

The AfroEuropeans Network: A Short Historical Overview (2004 –) 15/06/2020 14:14:00

The international multidisciplinary research group ***AfroEurope@s: Culturas e Identidades Negras en Europa*** [AfroEurope@ns: Black Cultures and Identities in Europe] was established in 2004 at the University of León by Professor Marta-Sofía Rodríguez-López with other academics, artists, and writers. It soon grew into a research network connecting academics, artists, activists and cultural workers committed to the study of black cultures in different countries and institutions across Europe. The comparative study of the culture, literature, history, and theory created by African Europeans in the last decades has aimed to explore cultural specificity, heterogeneity, and dialogue among black communities in Europe. The varied connections to Africa and across its diasporas are also considered. The Network's remit continues to evolve, adapting to developments in black cultures in Europe and beyond.

Linguistic, cultural, and political barriers within Europe have impeded communication between stakeholders working within different disciplines and in distinct languages. The AfroEuropeans Network has been committed to transcending these barriers by creating a virtual workspace, shared by artists, academics, and activists working in, among other languages, Spanish, French, Portuguese, German, and English. It also has acted as a link between research groups and private and public institutions such as Casa África (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria) and The George Padmore Institute (London) working in adjacent and related fields who share the aim of promoting dialogue with Black communities. It strives to stimulate more collaboration between the Global South and the Global North – from anti-essentialist, inclusive, and transdisciplinary perspectives. The reflections put forward by this Network are designed also for the benefit of policy makers and those invested in the process of evolving a culture of dialogue and equal exchange in the context of an irrevocably heterogeneous Europe and an increasingly globalized world. The formation of a multidisciplinary and translocal Network linking up AfroEuropean practitioners working in different locations with representatives from different academic disciplines constitutes a decisive step towards the development of open-minded, pluralized, and hybridized European identities and a more inclusive Europe.

The Research Group initially received funding from the *Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia* (Spanish Ministry of Education and Science) for three phases (2004-07; 2009-12; 2013-6), with partners in Spain (Universidades de León, Cádiz, Alcalá y Salamanca), the UK (Universities of Nottingham Trent and Leeds); Germany (Universität Münster); the US (University of Maryland); and Finland (University of Tampere). During this period, the group evolved into a Research Network that is characterized by its *open format*. It has no formal executive structures and no formal membership. Given its continuing development, the Network also appeals to younger generations of scholars and reaches out to further constituencies across Europe and beyond, mainly through its conference series, publications, and mailing list.

For over fifteen years, the AfroEuropeans Network has regularly hosted major international conferences across the European mainland, from Spain to the UK, from Germany

to Finland, from Portugal to Belgium.¹ These events have been very well-attended by delegates and speakers from around the globe and from a wide range of academic disciplines and fields, including also writers, artists, activists, publishers, and other cultural workers. The biennial Network conferences stand in a relationship of entailment: the torch is passed on from one team of conveners to the next, supporting dynamic growth, dialogue, and continuity. In this way, emphasis, perspectives, and work modes shift from one conference to the next, while the overall aims continue to be shared.

The 2017 conference held in Tampere ended with a plenary discussion focusing on ways to continue the network's aims and conferences beyond the Spanish funding scheme. A Call for Conveners was circulated and publicized widely; several proposals were received from teams across Europe. These were reviewed and compared (with respect to the conference topic, its innovativeness, aspects including inclusivity, diversity, conference format and work modes, feasibility, and funding options) and as a result Lisbon (2019) and Brussels (2021) were invited to host the next two conferences. Well before the next biennial conference (7 - 10 July 2021; details here: www.afroEuropeans2021.com), the next Call for Conveners will be published, with the aim of deciding on the host for the 2023 conference.

Since 2004, the Network has not only grown larger and become more diverse, it has also published a volume of essays titled *AfroEurope@ns: Cultures and Identities* (López 2008) and published the peer-reviewed e-journal *Afroeuropa* (2007 to 2009). Further book publications include Brancato 2011, Bezmohun 2016, Rastas 2019, and Espinoza Garrido et al. 2020.

From Afropean to Afrosporic, from black British to *afrodeutsch*, from diasporic to Black, from AfroEurope@n to African European, the terminology embraced in different languages and contexts by individuals, collectivities, organisations, and disciplines is highly diversified, nuanced, and not undisputed. Terminological choices made by academics, artists, and activists are often tied to specific debates, struggles, and histories; terminology can change its semantic meaning, its function, and even its appeal as it travels across time, place, and constituency. Without the many initiatives, projects, and organisations founded by AfroEuropeans, without the wealth of cultural, political, and academic work that has already been achieved, this Network could not have developed. It is therefore vital to see the **AfroEuropeans Network** in the **wider context** of other initiatives, projects, research fields, organisations, and publications that have evolved across and beyond Europe. A short bibliography can at best gesture at the context's academic and cultural diversity as well as its intellectual vibrancy and political urgency.

More information about the Network and a link to its **mailing list** can be found here: go.wwu.de/AFROEUROPEANS

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¹ 2006 and 2008 in León; 2011 in Cádiz; 2013 in London; 2015 in Münster; 2017 in Tampere; 2019 in Lisbon; 2021 in Brussels.

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