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Oppressive Even As It Inspires

Approaching Black American Centrality in the Age of the Black European Renaissance

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Abstract

In this article, we trace the evolution of the connections between Black America and (Black) Europe since the mid-twentieth century and the study thereof. We do so through the lens of ‘Black American centrality,’ referring to the ways in which perceptions of Black America serve as an outsized reference point in European understandings of race, ‘Blackness,’ and Black (European) emancipation struggles. This allows for exploring the dilemmas that the, at times overwhelming, visibility of ‘Black America’ poses to Black Europeans, particularly during the current moment of flourishing Black European culture, politics, and scholarship. In that context, we show how both U.S.- and Europe-based scholars of Black American history and Black European history have approached Black American-European connections differently. The article concludes with suggestions for how these fields can engage with each other to develop academic approaches that account for but do not privilege the position of Black Americans within diasporic exchanges in the North Atlantic region, which is currently an under-explored area in diaspora studies.

Keywords: African American Studies; African Americanization; Black American Centrality; Black Europe; Black European Renaissance; Black Europe Studies; Diaspora; Transnational Solidarities

Introduction

The Movement for Black Lives presents a dilemma to Europe. Beginning in 2013 and culminating in the 2020 George Floyd sympathy protests across the continent, the U.S.-originated movement challenges Europeans to grapple with structural racism in their own societies. Its global resonance draws unprecedented numbers of primarily young Europeans into a renewed, dynamic grassroots movement for racial equality; allows them to express their solidarity for the plight of Black Americans; and, most fundamentally, provides an auxiliary framework to call attention to homegrown anti-Black racism (Balogun and Pędziwiatr, 2023; Kelly and Vassell, 2023a; King 2020; Younge 2020). As the latest major example of Black transnational anti-racism—part of a long history that goes back to slavery and abolitionism and climaxed during the 1960s—the worldwide scope of ‘Black Lives Matter’ (BLM) is a testament to the international impact of the Black freedom struggle and the effectiveness of diasporic politics.

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In the European context, however, the movement can be used to reconfirm the centrality of the Black American experience and in that way curtail public debates on racism. For instance, the U.S. origins of BLM allow for the wholesale dismissal of European anti-racism as an import of divisive American identity politics. The visibility of the American movement, and the outrage generated by the deaths of Michael Brown or George Floyd, can overshadow the problems of police brutality and racism—often defined by its American manifestations, such as Jim Crow apartheid—within Europe itself (Beaman and Fredette, 2022; European Network Against Racism 2020; Onishi 2021; Özdil 2014; Small 2019). Above all, it risks obscuring the agency and longevity of homegrown Black European resistance, specifically the ways in which Black Europeans assert their voice and presence as part of what Reni Eddo-Lodge (2017) terms a “renaissance of black critical thought and culture” in twenty-first century Europe, which emerged in conjunction with *and* separate from its American counterpart (p. 235).¹

Today’s Movement for Black Lives accordingly represents the latest phase in a longer history of Black American-European connectedness that serves as a double-edged sword for Black Europeans.² However, this continuing currency of Black America precisely at a moment when a revitalized, self-conscious Black European culture, politics, and scholarship is in full swing puts this relationship on edge in unprecedented ways. Among contemporary scholars and activists, the prevalence of what we call ‘Black American centrality’ in Europe—that is, the ways in which perceptions of Black America serve as an outsized reference point in European understandings of race, ‘Blackness,’ and Black (European) emancipation struggles—is increasingly put into question and regularly factors, explicitly or implicitly, into their course of action.

Yet despite the routinely cited exasperation with Black American centrality and models deriving from African American Studies, a comprehensive analysis of their impact within Black transnational exchanges across time and space remains underdeveloped.³ While the existence of such a centrality is undisputed and awareness of it meaningful and necessary, pinpointing its exact significance is harder. What exactly does ‘Black American centrality’ mean in theory and practice? In what contexts and through which dynamics and means of agency has it come about? What do activists and scholars do with this given in their analyses of various localities and eras and for what purposes, including when they decide not to (fully) engage with it at all?

While answers to such questions diverge across the many settings of the Black Diaspora, this article seeks to define and categorize the unique dynamics of Black American centrality in Europe. It focuses on the post-World War II era to the present and on the different ways in which that centrality relates to the origins, goals, and recent scholarship of African American Studies, Black Europe Studies, and the works of European-based Americanists, which are rarely studied in relation to each other. In doing so, our central argument, with regard to current scholarship, is that we must understand and acknowledge the very different roles that Black American centrality has played and continues to play in these academic fields in order to develop joint approaches to the analysis of diasporic connections between Black America and Europe that account for but do not privilege the Black American experience. As such, this article builds on recent calls by scholars from both sides of the Atlantic to expand the study of Black global activism and articulations of ‘Black internationalism’ by developing multiple analytics for different geographies and historical eras (Bedasse et al., 2020; Bressey 2018; Faymonville 2003; Perry 2012). After all, due to Europe’s singular historical experience with the global Black American presence, Black American centrality poses a number of challenges that are specific to the experiences of Black Europeans.

However, bearing in mind Jacqueline Nassy Brown’s (2009) warning not to turn Black Europe “into the newest entry in the encyclopedia of the global Black experience,” the

objective is not to further over-theorize the diaspora nor to elevate particular geographical contexts or Black lived experiences over others (p. 201). Rather, by following her admonition to prioritize the “situated encounters in which people actually express some form of desire for connection,” the emphasis lies on the ways in which ‘Black America’ operates—as an object of European desire *and* rejection—in historically specific encounters between America and Europe as expressed in and through the literature on this topic (p. 201). The first section starts with an analysis of the origins and meanings of ‘Black American centrality’ in Europe and the challenges it poses for Black Europeans. The second section explores how the fields of (African) American and Black Studies, particularly in Europe, have historically developed along different tracks, in order to contextualize section three, in which recent scholarly approaches to Black American centrality in Europe are compared in order to define trajectories for future research into Black Europe and the study of Black transnational exchanges between the United States and Europe.

Black American Centrality in Europe

African American ‘centrality,’ or ‘exceptionalism,’ means something else in Europe than it does in the United States, where the term refers to the tendency to center the African American experience in accounts of American race relations at the expense of other racial and ethnic minorities.⁴ The meanings it obtained in Europe are the result of complex historical developments and struggles over who can determine its meaning. In 1998, Nassy Brown already captured the essence of what Black American centrality means to Black Europeans when she posed the question: “[W]hen does the unrelenting presence of black America actually become oppressive, even as it inspires?” (p. 297). Yet rather than looking for hypothetical ‘breaking points’ or dual positionalities between frustration and inspiration, a more systematic analysis of the historical origins, power dynamics, and realities of the relationships between Black America and Europe can help illuminate what informs, and enables, a broad response spectrum that ranges from inspiration to agitation *all at once*.

Historically, these responses must be understood within the context of two interrelated post-World War II developments. First, they were shaped within the larger framework of U.S. hegemony in Europe. The concurrence of Cold War rivalry and anti-colonial revolutions against European imperialism pushed race to the fore of global politics and forced Washington to make concessions to domestic civil rights activists while pushing a narrative of racial progress in its global public diplomacy. Simultaneously, Europeans encountered Black American soldiers during the war and after, as the United States expanded its military bases, thereby spreading Black American culture and politics (Borstelmann 2001; Dudziak 2011; Höhn and Klimke, 2010; Smith 1987; Von Eschen 2004). Such developments arguably shaped massive European interest in the 1950s–1970s Civil Rights and Black Power Movements and conditioned European receptions of Black American activists such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, or Angela Davis, who visited Europe in search of their own global audiences (Gerund 2013; Höhn and Klimke, 2010; Tuck 2014; Ward 2017). Finally, as American cultural preeminence became a fact of life in postwar Europe, the visibility of Black American culture also took flight. Due to the singular ways in which it intersects with Black diasporic connections as well as longstanding European understandings of ‘race’ and ‘Blackness,’ however, that process of ‘African Americanization’ should be understood as “a distinctive factor in transatlantic cultural traffic which requires to be explored in its own right” (Gerund 2013, p. 12).⁵

Second, European interest in Black America dovetailed with the growth of Black communities in Europe, albeit mainly in urban areas of western nations, due to the arrival of immigrants from former colonies, refugees, and economic migrants from Africa and other areas of the ‘Global South.’ The number of Europeans who identify as Black reached

seven million in 2017 but remains low compared to the 770 million Europeans overall and the 46 million Americans who identify as Black. This created a double bind in which their numbers increased sufficiently to stir unease in certain segments of the European population, while being low enough to maintain a sense of invisibility. Crucially, such perceptions are spurred by their lack of cultural, political, and academic representation as well as literal absence in many European nations' official statistics. This, combined with the difficulties related among others to questions of (self-)identification, makes these numbers tentative at best (Blakely 2009, 2012; Small 2018, 2019). In France, for instance, many creoles and mixed-race peoples reject 'Blackness' as a self-identification marker, and in Italy and Portugal, African migrants such as Cape Verdeans and Ethiopians all relate differently to the term vis-à-vis each other (often on hierarchical grounds of 'old' migrants from former colonies and 'new' ones) and across time and generations. First generation Cape Verdeans in Portugal especially "distance themselves from other black Africans" while second-generation ones are "becoming more politicized" (Gieskes 2017, p. 4). Likewise, second-generation migrants of African descent in Sweden use 'Afro-Swedes' for self-empowerment and to avoid any negativity associated with terms like 'Black.' This also reflects these groups' East African origins "where ethnicity, nationality and religion rather than race" define identity as well as internalization of Swedish notions of color-blindness (Gieskes 2017, p. 4, 6; McEachrane 2014; Sawyer and Habel, 2014; Skinner 2022a, 2022b). Despite the long presence of Black populations, historically and in European imaginaries, Barnor Hesse (2009) finds, "'Europe' and 'European' remain so articulated with assumptions of whiteness, disavowals of its coloniality, and hallucinations of ethical universalism, that to posit even the idea of Black Europe seems heretical, if not perverse" (pp. 300-301).

What Black American centrality means in Europe is therefore not somehow inherent to the nature or intentions of a 'Black America' (although it is partly a consequence of African American actions⁶) or merely located in the makeup, agency, and desires of a 'Black Europe.' Historically, it is also partly a creation of predominantly White European citizens and scholars and part of the larger epistemological battle waged by, and within, the larger Black freedom movement over whose knowledge is valued. This complex dynamic shapes Black Europeans' position and response spectrum, which can be plotted along four separate but intersecting axes.

First, 'Black America' serves as one of many means by which Black Europeans challenge their invisibility, but it also reinforces it. For instance, many first- and second-generation Black Germans in the late twentieth century made Black America "a focal point of identification" (Campt 2002, p. 109). According to Tina Campt (2002), this flowed from a mix of authentic affinity, a lack of other 'diasporic resources' for creating shared narratives of belonging, and its usefulness as a paradigm through which they could relate their experiences to White Europeans. Yet it left "little, if any, discursive space for black German articulations of self...in ways that might not necessitate reference to black America" (Campt 2002, p. 109). Black America's outsized visibility also means that Black European communities are measured against Black American standards. Afro-German identity and history, she observes, are often portrayed patronizingly as being "at the beginning of a long journey toward 'real' or 'true' Black consciousness, a model assumed to be exemplified by the African-American community" (Campt 2005, p. 4). The European tendency to view America as the height of modernity was also transferred to African Americans, leading to their perception as more 'sophisticated' than their African or European counterparts among elements within Black and White European communities alike (Alexander 2018; Naumann 1998; Rice 2004). Pragmatism additionally influenced consumer choices. For example, in Switzerland, North African and Middle Eastern women at times gravitated towards Black American authors because they were the most easily available (Ohene-Nyako 2019b).

Yet, Rob Berkeley (2017) argues that Black America's hypervisibility is also a logical result of institutionalized racism in Europe: "People of African descent in Europe negotiated the failure of European broadcast media to reflect our existence by immersing ourselves in American media and pop culture" (p. 50). American popular culture reinforced Europeans' often flattened notions of Black America, and by extension, of Black Europe. "African American culture is often marketed as a consumable, homogeneous whole," Michelle Wright (2011) notes, as a "people bound together by a common worldview, cultural values, black pride and, of course, innate musical and athletic abilities" and as "self-assured and attractively stable" (p. 268). Moreover, the myth of European colorblindness—which is reinforced in juxtaposition to the widespread European attribution of race essentialism to America due to its 'one drop rule' history—exported 'Blackness' outside Europe's borders.⁷ Subsequently, as Priscilla Layne and Kira Thurman (2022) note for Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, claims of 'quality' get transferred to White cultural products, and of 'authenticity' to African American ones. Sometimes such "rigid authenticity boxes" of tying 'Blackness' to slavery and Black America forced local Black European artists to perform Black American cultural expressions, like jazz, to gain employment (p. 366). In a telling example of the Dutch Black Renaissance, the story-collection *Zwart!* (Sherif and Rouw, 2018) was explicitly compiled to showcase Black Dutch and Belgian authors' talent and counter Dutch publication houses' obsession with 'superior' African American literary products.

The recent activism of Black Italian youth, many of them children of immigrants but born and raised in Italy, shows that these dynamics can also become a source of strength. Their identification with Black America inspired activism against police brutality and for citizenship rights at home. Yet holding themselves and being held by outsiders to an imaginary yardstick of American 'Blackness'—one largely begotten from popular culture in the absence of knowledge about homegrown Black history—simultaneously invited dismissive responses from within and outside their community. But these debates over what Black America can and should mean for Black Italians allowed new senses of self to emerge. "[N]ascent black Italian cultural politics," Camilla Hawthorne (2017) argues, is indeed characterized by a *simultaneous* desire for connections with Black America and "an insistence on *difference*." The realization that "Blackness cannot be reduced to a single, universal condition" after Italy's BLM protests became "the second chapter of the 'coming to consciousness' narrative that began with seeing oneself as solely Italian" by "looking to the other side of the Atlantic for guidance, and eventually realizing that what used to serve as a mirror no longer offers a perfect reflection" (Hawthorne 2017, p. 164).⁸

Second, Black American visibility has enabled the relegation of racism and anti-racism to the United States, and the fact that Black Americans came to Europe to escape American racism often serves as the closing argument (Beaman and Fredette, 2022).⁹ This dangerous trope delegitimizes and harms local emancipation movements, serves as a powerful tool for defenders of the racial status quo, and prevents the development of homegrown European models and theories. Importing American race politics "signals that race and racialization is somehow fundamentally foreign," Akwugo Emejulu and Francesca Sobande (2019, p. 5) therefore forcefully charge, which among other things "robs European Black feminists of a key analytical tool to name and act on our oppression. If racial injustice is understood on American terms and as an American export, there is no incentive to dismantle the distinct European racialised social order" (p. 5). For instance, the "radical practice of 'talking back'" by European women of color is regularly framed, and then rejected, as copycatting the (perceived) racial essentialism of African American identity politics (Emejulu and Sobande, 2019, p. 8).¹⁰

Such disconnects with local racial realities have deep historical roots. Tiffany Florvil (2020) and others note how White Germans after World War II "were more concerned

with improving” American race relations than their own, as doing so “allowed them to be ignorant about their own homegrown racism,” even as the United States provided an avenue for local Black communities to raise the issue (p. 18; El-Tayeb 2022). As in other western European nations, particularly the American Civil Rights Movement—read superficially as “a movement with a ‘just cause’ and a ‘successful ending’” (Hirschfelder 2020, p. 38)—served that purpose. Approaching it through “a particular, white-dominated, *German gaze*,” Nicole Hirschfelder (2020) argues, facilitated “an imagination of solidarity that did not interfere with Germans’ day-to-day life [regarding homegrown racism]—a pattern that should also be critically applied to the current [German] protests against police brutality in the U.S.” (pp. 38, 56–57).¹¹ This fits a larger pattern of predominantly White Europeans misrepresenting Black American activists, like Martin Luther King and Black Power advocates, and copying rhetoric from the latter’s conservative opponents in the United States to quell anti-racism and immigrant rights movements at home, while Black Europeans turn to such figures to help make their case partly *because* their countrymen lack knowledge of local Black history and anti-racism figureheads (Tuck 2015; Visser-Maessen 2019; Ward 2017).

Third, Black American centrality complicates Black diasporic solidarities. Despite Black European readiness to set up local BLM chapters and utilizing its discourse, the large-scale sympathy of European progressives for Black American social justice movements—in contrast to support for their Black European equivalents—simultaneously pushes some to embrace pan-African European identities instead (Berkeley 2017). The editors of *Black France/France Noire* likewise note how two centuries’ worth of Black American “positive reception in France—real, perceived, and utilitarian—has amplified intergroup tensions and unmasked presumptions of solidarity already questioned within Black populations” (Keaton et al., 2012b, p. 3). Black America’s hypervisibility also fuels tension over the existence of hierarchies in the reciprocity of solidarity. “While black Germans... were often aware of larger struggles in Africa and even more so those in the United States,” Fatima El-Tayeb observes, “black populations elsewhere rarely questioned Germany’s (self)representation as a white nation” (2011, p. 66).

The common and deliberate usage of ‘Blackness’ as a social and/or political identity or “an all-inclusive term for all who experience racism” by a broad spectrum of European citizens—as well as negative reactions to this usage—also factors into Black Europeans’ simultaneously open and ambivalent responses towards African America (Obasi 2019, p. 233). The adoption of ‘Black’ as a strategic choice by South Asian immigrants to the United Kingdom or Dutch citizens of Moroccan and Indonesian descent; the addition of the prefix ‘Afro’; the deliberate rejection of such practices; or attempts at new identification markers such as ‘Afropean’ and ‘lusu-Africanos’ showcase the instability of meanings of ‘Blackness’ among various national, racial, and ethnic groups within Europe across time and space (Angelo 2018; Bedasse et al., 2020; Gieskes 2017; Guadeloupe 2022; Pitts 2020). During the 1980s, for instance, a hallmark of Black European feminism was its rejection of race essentialism, which partly explains these women’s openness to African Americans who shared such views, like Audre Lorde. Many among the generation of post-colonial immigrants considered essentialist categories they associated with African American politics too ‘radical’ as well as reminiscent of European colonial oppression. Attraction to ‘Pan-African solidarity’ also flowed logically from the fact that many immigrants hailed directly from Africa (El-Tayeb 2003; Grégoire and Ntambwe, 2019; Ohene-Nyako 2019a). Elements within younger generations, born in Europe and politicized by the Black European Renaissance, however, may relate differently to essentialist notions, including as a (strategic) means to distinguish between forms of racism and anti-Black racism that have become diluted due to the widespread usage of political Blackness on the continent.

Fourth, the singular ways in which Black America was and is received, appropriated, or rejected by the larger, predominantly White, European populace complicates what Black America could mean for Black Europeans. Such receptions and their consequences vary across time and space, but several recent studies suggest that images of Black America played important roles in the construction of White European identities, including White nationalism.¹² While the outsized presence of Black America also challenged Europeans' racial assumptions, Americanization simultaneously created distinctions between 'Black' and 'Black *American*,' which enabled Europeans to embrace the latter, but to continue to reject the former.¹³ Admiration for the Civil Rights Movement and criticism of U.S. race relations allowed Europeans to (re)construct a positive self-identity in the aftermaths of fascism and empire and to challenge U.S. hegemony by defining itself as a moral counterpoint to American racism. White Europeans' embrace of *specific*, often perceived as moderate, Black Americans—like Jesse Owens, Martin Luther King, and Barack Obama—served as tools to enable the treatment of Europe's darker pages—from slavery to the Holocaust and post-9/11 Islamophobia—as incidental. Europeans also romanticized and appropriated Black American culture and politics in their own fights against Communism, capitalism, or for personal freedoms.¹⁴

Crucially, this imagined distinction between a racist United States and colorblind Europe obscures both the history of White Europeans' responsibility for the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism and the current reality of racial politics that fundamentally shape the societies of liberal democracies on both sides of the Atlantic. As Charles W. Mills (2017) and Michael G. Hanchard (2018) have shown, implicit but deliberate assumptions of White supremacy exist at the core of the social and political organization of Europe and the United States. We therefore suggest that, in Europe, racial politics and Black American centrality enable a unique, mutually reinforcing relationship: receptions of Black America facilitate the erasure of European racism and Black European invisibility.

Despite these sizeable consequences of Black American centrality for Black Europeans, Paul Gilroy's plea to more thoroughly examine "how US hegemony complicates power relations between black people" in all areas of life has yet to be realized (Gieskes 2017, p. 2). Instead, the study of the singular vortex created by Americanization and mass migration in postwar Europe has largely remained in separate lanes, with Americanists mostly focusing on (African) Americanization and Black Europe scholars on diaspora. This is partly the result of how African American Studies in the United States and in Europe and Black Europe scholarship developed during this time, and the role that (African) Americanization implicitly or explicitly played in these trajectories.

Disciplinary Differences: African American and Black Europe Studies

Black diaspora scholarship and African American Studies in the United States relate differently to each other than the same fields in various European nations due to the socio-historical contexts in which those fields developed. Transnationalism has always been a cornerstone of Black American approaches to African American history (Kelley 1999). Subfields such as African American Studies, Black Studies, and Africana Studies are therefore, by and large, interwoven in the United States, whereas in Europe, alliances or mergers between Black Europe scholarship and African American Studies are as yet more rare due to their divergent origins and objectives. Accordingly, and as the scholars in question have often noted, it matters *where* the history of the Black diaspora is written, as well as *by whom*. This is true in terms of the stake that various authors might have in the topic, as well as in scholarly traditions, methodologies, and subject choices (Bedasse et al., 2020; Del Pero et al., 2014).

Yet the distinct origins and disciplinary developments of European-based African American and Black Europe Studies after World War II are both tied to the lack of (non-racist) knowledge production on race within European academia, albeit in different ways. European educational institutions often had ties to slavery and/or colonialism, which fundamentally influenced the resources for and content of teaching and research. Subsequently, Stephen Small (2018) finds, “when it comes to the study of racism and the experiences of Black people most European universities are limited in scope, narrow in methodologies and restricted in access” (p. 165). The general absence of a scholar-activism tradition in Europe; the focus on nation state-centered approaches and Eurocentric knowledge paradigms; and the low number of students and academics of color at universities reinforced this (Essed 2013; Gieskes 2017; Small 2018).¹⁵ The overall marginal attention to colonial history then created a triple erasure for those with roots in this history: not only were their stories overlooked, but the belief in European colorblindness also rendered their experiences void as it fed “the notion that black people in Europe should be grateful to live in Europe, where racism is not as pervasive as in the United States,” and then they were transplanted by studies on “Muslims, refugees, and migrants” (Gieskes 2017, p. 3).¹⁶ Because of the European practice of discussing ‘race’ through the prisms of culture, class, and ethnicity or replacing it with terms like ‘minority,’ ‘race’ as a concept and recognition of it as an “organizing principle” of European societies was largely absent from twentieth century European historiography (Gieskes 2017, p. 9; Hondius 2017; Salem and Thompson, 2016).

However, the reluctance of European academia to support critical race studies notably excluded African American Studies. This is partly due to the U.S. government’s active promotion of American Studies departments as part of its campaign to counter Soviet propaganda about American racism (Boesenberg 2011). But it was also attractive to European scholars because it allowed them to explore, by proxy, issues of exclusion and racism at home as there were few other options for doing so in European academia. German attention to African American history could indeed be read, Sabine Sielke (2006) suggests, as a “mediated interrogation of Germany’s own history of racial discrimination and genocide” (par. 15). Stephen Tuck and Clive Webb (2020) likewise observe widespread British academic interest in the Jim Crow South and the Civil rights and Black Power Movements precisely when debates about immigration were heating up at home. American academia’s exemplary pluralist and intersectional approach to social movement history also resonated with an increasingly multicultural Europe (De Pero et al., 2014).

It was, however, exceedingly rare during the twentieth century for European-based African Americanists to *explicitly* address the relevance of their field for Europe. This was partly due to its orientation towards the United States, as the preeminence of American academia created pressures to publish in English for U.S. journals and disincentivized discussions from a European angle (Del Pero et al., 2014).¹⁷ Cultural-linguistic factors partly explain why European scholars have also been reluctant to apply concepts from U.S.-based Black Studies to European contexts. For various reasons, terms such as ‘race’ and ‘racism’ (and their equivalents in European languages) were purged from postwar public discourse in many European countries in favor of ‘colorblind’ terminology (Berg et al., 2014; Hondius 2017; Morrison-Reed 2022). Subsequently, Berg and colleagues (2014) argue, “[r]acial problems, it seemed, occurred only in other societies, most notably in the United States,” and usage of the term ‘race,’ defined as an essentialist or biological category, confirmed it (p. 802). Therefore, “European historians will be more comfortable using ‘race’ to talk about racial tensions in the United States than as a way of describing social groups [or] their own countries” (2014, p. 807). This fundamentally influences descriptions and interpretations of Black European activism to this day (Bleich et al., 2023).¹⁸

Approaches to American ‘race’ terminology then exemplify and reinforce ambivalence towards Black American centrality in Europe. European Americanists, trained in English and imbued in American terminology, do work with these concepts that harbor an entire, politically charged “worldview that travels with it” that can miss the mark when applied to European contexts and separate them from race scholars who study Europe in other disciplines. U.S.-based scholars interested in Europe, whose numbers have grown in recent years, in turn “also act, unwittingly, as transmitters of American meanings of key concepts such as race” (Berg et al., 2014, pp. 801, 807). Yet scholars who *are* versed in European languages face difficulties in getting published when they do not write in English, and language barriers limit European and American scholars alike when researching the experiences of specific groups within larger transnational frameworks (Bedasse et al., 2020).

Despite its synergy with similar research fields in Europe and the United States, the emergence of Black Europe Studies must be viewed as a separate development, which, as Kwame Nimako argues, “should be understood as an emancipatory project for black communities that were historically situated as migrant groups but now must be analyzed through their European citizenships” (Gieskes 2017, p. 3). Contemporary scholars of Black Europe, predominantly those who identify as Black and who constitute its main driving force, generally trace its conceptual and scholarly roots to pioneering works such as The Centre for Cultural Studies’ *The Empire Strikes Back* (1982), Katharina Oguntoye and colleagues’ *Farbe Bekennen* (1986), Paul Gilroy’s *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), and Philomena Essed’s *Understanding Everyday Racism* (1991); the homegrown anti-racism movements and cross-European networks of Black feminists and Black queer collectives of the 1980s–1990s; and the (often short-lived) research institutions devoted to race and ethnicity in Europe during that era (El-Tayeb 2011; Nimako *forthcoming*; Perry and Thurman, 2016). They understand it, Kennetta Hammond Perry and Kira Thurman (2016) state, as an independent “unit of analysis and as an epistemological approach” (par. 4), even as they acknowledge their indebtedness to methods and paradigms from Africana, African American, and Black Diaspora Studies and to U.S. scholars and publishers for groundbreaking work on Black Europe, such as Darlene Clark Hine and colleagues (2009), Tricia Danielle Keaton and colleagues (2012a), and many works on Black Germany (Layne and Thurman, 2022).

Such scholars accordingly seek to foreground Black Europeans’ history, needs, and priorities. These include questions regarding meanings of citizenship; commonalities and differences on a European-wide basis; the formation of Black European identities; their relationality to other social groups; uncovering homegrown Black movements for social change; and European practices of racism and processes of racialization (e.g., Balogun 2024; Beaman 2017; Hawthorne 2022; McEachrane 2014; Pinto et al., 2022; The Black Mediterranean Collective 2021). Particularly works on the centuries-old Black human, cultural, and intellectual presence in, and contributions to, Europe from antiquity and early Middle Ages onwards have proliferated in recent years. These showcase Black Europeans’ lives and experiences as, among others, scholars, literary figures, philosophers, soldiers, knights, artists, flamenco dancers, craftsmen, activists, and in positions of power, including within dynasties such as the British Tudors, and discount popular notions that their numbers in Europe were marginal and limited to roles such as slaves, servants, or human zoo exhibits (e.g., Earle and Lowe, 2005; Fletcher 2016; Germain and Larcher, 2018; Kaufmann 2017; Matera 2015; Nubia 2019; Olusoga 2016; Otele 2020; Ramey 2014; Valeri 2010, 2016). Because this total body of work thus “complicates, unsettles, and disrupts racialized imaginaries of Blackness and Europeanness,” Perry and Thurman argue, they fulfill an existentialist drive to resist “White global hegemonies” of history-telling, ascertain personal survival, and create an opportunity for intervening in the future trajectory of

European history (2016, par. 6, 10; Araújo and Rodríguez Maeso, 2016; El-Tayeb 2022; Kelly and Vassell, 2023a, 2023b; Samples 2019; Unterweger 2016).

Yet in contrast to African American Studies, Black Europe scholars and activists have been marginalized in European academia. In some countries what exists of knowledge on local Black experiences was largely written by scholars who came from elsewhere, like in Germany, Portugal, and France, and who often returned—or were forced to return—to their countries of origin afterwards. Europe's sole Black Studies program (at Birmingham City University, U.K.) was not founded until 2017. Various European academic networks devoted to Black Studies, such as the AfroEuropeans Research Network (2004) and the Black Germany and Diaspora (2007) and Black Central European Studies (2014) networks, only recently emerged.¹⁹ Black Studies in most countries, like Spain, Italy, Portugal, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Sweden, are still in their infancy. A key characteristic of Black European knowledge production then is its forced existence *outside* academia. Nonetheless, knowledge has broadened through an upsurge in seminars, conferences, summer schools, lecture series, curricula, publications, and independent outlets such as Pluto Press and Amrit Publishers (Andrews 2020; BDG Network 2018; Gieskes 2017; Hine 2009; Nimako 2012; Small 2018).²⁰

While the invisibility of Black knowledge within Europe is key to understanding Black Europe Studies, scholars like Wright, Florvil, and others also cite frustration with power imbalances regarding the Black experience in discussions of the 'Black Atlantic' (BDG Network 2018; El-Tayeb 2003; Fleming 2023; Florvil 2020; Wright 2015). The sheer number of scholars who reference Black American centrality is telling of the singular role it plays in European scholarship. Yet ironically it was also *made* a central question, both intentionally *and* inadvertently, by and through the involvement of American-based academics in Black Europe scholarly venues, such as the 2005 BEST conference in Mainz, Germany, and the 2006 symposium at Northwestern University (U.S.), out of which the publication *Black Europe and the African Diaspora* emerged. "The Black diaspora in Europe," Small (2009) writes in its introduction, "is in large part, and always has been, dominated by the discussion of the Black diaspora in the United States," leaving him to question whether constructs like 'Black Europe' may even be considered American inventions to begin with (p. xxv).²¹

Black Europe scholars aim to problematize Anglo-American diasporic frameworks by revealing how "Europe's relationship to the Black Atlantic was multi-directional, multi-purposeful, and often contradictory" and by changing the parameters of diasporic meaning (Perry and Thurman, 2016, par. 6). Particularly in nations that did not have colonies but often benefitted from their neighbors' colonialism, like Luxembourg, Poland, and Switzerland, Black experiences cannot be as readily explained through what Wright calls the 'Middle Passage epistemology' upon which Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* framework is based (Balogun 2024; Gieskes 2017; Gilroy 1993; Morrison-Reed 2022; Omolo and Kelly, 2023; Pinto et al., 2022; Sawyer and Habel, 2014; Small 2018; Tavares and Vieira, 2023; Tisdell 2023; Wright 2015). In part to counter (White) European popular and scholarly obsessions with Black America and the overemphasis on the Black British experience and its connections to the Americas in defining 'Black Europe,' scholarship has begun to highlight the experiences of the majority of Black Europeans for whom memories of transatlantic slavery are not central to their identities; non-English speaking Black communities; and subgroups within them, like women, non-Christians, the LGBTQ+ community, and those living in rural areas. A key difference between Black Studies scholarship in the United States and in Europe then, Nimako (*forthcoming*) argues, is the use of Africa as a central reference point, since, unlike in the United States, many contemporary Black Europeans came directly from Africa and because "the creation of Black Europe was based to a great extent on its development as a presumed antithesis to Black Africa" (p. 2). Subsequently, a "distinctive

Africana intellectual tradition” is part of its methodological center, one “that revolves around, and integrate[s], issues of ‘race’, slavery, colonialism, humiliation, dignity and memory into the description, analysis and explanation in the position and status” of Black Europeans (p. 10).²²

The pronounced tension over Black American centrality in Black Europe scholarship can thus be explained through a convergence of all these factors, but it also helped accelerate the homegrown push for visibility and spurred calls to develop “appropriate, location-specific concepts” and methodologies (Small 2009, pp. xxix-xxx). It has even become a stepping stone for Black European scholars to foreground their own stories. In *Black Europe and the African Diaspora*, Small proudly notes how its contributors “have resisted the strong pull to analyze the Black diaspora in Europe primarily through the lens of the African diaspora in the United States” (2009, p. xxxi). In *To Exist Is To Resist*, Akwugo Emejulu and Francesca Sobande (2019) likewise use Black American centrality to position their work as a means to “talk back against both American domination and European silence about Black feminism and create a space for a different kind of dialogue—one that is led by and for Black women in Europe” (pp. 5-6). Yet doing so can also risk flattening, mis-, or selectively representing the Black American experience and African American scholarship. An analysis of how scholars approach the Black America-Europe connection in recent work then reveals what could be won when scholarship moves towards a more ‘synchronic approach’ in which (U.S. and European-based) African American Studies integrates findings from Black Europe Studies and vice versa, even when they remain largely and justifiably committed to diachronic perspectives.²³

Black American Centrality in Europe in Twenty-First Century Historiography

Around the turn of the century, the publication of Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and the ‘transnational turn’ in American Studies strengthened scholarly networks between U.S. and European-based African Americanists and Diaspora scholars, albeit often in nations with a noteworthy (African) American presence during the twentieth century. Several American-based scholars played key roles in this development, often due to a combination of scholarly and personal interests, including Tina Camp, Tricia Danielle Keaton, Michelle M. Wright, and Tyler Stovall. From a European perspective, Larry Greene and Anke Ortlepp (2011b) celebrated “the growing European interest in African American and African diasporic studies” and hailed the promising potential for analyzing “their interconnectedness and their relationship to Europe” rather than continuing to see “these diasporic cultures as separate research entities” (p. viii).²⁴ Since then, however, their prediction has only partially materialized, as European-based (African) Americanists and Black Europe scholars, in response to twenty-first century social and academic circumstances, each pivoted into a different direction.

Twenty-first century European-based Americanists largely moved away from their earlier position as “historians of America who ‘happened to live elsewhere,’” and shifted their focus to the ways in which Black America shaped Europe (Del Pero et al., 2014, p. 787; Tuck and Boehmer, 2016).²⁵ Martin Klimke, Maria Höhn, and others uncovered how Black American G.I.s stationed in Europe significantly contributed to both the American Civil Rights Movement and European racial discourses, especially through the ‘mixed race’ children they fathered who undermined common notions about race and nationality (Bland 2019; Fehrenbach 2005; Höhn 2002; Höhn and Klimke, 2010; Kirkels and Dickon, 2020; Smith 1987). Several anthologies, such as *Crosscurrents* (McBride et al., 1998), *Blackening Europe* (Raphael-Hernandez 2004a), *From Black to Schwarz* (Diedrich and Heinrichs, 2011), and *Germans and African-Americans* (Greene and Ortlepp, 2011a), and a number of monographs and articles on the twentieth century experiences of, and Europeans’

interactions with, individual African American writers, cinematographers, artists, athletes, and musicians in specific countries emphasized hybridity, agency in the process of cultural transfer, and mutually beneficial exchange.²⁶

Multiple studies from the 2000s and 2010s also investigated how Europe was one of the sites where the 1960s Civil Rights Movement's battles took place or sought to define the impact of American Black activism on European understandings of 'Blackness,' protest, and racial justice. Focusing mostly on the 'classical' Civil Rights and Black Power eras and especially their leaders, such studies showed an asymmetric (mostly west to east) yet reciprocal exchange between the American Black freedom movement, Black European communities, and European society at large.²⁷ A good example is the literature on Malcolm X's travels to Britain, which shows how the latter employed his reception in Europe to build his stature as an international leader; inspired the politics of Black and Asian communities in Britain; reconsidered his own mental map of the Black diaspora; and became a lightning rod of White British fears (Abernethy 2010; Ambar 2014; Street 2008; Tuck 2013, 2014).

Such studies played a pioneering role in constructing methodologies, unearthing ignored histories, and locating or re-evaluating archives, which indeed allow for an approach to Black American-European connections that de-centers the United States and opens spaces for the Black European experience. Yet in their choice of players, settings, diasporic connections, and periodization, many scholars followed the examples set in the American 'Long Movement' approach rather than Black Europe Studies (Tuck and Webb, 2020). After 'Long Movement' historiography was criticized for 'flattening' historical and geographical differences within the Black freedom struggle, (African) Americanists in the United States and Europe moved toward a focus on overlapping and competing geographies of Black international activism. Such scholarship—including Black Power Studies and those foregrounding 'Black Internationalism'—is partly defined by its conscious and explicit rejection of a U.S.-centered approach or an all-encompassing framework to study Black global activism.²⁸

From what could be said to be an intermediate position between United States and continental European academia, recent British scholarship already shows how insights from African American and Black Europe studies could reinforce each other in this regard.²⁹ As part of a process that Anne-Marie Angelo (2018) calls "grassroots internationalism," for example, the British Black Panther Party connected local fights to Black internationalism by forging fluid discourses on race that built on local knowledge as well as other activist traditions from the 'Global South' to suit specific local needs and offer Black Britons an auxiliary framework that provided a language to discuss British racism, multi-ethnic organizing, and anti-imperialism (p. 68).³⁰

However, the current literature on Black American-European ties continues to present challenges to the construction of a more unified, transnational, or comparative approach. Most studies follow the sojourns of African Americans in European metropolises, which exclude discussions of the history and the, sometimes vastly different, experiences of people of color elsewhere within a nation and the continent at large, or center European nations with solid historical connections to the United States and traditions of publishing in English alongside their native languages. In fact, much of the knowledge regarding the Black America-Europe connection is derived mainly from three nations—the United Kingdom, Germany, and France—while Southern, Eastern, and Scandinavian Europe remain largely untouched. Moreover, in these studies the limitations of Black America for understanding race, racism, and the Black diaspora in Europe are often noted but rarely fully or systemically investigated. The overemphasis on examples of African America as "the ultimate identification reference" or on the selective case studies of contacts between African Americans and Black Europeans also flatten images of Black Europe and Black European agency, tell only a selective portion, or misread them altogether (Bazenguissa-

Ganga 2012, p. 145).³¹ While studies which depart from the American Black freedom struggle and trace its global and European contours remain necessary, they thus risk affirming Black American centrality in the diasporic experience.

Tina Campt (2002) pioneered the call for a more critical investigation of the impact of that unique vortex created by Americanization and post-decolonial migration on Black Europeans. But Black Europe scholars' interest in connections to Black America waned in the twenty-first century as a logical consequence, *not cause*, of the way Black Europe Studies developed. Following Black communities on their own terms simply revealed that many African American paradigms did not fit Black European experiences and self-reflections, and reinforced self-awareness of Black invisibility caused partly by (White) European public and scholarly obsessions with Black America.³²

The Black European Renaissance also forged a different relationship to, and need for, African America. Largely energized by younger people—many of whom are naturally-born citizens who have different ties to, and expectations from, their country than their (grand)parents—this decidedly homegrown movement focuses on challenging systemic racism and Black invisibility in European political, cultural, and educational institutions. This spurred interest in Black Europe scholarship and vice versa, with Black female scholars playing vital roles in its development. For some, engaging in it is considered activism (Gieskes 2017; Layne and Thurman, 2022; Kelly and Vassell, 2023b; Small 2018, 2019; Visser-Maessen 2020). The adoption of 'Black Europe' then became a reflection of the permanent presence of Europe's growing Black population and an opportunity, Perry and Thurman (2016) state, "for thinking comparatively and transnationally about race politics and racial formation" (par. 6). Moreover, contemporary scholars and activists are acutely aware of the tightrope that Black American references present for Black Europeans. Especially after the George Floyd protests, reactionary *and* progressive forces in countries like France, Germany, and the Netherlands stepped up criticism of what they view as 'divisive' American identity politics, allowing them to frame the push for diversity in academia as part of the Black European Renaissance as 'cancel culture' (Byrd 2022; Onishi 2021).

'Black Internationalism' as practiced in U.S. academia today also presents pitfalls for some Black Europe scholars.³³ The latter's move away from 'Middle Passage epistemology' does create space for further disciplinary cross-fertilization, as several American-based scholars likewise desire to move beyond approaches that center struggles against slavery and colonialism. Yet an overly broad application may become another source of tension, especially since the Black European Renaissance and BLM protests have rekindled debates between Black and non-Black Europeans of color regarding the use of political Blackness. This may affect how Black Europe scholars respond either openheartedly or apprehensively to Black Internationalism as, in Kim D. Butler's words, "the *deliberate* extension of Black experience to work for, and collaborate with, all oppressed people" (Bedasse et al., 2020, pp. 1730, 1731).

More significantly, the divergent origins and objectives of Black Europe scholarship legitimize skipping over 'African America' altogether. In contrast to U.S. and European-based (African) American Studies approaches, foregrounding Black Europeans on *their* terms means de-centering 'Middle Passage epistemology'; focusing on the Africana intellectual tradition and the diversity of 'diasporic resources' for Black Europeans; uncovering a complex understanding of 'Blackness' and identity formations; and broadening the knowledge of the Black European presence beyond the players, localities, and periodization emphasized in African American Studies.

Subsequently, Black Europe scholarship offers a more contextualized understanding of the impact of Black America. The move away from 'professional' Black (male) activists and individual political leaders to ordinary citizens and their everyday practices of resistance—

whom Florvil (2020) calls ‘quotidian intellectuals’ and what in African American Studies became popularized simply as ‘the local people approach’—helped expand notions of diaspora and activism. A growing body of work is filling in the blanks on the politicization of (and cultural influences on) Black European women next to and *before* learning from, and about, Black American powerhouses like Audre Lorde, and informing their engagement with today’s Movement for Black Lives from their perspective (Beaman 2022; Beaman and Fredette, 2022; Florvil 2017, 2020; McCormack and Legal-Miller, 2019). The focus on the ‘quotidian’ additionally reveals the importance of non-traditional archival sources, like blogs and other digital spaces, book clubs, and festivals, for understanding the transnational flow of activist ideas and identities; the central role of women for sustaining Europe’s Black communities and protests; and ‘covert’ practices like motherhood, self-care, and the private home as meeting space as legitimate and effective forms of activism (Beckles-Raymond 2019; Boom 2019; Ellerbe-Dueck and Wekker, 2015; El-Tayeb 2011; Guadeloupe 2022; Hawthorne 2017; Heuchan 2019; Mirza 2015; Ohene-Nyako 2019a, 2019b; Othieno et al., 2019; Van de Velde 2019). Creative use of existing archival sources also unearths new insights on Black Europe and invisible subgroups, like queer women’s activism (Frank 2019).

Such new studies thereby expand and deepen knowledge regarding local and global Black activism, knowledge production, and organizing practices, but they can also function as new means for exploring Black (women’s) internationalism; the Black American–Europe connection; patterns, differences, and similarities in organizing strategies in Black activism over time; and theories and pragmatics of (African) Americanization in particular. For example, Florvil’s work (2020) on ‘quotidian intellectuals’ and Pamela Ohene-Nyako’s work on the 1980s World Council of Churches programs in Europe detail how transnational Black women’s activism also *became* distinctly ‘European,’ even as one of its singular hallmarks was the expansion of “the scope of identifications and solidarity” to a transatlantic and global scale (2019a, pp. 220, 224). Applying the ‘local people’ approach to Black European activism and its transnational contours may prove a productive avenue for scholarship to understand and broaden its scope beyond its most well-known figures and organizational structures (Frazier-Rath 2022).

However, from the perspective of the dilemmas created by Black American centrality, ‘Americanization’ is rarely addressed as such in Black Europe scholarship. The U.S. angle is often mentioned fleetingly, overlooked (including its impact on White Europeans’ notions of ‘Blackness,’ (anti-)racism, White nationalism, and national identity), or limited to the realm of popular culture. Alternatively, it is often transplanted with broader theoretical categories and critiques featured in Black Studies, such as ‘Westernization,’ ‘globalization,’ ‘transnational solidarity,’ ‘diaspora,’ and ‘racial capitalism’ to service the goal of illuminating local Black identity formations and practices of ‘Blackness.’ Indeed, a crucial problem is how the imposing presence of ‘Black America’ can be studied without (re-)centering ‘America.’

In that context, a nuanced understanding of ‘African Americanization,’ a term coined by Tyler Stovall (2009), might connect scholars working in African American and Black Europe Studies. Katharina Gerund (2013) argues that due to the specific gendered and racialized lenses through which (primarily White) Germans received Black American culture, African American cultural exchange cannot simply be subsumed under a more generic ‘Americanization.’ However, the impact of African American culture is difficult to separate from fits and flows of American cultural hegemony, as it was often understood in Germany in relation to White American culture. Moreover, some of the mechanisms behind Black America’s cultural transfer to Black Europeans—like agency in reception, appropriation, and adaptation; ambivalence towards the United States in general; viewing American culture in terms of attraction and rejection and in relation to discourses on

modernity; and the networks and infrastructures through which cultural transfer occur—are similar to those related to Americanization in Europe more broadly.

Departing from the perspective of Black Europeans, El-Tayeb and others have also shown that African American consumer culture often fulfills a ‘performative’ function; serves as a ‘safe’ space in White majority places; or is adapted by a variety of social groups to fit local circumstances and objectives, including in the service of political Blackness (Diallo 2019; El-Tayeb 2003; Van Gaalen 2020). As El-Tayeb (2011) notes for Germany, the African American presence was “transformed and adapted to the particular circumstances of the rather different (yet, perhaps, close enough) German situation, also...shaped by African migration and decolonization” (p. 65). Likewise, while Dutch Black urban popular artists outwardly support ‘strategic essentialism’ with “white and black as descriptive categories in line with North American usages, to combat anti-black racism,” their ‘underground work’ displays more intermedial approaches that fit the polyethnic realities of multicultural Holland (Guadeloupe 2022, p. 83). African American culture in Europe, then, “neither exists primarily outside structures of Americanization nor can it be fully assessed through an exclusive focus on [its] position in the black diaspora” (Gerund 2013, p. 12).

The outsized attention for the African American presence in Europe in part also sparked new studies that help generate pride, empowerment, and new epistemologies by enhancing the visibility, agency, and longevity of Black European communities, their politicization, and cultural products. Research on African American artists in Europe like Josephine Baker is now gradually being matched by ‘New Negritude Studies’ (Hondius 2017) that center the networks, texts, oral histories, and artistic performances by Black Europeans (e.g., Thurman 2021). These can become fruitful sources for better understanding the nuances of Black local and transnational practices and collaborations and of Black American centrality in the identity formation of racialized Europeans. As ‘Black’ diasporic peoples facing discrimination and exclusion, Roma and Sinti in Eastern Europe, for instance, drifted towards Black American literature, musical forms, and activist organizations, specifically those related to Black Power, but these forms of “diasporic intersubjectivity” and their pragmatics have hitherto been understudied both in works on (African) Americanization and in Black (Europe) Studies (El-Tayeb 2011, p. 59, footnote 17). Other new, exciting scholarly work puts African American sources in dialogue with local Black accounts. Mark Morrison-Reed’s (2022) article is an intriguing example of what could be done in future scholarly work for understanding the multi-directionality of the Black American-Europe connection, as he discusses various twentieth century literary accounts of African American visitors to Switzerland in relation to a 2021 book by a local Black woman who was prompted to write her story after the George Floyd protests.

The struggle over defining the meaning of ‘Black’ in Black activism and scholarship is in itself an inherent part of the Black European experience emerging from the social realities of low demographic presences; the myth of European colorblindness; the heterogeneity of Black European communities and their diasporic and migration trajectories; and their struggles to be accepted as citizens. Unlike in the work of most (African) Americanists, extensive theorizing on the meanings of ‘Blackness’ in specific national histories and activist circles feature heavily in Black Europe scholarship and constitute part of the attempt to create homegrown models and terminology.³⁴ African America and meanings of ‘Blackness’ emerging from this context are then rather used comparatively (if at all).

Further development of studies on the Mediterranean, for instance, could accordingly emerge as a site where European-based, African-based, and American-based scholars can deepen understandings of Pan-Africanism, the Black diaspora, and Black Europe in a way that re-centers the prominence of Africa as well as facilitates a more balanced incorporation of connections with the Americas beyond the United States. Indeed, Thurman points to

the necessity of engaging explicitly with how “Black Europeans have turned to the Global South to generate art and find community in European spaces” in the past and present (Bedasse et al., pp. 1724–1725). However, when studying the experiences and responses to the racial status quo in Europe of Black migrants from Africa or those from former colonies in the Americas to Europe, it is vital, as Bill Schwarz (2003) noted for the latter, to incorporate the memories, “intellectual baggage,” and lived experiences of ‘Blackness’ they brought with them *next to* the ways in which these merged with knowledge from Black freedom struggles in, particularly, the United States and South Africa (Perry 2014, p. 654). After all, in the Caribbean and South and Latin America, race, racism, and ‘Blackness’ have divergent meanings to those in the United States due to their different colonial trajectories and experiences with Indigenous peoples; Black demographic diversity and subsequent forms of activism; and the meanings of ‘race’ Southern European colonizers brought to the Americas. These, in turn, had been shaped by, among other things, the centuries-old physical and cultural presence of North Africans, such as the Moors, on the European mainland and by the historical attributions of ‘Blackness’ to Southern Europeans in general by Northern European citizens (Hanchard 1999; Hawthorne 2017). Yet the plethora of works on identity and ‘Blackness’ in relation to various racialized groups in Europe and all their intersectional markers also increases disciplinary splintering and will likely de-center the inclusion of the African American presence and Black American centrality in future research further, even where it might prove informative.³⁵

However, the denial of race within European societies partly explains why its Black communities can identify with African Americans. Despite obvious differences, one feature that unites many racialized communities in Europe with those in the United States is the experience of ‘double consciousness’ arising from their lived experiences as European nationals with diasporic ties and as citizens living in nations that explicitly root their identity in the ideals of the Enlightenment and modernity (Faymonville 2003; Gerund 2013; Gilroy 1993). After all, Nimako notes, official segregation in the United States was matched by the de facto exclusion of Black people in Europe “amid the official rhetoric of social cohesion and inclusion” (forthcoming, p. 3). Yet unlike Black Americans who, in the terminology of Michelle Wright (2003), to some degree are accepted as the ‘Other-from-Within,’ Black Europeans are perpetually treated as the ‘Other-from-Without’ despite being naturally-born citizens. This has meant that Black Europeans must rely on autobiography to “write oneself into the nation,” a tactic comparable to African American slave narratives (Wright 2003, p. 299). The conflation of scholarship and biography has even become a regular feature in Black Europe scholarship in itself (Layne and Thurman, 2022).

This body of work and the (re)discovery of autobiographical narratives, family histories, and photographs (Campt 2009) are thus rich resources that enable new insights into Black American centrality and Black Europe’s position within the diaspora; the importance of multilingualism and Africana traditions within Black Europe; and more locally appropriate terminology and conceptual frameworks. After all, the total of languages spoken by Black Europeans reaches into the hundreds (Small 2019). So, while the dominance of the English language helped Black Britain scholarship to emerge as an intermediary between African American and Black Europe Studies, it further disrupted continental Black Europe scholars’ comfort with Anglo-American frameworks for understanding Black Europe. The use of English—a marker of class and education—in itself reinforced hierarchies within Black knowledge systems (Cruel Ironies Collective 2019; Grégoire and Ntambwe, 2019; Layne and Thurman, 2022). Emejulu and Sobande (2019) for instance lament how “the linguistic divides between English-speaking Black feminists of Britain and North America drown out the perspectives and experiences of Black women in Continental Europe” that must be “at the forefront” of work on Black European feminism (p. 5).³⁶ Such re-centering mirrors the broader self-conscious societal trends in twenty-first century

Black Europe. Activists in some Black communities in France now “use the nomenclature ‘Noir’ instead of the once pervasive English word ‘Black’” to mark their homegrown experiences, existence, and visibility in a society that officially only recognizes ‘French people’ (Keaton et al., 2012b, p. 3). Moreover, using (African) American concepts can impede local antiracism movements’ dialogue with a broader, non-English speaking public, as for many Europeans they literally and figuratively are “part of a strange language” (Guadeloupe 2022, p. 65).³⁷

Centering Black Europeans’ experiences and perspectives in their own words can additionally help nuance theoretical frameworks and definitions, like those related to Black Internationalism, diaspora, and (African) Americanization. In an example of the quest for more locally appropriate terms, some scholars have come to transplant the term ‘color-blindness’ with ‘race-blindness’ to indicate that, unlike in the United States, denials of the relevancy of race are widely shared by the Left and deeply entwined with the traumas of the Holocaust and fascism (Beaman and Fredette, 2022; Goldman 2020; Keaton 2010). Emily Frazier-Rath (2022) meanwhile points to the need for humanizing the Black European experience behind the theorizing on Black transnational exchanges. Chandra Frank’s (2019) analysis of the material of the 1980s Black Dutch queer women’s collective Sister Outsider in Dutch feminist archives and in Audre Lorde’s American-based ones similarly shows how individualizing the actors *and* the geographical spaces in which they operated is needed, as the “overuse of ‘transnational’ to analyse modes of exchange” risks the entrapment of political solidarity like that expressed by Sister Outsider “in a vacuum of ‘transnational’ without giving specific meaning to its use” (p. 12). According to Kristen Stern (2019), close analyses of translations of African American literary products provide another avenue for crystalizing the complexities of positionalities by serving as “a cautionary tale against thinking that transatlantic texts or authors are as fluid as descriptors like ‘transnational’ or ‘the Black Atlantic’ can lead readers to believe” (p. 215). Indeed, as exemplified by the works of Elisa Joy White (2012) on Black Dublin, Paris, and New Orleans; García Peña (2022) on the genealogy of ‘Black Latinidad’ in the United States, Caribbean, and Europe; and Maya Angela Smith (2020) on the use of strategic multilingualism by people of Senegalese heritage in Paris, Rome, and New York, the use of comparative methodology connecting various geographies and disciplines remains a fruitful and enriching means to better understand and appreciate locally specific diasporic sensibilities and practices as well as obfuscates the U.S.-Europe binary as a focal point for understanding Black Europe.

Conclusion

The study of transnational exchanges between Black America and Europe is rich with potential, but restricted by its confinements to distinct scholarly lanes and national historiographies. Divergent approaches to (Black) America reflect this splintering and hinder a more comprehensive understanding of the meanings and manifestations of Black American centrality in Europe. To move beyond, as Monique Bedasse put it, “analytical frameworks that center the United States and claim internationalism only in terms of how Americans interact with Black people in other places,” scholars on both sides of the Atlantic must *begin* by recognizing the historical moment of the Black European Renaissance (Bedasse et al., 2020, p. 1706). This includes new insights emanating from Black Europe scholarship, particularly in regards to the ways in which Black America and Black Atlantic epistemologies interact with (post-colonial) Black European communities; the need to move away from periodization and localities based on African American history; adopting location-appropriate concepts, rather than borrowing terms and concepts derived from American academia; and recognizing the need for multiple languages and knowledge on different local and national settings.

Scholarship into these exchanges must account for and engage with Black Europeans' specific, contentious history with Black American centrality even if it cannot be fully explained in terms of the actions or desires of either Black Americans or Black Europeans. The major challenge is to recognize how the imposing visibility of 'Black America' shapes both disciplinary inquiries as well as realities on the ground for Black Europeans *in order to* move beyond it. So while 'diaspora' might be the conceptual glue that can bring (European-based) African American and Black Europe scholarship closer together, Carmen Faymonville's (2003) and Katharina Gerund's (2013) admonitions to account for the locally-specific ways in which diaspora functions for Black Europeans as "entailing movement and stasis, mobility and stability/settlement, roots and routes as well as mobility and immobility" needs to be heeded and crystallized further (Gerund 2013, p. 196). After all, it is precisely the struggle over the 'stasis' part that defines much of the Black European experience and outlook of twenty-first century scholarship on it, and any future research agenda into Black American-European transnational exchanges should reflect this.

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Notes

- ¹ The 'Black Renaissance' refers to the Black consciousness-waves in twenty-first century Europe and the United States that are characterized by celebrations of the self and demands for visibility and inclusion based on their own terms. See: Eddo-Lodge (2017), Kendi (2021), Layne and Thurman (2022), Skinner (2022a), Visser-Maessen (2019, 2020).
- ² We subscribe to Stephen Small's fluid definition of 'Black Europeans' as referring to Europeans who "identify themselves (or are identified by others) as Black, African, African descent, African-Caribbean, Afro-European, African Americans, or some other national variation" (2018, p. 34). However, due to local usages of 'Blackness' as a social and/or political identity marker, we refer to 'Black Europeans,' 'Black Americans,' etc. when it is *analytically appropriate* to discuss the complexities of the Black diaspora. By referring to regional or national situatedness in these ways, we do *not* imply that the people in question identified themselves by such labels. Likewise, 'Black Europe' is used as a fluid, analytical category that exists as much as a metaphysical "imaginary" or multiple "imaginaries" (Hesse, 2009, p. 301) and as referring to "a *discourse* on location" in which Black Europe emerges as "a racialized geography of the imagination even for *non-European* Blacks" and other outside groups (Nassy Brown 2009, p. 209).
- ³ See the examples in subsequent sections of this article.
- ⁴ 'African American exceptionalism' in the European context is often used narrowly to indicate frustration with the notions that the African American experience, models from African American Studies, or the transatlantic slavery prism can explain the entire Black diaspora. Using the term 'centrality' over 'exceptionalism' enables a broader analysis of the ways in which (perceptions of) Black America serve as an outsized reference point in Europe.
- ⁵ For European perceptions of 'Blackness' since the sixteenth century, see Hondius (2017). Ege and Hurley argue that a dominant focus on 'American' Blackness replaced a more general 'negrophilia' in Germany after World War II (2015, p. 18). Such shifts likely occurred across Europe, but continuities should not be ignored. Compare, for example: Perry (2014).
- ⁶ Examples include: Bruce (2012), Schwarz (2011).
- ⁷ The myth of European colorblindness—the refusal to believe that race and racism are fundamental problems in Europe—results from the complex ways in which (imagined) notions of race and national identity developed among others in relation to the overseas contours of European colonization; the Enlightenment and democratic socialism; the Holocaust; and comparisons to the United States (Beaman and Fredette, 2022; Salem and Thompson, 2016).
- ⁸ This also puts undue responsibility on Black Americans to function as 'role models' (Campt 2005; Gerund 2013; Wright 2011).

- ⁹ For very different reasons, Black Americans to some extent confirmed notions of Europe as a ‘colorblind utopia’ (For example: Fairclough 2007; Visser-Maessen 2019; Whitmire 2022).
- ¹⁰ Black female stereotypes begotten from American popular culture also factor into such rejections. See also: Beaman and Fredette (2022), Cruel Ironies Collective (2019), Diallo (2019), Othieno et al. (2019).
- ¹¹ See also: Hunt et al. (2021), Martina (2014), Waters (2015).
- ¹² For example, for Sweden, Italy, and Germany, see, respectively: Teitelbaum (2022); Hawthorne (2017, 2022); Gerund (2013). For the ‘Anglosphere’: Geary et al. (2020). However, the connections between Black America and European conceptions of Whiteness and national identity are not limited to White nationalism or (far) rightwing politics, but deeply ingrained in mainstream culture, at least in Germany (Gerund 2013).
- ¹³ Black Americans often *were* treated better in Europe, as, among others, their ‘Americanness’ offered them a ‘safety valve’ compared to African migrants (Coates 2015; Fairclough 2007; Gerund 2013; Lamar 2012).
- ¹⁴ On fascism: Boesenberg (2011), Hirschfelder (2020). On embracing specific Black Americans: Baker (1998); Hopkins (1998); Naumann (1998), Wright (2011). On empire: Perry (2014); Tuck and Webb (2020). On cultural appropriation: Höhn (2008), Klimke (2008), Von Eschen (2004).
- ¹⁵ This claim has European-wide validity, albeit with national variations. For Germany, see for example: Grewe (2022), Layne and Thurman (2022). For Belgium: Mielants (2006). For the Netherlands: Essed and Nimako (2006).
- ¹⁶ Despite the long history and large number of Europeans who identify as Black and Muslim, there is a noticeable tendency to separate the two (Alexander 2018; Nimako 2012; Small 2019).
- ¹⁷ An early exception is Ward (1995).
- ¹⁸ Terms can also have different connotations within various local contexts, with disastrous side-effects. In the 1960s-1980s, for example, British politicians used scholarly works that inappropriately applied American terminology such as ‘ghettoes’ and ‘race riots’ to local race relations to enact policies that harmed minority communities (Small and Solomos, 2006). Direct translations, like the German and Dutch ones for the American term ‘people of color,’ actually contain racist connotations (Faymonville 2003; Hondius 2014).
- ¹⁹ For example see: BDG Network (2018); Black Central Europe network (2024), www.blackcentraleurope.com; Black European Academic Network (2024), www.beaneu.com; Black European Women’s Congress; BEST-Black European Studies (2005), <https://www.hsozkult.de/event/id/event-54580>.
- ²⁰ Key elements within these initiatives are their explicit commitment to antiracism education and challenging established university practices. Interracial frictions within such initiatives furthered such practices and self-awareness and the creation of homegrown epistemologies, sometimes aided by Black American materials (Cruel Ironies Collective 2019; Diallo 2019; Howse 2019; Qureshi 2019; University of Colour 2018). Some outside voices are finding a (limited) ear in academia in the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, France, Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands (Gieskes 2017).
- ²¹ The high number of works by American-based scholars on Black Germany testifies to these unequal power dynamics (El-Tayeb 2022; Layne and Thurman, 2022).
- ²² Nonetheless, this centrality of ‘Africa’ is anything but stable across time and space, with some contemporary Black Germans for example dropping the prefix ‘Afro’ in favor of ‘Black’ (Florvil 2020).
- ²³ According to Jean Muteba Rahier, diachronic studies center “monocultural trajectories and histories of black community formation in exclusive national contexts” while synchronic ones combine “multiple histories and temporalities” and are “transnational in orientation [and] transcultural and interethnic at the core” (Gieskes 2017, p. 10).
- ²⁴ For similar calls outside Germany: Tuck and Boehmer (2016); Ndiaye (2008). Recent anthologies that feature Americanists and Black Europe scholars include: BDG Network (2018), Bolaki and Broeck (2015), Hine et al. (2009), Raphael-Hernandez (2004a).
- ²⁵ Others remain more interested in contributing to U.S. Black history, for example Wendt (2009).
- ²⁶ For example: Archer-Straw (2000), Jules-Rosette (1998), Leininger-Miller (2001), Moore (2021), Schmeisser (2006), Waldschmidt-Nelson et al. (2015). Slightly earlier examples include Fabre (1993) and Stovall (1996).
- ²⁷ Aside from Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Angela Davis appear to receive most attention. See also: Hodder (2016).
- ²⁸ For ‘the Long Movement’ see: Hall (2005), Cha-Jua and Lang (2007). For Black Power Studies see the work of Joseph (e.g. 2009). For Black Internationalism: Bedasse et al. (2020). Examples of Black Internationalism include: Blain and Gill (2019), Frazier (2014), Makalani (2011), McDuffie (2011), Umoren (2018).
- ²⁹ While running parallel to the development of Black Power Studies in the United States, this literature must also be understood in relation to British historiography that addresses imperialism and postcolonial migration, and the desire to move away from how White politicians defined a ‘color problem’ in favor of “how immigrants’ everyday lives defined Black political life” (Perry 2014, p. 652). Other recent works include: Angelo (2018), Bunce and Field (2011), Kelley and Tuck (2015), Perry (2015), Narayan (2019), Waters (2019).

- ³⁰ For a comparison to the Netherlands, see De Vlugt (2023).
- ³¹ The objective of *Blackening Europe* for instance was taking “African America”—rather than Black European communities themselves—“as the starting point for a discussion about the blackening of Europe in general” (Raphael-Hernandez 2004b, p. 2).
- ³² Emily Frazier-Rath, for instance, laments how the experiences of German children fathered by Black American G.I.s “have been relegated to other fields” and “excluded from ‘the story’ of the Black German community” (2022, p. 471).
- ³³ Black Internationalism can be criticized for de-centering Africa and Africana intellectual traditions (Bedasse et al., 2020).
- ³⁴ For the United Kingdom, see works by Paul Gilroy, A. Sivanandan, and Stuart Hall. For France: Babana-Hampton (2009), Keaton (2010), Keaton et al. (2012a). For Germany: Camp (2003), Faymonville (2003), Wright (2003).
- ³⁵ In the United Kingdom, the growth of race studies is already spurring “its fragmentation and dilution” (Alexander 2018, p. 1044).
- ³⁶ Such linguistic grievances go back to the 1980s (Ohene-Nyako 2019a).
- ³⁷ The use of English can also function as a source of empowerment and a barrier of protection (Faymonville 2003). For example, today’s activist movements against Blackface in the Netherlands publish literature and blogs in English to connect with international audiences for support, networking, and sharing and enhancing organizing tactics and knowledge production (Pitts 2020). Likewise, Dutch scholar Gloria Wekker deliberately published her *White Innocence* (2016) in English because she wanted to be “part of a larger decolonial circle of discourse” that could additionally protect against having the merit of her work be defined solely by Dutch critics invested in the myth of European colorblindness (Wekker 2018, p. 138). The Dutch version (*Witte Onschuld*, 2017) includes a chapter on the English version’s reception.

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