



INTERVIEW

“YOU’RE CAPTURING ...WHO YOU WANT TO BE.”

A Multidimensional Discussion On Perception(s) With Dr. Tina M. Campt

Trained as a historian first at Vassar College and later at Cornell for her M.A. and Ph.D., Dr. Tina M. Campt is currently a full professor in the Women’s Studies program and also serves as the director of the Africana Studies at Barnard College, where she has been a faculty member since 2010. Professor Campt’s work transgresses the constructed boundaries of disciplines and is truly interdisciplinary in its function. Contributing the first volume of its kind on the Afro-German diaspora under the National Socialist regime in her 2004 monograph, *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich*, she employs and analyzes oral histories to narrate the untold stories of the Black German Community during this time, broadening the often all too narrow scope of Holocaust studies to additional groups that were targeted by National Socialist politics, and emphasizing the role that memory (even in its contestations) plays in the construction of both (national) history and diaspora. While Dr. Campt’s interests lie at the intersection of racial and gendered analyses, visual studies have also come to the fore, as her most recent monograph published with Duke University Press, entitled *Image Matters: Archive, Photography and the African Diaspora in Europe*, evinces. The book is a highly compelling study of affect and images and is also first of its kind to assess the role that photography has played in the narration of nation, community, and family at racial and ethnic levels in the Black European diaspora in the early twentieth century. The Charles Phelps Taft Research Center in conjunction with the Department of German Studies at the University of Cincinnati provided the resources to invite Dr. Campt to campus in the fall of 2012 for the 17th Annual Focus on German Studies Conference, “Wanna Race?: Constructions and Contestations of Race in German Cultural History,” at which she held an enthralling talk on “Racing the Family Narrative: Black German Family Photography and the Stories Pictures (Won’t) Tell.” Vanessa Plumly had the opportunity to engage Dr. Campt later in conversation and get her to tell even more.

FOCUS As a white, female, American scholar, I am often asked what lead me to be interested in the topic of Afro-Germans and why it is important to me. For me it had a lot to do with coming to terms with my own racist predispositions and actively seeking to combat this, as well as recognizing my privileged position in and outside of academia, but of equal valence, was my belief that there are cultural productions of superior quality that are not receiving the recognition they deserve, as they are not deemed "canonical" in the rigid academic definition thereof, mostly meaning that they are not produced from a white, Eurocentric perspective. I'm curious as to how you came to the topic of approaching Afro-Germans from the various historical avenues that you do as an African-American scholar in the U.S.. Did you find your topics or did they happen to find you?

TMC The topic found me, and I believe I wrote about this in one of my articles. I was studying German in Bremen and met an Afro-German man who came up to me at a street fair and said to me "Hello, sister," and that was the initial interaction, and I didn't understand why he called me sister. I was actually a little bit taken aback by that because I had had a negative experience of being addressed as someone's sister based on African heritage by an African, who had then proceeded to hit on me in a really unpleasant way. It was a very off-putting kind of situation because it was using racial heritage/ background as the premise for some kind of commonality and that commonality was in turn being exploited. The conversation with the Black German man proceeded very differently, with him explaining how it was an explicit process for him to come to terms with his own Blackness, and that that was very significant for him to be able to recognize other people of African heritage because he grew up in a context where Blackness was viewed negatively. My interest in Afro-Germans arose out of that, of literally listening to him tell the story of coming to understand what it meant to be Black in a positive context and then thinking about the differences between that experience and the experience of African-Americans. It was really about the way in which Blackness is lived in different ways, despite the fact that racism is present in most contexts, and trying to understand what the specificities of racial formation looks like in different places. I had been training as a European historian and had never thought about Blackness in Germany; I just thought about German intellectual history and German social history and this put a whole different spin on it. Subsequently, when I was living there, the other thing that happened was that I experienced what it meant to be racialized in a very German way as opposed to being racialized in a very American way. It is for this reason that my study of the Black German community and its formation has always been about understanding the diaspora and understanding racial formation in cultural specificity in ways that also acknowledge its commonalities as well as its differences in different places.

FOCUS I often think, and I know in some of your own work you have also questioned the applicability of the concept, that diaspora is perhaps too broad for

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situating and determining identities that are so diverse, such as those of the Afro-/Black German community, even if the term does highlight the similarities of experience had by this specific group of people to which it refers. When I am examining diaspora in the context of Afro-Germans and their cultural productions, I find that the concept of *Heimat* actually becomes integral for narrowing the points of identification and positioning of Afro-German subjects. It allows both diaspora and national belonging to play a part in shaping identity, but it can also be something that is highly individualized and personal. Do you think that either of these concepts is specific enough or that perhaps even the concepts with which we are working are outdated or inapplicable?

TMC I actually don't think that they are outdated or inapplicable. I think they are very applicable, and I think that the challenge is making them relevant. This is the struggle that I have had and also the reason why I have had to be critical about the concept of diaspora being too broad. What I think frequently happens is that people want to impose a concept of diaspora onto the German situation, onto the British situation or onto the French, or wherever, and that people then want to read out of that a very specific experience that doesn't look like what they recognize, for example, from the Caribbean or perhaps the U.S. It's very different in each context, but I don't believe that that means that the concept of diaspora is outmoded or not useful anymore. I believe that the challenge is to show the multiplicity of diasporic formations. With respect to the concept you are talking about, *Heimat*, again, I don't think it's old fashioned or outdated; I think it really needs to be redefined in relation to the particular communities who employ it and the ways in which it actually affects them. One of the things I find really useful about understanding or engaging Black German history is that it gives us a different take on concepts that we think we understand, allows us to see how those concepts change over time, and how they mean something different for different communities even in the same place, so that *Heimat* would mean something different for Black Germans than it would mean for white Germans or for Turkish-Germans. It's only by allowing ourselves to see those differences that the concepts themselves remain relevant, and I think that is a very useful exercise.

FOCUS Since you’re already speaking to the importance of understanding concepts from a specific perspective or particular context, that brings me to the following: your most recent monograph, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography and the African Diaspora in Europe* (2012) deals with family photos and mostly archives kept by individuals (family members or friends) and implements only a few historical archives that were once personal holdings. Is it important to differentiate between these two types of archival collections? How can we assess the significance of photographs derived from both? Perhaps a more concise way of stating this is: does the context from which the photograph is taken matter as much as the image itself?

TMC It’s very much about the context to me. One of the ways I’ve tried to engage photographs and photography is by having multiple vantage points: multiple historical vantage points; multiple affective vantage points; and multiple sensory vantage points, in order to be able to understand how photographs tell multiple stories. With regards to the different archives you are talking about, it is very important to be able to acknowledge the difference it makes to be shown a personal photograph in the context of a very personal family history and then also to see that same photograph in relationship to others, and from there, to see that in relationship to alternative geographical and historical reference points. Keeping all those different contexts and reference points in play is what I found to be the challenge about writing about these images. Although I was not personally implicated in them directly and didn’t know the entire history of them, they still moved and affected me. That was a really marvelous challenge that I found revealed much more about how families are structured and how societies ask families to structure themselves, and how that structuring is also enacted through the photographs themselves. So yes, the archive makes a huge difference, but we are the people who create archives. Archives are not simply institutional constructions; many of them are, and those are the ones that gain the most authority and exercise certain kinds of power over what we deem relevant and what is constituted as knowledge; but, at the same time, it’s personal interventions like making these things visible that in turn creates new forms of archives and new interventions in existing archives.

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FOCUS I really like the way you stated that. The process of deciphering photographs sounds to me like an archeology of photography—that you are digging to find the stories behind the photographs and then building a narrative from the findings.

TMC That's exactly what I am trying to do.

FOCUS I also find the way that you take a one-dimensional image and turn it into something that is multi-layered through the narratives and differing vantage points, simply fascinating.

TMC It's fun, too.

FOCUS We've somewhat talked around and hinted at this next topic already. It seems that photography is a difficult field to master, as something is always left outside of the frame. What are we to do with that which is not present, i.e. that the image we receive can never fully be complete? Do you see this as a hindrance to the interpretation of the medium or a potentiality for exploring the unknown?

TMC I absolutely see it as the greatest potential of photography and that's exactly why we are so captivated by photographs, especially in a digital age when photographs are no longer about documenting a reality necessarily; they're about imagination. One of the things I am trying to say in my monograph is that photographs were always about imagination; there is no scientific rationale for them other than wanting to be able to capture something real. I really do think that what family photography shows us most dramatically is that you're capturing not so much who you are, but who you want to be.

FOCUS It's like autobiographies in that context; you tell the story you want to be told and heard/seen.

TMC Exactly, and it's fun to acknowledge the constructed and staged nature of the photograph, but it also powerful to acknowledge this because then you understand the photograph as more than just an object; you understand the ways in which people are trying to use it to articulate something, and then they're transformed into active sites of meaning production and that opens an entirely different world for understanding how a photograph works.

FOCUS I actually never realized that there is a lot overlap in both of your monographs. Now that I think about it and listen to you speak, in terms of memory and how memory is produced, or what becomes apparent in images as well as oral histories and narratives, it strikes me that this is the connection between the two works, that you are working with memory in both contexts, but simply through different media.

TMC Yes, that’s true, and that was the thing that I had to realize because I never had the intention of writing about photographs because I thought that they required certain ways of interacting with them that I was not trained in. And then I realized that it’s very much like working with oral histories, the kinds of interpretation of the personal experience and the ways in which they express a history, but that history is not self-evident; it’s not something that is already there. That actually gave me confidence enough to continue to pursue them because they are very historical. But many people want to see them primarily through sentiment, and I thought that that is a very limited way of approaching images and that there is a lot more that they were saying or trying to say.

FOCUS Interesting. So, the image not only produces affect in the viewer, but also speaks to the viewer in silenced ways that have yet to actually be vocalized through an elucidation of its contents.

Speaking of bringing new (hi)stories to light, with the growth of academic discourse focusing on the Black diaspora in Europe, where do you see Black German Studies heading in the future and/or how is it currently developing its status in the U.S.? I know that the Black German Heritage and Research Association with which you are involved is playing a big role in paving the way for creating new opportunities, but this is just one example.

TMC I’m very excited about the direction that it is going, mostly because it is becoming an established field, and not so much in relationship to recognition by German Departments or History or at the AHA or something like that, but because there are networks developing among scholars who are doing this work, where they get to talk with each other and think with each other, and that is one of the reasons why I am really happy to be involved with the BGHRA because it’s so inspiring to see that the people doing this work are no longer as isolated as we were back in the day when I started doing it. Your conference was another example of this. It delights me that people are reaching out and drawing on each other’s work, so we are not having to recreate the wheel. So, the direction I guess I see it moving in is into an intellectual community, and that is the highest goal it can achieve because it means that it is going to be serving a community, and it is going to be circulating within and outside of that community. That was the whole reason that people like May Ayim and Katharina Oguntoye published *Farbe bekennen*—to be able to reach out and have a conversation and a dialogue, and also to have a community learn about its own history in order to be able to redefine its future.

FOCUS I completely agree with you in terms of creating a community and a place for exchanging ideas. I think that is exactly what the discourse inside and outside of these sorts of spaces provides, and it’s the one thing that motivates me and inspires me to keep doing the work I am doing.

TMC Right. It doesn't make sense not to engage in the community; we're not writing books for ourselves. To be able to actually have people read them and say, "This is important to me"—that's why we do what we do.

FOCUS Absolutely.

I have one final question, with all of the success you have achieved thus far, I am interested in where the academic journey for you leads from here? Will there be another project that focuses on an untouched aspect of the African diaspora in Europe or a completely new research concentration?

TMC I wish I could answer that question. I actually have no idea. The reason I can't yet answer that question is the same reason that I mentioned before—projects find me, and I am the kind of person who literally can work only on one project at a time, so I never know what the next project is going to be, and I never know when it's going to arrive. It just announces itself, so I am still awaiting the next project and looking forward to it.

FOCUS I'm very fond of the idea of ending this conversation with an unforeseen future. I, too, look forward to your next project, whatever it may be! Thank you for your time and an insightful discussion.

Vanessa Plumly conducted this interview on July 8, 2013.



