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The Crowded Space of Diaspora: Intercultural Address and the Tensions of Diasporic Relation

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> Striving to be both European and Black requires some specific forms of double consciousness.
>
> —Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*

> Despite the obvious appeal of a hybrid, [albeit] unifying, transnational culture that could invite belonging among blacks everywhere, merely celebrating the ideal without attending to the power relations that thwart its realization invites a familiar brand of policing.
>
> —Jacqueline Nassy Brown, "Black Liverpool, Black America, and the Gendering of Diasporic Space"

In his 1994 article "Diasporas," James Clifford posed the probing question, "What is at stake, politically and intellectually, in contemporary invocations of diaspora?" [1] It is a question that holds continued relevance to current scholarship on African diasporic communities, and one that should prove central to understanding the links many black scholars see as significant to their analyses of the relations between black communities transnationally. Focusing primarily on black British and anti-Zionist articulations of diaspora, Clifford's article added a necessary degree of specificity to the discussion of the concept by bringing into dialogue two important models of **[End Page 94]** diasporic discourse. His mapping of these diverse yet overlapping discourses offered a useful site for exploring the links and investments among and between theorists of diaspora and the ethnic and cultural constituencies in whose name they formulated a politics of diasporic histories, relationship, and community.

I find it particularly pertinent to begin this piece by revisiting Clifford's original question. Reexamining it gives us the opportunity to reflect critically on the extent to which the discourse of diaspora has become far more centered, particularly in the fields of black studies, cultural studies, and African American history, than just a few years ago. Taking Clifford's provocative query as a starting point is also intended to invite a reflection on whether our stakes in the concept of diaspora in studies of black communities transnationally have changed as the term and its uses have become more centered. At the same time, it directs our attention toward the less celebratory, less comfortable, and more problematic elements of this discourse, as well as their implications for our attempts to make sense of the histories, cultural formations, and expressions of black communities elsewhere.

This article resituates Clifford's original question, reading it through a very different lens and site of analysis. In so doing, it takes as its starting point a related question, albeit one whose formulation

differs from Clifford's in important ways. Specifically, I ask, what work do invocations of what might be termed *diasporic relation* do for communities situated at what anthropologist Jacqueline Nassy Brown calls "the margins of diaspora"? [2] Although we may perhaps never succeed in answering this question comprehensively with any degree of satisfaction, it might prove useful to reflect momentarily on the term *diaspora*—both on its more recent genealogy and on some of the methodological and theoretical uses to which it has been put as an analytic framework for the study of black communities in order to even begin imagining what such an answer might entail. Following this brief introductory discussion, I offer a reading of two very distinct encounters with diasporic invocation from my own work on one such "marginal" African diasporic community—black Germans. The first encounter is a scholarly one, the second a very rich ethnographic one. Each offers different insights into the work that diasporic invocation does and the entanglement of intercultural interpellation and interrogation therein. Each asks us to engage the stakes of the relationships between black communities in ways that are at times uncomfortable, at times problematic, yet always insightful and instructive.

I

As numerous scholars have made clear, the forced dispersal or displacement of a people functions as the foundational notion of diaspora. A diverse array of social and cultural theorists have theorized diaspora in relation to this fundamental notion of **[End Page 95]** dispersal and displacement from an originary homeland, building on the much cited etymology of the term from the Greek *dia*, meaning through, and *speirein*, meaning to sow or scatter. Such analyses see their implicit and often explicit referent, the Jewish diaspora, as the concept's defining paradigm (what Safran terms the "ideal type"). [3] Traditionally, diaspora has been associated with a historical event of migration or dispersal whose profound effects come to be inscribed in narratives of displacement. Equally central to this model of diaspora is the maintenance of either a concrete or imagined relationship to an originary homeland, often cultivated across time and space. Yet, as both Clifford and sociologist Avtar Brah emphasize, the concept is not limited to a historical experience. Rather, it functions as both a theoretical concept and a complex analytic discourse that "invites a kind of theorizing that is always embedded in particular maps and histories." [4] Indeed, Brah contends that we conceive of diasporas as "an ensemble of investigative technologies that historicise [*sic*] trajectories of different diasporas, and analyse [*sic*] their relationality across fields of social relations, subjectivity and identity." [5]

Yet when considering the concept of diaspora specifically in relation to African-descended peoples, the question arises of what exactly constitutes the potentially beneficial diasporic connection among black peoples? It is precisely this question that has been the focus of the subtle and sophisticated analyses of black British theorists of diaspora, most prominently Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy. [6] Many models of African diaspora emphasize the role of African origins, cultural heritage, and legacies, and these models continue to constitute a highly influential discourse both within the academy and beyond it. Yet in the European context, black British scholars like Hall and Gilroy have theorized diaspora as multiple complicated processes of positioning in relation to a sense of belonging vis-à-vis the creation of psychic, symbolic, and material communities and home(s) in the sites of settlement. Yet both the historical event of migration and, at times, the residual effects of slavery as a defining moment of inequality with continually salient effects in contemporary social interactions remain elements of these articulations of diaspora.

In many ways, contemporary theorists of African diaspora culture privilege Gilroy's concept of diasporic relation as a model. Gilroy understands this relation as a transnational link forged through the mutual perception of a shared, racialized condition and the cultural and political resources black people make use of in their struggles against the various and varying forms of racial oppression with which they must contend in their respective contexts. [7] Specifically, it is the ongoing "pursuit of emancipation, justice and citizenship internationally as well as within national frameworks" that, Gilroy argues in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, constitutes a transcultural and indeed

historical link between black cultures. [8] Moreover, an intricate process of borrowing and adaptation prove key to Gilroy's diaspora discourse. This dynamic cultural "syncretism" is central to the relations between black cultures **[End Page 96]** because it allows communities like black Britain to draw on the "raw materials" of black communities elsewhere. As Gilroy writes in one of his most widely cited formulations: "Black Britain defines itself crucially as part of a diaspora. Its unique cultures draw inspiration from those developed by black populations elsewhere. In particular, the culture and politics of black America and the Caribbean have become raw materials for creative processes which redefine what it means to be black, adapting it to distinctively British experiences and meanings. Black culture is actively made and re-made." [9]

Through his emphasis on intercultural relations of borrowing, exchange, and adaptation within "settled" black communities, Gilroy articulates the discourse of diaspora as a complex politics of location and belonging. As Jacqueline Brown asserts, it thereby moves beyond a fixation on the consequences of migration, displacement, and the relation to originary homelands to focus on the types of raw materials (e.g., popular cultural artifacts such as music, shared memories, or cultural narratives) that black populations draw on when constituting their own cultures and communities. [10] Here Brown's notion of "diasporic resources" proves particularly useful. In her 1998 article, "Black Liverpool, Black America, and the Gendering of Diasporic Space," Brown engages the stakes of the discourse of "black America" in black British articulations of diaspora and offers an important intervention in the discussion of diasporic relation. Building on Gilroy's notion of raw materials, Brown undertakes a sophisticated analysis of the cultural and political practices of black Liverpudlians, focusing on their use of "the vast resources of what they construct as the black world, yet within the political economy of what has been available to them." She continues: "Diasporic resources may include not just cultural productions such as music, but also people and places, as well as iconography, ideas, and ideologies associated with them. . . . I use the term *diasporic resources*, then, to capture the sense that black Liverpudlians actively appropriate particular aspects of "black America" for particular reasons, to meet particular needs—but do so within limits, within and against power asymmetries, and with political consequences." [11]

Emphasizing the African diaspora itself as less a concrete geographical trajectory than a set of relations constructed actively by communities for specific purposes toward particular ends, Brown contends that "there is no actual space that one could call 'the African diaspora,' despite how commonly it is mapped onto particular locales." Yet she argues that this fact points out the extent to which "social spaces are constructed in tandem with processes of racial formation." [12] Moreover, central to her concept of diasporic resources are the complex forms of desire and longing she understands as crucial to the relations between different black communities. As we will see, these relations are anything but simple, universal, or egalitarian, but rather emerge as the product of past and contemporary histories and hegemonies that require our active and self-critical engagement. **[End Page 97]**

II

My own interest in fleshing out the limits and tensions of diasporic relation arises out of my increasingly frequent confrontations with diaspora as *the* requisite approach or theoretical model through which one should (or perhaps must?) understand all formations of black community, regardless of historical, geographical, or cultural context. In trying to understand the relationship between the history of black Germans and those of other black communities, it becomes increasingly apparent that the concept of diaspora does not constitute a historical given or universally applicable analytic model for explaining the cultural and historical trajectories of all black populations. Rather, we must engage this concept with an awareness of its limits in regard to those black communities whose histories and genealogies do not necessarily or comfortably conform to dominant models. Indeed, it is worthwhile to recall Gilroy's reminder that *diaspora* often serves to paper over difficult fissures and gaps within the affiliations constructed among black communities. As he remarks, "This

powerful idea is frequently wheeled in when we need to appreciate the things that (potentially) connect us to each other rather than to think seriously about our divisions and the means to comprehend and overcome them, if indeed this is possible." [13]

Similarly, I would contend that, particularly for a black community like the Afro-German one, it is necessary to establish their specific relation to the concept of diaspora before assuming their inclusion within this model on an equal footing with other black communities. The following quotation taken from the concluding comments of Carol Aisha Blackshire-Belay's 1996 article, "Historical Revelations: The International Scope of African Germans Today and Beyond," may serve as an example of this problematic dimension of the discourse of diaspora. She writes:

> It is true that the level of awareness of Africa and Africanness among African Germans has increased over the years since the organization of various groups among them. This has also led to a development of consciousness about who they are in European society. Examination of German history and German contacts with African people in Africa, Germany, and in the Americas helps them to identify the obstacles that have historically stood in the way of progress for the African Germans and their situation in German society today. This enables them to understand the ways in which these obstacles have been overcome in places and to draw up a program of action to overcome obstacles where they continue to exist. Indeed consciousness of Africa is a necessary rallying point for the promotion of more fruitful and enduring interactions between continental and diasporic Africans.
>
> The time has come for the African-German community to see itself as a community belonging to the African Diaspora—African-descended people **[End Page 98]** dispersed throughout the world. While the African Germans may perceived [*sic*] themselves as a small, yet visible minority in a white majority society, they are, however, national minorities in the countries of their birth. This becomes much more important when it is considered together with the populations of the African continent, and only then does the balance change. Because as members of the African Diaspora we are all connected by heritage although separated by birth. This connectedness offers us a strength that we can draw from, indeed just as African Americans have discovered over time. [14]

Blackshire-Belay's comments place Afro-Germans in a perplexing and indeed rather awkward space in the discourse of diaspora. On the one hand, Blackshire-Belay describes a reciprocal relation between Afro-Germans' growing awareness of their African history and heritage and the beneficial effects of this awareness on their sense of themselves as Europeans. On the other hand, through the emphasis she places on the lessons that might be learned from a closer examination of Germany's historical encounters with blacks at home and abroad, her comments seem to gesture toward a notion of raw materials or resources related, though less well-developed, to that articulated by Brown and Gilroy.

Yet at this point her arguments turn in a different direction—one that privileges both Africa and African Americans in her configuration of the relations of the African diaspora. When she writes that "consciousness of Africa is a necessary rallying point for the promotion of more fruitful and enduring interactions between continental and diasporic Africans," she elides the benefits of learning from the history of black peoples' struggles with an identification with Africa, at the same time making a curiously essential distinction between what she terms, "continental" and "diasporic" Africans. In this way, she seems to invoke the identification with a culturally and nationally transcendent "Africa" as the necessary prerequisite to diasporic relation. Blackshire-Belay's notion of the diaspora recenters Africa as a mythic point of origin and a unifying transnational social and politic adhesive between African diasporics and their irksome siblings, continental blacks. This recentering of Africa harkens back to much earlier discourses of diaspora similarly anchored in sites of origin and notions of

cultural heritage as powerful explanatory models for contemporary social and political configurations.

In this context Blackshire-Belay offers her most strident invocation to diasporic connectedness, insisting that the black German community's identification with the African diaspora is long overdue. Here she defines diaspora quite simply as "African-descended people dispersed throughout the world," where the diasporic relationship between black communities is their "common heritage"—a connection on which, she emphasizes, blacks can draw for strength. In many ways, Blackshire-Belay's **[End Page 99]** comments closely resemble the words of African American feminist poet and activist Audre Lorde, who in her 1990 foreword to *Showing Our Colors* articulates a similar set of issues when she writes that "members of the African Diaspora are connected by heritage although separated by birth. We can draw strength from that connectedness." [15] Yet unlike Blackshire-Belay, who defines a very specific relationship between black Germans and Africans in her diaspora discourse, Lorde formulates this relationship as a question both open to interpretation and in need of interrogation. In her earlier 1984 introduction to the original German publication of this text, *Farbe bekennen* (reprinted in the English edition), Lorde poses this question quite directly: "Who are they, these German women of the Diaspora? Beyond the details of our particular oppressions—although certainly not outside the reference of those details—where do our paths intersect as women of color? And were do our paths diverge? Most important, what can we learn from our connected differences that will be useful to us both, Afro-German and Afro-American." [16] In her 1990 foreword Lorde refines this formulation to explicitly query the exact relationship of African Asians, African Europeans, and African Americans to Africa. [17] Lorde's persistent efforts to ponder these relations as questions are useful, for in so doing, she foregrounds what she terms the "connected differences" between different black communities and cultures such that their moments of divergence become as salient as their similarities, overlaps, and commonalities.

Blackshire-Belay seems not to give credence to the deeply diasporic dialogue out of which both the term *Afro-German* and the movement itself emerged. As the authors of *Showing Our Colors* attest, it was the thoroughly diasporic, cross-cultural exchange between themselves and Audre Lorde that contributed substantially to their articulation of their identity as Afro-Germans. [18] Indeed, in many, if not all, of the personal narratives published in this seminal volume, one is struck by the recurring stories recounted by black German women of fateful visits made to Africa (or black communities in the Americas or Britain) and the pivotal role ascribed to these encounters with black communities abroad. They often do not describe positive experiences, though they almost always have substantial implications for the authors' later lives. Nevertheless, while identification with Africa or black communities elsewhere often serves as an initial starting point, such identifications must always be deconstructed to unearth the layers of projection, desire, and longing that shape these complex relationships. Similarly, privileging Africa within the discourse of diaspora equally requires unpacking. Yet beyond the tendency of such an uncritical invocation of diasporic relation to diminish the critical capacity of diaspora by reducing it to a descriptive term of identification and similarity through racialization, Blackshire-Belay's comments also illustrate another perhaps more worrisome dimension of the discourse on the African diaspora. We may read her citation of **[End Page 100]** black America as an exemplary, almost privileged site in the trajectory of diasporic cultural, community, and identity formation, and the increasing use of the African American context in articulating a politics of diasporic relation, less as one of relation than of hegemony.

In her compelling critique of Gilroy, Brown argues that Gilroy's analysis is troubled by the extent to which his attempts to theorize transnational diasporic relationships leave unexamined the asymmetries of power that exist across and between different black communities, and the very different relationships to diaspora that arise as a result. Brown urges us, in our engagement of notions of transnational black diaspora, to investigate how American hegemonies in particular have contributed to an imbalance in the nature of the transatlantic exchanges that constitute the diaspora. She cautions that "diaspora may very well constitute an identity of passions; but these passions, and

the means of pursuing them, may not be identical within particular communities. These points force the sober realization that, despite invitations to universal identification, not everyone partakes in the privileges of membership to the diasporic community with impunity." [19] Following Brown, it is important to recognize that the relationships among different black communities are structured no less by dynamics of power and hegemony than those that came to constitute the diaspora itself. Here the role of black America, not so much as a concrete history of struggle as the ways in which this history and the increasingly influential cultural capital of black America travels to and often structures modes of articulation within other communities, must also be incorporated into any assessment of diasporic relation. [20]

Yet when we set the history of the black German community in relation to the complex notions of diaspora discussed above, it is also important to reflect on the role of a markedly undertheorized element of diasporic relation—namely, the role of memory. Indeed, the status of memory suggests a different process of cultural formation and highlights some important tensions of diasporic relation that we must engage in any analysis of the black German community's relation to the African diaspora. For it should be reiterated that memory plays a central role in constituting diasporic identity and community. The direct and inherited memories of diaspora define and sustain both a sense of relation to real and imagined homelands as well as among and between communities separated spatially. This complex technology of memory as an act of both remembrance and commemoration engages strategic forms of forgetting imposed institutionally from without as well as individually and collectively within specific communities. In this way, it is important to recognize that memory provides the source of the defining tension of diaspora and diasporic identity: the dynamic play of originary and imaginary homes, and the complex networks of relation forged across national, spatial, and temporal boundaries.

In the German context, however, the historical absence of the forms of memory **[End Page 101]** so central to many models of black diasporic identity and community raises the question of what happens when a community lacks access to such memories. Until recently, few Afro-Germans had any connection to one another, for many in this largely mixed-race population grew up as the only blacks in their surroundings. With the exception of the current generation, most black German children did not grow up with their black parent, thus hindering almost any transmission and preservation of memory in a fundamental way. Despite the fact that points of contact among early black migrants to Germany did exist, the death or departure of these almost always male black parents often meant that these nascent networks of relation were rarely, if ever, sustained from one generation to the next. What hence marks much of this group is the lack of shared narratives of home, belonging, and community, which sustain so many other black communities and on which they draw as resources. As a result, black Germans have never regarded a sense of relation and belonging among themselves or to other black communities as self-evident. It has come to be negotiated only in the past two decades. Even current attempts to forge political and cultural connections and alliances with members of other black communities both in Germany and abroad repeatedly falter on this very issue. For they often come into conflict at the moment when established histories of other black communities are imposed on Afro-Germans, who are assumed to identify with histories of struggle (most often those of Africans, Caribbeans, or African Americans) in which they are not seen as active participants. Acknowledgments of their own struggles often go overlooked along with the histories and presence of black Europeans altogether.

In this way, Afro-Germans find themselves, once again, positioned in a type of interstitial space— implicated and intertwined, though not fully encompassed by such a model of diaspora/diasporic relation. The waves of forced or collective migration that mark other black communities do not characterize their history. And yet the mostly voluntary individual journeys (with the exception of the children of the postwar occupations) that led to the formation of this community might nevertheless be seen in relation to an alternative model of diaspora, albeit in a specifically German manifestation yet to find full articulation. The lack of recorded historical memories and the consequent difficulty of their public transmission and interpretation, in turn, further constrain the diasporic function of

memory. Thus the representation of Afro-Germans in larger historical narratives of nation, race, and place has only recently begun to occur, while this community's own work in establishing and claiming a "diasporic memory" still remains in its nascent stages.

III

Jacqueline Brown's insights into the stakes of theoretical moves that seek to render diaspora as a universal and/or democratic relationship help us understand this less than innocent tendency. The role of black America and its function within the relations **[End Page 102]** of diaspora took a different, though no less compelling, form in my own ethnographic encounters with my Afro-German informants. A phenomenon I refer to as *intercultural address* may serve as an example of these dynamics. It describes a series of eruptions/interruptions that I encountered repeatedly in the process of interviewing where, as an African American, I often became the object of address, being directly and indirectly spoken or referred to—at times even becoming the topic of our conversation itself—by my Afro-German interview partners in their attempts to describe and explain their experiences as black people in German society. My informants commonly made strategic use of black America to articulate their assumptions of our similarities and commonalities as black people, while always emphatically insisting on the specificity of our culturally distinct experiences of race in our respective societies.

Intercultural address illuminates important tensions of diasporic relation through the ways in which it simultaneously contests and affirms the assumptions of similarity between the black communities negotiated discursively in our interviews. As a way of contextualizing the articulations of intercultural address that follow, it seems both pertinent and necessary to include some degree of ethnographic detail (or "thickness") in my analysis. I do this as a way of suggesting how each of my informants' comments was situated within the larger interview and, at the same time, to fill in some of the contours of the ethnographic space of the encounter between my informants and myself. Despite the fact that, as a historian, the oral histories I conducted were intended to produce alternative historical sources, engaging these interviews as an ethnographic space proves important not only for understanding the eruptions of intercultural address that emerged therein. It also serves as a self-conscious attempt to acknowledge the extent to which the space of the interview constitutes a complex and loaded terrain shaped by dynamic interpersonal negotiations that reflect many of the complicated processes of social and cultural formation unearthed in and through the narratives they produce.

My conversations with both Peter and Clara took place in Germany in 1992. At the time, I was a graduate student living in Berlin on a research fellowship, working on my as yet unwritten dissertation. It was the second of what would eventually be a six-year residence in Berlin, at a volatile time in this city's recent history. It was a crucial moment in post-reunification Germany, for between 1989 and 1992, the country experienced a dramatic increase in racist and xenophobic violence. In April 1991, a twenty-eight-year-old Mozambican man was killed by a group of neo-Nazi youths who pushed him in front of a moving tram in the East German city of Dresden. In September of the same year, right-wing youths firebombed a residence for asylum seekers and assaulted its Vietnamese and Mozambican residents in Hoyerswerde. According to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz,* 1992 marked the height of these violent attacks. In **[End Page 103]** August 1992, Germany witnessed seven nights of violence in the East German port city of Rostock, while in November of that year three Turks were killed in an arson attack in the small town of Moelln. [21] In response, Germans staged a series of candlelight marches in Berlin, Munich, Hamburg, Bonn, and other cities, during which over 3 million people voiced their protests. It was against this disturbing background of resurgent racist violence and resounding reminders of eras past that my interviews with Peter and Clara occurred.

As with all of my informants, a third party and mutual acquaintance informally facilitated contact with my first informant, an individual I refer to for reasons of confidentiality as Peter. In both cases a

journalist I had met—a woman whose documentary on the history of blacks in Nazi Germany had been an important starting point for my own research—had given me his name. The journalist had known Peter since her childhood, having grown up in the small town where Peter had spent most of his life and still resides.

My initial contact with Peter followed what would probably be described as the most conventional rules of ethnographic or oral historical formality and etiquette—an initial contact letter followed by a phone call. In my letter, I introduced myself as an American, a historian, and a Ph.D. candidate. I explained that I was interested in speaking to him as part of my dissertation research—an oral history project on the history of Germans of African descent during the Nazi period. I described my interest in understanding his experiences and my desire to have them accounted for within the larger narrative of German history and the history of National Socialism. What I did not say was that I was black. Indeed, I am still unsure why I did not mention this in my letter, and I was only made aware of the implications of this omission later, as we will see, by Peter himself.

I sent off my letter feeling confident that our mutual friend had alerted Peter to the fact that I would be contacting him and hopeful that he would prove receptive to my request for an interview. She had encouraged and assured me Peter would respond positively. A "cold call" this was not, and I entered into our encounter optimistic, though anxious, if not petrified by the inevitable sense of terror and strangeness that accompanies the initial stages of ethnography and interviewing. Certainly, the initial personal contact marks one of the greatest moments of anxiety for ethnographers and oral historians alike, and for Peter and me this was a phone call. Almost immediately on receiving my letter, Peter phoned me in Berlin. The anxiety preceding that phone call was equally divided between the idea of being flat-out turned down for an interview and, perhaps even worse, the idea that, if granted the opportunity to speak with Peter, my German would fail me in the midst of our conversation. Neither of these scenarios came to pass. However, what did occur (both in my interview with Peter as well as in those with almost every other informant I spoke to) proved no less off-putting, albeit far more complex in ways that I see as emblematic **[End Page 104]** of the very tensions of diaspora among African Americans and black Germans I seek to explore here.

In our phone conversation, Peter and I discussed the details of where and how the interview would transpire, and I offered to travel to his home to conduct it. We agreed on this, and it eventually proved a very comfortable setting for the interview. Yet toward the end of our conversation, Peter posed a quite pointed question—one that I would come to see as characteristically direct and revealing of our future interactions. He began with an apology, explaining that he did not mean to offend me, but he needed to ask—"Are you black?" he said. "I mean, I know you're American, but are you a black American or a white American?" Peter's question pierced the anonymity of our exchange in ways that would become familiar to me in our interview and many subsequent conversations. At the same time, his disarming and strategic honesty vis-à-vis both my blackness and Americanness was a form of address that also characterized my conversations with all of my black German interview partners. It was a direct invitation to me to situate myself in the very same ways and with the same degree of specificity that I asked and implicitly assumed of them. When I replied to Peter's query that yes, I was African American, he responded that he thought so, and that that was good. He agreed to do the interview with me and later confessed that, had I been white, he would not have agreed to it.

Peter's comments disarmed and confounded me. The idea that Peter talked to me on the condition of my blackness, and the assumptions this seemed to reveal, perplexed me. Was my blackness assumed as the basis of empathy? Solidarity? Identification? An essential commonality and capacity to understand his experiences? More important than this, my own uncertainty that I could live up to any of the expectations that I imagined his remarks to potentially imply daunted me even more. Similarity and identification seemed to me the implicit point of reference for his remarks, and I felt wholly inadequate to such expectations. Indeed, my reply and affirmation that I was an African American was, to me, the source of greater unclarity than clarity. For what that statement did not name was the fact that I am an African American born in New York City and raised in the suburbs of Washington,

D.C. It did not say that I am a middle-class African American raised by parents from working-class southern families in one of the most class-stratified black communities in the United States. What my response did not name is the fact that I am a graduate of a Seven Sisters college and an Ivy League university. It did not speak to the vast problems of translation and interpellation African Americans experience within our own communities, not to mention the even more vexed problem we have communicating these complexities in our dialogues with other black communities outside of the United States, particularly in Europe. My response did not address the ways in which these tensions undergo constant negotiation, deferral, and displacement **[End Page 105]** in each and every one of the relations that black people refer to as diasporic—ways that sometimes get talked about, but very often do not. I did not address this, but Peter did, perhaps not always as directly, but nevertheless all too explicitly.

My primary motivation for interviewing Peter was a desire to understand the impact of sterilization on his later life, and I designed the interview to encourage him to give his account of this and other events in his life in the Third Reich. Yet in the interview itself, when asked to speak about this childhood experience, he did so by first speaking of a period in his life that, in my reading of his narrative, is or becomes at least as significant as his sterilization. That period is the two years he spent as a member of the Hitler Youth, directly preceding his sterilization. In establishing the connection between these two events in his narrative—sterilization and membership in the Hitler Youth—Peter articulates an important ambivalence in his life history as well as in the politics of race in the Third Reich more generally. Resisting an interpretation of his life defined solely by persecution or victimization, he effectively qualifies the social rejection perpetrated on him through his sterilization (marginalization) by way of his reference to the equally significant experience of belonging to the Hitler Youth (integration). This tension in Peter's biography exemplifies an element of the history of African Germans in the Third Reich that I refer to as the *Other within*, a term I use to articulate the paradox of being both internal to and to some extent acknowledged members of this society, while at the same time thoroughly marginalized by and within it. The *Other within* describes the complicated positioning of many black Germans in the Nazi period who experienced marginalization at the center, rather than the periphery of German society. In fact, the concept pertains to events throughout Peter's life. In 1942, six years after his sterilization, Peter was inducted into the Nazi army, the *Wehrmacht*, where he served three years of active duty before being captured and taken as a prisoner of war by the Red Army.

The following excerpt from our interview begins with Peter's recollections of his sterilization. What begins as a straightforward recounting of those painful events takes an interesting turn as Peter attempts to communicate its significance to me, his African American interlocutor.

PK: After the judgment they immediately loaded us up and took us to the hospital. There we were operated on, and in ten days I was released. And there I stood, back on the job. They had been informed at the railroad. [22] And they informed me too. I wasn't allowed to marry; I could not marry a German girl. That was clear. It was part of the Nuremberg laws. And the same people ask me today, "Hey, why didn't you marry?" **[End Page 106]**

TC: *And why didn't you marry?*

PK: Whom could I have married?

TC: *And after the war?*

PK: Well, after the war, it was too late.

TC: *Yeah?*

PK: After the war it was too late. When I returned from the POW camp I was thirty years old. Certainly, a person can also get married at thirty. But I didn't want to anymore. Before that, no girl

would have taken me. Even if the girls had wanted to, their parents wouldn't have allowed it. I don't know if I have to explain to you. . . . If you wanted to marry a white American man somewhere in a particular area, one doesn't have to ask you *why* you don't want to marry him. Maybe you do; maybe he does too. But it's still impossible. And here, aside from that, it was forbidden. It wasn't even worth mentioning. [23]

In the opening sequence of this passage, Peter changes the focus of his narrative when he shifts from recounting his childhood memories of sterilization to describing the effects of this experience on his life as an adult. He focuses on the example of marriage. Here he contrasts the prohibition to marry in the Third Reich with his later "choice" not to do so after the removal of Nazi legal restrictions. Peter's focus on marriage is significant in that it is through reference to marital status that he positions himself outside the social norm. He interprets the seemingly harmless question posed by his friends and acquaintances, "Why didn't you marry?" as more than a veiled reference to this social norm and, in fact, as an expression of ignorance regarding his particular experience as a black German under the Nazi regime. Peter explains that the circumstances precluding his marriage went beyond the institutional level of Nazi legal sanctions: "Before that, no girl would have taken me. Even if the girls had wanted to, their parents wouldn't have allowed it." Although Peter claims to have chosen not to marry after the war, he denies any choice in the matter in his youth. However, it is the way that he invokes what he assumes to be my experience as an African American to clarify this contrast that proves particularly revealing.

In the final sequence of this excerpt, Peter attempts to clarify to me his situation on the issue of marriage by means of comparison. Addressing me directly as a black person via his conception of my African American cultural background, he makes me the point of reference for his comparison. He begins with a gesture of hesitation, **[End Page 107]** remarking on the potential superfluous explanation: "I don't know if I have to explain to you." This phrase appears initially to indicate a moment when Peter seems about to defer to what he assumes to be my obvious cultural knowledge of such a situation as an African American by drawing on an example from my cultural context—one to which I am assumed to be able to relate. [24] Using his image of what it would be like for me in the United States if I decided to marry a white man as an example, Peter sets up a relation of similarity between us by drawing on the potential commonality of our experiences as black people. His statement "one doesn't have to ask you why" introduces a second assumption of commonality between the African German and African American contexts. In this instance, though, he is less hesitant. His statements in this last sequence appeal for intercultural reciprocity, urging me to draw on my own cultural knowledge as an African American to answer the very question I have just posed.

The exchange between Peter and myself in this excerpt reflects the process of negotiating our respective experiences as black people which transpired at a discursive level during our interview. In this passage intercultural address takes the form of an attempt to establish both discursive and intercultural reciprocity through comparative references. But Peter's use of comparison has a second dimension that does more than establish a dialogic of similarity. His use of comparative references at the same time function as gestures of distancing and respect, as attempts to probe the boundaries of our communication and explain the ways in which experiences of race and racialization exceed an uncritical discourse of similarity.

Directly following his allusion to interracial marriage in the United States, Peter defines the limits of his comparison. Here he uses the relation of similarity that he established through his reference to the African American context to explain the differences between the two situations. The statement, "And here, aside from that, it was forbidden," marks the point at which the similarities between Peter's experience as an African German and those of African Americans end. Despite the fact that, as an African American, I may recognize the similarities between Peter's experiences and those of my own cultural context, our respective experiences as black people differ considerably. As he shifts from using comparison as a means of establishing similarity to using it as a marker of difference, intercultural address in Peter's narrative practice becomes a form of *critical* juxtaposition. His

insistence on simultaneously alluding to both the differences *and* the similarities between his experiences and those of African Americans is neither random nor contradictory; for he intends the similarities he emphasizes to reinforce my ability to understand the differences in our respective experiences of blackness. His use of comparison and juxtaposition provoke me to reflect critically on my own African American circumstances, for his repeated references to me and my cultural context effectively implicate and draw me into his narrative. As a result, I am continually forced to critically assess the relationship **[End Page 108]** between our two communities and acknowledge the significant differences between them.

Peter's use of comparison and juxtaposition must also be seen in relation to the existence of a discursive gap in representing the situation of Afro-Germans. Here I would contend that comparison and juxtaposition function as modes of representing an experience that lies in space left out by available modes of representation. On the one hand, the hegemonic discourse of German identity remains a largely homogeneous and homogenizing discourse of whiteness, one that often conflates Germanness with whiteness as a form of racial identity. On the other hand, the discourse on blacks in contemporary Germany defines its black residents primarily as immigrants and foreigners in German society—individuals most often seen as "third world" economic and political refugees in pursuit of the wealth and opportunity the "first world" promises. At the same time, representations of African American culture as the dominant point of reference for "first-world" black populations permeate this discourse. At the level of visual representation, black America— particularly through the proliferation of hip-hop, house, funk, and rhythm and blues through the medium of music videos— has made African American cultural styles and expressions a focal point of identification for blacks in Germany. In addition, the legacy of the African American civil rights movement serves as a model for black liberation struggles around the world. The dominance of these representations of African American history and culture in Germany has come to define popular perceptions of blacks in the so-called first world. One effect of these representations is the perception of Afro-Germans (as well as all other blacks in Germany) as either "third-" or "first-world" others. In this way, the discourses of black and German identity which define "German" as white, and "black" as either African or African American leave little, if any, discursive space for black German articulations of self—space that might allow individuals like Peter to describe the experiences of Germans of African descent in ways that might not necessitate reference to black America.

In the sequence cited above, Peter's use of intercultural address serves as his mode of rendering his experience in relation to the constraints of these discourses of race and ethnicity for blacks in Germany. Moreover, it illustrates the extent to which the articulation of an experience that overlaps these two supposedly distinct forms of identity necessitates not only a dialogical relation of similarity (or at the very least, direct or indirect reference) to these dominant discourses, but also a differential and contestatory stance beyond them. The construction of alternative forms of identity like Afro-German also involves direct engagement with the dominant forms of identity that bind and consequently circumscribe them. It is the negotiation of these positions—between that which is sayable within or in relation to existing and/or available terms of black and German identity and that which remains unsayable and, **[End Page 109]** therefore, unsaid—that Peter's narrative practice, as well as experiences he recounts, reflect.

I would contend that intercultural address points to some of the ways in which communities like Afro-Germans must consistently reckon with black America and its hegemony as an "always already there," primary referent for the African diaspora, through which they must speak in their attempts to articulate their own very different experiences. This reason, perhaps, makes it all the more important to interrogate the contradictory manner in which this ever present referent shapes these articulations and mediates their relation to the diaspora. Here we must ask what the use of black America as a mode of articulation prevents individuals like Peter from saying, that at the same time enables him to speak?

In Peter's narrative, we may see intercultural address as a challenge that encourages us to reflect on the status of black America in relation to other black populations involved in the process of articulating their own experiences and constructing alternative forms of black identity and community. It asks us to take a closer look at the influence of representations of African American culture in these constructions. And yet, although it presents itself as an obvious model for explaining the sense of relationship postulated through such cross-cultural citation, the question remains: can or should we understand this as diasporic or as an expression or consequence of a diasporic relation? Should the ways in which Afro-Germans draw on the African American context be seen as their use of some of the few diasporic resources available to them as black people lacking other indigenous narratives of belonging, community, and struggle, or for that matter, access to the forms of collective or individual memory that sustain other black communities? Can or should such references to black America be understood as necessary attempts to draw from elsewhere that which is lacking, though essential, to the constitution of very different notions of black identity and community at "home"? Or might they also have everything to do with the emergent cultural capital of black America that increasingly allows it an almost endless capacity to proliferate and travel to many different global locations and thus become an available referent?

In Peter's case, as well as for many members of other black European communities more generally, I believe the latter is the case. Nevertheless, I am not quite ready to relinquish the notion of diaspora and the potentially productive work it does in fact do. Citational practices like those I have examined here, although in no way voluntary or egalitarian, are still extremely illuminating and instructive when engaged critically with an eye toward understanding how they reveal points of both distinction and commonality. For those of us interested in reconstructing the histories out of which communities and identities emerge, the ways in which intercultural and transnational links, bonds, and affiliations among different communities are invoked and produced through nuanced articulations both by scholars and individual members of these communities make for an important site of analysis that we **[End Page 110]** should not overlook. Indeed, articulations like those explored here urge us to rethink the discourse of diaspora and the diasporic relations it references. We might reexamine our tendency to consider them as a common trajectory of cultural formation or as a set of cultural and historical links that either precede or call into being particular community formations or identifications. Rather, these links and the discourse of diaspora are themselves forged in and through these very formations in ways thoroughly strategic and deeply embedded in the webs of power and hegemony that define our everyday social interactions. In this way, diaspora constitutes less an answer or explanation than a persistent question—in fact, the very question posed above: What work does it do?

My conversations with black Germans about their memories of their lives in the Third Reich forced me to contend with their often very different understandings of race and their own status as raced social subjects—understandings not always compatible with my own. My status as an African American often became the site of challenge, the ground on which complex contestations of difference, not simply similarity, were waged. In conclusion, it is important to keep in mind that, like the category of race itself, our relation as black people to the diaspora is not something we all have or are born with. On the contrary, these relations are constructed through such negotiations and contestations in specific ways not always or easily translatable into our respective cultural contexts. Relations of diaspora forged on the basis of similar experiences of racialization do not form transparent links between black people. Rather, these relations emerge as the products of highly constructed processes of cultural reading and interpretations that shape, define, and often constrain our ability to understand the differences between our respective histories and cultures. For although our experiences of living blackness may in some ways be similar, we must also consider the differences between our cultures and histories and recognize how their specificities have come to bear on the ways in which the effects of race are lived and read.

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Notes

1. James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* 9.3 (1994): 302.

2. Jacqueline Nassy Brown, "Black Liverpool, Black America, and the Gendering of Diasporic Space," *Cultural Anthropology* 13.3 (1998): 297.

3. William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora* 1.1 (1991): 84. As cited in James Clifford, "Diasporas" in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 248.

4. Clifford, "Diasporas," 302.

5. Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contested Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 180.

6. See most notably, Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 222-37; Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993).

7. My discussion draws significantly on Jacqueline Brown's masterful reading of Gilroy's diaspora discourse in "Black Liverpool." Her insightful critique of Gilroy's work is required reading for any student of African diaspora studies.

8. Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black*, 156

9. Ibid., 152.

10. Brown, "Black Liverpool," 294.

11. Ibid., 298.

12. Ibid., 291.

13. Gilroy, "It Ain't Where You're From, It's Where You're At: The Dialectics of Diaspora Identification," in *Small Acts*, 131.

14. Carol Aisha Blackshire-Belay, "Historical Revelations: The International Scope of African Germans Today and Beyond," in *The African-German Experience*, 120-1.

15. Audre Lorde, "Foreword to the English Language Edition," in *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out*, ed. May Opitz-Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye, and Dagmar Schultz (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), xiii.

16. Ibid., vii.

17. Ibid., x.

18. Opitz, Oguntoye, and Schultz, eds., *Showing Our Colors*, xxii.

19. Brown, "Black Liverpool," 298.

20. Indeed, as Brown asserts, "power asymmetries may be identified in the ways black American cultural products are differently absorbed, translated, and utilized within the individual black European communities into which they travel." Brown, "Black Liverpool," 297.

21. *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, and Conflict* (London: Academic Press, 1999), cited at www.violence.neu.edu/publication4.html. See also Background Papers, "Combatting Right-Wing Violence and Hate Crimes," available at www.germany-info.org/newcontent/np.bak/np_3d.html.

22. At the time, Peter apprenticed with the railroad—a position, he explains elsewhere in the interview, he only had access to through his membership in the Hitler Youth.

23. Peter K., interview by the author, Dudweiler, April 22, 1992. Translation and emphasis mine.

24. My reference to "cultural knowledge" is intended to go beyond a participatory notion of experience, conceived either as the subjective apprehension or retrospective interpretation of events. Rather, it refers to both individual lived experiences and the cognition of or reflection on the collective experiences of a cultural group. It also includes the historical knowledge or consciousness of the past experiences of this group.