# Conclusion

In this book, which was originally written as a doctoral dissertation, I considered what it is like to grow up as a person of African descent in Germany today. The research engaged with the lives of women born in the 1980s, from the generation known as millennials, and considered how diasporic identities are made in practice. For this work I merged local, national, transnational and global scales in order to understand diasporic identities in a broad context. It explored how practising diaspora is attached to generational consciousness, how being part of an educated urban middle class influenced coping with experiences of racism/racialisation and political identity formation; and last but not least, it questioned the role of kinship in the making of African diaspora identities at the intimate (engaging with transnational kin) and political levels (by engaging in Black political communities as a form of 'chosen family' [Weston 1997]). Ethnographic engagements with African diaspora and Blackness are still scarce, and they often focus on forms of political activism. I was interested in everyday understandings and practices of diaspora. Although activism has an important place in all this, the book also shows people before they became politically active in Black movements as well as people who are not politically active at all. This is a way of illustrating different experiences of what it means to be a person of African descent in Germany. The diasporic practices of the women I follow range from Black political activism, practising 'symbolic ethnicity' (Gans 1979) by wearing African garments, wearing their hair natural, listening to African music, cooking African food, and celebrating feasts, to the practice of travelling to connect with kin and other Black communities. Through this mix of practices, my interlocutors are able to forge both a *decentred* diasporic identity as Black Germans or Afro-Europeans as well as a *centred* diasporic identity as German-Guinean or Senegalese-German. The former is typified by Oxana Chi and Layla Zami, for whom it is more important to build a global Black feminist community by engaging in mobility than to engage with their ancestral countries of origin (Martinique and Nigeria respectively), or in the way that cities such as London and Paris can become places to experience and practice diasporic identity as Afrodescendant in Europe for Maya or Aminata. The centered aspect is well shown through Lafia who is looking to connect to the country of origin of her father – Senegal. In their practices, the

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women also shift between essentialist and hybrid approaches to diaspora. Although these women share an awareness that the essentialisation of identity is part of the problem of racialisation and racism, they sometimes use essentialisation with regard to others, too. For example, when Lafia referred to the French writer Marie Ndiaye as a 'Senegalese author' whom she could not connect to. At times they even essentialise their own identities – for instance when Aminata spoke of herself as a 'German potato' to explain her reaction when her son had an accident in Ghana. Essentialisation is used in a strategic way here, to connect to African diaspora broadly and to underline a specific relation or reaction, what Gilroy calls 'strategic essentialism' (1993, p. 31). Yet in their everyday practices, the women use a hybrid and situated understanding of identity that cannot simply be reduced to ethnicity, nationality, age or gender.

## Forging diasporic identities across generations

Working with friends and in my hometown of Frankfurt paved the way for a deep and nuanced analysis because of the knowledge that I was able to bring into the field and the relationships I already had with the women prior to the research. Global Black and African diaspora movements and scholarship are crucial for developing a personal African diaspora identity in Germany. Black American cultural production and the travels of Black American intellectuals like Audre Lorde were important in shaping Afrodiasporic identities in the 1980s in Germany, and are still important today, as new movements such as Black Lives Matter show, with its German chapters. Yet for the women in my research, the USA is only one point of orientation among many. It was of particular significance when they were teenagers as it helped them to forge a positive sense of racialised identity by leaning towards Black America and exploring the GI cultural world in and around Frankfurt. The shared memory of spending time together in spaces such as nightclubs and other military institutions (e.g. the PX) still creates a feeling of community today. Yet their focus on Afrodiasporic practice has evolved as adults and their orientations are now towards a variety of places. Their points of reference have multiplied today and through various practices the women refer to a vast array of Afrodiasporic identities – for example by exploring Afro-European cultures in London, Paris or Lisbon, and also by dealing more with their countries and regions of parental origin in West Africa. Travelling and the opportunities afforded by the internet have also helped them relate to different sources and places of inspiration. The multitude of Afrodiasporic bloggers around the world in areas such as fashion, music and politics offer many possibilities to relate to a multi-centred African diaspora.

And the digital sphere also creates opportunities to deal more directly with parents' country of origin. My interlocutors can stay up to date with political events or

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follow specific bloggers or organisations, which may strengthen their links to places of origin. This last point is particularly relevant to the diasporic practices of the parent generation, who came to Germany as migrants, as the father of Aminata, Lamine Camara, told me. Through digital media, he has been able to follow the political situation in Guinea on a daily basis, and he can communicate with his political allies in different countries such as France or in other parts of Germany.

What my work also shows in relation to generation is that there are certain continuities between people of African descent who lived in Germany in different periods – and one such strand is the fight against racism. Whether in 1880, when Africans came to Germany as colonial subjects and scientific racism was on the rise, or in the Black Lives Matter movement today, people have always used their agency to contest racism and to form coalitions against it. However, racism takes different forms in different generations. Whereas the people of African descent who came as colonial subjects had to fight against a pseudo-scientific racism that was increasingly integrated into the legal and executive system of the German Empire, then the Weimar Republic, and then completely institutionalised in the Third Reich, people of African descent today face a 'racism without races' (Balibar & Wallerstein 1991, p. 21). Racism is no longer based on the construction of different biological human races, thereby justifying the domination of one group over another. Instead, it works by stressing intractable cultural differences between 'migrants' (referring to all non-white people) and 'natives' (referring to all white people). This new form of racism – called neo-racism, cultural or differentialist racism – that developed after World War II essentialises cultural differences. Cultural socialisation is considered as a fixed and stable characteristic of a person, something impossible to change – but crucially only for those who in the old form of scientific racism were classified as non-Aryan or coloured. It works against Muslims as well as people of African or Asian origin, who are portrayed as essentially culturally different (Balibar & Wallerstein 1991, Fassin & Fassin 2009, Taguieff 1985).

## Racialised middle classness – an intersectional approach

How does being part of an educated urban middle class influence experiences of racism and racialisation? Ethnographic studies of racialised middle classness and those looking more generally at the intersection of race and class are rare, particularly in Germany. Most studies relating class and race concern racialised working class groups around the world. Yet the mechanisms of racism and racialisation and the means available to combat them vary according to the socioeconomic situations of those who face them. The women who were at the core of this study face racialisation and 'migrantisation', as Fatima El-Tayeb termed the process of othering of Black people and People of Colour in Germany (2011, 2016). It refers to the process of

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portraying people of non-European descent as eternal newcomers, regardless how many generations they have already lived in Germany. Whereas Aminata's father does not have a big problem with being seen as newcomer, as he arrived as a migrant (although this was now more than 40 years ago), Aminata Camara is struggling against that false assumption towards her and is especially worried for her children, as she sees that racialisation is still happening to them. It is the reason why an anti-racist education transporting a positive sense of their West African descent (Guinean-Ghanaian) has become very important for Aminata, as she sees that as the most important tool to fight against racist structures in society.

Experiences of racism and racialisation weigh psychologically on the people I worked with and induce a racialised fear of the possible loss of their middle-class status. The fear of status loss has been described as a typical characteristic of the middle class with its in-between location between workers and those who own the means of production (Ehrenreich 1989, Weiss 2019). Yet the fear for my interlocutors is accentuated because they are racialised. They worry that their children will face discrimination in their jobs, the housing market or the education system (which has indeed already happened) and that racial discrimination could have consequences for their professional trajectories. The women of the study are all middle-class and highly educated. But this middle-class status is in fact a 'contradictory class location' (Carrier 2015, p. 34): Despite being highly educated, many have faced or still face precarious work situations, with short-term contracts or low wages in the cultural sector; they entered the job market after the neoliberal pension and labour reforms of the German '*Sozialstaat*' (welfare state) undertaken since the early 2000s (Butterwegge et al. 2007). Their economic position does not feel secure and, as Aminata formulated it, 'we have to work hard every day to bring two kids up', referring to herself and her husband. This fear of falling also has an effect on the relations built with transnational kin in Ghana. On the other hand, the opportunity they had to partake in higher education also provided the women with significant social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986a); their social position in Germany is not precarious; they have German nationality, strong social networks and access to many resources (knowledge about literature, blogs, civil society organisations) to fight racism and to forge a self-empowered subject position. They also come from an urban middle-class milieu where being from different cultural backgrounds is celebrated more than it is stigmatised. That position in society also gives them a certain economic and cultural capital. Although African-ness is racialised in Germany, the women grew up in intimate circles where it was marked as positive – though sometimes in the negative sense of being exoticised. They still have to live with discrimination, but they grew into adults knowing that this is a structural problem in society and not theirs alone. This racialised middle-class position bears both privileges and vulnerabilities. Gender plays a role in the development of their Afrodiasporic identities, too. The feeling of not conforming to common German beauty standards and of always being per-

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ceived as exotic led to certain struggles during the women's youth. This was partly responsible for their turning to Black American cultural production, where they were able to find themselves reflected in terms of beauty, and to the foreign world of the GIs. A growing awareness of racialisation as adults, on the other hand, led to them accentuating Afro-centred traits such as wearing their hair naturally. Black beauty blogs, websites and novels helped them in this endeavour to redefine what beauty meant.

## 'Say their names' – listening to and sharing life stories

What is the role of life storytelling for the construction of self and community? The Afrodiasporic identities of my participants began to become more pronounced once they could be externalised – or objectified in the sense that they could recognise that their subjective experiences were shared by others. Maya and Aminata 'became Black' when reading about the experiences of racial discrimination of other people of African descent in Germany and the USA; it legitimated their own experiences of racism and racialisation and made them intersubjective. Hearing and reading about others' experiences with racism, racialisation and their intersection with sexism created empathy and made possible an identification with being Black and global Blackness – it created a possibility of self-understanding as well as identification with a larger group who faced the same structural injustice. This finding of one's experiences in others is crucial in building identity. And other's experiences helped them in narrating their own lives. In their life stories, my interlocutors create a narrative identity which includes Ricœur's two identity concepts of identity as *idem* and as *ipse*. The telling of their lives allows them to create a coherent and permanent self in time, while at the same time it allows the inclusion of ruptures and tensions in their identity constructions; their stories elucidate how being Afrodescendant has mattered throughout their lives: from something they might reject to a trait they identify with and embrace.

One of the crucial slogans of the global Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 and beyond has been 'Say their names!'. This refers to the importance to remember Black people who fell victim to police murders. Whether Breonna Taylor in the USA, Adama Traoré in France or Oury Jalloh in Germany, Black activists want to remember the lives of those taken and tell their stories, because otherwise their deaths would go unsanctioned and their lives would be forgotten in the public memory. Remembering is thus a practice of testimony against marginalisation, a practice that has been important for many oppressed groups who only had their lived experiences to share as evidence of experienced violence. The more evidence there is the more objective it becomes. Life-story sharing was a practise that Audre Lorde advised her Afrodescendant students to make use of in Berlin in 1984 (see Chapter 9), two years before the

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Afro-German anthology of writing and scholarship *Showing Our Colours: Afro-German Women Speak Out* came out in 1986. To counter racism anywhere in the world, Black activists consider it a powerful strategy to tell their own or others' (life-)stories, to forge themselves a place in history that is more than the marginal one that the lives of Afrodescendant people in Europe or the USA are usually granted; though this is generally much truer of Europe than the USA, where Black political movements and organisations have more influence than is the case in most European countries.

This book demonstrates that telling and sharing life stories is an act of resistance against racism, a means of making marginalised lives visible, and an act of community building to create solidarity. This activist tradition lies at the core of this work, which explores the role that life storytelling and sharing has in Black and Afrodiasporic movements. Yet it goes beyond the public educational effect the practice is supposed to engender and focuses instead on the role this storytelling and sharing has in bringing a community of experience together; much like 'coming-out' stories function as a community-building tool for gay men and lesbian women (Weston 1997). The sharing of one's life story, of experiences with racism and finding relief in a Black community function both as community-building practices and self-identity processes for people of African descent active in anti-racism networks. In my research, the life story was both a method and an object of study. I use it as a method to let my interlocutors tell me how they grew up and became who they are today, but I also analyse the relevance that life storytelling has for the construction of the women's Afrodiasporic identities. By following the travels of Oxana Chi and Layla Zami, I could perceive how they used Black and feminist activist ideals to story their selves in performances and lectures and how they also storied others for Black feminist activist purposes. Oxana brings biographical memories back to life through dance performance. Oxana and Layla use movement both in the sense of transnational mobility to connect to Black and feminist activists worldwide and in the sense of moving the body in performances in order to transmit the memories of Black women and Women of Colour on an emotional level. They embody the importance of movement for constructing African diaspora (Gilroy 1993). For Lafia or Maya, who are not part of political activist groups, the use of stories and novels helped them connect to their own lives and develop their diasporic identification as they formulated a 'narrative identity' Ricœur (1988).

## Travelling to connect or to practise cultural identity

What is the role of kinship in the making of Afro-diasporic identities and the role of travelling to build kinship ties? Kinship is essential in the process of diasporic identity-making for the women. and, at the same time, dealing with their African ancestry throughout their lives affected how they wanted to practice kinship. While

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reconnection efforts with African transnational kin were at the core of strategies to develop Afrodiasporic identities, the desire not to deal with that part of the self often made relations with African kin (whether close or distant) difficult for the women as teenagers and young adults. This book considers travelling to places defined as 'origins' as an important practice for dealing with Afrodiasporic identity. This allows the women in my research to engage with their African origins in the form of lived experience and helps them redefine what their origins mean to them. The lived experience offered via mobility is of particular importance for building transnational kinship relations and practising cultural skills. The travels the women engage in are very diverse and range from first-time roots travel to Senegal by Lafia T. to visit the country of her father and get to know extended family (Chapter 7); to a family visit to Ghana in Aminata's case, where they travelled to visit Albert's family (Chapter 8) and a work-move to Nigeria in the case of Maya, whose father is from Sierra Leone (Chapter 6). They can neither be subsumed under the label 'roots tourism' nor under 'transnational family visit', yet they include aspects of both; they are led by the motivation to deeply engage with the places the women define as ancestral as form of engagement with the self as well as a motivation to construct kinship relations. These diasporic travels are motivated by a wish to create family ties with distant kin, to turn a 'mutuality of being', where what makes kinship is the awareness of being part of a same lineage, into a 'mutuality of existence', where kinship is based on taking part in one another's lives (Sahlins 2011a, 2011b, Trémon 2022).

The travels also reveal the difficulties and limits of doing kinship with distant kin. Examining the practices of care employed during these journeys shows, on the one hand, how a feeling of becoming part of a family can be produced through everyday practices such as sharing food and time together (Lafia in Senegal in Chapter 7) – hence, how intimacy can be produced through care. On the other hand, a focus on care can reveal how, especially in a situation of crisis, the differences between close and distant kin become more pronounced and are revealed in care practices, with caring for close kin taking priority, as these are the people who are part of one's everyday life (Aminata in Ghana in Chapter 8). The production of trust is tied to the production of caring relationships, and trust can only be created over time. Caring is also relevant on a socioeconomic level. In relation to their kin in Ghana, Sierra Leone or Senegal, the geopolitical positions of my interlocutors are privileged; the fact that they are from a rich country in the Global North not only elevates their economic status but it is also attached to the privilege of travel freedom that comes with German passports. The women acknowledge this privilege, which can produce a feeling of moral obligation towards extended kin. This can be – as the example of Aminata and her family showed in Chapter 8 – a strong commitment to financially supporting family members in Ghana, sometimes beyond one's comfortable limits. The ongoing financial support contributes to the construction of relations of trust and responsibility.

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Another motivation for travel is related to practising cultural heritage. The benefit these journeys are supposed to provide the women is not meant in the socioeconomic sense of a gain in status. They are rather intended to enrich the women culturally. Through their travels, they aim to confirm the authenticity of their selves as being of West African descent. Despite the differences in form and circumstances of the various travels, the underlying motivation for engaging in such journeys are comparable – all are fuelled by the wish to connect to a cultural heritage through lived experience. Travel to the country of one's ancestors or parents is a way to acquire or practise cultural competences. It is an important step towards embodying a diasporic identity by means of the lived experiences one has in places one associates with one's African origins. Theis kind of travel gives the women in my study the chance to explore a place and (unknown) family relations with all their senses; to be able to generate memories for the future but also to have the possibility to create relationships to extended family. Forging contacts in the country of ancestral origin makes it possible to practise diasporic identity on an intimate kinship level. There has often been a rupture in diasporic family relations between country of parental origin and country of destination of the migrant parent of the women of my research. For different reasons, personal and geopolitical, it was particularly difficult for some of the women to travel to the ancestral countries as children and teenagers. There was a civil war in Sierra Leone and a politically unstable situation in Guinea, for example – structural barriers that made regular connection with the country of origin impossible, even for their fathers. In Lafia's case, a difficult relationship with her father made travelling unimaginable as a teen and even her father did not regularly travel there. As Anne-Christine Trémon argues in her work on diasporic relations of Tahitians of Chinese descent (2019), diasporic relations can be interrupted and taken up again at a different point in time depending especially on structural barriers and opportunities. Yet my work shows that personal circumstances (family relations, educational paths) are another factor that informs how much the descendants of migrants in particular will engage with ancestral origins. The travels of my interlocutors as adult women are an opportunity to reignite diasporic relations and can be seen as an attempt to fill the void of an interrupted transmission. These journeys are both a way to get closer to parents by getting to know their place of origin and a way to build a personal relationship with a place the women want to define as origins for themselves. Diasporic travels can also be read as an answer to a moral demand stemming from the family and which gets formulated as moral obligation to the self (you have to know your roots), as well as a demand resulting from a racialised position in Germany where the women of African descent are confronted with othering and questions about their 'real origins'. Maya's move to Nigeria is a good example of that. She contends that this move is of particular importance to break with the narrow and one-sided images that are provided in Germany of Africa as a whole. Knowing the reality by having lived there for an extended period and being aware of

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how life can be lived there is a weapon that shields her from negative stereotypes of Africa. The move is supposed to give her a feeling of a real and complex picture of Nigeria, besides being also a way to explore and improve her cultural skills as someone of West African descent.

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