

# Narrating Diaspora

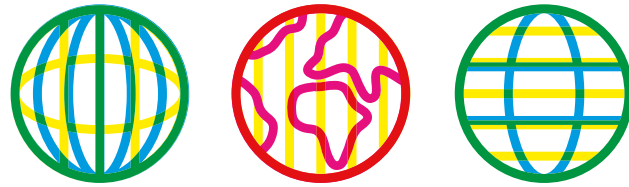
The African Diaspora as a Counter-Narrative

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(University of Wuppertal)



opportunities

for a fair narrative on migration



# opportunities

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Please cite this working paper as: Diallo, M. Moustapha, and Mariam Muwanga. 2023. *Narrating Diaspora: The African Diaspora as a Counter-Narrative*. University of Wuppertal.



Horizon 2020  
European Union Funding  
for Research & Innovation

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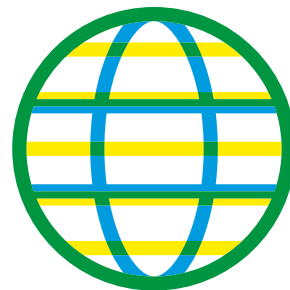
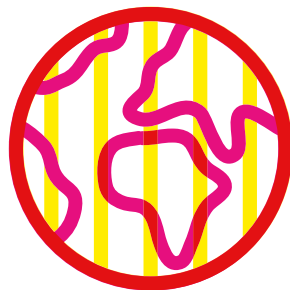
DISSEMINATION LEVEL: Public

**Project:** OPPORTUNITIES – Crises as Opportunities: Towards a Level Telling Field on Migration and a New Narrative of Successful Integration

**GA:** 101004945

**Call:** H2020-SC6-MIGRATION-2020

**Type of action:** RIA



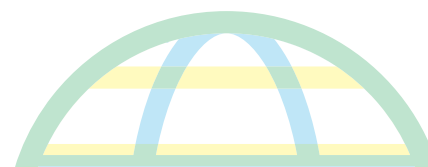
# Narrating Diaspora

## The African Diaspora as a Counter-Narrative

Work Package 5 – Deliverable 5.6

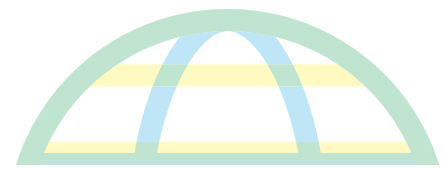
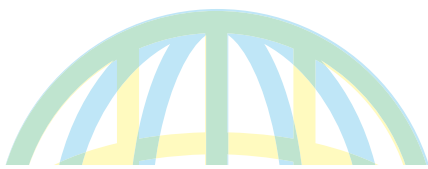
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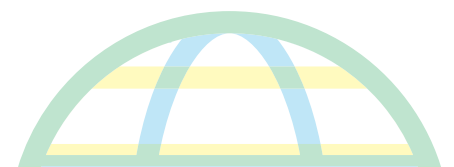
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# Abstract

This paper's central goal is to examine the role that narratives, collective or otherwise, play in the construction of diaspora as an epistemic formation. In particular, we are interested in exploring the interplay between dominant narratives *on* diaspora and competing counter-narratives *of* diaspora. In order to do this, we resort to the concept of "imagined communities" by Benedict Anderson, arguing that the sense of a communion among members of communities is buttressed in collective narratives based on shared knowledge, values, norms, and culture. Furthermore, the paper draws on a typology developed by Carolin Gebauer and Roy Sommer which differentiates between narratives *on* and stories *of* migration. Adopting this distinction, we argue that narratives *on* diaspora provide a primarily etic (i.e., outsider) perspective on diasporic formations, as they emphasize group cohesion and a sense of shared group consciousness that unites members of diasporic communities. Such narratives are often found in academic scholarship and in public discourses about diaspora. By contrast, narratives *of* diaspora refer to discourses that provide an emic (i.e., insider) perspective, acknowledging the diversity and historicity of diasporic formations and their roles as epistemic communities. This emic perspective foregrounds historical 'moments' that have led to the development of the African diaspora in Germany, which articulates counter-narratives to various discourses, especially anti-Black racism.



# 1. Introduction

The African diaspora,<sup>1</sup> in many parts of Europe (and the United States), can be considered a social formation that emerged and still exists within the crucible of discourses of racism in the West. This is because the issue of 'race' is central to the experiences and the different forms of dispersion of people of African descent across the globe and throughout history (see Tölölyan 23). Germany's colonial past is plagued by racialized interactions between German and African/Black people – the Nama-Herero genocide (in 1903) and the colonial exhibitions in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century being cases in point. Perhaps even more poignant is the prevalence of overt forms of anti-Black racism in the public discourses during and after Nazi dictatorship (see Oguntoye, "Afrikanische Zuwanderung") as well as subtle, covert forms of racism that continue to exist in German public discourses today.

People of African descent in Germany are often 'invisible' in public debates. However, they become 'hyper visible' when topics such as migration are discussed. Public debates on migration in Europe (and Germany) are not only stereotypical and one-sided, but they have also increasingly become toxic and often serve as 'fodder' for "anti-democratic ways of reasoning, anti-science worldviews, hostile opinion-building strategies, and the dismissal of 'mainstream' journalism" (Sommer, "Migration" 498). Given such circumstances, people of African descent in Germany have historically had to mobilize in order to advocate for equal rights and give voice to their unique experiences in the face of racism (see Oguntoye, "Farbe Bekennen"). Today the ways of mobilization vary from written texts to film, theatre performance, art and protest.

This paper uses the lenses of diaspora and narrative theory to understand the role of narratives in the construction of diasporic communities and Black cultural identity in Germany. The central goal is to examine the role that narratives, collective or otherwise, play in the construction of diaspora as an epistemic social formation that exists as a counter-narrative (Lueg and Lundholt). We proceed from the premise that diaspora is an 'imagined community' (see Anderson) whose existence is based on the shared knowledge its many members tap into in order to provide contrapuntal responses to dominant public discourses. Our focus on the African diaspora is aimed at focusing on the role of diasporas as sources of (situated) knowledge and, in a larger context, sources of alternative, sustainable solutions to long-standing political and economic problems.



## 2. Narrating Diaspora: Emic and Etic Perspectives

Diaspora is a term whose earliest usage can be found in the bible that is, in Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Old Testament. Once used to distinctively describe the traumatic dispersal of a group of people (such as Jewish, Greek, and Armenian diasporas) diaspora, “now shares meanings with a larger ‘semantic domain’ that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guestworker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community” (Brubaker 3). While paradigmatic approaches to diaspora stress what can be termed ‘boundedness’ of diasporic formations, that is, diasporas as primarily homogeneous group formations where solidarity and cohesion are emphasized, constructivist approaches focus on internal complexities of diasporic communities (see Muwanga, forthcoming). In particular constructivist approaches to diaspora ask questions such as: “*how* are diasporas made, *who* makes claims to be part of a diaspora, and *what* claims are made on behalf of a diaspora?” (see Cohen and Fischer 4, original emphasis).

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These questions are relevant for this section’s focus on narrating diaspora because they engage with the idea of diaspora as an epistemic formation, i.e. a product of shared knowledge, norms, values, and culture. As an epistemic formation, diaspora can be compared to what Benedict Anderson refers to as an “imagined community.”<sup>2</sup> In his analysis of nations as imagined communities, Anderson contends that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6). He argues further that “even members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). We maintain that this “communion” among members of communities is buttressed in collective narratives based on shared knowledge, values, norms, and culture. Hence, Anderson’s notion of imagined communities makes it plausible to examine the role that narratives, collective or otherwise, play in the construction of diaspora as an epistemic formation. In particular we are interested in exploring the interplay between dominant narratives on diaspora and competing counter-narratives.

In order to do this, we draw on a typology developed by Carolin Gebauer and Roy Sommer (“Beyond”) that draws a distinction between narratives *on* and stories *of* migration. The former discuss migration from an etic (or observer’s) perspective, i.e., from the point of view of economic, political, legal, and scientific discourses as well as the broader public discourses by individuals or groups that are not necessarily migrants themselves. Stories of migration, on the other hand, refer to narrative accounts from an emic (insider) perspective. They are told by “individuals who are, or have been, refugees and migrants themselves” (8).

Adopting Gebauer and Sommer’s distinction, this paper considers diaspora narratives as discourses that focus on shared experiences, knowledge, values, culture, aspirations of diasporic individuals from both an etic and an emic perspective. More specifically, we argue that narratives *on* diaspora provide a primarily etic perspective on diasporic formations. These narratives emphasize group cohesion and a sense of shared group consciousness that unites members of diasporic communities. Narratives *on* diaspora are buttressed in academic scholarship and in public discourses about diaspora. For instance, since the 1960s academic scholarship of diaspora has considered the Jewish diaspora as the paradigm for classical diasporas. This definition of classical diasporas emphasizes group solidarity and cohesion that are based on shared values and shared experiences (see Safran 83ff.).

The experience of moving from an ‘original’ homeland to another territory in the aftermath of a traumatic event is one of the defining tenets of classical diasporas such as the Jewish, Armenian, African and Irish



diaspora (see Cohen 4). Safran has cited other important tenets that emphasize group cohesion in classical diasporic formations. These tenets include: a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long period of time, a collective memory or myth about the original homeland, idealizing this putative homeland to which there is hope of a return, commitment to the maintenance of this homeland and to its safety and prosperity, and the belief that members are, and perhaps, will always be 'pariahs' in their host countries – that is, they will remain partly separate from the majority society because they will never be fully accepted (see Safran 83ff.).

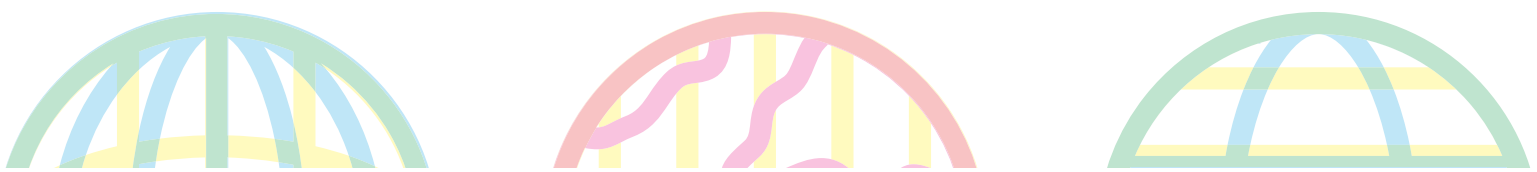
By contrast, narratives *of* diaspora refer to discourses that provide an emic (insider) perspective of diasporic formations. The emic perspective focusses on internal complexities of diasporic formations as well as historical 'moments' that have led to diasporas evolving into social formations that articulate a counter-narrative. While narratives *on* diaspora seem to highlight group cohesion in diasporic formations, narratives *of* diaspora focus on the situational nature of diasporic formations. For instance, narratives *of* diaspora can highlight specific contextual factors that have led diasporic formations to exist as and provide counter-narratives (Lueg and Lundholt 2021) to dominant public discourses.

## 2.1 Diaspora as a Counter-Narrative to Racism

In their introduction to the *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*, Klarissa Lueg, Ann Starboek Bager, and Marianne Wolff Lundholt define counter-narratives as the "social and normative struggle" to challenge dominant power regimes that influence social and cultural discourses, thus producing narrative environments in which "certain, particular outcomes [...] are being valued over others" (4). The authors argue that narratives "are densely interwoven with social rules for 'when, what, how, and why stories are told,'" which is why it is important to investigate "how naratives come into and unfold power by creating or benefiting from such contextual social rules [...] when drawing into question power relations" (4). Matti Hyvärinen, moreover, establishes a link between counter-(master-)narrative dynamics and critical race research, where "the terms 'master-narrative' and 'counter-narrative' are obviously used as rhetorical tools to consider cultural resistance" (19). Based on these insights, we contend that counter-narratives question the widely accepted norms of a dominant culture which tends to marginalize groups such as migrant and diaspora communities.

The African diaspora in many parts of Europe can be considered an epistemic social formation that exists as a counter-narrative to discourses of racism in the West. Indeed, some scholars have argued that what makes the African diaspora stand out from several other (classical) diasporic formations is that the process of racialization was and remains central to and concomitant with different forms of dispersion of Black and African people across the globe and throughout history (see Tölölyan 23).<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall's ("Cultural Identity") idea of positioning oneself according to discourses of the past provides an emic perspective about how the African diaspora can be considered a counter-narrative to anti-Black racism.<sup>4</sup>

According to Hall, black diasporic identity and experience are a result of positioning oneself by looking back at history in order to "excavate a past that has been 'lost'" (225). This type of positioning is based on transnational bonds of solidarity with other Black/African individuals or groups that are rooted, as Hall says, in "one shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self' [...] which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (223). These bonds of solidarity are, for example, articulated in the creation of activist movements of resistance such as Pan Africanism and *Négritude* that can be considered catalysts in pushing for the independence of many sub-Saharan African countries in the 1950 to 1960s. Drawing on the British Caribbean experience as an example, Hall (223) suggests that this version of the Black diasporic experience is a result of positioning Black identity in the crucible of historical contexts, in particular the Transatlantic slave trade and colonialism, that arguably laid the foundation for contemporary racist structures in Europe and the United States.





The discourse of anti-Black racism can be described as iterative and recurring – often dominating public discourses at given historical ‘moments’ when certain acts of racism go public. Cases in point are police brutality and killings of Black people in Europe and the United States. Such racist acts (of violence), when made public, evoke responses primarily from members of affected communities. For instance, protests by African diasporic individuals are an example of a collective response to racism – a counter-narrative of racism and of solidarity with other Black individuals. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests across much of Western Europe and the United States in June 2020 are a visual example of a historical ‘moment’ where African and Black diasporic formations mobilized in order to provide a counter-narrative to anti-Black racism.

In another context, African and Black diasporic mobilization against anti-Black racism can be observed within the context of the Ukrainian war. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 displaced millions of Ukrainians as well as several foreign students who, at the time, were studying in Ukraine. News channels and social media platforms reported that students from Africa (and India) were not only stranded in Ukraine but many of them reported that they were facing racial discrimination as they tried to get on public trains and cross the border into neighboring Poland.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, under the Twitter (also currently known as “X”) hashtag #AfricansinUkraine many affected students have continued to document their experiences in Ukraine and at the Ukraine-Polish border when the war broke out. While thousands of German protesters took to the streets of Cologne in February 2022 to show solidarity to Ukrainian refugees fleeing the country after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine,<sup>6</sup> some Black-led non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and members of the African diaspora in Germany mobilized resources to not only provide material help to African students stranded in Ukraine, but to also make public the acts of anti-Black racism that these students were facing in Ukraine.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.2 Origins of the African Diaspora in Germany: a Brief Overview

Individuals that consider themselves part of the African diaspora can be found in different contexts: as representatives of a group of people in society, as individuals actively involved in the affairs of their countries of origin, and as part of a community whose internal structures members and individuals may or may not be part of. The African diaspora is mainly present in Germany’s big cities and accounts for about one million people.<sup>8</sup>

In Germany, the term African diaspora became an object of academic inquiry after 1945. The African diaspora did not get recognition as a social actor in Germany’s history until the late 1980s, because until then the activities of its representatives had remained largely ineffective. The first officially registered African in Germany was Georg Adolf Christiani, who arrived in Berlin in 1678 and was baptized in Spandau in 1681. The first African to speak up in a way that earned him recognition in Germany was Anton Wilhelm Amo, whose biography is emblematic of the history of the African diaspora in Germany. As a four-year-old, Amo was abducted from Ghana in 1707 and, after three years, handed over as a ‘gift’ to Duke Anton Ulrich of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel.

Following the example of his friend, Tsar Peter the Great, at whose court the Ethiopian boy, Ibrahim Hannibal, made it to the rank of general, the duke made it possible for young Amo to receive a humanist education. At a time when there was hardly a public outcry about the enslavement of human beings, Anton Wilhelm Amo dedicated his master’s thesis in Philosophy (*De iure Maurorum in Europa* – “On the Rights of the Moors in Europe”) to the disenfranchisement of Africans in European societies. His master’s thesis, which had been long forgotten, reminds us that the laws in the Roman Empire did not distinguish individuals from each other based on the color of their skin. In the Roman Empire the principle of freedom was as much a human right to citizens from African territories as to citizens elsewhere in the empire. Hence, Amo’s work points out that slavery represented a regression behind the standards of an earlier time. With his critique about the discrimination of African people in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, Amo



exposed the foundations of racism that members of the African diaspora in Germany would have to confront two centuries later.

The speech of the rector of the university in Wittenberg that was given when Amo submitted his dissertation in 1734 mentions the importance of Amo's work in understanding the situation of members of the African diasporic community in Germany. The speech addresses the treatment of Africans in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe and this, it can be argued, accounts for the socio-political positioning of the African diaspora in Germany today. Addressing the apologists of European domination and hinting at slavery, the rector says:

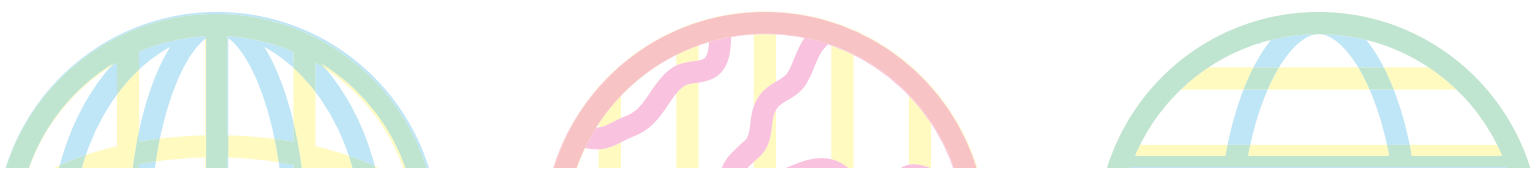
Africa once had great prestige, both in terms of talent and in terms of scientific endeavors and ecclesiastical organization. It produced several extraordinary men whose spirited studies produced worldly wisdom and more so, godliness. [...] In our time, however, this part of the world remains fruitful in other things rather than studies. That its talents have not yet been exhausted, however, may be proven here by the highly famous Master of Philosophy and of the Liberal Arts: Anton Wilhelm Amo, an African from Guinea (Martin, "Schwarze Teufel", 316).<sup>9</sup>

Appreciating Amo's work is remarkable in two respects: On one hand, the rector points out the changing perception of Africa at a time when the continent was being exploited.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, he exposes, with clarity so rare for his time, the social mechanisms that were driven by economic interests and which perpetuated racist ideology. From France to England and Germany, the most influential philosophers have denied the intellectual abilities of Africans and refer to the African as the 'missing link' between man and ape. This can be found in the work of philosophers like Hume, Hegel, Kant as well as Montesquieu and Gobineau, to mention some examples.

After the Berlin Conference convened by Bismarck in 1884/85 the division of Africa among the European powers was sealed and the 'colonial stage' was set for the German Empire. The expansion of Germany's territory formed the basis for the migration of many Africans. Skilled workers from the territories under German occupation were needed for colonial administration and for boosting Germany's economy. Young people from 'German East Africa' (that is, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi), 'German Southwest Africa' (that is, Namibia), Cameroon and Togo came to Germany to train as missionary teachers, language assistants, craftsmen, etc. Immigrants also included former *Askaris* – members of the German *Schutztruppen* in the occupied territories in Africa. Migration from Africa marked the beginning of the current formation of an African diaspora in Germany: a significant number of people of African descent came to Germany and have since then mobilized themselves to give voice to their common interests (see Rürger, "Imperialismus"; Sebald, "Eine Geschichte").

One prominent organ under which the interests of the African diaspora found articulation is the bilingual journal *Elolombe ya Kamerun* (Engl. translation: "The Sun of Cameroon") founded in 1908. The journal reported on the situation in the colony of Douala in the German language. In addition to this journal, the German section of the "League for the Defense of the N- race" should be mentioned, founded in 1929 by Josef Ekwe Bilé. From today's perspective, it is remarkable that the activities of the African diaspora were not against colonial occupation *per se*, but only against grievances – such as corporal punishment and discrimination of African people from and in the colonies. The extent to which Africans identified with the German *Kaiserreich* is shown by the demands of the diaspora representatives for a "restitution" of the colonies to the Weimar Republic in a petition that Martin Dibobe and his comrades-in-arms addressed to the Bundestag in 1919.<sup>11</sup>

When Germany lost its colonies, members of the African diaspora in Germany were confronted with existential problems. After the Treaty of Versailles, the members of the German colonies were subject to French, English or Belgian laws overnight. For those affected this meant coping with rapid changes in a way that was nearly impossible; apart from their mother tongue, they could only speak German. Moreover, they lost their status as members of the so-called "German protectorate" with immediate effect. A vivid example is the story of the most famous African of the Weimar Republic, Martin Dibobe.



Dibobe was born in Cameroon in 1876. He came to Germany 1896 as a member of a group that was to perform at the *Völkerschau* (Engl. translation: colonial exhibitions). After the six-month tour, he stayed in Berlin and trained as a locksmith and as a first-class train driver. As a politically active migrant, he became involved in the League for Human Rights and on July 27, 1919, he wrote a petition that went down in history as the “Dibobe Petition.” In this statement he, together with other representatives of the African diaspora, demanded civil rights for all people from the German colonies. Although he was a civil servant, he was subsequently relieved of his job. In 1922 he left Germany and returned to Cameroon. However, he was denied entry by the new authorities because they feared pro-German agitation. So, he travelled on to Liberia, where his trail was lost.

The experiences of discrimination became apparent during the economic crisis of the 1920s. Due to the slack labor market situation, it was extremely difficult for people of African descent to find a job. Even access to state unemployment benefits was denied them, as state benefits were only available to German citizens. “Some Africans were supported by a small budget from the Foreign Office, which was administered by the *Gesellschaft für Eingeborenkunde*, a German colonial association. The monthly allocation of funds was given the condition of good behavior and could be granted or refused without justification” (Oguntoye, “Afrikanische Zuwanderung”).

Beyond the lack of equal rights, members of the African diaspora experienced massive hostility after the end of the First World War. This aggressive discrimination manifested itself most clearly in the designation ‘Rhineland bastards’, which refers to the children of German women and African soldiers during the occupation of the Rhineland by French troops. The denigration culminated in vituperative campaigns with posters and coins depicting Africans as monsters and sex criminals. The extent of anti-Black racism is revealed in the joint protest letter of the political parties – except the USPD – against German troops. The letter describes the position of power of African soldiers on German soil as intolerable:

The French and Belgians continue to use colored troops in the occupied territories of the Rhineland after peace has been concluded. The Germans feel that this misuse of the colored troops is a disgrace and, observe with growing indignation, that they exercise sovereign rights in German cultural lands. For German women and children, men as well as boys these savages are a terrible danger. Their honor, life and limb, purity and innocence are being destroyed (Oguntoye 49).

This perception of the African gives an idea of how those affected were treated during the Nazi dictatorship. They lost their passports, had to report weekly to the police and were misused for propaganda. Because of the employment ban, the only form of gainful employment for people from Africa were appearances in colonial films and international shows, which confirmed the audience’s racist stereotypes. For example, in one of the most expensive films of the Nazi era, *Münchhausen*, Africans appear as servants. In *Quax in Afrika* racist dialogue demonstrates how uninhibited propagandists were in perpetuating covert forms of racism. This denigrating portrayal was exacerbated by forced sterilization and deportation to concentration camps (cf. Oguntoye 92).

The end of the Nazi dictatorship did not mean rehabilitation for members of the African diaspora because the century-old racist ideology was still prevalent. As Oguntoye observes, people of African descent did not receive reparations but instead “[t]he concept of the ‘racially persecuted’ was rather quickly narrowed down to the Jewish people, and soon there was no more talk of the other victims of racism, the Gypsies, the Poles and Russians, and indeed of us Blacks” (Oguntoye 85). Remarkable in this context is the debate in 1952 in the Bundestag about the 94,000 ‘occupation children.’ This debate sought get the Afro-German children out of the country. According to the weekly newspaper *Das Parlament*:

A special group among the occupation children are the 3093 ‘N’-mixed children, who represent a human and racial problem of a special kind. [...] The responsible authorities of the free official youth care have been thinking for years about the fate of these half-breeds, for whom the climatic



conditions in our country are not suitable. It has been considered whether it would not be better for them if they were taken to the country of their fathers (Oguntoye 86).

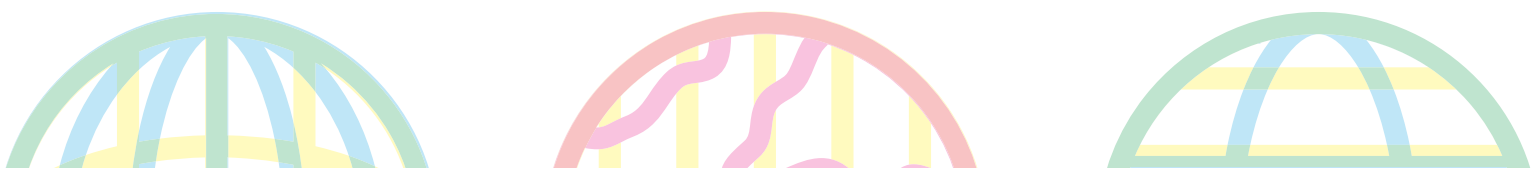
Scholarly studies from the 1950s also show how 'deep-seated' this racist mindset was in academic discourses. Under the label of "anthropology", some studies not only used dehumanizing terminology such as "bastardization", "bastard population" – as in Hitler's *Mein Kampf* – but also perfidiously claimed that there is an essentialist difference between 'Black' and 'White' people. They explicitly distance themselves from ideas of racist theorists such as those by Gobineau only to effectively propagate a racist worldview:

It is not acceptable, of course, that a group of people should be regarded as inferior because they are not equal to certain physical or mental demands due to their racial disposition. Nevertheless, it makes sense to point out the diversity of races and the resulting consequences of miscegenation, from which the mongrel himself has to bear the heaviest burden. This is the task of eugenics or applied anthropology (Oguntoye 91).

The above study's argument makes conclusions based merely on speculation as the following citation further shows:

As far as race is concerned, it can be assumed that the developmental advantages which the mulatto children display will probably cease with puberty. Intellectual ability in particular is likely to remain moderate, according to available studies of American N-mongrels. On the other hand, it can be assumed that the strong impulsiveness which was shown in the mulatto children will remain a negative racial characteristic (Oguntoye 92).

From a sociological point of view, exclusion manifested itself at various levels. 70% of Afro-German children were placed in institutions in 1950 (cf. Oguntoye).<sup>12</sup> In 1960, former German President Heinrich Lübke portrayed German colonialism as an altruistic project because, for Germans, "the relationship to the African continent has never been a task of calculation" but one that "must also be solved with the heart" (qtd. in Albrecht Monika "Europa", 95).<sup>13</sup> In the media, the ability of Africans to govern their countries has often been questioned: The first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, is called a "pathetic unknown N-student" (Albrecht 59), there is unrestrained talk of the "civilizational immaturity of the N-people", and there is even a well-known song that mocks the first prime minister of the Republic of Congo, Patrice Lumumba (Wackwitz 88). In this context, it is easy to imagine what children and young adults have been taught in school textbooks.<sup>14</sup>



### 3. Diasporic Counter-Narratives in Germany

This section briefly examines how the African diaspora in Germany has established itself as an epistemic social formation that has produced anti-racist counter-narratives since the 1980s. The focus is on the ways that narratives of diaspora, especially non-fictional texts, afford agency to African diasporic individuals in Germany. Particularly relevant in this context is how these narratives have contributed to reconstructing the history of African presence in Germany, how they challenge colonial discourses and the ways they engage in anti-racist advocacy. As shown in the previous section, colonial and racist discourses have shaped and continue to shape the experiences of diasporic individuals of African descent in Germany. The discussion in this section aims to show that diasporic members as well as institutions are an important epistemic resource for challenging such one-sided public discourses.

The edited volume *Farbe Bekennen* can be considered a turning point in the history of the African diaspora in Germany. It marks the first time that a group of people affected by racism makes their voices heard and addresses the wider public about racism from their perspective. The goal is to “show the connections between the social realm of racism and personal experiences” (Oguntoye 9).<sup>15</sup> The authors of *Farbe Bekennen* point out what can be referred to as the ‘misdirection’ of migration policy. Some of Europe’s policies on migration have indirectly resulted into mass deaths at sea.

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After ‘German unity’, ‘European unity’ is now imminent in 1992. Europe is becoming a political and economic fortress against the rest of the world, especially against countries and people from the so-called Third World. Already today, migration movements and immigration are controlled and stopped by international agreements of Western European countries (e.g. the Schengen Agreement of 1989).<sup>16</sup> (Oguntoye 12)

With the magazines *Afrolook* and *Afrekete* (1988-99), women made a further contribution to the assertion of the African diaspora in Germany by producing the most comprehensive collection of Black German poetry and short stories so far.<sup>17</sup> An awareness about the need for the diaspora to mobilize has given rise to an increased number of initiatives and organizations, which we will return to later.

The importance of this awareness became clear in the aftermath of the growing hostility in European discourses on migration that is articulated in expressions such as ‘flood of asylum seekers,’ ‘abuse of asylum,’ and ‘the boat is full’.<sup>18</sup> These terms are commonly used in mass media and by politicians. During these years, it became apparent how damaging a one-sided discourse can be and how this can hamper integration.

For the refugee debate in the FRG was and is not only conducted with the flood and boat symbolism in the media. In addition, there is the military symbol complex with which these people are met. [...] The effect of this symbolism is clear: refugees and immigrants become a military threat, pointed columns marching against the Federal Republic, an enemy army besieging the Federal Republic or Western Europe<sup>19</sup> (Jäger, “Rassismus”, 131).

Given the prevailing stigmatization of migrants, it was hardly surprising that asylum seekers’ homes were attacked, and people of non-European descent were assaulted in the streets. Amadeu Antonio, a contract worker from Angola, was victim to this unbridled racism in Eberswalde on November 24, 1990. The fact that he was murdered in East Germany refutes the propaganda of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), which had rendered racism ‘alien’ in so-called socialist societies. This narrative was matched by the regime’s mediatized release of African-American activist and avowed Communist,



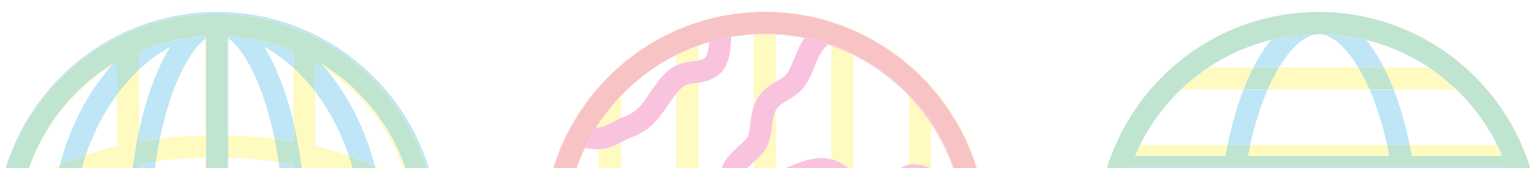
Angela Davis, who was even received by then-head of state Erich Honecker in 1972. Contrary to proclaimed efforts of creating a fraternity, the GDR's migration policy was based on the state-based isolation of African and Asian contract workers. The chimera of an anti-racist GDR was exposed, not least, after the attacks in Hoyerswerda (in September 1991) and Rostock-Lichtenhagen (in August 1992).

For members of the African diaspora – like other non-European migrants – the 1990s marked the peak of overt forms of discrimination. Despite the violence and murders, politicians and the media fueled anti-immigration sentiment. Particularly politicians of the CDU/CSU (which constitutes the political alliance of the Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union of Bavaria) fanned public resentment against migration. In the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), top candidate Jürgen Rüttgers' campaign team came up with the slogan "*Kinder statt Inder*" (Engl. translation: "Children instead of Indians") as a poignant response to the Social Democrats' (SPD's) move that had made it easier for Indian IT specialists to migrate to Germany. In Bavaria, the then Prime Minister, Edmund Stoiber, voiced a warning against what he referred to as "*Durchrassung*" of German society. In the state of Hesse, Prime Minister, Roland Koch, mobilized the population against the plans of the government led by the SPD and the Greens to allow dual citizenship. The plans of the government would enable many migrants with dual citizenship to participate in political decision-making processes both in Germany and their home countries.

Considerably similar attitudes towards migration were re-iterated in German media. This became apparent in arson attacks targeted at migrants in Germany and fanned by the supporters of the right-wing. "But something different was added to media representation of migrants and migration. German media accomplished the feat of simultaneously being outraged by racially motivated attacks while, at the same time, perpetuating racist attitudes"<sup>20</sup> (Jäger, "Rassismus", 132). The press analyses came to a unanimous conclusion "that the message behind the outcry in much of the press and almost all authors was to solve the problem by closing borders, deporting 'undocumented' refugees, etc" (ibid.).<sup>21</sup> Under this pretext, the laws for asylum seeking were changed that is, they were undermined. It was during this period that the neo-Nazi terror cell, NSU (National Socialist Underground), was founded. The NSU is responsible for committing ten crimes of murder on so-called "foreigners" (people who, judging from their biological features or phenotype, are visibly 'non-European').

Against this backdrop, members of the African diaspora were not only stigmatized in politics and the media, but they were also subject to discrimination by police officers. In addition to racial profiling, people of African descent were often subjected to police violence, which they have, on more than one occasion, paid for with their lives. For instance, the case of the 26-year-old Senegalese woman, Marème Sarr, who was shot dead in 2001 in Aschaffenburg by one of the police officers that had been called in to solve a marital dispute between Sarr and her husband. The media hardly reported on this case. The same thing also applies to Oury Diallo from Sierra Leone who burned to death in a police cell in Dessau in 2005 under mysterious circumstances – to name just a few examples.

Xenophobia in Germany has not regressed. This becomes even more apparent when one considers the rise of the right-wing populist party, AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*), and similar groups – such as Pegida and the Identitarian Movement – who shamelessly instigate anti-migrant sentiment and propagate a racist model of society. The murders in Kassel in 2019 and Hanau in 2020, as well as the attempted murder in Halle in 2019, illustrate how concrete right-wing extremist terror can be. This is quite alarming because discriminatory tendencies are on rise in almost all European countries. While everyone fleeing war has the right to find refuge according to laws governing asylum in the EU, it is worth noting that Ukrainian refugees were welcomed in Germany in a more open-minded way in 2022 compared to lasting sentiment of rejection that clouded the reception of refugees from African or Arab countries in Germany, particularly in 2015-2016. Media houses in Germany and in much of Europe have been criticized for pushing for a rhetoric of humanization and sympathy towards Ukrainian refugees while pushing for a rhetoric of negative stereotyping of refugees from the Middle East and Africa.



Statements by journalists about Ukrainian refugees such as “they are European people with blue eyes and blonde hair” imply that Ukrainian refugees deserve more sympathy compared to non-European refugees (Bayoumi, “They are civilised”). The fact that Ukrainian men between the ages 18 and 60 of were obligated to stay behind and defend their country explains why images of female refugees and children dominate in the media coverage. A similar level of sympathy did not always accompany reporting about refugees from the Middle East and Africa, with the exception of a brief period of German welcome culture in 2015 (see Gebauer 2023).

The work of the *Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland* (ISD), an NGO in Germany that is run by Afro-German individuals, addresses various forms of unequal treatment of Black people and people of African descent in Germany. In a sense, the ISD has taken on the legacy of the *Farbe Bekennen* (“Showing our colors”) campaign. As the largest Black-led organization in Germany, the ISD not only gives a voice to the African diaspora, but also promotes community-building and mobilization in ways that helps its members strengthen their group consciousness and solidarity:

ISD represents the interests of Black people in society and politics and aims to influence legislation. The issues of everyday racism, racist violence and police violence are central focal points of our work. For us, black resistance is first and foremost a struggle for the perception of these perspectives.<sup>22</sup>

Besides the ISD, countless associations work on overcoming marginalization and on the emancipation of people of African origin, such as Each One Teach One (EOTO),<sup>23</sup> the *Zentralrat der afrikanischen Gemeinde in Deutschland* or the *Afrikanischer Dachverband-Nord*.<sup>24</sup> They also include country-specific associations such as *Völkermord verjährt nicht*, which advocates for the recognition of the genocide in Namibia and for reparations for the Nama and Herero while also supporting associations for women and students.

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While these organizations are effective in their socio-political endeavors in Germany, individual members are making their mark on the transnational level. Apart from associations that support projects in African countries (of origin), it is private individuals that provide the bulk of monetary transfers to Africa's private sector. In 2018, remittances sent to sub-Saharan African countries by migrants amounted to \$46 billion (cf. Braunsdorf 7). According to the World Bank, the net official development aid to sub-Saharan African countries from all OECD countries combined amounted to \$50.88 billion in 2018.<sup>25</sup>

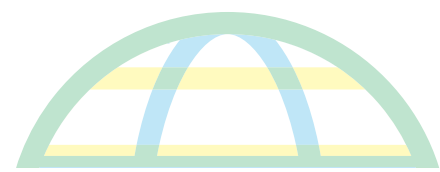
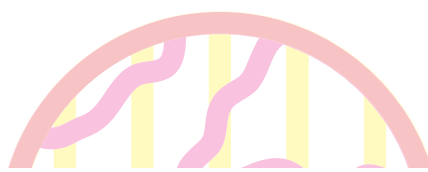
For this reason, the diaspora now has acquired the status of 6<sup>th</sup> region in the African Union (AU).<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, the African diaspora has created its own ‘government’ and initiated projects in key sectors of different African countries. However, it must be said that the economic sector lacks funding and appropriate financial structures required by members of the African diaspora to set up sustainable projects in Africa.<sup>27</sup> As far as development cooperation policies and the problems of migration are concerned, the diaspora, both in Germany and elsewhere, offers a viable alternative to controversial models. Instead, it is important to consider the potential of working with the African diaspora and, in so doing, engage in transnational cooperation that will bring about sustainable socioeconomic growth in countries of origin, particularly, since a number of initiatives have already been put in place.



## 4. Conclusion

African diasporas in many parts of Western Europe (and the United States) can be considered as epistemic communities that generate counter-narratives to colonial and racist discourses. The African diaspora stands out from other, more classical diasporic formations, because the process of racialization, the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas remain central to its origins across the globe. In the face of racism, an iterative and recurring discourse in Europe's public sphere, members of the African diaspora have mobilized and engaged in political activism and advocacy. As the paper has shown, narratives of the African diaspora find articulation in different forms, for instance in academic texts, such as the seminal work *Farbe Bekennen*. Such work provides insider perspectives about the role of the African diaspora as a counter-narrative.

While the paper has concentrated primarily on diaspora as an anti-racist counter-narrative, it should be noted that diaspora also provides counter-narratives to other political discourses. A case in point is the discourse of migration as a 'crisis' that dominated the European public sphere in 2015 and 2016. From an African perspective, migration is perceived as an opportunity to be discussed in terms of mobilities. The African diaspora today is also an important contributor to the GDP of many sub-Saharan African countries and should be considered an important stakeholder for establishing and solidifying transnational bonds between African countries and member states of the European Union which, in an increasingly multipolar world, should be in the interest of both. From this perspective, the notion of the diaspora as an epistemic community with shared knowledge and perspectives also has tangible economic and political consequences: diasporas can not only provide sustainable avenues for economic development in African countries but also foster new, mutual relationships with European partners.



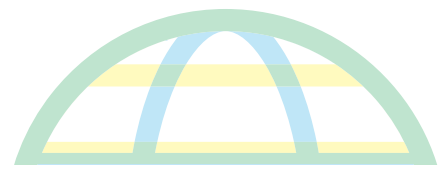
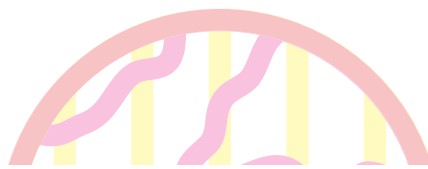


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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Although the concept of African diaspora has been around since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, academic delineation of the term began in the 1960s (Palmer, “Modern African Diaspora”). Palmer further draws our attention to the fact that African diaspora and who it refers to is not always clear. This is because it can refer to Africans abroad living outside their ancestral continent of Africa or to Africans *in* Africa living outside their countries of origin (27). In this paper, we have opted for a definition of African diaspora that is narrow but also inclusive. We draw on Stuart Hall’s (“Cultural Identity”, 223) idea of positioning to carve our definition of the African diaspora as constituted by individuals of African descent that self-identify with and consider themselves part of a larger community of individuals (living temporarily or permanently outside Africa) with a shared past, shared values, and experiences. Part of these shared experiences include an ancestry rooted in the Transatlantic slave trade and colonialism as well as shared experiences of anti-Black racism in Western European spaces. Hence, this definition includes people of African descent outside Africa but, for purposes of the paper’s scope, excludes the diasporas in Africa as well as Africans of Indian and those of European descent.

<sup>2</sup> While Anderson’s definition of imagined communities begins with the nation state as its backdrop (cf. Brubaker 4), this paper uses his term ‘imagined community’ to define diasporic communities as entities that may or may not be uncoupled from the nation state.

<sup>3</sup> The racialization of Black African people dates back to first recorded encounters between Africans and European travelers in West Africa in the period leading up to the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Some 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century travel writings by English explorers that have recorded encounters between English travelers in West Africa are examples of discursive practices that not only racialize Africans but also perpetuate an asymmetrical notion of race based on binary oppositions such as ‘Black’ and ‘savage’ that postcolonial scholars have critiqued (see Boulukos, “The Grateful Slave”).

<sup>4</sup> Hall (“Cultural Identity”, 222) posits that Black cultural identity or what he labels ‘the diaspora experience’ is not an ‘essence’ but rather a result of the ways that individuals and groups ‘position’ themselves or the ways in which they are ‘positioned’ in discourses of the past. ‘Positioning is the idea that “[w]e all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always in context, positioned.”

<sup>5</sup> This newspaper article contains personal accounts of African students, mainly from Nigeria, who re-live their experiences of racial discrimination as they attempted to flee from Ukraine after the outbreak of the war in February 2022: <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-war-african-students-face-russian-missiles-and-racism/a-61356066> (accessed September 14, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-protests-donations-and-solidarity-grow-across-europe/a-60933894> (accessed September 9, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Each One Teach One (EOTO), a non-governmental organization (NGO) led by Black people in Germany is one of several NGOs that started a call for supporting Black (and Indigenous and People of Color) fleeing the war in Ukraine. <https://www.eoto-archiv.de/neuigkeiten/support-for-bipoc-persons-fleeing-the-war-in-ukraine/> (accessed September 9, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> According to the Federal Bureau of Statistics the statistics from the year 2020 showed that roughly 985.000 Black and Afro-German people live in Germany.

<sup>9</sup> Translated into English by the authors. The original quote in German reads as follows: “Groß war einst das Ansehen Afrikas, sowohl im Hinblick auf die Talente als auch in Bezug auf die wissenschaftlichen Bestrebungen und die kirchliche Organisation. Brachte es doch mehrere ganz außerordentliche Männer hervor, durch deren geistvolle Studien die Weltweisheit und noch mehr die Gottesgelehrtheit begründet worden ist. [...] Zu unserer Zeit aber soll dieser Erdteil fruchtbar sein an anderen Dingen als an Studien. Daß er aber nicht erschöpft ist an Begabungen, das möge hier durch sein Beispiel beweisen der Hochberühmte Magister der Philosophie und der Freien Künste: Anton Wilhelm Amo, Afrikaner aus Guinea.” (Martin, “Schwarze Teufel”, 316)



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<sup>10</sup> In the Middle Ages, the African embodied the ideal image of the knight, as can be seen for example in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*.

<sup>11</sup> Petitionen von Martin Dibobe et al am Kolonialamt und an der Nationalversammlung (1919). Barch R1001 7220, Bl. 130-1, 231

<sup>12</sup> In the documentary film *Schwarz und deutsch* (Engl. translation: Black and German), a journalist persistently asks a young mother why she does not want to give her Afro-German child up for adoption.

<sup>13</sup> Translated by the authors. The original quote reads as follows: “das Verhältnis zum afrikanischen Kontinent niemals eine Rechenaufgabe gewesen“, sondern eine, die “auch mit dem Herzen gelöst werden [müsse]”. The author also remarks that: “But this statement also shows that politicians at the beginning of the 1960s could count on such vague allusions to German colonial history being understood.”

<sup>14</sup> In 2001 Anke Poenicke noted in a study of current school textbooks: “‘Racial’ traits are emphasized as well as the idea of ‘mixed-race’ vs. ‘racially pure people’. Even the racist notion of linking physical features and psychological ability with cultural traits has persisted in some books. Divisions and classifications that had become scientifically untenable long before the publication of the books analyzed are being put to use, cultural hierarchies are being revived – and all this is done using age-old racist terminology.” (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. 29).

<sup>15</sup> Translated by the authors. The original quote reads as follows: “[...] in Verbindung mit persönlichen Erfahrungen gesellschaftliche Zusammenhänge von Rassismus offen[zu]legen” (Oguntoye 9).

<sup>16</sup> Translated by authors. Original quote reads as follows: “Nach der ‚deutschen Einheit‘ steht nun die ‚europäische Einheit‘ 1992 bevor. Europa entwickelt sich zu einer politischen und ökonomischen Festung gegen den Rest der Welt, vor allem gegen Länder und Menschen der sogenannten Dritten Welt. Schon heute werden Migrationsbewegungen und Immigration durch internationale Abkommen westeuropäischer Länder kontrolliert und gestoppt (z. B. das Schengen-Abkommen von 1989)” (Oguntoye 12).

<sup>17</sup> The magazine *Awa Finnaba* (1983-1988), founded by African writers and artists in exile, should be mentioned because it also made a significant contribution to the production of Black German poetry and short stories.

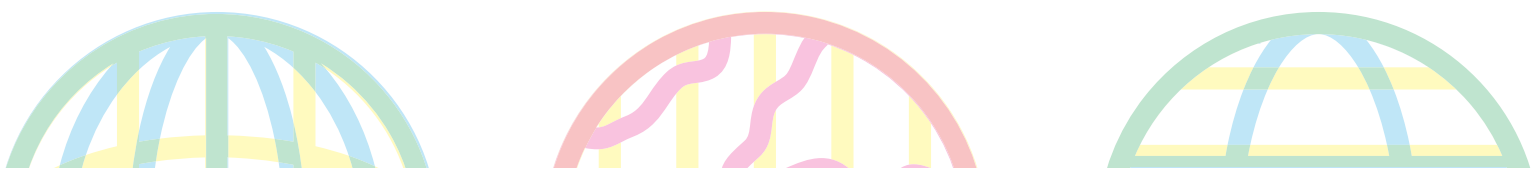
<sup>18</sup> One of the key concepts of the OPPORTUNITIES project is the distinction between stories of migration and narratives on migration (Gebauer and Sommer, “Beyond”, 8). The former refer to stories about migrant and refugee experiences from an emic perspective that is, by individuals who are, or have been, migrants and refugees themselves. The latter are the kinds of “abstract narratives which define the public debate on migration from a specific angle (e.g. political, legal, economic, or scientific). They are abstract narratives about migration from an etic (observer’s) perspective. Gebauer and Sommer (9) posit that such abstract narratives can serve nationalist ends: “Nationalist narratives frame migration as a threat to sovereignty”. Such nationalist narratives, for instance, may employ metaphors for migration that are supposed to serve their nationalist ends; for instance, the metaphor of the “flood” and the “full boat” reference countless numbers of migrants seeking refuge while “abuse” of asylum emphasizes the lawlessness of migrants who pose an economic burden to Fortress Europe.

<sup>19</sup> Translated by the authors. The original quote reads as follows: “Denn die Flüchtlingsdebatte in der BRD wurde und wird nicht nur mit der Flut- und Boot-Symbolik in den Medien geführt. Hinzu kommt der militärische Symbol-Komplex, mit dem diesen Menschen begegnet wird. [...] Der Effekt dieser Symbolik ist deutlich: Flüchtlinge und Einwanderer werden zur militärischen Bedrohung, zu spitzen Kolonnen, die gegen die Bundesrepublik marschieren, zur feindlichen Armee, die die Bundesrepublik bzw. Westeuropa belagert.” (Jäger, “Afrikabilder”, 131)

<sup>20</sup> Translated by the authors. The original quote reads as follows: “Doch es ist noch etwas anderes hinzugekommen. Die Medien vollbrachten das Kunststück, sich zugleich über die rassistisch motivierten Überfälle zu empören und rassistische Einstellungen weiter zu verfestigen.” (Jäger, 132)

<sup>21</sup> Translated by the authors. The original quote reads as follows: “dass nahezu unisono die hinter dem Aufschrei verborgene Botschaft fast der gesamten Presse und nahezu aller AutorInnen darauf hinauslief, das Problem dadurch zu lösen, dass man die Grenzen dicht machen müsse, dass die ‚unberechtigten‘ Flüchtlinge abzuschieben seien etc.” (Jäger 132)

<sup>22</sup> <https://isdonline.de/ueber-uns/#werwirsind> (25.06.2023, translated by the authors). The original quote reads as follows: “Die ISD vertritt die Interessen von Schwarzen Menschen in Gesellschaft und Politik und will auf die Gesetzgebung Einfluss nehmen. Die Themen Alltagsrassismus, rassistische Gewalt und Polizeigewalt sind zentrale



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Schwerpunkte der Arbeit. Schwarzer Widerstand ist für uns in erster Linie ein Kampf um die Wahrnehmung dieser Perspektiven.”

<sup>23</sup> “Each One Teach One e.V. is a community-based education and empowerment project in Berlin. Founded in 2012, the association opened its doors in March 2014 as a neighbourhood library and has been a place of learning and encounter ever since” (<https://eoto-archiv.de/>, accessed 25.06.2023, 14:00). Together with other organisations, EOTO e.V. campaigns for the interests of Black, African and Afro-diasporic people in Germany and Europe.

<sup>24</sup> “We are the nexus between politics, the public and communities of people of African origin. We do lobbying and committee work at institutional, social and political levels. We develop strategies and measures to counter anti-Black racism. We develop projects for sensitization about democracy, for the strengthening of a plural society in order to make the needs and concerns of people of African origin visible.” (<https://zentralrat-afrikagemeinde.de/unsere-arbeit/>, accessed June 25, 2023, translated by the authors).

<sup>25</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/> (accessed June 23, 2023).

<sup>26</sup> In Senegal, for example, the diaspora elects 15 of the 165 members to the National Assembly.

<sup>27</sup> MacoopA is an example of an initiative and service provider, based in Germany, that supports individuals and organizations living in and outside Africa in setting up financial structures and business projects in Africa. Its services include providing business development management and training for diasporic individuals and organizations. (<https://macoop.a.one/about-2/>, accessed June 26, 2023).





# opportunities

for a fair narrative on migration