

THE COLORS OF MY SKIN: THE MAKING OF BLACK GERMAN IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Undraa Lhamsuren: *The Colors of My Skin: The Making of Black German Identity*
(Under the direction of Priscilla Layne)

To those belonging to the majority white culture in Germany, the concept of someone being both Black and German can seem a contradiction in terms. Due to the way German citizenship laws have historically been tied to blood, and German blood associated with whiteness, Black Germans have always had a hard time being recognized as full-fledged German citizens despite having a German birthplace, citizenship, and socialization. Specifically, this misrecognition as foreigners, i.e., as non-Germans, leads to Black Germans being discriminated against, underrepresented, misrepresented, systematically excluded, and simply ignored in the country they call home. Devoting each chapter to examples of a particular literary genre such as life writing, poems, a play, and a novel, this dissertation explores the ways Black German authors push back against the exclusionary tendencies and practices that they face in the majority culture, fight for equality and recognition of their history and presence and define themselves on their own terms as both Black and German. In my analysis, I use the analytical term melodrama, or the family melodrama in particular which I define as an expressive mode that looks at how racial tensions are expressed in the domestic space. Family melodrama is also a useful analytic tool as it portrays clear moral categories of good vs. evil and focuses on a central character who has been victimized in some way. I demonstrate how employing melodrama allows Black German authors not only to critique racism but also evoke sympathy as well as offer hope for a minority group such as themselves.

In loving memory of my grandparents, J. Orolmaa and M. Ayurzana

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

At one of the readings of his life writing in a small German town, Black German writer Thomas Usleber was asked a question by someone from the audience that threw him off, “Aber im Großen und Ganzen gefällt es Ihnen doch hier bei uns, nicht wahr?”¹ What stunned him was that even though he had often heard variations of this question before, Usleber had never heard it after spending an hour stating explicitly and elaborately that he had always seen himself as being part of his native Germany. The man’s question suddenly made Usleber realize that he would never be able to reach those depths in the minds of people who had internalized this notion of division into “us,” i.e., white Germans, versus “them,” meaning Black Germans² and other People of Color who are perceived as foreigners. More importantly, Usleber finally understood that as a Black German, despite having been born and raised in Germany as a son of a white German mother and an African American father, he would never be part of this imagined “us,”

¹ (“But on the whole, you do like living here with us, don’t you?”) (All the translations are my own unless otherwise stated). Thomas Usleber. “Welche Figur passt nicht in die Reihe?” In: Marion Kraft (ed.). *Kinder der Befreiung* (Münster: UNRAST-Verlag, 2015): 97.

² I use the term “Black German” as it is now more widely used and is seen to be more inclusive than “Afro-German” even though they are both treated as synonyms. “Black German” refers broadly to descendants of interracial marriages between either African Americans and white Germans or Africans and white Germans. Since *Black* is not meant as an adjective describing skin color (such as *white*) but is a political term, it is capitalized. Sometimes, especially by Black German activists and Hip-Hop artists, the term *Afro-German* is used referring to “persons of African ancestry identifying as German.” [Fatima El-Tayeb, 2003] Though sometimes used interchangeably, the distinction between these two terms points to where one might locate one’s origins, be it in the Americas (its Black population originating in slavery) or in Europe (colonialism). Additionally, the term “Afro-German” is seen as problematic by some, as it excludes people living in Germany without a German parent. Therefore, “Black German” is preferred because those living in Germany without a German parent but identify as belonging to the African diaspora can also be subsumed under Black Germans. More on this see Fatima El-Tayeb, “If you can’t pronounce my name, you can just call me pride”: Afro-German Activism, Gender and Hip Hop (*Gender & History* 15.3, 2003): 461. And Priscilla Layne, “Don’t Look So Sad Because You’re a Little Negro.” (*Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender and the Black International*, 4:2, 2015): 171.

i.e., he would never be recognized as a full-fledged German citizen by the majority. This inability on the part of many white Germans, Michelle Wright argues, “to understand so simple a concept as one being both Black *and* German is most likely unique to the Afro-German experience.”³ They are perceived as either *Africans* or *African Americans* and by extension as *foreigners* but never really as *Germans*. This misrecognition as foreigners, i.e., as non-Germans, can lead to Black Germans being discriminated against, underrepresented, misrepresented, and excluded in their own country. This dissertation explores the dual-purpose Black German authors pursue in dealing with the above-mentioned misrecognition: on the one hand, through their works Black Germans push back against the exclusionary tendencies and practices that they face in the majority white culture by evoking sympathy for a minority group such as themselves. More precisely, by framing their narrative according to melodramatic tropes, they situate themselves as sympathetic characters and racist white Germans as villains. On the other hand, they define themselves on their own terms as both Black and German, and by extension challenge and redefine the concept of Germanness. By analyzing contemporary Black German literature, I show how Black German authors present a positive presence of Black people in Germany – positive in the sense of not only stereotypical depictions as drug dealers or criminals, as Black people have often been portrayed in the majority white culture, but also acknowledging Black people as full, complicated subjects. This positive representation serves as a role model for others to draw inspiration from and a way for Black authors to write themselves into the nation’s literary history.

³ Michelle M. Wright. *Others-From-Within From Without*. (*Callaloo* 26.2, 2003): 298.

Structure of this chapter

In this introductory chapter, I lay the theoretical groundwork and provide the context that will be helpful for my analysis of selected works by Black German authors in subsequent chapters of the dissertation. First, I make my own positionality clear as a non-Black person and what it means to write on Black German literature as one. I will also give the reasons and goals for undertaking this project. Next, I will provide an overview of the state of the field of Black German activism starting with the generation born before and after WWII to the current generation of Black German activists and authors. I will argue that all of the authors, whose work I analyze in this project, employ family melodrama to challenge racial discrimination while evoking sympathy for Black Germans. I will explain how the nineteenth-century Victorian domestic melodramas' focus on home as the site of broad struggles between good and evil in personal terms is especially helpful for framing Black Germans' domestic situation including their white German mother and (absent) Black father. In addition to employing family melodrama, all the authors in this project also draw on Critical Whiteness as an aesthetic choice to center Blackness and Black experience in their works. I trace the emergence of the field of Critical Whiteness, from its beginnings in US academia to its arrival and use in Germany, spearheaded by Black German feminist scholars. To give my readings of works (set in the twentieth and twenty-first century) in subsequent chapters a historical context, I follow the presence of Black people in Germany starting with the twelfth century, where the first encounter between Black people and Germans was established, through the German colonial period, WWI, WWII, the postwar period both in West Germany and East Germany until present-day. I end the chapter by briefly demonstrating the use of family melodrama in several poems by Black German poet, activist, and scholar May Ayim who was considered to be one of the pioneers and trailblazers of

Black German activism and literature. While Ayim was not the first Black German author to use family melodrama, she was one of the most significant one to influence subsequent generations of Black German authors and writers of Color.

A word on positionality

In writing this dissertation on Black German literature as a non-Black person, I would like to start off by being transparent about my own positionality as a researcher. It is not my intention to explain Black German experience, nor do I want to appropriate or assume a Black perspective. Nor do I intend to speak on behalf of Black German people. Speaking for or about others constitutes what Angelika Fenner calls a “discursive imperialism – of either erasing previous identities or inscribing new hierarchies.”⁴ For, the “rituals of speaking are politically constituted by power relations of domination, exploitation, and subordination. Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle.”⁵ My experiences as a Person of Color overlap with the unique experiences of Black people to a very limited extent. I have experienced what it is like to be misrecognized as an “Other,” i.e., non-German, which inevitably leads to experiencing exclusion and misrepresentation, and worse still racism, in the majority white culture. But since I recognize that my experience of racism as a Person of Color cannot be equated with experiencing anti-Blackness, I follow Sara Lennox’s lead and undertake this project as a gesture of solidarity and alliance, hoping to add to the production of critical knowledge in Black German studies and interrogation of whiteness and German identity.⁶ My hope is that increasing US publications on Black German studies will

⁴ Angelika Fenner. *Race Under Reconstruction in German Cinema*. (University of Toronto Press, 2011): 12.

⁵ Linda Alcoff. The Problem of Speaking for Other. In: *Cultural Critique*, No. 20 (Winter, 1991-1992): 15.

⁶ Sara Lennox, Introduction to *Remapping Black Germany*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016): 2.

make it increasingly harder for the German academy, the media, and the mainstream for that matter to ignore or exclude Black German scholars and activists, and by extension make it difficult to keep scholars of Color from becoming active producers of knowledge instead of passive objects of discourse. This exclusion can lead to absurd situations such as when in conferences and panel discussions on race, racism, colonialism, and migration, racialized scholars usually don't get invited to speak, and when they do, it's either someone from the US as an "expert" on racism ("Rassismus als strukturelles Problem [...] existiert vielleicht in den USA, aber sicher nicht in Deutschland.") or Black Germans and other minoritized groups are relegated to the role of the "affected" (*Betroffene*) or "native informants."⁷ As Noah Sow argues, "ohne Schwarze Personen als Verantwortliche bleiben Black Studies *Die Erforschung der Anderen*," making Black people, and other minority populations, objects to be studied rather than participating subjects.⁸ According to Peggy Piesche, Black German studies is still either subjected to a niche position, a subfield among many others, within the German academy, or Black German scholars have no other alternative than to collaborate with white scholars, who then set the terms and conditions.⁹ In sum, my project is directed at white German scholars to emphasize the importance of including marginalized and alternative voices and worldviews, no longer as "die Stimmen der Betroffenen..." (*the voices of the affected...*) but as active participants and producers of knowledge.

⁷ Fatima El-Tayeb. *Undeutsch*. (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016): 11.

⁸ "Without Black people in charge, Black Studies remain *The Study of the Other*." Noah Sow. *The Beast in the Belly*. In: *Heimatkunde*. Migrationspolitisches Portal, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 8. Dezember, 2014, <https://heimatkunde.boell.de/2014/12/08/beast-belly> Last accessed on December 20, 2019.

⁹ Peggy Piesche / Sara Lennox. Epilogue of Epistemologies and Positionalities. A Conversation, Berlin, October 21, 2014. In: Sara Lennox. *Remapping Black Germany*. (University of Massachusetts Press, 2016): 277-279.

State of the Field

As mentioned above, I hope to contribute to the production of critical knowledge on contemporary Black German literature that challenges the very notion of Germanness. According to Black German historian Fatima El-Tayeb, existing notions of “German” in mainstream culture are characterized not so much by who is German as by definitions of who is “absolutely *not* German.”¹⁰ This leads to exclusions of anyone who is visibly different – including Black Germans. In order to counteract such exclusionary tendencies in mainstream German culture, Black German authors and scholars *before* 1980s, i.e., the time the second Black German movement gained international prominence,¹¹ engaged in what Black German scholar Peggy Piesche calls “counter-narratives.”¹² Without any communal structure or a collective memory to draw on and faced with a hostile dominant culture, earlier Black German authors and scholars born in the colonial era, the Weimar period, as well as in the postwar period spanning the decades from the 1960s-1980s had to position themselves vis-à-vis older German arguments about race and identity, asserting and insisting on their Germanness and their belonging to the German culture and nation. This effort is evident in the titles of their publications as in the case of Theodor Wonja Michael (born 1925) and his life writing, *Deutsch sein und schwarz dazu* (2013, *Black German*, 2017), Ika Hügel-Marshall (born 1947) and her *Daheim unterwegs. Ein deutsches Leben* (1998, *Invisible Woman: Growing up Black in Germany*, 2001) or Charles M.

¹⁰ Fatima El-Tayeb, “If you can’t pronounce my name, you can just call me pride”: Afro-German Activism, Gender and Hip Hop (*Gender & History* 15.3, 2003): 464.

¹¹ The first Black German movement occurred during German colonial times in Africa between 1884-1914 where mixed-race children from German men and African women, servants to colonial officials, workers, instructors, children of elites from the colonies came to Germany to study and work. More on this see Robbie Aitken and Eve Rosenhaft. *Black Germany*. (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹² Peggy Piesche / Sara Lennox. Epilogue of Epistemologies and Positionalities. A Conversation, Berlin, October 21, 2014. In: Sara Lennox. *Remapping Black Germany*. (University of Massachusetts Press, 2016): 275.

Huber (born 1956 as Karl-Heinz Huber) and his *Ein Niederbayer im Senegal* (2005, *A Lower Bavarian in Senegal*). In the year 1986 then, Black German feminists published the seminal anthology, *Farbe bekennen* (*Showing Our Colors*, 1991) that included research done by May Ayim, who uncovered the history of Black people in Germany dating as far back as the twelfth century. In doing so, they were able to contextualize and connect the Black German experience to a larger transnational Black Diaspora perspective.¹³

No longer merely reactive to dominant discourses, Piesche argues that Black German authors and scholars of today have been actively producing “alternative knowledge”;¹⁴ in other words, work that no longer seeks to explain Black German identity to the white majority; and work that is beyond “the pursuit of recognition, understanding, or empathy by those who are different.”¹⁵ In order to understand what this means exactly, one needs to acknowledge the paradigm shift that took place between the older generations of Black German authors and scholars, i.e., those born in the colonial era, the Weimar period, and after WWII, and newer generations born in the 1980s up until the present. Those Black Germans, born after 1945 and politically active in the 1980s, rejected the practice of having to constantly assert, explain, and justify one’s existence that older generations had to do as energy-draining and agency-draining. Instead, especially since the 1990s, Black Germans have turned to more of a transnational or global diasporic perspective, thus drawing on transnational collective Black experience. For this reason, and not least because Germany has always been opposed to the concept of bi-nationality

¹³ Towards the end of this introduction, I give a more detailed overview of the history of Black presence in Germany.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Noah Sow. *Diaspora Dynamics*. (*Journal of African Literature Association*, 2017): 29.

or multi-nationality, some Black Germans “opt out” and choose the non-German part of their identity to self-identify, saying for example, “No, I’m not German. I’m Ghanaian.”¹⁶ This “alternative knowledge” production by today’s Black Germans, i.e., works that do not explain Blackness, is thus geared towards providing positive and diversified representations of Black people *for* Black people, and allowing them “to imagine a future in which they can not only exist but thrive.”¹⁷ *Positive* here does not denote a moral component, but rather it stands for representations of Black people, whose lives aren’t reduced to oppression or overdetermined by structural racism, but rather representations of Blackness that don’t need to be recognized by white people.¹⁸

As mentioned above, Black German scholars and artists today no longer feel the need to explain or justify their existence and belonging to Germany compared to earlier generations of Black Germans. This is mostly due, on the one hand, to the tremendous foundational work done by Black German feminists in the mid-1980s by uncovering the history of Black people in German-speaking lands, contextualizing lived experiences of Black Germans, and creating a community that led to the founding of the Initiative of Black Germans (Initiative Schwarzer Menschen in Deutschland; ISD) and the Black women’s organization ADEFRA (Schwarze Frauen in Deutschland; *Black Women in Germany*), among other things. On the other hand, the increasing normalcy and what scholar Dirk Göttsche calls the “mainstreaming of Afro-German

¹⁶ Noah Sow. *Activists // Academia: Visions and Challenges for Black German Studies 2.0*. Keynote speech at the “Transnational Perspectives on Black Germany” 2018 conference by The Black German Heritage and Research Association (BGHRA) at the University of Toronto. <http://bghra.org/2018-conference-program/> Last accessed July 20, 2020.

¹⁷ Priscilla Layne. *The Stakes of Representation and Fantasy in Black German Theater: Simone Dede Ayivi’s First Black Woman in Space*. “Transnational Perspectives on Black Germany” 2018 conference by BGHRA. <http://bghra.org/2018-conference-program/> Last accessed July 21, 2020.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

experience” beyond a discourse of victimization is also possible due to the growing diversity, openness, and the multicultural transformation of the German society along with increased global mobility and communication.¹⁹ One example of a Black German of the current generation is Maciré, a spoken word performer, featured in Natasha A. Kelly’s *Millis Erwachen (Milli’s Awakening, 2018)*, a short film followed by a print edition, in which Kelly featured the voices of eight Black German female artists. Born in Bremen 1995, Maciré attended an Afro-German playing group, an Afro-German children’s group, and later founded an Afro-German youth group. This early immersion in the community, we learn, strengthened Maciré’s Afro-German identity and resulted in her self-confident awareness as a Black German.²⁰ She is of the opinion that the liberation of Blacks (Germans) can and should be done without white people:

Ständig Menschen daran zu erinnern, dass unser Leben einen Wert hat, sagt etwas über uns aus. Warum müssen wir das ständig machen? [...] Bei mir ist es inzwischen so, dass es mir leichter fällt, einfach zu akzeptieren, dass es so ist. Es gibt eine Entmenschlichung von Schwarzen Körpern immer noch und ich werde mich nicht daran abarbeiten, *weiße* Leute daran zu erinnern, dass mein Leben einen Wert hat [...]. Für mich persönlich ist es nicht etwas, was ich mir ständig sagen muss. [...] Und ich brauche es nicht mehr. Es ist mir egal. Ich glaube inzwischen tatsächlich, für eine ernsthafte Befreiung braucht es weiße Leute nicht. Oder sollte es sie nicht brauchen.²¹

Maciré has realized that it is easier and less energy-draining if she stopped doing what she calls “24/7 damit beschäftigt, mir irgendwelche Abwehrstrategien zu überlegen” and just accepted that she can’t change people’s minds.²²

¹⁹ Dirk Göttsche. Self-Assertion, Intervention, and Achievement. In: Sara Lennox. *Remapping Black Germany* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2016): 76.

²⁰ Natasha A. Kelly. *Millis Erwachen* (Berlin: Orlanda Buchverlag, 2019).

²¹ (“Constantly reminding people that our lives have value, says something about us. Why do we have to do this all the time? [...] By now, it has become easier for me to accept that this is the case. There is still this dehumanization of Black bodies, and I won’t work to remind *white* people that my life has a value [...]. For me personally, it’s not something I have to tell myself all the time. [...] And I don’t need it anymore. I don’t care. I actually believe that our liberation doesn’t need white people. Or shouldn’t need them.”), Natasha A. Kelly.

²² (“I think about all sorts of defense strategies 24/7”), Natasha A. Kelly.

As we've seen, starting with the older generations of Black Germans, i.e., those born before WWII, and those born in the postwar period, white Germans have excluded them by misrecognizing and misnaming them as *Africans*, *Afro Americans*, *mixed-race*, and "Ausländer" (*foreigner*), just to name a few. Black Germans have had to actively push back against this misrecognition and claim their agency as well as their self-definition, as we will see later on in this chapter when I give a brief summary of Black German presence in Germany. While older generations of Black Germans asserted their Germanness and belonging to the German nation, the younger generations, by contrast, no longer feel the need to ask for their recognition by white Germans. In other words, Black Germans' process of self-definition has always been evolving and in flux. In writing about "identity," I follow Stuart Hall's definition, namely, "instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact" [...] "we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process."²³ Or in the specific context of Black Germans who engage with "multi-layered identities," i.e., "complex ways of knowing and being African, Black, [and] German."²⁴

Family Melodrama

In evoking sympathy for a minority group such as themselves, Black German authors, I argue, rely on the mode of family melodrama. While melodrama has a long genealogy, going back as far as ancient Greece, I am specifically borrowing the analytic term "family melodrama" from film studies. In my project I demonstrate how family melodrama, which looks at how racial tensions are expressed in the domestic space, allows Black Germans to name and confront the

²³ Stuart Hall. Cultural Identity and Diaspora. In: Jonathan Rutherford (ed.). *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990): 257.

²⁴ Maureen Maisha Auma / Eric Otieno / Peggy Piesche. 'Reclaiming Our Time' in African Studies: Conversations from the Perspective of Black Studies Movement in Germany. (*Critical African Studies*, Vol. 12, Nr. 3, 2020): 334.

problem of race in German society while also allowing them to occupy the point of view of the victim. Having readers thus identify with the victim, who is morally in the right, is an important part of how melodrama functions. What makes family melodrama so useful for evoking sympathy for Black Germans is its dependency on clear moral categories of good vs evil, as well as its focus on a central character who has been victimized in some way. What is uniquely characteristic about the domestic situation of those Black Germans born before WWII as well as the postwar period until the 1980s is that most grew up with their white German mother while their African or African American father left for his home country shortly after the birth of their child often due to immigration restrictions and/or familial obligations. The fathers, therefore, had very little or no influence on their child's upbringing. As a result, for many Black Germans, the process of identity formation invariably involves the search for the missing father, i.e., the only Black parent, with whom they could identify and, more importantly, who could help them understand and deal with racism in a majority-white society. Additionally, bell hooks argues that "the absent man, the absent father has been the constant sign" white people point to when they want to critique Black families while elevating the white nuclear family as "the only truly healthy family system."²⁵ The absence of a Black father, or a Black parent, leaves Black German children thus more vulnerable to the threats and prejudices of a majority-white society, therefore intensifying their experience of exclusion. In addition, white German women were often criticized and ostracized for having sexual relations with Black men since miscegenation was considered a serious sin in the postwar period.²⁶ Therefore, Black Germans' experience with

²⁵ bell hooks. *We Real Cool. Black Men and Masculinity*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2004): 101.

²⁶ Also see Maria Höhn, *GIs and Fräuleins: The German-American Encounter in the 1950s West Germany*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

racism often revolves around their domestic space.

The term “family melodrama” was first coined and defined by film historian Thomas Elsaesser to explain the dynamics at work in Hollywood films from the first half of the twentieth century and in particular the 1940s and 1950s. Elsaesser defines family melodrama as an expressive mode that exposes the tensions and contradictions in “the middle-class American home,” most notably the “claustrophobic atmosphere of the bourgeois home.”²⁷ According to Elsaesser, directors of movies such as *Way Down East* from the 1920s managed to transfer explicit political topics onto a “personalized plane” and “emotionally charged family situations” by means of melodramatic effects.²⁸ According to Elsaesser, it is the family melodramas of the 1940s and 1950s that excelled in functioning as social commentaries by zeroing in on the family experience. Whereas dramas externalize their central conflicts into action (e.g., bank robbery, a jail break) as signs of the hero’s inner dilemmas, the family melodrama on the other hand, often lacking any physical action, internalizes the conflicts of the protagonists into inner turmoil in such a way that they constantly look inward and against themselves.²⁹ This inwardness allows melodrama to focus on the point of view of the victim, which, according to Elsaesser, is one of the characteristic features of melodrama.

However, since Elsaesser’s initial groundbreaking essay on family melodrama, film scholar Linda Williams has explored how the melodrama has been particularly useful for exploring racial tensions in the United States. Using racially marked characters such as the

²⁷ Thomas Elsaesser. *Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama*. In: Grant, Barry Keith (ed.) *Film Genre Reader IV* (Austin: University of Austin Press: 2012): 454-55.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 437.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 448.

“suffering black body and the threatened white female body” as symbols, Williams states that works such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* sought to move us to “feel for the sufferings of the virtuous and against the villainy of others.”³⁰ Thus, like Elsaesser, Williams considers sympathy for another person’s suffering to be the key feature of all melodrama; only for her it is a victim whose suffering is tied to racial conflict.³¹ In order to adapt the term “family melodrama” for a literary and a German context, I define family melodrama as a mode that looks at how racial tensions are expressed specifically in the domestic space, the home. This can be exemplified by how societal racial tensions affect this domestic space, but it can also be seen in conflicts between family members of different races and generations. According to Williams, this domestic space signifies what she calls a “space of innocence,” a space that is irrevocably lost but to which one wishes to return, or at least to restore some semblance of it.³² Melodramas, Williams argues, usually begin and end in this space of innocence. Rural homes and gardens are considered as the stereotypical icons of such a space of innocence, “offering a moment of virtue taking pleasure in itself.”³³ For almost all of the Black German women, whose life stories I analyze in the second chapter,³⁴ the time of childhood and young adulthood was a period shaped by racial discrimination, name-calling, isolation, and loss. They nonetheless equate their childhood home with such a space of innocence as described by Williams, within which they experienced a relatively safe and secluded time and space, regardless of whether their childhood

³⁰ Linda Williams. *Playing the Race Card*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): xiv, 12-13.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

³² *Ibid.*, 28.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ In my dissertation, I examine works by only female Black Germans and not those by male Black German authors. This is not because I don’t think male Black experience as important, it is because I’m interested in the intersectional ways that the racism experienced by female Black German is compounded by their gender.

household consisted of the white mother and the white maternal family or both parents. The reason for this general feeling of safety and security during early childhood, i.e., the time before kindergarten and elementary school, is twofold: on the one hand, inside their childhood homes, Black German children were usually shielded from racial discrimination and name-calling. On the other hand, especially in early childhood they were not fully aware of racial differences and the different meanings attributed to white and Black skin. Those who grew up in orphanages, as exemplified by Hügel-Marshall in the second part of the second chapter, experienced mistreatment and abuse by caretakers due to their skin color. In contrast to these older generations, who foreground their domestic homes including the period of childhood and young adulthood, newer generations of women, who, having been brought up with one or two Black parents and thus with a natural self-confidence and awareness of being Black German, do not focus so much on the domestic space and the period of her childhood as more on the normalcy of being Black German today. Even so, these newer generations still view the domestic space as a safe place where they don't have to deal with racism and microaggressions.

This idea of “home” in melodramas then constitutes not only a familiar physical space that consists of people and things, but also a site of nostalgic, past memories of a happy and innocent childhood and community. More significantly, in domestic melodramas the home becomes the site of broad struggles between good and evil in personal terms. Referring to nineteenth-century Victorian domestic melodramas in particular, Martha Vicinus argues that domestic melodrama was the “working out in popular culture of the conflict between the family and its values and the economic and social assault of industrialization.”³⁵ With the onset of

³⁵ Martha Vicinus. “‘Helpless and Unfriended’: Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama.” (*New Literary History*, Fall 1981; 13, 1): 128.

industrialization and the accompanying urbanization, social and economic conditions were very unstable. Melodrama became popular with working classes as it acknowledged the harsh conditions brought about by industrialization, and later, capitalism, and offered comfort through its happy endings.³⁶ While exploration of contemporary issues surrounding class and gender made domestic melodramas the most important types among Victorian melodramas, situating these issues in a familial context gave them their emotional power.³⁷ Needless to say, the family is the psychic hub of a domestic melodrama and the center of life. The home becomes the “setting for passion, sacrifice, suffering, and sympathy” where the powerless struggle for recognition and, eventually, have their virtue recognized.³⁸ Melodrama’s emotional force stems thus from making the virtue visible in the suffering of virtuous characters. Melodrama operates under the belief that a larger moral order always prevails in the end.³⁹ Being thus a refuge from societal change as well as a space where family values and traditions are preserved, the home, however, gets frequently targeted by outside evil forces. Nineteenth-century domestic melodrama in particular, was predicated upon the threat to female virtue usually represented by a young heroine. White, middle-class women, relegated to the realm of the home, devoted all their mental and physical energies to the care and well-being of their husbands, children, and elderly parents, and became the creators of an idealized space of “home.”⁴⁰ For white, working-class women, the world of urban cities outside their homes, without the protective supervision of

³⁶ Ibid., 131-132.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 129.

³⁹ Ibid., 134.

⁴⁰ Christine Gledhill. Domestic Melodrama. In: Carolyn Williams (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama*. (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018): 61.

church and community, represented an increased sexualized persecution.⁴¹ The marriage choice of a female heroine, spurred by the seduction of the female by a cunning male, usually threatens the harmony of domestic life as well as the close relationship between parents and their daughter. Such generational conflict between family members thus is central to domestic melodramas' plot. In melodramas, the most common domestic tie is between a father and his daughter where the mother is either deceased before the start of the story or, if alive, is kept in the background and doesn't figure much in the life of her daughter.⁴² This marginalization of mothers is usually due to the roles that have been historically ascribed to fathers and daughters, in literature and otherwise; the father figure is important because of his role as the representative of the social order and patriarch and breadwinner of the family. And daughters figure prominently because of their potential to give birth to the next generation. By highlighting the relationships between the white mother and the Black daughter in their works, Black German authors thus subvert and challenge the conventions of traditional domestic melodramas by arguing that the white mothers represent the tie to the social order, as we will see in my respective analysis in the subsequent chapters.

Finally, one must also consider how strong emotions and exaggerated gestures and looks that typically characterize a stage performance of a melodrama can be expressed in the written texts I'm analyzing. Peter Brooks, who in his seminal work, "The Melodramatic Imagination," examined the "melodramatism" in the works of novelists Honoré de Balzac and Henry James,

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² In German eighteenth-century bourgeois dramas, the central conflict revolved around the seduction of the virginal daughter by an aristocratic male whom she cannot marry because of class difference. The father, the patriarch of the family, usually disowns his pregnant daughter for bringing shame on the family. The only possible outcome to save the family's name as well as the disgraced daughter is either if her seducer agrees to marry her or, as in the case of G.E. Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* (1772), the father kills his daughter to save his *and* her honor.

states that the way writers create drama “from the banal stuff of reality” is to apply pressure to the surface of reality, i.e., to the surface of their texts.⁴³ By piercing and interrogating the surface of the texts, Brooks argues, dramatists arrive at the “truer, hidden reality,” the true drama that lies behind it.⁴⁴ Brooks demonstrates how in Balzac’s first major novel, *The Wild Ass's Skin* (*La Peau de Chagrin*, 1831), the writer creates drama by having the narrator pose a series of questions to the reality of things, among other things; in other words apply pressure to the gesture, “pressure through interrogation, through the evocation of more and more fantastic possibilities, to make it yield meaning.”⁴⁵ In addition to posing questions, especially in climactic moments, characters “confront one another with full expressivity.”⁴⁶ As Brooks explains, the desire to “express all seems a fundamental characteristic” of melodramas. Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; “the characters [...] utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures and the whole lesson of their relationship.”⁴⁷ In thus speaking the unspeakable and giving voice to their true feelings, characters arrive at a deeper meaning and push “*through* manners to deeper sources of being.”⁴⁸

Writing About Race in Germany

In addition to employing family melodrama to evoke sympathy for a minority group such

⁴³ Peter Brooks. *The Melodramatic Imagination*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976): 1-2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

as themselves, I argue that all the primary authors whose work I'm analyzing in my project, namely, Katharina Oguntoye, May Opitz, and Dagmar Schultz, (the editors and authors of *Farbe bekennen* in chapter 2), Olumide Popoola (*Also by Mail* in chapter 3), and Noah Sow (*Die Schwarze Madonna* in chapter 4) draw on Critical Whiteness as an aesthetic choice to center Blackness and Black experience in their writing. Besides the misrecognition as foreigners, or more specifically as non-Germans, that I have outlined before, Black Germans experience a systematic exclusion from academic, social, and cultural participation in the majority white German society. This exclusion happens over and over again because the very existence of Black Germans is something that is routinely ignored, or rather, simply not acknowledged by white Germans. As has been well documented by Black German scholars and activists, this "absence" and invisibility of Black people in Germany as perceived by white Germans helps maintain the illusion that Germany is a homogenous, white country. By employing Critical Whiteness Black German authors expose established power structures by making whiteness a marked category and the object of ethnological studies. In other words, all of a sudden it is "die dominante Mehrheit, deren Verhalten kritisch an etablierten Normen gemessen wird."⁴⁹ In addition to giving the minority populations the power of representation, employing Critical Whiteness means portraying Blackness as a fact of life, rather than something unusual or strange that deviates from a white norm. Priscilla Layne argues that when modernist and postmodernist white German authors wrote about Black people, they usually tended to emphasize the alleged difference rather than the similarities between Black people and white people. They did so, she states, by often exaggerating the "physical appearance of Black characters, whom they treat as

⁴⁹ ("the dominant majority whose behavior is critically evaluated against established norms.") Fatima El-Tayeb. Vorwort. In: Maureen Maisha Eggers / Grada Kilomba / Peggy Piesche / Susan Arndt (eds.) *Mythen, Masken und Subjekte: Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland* (Münster: UNRAST Verlag, 2018): 7.

mere props, either to add an exotic touch or as a foil against which they can construct their whiteness.”⁵⁰ Black German authors, by contrast, center in their works Black characters and their way of life as already part of German society as I will show in subsequent chapters. In the following I would like to elaborate on what led to the emergence of the field of Critical Whiteness.

According to the Black German historian, Fatima El-Tayeb, postwar German society has been characterized by the firm conviction that there is neither structural racism in Germany nor are white Germans racist; on the contrary they are colorblind and they don’t care what color a person is.⁵¹ This misconception is predicated on the belief that German colonialism was very brief and without any long-term consequences (at least not for the contemporary German society), and that National Socialism was an atypical exception, and not an expression of anything structural. El-Tayeb terms this process “Rassismusamnesie” (*racism amnesia*) which puts minority populations in a position having to prove over and over that racism does exist.⁵² This “Rassismusamnesie” coupled with Germans’ self-professed self-image as a colorblind and an anti-racist society, has created a paradoxical situation when it comes to minoritized populations in Germany on the one hand as well as the issue of race and racism on the other. Due to an essentialist understanding of culture, according to which Germany remains coded as white and Christian, anyone who deviates from this “norm” is placed outside of Germany’s history, culture, and society. In other words, race and religion play a crucial role in this politics of

⁵⁰ Priscilla Layne. *Suspicious Spiral: Autofiction and Black German Subjectivity in Olivia Wenzel’s “1000 Serpentine Angst.”* Speech at a video conference organized by the Center for German and European Studies, Brandeis University, 2020.

⁵¹ Fatima El-Tayeb. *Undeutsch. Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft.* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2016): 7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 15.

exclusion. Thus, those groups, who are labeled as fundamentally different because of their race and religious belonging, are seen as embodying the opposite of the white Christian Germany. Thus racialized populations possessing the “visual markers of Otherness” such as dark skin and headscarf are always perceived as “eternal newcomers, forever suspended in time, forever ‘just arriving’” regardless of individual experience and historical presence.⁵³ The fact that this view is even applied to the second and third generation of minority populations who remain in the dominant perception permanently as “Zuwanderer” (*immigrants*) or more politically correct “Bürger*innen mit migrantischem Hintergrund” (*citizens with migration background*) but never really just “Germans” despite their long presence in Germany highlights the full extent of racist amnesia. These second and third generations of racialized minorities, despite their long-term residency and German citizenship, are routinely ignored and excluded from contemporary German culture, private and public debates, and society in general. If they are acknowledged and perceived at all, it is usually in connection with negative headlines and the refugee crisis that escalated in 2015. In addition, as El-Tayeb observes, the European migration studies in general, and the German one in particular, still focus on the first generation of migrants as well as the processes of migration rather than the subsequent generations of minorities already part of Germany. This omission, El-Tayeb argues, reinforces the belief that there are only migrants but no *minorities* in Germany, who are expected to leave for their home countries in the near future.⁵⁴

Similar to the externalization of minoritized populations, race and racism are also

⁵³ Fatima El-Tayeb. *European Others. Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011): xxv.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, xxi.

considered to exist outside of German history and thought. Consistent with the aforementioned belief that the German colonial period was a long time ago and very brief and National Socialism is long overcome and dealt with, and hence inconsequential for the contemporary German society, the postwar German society has not only failed to adequately deal with the effects of these historical periods but also to embrace important theories such as postcolonial and Critical Race theories.⁵⁵ In fact, in accordance with this negligence it is assumed that debates and discussions around racism are new in the German context, and that it is something that was carried over from US discourses on race. More significantly for the German context, white Germans believe that racism is tied to the experiences of minoritized populations and, more importantly, that it is caused by their presence. As Natasha A. Kelly rightly observes, racism is “nicht nur dann relevant [...] wenn Schwarze Personen anwesend sind. Rassismus ist ein Problem, dass durch *weiße* Menschen verursacht worden ist und auch wirkt, wenn *weiße* Menschen unter sich sind. Es ist nicht ausschließlich ein Problem Schwarzer, sondern auch ein Problem *weißer* Menschen.”⁵⁶ In other words, racism doesn’t need the Other to exist, it actively produces the Other.⁵⁷ If racism is acknowledged at all by the German mainstream, then either only in its most extreme cases as when neo-Nazis put an asylum seeker’s home on fire,⁵⁸ or it is

⁵⁵ Fatima El-Tayeb. *Undeutsch. Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft*. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2016): 18.

⁵⁶ (“Racism is not only relevant when Black people are present. Racism is a problem that has been caused by white people, and it still works even if white people are amongst themselves. It is not exclusively a problem of Black, but also a problem of white people.”) Natasha A. Kelly. *Rassismus. Strukturelle Probleme brauchen strukturelle Lösungen!* (Zürich: Atrium Verlag AG, 2021): 40.

⁵⁷ Fatima El-Tayeb. *Undeutsch. Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft*. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2016): 14.

⁵⁸ Priscilla Layne. *Suspicious Spiral: Autofiction and Black German Subjectivity in Olivia Wenzel’s “1000 Serpentine Angst.”* Speech at a video conference organized by the Center for German and European Studies, Brandeis University, 2020.

associated with the US context or with actions of right-wing extremists from East Germany believed to be less tolerant and advanced than their Western counterparts.

In German public and academic debates and perception, this “absence” of racism has created a state of pseudo racelessness. Despite the fact that the concept of race originated from German Enlightenment philosophers and race-based policies undergirded both National Socialism as well as German colonialism, German discourses on race are almost non-existent in the public sphere and any mention of the word race is considered a taboo. In fact, any attempt to identify racist structures or racial differences is seen as racism itself or is called “reverse racism” (“you are racist if you ‘see’ race and therefore cannot be racist if you are ‘colorblind’”).⁵⁹ Currently, there is even a debate among major German political parties to erase the word race from the German constitution in a misguided effort to “do away” with racism.⁶⁰ The fact that the absence of the word race does not equal an absence of racism or racial thinking seems more than obvious. As a matter of fact, racelessness and colorblindness⁶¹ are active processes of suppression that render racial thinking and its effects basically invisible.⁶² It goes without saying that this denial of racism as well as racelessness make it extremely hard to address, challenge, and fight it effectively. As a result, this discourse of racelessness and colorblindness, which claims not to “see” racialized difference, but at the same time equates non-whiteness with non-

⁵⁹ Fatima El-Tayeb. *European Others. Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011): xxix.

⁶⁰ On the implications of this proposal, see Natasha A. Kelly. *Rassismus. Strukturelle Probleme brauchen strukturelle Lösungen!* (Zürich: Atrium Verlag AG, 2021): 38-40.

⁶¹ Charles A. Gallagher argues how colorblindness in the US “has been twisted politically to maintain white privilege,” and the term means “blind to the effects of prejudice on people because of their color.” From: *White Racial Formation: Into the Twenty-First Century*. In: Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (eds.). *Critical White Studies. Looking Behind the Mirror*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997): 9.

⁶² Fatima El-Tayeb. *European Others. Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011): xxiv.

Germanness due to nationwide recognized visual markers, continues to place BIPOC outside the limits of the German nation, making them thus invisible.

It is against this invisibility that Black German activists and writers and those of Color have pushed back by employing Critical Whiteness. As the name suggests, “critical whiteness” refers to scrutinizing the white majority’s behavior, and with it everything that has been considered the “norm” or “normal.” It is against this white “norm” that typically everyone else is marked as Other while whiteness itself remains neutral, unmarked, and invisible.⁶³ And whiteness remains invisible because it is understood to be universal.”⁶⁴ Nakayama and Krizek suggest that only by naming and critically studying whiteness do we displace it from its universal and unarticulated position.⁶⁵ Whiteness, however, doesn’t like to be studied and resists, violently at times, any substantial characterization. This is because whiteness was not meant to be studied in the first place. As Maureen Maisha Auma (Eggers) writes, the construction of “slaves” and “colonized subjects” as well as the racially marked “Other” is premised on the myth that these constructed positionalities can be observed and studied but not vice versa. In other words, “Schwarze sehen Weiße nicht.”⁶⁶ If white people are to be seen at all, then it’s only the positive projections of whiteness such as, “naturalisierte *weiße* Führungsansprüche, eine vermeintliche universelle *weiße* Neutralität, automatische *weiße* Kompetenzen und ein selbstverständlich

⁶³ More on this also see, Richard Dyer, *White*. (London; New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁶⁴ Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek. Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric. (*Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, 1995): 293.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁶⁶ (“Blacks don’t see whites”). Maureen Maisha Eggers. Ein Schwarzes Wissensarchiv. In: Maureen Maisha Eggers / Grada Kilomba / Peggy Piesche / Susan Arndt (eds.) *Mythen, Masken und Subjekte: Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland* (Münster: UNRAST Verlag, 2018): 26.

universell gültiger *weißer* Machtanspruch” in order to maintain the appearance of whites’ supposed normativity and universality.⁶⁷

It is against this assumption of invisibility of whiteness, however, that Black people have always been observing and studying white people and their behavior. Going way back to the beginning of white hegemony during slavery, colonized Black subjects and Black slaves secretly observed and studied their white masters and mistresses, creating an archive of Black knowledge that was passed down to subsequent generations via oral traditions consisting of proverbs, parables, sermons, jokes, songs, spirituals, and narratives. Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) and W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) are two such examples of archival knowledge about whiteness that has been passed down. This archive of knowledge was created and collected in connection with and primarily for the purpose of survival tactics of Blacks. In fact, deconstruction of the alleged white normality has always been part of Black liberation as well as resistance struggles.⁶⁸ In the same vein, Critical Whiteness Studies signify a necessary survival strategy for minority populations. More than ten years after its establishment in US academia, Critical Whiteness Studies have also arrived in German academic discourses spearheaded by Black German feminist scholars. In their works, they offer a differentiated understanding of racism, its origins, and effects, as well as its connections and links to other systems of power.⁶⁹ They understand that rather than resulting from there being different races, racism is a politics of power that created different races to

⁶⁷ (“a naturalized white claim to leadership, a supposed universal white neutrality, automatic white competencies, and a self-evident universally valid white claim to power.”). *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁸ Peggy Piesche. Das Ding mit dem Subjekt, oder: Wem gehört die kritische Weißseinsforschung? In: Maureen Maisha Eggers / Grada Kilomba / Peggy Piesche / Susan Arndt (eds.) *Mythen, Masken und Subjekte: Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland* (Münster: UNRAST Verlag, 2018): 18-19.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

justify the oppression of people. Even if the construct of different human races may now be considered to be scientifically untenable, it still affects everyday life of PoC and interpersonal communications and erects invisible and insurmountable barriers. Last but not least, Critical Whiteness scholars understand that whiteness is a construction that produces violent social realities. It is thus not just an academic field, but part of everyday life of Black people in a hegemonic white setting. In the following, I give a brief overview of the history of Black people in German-speaking lands in order to provide a context for the works I'm analyzing in this dissertation.

Black Presence in Germany

As mentioned in the beginning, Thomas Usleber's father was an African American soldier while his mother was a white German. During the postwar years Black Germans like Usleber (born in 1960), who were born following the end of WWII and the subsequent decades, were often referred to as "Brown Babies"⁷⁰ or "Farbige Besatzungskinder" (*colored occupation children*).⁷¹ It is common belief in the majority-white German culture that Black presence in Germany began with the occupation of Germany during WWII by Allied forces when African American soldiers fathered children with white German women. But it began much earlier than that. Even though it is difficult to determine when the first Africans came to Germany, most scholars agree that the first encounters between Germans and Africans took place in the twelfth century – depicted in paintings and literature from the Middle Ages.⁷² Up until the nineteenth

⁷⁰ Marion Kraft. Spurensuche. In: Marion Kraft (ed.). *Kinder der Befreiung* (Münster: UNRAST-Verlag, 2015): 269.

⁷¹ Heide Fehrenbach. *Race after Hitler*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005): 75.

⁷² According to Sara Lennox, Feirefiz, son of Belacâne, the first wife of Parzival's father, Gahmuret, in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* from the first quarter of the thirteenth century is the "first Black child represented in

century German contact with Africa consisted mostly of trade relations where goods and, later, people were shipped to Europe as it was popular in courtly culture to have an African as a servant and/or status symbol.⁷³ Two of these Africans brought thus to Europe in the eighteenth century gained considerable recognition in their own time as a scholar and an intellectual, respectively. The first one, Anton Wilhelm Amo (1703-1753), was brought to Germany from Ghana as a gift to Duke Anton Ulrich of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, and studied law at the University of Halle, graduating with his thesis in Latin titled “De Jure Maurorum in Europa” (*The Rights of Moors in Europe*), and, later, philosophy at the University of Wittenberg where he gained his doctorate and also gave a series of lectures. His thesis on the rights of Blacks is considered to be the first defense of Black people written in a German-speaking land, and his dissertation titled “On the Absence of Sensation in the Human Mind and Its Presence in our Organic and Living Body,” again in Latin, is recognized as advocating for the granting of human rights to non-Europeans.⁷⁴ Amo’s intellectual contributions were, however, ignored during the time of German romanticism and idealism by thinkers such as Schiller, Fichte, and the Schlegel brothers. Despite his recognition and achievement as a scholar, Amo did not remain in Germany. In addition to political, economic, and scientific factors that possibly led to his departure to his former home Ghana, racism played a role as well. He was made the target of a satirical slander

German literary text.” In: Introduction to *Remapping Black Germany*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016): 12.

⁷³ In the seventeenth century when the Ottomans were on their way to conquer Vienna and had entered central Europe, Africans, especially Christian Ethiopians were chosen by rulers of Europe to be Allies in the fight against the Muslim Turks. To this end, contacts between Ethiopia and Europe were intensified and delegations, pilgrimages in both directions as well as the foundation of Ethiopian Studies, the science of the language and culture of Ethiopia, were the result. More on this see Peter Martin. *Schwarze Teufel, edle Mohren*. (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001): 17-18.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

that accused him of inappropriate sexual relationships with women. This slander occurred in the wake of the then-popular discussion on the status of Blacks in the hierarchy of races.

Angelo Soliman (ca. 1721-1796), the next African brought to Europe, was taken to Sicily first as an enslaved child before serving in Vienna in the court of Prince Liechtenstein. A member of the Freemasons, Soliman moved in high social circles and was well-known during his time. Yet, despite his fame and popularity in Viennese circles, upon his death Soliman's body was skinned, stuffed, and displayed in the newly founded natural history cabinet of Emperor Franz II. The way Amo and Soliman were treated – the suppression of their intellectual contributions and their degradation as (museum) objects – despite their recognition during their lifetime is consistent with the manner in which Black people in general were regarded in Western discourses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁷⁵ According to Michelle Wright, Blacks were seen as “atavistic relics – primitive, savage, closer to nature, and therefore much out of place.”⁷⁶ She traces the origins of such descriptions to the philosophical writings of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European Enlightenment thinkers such as G.W.F. Hegel, Immanuel Kant, and David Hume, and the American philosopher and statesman, Thomas Jefferson. Hegel's thought in particular, argues Wright, had the greatest influence in positioning Black Germans as “the Other.”⁷⁷ In Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, Wright claims, not only does Africa “stand outside of ‘analytical history,’ or the history of intellectual, cultural and

⁷⁵ See Katrin Sieg, *Decolonizing German and European History at the Museum*. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2021).

⁷⁶ Michelle M. Wright. Others-from-within from without. (*Callaloo* 26.2: 2003): 296.

⁷⁷ “The Other” is a term that goes back to literary critic Edward Said. In his seminal work *Orientalism* from 1978, Said argued how European culture during the post Enlightenment period systematically constructed and invented the Orient as “‘the ultimate Other’ that can be controlled and managed through a hegemony of power relations.” See Shehla Burney. Pedagogy of the Other: Edward Said, Postcolonial Theory, and Strategies for Critique. (*Counterpoints* 417, 2012): 23.

technological development,” “Hegel in fact places the Negro as the antithesis of the (white, male) European.”⁷⁸ Although according to Hegel, the Negro does not exist in the dialectic, Wright further argues, “the Negro is the necessary antithesis to the white [European male] so that the latter can, by contrast, be thus established as superior, civilized, and therefore a *subject*” (italic mine).⁷⁹ Wright contrasts Hegel’s Other, who is rhetorically placed outside of Germany’s borders, with Thomas Jefferson’s description of American Blacks in his *Notes on Virginia* as being within the borders of the U.S. but still seen as similarly primitive and savage.⁸⁰ Wright terms the former, i.e., Germany’s Other, who is outside of Germany’s, and by extension Europe’s history and borders, “Other from Without,” and Jefferson’s Other, who exists within the nation’s border but still perceived as foreign, as “malevolent outsiders, who, if unfettered, will do harm to that [nation’s] body” as “Other from Within.”⁸¹ According to Wright, this placing of Blacks as Other-from-Within is typical of racist discourse in the United States and in Britain, and to some extent in France as well – “physically part of the nation, but in all other ways utterly foreign and thus utterly incapable of being integrated into that nation.”⁸² In Germany, on the other hand, Black Germans have often been misrecognized as Others-from-Without, i.e., as Africans, despite a German birthplace, German parents, and socialization. This goes back, again, to Thomas Usleber, and his experience as a Black German. In contrast to African Americans, who are, as Others-from-Within, at least recognized as having been born and

⁷⁸ Michelle M. Wright. Others-from-within from without. (*Callaloo* 26.2: 2003): 297.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

raised in the U.S., Black Germans such as Usleber have to contend with being misrecognized as Others-from-Without, as Africans or African Americans, but never as Afro-Germans or Black Germans, let alone simply Germans. To Wright, this puts Black Germans in an unusually “unique” position of being perceived as Others-from-Within from Without, physically and legally part of the nation as citizens but treated as though they are outside of Germany’s borders. In other words, the Black German identity is simply non-existent or, as Fatima El-Tayeb observes, “a non-entity”; it is “not publicly recognized, as it is not supposed to exist.”⁸³

This inability, or rather the unwillingness, on the part of white Germans to acknowledge Black Germans as such has something to do with how the notions of race and nationality have been linked historically – for the first time in one of Germany’s then colonies, Southwest Africa (now present-day Namibia).⁸⁴ Building on the theories of race hierarchy first formulated by Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant or Hegel, German scholars within the Social Darwinist movement⁸⁵ played an important role in advancing the “race question” as it served as legitimization for German colonialism in Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. Social

⁸³ Although Black Germans were supposed to be a “non-entity,” their very presence could not be ignored or denied in the German colonies as well as Germany itself. That is why, according to Fatima El-Tayeb, Blacks were ideologically eliminated through a discourse that stressed the protection of the “purity of the German nation” above all else. In: *Dangerous Liaisons. Race, Nation, and German Identity*. In: Patricia Mazón / Reinhild Steingröver (eds.) *Not so Plain as Black and White*. (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005): 28, 45.

⁸⁴ Between 1884 and 1914 Germany colonized Togo, Cameroon, German East Africa (today Tanzania), and German Southwest Africa (today Namibia), and the former German protectorate in the Pacific called German New Guinea (now Papua New Guinea). See Katharina Oguntoye / May Opitz / Dagmar Schultz. *Farbe bekennen*. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1992): 30.

⁸⁵ Social Darwinists instrumentalized Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution by presenting social structures as natural laws. “If the existence of all living things was the result of a merciless fight for survival that left only the fittest in the game, human societies could be no exception. The ideological construct of the inequality of races, with the resulting need to fight for white domination, could now be presented as part of an inevitable natural process. Race, class, and gender hierarchies appeared as the final product of a millennia-long process, the mechanisms of which were beyond human control.” Fatima El-Tayeb, *Dangerous Liaisons. Race, Nation, and German Identity*. In: Patricia Mazón / Reinhild Steingröver (eds.) *Not so Plain as Black and White*. (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005): 31.

Darwinists theorized that there were different races with distinct characteristics, with the “Aryan race” being superior and the Black race at the bottom of the hierarchy, while the position of “intermediate” groups such as Asians and Jews varied widely.⁸⁶ This black-white antagonism, where the first group “represented mankind in its most perfect form, the latter in its most primitive,” was at the basis of all politics and also shaped Western discourses on the subject.⁸⁷ The greatest danger to this race hierarchy, however, was perceived to be “racial mixing” because it threatened not only the credibility of this notion of a hierarchy of opposite and incompatible “races” but also the “purity of the German race,” which had to be protected from “bad blood.”⁸⁸ Consequently, measures were taken against miscegenation and this meant exclusion of any individuals with any trace of “native blood” from German citizenship, i.e. children of German men married to African women. In many African colonies, marriages between white German men and native women were forbidden and existing ones annulled, making Germany the only colonial power to ban such marriages. Even though the mixed-race children automatically inherited German citizenship through their white fathers according to the Nationality Law from 1913, with the ascension of the Nazis to power in the 1930s they lost their German citizenship. The citizenship law of the federal republic after the WWII still hewed closely to the 1913 law, which until as recently as 1999, granted citizenship solely on the basis of ethnicity (*Jus sanguinis*) rather than place of birth (*Jus soli*).⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 36.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁸⁹ In addition to mixed-race children, who immigrated to Germany, many colonial subjects came to Germany for a variety of reasons; some came as personal servants to colonial officials, others as missionaries and private instructors, and still others came to work at German ports. Elite African families also sent their children to study in Germany. More on this see Robbie Aitken and Eve Rosenhaft. *Black Germany*. (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

The way Africans in the German colonies were discriminated against and excluded served as an example on how to treat racialized minorities in Germany itself.⁹⁰ When Germany lost its colonies after the end of WWI Black Germans were declared stateless and given “Fremdenpässe” (*alien’s passports*), leaving them and their families without nationality.⁹¹ The hostile atmosphere in the succeeding Weimar Republic towards Blacks was amplified by the deployment of several thousand soldiers of Color (from French as well as British colonies, and African American divisions) by the Allied forces during WWI and the subsequent occupation of the Rhineland by African soldiers among the French troops in 1919. Having lost its colonies following the defeat in WWI, the presence of these Black soldiers was perceived as especially humiliating to Germans as it “inverted the established colonial relationship of domination between ‘whites and blacks’ on German soil.”⁹² In the ensuing postwar racist campaign against what was called the “Black Shame” or the “Black Horror on the Rhine,” Black soldiers were portrayed as sexually menacing and aggressive, who allegedly committed acts of sexual violence against white German women.⁹³ The estimated 600 to 800 children born from relationships between colonial soldiers and white German women were termed “Rheinlandbastarde” (*The Rhineland Bastards*), who took their mothers’ German citizenship, and who are, according to Tina Campt, “the first representation of a domestic, German-born Black native.”⁹⁴ In order to

⁹⁰ Fatima El-Tayeb. ‘Colored Germans There Will Never Be’ In: Dawne Curry / Eric Duke / Marshanda Smith (eds.). *Extending the Diaspora*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009): 236.

⁹¹ Fatima El-Tayeb. “If you can’t pronounce my name, you can just call me pride”: Afro-German Activism, Gender and Hip Hop (*Gender & History* 15.3, 2003): 467.

⁹² Quoted in Sara Lennox, Introduction to *Remapping Black Germany*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016): 16.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Tina Campt. *Other Germans*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004): 28.

diminish their “eugenic threat to the German nation,” measures such as sterilization or emigration of these Black German children were considered by German officials, but eventually dropped in the Weimar Republic due to fear of political repercussions at the domestic and international levels.⁹⁵

With the ascension of the Nazi regime to power, however, such plans gained more urgency, and the fate of the Black German children became one of the new regime’s racial problems. Sanctified and legitimized by “respectable” scientists such as Eugen Fischer, head, and later, rector of the then Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Genetics, and Eugenics in Berlin, 385 Black children were secretly and illegally sterilized in 1937. Due to their relatively small number compared to that of Jews and thus regarded as powerless, there were no policies particularly aimed at Black Germans during the Third Reich, even though they still suffered from laws directed at other minorities like Jews and Sinti and Roma such as exclusion from schools, professions, and public activities closed to “non-Aryans,” and, in addition, they were also sent to concentration camps or condemned to forced labor.⁹⁶ Some Africans and Black Germans, on the other hand, found employment in the Nazi film industry where they portrayed “natives” and other exotic characters. These colonial and propaganda films were made with the specific purpose of promoting the value of colonies for the German economy and of justifying German expansion in Africa. Furthermore, the Nazis expected Blacks in Germany to serve as mediators between the regime and Germany’s former colonies that they hoped to regain should Germany

⁹⁵ Heide Fehrenbach. *Race after Hitler*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005): 84.

⁹⁶ Heide Fehrenbach argues that due to the enormity of the Nazi crimes against Jews, violence against Black Germans has been rather neglected in contemporary public discourse on Nazi crimes. In: *Ibid*, 87-88. For this reason, Fatima El-Tayeb contends, Black Germans have never been officially recognized and compensated as victims of Nazi persecution. In: “If you can’t pronounce my name, you can just call me pride”: Afro-German Activism, Gender and Hip Hop (*Gender & History* 15.3, 2003): 468.

win WWII. Another way Black Germans were exploited during the Nazi regime was to hire them in the so-called “Deutsche Afrika Schau” (*German Africa Show*), ethnographic expositions where in replicated, primitive African-looking villages actors, wearing corresponding “primitive” clothes, had to perform “native” customs and acts such as religious rituals or war dances. These exhibitions were more of a reflection of the European cliché of indigenous people rather than the reality of the lifestyle of such peoples.

Although the first cohort of biracial Germans derogatory labeled “occupation children,” born between 1945 and 1955 from relations between African American GIs and white German women, constituted only a very small part of the overall “occupation children” – of a total of 67.770 children fathered by Allied troops, 4.776 were Black children – they still attracted disproportionate attention from German officials and academics.⁹⁷ As illegitimate children of German women, they took their mothers’ German citizenship according to the Nationality Law of 1913, which made them indisputably a German responsibility.⁹⁸ Due to their foreign fathers and their racial difference, these Black German children were subjected to several censuses and sociological and anthropological studies in the 1950s in an effort to study their phenotypic difference and foreignness, and in effect to find a “solution” for their future, as it was assumed they could not survive and thrive in a white German environment and therefore required state intervention. This intervention involved convincing the mothers to give up their child for adoption in “the land of their fathers,” and as a result, by 1954, up to 700 children were adopted

⁹⁷ Sara Lennox. Introduction to *Remapping Black Germany*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016): 19.

⁹⁸ Sara Lennox argues that the reason for this “obsession” with these Black children lies in the fact that they represented a constant and visible reminder of Germany’s earlier racial shame after WWI. From: *Claiming Blackness in Germany*. In: Martin Kagel / Lauren Tate Kagel (eds.). *The Meaning of Culture*. (Hannover: Wehrhahn, 2009): 183.

by African Americans in the U.S.⁹⁹ In 1952, when the first cohort of Black German children entered school, and later when they became adolescents, German officials sought to entice them to emigrate, possibly to warmer regions that would better suit their “hot” temperament than the moderate European climate, and where they could be “among their own kind.”¹⁰⁰

For a number of other Black German children, on the other hand, the postwar time meant growing up either with foster parents or in “Kinderheime” (*children’s homes*). The German mothers of these children were portrayed as promiscuous and from a lower social class for having engaged in sexual contact with Black occupation troops, i.e., the “enemies,” and were thus declared unfit to care for their child. Other mothers voluntarily brought their children to children’s homes as they had to deal with familial ostracization or public racism towards their child, or simply lacked the means to support their child alone, especially during the early postwar years of material scarcity.¹⁰¹ A majority of the Black children, nonetheless, grew up with their German mother within their maternal families as their Black father had to return to their home countries following the end of WWII – African American GIs usually weren’t allowed to marry their German girlfriends, let alone bring them to the U.S. Comparing the lives of Black Germans,

⁹⁹ Heide Fehrenbach argues that these adoptions were more of political than social nature, a way for both the U.S. and West Germany to demonstrate the humanity of their respective postwar societies. In: *Race after Hitler*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005): 157-159.

¹⁰⁰ According to Tina Campt, Pascal Grosse, and Yara-Colette Lemke-Muniz de Faria, the efforts made to emigrate Black German children, especially at a time when they came of age and potentially became sexually active, reveal the real reason behind the actions, which was not integration into the postwar German society, but separation from their white peers. This again invokes colonial notions of protecting the German nation from “bad blood.” From: Blacks, Germans, and the Politics of Imperial Imagination, 1920-60. In: Sara Friedrichsmeyer / Sara Lennox / Susanne Zantop (eds.). *The Imperialist Imagination*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998): 207.

¹⁰¹ Additionally, as Angelica Fenner writes in her study on racial formations in postwar German cinema, “until the Federal Republic achieved full sovereignty in 1955, mothers of illegitimate children fathered by American occupation soldiers were barred any legal recourse within German civil courts for filing paternity or child support; nor could they do so in U.S. courts unless the complainant and child resided on American soil.” In: *Race Under Reconstruction in German Cinema: Robert Stemmle’s Toxi*. (University of Toronto Press, 2011): 110.

who were raised in postwar Germany, yields the following commonalities: they grew up being almost always the only Black person in town without knowing of the existence of other Blacks, they were discriminated against in school and taunted for their mother's alleged shame (for having associated with a Black GI, i.e., "the enemy"), pushed towards vocational training rather than higher education, and generally attributed with characteristics rooted in stereotypes about Black people: "heightened physical skills, musical and rhythmic abilities, laziness and lack of discipline, impetuosity, low intelligence, hypersexuality."¹⁰²

This negative treatment of Black Germans has to do, again, with how race was defined, or rather not defined, in postwar Germany. Following the end of National Socialism and international condemnation thereof, any reference to the word "race" was declared taboo. In fact, as a way of reeducating the public on racist thinking, Black German children were made part of the nation's rehabilitation and redefinition, not least because it was assumed that the treatment of these children would be an indication internationally of how well Germany had rejected and overcome National Socialism. As Angelica Fenner argues, Black German children "arguably came to constitute a form of symbolic capital, serving as an ideological icon around which to restructure national coherence in a publicized display of xenophilia."¹⁰³ Focusing solely on Black Germans, however, meant that Jews were deracialized, i.e., they were no longer understood in racial terms, instead race was simplified and implicitly conflated with Blackness in accordance with a black-white binary, "redrawing the lines of meaningful difference according to

¹⁰² Sara Lennox. Introduction to *Remapping Black Germany*. (University of Massachusetts Press, 2016): 21.

¹⁰³ Angelica Fenner. *Race Under Reconstruction in German Cinema: Robert Stemmle's Toxi*. (University of Toronto Press, 2011): 80.

stereotypical phenotype.”¹⁰⁴ This inscription of race as Black with simultaneous complete avoidance of any reference to the word “race” has made it extremely hard for Black Germans, and other minority groups, to name and confront racism. As a matter of fact, as Fatima El-Tayeb contends, this refusal to speak of race, let alone acknowledge it as a structural problem that is taking place anywhere (e.g., the U.S.) but Germany is typical of postwar German society, a process that is still continuing to this day.¹⁰⁵ El-Tayeb traces this back to what she calls, quoting Stuart Hall, “ein internalistisches Narrativ” (*internalist narrative*), a narrative where “ein essenziellistisch definiertes, weißes, christliches Europa immer und zwangsläufig die Norm bleibt,“ and anyone who does not meet these attributes is coded as non-German.¹⁰⁶

According to El-Tayeb, this narrative has had far-reaching consequences for minorities in Germany. On the one hand, the near-complete vanishing of the German colonial period from public memory as well as the lack of adequate coming to terms with the Nazi past have led to a collective repression of historical presence of racialized minorities in German-speaking lands. This is expressed by what El-Tayeb calls “die zwanghafte ewige Wiederholung der ersten Begegnung mit dem Fremden,“ a process where a person of color is always perceived as being the very first one to appear, out of nowhere, a complete stranger and foreigner, whereupon the local goes through emotions such as surprise, curiosity, fascination, suspicion, and finally rejection or acceptance.¹⁰⁷ This explains why verbal and physical racist discrimination has often

¹⁰⁴ Heide Fehrenbach. *Race after Hitler*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005): 96. Also, Timothy L. Schroer argues that “as Jews grew less important to the postwar German racial imagination, blacks gained importance as a foil for racial self-definition.” From: *Recasting Race After World War II*. (University Press of Colorado, 2007): 40.

¹⁰⁵ Fatima El-Tayeb. *Undeutsch*. (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016): 11.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 19. (“An essentialistically defined, white, Christian Europe always and inevitably stays the norm.”)

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 15. (“The obsessive, eternal repetition of the first encounter with the foreigner.”)

been termed “Fremdenhass” (*xenophobia*) rather than “Rassismus” (*racism*) in mainstream media. Xenophobia externalizes the emotion as stemming from a temporary, “understandable” discomfort caused by the sudden appearance of a foreigner, whereas racism would place the blame on the perpetrator and invite a look into Germany’s long history of racism and notions of race.¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, the hegemony of the internalist narrative, argues El-Tayeb, necessarily excludes marginalized and alternative voices and worldviews as these would inevitably question the established order defined by the internalist narrative.¹⁰⁹ As a result, minorities are not only routinely ignored and marginalized, but also made passive objects rather than active subjects of discourse.

Black people in the former German Democratic Republic (henceforth GDR) experienced similar instances of social exclusion and discrimination as their West German peers. Even though there were individual, but scattered, Black Germans in the GDR,¹¹⁰ a Black German minority did not start to emerge there until the 1960s when people from Ghana, Nigeria, and Zambia came to pursue a university career.¹¹¹ Other people of Color from countries such as Angola, Mozambique, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Vietnam, and Cuba were recruited by the GDR

¹⁰⁸ See Heide Fehrenbach, *Black Occupation Children and the Devolution of the Nazi Racial State*. In: Sara Lennox (ed.). *Remapping Black Germany*. (University of Massachusetts Press, 2016): 218.

¹⁰⁹ Fatima El-Tayeb. *Undeutsch*. (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016): 23.

¹¹⁰ For instance, Gert Schramm was born in Erfurt in 1928 as the son of an African American and a white German. At the age of sixteen Schramm was deported to the concentration camp Buchenwald as the only Black prisoner. After WWII, Schramm’s career trajectory included working in the mining industry, traffic and transport office, building his own taxi company, educational and awareness training, respectively. More on this see his life writing, *Wer hat Angst vorm schwarzen Mann? Mein Leben in Deutschland*. (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2011).

¹¹¹ Peggy Piesche. *Black and German? East German Adolescents before 1989*. In: Leslie A. Adelson (ed.). *The Cultural After-Life of East Germany*. (American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, 2002): 38, 41. **And** Sara Pugach, *African Students in East Germany, 1949-1975*. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2022).

as workers as part of its solidarity convention with such socialist countries.¹¹² Members of this group usually worked menial labor that included textile, chemical, or mechanical sectors, and their numbers were significantly lower than the guest workers recruited by West Germany around the same time. The GDR used its solidarity conventions such as recruitment of workers from socialist countries, and payment of all costs for these workers to propagate its themes of internationalist solidarity and unified humanity. Despite its outward declarations of internationalism and solidarity, the actual treatment of such workers in the GDR was less than desirable. In addition to receiving low wages, these foreign workers were subjected to strict guidelines that considerably limited their legal rights as well as participation in social, cultural, and educational activities, which also included contacts to the citizens of the GDR. In such cases where foreigners did establish relationships with locals, multi-ethnic couples were not allowed to live together, let alone get married. More than half of these children born from these relations were raised by their biological mother, while only 13 percent by both of their parents, one Black and one white.¹¹³ Similar to the situation of Blacks in West Germany, these Black Germans, whose fathers were African students, grew up in the closed society of the GDR being perceived as foreign, exotic, and different, despite their German socialization, and ultimately without a positive role model to identify with. The GDR did not go through the multicultural turn that happened in West Germany in the 1980s,¹¹⁴ and Quinn Slobodian contends that East Germany's

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 45.

¹¹⁴ A German understanding of "multiculturalism" was promoted in 1980 by German church officials and soon picked up by public discourses in order to change the negative way labor migrants were perceived by the West German population. Following the end of the guest worker program that brought labor forces to Germany to resolve the labor shortage following the end of WWII, many labor migrants, especially Turks, decided to remain in Germany, which was not met with approval by the larger public due to recession in the 1970s. Multiculturalism was supposed to urge people to perceive the migrant workers in a more humane and comprehensive way as enriching

proclaimed anti-racism was ambivalent in that sympathetic and solidarity views towards Blacks, and by extension Others seen as foreign, usually concealed racist attitudes.¹¹⁵ Similar to West Germany, any reference to “race” was banned from official language not long after the GDR was established in 1949. East Germany, however, went a step further in declaring that racial hatred and discrimination were not only a thing of the past, i.e., Nazi Germany, but also that it only happened in Capitalist countries like the U.S. and West Germany, i.e., the “enemies.”¹¹⁶

Although African migrants and other Blacks in Germany had been building communities for years, both in West and East Germany there initially was not a specific German-based Black German community.¹¹⁷ This changed with the arrival of African American poet, feminist, and activist, Audre Lorde, at the Free University of Berlin in 1984, which marks the beginning of the second Black German movement as it is known today. Within the framework of her seminar on African American female poets at the university, Lorde sought to meet with Black German women as she had heard there were quite a few of them in Berlin and she had long been interested in the international scope of Black women’s struggle against oppression. Since there was no common name for Black Germans – one of Lorde’s Black students told her that “The

German culture rather than presenting a problem. More on this see Sabine von Dirke. Multikulti: The German debate on multiculturalism. (*German Studies Review*, 17.3, 1994): 516.

¹¹⁵ Quinn Slobodian. Socialist Chromatism. In: Quinn Slobodian (ed.). *Comrades of Color. East Germany in the Cold War World*. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015): 32.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 30-31.

¹¹⁷ As mentioned before, well before the twentieth century Black people had been coming to Germany to settle there for a limited or longer period of time to study and work. While there, they published a variety of texts from books, periodicals to poetry as means of social commentary. For a comprehensive overview, see Philipp Khabo Koepsell’s *The Invisible Archive*. In: Susan Arndt & Nadja Ofuately-Alazard (eds.). *Afrofictional Interventions*. (Edition Assemblage, 2014).

nicest thing they ever called us were warbaby”¹¹⁸ – in collaboration with Lorde, Black German women coined the term “Afro-deutsch” (*Afro-German*) in the style of *Afro-American* to signify their cultural origins. Up until that point, Black Germans had mostly been referred to by their white compatriots as “Mischling” (*mixed-race*), “Mulatte” (*Mulatto*), and “Farbige” (*colored*). Initiated and encouraged by Lorde, more and more Black German women, most of whom hadn’t known other Black Germans even existed, came together to learn about their lives and struggles.

Thus, a German-based African diaspora was established.¹¹⁹ Under the guidance and tutelage of Audre Lorde, the seminal anthology *Farbe bekennen* (1986, *Showing Our Colors*, 1992) was published in 1986 by Black German activists Katharina Oguntoye and May Opitz and edited by filmmaker Dagmar Schultz. This volume, which is considered to be a foundational text today, presented the life stories of three generations of fourteen Black German women from ages of 17 to 70. *Farbe bekennen* not only traced the history of Black German presence in Germany that had been suppressed by politics, academia, as well as society at large, it also provided a context for Black German experiences that were perceived as individual by white Germans as well as Black Germans themselves. In this context the German subtitle is more telling than that of the English translation, *Farbe bekennen. Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (*Showing Our Colors. Afro-German Women Speak Out*). The fact that the German subtitle implies that Afro-German women are merely uncovering the traces instead of the whole

¹¹⁸ Audre Lorde. Foreword to the English Language Edition. In: May Opitz / Katharina Oguntoye / Dagmar Schultz (eds.). *Showing Our Colors. Afro-German Women Speak Out*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992): vii.

¹¹⁹ Philipp Khabo Koepsell suggests that since there had always been Black people building communities in Germany since at least the beginning of the twentieth century the time of Audre Lorde’s collaboration with Black German women in the 1980s should be referred to as a “transition point” rather than the “birth” of Black German activism and literature production. In: Asoka Esuruoso & Philipp Khabo Koepsell (eds.) *Arriving in the future*. (Berlin: epubli, 2014): 12.

history itself speaks to the process of the said history being suppressed from German historiography, while the English subtitle alludes to the new-found energy and sense of community that enables these women to speak out.

What was characteristic of this second Black German movement was its clearly feminist beginnings. The US debate surrounding racism within the feminist movement and the identification with it was of great interest to Black German women who did not find their own concerns reflected within the white German feminist movement. It was not until Audre Lorde had created a platform and initiated a dialogue that Black German women started to address their situation.¹²⁰ Thus, the African American context was initially crucial in serving as a reference point, making Black German experience diasporic as Black women in Germany as well as the US created a cross-cultural dialogue. However, though similar in their experiences of exclusion and discrimination in a predominantly white society, the Black German experience differs from that of African American one mainly in its history. What sets Black Germans apart from other minorities in Germany is their heterogeneity as a group in terms of their backgrounds. They have no shared history of migration (either forced or voluntary) as they mostly descend from Blacks making individual journeys to Germany for professional reasons, among other things as students, musicians, politicians, soldiers. Some of these Blacks were migrants from German colonies in Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century, while others were stationed in Germany as G.I.s in the WWII, while still others came to Germany as African students or political refugees in the second half of the twentieth century. Due to professional reasons, most of them had to return

¹²⁰ According to Fatima El-Tayeb the reason why the Black German movement was dominated by women and why publications by male authors had been rare lies with the feminist context. For one there was no male counterpart to the feminist network that published works dealing with the Black German experience which might have been “off-putting” to some men. More on this see Fatima El-Tayeb, “If you can’t pronounce my name, you can just call me pride”: Afro-German Activism, Gender and Hip Hop (*Gender & History* 15.3, 2003): 473.

to their home country after a certain time. Therefore, their children grew up without a Black parent and in relative isolation from other Black Germans.

Precisely for this reason – almost complete isolation – Black Germans, especially the older generations, stress the importance of literature, i.e., books by Black writers in particular, not only as beneficial for their political awareness but also as an introduction to the international Black community. The importance of literature lies in the way it enables Black Germans to assert themselves on their own terms as Black and German. To Audre Lorde, for example, assertion through speaking is an act of self-revelation which brings something into existence that wasn't there before. Lorde asserts, "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood."¹²¹ Lorde suggests that the risk of speaking out will be high; however, the cost of not speaking out will be even higher. Lorde's works and views were relatively well known in German feminist circles in the context of *Power and Sensuality*, a volume with essays by Lorde and Adrienne Rich published by the Berlin-based feminist publisher, *Orlanda*, the first German language publication on the US feminist debate surrounding racism. Ika Hügel-Marshall, whose life writing, *Daheim Unterwegs*, will be analyzed in the next chapter, narrates how reading Lorde's texts as well as meeting her in person later on helped find her voice and assert herself as Black German. She states, "Ihre Texte machten mir Mut, und ich fühlte mich verstanden, konnte mich darin wiederfinden – nicht nur in dem Leid, welches ich und andere Schwarze Menschen erfahren hatten, sondern auch in der Botschaft, die sie vermittelte, dass wir uns nicht länger

¹²¹ Audre Lorde. The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action. In: *Your Silence will not Protect You*. (UK: Silver Press, 2017): 1.

einem rassistischen System hilflos ausgesetzt fühlen mussten.“¹²² Hügel-Marshall writes further how Lorde always encouraged her to break her silence and tell her story in her own voice.

May Ayim as a Trailblazer

I would like to dedicate the penultimate part of this introductory chapter to the Black German poet and activist, May Ayim, without whom a study on Black German literature would be incomplete. Ever since she served as a writer as well as an editor to the foundational work, *Farbe bekennen* – Ayim’s research into the history of Black people in Germany and the German colonial period provided a context for Black Germans’ life stories in the text – Ayim paved the way for others with her writing, activism, and advocacy until her untimely death in 1996. Right before the publication of *Farbe bekennen*, Ayim co-founded the *Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland* in 1985 (ISD, Initiative of Black People in Germany), the oldest organization of and by Black people in the Federal Republic of Germany that aims to improve the political participation as well as the lives of Black people in Germany. Ayim’s contributions to the advancement of Black Germans have been deemed so great that in 2004 the May Ayim Award, the first International Black German Literature Prize, was founded to honor her. And in 2011, a street in the Berlin district, Kreuzberg, which was formerly called “Gröbenufer” (after the German colonialist Otto Friedrich von der Gröben) was renamed “May-Ayim-Ufer” (May-Ayim-Shore). In her poetry and essays, Ayim was known for her ability to aptly describe Black Germans’ marginal position in German society, and to inspire hope to continue the fight. Her major publications include, aside from *Farbe bekennen*, the essay volume *Entfernte Verbindungen* (1993, *Distant Ties*), the poetry and essay collections *blues in schwarz weiss*

¹²² (“Her texts gave me courage and made me feel understood. I’d rediscovered myself, not only in the way she expressed the pain that I and so many blacks felt, but also in her message that we must stop seeing ourselves as helpless victims of a racist system”) Ika Hügel-Marshall. *Invisible Woman*. Translated by Elizabeth Gaffney. Continuum, 2001, 111). *Daheim unterwegs*. (Berlin: Orlanda, 1998): 95.

(1985, *Blues in Black and White*, 2003), *grenzenlos und unverschämt* (posth. 1997, *Borderless and Brazen*), and *nachtgesang* (posth. 1997, *Night Song*). Even if most of her poems challenge negative stereotypes about Black Germans such as the famous duo *afro-deutsch I* and *afro-deutsch II* (*Afro-German I* and *Afro-German II*), Ayim's other poems are deeply personal and deal specifically with her feelings of loss and abandonment from growing up without her biological parents. In the following, I analyze two of her other poems, *Dunkelheit* (*Darkness*) and *Entfernte Verbindungen* (*Distant Ties*) and show how she employs characteristics of family melodrama to draw attention to her upbringing and the way it shaped her life.

By presenting her lyrical I as someone abandoned by her biological parents as well as affected by broader institutional neglect, Ayim manages to evoke sympathy for herself – a hallmark of family melodrama. In her poems, Ayim thus indicts her biological parents for abandoning her as an infant, and the German family law that led to further disintegration of her nuclear family. After she was born in 1960 in Hamburg to a Ghanaian father and a white German mother, her father wished to take his daughter to his childless sister back in Ghana, but he was legally forbidden to bring his out-of-wedlock child with him, so he returned to Ghana alone, making infrequent trips to Germany to see his daughter.¹²³ Her mother, financially unable or unwilling to raise her child alone, gave her for up adoption. Ayim was thus raised by a foster family, with sparse contact to her father, and none at all to her mother. bell hooks in her, *We Real Cool. Black Men and Masculinity*, urges the reader to consider – beyond individual faults of Black men – the “more powerful role of the state in the removal of black men,” arguing that “Black males in the culture of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy are feared but

¹²³ Silke Mertins. *Blues in Black and White: May Ayim (1960-1996)*. In: *May Ayim. Blues in Black and White. A Collection of Essays, Poetry, and Conversations*. Translated and with an Introduction by Anne V. Adams. (Berlin: Orlanda, 2003): 144.

they are not loved.” “If black males were loved they could hope for more than a life locked down, caged, confined; they could imagine themselves beyond containment.”¹²⁴ To bring this back to Ayim, the German family law prevented her from growing up with a relative of her father’s, and be thus close to her biological father.

In her poem, *Dunkelheit (Darkness, 2003)* from the poetry collection, *blues in schwarz weiss* (1985), Ayim paints the circumstances surrounding her birth in emotionless and matter-of-fact tones:

damals	at the time
eine frau ein mann ein kind	a woman a man a child
die frau sehr jung	the woman very young
der mann nicht viel älter	the man hardly older
das kind gerade geboren – schreiend	the child just born – crying
der mann brachte	the man made
die frau zum kind	the woman have a child
die frau brachte das kind	the woman made the child
ins heim	live in a home
eine mu	a mo
ein va	a fa
ein ki	a chi
die mutter verschwand	the mother disappeared
im dunkel der zeit	in the darkness of time
der vater kam	the father came

¹²⁴ bell hooks. *We Real Cool. Black Men and Masculinity*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2004): xi-xii, 108.

dann und wann	now and then
zu besuch	to visit
das kind blieb	the child stayed
meistens allein	alone most of the time
das erste wort	the first word
war nur ein wort	was just a word
MAMA ¹²⁵	MAMA ¹²⁶

While the first stanza shows a young couple having a child, the second stanza turns dark as there is a direct line from the parents to an orphanage that doesn't become obvious in the English translation. In the German original, the word "brachte" (*brought*) underlines the child's trajectory of being delivered from the hands of her father to her mother and then directly to an orphanage; the child doesn't get to stay with her birth mother or father, she ends up in an orphanage. The following word fragments, *eine mu / ein va / ein ki*, symbolize the broken familial bond which is further emphasized in the next stanza by the parents' near-total absence during the child's childhood. This parental absence is finally manifested by the child's first word, MAMA, which, usually symbolizing a child's emotional bond with her mother, is without meaning here, just an empty word, and nothing more.

Even if Ayim makes her readers sympathize with the little abandoned girl, she still manages to create a symbolic family unit in her poems and have her virtue recognized. The nonexistent intact family bond between Ayim and her parents as well as the integrity of a family unit symbolize her virtue that is then publicly recognized by her readers, even if, in real life, her

¹²⁵ May Ayim. *blues in schwarz weiss. Gedichte*. (Berlin: Orlanda, 1985): 21-22.

¹²⁶ May Ayim. *Blues in Black and White. A Collection of Essays, Poetry, and Conversations*. Translated and with an Introduction by Anne V. Adams. (Berlin: Orlanda, 2003): 43-44.

relationship to her biological parents remained fragmented at best. In her poems, however, Ayim creates a family unit consisting of a father, a mother, and a child through a linguistic link in place of the missing one: *eine frau ein mann ein kind*, and however broken a family: *eine mu / ein va / ein ki*. This way, her virtue is recognized publicly and thus restored implying that it was not her fault that she was abandoned by her parents. This notion of a linguistic link or chain to replace the broken familial one is also found in her poem, *Entfernte Verbindungen (Distant Ties)*:

entfernte verbindungen

die hände meiner mutter
sind weiß
ich weiß
ich kenne sie nicht
meine mutter
die hände

die hände meines vaters
ich weiß
sind schwarz
ich kenne ihn kaum
meinen vater
die hände

abseits
visionen
über grauen schuldgefühlen
schattenküsse
in der finsternis

abseits
erinnerungen
heiter ihr gesicht an seiner stirn
schmerzendes deutsch
auf den lippen

abseits
vergessen
ihre lippen sein gesicht
schmerzen heiter
afrikanische worte

abseits

distant ties

my mother's hands
are white
i know
i don't know them
my mother
the hands

my father's hands
i know
are black
i hardly know him
my father
the hands

apart
visions
above grey feelings of guilt
shadow kisses
in the darkness

apart
memories
cheerful her face on his forehead
painful german
on his lips

apart
forgotten
her lips his face
ache cheerfully
african words

apart

bevor sie sich verloren die tochter abseits	before they lost each other the daughter apart
ich weiß seine dunklen finger an meiner hand weiß ihre hellen spuren auf meiner haut schattenküsse auf dem weg	i know his dark fingers on my hand know her light traces on my skin shadow kisses on the way
entfernte verbindungen verbundene entfernungen zwischen kontinenten daheim unterwegs	distant ties connected distances between continents on the road at home
ich weiß in augenblicken erinnerungen ich weiß in händen den horizont lebendig ¹²⁷	i know in moments memory i know in hands the horizon alive ¹²⁸

What characterizes this poem is the German word *abseits* (*apart*) that precedes the indented stanzas 3-6 to symbolize “being apart” on a linguistic level. Ayim uses this word to describe her parents’ courtship that takes place apart (*abseits*) from German society in secret (stanzas 3-4) as a relationship between a Black man and a white woman was likely frowned upon, which makes them feel guilty (*über grauen schuldgefühlen*). In stanza 5, this time the couple is apart, separated from each other (*vergessen / ihre lippen sein gesicht*), before, in stanza 6, Ayim again conjures the image of the abandoned child who is not only separated from her parents but also from the rest of society through her marginalized position as an orphan and a Black German (double use of the word *abseits*: *abseits / bevor sie / sich verloren / die tochter / abseits*). Yet, as

¹²⁷ May Ayim. *blues in schwarz weiss. gedichte*. (Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1995): 28-29.

¹²⁸ May Ayim. *Blues in Black and White. A Collection of Essays, Poetry, and Conversations*. Translated and with an Introduction by Anne V. Adams. (Berlin: Orlanda, 2003): 41-42.

with her poem, *Dunkelheit*, Ayim creates a linguistic link to replace the broken familial one by, according to Karein K. Goertz, linking “words of opposite meanings: distance (*Entfernung*) and connection (*Verbindung*).”¹²⁹ Also, when she starts out her poem by stating in the first two stanzas that she hardly knows her parents (symbolized by the image of their hands), she comes full circle and concludes her poem by acknowledging that she does recognize her parents in herself, by the traces they left on her hands as if they were holding hands: *ich weiß / seine dunklen finger / an meiner hand / weiß / ihre hellen spuren / auf meiner haut*. Ayim thus resurrects the image of a family that, even if separated physically, is still connected spiritually across distances and continents.

Chapter Overview

In the first part of chapter two, I look at *Farbe bekennen* (1986, *Showing Our Colors*, 1991), the foundational work of Black German literature edited and co-authored by May Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye, and Dagmar Schultz, containing life stories of and by Black German women who challenge existing stereotypes about Black people. *Farbe bekennen* features four generations of Black German women including those born during the Weimar period, in the immediate postwar period, in the 1960s and 1970s, and those born in the late 1970s and 1980s. I will argue that Black German authors use the traditional genre of autobiography to write their own life writing and thus write themselves into the nation. Also, reading their life stories through the lens of family melodrama makes it possible for them to focus on marginalized people who tell their experiences in such a way to have white readers sympathize with them. In the second part of chapter two, I examine Ika Hügel-Marshall’s life writing called *Daheim unterwegs. Ein*

¹²⁹ Karein K. Goertz. Showing Her Colors. An Afro-German Writes the Blues in Black and White. (*Callaloo* 26.2, 2003): 10.

deutsches Leben (1998, *Invisible Woman*, 2001). Hügel-Marshall belongs to the generation born in the immediate postwar years as part of the derogatorily labeled “Besatzungskinder” (*Occupation children*), i.e., children born from white German women and African American soldiers. As part of the postwar German government’s measures to “solve the problem of mixed-race” children, Hügel-Marshall was separated from her family and put in a children’s home. In her book, she gives a powerful testament to growing up in postwar Germany as a Black German without knowing any other Black person or belonging to a Black German community until she’s in her forties. And constructing her life writing as a family melodrama enables Hügel-Marshall to discuss race and critique racism while also evoking sympathy for her racial victimization. In chapter three, I analyze Olumide Popoola’s play *Also by Mail* (2013) about the Black German siblings, Funke and Wale, who were born in the 1990s and grew up in Germany without their Nigerian father. Here, I argue that Popoola uses family melodrama to stress the importance of transgenerational communities in the fight for racial justice, all the while critiquing instances of racial discrimination such as racial profiling. The fourth, and last chapter, deals with Noah Sow’s crime novel *Die Schwarze Madonna* (2019, *The Black Madonna*) which critiques notions of “Heimat” (*home; home country*) that often exclude PoC, and anyone deemed non-German. Also, utilizing family melodrama allows Sow to focus on her protagonist’s family dynamic to figure out what it means to be a Black German mother today. Additionally, Sow employs Critical Whiteness by portraying Blackness as a fact of life and as belonging to Germany.

CHAPTER TWO: ETHNIC LIFE WRITING

„Ich bin deutsch und auch nicht. Ich habe mich damit abgefunden.“ This is what Corinna N, a Black German born to an Ethiopian father and a white German mother, says of her heritage and self-perception in *Farbe bekennen* (1986; *Showing Our Colors*, 1992), a seminal anthology, which has come to be considered a foundational text in Black German Studies today.¹³⁰ She is referring to the fact that white Germans do not perceive her as a full-fledged German citizen due to her skin color, which is evident based on a series of questions they often ask her, “Where do you come from?” and if she answers Germany, then “Where do you *really* come from?” Corinna states further that she no longer responds to these questions and has accepted the fact that she will be viewed as non-German despite being socialized in Germany. This sentiment of feeling German despite not being recognized as such by the white majority culture reverberates throughout the personal stories by Black German women in *Farbe bekennen*, which contains life stories of four generations of Black German women from ages 17 to 70: including those born during the Weimar period, who survived National Socialism; those born in the postwar period to mostly African American fathers; those born in the 1960s and 1970s in West and East Germany to predominantly African fathers; and those born in the late 1970s and 1980s, who make up the youngest generation in the book.¹³¹

¹³⁰ (“I am German and I’m also not German. I’ve made my peace with it”). May Opitz / Katharina Oguntoye / Dagmar Schultz. *Showing Our Colors*. Translated by Anne V. Adams. (University of Massachusetts Press, 1992): 188.

¹³¹ Dirk Göttsche. Self-Assertion, Intervention and Achievement. Black German Writing in Postcolonial Perspective. (*Orbis Litterarum* 67:2, 2012): 86.

This current chapter deals with the way Black Germans have used the genre of autobiography as their main approach to self-representation and self-definition. I argue that Black Germans utilize an established genre such as autobiography to draw attention to their existence and experience, as well as to write themselves into the national literature and therefore into the nation itself. The Western tradition of autobiography, however, has increasingly been regarded by postmodern and postcolonial scholars to be exclusive and simply limiting in its ability to account for the diverse genres and practices of life writing by not only white but especially non-white authors.¹³² Emerging in the era of Enlightenment, *autobiography* became a “Western mode of self-production”, privileging the “autonomous and rational individual and the universalizing life story as the definitive achievement of life writing.”¹³³ So-called ethnic and immigrant autobiographies challenge the traditional autobiography’s exclusivism and its universalizing prerogative that set “the White male as normative subject, and successful integration into mainstream society as the prescribed conclusion.”¹³⁴ In thus broadening the scope of traditional autobiography, ethnic autobiographers, writing from the margins of society, recreate their experience that has been “erased, falsified, and devalued by the construction of otherness.”¹³⁵ And because their existence and experience have thus been denied by the dominant in society, the socially marginal feel a sense of urgency in asserting and regaining their selfhood as well as their agency in society by means of writing down their story. In other words,

¹³² Sidonie Smith / Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³⁴ Rocío G. Davis. *Begin Here. Reading Asian North American Autobiographies of Childhood*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007): 9.

¹³⁵ Lauren Rusk. *Life Writing of Otherness: Woolf, Baldwin, Kingston, and Winterson*. (New York: Routledge, 2002): 1.

it is crucial for them to write themselves onto the very social and political space that has excluded them, the physical text of their life story serving as evidence of this inscription.

Ethnic autobiographies have been termed “life writing of otherness,”¹³⁶ “self-as-other-writing,”¹³⁷ and “ethnic self-writing.”¹³⁸ In this chapter, when analyzing life stories by Black Germans in *Farbe bekennen* as well as in *Daheim unterwegs* by Ika Hügel-Marshall (1998; *Invisible Woman* 2001), respectively, I prefer to use the more inclusive term *life writing* rather than autobiography. I adopt the simple definition of life writing offered by Lauren Rusk that denotes it as “writing that is *from* as well as *about* the subject’s life” (emphasis in the original text).¹³⁹ What differentiates life writing of Otherness from more traditional autobiography, however, apart from being written by the socially marginal, concerns the question of the collective that is also implied by the individual writing his or her story, and by extension the question of readership. Lauren Rusk argues that ethnic life writing takes on a collective value where the individual concern is “magnified because a whole other story is vibrating within it – the story of the group.”¹⁴⁰ According to Rusk, because the expressive power of the group as a whole has been “muted,” life writing from a “muted milieu, by its very act of bursting into the dominant discourse, speaks collectively,” i.e., about the collective experience of being treated as

¹³⁶ Lauren Rusk. *Life Writing of Otherness: Woolf, Baldwin, Kingston, and Winterson*. (New York: Routledge, 2002): 3.

¹³⁷ Claudine Raynaud / Nelly Mok (eds.). *The Self as Other in Minority American Life Writing*. (UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019): 9.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Lauren Rusk. *Life Writing of Otherness: Woolf, Baldwin, Kingston, and Winterson*. (New York: Routledge, 2002): 3.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.

Other.¹⁴¹ This kind of uncritical expectation by white editors and critics that the ethnic author represent or speak for his or her group has been criticized by writers of Color. Sau-ling Wong, for example, elaborates on the special obligation on the ethnic autobiographer as follows:

[...] to provide a positive portrayal of the ethnic community through one's self-portrayal. At the very least, the autobiographer's work should be innocent of material that might be seized upon by unsympathetic outsiders to illustrate prevalent stereotypes of the ethnic group; the author should stress the diversity of experience within the group and the uniqueness and self-definition of the individual. Ideally, an ethnic autobiography should also be a history in microcosm of the community, especially of its sufferings, struggles, and triumphs over racism. In other words, an ethnic autobiographer should be an exemplar and spokesperson whose life will inspire the writer's own people as well as enlighten the ignorant about social truths.¹⁴²

Even though Wong is referring to the experiences of Asian communities across North America, these requirements put upon ethnic writers may as well apply to Black German and other authors of Color. Sharon Dodua Otoo, in her opening speech titled, *Dürfen Schwarze Blumen malen?*¹⁴³ to the reading competition for the Bachmann Prize in Klagenfurt, Austria, in 2020 argues how Black (German) authors and artists work under similar pressure and expectations, "Auch wenn wir es wollen, steht unsere Kunst nicht für sich allein – sie wird zur Repräsentation einer ganzen Community," and advocates for more space for (and acceptance of) diverse sets of work by writers of Color.¹⁴⁴

Even as Wong and Otoo speak of the pressure put on writers of Color and the implicit expectation to represent their community in their works, they nonetheless acknowledge the

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 4, 5.

¹⁴² Quoted in Rocío G. Davis. *Begin Here. Reading Asian North American Autobiographies of Childhood*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007): 23.

¹⁴³ ("Are Black People Allowed to Paint Flowers?")

¹⁴⁴ ("Even if we want it, our art doesn't stand on its own – it becomes a representation of a whole community."). Sharon Dodua Otoo. *Dürfen Schwarze Blumen malen? Klagenfurter Rede zur Literatur*. (Klagenfurt: Verlag Johannes Heyn, 2020): 27.

importance of such works. Especially, in the case of a foundational text such as *Farbe bekennen*, the editors, May Opitz (later Ayim), Katharina Oguntoye, and Dagmar Schultz, I argue, pursue a manifold goal: to uncover the history of Black people in German-speaking lands dating back to the twelfth century; to critique the colonial legacies and racism in contemporary German society; to showcase the isolation and the lack of community experienced by Black Germans, especially the older generations born before and after the Second World War; to promote their individual and collective self-assertion as a Black German community in a predominantly white society that views the terms “Black” and “German” as mutually exclusive; and, finally, to write their own history into the “existing official versions.”¹⁴⁵ Issues such as agency and community building, as pursued by the editors of *Farbe bekennen*, complicate thus the question of readership. Rocío G. Davis contends that with traditional autobiographies, the relationship between the writer and reader is assumed to be relatively “unproblematic” and comfortable.¹⁴⁶ In the context of ethnic writing, however, this relationship is less straightforward. In other words, the editors of *Farbe bekennen* target white as well as Black German readers. They address the mainstream white readership by challenging negative stereotypes about Black Germans and pleading for tolerance and acceptance for a minority group such as themselves. They speak to Black readers by validating their experiences and presenting a positive presence of Black people in Germany – a role model for others to draw inspiration from. As a result, they empower Black readers and inspire them to expand the community by producing more texts. And in the decades following the publication of *Farbe bekennen*, many Black German authors have published their own life

¹⁴⁵ Rocío G. Davis. *Begin Here. Reading Asian North American Autobiographies of Childhood*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007): 25.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 23.

writings, contributing to what amounts to a substantial literary production by Black (German) writers and artists today.¹⁴⁷

Given the fact that Black Germans have chosen to tell their stories in form of a life writing, such works have been the main focus of scholarship on the Black German experience. Life writing by Black Germans have been examined in terms of how they have been received by white German readers,¹⁴⁸ how they have been shaped and influenced by African American literature,¹⁴⁹ to what extent they mirror social problems of German-American relations in the postwar era,¹⁵⁰ how they bear witness to unchanged conditions for Black Germans in Nazi Germany and West Germany,¹⁵¹ how they connect to diasporic traditions and transnational frames of reference,¹⁵² and how autobiographies can be means of identity construction in the struggle for acceptance – to name a few.¹⁵³ I, on the other hand, take a slightly different approach when analyzing life writings written by Black Germans. I argue that Black German literature can be interpreted as an example of family melodrama, as I delineate below.

¹⁴⁷ For a comprehensive summary of Black German life writings, see Dirk Göttsche. *Self-Assertion, Intervention, and Achievement*. In: Sara Lennox. *Remapping Black Germany* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2016): 67-91.

¹⁴⁸ Leroy Hopkins. *Writing Diasporic Identity*. In: Patricia Mazón / Reinhild Steingröver (eds.) *Not so Plain as Black and White*. (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005): 183-208.

¹⁴⁹ Aija Poikāne-Daumke. *African Diasporas*. (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2006).

¹⁵⁰ Kraft, Marion. *Spurensuche*. In: Marion Kraft (ed.). *Kinder der Befreiung* (Münster: UNRAST-Verlag, 2015): 260-284.

¹⁵¹ Priscilla Layne. “Don’t Look So Sad Because You’re a Little Negro.” (*Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender and the Black International*, 4:2, 2015): 171-188.

¹⁵² Dirk Göttsche. *Self-Assertion, Intervention, and Achievement*. In: Sara Lennox (ed.) *Remapping Black Germany*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016): 67-90.

¹⁵³ Massimlawè Harakawa. *Autobiographisches Schreiben als Überlebensstrategie oder Identitätsbildung*. (Göttingen: Cuvillier Verlag, 2017).

Despite individual differences in cultural, ethnic, and social background, as well as the historic period they grew up in, life writing by Black Germans nonetheless exhibit some common melodramatic tropes that run through these stories, as will become apparent in my following discussion of *Farbe bekennen*. The first trope is the domestic space with the white German mother and the absent Black father. As I have explained in the first chapter, the Black German child, growing up in the period before WWII and in the postwar years up until the 1980s, in this case grows up without knowing a Black community as the only Black person in their surroundings in isolation. Their identity formation is thus coupled with their search for their Black father. The next melodramatic trope revolves around the idealized space of home including the period of happy childhood. Before Black German children enrolled in school, they live through a relatively happy and safe childhood mostly free from racial discrimination. This period is thus remembered as a happy and carefree time. The next melodramatic trope involves the focus on victim-heroine and her suffering, and the depiction of villainy. As Black Germans leave their childhood home and become (young) adults, they are fully confronted with racial discrimination in educational and professional institutions as well as their daily interactions with white people. The final melodramatic trope signifies their coming to terms with the past and present, a period I call the Black *coming out*.¹⁵⁴ What I mean with that is that Black Germans stop explaining themselves to white Germans and finally acknowledge and accept their Blackness and gain a new self-awareness as Black Germans. They actively push back against being Othered and excluded. This process of self-discovery also involves the search for their Black father and their origins. Using family melodrama thus allows Black Germans to evoke sympathy for themselves while also calling attention to their existence and achieving self-

¹⁵⁴ Borrowed from Tiffany N. Florvil. *Mobilizing Black Germany: Afro-German Women and the Making of a Transnational Movement*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020).

definition on their own terms.

“Farbe bekennen. Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte”

In the foreword to the first edition of *Farbe bekennen*, the editors Katharina Oguntoye and May Opitz (later Ayim) describe their encounter with other Black German women as follows:

Beinahe jede von uns afro-deutschen Frauen zwischen 20 und 30 Jahren war es gewohnt, sich allein mit ihrer Herkunft und ihrer Identität auseinanderzusetzen. Intensiven Kontakt zu anderen Afro-Deutschen hatte kaum eine zuvor gehabt. Wenn wir Freunde und Freundinnen mit unseren Gedanken und Problemen konfrontieren, müssen wir immer befürchten, jemanden zu verlieren oder für „zu empfindlich“ gehalten zu werden. Uns als Afro-Deutsche zu begegnen und aufeinander einzulassen, war ein völlig anderes Erlebnis. Gemeinsam war uns [...] unsere andere Sozialisation, ansonsten waren wir sehr verschieden [...].¹⁵⁵

Growing up in isolation, i.e., without any contact to other Black Germans, as the authors explain, has left them with no other choice than to construct a Black German identity on their own. When they do share their experiences and their new-found awareness with white Germans, they run the risk of losing someone as a friend because this process involves challenging people’s ingrained prejudices and assumptions that had never been questioned before. In other words, Black Germans are met with what Reni Eddo-Lodge calls “emotional disconnect” from white Germans. “Emotional disconnect,” Eddo-Lodge states, is the “conclusion of living a life oblivious to the fact that their [white people’s] skin color is the norm and all others deviate from it.”¹⁵⁶

Furthermore, white people “never had to think about what it means, in power terms, to be white,

¹⁵⁵ (“As Afro-German women almost all of us between the ages of twenty and thirty were accustomed to dealing with our background and our identity in isolation. Few of us had any significant contact with other Afro-Germans and if we attempted to discuss our thoughts and problems with friends, it was always possible that we would alienate someone or be accused of being “too sensitive.” Meeting each other as Afro-Germans and becoming involved with each other has been a totally new experience. What several of us did have in common was a socialization unlike that of other Germans; aside from that we were very different [...]). *Showing Our Colors*. Translated by Anne V. Adams. (University of Massachusetts Press, 1992): xxi.

¹⁵⁶ Reni Eddo-Lodge. *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race*. (Bloomsbury: London, 2017): ix-x.

so any time they're vaguely reminded of this fact, they interpret it as an affront." This unwillingness on the part of white Germans to acknowledge racism contributes to Black Germans' feeling of isolation, a "socialization unlike that of other Germans" that Oguntoye and Opitz refer to.

Describing their isolation and exclusion helps Black Germans to evoke sympathy for themselves, and clearly laying out the societal causes that led to that isolation. It has something to do with how white Germans never really had to think about their position as white and how that was caused by the near-complete absence of the German colonial period from public memory as well as the lack of adequate coming to terms with National Socialism, in particular with regard to Black people and People of Color. During the Nazi regime, Black people were excluded from schools, professions, and public activities closed to "non-Aryans," and, in some cases, they were even sent to concentration camps or condemned to forced labor. The forgetting and neglect of this part of German history has inevitably led to a repression and collective ignorance of the historical presence of racialized minorities in German-speaking lands including Africans and Black Germans. For this reason, it was crucial for the editors and authors of *Farbe bekennen* first and foremost to uncover and research the history of Black people in Germany in order to contextualize their experiences, which had been perceived as individual instances by the majority white German culture as well as Black Germans themselves. Positioning themselves thus vis-à-vis exclusionary and isolating tendencies in the majority culture all the while asserting their Germanness and belonging to the German culture and nation, these Black German "counter-narratives"¹⁵⁷ in *Farbe bekennen* take a clearly political stand. Dirk Göttsche calls this

¹⁵⁷ Peggy Piesche / Sara Lennox. Epilogue of Epistemologies and Positionalities. A Conversation, Berlin, October 21, 2014. In: Sara Lennox. *Remapping Black Germany*. (University of Massachusetts Press, 2016): 275.

political fight against racism in combination with personal accounts of Black German experience “minority intervention” in German society and culture that seeks to correct and rewrite German colonial history.¹⁵⁸

What is significant about this political fight of this Black German literature is its clearly feminist perspective. Prior to meeting African American poet and feminist, Audre Lorde, at the Free University of Berlin in 1984, some of the activists and editors of *Farbe bekennen* such as Ika Hügel-Marshall and Dagmar Schultz had already been involved and active in the German feminist movement of the 1970s. Schultz’s Berlin-based feminist publishing house, *Orlanda*, had published feminist essays by Lorde and Adrienne Rich, bringing thus key texts from US women’s movement on racism to German readers. As mentioned in the Introduction, literature by Black writers, particularly African American, women writers, were immensely influential for Black German women to make sense of racism and to come to terms with the seemingly “contradictory” parts of their identity, *Black and German*, in a society without a cohesive Black community.¹⁵⁹ Left to their own devices and confronted with a lack of available texts in German surrounding race and racism, Black Germans thus turned to African American women authors for guidance. When Audre Lorde came to Berlin to offer seminars on American women poets, Black German women, therefore, took the chance to meet her in person. Lorde’s meeting with these women became a catalyst for events such as: the coining of the self-designation “afro-deutsch” – which served to replace derogatory names imposed by white Germans, e.g.,

¹⁵⁸ Dirk Göttsche. Self-Assertion, Intervention and Achievement. Black German Writing in Postcolonial Perspective. (*Orbis Litterarum* 67:2, 2012): 85.

¹⁵⁹ More on this, see Sheila Mysorekar. ‘Pass the word and break the silence’ – The Significance of African-American and ‘Third World’ literature for Black Germans. In: Carole Boyce Davies / ‘Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (eds.) *Moving Beyond Boundaries*. Vol. 1: International Dimensions of Black Women’s Writing (London: Pluto Press, 1995).

“Mischling” (*mixed-race*) or “Mulatte” (*Mulatto*) – and building a sense of community and thus creating a platform to address their situation. Moreover, in her role as a mentor, Lorde validated these Black German women’s voices as never before and encouraged them to share their experiences, which then were published in *Farbe bekennen* after two years of research. Furthermore, Lorde recognized these women as part of the Black Diaspora, connecting them thus to a larger transatlantic diaspora. In the foreword to the English language edition of *Farbe bekennen* in 1992 Audre Lorde states,

“We are the hyphenated people of the Diaspora whose self-defined identities are no longer shameful secrets in the countries of our origin, but rather declarations of strength and solidarity. We are an increasingly unified front from which the world has not yet heard.”¹⁶⁰

By using the plural form, “we,” Lorde makes Black Germans part of not only the larger Black Diaspora but also the community of people with hyphenated names, i.e., “Afro-Europeans, Afro-Asians, Afro-Americans.”¹⁶¹ Lorde sees these people of the Diaspora, unified in their strength and solidarity, as a driving force for a global change. This crucial collaboration between Audre Lorde and these young Black German women activists, which helped them emerge from invisibility, silence, and isolation, however, did not constitute the beginning of Black German activism or even print production; rather, it was a “transition point”¹⁶² from activism and literary productions by migrant and “temporary” Black communities¹⁶³ in Germany to the German-based

¹⁶⁰ Audre Lorde. Foreword to the English Language Edition. In: May Opitz / Katharina Oguntoye / Dagmar Schultz. *Showing Our Colors*. Translated by Anne V. Adams. (University of Massachusetts Press, 1992): viii.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Asoka Esuruoso & Philipp Khabo Koepsell (eds.) Introduction Alpha. In: *Arriving in the future*. (Berlin: epubli, 2014): 12.

¹⁶³ Examples of these migrant and “temporary” Black communities in Germany include, just to name a few, Africans from former German colonies speaking out for the rights of their countrymen at the beginning of the twentieth century; the Cameroonian, Dualla Misipo, detailing German colonial despotism and racial discrimination

Afro-German community, i.e. people born and raised in Germany who possessed German citizenship. The latter gained more prominence and momentum through the involvement of Audre Lorde, and, in effect, resulted in the founding of the cultural organizations Initiative of Black People in Germany (Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland, ISD) and the Black women's organization ADEFRA.

Black German women's encounter with Audre Lorde encouraged them to become more politically active and produce their own literature in order to raise awareness about their histories and experience, as well as their sense of self and encourage other Black Germans to do the same.¹⁶⁴ In doing so, I argue, the authors in *Farbe bekennen* utilize family melodrama as a means of not just telling their individual stories, but also of confronting and interrogating racism and exclusion that they have faced in the majority society. With a special focus on the domestic space, family melodrama allows Black German authors to address their unique family constellations. There are certain distinctive family constellations that Black German women share. Many of the women in *Farbe bekennen* grew up in the absence of their Black fathers, which meant white mothers were the focal point of the parent-child relationship. Their mothers had their own unique struggles; white women, often faced criticism from German society for having fraternized with Black men and, as a result, having a Black child. In addition, even if white women were not racist themselves, they often had difficulty understanding Black women's unique experience of racism and sexism. The one exception to the white-German-mother

in his novels from the 1960s through 1980s; or the African Writers Association, comprised of African intellectuals, activists, writers, who published journals and magazines in the 1970s and 1980s. For more examples, see Asoka Esuruoso & Philipp Khabo Koepsell (eds.) Introduction Alpha. In: *Arriving in the future*. (Berlin: epubli, 2014).

¹⁶⁴ On a brief overview of literary productions and Black German activism before 1980s, see the introductory chapter of this dissertation.

household can be found with the youngest generation in *Farbe bekennen*, who often have Black German mothers and therefore grow up with a better understanding of Blackness and racism and therefore had a natural self-awareness and self-confidence as Black Germans. Since *Farbe bekennen* tells the personal stories of four generations, these women's individual experiences appear to have little in common, due to their class, location, family background, and the historic period they grew up in. Nevertheless, reading them through the lens of family melodrama, I have identified the following five melodramatic tropes that connect these stories; namely the domestic space with the white mother and absent Black father; the idealized space of home including the period of "happy" childhood; the focus on the victim-heroine and her suffering; the depiction of villainy; marriages to white German men, and the coming to terms with the past and present, i.e., the Black "coming out." In the next section of this chapter, I will expand on these common themes and the way they advance Black German authors' goals in writing in *Farbe bekennen*. For family melodrama as such makes it possible for these authors to focus on marginalized people and to tell their experiences in such a way that creates sympathy for them in white readers. As I've argued at the beginning of this chapter, in asserting their Germanness and belonging to the German culture, the authors in *Farbe bekennen* are, in part, addressing white German audiences in order to gain recognition and acceptance. On the other hand, the essays in *Farbe bekennen* are also directed at younger generations of Black Germans by presenting them with positive instances of Blackness in Germany to draw inspiration from. In the final section of this chapter, I focus on Ika Hügel-Marshall, another Black German woman, who told her personal story in her life writing titled, *Daheim unterwegs* in 1998. In many ways, Hügel-Marshall's experiences echo those depicted in *Farbe bekennen* in terms of being marginalized and racially discriminated in a white-German society. On the other hand, as opposed to the

compressed structure of *Farbe bekennen* where life stories are pressed into short sections (5-12 pages long) *Daheim unterwegs* is a detailed account of Hügel-Marshall's life from childhood to adulthood, which allows her to greatly expand on many of the themes touched upon in the anthology as we will see in my analysis of her life story.

In analyzing the personal accounts in *Farbe bekennen*, I concentrate on one or two women from each generation, not for the sake of completeness or comprehension, but in order to highlight the ways the circumstances of their respective socio-historical time and their individual family situations have influenced and shaped their views and self-perceptions, and the way they were, in turn, viewed by white Germans. For there are no clear-cut ideological separations between these generations, rather, similar aspirations and experiences that overlap and interconnect. Apart from the common threads mentioned above, however, these women differ greatly in terms of socio-economic status, familial background, and personal views, and should definitely not be lumped together. In analyzing their personal accounts with respect to the common themes, I take into account each author's rich personal history. In dividing up the authors in groups along generations I argue that older texts by Black Germans have the primary function of documenting Black German history as well as gaining recognition from white audiences, whereas younger generations do not share this need for recognition. In fact, the younger women foreground Blackness as natural, ordinary part of life rather than something extraordinary.

The first authors I will discuss are the two sisters, Anna G. and Frieda P. (70 and 65 years old respectively at the time *Farbe bekennen* was published in 1986), who represent the oldest generation in *Farbe bekennen* that experienced the first World War firsthand. Growing up during the Weimar Republic and the Second World War with their Cameroonian father and their white

German mother, the two sisters had to contend with issues that resonate with experiences of other Black people and People of Color at that time: hostility, ostracization, sterilization, name calling, racial discrimination in school and when looking for jobs and housing, and finally forced labor. But they also enjoyed a certain level of privilege due to the good standing and popularity of their Black father among white Germans as he was an honorary member of the militia of the Free City of Danzig (now Gdansk in Poland) and came to Germany to study medicine. Despite the racism they encountered and the horrendous experiences during the war, the sisters have made peace with the past and even identify as “Mulatten” (*mulattos*), possibly due to the fact that they were brought up at a time where the use of such derogatory terms were widely accepted and other positive designations such as *Afro-German* or *Black German* simply did not exist.

The second group of authors I will discuss are Helga Emde (40 years old) and Ellen Wiedenroth (30 years old), who were born in the postwar years and who belong to the generation of Black Germans, who actively sought to engage with social activism and fight back against the racism and racial discrimination that they faced in the majority white culture. This is not to suggest that older generations, represented by the sisters, didn't fight back, but that they might have had to contend with more pressing issues like literally fighting for their lives during the years of National Socialism. The last group of authors in my analysis include Julia Berger (17 years old), who belongs to the youngest generation of Black Germans in *Farbe bekennen*. Having been raised by a Black parent (Astrid Berger, who also tells her story in *Farbe bekennen*), Julia Berger grew up with more confidence and an almost natural sense and awareness of being Black German even if she still dealt the experience of being Othered, with xenophobia, racism, and discrimination. Also, what makes Julia's experience different is that she grew up in a more diverse and bigger city such as Berlin, and she's lighter-skinned than other

Black Germans (her father is white). In addition to these three groups, I will at times also refer to the other Black German women in *Farbe bekennen* to present as diverse a range of experiences by Black Germans as possible in my analysis. In the next section I will start with the first melodramatic element that I have identified in *Farbe bekennen*, namely the domestic space surrounding the white German mother and the (absent) Black father, including the period of “happy” childhood.

The domestic space and the marital home

In the personal accounts of the Black German women in *Farbe bekennen*, the domestic space revolving around the white mother and the absent Black father plays a prominent role. According to Linda Williams melodramas usually begin and end in what she calls a “space of innocence,” i.e., a domestic space that is irrevocably lost but to which one wishes to return, or at least to restore some semblance of it.¹⁶⁵ Rural homes and gardens are considered as the stereotypical icons of such a space of innocence, “offering a moment of virtue taking pleasure in itself.”¹⁶⁶ In contrast, for almost all of the Black German women in my analysis the time of childhood and young adulthood was a period shaped by racial discrimination, name-calling, isolation, and loss that they experienced outside of the protection of their homes. Most were raised by their white mothers alone in mostly small rural towns, very few of them also lived with a Black parent, and still others spent the early years of their childhood in orphanages. Most of them nonetheless equate their childhood home with such a space of innocence as described by Williams, within which they experienced a relatively safe and secluded time and space, regardless of whether their childhood household consisted of just the white mother and the white

¹⁶⁵ Linda Williams. *Playing the Race Card*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): 28.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

maternal family or both parents. The reason for this general feeling of safety and security during early childhood, i.e., the time before kindergarten and elementary school, is twofold: first, inside their childhood homes, Black German children were shielded from racial discrimination and name-calling. Second, especially in early childhood they were not fully aware of racial difference and the different meanings attributed to white and Black skin. Those who grew up in orphanages, as exemplified by Hügel-Marshall in the second part of this chapter, experienced mistreatment and abuse by caretakers due to their skin color. An exception to these older generations of Black German women in my analysis, who foreground their domestic homes including the period of childhood and young adulthood, is Julia Berger, the youngest woman in *Farbe bekennen*. Having been brought up with a natural self-confidence of being Black German, Julia does not focus so much on the domestic space and the period of her childhood as more on the normalcy of being Black German at age 17 (in 1986) and the subtle, everyday racism that she encounters. First, I will start with the oldest generation of Black German women in *Farbe bekennen* to see how they describe their space of innocence.

The sisters Anna G. and Frieda P. grew up in the Free City of Danzig (now Gdańsk, Poland), a semi-autonomous city-state from 1920 until 1939, where they lived with their African father and white mother from East Prussia. Their father had come to Germany from Cameroon, one of Germany's former colonies, to study medicine on the initiative of emperor Wilhelm II. He was also an honorary member of the militia and was said to have been "kaisertreu und deutscher als viele gebürtige Deutsche."¹⁶⁷ Due to their father's popularity and high standing among their white neighbors and high-ranking Germans in Danzig, the sisters spent a relatively happy and

¹⁶⁷ ("Loyal to the Kaiser and more German than many native-born Germans"). *Showing Our Colors*, 57.

safe childhood, undisturbed by anyone. They describe their father as a family man who used to spend time with his kids and play with them. Their white German mother, however, experienced ostracization for marrying a Black man. Her family, for example, was completely shocked about her marriage plans; they had never seen a Black man before, not even from afar. Her sister even refused to meet her Black husband and daughters. The authorities even urged her to get divorced. Their discomfort and disdain likely stem due to how notions of nationality and race have been historically linked in Germany since at least the end of the nineteenth century, the time of German colonialism in Africa, and the way miscegenation was regarded as a serious sin in the Weimar Republic and well into the postwar years.¹⁶⁸ After having met her son-in-law in person, however, their grandmother became bosom buddies with him, the sisters write. All in all, the sisters depict their childhood home as peaceful and harmonious, and their childhood as sheltered, “Wir hatten eine behütete Kindheit und haben nie empfunden, dass wir anders waren.”¹⁶⁹

In contrast to the sisters mentioned above, Helge Emde (born 1946) describes her childhood as not a happy one, which makes her an exception in my analysis of Black German women in *Farbe bekennen*. As a so-called – derogatory labeled – “occupation baby” (her father was an African American soldier), Emde grew up as the only Black person in her family with her white mother and white sister in a time that was still very much shaped by the Nazi past. As miscegenation was still regarded a sin in postwar Germany, her mother saw the birth of her Black daughter as a kind of punishment for having had a liaison with a Black man. She tried to overcompensate in order to fight the feelings of guilt, which consisted of making sure her

¹⁶⁸ On how miscegenation was considered a sin in the Weimar period as well as postwar Germany, see the Introductory chapter of this dissertation.

¹⁶⁹ (“We had a sheltered childhood and never felt we were different”): 56.

daughter had everything she needed, which led to overfeeding, among other things. However, Emde states that what her mother did not give her, and what Emde needed most growing up, was love and affection. This is likely due to the fact that her mother was vilified for having a Black child and could thus not bring herself to feel affection towards her daughter. Additionally, it is also possible that her mother felt overwhelmed and angry because her husband, Emde's father, was no longer in their lives. In addition to her lack of parental affection, her mother was also unable to provide her daughter with any kind of guidance and support when Emde felt torn, disoriented, and in search of a positive identity. According to Emde her mother was incapable of doing so not so much out of lack of interest but because of her own "prüde Erziehung."¹⁷⁰ The only time that Emde thought her mother seemed to have any positive feelings towards her daughter's Blackness was when people used to admire and compliment Emde's hair when she was small. This was the only time, Emde narrates, that her mother seemed to feel flattered and even to be receiving some sort of positive attention. It is very likely that her mother was ostracized in the white German society for having a Black child from a Black man. And when Emde was exoticized for her hair and skin, this was the only time that people said anything "positive" about her Blackness as she was otherwise used to being discriminated against and called derogatory names such as the N-word, "Moor head," and Sarotti-Moor." As the only Black person growing up, Emde inevitably internalized the prejudice and racism of her surroundings against Black people, including African American soldiers, the only Black person she met as a kid and whom she was scared of. She didn't see herself as Black, for people associated being Black with foreignness and animality. Fearing the discrimination and humiliation of her white surroundings, Emde's only wish was to be invisible, which was

¹⁷⁰ ("prudish upbringing"). *Showing Our Colors*, 103.

impossible as she was tall, overweight, and Black, and was thus always visible. Her wish to be invisible and inconspicuous led her to even want to become white.

In contrast to Emde, Astrid Berger (42 years old) shows us what a difference it can make to grow up with a Black parent in her account of her father from Cameroon. Even though she lost him very early on – she was eleven when he died – Berger states that her father was the one person who has positively shaped her life. Born only two years after Helga Emde, Astrid Berger also grew up in the immediate postwar years where she experienced anti-Blackness and racism. She narrates how when she first entered school, her teacher looked at her and exclaimed, “Das ist ja ein hochinteressanter Fall!”¹⁷¹ Berger comments, “Ich war ein ‘Fall,’ kein Mensch – wie sollte ich damit umgehen?”¹⁷² Later when she went to a girls’ school, she was usually assumed to be the perpetrator when something went wrong, “Das war die Schwarze.”¹⁷³ Especially when it came to such discriminatory experiences it was crucial to Berger to have her father around who supported his daughter and shared her experiences. Berger writes, “Bei meinem Vater hatte ich [...] immer das Gefühl, er hätte nichts auf mir sitzen lassen, wenn mir Unrecht geschehen wäre.“ [...] Es war sehr wichtig für mich, die sechs Jahre einen Menschen zu haben, auf den ich mich blind verlassen konnte – ich habe nie wieder von einem Menschen soviel Zuwendung bekommen.“¹⁷⁴ It was important to Berger to have someone in her life, however briefly, who not only understood and supported her, but who could also personally relate to her experiences and

¹⁷¹ (“This is quite an interesting case!”): 114.

¹⁷² (“I was a ‘case,’ not a person – how was I supposed to deal with that?”): 114.

¹⁷³ (“It was the Black girl.”): 115.

¹⁷⁴ (“With my father [...] I always had the feeling that he wouldn’t let anybody get away with treating me unfairly.” [...] “It was really important for me to have a person for six years that I could depend on unquestionably – I’ve never since had so much loving devotion.”): 115.

give her advice on how to deal with discrimination. Precisely for this reason, Berger says, today, she is able to support and defend her own daughter, Julia Berger, who is the youngest woman in *Farbe bekennen*. Berger writes that she raised her daughter to be a fearless and proud young woman. Despite losing her father at an early age, Astrid Berger remembers having had a harmonious and pleasant childhood.

Although she didn't grow up with her Black father like Astrid Berger did, Ellen Wiedenroth (30 years old) tells of her safe and secure ("geborgen") early childhood with her white mother. Until she entered school, Wiedenroth doesn't remember experiencing any kind of exclusion or marginalization. This was achieved, according to Wiedenroth, through her mother's meticulous and almost complete isolation of her family from the outside world. Her mother was scared for her daughter's safety and assumed that she would be treated unfairly based on her skin color, which is why Wiedenroth was not allowed to visit friends or deviate from her usual path to school. Additionally, her mother did not know how to support her daughter or deal with the racism her daughter was experiencing such as being called the N-word. The only way she knew how to protect her daughter was not only to physically isolate her from the outside world, but also to avoid mentioning or discussing anything related to racism, Blackness, or skin color.¹⁷⁵ The "perfect world" at home was deceptive in that it was only possible by way of silence and avoidance of any kind of problems. This silence and reluctance surrounding the issue of race and racism was, as outlined in the Introduction to this dissertation, typical of postwar German society where the mere mention of the word "race" was declared taboo in an effort to "overcome" the

¹⁷⁵ Marion Kraft elaborates on the consequences this kind of upbringing could have on Black children who grow up without being taught about Black culture or identity. Among other things, she mentions that they tend to feel torn, disoriented, lost, and have a strained relationship to their own identity. In: *Kinder der Befreiung* (Münster: UNRAST Verlag, 2015): 20-64.

Nazi past and move on with life. Wiedenroth comments her “exit” from her childhood home as follows, “Sobald ich mich aus der geborgenen Welt meiner Mutter löste, schlug mir die Welle der kühlen Ablehnung jäh ins Gesicht.”¹⁷⁶ Leaving the secluded space of her childhood home and experiencing rejection and marginalization with full force led her to seek the company of other Black people, a theme, to which I will return later on in this chapter.

Some of the Black German women in *Farbe bekennen* sought to recover the solidarity, understanding, and acceptance, which they once had in childhood, in marriages to white German men. This is their attempt, I argue, to recreate a semblance of their childhood, a space of innocence, to experience again that feeling of security and safety of their childhood home. For as Linda Williams states, one of the main characteristics of melodrama is to “get back to what it *feels* like the beginning,” i.e., to return to the time of origins and the space of innocence.¹⁷⁷ Helga Emde, the one exception in my analysis, felt throughout her childhood and as a young adult isolated, humiliated, and unhappy until she married a white man. Her marrying a white German man was her attempt to recreate a semblance of a happy childhood that she *never* had, and her hopes were clearly based on a heteronormative standard. With a white man at her side Emde thought she could finally find solidarity and be part of the white German society, as she writes, “Endlich fühlte ich mich zugehörig und auch ein Stück weit sozial anerkannt. Ein weißer Mann an meiner Seite, das konnte mir schon einige Sicherheit vermitteln, zumal wenn es immer heißt, dass nur das Weiße zählt.”¹⁷⁸ As the majority white society in Germany considers being white as

¹⁷⁶ (“As soon as I extricated myself from my mother’s secluded world, a wave of cool rejection slapped me square in the face.”): 170.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁷⁸ (“At last, I felt that I belonged and that I had a bit of recognition out there in society. A white man at my side, this could certainly provide me with some security, even if it still meant that only white counts.”): 105.

superior and belonging to the German nation, Emde had hoped that being with a white man would provide her with some security in that she would also be seen as part of the German nation as opposed to being outside of it.¹⁷⁹ What this shows us about the intersection of race and gender in German society is that not only were women in general expected to be married to be seen as “respectable” members of society; unmarried Black women, in particular, found themselves in addition to being socially “unacceptable” – because not married – also outside of the majority-white culture due to their skin color. They hope, therefore, that a marriage to a white German man would mean being part of not just society in general but *white*-German society. In Emde’s case, however, due to his inability and unwillingness to really understand her, her husband could not sympathize with her and show her solidarity. Because he was a white cis man and he had never experienced racism or discrimination due to his skin color or gender, he simply could not relate to the subtle instances of hurt and hostility that his wife daily endured as a Black person. To him, she was just being too sensitive. In addition, he enjoyed being at the center of attention due to his wife’s Blackness and perceived otherness, “[...] für ihn war ich keine gleichwertige Partnerin, sondern seine Vorzeigefrau, mit der er, wo immer wir uns sehen ließen, automatisch im Mittelpunkt stand.”¹⁸⁰ Instead of treating her as an equal partner in marriage, he used Emde’s race as a Black German woman to elevate his own standing in society.

Another Black German woman in *Farbe bekennen*, Angelika Eisenbrandt, reports of similar experiences with her white German husband, who she thinks only married her because he wanted to feel special. He would urge her to style her hair in a way that would make it look more

¹⁷⁹ More on the implications of unions between white men and Black women, see Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

¹⁸⁰ (“For him [...] I was not an equal partner, but his wife to be shown off, whose presence automatically made him the center of attention wherever we went.”): 106.

African, “wie bei den Schwarzen, die so richtig Wolle haben,”¹⁸¹ even though she preferred short and straight hair. He wanted a wife that he could show off, an *African* wife who looked “extraordinary.” This experience of being exoticized by men and exploited for personal gain is also echoed by Astrid Berger, another Black German woman in *Farbe bekennen*. She narrates how an ex-boyfriend told her after being asked why he loved her, “Eine Mannequin oder eine Stewardess kann ich täglich haben, eine schwarze Frau aber nicht.”¹⁸² In other words, according to him a Black woman is such a rare person to come by that he couldn’t miss the opportunity to date her. Berger calls men like him “racist exploiters.”¹⁸³ This quote from her ex-partner highlights the precarious situation Black (German) women find themselves in: while they might already suffer from sexism due to simply being women, as an exoticized and overly sexualized Other – a rare “commodity” – they are subject to more overt and aggressive sexual pursuit and exploitation by white men.¹⁸⁴

Villainy and the suffering of the victim-heroine

Another typical feature of domestic melodramas, as Linda Williams argues, is when “the villain intrudes upon this idyllic space,” the space of innocence.¹⁸⁵ In melodramas the villain can be an actual evil person intending to harm the hero/heroine or it can be represented by a “larger

¹⁸¹ (“like Blacks who have that real woolly hair.”): 193.

¹⁸² (“A model or stewardess I can have anytime, but not a Black woman.”): 118.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Heide Fehrenbach writes that Black women were seen as a “powerful stimulant of white male desire.” In: Black Occupation Children and the Devolution of the Nazi Racial State. In: Sara Lennox. *Remapping Black Germany*. (University of Massachusetts Press, 2016): 216.

¹⁸⁵ Linda Williams. *Playing the Race Card*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): 28.

corrupt social order.”¹⁸⁶ In their personal accounts in *Farbe bekennen*, the Black German authors report of experiencing different kinds of “villainy” depending on the socio-historical time period they grew up in; however, what they all have in common is that they equate the white society in Germany that they call home, including neighbors, colleagues, strangers, friends, and even family members, with a metaphorical villain intruding upon their space of innocence. The oldest generation, the sisters, Anna G. and Frieda P., for example faced the most violent form of evil, National Socialism, where they had to contend not only with name-calling, ostracization, and exclusion but also eviction and forced labor. In addition, they narrowly escaped sterilization and internment in a Nazi concentration camp. On the contrary, Helga Emde, who belongs to the generation born after the Second World War did not have to fear Nazi persecution or fend off physical harm to her well-being. Rather, she confronted a postwar society, which was still very much shaped by the National Socialist past and its ideology, but because of denazification abstained from openly defaming People of Color. Instead, white Germans’ mistrust and disdain of non-white people manifested itself in marginalization and race-based discrimination of such people.¹⁸⁷ The youngest generation, including Julia Berger and Abena Adomako, in contrast experience being Black German today as something normal; Blackness is a fact of life rather than a strange curiosity. In other words, they show that it is normal nowadays to be raised by at least one Black parent and to encounter other Black people and People of Color in German society. Also, while they don’t experience overt forms of racism such as being called racist slurs on the streets that the oldest generation had to endure, they face more non-violent, everyday

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Priscilla Layne. *Suspicious Spiral: Autofiction and Black German Subjectivity in Olivia Wenzel’s 1000 Serpentin Angst*. Speech at video conference organized by the Center for German and European Studies, Brandeis University, 2020.

racism and xenophobia, such as microaggressions in the form of questions like, “Where do you come from?” or intended *compliments* that Other them like “You speak German well!”; remarks that imply that Black people don’t belong to the German nation and culture.

By foregrounding the racism and discrimination they have endured in the majority white culture, these Black German authors tell their stories in *Farbe bekennen* from their point of view as racialized victims, which allows them to portray their suffering in a more direct and unmediated way. According to film scholar Thomas Elsaesser, focusing on the perspective of the victim is a characteristic feature of domestic melodrama, causing the viewer/reader to feel sympathy for the suffering of another person.¹⁸⁸ Linda Williams specifically points out how the melodramatic victim’s suffering is tied to racial conflict. She argues that racially marked characters such as those embodying “the suffering black body” move the reader to “feel for the sufferings of the virtuous and against the villainy of others.”¹⁸⁹ The way they detail the acts of abuse and manifestations of pain in the form of racialized exclusion, marginalization, name-calling, and xenophobia that these women have endured at the hands of their white German compatriots, make them worthy of recognition, acceptance, and sympathy by the white reader, the primary audience of *Farbe bekennen*. At the same time, the description of their suffering is a testament to their strength and survival in the face of adversity and, oftentimes, life-threatening violence, so that younger generations of Black Germans and other People of Color might draw inspiration from them. In the next section, I will go into detail on what “villainy” the Black German authors faced in their respective socio-historical time period.

¹⁸⁸ More on Elsaesser’s views on family melodramas, see the Introductory chapter of this dissertation.

¹⁸⁹ Linda Williams. *Playing the Race Card*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): xiv, 12-13. Again, more on Linda Williams, see the first chapter of this dissertation.

Surviving National Socialism

Confronted with the horrors of the Third Reich, the sisters Anna G. and Frieda P. emerged from this period not as mere victims but what Tina Campt calls “contestatory and resistant subject(s).”¹⁹⁰ However, they were met with anti-Black sentiments well before the Nazi Regime ascended to power. Having lost World War I and its African colonies, Germany saw the presence of Black soldiers deployed by Allied forces during World War I and the subsequent occupation of the Rhineland in 1919 as especially humiliating and provocative. The French troops used colonial soldiers from Africa in their occupation of the Rhineland. In the Weimar Republic then a racist campaign, supported by political parties and all kinds of non-government organizations and groups, was launched to defame those Black soldiers and falsely accuse them of acts of sexual violence against white German women. The Black German children born to Black soldiers with white German women – derogatorily labeled as the *Rhineland Bastards* – were regarded by the Weimar government as a particular threat to the “purity of the German race.” Since the German colonialization of Africa, “blood” (i.e., ethnicity and race) had been legally linked to Germanness and German nationality, originally intended to exclude “mixed-race” children of white German men and African women in the colonies from gaining access to German citizenship. Through the 1907 amendment to the citizenship law Black German children did lose their German citizenship.¹⁹¹ In order to protect the “purity of the German race” from the “deadly danger” posed by these Black German children, the Weimar government weighed several “solutions” such as the plan to send the children to Africa to a climate better suited to their “nature” or, more drastically, sterilization. In the end, these plans were not carried out due

¹⁹⁰ Tina Campt. *Other Germans*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004): 138.

¹⁹¹ Kathleen J. Reich. Racially Mixed Marriages in Colonial Namibia. (*Crosscurrents: African Americans, Africa, and Germany in the Modern World*, 1998): 160.

to fears of domestic and international political repercussions.¹⁹²

When the Nazis ascended to power, however, such measures, especially sterilization, were actually put into practice, with illegal sterilizations beginning in 1937.¹⁹³ Although the Jewish population was the primary target of NS racial persecution, the regime's anti-Semitic policies nonetheless affected other racialized minorities like Black Germans and Sinti and Roma. In effect, all individuals considered to have "foreign blood" were declared as "non-Aryan" and threat to soil the purity of the Aryan race. With regard to Black German children, however, Camppt argues, National Socialism's policies were informed mainly by those directed against the Black German children of the Rhineland occupation.¹⁹⁴ These included compulsory sterilization, prohibition of contact between Blacks and white Germans, exclusion from schools, universities, professions, and public spaces and activities. In worst cases, they were condemned to forced labor or even sent to concentration camps. Some Black Germans and Africans escaped such fate by appearing in Nazi colonial and propaganda films, made specifically with the hope of regaining the lost African colonies and making this idea appealing to the German audience at home. Both sisters, Anna G. and Frieda P., from *Farbe bekennen* were engaged in the Nazi film industry as it was the only employer that not only hired but specifically sought non-white people.

For the sisters, the anti-Black sentiments during the Weimar Republic began with

¹⁹² Fatima El-Tayeb. "If you can't pronounce my name, you can just call me pride": Afro-German Activism, Gender and Hip Hop (*Gender & History* 15.3, 2003): 466-468.

¹⁹³ Apparently, in his autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler referred to Black Germans as "Rhineland bastards" and talked about his plans of sterilizing them. More on this see: <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/the-strange-and-awful-history-of-blacks-in-nazi-germany-c6e0e7250b7d>

¹⁹⁴ Tina Camppt. *Other Germans*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004): 137.

exclusions: in 1932 the sisters were thrown out of their girls' school;¹⁹⁵ when they applied for apprenticeships, they were told that only Aryans would be hired, and when white Germans did hire them, the sisters were let go shortly thereafter; their father's store went broke as people were prevented from buying there; their landlord terminated their lease so they had to move to a smaller apartment away from the city center; Frieda P. was thrown out of her gymnastics group as well as her bible circle. They also experienced ostracization: on the street they were spit at, jostled, and called racist slurs like *bastard*, *mulatto*, and the N-word; neighbors and friends stopped speaking to them; and teachers made life hard for the sisters.

The period of National Socialism was, Frieda P. writes, was the worst time one could imagine. In 1939, when the Free City of Danzig became part of the German nation, the family had to give up their Free State passports. As a result, they were declared stateless and were given "Fremdenpässe" (*alien's passports*), basically leaving them without a nationality. As was common during the Third Reich, Frieda P. was ordered to be sterilized, which she narrowly escaped because one of the men driving her to the clinic felt sorry for her and decided to let her go. As mentioned before, the sisters were hired to appear in Nazi colonial films and to tour with a dance troupe.¹⁹⁶ The film business, the sisters narrate, was quite pleasant, considering the circumstances: acting skills weren't necessary and they were usually hired to play naked wild men or women, or servants; still, the sisters write, they were paid well and were among other Black Germans and Africans. Towards the end of the war, the sisters were subjected to forced

¹⁹⁵ According to Tina Campt, in 1933 the "Law against the Overcrowding of German Schools and Universities" was passed to restrict the number of "non-Aryans attending German schools and universities to no more than 1.5 percent." *Other Germans* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004): 140.

¹⁹⁶ This inconsistent behavior of the Nazi regime towards Black people – wanting to sterilize them but also use them for their propaganda films – highlights the extent of the Nazis' efforts to expand their territories as well as their power. They had hoped to regain their former colonies in Africa that they had lost after the end of WWI.

labor and narrowly escaped being sent to concentration camps by hiding out in friends' apartments. According to the sisters, the hostilities against them stopped only after the end of the war.¹⁹⁷ Though they cannot forget and forgive many things that were done to them during the Nazi period, they have made their peace with it and had to move on with their lives. By appearing in *Farbe bekennen*, the sisters have the possibility to narrate their personal stories from their own point of view, thus giving their accounts a direct and unmediated touch. This technique invites sympathy from the reader to recognize them not only as victims of National Socialism, but also as German citizens and strong and resistant women who are proud of their heritage.

The postwar years

As a representative of the postwar generation in *Farbe bekennen*, Helga Emde, faced a society which was not as racist as the Third Reich, although there were some continuities.¹⁹⁸ One important difference from the Nazi period was that after denazification and reeducation of the German public enforced by Allied forces, overt hostilities and vilification towards non-white people diminished and Black people, and Black "Mischlingskinder" (*Black mixed-race children*) had replaced the Jewish population as the racialized Other.¹⁹⁹ Even though these children born

¹⁹⁷ In her essay on the Black German Marie Nejar, born in 1932, Priscilla Layne argues that Nejar was granted a "partial inclusion" into the German community through her acting and singing career during the Nazi period and postwar years. However, this belonging did not mean subjecthood; she was excluded from enjoying all the freedoms and rights of all other German citizens. More on this see: Priscilla Layne. "Don't Look So Sad Because You're a Little Negro": Marie Nejar, Afro-German Stardom, and Negotiations with Black Subjectivity. (*Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender and the Black International*, 4:2, 2015): 172.

¹⁹⁸ For a more nuanced discussion of this, see Rita Chin / Heide Fehrenbach / Geoff Eley / Atina Grossmann. (eds.) *After the Nazi Racial State. Difference and Democracy in Germany and Europe*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

¹⁹⁹ More on this see, Timothy L. Schroer. *Recasting Race After World War II. Germans and African Americans in American-Occupied Germany*. University Press of Colorado, 2007.

from relations between Black soldiers from Allied forces and white German women only made up a very small number (a little over four thousand) of the overall derogatorily labeled “occupation babies” (over ninety thousand), postwar German society invested these Black German children with a symbolic significance to show the world how it had effectively battled and overcome National Socialist ideologies during its transition to a democratic state. As the US military government generally didn’t allow interracial marriages between their Black soldiers and white German women, Black German children were as a result declared “illegitimate,” which meant that the children acquired their mothers’ German citizenship. Even if some of these children were adopted by mostly African American families in the US, and later also by Danish couples, (overall around seven hundred adoptions) and some ended up in orphanages and children’s homes (about ten percent),²⁰⁰ most of these children grew up with their white German mother in Germany. In the 1950s, as minors with German citizenship, which thus made them undeniably a German “responsibility,” these Black German children became the object of study by academics and scholar, and of numerous scientific, sociological, and anthropological studies in an effort to keep a record of these children and to find a “solution” for their future. However, by the 1960s, as the oldest cohort of Black German children entered the work force, their integration into the German postwar society was declared a success and completed since integration was defined primarily in economic rather than social terms.²⁰¹ As a result, official and public interest in Black German children had subsided, the postwar problem of race, personified by those Black children, was considered solved, and any mention of the word “race” or any reference to anything “racial” was taboo. Concurrently, National Socialism, and by extension

²⁰⁰ Heide Fehrenbach. *Black Occupation Children and the Devolution of the Nazi Racial State*. In: Sara Lennox. *Remapping Black Germany*. (University of Massachusetts Press, 2016): 212.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 215.

racism, was in effect declared “overcome” and thus no longer a threat to society nor was there any need to dwell on it any longer than necessary. This pseudo “closure” and inadequate coming to terms with the Nazi period, argues Fatima El-Tayeb, has led to the near-complete disappearance of the way Black Germans were treated during National Socialism as well as the brief German colonial period at the end of the nineteenth century from public memory.²⁰² This is the reason, El-Tayeb continues, why Germany’s immigrant populations have since been treated as if they were the first ones to arrive in Germany, and discriminatory behavior has been termed xenophobia (hatred of foreigners) rather than racism. More importantly, such refusal to speak of “race” and racism has, until recently, robbed Germany’s ethnic minorities of the language and analytical tools to effectively confront and combat everyday experiences of social exclusion and isolation. Up until the 1980s, when *Farbe bekennen* was published, Black Germans who grew up as “occupation babies” assumed that their experiences were individual rather than collective due to systemic and structural racism, as it becomes apparent in Helga Emde’s narrative below.

To Helga Emde, the only image and knowledge that she had of Black people were prejudices passed down to her from her social circle: “Schwarz gleich beängstigend, fremd, unheimlich und animalisch,” and “Schwarz gleich nicht existenzberechtigt.”²⁰³ And that is exactly how she felt. In order to avoid discrimination, she wished to become as white and invisible as possible. Due to her dark skin and curly hair, however, Emde was always visible. She writes that the reason she wanted to be white or invisible is because she was never perceived as just a sassy little girl, but as a “N...,” “Moor Head” and “Sarotti-Moor.” From an early age on,

²⁰² Fatima El-Tayeb. “If you can’t pronounce my name, you can just call me pride”: Afro-German Activism, Gender and Hip Hop (*Gender & History* 15.3, 2003): 468.

²⁰³ (“Black meant frightening, strange, foreign, and animalistic.” “Black means unworthy of existence.”): 102.

Emde learned to deal with insult and injury, to hide her true feelings, to smile, and keep her mouth shut as a form of self-defense. Wherever she went, she was always seen as “exotic” and “different” but never as a person with feelings. Needless to say, she felt humiliated, discriminated against, isolated, and lonely. Her sister-in-law, for example, concluded after undergoing psychoanalytic treatment that Emde’s Blackness was scary and her personality too strong for her to handle. When Emde felt unhappy, overwhelmed, and uneducated as a housewife and strived to change her position and status, she was met with a lot of resistance from her family members and friends. When she started studying to get her High School diploma so she could attend a university and get her graduate degree in education (“Diplom-Pädagogin”), she encountered a lack of understanding from almost everyone and was accused of neglecting her duties as a mother and housewife. The more the roles shifted, and she became equal to the others in terms of education, i.e., Emde was no longer “die dumme kleine Exotin,”²⁰⁴ the more her friends distanced themselves from her and some even ended their friendship. Emde’s own sister, who is white, accused her of “stealing” a place at the university that she thought should be reserved for young people. Emde’s husband similarly tried to undermine her efforts to further her education by blocking and distracting her with subtle forms of “love,” often asking her to join him for a walk when she needed to study for her exams. Her family members and friends were undeniably invoking a racialized hierarchy where Emde would stay inferior, nothing more than a mother and housewife while they feel superior by taking up the “white man’s burden” and do *developmental work* (“Entwicklungshilfe”) on her. So, they refused to treat her as their equal. If they had seen her as their equal, then their whole world view, where a white person is superior and the Black person inferior, would have collapsed. By detailing the discrimination and

²⁰⁴ (“the ignorant little exotic girl”): 108.

humiliation she has endured in the majority white culture this way, Emde is confronting her white social circle with their racist behavior by holding the mirror up to them.

The youngest generation of Black German women in *Farbe bekennen*, represented by Julia Berger (17 years old) and Abena Adomako (23 years old), showcase the normalcy of being Black German today while foregrounding different aspects of their experiences. While Berger stresses the fact that people do not see her as a foreigner and she is okay with being Black German, Adomako, who has a visibly darker skin than Berger, highlights the discrimination she has faced and her defense mechanisms. Due to factors like colorism, differing personal views, familial situations, social backgrounds, and the place they live in, these two women have had different experiences of growing up as Black Germans. Having been raised by her Black German mother (Astrid Berger) in the multicultural city of Berlin, where she says that there are a lot of other Black people and People of Color like her, Julia Berger writes that she never had any difficulties in school except one time when a boy told her, “Was willst du eigentlich? Geh doch zurück, wo du herkommst,” and a girl in elementary school told her, “Mit dir spiele ich nicht. Du bist ja Mulattin.”²⁰⁵ Berger explains that she responded with a retort (“Na und? Und dein Vater ist Alkoholiker.”)²⁰⁶ and assures defiantly that these remarks didn’t bother her one bit. Furthermore, when people sometimes assume that she is half American or when they are surprised to find her speaking “such good German,”²⁰⁷ Berger doesn’t feel humiliated or degraded, in fact she is fine with it. She doesn’t wish to be white when she states, “Ich bin halt

²⁰⁵ (“What are you doing here anyway? Why don’t you go back where you came from?” “I’m not going to play with you. You’re a mulatto”): 197.

²⁰⁶ (“So? And your father’s an alcoholic”): 197.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 198.

so. Damit muss ich leben, und ich finde es auch nicht schlimm, damit zu leben.“²⁰⁸ Berger credits her confidence with having a Black German mother and the fact that her white friends accept her the way she is. Since there is nothing she can do about her heritage, Berger has not only accepted it as part of her life, but she is also proud of it. Here, Berger is gesturing towards what Philip Khabo Koepsell calls “revolutionary” when Black Germans today establish the normalcy and the ordinariness rather than the uniqueness of being Black, when what they write about is not always about their origins or identity.²⁰⁹ Koepsell argues that it is “revolutionary” in the sense that the normalcy of being Black German, meaning part of German culture, nation, and everyday life, is what makes some German conservatives want to desperately cling to the idea that they still have the power of definition and interpretation (“Deutungshoheit”) in public discourse.²¹⁰

Though only six years older than Julia Berger and also living in Berlin, Abena Adomako reports of more discriminating experiences, while still asserting her Black Germanness. Having been born to a Black German mother (Anna G.’s daughter) and her Ghanaian father, Adomako has a darker skin tone than Berger and is thus exposed to more discriminatory behavior. This is due to colorism where darker-skinned individuals (as in the case of Adomako) are assumed to be from a lower social class, while lighter-skinned people (as with Julia Berger) – because it is closer to white – to be of higher social standing.²¹¹ In order to avoid such prejudice against Blacks, Adomako’s mother and grandmother have raised her to be especially “clean,” “neat,” and “decent” as well as to perform exceptionally well in school; in other words to engage in

²⁰⁸ (“That’s just the way I am. I have to live with it, and I don’t find anything negative in it.”): 198.

²⁰⁹ Philip Khabo Koepsell. (ed.) Preface to *Afro Shop*. (Berlin: epubli GmbH, 2014): 7.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ For more on colorism, see chapter 1, footnote 129.

respectability politics.²¹² During puberty, she was usually excluded from having a boyfriend, from partaking in kids' pranks such as ringing the doorbell or spin the bottle games because, as she says, her skin was too dark. Whenever she goes out, for example to a disco, Adomako feels like she should dress in as a neutral, less provocative, and less sexy way as possible to protect herself from unwanted attention and undesirable suitors. She claims that although all women get hit on, in her case men don't even try to hold back. A Black woman is first and foremost "eine sexuell attraktive Frau, als zweites eine Frau mit Charakter."²¹³ In other words, Black women are primarily seen as a sexual object rather than an individual with personality. This also intersects with colorism as a darker Black woman will be assumed to be even more sexually loose than lighter-skinned Black women. The only time Adomako felt good about herself, undisturbed and inconspicuous, was when she went to Ghana, and later to London to work as an au pair. Especially in London, a cosmopolitan city, she was able to go about her day without being constantly watched and hit on; in other words, she felt liberated. It was in London, too, that she learned to fully accept her skin color: she didn't want to be lighter skinned anymore, she was happy being Black. Back in Germany, she was back to being the "foreign object" so that she even briefly considered moving to a different country where she thought prejudices might not exist. Even though Adomako has found a way to be herself and to show her body instead of trying to hide it, she can't help adopting a kind of battle stance, always ready to ward off hostilities and assert her existence.

²¹² According to Evelyn Higginbotham, respectability politics refers to a set of social guidelines dictating acceptable and "respectable" behavior that African Americans adhere to in order to better appeal to dominant standards. From: Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 188-1920*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993): 185-229.

²¹³ ("a sexually attractive woman, second, a woman with character"): 202.

“Coming out” as Black

Melodramas usually end when virtue is publicly recognized, not gained, because virtue was always there, thus it is simply exposed and recognized. In addition, the heroine gains the ability to speak out, she obtains the right to expression, to reveal herself from silence and repression.²¹⁴ In *Farbe bekennen*, the Black German women, especially the older generations, to varying degrees, had to go through a long period where they had been silenced and repressed, confused, and isolated until they were finally able to find their voice, acknowledge and accept their Blackness and discover their self-definition and origin; in other words, to “come out” as Black, which is the last melodramatic element in my analysis that connects the personal accounts of the authors in *Farbe bekennen*. This new self-awareness as a Black German, however, can be a difficult process. Mike Reichel, a Black German activist and policeman, for instance, remembers how discussing his new-found awareness with his white friends always carried the risk of loss and isolation. He explains as follows,

Für mich war es durchaus mit vielen Ängsten verbunden, denn auf einmal widerspricht man Freunden und Bekannten, diskutiert mit ihnen Begrifflichkeiten, die sie nie infrage gestellt haben. Wird vom Opfer zum Unruhestifter. Die Angst kommt auf, Freunde zu verlieren, die man in der Vergangenheit so bitter nötig hatte.²¹⁵

Reichel was afraid of upsetting and losing his white friends, on whom he depended in the past for his survival in a white society. He would run the risk of losing them because for the first time he challenged their views and prejudices that had never been questioned before. He argued about

²¹⁴ See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

²¹⁵ (“I was always worried because suddenly you start disagreeing with friends and acquaintances, you debate about terminology that they never had questioned before. You’re not a victim anymore, you become a troublemaker. You fear to lose friends that you desperately needed in the past”) Reichel, Mike. *Polizist und Schwarzer Aktivist*. In: Marion Kraft (ed.). *Kinder der Befreiung* (Münster: UNRAST Verlag, 2015): 129.

racist terms like the N-word that his friends grew up thinking were neutral and thus okay to be used since jokes involving the N-word were more or less prevalent among his colleagues. Instead of the trope of the “anständiger Afrikaner,”²¹⁶ the victim that never “stirred things up” and that white people felt superior to, he suddenly demanded to be their equal and was therefore seen as an agitator. In the end, Reichel says that it was worth having those discussions because he and his friends grew closer together and came to a better understanding of each other.

For the women in *Farbe bekennen*, the Black “coming out” happened in various ways. The oldest generation, represented by the sisters Anna G. and Frieda P., had to fight for their survival during National Socialism, where they were nearly forcibly sterilized and were almost sent to concentration camps. For them, “coming out” as Black didn’t happen the way it did for the generation after the war. Frieda P. asserts that she always enjoyed being a “mulatto” and that she could always adjust, “one time I’d be black, one time white.”²¹⁷ They also had a Black community; their Cameroonian father was kind of a point of contact for Africans coming to Berlin, and during their time in the Nazi film company they met a lot of fellow Black actors and musicians. And Anna G’s husband was a Cameroonian, who toured as a wrestler. Adjusting to their circumstances, however, didn’t mean that they never challenged discrimination; on the contrary, the sisters fought back whenever they could; Frieda P. narrates how she, as a child, would always yell back a retort whenever a kid shouted the N-word at them. The fact that they identify as “mulatto” is partly because words like *Black German* simply didn’t exist back then and it was “normal” for them to be called “mulatto” and to identify with that word. Due to the socio-historical time they grew up in, they simply did not have the language, the tools, and the

²¹⁶ (“a good African”): 201.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

time to fight for their recognition as Black Germans; rather, they fought to be accepted as human beings first and foremost, as people worth living. They echo what other Black German women in *Farbe bekennen* such as Ellen Wiedenroth in what follows also claim: that they chose not to move to another country because their roots were here, in Germany, in spite of everything.

The moment that she was no longer on the defensive, in a position where she constantly had to identify and explain herself, to prove again and again that she was German, that was when Ellen Wiedenroth was able to accept her “Otherness” and her Blackness. Her passive attitude turned active – she wanted to be Black, and nothing else. Wiedenroth is one of several women in *Farbe bekennen*, who actively sought to push back against the discrimination and racism that she and others have experienced in the majority white culture. She is still active today in the Black German scene; she was (today as Eleonore Wiedenroth-Coulibaly) one of the founders of ISD (*Initiative of Black People in Germany*). In *Farbe bekennen*, Wiedenroth urges other Black Germans to speak out and stand up to discrimination:

Ich finde, wir dürfen nicht als Einzelne in der weißen Gesellschaft untertauchen, sondern müssen als Gruppe gegen Diskriminierung vorgehen, müssen lernen, uns gemeinsam zu wehren. Ich bin oft sprachlos oder kann nicht reagieren, und ich glaube, viele von uns haben gelernt, den Mund zu halten.²¹⁸

Here, Wiedenroth stresses the importance of building a community to effectively combat discrimination. She argues that as individuals Black Germans have been perceived as a curiosity, as isolated incidents, and were not enough to initiate what she calls a “Denk- und Umlernprozess” (*a thinking and relearning process*) in the majority white society. She also echoes Reichel when she writes that sometimes it is easier to keep silent than challenge one’s

²¹⁸ (“I believe we must not disappear individually into white society, but that we have to work as a group against discrimination, we must learn to defend ourselves together. Often, I’m speechless or unable to react, and I believe a lot of us have learned to keep our mouths shut”): 166.

friends and run the risk of losing them, perhaps the only ones who ever understood and supported them. She further states:

Schwarze Deutsche werden aus dem Denkmuster ausgeklammert, sie existieren gar nicht im Bewußtsein der meisten Bundesdeutschen. Und genau an diesem Punkt müssen wir ansetzen. Die anderen müssen Notiz von uns nehmen, müssen sich mit unserer Existenz bewußt auseinandersetzen, müssen uns als Realität erfahren.²¹⁹

Here, Wiedenroth confirms what many Black people and People of Color had been experiencing and still experience today: they get placed outside of the German nation, history, and culture as not belonging, as foreigners. The reason she utilizes the word “must” in the sentence, “they must experience us as a reality” is because white Germans do not have a choice, Black Germans and other People of Color *are* very much a reality in Germany and they’re going to stay.²²⁰ Her existence alone, Wiedenroth’s very being as Black *and* German, which is perceived as a contradiction in terms by some white Germans, is, as she narrates, part of this reality and that which “sets things in motion.”

Being perceived as a foreigner by white Germans is what made Wiedenroth seek out the company of other Blacks. At college, she met a lot of Africans, with whom she immediately got along well. For the first time in her life, Wiedenroth felt that her Germanness and Blackness were not problematized at all; she experienced solidarity, openness, friendliness, and a natural acceptance of her person – in other words, she felt like she belonged. Following this culture of

²¹⁹ (“Black Germans are excluded from our thought-patterns, they don’t even exist in the consciousness of most West Germans. And we have to start at exactly this point. Others must take note of us; they must come to grips with our existence; they must experience us as a reality”): 167.

²²⁰ This kind of stance was typical of the “counter-narratives” such as *Farbe bekennen* produced in the 1980s. Today, Black German activism takes a different approach; they no longer see the need wishing to be accepted by the majority white culture. They argue that they can be German if they choose to be, but they don’t have to. More on this see, Philip Khabo Koepsell. (ed.) Preface to *Afro Shop*. (Berlin: epubli GmbH, 2014): 5-6.

belonging and welcoming, Wiedenroth wished to emigrate to an African country to find a home, and traveled to North and West Africa, Hawaii, among other places. In Liberia, however, she experienced something that other Black Germans also have: she was perceived as white. While she was watching a group of kids looking for something useful among a pile of trash, the kids started calling her “White lady, white lady!” Wiedenroth felt shocked and stigmatized, again, this time in Africa where she hoped to belong. It wasn’t until much later that she found out the reason for being called “white”: it was not so much her lighter skin tone but her behavior – too interested, observant, and distanced to be a local – that had marked her as European. And since Europeans are stereotypically white, in that moment she had become white, too. After this disappointing experience, Wiedenroth put aside her plans of emigrating, and instead, decided to make Germany her “home,” which it is after all. She realized that home is not where you look similar to people around you, but it is what she calls an “inner point of reference” (“innerer Bezugspunkt”), which can be familiarity, a sense of comfort and certainty, and belonging. This realization inevitably confirms Wiedenroth’s belonging to Germany, against all odds, as she has been socialized in German culture and society.

In this part of the chapter I have analyzed personal accounts of Black German women in *Farbe bekennen* with respect to common melodramatic tropes that run through their stories: the domestic space – including the period of “happy” childhood – and a focus on their relationship with their white mother, marriage to white German men as an attempt to recreate the “space of innocence” from their childhood, the intrusion of villainy into their “space of innocence” as well as the importance of highlighting their suffering and of narrating their story from their point of view, and the Black “coming out.” Due to differing familial and social backgrounds and the respective historical time period, the Black German women, whose personal accounts I have

analyzed, have had different techniques of challenging discrimination and marginalization and of coming to terms with their Blackness. In the next section, I will focus on another Black German woman, Ika Hügel-Marshall, who does not appear in *Farbe bekennen*, and who instead tells her story in her book *Daheim unterwegs*.

Ika Hügel-Marshall. Daheim unterwegs. Ein deutsches Leben (1998)

In the year 1952, when the first cohort of Black German children born after WWII entered school, the German parliament debated the “fate” of these mixed-race children:

Die verantwortlichen Stellen [...] haben sich bereits seit Jahren Gedanken über das Schicksal dieser Mischlingskinder gemacht, denen schon allein die klimatischen Bedingungen in unserem Lande nicht gemäß sind. Man hat erwogen, ob es nicht besser für sie sei, wenn man sie in das Heimatland ihrer Väter brächte [...] Bei ihrer Einschulung beginnt für die Mischlingskinder nicht nur ein neuer Lebensabschnitt wie für die übrigen Schulanfänger, sondern sie treten auch in einen neuen Lebensraum ein aus ihrer bisherigen relativen Abgeschlossenheit. Sie fallen auf durch ihre Farbigkeit. Bei einigen zeigen sich auch Schwierigkeiten des Temperaments. (18-19)²²¹

According to this official position, these children would not do well in school not only because their skin color makes them visible, which, the statement implies, attracts unwanted attention, but also because their “foreign” physical constitution and “hot” temper render them unsuited to the moderate European climate as well as to a strictly regulated school system. Due to their supposed “foreignness,” these Black German children were dramatically referred to as constituting a “menschliches und rassisches Problem” (18) that needed national attention.²²² In

²²¹ (“The responsible authorities [...] have long deliberated over what the fate of these mixed-race children should be. Among other concerns there is the fact that they are ill suited to the climate here. It has been suggested that it would be better for these children to relocate them to the homeland of their fathers [...] The beginning of their school years is, for Mischling children, more than just the onset of a new stage of life. This is the time when they step from the relative isolation of their previous existence and into a new arena, in which the color of their skin makes them stand out. Some exhibit behavioral problems”): 21-22.

²²² (“Particular humanitarian and racial problems”) Ika Hügel-Marshall. *Invisible Woman*. Translated by Elizabeth Gaffney. (Continuum, 2001): 21.

about thirty per cent of the cases, German authorities managed to persuade the mothers to give their children up either for adoption, for instance, by African American families or to live in children's or foster homes. In other words, Germany sought ways to either remove these Black German children from the country or, at least, remove them from their homes. Despite authorities' alleged concerns with these children's well-being, a significant motivation for this removal was that these children were a living reminder of the not-so-distant occupation by the Allied forces and Germany's subsequent defeat in WWII.

Ika Hügel-Marshall, born in 1947 to a white German mother and an African American father, grew up in an orphanage. In her life writing titled, *Daheim unterwegs. Ein deutsches Leben* (1998, *Invisible Woman*, 2001), Hügel-Marshall depicts her early life in a small town in Bavaria where she lived with her white mother, after her father, an African American G.I., was sent back to the U.S. before she was born. At the age of seven, due to government intervention, she is sent to an orphanage where she experiences mental as well as physical abuse, and once, even an exorcism. After elementary school Hügel-Marshall gets transferred to a boarding school despite her good grades and her wish to become a teacher because German boarding schools don't grant the university-entrance diploma and were known to educate "unruly" children. Instead, she is forced to begin training to work in child education and welfare. In the 1970s Hügel-Marshall became involved with the women's rights movement, and in the 1980s with the burgeoning Afro-German movement where she is still active today. After years of searching for her biological father, at the age of 46 she finally met him in Chicago, one year before his death.

Having been told early on that "Schwarze sind dumm, unterentwickelt, primitiv,

unzivilisiert; Schwarze sind unberechenbar, triebhaft, gefährlich und zu bemitleiden” (51),²²³ and having internalized these and similar racist remarks, Hügel-Marshall grew up hating her skin color and wishing to be white. Her life writing then is a testament to her new-found confidence and self-assertion as a Black German as well as the process of her finally overcoming the damaging effects of the racism and discrimination that she has been subjected to throughout her life. In recording her own life story, Hügel-Marshall is writing herself into the narrative of German culture and society as well as the nation’s literary history. She is accomplishing this by providing living proof that being both Black and German is not a contradiction in terms, rather she is very well part of German culture and society. Moreover, I argue that constructing her life writing as a “family melodrama” allows Hügel-Marshall to discuss race and to critique racism and isolation that she has suffered. In showcasing how societal racial tensions have affected her childhood home, and later her marital home, as well as the way her life has turned out as a result of these tensions, she manages to evoke sympathy for her racial victimization and suffering. On the one hand, she is thus primarily addressing white German readers, so that they may recognize and become aware of the struggles she and other people and minorities of Color have been through. On the other hand, as the first one to write down her life story ever since the Black German movement gained prominence in the mid-1980s, Hügel-Marshall functions as a role model for other Black Germans to draw inspiration from. Even if she herself grew up without any Black person to identify with, let alone to look up to, in a way she is presenting a positive presence of Blackness in Germany. Her life writing is thus also directed at younger generations of Black Germans, providing them with a sense of pride and belonging within the Black German community. As an activist and an influential figure within this movement, through her life

²²³ (“Blacks are stupid, backward, primitive, uncivilized. They are unreliable, shifty, dangerous, pitiful”): 56.

writing Hügel-Marshall is building on what filmmaker and sociologist, Dagmar Schultz, calls “archival activism—that is, as both a personal, individual, and sociopolitical document and a text that has the potential to promote activism.”²²⁴ Ultimately, Hügel-Marshall’s writing is highly subversive in nature in that it challenges existing notions of Germanness declaring that “Deutsche auch Schwarz sein können” (106).²²⁵

In the following I will focus on Hügel-Marshall’s specific family constellations, on which she focuses in the first half of *Daheim unterwegs*. These family constellations take place in her childhood home including her mother, her half-sister, her stepfather, and her grandmother, and later her marital home with her husband. In focusing on her childhood home and the way she was violently removed from it to live in an orphanage, Hügel-Marshall details the traumatic experience of being left in an orphanage without even a goodbye,

Ich schreie vor Angst und Verzweiflung. Immer wieder versuche ich von meinem Stuhl aufzustehen, wegzulaufen, und werde bei der kleinsten Bewegung fest und unbarmherzig an die Stuhllehne gepresst. „Mama, wo bist du, warum hörst du mich denn nicht? Mama, komm doch, wo bist du, Mama?“ Sie hört mich nicht. Als ich nicht aufhöre zu schreien und zu weinen, greift Schwester Hildegard plötzlich nach einem schwarzen Turnschlappchen, zieht mir vor allen Kindern die Hose herunter und schlägt mit dem Schuh auf mich ein: „Willst du wohl sofort mit dem Geschrei aufhören, du elendiger Bastard, deine Mutter kann dich nicht hören, auch wenn du noch so hysterisch herumschreist. Sie ist schon ganz früh heute morgen mit dem Zug weg.“ Schreiend werde ich auf mein Zimemr gebracht. (24)²²⁶

²²⁴ Dagmar Schultz. Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years 1984-1992. (*Feminist Studies* 40.1, 2014): 199.

²²⁵ (“...that someone who is German could be black”): 122.

²²⁶ (“I’m crying from fear and anxiety. Again and again, I try to get up from my seat, but now my slightest movement causes her to press me firmly and unsympathetically back down against the chair rungs. “Mama, where are you? Why can’t you hear me? Mama, why don’t you come? Where are you?” I cry, but she doesn’t hear me. When I don’t stop crying, Sister Hildegard finally grabs a black gym shoe she seems to have at the ready for just this purpose, pulls down my underpants in front of all the other children and beats me with it. “Stop your endless screaming, you miserable little bastard! Your mother can’t hear you, no matter how hysterically you cry. She left on a train first thing this morning.” I am taken, sobbing, to my room.”): 26.

Her depictions of such experiences are meant to elicit a visceral reaction of sympathy for her sufferings. Like the women in *Fabe bekennen*, she equates her childhood home with “a space of innocence,” i.e., a domestic space that is irrevocably lost but to which she wishes to return, or at least to restore some semblance of it.²²⁷ Likewise, her marriage to a white German man, Hügel-Marshall’s attempt to recreate a semblance of such a “space of innocence,” fails mostly due to social pressure in the form of racist attitudes and verbal abuse that she encounters as part of an interracial married couple, as well as racist attitudes and verbal abuse from her husband. In addition, telling her narrative from her own point of view as the victim, which according to Elsaesser is a characteristic feature of melodrama, allows Hügel-Marshall to portray her suffering in a more direct and unmediated way.²²⁸ Throughout her life writing she portrays her African American father, whom she doesn’t meet until she’s in her forties, not only as a missing part of her original space of innocence, but also as an integral link to the completion of her self-definition as a Black German woman. Her quest for her biological father becomes therefore a quest for her very being, a validation of the part of her identity that has been suppressed and ignored.

The childhood home as a “space of innocence”

Hügel-Marshall depicts her childhood home as an idyll and a space of innocence. She conjures up an image of her childhood home where she felt relatively “unbeschwert” and happy (17).²²⁹ She grew up in a small Bavarian town with her white family including her mother,

²²⁷ Linda Williams. *Playing the Race Card*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): 28.

²²⁸ Thomas Elsaesser, *Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama*. In: Barry Keith Grant (ed.) *Film Genre Reader IV* (Austin: University of Austin Press: 2012).

²²⁹ (“trouble-free”): 19.

stepfather, half-sister, and her grandmother. They didn't have much but enough to get by, and she had lots of friends to play with. Everyone in town from the baker to the mailman knew her, and she never felt lonely. She writes that she was very close to her mother and sister and that she was her grandmother's favorite grandchild. All in all, she felt very much part of her white family even though she knew early on that her stepfather was not her biological father. Being thus part of her family felt so natural to her that she saw no reason to doubt it for a second, "Für mich gab es überhaupt keinen Grund, daran zu zweifeln, mit meiner weißen Mutter in meiner weißen Familie in meiner weißen Heimat glücklich zu sein und erwachsen zu werden" (17).²³⁰ Her early childhood was a time where she was not yet aware of racial difference, of the different meanings attributed to Black and white skin. She was the only Black person in her hometown, and her white family and the neighbors were her sole reference points, so she implicitly assumed that she was white, too. As she explains, "Noch teilte ich die Welt nicht ein in Schwarz und Weiß, eher vielleicht Gut und Böse, in Freundlich und Unfreundlich" (17).²³¹ This idyll, however, is only temporary. For at the age of seven youth welfare officials separated Hügél-Marshall from her family and placed her in an orphanage. As is typical of melodramas, Williams contends, the narrative usually begins when "the villain intrudes upon this idyllic space."²³² In her narrative Hügél-Marshall equates the white society of her hometown with a metaphorical villain intruding upon her space of innocence and freedom. Oftentimes when she left the house, her safe haven so

²³⁰ ("I saw no reason in the world that I wouldn't be able to grow up with my white mother in my white family and be perfectly happy"): 20.

²³¹ ("In those days, though I understood that there were good and bad things and friendly and unfriendly people, I hadn't yet learned to divide the world into black and white"): 19. Analyzing family photos of Black Germans as children, Tina Campt finds that such photos convey a sense of intimacy between parents and children, and evoke fond memories of "tenderness or affirmation, comfort or safety." In: *Image Matters*. (Duke University Press, 2012): 8.

²³² Linda Williams. *Playing the Race Card*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): 28.

to speak, with her mother, they were subjected to deriding looks and gossip in the form of, “Schau dir die an, die Negerhure und ihr Bastard” (31).²³³ At first glance, such gossip seemed to defame Hügél-Marshall’s mother, but on a deeper level it functioned as a warning to other white German women not to date Black men, otherwise they would become the target of similar ostracism. Such racist comments thus reinforced racial boundaries and maintained stereotypes about Blacks.²³⁴

The most consequential intrusion into Hügél-Marshall’s space of innocence, however, occurred when local authorities coerced her mother into sending her daughter to an orphanage despite her initial refusal to let her daughter be taken. Local authorities justified such separation of mother and daughter arguing that the personal and professional development of Black German children were in jeopardy in a hostile environment such as a small town, read as backward and intolerant. Furthermore, mothers with Black children were blamed themselves for having brought this fate upon their children. One employee from the youth welfare told Hügél-Marshall’s mother that, “schließlich und endlich haben Sie es sich selbst zuzuschreiben, ein Negermischlingskind in eine so feindliche Welt gesetzt zu haben“ (21).²³⁵ As a result of this separation, Hügél-Marshall spent the next few years in an orphanage enduring mental and physical abuse. Although all the children in the orphanage were stigmatized and ostracized by neighbors – they were recognizable by their homogeneous clothing – and were generally

²³³ (“There go the nigger whore and her little bastard daughter”): 36. Her mother was called “Negerhure” for having had sexual relations with an African American soldier. If it was a white American soldier, German women were labeled as “Amihure” (*American whores*) or “Amiliebliebchen” (*American sweethearts*) (16).

²³⁴ According to Frantz Fanon, “Hate is not inborn; it has to be constantly cultivated, to be brought into being [...] Hate demands existence, and he who hates has to show his hate in appropriate actions and behavior; in a sense he has to become hate.” From: *Black Skin, White Masks*. (New York: Grove Press, 1967): 37.

²³⁵ (“When it comes to it, it was your decision to bring another *Negermischling* into a hostile world”): 24.

mistreated by caretakers, Hügel-Marshall was subjected to particularly harsh abuse due to her skin color. She relates how she once had to spend three hours in the attic with hands tied as a punishment for disobedience and insubordination; how when she didn't like the food and vomited her hands were tied behind her back and she was spoon-fed her vomit. These and other acts of abuse, and manifestations of pain that she had to endure in a place that resembled more a detention center rather than an orphanage as a young girl based on her skin color make her worthy of recognition as a racialized victim. Her suffering and adversity at the hands of the caretakers invite sympathy from the reader.

The most severe form of abuse that she endured, however, was the exorcism that she was forced to undergo during her time in the orphanage to rid her of her "demons." To her caretakers Hügel-Marshall's blackness not only stood for intellectual inferiority but also for miscegenation, committed by her mother, which was condemned because it was considered a sin to have sex with a person of a different race. Due to how notions of nationality and race have been historically linked in Germany since at least the end of the nineteenth century, the time of German colonialism in Africa, miscegenation was considered a serious sin in the postwar period. In order to rid her of her "demons" caused by miscegenation, Hügel-Marshall is led to a darkened room in a church where a priest-like man is waiting for her to carry out the exorcism. Blindfolded, she is forced to kneel down and repeat words the priest utters, words that ask God to forgive her sins and chase the devil away. Terrified and nauseated she vomits, „Mir wird schlecht und schrecklich kalt. Ich übergebe mich und zittere am ganzen Körper. Ich weiß nicht mehr, wo ich bin und ob es noch die gleiche Welt, die gleiche Wirklichkeit ist, in der ich lebe

und die ich schon einmal eintauschte gegen den Traum von zu Hause“ (38).²³⁶ This description of her visceral reaction to the exorcism, this image of a suffering and innocent child, being punished for her mother’s “sin,” bestows upon her what Williams calls “moral legitimacy.”²³⁷ According to Williams, this conversion of bodily suffering into virtue in western culture is a topos that stems from Christian iconography. “The Christian passion” of death on the cross, argues Williams, has been employed in American melodramas from the nineteenth century onwards to display bodily suffering as the means to the recognition of virtue in a world where such recognition is not obvious.²³⁸ Even if Hügel-Marshall’s virtue is not obvious by itself – her existence is seen as an aberration by the majority of German society – the description of the literal suffering of her body is meant to elicit a visceral reaction of sympathy and thus warrants recognition.

Being punished for the alleged “sin” of the other is what brings mother and daughter closer to one another. Even though she resents her mother for having been persuaded to send her daughter to an orphanage, Hügel-Marshall says she cannot afford to be angry with her as her mother is the only person who loves her and who she loves. What binds mother and daughter together is the mutual awareness that the one suffers because of the other or for something the other did. Her mother gets derided and ostracized in public for having had sexual relations with a Black man which resulted in producing a mixed-race child with visibly darker skin. Hügel-Marshall experiences abuse such as an exorcism because of her mother’s “sin,” miscegenation.

²³⁶ (“Eventually, I’m overcome by nausea and chills. My entire body shakes, and I vomit on the floor. I don’t know where I am or what world this is, what reality. Is it the one I’ve been living in, which replaced the earlier dream of home, or is it something new?”): 42.

²³⁷ Linda Williams. *Playing the Race Card*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): 44.

²³⁸ *Ibid*, 29.

The only difference is that while her mother gets to stay home despite the gossip and social exclusion, her daughter is the one being physically removed from society and sent away because she is Black. Hügel-Marshall becomes a visible site onto which fears of miscegenation and prejudices against Blacks are projected and acted upon. As her mother knows that her daughter experiences discrimination due to her skin color, likewise, Hügel-Marshall recognizes her mother's virtue, "Was mich sehr früh und eng mit ihr verbunden hat, war das quasi unbewusste Wissen, dass sie meinetwegen verspottet, verachtet und aus der Gesellschaft ausgeschlossen worden ist" (32).²³⁹ In addition, as the innocent Black child paying the price for a white person's "sin," Hügel-Marshall's virtue is further recognized by the public spectacle of her suffering – even if her mother doesn't learn about the abuse in the orphanage until much later, the readers of her life writing still witness it and can be moved to sympathy.

Even in her space of innocence Hügel-Marshall experienced racial victimization caused by societal racial tensions. Her relationship with her white stepfather is purely functional without any emotional bonding. He teaches her how to ride a bicycle, but he doesn't talk to her more than what is necessary and, most importantly, he doesn't wish to be a father figure to her. Coming from war captivity as a former soldier, who fought for the Third Reich, he met and married her mother when Hügel-Marshall was one year old. He avoids being seen in public with his Black stepdaughter for fear of gossip in the form of, "Dass der die überhaupt geheiratet hat, diese Negerhure, schämen sollte die sich. Na, die hat vielleicht Glück, so ein netter, sauberer und ordentlicher Mann. Die ist ja richtig zu beneiden. Für diesen Bankert würde ich an seiner Stelle

²³⁹ ("I knew subconsciously from an early age that she, too, was reviled and derided because she had had me. I knew that she had in some way sacrificed her standing in the community on my behalf"): 36.

allerdings auch keine Verantwortung übernehmen“ (41).²⁴⁰ So, whenever the family goes out for grocery shopping, Hugel-Marshall narrates, she is left alone at home despite the efforts of her mother to include her in family outings. Her mother has to contend with not only the gossip from her neighbors, but she also has to deal with her husband’s prejudices regarding her daughter. Hugel-Marshall becomes a racial victim outside as well as inside her childhood home.

Her relationship to her half-sister is also negatively affected by racist attitudes in German society. When Hugel-Marshall and her sister are teenagers, they go to a disco accompanied by her sister’s friends. When one of the friends asks her sister whether Hugel-Marshall is her friend, her sister replies yes. Even though Hugel-Marshall is shocked by her reply, “Ihr Ja trifft mich mitten ins Herz, sie hat mich als Schwester verleugnet” (59),²⁴¹ she intuitively tries to justify her sister’s denial by arguing that her sister probably needs to save face with her friends. Hugel-Marshall never tells her sister how she felt about the betrayal. Due to adverse images of Blacks pervasive in postwar German society her sister might indeed have needed to renounce her sister in order not to jeopardize her own standing in her community. For it is possible that her sister feared the consequences of publicly admitting that she had a Black half-sister. Later when they’re adults her sister confided in Hugel-Marshall that she too had been the target of derogatory comments and jibes because to some people she too was the daughter of a “Niggerhure.” Hugel-Marshall never confronts her sister about her renouncement and forgives her almost immediately. She explains, “Ich habe ja gelernt zu verstehen, ohne verstanden zu

²⁴⁰ (“She ought to be ashamed of herself for the fact that he even married her, that nigger-whore. She’s lucky to have gotten such a nice, proper man. She’s to be envied. But if I were him, I wouldn’t take an ounce of responsibility for her bastard daughter”): 45.

²⁴¹ (“Her *yeah* cuts me to the quick. She’s just denied that I’m her sister”): 65.

werden“ (59).²⁴² She sacrifices herself because she understands why a close family member betrayed her. Her ability to understand the difference along race and the vastly different meanings attributed to skin colors helped her survive. Additionally, despite the betrayal and abandonment she suffers at the hands of close family members, Hügel-Marshall cannot afford to confront them about their behavior because she needs them to survive. For a survival tactic is what she describes her daily life, a racialized victim literally fighting against exclusion and for her self-esteem and self-definition in a racist society. In her life writing there are several rhetorical questions and statements subsumed under the subtitles “Überlebenskunst I” and “Überlebenskunst II” (*The Art of Survival*). In “Überlebenskunst I” she asks, “Wie kann ich erkennen, dass mir Schwarze Identität verwehrt wird und dass Chancengleichheit in dieser Welt für mich nicht gilt – ohne aufzugeben?“ (30)²⁴³ and in “Überlebenskunst II“ she declares, “In einer rassistischen Gesellschaft überleben heißt kämpfen, tagtäglich“ (43).²⁴⁴ Meant to document her inner thoughts and anxieties, these phrases also establish her as a racialized victim fighting for survival. However brief and fragile her time in her childhood home might have been, Hügel-Marshall is full of nostalgia for the lost home and the importance it had on her later life when she notes that, “Aus der Fülle meiner ersten sieben Jahre zu Hause schöpfe ich auch heute noch Kraft, denn in der Zeit danach bin ich immer auf mich allein gestellt gewesen” (33).²⁴⁵

²⁴² (“I’ve learned to understand others without being understood myself”): 65.

²⁴³ (“How can I recognize that I am loathed for my blackness and that I will not be afforded an equal chance in life without also giving up completely?”): 33.

²⁴⁴ (“In a racist society, to survive is to fight, every moment, every day”): 48.

²⁴⁵ (“The richness of my first seven years continues to be a source of strength for me today, but in the years immediately afterward, I had no other source of strength whatsoever. I was always alone”): 37.

The marital home as a second “space of innocence”

As I stated in my analysis of *Farbe bekennen*, Williams argues that one of the main characteristics of melodrama is to “get back to what it *feels* like the beginning,” i.e., to return to the time of origins and the space of innocence.²⁴⁶ I suggest that Hügel-Marshall’s marriage to a white German man is her attempt to create a semblance of the lost home of her childhood, a place that might feel like the beginning. But her marriage fails due to gossip and verbal abuse that the couple experiences, and her husband’s unwillingness and inability to adequately deal with such discrimination directed at his Black wife. Hügel-Marshall comments on her failed marriage as follows, “Für kurze Zeit hatte ich geglaubt, aufgrund meiner Heirat mit einem weißen Mann wäre ich nun endlich ein vollwertiges Mitglied der Gesellschaft, geachtet und manchmal vielleicht sogar bewundert. Dem war nicht so” (77-78).²⁴⁷ Through her marriage to a white German man she had hoped that she would again be a member of a family unit as well as the wider German society.²⁴⁸ However, the antipathy she encounters is relentless. It starts with the registrar’s office where the marriage registrar deliberately ignores Hügel-Marshall and inquires her husband where he left his bride, who is assumed to be white; or when they leave the registrar’s office and people outside congratulate one of her white bridesmaids on getting married. The racist remarks on the street range from “Sieh dir die an, die glaubt jetzt wohl was

²⁴⁶ Linda Williams. *Playing the Race Card*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): 35.

²⁴⁷ (“For a short time I thought my marriage to this white man had finally made me a full-fledged member of the society I live in, respected, perhaps, even admired. I was wrong”): 93.

²⁴⁸ Frantz Fanon argues that due to Black people’s what he calls “inferiority complex” instilled by colonialism and racism, some Black women strive to marry white men as a way to “belong” to white society and access the advantages otherwise not available to them. Yet, argues Fanon, these Black women will never be fully accepted by white people, and their white husbands will always perceive them as inferior. Although Fanon doesn’t judge Black women for doing so, he fears that this might negatively impact the way Black women are viewed in general. According to Fanon, romantic relationships between a Black woman and a white man will thus not be “pure” or “healthy” as long as this feeling of inferiority isn’t dealt with. More on this see *Black Skin, White Masks*. (Grove Press, 1967): 28-44.

Besseres zu sein mit ‘nem weißen Mann an ihrer Seite“ to “Kann die sich nicht einen ihresgleichen suchen? Muss das ausgerechnet ‘n Deutscher sein?“ (75).²⁴⁹ Over time, her husband starts to withdraw and avoids being intimate with her in public. He increasingly prefers to go out alone and is ashamed of being seen with his Black wife. What bothers Hügel-Marshall is his unwillingness to share his feelings and worries so that they might find strategies to fight discrimination together. Plus, what becomes evident from the racist remarks directed at Hügel-Marshall is the resentment over the fact that she obtained something – marrying a white German man – that in the eyes of white Germans she as a Black person was not entitled to. It would have been better if she had stayed among her “own kind,” according to the dominant opinion. What’s at play here is the latent wish to separate her and other Black women from German men and thus limit their participation in German society since Black women are assumed to be not German. For fears about Black sexuality was just as prevalent in postwar Germany as it was during the Nazi regime.²⁵⁰ What’s more, we see the double standard applied to her and her husband. While Hügel-Marshall is resented for having overstepped invisible racial boundaries by marrying a white man, her husband causes envy among his friends and is even congratulated on having found a “sexy” wife, “Ein Rasseweib, kann ich da nur sagen, sieht ja echt gut aus, deine Frau” (76).²⁵¹ Here, she is exoticized to perpetuate stereotypes about Black people being overly sexual. These and other derogatory remarks make her realize that not even a marriage to a white German man would change the way she is perceived by the majority white culture. Her attempt to build a

²⁴⁹ (“Look at that one – thinks she someone, just because she’s got a white man on her arm,” “Couldn’t she find one of her own kind to pair off with? Did it absolutely have to be a German man?”): 91.

²⁵⁰ Priscilla Layne. “Don’t Look So Sad Because You’re a Little Negro”: Marie Nejar, Afro-German Stardom, and Negotiations with Black Subjectivity. (*Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender and the Black International*, 4:2, 2015): 183.

²⁵¹ (“That’s your wife? You got yourself an ethnic one, eh? She doesn’t look half bad to me”): 92.

second space of innocence through her marriage to a white German man, which would resemble her childhood home where she experienced relative safety and comfort, fails due to social pressure specific to the German postwar era. It was a society permeated with fears of miscegenation, panic about Black sexuality, and it had no name for someone being both Black and German.

Although she has experienced social exclusion, discrimination, and racism within and outside her family configurations in German society, Hügel-Marshall does not opt out of this community to live somewhere else. Instead she chooses to stay, “Ich will mit Weißen leben, mir bleibt auch gar nichts anderes übrig” (85).²⁵² In positioning herself in close contact with and among white Germans despite the bad treatment she has received she is advocating for the humanity of herself and other people of color living in the majority white German society. Plus, she has no other choice because Germany is her home so she’s going to stay. She’s appealing to white Germans to acknowledge the fact that Black Germans are and have been part of German culture and society for some time now.

Coming out as Black

Hügel-Marshall’s political awareness awakens when she joins the white German feminist movement. However, as much as she enjoys fighting alongside white friends and activists for the right for abortion, for equality, and against oppression, Hügel-Marshall critiques the white feminist movement for not fighting against racism as well. When she draws her white colleagues’ attention to this issue, she is met with anger, reluctance, and a total lack of understanding from them. They tell her things like, “Du weißt doch, wir sind ganz anders als die

²⁵² (“living alongside white people, I have no other choice”): 101.

anderen Frauen, wir sind Feministinnen und haben nichts gegen Schwarze Menschen. Laß doch mal deine Hautfarbe aus dem Spiel, wenn du uns etwas sagen willst“ (83).²⁵³ Or, „Als Feministin sage ich dir: Es gibt Bereiche, wo eine Auseinandersetzung mit Rassismus wichtig und notwendig ist, aber das trifft für uns hier nicht zu“ (84).²⁵⁴ Hügel-Marshall rightly observes, „Ich frage mich, wie sich eine Bewegung als emanzipatorisch begreifen kann, wenn sie sich nicht auch gegen Rassismus und Antisemitismus wendet“ (105).²⁵⁵ What Hügel-Marshall is critiquing here is not only white feminists’ ignorance and refusal to acknowledge how race and class intersect in Black women’s lives, but they also advance theories as universally applicable without realizing that they apply to white, middle-class, and European women. White women’s refusal to acknowledge the importance of fighting racism reflects their unwillingness to admit that they have benefitted from it. According to feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh, white people are “carefully taught not to recognize white privilege.”²⁵⁶ McIntosh describes her own struggles to seeing her own privilege, “I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious.”²⁵⁷

As she struggles to be understood and to have her experiences of racism taken seriously

²⁵³ (“Come on, you know we’re different from other women. How could we, as feminists, have anything against blacks? If you have a specific problem to raise, okay, but try to leave skin color out of it.”): 99.

²⁵⁴ (“As a feminist, I must tell you that while there are some situations in which it’s important to confront racism, this isn’t one of them.”): 100.

²⁵⁵ (“I ask myself once again how a movement like the women’s movement can say that its mission is emancipation if it fails to address racism and anti-Semitism as well as sexism.”): 121.

²⁵⁶ Peggy McIntosh. White Privilege. Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack. In: White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies." (*Wellesley College Center for Research on Women*, 1988): 1.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

by her white feminist friends, Hgel-Marshall sometimes wondered what it would be like to meet other Black Germans. However, when she does hear about a nationwide meeting of Black Germans, she is skeptical first and refuses to go. Growing up Black in total isolation had been painful for her and she had internalized white people’s prejudice against Blacks. She’s plagued by thoughts like: “Was um alles in der Welt will ich mit ‘meinesgleichen’?”, “Nein, ich will nicht in andere afrodeutsche Gesichter sehen und meinem Schmerz begegnen”, “Der Hass auf meine Hautfarbe ist viel grer als der Wunsch, andere afrodeutsche Frauen und Mnner kennenzulernen“ (88-89).²⁵⁸ Growing up as the only Black person in a white society had forced her suppress her Blackness in order to fit in, and to despise her skin color. Meeting other Black Germans, i.e., people who looked like her, would mean to confront her Blackness, to come to terms with the painful experiences of being Black, and to become visible. Also, since Hgel-Marshall had never met a Black German before, she didn’t know what to expect of them, and this uncertainty scares her. However, she’s familiar with white Germans and has learned to navigate their behavior. In the end, as her isolation grows, she does accept the invitation of a Black German woman, who gives her a call, to attend the next meeting of Black Germans.

Meeting other Black Germans is a watershed moment in Hgel-Marshall’s life. Not only does she gain a community of people, who validate her experiences and embrace her full-heartedly as one of their own, she also learns to love herself for who she is when she’s thirty-nine years old, “Das Gefhl, eine Community zu haben, gibt mir Kraft und strkt meine Persnlichkeit,” “Ich beginne mich zu lieben, meine Hautfarbe, all das, was mich ausmacht” (91-

²⁵⁸ (“Why would I want anything to do with ‘people of my own kind’? I don’t want to look into ‘Afro-German’ faces and see more of my own pain. My hatred of the color of my skin far outweighs any desire I might have to meet other Afro-German men and women.”): 104.

92).²⁵⁹ She becomes active in the West-German Black German movement, involved among other things in the ISD, the Initiative of Black people in Germany, and ADEFRA, the organization of and by Black German women. And she forges transnational alliances by meeting and becoming friends with the Afro-American poet and activist, Audre Lorde, who encourages Hügel-Marshall to write down her life story which she publishes under the heading *Daheim unterwegs. Ein deutsches Leben* in 1998 (*Invisible Woman. Growing Up Black in Germany*, 2001).

Similar to how Helga Emde has had to endure her white friends' and family's resistance and backlash to getting a graduate degree to improve her situation, Hügel-Marshall also faced push back from her white friends for accepting her Blackness and gaining confidence as a Black German. But she no longer feels the need to be accepted and recognized by white Germans, she doesn't need them for her survival. She's no longer afraid of losing her white friends for speaking out against racial discrimination or their insensitive behavior. She has found a community of other Black Germans who need her, and who she's part of. Through Audre Lorde she has learned the importance of speaking out.

²⁵⁹ ("This new sense of having a community has empowered me and strengthened my personality. I even begin to love myself, my skin color, everything that I am-"): 107-108.

CHAPTER THREE: *ALSO BY MAIL* (2013)

In this chapter I analyze Olumide Popoola's play, *Also by Mail*, in terms of how it critiques existing instances of racial discrimination while offering hope for Black Germans and Black people more broadly. Racial profiling on public transportation is just one example of microaggressions that are a part of the everyday racism ("Alltagsrassismus") that Black Germans and other People of Color are subjected to on a regular basis in Germany. By thematizing this issue in her play, Popoola not only validates the experiences of Black Germans with racism but also empowers them by showing them a possible way out of a society plagued by racism. In addition, Popoola uses family melodrama to stress the importance of a transgenerational community in the fight for racial justice. By focusing on the specific family configurations within a Black German family in her play, Popoola suggests that only by building communities, passing down traditions, and exchanging knowledge with each other – between and within generations and with the diasporic community – can there be hope for current and future generations of Black people and PoC.

Popoola's two-act play deals with two Black German siblings, Wale und Funke, whose father is Nigerian and whose mother is white German. The siblings grew up with their mother in Germany while their father, Mr. Ogunleye, went back to Nigeria shortly after their birth. The play begins with the two of them traveling to Nigeria to attend their deceased father's funeral, whom they haven't seen in a while. In Nigeria, Wale and Funke are met with their Nigerian relatives, namely Uncle Bola, their father's older brother, and Aunty Yemisi, their father's younger sister, who are organizing the funeral. Also, Lanre, Mr. Ogunleye's son from his second

marriage, has just arrived from the United States to attend the funeral as well. While in Nigeria, Wale und Funke clash with their relatives over differing views and expectations with regards to the funeral. It becomes clear that the siblings are unfamiliar with Nigerian customs and traditions, most likely due to the absence of their Black father from their lives most of the time. For example, following Nigerian traditions, Uncle Bola expects Wale, as a first-born son, to attend to his duties, which include speaking at the funeral as well as receiving guests at home whereas Wale would much rather mourn his father in his own private way. Meanwhile, another source of conflict in the family is that Mr. Ogunleye's will has been lost. We learn that right before his death Mr. Ogunleye was about to sign a government contract that would have secured him a big sum of money. The anticipation of receiving this money causes great tension between the extended family members as everyone feels that they are entitled to their share. When tensions escalate between Wale and Uncle Bola – at the funeral Wale says a prayer in German, which upsets the guests – Wale leaves for Germany to find closure on his own. While riding the train in Germany, Wale becomes victim of racial profiling when the ticket inspector demands to see his passport; the inspector suspects Wale of not being German and not being a legal resident of Germany. When Wale refuses to comply, the police arrive and force Wale to leave the train. Angry, Wale accuses the police of using “SS methods” and gets charged with insulting the police. Following this incident, Wale decides to stay in Germany to pursue legal means to get justice.

Meanwhile in Nigeria, Funke is upset with Wale for leaving her alone to deal with their relatives and the funeral. Wale refuses to return to Nigeria as he is involved in legal battles and wants to see them through to the end. In addition, Funke falls ill with malaria and is fighting a high fever. In this feverish state, she is visited by her late father, Mr. Ogunleye, who has come to

make amends and solve the familial conflicts. It is not clear whether Funke is seeing her father's ghost or whether she is just hallucinating due to her high fever. Mr. Ogunleye tells Funke that racism was the reason he left Germany when his children were small – something he had never discussed with them before. When Wale does return to Nigeria out of concern for Funke's health, she tells him about her "encounter" with their father and the two of them reconcile. Funke admits to Wale that she has found her father's will that was missing. When it is time to read the will, the family is interrupted by two musicians, who had been acting as a chorus throughout the play, and who had been hired by Mr. Ogunleye to deliver two envelopes to his family. In the first document, there is a quote from Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, which the musicians act out in front of the family. After the quote has been read aloud, the family members reflect on the meaning of the quote and finally reunite and reconcile with each other. The play ends with Mr. Ogunleye tasking the musicians to deliver the second envelope to his children as soon as they can. This second document contains a statement informing the reader that racial profiling has been outlawed in Germany.

Finding one's own voice and speaking back is one of the main characteristics of melodrama. In this sense, offering hope in the face of oppression has always been at the forefront of Black German literature and activism. As I discussed in my introductory chapter, having always been confronted with a majority-white society that viewed the terms *Black* and *German* mutually exclusive, the modern Black German activist movement starting in the 1980s sought first and foremost to uncover and research the history of Black people in German-speaking lands to prove that Black Germans from various backgrounds have in fact been part of the German nation for a long time. In addition to documenting the presence and experience of Black people in Germany, Black German activists, spearheaded by Black German feminists, created a

community that validated and contextualized the experiences of Black Germans in particular and PoC more broadly. In doing so, Black Germans directed their activist and literary productions primarily to white German readers and audiences with the aim of gaining recognition and understanding from them. Secondly, they also sought to reach other Black Germans in order to empower them and offer them hope in their struggle for recognition. By thus addressing white German audiences, Black German activists and authors were producing what scholar Peggy Piesche calls “counter-narratives,” challenging and resisting exclusionary, marginalizing, and discriminatory practices and discourses in the majority-white culture.²⁶⁰

Through her play, *Also by Mail*, Olumide Popoola, is similarly engaging in a counter-narrative by confronting the persistent belief held by white Germans that structural racism and racial discrimination no longer exist in contemporary German society. By thematizing racial profiling, the stop and search method based on skin color and ethnicity, Popoola is showcasing a concrete instance of everyday racism that Black people, especially Black men, have to deal with regularly. By doing so, Popoola is addressing white German audiences and readers, encouraging them to reflect on their long-held beliefs about (everyday) racism in their own country. The fact that there is an urgent need to address this becomes evident in the “color-blindness” and the taboos surrounding issues of race and racism that permeate German society today. Following the horrors of National Socialism and the subsequent denazification process, any reference to the word “race” was declared taboo, and the underlying ideology of the Third Reich was regarded as “overcome” and defeated, and thus no longer of any relevance to German postwar society.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Peggy Piesche / Sara Lennox. Epilogue of Epistemologies and Positionalities. A Conversation, Berlin, October 21, 2014. In: Sara Lennox. *Remapping Black Germany*. (University of Massachusetts Press, 2016): 275.

²⁶¹ Priscilla Layne argues that the reason for this attitude is due to white Germans’ tendency to understand racism in its extreme cases, e.g., an arson attack on an asylum seekers’ home. This “racism as spectacle” ignores all the non-

Therefore, racist discrimination and violence is still not recognized as a structurally German problem, but rather actions of right-wing extremists or character flaws of individual persons. Instead of acknowledging racism – both extreme violence and non-violent, everyday racism – as a structural problem, white Germans have adopted so-called “color-blindness,” a stance that proclaims *Ich sehe keine Unterschiede, für mich sind alle Menschen gleich* that presents itself as politically correct and anti-racist.²⁶² Black German scholar Fatima El-Tayeb contends in the preface to *Mythen, Masken und Subjekte* that when white Germans do address racism, they usually distance themselves from a racism that, “entweder in der Vergangenheit oder bei anderen, weniger gebildeten/progressiven/weitgereisten Weißen verortet wird, aber sicher nicht innerhalb eines linken Diskurses oder der eigenen Identitätskonstruktion.”²⁶³ This inability, or rather, unwillingness on the part of white Germans to speak of racism as well as their complete avoidance of any reference to the word “race” has understandably made it extremely hard for Black Germans and other minority groups in Germany to name and combat racism. By having one of her Black German protagonists, Wale, experience racial profiling, Popoola is presenting a concrete example of racism, and thus undermining the dominant discourse of a homogeneous white society that has successfully overcome its Nazi past.

violent ways that racism presents itself in Germany. From: *Suspicious Spiral: Autofiction and Black German Subjectivity in Olivia Wenzel's "1000 Serpentinien Angst."* Speech at a video conference organized by the Center for German and European Studies, Brandeis University, 2020.

²⁶² (“I don’t see any differences, everyone is/looks the same to me.”).

²⁶³ (“Racism that is located either in the past or in other less educated/progressive/widely traveled white people, but surely not within a leftist discourse or one’s own identity construction.”). In: Maureen Maisha Eggers / Grada Kilomba / Peggy Piesche / Susan Arndt (eds.) *Mythen, Masken und Subjekte: Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland* (Münster: UNRAST Verlag, 2018).

Theater, Melodrama, and Race

In framing her play as a melodrama, Popoola is positioning herself in the tradition of using theater to address racial conflict, or more generally conflicts of social difference. The use of drama to deal with social issues can be traced back to ancient Greek playwrights (fifth to third centuries BC). Their plays drew their stories from ancient myths featuring characters with a “dimension larger than life – they are gods, heroes and heroes’ wives, surrounded with all the penumbra of legend.”²⁶⁴ A major influence on Greek dramatists were Homer’s epics, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the way in both works the feelings and lives of ordinary humans are affected by the “grand schemes and strategies” of the gods, heroes, and supernatural beings.²⁶⁵ Whether working on tragedies or comedies, ancient Greek playwrights (particularly Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Aristophanes) often wrote political plays with the Persian and the Peloponnesian Wars as the background. The playwrights sought to instill in their audiences a sense of patriotism for Athens and its institutions, and a series of “lessons about the ethics and morality of different systems of government, in peace and war.”²⁶⁶ Most importantly, Greek writers presented their spectators with a series of ideas to reflect on, for, as Aristotle argues in his *Poetics*, people learn by watching and imitating, and changing in the process (“emotional purgation or cleansing”) as they feel for characters’ suffering on stage.²⁶⁷ While the majority of ancient Greek playwrights (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes), whose works survived, wrote such political plays based on myth-stories, Menander (342-290 BC), writing a century later, focused on

²⁶⁴ Kenneth McLeish. *A Guide to Greek Theatre and Drama*. (London: Methuen, 2003): 15.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 270.

domestic drama, becoming the first practitioner of a form of comedy that depicted the concerns and lives of ordinary people who deal with life events (typically marriage), get in conflicts based on misunderstandings until these are resolved and equilibrium is restored.²⁶⁸ In his two surviving plays, *The Malcontent* and *The Woman from Samos*, two family groups clash due to differences based on class, gender, and economic status, as well as different attitudes concerning town vs. country and between generations. As the characters resolve their conflicts through reconciliation, intermarriage, and generosity, the spectator is equally “forced” to reflect on their own attitudes regarding these issues and to put their differences aside.

But it wasn't until the eighteenth century, following the aftermath of the French Revolution, that melodramas were revived on the modern stage. Melodramatic plays became not only a means to escape the drudgery of everyday life for some lively entertainment, but also an opportunity to come to terms with modernity, secularization, and more broadly, to make sense of life in general. In fact, according to scholar Rohan McWilliam, the immense popularity of melodrama stemmed from the way it offered an evening of “sensation and comedy, patriotism and peril” as well as the fact that melodrama allowed for the possibility that “drama could be found in the lives of the common people.”²⁶⁹ Originating thus in France in the later eighteenth century and spreading to England, Germany, and the United States, modern melodrama, written for a popular audience, dominated the stage for the following hundred years.²⁷⁰ Drawing on both tragedy and comedy, melodrama was moralistic as it dramatized the struggle of good and evil, assuring that virtue will be recognized and good will always prevail in the end. Melodramatic

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 255.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 59-60.

²⁷⁰ Rohan McWilliam. Melodrama and the Historians. (*Radical History Review*, 78:57, 2000): 59.

acting on stage was characterized by heightened emotions and exaggerated gestures and looks. Characters on stage give voice to their deepest feelings and “utter the unspeakable.”²⁷¹ Deriving from pantomime and Romanticism, theatrical expression of heightened emotions served, first and foremost, to illustrate psychological states and basic psychic conditions.

In contrast to eighteenth as well as the nineteenth-century melodramas that failed to equip their audiences with the necessary means to bring about actual change once they leave the theater, Popoola’s play proposes both concrete and fantastical solutions to a problem presented in her play that is based on real-world events. Referring to nineteenth-century English plays, Christina Crosby argues that “if only!” was melodrama’s main phrase, suggesting that happiness was within reach if only the characters knew. Thus, in stage melodramas the action oscillated between hope and despair, conveying that time is irreversible and human intervention is often too late. So, the audience, although they knew more than the characters on stage, had no power to intervene. This technique, argues Crosby, could inspire anger about injustice, but showed the spectators no means to translate their resentment into action. As a result, nineteenth-century audiences left the theater feeling safe in their own privileged lives.²⁷² In contrast, in presenting a real-world example of racial discrimination that is resolved in the courts, Popoola is saying that audiences can become politically active and help bring about social justice in the outside world. Popoola, however, has different intentions for different audiences; her play is not meant for a privileged audience to feel safe. She wants privileged, white Germans to feel uncomfortable whereas (unprivileged) Black Germans should feel inspired by her play to bring about change.

²⁷¹ Peter Brooks. *The Melodramatic Imagination*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976): 4.

²⁷² Christina Crosby, *The Ends of History*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013): 86-87.

In arguing for political activism in her play, Popoola's play can be viewed within a German theater tradition, by building primarily on Bertolt Brecht's theories on theater as an educational project. In her dissertation, *The Drama of Race*, Jamele Watkins examines the productive ways in which Black German theater reimagines the possibilities of (white) German theater as formulated by Brecht and Goethe to educate the audience. Watkins argues that the main purpose of traditional German theater was to educate audiences by creating distance between audiences and plays, as proclaimed by Goethe and, later, Brecht.²⁷³ In Goethe's vision, the aesthetic distance that was created between the stage and audience members was designed to help them to see the performance on stage as a "learning and cultivating experience" rather than an exact representation of how people usually behave.²⁷⁴ Goethe's primary goal for the eighteenth-century German theater was to focus on developing the intellectual and spiritual capabilities of theatergoers so that they would be able to critically reflect on societal norms and expectations. While similarly aiming for engaged audiences to bring about political and societal change, Brecht, on the other hand, created aesthetic distance through his method of alienation (*Verfremdung*). Brecht developed his concept of alienation because he believed that we had become too familiar with society and its workings to the point that we had stopped questioning anything.²⁷⁵ The reason for audiences' passivity, Brecht argued, was because traditional, existing theater practices encouraged the spectator to accept the status quo by presenting characters on

²⁷³ Jamele Watkins, *The Drama of Race: Contemporary Afro-German Theater* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Amherst / Doctoral Dissertation, 2017): 34-35.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁷⁵ Reinhold Grimm, *Alienation in Context: On the Theory and Practice of Brechtian Theater*. In: Siegfried Mews (ed.) *A Bertolt Brecht Reference Companion* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997): 41.

stage as helpless victims of their environment.²⁷⁶ What was needed then, Brecht concluded, was a method that forced us, the audience, to see things from a different and fresh angle, rendering the familiar unfamiliar and questionable. By experiencing a “shock of alienation” while watching the action on stage, Brecht argued, the spectator would become aware of sociological conditions that they have taken for granted up to that point. By questioning seemingly self-evident phenomena, the spectator would, at last, arrive at a real understanding that would then prompt them to action. In a way, Brecht is confronting the audience with alternative courses of action that could lead to different outcomes. Brecht’s *alienation* is thus an aesthetic method that promotes political awareness by forcing the audience to take an active and critical stance towards sociological conditions.

But creating aesthetic distance through alienation, however, did not mean that Brecht was against emotion altogether. What he rejected was total identification with characters on stage that rendered the spectator complacent and unable to retain any critical attitude and distance. Scholars trace Brecht’s aversion to empathetic audience response to the socio-historical time period in the first half of the twentieth century when Brecht developed his ideas on theater.²⁷⁷ Empathy, Brecht theorized, hindered critical thinking, and made the spectator passive and receptive to repressive politics in particular. Alienation, on the other hand, activated critical thought and resistance to dominant ideologies.²⁷⁸ Alienation was thus necessary to distance audiences from both the action as well as the performers on stage so that the spectators can consciously decide to

²⁷⁶ Laura Bradley, *Brecht and Political Theater: The Mother on Stage*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006): 3.

²⁷⁷ See Douglas Robinson, *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature: Tolstoy, Shklovsky, Brecht*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008): 205-217.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 207.

either accept or reject the action and utterances on stage. In his efforts to reeducate German society, Brecht thus wanted to keep audiences actively engaged during the duration of a play. Ultimately, Brecht's goal was to transform German society by inspiring people, especially the lower classes, to take action outside of the theater.

Building on such canonical writers, Black German theater intervenes in traditional German theater history in crucial ways. Watkins rightly recognizes that Black German theater challenges the exclusionary nature of white German theater, by including minority actors and characters who expand the meaning of Germanness.²⁷⁹ While similarly asking audience members to take a critical stance towards societal norms and expectations like Goethe and Brecht did, Black German theater puts an emphasis on empowerment and resistance by displaying and validating Black Germans' racist and exclusionary experiences in German society. Furthermore, Watkins argues that Black German theater is confrontational in that it not only urges white audiences to empathize with Black characters and their plight, it also confronts them with the question of to what extent they might have enabled those microaggressions presented on stage.²⁸⁰ By presenting them thus with instances of racial discrimination experienced by Black people and PoC, Black German playwrights and writers are urging white audiences to not just become enraged about racism and injustice, but also to reflect on what one can do to fight it.

Popoola relies on real-world events to offer a concrete example of racism that can be resolved positively due to political activism. The storyline involving Wale getting caught up in a case of racial profiling while riding the train in Germany is modeled after a similar real-life

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 36.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

incident with a young Black German that took place in 2010. In the introduction included prior to *Also by Mail* we learn that the young man filed a complaint against the Federal Police saying that he was targeted by the police because of his skin color. An administrative court in Koblenz then ruled in 2012 in favor of the police, declaring their stop and search to be a legitimate police measure, even if a person's non-white skin color and "non-Germanic ethnic origin" are the main reasons for performing identification checks.²⁸¹ This decision immediately drew intense criticism from human rights activists and citizens alike. The ISD (Initiative of Black People in Germany), the main force behind the activism, protested by organizing a broad political campaign, flash mobs, panel discussions, to name a few, to raise awareness among the general public and the media.²⁸² Due to this broad opposition to the Koblenz's court ruling, a higher court later overturned that earlier decision and outlawed racial profiling that violated the anti-discrimination provisions of the German Basic Law. In taking up this case in her play, Popoola is stressing that however fictional her play might be, the storyline refers back to real existing events that people can do something about. Similar to Brecht, Popoola is therefore showing audiences alternative courses of action that can lead to other, i.e., positive outcomes. One could argue that this is a unique feature of Black German writing, inspiring readers to translate their anger about social injustice to action in the real world. In the following, I elaborate on what exactly racial profiling means for PoC.

Wa Baile et al. write in the introduction to their collection titled *Racial Profiling*.

Struktureller Rassismus und antirassistischer Widerstand that racial profiling is one of the most

²⁸¹ Jamie Schearer and Hadija Haruna. Introduction. In: Olumide Popoola. *Also by Mail* (München: edition assemblage, 2013): 11-12.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 12.

visible forms of structural racist violence that at the same time remains invisible.²⁸³ It is highly visible because, on the one hand, the stop and search methods used by the police and border agencies take place in public spaces like on the streets, in train stations, on trains, and even in shopping malls. It is also visible because Black people and PoC as “visible” (through external markers) minority groups are almost always targeted by such practices. On the other hand, however, racial profiling remains invisible because even though it occurs in public spaces the majority society does not acknowledge it as a form of structural racism. On the contrary, it is seen as a necessary means to establish order and to keep society stable and safe. According to Wa Baile et. al, racial profiling contributes to the creation of social differences and segregated spaces:

Mithilfe von Racial Profiling werden Praktiken der Rassifizierung, das heißt die Konstruktion einer Trennlinie zwischen “Eigenen” und “Fremden” in einer Gesellschaft, überhaupt erst in Umlauf gebracht, zur Schau gestellt, legitimiert und normalisiert.²⁸⁴

In other words, racial profiling is a violent technique that creates “the Other” along racial differences. Also, this normalization of everyday racism allows the dominant group of a society to view racial profiling as a legitimized and justified practice of the police.

People, for whom racial profiling is part of everyday life, do not see the police as protectors enforcing law and order. Those, who are frequently targeted for racial profiling, identify as, among other things, PoC, Asians, Muslims, and Sinti and Roma. For these groups,

²⁸³ Mohamed Wa Baile / Serena O. Dankwa / Tarek Naguib / Patricia Purtschert / Sarah Schilliger. (eds.) Introduction to *Racial Profiling. Struktureller Rassismus und antirassistischer Widerstand*. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019): 9.

²⁸⁴ (“Through racial profiling, practices of racialization, i.e., the construction of a dividing line between “our own” and “foreign” in a society, are circulated, displayed, legitimized, and normalized in the first place.”) Mohamed Wa Baile / Serena O. Dankwa / Tarek Naguib / Patricia Purtschert / Sarah Schilliger. (eds.) Introduction to *Racial Profiling. Struktureller Rassismus und antirassistischer Widerstand*. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019): 10.

racial profiling can mean being criminalized, humiliated and exposed publicly, and addressed with racial slurs.²⁸⁵ It can also mean having to “decriminalize” themselves after being controlled by the police, i.e., to make clear to family and friends that they didn’t commit any crimes. They also report psychosocial effects, fear of persecution, and depression.²⁸⁶ They live in a constant state of uncertainty because they know they might get targeted any time. It is needless to say that racial profiling can be deadly for PoC; the most famous one involves Oury Jalloh, who in 2005 burned to death under mysterious circumstances in a police cell in Dessau, Germany, and whose case is still not sufficiently resolved. Fatima El-Tayeb and Vanessa Eileen Thompson suggest that this is due to the normalization of racial profiling and the difficulty of holding the police accountable for racist practices; they write that when police violations are reported, they are often rejected by authorities, and the victims know that the chances of conviction of the police are very low. Also, it is hard not only to find witnesses who are willing to testify against the police, but also lawyers who are willing to accept clients because legal proceedings against the police in Germany are almost always unsuccessful. In addition to all this, in most cases PoC are subjected to penalties and even counterclaims by the police, thus continuing the criminalization of racialized subjects.²⁸⁷

In the scene where Wale gets racially profiled by the ticket inspector on the train and, later, by the police, it’s obvious that he’s being targeted for his looks rather than the validity of his ticket. When he refuses to show his passport without learning the reason for the random stop

²⁸⁵ Fatima El-Tayeb / Vanessa Eileen Thompson. Alltagsrassismus, staatliche Gewalt, und koloniale Tradition. In: Mohamed Wa Baile / Serena O. Dankwa / Tarek Naguib / Patricia Purtschert / Sarah Schilliger. (eds.) *Racial Profiling. Struktureller Rassismus und antirassistischer Widerstand*. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019): 317.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 318.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

and search, the ticket inspector immediately notifies the police, saying into his walkie-talkie,

TICKET INSPECTOR. Ja, I have someone here. [...] You can't miss him, it's all empty. Yes, probably thought we wouldn't come that far if he went all the way to the back. His ticket is fine. Even managed to get a Bahncard. Clever boy. But I don't think he will be so clever once we call out his scam. [...] (Act I, scene VII, 40)

Here, it's clear that it doesn't matter whether or not Wale has a valid ticket ("His ticket is fine"), the ticket inspector has already decided that, because Wale is Black, he can't be German, which makes him suspicious: he cannot have acquired his ticket through legal means. In a later scene after this incident, when Wale is talking to his lawyer, his lawyer informs him that that specific train that Wale was on, is frequently used for illegal entry into the country. It is safe to assume that the police regularly racially profile people on the train who they suspect are not German and are therefore entering the country illegally.

Instead of complying with the ticket inspector and the police and showing his identification papers, Wale asks questions and resists, which is an act of empowerment.

WALE. What's going on? Did something happen?

POLICEMAN. Your passport. This is a Kontrolle. I want to see your Papiere. The papers please.

WALE. Why? Was there an incident or anything?

POLICEMAN. No no. Nothing happened hier ist alles fine. I need your papers.

[...]

WALE. I'm not showing you my papers. There is absolutely no reason for that. Do you ask every passenger or just the Black ones?

POLICEMAN. When there is reason for suspicion we ask.

WALE. Suspicion of what?

[...]

WALE. You haven't given me a good reason. In fact you haven't given me any at all.

POLICEMAN. Because you behave yourself suspicious to us. Your conduction is suspiciously. So we check that everything is in ze right order. One never knows, with ze people like you. You could be... (*catches himself and stops*). As I said, this is your last chance.

WALE. I'm sure. What people like me? Being Black is a suspicious thing? (Act I, scene VII, 40-41)

What's ironic here is the way the policeman Other Wale by speaking to him in English because he assumes Wale doesn't speak German due to his skin color. However, compared to Wale's perfect German – he's a native speaker after all – the policeman speaks incorrect English with a heavy German influence, exhibiting his own ignorance and arrogance. This also showcases white Germans' implied assumption that PoC's integrity is always to be questioned, interrogated, and on trial while white people escape similar inspection. When the police thus throw him out of the train and even search his backpack, Wale compares their behavior to SS methods. He realizes that German police regard Black people as already guilty without them having committed any crime. After this shocking encounter with structural racism from the police, Wale decides to take legal action by suing the German police, telling his lawyer "... once you travel with my skin color you're still up for grabs" (46).

However, Wale's behavior is what the scholar bell hooks calls "back talk" or "talking back," resisting, and protesting is a "courageous act – an act of risk and daring."²⁸⁸ People who are victimized through racial profiling often react by keeping silent, bottling up their experience, and even blaming themselves for it because being racially profiled can leave them feeling criminalized and even humiliated as if they had committed a crime, as I have written further

²⁸⁸ bell hooks. *Talking Back. Thinking Feminist. Thinking Black*. (New York: Routledge, 2014): 5.

above.²⁸⁹ So, it takes courage to be able to imagine a nonviolent and self-determined life and to stand for your right to be able to lead such a peaceful life. According to bell hooks, actively engaging with the situation can empower one: “...true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless.”²⁹⁰ This defiant “talking back” thus is not just empty words, it “heals, [...] makes new life and new growth possible.” More than that, it allows our movement “from object to subject – the liberated voice.”²⁹¹ Indeed, Mohamed Wa Baile, for example, the Black Swiss man who was racially profiled in Zurich, Switzerland, in 2015, describes his process of empowerment as follows:

Die negativen Gefühle, die die Erinnerung an die Polizeikontrollen auslösen können, gibt es nicht mehr. Ich bin befreit durch den gewaltfreien Widerstand und die Solidarität, die es heute gibt. Das Gefühl der Erniedrigung ist weg.²⁹²

So, protesting and resisting not just as an individual, but as a group and as a collective can weaken and transform the experience of racial profiling that is usually associated with a sense of fear and powerlessness. Collective resistance can also make it possible to fight racial profiling. In her play, Popoola shows one concrete course of action that readers can take to help fight injustice. While the police forcibly remove Wale from the train and go through his things on the

²⁸⁹ Mohamed Wa Baile / Serena O. Dankwa / Tarek Naguib / Patricia Purtschert / Sarah Schilliger. (eds.) Introduction to *Racial Profiling. Struktureller Rassismus und antirassistischer Widerstand*. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019): 22.

²⁹⁰ bell hooks. *Talking Back. Thinking Feminist. Thinking Black*. (New York: Routledge, 2014): 8.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 9.

²⁹² (“The negative feelings that can be triggered by reminders of racial profiling are gone. I am liberated through the nonviolent resistance and the solidarity that we have today. The feeling of humiliation is gone.”) Mohamed Wa Baile / Serena O. Dankwa / Tarek Naguib / Patricia Purtschert / Sarah Schilliger. (eds.) Introduction to *Racial Profiling. Struktureller Rassismus und antirassistischer Widerstand*. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019): 23.

platform outside, voices of, presumably, bystanders are heard off screen addressing the police:

VOICE 1. What's going on here? Is this legal?

VOICE 2. We are recording this, you won't get away with this kind of treatment.

[...]

VOICE 1. We will take this further. You can't just go through his things. What is it you are looking for?

[...]

VOICE 2. (*To* *Wale*) You don't have to take this type of treatment. (Act I, scene VII, 42)

Here, Popoola shows the proactive way bystanders can act instead of being passive, and thus silently encouraging and tolerating racist behavior. She is saying that, when witnessing this kind of racist actions by the police, as bystanders we could intervene and not just offer support and solidarity to the person being detained, but also record and document the incident, which could help hold the police accountable for their actions in court of law. Vanessa Eileen Thompson argues that witnessing how a person of Color is being subjected to racially motivated attacks and insults and not doing anything and staying silent as bystanders is also a form of racial profiling in itself.²⁹³

Family melodrama: Virtue Recognized

In addition to being an act of empowerment, *Wale's* "talking back" and resisting the authorities is also a typical melodramatic trope to expose injustice. In thus fighting and revealing the villain, i.e., racially motivated stop and search, *Wale's* virtue is recognized publicly by the bystanders on the train platform. In traditional melodramas, the plot is structured in a way that evil is always defeated in the end and virtue is recognized. A melodrama has a happy ending not so much because virtue is gained – it was always there – but because virtue is exposed and

²⁹³ Fatima El-Tayeb / Vanessa Eileen Thompson. Alltagsrassismus, staatliche Gewalt, und koloniale Tradition. In: Mohamed Wa Baile / Serena O. Dankwa / Tarek Naguib / Patricia Purtschert / Sarah Schilliger. (eds.) *Racial Profiling. Struktureller Rassismus und antirassistischer Widerstand*. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019): 319.

publicly acknowledged. As Peter Brooks writes, “The reward of virtue [...] is only a secondary manifestation of the recognition of virtue.”²⁹⁴ In traditional melodramas, virtue is usually represented by a young heroine whose innocence is compromised by a villain, i.e., a cunning male who seduces the innocent and naive female and abandons her when she is pregnant, as I have delineated in the introductory chapter of this dissertation. In *Also by Mail*, however, I argue that the virtue is represented by Wale’s innocence for being targeted by the ticket inspector and the police for no other reason than for his skin color. When Wale refuses to show his ID and demands to know the reason for the stop and search by the authorities, he is speaking out his truth, so to speak. In other words, this scene represents what Peter Brooks calls a “victory over repression.”²⁹⁵ While Wale is thus exposing the injustice of the authorities, the bystanders on the train platform recognize Wale’s virtue by bearing witness to the scene by filming it and intervening. When in the past, the police were able to target and racially profile PoC with impunity, now there are witnesses to their actions and the possibility that they might be held accountable for their behavior.

Another way virtue is recognized in *Also by Mail* happens when a quote from Lorraine Hansberry’s play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (henceforth *Raisin*) is read aloud by the musicians in front of the whole family so that virtue can be recognized publicly, i.e., by the family members as well as the audience; and virtue in *Also by Mail* is represented by the integrity of Funke and Wale’s Nigerian family, which had been threatened to fall apart due to the displaced will of Mr. Ogunleye. In other words, Popoola uses a direct quote from Hansberry’s play as an intertext to bring about the resolution to *Also by Mail*’s conflict. In the context of Popoola’s play, I suggest

²⁹⁴ Peter Brooks. *The Melodramatic Imagination*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976): 27.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

that virtue is represented by the integrity of Mr. Ogunleye's family in Nigeria – the solidarity and understanding between family members, and hope for a better future. This integrity is threatened when the family members are tempted by the potential gains of the government contract Mr. Ogunleye signed shortly before his death. Because his will has disappeared and everyone assumes it is hidden somewhere in the house, this has the potential to pit the family members against each other. Over the course of the play, Mr. Ogunleye's nuclear and extended family including his older brother, Bola, his younger sister, Yemisi, his divorced second wife, Mrs. Akinbiyi (and son, Lanre) as well as Hope, with whom Mr. Ogunleye had an affair and a two-year old son, all lay claim to his inheritance and hope to get their "share" of the money. Tensions arise around the displaced will and the question of who has a right to Mr. Ogunleye's money. Furthermore, as stated before, Wale's and Funke's disregard for Nigerian customs and traditions as well as for matters surrounding their father's inheritance intensifies the conflict. Just like a villainous person luring an innocent woman to destruction, greed and obsession with money threatens to destroy the Ogunleye family's peace and solidarity. Towards the end of the play, when the family members gather around to read the will that Funke was able to find, the two musicians read out the quote from *Raisin*, following it up with a rendition of *More money more problems* by The Notorious B.I.G. on their talking drums. The direct quote from *Raisin*, urging everyone not to depend solely on a dead man's money for the betterment of their lives, makes the family members to eventually drop the matter of the will and reconcile with each other, restoring their virtue. The stage directions following this scene read, "There is a re-unifying energy between the family members. Relief, re-building, trust, curiosity... [...] The father has tricked them all into seeing the error of their ways. After a while the family disperses" (77). This scene constitutes a moment of reckoning, a moment where virtue is recognized by all; not won, for

peace and solidarity among the family members has always been there, but publicly acknowledged. The family members have realized that they can change their lives for the better without having to rely on someone else's money to initiate that change. Mr. Ogunleye's inheritance could have meant upward mobility and wealth for his family, but it could also have brought problems, just like the mere prospect of having it already caused tensions between the family members. In a way, Mr. Ogunleye has, in a spiritual form, saved his family from falling apart. Popoola employs the trope of ancestral spirits and *Raisin* as an intertext to resolve the play's conflict. In doing so, Popoola advocates transgenerational solidarity ("Zusammenhalt"); while the musicians read aloud the quote from *Raisin*, Lanre, Wale and Funke's younger half-brother, recognizes the quote to be from Hansberry's play that he asked his father to read a while ago. Both Watkins and Priscilla Layne point out that the use of the quote by Mr. Ogunleye demonstrates that he took his children seriously and, contrary to what they assumed, he actually listened to them, proving "... how much his children's opinion meant to him."²⁹⁶ Layne argues that Mr. Ogunleye urges his children through the quote from Hansberry's play delivered by the musicians not to rely solely on their dead father's money to make their lives better; instead, they should have hope and faith that things will get better, "with or without money."²⁹⁷ to have hope. This scene thus recognizes Mr. Ogunleye as a father and re-establishes the bond between the generations. Such transgenerational tension and conflict are integral to family melodramas as we will see in the following. Before I, however, investigate how heightened expressions and emotions, hallmarks of melodrama, are expressed in the play, I'd like to briefly explore what

²⁹⁶ Priscilla Layne. *Out of this World: Afro-German Afrofuturism*. (Forthcoming with Northwestern University Press): 42.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

makes Hansberry's play melodramatic and, therefore, of interest to Popoola's play.

Intertextuality – Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

Black dramatists such as Lorraine Hansberry and Olumide Popoola, who uses Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* as an intertext for her own play, use drama first and foremost to advocate racial justice and equality. Hansberry wrote her play, *Raisin*, to offer hope to African Americans while highlighting the racism and economic hardships Black people, exemplified by a Black family in Chicago's Southside in the play, experienced in the 1950s. The play is considered one of the most significant plays by an African American because it centers, for the first time, Black people as main characters "talking together outside the presence of whites" and portrays them on stage with "dignity, humanity, and complexity."²⁹⁸ Also, *Raisin* was such a huge success because Hansberry wrote a "universal story about what would otherwise be seen as a particular, *Black* experience."²⁹⁹ The portrayal of the working-class, African American Younger family in Chicago's Southside in the 1950s and the economic hardships that they faced resonated with white and Black audiences alike, offering them hope for a better future.³⁰⁰ In *Raisin*, the matron of the Younger family, Lena "Mama" Younger, purchases a house in an all-white neighborhood with the insurance money from her deceased husband, and at the end of the play, despite opposition from their white neighbors, the family decides to move into the better neighborhood.

²⁹⁸ Jamele Watkins, *The Drama of Race: Contemporary Afro-German Theater* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Amherst / Doctoral Dissertation, 2017): 157.

²⁹⁹ Priscilla Layne. *Out of this World: Afro-German Afrofuturism*. (Forthcoming with Northwestern University Press): 6-7.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

What makes *Raisin* a melodrama is the way the Younger family deals with their economic hardships is portrayed. The family consists of three generations that live in a small run-down two-bedroom apartment with an adjoining bathroom that they share with their neighbor. All the action of the play takes place in their stifling domestic space, i.e., their apartment, and there is palpable tension between the family members as they navigate their life. Due to segregation and racial discrimination of the 1950s, the family members are forced to work in low-paying and manual jobs; the eldest son, Walter Lee, works as a chauffeur, his wife, Ruth as a babysitter, and his mother, Mama Younger, works as a kitchen maid. All the family members confront each other with full expressivity, expressing their hopes for a better future despite economic hardships. The family's virtue is recognized when they decide to move into their new house in an all-white neighborhood despite backlash and resistance from white people. This scene occurs at the end of the play, when Walter Lee speaks his truth by turning down the offer of Mr. Lindner, a representative of the white neighborhood, who had offered to buy them out as an exchange for not moving into the new neighborhood. In a scene full of melodramatic characteristics, Walter Lee informs Mr. Lindner of his decision,

WALTER (*Starting to cry and facing the man eye to eye*) What I am telling you is that we called you over here to tell you that we are very proud and that this is – this is my son, who makes the sixth generation of our family in this country, and that we have all thought about your offer and we have decided to move into our house because my father – my father – he earned it. (*Mama has her eyes closed and is rocking back and forth as though she were in church, with her head nodding the amen yes*) We don't want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes – but we will try to be good neighbors. That's all we got to say. (*He looks the man absolutely in the eyes*) We don't want your money. (*He turns and walks away from the man*)³⁰¹

With full expressivity, Walter Lee is letting Mr. Lindner know that he and his family deserve to live in a good neighborhood, just like everybody else. What makes this play of interest to

³⁰¹ Lorraine Hansberry. *A Raisin in the Sun*. (New York: A Signet Book, 1987): 127-128.

Popoola's play, I argue, is how racial tensions are expressed in the domestic space where generations of family members confront one another with full expressivity. Similar to the plot of *Also by Mail*, the patriarch of the Younger family recently died and left an inheritance to his family in the form of an insurance check. Everyone in the family, including Walter Lee's younger sister, Beneatha, lays claim to the money and tries to use the money for their own benefits. But similar to the ending of Popoola's play, the Younger family reconciles with each other and decides to fight racism as a united front.

By the way, this type of intertextuality, i.e., borrowing pieces of writing such as quotes, images, songs from various African and African American diasporic literatures is common among Black German writers and playwrights. They use such diasporic references in an intentional and a self-reflective way to establish meaning and identity in their own works.³⁰² This technique of identity-creation via intertextuality is due to a lack of general knowledge of the history of Black Germans as well as the absence of a sustained community of Black Germans prior to the 1980s. In the previous chapter of this dissertation, I emphasized the importance of literature by Black writers, especially African American female writers, for older generations of Black Germans born in post-war Germany through the 1960s. Black German women such as Ika Hügel-Marshall, born 1947, just to give an example, turned to the writings of African American women like Audre Lorde not only to establish their self-identity as PoC in Germany but also to find a sense of community in the transatlantic Black diaspora.

³⁰² Jamele Watkins, *The Drama of Race: Contemporary Afro-German Theater* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Amherst / Doctoral Dissertation, 2017): 30.

Family melodrama: Drama of excess

Jamele Watkins informs us in her work that Popoola's play has never been staged. Being thus a play that is seemingly meant to be read rather than performed on stage, the question inevitably arises as to how strong emotions and exaggerated gestures and looks that typically characterize a stage performance of a melodrama, are expressed in the text of *Also by Mail*, if at all. Here we turn again to Peter Brooks, who in his seminal work, "The Melodramatic Imagination," examined the "melodramatism" in the works of novelists Honoré de Balzac and Henry James. Brooks states that the way writers create drama "from the banal stuff of reality" is to apply pressure to the surface of reality, i.e., to the surface of their texts.³⁰³ By piercing and interrogating the surface of the texts, Brooks argues, dramatists arrive at the "truer, hidden reality," the true drama that lies behind it.³⁰⁴ Brooks demonstrates how in Balzac's first major novel, *The Wild Ass's Skin* (*La Peau de Chagrin*, 1831), the writer creates drama by having the narrator pose a series of self-reflective questions, among other things; in other words apply pressure to the gesture, "pressure through interrogation, through the evocation of more and more fantastic possibilities, to make it yield meaning."³⁰⁵ In the text of a play like *Also by Mail*, drama is created through characters' speeches, monologues, their interactions with each other, their speeches in all caps signifying shouting, the two musicians standing in for a Greek choir, and stage directions. In order to look at how melodrama is created in the text of *Also by Mail*, I would like to analyze scene V in Act I that takes place right after the funeral ceremonies for Mr. Ogunleye. Wale is furious about a funeral guest who had publicly criticized him for saying a

³⁰³ Peter Brooks. *The Melodramatic Imagination*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976): 1-2.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

prayer in German at his father's burial. The scene following the burial illustrates the culmination of the clash between Wale and Funke with their relatives, i.e., Uncle Bola and aunty Yemisi, over differing views regarding cultural values, traditions and customs, and gender roles. The scene is also pivotal as a turning point in the play because the big fight among Wale and his uncle causes Wale to leave for Germany, and Funke to fall ill with malaria.

The fight between the family members, especially between Wale and Uncle Bola, which was partly based on a misunderstanding with regard to the circumstances of Wale's speech at the funeral, constitutes a climactic moment in the play where the characters are "able to confront one another with full expressivity."³⁰⁶ As Peter Brooks explains, the desire to "express all seems a fundamental characteristic" of melodramas. Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; "the characters [...] utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures and the whole lesson of their relationship."³⁰⁷ The misunderstanding between Wale and Uncle Bola stemmed from the latter's expectation that Wale, as the eldest son, would be expected to say something at his father's funeral; although very reluctant, Wale agreed to say a short prayer. At the burial, Wale says a prayer in German as a tribute to his father, who spoke German fluently, with English explanations for the funeral guests. This angers a funeral guest as well as Wale's relatives as burials in West Africa, Nigeria specifically, are meant to honor the deceased as much as the funeral guests. Citing Christopher Waterman, Priscilla Layne argues that during the burial ceremonies Mr. Ogunleye's house becomes the center of activity with his wealth on display for everyone to see:

In Nigeria, neotraditional ceremonies celebrating the naming of children,

³⁰⁶ Peter Brooks. *The Melodramatic Imagination*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976): 4.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

marriage, death, or the acquisition of property served as an idiom for demonstrating wealth, urban sophistication, and generosity – expressed by the provision of food, drink, and entertainment – toward less unfortunate kin and acquaintances.³⁰⁸

According to Nigerian tradition, it is customary to tend to the funeral guests who have come to pay their respects to the dead. Not having grown up with these traditions or without their Nigerian father, who could have imparted those traditions to his children, Wale and Funke do not know that they are, in their respective roles as hosts, to receive the funeral guests in their father's home. Uncle Bola and aunty Yemisi act as parental figures in the way they try to protect them from gossip and guide them through the burial ceremonies. But they also Other Wale and Funke, explicitly and implicitly reminding them that they are not Nigerian.

The big fight between Wale and Uncle Bola after the burial plays out as follows:

UNCLE BOLA. The funeral is not a place to try out ideas--

WALE. Try out ideas? (*Shakes his head vehemently*) I can't believe it. Try out ideas? I ran this by you Uncle Bola, I told you about this. That idea was actually signed off by you.

UNCLE BOLA. Not in German.

WALE. WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH GERMAN? Dad spoke it fluently. He probably would have been touched.

UNCLE BOLA. He's not here. These people are here.

WALE. I was saying the prayer because he wasn't here. I don't believe it. Her opinion [the funeral guest] matters so much that you can't understand where I'm coming from?

UNCLE BOLA. I understand, but it wasn't necessary.

WALE. I NEVER WANTED TO SAY ANYTHING IN THE FIRST PLACE. I DID IT BECAUSE I WANTED TO PLEASE YOU.

[...]

³⁰⁸ Quoted in Layne (22): Christopher Waterman. *jùjú: A Social History and Ethnography of an African Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990): 70.

WALE. I'm going upstairs to my room.

UNCLE BOLA. You are coming outside. You need to speak to the guests. They will want to give their condolences. You are the eldest son. They are expecting to speak to you.

WALE. I've had enough *conversations* for one day.

LANRE. Come on – please.

WALE. (*Bitter*) I don't think I can be trusted right now. Who knows what else might come out of my mouth? It might actually concern my father. (*Losing it*) THE ONE PERSON WHO SHOULD MATTER. But I don't want to put anyone through any more of my inconsiderate actions. (*Facing uncle Bola*) Instead I'm going to act like a man. I am going to take responsibility for the consequences of my actions and remove myself. No worries: no unmanly behavior to watch out for! No crying, no sentiments, nothing at all. But do get back to me so we can speak business some time. (Act I, scene V, 33-34)

This scene is full of melodramatic characteristics. It begins with the stage directions informing the reader that Wale “comes storming back into the house followed by Lanre and Funke” (32). Wale’s anger and frustration are apparent from his body language, conveyed by the stage directions, i.e., the way he storms into the house, shakes his head vehemently, and shouts at his uncle (all caps). This scene represents a “victory over repression” as Wale speaks out his truth; namely that he has come to Nigeria not just to attend his deceased father’s funeral, but also to come to terms with the man who was never really that present in his life growing up. And saying the prayer in German was his way of connecting with his late father as well as finding some sort of a closure from him, whereas Uncle Bola’s main concern was to honor his dead brother by giving him a befitting ceremony, as dictated by Nigerian tradition; this would involve demonstrating and extending Mr. Ogunleye’s wealth and generosity to the funeral guests by receiving them in the deceased's home.

More importantly, however, in addition to enabling characters to express *all* and give voice to their true feelings, melodramatic characteristics in this scene serve a deeper meaning. By speaking their truths and confronting each other with *full* expressivity, the characters push

“*through* manners to deeper sources of being.”³⁰⁹ In speaking the unspeakable and through all their heightened emotions and gestures, Wale and Uncle Bola reveal the true stakes and meaning of their relationship and existence: Wale got in trouble in Nigeria for speaking German. In other words, the question of Wale’s, and by extension, Funke’s belonging and what they consider *home* is at stake in the play. As I’ve mentioned before, in Nigeria the siblings are Othered as Germans, as not belonging to their late father’s home country, whereas in Germany, the country of their birth and citizenship, they are again Othered as not belonging, as we’ve seen in the scene where Wale gets racially profiled by the German police on the train. With regard to the theme of home, Jamele Watkins argues that Popoola’s play initially shows the “lack of home” – Wale and Funke feel home neither in Germany nor in Nigeria – so that the siblings end up finding belonging in the diaspora, accepting all the “rupture[s], the break[s] and the disconnect[s];”³¹⁰ Priscilla Layne, however, states that Wale and Funke manage to find home in *both* countries, Germany and Nigeria, thereby blurring the strict boundaries between the two countries.³¹¹ I, on the other hand, suggest that it is not that important *where* the siblings find a home and belonging – in Nigeria, Germany, the diaspora, or in all of these places – , what matters is with *whom*. By employing family melodrama, Popoola shows in her play that the way to beat racism and racial injustice is together as a family, and by extension, as a community by passing down knowledge and information from one generation to the next, and by embracing our differences; in other words, it should be okay to say a prayer in German at your father’s funeral.

³⁰⁹ Peter Brooks. *The Melodramatic Imagination*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976): 4.

³¹⁰ Jamele Watkins. *The Drama of Race: Contemporary Afro-German Theater* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Amherst / Doctoral Dissertation, 2017): 160, 167.

³¹¹ Priscilla Layne. *Out of this World: Afro-German Afrofuturism*. (Forthcoming with Northwestern University Press): 10.

The fight between Wale and Uncle Bola is followed by a mock funeral speech by Funke that critiques Nigeria's culture of sexism as well as appeals to more solidarity among the family members. Her speech reads as follows:

Wale storms up the stairs. Funke takes a glass and clinks a spoon on it to gain attention and stands on a chair addressing an invisible audience.

FUNKE. Dear gathered people. Thank you for coming to pay your respects. Not! I am grateful that I have been given this exclusive opportunity to address you. Not because of my position, not because my particular feelings or concerns are of any importance here whatsoever, simply because I felt the need and let's face it: because I can.

LANRE. Funke please...

FUNKE. Thank you, thank you. Of course, I shall expand. When a parent dies, as those of you who have experienced this will know, it is the family who comes together to share their grief. The idea being that this communal mourning lightens the feeling of loss.

LANRE. Come on sis...

Aunty Yemisi and Uncle Bola stand speechless.

FUNKE. I am pleased to announce that we have indeed come together so we can check off on the "communal." Whether we are sharing anything but animosity... I leave that up to your esteemed interpretation. You will all be delighted to hear that despite contrary expectations there seems to have been no poisonous presents. At least not as far as we are aware of. Things have at times taken an unexpected turn, but all will be rectified shortly. We are back on track and should return soon to larger issues at hand--

UNCLE BOLA. You have lost your mind. Stop this immediately! People are waiting outside. Go and get your brother.

FUNKE. Of course, as you would expect in the case of the death of a business man like my father, this concerns foremost how we can still get what *we* have lost; what he lost because his life is no longer in his possession. That itself is a conundrum worth pondering on but we leave that for other times, old age perhaps, or any other time when nothing pressing awaits our immediate attention. We should refrain from wasting any time on reminiscing about the man we are here to mourn. In fact we have left all sentimentality for professionals and gatecrashers, who we are about to feed. In this house we are set on discerning priorities. We look at the future while being mindful of the present-- (Act I, scene V, 34-35)

By delivering her mock funeral speech, Funke is challenging the sexism exhibited by Uncle Bola towards her and the women in his family in general. Ever since Funke arrived in Nigeria, Uncle

Bola has ignored her during conversations and has even forbidden her to say something at her father's funeral. Not having grown up with Nigerian culture, Funke is not accustomed to the emphasis placed on patriarchy, according to which eldest sons play a big role in family matters. In addition, Funke is criticizing what she perceives to be the rather superficial side of the funeral procedures – instead of coming together as a family to mourn the deceased in a more personal way, the way she and Wale would have preferred to, her relatives strictly follow funeral rites, as dictated by tradition, and leave little room for personal reflections and familial grieving. Again, through Funke's mock funeral speech, Popoola is advocating for a close-knit family and community that embraces differences to grow together rather than letting the same differences tear them apart. Through her performance – by standing on a chair and tapping a spoon against a glass to get everyone's attention – and through her mock funeral speech, Funke is delivering the speech that she wasn't allowed to give at her father's funeral, albeit in a sarcastic way, while also speaking her own truth. In addition to critiquing the sexism in Nigerian culture as well as pushing back against the family strife, Funke is urging for more closeness and solidarity between her family members.

After Wale has left for Germany, Funke is able to achieve such a closeness with her dead father when he visits her in her feverish state. Mr. Ogunleye, as an ancestral spirit, visits Funke as it is believed in the Yoruba religion that deceased ancestors appear to their descendants to look after them, as I will elaborate on in more detail in the next section, *Transgenerational Communities*; in particular, Mr. Ogunleye in ghost form comes back to reconcile his daughter with her brother by making up for his past mistake as a parent, i.e., by telling her of his past experiences with racism in Germany and thereby validating his children's experiences with racial injustice and showing them a possible way forward. Now, however, I'm going to look at Mr.

Ogunleye's (renewed) relationship with Funke from a melodramatic perspective. As I've mentioned before, the father-daughter relationship is the most common domestic tie in melodramas. Usually, in nineteenth-century melodramas, for instance, a marriage choice of the daughter – usually spurred by a cunning male who has seduced the daughter – threatens to destroy the harmony of domestic life and the close relationship between the daughter and her parents. In *Also by Mail*, by contrast, no marriage choice is threatening any relationships between parents and their offspring. What is at stake is the harmony between the immediate and extended family members more broadly, caused by differing views regarding the funeral proceedings as well as Mr. Ogunleye's displaced will, and the harmony in particular between the siblings, Wale and Funke, caused by the question of the siblings' sense of belonging, i.e., the place they call home.

In the beginning of the scene when Mr. Ogunleye appears to Funke, there is a profound sense of loss that is felt by both characters.³¹² Both are unhappy about the way things are going; Mr. Ogunleye feels sad that his oldest children are not getting along with each other, and Funke feels abandoned by her brother in a time of grief where she thinks they should be there for each other more than ever. This feeling of loss is central to melodramas, argues Linda Williams.³¹³ In working out key melodramatic features in her book, *Playing the Race Card* (2001), Williams draws on the work of Franco Moretti and the latter's analysis of the phenomenon of crying in response to movies. Moretti explains that when we cry, we “recognize that something is lost and

³¹² As to why Mr. Ogunleye only appears to Funke and not the others is because, according to Priscilla Layne, Funke's weakened state makes it possible to experience this visitation with her father. Quoting Geoffrey Parrinder, Layne writes that the sick and dying, and older ones, i.e., those, who will join their ancestors soon, have visions of those, “who have gone before them, and these ‘phantasms of the dying are very common.” In: Priscilla Layne (25). Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1961).

³¹³ Linda Williams. *Playing the Race Card*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): 31.

cannot be regained. Time is the ultimate object of loss; we cry at the irreversibility of time. We cry at funerals, for example, because it is then that we know, finally and forever, that it is ‘too late.’”³¹⁴ Similarly, Williams states that this sense of loss is important for the role crying plays in melodramas; scenes of “pathetic death” do not have to occur in a melodrama, but, so Williams, “what counts is the feeling or threat of loss suffused throughout the form, the sense that something has [...] ‘gone with the wind,’ and the imagination of a loss that is not normally spoken.”³¹⁵ But in the case of *Also by Mail*, the sense of loss does get articulated both by Funke and Mr. Ogunleye. He informs his daughter of the reason for his visit, saying that “Funke, the way things are going, I’m not happy. Not at all” (60). Similarly, Funke vents her frustration with Wale for choosing to stay in Germany instead of helping out with the funeral as well as the issue surrounding his father’s will in Nigeria; Funke says:

“He’s not there for me and I have asked him. Believe me. So many times! If you observed the whole thing you would know that I begged him but it is more important for him to go to court in Germany than to take care of the legal affairs here. To see the issue with (*hesitates*) well, the inheritance through. [...] He doesn’t see why... I don’t understand him, I don’t get what he’s doing. Now – of all times. I’m sure he could get the whole thing deferred or something.” (Act II, scene II, 63)

What becomes apparent here is that Funke is upset with her brother for not being there for her in a time of immense grief when they have just lost their father. However, she doesn’t realize yet that staying in Germany and winning his court case will help Wale not only get compensation for the abuse he endured at the hands of the German police, but it will also benefit the Black German community and PoC more broadly in the long run if racial profiling gets outlawed in Germany. Later, in scene IV of act II, however, when she is feeling better and when Wale comes back to

³¹⁴ Quoted in Linda Williams: Franco Moretti. “Kindergarten.” In: *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*. (London: Verso, 1983): 159-162.

³¹⁵ Linda Williams. *Playing the Race Card*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): 31.

Nigeria, Funke does understand the importance of winning the court case and pledges her support for her brother.

Before Mr. Ogunleye can even get to rectifying his past mistake and helping to reconcile his oldest children with each other, he has to convince his daughter to listen to his advice to begin with. Several times during their conversation, he has to beg and even order Funke to listen to him saying, “Listen to me. I would like to tell you why I am concerned if I may. Do you think that is possible?” (61), “Since when do you talk to your father like this?” and “Would you mind, Funke? I’m still your father. Let me say it in a way I think you can easily understand: I don’t have forever,” and “(*Shaking his head*) I’m going to start. It’s your choice whether you want to listen or not” (62), “Listen daughter! (*Pause*). Please. I want to tell you something. Just listen for once” (63). The reasons for what Mr. Ogunleye perceives as Funke’s lack of respect for him are twofold; first, it obviously shows her ignorance or disregard of Nigerian cultural practices, in particular Yoruba customs. According to Yoruba religion, young people of any age are expected to listen to their elders and heed their advice.³¹⁶ Furthermore, Funke’s somewhat dismissive attitude towards her father reveals another aspect of ancestral reverence in Yoruba practices. Namely, the ancestral spirit does not “come back” just to reconcile his descendants with each other or to watch over them, the patriarchal spirit also has to earn his veneration in the sense that, while alive, he worked hard to ensure his and his family’s survival after his passing. Hence, Funke’s initial stance towards Mr. Ogunleye could mean that he hasn’t yet earned his veneration.³¹⁷ Second, Funke’s initial disrespect for her father is a testament to their strained

³¹⁶ More on this, see Priscilla Layne, *Out of this World: Afro-German Afrofuturism*. (Forthcoming with Northwestern University Press): 27-28.

³¹⁷ Priscilla Layne. *Out of this World: Afro-German Afrofuturism*. (Forthcoming with Northwestern University Press): 25-26.

relationship that existed even before Mr. Ogunleye's death. She obviously still resents her father for not being there for her and Wale when they were growing up (because he left for Nigeria after his racist experiences in Germany), as a result of which Mr. Ogunleye didn't get to teach his two oldest children about Nigerian culture and customs as well as about how to deal with racism. Mr. Ogunleye simply doesn't know his daughter that well anymore, as his comments make clear, "You have taken on a rude tone I am not quite accustomed to, Funke" (62), "I don't like your new tone Funke! Not at all" (66). After this initial back and forth between father and daughter, Funke finally listens to what her father has come to tell her.

As I have mentioned before, in a traditional melodrama the marriage choice of the daughter usually threatens the harmony between her and her parents, whereas in *Also by Mail*, that is not the case. What is at stake in the play and what ultimately threatens the harmony in the family is Mr. Ogunleye's lost will and the question of Wale and Funke's sense of belonging. Because Mr. Ogunleye's will has been displaced, there is great unrest between the rest of the family members as everyone is eager to locate the will and get their rightful share of Mr. Ogunleye's wealth. Additionally, disagreements between the siblings and their Nigerian relatives over different cultural norms and customs threaten the harmony that is exacerbated by the racist incident Wale experiences on the train in Germany, which in turn prevents his return to Nigeria as he wants to bring the German police to court. To better understand the way Mr. Ogunleye intervenes in his family's affairs and solves the conflicts, I would like to, again, refer to Linda Williams's set of what she identifies as key characteristics of melodramas in the context of moving pictures, but I think it can be applied to narrative texts as well. When talking about the moment leading up to the recognition of virtue in melodramas, Williams argues that there is a

“dialectic of pathos and action – a give and take of ‘too late’ and ‘in the nick of time’.”³¹⁸

Although not being the only emotion found in melodramas, Williams states that pathos is important in that even in melodramas with a happy-ending there is a palpable tension between “the paroxysms of pathos” and “the exhilaration of action.”³¹⁹ In order to illuminate this tension between pathos and action, Williams discusses D.W. Griffith’s silent romantic drama, *Way Down East* (1920), as she considers this movie to be one of the more popular examples of the American silent cinema as well as the American melodramatic stage.³²⁰ In the climactic scene of the film, Anna, the innocent protagonist, who has been wronged by a villain, publicly exposes her seducer, and, out of shame, dramatically throws herself into a snowstorm from which she is rescued in time. After suffering in silent pathos throughout the film, unable to identify the villain because of society’s double standard that would inevitably blame her for her downfall rather than her perpetrator, Anna is forced to act and names her seducer. Tension is created because the viewer knows about Anna’s predicament and eagerly awaits the “long-wished for and equally long-delayed” exposure of the villain as well as the public recognition of Anna’s virtue.³²¹ Additionally, the “in the nick of time” rescue happens when Anna is saved just in time at the very last second before she is about to plummet over a waterfall.

Similarly, in *Also by Mail*, Mr. Ogunleye resolves the family strife in the “nick of time,” just when things hit their lowest point as Wale leaves for Germany following his big fight with Uncle Bola, and Funke falls ill with malaria. He does this in three stages; by visiting Funke to

³¹⁸ Linda Williams. *Playing the Race Card*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001): 30.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Ibid., 26.

³²¹ Ibid., 32.

help her reconcile with her brother, by having the two musicians deliver the first envelope (containing the quote from *A Raisin in the Sun*) to be read to the assembled family and the second one (containing positive news of Wale's court case) later. The long-wished for resolution to the conflicts gets delayed over and over again until the very end of the play by little dramas and disputes among the extended family members, including the talks between Uncle Bola and the doctor, who are concerned about Funke's ever-rising fever; the appearance of Hope, a young woman, with whom Mr. Ogunleye had an affair and fathered a son, and who wants her son's share of the money; disagreements between Uncle Bola and Mrs. Akinbiyi, Lanre's mother, over their "rightful" place in the family and their rightful share of the money. All these little tiffs serve to delay the long-awaited resolution to the family conflicts and create drama and tension for the reader as well as for the characters themselves.

The biggest tension, however, is created when Popoola delays the good news of Wale's court case until the very end of the play. In the very last scene of *Also by Mail*, after the two musicians, on Mr. Ogunleye's orders, read the brief quote from *A Raisin in the Sun* to the assembled family and thus help them reconcile, Mr. Ogunleye tasks the musicians with a second envelope to be delivered to his family as soon as possible. As one of the musicians reads the content of the envelope to himself, the text is revealed to the reader through a "news recording":

NEWS REPORTER. Yesterday in a landmark ruling, the upper administrative court in the city of Dahstadt overturned an earlier decision that had attracted widespread criticism from human rights activists and citizens alike. In the controversial ruling, the police was granted the right to perform identification checks on train routes near the border based on skin color.

Although German Basic Law forbids discrimination based on race, homeland or origin, the court found that this so called racial-profiling was justified on train routes known to be used by immigrants not in possession of the necessary documents. In an appeal the court overruled the earlier decision yesterday establishing that the police should not base their checks on skin color. The adjudication was welcomed by human rights activists who

see this as a step towards a better understanding of diversity within Germany and --
(ActII, scene V, 81)

Through this news recording, Mr. Ogunleye informs his children that Wale's court case will be successful, and that racial profiling will be outlawed in Germany.³²² What is interesting, however, is that although Mr. Ogunleye asks the musicians to deliver his message to his family, we don't actually see them do it as the play ends with the news recording. We *assume* that his children will be informed of the positive outcome of the court case eventually. In other words, the tension hasn't been resolved just yet; for the characters the "long-wished for and equally long-delayed" delivery of the good news is still pending, even though the reader knows about it. Moreover, the news recording has no date. We don't know whether racial profiling will be outlawed in Germany pretty soon or sometime in the far future. Mr. Ogunleye thus assures his children that even if the end of racial discrimination in Germany "might seem humanly speaking unattainable" at the moment, they should have hope and act in a way to bring about change, just like Wale did with his court case against the German police.³²³ I also suggest that since the play ends with the revelation of the good news, which the reader can read about but not the characters themselves, Popoola's last words are directed towards the readers of her play. She is saying that, in a way, it is up to the reader to help resolve the case in a positive way, to actually make it happen through activism. Not just this case, but all future similar cases.

Transgenerational Communities

Popoola delays the good news regarding Wale's court case because she is suggesting that

³²² Priscilla Layne argues that it doesn't really matter whether Mr. Ogunleye, as a spiritual being, was able to actually change the outcome of the court case, or whether he can see into the future. What counts is the message of a better future that he leaves with his children. See *Out of this World: Afro-German Afrofuturism*. (Forthcoming with Northwestern University Press): 43-44.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 45.

there are challenges to achieving positive results. As mentioned before, the reader learns in the introduction to the play that the real-life case of racial profiling was resolved positively in the courts. In the play itself, from the moment Wale is racially profiled on a train in Germany (act I, scene 7) and decides to file a complaint (scene 9) Popoola doesn't inform the reader about the positive result of Wale's case until the very last scene of the play when a news reporter is heard announcing the good news. Popoola offers three reasons for this delay: the first one has to do with whether enough awareness about the issue was raised and the attention, or the lack thereof, the case received in the media. As Schearer and Haruna from the ISD (Initiative of Black People in Germany) argue in the introduction to the play, "[the] visibility of minority groups is tied to the willingness of the media and public institutions dominated by a white majority to work on topics disclosing perspectives other than their own and letting them be told by the parties affected, instead of marginalizing the minority groups and *talking about them*" (emphasis in the original).³²⁴ In other words, it is often not enough and nearly impossible to reach a wider audience when Black activists and citizens try to generate awareness about an issue to bring about change if white mainstream media is not willing to report about the story in the first place. Sure enough, in the play Wale's lawyer laments the lack of sufficient support for the case: "Yes, it [his case] was in the media, maybe not as prominent as it should have been, but there has been commentary..." (51).

The second reason for delaying the good news about Wale's court case until the very end of *Also by Mail* lies with Popoola's use of ancestral spirits intervening in the lives of the characters to resolve the play's conflict, and to offer hope for the future. As mentioned before, the deceased Mr. Ogunleye in a spiritual form appears to his daughter, Funke, in her feverish

³²⁴ Ibid., 11.

state to share with her his experiences with racism in Germany, which helps Funke to better understand her father and empathize with him more. Additionally, Mr. Ogunleye tasks two musicians to deliver messages to his children informing them that Wale's court case will eventually be solved positively. This use of otherworldly spirits intervening in the lives of their loved ones to enable a positive outcome is a West African religious belief quite commonly employed by Black German authors.³²⁵ They include it in their work as a narrative device to have their characters battle oppression as well as make sense of their belonging to both Africa and Europe.³²⁶ Popoola, for example, uses religious beliefs from the West African, specifically Nigerian, ethnic group Yoruba to combat racism in Germany and bring about change.³²⁷ According to the spiritual belief system of the Yoruba, a deceased parent, especially a father, is believed to be still among his family and close relatives, watching over them as well as influencing and affecting their lives in a positive way. These ancestors are seen as "past heroes" who have the capacity to reward or punish their descendants.³²⁸

Through the use of such tropes of ancestral spirits Popoola is intervening in traditional German theater by giving power to marginalized groups such as Black Germans. As Jamele Watkins observes, stories with ancestral spirits "challenge dominant narratives of normalcy" and

³²⁵ Priscilla Layne, *Out of this World: Afro-German Afrofuturism*. (Forthcoming with Northwestern University Press): 20.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ According to Priscilla Layne, the reason for the prominence of West African religious beliefs in some Black German writers' work, such as Popoola's, is because, on the one hand, these authors themselves are from West Africa. On the other hand, the majority of the enslaved people in the slave trade came from West African countries, rendering their religious beliefs more famous than others. More on this see *Out of this World: Afro-German Afrofuturism*. (Forthcoming with Northwestern University Press): 20.

³²⁸ Ibid., 23-24.

transcend what is normally seen as acceptable in literature.³²⁹ Quoting Kathleen Brogan, Watkins argues that ghosts are significant in African diasporic literature, adding that “ghosts can offer agency to a group of people who have been marginalized; indeed, ghosts are necessary to combat the imminent erasure and oppression that marginalized groups experience. Ghosts have agency to revise history.”³³⁰ In addition to empowering oppressed groups, ancestral spirits also have the capability to “reconcile things that the ‘living’ characters cannot.”³³¹ In *Also by Mail*, we see this clearly when the deceased Mr. Ogunleye appears to Funke to help reconcile her with her brother. Mr. Ogunleye urges Funke to have empathy for Wale for deciding to stay in Germany for his court case instead of taking care of his family business back in Nigeria. In order to help her understand Wale’s situation, Mr. Ogunleye relays his own experiences with racism from when he was a student in Germany – something he had never shared with his children before. He tells her that while in college in Germany one of his professors purposefully gave him a bad grade because that professor didn’t like foreigners who he felt were “lazy and taking away opportunities from the good [white] Germans” (63-64). And later, when Mr. Ogunleye was applying for a job, his employer gave him a bad letter of recommendation on purpose for the same racist reasons. Because of these racist incidents Mr. Ogunleye decided to leave Germany, leaving his two children and their mother behind. The reason why he never discussed his experiences with his children is because, on the one hand, he wanted to protect them, saying that he “had just hoped it [racism] would go away before you were big enough to know any better” (67). On the other hand, he had assumed that with a good education, a German citizenship, and a

³²⁹ Jamele Watkins, *The Drama of Race: Contemporary Afro-German Theater* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Amherst / Doctoral Dissertation, 2017): 163-164.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

³³¹ *Ibid.*

white German mother his children would experience far less racism than he did. Obviously, Mr. Ogunleye was engaging in respectability politics here when dealing with racism. When becoming aware of his misconceptions regarding this issue, he has, therefore, come back to rectify his mistake.

Mr. Ogunleye's attempt thus to reconcile his children constitutes the third reason why Popoola pushed the good news about Wale's court case to the end of the play as she promotes the importance of a transgenerational family and community to fight racism. Mr. Ogunleye has realized that, historically, German belonging has always been tied to being white, which is why his children have always been Othered, i.e., excluded from belonging to the German nation due to their skin color as it is exemplified in the way the German police racially profiled Wale. Mr. Ogunleye has learned that it is important to pass down and exchange knowledge on these matters when he admits to Funke, "One must speak about these things. Now we know that" (67). When thus sharing his own experiences with racism with his daughter, Mr. Ogunleye validates his children's experiences, bringing him closer to Funke. When Funke, in turn, relays her father's visitation and what he shared with her to Wale, the two siblings are able to reconcile and develop more understanding and empathy for their late father. Only after their reconciliation, then, does Popoola reveal the positive outcome of Wale's court case.

Another way that Popoola stresses the significance of building transgenerational communities is shown in the relative ignorance of Funke and Wale in regard to Nigerian customs and traditions. As Mr. Ogunleye didn't raise his children and therefore didn't get to teach them about Nigerian culture, Funke and Wale are reminded, and at times, scolded by their Nigerian relatives for not knowing and respecting customs of their father's home country. Gender seems to play a big role in Nigerian culture: for instance, Wale's aunt and uncle expect him as the

eldest son to take care of the family business, act as a host to entertain the guests at the house and give a speech at the funeral. However, they strongly discourage Funke from doing the same, in line with tradition. In the scene following a big fight between Uncle Bola and Wale after the funeral, the uncle's frustration with his niece and nephew are palpable:

UNCLE BOLA. These children! They are ungrateful.

AUNTY REMISI. Have you not pushed them too hard, Bola?

UNCLE BOLA. I have tried to make them understand what is right and what is not in a situation like this. They are not from here. (Act I, scene V, 35)

Here, we can see how the siblings are Othered by their relatives as not belonging to Nigeria. Instead, they are seen as German, although they don't regard themselves as German, as exemplified in Funke's emphatic rebuff to her father when he referred to Germany as her country, "It's not my country!" (63). Paradoxically enough, in Germany, Funke and Wale are not seen as Germans, apparent in Wale's confrontation with the German police on a train.

How would transgenerational community building have helped Wale and Funke in their encounter with structural racism then? By adhering to respectability politics, i.e., by implying that one only needs to get a good education and culturally assimilate to the hegemonic society to avoid experiencing racism, Mr. Ogunleye inadvertently put the onus on his children to make sure they didn't encounter racism; and if they did, it would be their fault. Black feminist scholars find respectability politics limiting and normative, and they liken it to a form of surveillance that insures "members of the community" stay respectable and adhere to the norm. This can include, among other things, getting good grades in school, dressing respectably, and having "tamed"

hairdos.³³² Instead of expecting his children to assimilate to the norms of the dominant society in order to “belong” and avoid experiencing racism, Mr. Ogunleye could have shared his own experiences with racism with them, something they can relate to. If he had, his children might not have blamed themselves and they wouldn’t have felt so alone in their experiences, as Funke puts it, “... like it was our own fault for not finding the right approach” in navigating racist experiences (66). For this omission on the part of Mr. Ogunleye as well as his absence in his children’s lives, his children were estranged from him, and their relationship was strained. Popoola is arguing that passing down knowledge and sharing it with one another is an effective way to not just validate one another’s experiences, but also form a united front to combat racism.

³³² Rahel El-Maawi / Jovita de Santos Pinto. Handwerksgeschichten. Schwarze Frauen im Gespräch. In: Mohamed Wa Baile / Serena O. Dankwa / Tarek Naguib / Patricia Purtschert / Sarah Schilliger. (eds.) *Racial Profiling. Struktureller Rassismus und antirassistischer Widerstand*. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019): 130-131.

CHAPTER FOUR: *DIE SCHWARZE MADONNA* (2019)

In 2015 a research group called “Black Knowledges” sought to institutionalize Black German Studies at the University of Bremen by proposing a Creative Unit titled, “New Black Diaspora Studies: Ethical and Aesthetic Challenges of the 21st Century.”³³³ According to its research proposal the group set the goal of “pioneering Black Studies in Germany,” and generating “strong international visibility beyond the German academy.”³³⁴ Furthermore, the Creative Unit, for the first time in German Humanities, would “establis[h] a platform for the interdisciplinary investigation of literary and visual practices and discourses of the Black Diaspora, and it creates an international research network.”³³⁵ However, in its efforts to pursue these goals, the research group “forgot” one crucial aspect: to include Black (German) academics and scholars in its intended unit. As can be seen from the line-up, the initiators, the professors, the post-doctoral fellows as well as the graduate students were all white.³³⁶ Not only were Black German scholars not consulted during the creation of the proposed unit, but their names were listed as “potential” cooperating partners without their consent. After heavy protests from Black German organizations and Black German as well as international activists and scholars the proposed project was finally called off.

³³³ http://www.fb10.uni-bremen.de/inputs/pdf/Communitystatement_BlackStudiesBremen_engl_Undersgnd415.pdf
Last accessed on January 17, 2022.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Ibid.

This kind of institutionalized exclusion of Black Germans and PoC from academic, social, and cultural participation is symptomatic of white-German society, as I have shown throughout my dissertation. This exclusion happens over and over again because the very existence of Black Germans is something that is routinely ignored, or rather, simply not acknowledged by white Germans. As has been well documented by Black German scholars and activists, this “absence” of Black people in Germany as perceived by white Germans helps maintain the illusion that Germany is a homogenous, white country: this illusion leads to absurd situations such as when in conferences and panel discussions on race, racism, colonialism, and migration racialized scholars usually don’t get invited to speak, and when they do, it’s either someone from the US as an “expert” on racism (“Rassismus als strukturelles Problem [...] existiert vielleicht in den USA, aber sicher nicht in Deutschland.”) or Black Germans and other minoritized groups are relegated to the role of the “affected” (*Betroffene*) or “native informants.”³³⁷ Another rather extreme instance of “absence” of PoC from public perception happens when it comes to police brutality in Germany: following the murder of African American George Floyd by a white police officer in May 2020, people in Germany took to the streets to protest specifically against police brutality in the US, while murders of Black Germans and PoC at the hands of white German police are not only rarely acknowledged, but have also rarely elicited similar reactions from the white German public.³³⁸

³³⁷ Fatima El-Tayeb. *Undeutsch*. (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016): 11.

³³⁸ Natasha A. Kelly. *Rassismus. Strukturelle Probleme brauchen strukturelle Lösungen!* (Zürich: Atrium Verlag AG, 2021): 7. **Also:** Priscilla Layne argues that the reason for this attitude is due to white Germans’ tendency to understand racism in its extreme cases, e.g., an arson attack on an asylum seekers’ home. This “racism as spectacle” ignores all the non-violent ways that racism presents itself in Germany. From: *Suspicious Spiral: Autofiction and Black German Subjectivity in Olivia Wenzel’s “1000 Serpentinien Angst.”* Speech at a video conference organized by the Center for German and European Studies, Brandeis University, 2020.

It is this “invisibility” and the aforementioned “absence” of Black people and People of Color followed by the belief in the “absence” of racism in Germany against which Black German activists and scholars like Noah Sow have been pushing back by centering Blackness and Black experience in their writing. They do so by employing Critical Whiteness that exposes established power structures by making whiteness a marked category and the object of ethnological studies. In other words, all of a sudden it is “die dominante Mehrheit, deren Verhalten kritisch an etablierten Normen gemessen wird.”³³⁹ In addition to giving the minority the power of representation, employing Critical Whiteness means portraying Blackness as a fact of life, rather than something unusual or strange that deviates from a white norm. By centering Blackness and Black experience in her crime novel, *Die Schwarze Madonna*, Noah Sow positions Black Germans as a natural part of German society as seen in her portrayal of her Black German protagonist, Fatou Fall, and her 11-year-old daughter, Yesim in particular. In doing so, Sow is not only exposing everyday instances of racism, racial discrimination as well as xenophobia that Black Germans and PoC have to deal with on a regular basis, she is also urging Black Germans to fully claim their Germanness while embracing their Blackness without any shame. This is especially crucial, Sow claims, when raising the next generation of Black Germans who represent the future of Germany. I therefore would argue that Sow is targeting both Black Germans as well as white audiences in distinct ways. To white Germans, Sow is highlighting not only the (everyday) racism that Black Germans and PoC are subjected to on a daily basis, but also the reality of Black Germans today as part of Germany, as exemplified by the protagonist’s daughter, Yesim. Additionally, utilizing family melodrama allows Sow to focus on her

³³⁹ (“the dominant majority whose behavior is critically evaluated against established norms.”) Fatima El-Tayeb. Vorwort. In: Maureen Maisha Eggers / Grada Kilomba / Peggy Piesche / Susan Arndt (eds.) *Mythen, Masken und Subjekte: Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland* (Münster: UNRAST Verlag, 2018): 7.

protagonist's tight family dynamic consisting of her and her daughter to figure out what it means to be a Black German (mother) today. By zeroing in on the domestic space in the novel, Sow is able to highlight what's at stake for her protagonist, namely, to provide her daughter a better childhood than she herself had: Fatou raises her daughter with a natural self-awareness as a Black German surrounded by Black people and other PoC. Sow explores this family dynamic in detail as it is immensely important for Black Germans to be part of a community, as I have made clear throughout my dissertation. In *Die Schwarze Madonna*, we learn that Fatou was raised by her white foster aunts without knowing her Black father and any other Black person for that matter. As a result, Fatou's identity and self-awareness as a Black German is strained and complex as I will show later in the chapter. Also, thus discussing family dynamics Sow is emphasizing the importance of Black German belonging and community building through family. Lastly, Sow is expanding the breadth of Black German literature by writing a "Heimatkrimi" (*homeland crime fiction*) for the first time from a Black German perspective. A brief summary of the novel will follow to provide more context.

Die Schwarze Madonna begins with Black German Fatou Fall, who is a department store detective, and her 11-year-old daughter, Yesim, arriving in the Bavarian small town Neuötting, where Fatou grew up, to visit her aunt and to spend their summer vacation there. While in the neighboring town Altötting, Fatou and her daughter witness an incident of vandalism at a local church where two white men spray something in incorrect Arabic. Following this incident, the local authorities are quick to declare it a terrorist attack and the latent Islamophobia and xenophobia in the town lead to increased acts of discrimination against People of Color against the backdrop of a local election campaign. When her suspicions regarding the identity of the perpetrators of the vandalism, who had painted their faces brown, fall on deaf ears, Fatou takes

matters into her hands and resolves to solve the crime on her own. When she is close to solving the identities of the attackers, a far more serious crime takes place; her neighbor's daughter gets kidnapped. Her private investigation leads Fatou into different milieus and personalities of the small Bavarian town including a local priest, a fraternity member, the mayor, a mayoral candidate, and the local association of Muslims. At the same time, Fatou meets Isabel, a Bangladeshi German girl that Yesim befriends, who was adopted by Fatou's white childhood friend, and Grace, a Black activist from the local Refugee Group. These encounters challenge Fatou to confront questions about her own origins and her self-identity as a Black German mother. Before exploring how focusing on Black experience thus is made possible through Sow's employment of Critical Whiteness, I will first establish the norms of the *Heimatkrimi* and the ways Sow makes use of this genre in her novel.

Heimatkrimi

By writing a crime novel from a Black German perspective, Sow is breaking new ground in many ways. Here, I will delineate the ways Sow employs the German crime fiction genre of *Heimatkrimi* (*homeland crime fiction*) on the one hand, as well as the controversial term "Heimat" on the other. *Heimatkrimi* is a subgenre of the German crime fiction genre that has been slowly gaining more popularity in recent years. Before establishing the conventions of this genre, however, it is crucial to define the German term "Heimat" and dwell on its history in order to understand the controversy surrounding the term today. Roughly signifying "home" and "homeland," the term "Heimat" nowadays is generally considered untranslatable into other languages.³⁴⁰ Even though scholars trace the origins of the term to the eighteenth century as a critical stance to Enlightenment's claim to universality, it wasn't until the mid-nineteenth century

³⁴⁰ Jürgen Heizmann (ed.). *Filmgenres. Heimatfilm international*. (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2016): 8.

that a whole culture surrounding the word “Heimat” took hold in Germany.³⁴¹ In the course of industrialization of that same century “Heimat” acquired a positive meaning as a counterpart to the anonymity of mass societies in big cities. It was around this time, too, that the culture surrounding “Heimat” manifested itself in a variety of activities: “Heimatvereine” (*local clubs/organizations*) and “Heimatbewegungen” (*homeland movements*) sought to maintain and protect local customs and traditions that were then put on display in local “Heimatmuseen” (*homeland museums*).³⁴² “Heimatkunst” (*local/homeland art*) including “Heimatliteratur” (*homeland literature*) towards the end of the nineteenth century, for example, was a conservative movement that stood for an antimodernist, anti-urban, and a nationalist notion of belonging and rootedness.³⁴³ While the terms “Heimat” and nation were aligned during World War I, in the Third Reich, by contrast, the two were basically conflated, which led to a racially defined concept of “Heimat.”

The most famous use of “Heimat,” however, was certainly in “Heimatfilme” (*homeland cinema*), the successful German film genre of the immediate postwar years, as I will show below. As Johannes von Moltke points out in *No Place Like Home*, in each of these historical periods, “Heimat” accumulated additional meanings to the point that it now has, depending on the context, a multiplicity of meanings and notions, rendering the task of defining the term sheer impossible.³⁴⁴ But whether it signifies nostalgia for the place of one’s childhood, a sense of belonging, a regional or national territory, one thing is clear: the historical persistence, and the

³⁴¹ Ibid, 9.

³⁴² Johannes von Moltke. *No Place Like Home. Locations of Heimat in German Cinema*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005): 7.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

increased recent use, of the term highlights the “continuing need to articulate the links that mediate between the individual and the nation,” reconciling a local world with the “larger, more impersonal, national sphere.”³⁴⁵ I would go one step further and argue that the term “Heimat” has always been invoked whenever it was time to establish a new national identity in the face of a perceived threat from an Other in order to define who can belong to the German nation and who cannot; just to name a few recent examples: in debates surrounding migrant workers, the German reunification, the European unification, the refugee crisis of 2015, and racially-motivated attacks against Germans of Color. In their seminal volume, *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum (Your Homeland Is Our Nightmare)*, 2019), the editors, Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, write that the idea for the book was born in 2018 when the former German Ministry of the Interior was renamed “Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat” (*Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Homeland*), or short “Heimatministerium” (*Ministry of Homeland*) headed by a politician known for his more restrictive migration policies.³⁴⁶ The authors see this as a deliberate move to normalize and mainstream a term laden with negative connotations that has been appropriated by rightwing populists and extremists. To the editors and authors of the volume, most of them Germans of Color, “Heimat” has meant a literal nightmare because:

Heimat hat in Deutschland nie einen realen Ort, sondern schon immer die Sehnsucht nach einem bestimmten Ideal beschrieben: einer homogenen, christlichen weißen Gesellschaft, in der Männer das Sagen haben, und Frauen sich vor allem ums Kinderkriegen kümmern und andere Lebensrealitäten schlicht nicht vorkommen.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 9.

³⁴⁶ Fatma Aydemir / Hengameh Yaghoobifarah (eds.) Preface to *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum*. (Berlin: Ullstein Verlag, 2019): 9.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., (“The concept of *Heimat* has never described a real place in Germany but always, rather, the yearning for a particular ideal: a homogenous, white, Christian society in which men have the final say and women worry about childbirth—where other realities of life simply find no place”, translated by Jon Cho-Polizzi / Michael Sandberg, digital publication 2020: https://transit.berkeley.edu/2021/foreword_to_the_collection/).

In light of such a reality oriented around the ideal of a homogenous, white Christian society at the expense of all other “realities of life,” the editors ask the reader to imagine what a society would look like where every individual regardless of their race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation is treated equally.³⁴⁸

Nowhere is this sought-after ideal more evident than in Heimatfilms following the end of the Second World War. Since Heimatkrimi builds on, and at the same time, pushes back against many conventions of Heimatfilms, I’d like to briefly include this genre in my discussion of Heimatkrimi. Besides, traditionally, the German literary and televisual crime genres have many conventional intersections, and the German word for crime fiction, “Krimi,” is commonly used to refer to both genres. In the postwar years until 1960, almost three hundred Heimatfilms were produced around the same formula with very few variations: “ein einfach gestrickter Plot, schöne Landschaften, kauzige, aber liebenswerte Menschen, die mit dieser Landschaft verwurzelt sind, eine romantische Liebesbeziehung mit Happy End, lebendige Traditionen, die Betonung des Privaten bei gleichzeitigem Ausblenden von sozialen Problemen.”³⁴⁹ Heimatfilms were meant to serve one primary purpose: to offer an escape from the horrors of the war.³⁵⁰ Accordingly, they were free from depictions of “Industrie, von Politik, von historischer Schuld und, wie die idealisierte Kindheit, frei von Sexualität.”³⁵¹ Nothing was supposed to remind audiences of

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 10.

³⁴⁹ (“A simple plot, beautiful landscapes, eccentric but likable people who are rooted in this landscape, a romantic love story with a happy ending, thriving traditions, emphasis on the private sphere while avoiding social problems.”), Jürgen Heizmann (ed.). *Filmgenres. Heimatfilm international*. (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2016): 11.

³⁵⁰ Johannes von Moltke argues that Heimatfilms represented a “refuge from modernity.” *No Place Like Home. Locations of Heimat in German Cinema*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005): 13.

³⁵¹ (“Industry, of politics, of historical guilt, and like the idealized childhood, free of sexuality”), Jürgen Heizmann (ed.). *Filmgenres. Heimatfilm international*. (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2016): 11.

destroyed cities, war guilt, and the mass murder of the Jewish population. In essence, these highly popular movies presented a notion of “Heimat” as a fantasy world characterized by innocence. In a way, Heimatfilms constituted a highly selective way of remembering in that they portrayed history by “skipping” the period of National Socialism and suggesting a continuity with peaceful prewar times.

It was against the backdrop of this idealized version of “Heimat” that Heimatkrimi came about, namely, as a follow-up to the so-called “Anti-Heimatfilme” (*anti-Heimatfilms*).³⁵² Beginning in the 1960s, directors of anti-Heimatfilms began to push back against and critique Heimatfilms by uncovering the repression and violence beneath the idyllic surface presented on the screen. Heimatfilms became the epitome of parochialism (“Spießigkeit”) and were regarded as backward, bigotted, prejudiced, and static, i.e., lagging behind societal developments. In their effort to maintain the illusion of an idyllic, homogenous, and close-knit community, Heimatfilms tended to portray any rupture or disruption of this idyll as coming from the outside: be it modernity, guestworkers, refugees, or foreigners. Peter Fleischmann’s 1968 anti-Heimatfilm based on Martin Sperr’s eponymous play, *Jagdscenen aus Niederbayern (Hunting Scenes from Bavaria, 1965)*, perhaps best illustrates a moral universe with a stark hierarchy where everyone deemed an “outsider” or a “misfit” is excluded: inhabitants of a Bavarian village hunt down or ostracize, among other things, a prostitute, a homosexual, guestworkers, a person with a disability, and even young people with long hair.³⁵³ This paranoid atmosphere of “Heimat” is then turned into a crime scene in Heimatkrimi. Instead of portraying a peaceful and idyllic small

³⁵² Susanne C. Knittel. Case Histories: The Legacy of Nazi Euthanasia in Recent German Heimatkrimis. In: Lynn M. Kutch and Todd Herzog. *Tatort Germany. The Curious Case of German-Language Crime Fiction*. (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2014): 124.

³⁵³ Jürgen Heizmann. *Der Heimatfilm. Themen, soziale Anliegen und filmische Formen*. (INDES 2018-4): 68.

town as did the idealized Heimatfilms and, its literary counterpart, Heimatliteratur of the past such as in Ludwig Ganghofer's Heimatroman *Der Jäger von Fall* (*The Hunter of Fall*, 1883), Heimatkrimi presents a society where the culprit is not a "foreigner" coming from outside the close-knit community but from *within* it. This depiction of the murderer as "one of us" subverts the harmonious image of "Heimat" and forces the reader to question the very concept of "Heimat." Indeed, what Heimatkrimi does is it localizes the crime and the criminal within the small-town setting. According to Susanne C. Knittel, this localization rather than the externalization of the perpetrator has the effect of showing the "nuances of perpetratorship, thematizing the guilt and responsibility of those who profited, collaborated or simply stood by."³⁵⁴ In other words, as the perpetrator turns out to be one of the "locals," the question arises as to who else in the small town might be implicated in the crime and what it says about that community.

This hyperfocus on localization and the small-town setting is an important part of Heimatkrimi as well as the "Regionalkrimi" (*regional crime fiction*), a crime fiction subgenre that is now considered to be a modern form of Heimatliteratur.³⁵⁵ Establishing the meaning of localization to Heimatkrimi by way of looking at Regionalkrimi, which is much more popular, hence more researched, will, I believe, be helpful to understanding the way Noah Sow makes use of the genre in her novel. As the name suggests, in the Regionalkrimi the emphasis lies on the setting and the region in which the crime takes place and where the characters reside rather than

³⁵⁴ Susanne C. Knittel. Case Histories: The Legacy of Nazi Euthanasia in Recent German Heimatkrimis. In: Lynn M. Kutch and Todd Herzog. *Tatort Germany. The Curious Case of German-Language Crime Fiction*. (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2014): 123.

³⁵⁵ Kyle Frackman. *Vor Ort: The Functions and Early Roots of German Regional Crime Fiction*. In: Lynn M. Kutch and Todd Herzog. *Tatort Germany. The Curious Case of German-Language Crime Fiction*. (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2014): 26.

the actual crime itself. What's interesting about the German regional crime fiction is that the stories occur in real-existing and easily recognizable places in more rural, less trafficked locations. As a result, due to readers' familiarity with the places and locales, the region itself acquires the status of a protagonist. So far, the German regional crime fiction has covered almost all of the major geographical regions in Germany, and the long-running *Tatort* series (*Crime Scene*, from 1970 onwards) is the most famous televisual manifestation of this genre. This highly successful and popular TV series, which has a strong local character with teams of detectives based in various German cities, is credited with making the crime fiction genre more widely available and acceptable in the German mainstream.³⁵⁶ Jürgen Heizmann attributes the ongoing boom and popularity of the regional crime fiction to audiences' need to feel a connection and rootedness to a place, to stable positions, and identities in times of telecommunication and unlimited mobility and fluidity.³⁵⁷ The hyperlocal setting of the regional crime fiction, by contrast, allows for readers' identification with the narrative and creates a sense of familiarity through the depiction of local idiosyncrasies such as local dialects and local cuisine seemingly untouched by the advancements of globalization. One of the main goals of this genre, then, is to facilitate "immediate recognition for locals" and "support [...] vivid imagination" and voyeuristic view of a region for nonlocals.³⁵⁸

The creation and establishment of the Regionalkrimi is considered to be a new development in the history of the German crime fiction genre in its efforts to move away from

³⁵⁶ Jochen Vogt. *Regionalität und Modernisierung in der neuesten deutschsprachigen Kriminalliteratur* (1990-2015). (*Germanica* 58, 2016): 17.

³⁵⁷ Jürgen Heizmann. *Der Heimatfilm. Themen, soziale Anliegen und filmische Formen*. (*INDES* 2018-4): 69.

³⁵⁸ Kyle Frackman. *Vor Ort: The Functions and Early Roots of German Regional Crime Fiction*. In: Lynn M. Kutch and Todd Herzog. *Tatort Germany. The Curious Case of German-Language Crime Fiction*. (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2014): 34.

Heimatkrimi as the designation for this genre. Due to the aforementioned history of the controversial term “Heimat” as well as the negative nationalistic characteristics of Heimatfilms, nowadays publishing houses, editors, and authors alike are more likely to avoid to call a work Heimatkrimi, opting instead for the less controversial option Regionalkrimi.³⁵⁹ In fact, the German word for “region” became widely used in the 1950s to replace precisely those traditional terms like “Heimat, Volk” (*people/nation*), and “Nation” (*nation*), terminology that had been politically misused by the Nazis and were thus regarded as unusable and outdated.³⁶⁰ So, even when German regional crime novels and TV series such as *Tatort* heavily rely on regionality and emphasize folkloric and regional elements and customs, their authors and screenwriters have largely refrained from using the term “Heimat.” If, however, in rare instances a work is specifically called Heimatkrimi, it is usually a deliberate act, as is the case with Noah Sow’s use of the term in the title of her novel, as I will show below.

Die Schwarze Madonna as a Heimatkrimi

So, what does it mean when Noah Sow calls her novel Heimatkrimi, given the aforementioned history, conventions, and not least the controversy surrounding the term “Heimat”? Similar to the authors of *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum (Your Homeland Is Our Nightmare, 2019)*, Sow is showing what the term can mean for Black Germans and Germans of Color. In revising a well-known genre such as Heimatkrimi from a Black German perspective, Sow is exposing the (everyday) racism, xenophobia, and bigotry lurking underneath the idyllic image of a small Bavarian town. Unlike Heimatliteratur at the turn of the nineteenth century and

³⁵⁹ Sascha Gerhards. Krimi Quo Vadis: Literary and Televised Trends in the German Crime Genre. In: Lynn M. Kutch and Todd Herzog. *Tatort Germany. The Curious Case of German-Language Crime Fiction*. (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2014): 45.

³⁶⁰ Jochen Vogt. *Regionalität und Modernisierung in der neuesten deutschsprachigen Kriminalliteratur (1990-2015)*. (Germanica 58, 2016): 14-15.

Heimatfilms of the postwar era, where the “foreigner” and “outsider” were made responsible for social and economic problems and for any rupture of the harmony of a close-knit community, in *Die Schwarze Madonna*, by contrast, the culprits turn out to be from within the community. Additionally, the “criminals” are not Black people or other PoC, as people in the village are made to believe, and as they are, frankly, very eager to assume; instead, they are white. By deliberately labeling her novel a Heimatkrimi as opposed to the more common, and less controversial, variant, “Regionalkrimi” (*regional crime fiction*), Sow is confronting the reader with the very concept of “Heimat” and its implications for communities of Color.

But what better way to do so than writing a Heimatkrimi? Generally speaking, crime fiction is a genre that is regarded by scholars to be ideally suited to tackle sociocultural issues.³⁶¹ While the suspense, and the eventual solving of the crime, aim to entertain audiences, the actual goal of crime fiction is to explore and critique society, as it is most strongly expressed in “Soziokrimis” (*social crime fiction*). Moreover, there is a consensus among critics that crime fiction can realistically portray contemporary society and societal conditions, “thereby functioning as a useful historical record.”³⁶² Indeed, as I’ve mentioned before, the hyperfocus on locality in “Regionalkrimis” (*regional crime fiction*) allows for the crime itself to take a backseat while the milieu and society appear in the foreground to enable a “focused social critique.”³⁶³ In situating her story in the rural small town of Altötting in Bavaria, Germany, Sow is thus able to ask complex questions beyond the crime itself about the makeup of the town’s community, their

³⁶¹ Nicola Barfoot. *Frauenkrimi/polar féminin*. (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007): 62.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁶³ Lynn M. Kutch and Todd Herzog. *Tatort Germany. The Curious Case of German-Language Crime Fiction*. (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2014): 7.

social interactions, their attitudes regarding nonlocals and what they regard as “foreigners,” and ultimately, about identity. By portraying the fictional community of the real-existing town of Altötting, Sow is commenting on white Germans’ racist attitudes that have led to PoC’s marginal status in German society.

But writing a crime fiction from the perspective of a Black German detective, however, is groundbreaking, and it is something that is quite rare across Germany’s media and literature landscape. As Vanessa Plumly rightly observes, despite the enormous popularity of crime fiction in Germany and its professed focus on societal issues and conditions, very few novels and TV shows deal with race, racism, and anti-Black violence, let alone feature Black Germans in the role of detectives.³⁶⁴ Noah Sow’s crime fiction *Die Schwarze Madonna* is thus one of two documented crime novels to introduce an explicitly Black German detective; the other one is John Eichler’s *Verbotenes Land (Forbidden Land, 2018)*. The only other literary work that comes close to being called a “fiction of detection” written by a Black German is the thriller *Die Falle (The Trap, 2015)* by Melanie Raabe.³⁶⁵ The only other examples involving Black German detectives are from German television shows such as *Der Alte (The Old Fox, 1977- present)* where Charles M. Huber joined the cast in 1986 as the first Black German police investigator. His role was replaced in 1997 by another Black German actor Pierre Sansoussi-Bliss who played that part until 2015.³⁶⁶ Also, Tyron Ricketts played a Black German lead detective on *Soko Leipzig* from 2006-2009, and Florence Kasumba currently stars as the first female Black German

³⁶⁴ Vanessa D. Plumly. *Auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte: Black German Detectives and the Case of Anäis Schmitz and Fatou Fall*. (*Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, Vol. 57, Nr. 4, November 2021): 407.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 409.

detective on the *Tatort* series. Not surprisingly though, the list of Black German investigators on German television shows is very short, and a feature-length film with a Black German detective is yet to be made. So, by writing a crime fiction novel featuring a Black German female detective, Noah Sow is not only expanding the breadth of Black German literature in particular as well as the wider German crime fiction landscape in general, but she is also paving the way for others to follow. In addition, what's unique about Sow's novel compared to these more mainstream examples I have mentioned above is that Sow portrays her characters in a more nuanced and less clichéd way as I show below. Also, besides her Black protagonist Sow includes a host of other Black and PoC in her novel, some of whom identify as non-binary, and who have a different legal status, namely refugees.

However, in portraying her protagonist, Fatou Fall, as a private investigator rather than the usual state-employed detective of German crime fiction series, Sow is challenging the well-established tradition of the German crime fiction genre. Indeed, as Arlene A. Teraoka points out the phenomenon of the state-employed German police inspector has been the “most enduring, and the largest triumph of the German television industry” made famous by series like *Der Kommissar* (1969-1976) and its successor *Derrick* (1974-1998).³⁶⁷ The police inspectors in such shows exhibited similar characteristics as generally nonviolent “late-middle-aged, lower-middle-class (but oddly comfortable), authoritative but benevolent paternal heroes,” who restored and guaranteed the established social order.³⁶⁸ To postwar German audiences, these figures thus offered a sense of safety and projected a “therapeutic image of Germans who were disciplined,

³⁶⁷ Arlene A. Teraoka. Detecting Ethnicity: Jakob Arjouni and the Case of the Missing German Detective Novel. (*The German Quarterly*, Vol. 72, Nr. 3, Summer 1999): 267.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 268.

dutiful, and nonviolent.”³⁶⁹ Even the “new” type of anti-authoritarian and anti-bourgeois police inspector portrayed by Götz George as Horst Schimanski in *Tatort* in the 1980s still operated within the state apparatus. This tradition still continues today with highly popular crime TV shows, apart from *Tatort*, such as *Mord mit Aussicht* (*Murder with a View*, 2008-2014) and *Heiter bis tödlich* (*Sunny to Deadly*, 2011- present), to name two examples, usually featuring teams of two (inspectors) working under a lead detective. What did not find a resonance among the German viewing public, by contrast, was the figure of the lone private investigator who worked on their own and who answered to no one. Generally associated with the American crime fiction tradition established by writers like Raymond Chandler, the “hardboiled” private investigator was the personification of “Western individualism, of a rugged and incorruptible masculinity, of a private and puritanical moral code of male friendship, justice, honor, and sacrifice.”³⁷⁰ However, what led to a rejection of the private detective in German culture was his suggested closeness to and associations with German fascism, for his “violent rebellion contain[ed] fascistic potential, a sadistic and destructive impulse that manifest[ed] itself in his trademark racist, misogynist, and homophobic attitudes.”³⁷¹ According to Arlene A. Teraoka, this anxiety regarding any possible connection to Germany’s fascist past has given rise to the popularity of the nonviolent and benevolent police inspector as an employee of the state. So, working on her own rather than as part of an investigative team under state authority, Sow’s protagonist Fatou Fall is unique as a Black German private detective within the German crime fiction genre.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 267.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 266-267.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 267.

By featuring such a Black German protagonist as well as a host of other Black characters and PoC in her novel, Sow is critiquing German shows and films that portray Black people in subordinate and clichéd roles. In the short prologue preceding her novel, Sow states the following: “Die Geschichte spielt in der Fiktion eines realen Ortes. So wie die Schnulzenfilme im ZDF, die in Nairobi spielen. Oder wie Karl May (nicht) unterwegs war.”³⁷² Here, she is likely referring to German movies like *Nirgendwo in Afrika* (*Nowhere in Africa*, 2001) or *Die weiße Massai* (*The White Massai*, 2005), based on the novels of the same name, that are set in Africa but told from the perspective of a white person. These movies reinforce stereotypical images of Africa featuring Black people who, instead of protagonists, appear as “dekoratives Beiwerk zur Untermalung einer exotischen Kulisse.”³⁷³ A common setting for these movies are countries like Kenya or Namibia that are some of the favorite holiday destinations for white Germans, most likely because of their former status as Germany’s colonies, as Namibia was from 1884-1914.³⁷⁴ While the authors of *Nirgendwo in Afrika* and *Die weiße Massai* did visit the African countries where their stories take place, Karl May, on the other hand, never set foot in the American West, the setting for his fictitious and adventure novels. His most famous trilogy, *Winnetou* (1893), about the adventures of a Native American chief and his German companion Old Shatterhand, remains highly popular with German audiences, and an open-air festival in Bad Segeberg has been celebrating Karl May’s works annually by performing scenes from *Winnetou* since 1952.

³⁷² (“The story takes place in the fiction of a real place like those tearjerker movies in ZDF (Second German Television) that take place in Nairobi. Or where Karl May was (not) traveling.”). Noah Sow. *Die Schwarze Madonna. Afrodeutscher Krimi*. (Norderstedt: BoD - Books on Demand, 2019). All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

³⁷³ (“decorative accessory to highlight an exotic scenery.”) Noah Sow. Kurzer Begriffsratgeber für Weisse. (*Saiten: Ostschweizer Kulturmagazin*, Vol. 22, Issue 243, 2015): 26.

³⁷⁴ Julia Augart. Der Afrika-Krimi: Africa in German Crime Fiction. In Katharina Hall. (ed.) *Crime Fiction in German. Der Krimi*. (Cardiff, Wales: University of Wales Press, 2016): 87.

Though May wrote his novels during the German colonial period, his stories are set primarily in the Wild West, the Orient, and other exotic places. Furthermore, he depicted his white German heroes as morally impeccable: “Where other whites have done nothing but wreak havoc, the German ‘westmen’ try to repair the damage and punish the wrongdoers”; in other words, “they are there to see justice done and help the red man in his plight.”³⁷⁵ Given the atrocities of the German colonial administration in Africa (e.g., the brutal squashing of the Herero uprising in 1905), May not only restored Germans’ honor and reinstated their image on a fictional level, he also legitimized the violence through his works. Katrin Sieg argues that this externalization and displacement of the cruelty of the German colonial era, and later the Holocaust, to the American frontier helped German prewar and postwar audiences deal with ambivalences and conflicts of their time: “the traumatic experience of shame along with the denial of collective responsibility, the resentment against the accusers and victims of genocide as well as grief and the wish for atonement.”³⁷⁶

So, when Noah Sow sarcastically likens her novel in the prologue to those mentioned above, there is a fundamental difference between them: while the authors of both novels, *Nirgendwo in Afrika* and *Die weiße Massai*, as well as the directors of the corresponding film adaptations were white people who appropriated African culture in order to advance their white protagonists’ story, Noah Sow was born and raised in Bavaria, Germany, where *Die Schwarze Madonna* is set. In other words, Sow is able to depict the local culture in Bavaria as an insider and a native rather than as an outsider observing a foreign culture. Additionally, Sow is

³⁷⁵ Katrin Sieg. *Ethnic Drag. Performing Race, Nation, Sexuality in West Germany*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002): 78.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

critiquing the willingness on the part of white German audiences to believe these “intimate accounts” of a foreign place at face value, especially when the stories are written by a white author. In the following I examine how the hyperfocus on locality in *Die Schwarze Madonna* enables Sow a so-called focused social critique.

As mentioned before, by focusing on the local social milieu of the small Bavarian town in *Die Schwarze Madonna*, Sow is exposing the (everyday) racism, xenophobia, and bigotry lurking underneath the idyllic image. As a Catholic town with a picturesque landscape and scenery, Altötting in Upper Bavaria is a highly popular tourist attraction and a place of pilgrimage. This image is underlined by all the souvenir shops downtown and the many international tourists in town. This seemingly welcoming and idyllic guise is shattered when two white men with ski masks vandalize the local church of the Black Madonna and spray the words, ALLAH WAKBA, on one of the walls. To support their masquerade as Muslims, they yell something resembling the word *Allah* into a megaphone several times. Fatou and Yesim, who were watching nearby, recognize immediately that the two men have not only put dark makeup around their eyes to hide their white skin, but that the words they sprayed are also in incorrect Arabic. In other words, the perpetrators are not Muslim, but white. And even though Fatou informs the local police about this fact, they ignore her statement and insist that the two men were Islamic terrorists. Here, Sow is highlighting the “blatant nature” of anti-Muslim racism and the ignorance of white Germans when it comes to Islam as they refuse to acknowledge the obvious facts and to think in a more critical and differentiated way.³⁷⁷ Following this staged act of vandalism, Islamophobia and xenophobia become more pronounced throughout the small

³⁷⁷ Vanessa D. Plumly. *Auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte: Black German Detectives and the Case of Anäis Schmitz and Fatou Fall*. (*Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, Vol. 57, Nr. 4, November 2021): 416.

town. Grace's friends, fellow refugees Ismael and Abadin, for example, report of an increase in discriminating incidents such as being racially profiled by the police for no apparent reason. There is a general suspicion towards everyone, who is not white, of somehow being guilty of a crime. Indeed, the readiness with which the police in Altötting have embraced the belief that the criminals of the vandalism were Muslim despite contrary evidence suggests an underlying xenophobia that was already there. Fatima El-Tayeb argues that following the attacks of September 11th there has been an increased global suspicion against Muslims in general, "Muslimische Migranten und Migrantisierte stehen pauschal unter Tatverdacht, müssen stets neu beweisen, dass sie zu 'uns' und nicht den 'Terroristen' gehören."³⁷⁸ The close-knit community of Altötting is quick to blame "the outsider" and "foreigner" and anyone who is perceived as not white and German for any crises. It is therefore left to minoritized communities to prove their innocence since the police are not willing to do it. It is significant that Fatou as a Person of Color proves the police in Altötting wrong and exposes the culprits who turn out to be white.

As Fatou discovers during the course of her private investigation, the vandalism of the church was a ruse used by local organizations and politicians to stoke fear of Islamist terrorism for their own political gain. The local fraternity house ("Burschenschaft") as well as the candidate from the local SPD (*Social Democratic Party*) running for mayor have conspired to prevent the local Islamic culture society from receiving funding to build a new Islamic culture center in Altötting. Besides the Social Democrats, the local CDU (*the Christian Democratic Party*) and the right-wing party called "Die Bürger" (*The Citizens*) use this atmosphere of xenophobia to gain ground in the upcoming elections of the regional government with slogans

³⁷⁸ ("There has been a general suspicion against Muslim migrants and migrants in general; they have to prove over and over again that they are one of 'us' and not one of the 'terrorists'"). Fatima El-Tayeb. *Undeutsch*. (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016): 156.

like, “Integration fördern, Zuzug regulieren” (‘Promote integration, regulate influx’), “Alles hat seine Grenzen!” (‘There is a limit to everything’; this is a wordplay on the word *Grenzen* as it also means borders), and “NEIN zum Moscheebau!” (‘NO to building a mosque!’). Here, Sow is obviously critiquing the way German political parties, not just the right-wing party AfD, short for *Alternative für Deutschland* (*Alternative for Germany*) but also the center-left party have employed fear mongering in their effort to advance their political interests and to attract more constituents. In thus focusing on the regional local makeup of the small town of Altötting in Upper Bavaria, Sow is able to show a community that outwardly appears welcoming to foreigners, but one that is characterized by narrow-mindedness and even xenophobia and racism in times of a crisis.

This seemingly welcoming outwardness with simultaneous internalized xenophobia is also evident in the history and context surrounding the local church of the Black Madonna in Altötting. In one of the outer walls of the church rests a small figure of the Black Madonna with her child that according to Fatou seems to attract “auf bestimmte Katholiken aus der ganzen Welt eine außerordentliche Anziehungskraft ...” (40).³⁷⁹ Altötting is famous for this statue that serves as a patron saint. Fatou even remembers times she was visiting the church as a kid and looking at the figure of the Black Madonna when a woman suddenly knelt in front of Fatou and prayed to her as if Fatou were the embodiment of the Black Madonna. According to Geraldine Heng, such statuarities in Germany depicting Black saints can be traced as far back as the thirteenth century such as the one devoted to the African St. Maurice in Magdeburg, martyr of the Theban

³⁷⁹ (“seems to be extraordinarily attractive to certain Catholics from all over the world.”).

legions.³⁸⁰ This what Heng terms “paradoxical play with color” has puzzled art historians as to why a Black African saint would be venerated in Germany despite a “virulent discourse on blackness.”³⁸¹ In addition to common explanations regarding artistic freedoms that thirteenth-century German artists apparently enjoyed, Heng suggests “circuits of pleasure” that enabled the:

acceptance and welcome, publicly and in contexts of privacy and intimacy, of imaginative representations like that of Maurice: beautiful and comforting renditions of what might otherwise be deemed frightening or malign in other historical contexts.³⁸²

Heng argues that such public and private acceptance and welcome of an Other signaled by color was even more pronounced when it intersected with fantasies of sexuality and gender. Heng further argues that such “paradoxical play with color” is only possible if a hierarchy of race has already been established and stabilized so that such play leaves the hierarchy otherwise untouched and undisturbed.³⁸³ So, one could say that Noah Sow is critiquing the way residents of Altötting worship a religious statue of an Other but otherwise adopt a more restrictive view on immigration. In other words, an abstract Other from African countries is integrated into the community, but the contemporary inhabitants of those regions are denied integration.

Die Schwarze Madonna as a family melodrama

In this section, I’d like to elaborate on the relevance of Fatou’s detective work through the lens of melodrama. In addition to exposing the scheme by local political parties and organizations for using immigrants and refugees as scapegoats to advance their own political agenda, Fatou’s private investigation and her eventual solving of the crime has a different

³⁸⁰ Geraldine Heng. *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*. (Cambridge University Press, 2018): 43.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 44.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Ibid.

function on a more personal level. It improves her close, yet somewhat strained, relationship with her daughter, on the one hand, and proves and solidifies Fatou's ability and expertise as a detective on the other. Ever since she was fired from her last job as a department store detective, Fatou didn't have time to find a new job prior to coming to her aunt's place in Bavaria. As a result, during her stay in Altötting she has frequently felt desperate whenever she thought of the day she will return home to Hamburg as she doesn't know how to pay her bills. What's more, Fatou has kept her inner turmoil from her daughter as she feels she has to appear confident and present a tough can-do attitude as a Black German mother. Fatou believes that she has to be a role model showing her daughter how to be strong to overcome life's hardships:

Wenn sie [Fatou] nicht stark war und vermittelte, dass sie jede Herausforderung des Lebens bezwingen konnte, würde Yesim womöglich ihren Halt verlieren, das Vertrauen in ihre Mutter und damit das Vertrauen, dass auch sie selbst einmal alles schaffen konnte. Das durfte nie passieren. (11-12)³⁸⁴

It's important to Fatou that her daughter, Yesim, believes in her mother and her ability to master anything. Fatou is convinced that her daughter will thus believe in herself and be strong and confident. Demonstrating to her daughter how to be professionally successful and thus be able to provide for her is crucial to Fatou. I believe that looking at this familial situation through the lens of family melodrama is very useful here. As I've discussed in previous chapters, melodramas shift social problems to the domestic sphere; it is in the home where struggles between good and evil are carried out in personal terms. Ever since the beginning of melodramas, Chuck Kleinhans argues, the family as a source of meaning, comfort, and stable identity, has always taken on newfound significance whenever "moral authorities" like religion, class, and even one's job fails

³⁸⁴ ("If she [Fatou] wasn't strong enough and conveyed [to her daughter] that she was able to overcome life's challenges, Yesim could possibly become unstable, lose her trust in her mother and thereby trust in herself that she could do it all. This should never happen").

to provide a sense of cohesion and identity: “Given that one’s sense of identity and social worth could not be achieved in productive labor under capitalism [...] the family and the area of interpersonal relations took on a huge burden.”³⁸⁵ Or, to put it in a positive way, the family and interpersonal relations acquire transformative and restorative power. So, when Fatou loses her job and thus her sense of identity as a working mother, who is able to provide for her child, is threatened, it becomes all the more important for her to prove her “worth” at home on a personal level; her relationship to her daughter takes on a renewed meaning. Having witnessed the vandalism of the local church firsthand, Yesim urges her mother to solve the crime; after all, Fatou’s profession is that of a detective. Her ability and skill to solve the crime in Altötting redeems her in her daughter’s eyes and thus reinstates and solidifies her identity as a detective. To use melodrama’s language, Fatou’s virtue is recognized in the end. Towards the end of the novel, Yesim is proud of her mother for having solved the crime and Fatou herself toys with the idea of opening her own private detective agency back in Hamburg.

Another way family melodrama becomes useful here is if we think about the reasons Fatou travels to Bavaria. As I’ve established in previous chapters, the home, or rather, the idea of a home in domestic melodramas is a physical as well as a figurative site of happy memories of childhood and community. Home is where struggles between good and evil are carried out in personal terms. It is also here that racial tensions are expressed. The childhood home, in particular, as an idyll and a space of innocence is a key feature of melodramas. And as we’ve seen in my analysis of Ika Hügel-Marshall’s *Daheim Unterwegs* (1998, *Invisible Woman*, 2001), there is a desire to recreate this space of innocence and to return to the beginning, i.e., to the

³⁸⁵ Quoted in Chad Newsom, *Feels Like Home: Since You Went Away* and the 1940s Family Melodrama. (Screen 58:3, 2017): 289-290.

feeling of safety and comfort. Neuötting signifies such a place for Fatou in *Die Schwarze Madonna*. It is here that she spent her childhood – first for a few years with her biological mother and then with her foster aunts Hortensia and Rosa – and felt relatively safe and carefree. Vacationing now in the rural and idyllic Upper Bavaria, Fatou had hoped to escape her hectic life in Hamburg and leave her problems behind, “Der Gedanke an Urlaub in der geruhsamen Kleinstadt hatte sofort Fatous Herzrhythmus reguliert. Es hatte ihr geholfen, die letzte Woche überhaupt durchzustehen. Jeden Tag ins Kaufhaus zu gehen, obwohl ihr schon gekündigt worden war. [...] Dem Tratsch der Frauen im Wandsbeker Afroshop zu entkommen, die sie für so ziemlich alles beurteilten” (88).³⁸⁶ It is in Neuötting that despite the horrible crime that occurs there Fatou learns to embrace herself the way she is, including her Blackness thanks to Grace, as we’ll see later in this chapter. It is also here that she arrives at a better understanding of what’s best for her daughter’s future, as I show below.

Within this idyllic space of home of a domestic melodrama, however, the family is the psychic hub and the center of life. Moreover, generational conflict between family members such as involving the Black German siblings, Funke and Wale, and their Nigerian relatives in *Also by Mail*, my chapter preceding this one, is central to domestic melodramas. Utilizing melodramatic characteristics like speaking their truths in full expressivity, the characters in Popoola’s play revealed what was at stake: the Black German siblings’ belonging and what they considered home. Similarly, in *Die Schwarze Madonna* we find a similar generational conflict between the mother-daughter duo that revolves around the question of belonging and identity. The reason for

³⁸⁶ (“The thought of vacationing in the peaceful small town had immediately regulated Fatou’s heart rhythm. It had helped her to survive last week at all. To be able to go to the department store every day even though they had already fired her. [...] To be able to escape the gossip of the women in the Afro store in Wandsbek [Hamburg] who tended to judge her for everything.”).

the otherwise close relationship between mother and daughter is strained is because Fatou and Yesim disagree on what secondary school Yesim should attend which will determine Yesim's future professional life. Fatou wants her daughter to attend a German "Gymnasium," a secondary school with a university-entrance diploma, so that it will be easier for Yesim to go to college later on. Yesim, on the other hand, wishes to go to a regular German high school ("Gesamtschule") where students don't have to decide right away what diploma they want to work towards. Yesim wants to go there because all of her friends are going there. Fatou's reasons for choosing a "Gymnasium" for her daughter are twofold; first, she would like her daughter to have good prospects for high-paying jobs following a college degree. Second, Fatou's obviously engaging in respectability politics as she hopes that with a good education Yesim will not be exposed to racialized discrimination as much as she would be without it. Ever since Yesim was little, Fatou has worried about how racism and anti-Blackness was affecting her daughter's wellbeing and has taken great care to shield her from its effects:

Es kam ihr [Fatou] vor, als würde sie Rassismus überhaupt erst am eigenen Körper erleben, seit ihre Tochter ihn erlebte. Yesim musste dauernd erleben, dass Menschen, Bücher, Lehrer und Fernsehserien ihr zu verstehen gaben, dass mit ihr etwas nicht stimmte, dass sie nicht dazugehörte, dass sie nur toleriert wurde. In diesen Momenten wünschte sich Fatou manchmal insgeheim eine Sekunde lang, dass sie beide nicht Schwarz wären. (46)³⁸⁷

Seeing how her daughter experiences racism on a daily basis the way she herself did as a child forces Fatou to confront it head on and to become active. Fatou understands that she can't always protect Yesim from the white gaze (e.g., at public swimming pools) or from having her belonging questioned or from being taken for a Muslim girl.

³⁸⁷ ("It seemed to Fatou that she was experiencing racism firsthand since her daughter was experiencing it. Yesim had to see over and over again that people, books, teachers, and TV shows implied that there was something wrong with her, that she didn't belong, that she was just being tolerated. In these moments Fatou secretly wished just for a second that the two of them weren't Black.").

As she herself was full of questions and doubts as a child and wondered why her biological parents had left her, Fatou is therefore determined to offer her own child a better life. Fatou makes sure that her ex-husband is involved in his daughter's upbringing and that Yesim grows up surrounded by PoC, as described before. More importantly, Fatou wants to demonstrate to her daughter that as a Black person, or a PoC in Yesim's case, she is able to overcome life's challenges whatever they may be. And Fatou thinks that besides a confident attitude a good education should be a big part of it. Grace, a Black refugee and an activist that Fatou befriends, challenges Fatou to see her daughter's positionality opposite other racialized groups. Against the backdrop of the xenophobic and Islamophobic sentiments in Altötting following the vandalism of the local church, Fatou is worried about how it might be affecting Yesim, whose father is Muslim. Ideally, Fatou would like her daughter to choose however she wants to identify as and what religion she wants to belong to, if at all. However, due to her last name and looks Yesim is automatically Othered as a Muslim:

“Ich bin katholisch aufgewachsen,” sagte Fatou, “und Yesims Vater ist muslimisch. Sie kann es sich aussuchen oder buddhistisch werden oder atheistisch [...]. Aber in Wirklichkeit kann sie es sich eben nicht aussuchen.” Tränen stiegen ihr in die Augen.

“Mit ihrem Namen und Aussehen ist sie automatisch für alle muslimisch, egal, woran sie glaubt.”

“Findest du, dass es etwas Schlimmes ist, dass sie für muslimisch gehalten wird?“, fragte Grace.

“Nein. Ja. Nein,” stotterte Fatou. “Sie bekommt die Vorurteile jetzt schon zu spüren. Sie ist erst elf!”

[...] “Alle muslimischen Mädchen bekommen diese Probleme gemacht. Nicht nur deine Tochter.” Fatou wusste, worauf Grace damit hinaus wollte. Sie fand es aber nicht ganz gerecht. (175)³⁸⁸

³⁸⁸ (“I grew up Catholic,” Fatou said, “and Yesim’s father is Muslim. She can choose to become Buddhist or Atheist [...]. But in reality, she can’t choose.” Her eyes filled with tears. “Given her name and her looks people automatically assume she’s Muslim no matter what she believes in.” “Do you think it’s a bad thing that people think she’s Muslim?”, Grace asked her.

Here, Fatou is criticizing the way white Germans Other People of Color and discriminate against them based on external categories such as looks and names regardless of what the person actually identifies as. While Grace agrees that it is not ideal to be mistaken for a Muslim when you're not, Yesim is hardly the only one to experience this Othering. More importantly, in contrast to (Muslim) refugees, for example, Yesim does enjoy certain privileges as a German citizen, the same way Fatou does. I believe what Grace is saying is that People of Color should join forces and fight racism and othering together instead of fighting each other.

In addition to Grace, meeting Isabel helps Fatou reach a decision regarding Yesim's school situation. Isabel is a Bangladeshi German girl that Fatou's next-door neighbor and childhood friend in Neuötting, Anita, had adopted. The way comparing her positionality with Grace, a racialized Other, had challenged Fatou to become aware of her own position, so does comparing Isabel's situation, another person of Color, with that of her own daughter. Anita and her now-deceased husband had adopted Isabel from Bangladesh in a misguided effort to *save* her from what they considered to be a misogynist society, "In Bangladesh sind Frauen nicht viel wert. Deswegen haben wir sie ja extra von da weg adoptiert. Ich habe schon eine Verantwortung, dass sie emanzipiert wird und unsere Werte lernt" (80), Anita tells Fatou.³⁸⁹ Here, Anita is clearly invoking a racialized hierarchy whereby she and her husband took up the "white man's burden" and did developmental work by "rescuing" Isabel, and thus "carrying on the colonizing

"No. Yes. No," Fatou stuttered. "She's starting to notice the prejudices [towards Muslims]. She's only eleven!" "All Muslim girls experience these problems, not just your daughter." Fatou knew what Grace was implying, but she didn't think it was quite fair.")

³⁸⁹ ("In Bangladesh women aren't worth much. That's why we made sure to remove/adopt her [Isabel] from there. It's my responsibility that she is emancipated and learns our values").

mission to civilize the savages.”³⁹⁰ Even though Isabel is being raised with (white) German values, the way her adoptive parents wanted, she is still growing up in isolation, disconnected from her Bangladeshi side, just like Fatou grew up disconnected from her West African side. Since the death of her husband, Anita feels overwhelmed as a single mother with three children, leaving Isabel to fend for herself. Witnessing firsthand Isabel’s isolation and Anita’s ignorance with respect to how to raise a child of a different race, Fatou sees her own childhood reflected in Isabel’s and decides to take her under her wing. She makes plans to keep in touch and have Isabel come to Hamburg for a visit. In contrast to Isabel, Fatou realizes that Yesim gets to grow up with a Black parent as well as being surrounded by other PoC. In providing a little bit of an extended family and community for Isabel, Fatou decides at the same time that for Yesim it is more important to feel included and to be with her friends at the high school than getting good grades at a “Gymnasium” where she doesn’t know anyone. In other words, Fatou wants her daughter to belong. In thus presenting her novel as a domestic melodrama, Noah Sow is able to zero in on the specific family constellation of her protagonist and work through the generational conflict of the mother-daughter duo. In the following, I’d like to explore why and how Sow centers Black characters in her novel through the use of Critical Whiteness.

Race in *Die Schwarze Madonna*

As I explained in the introductory chapter, the way Black German writers like Noah Sow utilize Critical Whiteness is by dissecting what is considered “normal” (= white), while presenting Blackness as a fact of life rather than something strange or unusual. Priscilla Layne argues that whenever white authors wrote about Black people, they usually tended to emphasize

³⁹⁰ Michelle Wright. Others-From-Within From Without. Afro-German Subject Formation and the Challenge of a Counter-Discourse. (*Callaloo*, 26.2, 2003): 300.

the alleged difference rather than the similarities between Black people and white people. They do so, she states, by often exaggerating the “physical appearance of Black characters, whom they treat as mere props, either to add an exotic touch or as a foil against which they can construct their whiteness.”³⁹¹ Black German authors, by contrast, center in their works Black characters and their way of life as already part of German society as is evident in Sow’s portrayal of her protagonist Fatou and, especially Fatou’s 11-year-old daughter, Yesim, in *Die Schwarze Madonna*. Putting Blackness at the center of attention in her works and thus addressing other Black Germans constitutes “a deliberate focus” on the part of Sow, as she stated in her keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the 41st African Literature Conference.³⁹² She came to this decision, she claimed, after reflecting on the immense commercial success of her first book publication, *Deutschland Schwarz Weiß* from 2008 (*Germany Black and White*), which is now considered to be a standard reference work surrounding structural racism in the German mainstream.³⁹³ Sow understood that the main reason her first book was so successful and popular among white German readers was because it *explained* oppression to people who “still needed a written reminder on the subject of basic human decency” (author’s emphasis).³⁹⁴ In the process of explaining oppression and structural as well as everyday racism to a white audience, Sow realized that she had neglected her “very own sisters” who, obviously, did not need a study on

³⁹¹ Priscilla Layne. *Suspicious Spiral: Autofiction and Black German Subjectivity in Olivia Wenzel’s “1000 Serpentine Angst.”* Speech at a video conference organized by the Center for German and European Studies, Brandeis University, 2020.

³⁹² Noah Sow. *Diaspora Dynamics: Shaping the Future of Literature.* (*Journal of the African Literature Association*, 2017): 28-33.

³⁹³ Hengameh Yaghoobifarah. *Noah Sow: Mit Anfängern rede ich nicht mehr.* (Interview) (Berlin, Germany, *Die Tageszeitung*, 04/06/2018): 13.

³⁹⁴ Noah Sow. *Diaspora Dynamics: Shaping the Future of Literature.* (*Journal of the African Literature Association*, 2017): 29.

humanity or oppression. Only by detaching herself thus from this urge to explain and to make herself understood by white Germans, Sow argues, can she make room and generate energy and space in her mind and body to reflect on and write about and to Black Germans. Addressing “her sisters” this way, Sow writes, can be and is a source of empowerment and power in and of itself.³⁹⁵ It is self-sustained; not in relation to an already established (white) center, but rather a center of its own. To Sow’s mind, addressing each other this way is a radical and a relatively new thing to do, especially given the history of Black Germans’ presence in Germany, who, as I have written in the introduction to this dissertation, have been fighting for a recognition of their existence and history (by a white audience) for a long time. As Sow sums up her change of outlook succinctly, she exists “beyond struggle.”³⁹⁶

Through the characterization of Fatou’s 11-year-old daughter, Yesim, Sow is confronting the reader with what is normal for Black Germans today, especially the youngest generation, who feels part of Germany in a way that is less problematic than their ancestors. The main reason the mother-daughter duo is traveling to the small Upper-Bavarian town, Neuötting, is because Fatou wants to provide her daughter with a sense of belonging and “Heimat” by helping her get acquainted with the place where she herself grew up. Having herself lacked any stability and belonging during her childhood – Fatou was abandoned by her biological mother and was raised by her (non-blood-related) aunts Hortensia and (and the now deceased) Rosa – she is determined that her daughter should always know where her roots are: “Yesim sollte immer wissen, wer und was sie genau war, und welchen Platz sie auf der Welt hatte. [...] Dazu gehörte auch, ihrer

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

Tochter starke Roots zu vermitteln” (12).³⁹⁷ Spending her summer vacation in rural Bavaria amid mountain air and local culture, Fatou hopes, will help her daughter see that a different, but not necessarily bad, way of life and set of values existed outside of Hamburg where they lived. In short, she does not want Yesim to end up as “ein vollends entfremdetes Großstadtkind” (“a completely estranged big-city kid,” 12). What is striking about Yesim, however, is her confidence in herself and her awareness of her ethnicity and familial constellation; her father is Turkish German, Muslim, and separated from her mother; she knows that her last name, Fall, comes from West Africa where her mother’s roots lie. Furthermore, Yesim is aware of how white people see her due to her skin color and ethnicity. Most importantly, though, Yesim has a natural sense of belonging and a self-understanding of herself as (Black) German that is due to Fatou’s parenting style that involves surrounding her daughter with people from other nationalities in a cosmopolitan city like Hamburg where the percentage of PoC is a lot higher than in other, more rural, parts of Germany. When paying a visit to her next-door neighbor and childhood friend, Anita, in Neuötting, Fatou wonders whether or not to tell her how back home they regularly socialize with people from all over the world:

Was sollte sie ihr sagen? Dass sie [Fatou and Yesim] in Hamburg den ganzen Tag umgeben von Menschen aus vier Kontinenten waren? Dass Fatou eine Schwarze Mädchenclique hatte? Dass Binta aus Senegal war, Sandra aus Österreich, Ngozis Eltern aus Ghana, Denises Mutter aus den USA und ihr Vater aus Singapur? Dass ihr jeden Tag das Herz aufging, wenn sie sah, wie ihre Tochter eine Jugend erlebte, die so anders, so viel weniger von Vereinzelung geprägt war als ihre eigene Jugend? (81)³⁹⁸

³⁹⁷ (“Yesim should always know who and what exactly she was, and what her place in the world was [...] Part of this was to provide her daughter with strong roots.”).

³⁹⁸ (“What was she supposed to tell her? That the two of them back in Hamburg were surrounded by people from four continents? That Fatou was part of a Black female friend group? That Binta was from Senegal, Sandra from Austria, Ngozi’s parents came from Ghana, Denise’s mother from the US and her father from Singapore? That it warmed her heart every day to see that her daughter’s youth was so different, shaped less by isolation than her own youth was?”).

This kind of immersion in a diverse and multi-ethnic community is already a reality for Black Germans and other PoC nowadays, especially the youngest generations, as has been documented by scholar and author Natasha A. Kelly in her short film *Millis Erwachen (Milli's Awakening, 2018)*.³⁹⁹

What becomes obvious, however, from the juxtaposition of Fatou's own childhood with that of her daughter is the stark difference in terms of isolation and a lack of a sense of belonging that Fatou experienced. Throughout *Die Schwarze Madonna*, Fatou grapples with the question of her origin and how that has affected her life, "... Sehnsucht, die eigenen Eltern wenigstens zu kennen, zusammen zu sehen, [...]. Es war ein Loch in ihrem Leben, und es hatte erst aufgehört, jeden Tag weh zu tun, als ihre eigene Tochter geboren wurde" (159-160).⁴⁰⁰ There is very little information on Fatou's biological parents in the novel, and what there is boils down to this: despite Fatou's search for her father, she never found him, and until she moved away from Neuötting when she entered third grade, she used to live with her foster aunts, Hortensia and Rosa, because her own mother had left when Fatou was little. Also, Fatou doesn't explicitly mention her mother's race but there are hints that she was white; she didn't know how to take care of Fatou's hair, and she was ostracized by people in her village for having a Black child - Fatou remembers times when her mother got into arguments because of her daughter, and times when people were unfriendly towards them or would insult them on the street. In addition, there are signs that her mother was overwhelmed with raising a Black child, and that she was possibly mentally unstable: once, she left her 5-year-old daughter in a disco for two hours, and Fatou

³⁹⁹ In *Milli's Erwachen*, (Berlin: Orlanda Buchverlag, 2019), Kelly collected the voices of eight Black German female artists. The youngest of the group, Maciré, a spoken word performer, attended an Afro-German playing group, an Afro-German children's group, and later founded an Afro-German youth group.

⁴⁰⁰ ("... the longing to at least know your own parents, to see them together, [...] It was a void in her life, and it only stopped hurting every day when her own daughter was born").

remembers being left alone in the local church for whole afternoons, and lastly, her mother abandoned her for good at a young age. I argue that by demonstrating what a profound adverse effect her biological parents' absence had on Fatou's life and mental health, Noah Sow is showing us how differently Fatou raises her own daughter as shown above. Going a step further, Sow wants Black Germans to reflect on their identity and positionality as I will show later.

In addition to her upbringing and the isolation she experienced as a Black child, Fatou has had to deal with racism and racialized discrimination throughout her life. During her childhood in Neuötting where she didn't know any other Black person, Fatou was always aware of being treated differently due to her skin color, "Fatou hatte sich oft allein gefühlt. Die Menschen um sie herum waren einfach nicht wie sie. Das fanden zumindest diese Menschen - und ließen es sie spüren" (159).⁴⁰¹ As a kid, Fatou had internalized such antipathy and prejudice against Black people, to the point that she not only rejected Blackness herself and didn't want to be associated with it, but it's also possible that she didn't see herself as Black. While looking at photo albums together, aunt Hortensia reminds Fatou of an episode in her childhood that involved a Black doll. On the day of her first day of school, her aunt Rosa had decided to give her a Black Barbie doll instead of the white one Fatou had desired. Upon seeing the doll, Fatou had thrown it on the floor and made a scene.⁴⁰² Even though her aunts thought they were doing something good for Fatou with the Black doll, they didn't take into account the ways Fatou experienced discrimination and humiliation based on her skin color to the point that she herself rejected Blackness. Such childhood experiences of growing up without a Black parent, by the

⁴⁰¹ ("Fatou had always felt alone. People around her simply weren't like her. At least these people thought so, and they let her know that").

⁴⁰² The Black Swiss author, Angélique Beldner, describes in her book a similar incident that involved receiving a Black doll for Christmas. She remembers feeling that she didn't know what to do with the Black doll. See Angélique Beldner / Martin R. Dean. *Der Sommer, in dem ich Schwarz wurde*. (Zürich: Kampa Verlag AG, 2021): 28-29.

way, reminds one of personal stories told by Black German women in *Farbe bekennen*, particularly, those born in the 1960s and 1970s like Helga Emde. Similar to Fatou they grew up with a white (foster) parent without a Black father, and without any ties to a Black community. I would argue that by mentioning Fatou's involvement in a multi-ethnic community in Hamburg as well as through her encounter with Grace Bâ, Noah Sow is urging Black Germans to claim their Germanness while simultaneously embracing their Blackness without shame, and despite the fact that white Germans constantly question their belonging, as I will show below.

Although Fatou has always grappled with her identity, her encounter with Grace Bâ, a West African refugee, forces her to really confront and reflect on her positionality as a Black German. Grace has lived in Altötting for ten years and organizes the local refugee initiative. Fatou is more than impressed with Grace's appearance and wishes to be friends with her: "Grace strahlte geradezu vor ... Coolness. Obwohl sie nicht besonders groß war, war sie eine beeindruckende Erscheinung. Ihre Haltung war wie mit dem Lineal gezogen, so dass ihr Hals noch länger aussah. Dadurch wirkte sie stolz und unbesiegbar" (116).⁴⁰³ While they're getting to know each other, Grace inquires about Fatou's ethnic background, as shown in the following dialogue:

"Wo kommst du eigentlich her?"

[...] Fatou fühlte die Erstarrung, die sie bei dieser Frage ihr ganzes Leben lang begleitet hatte. "Ich habe dir doch schon gesagt, dass ich hier in der Nähe geboren bin!", sagte sie etwas zu schroff.

Grace schüttelte den Kopf. "Das meine ich nicht. Deine Eltern, aus welchem Land kommen sie?"

⁴⁰³ ("Grace was practically beaming with ... coolness. Even though she wasn't that tall, she had an impressive appearance. Her posture was like drawn with a ruler so that her neck looked even longer. She thus appeared proud and invincible.").

In Fatous Kopf bereitete sich eine plötzliche Leere aus. Aus dieser Frage gab es kein Entrinnen. Sie konnte nicht glauben, dass dieses uralte ausgeleierte Drehbuch sich gerade wiederholte, mit einer afrikanischen Frau, der sie vertraute, die sie sich sogar als Freundin erhoffte. Grace musste doch selbst darunter leiden, dass immer eine *Erklärung* von ihr verlangt wurde dafür, dass sie es überhaupt wagte, in Deutschland anwesend zu sein.

[...] “Warum willst du es nicht sagen?”, fragte sie [Grace]. “Ich bin stolz darauf, dass ich aus Afrika komme.”

“Ich komme aber nicht aus Afrika”, sagte Fatou etwas lauter, als sie wollte, “sondern von hier. Aus Oberbayern. Du hast gefragt, wo ich herkomme, aber du weißt es schon. Warum fragst du dann? Tu du nicht auch noch so, als ob ich nicht deutsch sein kann. Es muss dich doch selbst nerven, wenn du das ständig gefragt wirst!”

Grace blieb ruhig und schürzte die Lippen. “Ich bin aber keine Deutsche, die dich das fragt. Ich dachte, es ist in Ordnung, wenn wir uns kennenlernen, dass ich mich für dich interessiere, für deine Geschichte.”

[...] “Würde ich aus Afrika kommen, wäre ich auch stolz darauf”, sagte sie [Fatou]. “Leider kann ich das nicht bieten.” [...]

Grace sah unbeeindruckt drein. “Du kannst African Pride haben und trotzdem hier aufgewachsen sein”, sagte Grace. “Aber vergiss nicht, mit dem du gerade sprichst.” Prüfend sah sie Fatou an. “Es ist auch wichtig für deine Tochter.” (175-176)⁴⁰⁴

The question *Where do you come from?* is one that white Germans like to ask Black Germans and other PoC, thereby signifying them as non-Germans by questioning their belonging to Germany. Having met another seemingly like-minded Black woman, Grace, Fatou had hoped that for once she wouldn't have to explain herself and her ethnic origin, that Grace would just

⁴⁰⁴ (“Btw, where do you come from?” [...] Fatou felt the numbness that she has felt all her life when asked this question. “I’ve already told you that I was born around here,” she said a little too abruptly. Grace shook her head. “That’s not what I mean. Your parents, what country are they from?” Fatou’s head suddenly felt empty. There was no escaping this question. She couldn’t believe that this age-old scenario was repeating itself here, with an African woman whom she trusted, and who she hoped would become her friend. Surely, Grace herself must suffer from having to offer an *explanation* for the fact that she dared to be in Germany.

[...] “Why don’t you want to say it?” Grace asked. “I’m proud to be from Africa.”

“But I’m not from Africa,” Fatou said a little louder than she had intended, “but from here. From Upper Bavaria. You asked where I’m from, but you know that already. Why do you ask? Don’t you pretend too that I can’t be German. Surely, it bothers you to be asked this constantly!”

Grace pursed her lips. “But I’m not a [white] German who’s asking you this. I thought it would be OK if we got to know each other, that I’m interested in you and your story.”

[...] “If I came from Africa, I would be proud of it too,” Fatou said. “Unfortunately, I can’t offer you that.” [...] Grace looked unimpressed. “You can have African Pride while having grown up here,” Grace said. “But don’t forget who you’re talking to.” She looked inquisitively at Fatou. “It’s also important for your daughter.”)

intuitively *understand*. However, sharing the same race doesn't equal shared history, of course. Having grown up in West Africa among Africans, Grace can confidently call herself an African, so she expects Fatou to feel the same way about her own background. But for Fatou things are a little more complicated. As mentioned before, she grew up without a Black parent among white Germans, with white aunts who, due to their ignorance regarding racism, obviously didn't know how to prepare Fatou for a life in a majority white culture. In addition, white Germans constantly questioned her belonging and often excluded her for being Black. In an effort to belong and be accepted by white Germans, however, Fatou had as a kid fully embraced being German to the point that she felt she had to reject her African origin:

Damals hatte sie sich den Gedanken verboten, dass es in dem afrikanischen Teil ihrer Wurzeln irgendetwas Wichtiges für sie zu sehen geben könnte. Es wäre Verrat gewesen. An den bayerischen Tanten, die sie schließlich fürsorglich aufzogen. An den deutschen Lehrerinnen, die immer betonten, dass "wir hier alle gleich" seien. Und an ihrer Heimat in Europa. Wenn sie sich nach Afrika sehnte, würde sie nie dazugehören. (330)⁴⁰⁵

Fatou had felt that showing even the smallest interest in her African origin would be interpreted by white Germans as her not wanting to integrate fully into white German society, that her aunts would think her ungrateful for wanting to know about her African origin. And despite her teachers' constant assertion that everyone is equal (in Germany), Fatou was always treated differently. Embracing German values and norms and identifying thus with German culture isn't enough to protect her from racialized discrimination from white Germans, as I will show below. White Germans' expectation that People of Color integrate into German society is in reality a demand for total assimilation that leaves no room for anything other than white German values and norms. And when PoC do embrace their origin culture and attempt to maintain it, white

⁴⁰⁵ ("Back then she forbade herself to think that there could be anything important to know in the African part of her roots. It would have been like a betrayal. Betrayal of her Bavarian aunts who caringly raised her; of her German [female] teachers who always emphasized that "we're all equal here"; and her home in Europe. If she longed for Africa, she would never belong.").

Germans accuse them of not integrating fully and creating parallel societies.⁴⁰⁶ As Fatima El-Tayeb argues this assimilation into German culture is unattainable and impossible because white Germans still equate PoC's non-whiteness with non-Germanness and exclude them due to visual markers *despite* the fact that a person of Color may actually be fully integrated into German society.⁴⁰⁷ In other words, the demand to assimilate into German society is doomed because the majority population still gets to decide who can belong and who can't. What this means for Fatou is that due to her skin color she was treated as non-German and her belonging was questioned even though she felt German and made every effort to fit in. Consequently, it was and is still not that easy for Fatou to confidently call herself German *and* Black. Nevertheless, I believe that Noah Sow, speaking through Grace, is encouraging Black Germans to claim their Germanness while embracing their Blackness. She is saying that for the next generation of Black Germans like Yesim it is important for their self-understanding if their parents are confident in who they are and where they come from.

Fatou gains such confidence after coming to terms with her identity as Black German when Grace makes her realize that Fatou enjoys certain privileges as a German that Grace does not. When discussing the candidates for the mayoral election, Fatou casually defends the politician from the local SPD (Social Democratic Party) as being "one of the good ones" despite his party's negative stance towards immigration. This in turn prompts Grace to exclaim that no matter what, Germans like Fatou always stick together:

"Das ist das Problem mit euch Deutschen, ihr wollt 'gut' sein, aber ihr haltet immer zusammen."

⁴⁰⁶ Fatima El-Tayeb. *Undeutsch. Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft*. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2016): 39.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

Fatou brauchte ein paar Momente, bis der Inhalt des Satzes bei ihr angekommen war. [...] Wieso hatte Grace sie als 'Deutsche' angegriffen, wo sie doch ebenso eine Schwarze Frau war und deswegen die ganze Zeit für eine Ausländerin gehalten wurde? [...]

"Ich wollte dich nicht verletzen. Bist du jetzt traurig, dass du Deutsche bist?", fragte Grace.

"Nein", sagte Fatou. "Nur ... ich dachte, dass wir so viel gemeinsam haben, und"

"Das haben wir", sagte Grace [...]. "Ein paar Sachen haben wir gemeinsam. Aber nicht alles. Deine Mentalität ..." (133-134)⁴⁰⁸

Having been Othered her whole life, being now called 'German,' a label that creates an invisible barrier between her and her friend Grace, is shocking to Fatou. She had always felt an alliance and solidarity with other PoC the way she is immersed in a multi-ethnic community in Hamburg and the way she's drawn to Grace. In contrast to their conversation earlier regarding Fatou's origin, this time it is Fatou who assumed a commonality due to shared race. When Grace says that they have a few things in common but not everything, she's indirectly referring to Fatou's legal status as a German citizen as opposed to Grace's status as a refugee. Obviously, as a German citizen Fatou doesn't have to worry about her legal status and enjoys social security as well as mobility in terms of finding a job, an apartment, etc., whereas Grace's refugee status limits her mobility as to what she can do and where she can go, and ultimately, affects her legal residence in Germany. This is something that Fatou never had to consciously think about until she met Grace. In her keynote at the tenth anniversary conference of the Black German Heritage and Research Association (February 2022), Priscilla Layne identifies this inward turn and self-reflexivity of Black German characters as part of a new trend in recent Black German novels.

⁴⁰⁸ ("That's the problem with you Germans, you want to be 'good,' but you always stick together." Fatou needed a moment until she grasped the full meaning of that sentence. [...] Why did Grace attack her as 'German' even though she was another Black woman who, because of that, people thought was a foreigner? "I didn't mean to hurt you. Are you sad because you are German?", Grace asked. "No," Fatou said. "It's only ... that I thought we had so much in common and." "We do," Grace said. "We do have a couple of things in common. But not everything. Your mentality...").

Layne argues that according to what she terms a New Black German Subjectivity it has become central to Black German characters to “consider their positionality vis-a-vis other racialized and oppressed groups.”⁴⁰⁹ Furthermore, according to Layne, in the process of reflecting on their positionality these characters become aware of the “power and privilege they themselves have, depending on categories like citizenship, class, and gender.”⁴¹⁰

One such example of Fatou’s privilege is her command of the local Bavarian dialect that she uses to assert her belonging to Germany. One night while taking a stroll alone in her neighborhood in Neuötting, a car pulls up next to Fatou where two drunk, white German men make sexually suggestive remarks to her, “Was macht denn so eine heiße Lady in einer so heißen Nacht allein auf der Straße?” (336).⁴¹¹ Assuming that Fatou doesn’t speak German, the two men ask her in the broken speech imagined to be the language of foreigners whether she speaks German, “Du sprechen Deutsch?” (336). In a desperate attempt to save herself, Fatou asks them in perfect Upper Bavarian if they have any cigarettes, “Habt’s ihr a Zigaretnn?” (336). Her command of the local dialect completely stuns the men and takes them by surprise that they decide to leave her alone. This confusion and irritation on the part of white Germans concerning PoC’s Germanness has, again, something to do with the aforementioned demand for assimilation with a simultaneous, inherent expectation that they stay non-German. As El-Tayeb puts it, “...nichts ist für die Mehrheit irritierender an Migrantisierten als das Deutschsein, das sie

⁴⁰⁹ Priscilla Layne. *New (Black German) Subjectivity: Intersectionality in Recent Black German Novels*. Keynote at the Tenth Anniversary Conference of the Black German Heritage and Research Association, February 17-20, 2022.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ (“What is a hot lady doing alone outside on a hot night like this?”).

verkörpern.”⁴¹² In other words, white Germans experience a discrepancy when meeting a person of Color, whom they label as non-German due to visible markers like Black skin, but who speaks and sounds like a native. Making this use of her local dialect as a defense mechanism when Fatou’s belonging is questioned by white Germans is a privilege that Grace doesn’t have, who speaks with a noticeable West African accent, and who wouldn’t have been able to defend herself in a similar way if she had been in the situation with the two white men. So, meeting someone like Grace, whose legal situation is more precarious, makes Fatou aware of her own privileges as a Black German. At the end of the novel, there’s a hint that Fatou finally feels more at ease with herself and, especially, with her African side when she embraces the new haircut Grace gave her. The novel ends with the following words, “Seit sie den kurzen Afro trug, gab es keine Strähne mehr, die sie sich aus der Stirn pusten konnte. Sie kämmte sich stattdessen mit großer Geste über die Schläfe. Es fühlte sich gut an” (393).⁴¹³

Through Fatou’s ability to pass as a local, as described above, Noah Sow is also highlighting the performative and shifting construction of identity and at the same time critiquing the essentialist notion of Germanness and belonging. Depending on the situation, Fatou enacts different “identities” throughout *Die Schwarze Madonna*; in the scene described above she is a local Upper Bavarian while in Hamburg she is a “city dweller” speaking standard German among her friends of Color. In another scene Fatou and Grace disguise themselves as cleaning ladies to do undercover work in a fraternity house. They play on German stereotypes of cleaning personnel as imagined by white Germans and for that reason become convincing; they blend in,

⁴¹² (“Nothing is more irritating for the (white) majority than the Germanness that migrants personify.”) Fatima El-Tayeb. *Undeutsch. Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft*. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2016): 15.

⁴¹³ (“Ever since she started wearing the short Afro, she didn’t have to blow any loose strands away from her forehead. Instead, she combed her temples with her hand in a grand gesture. It felt good.”).

and everyone accepts them unquestioningly as cleaning ladies and they're able to complete their undercover work. Having her belonging questioned repeatedly throughout her life, Fatou has learned to make use of different identities to her benefit. By thus having Fatou slip in and out of different identities, as the situation dictates, Sow is emphasizing the fluidity of identities as opposed to the rigid way it is normally understood in Germany with categories presented as mutually exclusive and separate. This provisional nature of identity echoes what Maureen Maisha Auma et. al understand as "complex ways of multi-layered identities"; that means "complex ways of knowing and being African, Black, German."⁴¹⁴ In other words, belonging is not fixed.

⁴¹⁴ Maureen Maisha Auma / Eric Otieno / Peggy Piesche. 'Reclaiming Our Time' in African Studies: Conversations from the Perspective of Black Studies Movement in Germany. (*Critical African Studies*, Vol. 12, Nr. 3, 2020): 334.

CONCLUSION

Writing about a selected group of literary works means excluding many others. One of those works is May Ayim's poem titled, *Der Käfig hat eine Tür* (*The Cage has a door*), from which I would like to quote the following stanza:

“...es ist mir inzwischen lieber
ich bin ausgegrenzt
ich bin nicht eingeschlossen...”⁴¹⁵

These few lines perfectly sum up the long way Black Germans have come to build a community of members with a natural awareness of their identities as Black Germans. Whereas earlier texts by Black Germans were primarily characterized by their functionality – to ask for acceptance from their white German neighbors – the later and more current literary productions exhibit – no longer reactive to dominant discourses, freed from the burden of representation and the plea for acceptance – a wide range of diverse set of stories. To name a few recent examples, the crime thriller, *Die Falle* (*The Trap*, 2015) by Melanie Raabe doesn't thematize Blackness or racism, neither does Jackie Thomae's *Brüder* (*Brothers*, 2019). Engaging in “counter-narratives”, Black German scholars and authors of the 1980s sought to be recognized by their white Germans as one of their own because they didn't have a Black community to surround themselves with and thus depended on their white compatriots for their survival. That this constant explanation of and justification for one's existence and humanity are tiring goes without saying. Nonetheless, the achievements of these early Black Germans are manifold: they uncovered the history of Black

⁴¹⁵ (“I would rather now / be excluded / I am not included...”) May Ayim. *Blues in Schwarz Weiss / Nachtgesang*. (Münster: UNRAST Verlag, 2022).

people dating as far back as the twelfth century; they created a – however small initially – community of Black Germans; they recorded and critiqued the colonial legacies and racist structures in contemporary German society, thus validating other Black Germans’ and PoC’s experiences with racial discrimination; they defined themselves on their own terms as Black *and* German; they wrote themselves into the nation as well as the nation’s literary history; and, finally, they offered positive, not stereotypical, and diversified representations of Black people for others to draw inspiration from, thus inviting subsequent generations to produce more texts to widen the ever-growing Black German literary production. Thanks in small part to these monumental achievements of earlier generations, Black Germans nowadays produce literature termed “alternative knowledge” that not only showcases the normalcy of Black German existence today (Critical Whiteness), but also presents them as *thriving*.

While I started out this project with the somewhat vague and grandiose intention of contributing as an ally to the growing number of literary productions in US academia on Black German literature which would then, hopefully, “shame” German higher institutions to include more Black and of Color writers among their ranks, and this goal still stands, my concrete contribution to the field of Black German Studies is nonetheless not insignificant. Analyzing Black German literature through the lens of family melodrama hasn’t been done before to my knowledge. With its clear-cut moral binary between good versus evil as well as with a special emphasis on the point of view of the victim, melodrama is a useful mode for Black German authors to portray racism as the villain and themselves as the suffering victim to evoke sympathy from readers. And while traditional melodramas featured father-daughter duos as the most important relationship that carried the plot with an absent mother, Black German writers, I argued, subvert and challenge the traditional conventions of family melodrama by having their

stories revolve around the Black German child and the white German mother while their Black fathers were absent. The white mother thus represents the tie to society.

To be completely honest though, examining the works in this project through the lens of melodrama and making my main argument in this regard convincing has been the most challenging aspect of writing this dissertation. As we have seen, melodrama originated on the stage where actors spoke their lines by employing exaggerated gestures, intonations, and dramatic body language. Also, loud, diegetic music suggesting natural phenomena like a thunder or a waterfall, or the sounds of an approaching train or a car accompanied climactic scenes to accentuate the dramatic impact. Since all these diegetic sounds and dramatic gestures are absent from a written text such as a novel, for instance, we look to the text itself to find the “drama,” as Peter Brooks demonstrated in his analysis of novels by Henry James and Honoré de Balzac. If at times my argument felt somewhat forced or lacking clear textual evidence, then it is a testament to my inadequate application of melodramatic characteristics to Black German writing. I am nonetheless convinced that melodrama, especially family melodrama, constitutes a useful tool for zeroing in on the domestic space as the Black German women in my analysis focus on their own childhood domestic space with their white mothers as a pivotal and defining time in their lives. In other words, melodrama in Black German writing is definitely a topic worth pursuing further in future research.

Even though I was limited in my selection of works due to the scope of this project, I see several promising avenues for future research on Black German literature. Because I was interested in and wanted to highlight the myriad ways racism and sexism intersect in the lives of Black German women, the works I examined are all exclusively written by female authors. It would be thus equally interesting to explore how Black German men have been affected by

racial discrimination and have dealt with prejudice and stereotypes around Black men and specifically around Black male sexuality. Black German men such as Charles M. Huber, Theodor Wonja Michael, Gert Schramm, Detlef Soost, Ijoma Mangold, and Hans Massaquoi, to give a few examples, all grew up with a white German mother, or a maternal grandmother, while their Black fathers were (mostly) absent from their lives, as they narrate in their respective life writing. Just to judge from the titles of their life writing, Charles M. Huber, *Ein Niederbayer im Senegal (A Lower Bavarian in Senegal, 2005)*, Theodor Wonja Michael, *Deutsch sein und schwarz dazu (2013, Black German, 2017)*, Gert Schramm, *Wer hat Angst vorm schwarzen Mann? Mein Leben in Deutschland (Who's Afraid of the Black Man? My Life in Germany, 2011)*, Detlef Soost, *D! Heimkind – Neger – Pionier, (D! Foster child – Nigger – Pioneer, 2006)*, Hans Massaquoi, *Neger, Neger, Schornsteinfeger. Meine Kindheit in Deutschland (Destined to Witness: Growing Up Black in Nazi Germany, 1999)*, it is clear that they not only play with and challenge German stereotypes regarding Black people, but they also assert their belonging to Germany.

Since all of the Black German women, whose works I analyze in this dissertation, originate from West German towns and cities, which incidentally was not intentional on my part, a look at works by Black Germans from the former East Germany, the German Democratic Republic, would complete the picture. Just to give a few examples, both Olivia Wenzel and Abini Zöllner (*Schokoladenkind. Meine Familie und andere Wunder, 2003. Chocolate Child. My Family and Other Miracles*) grew up in the former GDR, as did Gert Schramm and Detlef Soost, as we know from their life writing (strictly speaking though, Wenzel's novel, *1000 Serpentinien Angst (2020, 1000 Coils of Fear, 2022)* is an autofiction, combining elements of autobiography

and fiction).⁴¹⁶ It would be interesting to examine how these Black Germans navigated growing up Black with a white German mother under a repressive regime that, despite its outward declarations of internationalism and solidarity, forbade People of Color to establish and maintain any social contact to white Germans which contributed greatly to how their Black fathers were mostly absent from their lives. Also, Olivia Wenzel's novel features a queer protagonist, who in addition to being Black, navigates life as a queer person. On the other hand, Ika Hügel-Marshall, one of the queer writers in this project, does not thematize her queerness in her life writing at all, presumably because she deemed her experiences with racial discrimination to be more pressing and relevant, and also because she didn't start identifying as queer until later in her life (when she was forty years old), around the time the plot of her life writing ends. Exploring the intersectionality of Blackness and queerness would therefore be one of the most compelling avenues for future research.

⁴¹⁶ Priscilla Layne. "That's How It Is": Quotidian Violence and Resistance in Olivia Wenzel's *1000 Coils of Fear*. (*Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 55:1, 2022).

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