9. Life storytelling as Black and feminist political practice

As forms of artistic expression, storytelling and music making were means of communal liberation for African Americans: This cultural production was a way to bring and to write oneself into being, as for a long time the stories of African Americans were stories untold. It was a way to create agency as a marginalised group (Jackson 2013). Artistic expression and narration of one's own life is, according to Paul Gilroy (1993), intrinsic to the political liberation struggle of African Americans in the USA. Today, the sharing of one's personal story, sharing of experiences of racism and of strategies to cope with forms of discrimination and marginalisation have become an important tool to develop Black political communities worldwide.

In this chapter, I show how the practice of artistic expression of one's life emerged in African American cultural production and how it travelled to Germany to influence the emergence of the Afro-German movement of the 1980s. It is especially the practice of life storytelling which has been taken up by Afro-German activists through the influence of Audre Lorde, a Black feminist poet and academic from the USA.

Artistic expression is employed widely as a strategy for waging political struggle in Black German movements; life stories make up major narrative elements in the productions of contemporary Black activists and artists. Recently, for example, Natasha Kelly, a university lecturer, Afro-German activist and film-maker created *Milli's Awakening: Black Women, Art and Resistance* (2018),[1] in which Black female artists of different ages talk about their lives in Germany. Kelly and the other women who feature in the film use art in order to make a political statement and to connect with each other.

I adhere to the premise that art is vitally important for circulating political messages in the world and for creating global Black communities. These artistic expressions have to be seen as a means to an end: They are instruments to transport testimony and make it available to a wider public. Such personal testimonies are a promi-

1 For an overview of Natasha Kelly's work, see her website: https://www.natashaakelly.com/arts (accessed 21 November 2020).

nent tool for mediating the experiences of marginalised people. They are frequently used, for example, in human rights advocacy – often as the only evidence survivors of violence can put forward (Patel 2012). They are also a very prominent tool for political activism in general, as the #metoo movement has demonstrated. Within this movement, the accumulation of online and real-life personal testimonies is seen as one of the most important ways of dismantling sexism and giving women the courage to speak up (Brunner & Partlow-Lefevre 2020).

Girloy's book, besides showing the importance of travel and mobility for the development of African American intellectual production, explores the uniqueness of Black American culture and how it makes sense to speak of a shared culture for African Americans based on their historical experience of slavery in the USA. This derives from the shared conditions and the overcoming of slavery, the struggle for liberation from oppression and the urge to tell the world about it so that it cannot be forgotten, and the need to build strong communities for survival. The histories of Afrodescendant people in Germany have much less in common, as there was never a single period when many Africans or Afrodiasporic people immigrated. Rather, they arrived at many different times and from a highly diverse variety of countries and social backgrounds, and never in very high numbers (see Chapter 2 for a history of the African diaspora in Germany). Yet common denominators can still be found, for instance in shared experiences of racism and the experience of living in a society where white people are a dominant majority and Afrodescendant people are still exoticised.

Origins and themes of life stories in Black movements

The importance of life stories for African diaspora movements dates back to the documentation of slave narratives. I was not aware when I started my research that documenting life stories or narratives was a highly sensitive matter. I knew, of course, about the ethics of representation, but personal biography is much more a political matter in Black political movements than elsewhere, because telling one's story is perceived as a political act of emancipation and part of the struggle against marginalisation. It is about controlling and having power over one's own narrative. That issue is highlighted by Robert Stepto (1979) when analysing the production of slave testimonies in his book *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. The first slave narratives were written and edited by white people that 'advocated' for their authenticity, for the veracity of the narrative. It is only later that Black authors took control over the whole process of publishing their own stories. To date the most famous is still the autobiography of Frederick Douglass, *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, 1845* (1968). Life story recording became widespread through the Federal Writers Project (1936–38) in the USA, which was ini-

tiated as part of the United States Work Progress Administration during the Great Depression and as part of which 2,300 life-histories of people who had been born into slavery were collected in seventeen different US states.[2] Otherwise nothing would remain to remember slavery besides the materiality of the estates of slaveholders. Personal testimonies thus became a crucial source of evidence. The were a way to afford the people who had been forced to suffer some agency, to give them a voice and make them part of history. Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright were among the famous writers who collected these narratives. For Gilroy (1993), African diaspora or Blackness in the USA and the Caribbean was created through shared experiences of displacement and racial terror. Common cultural practices evolved through these shared experiences of the 'middle passage' (the Transatlantic slave trade). Gilroy explores the practices of diaspora as community-making processes and the importance of creating shared narratives. For the African diaspora of the Black Atlantic (USA and Caribbean), it is thus the experience of death and suffering that generated specific forms of cultural expression. Regarding the themes of these Black narratives, Gilroy draws the connection between storytelling and religion:

> They were, of course, initially stories taken from the Bible. Stories of slavery and escape from bondage blasted out of their former place in the continuum of history by Africans and then re-accentuated as an integral part of their struggles in the West. Both storytelling and music-making contributed to an alternative public sphere […]. (1993, p. 200)

Only mentioned briefly by Gilroy is the role of the church for the Black population in former slave states of the American South, which I believe is crucial for understanding the quest for liberation – and the anti-racism struggles of Black organisations and movements today. In the face of the experience of slavery and 'racial terror' (Gilroy 1993, p. 129) in the USA, the role of the church was to provide a narrative of healing – from the wounds caused by centuries of slave labour and racist discrimination. It was also the institution to keep the memory of that time alive, through the people's narratives. Suffering, redemption and healing are common themes in Christianism and Judaism, and they accrued another very non-metaphorical meaning for African American people from the American South, who personally suffered or were descendants of those who suffered as slaves. The narrative strands used in sermons in African Methodist/Black churches in the South of the USA are still valid for Black movements today, where life stories include themes such as suffering, healing and exile. Steve Gadet (2015), Senior lecturer in American Studies at the

2 For more information on the project 'Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938', visit https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/ (accessed 6 April 2020).

Université des Antilles, writes about the birth of the Black church during slavery and how it became a social movement and a safe space for freedom of expression for African American slaves. The church became also a place for organising politically, for creating a common voice and a common agenda as African Americans. The first African Baptist church was officially recognised in Georgia in 1788, founded by a liberated slave, Andrew Bryan. It was during the American Revolution (1776–1783) that a movement for independent Black churches emerged, for the expression of faith for African Americans who were tired of being relegated to the back pews in biracial churches. From the outset, the African Baptist church was attached to a Black liberation struggle and would provide a strong intellectual basis for Black movements to come (Gadet 2015).

Alongside suffering, redemption and healing, the Black Power and Civil Rights movements have also emphasised narratives and practices of self-care. The 'self' takes on a double meaning here, referring to the African American community as well as to each singular individual. The Black Panthers transformed the health aspect of self-care into a programme of political action, pointing to the correlation of poor health with social and economic discrimination against the Black population. Caring for oneself and others became a form of political resistance in the face of structural injustice against Black people; it was also very prominent in women's movements within the Civil Rights struggle (Sheber 2018). The efforts of the Black and Civil Rights movements in the USA reverberated transnationally, too, and pointed to the connections between health, wellbeing and anti-racism work, as Hobart and Kneese (2020) indicate in their *Social Text* special issue on 'radical care':

> During the women's movement and civil rights era of the 1960s and 1970s, physical health became central to maintaining community resiliency against racism, sexism, colonialism, classism, and homophobia. (p. 6)

These themes, originating from Black churches and then the Civil Rights campaigns and the women's movement – of suffering, redemption, liberation, community organisation and (health)care – have found their way into life-story writing in Afro-German movements, too.

The Afro-German movement in the 1980s

The Afro-German movement of the 1980s was strongly influenced by feminist activists and scholars and attracted many women of African descent. The importance of telling one's story in the Afro-German movement was inspired by Audre Lorde in Berlin. Lorde came to live and teach in Berlin in 1984. She had been invited by Dagmar Schultz, a German feminist scholar who had lived and taught in the USA, which

is also where the two had met. Schultz was the life partner of Ika Hügel-Marshall, whose important autobiography I discuss further below.

During Lorde's time as a lecturer at the Freie Universität Berlin, where she taught classes in Minority Women's Literature, she incited Afrodescendant women and men in her class to talk with each other about their lives. Two years later, this resulted in the publication of *Showing Our Colours: Afro-German Women Speak Out* (Oguntoye et al. 1986). For Lorde, the child of Caribbean immigrants in the USA, this practice of life-writing represented a way to inscribe oneself in history as a marginalised person, a form of emancipation as a racialised woman, facilitating the formation of a collective identity as Black women (Lorde 2012). She suggested that it was important to tell the stories of people of African descent as they were untold in the German public realm, where Black people seemed to be perceived as eternal strangers. In order to forge a place for them in Germany, Lorde suggested they tell each other about their lives and write down the stories. This was the beginning of the writing of African-German history, and was based on the assumption that no one else would do it for them (Piesche 2012).

Audre Lorde (1934–1992) was an Afro-Caribbean author, poet and Black lesbian feminist activist from the USA who had been very active in the Civil Rights and Black Power movement. She was among the first feminists in the USA to include intersectionality in her work, addressing the issue of intersecting categories of discrimination and marginalisation such as gender, race/ethnicity and class, often by using her own biography as an example (Lorde 1983). She wrote about her life as a Black Lesbian woman and feminist in the USA who originated from a working-class family, and about the power of organising with other women across differences but with the acknowledgement of intersectionality and asymmetries of power within women's movements in the USA and beyond (*Sister Outsider*, 1984); about her life with cancer and how her loved ones helped her in these difficult times (*Cancer Journals*, 1980); about feminist and Black activist forms of resistance (*A Burst of Light*, 1988); and she wrote her autobiography in a new genre she called biomythography, combining history, biography and mythology in *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* (1983). In her autobiography, Lorde talks about her growing up in Harlem, about how important education was for her parents, about experiences of racism and ableism (she was sight impaired as a child), her evolution towards politicisation in Black and feminist movements, as well as dealing with her Caribbean heritage through memories of her mother. Lorde explains that 'Zami', the name she chooses for herself, comes from Carriacou mythology and means 'women who work together as friends and lovers' (1993, p. 255); Carriacou is the island of origin of her mother. Themes of overcoming suffering through solidarity and care and the search for Afrodiasporic origins are important in her work. She often uses personal stories to contextualise larger themes, thus underlining the importance of body and embodiment for the work of

an anti-racist and feminist activist; she valued personal narratives as political tool of resistance.

Many of the co-editors and writers of the book *Showing Our Colours* (*Farbe bekennen* [1986]) were of mixed German and Afrodescendant heritage, such as May Ayim, who was of German-Ghanaian heritage; Ika Hügel-Marshall, who had German and African American heritage, and Katharina Oguntoye, a woman of Nigerian-German descent. All three of these women were Afro-German activists of the first hour and had attended Lorde's classes. Ayim wrote her Master's thesis in pedagogy about the history of Afro-Germans. It became part of the basis for the book *Showing Our Colours*. Ayim was very active and soon became an icon for the Afro-German movement. She wrote poetry and essays about her life and the political situation in Germany for people of African descent and was tireless in her work for anti-racist organisations (Ayim 1995, 1997).

This foundational text, *Showing Our Colours*, is divided into four sections: 'Racism, sexism and pre-colonial representations of Africa in Germany', 'Africans and Afro-Germans in the Weimar Republic and in Nazi Germany', 'Afro-Germans after 1945 – the so-called occupation children', and 'Racism here and today'. It is essentially a collection of life-narratives in which Afro-German women of different generations came together to relate their life stories as Germans of African descent, beginning with the daughters of Mandenga Diek and Gottlieb Kala Kinger, two Cameroon natives who arrived in Germany before 1914 during German colonialism. It was also through the intellectual and editorial work of the authors and their project on the history of Africans and Afrodiasporic people in Germany that the organisations Initiative for Black People in Germany (*Initiative Schwarze Deutsche* [ISD]) and Afro-German Women (*Afro-Deutsche Frauen* [ADEFRA] were founded in 1986. The main goal of the ISD, according to Tahir Della, its current director, is the historical revision of Black history in Germany (Kazeem 2013). At first, the ISD was a small organisation with a few members in Berlin and Frankfurt, but it soon started to establish local branches in other cities, too. Now there are several regional branches and an umbrella organisation at the national level, most of which are run by volunteers. It supports arts and educational projects that are directed at the empowerment of people of African descent, organising exhibitions and doing political lobbying in Germany on themes related to anti-racism. It also collaborates regularly with other German and European Black political organisations.

Since its beginnings, the ISD has organised annual meetings of its members, and these events have become important intergenerational gatherings. The ISD describes itself as a non-profit organisation that represents the interests of Black people in Germany; in its mission statement on its website, it names some of its objectives as the hope of promoting a more positive Black identity ('*Wir bieten eine positive Identitätsfindung*'), Black consciousness ('*Wir fördern ein Schwarzes Bewusstsein*') and standing for anti-racist attitudes in all areas of society ('*Wir treten für eine anti-rassis-*

tische Haltung in allen gesellschaftlichen Bereichen ein'). In the publication that marked the organisation's 30th anniversary (2016), there is an explanation of the two words Afro-German (*Afrodeutsch*) and Black (*Schwarz*). The ISD stresses that there is a plurality of understandings of Afro-German identity and that Blackness is a cultural construct based on shared experiences of racialisation and not a simple description of someone with a brown skin tone:

> Afro-German: A self-description used by many Black people in Germany. It was inspired by the term 'Afro-American' and connects aspects of African-diasporic origin with a belonging to German society.
> Black: A non-discriminatory self-designation. It marks certain common experiences and life realities in a society dominated by whiteness. In its political sense, Black is written with a capital B, in order to illustrate that it describes a constructed category rather than a real 'characteristic' that can be related to a skin tone.
> (Ridha et al. 2016, pp. 12ff)

The terms 'Black' and 'Afro-German' were introduced to Germany through the US Black Power movement and by scholars such as Audre Lorde. They are widely used today in Germany in the context of political activism undertaken by Germans of African descent, but they are not common self-designations for the majority of Afrodescendant people in Germany. This was mentioned briefly above in the case of Lamine Camara, who would not refer to himself as 'Black'. It is not a category that he embraces; he is not attached to the idea of solidarity between all people of African descent in the same way as his daughter. People who self-identify as 'Black' in Germany today have often been in touch with Black activist resources or have been included in politically activist circles themselves at a certain point in their lives. The editors of *Showing Our Colours* were all members of the ISD – some younger, some older – and many of them were also part of ADEFRA. ADEFRA was founded as a women-only organisation, inspired by discussions in the classes of Audre Lorde at the Freie Universität in Berlin. A group of Afrodescendant and feminist women organised get-togethers and there followed the idea of a safe space for Black women in Germany. Out of these gatherings, the organisation was created, open to all interested women of African descent whether students or not – and it still exists today. Most of its members had an academic background and studied subjects such as educational sciences or sociology. ADEFRA and the ISD were intended to complement each other. Since 1986, members of these organisations have contributed a great deal to scholarship on 'Black Germany' (e.g. Katharina Oguntoye, Peggy Piesche, Manuela Ritz, May Ayim). Much of their work was published by the Orlanda publishing house, co-founded by Dagmar Schultz in 1974. Schultz, a feminist historian and sociologist, had invited Audre Lorde to Berlin in 1984, after studying

literature, filmmaking and sociology in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s where she became acquainted with an intersectional approach as well as with Black feminism – themes that were not discussed yet in Germany and let alone forming part of any university courses.

Many Afro-German authors and activists describe meetings of Germans of African descent, autobiographical writings and the sharing of life stories as strategies to fight against a feeling of isolation and exclusion while growing up in Germany (Ridha et al. 2016, Hügel-Marshall 1998). Since its beginnings in the 1980s, the Afro-German movement has had an agenda to raise awareness of the presence of Black people in the history of Germany and to highlight racial discrimination and prejudices against Black people in Germany. Ika Hügel-Marshall and May Ayim, two of the founding figures of the feminist Afro-German movement, both wrote autobiographical essays or books where – inspired by Audre Lorde – they describe what it was like to grow up in Germany after World War II (Hügel-Marshall) and in the 1960s and 70s (Ayim), how they found relief in Black and feminist collectives and how they searched for their Afrodiasporic origins.

In both Hügel-Marshall's and Ayim's autobiographical writings there are common threads with the life stories of other Black artists/activists (for example the one that I present in the introduction, Tiffany López Ganet from Spain): experiences of growing up or going to school as the only Afrodescendant, experiences of racism or racialisation (although in very diverse forms, ranging from exoticisation to physical violence), finding relief in community with other people of African descent in one's home country/town and, finally, dealing with personal African or Afrodiasporic family heritage including through roots travel. Although the three women were born in different times (1947, 1960, 1990) what unites them is their leaning towards Black political activism and anti-racism, and the use of life storytelling as political act in their work.

Ika Hügel-Marshall

In her autobiography *Invisible Woman: Growing up Black in Germany* (1998, 2008), Hügel-Marshall writes about her childhood in the immediate aftermath of World War II and the stigma of her status as an 'occupation child' that she and her family had to face.[3] Ika was born in a village in Bavaria in 1947 as the daughter of a white German Bavarian mother and an African American GI father, who had to leave Germany due to illness before she was born, without knowing about her existence.

At the age of seven, her mother placed Ika in a children's home, a practice that was encouraged by the German state to educate 'occupation children' (1998, p. 10) – which was what most children of African or African American descent were referred

3 Part of this section has been published in the French journal *Ethnographiques*: https://www.ethnographiques.org/2019/Wojczewski (accessed 30. April 2024) (Wojczewski 2019).

to at the time. The mothers were often stigmatised for having been in a relationship with an American soldier after World War II.

They were doubly stigmatised when the father was an African American, because not only did they have a relation with the occupier but also with a Black person – a reaction that again demonstrates the enduring racism against people of African descent. A newspaper article published in the 1950s that Hügel-Marshall cites in her book reports a speech in the Bundestag in which these 'mixed' children were referred to as a 'special human and racial problem' (1998, p. 12). Hügel-Marshall's case was no exception: Many children of both African American and African descent were put up for adoption after the war or grew up in orphanages, homes or foster families in Germany or the USA (African American families adopted many) between 1945 and 1960. Around 4,000 children with African American fathers and German mothers were put up for adoption or placed in homes, often forcefully separated from their biological parents, because the soldiers were called back home or the military hierarchy refused to authorise the marriage (where racial segregation was officially ongoing) (Lee 2011, Lemke Muniz de Faria 2003, Aitken & Rosenhaft 2015). From early school age, Hügel-Marshall had experiences of being treated badly by schoolmates and teachers because of her skin colour, but she also forged friendships and was often respected by the other children.

Hügel-Marshall goes on to describe her path towards political activism. After training as a childcare worker, she moved to Frankfurt as a young adult. She explained this by stating that she wanted to leave the small town to immerse herself in a bigger city where her skin colour would not matter. She decided to study pedagogy in Frankfurt, one of the hubs of the 1968 student revolt. Before becoming active in Afro-German movements, she had already become engaged in feminist organisations and lived in a shared feminist flat where they often discussed politics. It was only in 1986, at the age of 39, that she went to her first Afro-German meeting, held by a local ISD group. What created a feeling of community here, she writes, was the shared experience of racism that people of African descent were facing in Germany. In her book, Hügel-Marshall describes how by connecting with people like herself, she was able for the first time to forge a self-confident form of belonging in Germany, because she could identify with other Afro-Germans. The final and longest part of her book is dedicated to her father and her uncertain origins, which she started to explore when she was already involved in Black movements. She describes how she finally got to know her father and his family in the USA when she was already in her forties, how she took his name and American nationality. She also dedicates a part of her book to her friendship with Lorde, who had lived with her and Dagmar Schultz in Berlin.

Throughout her autobiography, it is clear that Hügel-Marshall is writing in her role as Black German activist, where the telling of one's story is an important act of empowerment and solidarity – 'an act of public recognition' for marginalised groups

in a society, as anthropologist Michael Jackson (2013, p. 32) describes the political motivation of storytelling. Her book relates how the experience of being racialised in a society can be dealt with productively by finding community, a theme that recurs in many other accounts of Black identity.

May Ayim

May Ayim (born 3 May 1960 in Hamburg, died 9 August 1996 in Berlin) is the pen name of May Opitz, co-founder of the Afro-German organisations ISD and ADEFRA in 1986 and an anti-racist and feminist activist, researcher, speech therapist and poet. The child of a German woman from Hamburg and Ghanaian medical student Emanuel Ayim, who came to Germany in the 1950s, she was sent to a children's home when she was born. Her biological father wanted to take her with him to Ghana, but German law would not allow that at the time (Ayim 1997, p. 13). She was adopted by a white German family – the Opitzes – in Münster when she was two years old and grew up with her adoptive parents and three brothers and sisters. Ayim wrote many autobiographical poems and essays published, for instance, in her posthumous *Grenzenlos und unverschämt* (1997a).

Much like Hügel-Marshall, Ayim recounts experiences of racism and racialisation (though less brutal than Hügel-Marshall faced). She also describes growing up in a family that did not know how to deal with racism and could not protect her from it, as well as her path towards political activism and dealing with her Ghanaian heritage. May's adoptive family had a working-class background. Her parents wanted her to have a good education in order to be able to 'take a job where her skin colour would not matter and where she could possibly also work in Africa' (Ayim 1997, p. 78). Ayim remembered later in her life that her family frequently told her to try to keep a low profile, as her dark skin tone and curly hair already attracted 'too much attention'. However, they encouraged contact with her biological father, Emanuel Ayim, and she would meet him from time to time before he left Germany. Her career as a feminist and Black activist started when she attended the First Congress for Foreign and German Women (*Erster Kongreß der ausländischen und deutschen Frauen*) in Frankfurt in 1984. In a letter to the organisers, she wrote that she had never been to a women's congress before, and began to tell her life story: She left her adoptive family following a fight after her final school exams and did not have any contact with them for a few years. Then she went on to write what it meant for her to have both dark skin and a German passport:

> Physical appearance normally shouldn't be important. Yet what this only apparent incompatibility of skin colour and nationality signifies for me in my search for identity, having grown up in a society in which physical appearance is so important, I became aware of in particular this weekend: My socialisation was one of a 'German' girl in the midst of a German environment (my family had and has

> no contact with foreigners). I have a German name and 'enjoy' the privileges of a German 'national' with my German passport. I do not speak any African language, have never been to the native country of my father – in short, I am not a foreigner. I find it unnecessary to emphasise my 'Germanness'. But when, once again, people ask me about my country of origin, and I answer: 'I was born and raised in Germany', people seldom accept that answer. (1997, p. 10)

In this extract, Ayim talks about her experience of othering and racialisation. Having a brown skin tone often meant not being accepted as German. This is still an issue today. Although German society has become far more culturally diverse since the 1950s, my interlocutors still have to answer the same questions as May Ayim or Ika Hügel-Marshall. Ayim recounts the questions and comments she got after telling people about her German nationality: 'But you cannot deny blood', or 'But do you not want to go back home later?' or 'But you look so different' (1997, p. 10). Another prominent activist and researcher from the Afro-German movement, Katharina Oguntoye, puts it like this in *Showing Our Colours*: 'As we are not perceived as European, a feeling of being different develops in us' (Oguntoye et al. 1992, p. 20). Ayim explains racist behaviour towards and stereotypes of Black and African people in Germany: She too, while socialised in Germany, had learned how African people were negatively portrayed since childhood – in songs, stories and carnival costumes. Many of the questions above have now become emblematic in confronting racism in Germany and are often taken up by anti-racism activists or People of Colour to explain experiences of everyday racism.

Ayim wrote her Master's thesis in pedagogy on Afro-German cultural and social history. She moved to Berlin in 1984 and described the city as her 'home […] more than anywhere else' (Ayim 1997, p. 89). But another aspect of her work is dedicated to her relationship to Ghana and journeys to other countries such as Brazil and South Africa, which helped her deal positively with her African origins when she was in her twenties. Her poem 'Zwischen Avenui und Kreuzberg' (published in the posthumous volume *Nachtgesang* by Orlanda Frauenverlag in 1997) is about her encounter and later ongoing relationship with her grandfather and the native village of her father, where she travelled in 1986. Many of Ayim's books and anthologies were published by Orlanda – a feminist press founded by Dagmar Schultz in 1974. This publisher is still an important voice for Afro-German authors and feminist literature in general.

Both Hügel-Marshall and Ayim combine an intellectual project on Black and African history in Germany with a more existential project of finding out about their own specific family history. This aspect of discovering one's unknown family past is still an important task for ISD, which tries to help find unknown family members for Germans of African or African American descent. Ayim and Hügel-Marshall were

been inspired in this regard by the example of Audre Lorde as an individual as well as by her writing style and the themes she explores.

Here we may observe the two uses that Paul Ricœur suggests for the concept of identity: '*l'identité comme mêmeté et l'identité comme soi*' (identity as sameness and identity as self) (1988, p. 296). In the life narratives of Hügel-Marshall and Ayim, we find elements of identification with a group, in this case with a community of Black feminists. Both life stories describe certain experiences – for example, being confronted with racism in Germany and learning how to protect oneself from it by being part of a Black collective. They also show the importance of transnational mobility for the perception of self; travelling both within Germany and beyond national boundaries is a strategy that Hügel-Marshall and Ayim use to fill an existential void and to search for belonging to a transnational community. Both built an identity as Black activists by sharing their experiences with other Afrodescendant people, and by becoming members of anti-racist and feminist movements as well as by getting to know their respective biological families. Yet the act of telling can be also considered an act of identity-making as self-fashioning; it is through the narration itself that a permanent identity is created, in the cases of these two figures, a permanent and coherent self as an Afro-German feminist (Wojczewski 2019).

Connecting lives through stories

Life storytelling and sharing not only has the potential to cross geographical boundaries to create community but also connects different generations. This has been an important cultural and political practice for African Americans since plantation slavery. First, it created a community of existence in the USA through writing and storying oneself into history. Then the practice became important all over the world for Black political communities. In Germany it gained significance in the Afro-German movement from the 1980s through the influence of Afro-feminist poet Audre Lorde. Getting together and telling each other about one's lives was at the foundation of Afro-German organisations such as ISD and ADEFRA. Becoming acquainted with Black intellectual scholarship can lead to a re-storying of self. This process can be witnessed in the writings of Ika Hügel-Marshall and May Ayim.W h i l e the two women did not feel they belonged to a community, alignment with Afro-feminist movements and the practice of narrating experiences in the form of autobiographical writing led them to create coherent selves. Their life and travel experiences are what philosopher Paul Ricœur calls 'narrative interpretation of identity'[4] (1988). Writing helped them create self-identities with a permanence in time while also taking account of the changes that happen in a life.

4 *L'interprétation narrative de l'identité.*

But life storytelling is not limited by national boundaries. As I described at the very beginning of the book, in the fieldnote about the 2019 Afroeuropeans conference in Lisbon and the Black activist Tiffany López Ganet, life storytelling and sharing has the power to connect Afrodescendant activists all over the world through its focus on specific themes. The sharing of these intimate stories allows for a construction of global Black brotherhoods and sisterhoods that stand in solidarity as they create resonant points of identification.