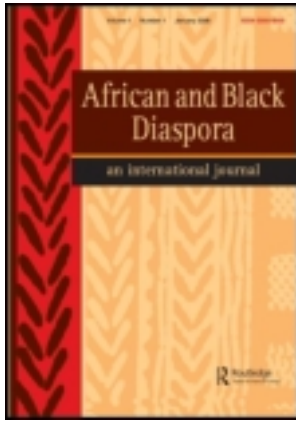


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Publisher: Routledge

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African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rabd20>

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Published online: 18 Jul 2011.

To cite this article: Cassandra Ellerbe-Dueck (2011) The Black European Women's Council: 'thinking oneself into the New Europe', African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal, 4:2, 145-160, DOI: [10.1080/17528631.2011.583452](https://doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2011.583452)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2011.583452>

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The Black European Women's Council: 'thinking oneself into the New Europe'

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With the continuous political shift to the right in many European countries, exclusivist constructions of the nation and concepts related to national identity – issues which are immersed in and often conflated with biology and culture – the necessity for mobilization and political activism among women, migrants, and minorities in Europe has become all the more acute and timely. Organized within the framework of the 'European Year for Equal Opportunities 2007' and initiated by Béatrice Achaleke, AFRA (International Centre for Black Women's Perspectives in Vienna, Austria, and co-organized by Helen Felter, Director of Tiye International (The Netherlands); the Black European Women's Congress (26–29 September 2007) culminated in the formation of the Black European¹ Woman's Council (hereafter BEWC). Employing a mix of discourse analysis, social movement and intersectional theory, I address the issues of Black female subjectivity, political agency, and strategies in relation to the socio-political empowerment of Black women across Europe. Based on qualitative data, I argue that the cross-border network of the BEWC exhibits the potential to serve as a structured political force not only on local and national levels, but also within the sphere of the European Union; and to possibly assist Black European women activists with the task of 'thinking themselves into the New Europe'.

Keywords: Black women; Black European's Council; New Europe; Black female subjectivity

Introduction

With the continuous political shift to the right in many European countries, racialized ethnic minorities and migrant citizens in Europe find themselves more and more threatened. African/Black² people face disproportionate exposure to 'race'-racism,³ marginalization, hate violence, and gendered forms of racial profiling.⁴ In the face of such challenges, the necessity for mobilization and political activism has become all the more acute and timely. These developments have led many politicized Blacks in Europe to become more vocal, and to mobilize resistance and anti-racist activism. Groups such as RAAS (Racial Adjustment Action Society) 1965, UCPA (Universal Coloured People's Association) 1960s, Black People's Alliance, mid-1960s, IWA/GB (Indian Workers Association⁵) 1967, CRAN (*Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires*) 2005, are only a few examples of the history of Black and people of colour's mobilization and resistance. Unfortunately, it is often forgotten that Black women have also played a key role in the mobilization of such resistance.

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This article was inspired by the words of the Black Russian scholar Lily Golden. In 2004 the Black Atlantic Conference was held in Berlin, Germany. Amongst the many panels and roundtable discussions, there was one particular panel that captured my attention: it was “‘Becoming Black Europe’: Possibilities and Obstacles to a Black Europe’. During this panel Lily Golden sat with several other Black European female scholars and discussed the situation of Black people in Russia, Germany, The Netherlands, and Sweden. And while each panellist spoke about the specifics of their respective countries; the topics of ‘invisibility’, ‘race’-racism, marginalization, cohesion within and between Black communities, and ‘belonging’ were common to the experiences of Black people in Europe as described by the panellists. Golden stated: ‘There is much to be done to join forces among diverse Black communities to work together and find a common ground.’⁶ She also stressed the necessity to create networks in Europe and that Blacks in Europe must ‘think themselves into the New Europe’.⁷ History indicates that Black, migrant, and refugee women are by no means unfamiliar with the practice of trans-border networking. However, very little research exists that looks in depth at how politically active Black women perceive the concepts of becoming ‘European’ and the ‘new Europe’.⁸ Drawing from my recent fieldwork with members of the Black European Women’s Council (hereafter BEWC), I argue that such trans-border coalitions could be of great assistance to politically active Black women in the process of *thinking themselves into the ‘new’ Europe*. Moreover, in examining the activities of these women, I have come to view their activities and goals as an essential component of the process(s) of *thinking* and *becoming*. My research indicates that for the women of the BEWC, the process of *becoming* European entails three significant steps. First, in what follows, I broadly address the prior endeavours of politically active Black women in Europe and underline how this paved the way for the formation of the Black European Women’s Council. Second, I utilize aspects of discourse analysis, intersectional and anthropological theory to examine the importance and difficulties of the self-ascribed term ‘Black European’, and also underline how this term figures in the process of *becoming*. Finally, I conclude this discussion in examining the potential significance of the BEWC as an instrument for garnering agency, greater visibility, political participation, and leverage on the level of the European Union.

A moment of reflection

Before beginning this discussion, I find it important to briefly mention my position and identity as a researcher. Postmodernist theory has pointed to the importance of reflexivity, and teaches researchers that it is important to question oneself and one’s disciplinary interest before simply questioning others. The theoretical insights of feminist scholars of colour have also emphasized the importance of self-reflexivity, positionality, and perspective which have contributed greatly to my methodological approach. My training in the disciplines of Anthropology/Comparative Cultural Studies and Women’s Studies has shown me that these disciplines provide a researcher with the theoretical means to do the following: examine and produce anthropological knowledge on every aspect of human life and culture, but also to remain mindful of the position and responsibility of the researcher, and the important aspect of gender.

This research emerged from an international and multidisciplinary European Union project titled SeFoNe.⁹ My position as a Black female researcher with first-hand experience of migration placed me in close proximity to the trajectories of many of the women that I interviewed. Several of the women expressed to me that they were only willing to share their stories with me, because I was a Black female living in Germany. I was warmly welcomed and asked to join the activities; I found more than willing interview partners.

I was requested by Mama Cash in the Netherlands to assess the merits of the BEWC conference project proposal being discussed in Vienna in August 2007. After I attended that conference, I contacted all the members of the German and Austrian organizations that took part. At the conference itself I engaged in participant observation activities with virtually all participants. After the conference I travelled around Germany, to Berlin, Dortmund, Cologne, Munich, and Frankfurt in order to interview the German-speaking members of the BEWC. Thus the Black women voices highlighted here mainly reflect the German-speaking context and should not be seen as representative of BEWC members from other European countries.

I conducted a total of 40 open-ended ethnographic interviews with informants during meetings in Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands. I have selected 14 of those interviews with female German-speaking informants for analysis of this text. Activist engagement in a European Black women's organization served as the main criterion for the selection of the informants. Informal interviews with members from Greece and France also constitute part of my data. However, this paper concerns primarily the views of BEWC members from Germany and Austria. My participant observation activities with the informants ranged from stuffing envelopes at the AFRA¹⁰ office in Vienna, to enjoying meals and engaging in 'small talk' with leading figures and novice participants of the BEWC. At first, my method for selecting informants was to develop an array of categories, such as age, socio-economic situation, place of birth, etc. However, the situation on the ground did not always enable me to find participants who fit these criteria. Thus, I ended up interviewing Black heterosexual women from the BEWC who were voluble, enthusiastic, and had long-term histories of passionate political engagement. The data sample presented here illustrates the perspectives and goals of Black women with a past and current history of political activism. Unfortunately, my data do not include the profiles of Black women who are relatively new to political mobilization and participation.

The complexity of power dynamics between the researcher and informant also prompts us to examine the 'subject'-'object' dichotomy. Scholar and activist bell hooks (1990, p. 152) reminds us that 'objects' do not possess the power to define their own realities, and establish their own identities. The women of the BEWC trusted that I would not present them as mere powerless 'objects' of research, but as 'subjects' on the road to self-empowerment, who indeed have the power to define their realities and establish their own identities. With that in mind, I am striving to present the informants not as 'objects', but as empowered subjects while *becoming* politically active European citizens in their respective countries. The topic of citizenship also demands that I mention the subject of migration. Of the 14 interviewees, 12 had an experience of migration, but only one interviewee did not have a European passport.

'Invisible Europeans'

Prior to discussing Black women in Europe and their politicized mobilization, it is worth mentioning that the historical trajectory of the Black population in Europe is embedded in the concept of the African/Black Diaspora. While there is much to be said and even criticized about the various perspectives concerning the concept of Diaspora, avoiding it is nonetheless impossible. In looking at the study of the African Diaspora, the dominant focus of scholarly interest has mainly been the 'node/s' of this Diaspora that are located in the Americas and the Caribbean (Sawyer 2002). It has been only in recent years that the hidden histories of the Black Diaspora in Europe are slowly being unearthed (El Tayeb 2004, pp. 5–6). Many European countries have been reluctant to deal with the unpleasant aspects of their own colonial histories. This has especially been the case with Germany. The invisibility of Black people within German historiography can be traced to the concept and existence of *Blinde Flecken* (blind spots). These *Blinde Flecken* are a kind of collective amnesia regarding Germany's direct and indirect links to the transatlantic slave trade, its participation in the division and the colonization of the African continent. And while Black people have long *been* part of the socio-cultural fabric of many European countries, it has been the deeply ingrained images of white homogeneity across the continent, and throughout society that have rendered Black peoples in Europe as invisible and 'non-European' (Goldberg 2006, p. 353).

It is also important to remain mindful of the differences between Black communities in Europe and those in the Americas. Any exploration or analysis of the European 'node' of the Diaspora must take into account the multiplicity of socio-historical trajectories, locations, language differences, politics, and perspectives of Europe's Black citizens. However, despite diverse developments, the impact of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism has had a common, long-lasting effect upon the lives of the Black people in Europe. The aforementioned forms of oppression from the past have morphed into obstacles that inform the current 'everyday' realities for Blacks in European societies. Discrimination, exclusion, marginalization, socio-economic disparities – and need we mention – the threat of physical violence, are only a few examples of the harsh realities faced by Black communities in Europe. Moreover, the geopolitical construct referred to as Europe, has not only excluded Black peoples from its collective 'imaginary', but also from external geographical borders. Since the Single European Act of 1986/1992, the opening of Europe's internal borders has led to the fortress-like impermeability of the continent's external borders. Migrants from the global South have found it increasingly difficult to enter Europe; Blacks and other people of colour, who are residents and citizens often find themselves under intense scrutiny and surveillance.

Black women and political life in Europe

Boatswain and Maynard (1993, p. 121) argue that Black women have a history of contribution to the growth and prosperity of Europe. Unfortunately, the contributions of Black women to European societies have remained largely invisible to the eyes of white Europeans. In addition, Black women are caught between two debilitating forces – 'race'-racism and sexism. Not only do they endure sexism from the dominant white society, but also in certain situations from within their own

communities. Thus, Black women in Europe experience and grapple with these realities on two distinct fronts. However, despite past and ongoing experiences at the intersections of multiple systems of oppression, Black women have forged ahead and are utilizing activism as a tool in fighting against the challenges of 'race'-racism, sexism, and marginalization in their respective countries. Black women in Europe are far from being a homogeneous group in terms of socio-economic and legal status, for example, levels of education and income. Nevertheless, many Black women living in European societies are disproportionately affected by racism and discrimination in the labour market. It is often the case in certain labour sectors¹¹ that Black women with equal qualifications and skills often find themselves in a situation where their earnings are less, and their job status inferior to that of their white female counterparts.

Regarding Black women and politicized action, it is pertinent to briefly mention the topic of migration and citizenship. While not all Blacks in Europe have a direct migration experience, the ascribed status of 'foreigner' to Black people on the continent has forced this group in many instances to form alliances with Black migrant and other 'minoritized' groups. As stated in an earlier section, the majority of the informants have had a migration experience, but over the years acquired European citizenship. While it is not within the scope of this article to conduct an in-depth discussion of citizenship and its related practices, it is important to note that politicized mobilization of Black women may be indicative of a step towards creating new ways and meanings of belonging and/or *becoming* European. However, political mobilization is also related to long-term experience in dealing with European societies, something that recent migrants and refugees do not have at their disposal.

The recent arrivals do not have access to the resources and know-how of the long-term Black citizens or other minorities. Nevertheless, politicized activity is an important step. Local and national political arenas in the majority of European countries are spheres where Blacks and particularly Black women are virtually invisible. Long-time Dutch activist Hellen Felter (Tiyé International) touched upon this reality with her statement: 'There is a culture within political parties that excludes Black women.'¹² Felter's words are reflective of sentiments of the Black women activists, who shared their experiences and knowledge with me. None of the interviewees considered themselves truly represented or included in the decision-making processes related to politics.

Black women organizing across Europe: past and present

Networking and mobilizing around social justice issues is by no means a new phenomenon for Black women in Europe. During the late 1970s Black women began establishing their own organizations and networks. The now defunct Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) founded in 1978, was a groundbreaking attempt to bring together Black women and women of colour from diverse backgrounds and political views. OWAAD was a minority women's organization in the UK that utilized the term 'Black' as a multiracial unifying political category. However, the ideal of a unified 'Black' identity proved difficult to uphold and maintain when faced with the reality of cultural, 'racial' and political diversity within the organization. According to Amina Mama (1995, p. 4) the difficulty of using the concept of Blackness as a multiracial signifier was one of the

factors that led to the demise of this coalition. In the decades to come, various other groups would also emerge, for example, Brixton Black Women's Group (1973), Southall Black Sisters (1979), along with conferences/meetings, which provided Black women with the space to determine and define their own priorities. In the Netherlands¹³ national and local-based organizations such as Tiye (1994), Zami (1991) and Sister Outsider (1980s), European Black Women's Network (1991), to name a few, provided Black,¹⁴ migrant and refugee women with the possibility to organize across borders and lines of 'race' ethnicity, legal status and sexuality. I have cited examples of these earlier efforts of politicized mobilization to indicate that the majority of these endeavours took place primarily in countries (UK and the Netherlands) that were more readily associated with postcolonial migration from Africa and the Caribbean. It was commonly known that the UK and the Netherlands had Black citizens. This however was not the case with the German-speaking countries. The global and political awakening of African/Black diasporic peoples across the globe during the latter half of the twentieth century (McLaughlin 2005, p. 75). With that said, I would like to briefly mention the politicized awakening in a European country where a sense of a cohesive Black community emerged somewhat later than in countries such as the UK, France, or the Netherlands.

In Germany Afro/Black German women led the politicized awakening and consciousness-raising during the mid-1980s. With the publication of the anthology '*Farbe Bekennen*' (1986) (trans. 'Showing Our Colours', 1991), Black German women were able to break free from an isolated existence, discover, and articulate their distinct voices. This led to the formation of the Afro/Black German and Black Women's organization called ADEFRA.¹⁵ Established in 1986 and mentored by the late lesbian warrior-poet and activist Audre Lorde, who is considered to be the Godmother of the Afro/Black movement,¹⁶ ADEFRA was the first grassroots activist group created for and by Afro/Black German women (many of whom identified as queer) in Germany. In addition, ADEFRA along with the ISD (Initiative of Blacks in Germany) formed the backbone of the Afro/Black German movement. This movement also inspired Black consciousness, cross-border politicized activities and dialogue between German-speaking Blacks in Germany and Austria (e.g. AFRA¹⁷ and Pamoja¹⁸) and Switzerland.

Despite these examples of politicized mobilization, the political strivings and social presence of Black women have hardly been taken into account. Black women in Europe have been and remain situated mostly outside the realm of formal politics at the local, national, and the EU level. Diane Abbott, one of the two Black female Members of Parliament in the United Kingdom, shed some light on the situation of Black women in European politics. Abbott succinctly stated in *The Guardian* (10 July 2008): 'Black women are conspicuous by their absence from politics.'

The Black European Women's Council

The past decades have witnessed the creation of several transnational and cross-border networks and organizations that strive for the advancement and political mobilization of women in Europe.¹⁹ Valentine Moghadam²⁰ asserts that networks appear to be the best means for doing this type of mobilization work. I assert that the formation of the Black European Women's Council is the most recent example of how networks can be built and utilized to bring together Black activist women. Thus,

I reiterate my argument that such trans-border coalitions could be of great assistance to Black women in the process of *'thinking themselves'* into the New Europe. One hundred and twenty Black female delegates from 16 European countries gathered together for the Black European Women's Conference in Vienna, Austria from 27 to 29 September 2007. This highly significant meeting was organized by two smaller women's organizations, AFRA²¹ located in Vienna, and Tiye International, located in Utrecht. The BEWC conference participants also represented Black women's organizations throughout Europe, NGOs and initiatives/projects. Many of the women that came to the Vienna conference were already acquainted or had shared histories of activist collaboration. These collaborations came from various societal sectors, for example, education, politics, health-care, culture and the economy.

According to Béatrice Achaleke (AFRA) and Helen Felter (Tiye International) many more women answered the call that went out over the Internet and by word of mouth. Because of limited funding and a modest staff, over 40 Black women were placed on a waiting list for lack of sufficient accommodation even though many were willing to finance their travel themselves. The women that managed to attend the conference represented the diversity and complexity of the Black Diaspora in Europe, both East and West, in terms of language, ethnicity, religious background, socio-economic level, legal status, sexual orientation, political involvement, and experience. As with many international conferences, English was the working language. But, in many instances, women who were multilingual were asked to interpret for non-English speakers. Written translations were also organized, and the BEWC Vienna Declaration appears online in English, German, Portuguese, Swedish, and French. These languages were selected because representatives from these countries volunteered to compose the translations.

The conference initiators (AFRA and Tiye International) were inspired by the European Commission's decision to declare 2007 as the 'European Year for Equal Opportunities for All'. This campaign urged all 27 Member States along with Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway to participate by hosting initiatives and events that would promote awareness about rights to equal treatment and anti-discrimination legislation.

In recent years the topic of 'promoting diversity' has gained attention from the EU. Diversity has come to be seen as a beneficial aspect of European societies, and was also propagated as a key issue of that year-long equal rights campaign. One initiative in Austria posted the following statement on its website: 'The European Union can be proud of its anti-discrimination laws, which belong to the most modern laws in the world.'²² It is without a doubt that the EU has become an important force in encouraging its Member States to tackle the issues of 'integration', equal opportunity, and diversity. However, one should not forget that the EU has also been a leading institution in restricting and denying entry to individuals who constitute part of the 'diversity' that this campaign claims to promote.

While the EU appeared to be proud of its advancement in the pursuit of social justice and inclusion, the women at the BEWC conference did not appear to be totally convinced. The conference participants were focused on and interested in a critical evaluation of the methods and strategies used by the European Commission to promote equal opportunities and ensure inclusion. BEWC conference organizers Béatrice Achaleke and Helen Felter both stated to me in informal conversations that

they wondered if the concept of equal opportunity would become just another resolution without much thought given to its effectiveness when it comes to the daily realities of persons facing multiple forms of discrimination (personal communication, 28 September 2007). Further, the women of the BEWC believed it necessary to examine the EU's progress and future plans, especially from a Black female perspective. Brainstorming and critical evaluation took place in the form of working groups where BEWC participants discussed the following five themes as published in the conference report:

1. Identity and Self-Empowerment
2. Challenges Faced by the Younger Generation of Black Children and Youth
3. Psychosocial Conflicts Affecting Black Communities
4. Qualification and Access to the Labour Market
5. Political Participation.

After two days of lively and at times heated discussions, the conference culminated in the formation of the Black European Women's Network (later renamed Council). Within this exclusively Black female space, the organization's Vienna Declaration was drafted, a definitive name for the organization was voted upon, and the groundwork was laid for the creation of a European-wide umbrella organization of Black women. The BEWC conference can be considered a milestone in the history of Black women's organizations in Europe. While membership criteria was/is determined along lines of gender and self-definition as a member of the African/Black Diaspora in Europe, the BEWC also strives to build EU partnerships, lobby for funding on national and EU levels, promote the participation of Black women in European politics on various levels, utilize the European Union's Lisbon Strategy²³ as a platform for socio-economic and political advancement of Black Europeans, and fortify trans-Atlantic alliances, such as with the Helsinki Commission²⁴ in Washington, DC.

On 9 September 2008 the BEWC celebrated its official inauguration in Brussels. The Brussels launch was an important step in the articulation of a politicized Black and gendered voice within the EU arena. Vladmir Spidla (Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunity of the European Commission) stated, 'I would like to congratulate you for having made yourself heard on an international level [...] The Black European Women's Council is a new voice to represent an important part of European society.'²⁵

Consolidation of the BEWC

On 9–10 April 2009, representatives from 31 Black women's organizations from 12 EU member states gathered in Utrecht-Soesterberg. Their intention was to elect the BEWC's first Management Board members and to focus on capacity building strategies. The current Executive Board Members of the BEWC are:

1. President: Béatrice Achaleke (Austria)
2. Vice-President: Yvette Jarvis (Greece)
3. Treasurer: Hellen Felter (The Netherlands)
4. Secretary: Sandrine Joseph (France)

It is noteworthy that the four women come from different European countries with diverse Western European experiences. Eastern European representatives, for example, Poland, attended the 2007 Vienna conference, but were not present at the organization's Brussels inauguration or at the election of the Management Board Members in 2009. I was told that the absence of the women from Poland was due to a conflict in schedules, which prevented them from travelling to Brussels and Utrecht (personal communication, 9 April 2009).

During the third European-wide meeting, BEWC members developed a public relations motto. The BEWC defines itself as 'A vehicle for the recognition and visibility of Black women in Europe, through which they can reach their optimum potential'.²⁶ The General Assembly meeting in Utrecht-Soesterberg ended with a clear plan of action, and an outline of the BEWC's future priorities. Board Members and participants agreed upon the following priorities:

- Establishment of an equipped BEWC office and staff in Brussels,
- The drafting of annual reports and statistical data on the situation of Black women and their communities in Europe,
- Capacity building,
- Mentor, leadership and empowerment strategies for African/Black diasporic youth,
- Black female empowerment and increased political participation,
- Black women's health issues.

The creation of the BEWC was inspired by the prior participation of several of its current members in other European women's organizations. Several members of the BEWC have been and are still currently active in EU organizations such as the European Migrant Women's Forum and the European Women's Lobby. Many had longstanding experiences as outspoken feminist activists in their countries of 'origin' and in Europe. However, while the participants did express diverse views on the needs and concerns that are specific to Black women and Black children/youth, the majority of these women felt that their concerns had often fallen under the thematic table of these large umbrella organizations. In addition, several BEWC members expressed frustration with the fact that no Black women held positions of power within the aforementioned EU based organizations.

BEWC President Béatrice Achaleke addresses these sentiments by stating: 'Schwarze Frauen wollen handeln und nicht behandelt werden' ('Black women want to act and not merely be acted upon'). Achaleke was rejecting the stereotypic role ascribed to Black women as infantilized passive objects. Béatrice Achaleke alluded at various times to the infantilization of Black women. While in the midst of sharing her past positive as well as negative experiences of coalition work at the BEWC's April 2009 meeting, she stated: '... we are a group of Black women who have had enough of being mothered'.²⁷ This statement was in reaction to Achaleke expressing her anger at and frustration with established white dominated NGOs and migrant women's groups (ethnic/'racialized' minorities). In her opinion, the relationships between these two groups had been akin to that of the parent-child dyad. According to Achaleke, these relationships evolved in such a way that the more established NGOs (often predominately white) commonly saw their role as that of the 'protector' of migrant women and their organizations. When migrant women's

groups decided to assert their views and forge self-determined paths that differed from the guidance of the NGOs; their actions were met with resistance, and strife often erupted within these alliances. During the preparation for the 2008 inauguration in Brussels, she also stated the following:

Just to be a bit provocative, I have the impression, that these majority organizations are not really interested in migrant women becoming emancipated. When suddenly we want to do more than just get just their help. From the moment we want to realize our full potential and position ourselves, a power struggle emerges, and sometimes there is even intrigue.²⁸

An intersectional reading of the interview excerpt indicates not only how Black women are confronted with social stratification and marginalization, but also with stereotypes. Sesko and Biernat (2009, p. 1) conducted studies on the subject of prototypes and stereotypes based on race and gender in the United States. The authors asserted that Black women in the US tend to be seen as more ‘masculine’ (e.g. assertive, strong, self-reliant, etc.) than white women.

Moreover, there is also the issue of co-formations. Feminist theorist and scholar Paola Bacchetta (2008, 2009) has theorized and written about the co-formation of subjects. Norma Alarcón’s (1990) critique of the ‘unitary subject’, inspired and helped Bacchetta to configure her theory on the notion co-formations. In looking at the notion of co-formations, Bacchetta asserts that subjects are co-formed through gender, ‘race’, sexuality, class, religion, coloniality/post-coloniality, etc. Thus, when these constructions are blended or overlap, they form inseparable relationships in the production of subjects. To understand the subject through co-formations is to think of the subject as both a subject-effect, and as a subject-in-process (Alarcón 1990).

In looking at the situation of Black female subjects in Europe, it is important to remember how the European ‘civilizing’/colonizing mission in Africa evolved. Anne McClintock (1995) has shown that white Europeans based their ‘civilizing’/colonizing methods upon gendered notions of African and Asian pathology. Part of these methods entailed the notion of ‘saving’ Black women from immoral behaviour and inappropriate forms of patriarchal control. During the colonial era and thereafter, white Europeans believed that Africans were innately ‘child-like’ and in need of moral direction and religious guidance. White European women were also disadvantaged under the constraints of patriarchal colonial rule. Nevertheless, it was in particular the disregard for the humanity of Africans and the pathologization of the Black body that positioned Blacks upon a rung lower than white women – as the ultimate inferior ‘other’. Gendered racist constructions created images that portrayed/portray colonized subjects, that is, Black women, as dirty, hypersexual, lazy, unintelligent, and aggressive. Many of these contradictory images still circulate today throughout European societies. The characteristic of aggressiveness is important here, because in terms of intellectual capacity and political astuteness, many of the informants believed that this is a characteristic not commonly ascribed to Black women in Europe.

In the interview excerpt, the process of infantilizing Black and migrant women comes to the forefront. When Black and or migrant women sought to break out of the ‘parent–child’ dyad, these women were confronted with power struggles and intrigue aimed at destabilizing independent efforts. While I cannot make generalizations based

upon one interview excerpt, I can confirm that the issue of wanting to be seen as 'empowered subjects' was a crucial topic during the identity and self-empowerment workshop at the 2007 Vienna conference. This has led me to believe that certain colonial views still continue to co-firm the production of the Black female subject.

Despite the common categorization and treatment of Black female subjects as 'objects' void of political representation and agency; BEWC members invest hope and ambition in this newly formed council in which self-empowerment can be achieved and politicized gendered agency exercised. The aforementioned quote underscores why it is so important for this group of politically active Black women to negotiate their own conditions. These aspirations carry political significance for Black women residing throughout Europe who wish to enter local, national, and EU level political arenas. These are spheres that have excluded? Black women, but also leave much to be desired in regard to gender equality between white women and white men.

What's in a name?

While in the midst of organizing the Black European Women's conference and seeking sponsorship, Béatrice Achaleke mentioned to me that several donor organizations questioned her about the term 'Black European' and wondered why she refused to employ the term 'African' women in Europe (personal communication, 29 May 2008). In the following interview excerpt she recounts the thoughts and strategies linked to the term Black European:

This term, 'Black European women', is a strategic working definition, which I think is very important. When they speak about us, then we will be one step in the direction of being recognized as a European population, and not be seen as 'these' [emphasis mine] second and third generation migrants.²⁹ [She continues] The name Black European came out of the reflection that I don't want my children to forever be considered migrants [...] And that my children can at sometime define themselves as part of the European population. They were socialized here. They should be at home here.³⁰

In looking at the usage of the term Black European as a specific strategy, it is important to remember that this strategy has been implemented in many of the socio-political movements within the African/Black Diaspora, for example, Black Liberation Movement, across the globe. The process of determining self-ascribed terms, embracing ideas concerning 'racial' selfhood, and the creation of a sense of a collective identity (Hanchard 1999, p. 245), have been integral to nearly all trans-national Black movements of the past two centuries. The self-ascribed term Afro/Black German was certainly a crucial ingredient of the Afro/Black German³¹ movement in Germany, and has also been implemented among Black Austrians.³² Prior to 1986 Afro/Black Germans were subjected to a myriad of blatantly derogatory descriptions that were definitely not of their choosing. And just as Afro/Black Germans found it necessary to call attention to their German identity along with their 'imagined'³³ African/Black diasporic identity, the participants of the 2007 BEWC Congress also found it crucial for the cohesiveness of the Council to agree upon a self-designated term. During the drafting of the BEWC Vienna Declaration, the term Black European Women was selected and the women decided

that the term would be utilized to encompass all Black women living in Europe regardless of one's migrant or non-migrant trajectory.

While yet to be conclusively defined, this phrase has gained political and academic accreditation, and is used when addressing the specificities of the African/Black Diasporas in Europe. Evidence of this can be noted in the establishment of the 2004–2006 Black European Studies project at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany, which focused on the history and development of Black people in Europe.³⁴ Another example of the importance of this term was discernible in the address of Commissioner Spindla to the BEWC's 2008 inauguration. The Commissioner as well as the other invited speakers all referred to the members of the BEWC as 'Black European women'. However, despite apparent acceptance by this particular group, the label Black European includes a multitude of identities and differences among African immigrants, the nascent Black and dual heritage populations in Europe. Clearly the concept of what constitutes a Black or African identity was openly and passionately debated at the BEWC Congress in 2007. There was unanimous awareness that in Europe somatic Blackness was readily coupled with the African continent and that individuals were routinely labelled 'African'³⁵ regardless of their location of birth, parentage, dual heritage, or socialization. Many Black Austrian women pointed out the need to acknowledge the heterogeneity of Black identity in Europe and argued this point with those who attended the identity and empowerment workshops at the congress. While many of them claimed Black Austrian identities, there were also some participants that did not consider themselves to be African, and strongly argued for use of the term Black European. The women ultimately agreed upon the term Black European as a more encompassing self-ascribed term that allows for the diversity of the Black experience in Europe.

The phrase Black European cannot be seen as a panacea for dealing with all identity issues among Europeans of African/Black diasporic heritage. It became apparent in the discussions that coupling the term Black with European also raised questions regarding the efficacy of strategic essentialism and usefulness of identity politics. Despite all this, the interview data do indicate that members of the BEWC preferred the term Black European because it underscores the '*Hier-Verortung*'³⁶ of the Black experience in Europe rather than stressing the issue of migrancy.³⁷ With that said, I would like to underline the fact that it was during the 2007 conference that the term *Black European* was decided upon as a strategic and political tool for entry into politics on the level of the EU. Defining oneself as a *Black European* was agreed on as a way to encompass not only the diverse trajectories of Black peoples across the European space, but also for the recognition of Black peoples by EU bodies as empowered players in the struggle to transform the current social, political, and economic status quo for now and for future generations.

Conclusion

I have tried to demonstrate through discussion of the growth of the Black European Women's Council the step-by-step process of creating a new way of *thinking oneself into the 'new Europe'*. By coming together and hammering out new concepts of self-empowerment and breaking the bonds of isolation, these women are building a theoretical foundation for Black people in Europe. Through the conferences,

workshops, and seminars in held in various countries, BEWC members have chiselled out definitions of themselves and for their children that position them in the heart of the new Europe. These women have shown tremendous optimism and faith in themselves in the face of persistent everyday racism, discrimination and hardship. The direction of their thinking and actions shows that these women refuse to withdraw from European society, but rather are seizing the opportunities that are offered by the EU, however modest, to create a space for themselves as participants in the making of the new social, cultural, and political fabric of Europe.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Annette Dumbach, Paola Bacchetta, Umut Erel, and to all the wonderful women of the Black European Women's Council.

Notes

1. Within the context of this discussion, the term Black European refers to individuals of African descent living in Europe, who identify as such. In addition, this is the self-designated term used by the members of the Black European Women's Council.
2. Black refers to descendants from the African/Black Diaspora.
3. I am aware of the various debates on the topic of race and the racialization process. However, I align myself with P. Bacchetta (2008, 2009) and A. Nayak (2006) in their understanding these processes, and have chosen to couple the two terms 'race'-racism in order to indicate the symbiotic bond between the social construction of race and the actual realities of the racialization processes, racist practices and their subsequent effects.
4. While a single universal definition of the this term does not exist, it is commonly employed to designate the practice of stopping and controlling individuals in the public sphere (pedestrian zones, train stations, urban areas) for no apparent reason other than a statistical profile linked to an individual 'race' or perceived ethnicity. Racial profiling takes on a gendered form, and is the result of a systematic and historical practice of targeting African descended peoples. This practice feeds into negative stigmatization and gendered stereotypes claiming that these individuals possess an innate propensity for criminal behaviour, that is, the African male drug dealer and the Black female sex worker.
5. Established during the 1930s in London as a forum for East Indian migrant workers in the UK, the IWA/GB became in 1958 a coordinator for local groups interested in improving the labour conditions of immigrant workers. In 1967 the IWA/GB split into two groups. It was the IWA/GB group led by J. Joshi that became an example of Asian/African diasporic collaboration and unity when the IWA/GB joined the Black People's Alliance. See Jouhl (1993).
6. The 'Becoming Black Europe: Possibilities and Obstacles to a Black Europe' panel (19 September 2004) took place within the framework of the Black Atlantic Project in Berlin Germany (17 September to 15 November 2004). The panel was created with the intent to present a trans-cultural space to explore the historical as well as socio-cultural ties between Africa, the Americas and Europe. Dr Lily Golden is a well-known scholar and expert on the Black experience in Russia.
7. Ibid.
8. The term 'New Europe' is used in reference to the construction of the single European market in 1992, and the enactment of the SEA (Single European Act 1986/1992). The integration of European countries within a common economic, administrative, political framework exercised a detrimental impact on the civil rights of Blacks and ethnic minorities living in Europe. While this legislation opened Europe's inner borders it set into motion the tightening of its outer borders. The stringent immigration policies and controls that emerged from this political project led to an increase in the surveillance of third

- country nationals, and EU citizens of colour already living within what has become known as 'Fortress Europe'.
9. SeFoNe-Searching for Neighbours: Dynamics of Mental and Physical Border in the New Europe. See www.sefone.net.
 10. AFRA: International Center for Black Women's Perspectives. Co-founded in 2005 and directed by Béatrice Achaleke, is a non-profit NGO created for and by Black women in Vienna, Austria. The organization focuses on the main challenges, and addresses the critical needs of Black women and children in Austria and Europe. See www.blackwomenscenter.org.
 11. During my period of fieldwork with the BEWC, I encountered several Black women with graduate and post-graduate degrees from either European, African or American universities, who were unable to find employment in their respective countries that corresponded to their levels of education and experience.
 12. BEWC 2007 Conference DVD.
 13. During the 1970s and 1980s there were many more larger and nationally active Dutch Black, migrant and refugee women's organizations such as HTIB (1975), MVVN (1982) and LOSV (1986). However, I mention Tiye based on its collaborative work with the BEWC, and Sister Outsider and Zami, because of its link to Audre Lorde.
 14. Within the Dutch context during this period, the term Black was also used politically to mobilize individuals of diverse ethno-racial backgrounds. However, women of Turkish and Moroccan backgrounds would later reject the term, and it would come to be used solely for populations of African diasporic Surinamese and Dutch Antilles descent.
 15. ADEFRA is the acronym for *Afro-Deutsche Frauen* (Afro-German Women). The organization has since amended its name to include all Black women living in Germany regardless of their nationality.
 16. Audre Lorde (1934–1992) was guest-teaching in 1984 at the Free University of Berlin. It was there that she became the mentor of May Opitz-Ayim and Katherina Oguntoye (co-authors of *Black German Women's Anthology, 'Farbe Bekennen'*). This encounter led to the co-creation of the self-ascribed term Afro-German/Black German.
 17. AFRA, see note 10.
 18. The Black diasporic Austrian organization Pamoja was established in 1996 in Vienna, Austria, and constituted the cornerstone of politicized mobilization of Blacks in Austria. For a more detailed account of this organization, see Araba Evelyn Johnston-Arthur (2007).
 19. Rolandsen and Roth (2010).
 20. Moghadam (2000).
 21. See note 15.
 22. 'Die Europäische Union kann stolz sein auf ihre Anti-Diskriminierungsgesetze, die zu den modernsten der Welt zählen'. See http://www.verwaltung.steiermark.at/cms/dokumente/10006104_600279/d8a07c82/IF-Folder%200406_.pdf [Accessed 1 June 2010].
 23. The Lisbon strategy also known as the Lisbon Agenda, or Lisbon Process is an action/development plan for the European Union. The goal of this plan is to make the EU 'the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, and respect for the environment by 2010'. See http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm.
 24. Established in 1976, The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), also known as The Helsinki Commission, is an independent US government agency created to monitor and encourage compliance with the Helsinki Final Act and other OSCE commitments. The Helsinki Commission sent representatives in September 2008 from its Washington, DC branch to attend the BEWC's official launch in Brussels.
 25. Excerpt from speech by Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunity Vladimir Spidla at the official launch of the Black European Women's Council on 9 September 2008 in Brussels, Belgium.
 26. Fieldwork notes from C. Ellerbe-Dueck (9 April 2009) Utrecht–Soesterberg, The Netherlands. The BEWC's motto is also posted on the BEWC website. See <http://www.bewnet.eu>.

27. Ethnographic data from the BEWC General Assembly Meeting, 9–10 April 2009.
28. Informal conversation with Béatrice Achaleke during the preparation for the BEWC official launch in Brussels, Belgium, 7 September 2008.
29. Interview excerpt in German with Beatrice Achaleke, 28 May 2008, Vienna, Austria, p. 10 (English translation by author).
30. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
31. Coined in 1986, the self-ascribed term Afro-German or Black German is employed interchangeably by Germans of African diasporic heritage, who claim an Afro/Black German identity. Originally equated with ‘biracialism’, the term Afro-German/Black German has now come to encompass individuals of African/Black diasporic heritage residing in Germany, who are not nation (Africa) bound. White German ancestry is not necessarily a prerequisite for Afro/Black German self-identification.
32. In the Black consciousness movement in Austria, the term Black Austrian has been the term commonly utilized by members of the movement and also by the women that I interviewed. The term Black Austrian was also employed in conjunction with the Black Austria media campaign launched in 2006/2007 in Vienna. The goal of the campaign was to dismantle common stereotypical gendered depictions of Black people living in Austria, for example, Black male drug dealer and Black female prostitutes. Unfortunately, the campaign ended its activities in January 2009. See <http://www.blackaustria.at/> [Accessed 20 April 2010].
33. The term ‘imagined’ refers to the fact that many Afro/Black Germans and Austrians have had to create their own sense of a Black identity. In many cases Afro/Black Germans and Austrians did not grow up with their African/Black parent (often their fathers) and thus did not experience direct immersion into African/Black diasporic culture.
34. The Black European Studies project was funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. The BEST research project focused on the historical and present-day history and future perspectives of Black populations in Europe. See <http://www.best.uni-mainz.de/modules/Informationen/index.php?id=13> [Accessed 20 April 2010].
35. I emphasize the term African here to underline the fact that there is no sole African identity.
36. The German term *Hier-Verortung* is nearly impossible to translate. However, my affinity with this term is linked to its use in the German language. A loose translation could indicate that it points to an individual’s/collective conscious choice to see oneself geographically grounded within the German-speaking context, and also as a member of the society in which one was socialized. It suggests, I believe, a politicized conscious effort to reject an ascribed position of marginality, and to underscore and shed light on the suppressed existence of the Black Diaspora(s) within the German-speaking world.
37. While some of the women of BEWC may have a migrant experience, the migration narrative does not extend itself to the entire Black Diaspora in Europe. Moreover, my doctoral and current research indicates that while some Black Germans and Austrians may have parents that were/are immigrants, many do not view themselves as such, and often point to their location of birth and socialization (Europe) as a determining factor in their identity formation, and often express dismay and annoyance with constant references to their ‘migrant’ histories.

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