Coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516, the word “utopia” — an amalgam of the ancient Greek ὑ (not), τόπος (place) and the classical Latin suffix -ia — describes, in its eponymous work, an imaginary island with a perfect social, legal, and political system. Despite the island’s perfection, More’s work leaves open the question of whether this non-place is truly ideal.

How is Germany’s identity imagined, both from inside and outside its borders, as a utopia or as its negation, a dystopia? At the same time, how does the notion of utopia help us understand German writers’ and artists’ visions of places beyond their country’s borders? The questionable aspects of utopia may also become visible in cultural contact, contact that prompts alterations of experiences, practices, and worldviews.