



# Interview with Tiffany Florvil

**James Skidmore:** My name is James Skidmore, and I'm the Director of the Waterloo Centre for German Studies, an institute at the University of Waterloo that promotes research into all aspects of the German-speaking world. To further this mandate, we've established the Waterloo Centre for German Studies Book Prize to recognize first-time authors whose scholarly work provides a substantial contribution to our understanding of German-speaking society. The shortlist for books published in 2020 has just been announced, and it's my pleasure to interview each of the six finalists about their work. Today I'm speaking with Tiffany Florvil, author of *Mobilizing Black Germany: Afro-German Women and the Making of a Transnational Movement*, published by University of Illinois Press. Tiffany is Associate Professor of History at the University of New Mexico. She is a scholar of the modern and late modern period in Europe, especially social movements, gender and sexuality, emotions, and the African diaspora. Tiffany, welcome and congratulations on being named to the shortlist.

**Tiffany Florvil:** Thank you so much. I'm excited to be here and honoured that my book is on the shortlist.

**JS:** We're very happy to have you, thanks for being here. Your book recounts the struggle of black women in the 1980s and 1990s against anti-black racism and discrimination in Germany. What were the contours of the racism that Blacks were facing in Germany at this time?

**TF:** That's a very good question. Especially after the Wende – after the fall of the Wall, so post 1989 – there was sort of a resurgence of ethnonationalism that occurred that really impacted black people more broadly. Not only black Germans, but African migrants and immigrants who were in Germany; they were enduring racial violence. There was also a presumption [inaudible 00:02:02] that black Germans really weren't German. There was a disconnect with the fact that Germans were actually multicultural and multiracial. So they would have experiences of everyday racism in terms of some of the language, everyday parlance, some of the presumptions that are made when they're having interactions with their compatriots [etc.]. So the contours of racism ranged from seemingly innocuous in the everyday, to also quite embedded and entrenched in institutions in Germany, [for example in] universities and the like. So these women, these larger activists [and] intellectuals are challenging that and calling out the contours of that racism and showing that it basically has connections to the German colonialism of the 19th century.

**JS:** They're connecting it back to the colonial period. Explicitly.

**TF:** Yes.

**JS:** Okay. In your book, there are two movements in particular that take up a lot of attention. The Initiative Schwarze Deutsche, the initiative of Black Germans, or ISD; and the Afrodeutsche Frauen, Afro-German women, or ADEFRA. Is that [right]?

**TF:** Yeah, ADEFRA.

**JS:** So what role did these groups play in rallying the Afro-German community?

**TF:** That's also a fabulous question. They played quite a significant role. ISD in particular is one of the first black German organizations that was created in Germany in the 1980s. And it really helps to give



black Germans a voice, and also serves as a site for connection and solidarity in which they no longer feel alone and isolated. I should preface that [with saying that,] oftentimes, black Germans were raised [with] white German family members and [in] foster homes; or adopted. So they're not really having connections with other people of African descent quite frequently. They're not necessarily connected with their relatives of African descent. And so the movement really serves as a site for diasporic connections, but also as a site for diasporic resources, at which ISD and ADEFRA become two of the most significant organizations within the larger black German movement. ADEFRA serves as a sort of sister organization, a feminist sister organization, to ISD. There were some moments of misogyny and sexism within ISD in which, of course, ADEFRA activists felt like they wanted their own space to still engage with issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, and the variety of -isms that were certainly common in the German context.

**JS:** Was ADEFRA formed sort of in reaction to this kind of misogyny?

**TF:** Not only in reaction to the misogyny and ISD but, in part, I think the feminists who were involved with ISD and working closely with the men continued to try to challenge them on their sexism and the misogyny. Mostly, there was also a need for a black woman's space in Germany that really helped them feel like they could engage in particular [with] feminist politics that weren't necessarily focused on in as much depth as they had hoped with ISD. But strangely enough, it's interesting to think about [the fact] that many of the co-founders of ISD chapters across Germany were also instrumental in creating and founding [ADEFRA] chapters across Germany. So there's so much overlap. It's not here or there. There's really an interesting interplay of exchanges and networks and the like.

**JS:** Right. Back to ISD briefly, was there any kind of instigating moment or issue that made ISD come together or be formed?

**TF:** Yeah. I had hoped to go back to Germany in 2020 but, of course, COVID made everybody's plans go down the tube, so to speak. I had hoped to go back because, prior to the founding of ISD, there [were] actually efforts to form two groups in earlier periods in Düsseldorf, and so I wanted to learn what happened there. They tried and it didn't work together. I think it's a combination of factors that helped with ISD in the mid-80s. You not only had Audre Lorde as an American-Caribbean feminist who was teaching at the FU, but you also had African expats; specifically from South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria. So they're exchanging resources and talking to these people, and it's that confluence of events, ideas, and people that really made this a key moment for the creation of ISD.

**JS:** Yeah. And that's very interesting. There are a couple of things there that I want to talk about. The one is this international connection. You're saying that, [with] the ISD, part of it coming into existence was because of the presence of other Africans in Germany at the time – in exile or having emigrated there – and they bring this black German movement into a larger international struggle of the African diaspora. Coming back to the Afro-German women, what kind of influence did they have on that larger international network?

**TF:** That's a really good question. They're connected with feminist and lesbian networks internationally, so they are attending a variety of lesbian [and] feminist conferences in Germany [and] outside of Germany. And so they're tapping into that larger queer and feminist network that is in existence. Many of those women wouldn't have considered themselves queer; they probably would have considered themselves lesbian, in terms of the distinction. But they are part of this larger queer activism that emerges in the 80s. They may see that the idea of queer is for older lesbian and gay individuals, [so] they're a little



reticent to use that. But I think a younger generation is very much saying, "This is all a part of the larger queer activism of the 80s and 90s." So they are tapped into that. They attend conferences; they attend feminist conferences in London, in Montréal, in the Netherlands. They're participating in Zwarte Piet protests in the Netherlands.

**JS:** Oh, is that right?

**TF:** They are, in the 80s. So I think it's a larger network of feminists that they, too, are connected to, in which Lorde is one of many that they're able to connect to. One of the prominent individuals in ISD was Patricia Elcock – and she was an African-American woman, she's still living – who really was a key diasporic figure, a feminist figure, an antiracist figure, a person who is championing human rights activism. So they're tapping into feminist and queer networks along with the larger antiracist/Black diasporic activism.

**JS:** The person you just mentioned – what was the name again?

**TF:** Patricia Elcock.

**JS:** Elcock. What brought her to Germany?

**TF:** That's another thing that I only briefly talk about in the book but there's also a dynamic African-American expat community in Germany; oftentimes studying, oftentimes working, living, performing. She's part of that larger African-American expat community that helped [the community] to really be a significant figure. She helped with ISD eventually [creating] Black History Month events – she was one of the progenitors for that. She also was key in really pushing the movement in a number of artistic directions, so incorporating art exhibitions and the like, and mentoring a variety of people. So I think her presence, in addition to a variety of other individuals' presence in Berlin and Munich and other sites, was very important.

**JS:** Of course, perhaps the most important figure of the diaspora who had come to Germany is Audre Lorde. Jennifer Michaels has written that this American feminist lesbian, poet Audre Lorde, helped coin the term "Afro-German." And it's interesting because Lorde, even though she's passed away for a number of years, she's still a big presence in Germany; and not just in Afro-German circles, but in larger contexts. So I'd like to hear a little bit about how she came to be so influential in Afro-German culture.

**TF:** I'm enjoying these questions immensely. She died in 1992 of liver cancer, and black Germans were present as she died. Dagmar Schultz, Ika Hügel-Marshall, and May Ayim were present when she died in St. Croix in 1992. Her last trip to Germany was, I think, in September 1992, and she died in November of 1992. She is significant for a variety of reasons. [Regarding] Jennifer Michaels, I think Lorde does help them coin ["Afro-Germans"], but they come up with the term on their own. So it really is May [Ayim] and Katharina [Oguntoye] who decide to use "Afro-American" as a model for "Afro-German" and "black German." So it's conversations with them, [Lorde's] constant encouragement, and her presence as this prominent lesbian activist, poet, warrior – she had a number of labels that she gave herself – and I think it's that combination that really helped them to figure out [that they] can do this. She taught a variety of courses at the FU; all of the courses were pertaining to literature; so poetry, poet as outsider, and the like. I also listened to some of those classes at the FU archive.

**JS:** They recorded them?



**TF:** Yeah. Some of those classes are recorded, and you can listen to her as a pedagogue. And you can sort of see her pedagogy in practice, which is also a different way to get a sense of how she was in the classroom and how she influenced her students. Several black German women were in those classrooms – May Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye, and others – and she really encouraged them to meet outside of the classroom and to meet in the classroom and to speak up. So it's a combination of things. She's a prominent black woman who's taken an interest in them and the larger black German community. Because that's also one of her reasons for coming to Berlin, meeting the black German community. She knew that they were in existence. So she is significant not only for them but also for West German feminism. She really helped to push West German feminists, white West German feminists, to understand the need for intersectionality; to really work together with Jewish German feminists, Turkish German feminists, black German feminists. She's very much pushing them to recognize why racism and discrimination matter to them as well. There's a lot of tension surrounding her, pushing for them to engage with more intersectional approaches, and to be cognizant of their own racial blind spots. She, I think, now has a street named after her in Berlin.

**JS:** I wouldn't be surprised.

**TF:** She does, in Berlin. [There's also] an Audre Lorde walking tour, where people can experience the sites that she saw. And then, of course, there's the film that Dagmar Schultz created in 2012, *Audre Lorde: the Berlin Years*, that really helps show her significance for the movement. But I argue she really was a figure for other women in Germany, and she really helped them come into a confrontation about some of their racism, some of their discriminatory practices.

**JS:** And she came originally to teach at the Freie Universität Berlin?

**TF:** Yeah, the Freie Universität Berlin in the summer semester of 1984. She taught from basically April to July that semester and met black German women. [She] also met with Afro-Dutch women in the Netherlands. They had an organization called Sister Outsider, which was named after one of Lorde's books. And so there's all of these connections that she was able to forge with other women across Europe; she travelled to Switzerland, she travelled to the UK, she travelled to France. She really was keen on forging connections with minoritized communities and was not afraid to also [say,] "Look, we have to really connect across our differences. We don't have to be the same, but we do have to be cognizant that we're fighting similar discriminatory structures."

**JS:** Yeah. This thing about the tapes of these recordings of her teaching – I wouldn't want anybody recording my teaching and putting it out there for others to hear. So what was she like as a teacher, as an instructor?

**TF:** One of the first things that struck me – and this is something that I still struggle with in the classroom – is that silence. You know, allowing silence to happen. I just want to fill the silence with whatever is necessary to not make it so awkward. But she was very good at using silence. She was not afraid of the silence. There were moments of silence in the classroom and she allowed it to be, and then she would ask follow-up questions to try to facilitate some of these discussions. [Sometimes,] her line of questioning wasn't as useful as she thought, so she reimagined and reworked her questions. But [she used] loud silence to be a pedagogical tool, which I am reluctant to use. We're all sometimes reluctant to use silence. It's maybe like a second of silence, and you're like, "Oh, let me talk and fill it." But it was more than a second of silence. And I was struck by the fact that she allowed it. And then, I wouldn't say [she was] a



confrontational professor, but she also was very frank and was like, "Look, this is not what I'm looking for. I need you to dig a little deeper." I tried to listen to each of her classes that she taught – she taught three – to get a sense of what her pedagogical style was like. She would also read poetry in the class in a way that was reminiscent of how she would read her own poetry at events. So she was a dynamic lecturer. But that use of silence really struck me. Especially the use of silence as a pedagogical tool did something for me when I listened to it, and I was like, "Okay, I've got to try to implement this in some way."

**JS:** When I have silence in the classroom, I start humming the Jeopardy tune. It doesn't really help them come up with any answers but it fills the silence.

**TF:** Exactly. Because you feel so awkward.

**JS:** You do.

**TF:** And, of course it's awkward. But, in listening to those silences, she knew that it was awkward but was like, "Okay, this is a moment for them to learn." And I appreciated that. And for me, I'm just like, "Ah, what self-deprecating joke can I make?"

**JS:** You also mentioned that there was friction. When Lorde would confront, say, white Germans and say, "We need more intersectionality. We need to connect more with minoritized women's groups of various sorts" – black German women, Turkish-German [women], what have you. What was causing that resistance on the part of the white German women?

**TF:** I think they weren't aware that racism still impacted them. I think that, seeing that, they thought, "Oh, racism is for those minoritized communities." And this is why intersectionality matters. Because it's not only about racism; it's about sexism, classism, homophobia, ableism. All of these things are connected. And so she was really pushing for them to see, "Look, [racism] has an impact on you as well, even if you're not a minority community in the German context." She's also coming in a moment where the larger West German feminist movement is also grappling with coming to terms with the Holocaust. Courage, EMMA – there's a reckoning with Holocaust memory in some of these journals. So there's a reckoning, in some cases, with antisemitism. And so she's really pushing them to see, "Look, Germany is not antiracist. It's certainly still antisemitic. So this is why working against these intersecting oppressions is important; because we can do work together more so than we can do work separately."

**JS:** Strength in unity.

**TF:** Strength in unity.

**JS:** We've been focusing on West Germany. Can you tell us what was going on in East Germany at this time?

**TF:** Yeah. The East Berlin chapter of ISD worked together with the Berlin chapter of ISD prior to the fall of the Wall. So there was that connection. Again, I was hoping to do more research in 2020, but what can you do? After the fall of the Wall, there are more prominent ISD groups that emerge. There's several in Leipzig, there's some in Dresden, there's some across scattered across the former East. And then they also start to have events in the former East. They're really opening it up to their West German counterparts. They're having national meetings in the East, [and] they're also helping to integrate more East black German perspectives at Black History Month events. So there is a larger presence from the early 90s onward of more former East German ISD groups. It's hard to come across some of the East



German ADEFRA groups, although ADEFRA activists would go over to the East. But you do have black German feminists from the East coming over to ADEFRA events in the West, especially after 1990. So that becomes more of a connecting glue for them, that, "This is a site for me. This is a space for me to be a lesbian, black, a reverent," – whatever they wanted to be, that there was a space for them within ADEFRA, especially in the West. But, in the East, there's also migrants from Namibia, Mozambique, Angola, Cuba. There's a larger dynamic of individuals there that are very segregated, quite honestly, from white East Germans. On the one hand, there was an Institute for Friends with Africa, I think, a school in Leipzig. But yet those students were very much segregated from white East Germans, and the encouraging of friendships and interracial relationships was certainly frowned upon. One of the scholars whose book is coming out next year, Sara Pugach, has written about African students in the East and their experiences during the 50s and 60s and later; and what that meant, especially in East Germany. And so you have that legacy, and then you have black Germans there struggling to gain some degree of visibility. They're not from Mozambique per se; they're probably from Nigeria – there were also Nigerian students and students from Ghana who came to East Germany – and so there's a different composition of black Germans in the East.

**JS:** You don't touch on it in your book – your book is focused on the 80s and 90s – but, of course, the history of anti-black racism in Germany is long as it is throughout the Western world, I would think. And the Völkerschauen, these human zoos, are just one horrible example of this. I'm wondering if you could briefly tell us, has your research explored the roots of this white German prejudice against Blacks? Are there any things that really strike you?

**TF:** That's a very good question, again. I think what struck me was going back to the colonial moment in Germany. This is after the Berlin conference in 1884 and 1885 that Bismarck holds in Berlin – or the Congo conference, as it's also referred to. Going back to German understandings of identity and citizenship, it's really the colonial period that's striking and how they really tried to legitimate Germanness through codifying it in law. So you have the 1913 citizenship law, which really claims, "This is what Germanness is. This is who has access to Germanness." And I was really struck by the fact that, even then, you have a German statecraft [which] was also simultaneously racecraft; but they weren't disconnected, as much as it would seem. We oftentimes think [that it's only] after Weimar and the rise of the Nazis that we see a more stringent version of German racecraft. And, quite frankly, you see that racecraft in the colonies. Eugen Fischer, who was in German southwest Africa, was a mastermind for the sterilization of, sadly, the Rhineland Bastards in Germany. So you see those continuities from the colonial period. And I think there's more work being done, quite frankly. Laurie Marhoefer has written a book on Magnus Hirschfeld and his engagement with race, and that book is coming out in [2022] as well. She charts his engagement with race, and I think he is the one she argues has coined "anti-racism." So I'll be intrigued to see what it meant for him. Was it a 19th century coinage? Or was that 20th century coinage for him?

**JS:** Oh yeah, that would be very interesting. I'd like to now jump all the way to today. In your epilogue, you come up to the moment. You come up to the now. You discuss briefly [the] Black Lives Matter movement in Germany, and you write – and I want to quote you here – that "many white Germans fail to acknowledge black Germans as compatriots and that they position black Germans outside the boundaries of the nation, while also rendering their complaints as a misunderstanding, oversensitivity, or divisiveness. Such claims sustain and reaffirm German whiteness, including notions of German



citizenship and belonging." That sounds like what you were just describing about the colonial period. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. So, what's necessary for that to change?

**TF:** I think it's changing in small ways. I do think that the fact that Berlin has anti-racist legislation, anti-discrimination legislation, is huge. That's a recent dynamic that they were also advocating for in the 80s and 90s. I've seen sources in which they're like, "Hopefully, one day we can have this type of legislation." I also think that the fact that "black German" is in the Duden says something too. There's a linguistic mark. Not only did we coin these terms in the 80s, but now we're in one of the premier dictionaries for the German language. Aside from ISD and ADEFRA, you [also] have the campaign against racial violence, racial profiling; you have all these organizations coming up trying to push discussions about how police brutality and profiling matter. So I do think that there's a larger push for these discussions in which race isn't silenced. They're still pushing for more critical engagement with race that's not only cognizant of black German concerns but [also] Vietnamese-German, Turkish-German, the list goes on. So I see that as a positive. And I also see the push for Afrozensus [as positive]. Afrozensus was a push to have quantifiable data in housing, employment, and schooling so that we knew what figures of discrimination occurred. These are all smaller steps but they all matter to help them gain a sense of the data about racism in the German context. We have examples but we need hard facts and hardcore figures that help substantiate these claims – which we've already known for years exist, but the data does help to then push this in a more federal level, in which we get more anti-discrimination legislation across a variety of German states.

**JS:** Yeah. Data can drive policy.

**TF:** Exactly. Absolutely.

**JS:** You know, the book is very well written. It's very accessible, and credit to you for that. I like to ask good writers what they're reading. So I'm wondering, what have you been reading lately in your field or generally that you've really liked?

**TF:** I recently purchased Kira Thurman's book *Singing Like Germans*, in which she talks about 19th century and 20th century African-American performers in Central Europe. I've also been reading Keisha Blain's work; she wrote a biography on Fannie Lou Hamer that recently came out. And then I've gone back to an oldie that's really quite good; Dionne Brand's work. Dionne Brand is a poet and an essayist, and I've gone back to some of her work because she writes in a way that is just so beautiful. Those are the three things at the moment that are occupying my mind.

**JS:** Well, that's a lot to be occupied with. It sounds like really good stuff, so thanks for that. And thanks for telling us about your book today, Tiffany, I really enjoyed hearing about it.

**TF:** Thank you so much for the invitation. I'm so honoured to be shortlisted and to have this conversation with you.

**JS:** You're welcome. I'd also like to highlight for our listeners the cover illustration of your book; it's called "Girlfriends" by the Nigerian-Italian artist Diana Ejaita. She divides her time, I think, between Berlin and Africa. For listeners, if you're familiar with *The New Yorker*, she's had a few covers with *The New Yorker* over the past couple of years, and I encourage you to take a look at those because her work is really striking; it's wonderful work. That must make you happy having her work on your cover.

**TF:** Yeah. I was so excited when she said yes.



UNIVERSITY OF  
**WATERLOO**



**JS:** It really makes for a lovely cover. I've been speaking to Tiffany Florvil, whose book *Mobilizing Black Germany: Afro-German Women and the Making of a Transnational Movement* has been shortlisted for the Waterloo Centre for German Studies Book Prize. To find out more about Tiffany's book, check out the show notes or go on over to [wcgs.ca](http://wcgs.ca). Thanks for listening.