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Afro-German Cultural Identity and the Politics of Positionality: Contests and Contexts in the Formation of a German Ethnic Identity

Tina M. Campt

> Black women's everyday acts of resistance challenge two prevailing approaches to studying the consciousness of oppressed groups. One approach claims that subordinate groups identify with the powerful and have no valid independent interpretation of their own oppression. The second approach assumes that the oppressed are less human than their rulers and are therefore less capable of articulating their own standpoint. Both approaches see any independent consciousness expressed by an oppressed group as being not of the group's own making and/or inferior to the perspective of the dominant group. More important, both interpretations suggest that oppressed groups lack the motivation for political activism because of their flawed consciousness of their own domination. As a result, emerging work in Black women's studies contends that Black women have a self-defined standpoint on their own oppression.
>
> — Patricia Hill Collins,
> "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought"[1]

This essay seeks to examine a series of quotations from a discussion between three Afro-German women, Katharina Oguntoye, May Opitz, and Laura Baum, published in the collection *Showing our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out.*[2] I would like to begin by posing a series of

1. Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14.4 (Summer 1989): 746-47.
2. *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out*, ed. May Opitz, Katharina

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questions: What "position(s)" do these women occupy in German society? What are some of the effects of the dominant conception of German cultural identity on members of this population? How does the position that these women occupy in their society affect their formation of a sense of ethnic consciousness and cultural identity? What are the broader implications of this position for the study of other "marginalized" groups?[3]

I will argue that these Afro-German women's individual and collective strategies of everyday resistance force one to rethink and redefine the dominant conception of German cultural identity. More generally, by calling into question dominant definitions of cultural identity (as well as social and ideological constructions of both "culture" and "identity"), the study of the histories and experiences of members of ethnic groups initiates a process of reconceptualization and clarification of such definitions and provides an additional tool of resistance to the oppression of ethnic peoples. Perhaps more importantly, it is the politicization of the lived experience of members of ethnic groups which forms the basis of this process. My goal in the following pages is to examine the social, political, and ideological implications of the ways in which one group of Afro-German women construct their identities as a German ethnic minority. The situation of Afro-Germans in contemporary Germany is one site where the struggle for the redefinition of cultural identity is currently being waged.

Afro-Germans are German-born individuals of African descent. Estimates vary as to the side of the present Afro-German population. May Opitz estimates that out of 100,000 blacks currently residing in Germany, 30,000 are Afro-German, whereas others estimate the total number of Afro-Germans anywhere from 50 to 300 thousand.[4] The contemporary Afro-German population traces its twentieth-century origin to African immigrants to Germany throughout this century, as

Oguntoye, and Dagmar Schultz, trans. Anne Adams, with Tina Campt (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1992) 145-64. Subsequent references to this volume will be provided parenthetically within the text.

3. My analysis is based upon the statements of these three individual Afro-German women and is not an attempt to make more global statements regarding the experiences of Afro-Germans. Their statements should be seen as one of a number of different expressions of cultural identity which cannot be reduced to a single, more generalizable conception of Afro-German cultural identity.

4. Karin Obermeier, "Afro-German Women: Recording Their Own History," *New German Critique* 46 (Winter 1989): 172-80.

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well as to the African and African-American troops used in the occupation of Germany following the First and Second World Wars. Some Afro-Germans trace their roots back to the nineteenth century.

In their discussion, Opitz, Oguntoye, and Baum exchange personal experiences, observations, and interpretations of the impact of race on issues such as popular conceptions of beauty, cultural identity, ethnic identification and consciousness, marginality, and their notion of "belonging." As these quotations are themselves part of the dialogue, they are themselves attempts to articulate and specify their experiences in relation to others. For this reason, I find this text to be a particularly provocative expression of these women's sense of their cultural identity, given its context in their collective attempt to theorize their experiences as members of this unique German minority.[5]

These Afro-German women's conceptions of their cultural identity reveal the inadequacies of traditional models of cultural and racial identity which posit an either/or choice between opposing categories of cultural or racial identity (i.e., foreign/German, black/white, Black/German). Their situation between a number of different "identities" has led them to develop an alternative form of identity. The concept of an "afro-deutsche" cultural identity incorporates the contingent and fluctuating texture of these women's plural identifications and destabilizes both ends of the dichotomous conception of German cultural identity which opposes "German" to "blackness" and is hegemonically imposed upon Afro-Germans in German society.

As women of African descent, the experiences of Afro-German women are conditioned by the issue of race. The experiences described by the three Afro-German women participating in this discussion center on responses to what they refer to as their "skin color." It is on the basis of skin color that assumptions are made as to their national, cultural, or racial identity. The women describe a common experience of being denied affirmation of their German national and cultural identity based on their skin color. They frequently experience a reluctance on the part of Germans to recognize them as German. Their

5. It is important to emphasize that the remarks made in *Showing Our Colors* were made at a specific historical moment in each of these women's lives. In the five years since the publication of this conversation, these women have in many ways changed how they conceive of and articulate their identities as Afro- Germans. Thus the statements made in the text must be seen as expressions of an ongoing process of identity formation.

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physical appearance as women of African descent is immediately perceived as "blackness," which in turn is constructed to mean African (or African-American), as foreign or external to German culture. The idea of a Black German ethnicity seems almost an impossibility.

> **M.O.**: It often happens with me that people have their own expectations and ignore what I say. When I tell them that I grew up here and have spent my entire life here, the question might come afterward: "Yes, and when are you going back?" Idiotic! Now and then I have the feeling of not belonging anywhere; on the other hand, I've grown up here, speak this language, actually feel secure here and can express myself as I want. I share a background with these people even if they don't accept me. "Yes, I'm German," I say, perhaps for spite, to shake them up in their black-and-white thinking. . . .
>
> I often used to think I had to justify my being here. In the meantime, I've come to realize that I am who I am and now I ask quite boldly if there's something wrong when somebody looks at me doubtfully. Often the person will realize his rigid way of thinking. (150)

In the United States, African-Americans grow up with a history of their cultural heritage and the struggle of Blacks and other people of color as the basis of very strong forms of community. In contrast, Afro-Germans have no popularly acknowledged or recognized place in German history, few role models of African or Afro-European descent, and until recently, no real sense of themselves as a community. Because these women often have no direct relation to their African or African-American cultural heritage, laying claim to or identifying with "blackness" as constructed in German society (that is, as foreign) is neither a self-evident nor an unproblematic form of identification.

> **K.O.**: I wouldn't call myself white, but then again it's not correct to say I'm black. But sometimes I feel like a white person.
>
> **L.B.**: I don't actually consider myself white, but there are situations in which I'm not conscious of, or nobody makes me conscious of, being colored. (155)

In this passage, Oguntoye comments that she is uncomfortable with the separate, opposing racial identifications of "black" and "white," for she finds each to be in some way inappropriate for her. Both Baum

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and Oguntoye describe themselves as feeling more often "white" than "black," but Baum concludes that this is more a result of her social interaction in a predominantly white culture. Thus she is made aware by others of the issue of "racial identity." Baum indicates that she would prefer being *farbig* (colored) to having to choose between the rigid identifications of "black" and "white." May Opitz comments: "My color only registers when people mention it to me" ("Ich regestriere meine Hautfarbe nur bewußt, wenn mich Leute darauf ansprechen."). These statements attest to the socio-ideological construction of racial identity. For in German society, the "racial identity" of blackness is imposed as a set of socio-ideologically constructed meanings, which equate blackness with exteriority to German culture, marginality within German society, and the status of "foreign/er" in social relations.

The dominant notion of German cultural identity posits an intrinsic opposition between "blackness" (or ethnicity) and "Germanness." One effect of such a homogeneous conception of German identity is the conflation of "German" with "white," by implication rendering German cultural identity a form of "racial" identity. Thus constituted, German cultural identity excludes any form of ethnicity as "other" in relation to itself. Hence the choice imposed upon Afro-Germans is less between "black" and "white" than between "Black" and "German" — a choice between claiming either their Black ethnicity or their German national and cultural heritage, each exclusive of one another. Nevertheless, these Afro-German women lay claim to both heritages, constructing their identities less in terms of a single racial identity than as a plurality of mutually inflected ethnic and cultural identifications.

The dialogue in *Showing Our Colors* destabilizes dichotomous notions of ethnic identity as "black" or "white." Rather these women describe themselves paradoxically as *neither* black nor white and as *both* black and white — contingently, in different situations. The refusal of these women to accept a single racial identification is a form of resistance to hegemonic forms of cultural and ideological domination which seek to impose an essentialized form of "racial identity" on the basis of skin color. The inadequacy of bipolar racial categorizations which would assume a transcendent "essence of blackness" based on skin color, for these women, necessitates a reconceptualization of the traditional notion of "racial identity," forcing the development of a more inclusive and heterogeneous conception of this element of their identity.

The comments of Oguntoye, Opitz, and Baum indicate that the external perceptions of others have profoundly shaped their self-definition.

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For the construction of their identity is thoroughly conditioned by the responses of others to their color and the meanings they attach to it. Thus it appears appropriate that throughout their discussion these women speak of the effects and implications of "skin color" rather than "racial identity," inasmuch as it seems that it is their skin color more than a sense of "racial identity" which conditions the nature of their interactions in society.

> **K.O.**: Until I was about ten, I didn't perceive myself as either white or black. I felt like a normal German little girl; in Africa, too. There I did see the African part of me, but also the difference from people in Africa — for them I was "Eubio," the European — because I looked different. In Africa I felt like a German, because I didn't connect German with skin color. . . .
>
> The first reactions came in Heidelberg: to white people in Heidelberg I was something different. Then I began to worry about what I actually was. . . . I gradually moved from preferring to consider myself German to being an Afro-European. In the meantime, that has changed also: there's no Europe where I can feel at home.
>
> **L.B.**: Because you're always viewed as a foreigner?
>
> **K.O.**: Yes, I think my consciousness as an Afro-European doesn't compensate for the feeling of "belonging" ["Da gehöre-ich-hin"]. For this reason, I can still be pushed out ["vertrieben werden"]. (156)

Several times during their discussion, the women describe a lack of a sense of "belonging," a feeling fraught with conflicts and contradictions. On the one hand, the experience of being denied acceptance as Germans based on their color leads them to feel that they have no place in the society of their birth. Thus they experience a form of socio-ideological marginalization in German society. On the other hand, the fact that these Afro-German women were born in Germany and brought up in its culture and traditions makes it impossible for them to deny the German elements of their identities, despite the various forms of cultural rejection they often face. Hence in addition to the position they occupy as women of mixed heritage between conceptions of black and white racial identifications, the sense of "nirgendwo hinzugehören" ("not belonging anywhere") relates to a similarly in-between position that Afro-Germans occupy culturally, in a society

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whose traditions they share but a society that rejects them on the basis of their color.

The "in-between" position is one of the most significant aspects in the construction of identity among these Afro-German women. It is this position which has necessitated their development of a complex sense of cultural identity as a form of resistance to attempts to relegate them to a position of pure marginality (as yet another group of "outsiders" within German society), allowing them to claim parts of their identity which are denied them — their German cultural identity.

> K.O.: In my experience, people of mixed race always have special positions ["besondere Positionen"] in groups. I think that's because we bring it upon ourselves, because we are more noticeable and have to come to terms with our African and German parts. As a result, we develop a flexibility ["Wendigkeit"] that's otherwise not recognized in a white child. (150)

The notion of *Positionen*, a plurality of positions, as well as the capacity of *Wendigkeit*, translated here as "flexibility" or "versatility," are crucial elements in the construction of identity among Afro-German women. Positionality is the most immediate and fundamental issue raised by the individual and collective attempts of these Afro-German women to analyze and theorize their experiences as women of color in a society whose dominant conception of cultural identity is defined as homogeneously white. The term "positionality" refers to the plural cultural, political, and ideological subject positions occupied by individuals in society.[6]

The position of Afro-German women, simultaneously on the margins of German culture and thoroughly permeated by it, and between traditional conceptions of black and white racial identifications, has lead to their developing a cultural and ideological "agility." By "agility" I mean a capacity for movement among a variety of cultural and ethnic identifications, a versatility which enables these women to resist

6. In her essay "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," Linda Alcoff articulates a feminist notion of positionality in relation to the concept of "woman." She writes that the position women occupy is in fact a site which can be "actively utilized . . . as a place from where meaning is constructed, rather than simply the place where a meaning can be *discovered*." The importance of this conception of "woman as positionality" is that such an approach offers a potential tool for politically interpreting and constructing our own histories and experiences, rather than passively accepting an "already determined set of values." See Alcoff, *Signs* 13.3.

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both complete marginalization and assimilation within German society. It is a strategic capacity for movement between a number of subject positions, a mode of survival and resistance in the face of various forms of cultural and ideological domination.

> **M.O.**: I actually find the term "Afro-German" or "Afro-European" quite good. I am declaring that I look different, perhaps move differently too, also in some repsects think or feel differently based on my background and the life situations conditioned by it. But I don't want to be put back into a black or white compartment.

> **K.O.**: I used to have such a strong desire to consider myself "normal" white that I just acted as though that were the case. This need to fit in still remains subliminally with me. . . . I have now come to terms with my blackness and place a positive value on the word "Negro" ["Neger"]. (156)

These Afro-German women insist upon a plurality of identifications. For the notion of a single, primary identity, or even distinct multiple identities seems inconceivable to them due to their position between ethnic and cultural identifications and the configurations of meaning attached to them in German society. The term "Afro-deutsch" is an attempt by German-born blacks to define themselves against such negative categories as *Mischling* ("half-breed") and *Neger*. Throughout their discussion, the three Afro-German women refer to themselves as *farbig* ("colored")[7] and "Afro-German," emphasizing the mixture of their ethnic heritage.

The position of Afro-Germans between a variety of identifications also destabilizes the opposition between dominant and marginal socio-cultural positioning. For rather than constructing their identity simply in opposition to German culture, passively accepting a marginal position or, alternatively, attempting to assimilate and deny their African heritage, these women insist on laying claim to both elements. They do not deny the social pressures they feel toward assimilation and marginalization. Rather they attempt to include seemingly conflicting ethnic, national, and cultural elements by weaving them into the larger fabric of their lives. The result of this process is not a smooth

7. The term *farbig* is seldom used today, since it also carries racist tones, whereas "Schwarzer" or "Schwarze Deutsche" has come to be the predominant contemporary term of identification among Germans of African descent.

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or flawlessly integrated whole but a mixture of elements which vary across time.

In the field of feminist theory and criticism, the provocative critiques of the "white women's movement" of the seventies and eighties have led to similar rejections of the notion of a unified subject. Teresa de Lauretis characterizes this shift within feminist criticism as a movement toward understanding the concept of identity as "multiple and even self-contradictory." She writes:

> What is emerging in feminist writing is, instead, the concept of a multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory identity . . . an identity made up of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class, and often indeed across languages and cultures; an identity that one decides to reclaim from a history of multiple assimilations, and that one insists on as a strategy: "I think," writes Elly Bulkin, "of all the women [of mixed heritage] who, told to choose between or among identities, insist on selecting all."[8]

I would use the term "textured identities" to describe the diverse and fluctuating constructions of identity described both in Elly Bulkin's statement and those of Afro-German women. "Texture" connotes multiplicity and plurality without fragmentation. It is not a static construction but shifts and changes contingently in relation to the various subject-positions and locations which these women occupy in their social interactions. In addition, it allows for flexible and versatile configurations of a range of depths within a larger surface, but without the rigidity of a forced reconciliation of contradictory or conflicting identifications. Moreover, the notion of a "textured identity" provides a sense of continuity within one's sense of self/identity often lacking in the notion of "multiple selves" or identities. For it is a sense of continuity or "wholeness" (the capacity to have a plurality of identifications simultaneously, without prioritizing or hierarchizing these elements) that seems to structure these women's attempts to construct a form of identity and consciousness that incorporates the plurality of their cultural and ethnic identifications.

It is a "paradoxical continuity of self," asserts Chandra Mohanty, which underlies the process of "reterritorialization" — a process of rewriting

8. Teresa de Lauretis, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies" 9.

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and reclaiming one's identity through struggle.[9] It is this reclaiming of seemingly contradictory elements of one's identity which Mohanty identifies as a potential site of agency at the individual level. The Afro-German women participating in this discussion are engaged precisely in this process. Moreover, the process is a struggle which goes beyond the discrete boundaries of categories such as dominant and marginal, or oppressor and oppressed. These women also describe a sense of "competitiveness" in relation to other Afro-German women:

> **L.B.**: When I meet African women on the street, they usually smile in a spontaneous and friendly manner; but not so with Afro-German women; first comes an appraising ["abschätzende"] look and then maybe some other response. I often have mixed feelings, possibly out of competition, I don't know. . . .
>
> **K.O.**: When I meet Afro-German women, something else happens: I sense a pull there, I think we could really have something to offer each other, but then we go by one another. . . . In Heidelberg, for a while I constantly used to run into a colored woman with fascinating green eyes. She always kept her distance. I was afraid to initiate an acquaintance with her for fear of competition.
>
> **D.S.**: Over what or whom do you compete?
>
> **K.O.**: Primarily it's about affinity and recognition, maybe about your own identity also. (161-62)

The ambivalence, insecurity, and competitiveness that characterize these women's initial responses to meeting other Afro-German women appear to be an attempt to distance themselves from others who share a similarly complex and conflicted position in society. Although this shared position is one of potential identification and solidarity, it is also a tenaciously guarded place of individual security. For the sense of consciousness which these women have attained has been achieved at considerable emotional cost, in resistance to hegemonic social, cultural, and ideological forces. But such an oppositional construction of the self can also function to exclude potential allies: individuals in similarly contested positions in society, or even those sharing the same or

9. Chandra Mohanty, "Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience," *Copyright* 1 (1987): 42.

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similar ethnic and cultural background. These individuals can be perceived as a threat to the tenuous sense of security or stability achieved through the complex constructions of self and subjectivity which these women have attained.

The late Audre Lorde discusses a similar tension between recognition and acknowledgment of self among Black women in the United States. In her essay "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," she writes:

> I think about the harshness that exists so often within the least encounter between Black women, the judgment and the sizing up, the cruel refusal to connect. I know sometimes I feel like it is worth my life to disagree with another Black woman. Better to ignore her, withdraw from her, go around her, just don't deal with her. . . . Why do Black women reserve a particular voice of fury and disappointment for each other? Who is it we must destroy when we attack each other with that tone of predetermined and correct annihilation? We reduce one another to our own lowest common denominator, and then we proceed to try and obliterate what we most desire and love and touch, the problematic self, unclaimed but fiercely guarded from the other.[10]

The sense of social alienation and isolation of Afro-Germans within German society is complicated and intensified by their limited contact with other Afro-Germans and a lack of community among the members of this group. Until the recent emergence of the Afro-German movement, this has had the effect of alienating Afro-Germans from themselves, making the formation of a sense of community difficult. For the process of cultural and ethnic identification among Afro-Germans involves continually negotiating and confronting a "self" constructed in German society as "other," one from which these individuals are socialized to distance themselves at all costs. Lorde writes:

> We are drawn to each other but wary, demanding the instant perfection we would never expect from our enemies. But it is possible to break through this inherited agony, to refuse acquiescence in this bitter charade of isolation and anger and pain. . . . It means we must establish authority over our own definition, provide an attentive concern and expectation of growth which is the beginning

10. Audre Lorde, "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, New York: Crossing, 1984) 159.

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> of that acceptance we came to expect only from our mothers. . . knowing that such power is relative within the realities of our lives. Yet knowing that only through the use of that power can we effectively change those realities. (172-73)

Being "Black" in Germany has a paradoxically double dimension which relates directly to Lorde's statements. On one hand, blackness is the site of constant conflict and struggle for positive cultural affirmation. On the other, these women also acknowledge certain advantages to what they call their "Besonderer-Status" in German society. Katharina Oguntoye relates her reflections on a similar experience:

> K.O.: Yesterday as I was passing by three guys, one of them said: "Hey, look out: Black!" Immediately I was aware of the rejection of Black[ness] on the one hand, and then on the other hand, there was also an idea of "Hmm, how about that!?" I didn't react to it at all, because I was too busy trying to understand this two-sided thing. . . .
>
> Since we're not perceived as European, we develop a feeling of being different. . . . African women don't fit the European ideal of beauty; for them, there's only the role of "exotic beauty," and I didn't want to be viewed that way. . . . There are no words for me to describe African looks with regard to African women and to myself without this inferior standard of evaluation. It's not my brown skin that is considered beautiful but my light-brown skin. (147-48)

In their comments on such responses to their physical appearance, these women challenge eurocentric conceptions of beauty and the socially constructed meanings attached to it as a form of exoticism. In contemporary Germany, this eurocentric notion of beauty rejects women of color as "other," while paradoxically giving positive value to "otherness" as "exotic," and thus exterior to this ideal. These Afro-German women experience the adjective "schooon" both in terms of a rigid European beauty standard which excludes many ethnicities and as a category which *includes* them, albeit as marginal or extrinsic in relation to this standard.

Moreover, the "exotic beauty" of Afro-German women is also valued over that of African or other darker-skinned women of color, based on their lighter skin color. For their lighter color is perceived to be "not as foreign" as the "blackness" or darker color of other ethnic groups. Thus one effect of a homogeneous conception of German cultural

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identity is the production of "taxonomies of difference" — in this case, a construction of blackness which is hierarchically organized and differentiated internally. In this way, individuals are valuated in relation to a domniant population's conception of their own cultural identity, producing hierarchies within the category of blackness. The result is a process of "differentiating within categories of difference" and consequently of the valuation of Others in relation to the dominant conception of cultural identity. But the women participating in this discussion also acknowledge their own complicity regarding their status as "exceptions" within German society and to dominant European standards of beauty.

> **K.O.**: Walking a tight-rope between making fun and exploiting an advantage! On the job I flirt with the fact that I'm of a different color and kind of pretty, in order to get what I want or because it's simply the most pleasant way for myself and others.
>
> **L.B.**: Yes, at my job I've often consciously pretended to be naive, in order to avoid being bothered with things that didn't have to do with my being colored. At school in the GDR I had a definite advantage over my schoolmates. . . . I was something different and wasn't taken as seriously as the others. "She's different . . . there are other expectations of her; she is also more intelligent." "She has to struggle with her environment more, thus she is more critical and more argumentative." (157-58)

The advantages of being an exception also have a critical dimension which reveal some of the ways that these women participate in the practice of differentiating within categories of difference, and their own potential agency in this process.

> **M.O.**: I'm also reminded that my lighter skin was an advantage when I was seeing a black guy. I can do without people finding me beautiful and interesting because I'm dark but not too dark. With him, I rarely got into a disco, where as alone I'm a little exotic attraction. On the street, people stared at us shamelessly, and I got a bigger share of comments than otherwise. They also thought I didn't understand the language. In general I experienced the environment as much more hostile and had a much stronger feeling of being black. (159-60)

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May Opitz's remarks attests to her more pronounced recognition of the reality of "blackness" and racism in Germany in her interactions with other people of color. She acknowledges the forms of privilege to which she has access being "light brown" rather than "black" and her relation to those who do not enjoy such privileges in German society. More significantly, her statements give an indication of some of the potential dangers which underlie attempts to reduce the experiences of individuals of different ethnic groups to a single, shared experience of oppression. Collapsing such experiences significantly limits one's perception of the multiple forms which cultural domination takes, as well as the ruptures and inconsistencies within it.

The contemporary Afro-German movement, along with other ethnic groups throughout Europe, are engaged in a process of reappropriation and rearticulation of the concept of blackness, redefining it as a political position. The term "schwarz" is also used within the Afro-German movement and in the German women's movement by people of color from many ethnic backgrounds (Arabic, Turkish, and African) as an attempt to construct a position of political solidarity, in addition to redefining blackness as a positive attribute, a position of strength and self-definition. Thus the term "schwarz" is rearticulated with conscious recognition of its connections to colonization and to the position these individuals occupy as postcolonial ethnic subjects.

The politicization of the term "schwarz" has transformed it into the contested ground of meaning among members of ethnic groups as part of a process of reclaiming a positive conception of their ethnic identities. Most significantly, these individuals are taking this process beyond the discursive and ideological level to a more concrete sociocultural level. For by reclaiming "Schwarzsein" in public and political forums such as at conferences (for example the annual lecture and discussion series organized by the Initiative Schwarze Deutsche commemorating Black History Month), and within leftist and feminist political coalitions among individuals of Arabic, Turkish, Latin American, Afro-German, Jewish and other heritages, individuals of different ethnic backgrounds draw on the collective strengths and commonalities of their shared experiences of racism, oppression, and marginalization. At the same time they are reciprocally compelled to confront their own individual differences, thus disallowing the potential erasure of such differences within their shared experiences of racism.

My own interest in the question of identity formation among Afro-German women is bound up with the similarly multiple and in-between

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positions that I occupy both within and outside of the U. S. academy, and the flexibility and movement that these locations necessitate in my work and for my own survival within this institution. Cornel West describes the situation of U. S. Black intellectuals as "caught between an insolent American society and an insouciant black community, the Afro-American which takes seriously the life of the mind inhabits an isolated and insulated world."[11] West advocates an "engaged insurgent praxis" among an emergent class of "postmodern" black intellectuals, based on what he refers to as a "critical 'self-inventory'. . . that scrutinizes the social positions, class locations, and cultural socializations of black intellectuals":

> Despite the pervasive racism of American society and anti-intellectualism of the black community, critical space and insurgent activity can be expanded. This expansion will occur more readily when black intellectuals take a more candid look at themselves, the historical forces that shape them, and the limited though significant resources of the community from whence they come. This "self-inventory" should embody the sense of critique and resistance applicable to the black community, American society, and Western civilization as a whole. (124)

The type of critical self-inventory which West describes allows for both a form of critical distance and the interrogation of the Black intellectual's relation to the academy, as well as to her/his subject of analysis. An examination of the positioning of the Black critic or intellectual must also address the specificity of the individual histories of black intellectuals and black communit*ies*. For the history of Black Americans is plural; a set of shared and mutually implicating histories, struggles, and experiences, which is never reducible to the singular "Black Experience." The relationship of the Black critic to her or his community is also shaped and determined by issues of gender. Consequently, the type of critical self-inventory described by West must address the impact of differences of gender. For the multiple relations which Black women critics have to the various African-American communities is still more complicated than West's conception of these relations. The position that I occupy as an African-American woman writing within

11. Cornel West, "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," *Cultural Critique* 1 (Fall 1985): 109.

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the academy in relation to the U. S. Black community relates directly to the "in-between" position of Afro-German women in German society. I share a history with Black Americans of the post-desegregation generation, who had to come to terms with the effects of growing up Black in predominantly white, middle class neighborhoods or in predominantly white or all-white schools. The consequent identification with white role models or aspirations toward the privileges of whiteness often result in the use of terms such as "white-identified." But such an attribution oversimplifies the complexities of such a position at the crossroads of race, class, and gender. Such identifications are often accompanied by equally strong emotional ties and identifications with such vital institutions of African-American culture as Black church communities and family networks. The implicit opposition of the category "white-identified" with that of "black-identified" erases the complications and contradictions, as well as significant differences in the experiences of African-Americans, in presuming an "authentic" form of Black identity. Moreover, an attempt to categorize "Black" identity obscures the hegemonic forces which shape and produce an individual's responses to her/his situation in society, thus negating the possibility of individual resistance or agency.

The form of ethnic identity described by these Afro-German women offers an interesting counterpoint to the conception of blackness prevalent among many African-Americans, which holds that individuals who have *any* trace of Black African ancestry (regardless of how distant) are Black, implicitly negating any claim to a white racial identity, or any form of ethnic identity which meditates these two extremes.[12] It also challenges a phenomenon such as "passing" as it is conceived in the United States, which is rendered problematic in a cross-cultural context.[13] In the

12. F. James Davis, *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition* (University Park: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991) 5. Davis's book provides a very comprehensive analysis of how "blackness" has been defined in the United States, in particular of the impact of how the "one-drop rule" of defining blacks and the phenomenon of "passing."

13. Related to this point, Davis remarks: "It is the one-drop rule that does not permit individuals to be classified as racially mixed and that instead defined as members of the black community persons who actually have an extremely wide variation in racial traits. . one black ancestor seems to resolves questions about racial identity surprisingly well for most, but not for all." He writes that passing, as a path to equality, "is barred for blacks by the one-drop rule, since a person remains a black no matter how small the fraction of African ancestry, and the only option is the drastic step of passing as white. For those who do pass, the anxiety about the risks and the sense of loss of family, friends and the black community must be great, even for the relatively small number who are not 'black' on the inside" (149, 168).

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case of Afro-Germans, the legitimacy of their claim to a position between blackness and whiteness and their capacity for movement between the two would in the United States be contested as an attempt to distance themselves from the Black community and their "authentic" Black identity, in order to gain or maintain privileges connected to white identity. These Afro-German women attempt to incorporate the seemingly contradictory racial and cultural elements of their identity without privileging either as their primary or "authentic" identity. But one of the most significant differences between the experiences of African-Americans and Afro-Germans is the fact that in the United States, there exists an established history of African-Americans that grounds this community. It is this history that plays a decisive role in the construction of a sense of ethnic identity among African-Americans. In Germany the initiation of the process of writing and reclaiming the history of Afro-Germans is only in its beginning stages, but the work of Opitz and Oguntoye in *Showing Our Colors* is a significant contribution to this process. The role that this yet-to-be-written history will play in the construction of Afro-German identities will be no doubt as decisive as it has been for African-Americans.

The necessity of a critical interrogation of one's position as a critic or interpreter in relation to her subject has been strikingly revealed to me through the resistance of these Afro-German women to such analytic categorizations as "marginalized" or "assimilated" and the ways in which their expression of their cultural identity contest attempts to categorize them at one or the other end of such simple dichotomies. More generally, the examination of the ways in which members of ethnic groups attempt to integrate their own sense of ethnic consciousness into a construction of cultural identity which encompasses the unique texture of these elements reveals the effects and inadequacies of dominant and hegemonic forms of cultural identity. In particular, dichotomies such as dominant/marginal, assimilated/marginalized, and minority/majority reproduce hierarchical systems of cultural domination by defining or classifying members of ethnic groups solely in relation to those who fit the dominant conception of cultural identity of a given society. The destabilizing effect of these women's constructions of Afro-German identity on such categories illustrates the transformative potential of the study of ethnic populations and communities. The status of subjective experience in the formation of consciousness and cultural identity among members of ethnic groups is significant in that

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theorizing these subjective experiences (as well as the constructed meanings resulting from these experiences) is a crucial part of the process of politicizing ethnic identities. This politicizing is critical to deconstructing sedimented constructions of race, gender, class, culture, and ethnicity. Moreover, this process reveals counterhegemonic conceptions of cultural identity, as well as strategies of resistance to socio-ideological domination at microlevels of power relations. For the examination of the experiences of these individuals' responses to hegemonic cultural practices reveals the ways in which traditional notions of "identity" and "culture" have become reified as analytic paradigms. Finally, my examination of the experiences of these Afro-German women destabilizes my position as a historian, for my "objects" of study are individuals attempting to create their own history, through the construction of a uniquely encompassing form of cultural identity. Perhaps most significantly, the effects and implications of an Afro-German identity challenges who we think of as German *historically*, for it raises the question of who has been excluded from German history via the category and concept of "the German."

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Editor
Jeanne Hall,
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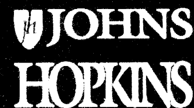

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