

An Ode to the Grandmothers of the Caribbean

Ashley Williams-Leon (PhD Candidate, Department of English, Royal Holloway, University of London). Email: Ashley.Williams-Leon.2019@live.rhul.ac.uk.

Oh, Woman

Your land of mango and

Almond trees,

Bush and

Lush seas.

Oh, Mother,

In muslin cloth, entwine your baby tightly,

Like 300-year roots of the ceiba cotton tree.

Kiss her goodbye.

Out of many, one people,

You have been called,

Ache from breast to deep womb.

Turn your back on nature to face the wind –

By sea or air.

MV Monte Rosa, Nazi-controlled, delivering German troops,

Repackaged, and now we call you

The Windrush.

The colonial tides have changed,

Subject of forced labour

To citizen of the Commonwealth,

Part of the labour force.

Oh, Mother,

From one island to another, plant your flag with pride as

The first pioneer.

As nurse and mother, doubled are your labour pains.

There is no plan like the one of a formidable woman

Marking her story on foreign plains.

Oh, Grandmother,

Now it is your turn to listen.

Watch the fruits of your labour return home.

Oh, Motherland,

Watch us recount and create more memories underneath mango and almond trees.

Come, Nanny,

Bathe with your great-grands in the warmth of those turquoise seas.

Boxing in Blackness

Halt.

until the green man says go¹

You are Jamaican? No.

African because Germany says so.

Out of 54, no specific one is named.

Who am I? (*Ich*)² pronounce it correctly, or else you're boxed in,

¹ In Germany, strict adherence to crossing only when traffic lights are green reflects a cultural emphasis on public safety, order, and respect for rules, with jaywalking often highly frowned upon by both social norms and occasional fines.

² The German word 'ich' translates to 'I' in English. It is a pronoun used as the first-person singular subject in German, similar to 'I' in English, indicating the speaker in a sentence.

they say.

Speak English with an American or British accent?

Respect.

Germany is not interested in (me) in post-Merkel society;

all you are is they (*sie*).³

Where did all the Nazis go?

They've turned neo-but not like the *Matrix*.

Chin up and brave chest at the Ausländerbehörde,⁴

there you are (*sie*) whatever your reason for entry.

Ausländer raus! Ausländer raus!⁵

They chanted it to May Ayim, and they are chanting it now.

For those of you wombed, cradled, and rocked in this nation,

how is your German so good?

Afro-German? Like *Schlagermove*?⁶

Or do you mean something else?

You are the gaze.

³ As the third-person plural pronoun, 'sie' means 'they'.

⁴ The 'Ausländerbehörde' is a German government office that handles matters related to foreigners and immigration. Translated as the 'Foreigners' Office' or 'Immigration Office'

⁵ 'Ausländer raus' is a German phrase that translates to 'foreigners out'.

⁶ 'Schlagermove' is an annual music festival in Hamburg, Germany, celebrating *Schlager* music – a genre of catchy, upbeat German pop with sentimental themes popular since the 1970s. The event takes place every July in Hamburg's St. Pauli district, with the main attraction being a colourful parade of decorated floats reminiscent of a street carnival. Attendees often dress in vibrant, retro-inspired clothing, afro wigs, bell-bottoms and glitter.

Black against the blank white slate.

The unsolicited German gaze and you.

The epicentre.

Now.

decentre the gaze.

decentre the box.

Eyes wide shut in this neo-colonial construct.

Black in Germany: A Reflection on Race, Identity, and Belonging

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What does it mean to be Black? It means locking eyes with a stranger, their gaze fixed on you. For a moment, you wonder: Is my nose bleeding? Is that leftover spinach from lunch living its best life, wedged between my teeth? Slowly, you realise – you are the gaze, and that fixed stare is not admiration but scrutiny.

Then it hits you. Black. That's what's on my face. At least, in Germany.

This was the conversation I had with my Nigerian-British friend as we reminisced over our year abroad in the nation that changed our perception of being Black women forever. We realised in Germany, you are Black before you are a woman. You are Black before anything else.

Growing up, partially raised in the United States and the United Kingdom in the early 2000s, my identity was a tug of war between countries, but never race. Being born in London to a Jamaican mother and growing up in the United States, always gave me a unique sense of identity. Small-town Pennsylvania has been the only place I have ever considered home, and despite living there throughout my formative years and speaking with an American accent, I was always called the *British girl*.

Life at home, however, represented a proud Jamaican heritage, meaning my Thanksgiving looked more like rice and peas and curry goat instead of sweet potato pie and collard greens. Nonetheless, I was still seen, loved, and nurtured by those in my community. It was a place and time where teachers were still considered an extension of your parents – evident through their faith in you, your respect for them, and the occasional mixtape made for you by your favourite art teacher.

The cultural melting pot of London bestowed me with an eclectic worldview. In true British fashion, I love an Indian curry, savour afternoon tea, and relish the option of dining on Nigerian or Somali food. And, of course, I embrace the iconic Sunday roast.

Living in London meant I was the now the *American girl*. But identity aside, it gave me the unique opportunity to travel across Europe and beyond – experiencing heaven on earth: bathing in Iceland's Blue Lagoon, eating traditional Moroccan food and getting henna tattoos with a family during Ramadan in Agadir, and sipping sangria on a beach in Cannes with my closest friends.

Most of all, these experiences allowed me to see people simply as people. They gave me not just a beautiful life, but also a beautiful mind.

One of those trips included a summer in Germany with a childhood friend from the States to visit her grandparents in 2015 – boat rides on the Alster River, jumping from wooden docks in a lake district in Berlin, and enjoying the best pizza and ice cream I had ever tasted – all of which made me fall in love.

That autumn, I went on to study German at university, and when the chance came to do a year abroad in 2017, I jumped at it. Unfortunately, I didn't get placed in the cool cities like

Berlin or Cologne. Instead, I ended up in a provincial town in the north of Germany called Hildesheim, and the rose-tinted glasses came off.

Fast forward to my arrival at Hanover airport: immediately, I was met with stares.

At first, I tried to justify it as a cultural difference. Once Erasmus week began, so did the fun: meeting new people, dinners, drinks, trips, and parties.

Yet when the time came to live as any other Hildesheimer, it became clear that would not be possible. Living here in 2017-2018 in the aftermath of Merkel's government, as liberal as Germany is framed to be, the lived experience was far from accepting.

Daily tasks – going for a walk, grocery shopping, riding the bus, or enjoying a meal – were exhaustingly shadowed by incessant staring. I knew Germans stared even at each other, and with social media exposing the phenomenon, the 'German stare down' became a newly coined term (Bradley, 2006).

However, for people of colour, it's different. It becomes a fixated, unbroken gaze as people unload all their perceptions onto you as if you were in one of Berlin's former human zoos.

I tried staring back, hoping to make people understand how uncomfortable it was, but it was always in vain – sometimes even met with hostility. A hostility that, if it could speak, would wag its finger and say: “*No, no, no – you are the gaze, not us*”. A sort of Fanonian *Black Skin, White Masks* moment. As Fanon (1952/1986, p. 110) writes, “The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man”.

I was young, and such an overwhelming experience led me to struggle with anxiety and depression. As a desperate reprieve, I began making frequent visits back to London in search of normality and belonging.

In all honesty, I struggled to continue learning the language – constantly asking myself: *why should I learn the language of a people who hate me?*

A core memory that stands out: accompanying a friend for a walk to the shops, only to stumble across a counter-Nazi demonstration at Hildesheim's main station.

Demonstrating against Nazis...in 2018? It felt like an alternate reality compared to my friends back in the UK cramming for deadlines in the library after a cheeky Nando's.

To this day, that year abroad is my biggest regret. I always think: why couldn't I have been a normal person who did their year abroad in Singapore – meaning, skipping class to jet off to Bali for an Eat, Pray, Love experience, sweetened by £8 massages, then hopping over to Thailand to drink Chang beer on the beach? But alas...

After meeting my friend that day and hearing her experience in Germany, I realised... If this is just our experience on an exchange programme, what is it like for the Black people who live here?

This question took me down the rabbit hole of researching the Afro-German/Black German presence.

Germany has always had a race problem – one that has been historically overlooked for centuries (Ngutjinazo, 2025) and was evident in the 20th century, during World War II, when Black and biracial people were also persecuted under Hitler's Third Reich.

In the aftermath of WWII, mixed children were sent to the United States as they were deemed racially impure in a post-holocaust society.

This request by the German government to have these children removed from society can be attributed to the national eugenics ideologies of a 'pure' Aryan race, which were still prevalent in post-Holocaust Germany (Patton, 2017).

These deeply entrenched experiences of historical racism are finally coming into mainstream discourse; however, the Afro-German voice is still widely invisible, exacerbated by Germany's historical refusal to collect racial census data until 2020 when the killing of George Floyd forced the country to reconsider (Kassam, 2023).

While well-intentioned, the lack of data left those experiencing racism without legal recourse. And even though a census has now been conducted, it doesn't change a country with a deeply rooted yet hidden history of colonial involvement – including the Scramble for Africa, which took place, ironically, at the 1884–1885 Berlin Conference (Lawal, 2025).

Today, it means African diasporic people in Germany must navigate in a society that does not recognise them – a society where the cultural identity is that of a 'German', which begs the question: who is and is not considered a German?

When interviewing participants who have lived their entire lives Black in Germany, many were hesitant to apply the label 'Afro-German' to themselves, as the country rejects them and denies their identity. One participant felt the label could only be applied to mixed-race Germans, as the country equates the German identity to whiteness over culture.

This sentiment is reflected in a statement expressed by the AFD (far-right Alternative für Deutschland) after the German nationality law that required citizens applying for a passport to have a German father.

This changed in 1975 when the women's movement won the right for this to be extended to mothers; however, in 2014, the right became applicable to all children born in Germany – amending the 2000 law that allowed some children to gain citizenship that way.

This offended AFD members who claimed that the 2014 law wouldn't make Germans with an immigrant background 'real' Germans or a part of the 'Heimat,' a German term used during the Nazi era “combining homeland, nation, and identity in a mythical way” (Sanyal, 2019).

Further Nazi ideological propaganda from the AFD led to widespread protests across Germany in January 2024.

The unrest followed the revelation that members of the AFD had attended a meeting with neo-Nazis and other extremists to discuss the mass deportation of migrants, asylum seekers, and German citizens of foreign origin (The Guardian, 2024).

Such political scandals, the presence of the far-right AFD and the NPD (National Democratic Party of Germany, founded in 1964 by “many former supporters of the Nazis” (‘National’, 2025)), debates around the terminology Afro-German, and the lived experiences of racism are clear reasons behind the struggle that Afro/Black Germans face in their fight to be considered German.

From my own experience, living in Germany made me feel like I had gone back in time – not simply due to the slow bureaucracy that requires you to still post documents, wait six months or more for any immigration updates, and years for a passport, but also because there are still aspects of the nation and society that feel immensely colonial.

For instance, I was stopped after getting off a bus by a middle-aged German woman who had spent some time in South Africa. She suddenly began speaking to me in Zulu, as if I should understand. Even after I explained that I am Jamaican and grew up in the United States, she simply smiled and nonchalantly said: “*It’s always nice to see a Black face*”.

The ignorance of the existence of the African diaspora is pervasive: the countless times I have been asked, “*Jamaica is in Africa, right?*”, or the expectation that African diasporic people and other people of colour should be the cleaners and servers of the nation, as you rarely see them in high-earning positions.

Much like how Britain clings to the memories of the World Wars, Germany clings to their pride in being Europe’s writers and thinkers. But where is the thought and conversation regarding Germany’s colonial past? The concentration camps in Namibia? The Herero and Nama Wars of 1904–08? Or the Maji Maji Rebellion of 1905–07?

Where is the historical education about Germany’s defeat in World War I, the loss of its colonies, and the African soldiers who remained in Germany, contributing to the formation of small African diasporic communities in cities such as Berlin, Hamburg, and Cologne?

What about during the Cold War?

Why isn’t it emphasised that migrant workers from socialist-aligned nations like Angola and Mozambique helped to rebuild East Germany’s economy?

Where are these conversations in classrooms and textbooks? When I question white Germans, they explain that these conversations about Germany's past were never taught, and if mentioned, it was done briefly and far removed from any social responsibility.

An article by the Associated Press highlights the lack of colonial history taught in German schools. As Justice Mvemba, founder of Decolonial Tours, explains: “It’s not mandatory to learn about colonialism in the school system. Some teachers may decide to tell students about the colonial era, but it’s often in romanticised ways”. Through her tours, she strives to offer “a more critical lens on the colonial era and to also break those glorified narratives” (Fahey and Brodersen, 2025).

I think this colonial amnesia is precisely why Germany feels as colonial as it does – and why such archaic mentalities and behaviours towards African diasporic people persist.

We all know the saying – **history always repeats itself** – and this is evident in contemporary Germany. Just as Germany once begged foreign workers to help rebuild the country after both World Wars, the nation is now crying for help again.

Yet when eager and optimistic immigrants relocate, they are met with hostility.

A news article from July 7, 2025, titled ‘Why Do Migrants Leave Germany?’ (Özdemir, 2025), illustrated brave and exhausted migrants’ sentiments – like a Greek man who stated: “Everything that brought me to Germany was no longer there, and at some point, I thought, that’s enough – I don’t want my children, if I ever have any, to grow up in this country”. His hard work over the decades was overshadowed by the reality that there would always be a ‘toxic’ association with his Greek heritage.

His words were echoed by a Turkish-German man who relocated to London due to the intense racism in Germany. He expressed that, because of his cultural background, he always felt like a “second-class citizen” and compared his experience to Bruce Willis’ character in *The Sixth Sense*, saying: “There is a life out there apart from you, and you don’t belong to it”.

The article concluded with a Bulgarian woman stating that even being fluent in the language does not help you get accepted into society. According to the report, 25 per cent of migrants think about leaving Germany – and it’s no surprise.

Germany is a nation imploring skilled migrants to relocate, but their skills are not painted on their skin. They are still perceived through the dehumanising lens of social constructs,

stereotypes, and negative perceptions steeped in animosity. It is German society's refusal to embrace and welcome people who want to contribute that is the problem.

My experience was nothing short of similar – from being ignored and racially discriminated against in banks and grocery stores, to being shoved by a German man on the bus who said his seat shouldn't be taken by someone with a 'foreign passport'. Once, I overheard another German guy mutter, "Great, more Black people" as a Black man walked through arrivals, where I was waiting to greet a visiting family member. Even something as simple as asking for a few different sauces on my kebab escalated into racialised disbelief and disgust, as if wanting toppings must be an 'African thing' – imagine the heart palpitations the man must get in *Five Guys*!

These public instances of racial abuse and humiliation are normalised in the country, with immigrants nervously laughing while regaling their horrific experiences in the immigration office, or navigating daily life in fear while still learning the ropes – what's scary is that these instances happen in public all the time and nobody ever comes to your aid – what's scarier is that these experiences were not only committed by white Germans, but also by individuals with a migrant background – who, as Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (1970/1996, p. 27) said, "the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors".

That is why I say the insidious nature of racism and xenophobia sustained and perpetuated by German society cascades down to all its members, leaving people to navigate and survive in a culture where discrimination and racism are deeply embedded.

I have been told by people who have voted for the AFD that they just want to see their country prosper and that issues of race cannot be at the forefront, as Germany is a white-majority country.

However, my question is: don't you think immigrants of all backgrounds also want to see the nation that they call home to prosper too?

They desire those things, yet they must contend with an economic crisis and discrimination, all while bearing the burden of being scapegoated for poor governmental decisions.

Living in Germany propelled me out of the innocence of adolescence into the ugliness of adulthood. Like Toni Morrison's investigation of the devastation racism inflicts on the most vulnerable in our society in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), my childlike innocence was shattered. Alone – navigating a new language, a new university, and facing deeply rooted societal rejection and racism – I encountered the harshest realities of humanity.

Yet through it all, I discovered resilience – not the outdated 'strong Black woman' trope, but the strength needed to survive and challenge systemic injustice. I should not have needed flights back to London for reprieve, or tearful conversations with Afro/Black-German participants and friends. But I did. And when racism stares us in the face, we must find that strength.

At the same time, I acknowledge my privilege of being able to shift through the world seen and participating in being a Jamaican, British, or American woman, not tied down to any one experience or place.

So, I say this, for the Afro/Black Germans who have no choice but to grow up and navigate in German society, I hope they will one day be seen, valued, and woven into the fabric of German society – and not viewed as an external deficient part of it. And I believe this change must begin in the education system, where little brown children can see themselves reflected, not erased, and become integral contributors to a shared future.

For now, only time will tell.

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University Road,
Leicester,
LE1 7RH,
United Kingdom
le.ac.uk/research/institutes/lias
lias@leicester.ac.uk

