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OTHERS-FROM-WITHIN FROM WITHOUT Afro-German Subject Formation and the Challenge of a Counter-Discourse

by Michelle M. Wright

Like many of my colleagues in African-American, postcolonial and African Diasporic studies, I first learned about Afro-Germans through the publication of *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (also published in English, six years later, as *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out*), an anthology of critical essays, poetry, and biographical sketches edited by May Ayim,¹ Katharina Oguntoye and Dagmar Schultz. What first struck me was that, whether in poetic or prosaic form, these different analyses of how Afro-German identity is interpolated by white Germans—or more accurately, *not* interpolated—speak to a unique set of circumstances which I had not found in the diverse array of 19th- and 20th-century African-American literature and theory. Indeed, even as my graduate and post-graduate studies moved to incorporate Black British and Black French communities for a comparative analysis of counter-discursive strategies in subject formation, the Afro-German situation remained unique.

In this article I want to examine both the material and discursive circumstances that produce Afro-German identity and the ways in which this theoretical conundrum has been approached in Afro-German counter-discourse. It is hard enough to respond to racist discourses that to begin with prefer fantasy to fact (Blacks are over-sexed, morbidly violent, genetically inferior, etc.); how does one then respond to a discourse that seems incapable of understanding the basic facts of your existence?

As any person of African descent born in the West will tell you, racist Western discourses are often numbingly predictable regardless of which North American or Western European country one happens to be in. Specifically, the way in which Blacks are Othered in these discourses is often quite similar, even as the strategies deployed by different Black writers and thinkers differ. Blacks are often depicted as atavistic relics—primitive, savage, closer to nature, and therefore very much out of place in such a civilized realm as the West in the 21st century. Although scholars are still at work in tracing the origins of these superstitions, thanks to works such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *Figures in Black* and Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze's *Racism and the Enlightenment*, we can find early examples of these beliefs in the philosophical treatises of 18th- and 19th-century European and American thinkers such as Emmanuel Kant, Thomas Jefferson, David Hume and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

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It is Hegel's depiction of the Black that has the greatest resonance for my article. In the introduction to his *Philosophy of History*, Hegel argues that Africa—and so the “Negro”—stands outside of “analytical history,” or the history of intellectual, cultural and technological development (of which Europe, and Germany more specifically, is the apotheosis). In the dialectic of analytical history, then, Hegel's Negro has no place—or does he? Although Hegel writes that Africa “is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit” and “What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History,” rhetorically Hegel in fact places the Negro as the *antithesis* of the (white, male) European in his dialectic of history.² That is, while Hegel's ideal European is free, reasonable, rational and in full possession of his will, the Hegelian Negro is unfree, unreasonable, irrational, and lacking will. Theoretically, Hegel's Negro does not exist in the dialectic; between the lines, however, the Negro is the necessary antithesis to the white so that the latter can, by contrast, be thus established as superior, civilized, and therefore a subject.

What does Hegel's *Philosophy* have to do with Afro-German counter-discourse? In his *Philosophy*, Hegel posits the African as an Other who lies outside of Germany's borders, yet he possesses a particular resonance for (white, male) German subjects as their antithesis.³ This type of alterity varies from, say, Thomas Jefferson's depiction of the Negro in *Notes on Virginia*, in which the Negro is also Other in much the same way (primitive, savage) but, by existing within U.S. borders, posits a direct threat to the (white, male) American subject. Elsewhere, I have defined these two variations as the “Other from Without” and the “Other from Within” respectively. The former, like Hegel's Negro, exists as the Other for what was ultimately to become colonialist discourse—primitive savages who exist elsewhere and thus should be conquered and “civilized” as part of the (white) nation's manifest destiny. The latter speaks to Jefferson's attempt to claim that, while existing (and most likely born and raised) within the (white) nation's borders, American Blacks are nonetheless foreign—a disease, one might say, on the national body—and thus not only outsiders, but most likely malevolent outsiders who, if unfettered, will do harm to that body.⁴

In both Britain and the United States, racist discourse posits Blacks as Others from Within—physically part of the nation, but in all other ways utterly foreign and thus utterly incapable of being integrated into that nation. In France, with some variation, the attitude is much the same. In Germany, as the contributors to *Showing Our Colors* attest, Afro-Germans born and raised in Germany are consistently misrecognized as *Africans*, even after extensive conversation has established a German birthplace, parents, and education for that Afro-German. Within the categories defined above, the Afro-German is both an Other-from-Within (a member of that country) and an Other-from-Without (misrecognized as an African).

The German presence in Africa was relatively brief, less widespread than its French and English counterparts, and the origins of the Afro-German population are not focused in this colonialist moment. The German discourse of linking Blackness to valuable colonial commodities and defining it as an external, abnormal physical state (Blackness as the result of drinking too much cocoa, becoming dirty, etc.) reflects a

history which reveals that, unlike Britain, France and the United States, the “German Black” is not read as an Other-from-Within, but an Other-from-Without.⁵ In obvious ways, this seeming paradox can be linked to Germany’s brief colonial history in West and East Africa. An anecdote that recurs throughout almost every personal narrative found in *Farbe bekennen*, as well as Hugel-Marshall’s and Massaquoi’s autobiographies, sums this up best. In “Three Afro-German Women in Conversation with Dagmar Schultz: The First Exchange for This Book” from the English translation of *Farbe bekennen*, Laura Baum and May Ayim, despite their widely varied backgrounds, bond over a common experience:

MAY: It often happens with me that people have their own expectations and ignore what I say. When I tell them that I grew up here and have spent my entire life here, the question might still come afterward; “Yes, and when are you going back?”⁶

or,

LAURA: [...] People think I’m a foreigner. If I speak flawless German, I get this “admiration.” (Opitz 151)

Encountering this inability on the part of many white Germans to understand so simple a concept as one being both Black *and* German is most likely unique to the Afro-German experience, and presents a complicated challenge to a counter-discourse.⁷ This refusal to understand Afro-Germans as German, much less as equals, is an oft-recurring theme in the German discourse on the white German subject and the African Other. African Americans have been and still are considered an *American problem*; Afro-Germans have only recently claimed a presence in the German imagination, although this is more true in large urban centers rather than the more rural towns and villages that have effected the greatest changes. As many of the authors in *Farbe bekennen* complain, too many white Germans are either resistant or incapable of imagining someone who is both Black *and* German. As many Afro-Germans relate, many white Germans, even after a detailed explanation from their non-white interlocutor, still attempt to determine what African country the subject comes from. In short, the Afro-German identity is not the *antithesis* in the dialectic of (white) German subjectivity: *it is simply non-existent*. Whereas African Americans function in white American racist discourse as the Other-from-Within (i.e., they are recognized as having been born and raised in the U.S., even if racists believe they do not belong there), white Germans insistently and consistently misrecognize Afro-Germans as *Africans*, or Others-from-Without, even though they obviously share the same language and culture. In other words, unlike African Americans, Afro-Germans must confront a racist discourse directed at Africans, rather than Afro-Germans. Technically speaking, there is no such thing as an *anti-Afro-German* discourse, only an *anti-African* discourse, raising the question of how one, as an Other-from-Within, should respond to a discourse that posits one as an Other-from-Without.⁸

To date, there is a paucity of Afro-German counter-discourses that move beyond the most efficacious method of response, namely with a narrative of one's life that challenges and confounds German assumptions. As Blacks born and raised in Germany, with all of its attendant uniqueness, Afro-Germans face a different type of Othering; being misread as African Others-from-Without means they cannot deploy the same strategies we have seen deployed by other African Diasporic figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois in *Souls of Black Folk* (double consciousness), or Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (the "white mask" of the title). The most common strategy one finds is autobiography, and the literal writing of oneself into the nation. In her article "The Private/Plural Selves of Afro-German Women and the Search for a Public Voice," Carolyn Hodges argues that the strategy of autobiography as used by these Afro-German women speaks directly to the concept of *métissage*, or "unified plurality" as developed by Françoise Lionnet.⁹ This "unified plurality," I would argue, can be more specifically rendered as Diasporic identity. In the rest of this article I will show how both this "anti-African" German discourse is best countered through a Diasporic model of counter-discourse, and how Afro-Germans enable this model in both their literature and their sociopolitical activities.

Beyond the most prevalent genre, autobiography, the Afro-German production of formal histories has also been used, albeit as of this writing there are only a handful of works in publication. *Farbe bekennen* and Katharina Oguntoye's 1997 *Eine afro-deutsche Geschichte (An Afro-German History)* provide detailed histories of Blacks in Germany, but to date, the only Afro-German to approach this question through fiction has been May Ayim. Two poems that focus on the type of encounter detailed above, tellingly named "Afro-German I" and "Afro-German II," are structured as transcripts from a conversation between a white German and an Afro-German, although this "transcript" restricts us to the statements and responses, underscoring the metaphorical erasure of self, or material existence, that the Afro-German undergoes in German racist discourse.

The dialogue-as-monologue Ayim constructs through these poems also highlights the insistent misreading and redefinition that operates in the German imagination; the Afro-German is consistently and stubbornly recast as an African. In the first lines of "Afro-German I," the white German, using the polite "you," comments:

Sie sind afro-deutsch?
 . . . ah, ich verstehe: afrikanisch und deutsch.
 Ist ja 'ne interessante Mischung!"

[You're Afro-German?
 . . . ah, I understand: African and German.
 There's an interesting mix!]

The German moves from astonishment and incomprehension towards a formula he can understand by (re)producing identity as a binary: "African and German."¹⁰ In the following paragraphs, we see Afro-German identity, as it is understood by the white interlocutor—a forcibly simplified subjectivity reduced to an "African" identity. The

C A L L A L O O

white German first translates the Afro-German identity into a derogatory category with roots in 19th-century race science, simultaneously performing and disclaiming the starkly racist overtones—yet still using the polite form of “you”!:

“Wissen Sie, manche, die denken ja immer noch,
die Mulatten, die würden’s nicht
so weit bringen
wie die Weißen”

[“You know, some folks, they still think,
Mulattos, aren’t
so far along
as Whites.”¹¹

This hypocritical disclaimer (identifiable to most African Americans by the preface “I’m not racist, but . . .”) is yet another way in which the minority interlocutor is silenced. If confronted with his racist assumptions, the white German can simply respond that *he* doesn’t personally believe that sentiment, he is simply pointing out how *other* people feel—and thus skirting the real issue at hand, namely, if those views are not your own, why do you feel compelled to air them, to voluntarily (and in a non sequitor) speak for those with whom you supposedly disagree?

The schizophrenic deployment of insults, disguised as reports from a third party who is not present, then moves to fully redefining the Afro-German as African, as one who does not belong on German soil:

Wenn Se fleißig sind mit studieren,
können Se ja Ihren Leuten
in Afrika helfen: Dafür
sind Sie doch prädestiniert”

[If you work hard at your studies
you could really help your people in Africa
you were predestined for it!] (Ayim 19)¹²

The geographical disconnect of (re)locating the Afro-German subject to Africa from Germany is accompanied by a temporal disconnect, as the white German urges, almost commands the interlocutor to devote his or her life to a career as a goodwill worker in Africa, carrying on the colonizing mission to civilize the savages. In a subtle move, the formal German you (“Sie”), becomes lazily obscured as “Se”, suggesting that the speaker is slowly but steadily invoking a racialized hierarchy in which he, as white and “really” German, takes up the “white man’s burden,” only this time instead of going himself, charges the half-breed to educate him or herself and then spread that civilizing influence.¹³ In arguing that the Afro-German is predestined for this type of mission, the speaker’s understanding of racial difference as biological and hierarchical is fully revealed.

There is a space between the last two paragraphs, and the final one begins with ellipses and a question, "Wie meinen Sie das?" ("How do you mean that?"), suggesting the Afro-German has responded to this Carl Peters-like address.¹⁴ The speaker's response is angry, rejecting the (implied) accusation of racism to argue that the Afro-German does not have the right to "cast the first stone" as it were, and therefore should remain silent altogether. "Afro-German I"'s simulated "conversation" quietly reveals that the Afro-German subject has never really been allowed to speak in the first place. Indeed, on first reading it appears she has been denied her agency altogether; yet by placing the focus on the white German's discourse, Ayim highlights how that discourse elides an obvious reality (the Afro-German), so that it may retreat into a fantasy of colonialist binaries where all the Germans are white, and all the Blacks are African primitives.

Another, equally important challenge with which Afro-Germans must grapple: it is not only the white German perception of Blacks and Blackness that bestows the Afro-German subject with certain unique aspects, but Afro-German history as well. These aspects should play heavily into any comparison we make between Afro-Germans and other Black subjects in the United States, France and England. When viewed in relation to the shared slave and/or colonial histories that produced African-American, Black British and French African communities in the West, the Afro-German population is a comparatively diverse group. Most were born and raised apart from one another and, although they share knowledge of German racism and ignorance most whites and non-Afro-Germans cannot fully know, they come from a wide range of class, ethnic, geographical, as well as historical backgrounds. Some Afro-Germans have Afro-German parents, some have adoptive parents who are all white; some, although born in Germany, grew up all over Europe, the United States, and/or East or West Africa. Some come from upper class backgrounds, others grew up wholly destitute; some were raised as West Germans, others born and raised in the former Eastern bloc.

While this vast number of differentials may strike some as yet one more obstacle to securing a positive and/or coherent form of identity or subject status, the Afro-German response to the diversity seems to have moved them beyond the more nationalist and restrictive understanding of "Blackness" that operates in many Black communities outside of Germany, and further towards what Paul Gilroy and Audre Lorde have identified as a "Diasporic" understanding of the Black subject. Although the term "Afro-German" is commonly used to denote someone of both African and German ancestry, there are a wide variety of terms by which Black Germans define themselves, include others, and explicitly identify with other groups of people both within and without Germany. "Black German," a term coming into greater currency, speaks to all Germans who identify as racial minorities, most often including peoples of Turkish and South Asian descent. The term "Afro-European" is also becoming more prevalent, deployed to specifically make common cause with peoples of African descent all over Europe, as well as those (such as Katharina Oguntoye) who have lived in other European countries in addition to Germany. One also finds Germans of African descent identifying as "African" and German (some are nation specific, indicating the specific country of origin of their family, such as Ghana or Cameroon),

or simply as “African,” or simply as “German.” Still others identify as African American, pointing to their father’s citizenship.¹⁵ Most often, Afro-Germans identify themselves differently depending on the context or group, understanding themselves as connected to a rather rich array of nations, ethnicities and communities.

This process of identification is far from passive in its construction: there are a number of Afro-German and Black German sociopolitical movements and groups that both reach out to Black, gay and women’s communities across the world, and make those connections in their own travels. At the moment, the two largest groups are ADEFRA (*AFro-DEutsche FRAuen*, or Afro-German Women), with its focus on the intersection between anti-racism and feminism, and the *Initiative Schwarze Deutsch*, or ISD (Black German Initiative), which is open to both men and women. The strategy of elective affinities is explicitly stated in each, as one can see on the first page of ADEFRA’s website:

ADEFRA is a forum in which we, as Black women, can develop our strengths and unfold our identities together. Therefore, our necessary strong points are mutual exchanges of histor(y)/(ies), culture(s) with everyday Black women (in West Germany and worldwide) through our similarities and differences (age, Socialization, origin, lifestyle, etc). It is also important for us to make public the perspectives of Black women in politics and history.¹⁶

Given this explicit construction of their group as Diasporic rather than national, it is not surprising to find that the Afro-German activists most often point to Audre Lorde, after May Ayim, as one of their most inspiring leaders and organizers, from the time she arrived in Berlin to teach two seminars in minority women’s literature at the *Frei Universität* in 1985 all the way up to her death in 1993.¹⁷

This Diasporic orientation can also be found in Afro-German autobiographies and histories. The majority of Afro-German writing traces the subject as s/he narrates through their Diasporic past and future, locating the national origins of their parents and grandparents, and then retracing those steps as they visit both nuclear and extended family in the United States, Ghana, Cameroon, Togo, Italy, England and elsewhere. As I noted earlier, on a smaller scale, these texts narrate the Afro-German in search of a subject status that is often in conflict with German nationalist discourse. On a much wider scale, these personal narratives “perform” the Diaspora by giving us a *Bildungsroman* for identity, beginning with its entirely nationalistic origins that begin with Germans, Cameroonians, Ghanaians, etc., then moving to compound national identities (most often in the arrival of French African troops and African-American soldiers during World War I and World War II respectively), and then finishing with the “mature” identity wholly Diasporic in its nature. This “culminating” subjectivity is most often evinced through the Afro-German as a product of not just single, but *compound* national identities (e.g., an Afro-German mother and African-American father, etc.) that also importantly intersect with gender and sexual categories.¹⁸ More than seeking inclusion and protesting exclusion, these texts, in “performing” the Diaspora, reveal to us the increasing uselessness of restrictive definitions that confine themselves to the heteropatriarchal mythologies of race and nation.

Although her poetry focuses on a range of issues, Ayim also makes a point of providing an effective counter-discourse for the Afro-German subject. In "Afro-Deutsch I" and "Afro-Deutsch II," Ayim uses a strategy also located in Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk* and Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*: ventriloquism. Yet she uses it to different ends, namely, to reveal the illogical spatial and temporal assumptions that emerge from those subjects who are unable to comprehend, much less speak, the material, performed truth of Diasporic identities that do not so easily align with monologic definitions of race and nation. In their use of ventriloquism, both Du Bois and Césaire adhered to concepts of race and nation that, while not as monologic as its white Western model, nonetheless read the Black subject in the West as a synthesis of these two concepts.

As a member of a generation who has benefited from the struggles and victories of previous generations of Blacks in the West, Ayim can now go further by mocking the white speaking subject as the one who is sadly misguided by outdated and outmoded concepts based on a dialectical, nationalist understanding of the subject and Other. Ayim demonstrates her fluency with this German discourse not only by writing in her native language (a "strategy" that we must admit to be largely intuitive rather than carefully planned), but by writing a *spoken* German with its contractions and colloquialisms. Like Rodgers and Lorde, Ayim also accesses other historical eras, but in this case only to locate the white German as a retrograde reactionary whose language and thought locates him or her squarely outside of the contemporary discourse. In Ayim's counter-discourse, the ideal is marked not only by its reliance on racial and national myths, but by its retrograde constructions. Whereas Negritudists such as Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire, or the poet, activist and essayist Audre Lorde, use the West African past to help constitute the Black subject, Ayim's African Diasporic ties are present and alive in her, and it is the white German (nation) that lives in the past.

The Afro-German community is still very much in formation, and it is difficult to make more than the most preliminary observations on its discourse of the subject. The community has also lost two of its greatest leaders and organizers, May Ayim and Audre Lorde, although the foundation that the community has built through its organizations is thriving. We may also see the term "Afro-German" fade from use as these organizations continue to build coalitions with other non-white minorities both in Germany and other European nations; indeed, the terms "Black German" and "Afro-European" are increasingly on the rise. Although one of the newest sociopolitical minority communities relative to Britain and France, their literature and politics reveal an extensively developed Diasporic orientation.

NOTES

My very great thanks to Tina Campt, who has unstintingly given of her time and expertise through every stage of this article.

1. Ayim changed her adopted name of Opitz to her biological father's name Ayim after the publication of *Farbe bekennen*.
2. See G.W.F. Hegel's *The Philosophy of History*.

3. I might also add “property owning” to my modifiers of the Hegelian subject. The same is true for Jefferson who, decades before Hegel, assumed that only men of property need recognize one another as privileged equals—Orwellian oxymoron intended.
4. Long before my derivations, Etienne Balibar offered a similar distinction between “internal” and “external” Others, based on his own research and theory. While there are several smaller distinctions between us, the most relevant difference is that Balibar suggests different racial minorities are Othered in different ways. I argue that one racial minority can be Othered in different ways, depending on their material circumstances. See Balibar and Wallerstein’s *Race, Nation and Class*.
5. As the succeeding sections of this article will show, France and Britain are not entirely homologous in their racial discourse.
6. See May Opitz’s *Showing Our Colors*.
7. That is to say, I do not think that this wholesale rejection of a Black citizenry is “natural” to any Northern European (read: blonde hair, blue eyes) nation. Despite the much smaller presence of Black Swedes and Black Danes (the majority of whom, like Afro-Germans, are biracial), in addition to the typical anti-Black sentiment present in all majority white nations across the globe, metropolitan Danes and Swedes tend to assume that those Blacks who are obviously biracial are in fact Danish and Swedish, and will speak to them in their native language. To my knowledge, the only other Western European nation that conceives its citizenry as wholly antithetical (perhaps even more so than Germany) to “blackness” is Austria, which of course has a long and overlapping history with Germany.
8. As Tina Campt has noted in discussion with me, it is not only the “German side” of Afro-German identity that produces problems in dominant discourse; it is also the “Black side” of this identity. Most Africans and peoples of African descent grow up either within or with access to Black communities, communities that boast centuries-long traditions, cultures and histories. Because most Afro-Germans grow up in a majority white German community, constructing an identity without a pre-established collective identity poses unique problems.
9. See Carolyn Hodges’ “The Private/Plural Selves of Afro-German Women and the Search for a Public Voice”: “The self-portraits and the poetry presented by the women [in *Farbe bekennen*] reveal that a braiding of the plural selves has occurred in varying degrees—in some cases still rather tenuously—but the fact that it has begun to take place within this marginalized group and the manner in which it is expressed call attention to issues of racism and sexism which parallel those raised elsewhere in feminist literature and in African-American Studies.”
10. I am assuming the interlocutor is a man because in “Afro-German II,” which seems to continue the one-sided conversation, the speaker makes a sexist comment.
11. See May Ayim’s *Blues in Schwarz Weiß* (*Blues in Black and White*, although Ayim has a double word play here through homonyms. In German, “white” is “Weiß, and the first person conjugation of “to know” is weiß, so we have *Blues in Black White* as well as *Blues in Black Knowing*).
12. German grammar makes it impossible to honor the line break without rendering the lines unreadable in English.
13. The practice of training light-skinned Blacks to work as administrators, missionaries and educators—representatives of white civilization to their “darker” (i.e. less civilized) fellow colonials—was present in French, British and German colonies in Africa, as well as in the United States.
14. The German version of the Great White Hunter, famous in both literature and film.
15. One will also find the term “African German,” although I have only heard that used by African Americans, not by Black Germans.
16. “ADEFRA ist ein Forum in dem wir als Schwarze Frauen gemeinsam unsere Stärken entwickeln und unsere Identitäten entfalten können. Wesentliche Schwerpunkte sind daher die Auseinandersetzung mit Geschichte(n), Kulture(n) und Lebensrealitäten Schwarzen Frauen (in der BRD und weltweit) und mit unseren Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschieden (Alter, Sozialisten, Herkunft, Lebensform, etc.). Wichtig für uns ist dabei auch, die Perspektive Schwarzer Frauen in Bezug auf Politik und Geschichte öffentlich zu machen.”
17. Maryse Condé has also been an active contact and supporter.
18. In fact, the majority of German and American scholarly engagements with contemporary Afro-German discourses focuses on the intersection between minority, gender and sexual identities, an intersection reflected in many of the autobiographical sketches from *Farbe bekennen* and Hügel-Marshall’s personal narrative.

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