CHAPTER SEVEN

Using Black German Studies to Dissect Race in the American Classroom

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over and over again
there are those who are
dismembered, sold off and distributed
those who always are, were, and shall remain the others
over and over again
the actual others declare themselves the only real ones
over and over again
the actual others declare on us
war

it's the blues in black-and-white
1/3rd of the world
dances over
The other
2/3rds
[ ]
united germany united europe united states
celebrates 1992
500 years since Columbus
500 years- of slavery, exploitation and genocide in the
americas
asia
and africa

from May Ayim, "Blues in Black and White" (1992)[1]

In this poem, Afro-German[2] poet May Ayim responds to a history of racism, imperialism and exploitation that spans 500 years—from Columbus' "discovery" of America to the violence following the reunification of East and West Germany in 1992.[3] German reunification was an especially traumatic experience for Black Germans and other minorities living in Germany. While white Germans viewed the event as a historical cause for celebration—finally families that had been divided for over forty years could be reunited—for people of color this was a dangerous moment, because the newly accepted national pride set off a surge of racist attacks against anyone who, based on appearances, was considered non-white and therefore not a part of the German people. And as Ayim points out in her (2003a) essay, "1990: Home/land and Unity from an Afro-German Perspective," this included Black Germans, Turkish Germans and German Jews—people who, based on race, religion or ethnicity, were not considered white enough to be German. But Ayim purposefully links this critique of national conditions to a global history of exploitation of people of color (the 2/3) by whites (the 1/3). By linking the racist violence of German reunification to Columbus' exploration of the Americas, Ayim argues that the contemporaneous problem of racist violence in Germany is not new, but rather part of an ongoing pattern of white supremacy that spans the world. Ayim's poem contains a lot of potential teaching possibilities for American students, from her references to the blues, to her critique of Columbus and U.S. foreign policy. However, if students have no idea who Black Germans are or what German reunification is, they will be missing the key to unlocking the meaning of the poem. I offer this as just one example of the potential benefits of engaging with the topic of the Black experience in Germany in the American classroom.

In this paper, I consider the usefulness of teaching K–12 American students about the social construction of race by engaging with the topic of Germany and the Black diaspora. In the 1970s, the social construct thesis proposed that rather than a biological fact, race is a construction that is embedded in social ideas and norms.[4] This can be a rather abstract concept for young students to grasp. However, an effective way of conveying this lesson to students is to take a comparative approach, showing students how Black people have been treated and blackness has been defined in an entirely new context; in this case Germany.

Germany's complicated attitudes about race present a great opportunity for American students. Throughout history, Germans and Americans often shared very similar attitudes about Black people, but there are also moments when African Americans found much more freedom and tolerance in Germany compared to at home. From W.E.B. Du Bois' doctoral studies in Berlin in the 1890s to presidential candidate Barack Obama's warm welcome in Berlin in 2008, many African Americans have felt a "breath of freedom" when traversing German soil.[5] Nevertheless, the German empire committed genocide against the Nama and Herero

(1904–1907) in the German colony of German Southwest Africa (which existed from 1884–1915 and is now present-day Namibia), many Black people were sterilized and interned in concentration camps during Nazi Germany and most recently, the UN accused Germany of systematic anti-Black racism.[6] So how does one reconcile this simultaneous German acceptance of and hatred of blackness and how can studying representations of and experiences of Black people in Germany be beneficial for American high school students?

Adrone Willeke argues that using German texts to teach American students about diversity can be helpful because:

> An advantage of a course on a German context is that American students view these emotionally charged issues from a historical and cultural distance. They are less likely to dismiss a course as indoctrination if the course does not directly challenge their values. Instead, by observing the German experience with minorities, they can discover for themselves points of similarity and difference to the situation in the United States. (Willeke 2001, 28)

In this essay, I will explain how I have used the topic of "Germany and the Black Diaspora" to achieve the following goals with American students:

1. Help them understand race as a social construct
2. Empower them to see Black people who are not always already oppressed victims, but also agents of history
3. Show them the importance of an intersectional analysis of racism that accounts for gender, class and education
4. Expose them to diverse perspectives from the Black diaspora

RACE AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

When I teach my course "Germany and the Black Diaspora," one of the first things I tell students is that in Germany, race doesn't exist. As one can imagine, American students are shocked to hear this. In the United States, they are constantly confronted with race. Any time someone fills out a form, they are asked to check a box indicating whether they are white, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American or Other. But, in Germany, no such category exists, because in Germany, race is one of many terms that are considered an inheritance from the Nazi period. In Germany, the term "race" invokes Nazi antisemitism, genocide, and the sterilization and euthanizing of anyone whom the Nazis considered inferior. When the two Germanies, East and West, were founded in the aftermath of WWII in 1949, both adamantly desired to distance themselves from the Third Reich. And part of rejecting this fascist legacy was disavowing race and insisting on the equality of all people. Nevertheless, that does not mean race has been a non-issue

in Germany since 1945. In fact, in my work I argue that after WWII, blackness became the new parameters according to which Germanness (whiteness) could be policed (Layne 2018).

Accepting blackness as a social construct is a necessary starting point for my first year seminar, because I want students to learn that most common-sense ideas held about Black people (held both by themselves and the authors of the texts) are not objective truths, but subjective impressions. As Stuart Hall famously stated, "'Black' is essentially a politically and culturally *constructed* category;" who or what is Black is a constantly shifting idea that depends on historical context (Hall 1996, 18). By reading texts by white German, Black German, African American and African authors, I encourage them to not only challenge cross-racial understandings, but also consider questions of intersectionality, asking questions like how did Mary Church Terrell's (1863–1954) experience of Germany in the 19th century, as a Black woman, differ from W.E.B. Du Bois', as a Black man (1868–1963)? How did Du Bois' experience as an educated African American during the German Empire differ from Hans-Jürgen Massaqoui's experience as a Black German in the 1930s or from Gilbert Ofodile's experience as a Nigerian political refugee in the 1980s?

IDENTITY AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

One of the biggest challenges for young students is achieving a more nuanced understanding of identity as something that is not natural, fixed or a given; not something that can be lost and then found, but rather a process of actively putting an identity together. In my teaching, I rely on Maria Isabel Aldinhas Ferreira's understanding of identity as developing from one's interaction with one's environment:

> the experiencer subject progressively constructs his own identity and the identity of the entities that surround him defining this way as microcosms where all interactions take place. This process involves acknowledging who oneself is and defining and acknowledging who are those one interacts with. This definition takes place in the context of a very complex network of social relations established between the experiencer subject and those he comes in touch with, a network where his own identity gets reinforced, the identity of others becomes shaped, attains a substance and social and emotional bonds are interwoven. (Aldinhas Ferreira 2011, 48)

What is of further significance, when it comes to the question of race, is that the "semantic substance we assign" to a specific person "and that define[s] his identity vary from person to person according to the context of experience and the type of relationship that links [this person] to all the others he interacts with" (Aldinhas

Ferreira 2011, 50). This is why it is possible for a Black person who passes as white to perhaps be known as white in one context and Black in another. It is also why a person might be considered white in one country, like Brazil, and then Black in another country where people's understanding of race is not as nuanced or does not account for as many categories. What is also important to consider is, " the shaping and definition of a person's identity is an on-going process, never definitely accomplished as long as that person is fully cognitively active " and this will be demonstrated in the texts I describe below (Aldinhas Ferreira 2011, 51).

In order to help the students grasp these complex theoretical ideas, during one of the first lessons I put the following statement on the board: "Dr. Layne is Black." Then I asked the students, "What makes this statement true?" The goal of this question was to get students to think about race as a construction, rather than a biological fact. I chose to make a statement about myself, a dark-skinned African American woman, because I didn't want to put any of the students on the spot or turn the activity into an exercise of interrogating someone's Blackness, if I had taken a celebrity for example. My students were clearly confused by this line of questioning. Finally, one white female student dared to answer that it was my physical appearance that made me Black. In response, a Black female student rejected this reasoning. She said, Black people come in all different shades and with different physical features and hair textures, therefore my physical appearance alone could not be enough to make the statement true. This was exactly where I'd hoped students would go with my question. In order to get them to the next step, I presented them with the following poem, called "Consider One Accordingly," by Black German poet Philipp Khabo Köpsell (b. 1981):

Consider one a human being
of a particular age
Consider one male, one straight
for the purpose of argument
in addition consider ones behaviorisms
accordingly
Consider one Black in the United States,
Coloured in South Africa, mixed in Europe
if you ask white people. Consider one white
if you ask Nigerians. Consider one Nigerian
if you are Black, and ask Germans. Consider one
privileged to the average arab immigrant. Consider one Arab,
to the privileged, muslim to the masses, danger to the elderly
Consider one pissed, if asked
whether one is slightly biased.

Consider me one Consider u 2
consider us all thus

have some consideration
the next time
u line ur
prime presumptions
up 2
prove a point. (Kabo Köpsell 2010, 24)

Köpsell's poem is powerful, because it showcases the fluidity of identity, suggesting the same person can be Black, white, or colored, depending on the circumstance. Furthermore, his poem centers identity production in discourse. People *say* he is Black, white or colored. These are not labels he is assigning to himself. Thus, I eventually conveyed to students that what makes the statement "Dr. Layne is Black" true, is that this is a discourse that began when I was born and since birth I have been told that I am Black; just like if the doctor might have proclaimed I was female and my parents raised me accordingly. But these labels "Black" or "female" do not solidify my identity; that is not necessarily always who I am. My identity is a constant negotiation between those outside of myself, who interpellate me and tell me who I am, and the stories I tell about myself.

AFRICAN AMERICANS ABROAD

I always start the term by having students read an excerpt from W.E.B. Du Bois' autobiography in which he relates his experience studying in Berlin at the University of Berlin (now Humboldt University). Du Bois ventured to Berlin in 1892 with financial support from Harvard University in order to study economics as a doctoral student in sociology. In Berlin, Du Bois encountered German professors who were familiar with and curious about the situation of African Americans in the United States. The main reason why I begin the class with Du Bois' autobiography is because students are always shocked to discover that while in the United States. Du Bois would have been subject to daily racism, discriminatory laws and possibly violence, in Germany he felt relatively welcome and free. Encountering Du Bois' experience in Germany is not just an important historical lesson about one of the most famous African American intellectuals in history, but it is also an empowering moment. Students consider, if Du Bois' blackness can signify one thing in the United States and something else in Germany, because there he is overdetermined by his nationality, class, education and gender, then blackness is not a stable signifier, neither stable through time nor through space.

While Du Bois' largely positive account can be inspiring, I try to make it clear to students that Germans' attitudes towards blackness are never straightforward, rather there are many gray areas. While Du Bois was enjoying his studies in Berlin, Germans were simultaneously exploiting and oppressing Africans in their colonies.

It is also important to remind students to consider the genre. As an autobiography, we are confronted with Du Bois' self-representation. Who is Du Bois' audience? How might he intend to present himself and why? Might Du Bois be downplaying or perhaps even silencing incidents of racism he experienced in Germany for a specific reason? In order to encourage students to question the fidelity of Du Bois' text, I pair his excerpt with an excerpt from Mary Church Terrell's autobiography. Terrell was one of the first African American women to earn a college degree and she later became a women's suffragette and Civil Rights activist. She travelled to Germany in 1904, after being invited to speak at the International Congress of Women. The excerpt from Terrell's *A Coloured Woman in a White World* affords students a counter example to Du Bois that helps highlights how intersectionality possibly affected their individual experiences. While Du Bois says very little about race regarding his time in Germany, Terrell not only remarks on how the presence of racist, white Americans in Germany complicates her *German* relationships, but she also comments on the Antisemitism she encounters and expresses disbelief at Germans' treatment of Jews. Terrell also discusses her safety concerns of traveling alone in Europe as a woman.

AFRICAN MIGRANTS IN GERMANY

The second kind of text I share with students are texts by African students who have spent time studying in Germany. This is an important collection of texts for the postwar period, because they offer American students perspectives on Africa that might be foreign to them and they stress how important Africa has been in global politics and ideological struggles since the end of WWII. This period not only initiated significant political shifts in Europe, but also in Asia, Latin America and Africa, as intellectuals' and activists' calls for decolonization grew more loudly. All around the world people of color began postcolonial struggles against imperialist nations and demanded their own self-governing nation states. Germany is often overlooked within this context, because it lost its colonies following WWI. Nevertheless, as Monika Albrecht demonstrates in the book, *Europa ist nicht die Welt* (Europe is not the World), Germans were in fact quite interested in decolonization and remnants of colonialism persisted in Germany long after it lost its colonies. Furthermore, the existence of a divided Germany actually had tangible effects for African immigrants on both sides of the Berlin wall. To a large extent, the two Germanies defined themselves in opposition to one another, competing for who would be seen as the "better" Germany. Both East and West Germans were eager to distance themselves from the legacy of Nazism and this competition for a positive global image was often played out in foreign policy. The two Germanies contended over who treated their guest workers better, who accepted

more refugees and who had better relations with so-called Third World countries in Africa and Asia.

One text that students particularly like is Auma Obama's autobiography *And then Life Happens* (2012). Obama is the older, half-sister of President Barack Obama. Thus, even though students won't necessarily have heard of Auma Obama, they are usually intrigued to learn a little more about their former President's family. Obama's book chapters lend themselves well to discussing a short excerpt in one class session, especially since her experience in Germany is largely contained to one or two chapters, beginning with her arrival at Frankfurt airport with a scholarship from the German Academic Scholarship Exchange (DAAD) to study. Furthermore, the documentary film *The Education of Auma Obama* (2011), directed by Branwen Okpako, is available on DVD and includes interviews about her time in Germany that can be played during a class session and discussed either with or in replacement of the autobiography.

Obama's memoir also provides a further moment for students to discuss privilege in the Black diaspora. Students can draw comparisons between Du Bois' and Obama's experiences in Germany—both had financial support, could speak German and went to Germany for educational reasons. This comparison helped my students to see Obama, who is originally from Kenya, *not* as an impoverished African refugee—which is a dominant stereotypical image in the West—but as an educated, somewhat privileged woman (compared to other Kenyans). This revelation helped students abandon Afropessimist[7] narratives common in both the United States and Germany that insist on viewing Africa as underdeveloped—an issue that Black German poet May Ayim addresses in the poem "Afro-German I" (2003a):

> Oh boy! All the misery there is in the world!
> Be glad
> You didn't stay in the bush.
> You wouldn't be where you are today!
>
> I mean, you're really an intelligent girl, you
> Know.
> If you work hard at your studies,
> you can help your people in Africa, see:
> That's
> What you're predestined to do,
> I'm sure they'll listen to you,
> while people like us –
> there's such a difference in cultural levels

In Ayim's poem, we are presented with the racist, stereotypical views of a white German woman about Africa which she shares with a Black German woman. In in Obama's memoir has similar encounters. She writes:

> The discovery of my 'African identity' in Germany went hand in hand with dealing with the Germans and their view of us Africans. It shocked and disappointed me that most of the Germans I met knew so little about Africa. They talked about it as if it were not a continent with fifty-three states, but one big country. (2012, 177)

In our discussion of Obama's text, students seemed drawn to the fact that Obama says she came to feel more "African" in Germany than she had in Kenya, precisely as a reaction to how people Othered her in Germany. In Kenya, she never felt she had to think that much about her identity. Thus, this Kenyan pride is more of a reaction to her being abroad, in a foreign space and realizing what is unique to her culture. This is an important observation, because students who themselves have immigrated to the United States might see themselves reflected in Obama's remarks. And students who have no experience with migration might better understand why integrating in a new country can be so challenging, especially if the citizens of the new country tend to exclude you. Thus, students learn more empathy for immigrants and can further reflect on the determining factors of identity.

BLACK GERMANS WRITING BACK

Finally, the best way to really challenge students' ideas about race and identity is to introduce them to texts by Black Germans. Despite a presence in Germany that reaches back as far as the Middle Ages, Black Germans are not a very visible minority in terms of numbers. Clarence Lusane estimates that only 0.5% of the German population (82.5 million) identify as Black, which would be roughly between 300,000 and 500,000 (Lusane 2014, 40). However, for the past forty years, a series of autobiographies has been published about the experience of being Black and German. The most well-known is Hans Jürgen Massaquoi's *Destined to Witness: Growing Up Black in Nazi Germany* (1999), which was a bestseller both in the United States and Germany.[8] In *Destined to Witness*, Massaquoi, who was the son of a white German nurse and the grandson of a Liberian diplomat and was born in 1926, recalls his childhood and young adulthood growing up Black in Nazi Germany. Reading excerpts from *Destined to Witness* is especially useful for helping students learn about the transition from the colonial period to the Nazi period. I normally choose three incidents in particular: (1) Massaquoi's visit to a *Völkerschau* (human zoo) as a youth, when the other onlookers suddenly point at him and insist he belongs to an exhibition of Africans, (2) Massaquoi's first day at school and his having to deal with children who tease him about his skin color and finally (3) an excerpt addressing Massaquoi's thoughts about the Nazis when he was a child and how a Nazi taunts him in a bar about him being a symbol of *Rassenschande* (racial shame). Students were puzzled that Massaquoi could be a supporter of Hitler and that it took him so long to discover that in addition to the

Jews, the Nazis would not accept him either. Massaquoi's conflicted feelings about the Nazis are important, because it introduces students to the idea that a Black German might not necessarily identify as Black or "feel Black," depending on their circumstances. And even if they do "feel Black," it is not necessarily the same way African Americans would define blackness.

In addition to Massaquoi's autobiography, we also read excerpts from Ika Hügel-Marshall's autobiography, *Invisible Woman* (2001). Hügel-Marshall was born in 1947, in Bavaria. She was one of thousands of Black Germans who, following WWII, were born to a white German mother and an African American father, who was stationed in Germany as a soldier. Throughout most of her childhood and her young adult life she was told again and again by the hegemonic white German public that as a Black girl and woman she was not German, and that she was ignorant, evil, immoral and oversexed. She faced countless challenges to her self-worth: abuse in a children's orphanage at the hands of nuns, a feeling of abandonment and shame stemming from treatment by her biological mother, stepfather and half-sister, and finally objectification and rejection from her ex-husband who at first exoticized her, but soon made it clear he could not take the difficulties of being married to a Black woman in Germany and had no intentions of having Black children. It was following her divorce from him, that she discovered the German women's movement and found a space where she felt confident speaking out. Reading Hügel-Marshall's autobiography following Massaquoi's allows students to not just compare Black Germans' experience across historical periods, but according to gender and class. Hügel-Marshall's text is also important, because it demonstrates how Black German women, like herself, became increasingly politicized after first becoming organized in the women's movement. And if teachers purchase the documentary film, *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years*, which is available with English subtitles, they can show students interview clips with Hügel-Marshall. In addition to these interviews with Hügel-Marshall, *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years* is also a useful film for the classroom because it provides not only an introduction to the second Black German movement through testimonies from early participants including the late May Ayim, but it also offers students a concise introduction to Audre Lorde's work, so that they can better understand why Lorde was so inspirational and influential to Black German women at the dawn of their political activism.

CONCLUSION

The field of Black German Studies is relatively new; its foundational texts were published in the last thirty years. In the essay, "Blackness and its (Queer) Discontents," Fatima El-Tayeb proposes that now that "Black German Studies has moved

beyond a state of mere affirmation," we can start to consider how rather than just being additive, Black German Studies might change our understanding of the diaspora (El-Tayeb 2016). This brings me back to Ayim's poem "Blues in Black and White." By thinking not only of her local experience, but also considering the global context, Ayim demonstrates a Diasporic consciousness that reflects her political awakening in conversation with Audre Lorde. Ayim viewed herself as an Afro-German, but also as a Black person who was part of a larger diaspora, and that's what makes her poem a potential teachable moment for African American students especially. Through texts like Ayim's, they can learn of the important impact African Americans like Lorde had in the world. They can also learn the significance of the African-American experience for the rest of the Black diaspora.

In the United States, students of color are often haunted by a feeling of powerlessness. Perhaps they attend an underfunded school, maybe they don't see themselves reflected in their teachers or maybe they learn a curriculum that primarily celebrates the history of the 1/3, while ignoring the history of the other 2/3s. For Ayim, the 1/3 represents white people, while the 2/3 are all the People of Color. Learning about how influential African-American artists and thinkers have been around the world, and particularly in the case of the Black diaspora in Germany, can be an empowering moment for them that demonstrates the value of their culture and conveys that they, too can go out in the world and explore places beyond what they know. Finally, Ayim's perspective of something they already know, Columbus, can be productive because of its potential for defamiliarization. In American public schools, students learn about Columbus the hero, Columbus the explorer and the person for whom we have to thank that we learned the world is not flat, thus allowing the pilgrims to risk the journey to America and found the colonies that would eventually become our nation. However, do they also learn of the critiques of Columbus? Do they learn that he and the Spanish conquistadors exploited the Native Americans? Do they learn that the Spanish colonizers spread diseases that decimated native populations? Do they learn how the Spanish desire to missionize the Americas led them to torture and kill natives? Ayim may only mention Columbus in one line, but the connections she draws between Europe and the United States, Columbus and the 1990s are enough to raise students' curiosity and allow them a more critical view of American history than what they may be accustomed to and this can serve to nourish their curiosity about their nation and the rest of the world.

NOTES

1. This is the poem's original publication date.
2. "Afro-German" is a term coined by African American feminist scholar Audre Lorde together with the Black German women she taught in a class at the Free University in the spring of 1984.

In her 1992 essay, Audre Lorde describes Afro-Germans as one group of many "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" (1992, viii). Since then, the term has come to signify individuals who have one white German parent and one parent who is a member of the African diaspora (e.g. African American, Afro-Caribbean, African). This definition of the word has, however, since been problematized because it excludes African diasporic peoples living in Germany who do not have a German parent. Furthermore, by now there are Germans who have two Afro-German parents or one Afro-German parent and another parent with roots in the African diaspora. Therefore, I prefer the term Black German because Black is not only a political term, but also more inclusive. See al-Samarai (2004).

3. Ayim (1960–1992) was born in Hamburg as Sylvia Brigitte Gertrud Opitz to a white German woman and a Ghanaian student. Ayim spent the first few years of her life in a children's home, before she was taken in by foster parents as a school-aged child. In the 1980s, after meeting African American poet and feminist Audre Lorde in Berlin at the Free University in Berlin, Ayim became involved in an emerging Black German movement. In addition to writing and performing poetry worldwide, she also wrote a Master's thesis on the history of Black Germans from the Middle Ages until the 1980s.
4. For essential readings on critical race theory see Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2012).
5. "A breath of freedom," is the phrase Colin Powell used to describe his time in Germany. See Höhn and Klimke (2010, 1).
6. For information on the sterilization and internment of Black Germans during Nazi Germany, see Campt (2004) and Lusane (2002).
7. The version of Afropessimism to which I refer here is what B'béri and Louw (2011, 337) describe as the assumption that there is "something wrong with Africans." Within this very simplistic notion, there are in fact many different threads. Nevertheless, whether an Afropessimist blames the African continent's social, political and economic problems on bad governments, colonialism or simply Africans more generally, as de B'béri and Louw point out: "the heart of this discourse derives from the fact that Africans are failing to live up to a set of criteria generated by Westerners who want it to develop such a way that the continent would mesh neatly into the globalised economy built by Europeans and Americans over the past two centuries" (2011, 337).
8. A film adaptation can be viewed online, under the German title *Neger, Neger, Schornsteinpfeger* (Negro, Negro, Chimney Sweep) with English subtitles.

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