

Section Introduction: Gendering the Black Diaspora

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Zusammenfassung:

Gendering der Schwarzen Diaspora

*In dieser Sektionseinleitung reflektiert Gloria Wekker über die anderen Kapitel dieses Buchteils und hebt Aspekte hervor, die ihr besonders wichtig erscheinen. Das Bild der Schwarzen Diaspora war lange Zeit maskulin dominiert; demgegenüber unterstreicht sie die Wichtigkeit der beiden Hauptbeiträge dieser Sektion, die als Korrektiv hierzu exemplarisch zwei weibliche Schlüsselfiguren in den Mittelpunkt stellen: Angela Davis und Audre Lorde, zwei Afroamerikanerinnen, die das Bild der Schwarzen Diaspora auch in Deutschland stark beeinflusst haben. Der dritte Beitrag in dieser Sektion kehrt zum Thema Maskulinität zurück, greift aber eine eher unkonventionelle Facette desselben auf: Während Schwarze Männer traditionell als Gegenbild zum ‘guten’, ‘typischen’ oder ‘stolzen’ Deutschen gesehen wurden, schreiben die hier thematisierten Schwarzen männlichen Diskurse sich aktiv ins Deutschtum ein und reklamieren Teilhabe am Nationalstolz für sich. Trotz dieser Revision des Bildes vom Deutschtum im Hinblick auf den männlichen Teil der Schwarzen Diaspora finden sich jedoch auch Kontinuitäten, nämlich im Hinblick auf die erneute Exklusion von Schwarzen Frauen, die auch hier entweder nicht vorkommen oder aktiv nationale Identifikationen zurückweisen. Im Hinblick auf Diskurse über die Schwarze Diaspora und Deutschland allgemein betont Wekker außerdem, dass die tiefe Verankerung von Rassismus in der deutschen Kultur nach wie vor unzureichend thematisiert wird, und stellt Bezüge zu ihrer eigenen Arbeit in den Niederlanden her, v.a. ihrem Buch *White Innocence* (2016).*

As the first two articles by Katharina Gerund and Cassandra Ellerbe in this section show, a gendered approach to the Black Diaspora in Germany yields novel insights which are a necessary correction to the male-dominated view of Black Diaspora. Bringing to the fore two iconic African American women, Angela Davis and Audre Lorde, and their reception and impact in especially the German-speaking Diaspora, the articles show the importance of centralizing Black women to the project of investigating a cultural Imaginary. But they also dig deeper in that they investigate the specific German cultural archive, how these women are represented and received, how they resonate there (Said 1993).

Gerund deftly analyses three songs written and performed in the 1970s by well-known pop-cultural artists, “Sweet Black Angel” by Mick Jagger and The Rolling Stones, “Angela” by John Lennon and Yoko Ono, and West German singer-

songwriter Franz Josef Degenhardt’s “Angela Davis”¹⁹⁶. These songs variously depict Davis as a slave girl, a sister and a comrade, sharing an investment in othering her, while *white* male fantasies and desires are abundantly on display. Ellerbe foregrounds Audre Lorde as a matrilineal diasporic figure, a symbolical mother to a largely matrilineally bereaved Afro-German female subjectivity. In light of the specific German situation where, until rather recently, the generative dyad was Black men, who subsequently were lost either metaphorically or in real terms, and *white* women, who could not offer a satisfactory mirror image (Ellerbe-Dueck/ Wekker 2015) to their ‘mixed-race’ female offspring, these contributions are vital to investigating the gaps and fissures in a symbolical German landscape, where self-aware, articulate adult Black females have been conspicuously missing for decades. In that light, it seems that both Angela Davis and Audre Lorde have been imbued with excessive significance in a situation where beyond Afro-Americanophilia, an abyss of missing identificatory possibilities with real-life Black women has afflicted generations of Black German women and men.

The third chapter in this section shifts the focus to constructions of masculinity. While masculinity is per se a more traditional part of the Black diasporic image, the chapter examines a somewhat unusual way of representing Black masculinity: whereas Black males are usually constructed as a counter-image to (*white*-centred images) of Germanness and German patriotism, the Black male self-representations discussed in this article actively inscribe themselves as part of the German national community. However, even such revisionist images show some continuities in relation to older discourses on Black Germans: namely, the fact that Black women, again, are excluded from these representations, and sometimes actively reject German national identifications.

These articles may be considered as first forays into one particular aspect of a one-sided gendered representation of Black Diaspora. It is painful territory; the evacuation of Black women from the diasporic imagination has had, as Ellerbe remarks, correlations with the lack of self-esteem, the self-hatred often found among subsequent generations of Afro-German women. At the same time, all three articles point to the racism that has been cemented into the German cultural archive, which becomes manifest in general colour-blindness and more sensitivity to class issues. While the particular German sensitivity to class issues has, in my opinion, so far been unsatisfactorily addressed in mainstream feminist articles on intersectionality, the erasure of ‘race’ still needs to be encountered head-on. This is important territory that needs to be traversed more thoroughly.

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¹⁹⁶ I am focusing here especially on the German Diaspora, while of course all three songs have impacted in a wider international sphere.

In my recent work *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (2016), I have undertaken just such a project with regard to the Netherlands. I investigated which narratives *white* Dutch people, but also Dutch People of Colour, who have not distanced themselves from these hegemonic readings, like to tell themselves about themselves. The book is an ethnography dedicated to the exploration of a strong paradox that is operative in the Netherlands and that, as I argue, is at the heart of the nation: the passion, forcefulness and even aggression that ‘race’, in its intersections with gender, sexuality and class, elicits, while at the same time the reactions of denial, disavowal and elusiveness reign supreme. A dominant discourse stubbornly maintains that the Netherlands is and always has been colour-blind and anti-racist, a place of extraordinary hospitality and tolerance toward the racialised/ethnicised other, whether this quintessential other is perceived as Black in some eras or as Muslim in others. The dominant and cherished Dutch self-image can be summed up by a general sense of being a small but ethically just nation that has something special to offer to the world, a guiding light to other folks and nations. Dutch exceptionalism manifests itself in a rosy self-perception regarding euthanasia, soft drugs, gender and sexual policies, but is decidedly void when it comes to ‘race’ and racism. The dominant mapping of ‘race’ in the Netherlands, importantly, contains first, a denial of the Dutch role in Empire. Second, there is widespread colour- and power-evasiveness and, third, a denial of ‘race’ as a social and symbolical ‘grammar of difference’, playing out in many different domains of society. My main thesis is that an unacknowledged reservoir of knowledge and affects based on four hundred years of Dutch colonial rule plays a vital but unacknowledged part in dominant meaning-making processes, including the making of the self, taking place in Dutch society.

I strongly suspect that with national variations, a similar configuration is operative in other international settings, such as Germany, that have an imperial history. It is my hope that the current articles may be followed up by large-scale and in-depth studies of the German cultural archive.

Black German Women, the Matrilineal Diaspora and Audre Lorde

Cassandra Ellerbe

Zusammenfassung:

Schwarze Deutsche Frauen, die matrilineale Diaspora und Audre Lorde

Dieses Kapitel untersucht das theoretische Konzept der matrilinearen Diaspora (Chinosole 1990), wie es für afrikanischstämmige Frauen im deutschsprachigen Kontext gilt/galt. Darüber hinaus beschäftigt es sich mit der Untersuchung des Entstehens von Schwarzem Bewusstsein, politisierter Mobilisierung und Identitätsbildung Schwarzer Frauen. Im Zentrum der Analyse der Schwarzen Diaspora-Bildung in Deutschland steht die Präsenz und Arbeit der verstorbenen Aktivistin, Dichterin, lesbischen Kriegerin, Mutter und Gelehrten Audre Lorde.

In contemplating historical and socio-political developments within the Black Diaspora in Europe it is pertinent to seek a conceptual frame of analysis that also entails the ideologies, experiences, strivings and accomplishments of Black women across the continent. Any discussion of the concept of Diaspora, and in particular the Black Diaspora, necessitates a clear understanding of the concept of its theoretical meaning and how it can be employed. Jacqueline Nassy Brown (1998: 291) aptly states: “There is no actual space that one could call the African/Black Diaspora”. It is not a geographical location where one can travel to or depart from. It is a space that is imagined and non-tangible. And yet, this ‘imagined’, non-tangible space has been utilised as a point of departure from which processes of identity formation, consciousness-raising and political mobilisation have emerged for Black people across the globe.

However, well known theorists and storytellers of the Black Diaspora such as W.E.B Du Bois and Paul Gilroy, both prominent scholars who have made wide-reaching contributions to this field of study, have omitted or rather overlooked for the most part the gendered aspect of the Black diasporic experience. The relative absence of a gender-focused perspective prompted me to seek a theoretical framework in which to explore the Black diasporic female experience within German-speaking countries¹⁹⁷. In order to do this, I will briefly explain my understanding and reading of the terms ‘African Diaspora’ and ‘Black Diaspora’ and utilise both interchangeably. My reference to this term is based upon the premise that the African Diaspora is a social construct, which can be used to describe a racialised and ‘imagined’ space that assumes a web-like structure. It pertains to the forced migrations and dispersal of African peoples to the ‘New

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¹⁹⁷ In a previous article I have gone into depth about the particularity of the Black experience in Germany and Austria (Ellerbe-Dück/ Wekker 2015: 62-65).

World’ from antiquity to the 19th century. I visualise this structure as one consisting of innumerable nodes where some nodes criss-cross and are more closely connected than others. For example, diasporic encounters between African-Americans and African-descended peoples from the Caribbean have historically been far more common than between Germany and the United States – although this is changing. Moreover, I imagine the Black Diaspora as a space engaged within an ongoing process of flow and revision.

This piece explores the theoretical concept of the matrilineal Diaspora (Chino-sole¹⁹⁸ 1990) as it applies to African-descended females¹⁹⁹ within the German-speaking context. Further, I will engage with it in examining the emergence of Black consciousness, politicised mobilisation and identity formation of Black females. Central to the analysis of the Black diasporic formation in Germany is the presence and work of the late activist, poet, lesbian warrior, mother and scholar Audre Lorde.

I argue that the concept of the matrilineal Diaspora is important to the examination and discussion of the Black Diaspora in Germany in that the crucial developments within this node of the Diaspora were forged, propelled ahead and maintained to a great degree by queer and cis-gendered Black German female activists, who drew tremendous inspiration from the work and legacy of Audre Lorde.²⁰⁰ A matrilineally focused approach would offer a more encompassing perspective on diverse diasporic experiences. Although the German context is the primary focus of this chapter, my past research has often entailed Austria and Switzerland as well. Therefore, I will also make cross-references to experiences of Black diasporic female activists in these countries and in the Netherlands as well.

I will use ethnographic material, literary sources and an analysis of the most recent events that focus on the past, and posthumous contributions of Lorde, to assist me in the discussion of her legacy and key position within the Black Diaspora in Germany. It should be noted that Lorde is not the sole influential female figure within this Diaspora’s development. There are other Black German women such as May Ayim and Katharina Oguntoye who have also played a

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¹⁹⁸ Also see Beach 2014.

¹⁹⁹ Throughout this chapter my use of the term ‘female’ refers to cis-gender individuals who self-identify as such. For reasons of anthropological precision, I find it necessary to mark cis-gender in order to prevent a misreading and generalisation of my findings as automatically applicable to trans people.

²⁰⁰ While the 1986 publication of *Farbe bekennen* can be attributed to the work and influence of Audre Lorde, I find it necessary to mention four publications which ensued from her encouraging Black Germans to write, document and publish their own histories: Hügel-Marshall 1998, Chebu 2014, Bolaki/ Broeck 2015, and Kraft 2015a.

significant role in the development and the furthering of a Black diasporic consciousness, community and identity in Germany. However, these Black German women can be considered examples of the fruition of Lorde’s work during her sojourn in Berlin in the mid-1980s. Additionally, I am also interested in looking at just how Black women within these spaces utilised and are currently utilising a matrilineal Black diasporic inheritance. Later in this piece, I offer a definition thereof and also discuss concrete examples that specifically underline how this inheritance has manifested itself and is being used.

Although the daily lives and *herstories* of many Black women in *white*-dominated spaces are filled with episodes of struggle against various forms of oppression, it is necessary to focus not only on a ‘single story’ of their experiences. We often find ourselves daily bombarded with negativity and depressing stories about the state of Black Europe. Black migrants are commonly depicted in the media as constituting an ominous threat to the physical safety, economic well-being and racial purity of the *white* European imaginary (Ellerbe-Dück 2011a: 164). Although the struggle for social justice for Blacks living in German-speaking countries or in other European countries is far from over, there are Black people, and Black German women in particular, who have chosen to forge ahead despite all the daunting challenges and be “shockingly happy” (Robinson 2008: 56). The idea of being “shockingly happy” was mentioned to me by the Black German poet, writer and activist Victoria Robinson at the 2007 Black European Conference in Vienna, Austria. It refers to the act of creating, nourishing and maintaining sources and spaces of happiness and choosing wellness as tools for survival. An excellent current example of this is the exclusively Black and self-identified female Facebook group ‘Soul Sisters Berlin’. This is an online safe space where its members offer mutual support, express their interests, exchange advice and organise activities that foster the empowerment of Black female²⁰¹ consciousness in Berlin, Germany, but also worldwide.

The matrilineal diaspora

The possibility of a matrilineal aspect of the Black Diaspora came to me as an after-thought a few years back after I had completed my post-doctoral research, which focused on the networks of Black diasporic female activists in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. My research methods consisted mainly of qualitative interviews and participant observation with not only Black German activists, but also Black female activists from Austria and Switzerland.

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²⁰¹ Soul Sisters Berlin is an exclusively Black Facebook group that includes cis-gender and transgender women. The inclusiveness of all gender expression(s) is part of the group’s mission statement.

My research (Ellerbe-Dück 2011a) indicated that the German node of the Black Diaspora exercised a notable influence upon the political mobilisation, consciousness-raising and identity formation of its Austrian and Swiss counterparts. Further, this influence and connection was in many ways – in a conscious and unconscious manner – undoubtedly traceable to the work of Lorde. And while several of my Austrian interview partners never actually met Lorde or May Ayim and only one Swiss partner enjoyed this privilege; the legacy of these two Black diasporic women undoubtedly exercised great influence on their political consciousness, activist work, identity formation and vision. Moreover, Lorde approached her work and the Black women she encountered from an intersectional perspective. She practiced intersectionality long before the term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw 1989; Ellerbe-Dueck/ Wekker 2015: 62) and was always concerned with the situation of the Black women she encountered regardless of their diverse identities.

In reviewing my data from that time, I came to the conclusion that one of my interview partners, in particular, had been the direct recipient of a matrilineal tradition of activism, from her maternal African grandmother. But she was also the indirect recipient – via fictive kinship links – of the work and words of Lorde. My utilisation of the term matrilineal is not constrained to its common use that primarily describes consanguine kinship ties. Rather, in speaking about the matrilineal aspect, I discuss and view the line of the ‘mother’ or the act of mothering from an understanding of fictive or extended kinship. Fictive kinship is a commonly respected practice among various African societies and African-descended peoples across the globe. My Black Austrian interview partner’s reference to the Black German movement of the mid-1980s and her reference to Lorde’s (1981) essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” while discussing the necessity for Black Austrian female activists to demonstrate more creative forms of resistance indicated clearly that she drew strength and inspiration from the words of Lorde. In addition, she also marvelled at achievements of Black German women such as May Ayim and Katharina Oguntoye, and viewed the creation of the Black German community as a blueprint for the work that needed to be done in Austria.

This prompted me to recognise that something significant was happening here. However, I did not yet have a framework that would enable me to further investigate this aspect. My dissatisfaction with the lack of a gender-focused theoretical framework led me to work of the late scholar-activist Chinosole (1990: 379). Chinosole utilised the concept of the matrilineal Diaspora in examining the “her-stories” of Black women and their various forms of engagement with one another across the Diaspora. In her piece “Audre Lorde and Matrilineal Diaspora. Moving History beyond Nightmare into Structures for the Future” (1990:

379), she utilised this concept to laud the contribution and honour the wisdom of Lorde. Chinosole spoke of, or defined, the concept of the matrilineal Diaspora as

[t]he capacity to survive and aspire, to be contrary and self-affirming across continents and generations. Matrilineal Diaspora names the strength and beauty we pass on as friends and lovers from foremothers to mothers and daughters allowing us to survive radical cultural changes and be empowered through differences (ibid.).

Chinosole further states that “the matrilineal Diaspora serves as a means to define the links among Black women worldwide enabling them to experience distinct but related cultures while retaining a special sense of home as the locus of self-definition and power” (ibid.).

Upon my discovery of Chinosole’s work, I immediately attempted to contact her for further inquiry about this fascinating concept. But, to my dismay, I received the unfortunate news that the scholar had made her final transition in October 2014. Moreover, in my search for more publications that employed this concept, I only came across works that employed it primarily in regard to the analysis of Black diasporic literatures (Chinosole 1990, Crump 2010) written by Black female authors.

Thus, I have decided to utilise the foundation already constructed by Chinosole as the core of a theoretical framework that reads the making of the Black Diaspora in Germany and its identity formation through a matrilineally inspired lens. Based upon Chinosole’s concept, I claim that the matrilineal Diaspora entails the creation of female-centred space(s) where diverse Black female histories can exist, unfold and be sustained within this ‘imagined’ space/construct known as the Black Diaspora. I also assert that a matrilineally inspired approach is a step in foregrounding the portrayal of Black diasporic activist women’s stories, experiences and intersectionalities from a Black female activist perspective rather than the traditional male-centred one which has come to dominate, in particular, Black European diasporic discourses.

Matrilineality

While Lorde never precisely articulated the term or spoke about a matrilineal Diaspora, revision of her life trajectory demonstrates that the matrilineal aspect was for her indeed a source of importance and strength in her own activist, academic and spiritual development. She often looked to her matrilineal roots as an integral part of her self-definition and journey to ‘her-self’. Evidence of this development can be seen in the biomythography *Zami* where Lorde states: “I am writing a book about the enfolding of my life and loves” (1982: 190). Within this biomythical journey she interrogates the origin of her strength by examining the triad of the grandmother, mother and daughter relationship. In addition, she traces her identity as a Black lesbian feminist to a tradition of Black dykes

that in her view have always existed, and included women who may not have seen themselves as such. Lorde remarks: “there have always been Black dykes around – in the sense of powerful and women-oriented – women who would have rather died than use that name for themselves. And that includes my momma” (1982: 615). Lorde’s self-confident demeanour and open expression of her identity as a Black lesbian feminist played a fundamental role in assisting many Black German lesbians, or women who did not want to label their sexuality but were in female same-sex relationships, in their ‘coming out’ and in the formation of their identity or identities.

Moreover, I have come to believe that that her own childhood experiences of “isolation”, mistrust, self-rejection and sadness were crucial life experiences that enabled her to assist the Black German activist women at the Free University of Berlin in 1984, and a multitude of others, in their own specific journey in learning to “mother ourselves/themselves”, coming into their own and creating their own identity (Lorde 1984: 174-175). Mothering has many facets. Here, I define mothering as a practice that entails the creation and maintenance of intergenerational connections, conversations and the passing on of diasporic knowledge(s) and heritage. I assert that Lorde was not only a friend, mentor and wise-woman, but that her interaction with many Black German women assumed a mother-, sister- or godmother-like dimension. And while Lorde has been and to a degree still is deified by many, there are dissident voices that implore us to remember that she was a living, breathing human being that also had her shortcomings. Thomas Glave (2014) writes:

Those women and I, and a great many other men as well, genuflected uncritically before the various altars so many of us – understandably – fashioned in homage to Audre, particularly in the years immediately following her death. Many people continue to pay uncritical homage to Audre-the-Goddess today, and insist on speaking of her only hagiographically, obscuring the very real human being beneath so many recurring mythmaking projects. I wonder now if some of our wholesale embracing of Lorde-as-Goddess – and the fetishizing, romanticizing, deifying, and mythicizing of Lorde that continues today – has much to do with a great many of us (black queer people in particular) coming of age in a generation before which there simply had been extremely few visible models of such political bravery.

That said, it is still important to underline that, despite her human foibles, her presence and work in Germany served as a Black diasporic lifeline to many. By attending her readings or simply sharing a meal with her, many Black German women were able to experience – often for the first time in their lives – that their very being (Black-femaleness, queerness etc.) was not a problem. The issue of self-esteem and how to overcome a lifetime of being seen as a problem was a topic which troubled many Black German women and caused deep pain and psychological suffering. As I have stated elsewhere (Ellerbe-Dueck/ Wek-

ker 2015)²⁰², Lorde was in many ways a missing maternal or sororal link to a generation of Black German women who had few if any Black female relatives or role models. She possessed a healthy dose of self-esteem and embodied a positive image of Black queerness. Lorde exuded a presence that made many Black German women find beauty within themselves, regardless of their sexuality, body-type, skin complexion or hair texture. The majority of Black German women of the *Farbe bekennen* generation²⁰³ had been born to *white* German mothers and Black diasporic fathers, who were often absent from their lives.

The mother-daughter dyad is an essential component in the formation of female identity. And while motherhood is undoubtedly a gendered identity commonly associated with females, this practice is not exclusively limited to female-bodied persons. Males can also practice the act of mothering. However, in the identity formation of Black German females, *white* German mothers at that time were rarely equipped to transfer the body of knowledge necessary to provide their Black German daughters with the necessary tools to deal with and resist interlocking systems of oppression. Patricia Collins (1993: 54) appropriately states: “Black daughters must learn how to survive in interlocking structures of race, class and gender oppression while rejecting and transcending those very same structures”. As I have discussed previously (Ellerbe-Dueck/ Wekker 2015), Black German girls/daughters of this generation had to survive in settings where positive and nurturing Black female role models were absent. Lorde undoubtedly filled that void. Her presence in these women’s lives was crucial to the formation of their Black diasporic female identity/identities.

And while the mother-daughter dyad has its complexities and difficulties, it is important to mention that Lorde often pointed to her motherhood as part of her self-description when she introduced herself to audiences. I always found this self-description empowering, because it underlined that motherhood was undoubtedly part of her identity and also served as a source of strength and power in her activist and academic work. Motherhood was by no means a hindrance for her work, nor did it supersede any of her other identities. Feminist poet Adrienne Rich offers one of the most well-known feminist texts on the subject: her book *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) looks in depth at the concept of motherhood as an institution and mothering as a practice. Prior to Rich’s work there had been little to no feminist analysis of the institution of motherhood. Rich asserts that motherhood is merely one dimension of a

²⁰² In the 2015 publication, I briefly mentioned the significance of the mother-daughter dyad as it relates to Black German women. In the present chapter I examine this issue in more detail as it involves the cultural and Black diasporic role of mothers and the practice of mothering.

²⁰³ By ‘Farbe bekennen generation’, I mean all Black German female and male activists that emerged during the 1980s.