



CLASSIQUES
GARNIER

FOLIE (Sandra), ZOCCO (Gianna), « Sketches of Black European Comparative Literature Studies. A Series of Interviews », *CompLit. Journal of European Literature, Arts and Society*, n° 6, 2023 – 2, *Sketches of Black Europe in African and African Diasporic Narratives / Esquisses de l'Europe noire dans les récits d'Afrique et des diasporas africaines*, p. 169-211

DOI : [10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-16076-2.p.0169](https://doi.org/10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-16076-2.p.0169)

FOLIE (Sandra), ZOCCO (Gianna), « Sketches of Black European Comparative Literature Studies. A Series of Interviews »

RÉSUMÉ – Cette contribution réunit huit entretiens avec des chercheurs internationaux de générations et disciplines variées qui étudient la littérature noire d'Europe : Elisabeth Bekers, Jeannot Moukouri Ekobe, Polo B. Moji, Deborah Nyangulu, Jeannette Oholi, Anne Potjans, Nadjib Sadikou et Dominic Thomas. Le but est de rendre visible les études sur l'Europe noire en littérature comparée, et de contribuer à un discours sur les perspectives de recherche, les théories ainsi que les défis et besoins futurs.

MOTS-CLÉS – études afro-européennes, littérature comparée, interdisciplinarité, érudition et activisme, perspectives de recherche

FOLIE (Sandra), ZOCCO (Gianna), « Esquisses de la littérature comparée noire d'Europe. Une série d'interviews »

ABSTRACT – This contribution gathers eight interviews with international scholars of different generations and disciplines who study Black European literatures: Elisabeth Bekers, Jeannot Moukouri Ekobe, Polo B. Moji, Deborah Nyangulu, Jeannette Oholi, Anne Potjans, Nadjib Sadikou, and Dominic Thomas. The aim is to make literary research on Black Europe more visible to scholars in comparative literature and to contribute to a discussion on research perspectives, theories, and future challenges and needs.

KEYWORDS – African European studies, comparative literature, interdisciplinarity, scholarship and activism, research perspectives

SKETCHES OF BLACK EUROPEAN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE STUDIES

A Series of Interviews

[T]he presuppositions with which Humanities scholars approach their object of inquiry are influenced by the ways of knowing they have acquired by having occupied particular subject positions throughout their biographies.¹

This somewhat unusual contribution to the special issue is a series of eight interviews with scholars of different generations and disciplines who specialise in Black European literatures from different countries and languages and with different thematic interests. It is unusual in that it does not feature academic works, but brings to the foreground the academics behind them. The interview series was inspired by the round table discussion “Imagining Europe/ans? African and African Diasporic Perspectives”, which was part of the Blankensee-Colloquium on *Sketches of Black Europe* that we organised in March 2022 at the Leibniz-Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung (ZfL) in Berlin.² There, Deborah Nyangulu (then University of Münster, now University of Bremen), Elisabeth Bekers (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), and Peter Simatei (Moi University, Eldoret) shared their views on topics such as “Europe under

1 Mahmoud Arghavan, Nicole Hirschfelder, and Katharina Motyl. “Who Can Speak and Who Is Heard/Hurt? Facing Problems of Race, Racism, and Ethnic Diversity in the Humanities in Germany: A Survey of the Issues at Stake”. In: *Who Can Speak and Who Is Heard/Hurt? Facing Problems of Race, Racism, and Ethnic Diversity in the Humanities in Germany*, edited by Arghavan, Hirschfelder, and Motyl. Bielefeld: transcript, 2019, pp. 9–42 (21).

2 See <https://www.zfl-berlin.org/event/sketches-of-black-europe-imagining-europe-ans-in-african-and-african-diasporic-narratives.html> [accessed 12th June 2023].

‘the African gaze’”, “Europe’s forgotten Black (literary) history”, and “processes of (de)colonisation and reconstitution in different European countries”. As is often the case, the time allotted for our round table discussion was far too short and more questions were asked than could be answered, which is why we wished to both extend the conversation and formalise it.

This interview series was also inspired by the numerous conversations with our colloquium participants: at breakfast in the hotel, before and after the lectures, in the coffee breaks, during our city walk in the African quarter in Berlin, or in the evening over a drink. It was mostly on these not-so-official, less formal occasions that we talked more freely about our respective research projects, about what we are currently reading, what our teaching experiences are, what setbacks and successes we have had, what challenges we are facing, and what plans we would like to implement in the future. In our experience, such conversations are very valuable, perhaps especially when they take place between scholars – Black as well as white – from different disciplines and generations, working with different languages and cultures, themes and texts, but who all see themselves as somehow connected to Black European (comparative) literature studies. However, it is also our experience that such exchanges happen far too rarely. While it is difficult and perhaps not even desirable to record and publish such informal and sometimes confidential conversations, we thought that a series of interviews loosely based on the (in)famous “Proust Questionnaire” would allow us to capture some of their benefits: a personal touch and perhaps even a certain lightness; the opportunity to present thoughts and ideas that have either been thought through for a long time or that are unfinished and new; a space to address challenges and problems, hopes and achievements, and, last but not least, the possibility to share concrete pieces of advice and perhaps discover opportunities for collaboration. In the style of Victorian “confession albums” or the back page of *Vanity Fair*, we sent the same ten questions to our eight interviewees. Unlike Proust’s Questionnaire, however, we did not ask about their favourite virtues or their idea of happiness, but about their understanding, experience, and positioning within literary research on Black Europe. This scholarly framing made it necessary to find questions that, without either drifting too far into the mode of a confession or leading to a mere aggregation of research

results, would allow for, and perhaps even provoke, as diverse and therefore subjective answers as possible. It was our intention that the gesture of the personal, provisional, and unpolished is still recognisable in the printed interviews which, compared to research articles, have the advantage of being short, to the point, and easy to read (even while commuting on a noisy train, in a few quiet minutes between appointments, or on a bench by the playground).

Besides approaching the ephemeral and maybe even oral, another advantage of the interview series is that it allowed us to include more people than would otherwise have found their way into this special issue. The time when our colloquium took place – spring 2022 – was a period marked by the opening up of many countries after long pandemic-related lockdowns and travel restrictions. However, the return of life back to “normal” also meant that many people faced overwhelming demands and huge backlogs, which made it difficult for some to submit a full-length article. While a questionnaire may be quicker to complete than a research article or a review, it brings with it a very different set of challenges. Following Grada Kilomba’s call for an epistemology “that includes the personal and the subjective as part of academic discourse”, the questionnaire asked for biographical information and personal opinion that would illustrate that “we all speak from a specific time and place, from a specific history and reality”.³ Not all of the colleagues we approached for this venture were willing to do so. All the more we thank those who agreed to participate: Elisabeth Bekers (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), Deborah Nyangulu (University of Bremen), and Jeannette Oholi (Dartmouth College), who had already presented a paper and/or contributed to the round table discussion at the colloquium; Anne Potjans (Humboldt University of Berlin), whom we also met at the colloquium where she chaired a panel; Polo Moji (University of Cape Town), whose research was brought to our attention by *CompLit*’s editor-in-chief, Brigitte Le Juez; Dominic Thomas (University of California), whom we got to know at the Andrew W. Mellon Workshop “Im/Mobilities” that took place in June 2022 at the American Academy in Berlin; Jeannot Moukouri Ekobe (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich), whose book on Afropean aesthetic interventions unfortunately

3 Grada Kilomba. *Plantation Memories. Episodes of Everyday Racism*. Münster: Unrast, 2019, p. 30.

caught our attention too late to invite him to the colloquium;⁴ and Nadjib Sadikou (University of Flensburg), to whose research Sandra's colleagues at the University of Jena drew our attention. Thank you all for your valuable contributions, for your time, openness, and trust. We think your responses make a wonderful contribution to this special issue; they both round it off and open it up.

In this section, through the race/ethnicity, nationality, university affiliation, discipline, age, and career stage of the interviewees as well as the focus of their research, we have endeavoured to represent a plurality of aspects of current Black European comparative literature studies. However, the field is naturally much vaster and gathers a large and growing number of scholars with diverse research topics from all over the world. While we cannot cover this breadth of interests with our selection of interviewees and the ten questions we ultimately chose, we believe that the responses we collated offer an extension to the perspectives provided with the research articles and thus contribute to making this special issue more representative of Black European comparative literature studies. Therefore, the term "sketches", which we have chosen for the title of this special issue, also fits the interview series fairly well. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), a sketch is "a rough drawing or delineation of something, giving the outlines or prominent features without the detail, esp. one intended to serve as the basis of a more finished picture, or to be used in its composition".⁵ In a way, this series of interviews aims to provide "a rough drawing or delineation" of literary Black European studies. While some prominent characteristics of this research field (if we choose to call it that) certainly emerge in the total of eighty answers, we are sure that, in contrast to the minimal definition of a sketch in the OED, here precious details are also present. Also, with this series of interviews we do not so much want to provide "the basis of a more finished picture" but rather aim to make literary research on Black Europe more visible to scholars in comparative literature and beyond. We hope that this contributes to a discussion that, like a sketch, is ultimately aimed at a future that does not yet exist, but is in need of being built – a future, which requires to be constructed out of different perspectives, approaches, and theories, a

4 See also Laura Steindorf's review of Ekobe's book in this issue, pp. 229–234.

5 "sketch, n.". Oxford English Dictionary Online [accessed 22nd June 2023].

future, in which we eventually see the consolidation of what we could provisionally call Black European comparative literature studies.⁶

Gianna ZOCCO & Sandra FOLIE

* *
*

ELISABETH BEKERS

“Literature has the unique ability to give visibility, speech and agency to those whose realities have been erased, to present us with ideas and views that may otherwise never reach us.”

Academic position(s) and affiliation(s):

Professor of British and Postcolonial Literature at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Belgium

Please name five keywords that characterise your research on Black Europe:

Black British women’s literature, Black British neo-slave narratives, Black British literary experimentation, African diaspora literature in Flanders/Belgium, canon formation

Please name one to three of your own publications that you would like to see mentioned here:

- Elisabeth Bekers. “Experimenting in the Ditch: Buchi Emecheta’s Early Novels of Transformation”. In: *British Experimental Women’s Fiction, 1945–1975*, edited by Hannah Van Hove and Andrew Radford, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 257-278. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-72766-6_12 [accessed 4th October 2023].

6 Our idea for this term is loosely inspired by Christel Temple’s proposition of a “comparative black literature”, which she herself based on Melvin Dixon’s earlier concept of a “world black literature”. See Temple. *Literary Spaces: Introduction to Comparative Black Literature*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2007. See also our introduction to this special issue, p. 19.

- Elisabeth Bekers and Helen Cousins. “Helen Oyeyemi at the Vanguard of Innovation in Contemporary Black British Women’s Literature”. In: *Women Writers and Experimental Narratives: Early Modern to Contemporary*, edited by Kate Aughterson and Deborah Philips, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 205-226. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49651-7> [accessed 4th October 2023].
- Elisabeth Bekers and Helen Cousins. “Contemporary Black British Women’s Literature: Experiments in Literary Form”. *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2022 (special issue: “Contemporary Black British Women’s Literature”, edited by Elisabeth Bekers, Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, and Helen Cousins), pp. 211-222. <https://doi.org/10.1353/TSW.2022.0017> [accessed 4th October 2023].

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. *What does “Black Europe” mean to you? In what way do you engage with it and since when?*

Black Europe, for me as professor of literature, is a fascinating body of Black European texts produced by authors of African(-Caribbean) descent since the late eighteenth century. As a specialist in literature in English interested in canon formation and issues of gender and intersectionality, I have focused especially on the innovations of Black British women writers, who certainly have gained more visibility since I hosted the first expert seminar on Black British women’s literature at Vrije Universiteit Brussel in 2013. I have since convened various panels at international conferences and also maintain a bibliographical website (<https://clic.research.vub.be/research/bbww> [accessed 4th October 2023]) on Black British women writers.

2. *What was the first author or topic connected to Black Europe (or Black literature from a specific European country) that you focused on in your research?*

I was introduced to the London novels of Nigerian-born author Buchi Emecheta, *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), at the University of Hull in the early nineties, in the context of my Master in New Literatures in English. My (post)doctoral research focused on female genital excision in African and African American literature,

but I delved back into Black European literature for a conference on “Transcultural Modernities: Narrating Africa in Europe” I co-organised at Goethe University in Frankfurt in 2005. For this, and the co-edited volume that followed (Rodopi, now Brill, 2008), I examined Black authors in Flanders (Belgium), most notably Chika Unigwe.

3. Was there a particular moment of Aha, insight, or discovery in your engagement with Black Europe that stuck in your mind and that you would like to share?

When I was appointed as Professor of British and Postcolonial literature at Vrije Universiteit Brussel in 2006, I shifted my research focus to Black British literature, struck by how much more scholarly attention was being paid to African American and even to African women authors. The first project in this area for which I received funding (Research Fund Flanders, 2011) tellingly included the phrase “Black Atlantis of Black British Women’s Writing and Criticism” in its title. I remember some found my research focus rather too niche, although earlier generations unreservedly devoted their entire careers to a single (admittedly white male) writer.

4. Could you please tell us about one particular challenge or difficulty that you have encountered in your research on Black Europe/ans?

Twenty-five years ago, I remember it was a challenge to persuade some students to refrain from using certain words in their literary discussions and, for instance, have them speak of “ethnic group” instead of “tribe”, even when the Black author (writing in the 1960s) used that word himself. My classrooms today are no longer exclusively white and the students themselves are asking their classmates not to read out quotations containing problematic vocabulary and to treat with respect also those views to which they do not subscribe. My increasingly international groups draw also on their own experiences when interpreting postcolonial literature.

5. “Black Europe” is a research subject that is approached from a wide number of disciplinary angles. What, in your opinion, is the special contribution that literary scholars – be it from individual philologies or comparative literature – can bring to this interdisciplinary field?

As with literature in general, what I love about Black British women writers is their capacity to create worlds of many shades and hues and to reflect on issues from multiple perspectives at the same time. Literature has the unique ability to give visibility, speech, and agency to those whose realities have been erased, to present us with ideas and views that may otherwise never reach us. Theory-of-mind research has shown that reading literature enhances one's understanding of others; by researching and teaching literature in its variety of styles and forms, I hope to contribute to this.

6. In contrast to more traditional (comparative) literary studies, the young interdisciplinary field of African European studies takes a decidedly decolonial approach that is oriented toward a mode of activist scholarship. How important is the connection between activism and academia in your research? At what levels?

Small but significant measures can already be a first step to such a decolonial approach. When I started at VUB in 2006, I renamed the courses I was assigned, systematically replacing “English Literature” with “Literature in English”. To counter the historical dominance of (Anglo-Saxon Protestant) white male authors in the survey courses I teach in the Bachelor, my Master courses exclusively deal with postcolonial literature and Black British women writers. Recently, we collaborated with the students of WeDecolonizeVUB (<https://www.ucos.be/wedecolonizevub-2/> [accessed 4th October 2023]) to host Black British author Laura Fish at a Black bookshop in the Matongé quarter, drawing an audience of students and Brussels locals.

7. Which theories or concepts have you used most fruitfully in your own work on Black Europe? What experiences have you made when adopting concepts developed for white, African American, or African texts for African European literature?

My own background in postcolonial literary studies has informed much of my research and teaching over the years, complemented with theorising on gender and intersectionality (with race, but also with ability, age, etc.) and an interest in image and knowledge production (imagology and agnotology). The supervision of my students' master theses and (post)doctoral projects and my collaborations with peers in

Belgium and abroad have stimulated me to look also into theorising on literary experimentalism, metareference, multimodality, identity theory, intergenerational trauma, as well as critical race theory and queer of colour critique, to name but some recent examples.

8. *What was the last book – scholarly or non-scholarly, factual or fictional – related to Black Europe that has left a considerable impression on you? Why was that?*

That would be *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo, not just because this great multiperspectival novel showcases the diversity of Black British women's experiences in recent decades through the interconnected lives of twelve characters, nor simply because it adopts an unusual, flowing kind of "fusion" style (Evaristo's words), but because it illustrates the ongoing controversiality of canon formation. When her novel won the Booker in 2019, Evaristo was the first woman (and first Briton) with Black heritage to ever win the prize, and made to share the award with Margaret Atwood, despite vows that the prize would never be split again.

9. *In your opinion, which developments within Black European studies – be it in terms of research subjects, but also with regards to processes of institutionalisation, communication or cooperation – are most urgently needed in the upcoming years? Could you please name two or three that you find most important.*

It is not that many moons ago that women writers were excluded from university curricula and that women's studies stimulated their integration into anthologies, literary-historical surveys, and syllabi. Although Britain's literary tradition still attests to this historical gender inequality, women are quite visible in contemporary literature. I am hoping that Black European studies may have a similar impact and encourage the further diversification of literature and the canon. It is my sincere wish that my successor's brief will simply be to teach "literature in English" and that gendered and racialised qualifications will be replaced with literary ones.

10. *Which writer or topic connected to Black Europe do you hope to consider in the future in your work?*

I hope to continue my research on experimentalism in Black British women's literature and stimulate younger scholars to not just read these authors sociologically, but to acknowledge their position at the vanguard of British literary innovation. With some junior researchers at VUB, I also want to give the Black British Women Writers Website a complete overhaul; after a decade its interface is outdated, or so I am told. We will use the opportunity to give the existing profiles and bibliographies a substantial update and add new writers. We started with twelve and now provide information about no fewer than thirty-three authors.

* *
*

JEANNOT MOUKOURI EKOBE

“For me, following a literary character [...] allows access to a type of knowledge about Black Europe that is not easily accessible through other sciences.”

Academic position(s) and affiliation(s):

PhD in comparative literature from the University of Munich

Please name five keywords that characterise your research on Black Europe:

Nation and racism studies, social and aesthetic imagination, transnational migration, questions of representation

Please name one to three of your own publications that you would like to see mentioned here:

- Jeannot Moukouri Ekobe. “Dystopie, Utopie, Heterotopie: Die Imagination des Strands in der Literatur von Afropäerinnen”. In: *Narrating and Constructing the Beach. An Interdisciplinary Approach*, edited by Carina Breidenbach et al., Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2020, pp. 82-99. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110672244-004> [accessed 4th October 2023].

- Jeannot Moukouri Ekobe. *Die (Re-)Imagination des Nationalen in Zeiten der Transformation. Eine afropäische ästhetische Intervention*. Münster: edition assemblage, 2021. (see Laura Steindorf's review in this issue, pp. 229-234).

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. *What does "Black Europe" mean to you? In what way do you engage with it and since when?*

I have been interested in the issue of "Black Europe" since my master's studies. But it was not yet fashionable to call it that. For me "Black Europe" is the claim or affirmation of a non-exclusive belonging to a space where the belonging of Black people is still questioned today. Most of the texts I work on are by authors who could be described as Black Europeans.

2. *What was the first author or topic connected to Black Europe (or Black literature from a specific European country) that you focused on in your research?*

Léonora Miano (France)

3. *Was there a particular moment of Aha, insight, or discovery in your engagement with Black Europe that stuck in your mind and that you would like to share?*

For me, one particular moment of insight was the discovery of the debate on the co-production of the modern world and the entangled histories between Europe and Africa, especially the contribution of Africa in shaping Europe's self-image.

4. *Could you please tell us about one particular challenge or difficulty that you have encountered in your research on Black Europeans?*

The particular challenge for me was the reception of my topics (colonisation, slavery, racism etc.) in the academic institution where I prepared my PhD in Germany. My positions were always considered controversial and seen as having a political agenda. It was a permanent battle with professors and the other PhD students who were all white.

5. *“Black Europe” is a research subject that is approached from a wide number of disciplinary angles. What, in your opinion, is the special contribution that literary scholars – be it from individual philologies or comparative literature – can bring to this interdisciplinary field?*

I think that literature and literary studies can give access to a certain subjectivity. This is sometimes absent when approaching Black Europe through other disciplines. For me, following a literary character through their evolution, their challenges, their depth, their struggles, their psychological complexity, their relationship to their environment, etc. allows access to a type of knowledge about Black Europe that is not easily accessible through other sciences.

6. *In contrast to more traditional (comparative) literary studies, the young interdisciplinary field of African European Studies takes a decidedly decolonial approach that is oriented toward a mode of activist scholarship. How important is the connection between activism and academia in your research? At what levels?*

Most of the authors I work on have a strong position outside the academic world. They are personalities who engage in decolonial struggles beyond the academic world. They are activists in their own way, even if the term is still seen as pejorative in the university. I think research on “Black Europe” cannot do without the connection between the academic and the activist worlds. In Germany, for example, there is, in my opinion, very little literary production by Black artists, and decolonial discourses are much more carried by activist movements. So, the impetus that we gain from activists cannot be ignored.

7. *Which theories or concepts have you used most fruitfully in your own work on Black Europe? What experiences have you made when adopting concepts developed for white, African American, or African texts for African European literature?*

I really like the theoretical approaches developed by Stuart Hall, Achille Mbembe, and bell hooks. But the concepts that struck me most were the *Sliding Signifier* (Stuart Hall) and especially *Afropéa* (in its Miano version). I think that the notions developed in direct relation to “Black Europe” are more adequate to analyse African European literature, since

the Black European context is different from the white European, African, or American one. For example, Europe is symbolically constructed as the territory of white people where Blackness is just tolerated. It is not sure that theories developed for other literatures can take this aspect into account.

8. *What was the last book – scholarly or non-scholarly, factual or fictional – related to Black Europe that has left a considerable impression on you? Why was that?*

Habiter la frontière by Léonora Miano. For me it was the first book that gave me the feeling of dealing with the issue of “Black Europe” or “the Afropean” in an affirmative way. I think that Afrofrench, or Afrodeutsch is not quite the same as Afropean. With Afropean one really claims to belong to a whole continent that has built up an image of itself as mainly opposed to that of Africa and the so-called barbarian worlds.

9. *In your opinion, which developments within Black European studies – be it in terms of research subjects, but also with regards to processes of institutionalisation, communication, or cooperation – are most urgently needed in the upcoming years? Could you please name two or three that you find most important?*

1. There should be departments of Black European Studies in universities.
2. The contributions of Black/Afro-European intellectuals who until now have huge difficulties gaining access to teaching and research positions in European universities, especially in a country like Germany, should be considered.

10. *Which writer or topic connected to Black Europe do you hope to consider in the future in your work?*

I would like to read and analyse a book, fiction or non-fiction, about the difficulty of researching Black European issues in academia, in short, a book about the epistemic violence that young Black PhD students and researchers face in European universities. I am not sure if such a book is available yet.

* *

*

POLO B. MOJI

“I think there is something in nuanced literature that resists rendering a subject transparent or fully ‘knowable’.”

Academic position(s) and affiliation(s):

Associate Professor in English Literary Studies, University of Cape Town

Please name five keywords that characterise your research on Black Europe:

Black geographies, Black France, Afroeuropanism, intersectional feminism, Afrodiasporic literature

Please name one to three of your own publications that you would like to see mentioned here:

- Polo B. Moji. *Gender and the Spatiality of Blackness in Contemporary AfroFrench Narratives*. London & New York: Routledge, 2022 (Routledge African Diaspora Literary and Cultural Studies Series). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003120544> [accessed 4th October 2023].
- Polo B. Moji. “Oceanic Bellies and Liquid Feminism in Fatou Diome’s *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique*”. *Cultural Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2022 (special issue: “Reframing the Black Atlantic: African, Diasporic, Queer and Feminist Perspectives”), pp. 298-315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2022.2104899> [accessed 4th October 2023].
- Polo B. Moji. “Blackness Blurred: (Un)Belonging, Kinship, and *Métissage* in Marie NDiaye’s *Ladivine*”. *Journal of the African Literature Association*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2023 (special issue: “Of Freedom and Literature in Africa and the Diaspora”), pp. 33-48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2023.2178723> [accessed 4th October 2023].

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. *What does “Black Europe” mean to you? In what way do you engage with it and since when?*

My research interest in Black Europe, particularly in urban geographies and Black spatiality in France, was prompted by the protests that spread across the peripheral banlieues of numerous French cities in October 2005. Prompting the slogan “*Morts Pour Rien*”, the protests were caused by the death of two adolescents, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traore, who had hidden from the police in an electrical substation in the banlieue of Clichy-sous-Bois because they did not have their identity documents. Having worked in the South African media industry, I was an MA student at the Sorbonne Nouvelle, living in central Paris and working part-time as an *assistante d’anglais* in the banlieue of Poissy when the protests started. When my students at the *lycée* described being subjected to the sorts of identity checks that had caused Zyed and Bouna to hide from the police, I realised that living *intra muros* gave me more freedom of movement than some of the AfroFrench students I was teaching – yet they were citizens, and I was not. Having experienced the legacy of racialised urban geographies in post-apartheid South Africa as a Black woman, the resemblance was obvious. Moreover, the French media’s spectacular images of angry Black men as protestors sparked my focus on how gender intersects with Black spatiality.

2. *What was the first author or topic connected to Black Europe (or Black literature from a specific European country) that you focused on in your research?*

I focus on Black French literature and have been heavily influenced by multiple texts written by Léonora Miano. Her fragmentary tract titled “Afropea” in *Écrits pour la parole* (2012), which stages the “I” or Afropean self as the inhabitant of an “interior land or space without limits”, is key to my conception of a simultaneous connection of Blackness to a national and a continental European identity. This takes into account the varying degrees of separation from the African continent denoted by an Afrodiasporic identity and productively connects to Édouard Glissant’s “poetics of relation” and to relationality as a mode of theorising Black Europe.

3. *Was there a particular moment of Aha, insight, or discovery in your engagement with Black Europe that stuck in your mind and that you would like to share?*

The first part of my book, *Gender and Spatiality in Contemporary AfroFrench Narratives* (2022), is titled “In the Shadow of Marianne”. It emerged organically from the following narratives: firstly, Fatou Diome’s *Marianne porte plainte* (2017), in which she defends a maternal Marianne’s complaint about an exclusionary conception of the French nation. Secondly, Mame-Fatou Niang’s documentary film *Mariannes Noires* (2016), which pluralises and racialises this feminine symbol of the French Republic. Finally, *Marianne et le garçon noir*, which Léonora Miano wrote following an incident of police violence in 2016. Discovering such narratives that address AfroFrench identity in the context of the French republican values of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* bridged the gap between politics and literature for me.

4. *Could you please tell us about one particular challenge or difficulty that you have encountered in your research on Black Europeans?*

A lexical challenge when thinking about Black Europe is whether to hyphenate or not. Is it Afro-European, Afroeuropean, or even Afropean identity? While I employ the unhyphenated terms (Afroeuropean and Afropean) interchangeably in my book to signify the relationality of identities, the hyphen between “Afro” and “European” could be read as a marker of separation. Admittedly, this was one of the most difficult conceptual challenges that I had in writing my book, because I wanted to transcend the binarity of African and European identities. I vacillated multiple times between inserting and removing the hyphen, but eventually was swayed by Johny Pitts, who writes about the term “Afropean” in his book of the same title: “It’s the first time I allowed myself to think of myself as unhyphenated and whole”. While Pitts employs “Afropean”, a neologism coined by the Zap Mama album title *Adventures in Afropea* (1993) and introduced into literature through Léonora Miano’s short story collection *Afropean soul et autres nouvelles* (2008), this denotes the same lived experience of relationality as the more widely used pan-European term “Afroeuropean”. These words communicate relationality and multiplicity – so I chose not to hyphenate AfroFrench, although I retain the capital “F” to signal the equal importance of being Black *and* French (national identity) in my study.

5. *“Black Europe” is a research subject that is approached from a wide number of disciplinary angles. What, in your opinion, is the special contribution that literary scholars – be it from individual philologies or comparative literature – can bring to this interdisciplinary field?*

Perhaps it is useful to think about the sort of authority that our disciplines give us over the subjects we choose to explore. More precisely, I am concerned about the idea that I can theorise, capture, and contain people’s lived experiences and render them transparent. I think there is something in nuanced literature that resists rendering a subject transparent or fully “knowable”. I use Katherine McKittrick’s “Black geographies” (plural), as opposed to Geography with a capital “G”, to engage with Black spatiality in my literary analysis. That way, my intervention surfaces the nuances and complexities of narrated lived experience rather than claiming to be an authoritative narrative about modes and ways of being.

6. *In contrast to more traditional (comparative) literary studies, the young interdisciplinary field of African European studies takes a decidedly decolonial approach that is oriented toward a mode of activist scholarship. How important is the connection between activism and academia in your research? At what levels?*

I did not set out to write an activist book, but I was intentionally political because there is a tendency to read Afropean or Afroeuropean literature through an exoticising lens of hybridity that does not engage with the lived experience of race. This is why I refuse to delink politics from my literary analysis. For example, I read Lauren Ekué’s hip-hop feminist novel *Îcône urbaine* (2005) as relating the particularities of Blackness in France to the globalised emergence of this musical form in ghettoised Afrodiasporic spaces. I have had people who said to me, “Why are you making flânerie or the flâneur political?”. I would like to tell them to navigate certain neighbourhoods in Paris as a Black French person and make the experience of being stopped for an identity check, then I would like them to look at the map of the city and tell me that there are no spatial politics there.

7. *Which theories or concepts have you used most fruitfully in your own work on Black Europe? What experiences have you made when adopting concepts*

developed for white, African American, or African texts for African European literature?

It is vital to foreground concepts drawn from Black European scholars themselves, and to bring them into conversation with Afrodiasporic theorists from elsewhere. I base my analyses on Pap Ndiaye's book *La condition noire* (2008), where he asserts that the increasing public demands of people who identify as Black in France have produced a heightened visibility that invents "*la question noire*" in contemporary France. I also use Édouard Glissant's notion of relationality to theorise the multiplicity of Afrodiasporic identities, and Tina Camp's notion of "intercultural address" to explore how globalised Blackness is mobilised by AfroFrench subjects to articulate the particularities of a Black French identity.

8. *What was the last book – scholarly or non-scholarly, factual or fictional – related to Black Europe that has left a considerable impression on you? Why was that?*

When I discovered that the neologism "Afropea" first appeared on the album *Adventures in Afropea I* (1993) by the Belgian-Zairian group *Zap Mama*, I started to trace the sonic element of the term. Its transfer into the literary sphere is attributed to Léonora Miano's collection of short stories, *Afropean soul et autres nouvelles* (2008). Miano later expounded on the concept of Afropeanism in *Afropea: Utopie post-occidentale et post-raciste* (2020). This non-fictional reflection and its insistence on the particularities of Europe as a space that creates a *specific* form of Afrodiasporic identity influenced my work considerably.

9. *In your opinion, which developments within Black European studies – be it in terms of research subjects, but also with regards to processes of institutionalisation, communication or cooperation – are most urgently needed in the upcoming years? Could you please name two or three that you find most important?*

In my opinion, Black European studies need to detach themselves from the spectacle of protest, ghettoisation, and the migrant crisis to really think about what it means to be a subject who is "sighted" or rendered visible through the micro struggles of having a racialised European identity. A key component of this is recognising that the dogma of a

“colourblind” Europe is a rhetoric of erasure because it denies people the language to articulate racialised European identities and casts them as eternal migrants. While scholars from Europe such as Pap Ndiaye and Fatima El-Tayeb theorise AfroEurope, African American theory is still overrepresented in the field.

10. Which writer or topic connected to Black Europe do you hope to consider in the future in your work?

When I was writing my book, I was struck by the lack of English translations for the AfroFrench literary works in my corpus. As one of my next projects, I plan to translate selected works by authors such as Lauren Ekué and Léonora Miano into English.

* *
*

DEBORAH NYANGULU

“This is a privileged position that literary studies finds itself in in the study of ‘Black Europe’ and it is indeed one way of coming up with interpretive paradigms that do not simplify but are nuanced [...]”

Academic position(s) and affiliation(s):

Postdoc at the DFG Research Training Group “Contradiction Studies – Constellations, Heuristics, and Concepts of the Contradictory”, University of Bremen

Please name five keywords that characterise your research on Black Europe:
Africa, African Europe, transnational Blackness, white supremacy

Please name one to three of your own publications that you would like to see mentioned here:

- Felipe Espinoza Garrido, Caroline Koegler, Deborah Nyangulu, and Mark U. Stein (eds.). *Locating African European Studies: Interventions*,

- Intersections, Conversations*, New York: Routledge, 2020. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780429491092> [accessed 4th October 2023].
- Deborah Nyangulu. “What’s in a Name? Renewing Socialism via Decolonisation”. In: *From Marx to Global Marxism: Eurocentrism, Resistance, Postcolonial Criticism*, edited by Kerstin Knopf and Detlev Quintern, Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2020, pp. 219-232.
 - Deborah Nyangulu (ed.). *Namwali Serpell’s The Old Drift: Disruption*. Special Issue in *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2022. <https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/50364> [accessed 4th October 2023].

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. *What does “Black Europe” mean to you? In what way do you engage with it and since when?*

Black Europe is a counterhistorical project which shows that Black people have always been part and parcel of Europe, and that the hegemonic narrative which presents Europe as solely a product of white ingenuity and genes is false. Black people in Europe are neither aberrations nor outliers although racism tends to present them as such. Different intellectuals such as Stephen Small and Natasha Kelly are some of the contemporary thinkers who engage with questions of Black Europe and have made significant contributions in delineating it as a historical category of analysis. It is difficult for me to say when I really began to engage with “Black Europe” because some of the questions that the category asks and the work that it does were always part of my curriculum during my days as an undergraduate student at the University of Malawi. So, for instance, while we studied Shakespeare or the Elizabethan age, we always incorporated the perspectives of scholars like Eldred Durosimi Jones or Eburn Clark who were African scholars writing in the twentieth century and also interested in the representation of Black characters/Blackness in European texts.

2. *What was the first author or topic connected to Black Europe (or Black literature from a specific European country) that you focused on in your research?*

I don't study a specific European country so I can't respond to your question. My focus is rather on understanding the structure of transnational Blackness and its contrary, white supremacy, which also manifests as global white nationalism. This is partly what we were trying to show in our book on *Locating African European Studies*.

3. *Was there a particular moment of Aha, insight, or discovery in your engagement with Black Europe that stuck in your mind and that you would like to share?*

I don't think I've had this moment. Probably my approach is one of constant learning/discovery, so that I can't quite say that I've reached an aha moment.

4. *Could you please tell us about one particular challenge or difficulty that you have encountered in your research on Black Europe/ans?*

I think the biggest challenge for me is that Blackness is so diverse and categories tend to homogenise. What I find daunting is how does one do justice to the different contradictions that Black Europe/ans espouse(s), a category that at once negates/negated African/Black histories and tries to make sense of a present in which Black identities relate differently to ideas of modernity, the nation-state, capitalism, while also trying to account for coloniality.

5. *"Black Europe" is a research subject that is approached from a wide number of disciplinary angles. What, in your opinion, is the special contribution that literary scholars – be it from individual philologies or comparative literature – can bring to this interdisciplinary field?*

The study of literature is by default interdisciplinary, and any comprehensive reading of a literary text must of necessity draw from a wide spectrum of knowledges. This is a privileged position that literary studies finds itself in in the study of "Black Europe", and it is indeed one way of coming up with interpretive paradigms that do not simplify but are nuanced enough to engage with the contradictions that I speak of above.

6. *In contrast to more traditional (comparative) literary studies, the young interdisciplinary field of African European Studies takes a decidedly decolonial approach that is oriented toward a mode of activist scholarship. How important is the connection between activism and academia in your research? At what levels?*

Well, I don't think African European studies is a field and neither is it young. The name African European is generic, but the work that it does and its methods as well as objects/subjects of study very much overlap with work that is done in Black studies, African studies, postcolonial studies or work that is done with categories such as Afro-European. And all these "fields" deal with the decolonial question to varying degrees. So take someone like Ngũgĩ whose work, both fictional and non-fictional, is decidedly decolonial, but the way he brings Gikũyũ and English texts into dialogue also contributes to comparative literary studies. And as a scholar, he wrote his decidedly decolonial manifesto "On the Abolition of the English Department" back in the 1960s at his University in Kenya. So my point being the focus on delineating fields deflects from focusing on the historical continuities and how knowledge is in dialogue. Or consider the dialogue that emerges when one, for instance, reads Ngũgĩ's *Decolonising the Mind* together with Small's *20 Questions and Answers on Black Europe*. As to the activist question, I study activism but I am not an activist.

7. *Which theories or concepts have you used most fruitfully in your own work on Black Europe? What experiences have you made when adopting concepts developed for white, African American, or African texts for African European literature?*

Probably concepts of paradox, intersectionality, and belonging have been key. Also Fanon's ideas on decolonisation are helpful. I also find the critique of eurocentrism to be useful. On adaptability of concepts – there's no one-fits-all concept, and it is always helpful to take into consideration particular local contexts.

8. *What was the last book – scholarly or non-scholarly, factual or fictional – related to Black Europe that has left a considerable impression on you? Why was that?*

I would say *Mapping Black Europe: Monuments, Markers, Memories* edited by Natasha A. Kelly and Olive Vassell. It is an accessible book, readable and, at the same time, it contains such a rich history of Black Europe.

9. *In your opinion, which developments within Black European studies – be it in terms of research subjects, but also with regards to processes of institutionalisation, communication or cooperation – are most urgently needed in the upcoming years? Could you please name two or three that you find most important?*

There are several things, but I'll mention one. To have really honest conversations about transnational Blackness, honest self-critiques, and future possibilities, Black people need to have safe epistemic spaces where they can discuss what matters without fear of the white gaze or having their knowledges appropriated by white supremacist institutions which depoliticise these knowledges, making them palatable for white audiences and divest them of their transformative potential.

10. *Which writer or topic connected to Black Europe do you hope to consider in the future in your work?*

I have not yet thought about it as I am working on another project at the moment.

* *
*

JEANNETTE OHOLI

“I believe that literary scholars contribute to making the research on Black Europe more diverse and complex because Black people in Europe have created resistant literary traditions.”

Academic position(s) and affiliation(s):

Post-doctoral Fellow, German Studies, Dartmouth College

Please name five keywords that characterise your research on Black Europe:
Contemporary literature, transnationality, critical perspectives, intersections, cross-genre

Please name one to three of your own publications that you would like to see mentioned here:

- Sharon Dodua Otoo, Jeannette Oholi, and Ruhrfestspiele Recklinghausen, eds. *Resonanzen – Schwarzes Literaturfestival: Eine Dokumentation*. Leipzig: Spector Books, 2022.
- Jeannette Oholi. “Ästhetiken des Schwarzen Widerstands: Literarischer Aktivismus durch Empowerment und subversive Sprache in afrodeutscher Gegenwartslyrik”. *German Studies Review*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2022, pp. 535-555. <http://doi.org/10.1353/gsr.2022.0051> [accessed 4th October 2023].
- Jeannette Oholi, Kyung-Ho Cha, Maha El Hissy, Maryam Aras. “Postmigration Reloaded: Ein Schreibgespräch”. *Politisch Schreiben*, no. 7, 2022. <https://www.politischschreiben.net/ps-7/postmigration-reloaded-ein-schreibgesprch> [accessed 15th November 2023].

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What does “Black Europe” mean to you? In what way do you engage with it and since when?

To me, “Black Europe” is a multi-layered network of Black people, experiences, belongings, and arts. Rather than something abstract, it is a part of the lived reality of Europe and the global African diaspora. I have always been involved with Black Europe through my own family history, but I first encountered the term in academia. I thus see myself as a part of Black Europe as well as a researcher of Black Europe as a literary scholar.

2. What was the first author or topic connected to Black Europe (or Black literature from a specific European country) that you focused on in your research?

I have always read a great deal of literature by Black authors from the U.S. but only started seeking out Black European authors when I was a student. The first and most important works that I encountered were *Farbe bekennen*, edited by May Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye, and Dagmar

Schultz, and poetry by Black German poets such as May Ayim, Philipp Khabo Koepsell, Olumide Popoola, and Chantal-Fleur Sandjon.

3. Was there a particular moment of Aha, insight, or discovery in your engagement with Black Europe that stuck in your mind and that you would like to share?

A pivotal moment in my engagement with Black Europe was when I learned about the connection between May Ayim and Linton Kwesi Johnson. This transnational connection and friendship touched me very deeply, and I realised that I wanted to research Black Europe transnationally. Therefore, I decided to not only focus on Germany in my dissertation but to compare literature from three different countries – Germany, France, and England – to shed more light on the connections within Black Europe.

4. Could you please tell us about one particular challenge or difficulty that you have encountered in your research on Black Europeans?

As a literary scholar, a great difficulty in studying Black Europe is the literature research. The self-designations of Black people differ across European countries and their literature is categorised under different labels. I often have the impression of not being able to find a variety of literary texts at all, as Black authors are still underrepresented in major publishing houses. Furthermore, it is often difficult to find older literature because many texts are out of print.

5. “Black Europe” is a research subject that is approached from a wide number of disciplinary angles. What, in your opinion, is the special contribution that literary scholars – be it from individual philologies or comparative literature – can bring to this interdisciplinary field?

Most research on Black Europe comes from the social sciences. I believe that literary scholars contribute to making the research on Black Europe more diverse and complex because Black people in Europe have created resistant literary traditions. By this, I mean that when we talk about the histories, experiences, and activist movements in Black Europe, we

should always include the arts as well, since the arts also show how Black Europe has been forming for centuries and shape Europe aesthetically.

6. *In contrast to more traditional (comparative) literary studies, the young interdisciplinary field of African European studies takes a decidedly decolonial approach that is oriented toward a mode of activist scholarship. How important is the connection between activism and academia in your research? At what levels?*

The connection between activism and science is crucial. Literary studies in Germany are still very conservative and white, so the focus on Black authors is always seen as political. As a Black scholar doing research on Black European literature, I am consistently told that I must choose a different research focus after my Ph.D. to work in German academia permanently. However, I believe it is important that I bring other knowledge to the universities through my research. I see this goal as an activist one.

7. *Which theories or concepts have you used most fruitfully in your own work on Black Europe? What experiences have you made when adopting concepts developed for white, African American, or African texts for African European literature?*

I have always enjoyed working with Fatima El-Tayeb's research focusing on Europe. Her notion of the dominant narrative of "Europeanness" has greatly influenced me as a scholar, as it presents a power-critical transnational perspective on Europe. I also find the concept of the Afropean helpful in exploring Black identities in Europe in the twenty-first century.

8. *What was the last book – scholarly or non-scholarly, factual or fictional – related to Black Europe that has left a considerable impression on you? Why was that?*

Recently, Bernardine Evaristo's *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up* has left a significant impression on me. I enjoyed the way Evaristo tells the story of her family as well as her career as a writer, always embedding it in the historical events of England. For me, the long historical presence of Black people in Europe became visible once again through that book – a fact that is often not addressed in public discourse.

9. *In your opinion, which developments within Black European studies – be it in terms of research subjects, but also with regards to processes of institutionalisation, communication or cooperation – are most urgently needed in the upcoming years? Could you please name two or three that you find most important?*

I think that the most necessary development is to institutionalise Black studies in European universities. Through institutionalisation, Black Europe could expand beyond a niche research area and be taken more seriously. I additionally believe that it is important to promote Black archives in Europe and to establish cooperations between archives and universities. Finally, it would be encouraging if the research field “Black Europe” was explicitly mentioned in job advertisements and if more Black scholars were hired to work in universities in permanent positions.

10. *Which writer or topic connected to Black Europe do you hope to consider in the future in your work?*

One wish is to do research on the Black German magazines *afro look* and *Afrekete*. I would also like to focus more on the solidarities between Black people and other people of colour in Europe.

* *
*

ANNE POTJANS

“Literature to me is a site where individuals, especially those from marginalised communities, reckon with their environments in ways that are eye-opening and pioneering [...]”

Academic position(s) and affiliation(s):

Postdoctoral researcher in the ERC Consolidator Grant research project “Tales of the Diasporic Ordinary. Aesthetics, Affects, Archives” at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Please name five keywords that characterise your research on Black Europe: Methodology informed by literary and cultural studies; eclectic materials; influenced by current perspectives in Black studies, queer theory, and Black and women of Colour feminisms; auto-theoretical; focus on post-WW II era

Please name one to three of your own publications that you would like to see mentioned here:

- Anne Potjans and Simon Dickel. “Racial Seeing and Sexual Desire: 1 Berlin Harlem and Auf den Zweiten Blick”. In: *Sexual Culture in Germany in the 1970s – A Golden Age for Queers?*, edited by Janin Afken and Benedikt Wolff, Cham: Palgrave, 2019, pp. 193-214.
- Anne Potjans. “Beyond Kinship and National Identity: Ika Hügel-Marshall’s *Dabeim Unterwegs: Ein Deutsches Leben*”. In: *Ethnicity and Kinship in North American and European Literatures*, edited by Klaus Rieser and Silvia Schultersmandl, New York: Routledge, 2021, pp. 69-81.
- Anne Potjans. *Why Are You So Angry? – Anger and Rage in Black Feminist Literature*. (PhD thesis, defended in 2022, forthcoming with Peter Lang)

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. *What does “Black Europe” mean to you? In what way do you engage with it and since when?*

This is a really great question, since, as a Black German woman working in American Studies, I often think about how the idea of “Black Europe” or “Black European”, differs from the concept of “African American” or “Black American”. First of all, it is important to think about the relation between Blackness and Europe, and what Europe as a continent means for how we, as Black people, understand ourselves in it. As Michelle Wright has so poignantly extrapolated in her book *Becoming Black* (2003), the idea of Europe is fundamentally dependent on the construction of “the Black” as its utmost “Other” or its flip side, so to speak. In this vein, the term “Black Europe” on the one hand, is a reminder of the role of Blackness in the European context, but it should also get us to think about what it means to formulate Black identity around a

concept that is built to reject that identity. What is the gesture of Black empowerment that is implicated in this? Secondly, Europe is a diverse place and even though white supremacy in Europe follows similar scripts everywhere (when we think about the criminalisation of Black people, for instance, be it by the criminal justice system, other state institutions, or at the borders of *Fortress Europe*), racialised subjects are often more impacted by the racist and anti-Black discourses that occur in the places we live in. The term Black Europe, thus, to me denotes a more loosely communal, less nation-bound, and therefore historically and philosophically differently founded way to think about being Black outside more nation-specific conceptualisations of Blackness, such as Black or African American, Black German, or Black British, to name but a few.

2. What was the first author or topic connected to Black Europe (or Black literature from a specific European country) that you focused on in your research?

When I started researching about Black German literature back in 2015 in the context of my Master's thesis, the first author I did research on and published about was the late Ika Hügel-Marshall (1947-2022) and her autobiography *Dahem Unterwegs – Ein Deutsches Leben* (translated as *Invisible Woman – Growing Up Black in Germany*). To this day this is still an extremely influential book to me when it comes to understanding Black German identity formation in the mid-1980s. Also, it is a book that has taught me a lot about how systems of anti-Black racism interlock and impact the conditions, life-choices, and racial mindsets of people across continents.

3. Was there a particular moment of Aha, insight, or discovery in your engagement with Black Europe that stuck in your mind and that you would like to share?

For me, merely coming in contact with the whole idea of Blackness in Europe was a moment of discovery and revelation, to be honest. I know, this may sound a little naïve, seeing as how much brilliant and extremely ground-breaking scholarship has come out over the past, let's say, ten years. And yet, despite the fact that Black people in Europe have been around for centuries, a lot of the times we perceive ourselves

as rather distant from each other, and this has been due to a lack of distribution of knowledge about each other. I think that especially in recent years the literary and scholarly market on Black Europe has grown considerably, and, to me, this has opened up a gateway to a whole new thinking community.

4. Could you please tell us about one particular challenge or difficulty that you have encountered in your research on Black Europe/ans?

I think that as someone who mostly works on Black German cultural productions and history, I find it sometimes difficult to understand when are we actually talking about Black Europe and when do we talk about Black Germany (or another national context), and how and when to keep these things separate, or how to make a case for the one or the other? And how do these two ideas relate to each other, conceptually and historically?

5. "Black Europe" is a research subject that is approached from a wide number of disciplinary angles. What, in your opinion, is the special contribution that literary scholars – be it from individual philologies or comparative literature – can bring to this interdisciplinary field?

Literature (or art in general) provides a space for imagination and experimentation. And I think that, through the way we approach it as literary and cultural studies scholars, we can help tease out the nuances that occur in individuals' lives between social realities and the imagination. Literature to me is a site where individuals, especially those from marginalised communities, reckon with their environments in ways that are eye-opening and pioneering, and they add significantly to these communities' representations and self-images. In addition to that, they also make it possible to allow for a balance between individual and collective experience.

6. In contrast to more traditional (comparative) literary studies, the young interdisciplinary field of African European Studies takes a decidedly decolonial approach that is oriented toward a mode of activist scholarship. How important is the connection between activism and academia in your research? At what levels?

For me, activism and academia are actually two sides of the same coin. There is no changing of social realities without changing the ways we think about certain topics and how we teach them (at educational institutions but also in everyday situations). So, I guess, for me, it is important to be activist in my teaching and research, to be mindful about the materials and voices I include, the messages I provide, and the ways in which I run my classrooms or any other event. Another aspect is of course outreach: how do we as academics connect with and work together with the communities we are a part of?

7. Which theories or concepts have you used most fruitfully in your own work on Black Europe? What experiences have you made when adopting concepts developed for white, African American, or African texts for African European literature?

One of the things that I want to look into more, and that has also proven fruitful for me in the past, is to work with concepts from Black American queer studies, and to see how, on the one hand, the knowledge generated there makes sense for us when we look at Black Europe, and to also take it as a starting point to ask, what do we still need to do? What are ways of thinking that we need to start engaging in when doing Black European/Black German Studies?

8. What was the last book – scholarly or non-scholarly, factual or fictional – related to Black Europe that has left a considerable impression on you? Why was that?

I am currently reading Musa Okwonga's novel *Es ging immer nur um Liebe* (*In The End, It Was All About Love*), published in 2021. I think what fascinates me about this book is that it provides me with a description of my chosen home, Berlin, that I can so clearly identify with, and there is something in the way that it is written – calmly, precisely, demandingly, and thought-provokingly – that has been incredibly capturing. Okwonga finds wonderful ways to put into words the things that are often only felt or fleetingly perceived but also often escape language. To me, his autofictional account adds an important layer to thinking about Blackness in the West, namely through affects, emotions, and the spatial practices and experiences of Black subjects moving through a world that is more

often than not hostile to them. Okwonga uses this wonderful metaphor of “winds” that move through time and space, and that carry, so to speak, the continuities of colonialism and enslavement, so that these violent histories are still felt in the present.

9. In your opinion, which developments within Black European studies – be it in terms of research subjects, but also with regards to processes of institutionalisation, communication, or cooperation – are most urgently needed in the upcoming years? Could you please name two or three that you find most important?

I would probably say, all of the above. I mostly think that institutionalisation is an issue, but so is interdisciplinary cooperation. For me, it is also really important that scholars within Black Studies are aware of the location they speak from, how they contribute to Black Studies, and how they keep it accessible to scholars and others involved in the production and teaching of Black knowledges from the various communities and institutional contexts we come from.

10. Which writer or topic connected to Black Europe do you hope to consider in the future in your work?

I am currently working on a text by Black German writer Nzingha Guy St. Louis. With its focus on Berlin, queerness, Blackness, and everyday life, this text is unlike everything I have ever read in terms of Black German literature and queer presence in the Black diaspora, and I hope to encounter more texts like it as I expand my research outward, beyond the borders of Germany.

* *
*

NADJIB SADIKOU

“One of the main characteristics of these texts is [...] their refusal to oversimplify cultural artefacts, as they show the complexity of mapping Europe and stimulate readers to openness and pluralism.”

Academic position(s) and affiliation(s):

Assistant Professor, Europa-Universität Flensburg

Please name five keywords that characterise your research on Black Europe:

Intercultural German studies, African European literature, postcolonial studies, intertextuality and intermediality, diaspora studies

Please name one to three of your own publications that you would like to see mentioned here:

- Nadjib Sadikou. “Wider die Ausschließlichkeit. Ästhetische Entwürfe von Vielfalt in der Literatur”. In: *Konzepte der Interkulturalität in der Germanistik weltweit*, edited by Renata Cornejo, Gesine Lenore Schiewer, and Manfred Weinberg, Bielefeld: transcript, 2020, pp. 91-104. <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839450413-007> [accessed 4th October 2023].
- Nadjib Sadikou. “Das andere Afrika? – Afrikanische Räume in deutscher Literatur und Kultur”. In: *Another Africa? (Post-)Koloniale Afrikaimaginationen in der russischen, polnischen und deutschen Kultur*, edited by Gesine Drews-Sylla, Jana Domdey, and Justyna Golabek, Heidelberg: Winter, 2016, pp. 185-193.
- Nadjib Sadikou. “Poetisches ‘Wissen’ und Alteritäts-Krisen. Zur Funktion von Kunst bei Priya Basil und Damon Galgut”. In: *Afrika im Deutschsprachigen Kommunikationsraum. Neue Perspektiven interkultureller Sprach- und Literaturforschung*, edited by Friederike Heinz, Simplicio Agossavi, Akila Ahouli, Ursula Logossou, and Gesine Schiewer, Bielefeld: transcript, 2022, pp. 185-196. <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839461624-014> [accessed 4th October 2023].

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. *What does “Black Europe” mean to you? In what way do you engage with it and since when?*

“Black Europe” means to me that Europe should not be defined exclusively as a “white continent”, but as a continent where Black People strongly believe that Europe is their homeland. They have made a giant contribution to Europe’s cultural and social life and development. I have engaged with Black Europe since at least 2012 in my research and

teaching in German Studies at the University of Tübingen and now at the University of Flensburg.

2. What was the first author or topic connected to Black Europe (or Black literature from a specific European country) that you focused on in your research?

The first topic connected to Black Europe, which I have focused on in my research, is the concept of “Creolisation” by Édouard Glissant. Glissant’s statement that the world is being creolised, i.e. that the world is never fixed or inscribed in an essence or in an absolute identity, is suitable to argue that Europe is no longer only white but also Black.

3. Was there a particular moment of Aha, insight, or discovery in your engagement with Black Europe that stuck in your mind and that you would like to share?

One of the particular moments when reading texts about Black Europe was the startling realisation that Black Europe is real in several states in Europe. It is not a phenomenon limited to one nation state, but it is indeed a transnational reality in Europe.

4. Could you please tell us about one particular challenge or difficulty that you have encountered in your research on Black Europeans?

A particular challenge I encountered in my research on Black Europeans is that many of their texts deal with several languages and cultures. So these authors are performing a “thick translation” in the meaning of Kwame Anthony Appiah: a translation that seeks to locate the text, with its annotations and its accompanying glosses, in a rich cultural and linguistic context. As a reader, you need to contextualise the words in their cultural sense and be careful about “transposing” them in your own apprehension or representation.

5. “Black Europe” is a research subject that is approached from a wide number of disciplinary angles. What, in your opinion, is the special contribution that literary scholars – be it from individual philologies or comparative literature – can bring to this interdisciplinary field?

In their research, literary scholars can focus on language or cultural aspects because Black European literatures distinguish themselves more than ever by their many-voiced forms of narrating diversity. One of the main characteristics of these texts is, among others, their refusal to oversimplify cultural artefacts, as they show the complexity of mapping Europe and stimulate readers to openness and pluralism. They show “discontinuities” in the sense of Anthony Giddens and new forms of worldwide interdependence, in which there are no “others”.

6. In contrast to more traditional (comparative) literary studies, the young interdisciplinary field of African European Studies takes a decidedly decolonial approach that is oriented toward a mode of activist scholarship. How important is the connection between activism and academia in your research? At what levels?

I would say that I’m less of an activist, although I love to read texts or statements by activists. I am rather engaged in the interdisciplinary field of African European Studies by using the thoughts of anticolonial or postcolonial scholars like Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Édouard Glissant, or Stuart Hall.

7. Which theories or concepts have you used most fruitfully in your own work on Black Europe? What experiences have you made when adopting concepts developed for white, African American, or African texts for African European literature?

I have used the concepts of “Négritude” (Léopold Sédar Senghor), “Creolisation” (Édouard Glissant), “Displacement” (Stuart Hall), and later also the concept of the “Afropolitan” by Taiye Selasi. My experience is that these concepts can be used to analyse both African European literature and African American literature.

8. What was the last book – scholarly or non-scholarly, factual or fictional – related to Black Europe that has left a considerable impression on you? Why was that?

The last book that has left a considerable impression on me is *Afropäisch* by Johny Pitts (I read Johny Pitts’ *Afropean. Notes from Black Europe* in the German translation by Helmut Dierlamm with my students at the

University of Flensburg). This book demonstrates that Black Europe is very “deep” because it shows the real presence of Black communities in Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam, Berlin, Stockholm, Moscow, Marseille, and Lisbon.

9. In your opinion, which developments within Black European studies – be it in terms of research subjects, but also with regards to processes of institutionalisation, communication or cooperation – are most urgently needed in the upcoming years? Could you please name two or three that you find most important?

I think that we need (a) more networks in the field of African European Studies and (b) more research projects in the field of intercultural German Studies which understand German Studies not only as classic German Studies (“klassische Germanistik”) but also as a subject in which authors like Sharon Dodua Otoo and Olivia Wenzel are read.

10. Which writer or topic connected to Black Europe do you hope to consider in the future in your work?

In my future work, I hope to consider more texts by African European scholars who are framing new strategies of re-creation and reconfiguration. This means a new arrangement, a new awareness of how to accommodate differences, how to transcend borders, and how to think on a wide scale of diversity.

* *
*

DOMINIC THOMAS

“Black European artists and writers [...] have an important role to play [...] in deploying a creative apparatus that can confront shifting political realities, raise consciousness, and endeavour to foster modes of identification.”

Academic position(s) and affiliation(s):

Madeleine Letessier Professor of European Languages and Transcultural Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles; Gutenberg Chair

in Ecology and Propaganda at the University of Strasbourg; Associate Member of the Centre of International History and Political Studies of Globalization at the University of Lausanne; CNN International European Affairs commentator

Please name five keywords that characterise your research on Black Europe:
Immigration, racism, Afropean, identity, ecologies

Please name one to three of your own publications that you would like to see mentioned here:

- Dominic Thomas. *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration and Transnationalism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007.
- Dominic Thomas. *Africa and France: Postcolonial Culture, Migration, and Racism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.
- Dominic Thomas, Sandrine Lemaire, Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, and Alain Mabanckou. *Colonisation & Propagande. Le pouvoir de l'image*. Paris: Le Cherche Midi, 2022.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. *What does “Black Europe” mean to you? In what way do you engage with it and since when?*

During the 1970s and 1980s, I lived in France and the United Kingdom, countries in which “race” and “Europe” were debated in very different terms. There was reluctance to engage with race in the former, and a lingering scepticism for Europe in the case of the latter. I ultimately found myself at odds with the prevailing thinking in *both* countries, a sentiment partially encapsulated in what Salman Rushdie has described as “double-unbelonging” (*East-West*, 1994). My own interest in “Black Europe” began in the context of riots and uprisings in the U.K. in 1981, the March for Equality and Against Racism held in France in 1983, and the emergence of advocacy groups such as “SOS Racisme”. These were all responses to racial discrimination and police brutality. In my studies, I was drawn to materials that engaged with the longer history of racial violence and to the multiple ways in which the shared experience of racial discrimination had contributed to shaping transnational “African”, “Afropean”, “Afro-European” identities. Paul Gilroy’s *There Ain’t No*

Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation (1987) and Caryl Phillips' *The European Tribe* (1987) were helpful in shaping the contours of my thinking on these questions. In many ways, this was also contained in Aimé Césaire's important question: "Are we entirely *a part* of France, or *entirely apart* from France?"

2. *What was the first author or topic connected to Black Europe (or Black literature from a specific European country) that you focused on in your research?*

This is a very hard question to answer, all the more so because I have always approached Black Europe from a transcolonial, transcultural, and transnational perspective. My first meaningful connection was with the Congolese novelist and playwright Sony Labou Tansi, whose play *La parenthèse de sang* I directed at the French Institute in London, in 1989, after attending multiple stagings of his plays at the *Festival international des francophonies* held annually in Limoges, France. Also, in 1989, I became a founding-member of the Association for the Study of African and Caribbean Literature in French (ASCALF, today Francophone Postcolonial Studies) and, in 2007, I published *Black France*, a book that juxtaposed Black African literature in French written during the colonial era with post-migration works. The title was considered an oxymoron by many French critics, and the French translation erased the racial marker, opting instead for *Noirs d'encre* (an interplay between "ink" and "blackness"). Later, with my colleagues in the ACHAC Research Group (<https://www.achac.com/> [accessed 4th October 2023]) we published *France noire* (2011) and, in 2014, when two edited volumes were published, *Francophone Afropean Literatures* (with Nicki Hitchcott) and *Afro-European Cartographies*, the Afro-European dimension was emphasised.

3. *Was there a particular moment of Aha, insight, or discovery in your engagement with Black Europe that stuck in your mind and that you would like to share?*

I am unable to precisely pinpoint whether the particular insights that come to mind originated on the occasions I will describe, but they certainly resonated with me at the time. The first dates back to a 2008 conference held in France on "Black France", at which the sociologist Éric Fassin argued (as he has done elsewhere) that the real racial "crisis"

might very well be one of “whiteness”. This certainly seemed apt given the multiple ways in which “Great Replacement” theories have been deployed in Europe and fuelled disquieting “civilisationist” and “nativist” discourses. And the second was to be found in Fatima El-Tayeb’s book *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (2011). Here, she argued that those very communities finding themselves the target of exclusionary discourses are in fact embracing “new conceptualizations of minority identity”, whereas those populations whose E.U. status and belonging remain unquestioned are exhibiting signs of national entrenchment.

4. Could you please tell us about one particular challenge or difficulty that you have encountered in your research on Black Europeans?

Globally, there have been calls for the improved representation of minority communities, greater diversity, historical reckoning, and the decolonisation of mindsets. As Achille Mbembe has repeatedly argued, “The perverse effect of this indifference to difference is thus a relative indifference to discrimination”. Writing about these questions has therefore often been challenging, if not to say somewhat polemical. In France, for example, researchers have been called “Islam-Leftists”, a debate that shares points of commonality with those denigrating critical race theory in the United States. Such attacks and criticisms have stifled conversations on racial advocacy and ultimately undermined efforts aimed at improving social justice.

5. “Black Europe” is a research subject that is approached from a wide number of disciplinary angles. What, in your opinion, is the special contribution that literary scholars – be it from individual philologies or comparative literature – can bring to this interdisciplinary field?

As I have repeatedly argued, we are living in an era characterised by an “empathy deficit”. This is most striking in immigration policy and in the ways in which asylum seekers, migrants, and refugees are described in order to satisfy nativist and protectionist agendas. This rhetoric encourages disidentification and a lack of empathy, and accordingly humanity and human rights have been sidelined in favour of a criminalising, debasing, and often dehumanising logic. Black European artists and

writers therefore have an important role to play in critical thinking, documenting, recording, and in deploying a creative apparatus that can confront shifting political realities, raise consciousness, and endeavour to foster modes of identification. Since 2010, I have edited the *Global African Voices* (<https://iupress.org/search-results-grid/?series=global-african-voices> [accessed 4th October 2023]) series at Indiana University Press, and our almost thirty titles include predominantly Black European authors: Alain Mabanckou, Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, Max Lobe, Wilfried N’Sondé, Kidi Bebey, In Koli Jean Bofane, Abdourahman Waberi, Gabriella Ghermandi, and Pap Khouma.

6. In contrast to more traditional (comparative) literary studies, the young interdisciplinary field of African European studies takes a decidedly decolonial approach that is oriented toward a mode of activist scholarship. How important is the connection between activism and academia in your research? At what levels?

I have always been fond of the way in which the French usage of the word “engagement” (most notably when one thinks of Sartrean “engagement”) signifies “political commitment”, and have found it helpful to think of contemporary forms of activism and racial advocacy as outgrowths of previous historical movements in France and elsewhere in Europe. These include intellectual movements such as *Négritude*, films about Africans in France such as Paulin Vieyra’s *Afrique-sur-Seine* (1955), associations (*Fédérations des étudiants d’Afrique noire en France*), radical movements (*L’Étudiant noir*, *Le comité de défense de la race nègre*), journals (*La Revue du Monde Noir*, *Légitime Défense*, *La Voix des Nègres*, *La Race Nègre*), and the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists (September 19–22, 1956). Various incarnations of a mode of activist scholarship have therefore characterised every aspect of the work that I do: advocating for a more “global” approach to European studies that gives emphasis to the impact of colonialism; curricular reform, the training of new generations of students, the hiring of scholars researching in these areas; publications, conferences, exhibitions, as well as interventions on these questions in public spaces. At the time of writing, my home department at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) is seeking a new colleague specialising in the field of Black Transcultural Europe.

7. *Which theories or concepts have you used most fruitfully in your own work on Black Europe? What experiences have you made when adopting concepts developed for white, African American, or African texts for African European literature?*

Ultimately, any thinking that challenges what constitutes Europe itself has been helpful in contextualising Black Europe. Europe and the European Union are often mistakenly confused with *mainland* Europe rather than including departments and territories located in such disparate regions as South America, the Caribbean, and the Indian Ocean. Most significantly, the minority population in these areas is often “white”, contrary to mainland Europe. Therefore, the “family” *tree* of democratic European countries warrants closer scrutiny. To this end, I especially like the fact that the filmmaker and scholar Mame-Fatou Niang is a Professor of French and *Black Geographies* at Carnegie Mellon University. Having said this, I am also very interested in the actual terminology that is deployed to describe “Black” or “non-White” individuals, communities, and groups in Europe: Black, Beur, noir, rebeu, second generation, immigrants, nègres, blacks, racisés, visible minorities, and so on. This inventory highlights fluidity, but also serves to underscore a persistent suspicion of ancestry and a lingering process of othering. In many ways, the field of Black European studies reflects the dynamic nature of these conversations, and one finds multiple terms aimed at circumscribing that which effectively constitutes Blackness in a European context: Afro-Europeans, Afropeans, African Europeans, Afropolitans, Black Europeans, and Africans in Europe.

8. *What was the last book – scholarly or non-scholarly, factual or fictional – related to Black Europe that has left a considerable impression on you? Why was that?*

As one might have anticipated, there is not *one* but rather *several* recent books that have left a considerable impression on me. But three in particular stand out. Firstly, Felwine Sarr’s *Afrotopia* (2016) challenged readers to rethink African history as the path towards recharting the coordinates of a sustainable cultural reinvention of the continent. Secondly, Olivette Otele’s *African Europeans: An Untold History* (2020) offered an in-depth account of how people of African descent shaped

Europe over a longer history and found themselves as African Europeans “at the crossroads of several intersecting identities”. Highlighting the collective migration experience over a much longer historical timeframe was important in destabilising the monolithic national history embraced by the far-right. And finally, Achille Mbembe’s *La communauté terrestre* (2023) challenges the paradigm according to which “the planet and all its inhabitants were regulated by Eurocentric certainties” and emphasises instead what we share “*in-common*”, especially given that the most important challenge we face is the ecological crisis, a crisis that does not distinguish between centres and peripheries, and in which remoteness and proximity no longer matter. Together, these works help strengthen Black European conversations about belonging and shared twenty-first-century challenges.

9. In your opinion, which developments within Black European studies – be it in terms of research subjects, but also with regards to processes of institutionalisation, communication or cooperation – are most urgently needed in the upcoming years? Could you please name two or three that you find most important?

Black European studies has made inroads in a broad range of fields while also actively participating in public debates. Today, the legacies of historic tensions are evident in debates on restitution, reparation, historical accountability and responsibility, memory wars, and identity politics. These have been most evident and striking in the public space, with the toppling, spray-painting, or beheading of statues that have glorified or honoured racist figures, signs and symbols of a painful history. These actions are not new; but their numbers have grown internationally, positions have become increasingly polarised and entrenched, juxtaposing forms of activism with those who bemoan the loss of a glorious past. Black European studies has an important role to play in improving the public understanding of the history of cultural and scholarly production, including the analysis of those mechanisms that shaped imperial ambitions. Many of these power dynamics remain in place, evident in asymmetrical relationships and anchored in mindsets that are the product of conditioning and myths. These postcolonial legacies need to be demystified, deconstructed, dismantled, and ultimately *decolonised*, precisely because they intersect with debates on police violence, environmental and social justice, and structural and systemic racism.

10. *Which writer or topic connected to Black Europe do you hope to consider in the future in your work?*

There are two interconnected areas linked to Black Europe that I am *concerned about* and *concerned with*, and these relate to “ecology” and “immigration”. Achille Mbembe has succinctly summarised the predicament: “The governance of human mobility might very well be the main problem we will have to confront in the 21st century” (2017). Indeed, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s pathbreaking work on how systems of domination and discrimination were conceptualised and implemented have shaped discussions in meaningful ways, and today new intersectionalities (global warming and environmental justice) have become incontrovertible in twenty-first-century society. Minority populations will be disproportionately impacted by these. Early in twentieth-century France, the Maurassian extreme right claimed that too much “exotic” immigration would unbalance France’s “biological” unity. More than fifty years since Enoch Powell’s infamous 1968 speech “Rivers of Blood”, in which he had articulated the dread over the “substitution” of the white population through racial mixing (that also found an echo in Germany in Thilo Sarrazin’s *Germany Abolishes Itself*, 2010), analogous debates continue to be heard in the context of “Brexit Britain”. Today, self-appointed and elected defenders of Western civilisation wave the flag as protectors of a nation being “invaded”, calling for greater vigilance, empty policies bolstered by a politics of emotion and fear.