

Rosemarie Peña's Remarks at Homestory Deutschland Exhibit Launch:

Howard University – February 3, 2016

I am delighted to extend greetings from the Executive Board of the Black German Heritage and Research Association, and more importantly, to publicly convey my profound gratitude to the ISD and the inspired creators of this critical work.

From the standpoint of a dual heritage, late informed, postwar adoptee, who was raised in an African American Military family only briefly in Germany, and then in several U.S. States, Homestory Deutschland embodies a collective history that I was never supposed to know. The thousands of children born during the U.S. Occupation period after World War II to German women and African American soldiers, who were adopted to the United States, represent the first organized transnational adoptions to the U.S., and the only cohort of children who were ever systematically expelled from their birth country, simply on the basis of race.

Noah Sow explained the following to the audience at our [inaugural convention held in 2011](#) at the German Historical Institute here in Washington, D. C. She said, “Ours is a ‘Geteilte Geschichte’ The German word geteilt has different meanings, some of which are actually opposites. Geteilt means shared and at the same time it also means divided, separated. The word Geschichte means history. ... It is our geteilte Geschichte, our shared history, which also divided us.”

As president of the BGHRA, I have had the privilege of meeting many adoptees and learning about their adoption experiences. A number of recurring themes emerge in their stories. With varying degrees of salience, despite having relatively happy childhoods and leading productive adult lives, adoptees often express a sense of alienation and loss. The loss extends beyond relationships with biological family members to a cultural heritage and peer community. Each opportunity to learn about the history and contemporary culture of Black people living in Germany is important as adoptees often wonder about what it might have been like had they grown up with their original families in Germany.

The mass deportation of Black German children through the instrument of adoption has had transnational implications. I challenge you today as you view Homestory Deutschland to consider those lives which are not represented in the collection and how their absence may have impacted the lives of those it commemorates. Noah Sow suggests the implications are noteworthy. [She said:](#)

Step by step, we are coming to understand that there is a reason, a link to why our older generations in Germany grew up isolated, alienated from other Black people—with the same pain and the key question that could not and cannot be safely enunciated, “You all do not identify with me. Where can I find someone who does? And with whom can I identify?”

We are coming to understand why this has been so. Why most of the Black German kids in the 1970s and 1980s didn't have anybody to turn to.

Because they had taken you away. You would have been our sisters, our mothers, our aunts. Our teachers, our deans, our doctors, our librarians, our social workers, our judges, our pilots, our nurses, our neighbors. We've been missing you a great deal.

My first encounter with Homestory Deutschland is a cherished memory that Noah Sow made possible. Upon her invitation, my first three-day return trip to Germany since leaving with my

new adoptive parents, was to the ISD Bundestreffen in Helmarshausen. I recall being unspeakably moved and wiping away tears during the accompanying dramatic presentation of the same name. This was a pivotal moment for me. Homestory Deutschland in all of its visual, material, and dramatic forms at once, experienced in Germany, among nearly 200 members of the Afro-German community, inspired me think more critically about my own place in history. One might say this was a revelatory moment that precipitated a renegotiation of my identity and my position within the Black German diasporic experience in ways that I could never have imagined.

Today I am happy to share my second viewing of Homestory Deutschland with you and am looking forward to hearing your thoughts on this significant exhibit.

[*View Noah Sow's 2011 BGHRA Keynote address at GHI-DC](#)