

Black Atlantic

May Ayim

Blues in Black and White

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Translated and with an Introduction by

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afro-german I

You're Afro-German?

...oh, I see: African and German.

An interesting mixture, huh?

You know: there are people that still think

Mulattos won't get

as far in life

as whites

I don't believe that.

I mean: given the same type of education...

You're pretty lucky you grew up *here*.

With German parents even. Think of that!

D'you want to go back some day, hm?

What? You've never been in your Dad's home
country?

That's so sad...Listen, if you ask me:

A person's origin, see, really leaves quite a
Mark.

Take me, I'm from Westphalia,

and I feel

that's where I belong...

Oh boy! All the misery there is in the world!

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Be glad

You didn't stay in the bush.

You wouldn't be where you are today!

I mean, you're really an intelligent girl, you

Know.

If you work hard at your studies,

you can help your people in Africa, see:

That's

What you're predestined to do,

I'm sure they'll listen to you,

while people like us –

there's such a difference in cultural levels...

What do you mean, do something here? What

On earth would you want to do here?

Okay, okay, so it's not all sunshine and roses.

But I think everybody should put their own

house in order first!

1985

(Translation by Ilse Müller; from *blues in schwarz weiss*)

afro-german II

...hm, I understand.

You can thank your lucky stars you're not

Turkish, right?

I mean: it's awful the way they pick on

Foreigners,

do you ever run into that at all?

“...”

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Well, sure, but *that's* the kind of problem I
have, too.

I feel a person can't blame everything on the
color of their skin, and things are never
easy for you if you're a woman.

Take this friend of mine:
she's pretty heavy,
and does she have problems!
Compared to her, you know, you seem pretty
laid-back.

Anyway, I feel
that blacks have kept a sort of natural
outlook on life.

While here: everything's pretty screwed up,
right?
I think I'd be glad if I were you.
German history isn't something one
Can really be proud of, is it.
And you're not that black anyway, you know.

1985

(Translation by Ilse Müller; from *blues in schwarz weiss*)

sister

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

touch

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the pain
behind my laughter

feel
the weariness
in my eyes

count
the furrows
on my forehead

examine
the scars
under my skin

why do you want to fold your cold hands
around my trembling heart

we are sisters
 you and I

we are sisters

1991
for Diane
(Translation by Ekpenyong Ani; from *blues in schwarz weiss*)

May Ayim

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One of the Others

“How do women experience the African continent?” was the topic of the travel book Schwarzafrika der Frauen [Africa for Women], published in 1989. May Ayim wrote her entry for the section “On My Father’s Trail: Afro-German Women.”

In 1986 I spent three months in Ghana, my father’s native country. Having grown up with German foster parents, I, of course, spoke not one word of Twi or any of the other indigenous languages; in fact I was glad I could communicate with some competence with my knowledge of English.

The closer my departure came, the stronger were my doubts about how well I had prepared myself for the journey.

How many medicines should I take, any warm clothing, gifts, contact addresses?

I was glad to be finally standing at the airport. With all the vacillating, trying to make up my mind, I ended up taking only a minimum of everything (which I didn’t regret later). The baggage scale showed eleven kilos, including youth hostel sleeping bag, mosquito net, and the one warm sweater in case it got cool. Actually, in spite of the rainy season, it was nearly always hot; even the few rain showers cooled things down for only brief periods.

For a part of the trip I had signed up with an international work camp program that collaborated with a Ghanaian organization carrying out projects dealing with rural social and economic structures. After a while I came to the conclusion that many of the projects, though initiated with good intentions, ended up at some point uncompleted. Consequently there were school buildings and farm plots started that no one bothered with anymore after the end of the work camp. Besides the scarcity of raw materials, tools and building materials, my only explanation for it is that the villagers, the actual beneficiaries of the project, had not been sufficiently included in the planning. As a result many projects went ahead in consultation with only a few insiders and supervisors and continued only as long as the sponsoring organizations sent work campers and money from outside.

Of course, the work tours in different villages provided the European campers, including myself, a unique opportunity for close contact with Ghanaians by working and living together. Likewise, many Ghanaians responded positively to meeting Europeans other than as travelers passing through and as money-spending tourists. Nevertheless we would be deceiving ourselves to claim that through our work we actually contributed to Ghana’s economic and social development. All in all there is still the feeling of at least not having done any great harm, along with the memory of goodwill and of having spent a meaningful vacation rather than wasting it away.

For me the work project was not so much a priority. By no means had I gone to Ghana for the purpose of helping or seeking relaxation and a change of scenery. Of far greater importance was my desire to

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know the roots of my African background, to feel the life of the country where I might just as well – maybe even better – have grown up as in the FRG.

But I didn't grow up in Ghana. And even if I was able to move about the streets unnoticed and unharrassed with questions – a pleasant contrast to my everyday experience in German cities – that carefree feeling came to an end as soon as I opened my mouth to speak: a black German?! A black woman who grew up in a white family?

In fact the questions that I was asked over and over were not so very different from those in Germany. However, there was one substantive difference: Even though I was quickly perceived by many Ghanaians as a white European, and even often referred to as *White Lady*, no one ever considered not accepting me as a Ghanaian anyway. Not only that no one thought it necessary to remark that Germany was where I belonged; as a matter of fact, many thanked me for having taken the long journey to search out my African heritage and expressed their hope that I might someday remain indefinitely.

I found this friendliness to be, on the one hand, quite normal, in its straightforwardness of expression, but, at the same time, like a sort of gift, something very special. How often, in my German “homeland,” am I required to cut myself off from “foreigners” in order to be competitive in the housing and job markets, that is, to have equal rights with white Germans. Basically I would have to be as “white” as possible and appear as “exotic” as necessary, to be accepted in the society where I was born and raised. Not so in Ghana. I clearly was and felt foreign, homesick, and everything that goes with it, but never did I feel rejected, unwanted, out of place.

Whenever I would have a conversation about this with people in Ghana, most of them were astonished and horrified to hear that there was discrimination against blacks in the FRG.

“But how come? You're one of them; and here, whites have it good. In fact we give them preferential treatment, because they're guests and aren't familiar with things here.”

I couldn't disagree with that. During my stay I had been in many situations where whites were brought to the front of a queue at a ticket counter to be served first – hospitality, which almost made me ashamed as an observer, but which was taken for granted, if not expected, by those to whom it was offered.

No, I had no plausible explanation for the intractability of racism in the FRG. The only ones who have any justifiable grounds for hostility and prejudice are those who have been excluded and exploited for so long. There isn't much more that I can say than that racism serves to legitimate the conditions of injustice that cannot be rationally justified, hence denigrating and belittling those whose oppression constitutes the other's power.

The fact that there is so little information disseminated in Ghana about the life and situation of blacks in the FRG can probably be attributed in part to the high expectations placed on returnees. According

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to those expectations it must be simply wonderful, almost like paradise in Europe. How else could it be that nearly all Europeans in Ghana are rich? Even unemployed whites can afford to leave their country for several weeks or even months for a vacation in Ghana.

It is understandably the dream of many in Ghana to go to Europe for a while, to work, use the money earned to build a life in Ghana and support the family. No one believes a Ghanaian who comes for a visit and says that things are bad for them in Germany, that he or she is not in the position to send for more family members, to finance their education and living expenses in Ghana. Surely, he must have failed or has perhaps become selfish in the absence of this family, with only his own good in mind.

In that regard it bears emphasizing that often it was the whole family that made the journey abroad possible, for virtually no one can afford a ticket to Europe on the average salary. How difficult it is to dash the expectations and the hopes attached to them, I experienced for myself on the day I visited my father's family. It was basically an unplanned, spontaneous visit, resulting from the willingness of everyone whom I told that my father was Ghanaian to help me look for my relatives. I wasn't even certain myself whether I even wanted to make contact with anyone in the family, considering that I hardly knew my father and that it had been so long since he had lived in Ghana. So, how would his family react to me? Who among them even knew of my existence?

Finally someone offered, with no guarantee, to gather a few pieces of information about my family, since they apparently lived not far from his hometown. When I met the man two weeks later, he told me:

"I've done my homework. I learned from a co-worker that he comes from the area that your father comes from. And, would you believe, when I was questioning him, it so happens that he is an uncle of yours. I went with him right away to your grandfather's and I am now proud to report to you that your grandfather is happily expecting you. And not only are he and his family excited about your visit, but the whole village is making preparations. I told them that you would show up there next weekend."

I know I tried to smile in appreciation, while a quiet feeling of horror crept up on me. The seemingly harmless announcements had snatched all decision-making out of my hands.

"They'll surely slaughter a cow or a goat for you."

"They'll all be so happy and convince you on the spot to stay there."

"The Ewes are very skilled in sorcery; their people are known for it. They will definitely try to keep you right there. Besides, they will be very proud that you have come from Germany to visit your relatives. You'll meet so many siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, that you'll never again have any reason to feel alone. Maybe you'll even find a husband there."

These and similar predictions, half serious, half joking, accompanied me on the way to the Volta Region. I remember that about ten years ago, at my father's request, I had sent a picture of myself to my grandfather. My brief letter and photo caused some confusion that was only resolved months later.

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The fact is that I had sent my grandfather one of three photos with my father and me together. So my grandfather had a picture from when I was three years old, which caused him from then on to think I was a little sister of myself. Consequently, in his reply letter he said he had heard of the big girl but not of me, the little daughter. In any case he was awaiting the day of our arrival in his home with open arms.

So, there I stood, now, before my grandfather. He was, by now 80 years old and I, 26. As I entered his house he came toward me, just like the letter said, with outspread arms and embraced me like I was his most beloved granddaughter. What good fortune!

That day that I spent with him I got to see more relatives than I could ever have dreamed of. The oldest among them was way over a hundred years old and the mother of the deceased grandmother. I was deeply moved at becoming a member of my extended family overnight. The whole day I was occupied with greeting and being greeted.

After I had made the journey to my relatives, some of them promised in return to visit me in Germany, for which I could only be partially enthusiastic. In Ghana it would have been possible for me to stay as long as I wished with any of the people I met, and especially with the relatives, and no one would have been disturbed. In Berlin I wasn't even living legally in my apartment, and I asked myself in all seriousness what the neighbors would say and do, particularly if Ghanaian relatives were going in and out of my place for several weeks. It was already annoying just thinking about how people on the street react when someone asks them for directions. Most likely my visitors would also be confronted with the usual "straight ahead, then turn right, then left, and then after you pass the traffic light, ask again"; whereas in Ghana someone always went with me a part of the way. All of a sudden my German environment seemed so cold and uncommunicative. But I kept my thoughts to myself; I didn't know if I could have made anyone understand them anyway.

As I said my good-byes, my grandfather gave me a loving wink. Looking at me with earnest expectation, he told me not to think about Germany so much but rather about him, about Ghana, and to bring back a little of the light that the whites had taken away from Africa.

I wasn't and am still not sure what of the gleam can be brought back and what could be done with it, here or there.

between avenui and kreuzberg

we always meet

in the distance

between

avenui and kreuzberg

beneath an old

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walnutmangotree

TOGBE

smiles

waiting for me

in his hands

a bowl of fufu

full to the brim

for him

i am granddaughter

MAWULI

i bring fruit

and vegetables

for dessert

i stir cottage cheese

i am happy

yes

his son too

my father is here

eating with us

one of us

listening to us

TOGBE

teaches me patience

and understanding

he worries about me

talks of ghana

about the dreams

of the ancestors of those

with second sight

he smiles

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while speaking

i

answer his questions

give thoughts to him

images of berlin

i explain

“the scene”

in kreuzberg

surrounding me

we laugh a lot

he and i

between

avenue and kreuzberg

beneath an old

walnutmangotree

in the tangled thoughts

in the distance

- in a dream –

1993

for my grandfather († 1993)

(Translation by Ekpenyong Ani; from *nachtgesang*)

distant ties

my mother's hands

are white

i know

i don't know them

my mother

the hands

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

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

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

apart
forgotten
her lips his face
ache cheerfully
african words

apart
before they
lost each other
the daughter
apart

i know
his dark fingers
on my hand

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know
her light traces
on my skin
shadow kisses on the way

distant ties
connected distances
between continents
on the road at home

i know
in moments memory
i know
in hands the horizon
alive

1992
for Sewornu and Hiavor

(Translation by Ekpenyong Ani; from *blues in schwarz weiss*)

darkness

in the beginning there was
gentle darkness and
nervous silence
then it became very noisy
very bright

grief and astonishment opened
the doors of the present
inside there was screaming
and a confusion of voice
outside it was midnight
and spring

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the house was somewhere
in or at the edge of
the city
surrounded maybe
by a lawn with
flowers on it
and high above in the sky
clouds
passing each other
in a rush and leisurely

at the time

a woman a man a child
the woman very young
the man hardly older
the child just born – crying
the man made
the woman have a child
the woman made the child
live in a home

a mo

a fa

a chi

the mother disappeared
in the darkness of time
the father came
now and then
to visit

the child stayed
alone most of the time

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the first word
was just a word

MAMA

1991

(Translation by Ekpenyong Ani; from *blues in black and white*)

Mary Ayim

1990: Home / land and Unity from an Afro-German Perspective

The anthology Entfernte Verbindungen [Distant Ties], published in 1993, from which this text is extracted, was the product of a working group consisting of women of diverse origins, who met regularly over the course of three years.

For me, the past two years have been shaped by rapid development and changes, not only politically but also personally. I think back to the end of 1989 and going into 1990, to the bewilderment and contradictions, the fits and starts, the recollections of things suppressed, the new discoveries.

At the time I was moving as though on an unmoored boat. I was so busy trying to avoid shipwreck in all of the whirlpool of the times, that it was nearly impossible for me to take full account of the events going on around me with any nuanced understanding. In retrospect I see some pieces only in bare outline; other pieces are much clearer viewed from a distance. It seems as though the Wall between the two Germanys cast its stony shadow well in advance of its crumbling. That shadow was cast directly into the heads of those who had accepted it, enclosed and adorned themselves with it: the Wall's shadow had been cast into our East-West brains. People from the two Germanys met one another like twins who know about their common parents but had lived separated from each other since birth. The initial euphoria erupted as the joy of reunion between two relative strangers, trying to deny the fact that their relations up to that point had been characterized by hostilities from a distance. All across the media-landscape the talk was of German-German brothers and sisters, of united and re-united, of solidarity and feelings for fellow human beings...Indeed, even terms like home, folk, and fatherland were suddenly – again – on the lips of many. Again making the rounds were words that had been used only with caution or even shunned in both German states since the Holocaust, with uninterrupted favor

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only in rightwing circles. Times change, people, too. Perhaps the questions of the times only change a bit and people's answers, hardly at all.

The early excitement of encounter crumbled with unpredictable speed, and the deceitfully won unity suffocated just as quickly under the tight artificial cloak of liberal German folksiness. Of course, previously you saw the little 'one-Germany' flags and banners waving. Germany jackets, t-shirts, and stickers were everywhere. I was amazed, in November, 1989, how rapidly and in what enormous quantities all sorts of black-red-gold paraphernalia appeared in the stores and even at flea markets – and in demand everywhere. I could not comprehend what was going on in the deeper recesses of people's heads and feelings. The white, Christian-German-Collective guilt complexes had apparently dissolved overnight, thereby tearing the present away from the past. Who were the consumers, who, the producers, of the freedom-for-sale, and for whom and how many was there space in the cherished new home? Who was embracing each other in German-German reunification, and who was embraced, pulled in, bumped out? Who, for the first time? Who, once again? Who, al along?

Within a few moments reunification led to the birth of a new Federal Republic in – as far as the GDR was concerned – a not particularly new guise. The GDR was left to the side. As the Wall fell, many rejoiced; others felt their heads spinning.

German Fa(r)ther-land...

My fatherland is Ghana, my mother tongue is German; homeland, I carry in my shoes. When the Wall fell, I felt, for a while, the fear of being struck down. It wasn't much, not a great fear, but more than usual.

Since 1984 I have been living and working in West Berlin and feel more at home in this city than anywhere else. Due to my underdeveloped sense of direction I get lost everyday in the streets, but compared with other cities where I lived and studied before, Berlin has always been a place where I felt pretty much at home. My skin color is not an unusual attention-grabber on the streets; here I'm not praised everyday for my good German, and, at seminars, programs, or parties, only seldom do I find myself the only black among an indeterminate number of whites. I still have to explain myself a lot, but not constantly. I remember former times, in small West German cities, where I often had the feeling of being under constant observation, of getting sick of constantly searching and questioning gazes. I remember days when I would feel especially lonely or unbearably exposed and would be on the lookout for black people while shopping or riding the bus. In Berlin, this anonymous city with its international face, those recollections faded very quickly from my memory. With the fall of the Wall and the period following it they returned, as though out of a dusty drawer, into my daily life.

In the days immediately following November 9, 1989, I noticed that hardly any immigrants or black Germans were to be seen around town, at least only rarely any dark-skinned ones. I wondered why not

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many Jews were about. I ran into a couple of Afro-Germans whom I had met in East Berlin the previous year, and we were glad to have more chances of getting together now. Moving around alone I wanted to breathe in a bit of the general enthusiasm, to sense the historical moment and share my reserved joy. Reserved because I had heard about the imminent policy-tightening regarding immigrants and asylum-seekers. And further, like other black Germans and immigrants, I knew that even a German passport did not guarantee an invitation to the East-West festivities. We sensed that along with the imminent intra-German union a growing closing off from outside would ensue – an outside that would include us. Our participation in the celebration was not invited.

The new “We” in “this our country” – Chancellor Kohl’s favorite expression – did not and does not have a place for everyone.

“Out, nigger, don’t you have a home to go to?”

For the first time since I had been living in Berlin I now had to protect myself almost daily against undisguised insults, hostile looks and / or openly racist offenses. As in earlier times I started again, when shopping and on public transportation, to look out for dark faces. A friend of mine, holding her Afro-German daughter on her lap in the S-Bahn,* was told “We don’t need your kind anymore. There are already more than enough of us!” A ten-year-old African boy was thrown out of a crowded U-Bahn train

* S-Bahn: elevated train

to make room for a white German.

Those were incidents in West Berlin in November, 1989, and since 1990 reports of racially motivated attacks primarily on black people have increased, mostly in the eastern part of Germany. Reports like those were at first known only in circles of immigrants and black Germans, the official media reporters hardly taking notice of the violent assaults. I began the year 1990 with a poem:

“borderless and brazen: a poem against the German “u-not y.”

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

i will go

yet another step further

to the farthest edge

where my sisters – where my brothers stand

where

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o u r

FREEDOM

begins

i will go

yet another step further and another step and

will return

when i want

and remain

borderless and brazen

1990

for Jaqueline and Katharina

(Translation by May Ayim)

As an outgrowth of the “Black History Month” series of programs on topics of black history, culture, and politics, initiated by a black activist group in Berlin, February, 1990, a task force was formed of black groups and individuals of racist attacks in Berlin and the surrounding area.¹

Around the same time I completed my training as a speech therapist. I remember not only the jittery exam time with sleepless nights and problems in my love-life, but also the meetings of black political groups at which for the first time we discussed measures for protecting our organizations and our individual persons from racist attacks. Between the two Germanys contacts among black groups and those concerned with immigrant politics intensified, leading to common actions and social gatherings. I was angry and disappointed that the liberation of Mandela received hardly any attention in the German media at that time. For the first time I came to appreciate the invention of cable TV, because I saw at least that not the entire European world was engaged in contemplating its navel.

At demonstrations against the tightening of immigration and asylum law early in the year, white German representation was scarce. The *TAZ*, on April 2, 1990, reported: “German Leftists Absent at Mass Demonstration Protesting Law on Foreigners. Too Foreign?”

I began to get angry over the East-West celebrations and programs that did not incorporate North-South dialog. In the women’s movement, too, German-German matters were discussed and celebrated, as though Germany were exclusively white and the center of the world. Conferences and seminars were held, with travel support for women from the GDR, without also considering asylum-seekers, who, whether in East or West Germany, have to squeeze out a minimal existence. This modus

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operandi was in keeping with the after-thought, half-hearted show of solidarity staged at the governmental level by the “Better Westerners” for the “Poor Easterners.”

Thinking back I recall an ad in the movies promoted by the Berlin Senate: East German workers on a construction site in West-Germany. A voice off-screen announced that it was GDR citizens who were taking the underpaid jobs and those unattractive to West Germans. The commentator was exhorting the audience, in a manner both urgent and friendly, to graciously receive “the people” who have come “to us” in the recent weeks and months. Why is it that only white German men are shown, if they were talking about feelings for fellow human beings between women and men from both Germanys? I wholly support a call to solidarity but not one that is silent on the fact that the least attractive and worst-paid jobs go to migrant workers from other European and non-European countries. Where is the call to solidarity with those who, in the tide of German-German embrace, are in greatest danger of no longer finding work and housing possibilities and of losing their jobs and training posts? For asylum seekers there were no embracing gestures of support with words of goodwill and discount tickets. On the contrary, the law on temporary or permanent residence especially for people from predominantly poor non-European countries was drastically tightened by means of new legal requirements. Further, as racist violence in the streets was increasing, white citizens and politicians from East and West, until the end of 1990, stood by doing nothing. And also, the “receptivity” and “hospitality” toward white GDR citizens seemed dishonest to me in the face of the attitude toward so-called foreign compatriots, who long before now, had been constantly reminded that the “boat” is full.

Biologist Irenäus Eibl-Dibesfeld, for example, published an article in 1981 with the title “Dangers of Mass Immigrations”, in which he said:

We should have no delusions: with every immigrant allowed in, we cede ground; and we have to tell the people like it is, for the contexts of large-scale biological integration are just as unclear to them as the possible consequences.²

A clear indication of this is that only certain groups of immigrants are categorically perceived and marginalized as “foreigners”, just as black Germans cannot be “real Germans”.

A blond, blue-eyed woman told me that white Germans have trouble believing that she comes from Brazil. She would often be asked, “But don’t your ancestors come from Germany?” In Brazil, she said, no one had ever doubted her Brazilian origins and her Brazilian nationality. Only in Germany had she begun to reflect on and research her family history. She found out that a long deceased great-grandfather had actually emigrated from Germany to Brazil. Today, whenever she introduces that bit

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of information into the “Where-are-you-from-conversation,” the reaction is not infrequently: “Oh, that’s wonderful that your ancestors are from Germany. How do you feel being in your homeland for the first time?” Black Germans have different experiences in this country.

The New German “We”: An inclusive and exclusive space?

Franz Beckenbauer commented, as coach of the German soccer team, on his team’s victory in the World Championship in the summer of 1990: “For years we’ve been unbeatable. I’m sorry for the rest of the world, but that’s how it is.”³ The disturbing vision of a we-are-again-somebody Germany took on increasingly real form over the course of 1990, with the growing popularity of racist pronouncements and behaviors. Likewise, the German “we” that had been touted remained split into two different halves. The historic moment which yielded so much counterfeit rhetoric of “revolution” could have been, in both parts of Germany, a moment of critical self-reflection and mutual stimulation for change. Already at the time the Wall fell it was clear that no one was prepared to criticize and reform the FRG as rigorously as was being urged for the GDR. In government circles attention was focused first and foremost on implementing political and economic interest, and so hardly guided by humanitarian ideals.

Hans-Joachim Maaz, a psychotherapist from Halle, is one of those who posed the question in 1990:

Where are the honest politicians of the West, to warn and inform us about the failures and problems in our own system, and not just smugly offer us their “superiority”? Where are the serious reflections about what needs to change in the FRG, so that a unified Germany becomes an opportunity and not a new danger for Europe?⁴

Since then, two years after the fall of the Wall, the face of the former GDR is no longer recognizable. Textbooks, laws, institutional structures, etc. were either brought into line with those of the former GFR or done away with. Flashing billboards everywhere are a clear indication that capitalism has taken a foothold in even the tiniest village of the five new federal states, and the “Trabis,” already a rarity now, seem like relics from the distant past. Considering its total removal, the entire Wall story is now hard even to imagine. The number of jobless, especially women, is climbing at a staggering rate. The re-naming of streets and the removal of certain monuments are among the signs pointing out the new view of the past and the next step into the future as drafted by those in power. What will we remember? What have we already forgotten? I notice that in the renaming of streets in the new states,

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often names of resistance fighters are replaced by names of flowers. Hence, “Liselotte Herrmann Street” in Erfurt has been recently renamed “Medlar Street.” The re-naming of East Berlin’s U-Bahn station “Thälmann Street” to “Moor Street” is a sure sign that racist language and associated thinking are tolerated and carried on even in the highest white ranks of the new republic. This is evident as well in the still unchallenged retention of street names and monuments in the western part of Germany that glorify colonialists and degrade the colonized.

The silence and denial of racism even on the part of “progressive” leftists and among women’s-movement women, though unsettling and shocking to me in 1990, hardly surprised me anyway. Undeniably, discussions on the subject of a “multi-cultural FRG” have been on the increase since the mid-’80s. But only in exceptional cases have they effected a change in anyone’s actual day-to-day political associations, so that a continuous, egalitarian collaboration with immigrants and black Germans became indispensable and taken for granted, and confronting racism became a constant commitment. The “Second Women’s Shelter” in Berlin and Orlanda Women’s Press are among the few independent women’s projects that have long been committed to quotas for immigrants and black woman in their hiring.⁵

Racism is still seen by many white Germans as an exceptional instance and special subject. Hence, immigrants, black Germans, and Jewish people are often only considered and included within the context of special programs, as, for example, “Immigrant Neighbors Week,” or a conference on “Migration and Population Policy.” This is one facet of unconscious and subtle in- and exclusion. A pertinent comment from Klaus F. Geiger in November, 1989:

The reporter is standing on the Kurfuerstendamm, surrounded by people celebrating the fall of the Wall. He interviews first two or three people from East Berlin, then looks for West Berliners as interviewees. Behind him are standing four or five Turks caught up in the festivities, young men, Between 18 and 20 years of age, shifting from one foot to the other, looking expectantly into the camera, making themselves available but not pushy. The reporter turns in a circle, seeing no one that he would call a West Berliner, cuts off his search and turns it over to the studio. For today it’s about the reunification of two German territories, about the reunification of two peoples, who are German citizens by law. Had the subject

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of the broadcast been worded “Problems of Foreigners”, these young Turkish Berliners would also have been appropriate interviewees – along with a lot of German experts.⁶

Not until the election in the second half of 1990 did the voices of immigrants, black Germans and the Jewish community begin to be heard. At that time conferences and public events on the subject of “Racism” were multiplying, but organized in large part and sometimes exclusively by white Germans. Such was the case, for example, with the conference “Exclusion and Tolerance,” held in Eindhoven in November, 1990. Even though black as well as white women scholars from the Netherlands and the Federal Republic gave papers and seminars on the subject, black women were not involved in the conceptualization and execution of the conference. Hence, for the preparations of the next conference the composition of the organizing team was revised. Fortunately, from a few other such events as well, not only were painful wounds left over but also equally fruitful initiatives for real collaboration between black and white women came out of them.

In a society marked by racism and other oppressive mechanisms the real or potential victims in each case are not at the same time the better people. Sometimes I observe, in political black-white situations, that black women or men are given unlimited time to speak, regardless of whether their intervention is useful. Preferential treatment is appropriate and necessary and an important requirement when it’s a matter of allocating jobs. But that can’t mean “fool’s freedom.” If we want to work together and regard each other as allies – and that’s my assumption – then we have to take each other seriously with the courage to express and take criticism. That goes equally for blacks and whites interacting with and among one another. A particular mark of East-West encounters among whites was and still is the fact that dialog often doesn’t happen unless the women and men in the new states come to sit at the discussion table on the western side of Germany. Black Germans and immigrants in the former FRG are also only now beginning to understand that it’s not dialog unless their groups in East and West approach each other with equal initiative.

I am becoming increasingly conscious of how much I have been marked by certain experiences in this society and on what points I wish to eradicate or retain those marks. Often, recalling childhood dreams and experiences, I let the adult’s comments pass in review, looking for meaningful messages. I dig around for repressed images and warnings. In writing this text I suddenly encountered my grandmother, who died in 1990 – actually, my foster mother’s mother. I saw her in her cozy kitchen and heard as she spoke with my “brother” and me. We loved her, and she always had a few sweets for us in her cabinet drawer. Now, as I saw her before me, at that moment she was annoyed by the noise we kids were making and called out in a half-joking voice: “It sounds like the Jew’s school in here!”

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Not until later did I flinch, understanding the meaning of her words, when Germany would bend down to the youngest grandchildren with that same saying. And racist expressions came out now and then in our house, seldom consciously nor with evil intent. No one meant to be anti-Semitic or racist.

Everyone abhorred the atrocities of the National Socialist past; and, after all, it wasn't just by chance that I had landed as the only black child in this white foster family. Nobody there could be prejudiced, right? Racism and anti-Semitism were some of the undesirable ingredients of the upbringing that I experienced. I am conscious of it and I won't let it go until I have rooted it out and dismantled it from myself.

Now it's 1992, the European Union is being concluded and in a few weeks the anniversary of German reunification will be celebrated. Daily – just as in summer and fall of last year and the year before last – we learn of new racist and anti-Semitic assaults, of arson against refugee quarters and of mob attacks in East and West Germany. In many places eager bystanders applaud openly or secretly, and politicians appear very concerned for the country's image, but very little for the real and potential victims of the attacks. Interior Secretary Rudolf Seiters had this to say about the escalating violence:

It is certainly the consensus that this is a phenomenon that damages Germany's image in the world and which could lead to the distortion and erosion of the reputation of a Germany hospitable to foreigners, which we must preserve at all costs.⁷

Chancellor Kohl, in his address of August 27, 1992 urged: "The abuse of the right to asylum must finally be resolved. That also includes amending the constitution, which, however, will not solve the problem alone but is a major step toward stemming the abuse of asylum."⁸ Recent weeks have witnessed more discussion of marginalized youth who are currently the primary perpetrators of neo-Nazi attacks. Discussions about the causes of refugee movements are not taking place, nor about measures that could end hunger, war and environmental destruction in poor countries and those which are kept dependent on Europe. An immediate and severe revision to the asylum law portends serious consequences; but even for the asylum seekers who are allowed to stay, the Federal Republic will, in the foreseeable future, not be a place to freely call "home." The same goes for immigrants, black Germans and Jewish people who have been living here all along.

The open violence in the streets resonates with the words of leading politicians and is, to some extent, their practical application. But I am convinced that we – and I am referring to all people in this country who do not tolerate racism and anti-Semitism – are desirous of and capable of coalitions. There are examples that we can follow or adapt. This is how the "Initiative of Black German," which was

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formed from a small group of Afro-Germans in the mid-80s, now has working and net-working groups in a number of cities in the Federal Republic. Organizations of immigrants, black Europeans and Jews have joined in to link up their groups and activities across national boundaries. The “Intercultural Summer Institute for Black Women’s Studies” has been held since 1987, with black participants from all continents.

In 1991 the hosts were black German women, and the several week-long seminars were held in Bielefeld, Frankfurt/M, and Berlin. The second conference by and for immigrant, black German, Jewish and women living in exile, which took place in Berlin in the same year, was, above all, an example of support of white Christian secularized women. Excluded as participants, they nevertheless contributed in large numbers through transportation assistance, childcare, providing overnight accommodations. Through their donations they made a critical contribution to the running of the conference. One thing is certain: The global and national structures of dependence as well as the power relations within our personal relationships are unsettling and destructive, but not static. We can bring about change!

¹ Black Unity Committee (ed.), *Dokumentation: Rassistische Überfälle in Berlin und Umgebung* (January-September 1990), Berlin 1990.

² Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, "Gefahren der Masseneinwanderung", in: *Lutherische Monatshefte*, no. 1, 1981, p. 34.

³ Quoted from Norbert Seitz, "Wir sind halt doch das Volk", in: Arthur Heinrich und Klaus Neumann (eds.), *Alles Banane. Ausblicke auf das endgültige Deutschland*.

⁴ Hans-Joachim Maaz, *Der Gefühlsstau Ein Psychogramm der DDR*, Berlin 1990, p. 182.

⁵ See the contribution by Dagmar Schultz in *Entfernte Verbindungen: Rassismus, Antisemitismus, Klassenunterdrückung*, Berlin 1993.

⁶ Klaus F. Geiger, "Nationalistische und postnationalistische Diskurse im Verteilungskampf der Bundesrepublik Deutschland", in: Institut für Migrations- und Rassismusforschung (ed.), *Rassismus und Migration in Europa*, Hamburg, Berlin 1992, p. 273.

⁷ Quoted from Dietrich Leder, "Medientagebuch", in: *Freitag*, 4 September 1992, no. 37.

⁸ Quoted from Tissy Bruns and Klaus-Peter Klingelschmitt: "Kein Wort der Scham in Bonner Kabinett" in *die tageszeitung* 28 August 1992.

no more rotten gray – for a colorful republic
talk – talk – show for the blah – blah – struggle

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

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we're suddenly addressed
we're finally included
we suddenly seem indispensable
we are even
flown over
on your invitation of course
as the "dear alien citizens"
naturally without civil rights
as migrants
from the countries of the world
as experts in matters of racism
as the ones "afflicted"

together with activists and politicians
celebrities and the socially committed
we discuss analyze debate
about
demands protest actions appeals
in discussions hearings talk-shows
on a panel in a forum or plenum

and then – what next

the demands
are neatly
listed
the lists
are neatly
filed
and surely
and reliably

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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

the “dear alien citizens”
still without civil rights of course
once again turn into the “spics”, “pakis” or “chinks” from next
door
the black or however
hyphenated germans
change back into the “Negroes”
from really far away
once again we are those
the whitewashers of history
already over-looked yesterday
or dis-covered
described defined instructed
in broken g / er / man
on the street
or in highly abstract studies
in a v-e-r-y s-c-i-e-n-t-i-f-ic language
we are patiently told over and over

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which way to go

why

INTEGRATION

is written in capitals

why and how

we are oppressed

why and how and when

we must liberate ourselves

why and how and when and where and most important

that doesn't take many words

nor lots of space

no

not really

the leftist alternative daily paper – so-called

for example only needs about two pages for international news

compared to about seven pages for german-german affairs

the so-called yellow press

quote: "germany in liberty that is our mission"

does it even quicker

shorter

more to the point

more capturing

the

north-south-monologue

that doesn't take many words

no, not really

that's why they hardly ever ask us

there's no space anyway

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whereas we're still indispensable of course
at least on special occasions
or for special events
but certainly
shortly before the next elections
they will remember us again
we'll definitely have to be a part of it
we'll be allowed to proclaim our distress
must in fact do so
should in fact
put our demands into words
and really blast the trumpet
or at least sing a song
no more rotten gray – for a colorful republic

but
the “dear alien citizens”
although or because
still without civil rights
dress up for their own celebrations
and also the black
or however hyphenated germans
no longer come because they've been invited
but only
when they want to
they're gradually getting cheeky
bad luck
luckily!

1990
for Tina, Gülsen, Yara and Nita

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(Translation by Ekpenyong Ani; from *blues in schwarz weiss*)