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May Ayim: A Woman in the Margin of German Society

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

MAY AYIM:
A WOMAN IN THE MARGIN OF GERMAN SOCIETY

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I would like to dedicate this work to my parents
for always supporting me in my studies and my life,
and Jason Ramrattan for his eternal patience and love.

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ABSTRACT

This work explores the life of the Afro-German writer May Ayim by analyzing her writings as well as by discussing the social circumstances in which she lived. Chapter 1 provides a look at the Ayim's life, with special emphasis on major factors influencing her childhood. The effects of the personal as well as social pressures that Ayim dealt with as a child and young adult are also discussed. Chapter 2 focuses on the history of Afro-German children born shortly after World War II. Chapter 3 includes an explanation of Minor Literature and an examination of May Ayim as an author of such literature. Her importance as such is established. Due to Ayim's position outside the mainstream of German society, social factors that greatly affected her life as a result of this situation are discussed in Chapter 4. These factors are: identity, culture, and ethnicity. In Chapter 5 Ayim's attempts to incorporate both the white and black aspects of herself despite the deeply rooted history of racism in Germany are also discussed. Chapter 6 includes an examination of the toll that Ayim's familial and social experiences played on her feelings of romantic love, especially toward another Afro-German. Chapter 7 examines the exhaustion that Ayim felt toward the end of her life.

Introduction

This thesis explores the life and writings of the Afro-German author May Ayim. It pays special attention to the political and social surroundings in which this author lived as well as the literature she produced. Ayim expressed her views as an Afro-German, a woman and a political activist in a variety of ways and this discussion examines her many vantage points through the close analysis of her words. To gain a better understanding of Ayim's life and work it is necessary to take a close look at the society of which she was a part. Due to the special political and social situation in Germany after the Second World War, Ayim, like other Afro-Germans, faced a very difficult battle. She struggled to find her position in a society that questioned her right to belong. Although there is a long history of dark-skinned people living in Germany, this study focuses primarily on the period after World War II and examines concepts of culture, race and ethnicity in order to determine what role these concepts play in the experiences of Afro-Germans like Ayim. From *Negerhuren* to *Mischlingskinder* to *Afro-Deutsche* the treatment of Afro-Germans and social awareness of their situation slowly improved between the 1940s and the Germany of today. As a minority of only about 34,000¹, their membership in German society still remains largely unaccepted by other Germans, yet writers and poets like May Ayim tried hard to exert their right to belong upon their countrymen (Goertz, "Borderless" 72). Ayim's life was marked by a sense of displacement and not belonging as she tried desperately to find her place in German and African society. She also found joy and support, however, among others who suffered the same plight. These opposing sentiments are evident in her sorrowful, regretful poems as well as her letters filled with hope and determination. The complexity of her character is reflected in the myriad of emotions her works express. A careful analysis of her personal history and experiences in German society will help us to gain a better understanding of her extraordinary life, her unfortunate death and above all it promises to illuminate the place of Ayim's contribution to German literature.

The following will include an overview of Ayim's upbringing and its effect on her character and personal relationships. It will take a closer look at how her poetry treats issues such as self-acceptance, and feelings of love and otherness in German society as

well as within her family. To better understand the atmosphere in which Ayim was raised there will be an ensuing discussion of Germany's history of racism with particular emphasis on the time period shortly after World War II, the time in which Ayim was born. The discussion will then move on to an examination of the role of minor literature and the importance of minor authors like Ayim. It will continue by discussing the important role played by identity, culture and ethnicity in the lives of people like Ayim, who live in the fringes and are seeking a place in society. In the following chapter the theoretical aspects of the race dilemma will be discussed as well as Ayim's attempt to unify her black and white selves. Finally, a close look at Ayim's love life will be revealed with emphasis on the role played in it by society and familial relationships.

While Ayim's poetry is that of a minor literature in Germany, her poetic reflections reveal common experiences of people who live their lives as a minority and want to voice their point of view from the margins of society.

CHAPTER 1

GROWING UP BLACK IN GERMANY

May Ayim was born in Hamburg, Germany to Ursula Andler and Emmanuel Ayim on May 3, 1960 and immediately brought to a childrens' home (*Blues* 169).² Although her father was a medical student at the time and wished to bring his child to Ghana to be raised by a childless sister, he had no rights over the out-of-wedlock baby and so the baby remained in Germany (Mertins, *Blues* 144). After eighteen months Sylvia Brigitte Gertrud, nicknamed May, was fostered by a white family by the name of Opitz, which already had natural children with whom Ayim was raised.³ The pain of being abandoned by her birth parents is evident in many of Ayim's poems; and although she had the stability of living with the Opitz family until her completion of Gymnasium, she was greatly troubled by this as a child. Feelings of abandonment combined with the extreme strictness and even beatings that she suffered from the Opitz family was a great strain on the private and sensitive child. Her foster parents raised May in a strict atmosphere in order to turn her into their idea of the perfect child. Their intentions were good but their methods were harsh. "By being strict the foster family wanted to make a model child out of the daughter of a (in their opinion) wayward woman and a Ghanaian medical student, to give the lie to all 'racial prejudices'" (Mertins, *Blues* 144). Instead they created an atmosphere where May writes that she felt only, "Fear of breaking into pieces from beatings and scoldings and of not being able to find yourself again" (Mertins, *Blues* 144). Looking back on this heavy-handed upbringing Ayim writes in the poem "mama":

sag mama
warum hast du mich
so oft und so hart geschlagen
nur weil ich ins bett machte
noch mit zwölf jahren
glaubtest du wirklich
ich will dir nur schaden (*Nachtgesang* 21)

(tell me mama / why did you / beat me so often and so hard / just because i wet the bed / even at the age of twelve / did you really believe / i only wanted to harm you; Ekpenyong Ani, *Blues* 24)⁴

Although her parents did not intend to be cruel, the lack of understanding that marred Ayim's upbringing is clear in this poem. Instead of consoling a child whose emotional state causes her to wet the bed, this behavior was ignorantly interpreted as deviance. Unfortunately, being an Afro-German child who was given up at birth had a negative emotional impact on May, but it seems that the manifestations of this fact were greatly misunderstood by her foster parents as bad behavior.

At times she wished to sleep and never wake again and at others she slept with a razor blade under her pillow, so did she sometimes desire death (Mertins, *Blues* 144-145). As she grew older the tensions between herself and her parents did not ease. May reported that after coming home late one night an ensuing argument resulted in her being thrown out of the home at the age of nineteen, a story that the family denies. Her contact with the Opitz family was only scant after that time, though she never severed it entirely (Mertins, *Blues* 144-145).

Ayim graduated from the Münster Episcopal school "Friedenschule" in 1979 having successfully completed the Abitur and with the qualifications to be an assistant nurse. She went on to study German and Social Studies at a teacher's college in Münster. After a trip to Israel and Egypt later that year she began attending the University of Regensburg and changed her majors to Psychology and Education. In the next few years Ayim traveled abroad again to Israel, but also to Nairobi, Kenya, and Ghana (*Blues* 169). It was in Kenya that Ayim first made an attempt to build a relationship with her father, the man who occasionally visited when she was a child living with her foster family. She

knew him as Onkel E, the name she was always most comfortable calling him. He was working as a professor of medicine and although he was an important figure in Ayim's life, her first visit to him did not lay the foundation of a close relationship (Mertins, *Blues* 146). He became the face of her African self, but too many unanswered questions remained and too much time had passed.

Ayim's contributions to literature and society began with her 1986 thesis from the University of Regensburg, "Afro-Deutsche. Ihre Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte auf dem Hintergrund gesellschaftlicher Veränderungen" ("Afro-Germans: Their Cultural and Social History on the Background of Societal Change"). Her thesis was published the next year in *Farbe Bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte (Showing Our Colors: Afro German Women Speak Out)*, as part of a book edited by Katharina Oguntoye, Dagmar Schulz, and herself. She then became a co-founder of the Initiative Schwarze Deutsche (Initiative of Black Germans and Black People in Germany) in 1986 (*Blues* 169). May never ceased her involvement with groups that sought to increase understanding of the Afro-German situation.

Ayim's return trip to Ghana with the International Youth Community Service in 1986 was a pivotal experience for her. Although she was disappointed with the good intentioned, though often uncompleted projects that the group undertook, she truly enjoyed the close contact she had with the native Ghanaians during tours of nearby villages. This contact took on special importance for her, because although perceived as a white European, she was also accepted as a Ghanaian because of her paternal heritage. The feelings of acceptance she experienced in that strange and foreign country were something rare and cherished in Ayim's life, and she was warmly welcomed to return again. Yet as remarkable an experience as it was for a woman who had always been questioned about her identity and her non-German roots to be blindly accepted by strangers in a foreign country, this was perhaps not the most remarkable part of her visit to Ghana. Through the help of a friend, Ayim was able to visit her father's native village. After many years her father had returned to Ghana and was again residing in the village. Ayim saw her father for the first time in many years during this visit, and more importantly, she finally met her father's family. Ayim, at the age of 26, met a large number of relatives, including her grandfather, then 80, who greeted her with outspread

arms and a warm embrace. Although Ayim spent her life in Germany, it seemed suddenly a distant and cold place where she never had been or would be accepted as she was in this very foreign, far-away land (*Grenzenlos* 52-59).

Despite her sometimes negative view of Western culture, it was home to Germany that she always returned. After several trips to exotic places like Brazil, Cuba and Senegal for work as well as pleasure, Ayim re-entered school, this time to study Speech Therapy. Ayim incorporated her interest in racism and sexism into her studies as can be seen by the title of her thesis: “Ethnozentrismus und Sexismus in der Sprachtherapie” (“Ethnocentrism and Sexism in Speech Therapy”). After graduation in 1990 Ayim worked as a speech therapist at a school for mentally disabled children but within a few years she did this work free-lance. She returned again to Africa, this time to South Africa for a study and research trip in conjunction with the Freie Universität Berlin (*Blues* 170).

Ayim loved the fast-paced and multicultural air in Berlin, the place she made her permanent home. After her return from South Africa she accepted lectureships at the Alice Soloman School for Social Work and Social Pedagogy, the Freie Universität Berlin in the Department of Education and Institute for Sociology, and at the Technische Universität. She also spoke at the conference “Education in Transition” about education and education planning in the post-Apartheid society of South Africa (*Blues* 170). Although Ayim had visited several African countries, she felt most at home in South Africa. In Ghana she was still considered an outsider, though a welcome one. In South Africa, however, she felt for the first time that she truly blended in with the crowd of varying shades of brown, a truly unique experience for her (Mertins, *Blues* 147).

It was during this same period of her life that she decided to adopt the name Ayim, her African father’s name, as her pen name. She would have preferred to legally change her name to Ayim, but the German government did not allow this (Mertins, *Blues* 145). The same year, 1992, she enrolled again at the Freie Universität Berlin as a Ph.D. student in Education. Her thesis topic again reveals the issues that continued to motivate Ayim’s research: “Ethnozentrismus und Rassismus im Therapiebereich Ethnocentrism and Racism in Therapy” (“Therapiebereich Ethnocentrism and Racism in Therapy”). She continued to speak at conferences and festivals such as CELAFI (Celebrated African

Identity), African Women Living in Europe, and the 11th International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books.

Her active participation in current affairs led to her invitation to the European Round Table on Human Rights and Cultural Politics in a Changing Europe: The Right to Participate in Cultural Life, the Council of Europe and UNESCO. She also produced more works such as *Entfernte Verbindungen* and several years later *Blues in schwarz-weiß* (*Blues in Black and White*), works that give the reader insight into the sensitive poet and politically oriented woman she was (*Blues* 171-172).

Although Ayim continued to speak, give readings and interviews at conferences as well as on television news programs she suffered from mental and physical afflictions that prestige could not mend. Busy organizing “Black History Month” Ayim worked without eating or sleeping for weeks until she broke down entirely. She was first admitted into the psychiatric ward of Auguste Viktoria Hospital in Berlin in January of 1996. Her friends and biological father visited her daily, though no one seemed able to comfort her. After investigating Ayim’s earlier complaint of vision problems she was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis and all medication for her psychosis and neuroleptica were abruptly discontinued. She was discharged in April and it seemed her will to live had been broken. She suffered from a deep depression and before being hospitalized again in June she attempted suicide. Ayim’s second hospitalization was shorter, and she was back at work at the Alice Solomon School in mid-July. Several of those close to her believe that she could not bear to face additional strife after a lifetime of hurt and struggle. Sadly, on August 9th, 1996 she jumped to her death from the 13th story of a building in Berlin (Mertins, *Blues* 155-56).

Ayim’s Struggle with “Otherness”

Ayim's feelings of otherness within the German culture are addressed directly and indirectly in both her letters and poems. In her 1984 "Ein Brief aus Münster" she writes that as a child:

Meine Sozialisation war die eines >>deutschen<< Mädchens inmitten einer deutschen Umwelt (in meiner Familie gab und gibt es keine Kontakte zu Ausländern). Ich habe einen deutschen Namen und >>genieße<< mit meinem deutschen Paß die Privilegien einer Deutschen als >>Inländerin<<. Ich spreche keine afrikanische Sprache, war noch nie im Geburtsland meines Vaters, kurz, ich bin keine Ausländerin. (*Grenzenlos* 10-11)

(My socialization was that of a "German" girl within a German milieu (in my family there was and is no contact with foreigners). I have a German name and, having also German nationality, I get to "enjoy" the privileges of being a German "national." I speak no African language, have never been in the land of my father's birth; in short, I am no foreigner. To me it's unnecessary to make an issue of my "Germanness"; Adams 19-20).

Despite Ayim's unquestionable Germanness she was constantly confronted with people who questioned her about her background, only to have more questions after she honestly responded. In her poem "Afro-deutsch" Ayim attempts to explain the kind of insulting ignorance she must endure and that always reminds her that she is seen as "other." "Sie sind afro-deutsch? / ...ah, ich verstehe: afrikanisch *und* deutsch." "Wollen Sie denn mal zurück? / Wie? Sie war'n noch nie in der Heimat von Papa? / Ist ja traurig" (*Farbe Bekennen* 138; You're Afro-German? / ...oh, I see: African and German. / What? You've never been in your Dad's home country? / That's so sad; Ilse Müller, *Blues* 14). Ayim tries through this one-sided interaction to show the reader the kinds of responses, which became commonplace for her. She makes it clear that the silent side, Ayim's side, is not important, because the speaker has already decided much about who she is based on her appearance. The speaker proves this by going on to say:

Wenn Se [*sic*] fleißig sind mit Studieren
können Se [*sic*] ja Ihren Leuten in Afrika helfen: Dafür
sind Sie doch prädestiniert,
auf Sie hör'n die doch bestimmt,
während unsereins –

ist ja so'n Kulturgefälle... (*Farbe bekennen* 138)

(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...; Ilse Müller, *Blues* 14-15)

Her personal stance as a strong and proud Afro-German woman developed in Ayim only over time. Her confliction over being a black child in the midst of a white society had a strong effect on her as a young girl. In the school system Ayim writes that she was subject to a multitude of humiliating experiences as the only black child. In addition to the lack of information about Africans in Germany, she was subjected to cultural ignorance that is apparent in songs like “Zehn kleine Negerlein,” a song, which Ayim was shocked to find in the “Berliner Institut für Fort- und Weiterbildung und Schulentwicklung” as late as 1994 (*Grenzenlos* 118-119). Not all similar experiences had a consciously negative impact on the little girl, however, since they were simply a part of the reality that she only began to question over time. When Ayim, as the only black child, was asked to play the role of the devil in a second grade play, Ayim reports that it seemed clear to her as well as the others that she was best suited for the role and certainly could not play the part of an angel. That role was given to a blond child. This kind of socialization, whether consciously or unconsciously absorbed by the impressionable Ayim, resulted in a child who begged her foster mother to wash her white, and secretly ate soap in the hopes of no longer being the outsider (*Grenzenlos* 116).

Ayim recognized the struggle to be accepted for one's differences in her poem “arrogant question.” Although the focus of this poem is a Chinese woman's struggle with Western culture, the message is clear, namely the “other” as a stranger, someone on the outside, someone who does not belong:

jesus
who was that, please
a chinese woman asked
surprised in a german lesson

some of them laughed
politely the others
loudly
all of them

baffled

about themselves (Dagmar Schultz, *Blues* 71)

It is typical of Ayim's poetry that she shows more than one type of reaction to an event. Some react "politely" and others, it is implied, are not so polite. Although Ayim often tries to be fair to the German public by portraying more than one type of person, as she did, for instance, in two poems about German perceptions of an Afro-German, the forgiving poem "einladung," and the angry poem "winterreim in berlin," she still has a strong message even when her tone is forgiving: Some people are more understanding than others, but none are truly accepting. In "arrogant question" an added emphasis is clear with the lines, "all of them / baffled / about themselves" (Dagmar Schultz, *Blues* 71). Her opinion that many are ignorant of the differences between people is cloaked in gentle words, but she makes her statement none the less.

Childhood Pressure

The unfulfillable wish to be white in order to belong to the cultural majority was accompanied in the lives of several documented Afro-German people with the pressure to be perfect as a child. Ayim was no exception to this. As one Afro-German, Bikai D., said to Ayim, "Ich glaube, daß man als Afrikaner bzw. als Schwarzer keinen Augenblick unbeobachtet bleibt" (*Grenzenlos* 119; I think that as an African or black there is never a moment that you're not being observed; Adams 82). The truth of this statement combined with racism in Germany resulted in extra parental pressure on Afro-German

children to be good, orderly, and mannerly. This was certainly a factor in Ayim's strict upbringing. With all the extra attention and negative stereotypes associated with being an Afro-German, many dark-skinned children could describe their upbringing as Helga Emde did: "Ich durfte nirgends auffallen, sonst wäre ich nicht als kleines freches Mädchen aufgefallen, sondern als >>Nigger<<, >>Mohrenkopf<<, >>Sarottimohr<<"" (Berger 120; I had to be careful not to be conspicuous or else I'd be noticed, not as a sassy little girl but as 'nigger,' 'moorhead' 'Sarotti-Moor'; Adams 83). Ayim's foster parents wanted to disprove negative stereotypes of Afro-Germans by raising a child so well-behaved that no negative attention need ever be taken of her. This pressure to disappear through good behavior was an extreme stress on the child. The psychological effect on Ayim was visible in the years of bed-wetting, which resulted in further punishment. When Ayim fell short of her foster parent's expectations her punishment was often physical. She writes that in retrospect she sees her childhood as a time when she yearned for love and acceptance but received crippling pressure and beatings instead. She writes of being hit about the head with a cooking spoon when she did not work out math problems quickly, and constant complaints that, "Dieses Kind treibt mich noch in den Wahnsinn" (this kid is driving me crazy) when, for instance, a razor was found in her bed (*Grenzenlos* 16). It was the imbalance of extreme pressure and little acceptance that led May to suicidal thoughts as a child (*Grenzenlos* 14-6).

The White World and Ayim's Black Father

Ayim's upbringing in the white world had a great effect on her feelings toward her father. She writes that once, when her father came to visit her all the other children ran away. Her father had brought candy for everyone. She reports that she and her foster brother would very much have liked to run away too but knew that wasn't permitted (*Grenzenlos* 18). Sadly, Ayim was so unfamiliar with the African part of herself that as a child she feared it, even in the form of her father. It was only under instruction from Ayim's foster

father that she wrote to her biological father, whom she saw about once every other year. Also, only under his direction did she address the letters, “Lieber Vater,” a title she was not comfortable with. As a child Ayim knew her father as Uncle E, since he was Uncle E to her white brother, but she worked to close this void in maturation (*Grenzenlos* 18).

Much of this change had to do with Ayim’s better understanding of her place on the fringes of white society. She writes in the poem “sein oder nichtsein”:

in deutschland großgeworden habe ich gelernt,
zu bedauern
schwarz zu sein, >>mischling<< zu sein, deutsch zu sein,
nicht deutsch zu sein, afrikanisch zu sein,
nicht afrikanisch zu sein, deutsche eltern zu haben,
afrikanische eltern zu haben” (*Nachtgesang* 17)

(growing up in Germany I learned / to regret / being black, being “mixed”, being German, / not being German, being African, / not being African, having German parents, / having African parents)

This poem was written in 1983, shortly before her first trip to Ghana. After growing up in Germany where a black German is not accepted because of skin color, it is not surprising that May tried to find a place in Ghanaian society (Adams 52). In “German Fa(r)ther-land...” Ayim exhibits a distance from Germany and a closeness to Africa when she writes, “My fatherland is Ghana, my mother tongue is German; homeland I carry in my shoes” (Adams 47). She accredits her native language to her country of birth and nothing else, while calling Ghana, a place she only visited, her homeland. Although she also calls Germany her homeland in another essay it is almost a sarcastic reference, with homeland (*Heimat*) in quotation marks and a list of complaints about Germany following (*Grenzenlos* 54).

Her feeling of distance from Germany is evident in several of her poems. In “winter,” for instance, she emphasizes the community spirit in Ghana, which is not to be found in Germany. “Winter” tells the story of a woman starving and freezing to death, while the neighbors seem “ratlos” to her pain (*Nachtgesang* 34). In her poem “tagein tagaus” Ayim criticizes Western society by implying that it creates a lifestyle composed of stress, advertisements, cigarettes and rats in the U-Bahn. It is a society in which:

manche haben blaugerahmte
augen oder rotgeschrammte nasen
einer weint
einer trinkt
einer raucht (*Nachtgesang 32*)

(many have blue-rimmed / eyes or scratched red noses / one cries / one drinks / one smokes)

In “exodus,” Ayim gives a dramatic view of the desensitizing grind of German life:

manche schaffen
es nicht
in den tag
sterben oder
sind schon gestorben
auf halber strecke
zwischen
neulich und
niemals (*Nachtgesang 29*)

(many do not accomplish / in the day / to die or / are already dead / half way / between / now and / never)

Grasping her Africanness

The hostility Ayim often felt toward her country of birth led to a desire to disassociate herself from it and somehow become a part of Ghana. Her paternal connection with Ghana was, of course, her reason for looking for a part of herself in that country, but the reasons for her more general interest in all of Africa are many. First of all, Ayim encouraged all people with African heritage to learn about Africa, especially about progressive African movements and the struggles they endure like those in South Africa.

She also wanted especially those of African heritage to appreciate Africa's many contributions to the world (*Grenzenlos* 47). In Western culture, Africa's contributions and innovations are often ignored while their "uncivilized" ways take center stage, leading to a flawed, devalued and one-sided view. Another reason for her interest was a bit more personal. After traveling to several countries in Africa, she expressed a heightened awareness of her Germanness in countries where, although she was not subject to discrimination like that in Germany, she was still seen as other because of her paler skin. Despite this fact and the extreme differences in culture she experienced in Africa, Ayim felt a sense of belonging that overpowered the foreignness of the place. As earlier noted, Ayim physically blended into the crowd in South Africa, a feeling of invisibility that she greatly enjoyed. While she was seen as a "white lady" in Ghana, she was also accepted as one of them, most importantly by her father's family there. This acceptance was, "wie ein Geschenk, etwas völlig Außergewöhnliches" (*Grenzenlos* 54; like a gift / something totally amazing).

Ayim wrote the poem "zwischen avenui und kreuzberg" for her grandfather after this meeting. The happiness she felt in his presence is evident throughout the poem, as she reports the small but kind interactions between the two, like, "er sorgt sich um mich / erzählt von ghana / von den träumen" (*Nachtgesang* 19-20; he worries about me / talks of ghana / about the dreams; Ekpenyong Ani, *Blues* 39). This short but meaningful experience was powerful to Ayim, and for this reason she says of her very foreign, distant, and warm grandfather:

wir treffen uns immer
in der ferne
zwischen
avenui und kreuzberg
unter einem alten
walnußmangobaum (*Nachtgesang* 19)

(we always meet / in the distance / between / avenui and kreuzberg / beneath an old / walnutmangotree; Ekpenyong Ani, *Blues* 38)

She represents a place between Germany and Ghana with a “walnußmangobaum”, a tree that bears the fruit of both countries, just as she does. That is the place between her world and his, where she feels the closeness of family and the familiarity of home.

Karein Goertz’s article “Showing her Colors: An Afro-German Writes the Blues in Black and White” makes the important point that while Ayim’s visit to Ghana was an attempt to find herself a place there it was not really an attempt at finding her “real home.” What she searched for in Africa was a deeper understanding of the rich culture of her heritage and thereby turn ingrained ideas about blackness into a “source of empowerment and community” (307). Or as Erin Crawley says of two of the most prominent Afro-Germans:

Opitz and Oguntoye travel to Nigeria and Ghana not because they believe that they belong there more than they do in Germany (they are not turning a negative stereotype on its head to make a positive one), but because of their desire to explore the sometimes elusive connections to other cultural identities that dominant cultural constructions of ‘the German’ do not permit. (84)

Ayim hoped by visiting Africa to get past the deeply embedded ideas about “African” and “European” in order to gain a real understanding of these concepts (Crawley 86). She was also concerned with understanding the difference between African and Ghanaian, which is also apparent, for instance, in her temporary, self-given label of Afro-Ghanaian. All this interest in Africa does not translate into a search for belonging, however. Ayim and Oguntoye are both aware of their difference in Africa and in their recollections about such visits neither one ever implies that they have somehow found their true home in Africa. Ayim’s and Oguntoye’s visits to their fathers’ native countries, although full of good experiences, are merely, “to some extent attempts to recover histories of their selves repressed in German culture” (Crawley 90).

Desire for Whiteness even in Africa

Despite the wonderful personal memories Ayim brought from Ghana, it also shocked and disappointed her that the superiority of whiteness was also a part of the African mentality. In fact, it seemed that it is not only black children in white societies that sometimes desire to be washed white. Ayim, a researcher of current issues as well as historical perspectives of Africans, points out in her essay “Wir wollen aus der Isolation heraus” that the same books filled with racism and stereotypes of Africans, which are printed and distributed in Europe, are also distributed in Africa. The result is similar to that, which May experienced as a child: the desire to be white. May documented that in Kenya she was greatly admired because of her almost-whiteness, proving that:

Durch kolonialistisch geprägte Filme und Werbung wird dasselbe verzerrte Bild von schwarzen Menschen auch nach Africa exportiert. Das hat einen Einfluß darauf, wie AfrikanerInnen sich selbst wahrnehmen. Als Kind hat man mir irgendwie beigebracht, weiß sein zu wollen. Das afrikanische Kind wird ebenfalls dazu gebracht, diesen Wunsch zu hegen. (*Grenzenlos* 48)

(Africans get the same wrong view exported there through colonialist films and advertisements. This affects the way they look at themselves. As a child, I was somehow made to wish that I were white. The African child is made to share this wish; Adams 28).

Ayim’s despair at seeing the same bias toward whiteness in countries where the majority is black, made it clear to her that importance being placed on skin color was not only a German problem. Many countries have a history of racism that has long shaped that society’s perceptions of worth and beauty, but it was the racism that Ayim suffered in her country of birth that carried the most weight in the shaping of her life.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY OF RACISM IN GERMANY

The history of race in Germany, as in most Western nations, has deep roots. Long before Hitler's blatant racism, German society was infiltrated with ideas about race. To understand the atmosphere into which Ayim was born, it suffices, however, to examine racism in Europe beginning in the mid eighteenth century. Arguably the most influential philosopher of the modern period, Immanuel Kant, played a role in the conception of races as superior and inferior. Kant took the stance that respect is due to *all* people, regardless of wealth and rank, because everyone is a person and as such is capable of self-determination. Yet, his discussion of Philosophy takes on a new meaning when it is understood in the context of Anthropology and Physical Geography, the two subjects on which he lectured for many years. One need merely read the following from Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* to realize that he was not a proponent of racial equality:

‘So fundamental is the difference between [the black and white] races of man... it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color’ so that ‘a clear proof that what [a Negro] said was stupid’ was that ‘this fellow was quite black from head to foot.’ (111,113).

Emmanuel Eze explains in an article drawing from all areas of Kant's works that Kant actually saw a racial hierarchy defined by color. White Europeans were at the top of this hierarchy, followed by “yellow” Asians, “black” Africans, and “red” Americans (Eze

196-237). Different mental capacities could be attributed to each group with the Europeans as self-starters, the Asians as rather developed though incapable of abstract thought, and Africans as able only to become morally educated as slaves or servants. To be found among Kant's documents is advice on beating Negroes, since, among their other bad traits, they are "so talkative that they must be driven apart from each other with thrashings" (Kant 111). So Kant, reputed proponent of equal respect for all mankind, was actually an influential supporter of the concept of sub humans and Europe's supremacy.

Approximately one hundred years later, the discoveries of Charles Darwin had the international effect of giving these already negative views of dark-skinned people a "scientific" basis. Many Darwinists, while believing that all humans had common ancestry, also believed that the presence of different races proved that some must be more developed than others. Unfortunately, it was not only those who followed Darwin who saw evolution as a good basis for racism, but also Darwin himself linked the importance of heredity as a carrier of mental, physical and even moral traits to the phenomenon of race. He believed that characteristics like selfishness, laziness, altruism, bravery, diligence, and cowardice were among the many traits handed down from our common ancestors. The strength of these traits was, in his opinion, dependent upon the race and its evolutionary level. He and others believed it would be futile to attempt to educate or bring culture from "civilized" Europe to the "heathens" of Africa, whose very "primitive" existence and "uncivilized" behaviors were evidence of their less evolved state.

Scholars who followed Darwin elaborated his claims, including respected scientists in Germany. Ernst Haeckel picked up the racist aspect of Darwin's theory of evolution and went further by claiming in 1868 that humans should be divided into ten different species. In his *Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte* appears a series of twelve facial profiles, which are arranged in order of evolutionary advancement. The first profile is of a European, followed by an East Asian, a Fuegian⁵, an Australian⁶, a black African in position five, and in the sixth position is the profile of a Tasmanian. The following six profiles in the series belong to gorillas, apes and other monkeys. He intended to support the claim that the difference between the highest and lowest human was greater than that between the lowest human and the highest animal. He did so by depicting each "species"

of man and animal is such a way that the Tasmanian, the supposedly least evolved human, appears to be just one step above the most evolved animal depicted, while the difference between the Tasmanian profile and the European one is great.

Another German proponent of Darwin's work was Oscar Peschel, who also used the theory of evolution as a basis for racial inequality in Germany. The racism that masqueraded as science at the time is evident in articles such as the ones that appeared in the German journal of geography and ethnology that was edited by Peschel himself, *Das Ausland*. He included his own works in this publication and in one particular article in the early 1860's, "Mensch und Affe," he tried to convince the reader of human evolution by comparing man to apes. His explanation included a description of the traits that Africans have in common with apes, from having a small head, long arms and short thighs to grimacing frequently, emitting disgusting odors and speaking in a grating tone. He hoped to prove that Africans, as opposed to Europeans, are less evolved and therefore closer to their ape ancestors (Peschel 833).

The eugenics movement of the early 1900's gave new impetus to Darwinian racism. Eugenicists were also avid Darwinists and the work of men such as Haeckel was also used as the basis for the growing discussion about the inferiority of other races. Alfred Ploetz, Ludwig Woltman, and Eugen Fischer are but a few of the enthusiastic Darwinists and Eugenicists who spoke and wrote specifically about the inferiority of Africans. They and others helped spread the belief that the mixing of races would produce inferior children. Western Aryans, they proposed, are the most developed race and for such a person to procreate with an African, for example, would result in a child whose intellect would be somewhere between the high intelligence of Western Aryans and the animal-like lack of intelligence characteristic of an African (Weikart 113-121).

From Kant's belief in racial hierarchy to Darwin's "scientific" basis for a similar idea came the Eugenics movement and after that the rise of Nazism. The lasting effect of this long history of belief in the inferiority of blackness is ingrained ideas about race that remain of major importance in the lives of Afro-Germans like May Ayim. Although the reality of the ever-present belief in the difference between races persists in contemporary society, Science has recently discovered that only .01% of our genes determine our appearance. Natalie Angier's article, "Do Races Differ? Not Really, DNA Shows" makes

the observation, for instance, that many researchers now claim as Dr. J. Craig Venter does, that “Race is a social concept, not a scientific one” (2). In another article on the subject of race by Charles Petit, “No Biological Basis for Race, Scientists Say Distinctions Prove to be Skin Deep” the claim was made in 1998 that race is, in fact, nonexistent. Jefferson Fish, a psychologist from St. John’s University in New York claims that variations among people can be found but that there are no distinct groups. Both articles agree, however, that many still believe in distinct groups of people. Even some scientists hold on to the concept of racial differences, such as a psychologist at the University of Western Ontario, Dr. J. Philippe Rushton, perhaps the biggest proponent of the belief that the differences in race can be seen in brain functioning (Angier 4). Scientific supporters of the old-fashioned view of race dwindle as research grows but society has not yet caught up in Germany, the United States, or throughout the world. While among contemporary researchers the old-fashioned view of race dwindles, cultural attitudes toward race and insistence on difference seems to persist in the mind of the people.

May Ayim’s work is a clear indicator that contemporary society has not overcome this difference. In her essay “Rassismus hier und heute” she not only addresses her own experiences with racism, she also provides a factual basis, taken from a survey done by INFAS in the year 1981/82. The title of the included survey is “Einstellung der Deutschen gegenüber verschiedenen Ausländergruppen.” Although it is now quite outdated it is important to note that right extremism and acts of violence against foreigners actually increased after the reunification that occurred approximately eight years later. In the case of eight out of the twelve groups of foreigners listed on the INFAS survey, a higher percentage of negative responses were recorded than positive. The highest response to all groups of foreigners, however, was a neutral one (with the exception of Turks, which had a higher negative response than neutral). “Black Africans,” and “North Africans” are among the groups included in the survey. In the case of both groups there was a 55% neutral response, and a 33% negative response. The positive response was 7% for “Black Africans” and 6% for “North Africans” (*Farbe bekennen* 140). Since Afro-Germans resemble and are often classified with or at least strongly associated with the above-mentioned groups these statistics are important in

giving their experiences with discrimination added validity. It is proof that the racism that Ayim addresses in her work cannot be explained away as over sensitivity or paranoia on the part of Afro-Germans.

Recent History of Racism and *Mischlingskinder* after World War II

The occupation of Germany by American soldiers after World War II included black Americans, and resulted in many “Besatzungskinder.” This group of mixed children faced many obstacles as a result of having African heritage in a nearly all-white country with a history of misunderstanding of dark-skinned people. Stereotypes concerning dark skinned people have more to do with, or perhaps are the result of, often deeply ingrained ideas about Africa itself. In much of German literature, especially colonial literature, black people are often depicted in a negative light. As noted, they are sometimes described as physically disgusting and the sexuality of African women is often depicted in a base, animalistic and perverse way. The genitalia of Africans is sometimes associated with urine. Some literature even depicts this foreign sexuality as a kind of pathology (Gilman 36-41). It is true that most of the colonial literature filled with horrible descriptions of Africans is no longer commonly read but these ideas, once written about without much, if any, contest, show us the commonly accepted mentality of many Germans at the time it was written, a time not very far back in history. In the 1920s, only a few decades before the birth of the *Besatzungskinder*, also known as the “Rhineland Bastards”, who make up many of the Afro-Germans today, sterilization of black people was considered though ultimately officially rejected since these children were, after all, still “legally” German.⁷

After World War II, racism persisted in Germany, resulting in deeply ingrained ideas that endure even today. For Ayim’s personal experience as a *Mischlingskind* the 1950s and 1960s are an important phase. Much of the anti-black sentiment in Germany at this time was not a direct assault upon dark-skinned people, but just part of the still existing

view of blackness in a “white” society. In 1951, at the time when the population of *Besatzungskinder* was rising and becoming noticeable, the rights of mixed children became part of public discussion in Germany for the first time.⁸ When the *Besatzungskinder* began to enter school in 1953 finding their place in German society was easy for neither white nor black Germans. In some cases Afro-Germans were taught more foreign languages in the course of their studies, with the assumption that they would eventually move to a place where they could “find a home,” meaning a more appropriate one like the United States or Africa (Lester 121). Afro-German children in the school system were such a concern to the German educational system that numerous research reports and pamphlets about the special problems that they brought about were published. In 1961 the most voluminous one, *Farbige Kinder in Deutschland* came about to address the needs and concerns regarding the first group of *Besatzungskinder* to reach puberty and become involved in higher education and training.

For a disproportionately high percentage of Afro-German children in the 1960s there was not a normal *Realschule*, *Hauptschule*, *Gymnasium* or job training in sight, but rather a *Sonderschule*. These special education institutions, reserved for “slow learners” and those with behavior problems, were not very well reputed. They could be described as places where, “society gets rid of its unwanted quite easily by sending all too many of the racially mixed children into the ghetto of the *Sonderschulen*” (Lester 126). The reason for this special placement was behavioral difficulties, a problem, when actually present, that was directly caused by societal problems in many cases.

What kind of a family would an Afro-German child have? Many of these children had only white family members and friends, if they had been adopted by a white family. It was looked down upon as the act of a loose and low class woman to become involved with an African man, or more commonly at this time, a black American soldier. This sentiment was shared by both Germans and the American government alike, as is made clear by the American prohibition of black soldiers to become involved with German women. Children were born of these unions despite this fact. Such a union was looked down upon as corrupt and wrong partially because of the lower social stratum to which many of the mothers belonged and also because of the social stigma attached to romantic relations with either an American or an African, or, even worse, a black American. Nine

percent of these white mothers gave up their children, often due to the societal pressures associated with having such a stigmatized child. The majority of white mothers of Afro-German children were especially protective, however, knowing what obstacles their children would inevitably face. Since many of the African or African-American fathers of these children had returned home with the military or completed the studies they had begun in Germany and returned to Africa, quite a few of these still-young women remarried Germans (Lester 113-135). Many of these German husbands demanded that Afro-German babies be given up to an institution, presumably to save the man and his new family the ridicule or having a dark-skinned child (Lester 122-129).

Ika Hügel-Marshall explains her situation as an Afro-German child with a white mother and new white stepfather in her autobiographical novel *Daheim Unterwegs (The Invisible Woman)*. Hügel-Marshall was sent away from home to attend school for many years despite her protest and the daily racism she suffered in that institution. Governmental pressure to institutionalize the illegitimate child was involved with her mother's difficult decision. Hügel-Marshall discovered many years later that it was in order to appease her mother's new husband that she was sent from the family. Ayim, on the other hand, was part of the nine percent of Afro-German children given up for adoption. She had little opportunity to know her birth father and no contact with her birth mother, a subject about which she expresses much pain and disappointment in many of her saddest and angriest poems. In "entfente verbindungen," written in 1992, Ayim writes with regret:

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 kenn ihn kaum
meinen vater
die hände (*Grenzenlos* 182)

(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;
Ekpenyong Ani, *Blues* 41)

The negative light in which white mothers and their Afro-German children were seen was definitely not improved by their presence in the popular literature of the early sixties. *Meine schwarze Schwester* by Ursula Schaake and *Mach mich weiß, Mutti* by Stefan Doerner both depicted their respectively twelve-year-old and eighteen-year-old protagonists as the products of rape. Both of their fictional American fathers visit the daughters in the hope of bringing them back to the United States. Both protagonists turn down this offer and both attempt suicide, sending a message of hopelessness about the situation for Afro-German children. These stories were published in serial form before their release as a book and about half of the reactions to, for instance, *Meine schwarze Schwester* were the outraged complaints that white German women had “thrown themselves” at black American soldiers only to claim later that they had been raped. Both the claims that only women with low morals would sleep with a black man, and the claim that many of these Afro-German children must have been the product of rape, show us the mentality of many Germans toward the white mother of an Afro-German child. The German belief in the tainted and morally wrong conception of most Afro-German children is certainly a stigma that an entire family would suffer from. Since many of the German mothers also belonged to the lower social classes, which contributed to and added another burden to being perceived as improper German women, it is only logical that the Afro-German children they produced were also made to suffer. “The apple doesn't fall far from the tree,” as the saying goes, but unfortunately for Afro-German children, many white Germans were convinced they knew what kind of apple they were dealing with just by looking at it (Lester 126-128).

The experience of being judged purely on one's appearance is one that many people on the fringes of society are familiar with. The writings from authors like Ayim who stand on the outside of society contribute a rich, new perspective to German literature and

the German discussion of race. This original view of the society at large makes their work indispensable.

CHAPTER 3

MAY AYIM, AUTHOR OF MINOR LITERATURE

Deleuze and Guattari define minor literature in “Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature,” not as writing that “comes from a minor language”, but “rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” (16). As a member of a minority in Germany, Ayim’s writings reflect her original position within this society. Her work and the work of other minor authors, like German-Jews and German-Turks, must be examined as part of the whole German culture, though different from it. Although Kafka is the primary subject of interest in Deleuze and Guattari’s work a parallel between their thoughts and the work of Afro-Germans stands out. Both Kafka and Ayim are authors of minor literature, Kafka because he was a Jew writing in German from Prague, and Ayim because she was part of the Afro-German minority. Deleuze and Guattari describe Kafka’s separation from the majority of German speakers as “deterritorialization” because of his physical distance from other German writers. Ayim, on the other hand, is not geographically cut off from German speakers. She writes from within German society yet remains separated from the majority culture.

In Karein Goertz’s article “Borderless and Brazen: Ethnicity Redefined by Afro-German and Turkish German Poets,” which was written in memory of May Ayim, Goertz discusses the borderland in which many minorities live, a place inside and outside of German borders. She writes that this situation is unavoidable since culture is always diversified by religion, race and color. This is why Goertz expresses agreement with

Gloria Anzaldúa's perspective that such borders are indefinite, vague and even imagined. Anzaldúa writes that the "border culture" from which minor literature comes can be described as follows:

And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants...the mulatto, the half-breed. (3).

Deleuze and Guattari go on to argue that minor literature is inherently political. The reason for this is that "its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics" (17). This is also true of Ayim's writing that each word carries greater weight because she is one of such a small number of Afro-German representatives. Her words become representative of the Afro-German reality, which she experiences bureaucratically, commercially as well as socially. Her interpretation of her experiences determines the values and the message of the story. In other words, Ayim's unique experiences and her understanding of them help explain not only her own life but also the lives of others like her. She is a representative for all Afro-Germans. The individual, personal elements within her works have increased importance because they represent her minority experience in the larger German society.

Michelle M. Wright writes that autobiographies are a useful tool for writers of a minor literature. By writing autobiographical works like *Farbe Bekennen*, they are able to actually write themselves into the nation (299). The narratives of their lives challenge and confound the assumptions of most white Germans, forcing awareness and pushing change. Ayim's poetry and prose all had at least some autobiographical elements and many could be described as purely autobiographical. The result is that she has indeed written herself into the German nation. Lorely French also discusses the works of Afro-German women, which "blend social consciousness with literary metaphors," and in turn, "create autobiographical essays with literary fervor," but she goes on to emphasize the fact that this job has been taken up largely by Afro-German women (92). Women like Ayim

have used their writings to help bring about a change in the largely homogenous view of German society by writing their stories into their largely white society.

Deleuze and Guattari go on to say that talent is generally not abundant in minor literatures, and while I do not wish to call May Ayim's talent into question, this fact remains significant. The absence of masters means that the individual enunciation contributes to collective enunciation. Instead of being focused on the mastery of language we are left with a message, something definitely present in so much of Ayim's work. The result is solidarity and literature with a role and a purpose. When it comes to minor literature like the words of May Ayim, "literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation" (Deleuze and Guattari 17).

This role is the basis of May Ayim's importance. In addition to being a phenomenal poet and writer, expresser of emotion and political spokesperson, Ayim is also a representative of the often ignored or forgotten Afro-German population. In researching May Ayim it becomes clear that the concerns of Afro-Germans still remain in the shadows. One of Ayim's most important works, *Blues in schwarz-weiss* was impossible to attain in German in any reasonable time frame since it has fallen out of print and her other works, *Nachtgesang* and *Grenzenlos und unverschämt* were also difficult to acquire outside of Germany. The inaccessibility of May Ayim's works magnifies the problems of modern Afro-Germans, namely their apparent invisibility in German society. This is especially sad considering what Ayim⁹ wrote in the prologue to *Farbe Bekennen*, "Mit ihrem Buch 'Farbe Bekennen' versuchen die Autorinnen, sich auf die Suche nach ihrer Geschichte zu begeben, gesellschaftliche Zusammenhänge von Rassismus offenzulegen und auf ihre besondere Situation aufmerksam zu machen". All of this is impossible if her works are not read and discussed, something this work hopes to promote. This is especially important because to date very little literary criticism has been done of May Ayim's works despite the many insights it offers into the significance role of race in the lives of Germans.

The Afro-German Minority Represented in Ayim's Poetry

Ayim's strong belief in the power of skin color to affect the lives of those who fall into one category or another can be seen not only on the social level, but also on the political level. As perceived outsiders, Ayim felt strongly that the concerns of Afro-Germans and other minorities are only occasionally and fleetingly of interest to politicians:

zu besonderen anlässen
und bei besonderen ereignissen
aber besonders
kurz vor
und kurz nach den wahlen
sind wir wieder gefragt
werden wir wieder wahrgenommen
werden wir plötzlich angesprochen
werden wir endlich einbezogen
sind wir auf einmal unentbehrlich (*Grenzenlos*184)

(on special occasions / and for special events / but especially / shortly before / and shortly after elections / we're in demand again / we're taken notice of again / we're suddenly addressed / we're finally included / we suddenly seem indispensable; Ekpenyong Ani, *Blues* 60)

Ayim's distrust of any appearance of genuine interest in the concerns of minorities becomes totally clear when she sarcastically writes that their demands are neatly listed and then quickly forgotten:

werden sauber
abgeheftet
und sicherlich
und zuverlässig
an die entsprechenden stellen
mit den wirklich
zuständigen leuten

weitergeleitet

und dann- was dann

die show ist aus

wir gehen nach haus

die engagierten fühlen sich erleichtert – zum teil

die betroffenen fühlen sich verarscht – total (*Grenzenlos* 185)

(and reliably / forwarded / to the right places / with the truly / responsible people / and then -- what next / the show is over / we all go home / the socially committed feel relieved –partly / the afflicted feel they’ve been taken for a ride –totally; Ekpenyong Ani, *Blues* 61)

It is clear that when the “bindestrich-deutschen / sind wieder die >>neger<<” the true concerns, or lack of concern become clear again. (the hyphenated Germans / change back into the ‘negroes’; Ekpenyong Ani, *Blues* 61). Ayim elaborates on her feelings that minority concerns are of no interest to the public in her poems “tagesthemen” and “die unterkunft.” In “die unterkunft” Ayim uses vivid language to explain the grim circumstances in which many asylum seekers in Germany live. She describes the depressing appearance of their residence with the words, “graue innenseiten / auch die außenseite / grau,” (gray on the inside / gray on the outside / gray) but with particularly vivid imagery Ayim goes further in her statement about the Germany’s treatment of those who are “other.”

fatima

sucht nachts nach händen

ihrer kinder

schreie

schrecken sie

aus jedem traum (*Nachtgesang* 73)

(fatima / searches for hands in the night / of her children / cries / startle her / from every dream; Ekpenyong Ani, *Blues* 112)

The building in which the asylum seekers are housed burns, leaving “fatima” scarred, but to differentiate this story from a simple story of loss and horror is the concluding stanza, “in deutschland einig vaterland / ist wieder ein >>asylheim<< / abgebrannt” (*Nachtgesang* 73; in germany united fatherland / another home for asylum seekers / burned).

In “tagesthemen,” a poem named after a popular German news show, she elaborates her belief that minority problems are of little interest to the general public:

herr und frau z.
essen pralinen
und sitzen
in wohnzimmersesseln (*Nachtgesang* 37)

(mr. and mrs. z. / eat pralines / and sit / in a living room chair)

...as they watch the news on television. Attention in the poem is paid to the details of the anchorman who, “hat ein neues toupé / frisch vom friseur” (*Nachtgesang* 37; has a new toupé / fresh from the barber). The poem is composed of excerpts from the anchorman’s news report, followed by more of the viewers’ observations of his appearance, showing that it is not the issues in Germany that truly interest the viewers but rather the face that reports them. This effect is heightened with the closing two stanzas of the poem:

>>köln
drei unbekannte
haben in der nacht
zum sonntag
einen brandanschlag
auf ein türkisches reisebüro
verübt
menschen kamen
nicht zu schaden<<

seine stimme
hat den klang
von gestern (*Nachtgesang* 37)

(cologne / three unidentified people / the night / before Sunday / burned / a turkish travel agency / no one / was hurt / his voice / had the sound / of yesterday)

By reflecting the sound of the anchorman's voice and not just his appearance Ayim effectively relays an even greater amount of distance between this particular news event and the concern of the German public. The viewers, "yawn apathetically and passively accept what should be unacceptable" (Goertz, "Showing her Colors" 314).

CHAPTER 4:

THE IDENTITY, CULTURE, AND ETHNICITY OF PEOPLE ON THE FRINGES

Identity, culture and ethnicity play an important role in the discussion of May Ayim and other Afro-Germans in a mostly-white society. Azade Seyhan's *Writing Outside the Nation* makes the point that in modern day Western societies, identities, which are composed of culture, ethnicity, and language, are exchanged and interlaced on a daily basis. Ayim resided in Berlin where there exists a wide array of cultural and ethnical identities. Yet even in this metropolis separation is visible in that ethnic groups band together. Moreover, Ayim's writing makes it clear that racism does not cease in the big city. Society notices difference, especially when it is physical, even in a time and place of great diversity. Seyhan argues that we are, "Faced with loss of roots," and therefore:

Our sense of belonging, our language and the myths we carry in us remain, but no longer as 'origins' or signs of 'authenticity' capable of guaranteeing the sense of our lives. They now linger on as traces, voices, memories and murmurs that are mixed in with other histories, episodes, encounters. (65)

Our cultural identity is the interaction of the mental representations we have constructed, the lessons we have learned, and the cultures we identify with the outside world. Episodes and experience relate to the inner workings of ourselves to help form our identity.

The special circumstance that confronts an Afro-German who searches for identity by mixing their cultural experiences as a German, with their personal experiences of being treated as a non-German creates a very unique struggle that Ayim and several other Afro-German writers have tried to explain. *Farbe Bekennen* is a work whose goal it is to bring Afro-Germans together to openly discuss their social and political problems. Ayim's many visits to Africa were only partially successful at helping her define her identity. Unsure in her German self, she longed to know her African self, only to feel more German than ever in Africa. Her attempt to make sense of her German self, as well as her non-German self, can be seen in her self-proclaimed Ghanaian-German status, a synthesis of what she is with what others see.

To better understand Ayim's struggle with her cultural identity it seems helpful to discuss the concept of culture. Central to a discussion of Afro-Germans is their desire to be seen as belonging. May Ayim and author Afro-German writers like Katherine Oguntoye were born and raised in a variety of German families, some loving and protective and some cold, yet all express a feeling of not belonging because of their darker skin color. Ayim is not the only Afro-German who felt compelled to visit Africa, Oguntoye also saw it as the place where she blended into a crowd for the first time. Although it is tempting to attribute their cultural curiosity to an attempt to adopt a culture into which they more easily blend, even a basic understanding of culture refutes such a possibility. Nearly any definition of culture mentions the commonalties among people such as language, and traditions, in which case Afro-Germans are indisputably a part of German culture.

Raymond Williams alludes to the fact that culture is acquired in two parts. The first part is merely the slow learning in childhood of customs, purposes, values, and meanings so that communication is possible. The second part occurs when an individual begins to test these cultural components by making new observations and comparisons, and developing a cultural identity that can readjust and shift slightly as new insights are gained. Individual cultural identity is therefore not a fixed concept, but continues to change and readjust with each insightful new experience.

The minority experience, which is shared by most Afro-Germans gives rise to different interpretations of what constitutes culture. The Afro-German experience begs

the question of whether this minority is in fact a part of the same culture as white Germans. Clifford Geertz elaborates these ideas in ways that help answer this question in his article “Emphasizing Interpretation,” in which he concurs with Max Weber that man is just an animal that is suspended in individually created “webs of significance,” that he himself spins. These webs are culture and therefore culture is not a science governed by laws, rather an interpretative science that searches for meaning. Based on what we learn and absorb we define culture on our own terms. This concept supports the idea that while Afro-Germans are a part of the German culture in the strict sense, it is possible that their interpretation of it differs because they have a different view upon it. This gap in the standard view of culture as opposed to an Afro-German’s view is perhaps where the desire to see Africa comes in. The cultural void that being black in Germany creates is filled by taking on a bit of the black culture.

Language is a less interpretative aspect of culture and as such also deserves discussion. It does not leave the experiential gaps that Afro-Germans might look to fill in other aspects of culture. Certain vocabulary and grammar rules govern language and facilitate the expression of thought for all Afro-Germans, regardless of skin color. Yet racist terminology like “Negerküsse” make even language open to a relatively small degree of interpretation. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that two native speakers of any language have the greatest chances of good, effective communication. The acquisition of language grows with each year it is spoken and this very fact binds citizens of any country together. A white and black German would communicate perhaps best of all were they never to speak face to face, since race and all the societal weight it carries could easier hamper than hurt pure, untainted spoken or written communication. Even within a single country, however, there remains the problem of dialect and when we look to Switzerland we are reminded that sometimes even language is not a simple component of culture. This is also a reminder of Helga Emde’s biographical story, “Jetzt kann ich sagen: ich bin schwarz.” Although Emde was raised in Germany among whites, just as May Ayim and the many other Afro-Germans were, her appearance is so disconcerting to other Germans that she is often complimented on how well she speaks German. The white majority assumes that German is not Emde’s native language because she is black, although she speaks, of course, just as they do. Emde reports that these inquisitive people

are unquestioningly satisfied with a lie explaining she is from the Ivory Coast; the truth that she is German unsettles them and inevitably leads to more questions. To those with a narrow idea of the German people, appearances take precedence over what would seem to be one of the very few relatively interpretation-free cultural attributes that all Germans share, namely language.

Aleksandra Ålund compares the concept of culture to doors in her article “The Quest for Identity” by referring to Georg Simmel’s analogy of culture in his essay “Bridge and Door” from the beginning of the century. Ålund explains his conception of culture by writing, “The symbolic home, has symbolic doors and, following Simmel, *door* signifies, in addition to a necessary psychological and cultural demarcation, the possibility of stepping outside its limitation” (92). She goes on to explain how a multicultural society develops in relation to the door culture, by saying, “Modern society’s limits – its programmed way of separation in order to connect – is expressed symbolically as a bridge. The multicultural society increasingly stands out as a system of bridge building between separate parts that are regarded discursively as ‘finite’ cultural products, with culture regarded as unchanging, as essence – as ‘roots’ (92). New “‘finite’ cultural products” are kept at arms length, not being invited through the door and incorporated into the home of this unchanging concept of culture. Therein lie only those unchanging aspects of culture, something to which Afro-Germans would arguably not belong. It is important to note, however, that no culture is totally isolated from others, and therefore no culture can insist on “closed doors”. The mere presence of other belief systems within a culture will have an influence upon that culture, making no culture, just as no race, totally pure.

Extreme minority groups like Afro-Germans are often visibly excluded, yet nearly every definition of culture seems determined to set limits and standards which never have and never will be sufficient since every culture is essentially plural and therefore diversified because it constantly interacts with other cultures (Goertz, “Borderless” 69). Afro-Germans, because of their darker skin color, stand outside the basic cultural definition of Germans. In Ålund’s terminology, Afro-Germans, although born and raised in Germany, need a bridge to get to the home of German culture.

Ålund addressed the impossibility of an ethnically pure culture, but says that Europe's obsession with this idea is the reason why it is often called Fortress Europe. Martin Evans points out in his essay "Languages of Racism within Contemporary Europe" that a similar mindset can be seen in the concept of cultural separatism promoted by the National Front in France as well as the Republican Party in Germany. He claims that these groups are creating a new kind of racism although they do not preach hatred toward other cultures.

Another aspect of race that must be considered is its biological basis, or lack thereof. In his essay "Race, Multiculturalism and Difference" John Solomos is in agreement with Dr. J. Craig Venter from the article "Do Races Differ? Not Really, DNA Shows." They agree that race has no scientific basis. Culture, Venter says, is defined only in terms of history and politics, hence race is the product of racism and not the opposite. He says that races do not have fixed boundaries and because of this they are merely imagined communities. Similar to Raymond Williams, Solomos argues that culture is not composed only of cultural institutions; rather it is a discourse. Solomos claims that culture is:

- a way of constructing meanings which influences and organizes both our actions and our conceptions of our selves. National cultures construct identities by producing meaning about 'the nation' with which we can identify; these are contained in the stories which are told about it, memories which connects present with its past and images which are constructed of it. (203)

Ayim's writings about her experiences in German culture helped her to find this meaning about the nation, which she was a part of. After taking in the traditional ideas about her nation, she related them to her own life, making them something she could identify with. In telling about her life she makes her unusual conception of German culture tangible not only to herself but also to the reader.

Solomos explains the unusual situation of Afro-Germans like May Ayim when he asserts that although culture has the groundwork of common identity, beliefs and institutions, culture is not a fixed set of ideas, which are simply handed down and accepted passively. While Williams points to an individual's involvement in the assessment and interpretation of these ideas, Solomos goes a step further saying that even

the traditional components of culture like basic beliefs, customs and major institutions are acted upon constantly. He points out that in present day politics institutions such as the educational, religious and legal systems are selected from the past and mobilized to fit our contemporary practices, something more reminiscent of Weber's webs than Ålund's bridges.

Culture is a concept that can be described as flexible; the flexible aspects of culture acknowledge individual experiences and assessments and are able to offer Afro-Germans a place in society. Although Afro-Germans are rooted in the same institutions and traditions as other Germans, traditional beliefs systems contribute to the perpetuation of ideas like those about the whiteness of Germans. As contemporary politics apply old traditions to modern laws, so Afro-Germans apply the most traditional definition of German culture to their modern lives and experiences.

A slightly different way of seeing this flexibility or evolution of culture is found in Erin Crawley's "Rethinking Germanness" in which she writes "marginalized people do not simply react to dominant cultural norms; they affect their construction in complex ways, and destabilize those norms" (82). Crawley emphasizes the effect that Afro-Germans have on the culture around them with this statement, instead of finding a way that they can sneak into and somehow become a part of it. In her opinion, Afro-Germans' presence forces an actual change in culture and not just a new adaptation of it.

Although Afro-Germans undoubtedly have a unique perspective in Germany it is also true that the country has suffered since the end of World War II from a lack of national identity, which is one of the main components of culture. Forty percent of Germans claimed to feel indifferent to the German flag, a lack of national pride that especially affects the young (Knischewski 131). It would seem that such a lack of a definite national identity would allow more room for those who do not fit the German mold, yet the rise of radical groups since reunification proves that this is not the case. This tainted portion of German history has rocked the very basis of national identity and national identity is one of the main elements of culture that Afro-Germans share with other Germans. Yet, does this mean Afro-Germans must help carry the guilt of the Third Reich, or feel like victims since many had suffered as a result of it?¹⁰ An Afro-German's reflections on the events of the Third Reich would surely be different from those of a

white German, simply because of skin color and the role it plays even in such a basic component of culture: shared background. This fact is just an example of the assessment and analysis of the basic ideas and traditions that make up the living part of culture, the part of culture that unquestionably accepts Afro-Germans.

Homi Bhabha believes that a common legacy plays a major part in the formation of a national identity and culture. Ayim's father was only a long-time visitor from his native country Ghana, a place whose culture and history differ dramatically from that of Germany but it must be assumed that "legacy" in Bhabha's sense is meant culturally and not biologically, meaning that the German legacy is the only one Ayim is a part of. Bhabha goes on to say that along with a shared legacy are shared regrets and plans for the future among citizens of a nation (19-45). It is these two features specifically that we must analyze in relation to Ayim and other Afro-Germans like her. Germany has committed relatively recent sins and they are therefore still quite fresh in the mind of the world and among Germans themselves today. Their gross miscalculations and mistakes were to some extent race-bound, as mentioned by the emphasis on what an ideal German and Aryan looks like. These sins were committed by white Germans, those that make up the vast majority of Germans and their sins affected not only Jews but also people of African descent, who could also be found in concentration camps during the Second World War but are never mentioned as Holocaust survivors (Gambia 1).

CHAPTER 5

MINOR RACE IN MAJORITY CULTURE

Reflecting upon all the contributions Ayim made in her short life to bringing awareness of social and political problems to the forefront of cultural discussion within Germany, it must be noted that the issues that moved her most were those that affected her own life. In a country where race and nationality are perceived as closely bound, Ayim had to find a way of accepting her own German-ness while the majority culture denied her this cultural identity. Homi Bhabha argues that discussions of nationality and race should not lose sight of the fact that the existence of any pure race is myth. No pure race exists on earth. Wars and migration have long resulted in the intermingling of peoples. Bhabha points out that it is erroneous to think that any land is free of such mixing of races and cultures.

Living in Germany, a country that traditionally thinks of itself as a “white, European people,” Ayim was reminded of her difference in color every day. Paul Gilroy makes an interesting claim in *Against Race* by saying that black is only black when compared to white. This opinion certainly pertains to the situation of the many Afro-Germans who are in fact half white German and therefore only 50% “black” at most. Many, both “black” and “white,” choose to focus on only the black aspects, ignoring the white almost entirely. The reason, according to Gilroy, is contrast. Logic plays no part in this discrimination process and as Gilroy points out, “The skin has no independent life. It is not a piece or component of the body but its fateful wrapping” (46). According to Gilroy

this wrapping will remain fateful as long as those who benefit from a racial hierarchy continue to do so. Without any motivation to give up the benefits they reap it is unrealistic to expect such change (*Against Race* 12). In other words, German society's view of race changes so slowly because as long as the majority benefits from being white it has no impetus to evolve, leaving only the non-white minority to push for a shift in modern thinking. This is not to say that the majority would not also wish to participate in this shift, but their lack of a sense of urgency or even awareness prevents such change. This is why Ayim's work is so important. Through her work she hopes to call attention to minority issues and build a bridge to the majority culture. Unfortunately, the problems of a visible minority within the majority can be seen all over the globe, a broader picture that Ayim also addressed in her works.

Racism on the Global Scale

Ayim's constant confrontation with the "race" discourse led her to research on the situation of Afro-Germans. Her avid interest in people of African heritage all over the world is reflected in her political writing and poetry. In her essay "Die afro-deutsche Minderheit" she traces the history of Afro-Germans from the fourth century to post-reunification Germany. Her interest in the historical and current effect of race and its significance on the global scale are apparent in her poem "die farbe der macht." In this poem she clearly states her perspective on the role of blackness and whiteness, not only in Germany but in South Africa and America as well. Her emphasis on the importance of one's shade of skin color supports Gilroy's idea that race distinction is important only because of contrast:

nicht die farbe der haut
die farbe der macht
entscheidet

rassismus ist das bleiche gesicht
der gewalt
die sich in deutschland wieder zunehmend offen
in südafrika
immer schon
ungeschminkt
zeigt (*Nachtgesang* 72)

(not the color of skin / the color of power / decides / racism is the pale face / of violence / that in Germany is increasingly open again / in south africa / already / openly / displayed)

She goes on in *die farbe der macht* to compare the experiences of black and white citizens of South Africa with the experiences of African-Americans and Native Americans in the United States, and ends with the words:

nicht die farbe der haut
die farbe der macht
entscheidet
für oder gegen das leben (*Nachtgesang* 72)

(not the color of skin / the color of power / decides / for or against life)

Incorporating her White and Black Self

In the face of a history of racism, Ayim worked hard over many years to come to terms with her white German and black African background. Being called a “white lady,” in Ghana, a term that was more laudatory than derogatory, made her aware that she was seen as “other” in Ghana as well, something she had hoped to escape there. She grew up feeling like an outsider in Germany because of her darker skin color, only to find herself admired in Ghana for her light skin. This was difficult for Ayim. Her father’s native country, while viewing her in a different and better light than in Germany, was still afflicted with a similar white-black controversy, a major disappointment to Ayim. Her

best attempt to deal with her uncomfortable position outside both the German and Ghanaian norm is well expressed in “grenzenlos und unverschämt: ein gedicht gegen die deutsche sch-einheit,” which shares a similar title with one of her major works, the collection of essays and some poetry entitled *grenzenlos und unverschämt*. This title takes on new meanings in the poem that starts:

ich werde trotzdem
afrikanisch
sein
auch wenn ihr
mich gerne
deutsch
haben wollt
und werde trotzdem
deutsch sein
auch wenn euch
meine schwärze
nicht paßt (*Grenzenlos* 92).

(i will be african / even if you want me to be german / and i will be german / even if my blackness does not suit you; May Ayim, *Blues* 48-49)

Her attitude that she is and will remain German is reminiscent of Elizabeth Boa’s “Writing about Women Writing in German” where she discusses German literature that finds itself in the margins. Perhaps because Ayim was a literary woman, or just a woman looking for her place in society, Ayim, like Boa, seems intent on pointing out that being German, especially literarily, has no set borders, it is *grenzenlos*. Being German, according to Boa, can be defined as maternal or paternal lineage, geographical location or place of residence, native language and many other criteria, but Ayim adds to this basic idea by pointing out that sometimes one must be defiantly so.

This is seen not only in the contents of her poetry but also in her writing style. Ayim’s poems defy the strict rules of German capitalization and instead introduce lower case nouns, which is more reminiscent of the English language than her mother tongue. Ayim does not accept “culture” as a fixed concept but hopes to change German people’s white

mindset to include her German blackness. She consciously decides to stand outside the norms of not only society but also literature all the while hoping to create a bridge to the cultural norm. She embraced her otherness and made no excuses for her existence as an exception to the rule, which is why she wrote “ich will / grenzenlos und unverschämt / bleiben” (*Grenzenlos* 92; i want to/ remain / borderless and brazen).

While the poem “grenzenlos und unverschämt” exhibits the strong, defiant aspect of Ayim’s experience as an Afro-German, she also understands the insecurity her blackness creates for the white German majority. In her poem “einladung” she gives a dialogue between two presumably white Germans who will be hosting Ayim for dinner. Their concerns about how to act toward her point out that many often have only good intentions. Yet the awareness of the difference of their guest combined with little exposure to dark-skinned people, and possibly even ingrained racist ideas from the German culture, create an atmosphere where an Afro-German’s difference is the main focus. “Einladung,” while not as straightforward as many of Ayim’s other poems, has just as clear a message. They speak of their coming Afro-German guest saying:

am besten ihr verhaltet euch
ganz ganz normal
sagt bloß nicht negerin
das wäre katastrophal
natürlich kennt sie kartoffeln
nein du brauchst sie nicht braten du
kannst sie ruhig kochen...” (*Nachtgesang* 67)

(it’s best you act / totally totally normal / don’t ever say negree / that would be a catastrophe / of course she knows potatoes / no you needn’t fry them / it’s fine if you cook them; Ekpenyong Ani, *Blues* 72)

Ayim exposes the large number of Germans who are aware to some extent of racist elements in culture like racist speech. Many still do not know what appropriate expectations of an Afro-German are and how they should behave toward them because race is a taboo subject and therefore seldom openly discussed. The result is well-meaning people afraid of offending yet often doing so out of ignorance. This lack of discourse is exactly the problem Ayim hoped to solve.

In her poem “frühjahr” Ayim generalizes her accusation of German racism by describing not only individuals but also German society as a whole. The bulk of this poem lists the many multi-cultural activities occurring everyday because “jetzt kommt die frühjahrs / multi-kulti-ethno-freizeitgarderobe”, (now here comes the springs / multi-culti-ethno-freetime wardrobe) making Germany seem a very open-minded place indeed. After taking a look at German society and how integrated and culturally tolerant they are with their “zöpfchen ins haar / wie in afrika”, (little braids in hair / like in Africa) she narrows her focus with the closing lines of the poem. The last words, presumably spoken by a few people sitting comfortably in the privacy of their home ask, “die ausländischen nachbarn von nebenan / woher die kommen?” (*Nachtgesang* 69; the foreign neighbors next door / where are they from?) Ayim seems convinced that the outward display of acceptance is no more than that, a display.

On a more resentful note Ayim elaborates on the lens through which many white Germans see their Afro-German neighbors in her poem “winterreim in berlin,” which sets the mood by saying:

du bist so weiss wie schnee
und ich so braun wie scheisse
das denkst du dir und
fühlst dich gut
dabei” (*Nachtgesang* 68)

(you are as white as snow / and i as brown as shit / you think that to yourself and / feel good / about it)

This is followed by her assertion that she simply does not care if the smell her pores emit is offensive to those who are “so weiss wie schnee”. This picture of the dark-skinned person or African as somehow disgusting probably alludes to the earlier mentioned fact that in colonial times Africans were often looked upon as disgusting and animal-like. In her essay “Die afro-deutsche Minderheit” her knowledge of historically negative portrayals of blacks is clear. She continues to allude to this history of racism by making references to the view of Africans women as sexual objects by writing in the next verse:

du willst mich
kaufen

so wie schokolade
als >>negerkuss<<
träumst du
mich
butterweich
doch (*Grenzenlos* 68).

(you want to buy me / like chocolate / like a “negerkuss” / you imagine / me / soft as butter / nevertheless)

Her understanding stance as presented in “einladung” has been replaced in this poem and is overcome by the frustration she feels after a lifetime of misunderstanding by the majority culture.

Ayim addresses the subtle and inadvertent aspects of being an Afro-German in her essays and poetry. She reveals how racism is ingrained in German society and visible in even the most subtle aspects of culture. *Negerküsse*, for instance, small chocolate covered marshmallows, have long been a part of everyday speech. While a white German might not even contemplate the implications of this term, Ayim felt shame at ordering *Negerküsse*, *Eisneger* or *Eismohr* because they were reminders of the personal feelings of embarrassment and otherness she felt due to her skin color (*Grenzenlos* 49). Research on Afro-Germans shows that most Afro-German share this feeling of “not-belonging.” *Farbe Bekennen: Afro- deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* is an important example of the individual trials and difficulties of Afro-German women in German society. Approximately a decade ago, when this work was written, these women were writing from the perspective of a minority of only about 34,000 people (Goertz, “Borderless” 72). In reading *Farbe Bekennen* it is clear that Ayim’s experiences echo the feelings of this small but prominent group. In her poem “liberty of the arts” she addresses the unknowing and thoughtless way in which racist speech infiltrates culture. While in “einladung” she represents the more socially conscious members of society, in “liberty of the arts” she gives us insight into those who cannot or will not see the way racist expressions hurt and embarrass those they affect. The poem is the supposed correspondence between two authors, and it starts as follows:

you may

take the word
“negro” or “mulatto”
as offensive
i cannot share your opinion for
i did not mean it offensively

for me such words sound
melodic and classic

tangibly sensual instead of inaccessibly objective (Ekpenyong Ani, *Blues* 107)

It seems that when a group stands outside the norm, in this case a black minority outside of a white majority, it is only through open discourse on the subject of race, prejudice and change that a common understanding can be found. “Liberty of the arts” makes it clear, however, that hearing the woes of the minority does not translate into understanding these problems. Race remains a taboo subject partially because of the uncomfortable nature of it and also because of the fear of causing offense by saying or doing the wrong thing. While trying to avoid offense though, the same offenses often persist and merely expose further cultural ignorance. To experience such ignorance on a daily basis can influence all aspects of the life of an Afro-German. The evidence for this is visible in the important role race played even in Ayim’s love life.

CHAPTER 6

MAY AYIM'S LOVE LIFE

The need for belonging was a theme that ran through all aspects of Ayim's life. Not only in the German society at large, but also in her most intimate relationships, Ayim sought the feeling of acceptance. She never received this from her foster or birth parents and perhaps this is why she needed so desperately to be loved and desired in a romantic relationship. Though little is written about Ayim's love life the many love poems written during every phase of her most moving love relationship make it clear that she was in fact deeply in love with a man. In her poem "vorahnung," for example, she writes adoringly:

wie du gehst
wenn du kommst
wie du lächelst
wenn du bleibst
wie du bist (*Nachtgesang* 54)

(how you go / when you come / how you smile / when you stay / how you are)

Unfortunately, nearly all of her published poems of love include a feeling of loss, fear and general sadness. Even the above-mentioned poem "vorahnung" with its concluding lines, "wenn ich komme / wenn ich gehe" (when i come / when i go) gives the reader a sense of impending loss (*Nachtgesang* 54). In Ayim's friend Silke Mertins' essay, "Blues in Schwarzweiß: May Ayim (1960-1996)" Mertins briefly discusses the subject of the man to whom these pain ridden love poems were addressed by saying that their

relationship consisted of his coming into and leaving Ayim's life. So great was her desire for this man that she could not let go of him despite lines such as, "und diesmal wenn du gehst / bin ich schon fort" (*Nachtgesang* 63; and this time when you go / i'll already be gone). Silke Mertins writes that, "Das Kribbeln war da, wenn sie seine Stimme hörte," (The tingling was there when she heard his voice) but Ayim's problems with her lover were worsened by the fact that it was a white woman with whom she found herself competing for his love and attention (*Grenzenlos* 167). Silke writes, "Aber sie rührten auch an alte Wunden. Ausgerechnet mit einer weißen Frau um einen schwarzen Mann konkurrieren zu müssen bedrückte May. Hatte sie nicht viel mehr mit ihm gemeinsam?" (*Grenzenlos* 167; But it also opened old wounds. To have to compete with a white woman, of all people, for a black man, was difficult for May. Didn't she have much more in common with him?). More importantly for the sensitive Ayim, who had seldom found acceptance in her life was the question, "Was hatte die andere, was er bei ihr nicht finden konnte?" (*Grenzenlos* 167; What did the other woman have that he couldn't find with her?) Her eventual acceptance of this humiliating love triangle shocked her friends. Moreover, it reveals the need for love and acceptance that Ayim's upbringing never fulfilled and her hope that this man would change all that.

Much of Ayim's interactions with her lover can be best understood by looking closely at the only other love relationships she had to compare it with, her problem-ridden familial ones. Silke Mertins wrote in her essay about her friend May Ayim that she was extremely private because she felt protected behind the walls she built around herself. Mertins writes, "Sie streute das Risiko, enttäuscht zu werden. So gut wie sie selbst anderen zuhören konnte, so sehr wollte sie vermeiden, daß jemand zu viel über die wußte" (*Grenzenlos* 168; She distributed the risk of being disappointed. As well as she herself could listen to others, she intensely wished to prevent anyone knowing too much about her; Adams 152). This trait is seen in her poem, "sister," for instance, where she asks:

why do you pierce me
with your eyes
why do you want to understand everything

touch
the pain
behind my laughter

feel
the weariness
in my eyes

count
the furrows
on my forehead

examine
the scars
under my skin (Ekpenyong Ani, *Blues* 30)

Unfortunately, the trusted tactic of self-protection through privacy that she learned from her family and used in her friendships did not stand up to the romantic feeling of love. Her tendency to protect herself through privacy must have seemed a wise tactic growing up in a family and a country that she did not feel accepted by, but the closeness she writes about in her love poems seems to indicate that with her lover she felt differently. Her love for him made her seek his closeness and the fact that he was also an Afro-German must have strengthened their bond. Ayim's friend Silke writes that of her foster parents and biological parents, it was only for her Ghanaian father that she never had a word of reproach. Her esteem toward her biological father remained despite the fact that she never managed to have the close relationship with him that she desired (*Blues* 143). Of her biological mother, who was not at all involved in her life, she writes with a sense of hopeless longing:

ich kannte dich immer überhaupt nicht
und nachdem wir uns
vor jahren
fünf minuten sahen

fast gar nicht (*Farbe bekennen* 210)

(i didn't know you at all / and after we / years ago / saw each other / almost not all)

Ayim had almost nothing at all to report about her loveless upbringing with the Opitz family, which is clear in the poem "mama und papa." In this poem she expresses how she continues to suffer as a result of her painful childhood, a feeling that does not subside by keeping her distance from her foster parents as an adult:

lange nicht gesehen

läßt schweregefühl

auf der zunge

im herzen

ein loch (*Nachtgesang* 16)

(long not seen / leaves a heavy feeling / on the tongue / in the heart / a hole)

Toward her biological father she expresses a less tainted yearning that is very clear in her poem "vatersuche":

als ich dich brauchte

hielt ich das bild an der wand

für wahr

das schönste was ich von dir hatte

und das einzige (*Farbe bekennen* 209)

(when I needed you / I held the picture on the wall / to be true / the most beautiful thing I had from you / the only thing; Adams 23)

Ayim did not have a satisfying, loving relationship with any of her parents, but of the four it was definitely Ayim's biological father who she desired closeness with the most. I believe that this explains her deep need for the love of another man, a love that she held on to even under humiliating and unfulfilling circumstances. The young woman had never felt acceptance, and in the form of her Afro-German lover it must have seemed the closest thing to the bond with her biological father that she always wanted but never had. The joy she expresses about being in the arms of her lover, the second dark-skinned man she loved, is unparalleled in her poetry. In "zwei tänze ein tanz" she writes:

mein temperament

hat die farbe
des feuers
es lächelt im dunkeln es
leuchtet
in deinem körper
funkelt
mein spiegel
zerbricht
sorglos
in hälften
schließt öffnet
gesang und rhythmus

zwei tänze

ein tanz (*Nachtgesang 52*)

(my temperament / has the color of fire / it smiles in the darkness it / shines in your body / sparkles / my mirror / breaks / carefree / in halves / closes opens / song and rhythm / two dances / one dance)

Ayim, an activist and woman with a mission, recognized the problems in her love relationship and although she continually resolved to let the relationship go, she honestly writes about the nature of this imperfect situation, where her anger toward him is coupled with an unbearable longing for him, which she writes about in “erinnerungen”:

du bleibst
ich gehe
zornig
traurig
du gehst
ich bleibe

aus

erinnerungen (*Nachtgesang* 57)

(you stay / i go / furious / sad / you go / i stay / out of / remembrance)

This ability to acknowledge but not accept the corrupted nature of their relationship is the most recurrent theme in her love poetry. Although she writes in “unterwegs” that when he leaves the next time she will already be gone, she writes in “endlich” just two weeks later about reuniting with him and the “hoffnungsschimmer” (shimmer of hope) she feels (*Nachtgesang* 64). Ayim was completely aware of the short-term happiness that she exchanged for long time struggle when she wrote:

endlich wieder

heiße küsse

wieder und wieder

auf bangende wangen

endlich

neue nahrung

für und wider

unendlich

stürmische zeiten (*Nachtgesang* 64)

(finally again / hot kisses / again and again / on fearful cheeks / finally / new nourishment / for and despite / endlessly / stormy times)

Her difficult relationship spanned at least four years, and so did their troubles. In what a West German Radio journalist Bettina Böttinger called her best poem, “nachtgesang,” Ayim wrote in 1992:

ich warte nicht mehr

auf die bessere zeiten

schwarzblauer himmel über uns

silbersterne dran

hand in hand mit dir

den fluß entlang

bäume links und rechts

sehnsucht auf den ästen

hoffnung im herz (*Nachtgesang* 9)

(i no longer wait / for the better times / midnight blue sky above us / silver stars upon it / hand in hand with you / along the river / trees right and left / desire in their branches / hope in my heart; Tina Camp, *Blues* 163)

The sign of her enduring love is most poignant in the last lines of that poem which read, “ich liebe dich / ich warte nicht mehr” (*Nachtgesang* 10; i love you / i wait no more).

Three years later and just four months before Ayim jumped to her death she was still writing about this hopeless situation in the poem “schatten.” One of her final recorded thoughts about her love is a desperate one:

tag und nacht
wünsche ich mir
ein du
ganz für mich (*Nachtgesang* 83)

(day and night / i wish for myself / a you / totally for me)

Ayim’s devotion to an Afro-German man may have had to do with the fact that with him she could be sure that she was loved for who she was and not for being “exotic,” or for the thrill of trying something new. An Afro-German man would not have had the stereotypes about black women that many white men did. In her essay “Weißer Stress und Schwarze Nerven,” Ayim included a quote that addresses the common complaint among Afro-German women that white men are often attracted to black women for the wrong reasons:

Ich habe festgestellt, daß bei vielen Männern die Vorstellung existiert, daß eine farbige Frau eher >>fürs Bett<< zu haben ist. Ich werde in dieser Hinsicht viel eher und direkter angesprochen als weiße Freundinnen. Das passiert immer wieder und deshalb bin ich auch doppelt mißtraurisch, wenn sich jemand für mich interessiert. (*Grenzenlos* 125)

(I have come to the conclusion that there is an image held by many men that a woman of color is easier to “bed down.” So I’m much more likely to be approached, and more directly, than white women friends. It happens over and over; consequently I’m doubly suspicious when someone is interested in me; Adams 87)

This complaint, reminiscent of the colonial days in Germany, is echoed from the mouths of other Afro-German women like Helga Emde, who married a white man, yet over time began to feel that her exotic appearance was his real attraction to her (Emde 110). This

suspicion coupled with comments from her husband's family that a black woman cannot be true to a white man, make it clear that Ayim, Emde and many others suffered from the same fear of being "loved" for the wrong reasons by a white man (Emde 107). By loving a black man, Ayim felt safe from such suspicions, a safety she must have valued highly in a white world.

Ayim never felt the unconditional love that she needed growing up. The result is that she searched for this love in a romantic relationship. Her choice of partner must have seemed safe to the guarded Ayim. With him she needn't fear racism or any of the devaluing, stereotypical ideas about blackness. When she failed to find security, acceptance and love even with him, an Afro-German, it was a major blow. Although Ayim spent her life trying to build a bridge for Afro-Germans to the majority of German culture she did not want to go over that bridge alone. When it became clear that she would never have the romantic love she yearned for her already deep-seated feelings of sadness and loneliness grew. So did she suffer that she desired her own end because only then would the pain stop.

CHAPTER 7

AYIM'S EXHAUSTION ON THE FRINGES OF SOCIETY

Ayim wrote a great deal about her own end long before she met it. Her exhaustion with the contrast struggles of life and her need to prove that she should belong are recurrent themes in Ayim's poetry. She states this feeling with particular clarity in "rückblick":

das leben ist
wie ein langer
schmerzhafter
kuß (*Nachtgesang* 25)

(life is / like a long / painful / kiss)

Ayim's life was characterized by strife. Friends describe the private Ayim as "Unnahbar" because of her private nature, but also friendly, and often a mediator. Although she was a fighter standing for the rights of minorities, Afro-Germans and immigrants alike, she avoided confrontations in her private life at every cost. Mertins reports that Ayim's motto was, "Tust du dir mir nichts, tu ich dir nichts" (*Grenzenlos* 169). Her friendliness and laughter won her friendship and trust among those who knew her (Mertins, *Grenzenlos* 168-169). Unfortunately, the hardships that Ayim suffered due to her constant position as an outsider produced in her an overwhelming feeling that there is a limit to what one human can endure. This sentiment is expressed in much of her more personal poetry and reoccurs for many years. In 1987, nine years before her death

Ayim wrote the poem “the time thereafter,” a poem full of hope about a future without the troubles of today, only to conclude by saying:

i have a dream
of people who are no longer born screaming
and a vision
of me lying with peaceful eyes
and a hole in my head

AMEN – A LUTA CONTINUA (May Ayim and Ekpenyong Ani, *Blues* 139-140)

This feeling escalated in the last few years of her life. The poem “stille” is another example of the hopelessness Ayim felt toward the end. It was written four months before her death and just ten days after she wrote one of her saddest love poems “schatten,” making it apparent that her failed love relationship was a factor in her depression. In “stille” she writes about this overwhelming sadness:

ein tiefer riß geht durch mein leben
unbeschreiblich
schmerzend
ungeanhnt verletzend
ungewollt
zerstörend
ich weine ohne tränen
ohne stimme
schreie ohne stimme
weine
ganz alleine
bin ich
ganz alleine (*Nachtgesang* 82)

(a deep tear goes through my life / indescribably / painful / unbelievably maming / unwanted / destructive / i cry without tears / without voice / scream without voice / cry / competely alone / i am / completely alone)

Ayim’s overwhelming sadness and subsequent wish for death is the topic of such poems as “was braucht ein leben zum sterben,” and “götterspeise,” but through her poetry

Ayim expresses clearly that it was not only a life of difficulty that led to her suicide in August of 1996. Her diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis clearly weighed heavily on her mind as well.

In “nicht einfach” she writes that it is more difficult than she had imagined, “schwer zu erkranken / in der mitte des lebens” (to become seriously ill / in the middle of life) but her belief in a life after this one is also clear when she writes:

vorzeitig

sterben

ist möglich

doch

leben ist

auch möglich (*Nachtgesang* 93)

(early / dying / is possible / but / living is / also possible)

The comforting belief in eternal life after this dreadful one on earth is also seen in “im anlitz des todes,” “diesseits und jenseits,” and especially poignantly in “ewiglich.” The positive spirit that her friends remember is visible in the concluding words of “ewiglich”:

schau wie ich sterbe

mit humor und verzweiflung

ich trage krankheit dem tod entgegen

und mich selbst

in ein ewiges leben (*Nachtgesang* 92)

(look how i'm dying / with humor and despair / i wear illness to the death / and myself / to an eternal life)

Thoughts of suicide were undoubtedly running through Ayim's mind long before she made her second and successful suicide attempt. In “kehrtwende,” written a year before her death, before the diagnosis that was her final trial and one she could not face, she says:

schon wieder

winkt ein

abschiedsgedicht
in die zukunft
schon weht
ein neuer wind
in mein herz
schon wieder (*Nachtgesang* 84)

(again / beckons a / goodbye poem / in the future / again blows / a new wind / in my heart / again)

The long precariously balanced scale of struggles and joys in Ayim's life was finally tipped by mental exhaustion and an incurable illness. The kind nature that made her life a story of love and friendship, as well as personal and political struggle, shines through in her final poem, addressed to those she loved:

abschied

was sollen die letzten worte sein
lebet wohl auf wiedersehen
irgendwann irgendwo?
was sollen die letzten taten sein
ein letzter brief ein telefonat
ein leises lied?
was soll der letzte wunsch sein
verzeiht mir
vergeßt mich nicht
ich habe euch lieb?
was soll der letzte gedanke sein
danke?
danke (*Nachtgesang* 99)

(departure / what should the last words be / fare-well see you again / sometime somewhere? / what should the last deeds be / a last letter a phone call / a soft song? / what should the last wish be / forgive me / forget me not / I love you? / what should the last thought be / thank you? / thank you; Dagmar Schultz, *Blues* 166)

Conclusion

May Ayim is an author of minor literature. She is a representative of an all too easily overlooked part of German society. She used her writings and speeches to promote awareness of minority problems in Germany. Born into German society Ayim strove in various ways throughout her life to claim her right to belong and be accepted as a member of this society. Instead, she was met with racism and subjected to utterings like, “>>Das Blut kann man doch nicht verleugnen<<. >>Meinen Sie nicht, daß Sie in Ghana z.B. viel dringender gebraucht werden, in Deutschland gibt es ja schon so viele Arbeitslose?!<<” (*Grenzenlos* 11; But theres no denying blood. Don’t you think you’re probably needed perhaps much more in Ghana, whereas in Germany there are so many unemployed people?!; Adams 20). Such assumptions, even if unintentional, had the powerful effect of making her feel rejected and eventually exhausted. Poems like “testament” speak of her deep feeling of never really finding an acceptable place in German society:

ich weiß nicht
woher ich das weiß
ich weiß nur
daß ich nicht alt werden werde

eine krankheit zerfrißt
seit langem mein herz

deshalb mein testament (*Nachtgesang* 11)

(i don’t know / how i know it / i just know / that i won’t grow old / a sickness has eaten / for a long time my heart / therefore my testament)

Finding a life between her black and white self, between love and hate of Germany, or as Ayim says, “zwischen den stühlen” (between the chairs), led to constant struggles, but this struggle and the literature she produced as a result of it is exactly why May Ayim is

so important. Rather than accept ignorance, Ayim fought until her death to change her reality. She did not allow fellow German citizens to comfortably follow in the racist footsteps of their forefathers, but constantly tried to point out the flaws in the perception of Afro-Germans as “other.” Such people are responsible for change and improvement in society the world over.

In Aleksandra Ålund’s terms it could be said that Ayim was building a bridge to make German culture more accessible to those with a darker complexion. Rather than wait to be invited in, May Ayim kept knocking on the door of German culture in the hopes that she could make those on the inside care enough to open it wide, allowing others in. If Afro-Germans such as Ayim did not try to raise awareness, what impetus would there be for change? As Paul Gilroy pointed out, as long as the majority benefits it will not necessarily realize the need for change. It is minor writers and activists like May Ayim that make this majority aware. Her work was not complete when she died, however, and so it is only by remembering Ayim’s work and continuing in her footsteps that society will continue to grow toward a more open and accepting future, where no one will be seen as “other” based on race. This means for many just to be aware of prejudice and to remember the hardship people like May Ayim suffer as a result of it. Even more important is the future spreading of this awareness to the German public at large through her literature. If Ayim’s work is forgotten so will be its impact. This was not what Ayim envisioned however. She saw hope:

i too have a dreamer, brother
of people who one day
are no longer born screaming
but laughing
laughing
in colors of the rainbow (May Ayim and Ekpenyong Ani, *Blues* 138)

NOTES

¹ In her article “Borderless and Brazen: Ethnicity Redefined by Afro-German and Turkish German Poets,” Karein Goertz writes that although there were 100,000 people of African heritage in Germany approximately a decade ago, when *Farbe Bekennen* was written, only 34,000 were Afro-Germans, i.e. German citizens. No definite number was available from the German Embassy in Washington D.C.

² Although May’s legal name was Opitz, her pen name Ayim (her birth father’s name) will be used in the text for clarity.

³ Her full, legal name was Sylvia Brigitte Gertrud Opitz, but she was nicknamed May and later she used the pen name Ayim instead of Opitz.

⁴ Ayim's poems that are cited from *Blues in Black and White* (the English translation of *Blues in schwarz-weiss*) were already available in English translation, hence these translations are cited in the thesis. Not all poems in *Blues in Black and White* were translated by Anne Adams who is listed as the translator of this book. In the case that poems were translated by persons other than Anne Adams, I will list the name(s) of the translator followed by the title of the book and the page number.

⁵ A Fuegian is a native of Tierra del Fuego, islands off the southern coast of South America.

⁶ The depiction of the Australian appears to be an Aborigine.

⁷ Although never legalized, some sterilizations were performed on young Afro-Germans before and during the Third Reich. See: Susan Samples, “African Germans in the Third Reich,” *The African-German Experience: Critical Essays*, ed. Carol Aisha Blackshire-Belay. (Westport: Praeger, 1996). 53-70.

⁸ Mixed children had long been present in Germany, and looked down upon. Depictions of black people, whether in parades or comic strips, were derogatory and/or silly, indicating the German mentality toward them.

⁹ Ayim used her legal name Opitz for this publication.

¹⁰ Tina Campt, *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich*, *Social History, Popular Culture, and Politics in Germany*. Ed. Geoff Eley. (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2004).

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

I spent my early childhood in Virginia but have lived in Northwest Florida for most of my life. I became a student at Florida State University in 1997 and graduated *summa cum laude* in 2000 with a double major in Psychology and German. After graduation I spent the year 2000-2001 in Magdeburg, Germany teaching English to German university students with the Robert Bosch Tutor Program for the Advancement of the English, French, Polish, Czech and Russian Languages in the Former East Block Länder. This experience led to my attending Florida State University again in 2003, this time as a Masters student in German Literature. During my stay at FSU I have twice served as the group leader of Beyond Borders Cultural Exchange, an FSU sponsored program, which sends ten FSU students to Dresden, Germany each year for a stay of three weeks. Upon graduation I hope to pursue my education, whether formally or informally, since I continue to grow as long as I continue to learn.