation and thus hopefully offering insights useful beyond the immediate subject at hand.

---

<sup>16</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).