Silvia WOJCZEWSKI, *Relating Afro-Diasporic Identities in Germany: Life-Stories of Millennial Women*

PhD thesis in the Anthropology of Tourism, Institut de géographie et de durabilité, Université de Lausanne, under the direction of Anne-Christine Trémon, maître d'enseignement et de recherche à l'Université de Lausanne, co-director David Picard, Universidade de Lisboa, defended on 30 August 2021

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Silvia Wojczewski

- 1 Aminata C., Maya K., Lafia T., Oxana Chi and Layla Zami are part of a middle class, highly educated, born in Germany and come from families of mixed African European heritages.
- 2 The diasporic practices of the women range from Black political activism, practising “symbolic ethnicity” (Gans, 1979) through African garments, wearing their hair natural, music, cooking and celebrating feasts, to the practice of travelling to connect with kin and other Afro-diasporic communities. Through this mix of practices, the women are able to forge both a *decentred* or *multi-centred* diasporic identity as Black Germans or Afro-Europeans as well as a *centred* diasporic identity as German-Guinean or Senegalese-German. For Oxana Chi and Layla Zami – Afro-feminist artist couple, researchers and activists –, it is as important to build a global Black feminist community by engaging in mobility as to engage with their ancestral countries of origin (Martinique and Nigeria respectively); and the likes of London and Paris can become places to experience and practice diasporic identity as Afro-descendants in Europe for Maya K. or Aminata C. In their practices, the women shift between essentialist and hybrid approaches to diaspora. Although these women share an

awareness that the essentialization of identity is part of the problem of racialization and racism, they sometimes use essentialization with regard to others, too.

- 3 This ethnography analyses the process of coming of age as person of African descent in Germany, and in particular of women who are part of the second generation born in the 1980s, children of (an) African migrant parent(s). The research includes different spatial scales to analyse diverse articulations of diasporic identities: the national/local, the transnational, as well as the global level. In Part I (Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5), I explore the African diaspora historically and ethnographically throughout the generations in Germany. Part II (Chapters 6, 7 and 8) follows the travels of my interlocutors and considers how the practice of travelling is used as a way to connect to transnational family and to an Afrodiasporic heritage through lived experience. Part III (Chapters 9 and 10) form the last part of this thesis, where I turn from the personal kinship network back to the political collective. My intended contribution through this work is not only in the presentation of life-stories but also an analysis of how stories of a life can reveal identity-building processes, how they are used to create a coherent self and in connecting with others. By focusing on the lives of five women, I intend to demonstrate the ways in which class, diaspora and kinship relations have influenced how they understand themselves and their position in the world. With an intersectional approach to class/race/gender, I analyse how these three categories structure the identification process of the women of this study. For diaspora and kinship, I use a practice-oriented approach. I analyse the practices used by the interlocutors to create kinship ties and diasporic communities: practices of care (for self and others), of travelling and of storytelling.

Research at home and on the move

- 4 The study employs ethnographic methods of participant observation, life-story analysis and family ethnography in order to study the coming of age of the five women of African descent. I conducted fieldwork at home and on the move between 2017 and 2018. Working with friends (I knew Aminata C., Maya K. and Lafia T. prior to fieldwork) 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.
- 5 The biographical or life-story approach is an essential part of my fieldwork; I collected life-story material from my research participants during fieldwork at home, as well as while on the move. The important dimensions for the analysis of life-stories in my thesis are *temporality* and *rupture* in the accounts, as well as self-interpretation with the help of fiction and sharing of stories which allow the women to identify with a larger Afrodiasporic culture. Temporality is one aspect that allows both continuity and change to be connected in a single narrative strand. The temporal dimension in the life-story, according to linguistic anthropologist Elinor Ochs and Lisa Kapps (1996), focuses on the transition from one stage to another and looks at how past, present and future get connected. In the analysis, I draw particular attention to the importance of anticipated or unexpected “turns of events” (Ochs and Kapps, 1996, p. 27). Travel experiences are often described as such turning points in the lives of the women and for their construction of diasporic identities, especially through meeting with transnational kin. The life-story or biographical method is used frequently in the

anthropology of travel and tourism, yet usually the travel itself is at the centre of the research, as the researcher tries to encounter the person in their home context (Picard, 2013; Leite, 2017; Simoni, 2015; Harrison, 2003). I decided rather to place an emphasis on the home context, to really understand where the people are coming from and how their diasporic travels are a small piece in the bigger picture of their lives. First exploring their home context allowed an understanding of the diasporic travels of my interlocutors in a wider context – how they are connected to the pasts of these women, but also to their future plans and endeavours; how their travels are not only an important objective in themselves, but that through these journeys, relationships can emerge and change at home too.

- 6 Instead of going only to Frankfurt and staying there for an extended period, like classical fieldwork methods would suggest, I decided to follow the people I studied, to engage with them in their mobility from one place to another, whether for leisure or for work (Elliot *et al.*, 2017).
- 7 Sociologists Monika Büscher, John Urry and Katian Witchger in their conceptualization of the “mobilities turn” (Büscher *et al.*, 2010, p. 1), call for innovative approaches in order to study a world that is increasingly built on the mobility of people, goods, technologies and services. New work–life models today question a simple work/leisure (stationary/mobile) dichotomy and in order to study emerging forms of mobilities and immobilities, old methods must be adapted and new methods invented. One such method is to join people during their journeys. With Maya and her husband Otis, I travelled for tourism to London and documented the travel with photos and fieldnotes. My fieldwork also occurred at conferences, to which I travelled between 2017 and 2019 to meet potential research participants and to which I later travelled with research participants. I decided to conduct fieldwork “on the move”, travelling to conferences and events, as I figured that this would open up my research, introduce me to a more political and academic side of Afrodiasporic identities and reduce the bias that existed at home where I conducted research with Black women who are good friends or acquaintances. The first I attended was the AfroEuropeans conference in Tampere in July 2017. In this way, I met Oxana Chi and Layla Zami.

Forging diasporic identities across generations

- 8 How is practising diaspora attached to generational consciousness? I approached diaspora as a set of cultural and political relations, examining the practices of my interlocutors and what they reveal about belonging to diasporic communities (Brubaker, 2005; Bidet and Wagner, 2012; Trémon, 2012). My thesis explored the significance of one’s generation in developing a diasporic identity and practice. I focused on the micro level of generation-making, and how living through specific historical periods, together in a same place, as people of a same age group, can strengthen the construction of a generational consciousness. For the women in my research, the USA is 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 racialized identity by leaning towards Black America and by exploring the GI cultural world in and around Frankfurt. The shared memory of spending time together in spaces such as nightclubs or other GI infrastructures (PX) still creates a feeling of community today. Yet their focus on Afrodiasporic practice has evolved as adults and

orientations now are towards multiple 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 digital possibilities have also helped them relate to different sources and places of inspiration. The multitude of Afrodiasporic bloggers around the world related to fashion, music or politics offers many possibilities to relate to a multi-centred African diaspora.

Travelling to connect or to practise cultural identity

- 9 What is the role of kinship in the making of Afro-diasporic identities and the role of travelling for building kinship ties?
- 10 This thesis considers travelling to places defined as “origins” as important practice for dealing with Afrodiasporic identity. It allows the women in my research to engage with their African origins through lived experience and helps them redefine what these mean to them. The lived experience offered through the 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 a 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, with whom they are in regular contact (Chapter 8), and a work-move to Ghana in Maya’s case, 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 a 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 a taking part in one another’s lives (Sahlins, 2011a, 2011b; Trémon, forthcoming). The travels also reveal the difficulties and limits of having kinship with distant kin. Examining the practices of care employed during these travels shows, on the one hand, how a feeling of becoming part of a family can be produced through everyday practices like 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 limits between close and distant kin become more pronounced and are evidenced in care practices. In a time of crisis, caring for close kin stands in the foreground and as these are the people who are part of one’s everyday (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 of being from a rich country of the Global North not only makes their economic status worth more but it is also attached to the privilege of travel freedom that comes with the German passports. The women acknowledge this privilege and it 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 above one's limits. The ongoing financial support contributes to the construction of relations of trust and responsibility. Yet it can also have the effect of postponing future travels for lack of financial means. Another motivation for travel is related to practising cultural heritage. These journeys are supposed to provide something in their lives, but not in a socioeconomic sense of a status gain. It is supposed to enrich the women culturally. Through the travels they aim to attain a distinct authenticity of their selves as being of West African descent. Despite the differences in form and circumstances of the travels, the underlying wishes for engaging in such journeys are comparable and 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 practice cultural competences. It is an important step towards embodying a diasporic identity through lived experiences they have in the places they associate with their African origins. Such travel gives them the chance to explore a place and (unknown) family relations with all the senses; to be able to generate memories for the future, but also to have the opportunity to create a relationship with extended family. The chance to have contacts in the country of ancestral origin creates the possibility to practise diasporic identity on an intimate kinship level.

Racialized middle classness – an intersectional approach

- 11 How does being part of an educated urban middle class influence experiences of racism and racialization? Ethnographic studies on racialized middle classness and those looking more generally at the intersection of race and class are scarce, particularly in Germany. Usually, studies relating class and race are about racialized working classes around the world. Yet the mechanisms of racism or racialization and how they can be faced vary according to different people's socioeconomic situations. I chose an intersectional approach for the analysis and focused on women in order to analyse the specific forms of racialization that Afrodescendant women face. The women who were at the core of this study face racialization and "migrantization", as historian 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 portraying people of non-European descent as eternal newcomers, regardless of how many generations have previously lived in Germany. Experiences of racism and racialization weigh psychologically on the people I worked with, and they induce a racialized fear of possible loss of middle-class status. The fear of losing the status of being middle class has been described as a typical characteristic for the middle class for its in-between location between workers and those who own the means of production (Weiss, 2019). Yet the fear for my interlocutors is accentuated because they are racialized. They worry that their children will face discrimination in their jobs or in the housing market or the education system (which has indeed already happened) and that racial discrimination could have consequences on their professional trajectories.

“Say their names” – listening to and sharing life-stories

- 12 What is the role of life-story telling for the construction of self and community? The Afrodiasporic identities of my participants began to become more pronounced once they could be externalized or objectified in the sense that it became possible to grasp a subjective experience in the experiences of others too. Maya or Aminata “became Black” when reading about other experiences of racial discrimination of people of African descent in Germany and the USA; it legitimated their own experiences with racism and racialization and made them intersubjective. Hearing and reading about others’ experiences with racism, racialization intersecting with sexism created empathy and made it possible to identify with being Black and global Blackness – it created a possibility of self-understanding as well as an 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 Paul Ricœur’s two identity concepts (1988) of identity as *idem* and as *ipse*. The telling of their lives allows them to create a coherent and permanent self in time, while simultaneously including ruptures and tensions in their identity constructions; through the stories, for example, it becomes possible to grasp and construct how being Afrodescendant mattered throughout their lives, sometimes as something they would reject, and other times a trait of identification they would embrace.

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