2.0 Internalizing a biological identity: Hybridity and black German identity construction

In his book *The Meaning of Race*, journalist Kenan Malik remarks that the Western concept of race, which has its beginnings in the Enlightenment period, has been woven into the fabric of our very existence—that is to say the existence of every person exposed to the West and the Westerner. When considering black German existence in Germany, this statement is especially relevant, because it refers to an environment that is particularly aware of racial categories. While many black Germans maintain that they no longer subscribe to German racial conceptions of Germanness, a close reading of their works shows that they have in fact internalized the racialized foundations of Germanness and reformulate them in order to assume a German identity. Thus, racial categorization is just as much at the core of the black German self as it is within the Caucasian German. Conversely, although the black German case was presented as a means whereby to step beyond racial markers of a German identity, it actually emphasizes the racially influenced parameters of Germanness. Often black Germans do not overtly express their acknowledgement of the racially based foundations of a German identity. Instead, they reveal their qualities of Germanness through the German equivalent of the model of the hybrid, which is expressed in the German as the *Mischling*.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the manner in which the *Mischling* model is employed by black Germans to express a German identity that is in fact racially based. Although the *Mischling* model represents a racially flawed German being, black Germans employ the model to maintain some form of continuity that binds them
irrevocably to Germany and its people. The chapter continues with both an historical and contemporary look at the conceptualization of the figure of the hybrid in western thought. Following this, it explores the function of the Mischling within the black German context and ends with some concluding remarks.

2.1 The significance of the Mischling Model

Historically, the hybrid has been regarded with much controversy, since the inception of the idea that human beings can be divided into discreet racial groups. During the nineteenth century, scientists assured some form of social order by constructing individuals from different races as members of different species. Critical theorist David Goldberg asserts that this was due to a theoretical change in scientific research. He states that there was a “theoretical shift from mono- to polygenism. If races are separate species, as polygenists claimed definitionally, mating of their members should not produce offspring at all” (Goldberg 78). By the end of the nineteenth century, the increased number of hybrid progeny from interracial relationships in Europe and the Americas disproved the validity of this scientific work. Eventually, it contributed to a wide pejorative perception of racially mixed individuals, who came to be perceived as symbols of disruption.

In the German, the concept of the Mischling was constructed in order to come to terms with the gradual disappearance of the Jewish race as a result of its assimilation in German society (Herzog 2). This model, Herzog shows, ensured that the Jew remained physically present and biologically identifiable in German society. In nineteenth as well as early twentieth century Germany, the Mischling was characterized as a pathological
being. Nineteenth century race theory maintained that, although he or she is able to pass as a pure German at times, the *Mischling* is rendered a degenerate, pathological and hysteric being by virtue of the mixing of his/her blood with both Jewishness and Germanness (Herzog 2).

Late twentieth century conceptions about the *Mischling* did not evolve very much from the earlier period. Physical and mental abnormalities continued to be perceived as recognizable qualities of biracialism. At this time, however, the individual of both African and German heritage became both a legitimate and threatening form of a hybrid. During the Third Reich, National Socialist rhetoric described the *Mischling* as a product from the devil: “Alle Weissen und Schwarzen hat Gott gemacht, die Mischlinge stammen vom Teufel” (quoted in Samples 54). Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* further delineates his definition of the *Mischling*. Here he states that the *Mischling* lacks... “blood unity” and “unity of will-power and determination to live.” The mixed identity situates the *Mischling* psychologically and racially in a middle space, which makes him or her “uncertain” and incapable of making decisions, as he or she would only “arrive at half measures” (Hitler 400). Hitler maintains that there are “innumerable cases where race holds up,” and “the bastard breaks down” (Hitler 400). In his view, the *Mischling* or hybrid is a racially mixed figure which naturally lacks a balanced center that within pure races affords them a normal existence.

Contemporary Germany is fascinated with the concept of hybridity. In fact, mixed identities have become a popular source of discussion in the media as talks of a dual nationality and multiculturalism spread around the nation. Between 1997 and 1999 German newspapers and magazines continuously published articles about the evolving
understanding of that which is German and how this concept is likely to change as a result of mixed identities. In a recent article about the changing face of Germany in Die Zeit, it was confirmed that one out of every nine children born in Germany in 1999 was of mixed heritage, that is to say black German, Turkish-German or Polish-German. (Böhm 13). Contemporary cultural criticism, especially in the German context, has brought the concept of the hybrid as an icon of political resistance back to the forefront of German social consciousness. In the end, these recent preoccupations with the hybrid take us back to turn of the century Europe and are also reminiscent of National Socialist ideologies.

2.2 Black Germans and the figure of the Mischling

Black Germans, however, reject the historical significance of the Mischling and maintain that they do not wish to be associated with its denotative meaning. In the introduction to Farbe Bekennen, the editors explicate that their biracial heritage has little to do with the development of their new identity:

Es geht uns mit dem Begriff jedoch nicht darum zu betonen, dass wir einen weissen und einen schwarzen Elternteil haben. Unsere wesentliche Gemeinsamkeit ist, dass wir Schwarze sind und einen bedeutenden Teil unserer Sozialisation und Lebenserfahrung in Auseinandersetzung mit der bundesdeutschen Gesellschaft entwickelt haben. (...) Mit dem Begriff „Afro-deutsch“ meinen wir alle, die diese Bezeichnung auf sich beziehen möchten, egal ob sie einen oder zwei Schwarze Elternteile besitzen. (10)
Katharina Oguntoye, however, presents a slightly different view. In her definition of black Germanness, a biracial identity plays an important role. Oguntoye states in her work *Eine Afro-Deutsche Geschichte* (1997):


Although Oguntoye co-authored *Farbe Bekennen*, she omits the recognition of pure black individuals that are German by nationality and focuses solely on black Germans of mixed heritage. Black German writing and critical responses by American scholars have in turn centered discussions about black Germans on mixed race individuals. However, if the *Mischling* model is representative of a flawed being that Hitler saw as destructive to German identity, why has it become such a central part of black German identity?

The following pages show that the *Mischling* model functions in two ways in black German identity. First, it provides blood unity with the German populace, and second, it prevents black Germans from being categorized as black or African because they locate themselves in an in-between space.

### 2.3 Continuity through blood

In her extensive analysis of the construction of Germanness, Uli Linke remarks that Germanness revolves around the symbolism of blood. Linke states; “German images
of the ‘national order of things’ rest on organic metaphors. Among the most potent metaphors for the national community is blood...Thinking about the German nation thus takes the form of origins, ancestries, and racial lines, which are ‘naturalizing images’: a genealogical form of thought” (Linke 117). Africanist Molefi Kete Asante explains that this genealogy transports one of the most valuable traits of Germanness—white skin:

Whiteness becomes a legal and social property bestowed upon the population of Germans by their ancestors, (...) To be white is to have something that assures a person first class status in the German society and full support of the political and social institutions. One is fundamentally registered by the society to be pure—that is of German blood—and therefore worthy of the benefits of the society (Asante 6).

In light of this, the notion of a biracial identity that is captured in the model of the Mischling is particularly significant because it represents a continuity of the flow of German blood. Black Germans commonly perceive their identity as biracial and often emphasize that they have one Caucasian German parent. Since the parent embodies both a cultural and biological link to Germany, he or she is thus a vital part of black Germanness. In the following interview, black German student, David M., illustrates how only the figure of the Mischling can be perceived as German because it contains German blood.

V. Dube: Afro Deutsch...Was siehst du, wenn du das hörst? Woran denkst du?


V. Dube: Darunter würdest du also nicht diejenigen zählen, deren Elternteile nur schwarz sind?
David. M: Nein. Würde ich nicht machen. Denn dann wären sie ja deutsch, weil sie hier geboren wurden. Rein äußerlich gesehen würde ich annehmen, dass sie nicht deutsch sind. Die haben kein deutsches Blut...Es ist im Moment noch nicht normal, dass ein Deutscher schwarz ist...

David’s response reveals that the pure black impedes the continuity of a German identity because the right blood does not flow through his or her veins. At the root of David’s response lies the idea that racial hybridity binds the black German inextricably to the German nation, while the pure black falls out of the frame of Germanness. By evoking the German law of citizenship, which is based on the principle of blood lineage, David legitimizes his response on political and legal grounds. Although the Mischling model was constructed in order to establish difference, David reformulates its meaning by employing it to establish similarity or unity with the larger Caucasian German populace. Author Ika Hügel applies a similar method. In her autobiographical text, Daheim Unterwegs (1998), Hügel uses her hybrid identity in order to establish a form of continuity that expresses her identity as German. The book is an account of Hügel’s life in her native Germany and her search to find a place of belonging. The account begins by locating her origin as the same as her German mother. She states, “In derselben bayrischen Kleinstadt, in der ich geboren wurde, war auch meine Mutter zur Welt gekommen, sie 1925, ich 1947” (Hügel 15). Hügel resorts to genealogy as a metaphor for continuity. As the book traces the matriarchal lineage of her German heritage through images as well as her personal accounts, Hügel emphasizes a continuity that follows bloodlines.
Beside the blood metaphor, black Germans also employ the skin as an indicator of biracialism. By depicting black German skin as one that is plagued by two colors, black and white, they embody elements of Germanness that are only racially acquired. In a fictional sense, this idea is best captured in the figure of Feirefiz, in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s Parzival. Here, the heritage of both races is evident through the black and white patches on Feirefis’ face. In the Afro-German context, this is especially evident in May Ayim’s poem “Entfernte Verbindungen,” which explores her black African and white German heritage biologically.

die hände meiner mutter
sind weiss
ich weiss
ich kenne sie nicht
meine mutter
die hände
die hände meines vaters
ich weiss
sind schwarz
ich kenne ihn kaum
meinen vater
die hände (Blues 28)

The poem first traces the biracial creation of the speaker. The speaker employs “hands,” which are symbols of creation, to describe her parentage and thereby
emphasizes her multiethnic heritage. In the last stanza these disparate identities leave traces on the body of the speaker and mark her as both black and white.

Ich weiss

Seine dunklen finger

An meiner Hand

Weiss

Ihre hellen spuren

Auf meiner haut (Nachtgesang 29)

The *Mischling* model functions here as a reminder that the Afro-German is primarily a biological construct. The reader is repeatedly drawn to colors such as “schwarz” and “weiss,” which underline the racial fragments that are captured in the skin. The presence of whiteness preserves Ayim’s German identity. The light traces on the skin of the speaker preserve the mother’s heritage.

2.4 **Black and White: “Ich möchte nicht weiss und auch nicht schwarz sein“**

Critics have often stated that Germans lack a firm definition of what really constitutes Germanness, and yet they manage to characterize certain individuals as non-German (Gross 7). While some may describe it as a weakness, a fragile national character serves as a manipulative tool, where the identity can be altered to suit the individual. The biracial identity of black Germans can be regarded in the same way—a tool of manipulation. Black Germans use their biracial identity to establish that they cannot be designated as non-German. Their biracial identity locates black Germans in an in-between space, where both German and African qualities are somehow incorporated.
In her poem “grenzenlos und unverschämt,” Ayim shows that her biracial identity prohibits anyone from barring her from a German identity and from limiting her identity as being purely African. The bold statements “ich werde trotzdem/ afrikanisch/ sein” and “ich werde trotzdem/ deutsch sein” remind the reader that each identity remains interwoven with the other, and thus Germanness and Africanness become a part of Ayim. In the end, these statements ensure that Ayim cannot be categorized in one specific space.

ich werde trotzdem
afrikanisch
sein
auch wenn ihr
mich gerne
deutsch
haben wollt
und ich werde trotzdem
deutsch sein
auch wenn euch
meine schwärze
nicht passt (nacht gesang 61)

The visual presentation of the poem articulates the manner in which each identity is intricately connected with the other. There is no punctuation in the poem, making it an uninhibited declaration of what I would describe as a “fragmented unison.” By this I mean that the concepts within the poem such as “schwarze,” “deutsch,” and “afrikanisch” are culturally conceptualized as divided from one another, and yet Ayim shows here that they are able to become one. One could perceive the self-ascribed identity “Afro-German” in a similar manner as the poem. The hyphen separates the two cultures yet binds one inextricably to the other. As a result, the identity is characterized by divisions:
First, the cultural division between the African continent and the German nation, second, the social and political division between Germanness and blackness, and finally the division between a self-determined and an imposed identity. The poem establishes black German identity as one that lies between these divisions.

The second half of the poem provokes and defies cultural norms as the speaker attempts to destroy the walls that stand between the mutually exclusive identities of “black” and “German.” By breaking through these walls, the speaker is able to travel across these categories. The journey, which is clearly color-coded, extends between a white center and a black margin, where the brothers and sisters of the speaker are located. The journey is also an emancipative movement as it takes place without boundaries.

ich werde
noch einen schritt weitergehen
bis an den äussersten rand
wo meine schwestern sind
wo meine brüder stehen
wo
unsere FREIHEIT
beginnt
ich werde
noch einen schritt weitergehen und
weiter
und wiederkehren
wann
ich will
wenn
ich will
grenzenlos und unverschämt
bleiben (nacht gesang 62)
The voice establishes itself as a conceptual migrant traveling across borders of meaning such as “black” and “German.” What is important in these lines is the implicit difference between the speaker and her brothers and sisters that are located at the margin. As mentioned earlier, the poem describes a white center and a black margin. The biracial heritage of the speaker gives her the authority to travel to both margin and center. Since the individuals at the center and margin are “pure races,” they are bound to their place. As a result, the *Mischling* figure is freed by its biracial heritage.

Ironically, the last word of this single versed poem is “bleiben.” The term evokes a resting or stopping point, which we never find in the poem. Throughout the poem we are shown that the speaker does not seek to stop anywhere and yet the idea of a specific location is suggested as a final point. The elusive “bleiben” thus remains lost between the center and the margin; between white and black; between German and African.

In “zwischen avenui und kreuzberg” the presence of a hybridized location between the Ghanaian region of Avenui and the German suburb of Kreuzberg in a section of Berlin marks another act of defiance against categories. The poem emphasizes the impossibility of coming to terms with one particular identity as the speaker describes the land and its vegetation as hybridized.

    wir treffen uns immer
    in der ferne
    zwischen
    avenui und kreuzberg
    unter einemalten
    walnussmangobaum (Nachtgesang 19)
The poem describes a reunion with the speaker’s African family, her grandfather and father. However, even this reunion is depicted in a liminal space. The speaker finds it practically impossible to be on either side, neither the African nor the German. Hybridity functions here as a mechanism that prevents the speaker from being categorized into one particular cultural group. Corinna N.’s poem entitled “vater” explores the themes of hybridity as well. However, her piece presents the speaker as torn between two identities. In this poem the voice is unable to bring together his/her German and African heritage. Ironically both poems, “vater” and “zwischen avenue und kreuzberg” use the figure of a tree to depict their relationship to both cultures. In Corinna’s “vater” the tree is put through strenuous physical activity to reach each culture.

wie ein Baum neige ich
mich links
neige mich rechts
bleib stehen, biege mich
um nicht zu zerbrechen” (Oguntoye 148).

The back and forth swaying motion depicts an insecurity that is caused by an in-between existence. In both cases the figure of the Mischling is recalled and rejects categorization.

Black German discourse about Germanness has circulated around the privileged figure of the Mischling. What is particularly remarkable about these reformulations of belonging is that they are constructed solely by black Germans and not by the larger German population. The Mischling, with all its racial faults, becomes a form of savior to biracial black Germans. However, the model rejects a major part of the black German populace for racially predicated reasons. This exclusion has a fundamental effect on
black Germans. One of the most significant consequences is the fragmentation of this minority population. As the next section shows, the Mischling threatens the future of German integration of blackness into its culture and society.