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Chapter Five

## FROM AMERICAN SLAVES TO HESSIAN SUBJECTS

### Silenced Black Narratives of the American Revolution

Maria I. Diedrich



29 February 1788 was a day of jubilation for Kassel's<sup>1</sup> garrison: Landgrave Wilhelm IX was visiting his troops. As an expression of his special bond with his soldiers, he deigned to serve as godfather at a twenty-four-year-old tambour's baptism—a rare mark of favor, indeed. The garrison church book records the tambour's original name as Moritz Moses. He was renamed Wilhelm, after his powerful godfather, in whose prestigious *Regiment du Corps* he served.<sup>2</sup>

Only one day before this spectacular adult baptism, the garrison church book registers yet another baptism: this time for a more typical candidate, a baby girl christened Anna Elisabeth, after her godmother and maternal aunt Anna Elisabeth Ernst. As proud and grateful parents the register identifies Marie Elisabeth (née Ernst) and Johannes Sabadon, who like Wilhelm Moses was a tambour in the landgrave's *Regiment du Corps*.<sup>3</sup> Expressions of joy at their baby's christening must have mingled with a more solemn mood on the parents' faces. For how could they forget that only nine months previously, almost to the day, their daughter Anna Christina—one year, ten months, and three days young—had passed away?<sup>4</sup>

What connects these baptisms and renders them special is the fact that both Wilhelm Moses and Anna Elisabeth were black. What also renders Landgrave Wilhelm's visit special, indeed, is the fact that more than thirty of the soldiers parading before him in splendid uniforms were black, and among the crowds cheering their sovereign were the faces of their numerous black and mixed-race family members.<sup>5</sup>

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Notes from this chapter begin on page 108.

Starting in 1776, Landgrave Wilhelm's father and predecessor to the throne, Friedrich II, had sent Hessian soldiers across the Atlantic to fight the American Revolution as British mercenaries—had sold them like slaves, his German and American critics would charge. Of these 16,992 men,<sup>6</sup> approximately two-thirds returned to Kassel after the war; almost six thousand were killed in combat, died during their American sojourn, deserted, or opted to stay in the New World when the defeated Hessian forces were finally transported back to Europe. Friedrich II no doubt knew that a considerable number of the men he had sent across the Atlantic would never return to Hesse. But could he have anticipated how dramatically the physical composition of his forces would be changed by the American expedition? Could he have envisioned a Hessian *Regiment du Corps* in black and white? Could he have imagined regular black soldiers, formally enlisted in the Hessian regiments, and their dependents—not just three or four black faces adding exotic splendor to the Hessian troops, but a sizeable group of black Americans-turned-Hessians who had come to Kassel to stay?

### Sources and Methodological Considerations

Between 1782 and 1783, more than one hundred black American women, men, and children boarded the ships returning the defeated Hessian troops to Germany after the Paris Peace Treaty,<sup>7</sup> and they settled in Kassel, then one of Germany's most dynamic and attractive royal seats, with a population of approximately twenty thousand people.<sup>8</sup> The documentation available on this African diasporic move is scarce, scattered, and was never identified or collected systematically. It exists in fragmented form only, for valuable material—especially community and church records—were destroyed during the bombing of Kassel in World War II. Even more importantly, the documentation available represents this black diasporic experience exclusively through the white Hessian perspective and narrative voice: Hessian journals and letters, army and court records, church books. Hessian soldiers and administrative staff responsible for the military records often spoke little or no English, but they were the men equipped with the authority to assign—and more often than not that meant misassign<sup>9</sup>—a name and personal data to black American volunteers joining the troops, thus inventing and imposing an official identity upon individuals whose personal identity was in flux. Also, the military records identify only those formally enlisted men; they do not include the numerous dependents that accompanied these soldiers, just as they do not mention the Hessian women and children traveling with the white Hessian officers and men; also, they failed to identify the black women, men, and children who came as personal servants or as slaves to Hessian officers.

At the center of this black American-Hessian encounter are people of African descent who joined the Hessian troops on the North American continent

between 1776 and 1783. They were a highly diversified group, considering their legal status: Hessian and British military papers, as well as documents held by state or local archives in Virginia, Georgia, the Carolinas, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Nova Scotia, Canada,<sup>10</sup> show that the majority consisted of young men in their teens and twenties who had run away from their masters to enlist with the Hessians—proud self-liberators. Some had been kidnapped as war booty by Hessian foraging parties and opted to stay with these troops, improving their situation and transforming themselves from slaves into common soldiers. Contemporary records also show that during the Revolutionary War many slaves-turned-soldiers did not run alone; encouraged and empowered by British liberation proclamations, they brought family and friends. At times, the entire population of a plantation sought freedom, shelter, and income among the British and Hessians.<sup>11</sup> Yet not all blacks eventually transported to Germany were volunteers: Adjutant General Major Carl Leopold von Baurmeister's letters and journals, Captain Johann Ewald's diary, and the personal data of black refugees listed in Graham R. Hodges's *The Black Loyalist Directory* reveal that many children and adolescents surfacing in the records had simply been confiscated as war booty<sup>12</sup> without their consent and shipped back to Hesse as gifts to the nobility, like crates of exotic fruit. Many Hessian officers, i.e., members of the lesser nobility and gentry, who were accustomed to an authoritarian system of lifelong serfdom back home, felt no compunction whatsoever about purchasing slaves at local auctions or stealing them from rebel plantations or households.<sup>13</sup> So black self-liberators and slaves lived side by side in the Hessian army camps during the American campaigns, and they traveled to Kassel together, into a future that for them could have no tangible definers as they boarded the British ships in New York Harbor in the summer and fall of 1783.

All blacks aboard the British vessels heading for Europe had lived on the North American continent, and most had opted to leave this territory. But for the eighteenth century, with the transatlantic slave trade still in full swing, this broadly defined locale "North America" does not necessarily imply that these individuals originated from the same place, or experienced the same national context; it is most likely that they did not even speak the same language.<sup>14</sup> The negotiation of individual and communal identity in which they were involved was most definitely one between worlds, of people in transit in more ways than one.

The places of birth or origin the fugitives identified for themselves upon enlisting with the Hessian forces<sup>15</sup> show that the majority were blacks whose ancestors had been kidnapped and transported to the Americas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Consequently, their families had been enslaved for generations. These enlistees had been part of that complex communal venture of enslaved blacks reinventing themselves as African Americans, creating an African American language, identity, history, memory, and culture. Others came from the Caribbean or South America; most of these were multilingual, and spoke

Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and/or French. Some of the fugitives, however, were first-generation slaves: Johannes Sabadon escaped from his carpenter master for the Hessian camps in Philadelphia in 1777 or 1778 and claimed to be born in “Hautgera, Africa”; other examples include tambour July/Julye, tambour London, and tambour Wilhelm, all of whom stated that they had been stolen from Africa.<sup>16</sup> These were men for whom the Middle Passage was raw memory, people traumatized and uprooted. These individuals were not yet African Americans, nor were they Africans. Not long before, they had been Hausa and Fulani, Asante and Yoruba, Igbo and Fon, people who defined themselves as members of a local community rather than a nation. They had never heard of “Africa,” this invention of European colonialism and the slave trade.<sup>17</sup> The New World reinvented them as African, as Negro, as slave, determined to transform them from human beings into chattel and, in the act, delete them from the human species, from culture and history.

The definers of the women, children, and men that eventually traveled to Kassel thus are diaspora and difference—personifications of what the transnational African diaspora and black Atlantic paradigms evoke as in-between identities and their in-between or plurilocations; fractured and variously connected disparate identities, geographies, and temporalities. These people in flux then interacted with Hessian soldiers, staff, and their dependents, who were also people in a transmigratory situation: many Hessians had been transported across the Atlantic against their will, in a state of semibondage—a transnational in-betweenness these Hessians, in turn, were struggling to negotiate for themselves. Together, they migrated or returned to a particularist Germany where, the chapters in this volume contend, under the impact of the Enlightenment, scholars of all disciplines were beginning to write systematic and complex natural histories of the human species, determined to “scientifically” classify humanity and redefine nation in racial terms—Kant, Blumenbach, Herder, and, of utmost importance for Kassel, the anatomist Samuel Thomas Sömmerring.<sup>18</sup> The white soldiers and their families returned to Germany with conflicting, often incompatible images of blackness and slavery firmly implanted in their minds—on the one hand, the degrading racial American identification of blackness, African, Negro, and slavery; on the other, their abhorrence at the reality of American chattel slavery, combined with their admiration for the black self-liberators now transformed into fellow Hessians. In the decades that followed, the British controversies over the transatlantic slave trade, news of the Haitian Revolution, and the abolitionist campaigns in the United States were widely reported and debated in Germany. In the German debates, in turn, the privileged and exotic *Mohr* would gradually lose out to the *Neger*, and the *Neger* would become identical with the degraded slave, the essentialized racial inferior.

Any attempt to reconstruct this African diasporic experience and black American-Hessian interaction faces an overwhelming challenge: how can we

return a voice, how can we represent the agency and subjecthood of black women, men, and children who, as a rule, left no written documentation whatsoever and who are beyond the reach of oral history? In her pathbreaking biography of the illiterate abolitionist Sojourner Truth, Nell Irving Painter contends that the biographies of individuals who left no “caches of personal papers” can be written, provided we develop “means of knowing our subjects’ way(s) of making themselves known beyond the written word.”<sup>19</sup> One way of identifying these “ways of making themselves known,” I argue in what follows, is to make use of the analytical tools provided by African diaspora, black Atlantic, and transmigration paradigms, as well as postcolonial theory, critical whiteness studies, and discourse analysis, to revisit the existing white German texts, to identify, negotiate, and reconstruct at least fragments of the silenced black voice in the white Hessian narrative.

### Blackness and the White Hessian Experience

The white Hessian interaction with black Americans on the North American continent and in Kassel can only be deciphered if we keep in mind that many Hessians had, indeed, encountered black people before they crossed the Atlantic in 1776. Peter Martin’s *Schwarze Teufel, edle Mohren* (2001), Sander L. Gilman’s *On Blackness without Blacks* (1982), and Wolfram Schäfer’s “Von ‘Kammermohren,’ ‘Mohren’-Tambouren und ‘Ost-Indianern’” (1988), as well as this volume, offer ample documentation of the presence of blacks in Germany ever since the Middle Ages. They were there as slaves; as sailors; as so-called *Kammer-Mohren* (chamber moors), proudly displayed as tokens of wealth and power by the courts, the gentry, and rich merchants; and, finally, of increasing importance during the eighteenth century, as army musicians. European aristocrats and the bourgeoisie competed for *Mohren*, a competition that resulted in skyrocketing prices for Africans on European slave markets and even kidnappings of precious black staff. This competition increased when a reformatting in military tactics, i.e., marching in formation, required that each regiment have its own musical staff, and black musicians became the fashion of the day.

Wolfram Schäfer’s sophisticated article on Kassel contends that the landgraves of Hesse-Kassel, never to be outdone when it came to displaying their wealth and power, had eagerly participated in this rush for exotic *Mohren*. Court records at the Hessian State Archive in Marburg reveal that the various landgraves, since the mid-seventeenth century, had invested enormous sums to have their power reflected in gloriously dressed and usually financially and socially privileged chamber moors. In fact, long before the American venture, Friedrich II’s personal *Regiment du Corps* boasted at least ten black musicians. Contemporary images of this Corps, held by the Murhardsche Library in Kassel and reprinted below (figures 5.1. and 5.2.), show these black tambours dressed in fancy uniforms and



**Figure 5.1.** Black tambour in a Hessian regiment in the 1780s (Source: G. C. T. Stiens, *Hochfürstliche Hessische Korps 1787*, Signatur 2° Ms. Hass. 267, Universitätsbibliothek Kassel Landesbibliothek and Murhardsche Bibliothek der Stadt Kassel).



**Figure 5.2.** Another black tambour in a Hessian regiment in the 1780s (Source: G. C. T. Stiens, *Hochfürstliche Hessische Korps 1787*, Signatur 2° Ms. Hass. 267, Universitätsbibliothek Kassel Landesbibliothek and Murhardsche Bibliothek der Stadt Kassel).

wearing white turbans with red feathers to emphasize the exoticism of this black corps.<sup>20</sup>

This means that the Hessian officers and many commoners had interacted with privileged blacks before their departure for the North American continent. Furthermore, from Baurmeister's, Ewald's, and other Hessians' journals and letters, we can see that the Hessian officers were aware of the landgrave's predisposition to increase their numbers. Friedrich II could very well imagine a retinue in black and white. Colonel von Donop's last will reveals<sup>21</sup> that his officers, in turn, knew of this craving and were eager to please their sovereign or other influential courtiers by making gifts of slaves—as a means of furthering their own careers.

In deciphering the Hessians' conduct toward the black Americans with whom they would live side by side in the years that followed, it is essential to understand that their images of blacks differed dramatically from the images they would encounter in revolutionary America. As the terminology they originally used—*Mohren*—illustrates, the Africans who came to live in Europe, though almost as a rule purchased as slaves, were associated not primarily with slavery or savagery but with the black Magi; with black saints and madonnas in German churches; with memories of the medieval Crusades and the exotic black women and men the returning crusaders brought to Germany; with the Turks and their spectacular black soldiers before Vienna; with Oriental splendor that the German nobility and bourgeoisie emulated. Most court or chamber moors had been purchased as slaves, their legal status was precarious, and their situation was one of dependence. However, the officers and commoners who went to the American war were members of a society that affirmed social inequality and dependence as natural. As subjects to a state in which status came with proximity to power, they perceived the moors as privileged, even pampered, individuals. These Hessian images of black sainthood or of aristocratic and Oriental splendor clashed fiercely with the misery of the American slaves—exploited, degraded, denied their humanity in their legal definition as chattel. These Hessians brought images of the *Mohr* to America, and there they began to add “Negro” and *Neger*, with implications of bondage and degradation, to their vocabulary, a transformational process of racialization that can be traced in Ewald's, Baurmeister's, and other white Hessians' narratives.

From monthly journals of the various regiments, held by the Hessian State Archive in Marburg, we know that the Hessians began recruiting black Americans as soldiers, personal servants, and nonmilitary staff almost immediately upon their arrival in 1776 in New York, then one of the hubs of slavery in North America.<sup>22</sup> Losses in manpower and vacancies the army faced in the first two years, especially during the New York and Philadelphia campaigns—from epidemics, as well as soldiers being killed, wounded, taken prisoner, or deserting—were often made up by enlisting black Americans as soldiers or hiring them as laborers. The HETRINA<sup>23</sup> papers document at least 150 such formal enlistments in military units, with most enlistees serving as musicians, but some also as fusiliers, grenadiers, musketeers, and privates. In addition, there were the camp followers of no official status—day laborers, personal servants, midwives, cooks, maids, laundresses, grooms, nurses, wagoners, prostitutes—who far outnumbered the regulars from the very start. Reports often mention foraging parties in which blacks became war booty. Recruiting or employing fugitive slaves in the Hessian army thus was an act of military expediency as well as a strategy to economically harm and subvert the authority of their rebel masters. For the majority of Hessians, who, after all, had come from a highly stratified, authoritarian context, these practices did not result from humanitarian considerations,



antislavery sentiments, or moral or political convictions—at least during the early encounters, i.e., before black agency taught them to listen to a different narrative, the black narrative, to see blackness with new eyes.

That the Hessians still harbored the image of the prestigious and precious chamber moor became clear when officers ordered Hessian army chaplains to educate and train black children they had bought or confiscated. These children were then sent back to Kassel as soon as the officers felt they were “ready” for court display. For instance, Adjutant General Major von Baurmeister, who served as first adjutant to all three Hessian commanders and wrote regular reports to the Hessian Minister of State and War Friedrich Christian von Jungkenn-Müntzer, mentions in a letter of 1 December 1777 a “negro boy about thirteen years old” whom Colonel von Donop, killed in action during the Philadelphia campaign, “bequeathed to your Lordship”—the act of transfer expressive of the boy’s status as property. After months of “instructions in the German language and also in the Christian religion” by Army Chaplain Georg C. Köster, he would be shipped to Hesse “at the first opportunity,”<sup>24</sup> von Baurmeister announced. Similarly, Hessian officers had two black American children of unidentified background—a girl of twelve and an adolescent boy—shipped to Landgravine Philippine. They received religious instruction and served as her personal servants, and in 1780, she had them baptized and confirmed in her court chapel. The confirmation questioning was conducted in German, and both “answered in a lively manner, loudly and without hesitating.”<sup>25</sup> These American slaves and Negroes were thus reinstated as orientalized *Mohren*, though their legal status is not recorded. These examples illustrate that it did not take long for some members of the Hessian lower nobility to conveniently embrace America’s “peculiar institution”: when stealing and dealing in slaves, after all, they behaved in accordance with the feudal or absolutist state’s strictly hierarchical understanding of the human species and the prescriptions of the social and political discourses of the day, in accordance also with their specific Hessian context.<sup>26</sup>

However, even more important than Hessians “foraging for Negroes” was the interaction between the Hessians and black Americans that the slaves themselves initiated, an interaction, this chapter insists, that had a powerful transformational impact on the Hessian attitude toward blackness and slavery. American slaves, recent scholarship contends, were neither passive victims nor mere observers of a Revolutionary War fought by (and for) whites only; they redefined this war as their war of self-liberation. Many supported the patriots, hoping their service would be rewarded with personal emancipation at the end of the struggle for national independence. But tens of thousands also ran from their masters and struggled to cross the lines into British-occupied territory after Lord Dunmore’s famous proclamation of November 1775, which promised freedom to any slave joining the British forces—Jefferson later spoke of more than thirty thousand black refugees in Virginia only. Succeeding British commanders would regularly

confirm and expand this proclamation, which slaves all over the colonies eagerly embraced as liberation news and promise.<sup>27</sup> Associating the Hessians with the British and, thus, with the British proclamation, these slaves offered their service as their ticket to freedom and protection, to an independent income, to agency and ultimate subjecthood. There was relatively little need and incentive for the Hessians to compel blacks to enlist. In fact, they quickly learned that bondspeople kidnapped or foraged into service usually deserted at first opportunity, as Baurmeister attested.<sup>28</sup> It was the slaves themselves who made the decision to serve—certainly a powerful way of “making themselves known.”

During their seven years on the North American continent, the Hessians thus encountered black women and men not primarily as brutalized victims of American racism and chattel slavery, but as trustworthy, valiant soldiers, competent midwives and nurses, skilled cooks and carpenters. They could not help respecting them for their personal courage, their stamina, their integrity. For the Hessian commoners and their dependents in the camps, fugitive slaves became fellow soldiers and laborers, buddies whose right to freedom they affirmed and, if required, defended.

This transformational process, army documents reveal, impacted not only the lower ranks but also the Hessian officers and their conduct toward blacks. Interacting with black soldiers and service personnel, these officers learned to acknowledge that the black fugitives in their regiments and in their camps, in their daily conduct as freedpeople, refuted the core assumptions of American and German racisms. Even the most conservative officers, coming from a society that affirmed inequality and strict hierarchies, found American chattel slavery to be simply incompatible with their notion of responsible patriarchy. Also, a considerable number of Hessian officers, as well as Landgrave Friedrich II, were Masons,<sup>29</sup> who were fascinated with an Enlightenment creed that, brought up against both American racism and black agency, tended to translate into antislavery, liberation activities. Reformatted from the perspective of the transformational impact of black and white interaction, the inhuman act of stealing or purchasing a black child could and occasionally did acquire a new, emancipating quality: Quartermaster Hunter, boarding the *Polly*, bound for Bremerlehe, in New York Harbor in August 1783, was accompanied by fifteen-year-old John, whom he “bought ... of Benjamin Carpenter of Jamaica, Long Island.” However, the entry “(Formerly the property) of the Quartermaster”<sup>30</sup> in *The Black Loyalist Directory* clearly attests that John had become a free man, and was traveling as the officer’s personal servant.

Under the impact of American racial slavery and black self-liberation, Hessian officers, commoners, and their dependents thus not only added *Neger*/Negro, with its implications of brutalization and essential inferiority, to their vocabulary. A careful scrutiny of the army records, diaries, and war correspondence also confirms the transformational power of black agency and its influence on white

perceptions: racial assignments became rarer as the war progressed, and interaction became routine. The Negro/slave resurfaced as refugee, laborer, groom, forager, and guide, all assignments focusing on military rank, social class, and performance rather than race.

General Leopold von Heister, first commander of the Hessian troops in North America, as well as his successor, General Wilhelm von Knyphausen, encouraged their officers to enlist black runaways as soldiers and to hire them as personal servants and grooms, as wagoners and laborers. In a letter to the landgrave, written near Germantown, Pennsylvania, in October 1777, von Knyphausen, complaining of the disconcerting sickness rate among his soldiers, reported that the solution to this problem was the enlistment of black soldiers. He had first accepted white American volunteers to the Hessian ranks, but the result had been desultory, “for neither can they march in line, and they are likely to return to the rebels. Also, they are not well suited as soldiers, on account of their cowardice and their undisciplined notions of freedom.” Fortunately, there was an alternative: “But we have recruited several Negroes as tambours for the infantry and grenadier battalions, and several have been performing well for the entire year.” He was especially pleased to report that “several have already decided to return to Hesse with us.”<sup>31</sup> Von Knyphausen claimed that the decision to migrate to Kassel lay exclusively with these free black men. He was pleased to welcome them as assets to the Hessian troops and state—testimony to von Knyphausen’s awareness of how eager Frederick II was to increase his prestige by adding black musicians to his personal corps, and expression also of the nobleman’s belief in the superiority of his Hessian culture to which the refugees would and could adapt. But, above all, this letter was a tribute to the men’s performance as soldiers and potential Hessian subjects.

In the years that followed, increasing numbers of black adolescents considered too young for armed service were recruited as musicians, as tambours, trumpeters, and fifers, freeing mature white Hessian soldiers for service as musketeers or grenadiers. Also, officers were urged not to use white Hessian soldiers as personal servants but to replace them with black refugees. Yet black Americans served not only as regulars and personal staff; their familiarity with the local territory and structures, combined with their determination to be free, made them indispensable as spies, informers, foragers, and laborers.

During the Southern campaigns, especially into the Carolinas, Georgia, and Virginia between 1780 and 1781, the numbers of black Americans who enlisted as regulars—or at least accompanied and supported the troops—increased dramatically, to the point that they far outnumbered the actual troops, as Captain Johann Ewald of the Jaeger Corps reported in June 1781 from the Virginia campaign. Ewald, a fiercely disciplined, self-controlled, and authoritarian officer, was exasperated at “a cavalcade” in black and white, which he compared in disgust to “a wandering Arabian or Tartar horde”:

Lord Cornwallis had permitted each subaltern to keep two horses and one Negro, each captain, four horses and two Negroes, and so on, according to rank. But since this order was not strictly carried out, the greatest abuse arose from this arrangement ... Every officer had four to six horses and three to four Negroes, as well as one or two Negresses for cook and maid. Every soldier's woman was mounted and also had a Negro and Negress for her servants. Each squad had one or two horses and Negroes, and every non-commissioned officer had two horses and one Negro.

Yes, indeed, I can testify that every soldier had a Negro, who carried his provisions and bundles. This multitude always hunted at a gallop, and behind the baggage followed well over four thousand Negroes of both sexes and all ages.<sup>32</sup>

Captain Ewald explicitly blamed Lord Cornwallis and his aristocratic decadence for what he castigated as multiracial Carnavalesque excess, which undermined the discipline, hierarchy, and order he proudly associated with European military conduct and code of honor.

With Lord Cornwallis's capitulation at Yorktown, Virginia, in October 1781, the dream of self-liberation through military service, which many ex-slaves dreamed of, collapsed, although the British evacuated hundreds of enlisted blacks, and sometimes even their families. They were first removed to New York, then, with the British recognition of American independence in November 1782, thousands were resettled in the Caribbean, Nova Scotia, or England; many would later join the Sierra Leone project.<sup>33</sup> However, the majority were left behind, to a fate that spelled punishment and reenslavement. The black Hessians who ended up in Kassel were among the fortunate self-liberators who were able to maintain their freedom by making the decision as free women and men to leave behind their in-between American home and embrace an equally precarious new diasporic fate in Hesse.

### Captain Johann Ewald's Narrative and the Black Voice

The Hessians were bureaucrats; they kept records of every man who enlisted with them. Similar to the famous British *Black Loyalist Directory*, they entered a name, place of birth/origin, approximate age, army status, regiment, salary, benefits, equipment, and any career moves, reassignments, military misconduct, or punishments. In addition, local church books and the landgrave's budget records provide information about income, benefits, housing arrangements, births, marriages, deaths, baptisms, and confirmations. But there is no authentic black narrative, no documented black voice. Still, it is possible to identify at least traces of the black voice and reconstruct black agency by critically revisiting the white Hessian gaze and narrative.

As a test case for this critical revisiting and its applicability to my further research and writing, I will turn to Captain Johann Ewald's *Diary of the American*

War. Ewald,<sup>34</sup> orphaned son of a lower-middle-class family, was born in Kassel in 1744, joined the military service (Infantry Regiment Gilsa) as a cadet at age sixteen, and studied military science with the famous Jakob von Mauvillon at the Collegium Carolinum at Kassel. As captain of the elite Jaeger Corps, he left for North America in May 1776 and returned to Kassel in May 1784, after eight years of service in which he had participated in most of the major campaigns. He kept a diary, a curious medley of private and public narratives, a copy of which he sent to his superior in Hesse-Kassel, Minister of State and War von Jungkenn-Müntzer, at regular intervals. Despite its semipublic quality, it is of high value because it represents the experience and perspective not of an administrator but a man of active service, with a focus always on military activities. In it, Ewald displays no interest whatsoever in the racial composition of the colonies or in the institution of slavery; in fact, he usually speaks of servants or *Neger* rather than slaves. All the same, black Americans are a continuous presence in his narrative, at first surfacing only in the representational stasis of the formulaic reports on successful military expeditions “to collect Negroes and livestock,” or “to collect Negroes, forage, and cattle.”<sup>35</sup> There is stasis also in the fact that throughout the American campaigns the black women and men he encounters remain the anonymous “Negro,” “Negroes,” or “Refugees.” It is a stasis that must be qualified, however: the common Hessian soldier in his text, as in all Hessian order books, regimental journals, letters, diaries, or memoirs of the day, is never identified by name, either. Class rather than race thus defines the relationship between the white Hessian captain and the black Americans he meets.

And yet a close reading of the first interaction Ewald reports on 26 November 1776, only three weeks after his arrival in New York, reveals that this static “othering” of the black as an object of white agency is challenged from the very start by a discourse of black semi-individual agency that forces its way into the text and reformats the nondifferentiating white voice and gaze. This early encounter is representative of dozens of similar interactions narrated in this journal: a Hessian patrol captures “a Negro” who informs them “that an enemy corps stood in the vicinity of Newark, and also that there was a plantation situated an hour away which was not deserted by its occupants and had a stock of wine and beer.” Not only are the Jaegers able to successfully raid the plantation of its precious stock after “the Negro led us along the footpath through the woods”;<sup>36</sup> the information he provides on patriot troops under General Henry Lee in the Newark area also proves reliable and enabling for the Hessian and British forces.

In this brief, tightly constructed episode, a pattern emerges that will be confirmed and strengthened in later years. The “Negro” as war booty and tool transforms himself into a valuable informer and guide, thoroughly familiar with the local setting and situation, on whom the Hessians rapidly learn to rely as knowledgeable and trustworthy. He is not identified by name, there is no description of his physical appearance or status, no reference to his blackness aside from the

all-inclusive identification as “Negro,” and, most importantly, his motivation for turning informer is never investigated. The narratives do not explicitly evoke slavery; still, Ewald establishes a firm link between Negro and slave status. However, and this is of utmost importance, from that “Negro equals slave” identification, he implicitly extrapolates not exclusively and reductively black victimization and degradation but the Negro as potential and actual Hessian ally and partner against the patriot as slave master: black American intelligence and agency claim the right to speak in the Hessian text and reformat the encounter as a partnership ultimately controlled by black individual agency.

The impact of this black agency and voice in this journal becomes even more powerful and complex once we turn to the Southern campaigns of 1780, during which Ewald and his men, for the first time in their lives, enter a territory where people of African descent, as slaves, form a numerical majority. In the initial encounter with his first black Southerner, which Ewald records on 14 February, we can identify two competing narratives: a white “master” narrative of black deprivation and degradation, a model of racialized “othering”; and parallel, or perhaps even clashing with it, the black narrative of self-empowerment and agency—two seemingly conflicting, even incompatible, narratives. And yet, within a few pages, they merge.

Ewald’s memories of the event are structured by the Hessian’s shock at not being able to communicate with “these people.”<sup>37</sup> Cultural “othering” becomes a self-protective move to retain his authority as a white European and officer; race and class intersect. The Hessians are totally disoriented because they disembarked without maps or guides on Simmons (now Seabrook) Island off the South Carolina coast. All white inhabitants had fled from the island upon the approach of the British fleet. Fortunately, the Jaegers get hold of “a Negro boy of eleven or twelve years who knew the way there.” Ewald’s text focuses entirely on the black child’s “poor dialect,” his Gullah—which the white officer who depends absolutely on the boy’s knowledge calls simply “his gibberish.”<sup>38</sup> And yet, the youngster reduced to and defined by “gibberish” enters the text as a calm and circumspect scout who guides the Hessians safely through “an impenetrable morass.” The Jaegers know they can and have to depend on him, and Ewald expresses his sense of mutuality, while yet struggling to affirm the strict military hierarchy he has internalized through the man-above-child opposition, through the endearing yet emasculating formula of “our boy.”<sup>39</sup> Six days into the march through unknown, swampy territory, Ewald admits that now “[e]ach party had its own guide,” runaway slaves who take them expertly through the Cox Swamp. And yet, despite their expertise, Ewald again complains that “none of us could manage to talk with these people because of their bad dialect, even had we spoken with the tongues of angels.”<sup>40</sup> The inability to communicate is located exclusively with the black “other.” The black agency permeating the text clashes with the

writer's Eurocentric reading and evaluation. In a situation in which black expertise and power determine every move of the lost and desperate Hessian officer, he imposes a reading of cultural hegemony upon them that defines the black experts' language as deficient "gibberish"—rather than admitting to the Hessians' deficient English. And yet the black guides "make themselves known" as experts in the narrative, triumphing over the white racial reading. They transform the white Hessian monologue into a dialogue.

The multidimensionality and complexity of this episode is revealed in the formula of "these people" that Ewald employs: on the one hand, "these" is a gesture of racialized and hierarchical distancing; on the other hand, Ewald's usage of "people" illustrates that even after four years of exposure to the American slaveholding context that reduced the slave to chattel, the black protagonists in his narrative defy this denial of their humanity. In fact, the longer Ewald remains in the South, the more he speaks of refugee, worker, laborer, sailor, usually without racial assignment, focusing on class rather than race. Also, after only one month in South Carolina, the communication issue simply disappears from his journal, to be replaced by Ewald's expressions of sincere gratitude for the black support, both voluntary and enforced, upon which the European troops depend and which they receive from black Americans: gratitude for valuable information and precious work; for the enormous workloads they (are made to) shoulder during the difficult approach of Charleston through treacherous swamplands, when they, together with unidentified sailors and soldiers, carry cannons through endless marshes; for the information that the swamps can be crossed and drained; for hundreds of black workers who strengthen the redoubts and dig ditches around Charleston during the long and bloody siege.<sup>41</sup>

The precarious alliance between black and white that the Hessian narrative constructs is strictly hierarchical up to this point. Ewald never mentions blacks as soldiers. They enter the text only as informers, spies, and workers who excel in whatever they do, but he leaves intact the hierarchy he as officer constructs between the value of military and nonmilitary action, between a white European performance of the superior military task and the supportive, essential, yet inferior service work performed by the army's black allies. However, he also maintains this differentiation when elaborating on the labor performed by equally anonymous British sailors and laborers. When the European forces finally take Charleston in May 1780, the social hierarchy he has internalized reveals the essentializing, racialized dimension that defines it to its very core: Ewald writes that Charleston boasts a population of "six thousand whites and mulattoes . . . , without counting the Negroes."<sup>42</sup> His white gaze continues to battle the black agency that permeates his narrative. At the same time, the cultural hegemony Ewald evokes is constantly being challenged and undermined by a discourse of mutuality, dependence, and respect that is forced upon him by black agency.

The battle between the black and the white voice pervades the entire narrative, revealing the power of both European discourses of class and race and of black determination to penetrate and subvert these structures.

The balance is tipped from hierarchy toward mutuality during the second Southern military involvement of Ewald's Jaegers in 1781,<sup>43</sup> which takes Ewald to Richmond, Portsmouth, and Norfolk, into North Carolina, and ultimately to Gloucester and Yorktown, Virginia, where he witnesses Lord Cornwallis's defeat in October. In May 1781, as commanding officer in Norfolk, he trains twelve fugitive slaves as cavalry and even has them "mounted and armed." This decision is based on a scarcity of European personnel as a result of malaria and a long, bloody campaign. Yet the Hessian officer also leaves no doubt that, despite their extremely brief training period, the refugees provide him with "thoroughly good service." Given the chance to excel in the military realm, the black recruits perform as any good soldier should, without racial qualification. The explanation Ewald offers at first smacks of patriarchal condescension: "I sought to win them by good treatment, to which they were not accustomed."<sup>44</sup> Yet Ewald's journal is full of similar references to the white Hessian commoners under his command, wherein he affirms his sense of paternal responsibility as an officer, as well as the loyal service he receives in return. Again the Hessian notion of class stratification is more important to the narrative than race.

The degree to which black Southerners acquire voice and control in Ewald's diary is revealed during the catastrophic British defeat by patriot and French troops in Virginia in the summer and fall of 1781. Only two days before Lord Cornwallis capitulates at Yorktown on 17 October, the British, facing shortages and military defeat, drive thousands of black camp followers from their camps. Although he is fully aware of the seriousness of the British situation, Ewald is appalled at this "cruel happening" he "would just as soon forget to record." But he does record it. For him, these black Americans have transformed themselves into more than mere tools the army had "taken along to despoil the countryside," more than mere laborers they had used "to good advantage and set ... free." He embraces "these unhappy people," "these unfortunates," as "our black friends," and he cannot bear to give them up to the mercy of "their cruel masters." While, as a rule, the British act would be justified as self-defense, Ewald affirms his personal responsibility as well as the blacks' right to freedom, arguing that "we should have thought more about their deliverance at this time."<sup>45</sup> The anonymous black war "booty" of the early journal—people treated as things who had to struggle for voice each time they performed in the white narrative—have reformatted themselves as women and men with the right to human respect, deliverance, and freedom.

Ewald's diary constructs, marks, and mediates race and class difference and otherness. In this, it is representative of the autobiographical Hessian texts produced during and after the war. Yet the black presence—two hundred years later



Toni Morrison would diagnose an “Africanist Presence”—in the white narrative succeeds in renegotiating these static constructions of racial, social, and cultural alterity in diverse and complex ways. It thus initiates the intriguing dynamic of these narratives and powerfully challenges the exclusive authority of the white Hessian monologue.

On 3 November 1781, the defeated British and Hessian officers boarded the vessels at Yorktown that would take them back to New York. Despite American protests, Ewald records that, thanks to Cornwallis’s intervention, more than two hundred black and white servants and camp followers “of both sexes” and races were on board the *Andrew* alone (the same holds true for other ships of the fleet), hiding their faces; “probably,” he states, they “were contraband.”<sup>46</sup> Ewald seems relieved that at least some of “our black friends” could be saved. The black soldiers in Hessian service, as well as their dependents, would have to wait two more years in New York before they could be shipped to Hesse. The memoirs of a fugitive black minister in the British forces, Boston King, published in 1798, recall that these New York years of waiting and uncertainty were marked by “inexpressible anguish and terror,”<sup>47</sup> caused especially by the refugees’ dread that their former masters would track them down and reclaim the self-liberators as “property.”

### Concluding Remarks

The slaves’ decision to run from their American masters and enlist with the Hessians was an act of self-liberation. That they continued to move and decide as free individuals—expressed, as we saw, in von Knyphausen’s statement that “some have already decided to return to Hesse with us”—was confirmed as the time approached for the Hessians to depart from the North American continent. Like their white Hessian comrades, they chose between three options, which the HETRINA records document: large numbers simply deserted and opted for an American future, perhaps hoping against hope that the young republic would abandon the pernicious and inhuman system of chattel slavery. Others, perhaps connected through family ties, asked for regular dismissal, which was granted. A third group of approximately seventy regulars chose migration to Germany, and were supported in this by their white Hessian superiors—tangible proof that they had served to satisfaction and were acknowledged as fellow Hessian soldiers and subjects. Also, we have to add to our list an unidentified number of dependents as well as officers’ personal servants and purchased or foraged slaves. These dependents and slaves certainly had little choice and limited agency.

The last Hessian troops, among them Ewald and his Jaegers, arrived in Kassel on 18 May 1784. They were inspected by the landgrave and, the profitable British subsidies having expired, dramatically reduced in numbers on the spot. Now considered military failures and financial liabilities, many Hessian com-

mon soldiers, all so-called strangers from other states, and especially all elderly and wounded servicemen, were dismissed from service, finally free(d) to return to their families and homes. “All services performed were forgotten and we poor ‘Americans,’ who had flattered ourselves with the best reception, were deceived in our expectations in the most undeserved way,”<sup>48</sup> an embittered Ewald concludes. However, the landgrave chose to confirm all black American regulars, for they would enhance his glory among the German and European nobility and royalty. In his official proclamation for the returning troops, Friedrich II decreed on 31 October 1783: “No Negroes are to be dismissed; but they shall all be retained, and until they can be transferred to my First Batallion Garde they shall receive a monthly bonus payment from the accumulated peace budget from my royal chatoul.”<sup>49</sup> Within months, all black Hessian soldiers were integrated into the landgrave’s personal elite corps and served in and around Kassel. American Negroes/*Neger* and fugitive slaves were thus redefined as privileged *Mohren* of an enormous representational value for their white sovereign and patron. They and their family members were transformed from American slaves into the landgrave’s subjects,<sup>50</sup> with both the utter dependence on his goodwill and the powerful protection and respect their new position in court entailed in this strictly hierarchical society where, as Anne Kuhlmann’s chapter in this volume illustrates, status came with proximity to power. They had freed themselves from the terrors of American chattel slavery, hoping, perhaps against hope and their deeper knowledge of human nature, that by relocating to Hesse-Kassel, they would move toward a freedom beyond race, toward a freedom without racism. In a Germany that was in the process of developing “scientific” theories of race, racial difference, and racialized nationhood, race—though in the new and unexpected local German expressions this volume traces across time—would continue to be their and their descendants’ daily companion. But in Kassel they were free, their human status uncontested and affirmed.

## Notes

1. Kassel was spelled Cassell until 1928. For consistency, however, it will be spelled Kassel throughout this text.
2. Kirchenbuch reformierte Gemeinde Kassel (KGK), Landeskirchliches Archiv Kassel (LKA), 78.
3. KGK, LKA, 78.
4. KGK, LKA, 995.
5. Inge Auerbach, *Die Hessen in Amerika, 1776–1783* (Darmstadt, Germany: Selbstverlag der Hessischen Historischen Kommission Darmstadt und der Historischen Kommission für Hessen, 1996), 357–86; Inge Auerbach, F.G. Franz, and O. Fröhlich, *Hessische Truppen im*

- Amerikanischen Unabhängigkeitskrieg (HETRINA)*, 6 vols. (Marburg, Germany: Archivschule Marburg-Institut für Archivwissenschaft, 1972–87); Graham R. Hodges, *The Black Loyalist Directory: African Americans in Exile after the American Revolution* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996); George F. Jones, “The Black Hessians: Negroes Recruited by the Hessians in South Carolina and Other Colonies,” *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 83 (1982): 287–302; and Wolfram Schäfer, “Von ‘Kammermohren,’ ‘Mohren’-Tambouren und ‘Ost-Indianern’: Anmerkungen zu Existenzbedingungen und Lebensformen einer Minderheit im 18. Jahrhundert unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Residenzstadt Kassel,” in *Fremdsein: Minderheiten und Gruppen in Hessen*, ed. Andreas C. Bimmer and Heinrich J. Dingeldein (Marburg, Germany: Jonas, 1988), 35–80.
6. Joseph P. Tustin, “Introduction,” in Johann Ewald, *Diary of the American War: A Hessian Journal: Captain Johann Ewald, Field Jäger Corps*, ed. and trans. Joseph P. Tustin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), xix.
  7. Hodges, *Black Loyalist Directory*, 119ff.
  8. Heide Wunder, Christina Vanja, and Karl-Hermann Wegner, eds., *Kassel im 18. Jahrhundert: Residenz und Stadt* (Kassel, Germany: Euregio Verlag, 2000).
  9. Jones, “The Black Hessians”; Schäfer, “Von ‘Kammermohren,’” 41ff.; Auerbach, *Die Hessen*, 357ff.
  10. For a detailed list of archives in Great Britain, Canada, and the United States, see Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 333–40.
  11. See, e.g., Hodges, *Black Loyalist Directory*, 120–21; Ira Berlin, “The Revolution in Black Life,” in *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), 351–82; Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Frey, *Water from the Rock*; Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, [1961] 1996); Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006); James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783–1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); and Ellen Gibson Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks* (New York: Putnam, 1976).
  12. Examples will be discussed below.
  13. See the example of ten-year-old David, a “likely boy” purchased by the Hessian Major General von Kospoth in Philadelphia and transported to Germany aboard the *Hind*: Hodges, *Black Loyalist Directory*, 119.
  14. Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), esp. chap. 1.
  15. For a detailed list of these enlistments, see Auerbach, *Die Hessen*, 357–86.
  16. Hessisches Staatsarchiv Marburg (StAM) Best. 10c, SR 68, f. 14 v. See also Auerbach, *Die Hessen*, 371–72, 385.
  17. James Sidbury, *Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
  18. Peter Martin, *Schwarze Teufel, edle Mohren: Afrikaner in Geschichte und Bewusstsein der Deutschen* (Hamburg, Germany: Hamburger Edition, 2001), esp. chap. 4; Sander L. Gilman, *On Blackness without Blacks: Essays on the Image of the Black in Germany* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982), chap. 4; and Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), chaps. 5–6.
  19. Nell Irvin Painter, “Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth’s Knowing and Becoming Known,”

- Journal of American History* 81 (1984): 462. See also Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).
20. Schäfer, "Von 'Kammernohren,'" 38ff.; Uwe Peter Böhm, "Farbige in Hessischen Diensten," *Zeitschrift für Heereskunde* 47 (1983): 81–84; and M. Rischmann, "Mohren als Spielleute und Musiker in der preussischen Armee," *Zeitschrift für Heeres- und Uniformkunde* 91/93 (1936): 82–84.
  21. Carl Leopold Baurmeister, *Revolution in America: Confidential Letters and Journals 1776–1784 of Adjutant General Major Baurmeister of the Hessian Forces*, ed. and trans. Bernard A. Uhlendorf (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1957).
  22. Graham R. Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613–1863* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), esp. chap. 5; and Graham R. Hodges, "Liberty and Constraint: The Limits of Revolution," in *Slaves in New York*, ed. Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris (New York: The New Press, 2005), 91–109.
  23. HETRINA is short for *Hessische Truppen im amerikanischen Unabhängigkeitskrieg*, a six-volume index that lists all individuals enlisted as Hessian soldiers and officers during the American War of Independence. The index was assembled by the Archivschule (archival school) Marburg in the 1970s.
  24. Baurmeister, *Revolution in America*, 131.
  25. Friedrich J. von Günderode, *Briefe eines Reisenden über den gegenwärtigen Zustand von Cassel* (Frankfurt: Fleischer, 1781), 85. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
  26. For a theoretical conceptualization of the importance of context, see Demetrius L. Eudell, *The Political Language of Emancipation in the British Caribbean and the U.S. South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 37.
  27. Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 67–68.
  28. Baurmeister, *Revolution in America*, 89.
  29. See Ortrud Wörner-Heil, "'Extreme Formalität und Gleichheit': Freimaurerlogen in Kassel von 1766–1794," in Wunder, Vanja, and Wegner, eds., *Kassel im 18. Jahrhundert*, 229–61.
  30. Hodges, *Black Loyalist Directory*, 120.
  31. "Bericht des Generalleutnants v. Knyphausen an den Landgrafen," vol. 1, 17 October 1777, StAM 10c,1/1a, 18–19.
  32. Ewald, *Diary of the American War*, 305.
  33. Schama, *Rough Crossings*; and Walker, *The Black Loyalists*. In 1792, almost 1,200 black refugees living in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, as well as a large number of "black poor" refugees living in England, migrated to Sierra Leone. This exodus was organized and funded by the British abolitionist Sierra Leone Company.
  34. For biographical information on Johann Ewald, see Tustin, "Introduction," xix–xxxii.
  35. Ewald, *Diary of the American War*, 120, 214.
  36. *Ibid.*, 20.
  37. *Ibid.*, 199.
  38. *Ibid.*, 197.
  39. *Ibid.*
  40. *Ibid.*, 199.
  41. Frey, *Water from the Rock*, 108–10; Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 100–20. For contemporary Hessian renderings of the siege, see Bernhard A. Uhlendorf, ed. and trans., *The Siege of Charleston: With an Account of the Province of South Carolina: Diaries and Letters of Hessian Officers* (Cranbury, NJ: The Scholar's Bookshelf, [1938] 2007).
  42. Ewald, *Diary of the American War*, 240.
  43. After Charleston had been taken by the British and Hessian forces in March 1780, Ewald and his Jaegers were ordered back to New York. See Ewald, *Diary of the American War*, chap. 2.
  44. Ewald, *Diary of the American War*, 298.

45. Ibid., 335–36.
46. Ibid., 343.
47. Boston King, “Memoirs of the Life of Boston King, a Black Preacher: Written by Himself, during his Residence at Kingswood-School,” in *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the 18th Century*, ed. Vincent Carretta (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 356. King’s memoir was originally published in London in 1798.
48. Ewald, *Diary of the American War*, 361.
49. “Journal von dem hochfürstlichen Hessischen, des General Major von Knoblauch aus dem Amerikanischen Krieg, von anno 1776 bis anno 1783,” StAM 10e, I 12, 618–19.
50. For a sophisticated analysis of the concept of subjecthood, focusing on Britain but also in many aspects applicable to the Hessian context, see Christopher Leslie Brown, “Empire without Slaves: British Concepts of Emancipation in the Age of the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 56 (1999): 273–306: “In the eighteenth century, the meaning of subjectship retained the quasi-medieval connotations of a personal bond between individual and lord. Subjectship could be natural or acquired. . . . In either case, subjectship was understood as natural, perpetual, and immutable, a civic analogue to the relation between parent and child. The relationship entailed obligations: the monarch owed the subject protection, and the subject owed allegiance” (282).

