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Carol Aisah Blackshire-Belay, ed. *The African-German Experience, Critical Essays.* Westport and London: Praeger, 1996. xiii + 136 pp. $52.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-95079-8.

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Germany's Citizens: The African-German Community in the FRG

Usually when discussions arise about the future of Germany since the fall of the Berlin Wall and unification, they include debates about the cost of unification, the apparent differences between East and West Germans (along with calls from both sides to raise the Wall again), and the rise of German nationalism. Without a doubt, many focus on what is Germany now and what it will be as well as what it means to be German and who is German. These conversations, especially those that take place in Germany, more often than not make certain assumptions about who and what Germany is.

Unfortunately, such discussions fail to recognize that Germany and Germans are not from a single "nationality" and general look the same. Indeed, this is far from the truth. In fact, despite official political statements to the contrary, Germany is a multinational, multiethnic country. This is most readily apparent in the existence of the African-German community, a collection of individuals who feel German inwardly in many respects but outwardly are not quite often accepted by their fellow German citizens because of their skin color.

It is precisely the objective of Carol Aisah Blackshire-Belay's edited volume to illuminate the plight of this community as it attempts to find its place and identity in the New Germany. Heavily influenced and inspired by the ground breaking work, *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out*, published originally in German in 1986,[1] the contributors aim "to analyze the way African Germans have presented themselves and the way others have viewed them" (p. ix). In doing so, they address issues of "identity, ethnicity, and self-perception found in the African-German community" (p. ix).

They approach this by looking at the various ways members of this community, either individually or collectively, have sought to express themselves and the ways their white compatriots have seen them through self-reflection, their relationships to each other, in the popular media, the similarities and differences to the African-American experience, and the effects and significance of history. Thus, they endeavor to answer the following questions: "(1) Precisely to what and whom are we referring when we talk about African Germans or black Germans? (2) Is this group any different from other African-descended people throughout the world living in predominantly white societies? " (p. x).

Therefore, they not only discuss the African-German experience using the voices of the African Germans themselves, but they also attempt to situate it in "the struggle of all blacks in the diaspora in general" (p. ix). Ultimately, this book challenges the assumption held by German politicians and other members of the German comity that their nation is not a multiethnic one.

The first essay, Molefi Kete Asante's "African Germans and the Problems of Cultural Location," contextualizes the African Germans within German society by exploring the problems encountered by African Germans in "cultural location" because of the racist construction of identity and nationality in Germany. Asante states that "one is culturally located at all times and the idea that we can be culturally dislocated, a possibility emerging from being on the fringes of a strong core culture, helps us to define the meaning of cultural location in the case of the African German" (p. 1).

Asante argues that this is a result of the German conceptualization of race and nation. In Germany, culture and nationality are merely expressions of race (pp.7-9).

Because the dominant culture in Germany is white, the African Germans are "forced to live their lives on someone else's terms than their own" (p.5). In other words, to be considered German, "one had to be German, not German and African, or German and Chinese, but German and German" (p. 5). The upshot of this is that despite the fact that they are German citizens and carry German passports, they are not considered "truly German because they do not have *pure* German ancestry" (p. 5).

Their skin color is, therefore, a statement of the "*impurity*" of their ancestry and thus other Germans perceive of them as foreigners (p. 9). This cultural dislocation, Asante continues, is further exacerbated by the fact that "because they do not know their African roots, they may *feel* German" (p. 5). Thus, they are rejected by one aspect of their double consciousness and are unfamiliar with the other. Asante nevertheless offers a solution by asserting that the African Germans have to "become connected, attached, and situated in the historical place of the African people by a conscious commitment to the discovery of self in every dimension" (p. 10).

Marilyn Sephocle, in her essay "Black Germans and Their Compatriots," similarly examines the position of African Germans through her investigation of German institutions and other Germans view them from the perspective of the"objects" and history. More importantly, she picks up where Asante left off when she looks at the initiatives and goals pursued by African Germans in search of their own identity and place within a "hostile" or "unwelcoming" German society. In fact, this becomes the primary focus of the piece since her historical overview is primarily superficial. This may be because such historical surveys are explored elsewhere in greater detail.

Specifically, she examines two organizations, namely the Black German Initiative [*Initiative Schwarze Deutsche (ISD)*] and the IAF, *Intressengemeinschaft der mit Auslaendern verheirateten Frauen* [The community of interests of women who are married to foreigners]. While the IAF is a political organization with a broader mission than the ISD, the *Initiative Schwarze Deutsche* is the foundation of the African-German movement which was founded in 1986 by thirty African Germans who realized the similarity of their situation (p. 15). This realization brought about a incipient recognition of who they were individually and as a community within the context of a New Germany where they still face many problems.

Sephocle's states that these African Germans were emboldened by contact with Audre Lourde, an African-American poet, to feel more positively about themselves and "empowered with a new sense of mission" (p. 16). They began to see themselves as a "potential challenge for the rest of Germany, the challenge of rethinking German identity in a less ethnocentric way" (pp. 16-17). The ISD is not a political organization, though, but rather a cultural one which "stresses the specificity of the African-German identity. In addition it has a social and psychological mission vis-a-vis its members and the rest of German society." (p. 17)

Sephocle concludes that this organization still has much to do, for through personal accounts and a quick historical overview she illustrates that "to some, having an African-German identity is not an issue, it is an impossibility; to others it is an incompatibility; and to a small minority it is a fragment of a multicultural and multiracial society (p. 26). In Sephocle's view, though, this latter group is not even dependable in making Germany a hospitable place for African German and other ethnic groups (p. 26). She ends by stating that "for the three hundred forty thousand African Germans living in Germany today, certain walls–unlike the Berlin Wall–certain walls remain hardly movable."

While I agree with Sephocle's last statement, I believe her previous comment does not give enough credit to the initiatives of the new "Multi-Kulti" movement sweeping through Germany in response to violent attacks against foreigners. Admittedly, though, these individuals tend to advocate friendship and acceptance *vis-a-vis* foreigners, while not addressing specifically that there might actually be non-white skinned German citizens. Without a doubt, however, her argument that Germany must still come to grips with the existence of the African-German community and the importance of this group finding and exerting its own identity remains a central issue to the evolution of a new German notion of nationality.

Francine Jobatey, in "From *Toxi* to T.V.: Multiculturalism and the Changing Images of Black Germans," further explores the imaging of African Germans, however within in the realm of popular culture, namely in film and television since the early days of the Federal Republic in order to reveal "the function of culture as a historical construct" (p. 29). Specifically, she contrasts the trend between 1952 and 1991. She focuses primarily on the 1952 film *Toxi*, "the story of the five-year-old daughter of a black American soldier and a light-skinned German mother" (p. 29), and Cherno Jobatey, the African-German anchor of a popular early morning news show in Germany since 1991.

While she starts off strong with a detailed theoretical foundation and provides a good overview of the German public's response (including from the African-German community) to various black German entertainers, her ultimate contention, namely that "ethnic and national identity are not always connected" (p. 29) remains underdeveloped. In fact, the lack of a more thorough critical analysis and follow-up is the major detraction from an otherwise interesting subject matter.

Meanwhile, Leroy Hopkins and Tina Campt continue to investigate what it means to be an African German by situating them in the larger context of the African diaspora, building upon Sephocle's reference to African-American influences . Both compare and contrast the African-German and American experiences.

Specifically, Hopkins in "Inventing Self: Parallels in the African-German and African-American Experience" examines "the problem of identity in the [African] diaspora … from the comparative perspective of its American and German perspectives" (p. 37). In both instances, he points out that literacy is a primary "prerequisite for the appearance of … [an] emerging group consciousness" (p. 38). Thus, the means to reflect and to record as well as to disseminate and share their experiences is pivotal in the formation of identity.

It was from contact with African-American women writers that moved African-German women in the 1980s to "document their common experience" and even "name themselves 'Afro-Germans' " (p. 40). Most notable are *Showing Our Colors* and Gisela Fremgen's 1984 publication *…und wenn du dazu schwarz bist. Berichte schwarzer Frauen in der Bundesrepublik* [*And when you are also black. Personal Narratives of Black Women in the Federal Republic*]. Hopkins asserts that "these…narratives are…attempts to create a new discourse, to establish a voice of their own" (p. 42). Imperative to this, according to Hopkins, was to search for an "identity within the context of German history" (p. 42). He argues that this "search for a voice, for a separate and distinct identity, is a characteristic shared by Afro-Germans and African Americans" (p. 42).

Like Asante, Hopkins contends that the key to this search is "the phenomenon of Africa and the African heritage." Otherwise, neither group can come to grips with its biculturality (p. 42). It is this common experience which unites both groups as well as other communities of the African diaspora. He argues that through more recent publications, especially the magazine *Uncle Tom's Fist* [*Onkel Tom's Faust*], the African-Germans have demonstrated a "commitment to multiculturalism and an aware of the global context of the African experience which position them to both contribute to and learn from the African-American struggle for identity" (p. 49).

In "African German/African American – Dialogue or Dialectic? Reflections on the Dynamics of 'Intercultural Address,' " Tina Campt takes a different approach by exploring not only the similarities but also the differences of the African-American and African-German experiences. She does this through an interview with Peter K., one of the so-called Rhineland "bastards."[2] For Campt, the interview with Peter K. is intriguing for none of the accounts of these children "give any details or follow-up information on their later lives" (p. 74). However, far more interesting for her is the "discursive dynamic that develops between the two of us in the interview" (p. 72).

In explaining himself, the interviewee makes several references to the African-American experience to explain his own situation because he believes that the interviewer, an African-American woman, will be better able to understand him. What these "intercultural addresses" do reveal are in fact the similarities and differences in their experiences. According to Campt, "Peter K.'s simultaneous assertion of difference, as well as similarity in his narrative establishes a form of dialogue with me and the African-American context that recognizes our commonalities of his own distinct cultural standpoint" (p. 83).

In other words, this dialogue enabled her to not only see the commonalities, but also recognize the dissimilarities as well. In a broader context, Campt argues that this "phenomenon encourages us [African Americans] to reflect critically on the status of our own cultural context among black populations outside the United States who are involved [in] the process of articulating their own experiences and constructing alternative forms of identity and community" (p. 83).

The last two essays, Susann Samples' "African Germans in the Third Reich" and Blackshire-Belay's "Historical Revelations: The International Scope of African Germans Today and Beyond," both explore the importance of history in the construction of identity.

Samples looks specifically at the "extraordinary circumstances surrounding the African Germans during the Third Reich" (p. 53). She contends that although their black skin especially singled them out in the racial state Hitler was creating, their blackness may have at times "protected" them. She attributes this, in part, to the

"myth of blackness, which tended to view blacks as exotic inferiors" (p. 55). Of course, they did face discrimination and some even sterilization, but they nevertheless did not suffer the same fate as the Jews and other "undesirables," according to Samples. Relying heavily on oral interviews as well as printed primary and secondary sources, she reveals that the racial "policy of the Third Reich was not always monolithic, but often contradictory (p. 57). Samples claims this was partly due to the "real specter of world condemnation" (p. 56) as well as the need the for blacks in propaganda films.

The fact that her interviewees and others survived testifies to the inconsistency in Nazi race policy, but Samples' analysis is not wholly convincing. For example, she asserts that "with the exception of the Jews, the issue of race was now virtually ignored" with the advent of World War II (p. 61). However, scholarly research shows that this is not true.[3] Perhaps some people slipped through, but the biological racism practiced by the Nazis went beyond the Jews, even if they were a primary target. Although her explanation is not wholly convincing, her examples do shed more light on the nature of the Third Reich, especially as it functioned on a day-to-day basis.

Carol Aisha Blackshire-Belay's approach to the African-German presence is more comprehensive. Such an approach allows her to explain the relationship between black and white Germans, to dispel misconceptions that this relationship only began during the colonial era, and to situate it in the larger context of the African diaspora. She begins in Antiquity and brings us up to the present. By doing this, she challenges the assumption made by "politicians, historians, Germanist scholars, and the average citizen" that Germany is a homogeneous society and forces them "to see it as the ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse society that it has actually become" (p. 89).

According to Blackshire-Belay, the historical approach allows us to better understand "the dilemma confronting African Germans within German society today and the attitudes of white Germans towards this population group ..." (p. 90). It also contributes to their developing sense of identity; Blackshire-Belay noted that several difficulties confront African Germans as a result of historical development.

In conversations with student members of ISD, she pointed out that because of "the uneasy relationship that has developed over time between the white German and black German population" (p. 115) students and the government do not take them seriously. In fact, she states that the German government and authorities perceive African Germans "as non-existent and politically irrelevant" (p. 116). In addition, confusion exists among African Germans about their cultural identity, especially because of their treatment by their white fellow citizens and their unfamiliarity with their African heritage (pp. 117-80).

Similar to Hopkins and Sephocle, she describes ways they have tried to discover and assert their own identity and come to grips with their "double-consciousness" as both Germans and Africans (p. 118). One such way is to come together in order "to discuss their experiences and to form solidarity and coalitions among themselves ..." (p. 115), such as in the ISD. Blackshire-Belay notes that African Germans' awareness of African and Africanness has increased over the years, but argues that "the time has come for the African-German community to see itself as a community belonging to the African-Diaspora..." (p. 120). She concludes that by heritage all members of the African Diaspora are connected and this "connectedness offers us strength that we can draw from..." (p. 120). She sees this as an essential ingredient in the creation of the New Germany (p. 121).

The only real criticism I have of Blackshire-Belay's essay is her statement about the legal status of marriages between whites and Africans. She states that "[i]n 1907 in German South-west Africa and in Cameroon, marriages between African and Germans that occurred before the passing of these [anti-miscegenation] laws were legally recognized" (p. 109). However, the converse is actually true. In 1907 the High Court in Windhoek "declared that marriages which had been contracted with Africans before the ban [1905] to be null and void."[4]

Nonetheless, Blackshire-Belay's exploration of the past and discussions with those now living, as well as the other essays contained in the book, will contribute to the awakening of an awareness among concerned individuals and the creation of an identity among the African-German community that will hopefully have a significant and profound effect upon the evolution of German society after unification. This awareness, this sense of self comes from understanding the past, drawing from similar experiences, noting the differences, and comprehending the present.

A new chapter in German history is unfolding largely as a result of these contributors who contribute significantly to our understanding of the African-German population and the struggles they face and the issues Germany will eventually have to confront as well as of the

role of nationality, ethnicity and culture. It is satisfying and refreshing to see the impact one book can have (namely *Show Our Colors*) and the response and level of interest and scholarship individuals–dedicated to revealing the truth–generated in this volume. However, as many of the authors noted, much research still needs to be done on the African-German community.

Notes:

[1]. Katharina Oguntoye, May Opitz, and Dagmar Schultz, eds., *Farbe Bekennen. Afro-deutsche Frauen auf die Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1986). Published in English as *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out.* Translated by Anne V. Adams (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991).

[2]. These were the children of French African occupation troops and German women in the Saar region after the First World War. For a detailed account of their treatment under National Socialism, see Reiner Pommerin's _Sterilisierung der Rheinlandsbastarde: Das Schicksal einer farbigen deutschen Minderheit, 1918-1937 (Dusseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1979).

[3]. See for example, Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State: Germany 1933-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), especially pp. 113-97, a book Samples even cites. See also, Detlev Peukert's "The Genesis of the Final Solution' from the Spirit of Science," in *Reevaluating the Third Reich*, ed. Thomas Childers and Jane Caplan (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1993), 234-252, who esplores the origins the National Socialist idea of "purifying" the national "body," i.e. the development of Nazi notions of race from notions of social welfare which allowed it to consider "undesirable" anyone who opposed the state or exhibited asocial behavior in addition to certain select groups, sucha as the Jews.

[4]. Helmut Bley, *South-West Africa under German Rule 1894-1914*, trans., ed. and prepared by Hugh Ridley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 212.

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