

Proposed Panel Title: “Adoption, (Re-)Kinning the Politics of Family in American Studies”

Panel Organizer: PD Dr. Silke Hackenesch (University of Cologne)

Confirmed Speaker: Dr. Rosemarie Peña (Rutgers University/ Black German Heritage and Research Association)

Adoption has long been a practice through which kinship in the United States is made and unmade. As an “adoption nation” (Pertman 2011; Melosh 2002), the U.S. has cultivated domestic, transnational, and transracial forms of “kinship by design” (Herman 2008; Choy 2013). Adoption can forge intimate ties across racial, religious, and national lines (Hackenesch 2022). Yet it also severs biological ties and disrupts existing kinship networks, carrying profound ambivalence.

After World War II, transracial and transnational adoption gained visibility as part of a humanitarian project of democratic renewal in opposition to fascism and communism. Narratives of “rescue” positioned adopted children as both symbols of U.S. benevolence and resources for national rebirth. While such adoptions were often framed as progressive or charitable, adoptees and scholars have reframed them as neocolonial, imperialist, and self-serving (Pate 2014). Importantly, while white American families often adopted under liberal Christian or humanitarian motives, Black American families who adopted Afro-German children navigated discriminatory adoption structures at home, placing their kinship practices within the broader civil rights struggle and transnational Black solidarity (Dudziak 2002; Von Eschen 1997; Slate 2015).

Conceptually, adoption compels a rethinking of parenthood, family, and kinship. It interrupts one set of ties in order to forge another, often across borders of race, nation, and belonging. Many adult adoptees today seek practices of “re-kinning” with birth families and communities (Kim 2010; Liem 2019, highlighting the ongoing dynamics of loss, reconnection, and resistance that adoption entails.

This interdisciplinary panel explores the politics, practices, and ambivalences of adoption in American Studies. We invite papers that examine adoption’s role in constructing and contesting kinship across history, culture, and representation, including but not limited to:

- Histories of transnational and transracial adoption after WWII and adoption as a legacy of military occupation
- Political and economic asymmetries structuring international adoption
- Adoptee practices of kinning and re-kinning in adulthood
- Representations of adoption in films, documentaries, literature, poetry, or social media
- Forms of empowerment and self-organization in adoptee communities
- Adoptees as both “ideal immigrants” (Winslow) and vulnerable non-citizens (Nelson)

By centering adoption as both kinship-making and kinship-breaking, this panel highlights adoption’s ambivalent place in the American project of family, nation, and belonging.

Please send an abstract of 250 words and a 1-page CV to:

PD Dr. Silke Hackenesch (silke.hackenesch@uni-koeln.de)

Confirmed Speaker: Dr. Rosemarie Peña (Rutgers University/ BGHRA)

“Rekinning, Reculturation and the Archive”

Transnational adoption in the postwar years not only impacted the adopted persons and their immediate families, but also significantly, the growing multicultural Black community in Germany as a whole. When the adoptees began searching for their first families, they found many of their generational counterparts looking for their absent fathers and siblings in the US. Black activists in Germany were focused on community development and establishing a Black political identity in Germany. My presentation will explore how over nearly two decades, the BGHRA, its conference and its video archive document the narrative shifts, the evolution of relations among members of

the international community and the organization’s success in creating an existential space of belonging, identity development and cultural affirmation for the adoptees in the US and beyond.

Bio Blurbs:

PD Dr. Silke Hackenesch is *Akademische Rätin* at the Institute of North American History at the University of Cologne, where she focuses on twentieth-century Childhood and Adoption Studies, Black American History, Commodity History, Critical Race and Gender Studies, and Black Diaspora Studies. She is the author of *Chocolate and Blackness: A Cultural History* (Campus, 2017) and editor of *Adoption Across Race and Nations: U.S. Histories and Legacies* (Ohio State University Press, 2022). A member of the editorial board of *Adoption & Culture*, her book project, *Colorblind Love or Racial Responsibility? The Adoption of Black German Children to Postwar America*, is forthcoming with New York University Press.

Dr. Rosemarie Peña’s multidisciplinary scholarship explores displaced childhoods; critically, the historical and contemporary intersections of transnational adoption and child migration. She has presented internationally as an invited speaker and published in several peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes on the postwar adoptions of Black German children from Germany to the United States. As founder and president of the Black German Heritage and Research Association (BGHRA) in Africana Studies at Rutgers University-Camden, Rosemarie has produced eight international conferences and in collaboration with select universities and international organizations has hosted numerous events featuring filmmakers, artists, performers, activists, and other notable members of the international community of Black Germans. More about Rosemarie, the BGHRA and its video archive is available at BGHRA.ORG.

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