6. Maya B.: Building Afrodiasporic identity through travel

Many things that were once familiar to Maya as a result of her growing up in a Sierra Leonean family are no longer part of her life in Germany since her father, brother, stepmother and stepsiblings moved to the USA when she was 17. Although she tries to connect to African colleagues at work, feeling connected to her West African heritage remains difficult in Frankfurt, a city that – although very international (almost 50 per cent of the population have a foreign passport) – is not very much influenced by immigration from African countries.

In this chapter, I consider the role that travel to various destinations at different times has had for Maya's practice and understanding of diasporic identity: a trip to Paris where she 'discovered' what it meant to be part of larger Black communities; a trip to London as an adult and a trip to Nigeria, where she moved for a job in 2018; finally, a trip that also gave her the opportunity to visit Sierra Leone again. During her European travels, it was the chance to encounter many Afrodescendant people of a similar age and urban upbringing, in particular, which created points of identification and fed into her construction of an Afro-European identity. Nigeria was important to connect to her personal biography and family – though not the country of Maya's ancestral origin, it combines life in a West African country with the opportunity to have a European standard of middle-class life. Her visit to Sierra Leone shows that, as a member of the second generation born and raised in Germany, she is still seen as an important transnational link for her family in Sierra Leone, despite the fact that she is not a primomigrant.

Travelling in Afroeurope

> Remembering Paris 1999 as a Teenager – Kitchen talk (2) Sitting in my kitchen in Frankfurt
>
> While we talk about famous Nigerian music and collaborations between Nigeria and the UK, I ask Maya if she knows the online documentary series

> Strolling, where Cecile Emeke creates portraits of young Afro-Europeans and Afrodiasporic adults from the USA and Jamaica. She doesn't, and I show her an episode that I like about two French Afrodescendant women in Paris. The two women talk about French beauty ideals and how they felt they did not correspond to them and how Black communities were organised or not organised in Paris. In particular, they said that Black men often wanted to be with women of a lighter skin complexion. 'It is as if it would be seen as incestuous when a Black man dates a Black woman', the one complains, 'But if no one in your community stands up for you, who else will?' While we watch it, Maya agrees and says that she knows that kind of behaviour especially from older Black men, for whom it is somehow important to date women with a lighter skin tone. She has often been fetishised because she has light skin. And she concludes: 'Oh, how nice it would be to just have coffee with these two now!' We go on watching the episode. It almost feels as if a dialogue has been established between her and the French women. The two Parisians go on talking about how they feel that there is no real solidarity among Black people in Paris. 'We see Black people in the streets every day, but there is no sense of community', one regrets. Yet here Maya begs to differ: 'That was not my feeling when we were doing the student exchange in Paris.' Back in school we participated in a student exchange, and her exchange partner was a French Afro-Caribbean girl. 'They took me everywhere, even to other African and Caribbean families'. Maya felt that Black communities were much more visible to each other in Paris. 'And is that different in Germany? You said once that you felt that African communities here were organised around nations, right?' I asked her. 'Yes, in Germany communities are quite separate. Although my father always helped people from different African communities. But actually Sierra Leone only had closer links with Gambia here, no idea why. My impression was that in Paris the communities were much closer. Here a Caribbean store, there an African one, and everywhere people greeted you nicely.' This short time in Paris is held dear in Maya's memory. (Fieldnote, 10 October 2017)

Maya often mentions Paris when talking about Afrodiasporic communities in Europe. We went there together during a student exchange when we were 15 years old. Since then, she has visited Paris on a few occasions. and it has become one of her favourite destinations in Europe.

I, too, vividly remember the student exchange to Paris that Aminata, Maya and I participated in. It must have been around 1999. Whereas all of us had very different experiences during those two weeks because of our different guest families, we could share them when we got together in Paris and afterwards. Maya went into a French family of Afro-Caribbean descent and got along brilliantly with her guest sister, who introduced her to the world of 'Parisian Caribbean-ness'. I remember seeing her only rarely outside of the regular school programme, because she was always hanging out with her guest sister and their friends. She was introduced to members

of Saïan Supa Crew, a top French hip hop band, and to Raggasonic, another French hip hopper, both of whom are very influenced by African/African diaspora music and are themselves of varied African descent.

While in Frankfurt for fieldwork in December 2017, I was going through my stuff at my parents place in Frankfurt when I found a report which our class had to write about this trip to Paris, and I spotted this piece that Maya wrote:

It is part of a school class report where everyone had to write a page about a special experience they had had during the trip to Paris. Maya chose to write about dinner customs in France and of her host family. Towards the end of the small report she writes:

> Dinner plays an important role for French society. […] It was like that when I was in France. The family was always invited to friends to eat together. That is how I got to know a lot of very nice and friendly people. In addition, it was always a family where the father or the mother had Caribbean origins. That is why they were often very interested in the culture of my father and in my origins, because Caribbean and Sierra Leonean culture have much in common. I really enjoyed my stay in Paris. (Maya, Paris report, 1999)

In Paris, Maya experienced family on multiple dimensions. It was an opportunity for her to get to know French Caribbean culture in the intimate setting of a family home, where she was welcomed as guest-daughter/sister. She was also able to share her own diasporic Sierra Leonen-German family culture with them. And she experienced family on another level while hanging out with people of African descent of her own age group. She was immersed for the first time in something she would call a 'Black community'. Remembering her time in Paris hanging out with her exchange partner and their friends she told me during a conversation we had during another trip:

> And they took such good care of me, well of course, in part because I was really young, but still, when someone talked to me, they were directly there, next to me, telling the person to leave their '*petite soeur*' [little sister] alone. There was not a single second that I felt uncomfortable. I felt really well looked after. (Conversation in London, 2017)

In the quotation above, Maya refers to her guest sister and their friends. They took her out sometimes with bigger groups of friends and the fact that they would refer to her as 'little sister' moved her and made her feel welcome. In that moment in Paris, the 'little sister' was more than a metaphor, she was almost adopted by another family for a while and treated as a family member. In Paris she got to know African diasporic life with peers, young Afrodescendant people growing up together in a European city. In Frankfurt, these opportunities were rather rare. Although it is a very

international city, many of whose inhabitants have an international migration history (see Chapter 3), African influences are rather scarce in comparison to European centres with more African migration, such as Paris or London. In Frankfurt, Maya's relationship to her African heritage was predominantly shaped by her father, who was a very active member of the Sierra Leonean community.

In Frankfurt, Maya was able to practise her African-ness as a form of diasporic belonging directed towards the origins of her father within the confines of a small African community. But in Paris she was able to practise diasporic belonging with a more multipolar vision of African-ness as community of people with varied African and Afro-Caribbean descent sharing the same age, class and urban upbringing. This experience was renewed as an adult when we went to London together in 2017.

London 2017 – Relating to Afrodiasporic subculture in Europe as an adult

I travelled to London with Maya and Otis (her husband) in November 2017, to celebrate Maya's birthday and to visit Clara, an old friend from Frankfurt. On several occasions during our journey, Maya and Otis felt a intimate connection to the diverse Afrodiasporic cultures, especially the youth culture they encountered there. Otis is from Frankfurt and has a German mother and an African American father who came to Germany as a GI but moved back to the USA when Otis was still small. And for many years he grew up with a stepfather from Ghana. Our itinerary in London was a mix of strolling around in Brixton, visiting Tate Modern, doing a Black heritage tour in Notting Hill and having a traditional high tea.

Strolling in London Day 1

On our first day, Otis is yet to arrive, we get off at Brixton station and wander around without any particular direction and arrive at a market. When Maya sees the stands with plantains and yams she says 'I would so open a restaurant here.' We stop in front of a Jamaican restaurant and agree that we will have to come back with Otis to eat chicken. Upon walking through an indoor market hall with a variety of African and Caribbean stalls, listening to the sounds of Reggae music, Maya tells me that usually she always feels best in the neighbourhoods where many immigrants live. It feels good to see the diversity of a city. The number of African influences compared to Frankfurt seems incredible. Besides the occasional Afroshop close to the main station in Frankfurt, there are only a few African businesses in the city, as the largest migrant communities are from Turkey or the former Yugoslavia. Here in London, one can directly feel that migration from African and Caribbean countries is bigger. There is also a shop that says 'Sierra Leone Groceries' and Maya is curious. She glance inside but as she does not see any familiar products, and the tenants look Indian or Pakistani, so we do not go in.

Figure 5: Brixton Market 2017, Photos by the author

Day 5

We were just finishing our lunch at Zoe's Kitchen, a small, hip Ghanaian restaurant at an indoor market in Brixton, and Maya and I are waiting outside for Otis. We talk about the day before, when we went to a 'roundhouse event', a music and performance event for young artists and bands. Among other things there was a youth band from the Notting Hill carnival, the biggest Caribbean carnival in Europe.
Maya: You begin to wonder how you would have turned out if you had grown up here. If you had discovered things more early, or your talents, in music, for example.
Silvia: And what do you think?
Maya: I believe it would have been easier for me to indulge in certain things. I think I would have made music. Something like Carnival music. And maybe, well, maybe the connections, maybe I would have studied creole languages or something like that. (Fieldnote, November 2017)

Simply because it seemed more part of everyday normality – this mix of Afrodiasporic cultures – Maya felt that life for her as an Afrodescendant person could have been different, as she would have been able to connect on diverse levels to the heritage that she wanted to practise.

What became evident during our trip was the link between travel experiences and personal biography. The places a person goes to and the people they meet are always set in relation to their own system of reference. Getting to know other Afroeuropean cultures and subcultures (music scenes, for example) in London made Maya re-evaluate her life and upbringing in Germany, and to reconsider other experiences she had had while travelling.

Being in London also caused her to reflect again on her time in Paris, where she had perceived a very different mix of Afrodescendant cultures and subcultures. As an adult, what struck her most was how many Black-owned businesses she saw:

> Maya: I already had that [feeling] in Paris. This feeling 'Oh how great, such a big community, this mix of Caribbeans and Africans, and still so many things in common', that made me think 'Oh my god, we have nothing [in Frankfurt]'.
> Silvia: Nothing? Because it is so different in Frankfurt?
> Maya: Yes, just seeing that so many [Black] people are entrepreneurs here. Maybe it would have given me the courage to also be one. I mean, it's all good really, but you start to question that. […] because you have so few contact points for Black identity, and when you do not even grow up in a big city than it really is a problem, especially for young boys. And it is different, it feels different, as Otis explained to you earlier.

Otis had talked about how it felt to be in a city with so many 'allies' (by which he meant other young Black people), in a place where you do not feel you are one of only a few dark-skinned people – and also the fact that there are many young Black people that you potentially have a lot in common with, with whom you can identify, compare hair styles, looks, music tastes. It is a lot about identifying with people your age and milieu. Otis was often stunned at the variety of hairstyles, for instance. He said that he would love to try the short braids, but at his job, that would not be appropriate – he works in the finance sector of a development cooperation organisation. Experiencing other Black youth subcultures in London created points of identification for both Otis and Maya, of positively identifying as Afrodiasporic people in Europe and feeling connected.

Exploring Afrodiasporic culture in Europe while travelling has been important to Maya ever since, and in that regard Paris and London have impressed her most. But much like in Aminata's case, her personal connection to West Africa has also become more important as an adult, and since she was in her mid-twenties the idea of living and working there has grown stronger. In her case this is also catalysed by the fact that her father has moved back to Sierra Leone, and the idea of living close to him has been with her for some years now.

Imagining Nigeria 2018

The anthropologist Frances Pine (2014) describes how futures are imagined through reference to certain pasts. Maya's memories of life in Sierra Leone, transmitted to her by her father, as well as, to a certain extent, the memories of her own travel to Sierra Leone as a child, coalesce as she imagines her own and her family's future.

Although Maya fully appreciates the security, freedom and range of possibilities of her life in Germany and with a German passport, she does not imagine her future as being located only there. Maya decided to engage in transnational mobility; although she is a person who can be perceived as 'solidly established in a territory' (de Gourcy 2019, p. 1) in Germany, where she was born and raised, it is a voluntary mobility. Her wish is to create a transnational life between West Africa and Europe not only for herself but also for her child (after a few months in Nigeria she became pregnant); it is important on the level of cultural experience and transmission and is facilitated by her German middle-class status, which provides her with economic resources and means that she encounters few legal barriers. In many ways, Maya and her husband are privileged and engage in privileged forms of living and travel, and they are aware of that. Not only do they belong to a highly educated middle class, but to a middle class from a rich country in the Global North. Nevertheless, at times their lives feel uncertain. They always had to work a lot in Germany in order to maintain their middle-class status and support their families, and Maya often feels lonely because part of her family is far away. Neither of them is from the upper middle class, and they have achieved some upward class mobility in comparison to their parents through higher education. The anthropologists Barbara Ehrenreich (1989) and Hadas Weiss (2019) describe this uncertainty and fear of losing one's status while aspiring towards upward social mobility as a defining characteristic of being middle class. Maya and Otis want to stabilise their class position, first by engaging in a transnational mobility, which could benefit their careers, and second by transmitting their intercultural background to their child who can potentially use it to strengthen their social position in the future.

The entanglement of physical mobility with social class mobility

All of Maya's higher education and professional choices have been directed towards the possibility of working either in the tourism industry or in urban development in countries of the Global South – in her case preferably a West African country. Maya has a BA in tourism studies from Cologne and a Master's in urban planning and development with a focus on the Global South.

In 2018, Maya and Otis got the opportunity to relocate to Nigeria to work. They both worked in a big development cooperation agency for a while and were looking out for opportunities to go to Nigeria. While Nigeria is not Sierra Leone, it is close,

and in terms of living standards is a wealthier country with more possibilities for people who are used to a comfortable European lifestyle. Nigeria offers Maya and her partner Otis more opportunities work-wise than any other country in the region, and it is an expat hub. Because Sierra Leone is the country of origin of Maya's father, one would think it the most logical destination, based on the wish to reconnect to family origins. While this is indeed the case in theory for Maya, Sierra Leone did not fit her professional or educational goals, or her European middle-class standard of living, which she feared would be difficult to keep up, especially in terms of healthcare and security. Sierra Leone had not long emerged from civil war (2002) and faced a grave Ebola crisis in 2014, and although her father was living there with his family not far from the capital, Freetown, Maya was not sure about the risks of living there. The security factor became even more important because she wanted to have children soon. Moreover, although her husband was generally open to living somewhere else at least for a while, it was important that he have good job prospects too. The connection to Sierra Leone is still significant for Maya, but she defines 'origins' in a broader sense. For her, origins go beyond a specific national context and come to include broader cultural practices, which she attaches more in general to West African countries.

Maya chose to engage in mobility, and her economic status and nationality allowed her to create a range of options of where to go. Nigeria was in fact her first choice, because it is economically stable, has functioning healthcare, a large middle class, and expat/repat communities, which make it easier to transfer their lifestyle to Nigeria. But cultural factors have a considerable say in the decision as well, as it is a West African country, where she can finally practice and learn about life there as an embodied experience and not only through virtual contact with her father and family. Maya and Otis are what Karen Fog Olwig would describe as 'privileged middle-class travelers' (2007, p. 90). They did not decide to engage in mobility specifically for economic reasons; social and cultural factors were in the foreground. However, their economic situation was crucial, too. They were not open to just going there and seeing what happened; their migration was carefully prepared. Maya and Otis both wanted to make sure that the move would not harm their economic position and that they would both have jobs which would permit them to also go back to Germany. Sure, they wanted to go to Nigeria, but with the resources and privileges that would make them fit into the category of European expats.

The association of social with geographic mobility today is not only important for people living in countries and regions with a long migration history, nor does it only concern people with limited economic opportunities and resources: Geographic mobility, short or long term, has become an ideal or a strategy within many social milieus and countries around the world – as shown, for example, in Catrin Lundström's study *White Migrations* (2014), on transnationally migrating white Swedish women. Olwig, an anthropologist and specialist in transnational

migration from the Caribbean, emphasises the importance of work on the social construction of class and its relation to transnational mobilities:

> Many if not most people migrate in order to improve, or at least consolidate, their social and economic position, and they are therefore quite conscious of their relative position in society in the place of origin as well as the migration destination. A good point of departure for a critical discussion of the notion of the privileged middle-class traveller, therefore, is an analysis of the social construction of class, including the role of physical mobility for people who self-identify as 'middle class'. (Olwig 2007, p. 90)

Olwig discusses the importance of examining how class changes or adapts to different national contexts and how it intersects with gender and race/ethnicity. Whether one decides to go somewhere to fulfil an ideal or to stay somewhere in order to lead a successful life, the question *should I stay or should I go?* (or return) is one which emerges in many lives and often more than once in a lifetime. It is linked to the desire to make the best of one's life or to do the best for one's family, and to make good life choices in a neoliberal world – a world where you as individual are held to be responsible for making yourself happy and respectable (McGuigan 2014). The sociologist Eva Illouz explains this lonely freedom of choice as a link between capitalism and happiness. In capitalist society, 'one pretends that it lies within one's own power alone to create the circumstances for wellbeing' (*Der Standard* newspaper, Interview 25 October 2019). Yet there are many factors outside of one's range of influence that constrain personal choice, as anthropologist Kath Weston (1997) observes in the case of life-partner choice, for example, or as Hadas Weiss (2019) notes about the structural constraints on the middle class. Maya attached much of her potential happiness to her mobility to West Africa, it is the fulfilment of a dream and of reuniting with family members.

When it comes to work and mobility choices, the process of decision-making can be difficult and full of apparent contradictions for young adults. This can be true even for the kinds of people who should not have to worry much, such as those who come from wealthy and politically stable countries and belong there to an urban middle class with a high level of education. Stabilising their middle-class status through mobility is only one factor which plays a crucial role in Maya and Otis's decision to go to Nigeria. The move is also intended to fulfil their personal wishes, especially for Maya.

The link between mobility and personal happiness

Going to Nigeria is an attempt for Maya to reconnect in many ways. In terms of family, it is a way for her to feel closer to her father who lives in Sierra Leone. The possi-

bility of visiting seems more realistic now she lives in Nigeria than it did before when she was based in Germany. Officially, her move to Nigeria would be categorised as labour migration; Maya B. decided to move only when she and her husband knew they would have jobs there which more or less fitted their professional profiles. But the underlying motivations to move are more personal and relate to the wish to reconnect to family origins which they have not yet explored individually as adults. For Maya, it can be considered a rite of passage that helps her to fully become the person she wants to be and to transmit that to her child, too.

Her father migrated to Germany and it was important for him that his children would be well integrated there. Now Maya is moving in the opposite direction: She wants to rediscover her origins on her father's side so that she is able to pass them on to the next generation. Much like the overseas-born Tonganese youth in Helen Lee's research who return to Tonga for parts of their education to 'learn their culture in order to be truly Tongan' (2017, p. 76), Maya values her experience in Nigeria as way to learn how to be 'West African'. The reference point is not the country of origin of her father, Sierra Leone, but her idenftification is broader: with a region and with African-ness, a concept promoted by Black and African diaspora movements across the world to create community. It is in many ways a 'journey into identity and acceptance' (2017, p. 8), a notion that Lee emphasised. Otis shares that wish, which for him is more attached to an appetite for adventure and discovery of a new life in Nigeria – though not only these things. He himself has a link to Nigeria, as he grew up with a stepfather who is Nigerian and thus Otis was familiar with Nigerian food, music and culture.

The move to Nigeria was a form of roots travel for Maya, Nigeria being in certain respects culturally and geographically close to Sierra Leone. Ever since I have known Maya, since we were teenagers, she has cultivated that wish, although in her teenage years it was also mixed with the desire to live in the USA (see Chapter 3). This changed considerably as an adult in her late twenties, and the USA was replaced by West Africa and an Afro-centredness in general, in terms of literature, music and how she imagined her future living arrangements. This parallels Aminata's developments as described in Chapter 4. The wish to live either in the USA as a teenager or in an African country as an adult was also motivated by wanting to escape or, to a certain extent, 'legitimate' a specific racialised position she experienced in Germany. Because she was of African descent, Maya grew up with questions and looks that made her feel exoticised and othered. *Where are you from?* and *Where did you learn German?* were constant companions. As a child and teenager, the idea of the USA with a large and powerful Black community and, later on, the idea of living in an African country where being Black would be the norm rather than the exception comforted her. Not because she would belong there more or not be racialised – as she knew she was very light skinned for a Black person and would not be seen as native but as white and a foreigner – but she would no longer face stereotypes and prejudices

directed towards 'Africa' as a whole in Germany. She wanted to counter these negative images and the ignorance she often encountered in Europe with a lived reality. Beginning in her teenage years, but increasingly since her late twenties, Maya began to counter negative stereotypes with a celebration of African-ness.

In my research, the act of imaginative rediscovery of self-identity is a product of hidden histories. Hidden histories of Germany as a colonial power or African diasporas in Germany are important motivators for diasporic practice and travel for Maya. Even when we were at school, she tried to include Black histories in presentations, essays and so forth, because she felt that Afrodescendant people were very rarely mentioned in class. Germany's colonial past was hardly raised at all in school, and historical figures presented in class were usually white. That celebration of African-ness led Maya to want to travel to (West) African countries more. Travel is seen as a way to re/discover an imagined essential part of self which has to stay undercover and underexplored in Germany. By travelling, she can practice and train her African identity by visiting places and people in Nigeria or Tanzania (where she went on a student exchange) and by getting to know African histories. It is an attempt to fill a void she felt in herself.

Discarded as essentialist by social scientists, the quest for identity and self often takes that exact meaning for people: the wish to discover one's true and essential self, to discover roots and origins is what motivates many people today – which explains the recent boom in hobby genealogy and the rapid rise of the roots tourism industry or the worldwide trend for genetic testing. Stuart Hall, in his famous text *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, refers to the political role of auto-essentialisation through imagination:

> We should not, for a moment, underestimate or neglect the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery which this conception of a rediscovered, essential identity entails. 'Hidden histories' have played a critical role on the emergence of many of the most important social movements of our time – feminist, anti-colonial and anti-racist. (1990, p. 224)

Hall is referring here to the identity projects of Black or postcolonial subjects, whose histories have often been neglected, misinterpreted and erased by imperialism and colonialism.

Rediscovery of identity and history in these political contexts is an act of resistance against marginalisation and discrimination. People who were part of feminist, anti-colonial or anti-racist movements seldom find a place in dominant discourses. It is often on the people active in these movements themselves to raise their voices so as to bring their stories to the fore.

Yet further to this celebration of African-ness as an essential part of her identity, travelling is also supposed to transmit to Maya a realistic picture of life in an

African country. When holding discussions with members of Black German movements, Maya was often annoyed when people told her that they had actually never been to the region where their parents came from or even to the African continent in general. She told me during one conversation: 'I cannot believe that they are working in Black movements and themselves have never lived in an African country. Maybe they have been to the USA but not Africa' (10 October 2017). She made this critique because she felt that it was necessary to have a realistic picture of life in an African country. It was not helpful to take references only from media, books and other resources, but it was useful to know the good and bad sides of life in Nigeria, for example, and to not stop at the celebration of Afro-centredness. In order to be active in African diaspora movements, she felt de-exoticisation was necessary on both sides, the ones that celebrated it and the ones who only knew the negative stereotypes of Africa.

Travelling around and living in an African country is seen by Maya as a sort of legitimisation of a political identity as Black German and as an Afrodescendant person in Germany, the country where she grew up. In her research, Andrea Louie (2004) notes that many Chinese Americans travel to China and engage with Chinese culture, primarily to legitimate their position as Chinese Americans in the USA. It works as a form of authentication or justification of identity. Dealing with origins by exploring them through travel serves multiple purposes, which are more connected to the country of residence than the country of ancestral origin: One is the legitimation of identity by getting to know one's parental origins. The other is working against a lack of information about the region of origin in the country of residence. Living in Nigeria is seen by Maya as a way to create her own narratives, memories and stories of Africa – and these differ from the one-sided stories available in Germany, where only rarely does an African country feature in the news and usually then from the view of a white European. These one-sided stories she knows from Germany about Africa (which include almost no stories about Sierra Leone itself) often create negative visions/narratives and make it difficult to achieve a positive identification with being African.

Before going to Nigeria, Maya told me about conversations she had had about her move and about her origins in Sierra Leone. Often the reactions were: 'But is it safe?' 'Are you not afraid of Malaria?' or 'Oh I heard that there are many child soldiers in Sierra Leone'. Such responses were often negative and annoying for Maya because they focused entirely on dangers to safety and health or poverty and war. What is more, often the people making these comments had no knowledge about Nigeria or Sierra Leone at all, yet they still had an opinion.

People in Germany still consider Germans of African descent 'through the prism of cultural difference' (Louie 2004, p. 325) and whether you want it or not, you will be confronted with questions about your non-German origins. When these origins are African (no matter which country), the stereotypes that exist about cultural dif-

ference are more often than not negative and uninformed. Not only will Maya be confronted with these negative regional stereotypes, but they are considered to apply to her, too, as she is seen as 'from there originally'. And one way to address that issue of constantly being confronted with a form of racial othering is to engage with ancestral origins in a constructive way. Hence, travelling, living and working, experiencing everyday life in an African country is a way to become the person Maya wants to be: truly German and Sierra Leonean. Diasporic travel as a way of searching for familiarity in unknown places and a place to practice Maya's 'skills' at being West African, such as speaking, or at least understanding, pidgin or creole, braiding her hair, being able to eat spicy food or mastering the public transport system. These are the skills she told me about with joy.

Reality check: replacing a uniform imaginary with the complexity of reality

The desire to live in a West African country can be translated into a wish to turn 'familiar knowledge' (*connaissance familière*) into 'competent knowledge' (*connaissance compétente*) (de Gourcy 2010, p. 351) of a place. A place that is familiar through stories and family references is not necessarily somewhere one has actually been. To get to know a place *materially*, to get to know its appropriate behaviours and its people, it is necessary to be there and to learn it as an embodied experience – only then does familiar knowledge turn into competent knowledge. This is a key realisation with which every ethnographer is familiar. To know a place and its people, you have to live there, live with them, see and feel how you are perceived and how you perceive others and how these perceptions are open to change over time; this process is the same for my interlocutors. To take a place and one's relations to it out of the imaginary box, you have to go there. In this way the box is filled with new memories and experiences. Maya B. has not been to Sierra Leone or West Africa for more than twenty years. She is familiar with the place because she calls her father almost every day, but her memories of a lived experience are old, they are attached to a faraway child who she no longer is. The fact of having been able to visit her father's village again in 2019 – after moving to Nigeria – has created new memories; memories which match her up-to-date self, her adult self. The trip allows the distance between her memories of the place and her actual self to be erased and replaced with a refreshed view and a vision for the future. This is something which Constance de Gourcy (2010) and Anne-Christine Trémon (2019) explain for roots travellers to Ireland and China, respectively. Being in the place someone defines as the origin of one's ancestors allows the traveller to reconnect with a past they only know from storytelling. Nigeria is also a place where Maya can practice the cultural skills she has learned from her father, in surroundings where these skills are properly valued.

Phone call Lausanne – Lagos

During a phone call in November 2018 – Maya and Otis moved to Lagos a few months earlier – I ask her how she is getting along with language. Usually it is English, and then mostly Yoruba, which she does not speak. But sometimes they also speak a Pidgin English, as they are quite influenced by Nigerian music and the Nigerian film industry, which often uses Pidgin. Maya understands and speaks Pidgin, which she knows from her father, and is proud that she can often tell people that she understood what they said. 'People here say that they hear when someone has a German accent, but with me they never know where to put me!' Maya tells me proudly. She likes the fact that people in Nigeria cannot tell immediately where she is from. 'They sometimes even asked if I was from Ethiopia or South Africa. People are surprised. You don't look German and you don't have the accent. Then I have to explain myself,' which she does not mind; she likes to present them with another picture of Germany, distinct from the one of blond and blue-eyed people with a harsh accent. 'They always want to protect me; for example, they cannot believe that I eat my food very spicy, so they say "careful it is very hot" and then they are surprised. Or when they saw my braids, they were like, "Oh did you do that for the first time?" And then I really have to laugh and tell them "Not at all!"' She has braided her hair since she was a little child. As people in Lagos usually categorise her as European, she is confronted with all the stereotypes attached to that. Having straight hair, eating non-spicy food, having a heavy accent. Maya is able to disrupt that idea a little and she likes that. (Fieldnote, November 2018)

It is not about fitting in physically – because from her looks people in Nigeria would not usually think that she is Nigerian, which is very clear to Maya. But in Lagos she can live and explore a part of herself that she cannot in Germany, living an 'African life' and being proud about how well she manages to fit in. Maya is also very critical about life in Lagos. Living is so expensive, people do not have proper access to electricity, and the differences between rich and poor are too big. 'Nigeria is always taken as an example to follow in Africa, but things are not as shiny when you live here. When you go to the beach it is so disappointing because people use it as a toilet and there is just so much plastic in the sea, it is so frustrating.' For Maya, living in Nigeria is a reality check in terms of personal future-making, which means working out how realistic it really is to build a life there, and in terms of how people actually live in Nigeria.

Most importantly, it is a test: By moving to Lagos, she wanted to come to understand – in experiential and emotional terms – how well she was able to fit in there. How well can she adapt to that different way of life and navigate the reality she experiences? Lagos has a good reputation as a city that is booming economically, culturally and artistically. In Afrocentric media and magazines, in particular, Lagos is associated with prosperity, a growing middle class and a flourishing fashion and entrepreneurial scene, which of course is only one side of the coin, Maya feels: 'A pizza

in one of the fancy restaurants where expats and richer Nigerians go costs ten times as much as a meal from a normal small restaurant. The differences are just too high between rich and poor.' Transport is a real issue for her too. She is used to walking and cycling, but that is impossible in Lagos, where you have to go everywhere by car. Maya works in a government agency, and has many colleagues who cannot afford to live in the capital and have to commute for hours every day. Despite being awkwardly consciousness of being a part of the problem of rising real estate prices – as this is also caused by development agencies, like the one she and her husband work for, which are willing and wealthy enough to pay high prices for accommodation – there is not much Maya and Otis can do to change the situation; they can only acknowledge gentrification as an issue. Other than that, Maya tries to support local businesses and rents from a Nigerian landlord – inspired by pan-African principles of Black solidarity.

In this way, living in Nigeria becomes a confrontation between imagination and reality. Both the myth constructed on social media promoting an Afrocentric vision of the world and the imaginary Africa constructed by Maya were always unlikely to hold when confronted with reality. Maya B. knew that already in theory, and to get to know the reality in practice was her aim.

Conclusion

By considering various trips that Maya B. took in Europe as well as move to Nigeria for work, I explore the specific ways in which these journeys were important in the development of her Afrodiasporic identity. Travelling to Paris as a teenager and to London as an adult let her discover countries with bigger African and Caribbean communities and opened up paths to identify with other Afro-European youth cultures. In her host family, she experienced what Black sisterhood/brotherhood meant in an embodied way – a metaphor she knew from books became a lived reality. She felt a connection between Afrodescendants in these places. Besindes her travels in Europe, a long-time existential wish of hers was to live in a West African country. By dwelling in an African country she is able for once to 'legitimate' her racialised position as a German of Sierra Leonean descent who is constantly being asked things such as *Where are you from?* But there is more to it. Living in a country geographically and culturally close to Sierra Leone gives Maya the opportunity to practice cultural skills she had learned through her father in Germany while still enjoying the comfort and security of life in the wealthier country that is Nigeria.

Studies of roots or diasporic tourism often underline the disillusion experienced when these tourists are confronted with the complexity of reality in their countries of 'origin'. Especially for roots tourists/travellers, the images they may have built up can be quite elaborate because the places have such a strong existential value, as they are considered to be the origins of their very selves in various ways. The pressure to

feel some sort of belonging is high and so disappointment is part and parcel of roots tourism. In her book *Performing Africa*, Paulla Ebron (2009) describes the surprise of African American roots travellers in Gambia and Senegal when perceived as 'white' or as just as American as all the others. Meanwhile, in her ethnography *Unorthodox Kin* (2017) Naomi Leite describes the disappointment of Jewish American roots tourists in Portugal upon finding out that the Jewish Marrano community was not officially recognised as Jewish by the religious authorities.

In Maya's case, she did not have the idealised view of Nigeria or Sierra Leone that many more traditional roots travellers would have of their destinations. She knew about everyday life in Sierra Leone through her father and was prepared to face a reality she was not able to fully anticipate. For her, the important thing was to have a lived experience in that reality that would – as she well knew – be very different from her life in Germany. More importantly, she was already aware that she would not be perceived as 'one of them' but be considered a foreigner, even as white. She was prepared for that too. Maya was confident she would be able to confront the reality that she would experience because she had the necessary cultural skills transmitted by her father and she did not have a romanticised picture of life in an African country. She had never totally lost touch with her Sierra Leonean origins; it was just the lived experience that was missing. Yet there were limits to how much she was willing to live that experience: Maya wanted her mobility to happen in the framework available to a German expat. She wanted to live in Nigeria, but always with the option to go back to Germany and resume her middle-class life there. Aside from the disappointment that they highlight, studies on roots travel stress the overall satisfaction of roots travellers who have undertaken such journeys. It is the achievement of an existential goal, regardless of whether it is accompanied by disappointment. Roots travel has often been many years in preparation. It is a project that has grown slowly, and so the trip is only the culmination of that personal project. The feeling is similar for Maya; no matter what her experiences in Lagos were actually like, she did it. She achieved her wish to live in West Africa. It marks the end to an existential journey and the beginning of a potential new relationship with a country and its people.