

Call for Papers

Between Empire and Exile: African American Thought and the German Colonial Imagination

November 19–21, 2026

John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies
Freie Universität Berlin

Keynote Speaker: Tiffany Florvil, Professor of History, University of New Mexico

Submission Deadline: October 9, 2026, 23:59 CET

Conference Description

Germany has played a significant yet insufficiently theorized role in African American intellectual history. Although scholarship on Black internationalism has often foregrounded France, Britain, the Caribbean, Africa, and the Soviet Union, Germany also became a consequential site of intellectual, political, and diasporic encounter for generations of African American thinkers from the late nineteenth through the early twenty-first century.

From W.E.B. Du Bois's studies in imperial Berlin to Angela Davis's relationship with East Germany, Audre Lorde's collaborations with Afro-German women and activists, and James Baldwin's encounters with postwar Berlin, Germany repeatedly emerged as more than a destination or historical backdrop. It functioned as a site in which African American intellectuals confronted—and reinterpreted—European colonialism, racial nationalism, fascism, socialism, memory, exile, and competing visions of political freedom.

Between Empire and Exile: African American Thought and the German Colonial Imagination invites scholars to consider Germany as a **Black intellectual contact zone**: a contested space in which African American thinkers encountered distinct racial formations, political traditions, colonial histories, and Black diasporic communities. Rather than approaching these encounters solely as isolated biographical episodes, the conference asks whether they constitute a broader, underexamined tradition within African American intellectual history.

The conference is the culminating event of the Stiftung Deutsch-Amerikanische Wissenschaftsbeziehungen (SDAW)-funded research project of the same name, organized by Dr. K. Bailey Thomas and Dr. Helen A. Gibson. The project centers archival research, oral histories, interdisciplinary scholarship, and collaborative inquiry into African American

engagements with Germany and their implications for Black intellectual history, Black German studies, German memory culture, and decolonial thought.

Central Questions

The conference will consider questions including, but not limited to:

- How did encounters with Germany reshape, refine, or redirect the intellectual and political projects of African American thinkers?
- In what ways has Germany functioned as a Black intellectual contact zone?
- What distinguishes African American engagements with Germany from better-documented histories of Black internationalism in France, Britain, Africa, the Caribbean, or the Soviet Union?
- How did German colonialism, National Socialism, the Holocaust, the Cold War, division, and reunification shape African American interpretations of race, empire, and political resistance?
- What do German archives and oral histories reveal about relationships between African American intellectuals and Afro-German communities?
- How did Afro-German thinkers, artists, organizers, and communities shape the ideas and activities of African American visitors?
- How might decolonial Africana epistemology clarify the relationships among memory, identity, coloniality, and resistance in German public culture?
- Which overlooked figures, exchanges, institutions, and intellectual networks complicate established histories of Black internationalism?

Possible Topics

We welcome proposals addressing any historical period and encourage interdisciplinary approaches. Possible topics include:

- W.E.B. Du Bois and imperial Germany
- Audre Lorde, Black feminism, and the Afro-German movement
- Angela Davis, East Germany, socialism, and international solidarity
- James Baldwin in Germany
- African American students, scholars, artists, writers, performers, and activists in Germany
- Black German and African American intellectual exchange
- Black women's and queer intellectual networks across the Atlantic
- Germany in African American political and cultural imagination
- African American critiques of German colonialism and imperialism
- Black responses to National Socialism and the Holocaust
- Race, fascism, and comparative histories of white supremacy
- Black internationalism during the Cold War

- East German and West German constructions of Blackness
- Exile, migration, estrangement, and belonging
- Black radicalism, socialism, communism, and anti-imperialism
- German universities as sites of Black intellectual formation
- Archives, oral histories, correspondence, and material culture
- Translation and the circulation of Black thought
- Literature, visual culture, performance, film, and music
- Memory politics, memorialization, and public history
- Black Berlin and the racial geography of the city
- Decolonial Africana epistemology and German memory culture
- Contemporary African American engagements with Germany
- Comparative and transnational approaches to Black German studies
- Methodological questions in recovering Black intellectual encounters

This list is suggestive rather than exhaustive. We particularly welcome work that expands the field beyond its most frequently studied figures and identifies overlooked intellectuals, communities, archives, or forms of exchange.

Presentation Formats

The conference will be organized around sessions of approximately **90 to 120 minutes**, with substantial time reserved for discussion. Submissions can be in German or English; please include an English translation if submitting your proposal in German.

We invite proposals for the following formats:

Individual Papers

Individual presentations should be approximately **15–20 minutes**. Accepted papers will be organized into thematically related panels.

Pre-Organized Panels

Panel proposals should include three or four papers connected by a shared theme. Panels should be designed for a total session length of approximately 90–120 minutes, including discussion.

Roundtables

Roundtable proposals may bring together three to five participants for a focused conversation on a conceptual, methodological, archival, pedagogical, or public-facing question related to the conference theme. Individual contributions should be brief in order to prioritize sustained discussion.

Alternative and Creative Formats

We also welcome proposals for workshops, performances, screenings, archival demonstrations, artist talks, or other formats that engage the conference themes. Proposals should clearly explain the format, anticipated duration, and any technical requirements.

Submission Guidelines

Individual Paper Proposals

Please submit:

- Paper title
- Abstract of **250-300 words**
- Short biographical statement of approximately **100 words**
- Name, institutional affiliation, and contact information
- Any accessibility or technical requirements

Panel Proposals

Please submit:

- Panel title
- Panel rationale of approximately **300 words**
- Titles and abstracts of **250-300 words** for each paper
- A short biographical statement of approximately **100 words** for each participant
- Name and contact information for the panel organizer
- Any accessibility or technical requirements

Roundtable or Alternative-Format Proposals

Please submit:

- Session title
- Description of approximately **300-500 words**
- Names and roles of all participants
- Short biographical statements of approximately **100 words**
- Proposed format and anticipated duration
- Any accessibility or technical requirements

Please submit proposals via the following link:

<https://cryptpad.fr/form/#/2/form/view/u2zNSLHqDISCk0aDsGnE4qXwRd+jcxigmh2CMrUygZE/embed/>

Submission deadline: October 9, 2026, 23:59 CET

Notification of decisions: October 19, 2026

Please register for the conference via the following link:

<https://cryptpad.fr/form/#/2/form/view/zF7FdyHG7iwwDYbb++Swiu0xFwIP31QQpfgxSJcsHk/embed/>

Publication Plans

The organizers anticipate developing an edited volume or special journal issue from work presented through the larger *Between Empire and Exile* research project. Participation in the conference does not obligate presenters to contribute to a publication, and acceptance to the conference does not guarantee inclusion in a subsequent volume or special issue. Further information will be shared with conference speakers following the event.

Conference Language and Accessibility

The primary conference languages will be English and German.

The conference organizers are committed to creating an accessible and supportive environment. Presenters are encouraged to provide accessible presentation materials and to caption audiovisual content whenever possible. Participants may indicate accessibility requirements when submitting their proposals or contact the organizers confidentially at any stage of the process.

Travel and Accommodation

Participants are responsible for securing any necessary visas and travel documentation. Letters confirming acceptance and participation can be provided upon request.

Conference Organizers

Dr. K. Bailey Thomas

Eleanor M. Carlson Visiting Assistant Professor
Gender and Women's Studies
University of Rhode Island
bailey.thomas@uri.edu

Dr. Helen A. Gibson

Adjunct lecturer
Department of History
John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies
Freie Universität Berlin
helen.gibson@fu-berlin.de

About the Project

Between Empire and Exile: African American Thought and the German Colonial Imagination centers Germany as a critical and understudied terrain in African American intellectual history. Through archival research, oral histories, workshops, and interdisciplinary exchange, the project investigates how African American engagements with Germany have generated new interpretations of empire, race, coloniality, memory, identity, and political resistance.

The project is funded by the **Stiftung Deutsch-Amerikanische Wissenschaftsbeziehungen (SDAW)**.

Additional information:

SDAW Project page: <https://sdaw-foundation.de/projects>

URI newsletter:

<https://www.uri.edu/news/2026/01/uri-visiting-professor-visits-berlin-to-research-transnational-black-history/>

Freie Universität Berlin press release:

https://www.fu-berlin.de/en/presse/informationen/fup/2026/fup_26_035-afroamerika-kolonialgeschichte-erinnerungsluecken/index.html

Project coverage in *Der Tagesspiegel*:

<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/themenspeziale/bildungundforschung/eine-bruecke-die-zu-lange-einbahnstrasse-war-black-studies-an-der-freien-universitaet-15513239.html>