3.0 Hierarchies and Categories—A Reality of Black German “community life”

Until this point we have discussed the way in which German society largely conceptualizes Germanness as a racial construct; that is to say that a person is considered German through his or her white skin and blood ties to the German community as a whole, which have been passed down from generation to generation. In other words, Germans all over the world are bound to each other and the nation by a pure blood that only flows in the veins of Caucasian Germans. Chapter one showed that this idea has been locked in the German social consciousness since the colonial years in Africa. In chapter two we have established that black German efforts to identify themselves in terms of the *Mischling* model make it possible for black Germans to claim membership to the larger German family, which, in reality, maintains that individuals with any trace of blackness cannot be adopted into the Germanic family unit. Therefore black Germans of mixed heritage, especially, have internalized racialized foundations of Germanness and employ them to judge the black German populace as a whole.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how racialized perceptions about Germanness held by black Germans have affected their relationship to each other. Informed by five interviews I conducted with black Germans of various backgrounds, the chapter illustrates that the racially based conceptions of a German identity have fragmented the black German populace. More importantly, it has constructed a social order where black Germans of mixed heritage value themselves as truly German, while those who are pure blacks fear to do so.
In the first part of this section, I offer some information on German cultural conceptions of blackness that have molded this culture since the colonial era. As these ideas have become a part of both black and Caucasian German existence, they have rendered it very difficult for black Germans to incorporate blackness into their identity. The second part shows that German thought has in fact determined black German relations. This part shows that black Germans have hierarchically categorized their population, because of their immersion into German cultural thought.

3.1 German perceptions about the Black and black German self hatred

\textit{in deutschland grossgeworden habe ich gelernt, dass}

\textit{afrikaner}

\textit{stärker transpirieren, das arbeiten nicht gewohnt sind}

\textit{auf einer anderen entwicklungsstufe stehen.}

\textit{manche sagen auch:}

\textit{die stinken}

\textit{sind faul}

\textit{primitiv}

Ayim, (blues 17)

In his study of the condition of various minority groups in Germany, political historian Dietrich Thränhardt states that in 1998 “substantial parts” of the German population placed black Africans in the category of “rejected foreigners” (13). While a
negative perception of blacks can be traced as far back as the European trans-Atlantic slave trade of African people, according to historian Peter Martin, contemporary German views of blacks have been primarily influenced by post-World War I allied occupation of German territories (Martin 211). As mentioned before, many of these allied military units included contingents of black soldiers, which alarmed numerous conservative politicians and led them to openly condemn the black presence in Germany, as well as to portray the Black as Germany's greatest enemy.

The interim war period constructed blacks as especially degenerate in Germany. Political propaganda by conservative parties presented blacks in the most heinous light. In addition to being described as a threat to national health, countless images in the German press reduced blacks to a subhuman entity by depicting their presence as an invasion of apes. These images sought to present the mindless quality of black allied soldiers that had been sent to occupy German territory. Further, the image of apes represented the assumed animalistic nature of blacks, who were perceived as untamed and immoral creatures. Most of the images captured apes carrying the naked bodies of German women through cities. In essence these images depicted an insatiable sexual drive on the part of blacks and questioned their ability to perform their duties in Germany. A similar pattern was also seen in post World War II propaganda about blacks among American troops that occupied western Germany. Here the degenerate nature of blacks was once again made the subject of German politics.

Another idea that was repeated in the press during this time is that the body of the Black is a vessel of disease. Numerous medical establishments supported these findings and published them in medical journals. Peter Martin draws our attention to an article
published by reporter Sally Marks in 1919, which shows the extent to which this idea was
driven into the minds of average Germans. She writes;

According to German propaganda 100 per cent of the native troops were afflicted
with syphilis, skin disease, and parasitic worms. They were equally infected with
malaria, dysentery, consumption, and leprosy (...) At various times, they were
accused of spreading all known venereal diseases, trachoma, malaria epidemics
and sleeping sickness (having presumably brought tsetse flies with them) as well
as typhus, plague, cholera, and tuberculosis. (Martin 219)

While the sarcasm in Marks’ report expresses the grossly exaggerated nature of German
commentaries about black military presence, it also shows the extent to which blacks
came to be conceptualized as threatening figures during the Weimar era.

A large part of German animosity toward blacks was a result of the threatening
significance of what critical theorist Mark Weiner terms the “transplanted black” (477).
In many ways Germans perceived blacks as indigenous to Africa, and thus their presence
in the West (United States and Germany) was regarded as transplantation; they were
literally uprooted from their African homeland and settled in the West. The presence of
the transplanted black, whether as a soldier in allied armies, a jazz musician, or a native
of a former German colony, was reminiscent of a failed German political authority, a
crumbing patriarchal social order and a devaluation of German ideals. Following
Germany’s defeat in World War I and her loss of African colonies, it was considered an
insult to see blacks, who previously represented second class German subjects, among the
allied troops. The nation had suffered considerably in terms of human life during the
war; many homes were fatherless and vulnerable to “attack.” Since the Weimar period
marks a time during which an extensive number of foreigners traveled through and resided in Germany, conservatives perceived this period as particularly dangerous to German values and families. Thus, propagandistic efforts by German conservatives exploited an existing national anxiety in order to demonize blacks in the consciousness of twentieth century Germany. The effects have since been evident in both black and white German thought.

3.2 Seeing the Self

A significant consequence of the demonization of blacks in early twentieth century Germany is contemporary black German reluctance to incorporate blackness into their identity. In fictive literature, the anguish that black Germans feel is comparable to the extensive agony that the character William experiences in Caroline A. Fischer’s eighteenth century account of the freed slave. In this short story entitled William der Neger, William falls in love with a young village girl but is dissuaded from marrying her because she is white. The classic torturous cry that William releases in the park when he believes that he is alone illustrates the deep psychological pain that accompanies the reality of being black in a society that rejects blackness. He exclaims: “‘Molly!’ (…) Wälder, Berge und Thäler durchirrend —‘Ach, warum bin ich Schwarz! Molly du himmlische Weisse’!"(Fischer 35). Williams cry pierces through nature, yet cannot be heard by those who do not give him the opportunity to be recognized as a valuable human being. His blackness, hence, remains his greatest flaw.

Contemporary research in the social sciences reveals that black people’s reluctance to accept blackness is not simply a figment of Western imagination, but a
reality among blacks in various Western nations. While it is difficult to single out particular factors that lead to a person’s perception and construction of the self, research shows that the black child’s formation of a self-image is primarily influenced by the color of his or her skin (Wyne 4). The Black Self presents the extent to which black children have rejected blackness through the case Brown vs Board of Education in Topeka Kansas (1952-55). During the trial the attorney for Brown presents a study by Dr. Kenneth B. Clark in which sixteen pupils from an all black school were presented sixteen white dolls. The results were as follows, “ten out of the sixteen children preferred the white doll. Seven out of these children thought the white doll looked most like them.” While many researchers claim that this empirical study was conducted unsystematically and is thus inconclusive, its implications are very relevant to our discussion. The study implicitly suggests that blacks have a difficulty in incorporating blackness into their self-image and this is directly shown as these black children identify themselves more with whiteness than with blackness.

Although this study was conducted in the United States, and in social conditions that are unique to this country, it is nevertheless possible to draw parallels between these results and the black German condition. In each of the following conversations with black Germans, blackness is problematized. That is to say that it is questioned and often evaded. The following excerpts from conversations held with black Germans reveal the reality of the personal conflicts they experience as a result of their blackness. The first conversation held with Bisi M, a young black German woman who is of African heritage only, explores her difficulty coming to terms with a black and German identity. Bisi was born in Germany and returned with her parents to Africa shortly after her birth. Bisi
returned to Germany with her father at the age of six. Soon he married a Caucasian German woman who, together with her father, has raised her since her childhood. She describes her life as follows:

Ich bin in Hamburg oder bei Hamburg in Isterruh geboren... Dann sind meine Eltern, ich glaube ende 79 nach Nigeria zurückgegangen und mit meinem sechsten Lebensjahr bin ich wieder nach Deutschland zurückgekommen und meine ganze Schullaufbahn dann hier in Deutschland, also von der Grundschule bis zum Abitur, gemacht. Mein Vater hat sich scheiden lassen und meine Mutter geheiratet und lebt jetzt weiter hier und ich bin mitgekommen.

Although Bisi was born in Germany her world opened up to whiteness when her father remarried. Her black African mother fell out of her memory and was replaced by her stepmother, who is white. Thus, Bisi perceives her German identity through whiteness. As a result, her blackness is often forgotten, even repressed. She tends to remember it when people stare at her or when she stares at herself in front of a mirror. Each exclamation that she utters (“ach,” “oh,” “doch”) shows that she repetitively calls on her memory to inform her that she is black. And it is always a painful realization that draws her back to reality.

...manchmal, wenn ich in den Spiegel schaue... merke[ich] “Ach Gott ich bin schwarz.” Oder, wenn ich durch die Stadt gehe, was ich nicht gerne mache, nicht weil ich Angst habe irgendwie beleidigt zu werden, sondern ich fühl mich dann einfach unwohl, weil ich dann denke warum gucken die mich eigentlich an und dann denke, “Oh ich bin schwarz.” Es ist mir dann so auffällig, wenn man den
Blick auf sich zieht. Dann denkt man, „Ich bin doch ganz normal,“ und dann
denkt man, „Aha ich bin ja schwarz.“

Bisi believes blackness deviates from a standard of normalcy that exists in Germany.
Even though she perceives herself as normal, she acknowledges that she is in reality not
regarded as such by the public. Although Bisi senses that she belongs in her country of
birth, it is the gazes of an estranged public that remind her she is different. More
importantly, the public informs her that she carries her qualities of difference outwardly,
and it is the gaze of the public that objectifies her body and labels it as ill placed. Her
reluctance to go through town can be perceived as a reluctance to face her blackness
before the public.

Michael E., who recently completed his studies in law and is a black German of
African heritage, evades blackness by emphasizing traditionally German rhetoric to prove
that he belongs in Germany.

Ich wollte dieses Interview nicht machen, denn das ganze wird bloss
missverstanden. Ich bin Deutscher. Wir sind alle Deutsche (looks at his
colleagues and laughs) Wir sind alle Germanen. Ich bin genauso deutsch wie du
[German colleague]. Es gibt keinen Unterschied. Deswegen will ich nichts mit
diesem blöden Zeug zu tun haben, denn du [Valerie Dube] versuchst mit deiner
Umfrage darauf zu deuten, dass wir Schwarze eine Ausnahme sind, dass wir

Michael refutes his blackness by rendering it insignificant to his German identity. The
interview began as a mild conflict because to me his blackness was such an important
factor. Although he does not have any white familial relations, Michael insists on
establishing a link between himself and the Germanic tribes of old. The phrase “wir sind alle Germanen” disconcerted his German colleague because it is reminiscent of the racial discourse of the nineteenth and twentieth century, yet these words in this case attempt to discount Michael’s blackness and validate his German heritage, as imperfect as it may be.

Black Germans of mixed heritage evade blackness in a different manner. To this group blackness is not a necessary part of their identity. Rather it is one that is accepted by choice. In Farbe Bekennen, many interviewees preferred the term “farbig” (people of color), which does not necessarily specify a black African heritage, but is very non-specific. David M., a black German of biracial heritage expresses the same idea. He maintains that accepting a black heritage is a result of his liberal nature and not his cultural heriatge:

**V. Dube:** Identifiziert du dich manchmal zum Afrikanischen Teil, zum schwarzen Teil?

**David M.:** Ja sicherlich. Aber und zu schön. Ich bin liberaler ... als die meisten.

David depicts himself as open-minded and thus able to accept blackness at times. Throughout the interview he avoids the term black and only speaks of “Farbige” – a move that separates him further and further from blackness, yet shows some underlying relationship. As a whole, black Germans share a love-hate relationship with blackness. While this is not typical of black Germans only, this group has a particular difficulty in facing blackness and their African heritage. Dangerous consequences of black German abhorrence of blackness have manifest themselves in black German relationships with each other.
3.3 Lines of division: The categorization of black Germans by black Germans

The black German population has within the past few years become a diverse group of people. While critics have concentrated on black Germans of mixed heritage (that is to say of German and black African or African American heritage) blacks of African heritage only have been little discussed. In his study about the history of ethnic minorities in Germany during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, historian Panikos Panayi shows that black Africans constitute a large part of the black German population. In 1999 individuals of pure Ghanaian origin already made up about 12% of the total Afro-German population (261). *Die Zeit* newspaper shows that the growing population of originally black Africans among black Germans is a result of the new citizenship laws that make it possible for individuals to become German because they were born in Germany (Kantara 21). Although, as a pure black, perceiving oneself as German may be difficult, we must acknowledge the fact that there are many pure blacks who recognize themselves as solely Germans. In light of black German reluctance to accept blackness, this places pure blacks in a conflicted position within the community. In many cases this means that they are judged by blacks according to German traditional values.

In the following account, Michael illustrates the severity of this “culture of racial judgment” that takes place among black Germans. Michael’s account of his experience in court brings to the surface the manner in which each black German sub-group is perceived by the other.

*Das ist wie das eine Mal als ich bei der Staatsanwaltschaft mit einem Richter arbeitete. Das war ja normal, dass wir mit einigen Anwälten an manchen Verhandlungen teilnahmen. Die anderen haben davon mit ihren Kollegen geredet.*

Haha, ich konnte nur lachen. Was habe ich mit denen zu tun?

I believe this story reveals the fragmented nature of the black German “Community.”

The passage draws our attention to the categorization of blacks by blacks in Germany. Michael’s account suggests that blacks can be categorized into two distinct groups in German society: Asylum seekers and German nationals. His statement presents the foreigner, more specifically the asylum seeker, as a criminal. Michael generalizes when he refers to asylum seekers as criminals and as individuals that have come to spoil the name of law abiding black Germans. German nationals on the other hand are given the position of goodness and morality. In addition to this, his story divides black Germans into those of mixed heritage and those of African heritage only. Further, Michael’s account of his experience in court shows that he has hierarchically structured these groups. At the top of the ladder are the Mischlinge (individuals of mixed heritage), these
are then followed by pure blacks with German nationality; followed by asylum seekers, who are non-German. Similar to nineteenth century race theory, Michael perceives the position of mixed race Germans as privileged. They are able to comment on pure blacks with the same authority as Caucasian Germans. Michael is motivated to prove black Germans of mixed heritage wrong. Thus he doesn’t wish to appear as a malefactor in the eyes of mixed race Germans. Asylum seekers, who are placed at the bottom by Michael, play an important role in this conflict. While they are placed below pure blacks that are German, the larger public perceives them as the same, because they look the same. When in 1999 German television host Mola Adebisi preferred to speak to the nation about animal cruelty rather than take up the cause for black African asylum seekers, numerous leftist Germans criticized his decision. Adebisi, on the other hand, maintained that while he is (pure) black, he is German and does not have anything in common with African asylum seekers in Germany. Adebisi and Michael’s experiences illustrate a general conflict between sub-groups of blacks within German society.

A principal reason for the conflict is the perceived superiority of biracial black Germans in the eyes of Germans who are purely black. Madeleine W.’s case explores black German reservations about openly expressing their identity as German. Madeleine was raised in a multi-racial home. Her mother, who is black African, remarried her white German stepfather and had two daughters with him. In the end, Madeleine experienced an extreme alienation, since she was the only pure black child in the family. Her mother valued the biracial German offspring more than her black child, who adopted a German identity as an infant. When asked about her German identity Madeleine expresses her
uneasiness, attributing her belonging in Germany rather to a sense of “Heimat” (home) than to a legally rightful place of being.


Although Madeleine begins the discussion about her German identity by discounting it, she assumes it once again when she is confronted with her African identity. In essence she does not believe that she is African in any way and validates her point by suddenly switching to her son, who she maintains embodies German qualities. When compared to her son, it becomes apparent that she is not like him. She lacks one focal ingredient, German blood. It is at this point that she retracts her statement and resumes the idea that she is not German. Madeleine’s responses demonstrate the delicate position in which black Germans who are pure blacks are placed. In relation to biracial black Germans, they always place themselves at a level lower.