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Digital Object Identifier: <https://doi.org/10.13023/etd.2020.216>

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Dr. Milena Minkova, Director of Graduate Studies

MAY AYIM'S BLUE NOTES IN *BLUES IN SCHWARZ WEISS*

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

Gabrielle E. Taylor

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Brenna R. Byrd, Assistant Professor of German Studies

Lexington, Kentucky

2020

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

MAY AYIM'S BLUE NOTES IN *BLUES IN SCHWARZ WEISS*

May Ayim has become a staple when it comes to Black German poetry within German Studies and continues to influence and challenge ideas of what it means to be black in Germany at the end of the 20th century. What is perhaps not challenged enough is the ways in which we, the readers and students of German literature and poetry, approach and study Ayim's poetry as we move deeper into the 21st century. Her collection of poetry, *Blues in Schwarz Weiss*, can be seen through a significant word found in her collection's title—*blues*. It is through blues, the musical form as well as the cultural influences therein, that we can better view and follow the intentional ways that Ayim chooses to create and present her work to herself and the world.

The blues scale, in the truest musical sense, is “a pentatonic scale with one more note added in the scale”. This added note is specifically called the “blue note”. It is in fact through the viewpoint of the blues scale and “blue notes” that we can read Ayim's poetry and better understand her structure, not only of the individual poems, but the collection as a whole. Ayim's poetry displays “blue notes” and juxtaposes them beside the larger “scale” that is the majority white German society. *Blues in Schwarz Weiss* is therefore a cultural blues product that follows the tradition of blues music by transcending any one singular perspective or thought, instead using the tension between these angles or mindsets to create a third space—a space where different traditions can speak to and have a conversation with one another (Brommel 197). In my research, I plan on using the four “blues form features” presented in Nick Brommel's analysis—intonation, call-and-response, the “lick”, and blues paradigms—to help categorize the distinct influences and allusions to blues music that Ayim utilizes in her work, and the ways in which the poems themselves are a reflection of blues music forms.

KEYWORDS: Blues Music, German Poetry and Literature, Black German, Belonging

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04/14/2020

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MAY AYIM'S BLUE NOTES IN *BLUES IN SCHWARZ WEISS*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The following thesis, while an individual work, benefited from the insights and direction of several people. First, my Thesis Chair, Dr. Brenna Byrd, who guided my thoughts and ideas in a way that constantly encouraged and challenged how I engaged with my research. Next, I wish to thank the rest of my Thesis Committee: Dr. Hillary Herzog and Dr. Joseph O’Neil. Each member of the Thesis Committee supported my thesis topic and helped improve all areas of my writing, providing the pushes I needed to create a polished piece of writing. Without their insight and feedback, this thesis would not be what it is now. Special thanks to Dr. Linda Worley, who used her own personal time to give assistance and meet with me.

In addition to the technical and instrumental assistance above, I received equally important assistance from family and friends. My parents, Pamela and Kevin Taylor, who supported my love of languages from the beginning, even as I chose the “road less traveled” by studying German, as well as my two brothers, Jonathan and Kevin, Jr., and sister-in-law, Amber. Thank you, family. Also, thanks to my best friends from home, Je’Vana and Nicole, who were my long-distance cheerleaders every step of my master’s program. Last but definitely not least, my amazing cohort, Brian and Lindy, whose constant encouragement, strength, and inside jokes helped me keep a healthy work/life balance. Thank you so much, friends.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: BLUES IN MUSIC, BLUES IN SCHWARZ WEISS

“I am becoming increasingly conscious of how much I have been marked by certain experiences in this society and on what points I wish to eradicate or retain those marks” (Adams, Ayim 56). Black German poet May Ayim wrote these words in 1993 as she attempted to come to terms with the ways in which Germany, at the time only newly reunited, began separating People of Color and religious minorities from the collective “we” the country presented to the world. With Ayim making this statement at least two years before publishing her first collection of poetry, *Blues in Schwarz Weiss*, I believe the poems within this volume speak to her ever-expanding racial consciousness and the intersectional approach she had when writing. “The title poem of Ayim’s first poetry volume, *Blues in Schwarz Weiss* [Blues in Black and White], published in 1995, traces the process of marginalization along color lines, with German unification as one of its more recent manifestations” (Goertz 306). Just as blues music is accessed and consumed in different ways depending on one’s environment and perspective, Ayim’s collection can be read, interpreted and analyzed based on what angle or position one has. I choose to read her work through the lens of the blues forms and the musical, societal, and historical impact it had and still has on Writers of Color, May Ayim being no exception. “Both structurally and thematically, the blues provide a compelling model for the lyrical, empowering, and communal expression of both grief and anger. Like Ayim’s poems, they embody the duality of distress and its transcendence” (Goertz 314). This strong statement articulated by Karen Goertz very precisely supports my theory that using the blues as a motif is a helpful vehicle to understand May Ayim’s *Blues in Schwarz Weiss*. Finding inspiration from the title, especially the word *blues*, I sought to find what exactly

Ayim was pinpointing as the “blues” within her poetry and herself. How far reaching is blues going to be for her and her work? Will there be a significant blues presence within her poems, and if so, how does that present itself? I will also determine how this music genre becomes a crossroad for understanding her experience as a Black German lesbian poet attempting to critique German society and literature. Within these layers of analyzing May Ayim’s poetry, I believe it is important to also look at how she inserts new perspectives and cultures into her writing. What does it mean to be German with these additions in place? I argue that blues music forms and features, not just stylistically, but musically, can be used to find the answers to these questions. Those same music forms can be used to effectively analyze and decipher how in Ayim’s work German literature moves and expands from the “tonic” perspectives and styles to more complicated and intersectional literary writings. This move thus “blues-es” the standards to include those voices that are usually suppressed. These voices are, in fact, the “blue notes” within the blues scale that is German society and German literature. Once these “notes” are added to the scale, the rest of the notes’ significance and importance alter and shift to include the “sounds” of those blues notes. It is vital to remember that these “blue notes” are not *new*, but only newly inserted into this specific scale. These notes have always existed but were not seen as a part of the scale until they were instituted into it.

CHAPTER 2. WHAT IS BLUES AND BLUESING?

When one thinks of blues music, it is usually associated with the American South and song lyrics associated with struggle and being “done wrong”. But over time, the idea of singing the blues and blues music as a form has moved to being discussed in more technical terms. Merriam Webster defines blues predominantly by its musicality, with only a short mention of what the original content of blues contained “blues: 1. Low spirits, melancholy/ 2. A song often of lamentation characterized by usually 12-bar phrases, 3-line stanzas in which the words of the second line usually repeat those of the first, and continual occurrence of blue notes in melody and harmony/ 3. Jazz or popular music using harmonic and phrase structures of blues” (merriam-webster.com). But May Ayim has a closer and clearer understanding of the role blues plays in expressing struggle, pain, and longing, and incorporates themes and reflections of blues within her work, *Blues in Schwarz Weiss*. In spite of her perceived distance from the African American experience, Ayim is able to resituate these same themes into something that is localized to her personal experience, and, at times, the Black German experience at large. African Americans also used blues celebrities of times gone by in order to encompass certain thoughts and feelings that may or may not have gone against the grain of mainstream society. Singers like Billie Holiday and musicians like John Coltrane began to become personas, having attributes that went beyond their everyday, “real-life” selves, in order to represent overarching ideas of Blackness and intersectionality (Rutter 3). “However, it is clear that blues men and women function as multifaceted vehicles through which poets implicitly challenge white supremacist ideologies, advance their own sociopolitical perspectives, and testify to the lyrical poignancy of their musician

counterparts and predecessors” (Rutter 3). These muses were not just who they were within their lifetime, but they soon became markers for progression or regression within the black community. I argue that Ayim is using blues music as a whole, and its connections to the African American experience, as her muse within her collection of poems. The entirety of blues music becomes the gauge for whether society has progressed, regressed, or stayed still. The various factors that describe blues music, including, but not limited to, the “blue notes” inserted into a scale that change the sound of the music, and the lamentations found throughout blues music, all show up in some form or variation within poems in *Blues in Schwarz Weiss*. These factors impact the tone and the lens in which we read these poems.

So how is Ayim’s work showcasing and representing blues music denotations? First, through *her* representation as a “blue note” in her society. According to the *Oxford Companion to Music*, a blue note is “one of the degrees of the scale perceived as departing in blues and jazz performance from the standard diatonic scale...Blue notes are best thought of as variations within a single flexible pitch area (as in many non-Western traditions) rather than as substitute notes...” (Dean). Weisethaunet defines the “blue note” as follows: “...referring to pitch, thinking of the note as an ‘item’, commonly thought of as the slight altering of the minor third and the flattened seventh” (99). If “blue notes” are added into a pre-established scale, then Ayim and the lives of Black Germans are the added “notes” within German society; but, they are “notes” that were incorporated generations before hers, and yet are still not always acknowledged as belonging. How would it look for a musician to play a blues scale, yet refuse to acknowledge the ways in which the blue notes in the scale alter the overall sound? Weisethaunet calls blue notes

“participatory discrepancies” (103), and I believe this is a great reflection of what Writers of Color do within their societies. They choose to participate in an act, whether through art, literature, music, and so on, in order to disrupt the status quo and bring attention to what is different. This is exactly what is happening in German society when Black Germans present themselves as always historically being a part of the culture, and not as a sudden or new addition.

This information gives good insight into the history of blues and the differences of writing approaches between African American writers and Ayim’s Black German experience. But this reflection does not fully explain how the musicality of blues music can also be used to describe May Ayim’s literary method of resistance through writing. Nick Brommel’s connection of the social impact of blues music to its musical forms and features takes care of this factor of musicality. Through the description of these music features, one can see the ways that Ayim thus resists literary and societal expectations through her collection of poetry.

The first blues form feature is the “paradigmatic chord progression” of the blues (Brommel 199). A chord progression is a sequence of notes played together, and in music they are the foundation for whatever melody is being created or performed. Although blues music is known to lean away from some of the standards within Western music, there are still those common paradigms within that create the basis of what differences are made later on in the music. Musically speaking, Nick Brommel talks about how this specific chord progression “begins by establishing *tense* dialogue between the tonic (1) and subdominant (4) chords” (199). What that means is the tonic of this chord, or the first degree of the scale and the note of utmost importance, builds pressure by being followed

directly by the subdominant, the fourth degree of the scale. Because this move from the tonic to the subdominant is not quickly resolved, the tension grows until “the blues wants to burst through to a third place, to a third possibility beyond the tightly dualistic confines that have been established by the first two chords” (199). It is only *after* the resolution, or release, of these two dueling chords through the playing of the 5th degree of the scale, also called the dominant, that we see movement towards *something* (Brommel 200).

“Thus, whether the 5 chord is uplifting or dispiriting, mocking or joyous, it always points to a freedom won by the sudden and radical intensification of feelings it brings into the song” (Brommel 200). Brommel talks about how this freedom is unfortunately very brief, and in the end reverts back to the subdominant again before finally settling back into the established tonic of the chord. So even though we have that small resolution or disruption, things fall back towards the prominent note: “We are weary at heart, or maybe grateful, back where we started, ready to begin again” (200). The tonic is that which has the greatest prominence when the song begins, but depending on the “dialogue” that takes place between it and the other notes of the chord, it may not keep its prominence consistently throughout the entire song.

CHAPTER 3. GERMAN LITERATURE PARADIGMS

If we apply this concept of the tonic to German literature, we can see these musically based ideas play out very similarly on a literary “scale”. If the “tonic” is that which carries the most prominence in the scale, what are the tonics for German literature that May Ayim is bluesing? Ayim’s influential co-edited work, *Farbe Bekennen*, where she not only helps gather personal and autobiographical accounts of Black German women’s experiences throughout multiple generations, but also inserts her research findings on Black and African peoples in Germany history, has very specific goals it is trying to reach. Ayim, along with her co-editors, state in the book’s introduction that one of the main points of all of her work is to place Black people back into the German history that they have always belonged within. “Unser unbekannter Lebenshintergrund und unsere Nichtbeachtung also Afro-Deutsche sind ein Zeichen für die Verdrängung Deutscher Geschichte und ihrer folgen” (Oguntoye 10). Her studies of German at a teacher’s college, and then later her research in psychology and education at the University of Regensburg, build an exceptional background of understanding, awareness, and insight into the literary influences being implemented and referenced within her German society. In fact, the foreword from *Farbe Bekennen* goes on to state how knowing about this back history can help to make Black Germans’ lives a little easier, because they would have something to help defend their existence within German society. Then they would be better able to connect their subjective experiences across Africa and Germany’s histories and protect their identity (Oguntoye 10)¹. Ayim’s

¹ “Unser Leben wird leichter sein, wenn wir nicht mehr immer von Neuem unsere Existenz erklären müssen. Indem wir unsere Spuren in der Geschichte Afrikas und Deutschlands entziffern und mit unseren

motivation is to bring a sense of belonging, not just within German literature, but in German society at large, to her fellow Black Germans. Because of this incentive, having a clear and detailed awareness of all of the literary standards that she then alters or “blues-es” is vital to recognizing the deeply rooted nature of her Germanness and Blackness in her poetry, working together to present a new perspective of life as May Ayim sees it.

Several literary styles and significant moments were happening right before and around the same time that May Ayim was writing and publishing her essays and poetry. One of the first literary forms seen in the late 1960s was the reemergence of the *lyric* genre (Bathrick 902). The structural breakdown and main elements that make up “lyrischer Texte”, or lyrical texts, are described as associating and connecting those connotations of words with their lexical meanings in order to impart all of those meanings at once (Biermann 178)². In other words, the different relations, natures, and meanings of the words used in a lyrical text, like a lyric poem, are bound to their connotations within the language, inferring all of those various meanings at the same time within the poem.

Some of the elements of the lyric genre include writing in verse and enjambment.

Writing in verse merely means grouping specific words together in a poem, whereas

subjektiven Erfahrungen verbinden, werden wir uns unserer Identität sicherer und können sie nach außen offensiver vertreten.”

² “Gedichte sind sprachliche Gebilde, die ein besonders hohes Maß an Strukturiertheit aufweisen. Die moderne Literaturwissenschaft spricht von der **Überstrukturiertheit** lyrischer Texte, ohne damit aber eine negative Wertung im Sinne eines Zuviel, eines Übertreibens zu verbinden. Überstrukturiertheit heißt: Die lexikalische Bedeutung der... ..Wörter (Denotation) wird auf vielfältige Weise überlagert von sprachlichen Bezügen und Verbindungen; diese rufen bei den Lesern/ Leserinnen verschiedene assoziative Mitbedeutung (Konnotationen) hervor und verleihen dem Gedicht seine schillernde Vieldeutigkeit.”

enjambment means that a full thought or idea is not expressed within one line of a poem, but flows over into the next line. The entire sentence could make up one line of the poem, creating a pause that follows more closely the cadence of spoken language; but the sentence could also break itself up between lines, forcing a lack of resolution until the following line. In Ulla Hahn's poem "Winterlied", we see how her sentences or phrases use all four lines of each stanza before concluding her thought.

“Als ich heute von dir ging
fiel der erste Schnee
und es machte sich mein Kopf
einen Reim auf Weh.

Denn es war die Kälte nicht
die die Tränen mir
in die Augen trieb es war

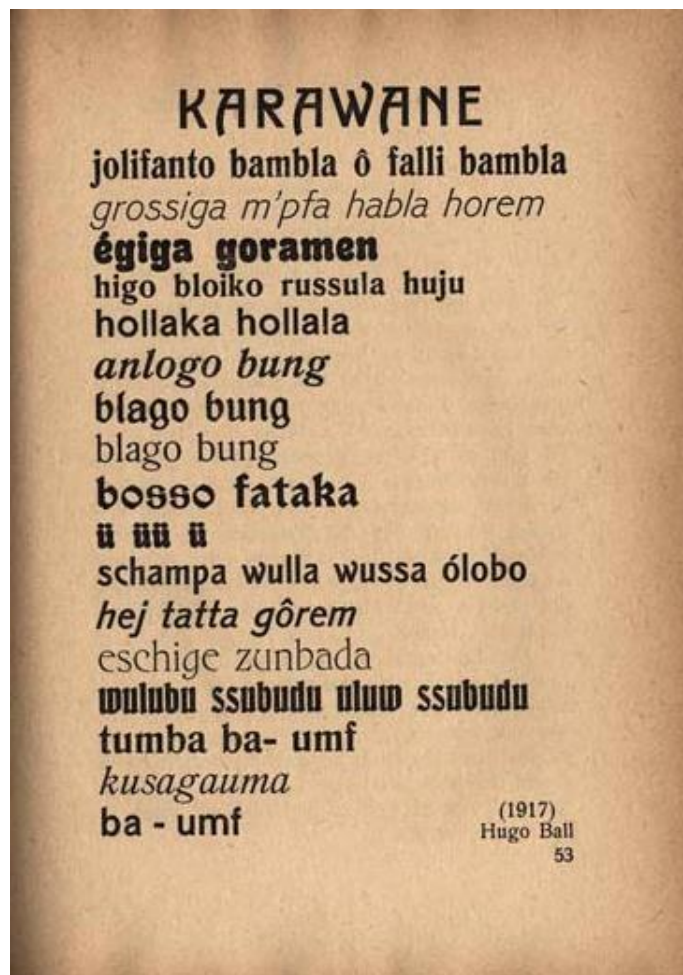
Ach da warst du schon zu weit
als ich nach dir rief
Und dich fragte wer die Nacht
in deinen Reimen schlief.”

(Biermann 180).

Another element found in the lyric genre is that of sound and rhythm within the lyrical form, especially that of a phonetic nature, which in turn allows the language itself to become only sounds and "Bildmaterial", or material for a picture. In this way it can take away those preconceived word meanings to become "nonsense", in order to present itself as a representation of physical art, like in Dadaism (Biermann 180)³. Hugo Ball's poem "Karawane," which he originally performed in cabarets in the 1910s, became a great example of Dadaist writers' "attempt to use the language with the same liberty with

³ "Wesentlich beteiligt am Sinnaufbau eines Gedichtes ist die lautliche Ebene, die in einigen Extremformen lyrischer Gestaltung, wie sie z. B. in der Romantik, im Dadaismus oder in der konkreten Poesie zu finden sind, sogar zum Hauptbedeutungsträger wird. Dort ist die Sprache nur noch Klang-bzw. Bildmaterial, ihre inhaltliche Bedeutung tritt ganz zurück."

which the Dada visual artists used their materials, aspiring to transcend literary conventions by treating language *plastically*” (Zurbrugg 122). As we can see from the presentation of “Karawane”, we lose those “standard” literary forms in order to become strictly “Bildmaterial”. If you then look at his printed version where he adds various typefaces to the text, one can then see how he uses the visual to further his questioning of what art can be, what it can do, and what it can look like. We will see this later as Ayim uses “Bildmaterial” to transcend societal expectations within her own writing.



[Figure 1: Image from *Dada Almanach 1966*]

The final element within the lyric genre that I will discuss is “die Ebene der Bildlichkeit” or the layer of imagery that presents itself in lyric poetry (Biermann 182).

This construction of “sprachliche Bilder” is the foundation of the messages that lie within the poem, and that the poet is striving to express to his or her audience. There are three different versions of “sprachliche Bilder”. The first is what they call a “Wie-Vergleich”⁴, where a more tangible or rational thing is compared to something visual (Biermann 182). For example, Rainer Maria Rilke’s well-known poem, “Der Panther”. The second stanza shows this “Wie-Vergleiche” in action

“Der weiche Gang geschmeidig starker Schritte,
der sich im allerkleinsten Kreise dreht,
ist wie ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte,
in der betäubt ein großer Wille steht.” (Rilke 42).

The way that the panther in the poem is moving in a circle, the rational idea, is likened as a dance of power, the visual and metaphorical concept. The animal’s circling its prey is not a dance at all, but it reminds the author of a dance that seems to be full of power and strength. The next example talks about a form that almost “melts” the physical thing to the picture that is trying to be created, more commonly known as our usual forms of metaphors (Biermann 182)⁵. Joseph von Eichendorff gives us this literary metaphor in his poem “Wünschelrute”, translated as “Divining Rods” in English, written in 1835:

“Schläft ein Lied in allen Dingen,
Die da träumen fort und fort,
Und die Welt hebt an zu singen,
Triffst du nur das Zauberwort” (Biermann 251).

This short piece carries several metaphors inside of it, one of which comes from the very first line, “Schläft ein Lied in allen Dingen”. A song cannot literally sleep, but the idea of

⁴ “Rational nachvollziehbare Übertragungsvorgänge zwischen Sach- und Bildbereich, wie sie für **Wie-Vergleiche** typisch sind...”

⁵ “Verstandesmäßig nicht auflösbare Verschmelzungen von Sach- und Bildbereich, wie sie für viele **Metaphern** bezeichnend sind...”

sleep has been “melted” together with a song, making it hard to separate one from the other. Specifically, Eichendorff attaches human qualities like sleeping and singing to elements that are not human at all, like a song or the world.

The final version of “sprachliche Bilder” in lyric poetry is called “Chiffren” or an “absolute metaphor”, connecting the picture wanting to be presented and the thing that is described as if it is an everyday and well-known occurrence (Biermann 182)⁶. For example, Paul Celan’s first and recurring phrase in his poem “Todesfuge”, which describes Celan’s perspective of the daily ash-filled air that escaped from the furnaces used to burn those killed in the concentration camps:

“Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends
wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts
wir trinken und trinken
wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng...”
(Biermann 331).

There is no such thing as “black milk” that people relate to everyday experiences, but it is presented as just that. These kinds of metaphors are detached from reality and an “everyday” kind of language is not needed, because its task becomes about creating a significant connection between the poem and the author (Biermann 182). Through “Todesfuge” we can see the unbreakable connection Paul Celan has with this type of funeral march music and the results of other victims of the Holocaust marching to their deaths in the camps.

So why Lyrik? Because of its associated values within the poetic genre— individualism, staying subjective, and incorporating Romantic themes like nature and love— lyric poetry was the best medium to challenge the norms of any one society and

⁶ “Die von aller Wirklichkeit und allem alltäglichen Sprachgebrauch abgelösten, Bild- und Sachbereich scheinbar willkürlich zusammenzwingenden **Chiffren**. Man spricht hier auch von ‘absoluten Metaphern’.”

communicate the choice to move beyond seeing everything through objective eyes only (Bathrick 906). This rejection to staying objective within literature, or only focusing on things not influenced by one's personal feelings, can also be described as "Neue Subjektivität". "Das vorherrschende Thema der Literatur der neuen Subjektivität ist die persönliche Krise...Die Werte des Paradigmas sind Authentizität, Unmittelbarkeit, Aufhebung der Dissonanz von Gefühl und Selbstbewußtsein, der Selbstzerissenheit usw." (Roberts 299).

This "Neue Subjektivität" within lyric poetry presents itself as a form that directly expresses the subject's experiences and feelings, while also making it difficult to decipher whether the speaker in the poem is directly voicing the sentiments of the author or not (Biermann 39)⁷. This perspective allows the writer to look inward, making the choice not to detach from feelings associated with daily life. Friederike Mayröcker's poem from 1974, "Der Aufruf", represents these themes very well:

“Mein Leben:
ein Guckkasten mit kleinen Landschaften
gemächlichen Menschen
vorüberziehen Tieren
wohl bekannten wiederkehrenden Szenerien

plötzlich aufgerufen bei meinem Namen
steh ich nicht länger im windstillen Panorama
mit dem bunten schimmernden Bildern

sondern drehe mich wie ein schrecklich
glühendes Rad
einen steilen Abhang hinunter
aller Tabus und Träume von gestern entledigt
auf ein fremdes bewegtes Ziel gesetzt:

ohne Wahl

⁷ "Der **Autor** oder die **Autorin** eines Gedichts kann nicht einfach gleichgesetzt werden mit dem **Sprecher** im Gedicht. Das Ich, das im Gedicht spricht, kann (muss aber nicht) in Beziehung stehen zu einer Stimmung oder einem persönlichen Erlebnis des Autors."

aber mit ungeduldigem Herzen”

(Biermann 40).

Mayröcker uses simple everyday experiences, like being jolted out of daydreaming with your toys when your name is called, to reflect on the ways that our inner selves sometimes jolt us out of those dreams and goals we had in days gone by. This poem encompasses the lyric genre as well as the content found in new subjectivity. May Ayim’s writing is full of this same type of subjectivity, and I believe it is very important to her goal of placing Black German experiences within German daily life.

Ayim chooses to connect painful or tragic historical moments with subjective verse writing, and often includes humor or sarcasm to allow her poetry to be more accessible without watering down the content. Peter Weiss’ theater piece, “Die Ermittlung”, also connects history and subjectivity, while using a dry wit to show the unjustifiable logic many Nazi officers used in court. He reflects on the historical consequences of the Holocaust and used real documents and court interviews to show the Auschwitz Trials in Frankfurt. At the same time, he was stylistically writing the text in verse, almost like song lyrics that could be sung or chanted (Biermann 332).

“...Los raus schnell schnell
Es waren anderthalb Meter herab zum Boden
Da lag Schotter
Die Alten und Kranken fielen
in die scharfen Steine...”

(Biermann 332).

While Ayim was writing her poetry, these literary forms described above are only a few of the poetic structures that created those pronounced paradigms, or standards, that she employs and “blues-es” in order to build more tension and pressure in her society and the writing world at large.

CHAPTER 4. BLUES MUSIC FORM 1: BLUESING THROUGH INTONATION

So then, how does all of this pertain to May Ayim? How is she also a part of these paradigmatic literary trends, and how does blues music help show the differentiation of her poetry? It is my belief that Ayim uses the motifs of German literature with the techniques present in the blues music tradition to show how she “blues-es” the German society “scale” by inserting her own “blue notes”. One cannot have blues music without the Black experience and the distinct positionality that Black experience gives. There is a very distinct perspective when one is privy to one’s society without being accepted within it. Ayim uses her knowledge of German literature through the years, as any German writer would, with her perspective as an “Other” within society to highlight how these styles, forms, and trends, while useful and important, do not adequately represent who she is as a Black German lesbian woman and poet. How does she “blues” these various styles and themes in her poetry? Where does her perspective differ and delineate from the status quo? We can use the other three blues music features from Brommel’s text to represent these depictions of “blues-ing” the poetry— altering the writing in a way that better includes the variety of experiences that Ayim embodies within herself, let alone what the readers’ experiences may highlight and personify.

When Nick Brommel mentions the next blues form feature— intonation— he discusses how this intonation appears within blues music as a tension, which is established by those paradigmatic chords and the foundation of the tonic, or the foundational note of the scale. This tension lies between two different traditions of music— European and traditional African influences. That type of musical climate will greatly change the sound of the notes and how they work together as the musician

decides when to “bend” and alter the notes being played (Brommel 198). The point of blues is not to choose one music tradition over another, but to create a dialogue through the alteration of notes that can push the conversation towards something *else*—something that is neither one nor the other but instead, a new space. “The blues *sound* is for this reason continuously dialogical— a musical spanning of two social spaces. It’s an example of what critics today would call hybridity” (Brommel 198). This intonation, this hybridity, is a fantastic symbol of what Ayim is doing as she writes her poetry. The poems that may be seen as typical or standards within German literature very quickly turn into a new hybrid as Ayim uses these same paradigms to change the topic of discussion. Ayim is able to challenge and pinpoint what voices are being removed or silenced in whatever context, and with this information, she can alter or shift the conversation until it bends to include those previously silenced. For example, in her poem “grenzenlos und unverschämt: ein gedicht gegen die deutsche sch-einheit”, Ayim uses the tension between German identity and African identity to create an identity that spans those two social spaces. This better defines and describes her personal reality.

“ich werde trotzdem
afrikanisch
sein
auch wenn ihr
mich gerne
deutsch
haben wollt
und werde trotzdem
deutsch sein
auch wenn euch
meine schwärze
nicht paßt
ich werde
noch einen schritt weitergehen
bis an den äußersten rand
wo meine schwestern sind

wo meine brüder stehen
wo
unsere
FREIHEIT
beginnt
ich werde
noch einen schritt weitergehen und
noch einen schritt
weiter
und wiederkehren
wann
ich will
wenn
ich will
grenzenlos und unverschämt
bleiben”

(Ayim 61).

There are several paradigmatic “chords”, or literary standards, in this poem that are being used within this piece of German poetry. Ayim is first using, and then “blues-ing”, by bending the standards to include her challenge of identity politics in German society. First is the multiple-meanings that can appear within one word or phrase, as previously described within lyric poetry. Where she uses and simultaneously “bends” this concept is through her subtitle “ein gedicht gegen die deutsche sch-einheit”. What all could be implied through the “sch-” in “sch-einheit”? One way to read this is by taking the dash out all together to form the word *Scheinheit*. This German word means “appearance” and therefore could be referring to the ways that Ayim sees German society attempting to appear in some politically correct way. If we keep this thought and add another meaning on top of this term *Scheinheit*, we get “sch-” plus “einheit”. *Einheit* means unity. Perhaps this is what the Germany Ayim sees is attempting to create-- a sense of unity. But then what of this sound, “sch-”? The dash that comes right after the “sch-” allows the reader to make their own guesses as to which words could fit into this space, as I have inferred through the term *Scheinheit*. Another word that comes to mind from this “sch-” is the

word *Scheiße*, which means crap or bullshit. With this in mind, Ayim is not just giving the reader multiple meanings of a word, but presenting multiple opinions that the reader is then tasked with juggling as they move into the content of the poem. It is the multiple opinions that become one of our “blue notes” in the poem, because originally, lyric poetry only suggests multiple meanings, not multiple opinions that challenge the societal norms of the day.

In connection to “blues-ing” how one sees and challenges the societal norms of the current day, Ayim also “blues-es” the ways that we remember and consider German history. As previously mentioned, one of the sections brought up in the description of “Neue Subjektivität” was reflecting on history, like Peter Weiss does in *Die Ermittlung*. Ayim “blues-es” this self-reflection by connecting tragic and vicious instances of violence in German history to what violence was happening around her in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Where others are using history to reflect on how things may have changed or what one has learned from these moments, Ayim takes another position by exposing how the same violence is perpetrated against the same groups of people, Jewish, Black, Roma and Sinti, gay and lesbian, and so on. Where others see historical events as strictly “past tense”, so to speak, Ayim shows that they have only changed in appearance, and connects every event mentioned with the fact that they all happened in Germany in the fall. Below we see the first out of two excerpts from her poem “deutschland im herbst”:

“kristallnacht:
im november 1938
zerklirrten zuerst
fensterscheiben
dann
wieder und wieder

menschenknochen
von juden und schwarzen und
kranken und schwachen von
sinti und roma und
polen und lesben und
schwulen von und von
und von und von
und und...”

(Ayim 68).

Here we see a description of how various groups of people were violently attacked and abused in Germany in November 1938, through the violent night that was *Kristallnacht*. Ayim then lists some of the bigger groups that were targeted, but through the repeated “und von und von/ und und”, we understand that so many more unknown groups and people were also victims of this violence. In the second excerpt, Ayim connects this past event with an event in November 1990, which would have only happened about three years before the publishing of this collection in 1993.

“ein einzelfall:
im november 1990 wurde
antonio amadeo aus angola
in eberswalde
von neonazis
erschlagen
sein kind kurze zeit später von einer
weißen deutschen frau
geboren
ihr haus
bald darauf
zertrümmert

ach ja

und die polizei
war so spät da
daß es zu spät war
und die zeitungen waren mit worten
so sparsam
daß es schweigen gleichkam
und im fernsehen kein bild
zu dem mordfall

zu dem vorfall kein kommentar:..."

(Ayim 69).

Again, instead of placing historical events within a perspective of "that was then, this is now", she argues that "that was then, and it is *still* now". We see that in two of the final lines of the poem "so war es/ so ist es"⁸. In the last stanzas of the poem, Ayim juxtaposes how those in higher positions of privilege, presumably white German citizens, see Germany as wonderfully reunited, while those from minority groups are still dealing with issues of violence in the same "reunited" Germany:

"... im neuvereinten deutschland
das sich so gerne
viel zu gerne
wiedervereinigt nennt
dort haben
in diesem und jenem ort
zuerst häuser
dann menschen
gebrannt..." (Ayim 69).

She ends the poem with two thoughts: the first being about how a collective memory of an event does not necessarily mean that is the reality of what happened, and the second, that if this violence is Germany during the fall, she dreads to see what winter in Germany would bring.

"...erst zuerst dann wieder

es ist nicht wahr
daß es nicht wahr ist
so war es

so ist es:
deutschland im herbst
mir graut vor dem winter"

(Ayim 70).

⁸ "So was it/ so is it" [my own translation]

The next paradigm that is used, and then “blues-ed” in this poem is enjambment, which is also a tradition in lyric poetry. An excellent example of this can be seen in the following lines from “grenzenlos und unverschämt”.

“ich werde trotzdem
afrikanisch
sein
auch wenn ihr
mich gerne
deutsch
haben wollt
und werde trotzdem
deutsch sein
auch wenn euch
meine schwärze
nicht paßt”

(Ayim 61).

The breaking up of one sentence or phrase allows Ayim to create space in and around her perception of herself. Enjambment is “blues-ed” here because of the content within the broken lines, and how they not only stall the resolution of the sentence, but allow the sentence to encompass more than one concept— in this case— both her German and African identities. The words “afrikanisch” and “deutsch” are both placed on their own lines, separating it from the phrase “ich werde trotzdem”, which can thus be applied to both identities equally. But later on, she again plays with what it means for her to be both German and Black by putting “deutsch sein” on one line and “meine schwärze” on another. She first introduces the words “afrikanisch” and “deutsch” as others might see them— mutually exclusive— but then later presents them as both belonging to her. She “is German” *and* it’s “her Blackness”. In another place, these ideas would not be able to be in close proximity to each other, but by utilizing enjambment the way that she does in this poem, Ayim does the same thing that blues music does. It “rigorously inflects and alters those notes” (Brommel 197).

The next paradigm that I will discuss from this same poem is Ayim's decision to not capitalize most of her words. In the German language, it is standard in writing to capitalize every noun present, even when that noun does not come at the beginning of the sentence. While not capitalizing is not uncommonly seen within poetry overall⁹, Ayim is still creating her own association with capitalization by choosing what is and is not capitalized. Where others would see "deutsch" and "schwärze" as being important, and thus perhaps worth capitalizing, Ayim chooses to instead only capitalize the entire word "FREIHEIT". This forces the reader to put more focus on the word "freedom" and less on these identity descriptions. She talks about being "grenzenlos", so the usual borders that identity can create are thus broken with this reach toward freedom, which is always "noch einen schritt weiter"¹⁰. The "blues-ing" of these paradigms through the intonation of her writing and content is just one way that Ayim shows her "hybridity", or as I prefer to call it, her "multiplicity"¹¹ between a variety of identities and social groups. Only in this way can she effectively present all versions of herself within her poetry and continue to challenge and create tension for the ways that previous German literature and current German society fail at embracing all parts of her sense of self.

Yet that same tension is used to create a brand new sound in the same way that blues did. It is a new type of "music" that does not throw away either/or, but utilizes both identities in a way that gives birth to an alternative from the traditions within both worlds. This mirrors the ways that Ayim's use of both German influences and African folklore

⁹ Poet e e cummings was doing this in the United States throughout his writing career in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s.

¹⁰ "still a step further" [my own translation]

¹¹ which will be described later in section 6. Bluesing through "The Lick"

and language create a brand new “sound” or “intonation”, something that transcends what is completely “German” or completely “African”. Just as “grenzenlos und unverschämt” shows how Ayim builds a dialogue between her two identities, her thoughts on “belonging” can be seen as another conversation that she wants to have with her audience. For example, the German idea of *Heimat* versus an African sense of home. The traditional idea of a German *Heimat*, something that is rooted in a physical space or location, can greatly differ from the African sense of home. This idea of home is traditionally seen as nomadic, or constantly moving and shifting within spaces, and then moving those spaces as time moves forward (Plumly 6). For Ayim to have both mindsets and perspectives of *Heimat*/home in her collection, she must “bend” her notes to forge a new relationship between the two ideas. This new relationship changes the tone and meaning of the notes surrounding it. So as Ayim “bends” the German *Heimat* towards the African idea of home, the conversation that the two have with each other changes. They no longer have a certain amount of “space” between them like in the isolation of the terms “afrikanisch” and “deutsch”, but the “bending” allows them to move in closer together becoming something totally new. While Brommel is, of course, talking more about blues musical forms in his article, his description of how two traditions of “notes” move and influence one another is a perfect representation of what Ayim does with German *Heimat* and the African diasporic sense of home. “The note in its Euro-American form is not an ideality to be reached for and achieved, but a notion to comment upon, to infuse with the priorities of African musical traditions and the presence of the Black performing self” (Brommel 198).

Ayim also gleaned inspiration from writers within Dadaism who were creating “Bildmaterial” through their work. As seen through her poem, “am anfang war das wort”, Ayim also uses elements like onomatopoeia and associates physical attributes to letters from the alphabet in order to move language into a visual form.

“es ward licht
doch durch den widerspruch
gab’s einen kurzschluß
wodurch
sowohl das wort
als auch das widerwort
zerplatzte:

peng! - das p entsprang
und mit ihm b und t
autsch! - das war das u
und mit ihm a und o
knacks! - das k entkam
und mit ihm kam das g

so ging das bis um mitternacht
und dann von früh bis spät
und aus dem wortsalat entstand
wie hier in deutscher variante
komplett ein alphabet: “

(Ayim 15).

In addition to the content of the poem, the actual placement of each stanza of the poem plays into the visuality of “Bildmaterial”. By spacing out the stanzas and moving their positions to be closer to or further away from the center of the page, each stanza draws our eyes to the next point being made— or in this poem’s case, the next moment that happens in this “creation story”. Just like the description of each letter being formed in the poem springs out of nowhere, the stanzas follow the same thought and jump around on the page. We are drawn to this movement and attempt to follow along with it as we read, reinforcing the picture that is being created through Ayim’s writing and word placement. This placement helps to create space for each stanza to breathe, giving each

section room to be individualized even as they all come together to form this one written piece.

Another way that May Ayim uses intonation to “blues” these German literature tonics is through the paradigm of lyric poetry as a form of humor, sarcasm, or wit. I believe the blues music genre uses a generous amount of humor in order to survive the heaviness that is often felt through the music, and that comes with being oppressed in a society. Emily Rutter reminds us that Black American writers who were influenced by blues music “valued the blues not only as a Black folk form but also as a cathartic vehicle capable of fostering community and the resilience necessary to combat white domination” (40-41). Humor and sarcasm can be used to point out the flaws in a society without directly hurling insults, allowing an open space for issues to be aired and a cathartic experience to be had. Ayim “blue-es” this concept further by highlighting the ways that *white* German readers attempt to police words that do not appear offensive to them, but are highly offensive to German Writers of Color. In the poem “freiheit der kunst”, she writes sarcastically to present how white women write in to tell the “receiver” of these comments how she should feel as a Person of Color. So again, by switching the focus of the content from an inside perspective to one that makes remarks as an outside observer who also participates within the society, Ayim shifts the dialogue to encompass more thoughts and ideas. While everything written appears very straightforward, the fact that members of the majority are claiming to understand the minority’s perspective on race shows the sting and bite lying underneath the seemingly “honest” tone. Although we can only read what one side of this conversation is saying, we “hear” the tone of both sides through that sarcastic “note”.

“Frau K.:

für sie
mag das wort
>>neger<< oder >>mulatte<<
eine beleidigung sein
ich bin nicht ihrer meinung denn
ich habe es nicht so gemeint

für mich klingen solche worte
melodisch und klassisch
greifbar sinnlich statt unnahbar sachlich...” (Ayim 76).

“Frau S.:

ich bin enttäuscht wie wenige westverlage
interesse für ostdeutsche autorinnen haben

die publizieren nur ihre eigenen sachen
oder bücher von ausländern und von mulatten
das ist nicht nur vernachlässigung
das ist auch betrug
wir sind scheinbar
nicht exotisch genug...” (Ayim 77).

The content of what both “Frau K.” and “Frau S.” speak of reinforces the assumptions that white German society has placed on Writers of Color in Germany, and chooses to stand in opposition of those voices who want to break those stereotypes. We know how the Writers of Color feel because of what the two white women write about. Where the two women see “mulatten” or “ausländern” as silencing the voices of real German women (like those in East Germany), the West German publishers mentioned in this poem disagree with this claim by having interest in what these two minority groups write on and publishing that literature through their company.

CHAPTER 5. BLUES MUSIC FORM 2: BLUESING THROUGH CALL-AND-RESPONSE

That tone of conversation that bridges the two worlds or traditions works in tandem with the second blues form feature, the “call-and-response”. As Brommel puts it, if there is no conversation between the musician and his audience then it may not be, in fact, blues (198). In Ayim’s case, this conversation could be between her poems and the readers. While some musical traditions are set up for the musicians to give, and the audience to receive, blues music requires the musician to open a two-way line of communication, and the audience is expected to participate. If there is no exchange of emotion or feeling between the two, the power within blues is untapped. The repetitive nature of blues music allows for this type of conversation to take place. In a way, it is almost like a crying out for someone to hear another, and that response means one’s voice has been heard and acknowledged. In the same vein, Ayim has created a collection that can play both roles as the “caller” and “responder”. As the “caller” in her poem “gegen leberwurstgrau— für eine bunte republik”, Ayim is seeking a response from those in authority in Germany. She insists on an answer for the ways that German society has used and abused minorities of various types for political gain in elections while simultaneously ignoring their existence at other times.

“zu besonderen anlässen
und bei besonderen ereignissen
aber besonders
kurz vor
und kurz nach dem wahlen
sind wir wieder gefragt
werden wir wieder wahrgenommen
werden wir plötzlich angesprochen
werden wir endlich einbezogen
sind wir auf einmal unentbehrlich
werden wir sogar

eingeflogen
auf eure einladung versteht sich
als >>liebe ausländische mitbürgerInnen<<
ohne bürgerrechte natürlich
als migrantinnen
aus aller herren länder
als experten in sachen rassismus
als >>betroffene<< ...”

(Ayim 62).

The specific platform that she is calling out here are the various talk shows that pick and choose when and where to take minority groups in Germany seriously. She then goes on to start listing the ways that these talk shows, and those in power who support them, use those who would otherwise not be asked to participate in anything. They, being those “othered” groups, are always invited to talk during special occasions or occurrences, and especially “kurz vor/ und kurz nach dem wahlen”-- when votes are at stake. She does not shy away from presenting these “requests” to speak as really being allowances to speak. It is only with permission that the “liebe ausländische mitbürgerInnen” can be approached, invited to whatever event, taken seriously, or even speak at all. And Ayim calls out how all of this is mere pretense, because these same “foreign citizens” do not have all of their civil rights and are still seen as foreigners or migrants in their own country. In the end, her response does not come from those in authority. They remain silent to the ways that “die engagierten fühlen sich erleichtert- zum teil/ die betroffenen fühlen sich verarscht- total¹²” (Ayim 63). Instead, she responds as a representative of this outside group, separating her author voice presenting the issue from her voice as one of the “betroffenen”. She does not argue a way to resolve this problem, but instead shows

¹² “the engaged feel enlightened-- to a degree/ the parties concerned feel fooled-- totally” [my own translation]

her solidarity with those other “bindestrich-deutschen”¹³ who are overlooked and taken for granted.

This is not the only poem where Ayim connects herself to those who are “othered”. In the poem “blues in schwarz weiss”, we see this same solidarity in connection with moments in German and world history. As previously mentioned through “Neue Subjektivität”, the tonic of postmodern literature as a reflection of history is very present in this poem. But Ayim does not present this poem as an unchangeable historical event. Instead she “blues-es” this to blur lines between tragic historical moments and the perpetuation of them in the current day

“während noch immer und schon wieder
die einen
verteilt und vertrieben und zerstückelt werden
die einen
die immer die anderen sind und waren und
bleiben sollen
erklären sich noch immer und schon wieder
die eigentlich anderen
zu den einzig wahren
erklären uns noch immer und schon wieder
die eigentlich anderen
den krieg

es ist ein blues in schwarz-weiß
1/3 der welt
zertantzt
die anderen
2/3
sie feiern in weiß
wir trauern in schwarz
es ist ein blues in schwarz-weiß
es ist ein blues”

(Ayim 82).

¹³ “hyphenated Germans”, or where one’s ethnicity, etc. is placed in front of their nationality (in this case, German). For example, one can be Afro-German or Turkish-German. Here she forms a large collection of people to include anyone who has a “bindestrich”, or hyphen, attached to their German nationality.

In this excerpt from the poem, we see Ayim situating herself with “die anderen”, who throughout history have been separated, displaced and fragmented in German society. They are always considered “the others”, even going so far as to say that the powers that be believe they, or “die einen”, should stay in that position. We know that Ayim identifies with this “othered” group because of the pronoun switch that happens from line 7 to line 10. At first, she writes “erklären sich noch immer...”¹⁴ showing neutrality towards this group. But in line 10 she throws away that desire to stay neutral and objective about this political issue, and rewrites the line as “erklären *uns* noch immer...”¹⁵ Through this new position, Ayim can then call out how history repeats itself in Germany and elsewhere, keeping the majority 2/3 on the bottom as the minority 1/3 continue to celebrate “in weiß”.

“das vereinigte deutschland das vereinigte europa
 die vereinigten staaten
 feiern 1992
 500 jahre columbustag
 500 jahre- vertreibung versklavung und
 völkermord
 in den amerikas
 und in asien
 und in afrika
 1/3 der welt vereinigt sich
 gegen die anderen 2/3
 im rhythmus von rassismus sexismus und antisemitismus
 wollen sie uns isolieren unsere geschichte ausradieren
 oder bis zur unkenntlichkeit
 mystifizieren
 es ist ein blues in schwarz-weiß
 es ist ein blues

 doch wir wissen bescheid- wir wissen bescheid
 1/3 der menschheit feiert in weiß
 2/3 der menschheit macht nicht mit”

(Ayim 83).

¹⁴ “always explain to them...” [my own translation]

¹⁵ “always explain to us...” [my own translation]

This concept of “call-and-response” is not a new concept that appeared in blues music, but has origins throughout African traditions (Brommel 198). This African music foundation connects Ayim’s influences to other Black peoples throughout the diaspora, which not only allows her to see “call-and-response” as something from her heritage, but also gives her permission to change the voices that call or respond according to *her* experiences. This is that same idea of a conversation that, as Brommel puts it, is “between two people, two attitudes, two moods, and between individual and community. The *content* of that conversation is infinitely variable; so is its tone...” (198). But while the tone and content of the conversation can constantly be changing, there must be a response by the “audience” every time. Musically speaking, blues is a “structure that belongs to the community, but each blues performer makes his or her own house” (Brommel 199). If we use this description as a connection for Ayim’s poetry, then her volumes of work, like *Blues in Schwarz Weiss*, are each an individual entity that she has built within the community space. In other words, it is a place for those who have had common experiences. If what she writes does not evoke some kind of reply from her community, whoever that may be at any given time, then it would not be a function of blues.

Ayim has been the responder to other people within her community, as well as being the subject that is being responded to by others. Ayim was greatly influenced by the Black American poet and essayist Audre Lorde, to the point where she includes a poem about Lorde in this collection, *Blues in Schwarz Weiss*, called “soul sister”. “Lorde’s ideas about diaspora and kinship served as a model for their¹⁶ movement, one

¹⁶ referring to the Afro-German women’s movement

that embraced difference yet recognized commonality through marginalization and sought bonds with communities of color in similar predicaments” (Florvil 141). It was through these bonds that Black German women, who were normally isolated from one another because of location, politics, or cultural backgrounds, could find a community with one another in order to fight against the white-washing of German history and society. In this same way, Ayim is reflecting or responding to the work that Lorde has done within the context of the Black or African community at large through her own personal language— i.e., her poetry. She is showing her appreciation for and highlighting the efforts Lorde has made even within a society that, according to Ayim, is still sick.

“ich denke und sage
meine persönliche wahrheit:

AUDRE LORDE

lebte
ein gesundes widerständiges schwarzes lesbisches
leben
in einer kranken gesellschaft
auf einem sterbenden planet
sie starb nach 58 jahren
einen gewöhnlichen tod
diagnose: krebs

ihr wirken lebt weiter
in ihren werken
unsere visionen
tragen erfahrungen
ihrer worte

erinnerungen”

(Ayim 56).

Again, by capitalizing the entirety of Audre Lorde’s name, we see the significance of this person to Ayim, and by the enjambment used to isolate the words “lebte” and “leben”, we see Ayim’s response to Lorde’s life, work, and death. Ayim is stating that yes, Audre Lorde *lived*, but those living still have her *life*, and that life is connected to not only the

work she has produced, but the experiences and memories that she “wore”¹⁷. Through the phrase “unsere visionen”, we see a community being created through attaching multiple visions and experiences into the collective “our visions”. Audre Lorde had a constant concern for a strong community that would be able to combat oppression and discrimination, and Ayim continued this charge in her own poetry. “Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist” (Lorde 112). She also answers or responds to the call that began with Audre Lorde’s poems and essays on Blackness and womanhood by writing her own work that echoes and repeats the same thoughts and sentiments, because those issues have not yet been resolved.

“rassismus bleibt
bleiches gesicht einer krankheit
die uns heimlich und öffentlich auffrißt” (Ayim 57).

This repetition, whether in lyrics or in notes, is a common representation of call-and-response within the blues tradition (Brommel 198). The ways that Ayim is working in these repetitive “notes” is reflective of the repetition and sameness of notes in blues music. “The blues are repetitive, and deliberately so. To an ear that can’t get into the blues, they are all ‘the same’ and therefore boring. Yet to performers and audiences who love the blues, their essential sameness is both a comfort and a challenge. The simple and familiar structure of a blues song allows us to perceive its outline as a whole, and thus to feel it as a whole, and thus in turn to notice each and every detail of the song’s inscape, which the blues performer is transforming and taking possession of” (Brommel 198). Just

¹⁷ alluding to the line “tragen erfahrung” here.

like a beloved song may have a chorus that repeats multiple times throughout the song, the familiarity of that recurring chorus allows the listener to think about the song overall, while also focusing on the small details within. While the content in Ayim's work may appear familiar to readers, it is the repeating of the same content that shows how she chooses to move the same challenge forward, receiving the baton from one who came before her, and continuing the race.

On the other hand, Ayim's work has been influential for Black German writers who came after her, allowing her to become a successor just like Audre Lorde. She is now one whose baton has been passed along to continue the dialogues already started. Black German poet Philipp Khabo Köpsell, in his poem "Willst'n A Kaufen?", mentions Ayim along with other Black Germans, to reinforce how many people have been pushed out of the collective memory of Germany and who have challenged stereotypes and assumptions associated with, and terms related to, Black people throughout history. Specifically in this poem, he associates specific letters with historical terms for people and things. These specific letters are used at the beginning of offensive words and shows how these words are deliberately used in everyday speech. They still have an impact on those groups who are at the receiving end of these words. For example, Köpsell uses lines like,

"Hey, Du ... ja, Du ... psssst
Hey, willst Du nen "A" kaufen?
... nen "A", Mann!!"

along with

"Nee, du willst lieber den harten Scheiß. Du willst Ns. N-Wörter
und so. Du willst sehen wie Menschen richtig aus sich rausgehen,
NIGGERNIGGERNIGGERNEGER..." (Köpsell 56).

to associate the use of these words to that of buying drugs off the street. Since using offensive words like those mentioned are seen as “hot topic” issues, the relation to buying “hot” items, like drugs, makes sense. Buying certain kinds of letters allows one to get a certain kind of “high”, one that can only be reached by speaking offensive words like the one written in full capitalization above. The speaker gives alternatives to these offensive words by listing those well-respected Black Germans seen below.

“Ayim, Komma, May, Asamoah, Komma, Gerald, Anton Wilhelm
Amo, Angelo Soliman
Nee, Du willst Dir lieber richtig ein’ schmettern, Du Sau.”
(Köpsell 57).

But instead of using these letters to form the names of these prominent Black Germans, the “you” in the text, which one can assume is not originally a part of these oppressed groups that are being spoken about through their slurs, chooses instead to belt out offensive words and keep that sought after “high”.

These are only a few ways that Ayim uses “call-and-response” to challenge societal issues, and it is a tradition that she has not only learned from her own mentors, but is a concept that continues to be passed down to other Writers of Color who want to challenge the status quo.

CHAPTER 6. BLUES MUSIC FORM 3: BLUESING THROUGH "THE LICK"

The final blues music form that can be used to describe the ways Ayim's poetry alters and "bends" the paradigms of German literature is "the lick". In Brommel's text, "the lick" in blues is illustrated as consisting of "relatively few notes, all taken from a single scale, yet combined and inflected in a new way. Made one's own" (199). When one uses this explanation to interpret German literature, we see that "the lick" here is May Ayim's specific poetry and all of its idiosyncrasies and unique alterations of literary paradigms. In blues music, "the lick is always a combination, or a combination lock, which other performers— friends and rivals— try to figure and reproduce. Of course, the best blues performers not only master the licks of their predecessors but significantly add to the repertoire others will inherit, thereby reproducing and extending the past" (Brommel 199). For Ayim, "the lick" is that *something* that cannot easily be replicated, even as it reuses and reiterates those same "notes" that have shown up in earlier works. While the usage of these past themes and experiences "extend the past", "the lick" helps to showcase that the mixture of the "notes", in this case the themes and experiences, is brand new in its presentation. "In other words, the blues lick is cultural memory at work and in the making" (Brommel 199).

If this is the case, what exactly is May Ayim's "lick"? What are the specific things— whether the production or subject— that makes her poetry difficult for others to reproduce and allows her work to stand out? Weisethaunet explains it as follows: "In performance, interplay (collaboration/communication) is based on the idea that each player finds or defines his 'space' in relation to the others" (103). Her relation to German society, the African diaspora, and even her sexual identity, all play together to form her

human performance. I believe that the overarching reason for the uniqueness in Ayim's poetry is her belonging in multiple arenas and having collaborative experiences as a Black lesbian German woman. It is her performance as such that allows her to create her own place of distinction. While I believe Ayim's intersectionality as a Black woman should be known and considered, in the specific case of her collection of poetry, the ideas of belonging are the bigger issues at hand. Intersectionality and belonging are not one and the same. The term "intersectionality" was first coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. In her article, Crenshaw focuses on how antidiscrimination law erases the experiences of Black women by trying to relegate them into only a Black experience or a woman's experience. On the other hand, belonging, as described by Lähdesmäki and colleagues, incorporates two dimensions: "place-belongingness" and the "politics of belonging" (236). "Place-belongingness" is stated as a "personal feeling of being 'at home' in a place" whereas the "politics of belonging" is more about socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion as a resource (Lähdesmäki 236). As we have seen in earlier sections of this text, May Ayim's experience as being both Black and a woman in Germany is not represented well through the paradigms of German literature and society, so she resists these predetermined attempts of categorizing her through the way that she writes her poetry. "Like Lorde, whose passionate essays, poems, and speeches emphasized the power of language, the Black women's movement in Germany has been closely tied to finding a language. Lorde considered language a means of resistance. For her, speaking was a challenge to mainstream white heteronormative silence" (Piesche 223). As a member of the Black women's movement in Germany, Ayim takes part in this resistance writing and places herself, her multiple identities, and her experiences back into German

society. “The sense of belonging to a place is commonly approached in the data as a temporal process that combines experiences from the past, notions of the present, and expectations for the future” (Lähdesmäki 236). With this in mind, Ayim’s approach of including the multiple identities that she belongs to in her poetry is understandable. No one group can represent her personal experience on its own, and so she has had to create a new space in order to express all parts of herself. “The lick” in blues music effortlessly demonstrates these new ways of presentation because, as Karein Goertz explains, “the blues provide a compelling model for the lyrical, empowering, and communal expression of both grief and anger. Like Ayim’s poems, they embody the duality of distress and its transcendence” (Goertz 314).

This duality plays into the unique mixture of “notes” and patterns in Ayim’s collection of poetry. One presentation of her “lick” is the way that she displays Germanness and Blackness as an exclusive package. It is specific to her experience of being born to a white German mother and Black Ghanaian father, and because of this, neither identifier can be removed or reduced. She is both German and Black, and how she writes about both in her poems reinforces her refusal to take out any one part of herself. For example, in her poem “exotik”, Ayim demonstrates the ways that the “they” mentioned in the poem attempted to wash away her Blackness in order to make her look more “white”, while still trying to keep the exotic “othered” impression of herself intact.

“nachdem sie mich erst anschwärzen
zogen sie mich dann durch den kakao
um mir schließlich weiß machen zu wollen
es sei vollkommen unangebracht
schwarz zu sehen”

(Ayim 66).

The conflict between the line “nachdem sie mich erst anschwärzen” which implies the attempt to denigrate or “blacken” something, and the line “zogen sie mich dann durch den kakao”, which literally would signify that she was then pulled or drawn through “the cocoa”. The metaphorical meaning of this phrase suggests that she was made fun of, presumably because of her skin color. The “they” states that it is improper to appear Black, but the title “exotik” implies that some part of her Blackness was admired, although she does not specify which part. Ayim’s experience navigating being both Black and German is an intersectional experience, and while society may try to make her highlight one part of herself over another, her poetry allows her to present both Blackness and Germanness the way that best represents her reality.

Another demonstration of “the lick” in *Blues in Schwarz Weiss* is Ayim’s intentional inclusion of Ghanaian Adinkra symbols in juxtaposition with her German language section titles. Again, the hybridity between languages— one being a written language and the other being symbolic and proverbial in nature— allows a specialized viewpoint of the Black German experience. Ayim uses the German written language and the Ghanaian proverbial and symbolic language of Adinkra to continuously challenge and resituate our thoughts of belonging. Multiplicity does not only come from a difference in physical appearances, like sex or race, but also learned identities, like one’s native language and a language learned later on in life. “By incorporating visual motifs into her text, Ayim forges a link between German words and African ideograms” (Goertz 312). What does this mean? It means that the juxtaposition of two very different types of language, and thus, comprehension, allows Ayim to create that “third space” of seeing the world, inserting her readers purposefully and without any thought of seeking permission

into a new “compelling model of intercultural dialogue between different modes of communication— verbal, visual, and musical— which together lay the groundwork for a broadened definition of German identity” (Goertz 307). Adding this extra layer of a new language, moral compass, and metaphorical expectations also allows Ayim to redefine and “resignify” (Goertz 307) what German-language poetry is and what all it can imply. As Audre Lorde states, “My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition” (Lorde 121). Being not only aware, but open to all facets of one’s cultures, languages, and writing styles allows Ayim to centralize her efforts to influence and impact, because she is no longer worried about showing too much or too little of any one side of herself. Knowing the origins and significance of this symbolic language is vital to understand the ways that Ayim is creating a new function of using this language. This new language function exists and works because of how she juxtaposes it against and beside her German-language poetry.

First, the Adinkra symbolic language was originally “used by a grieving person to convey a message to the departing soul to take with him to the ‘afterlife’” (Willis 1). In other words, these symbols began as ways to communicate different feelings, thoughts, or messages to those who have died. But what is fascinating is the fact that even these Adinkra symbols are known to have multilayered meanings (Willis 1). Willis states that Akan funerals constantly showed the relationship between the living and dead, death and birth and the symbols can also represent the multidimensional layers of life and death

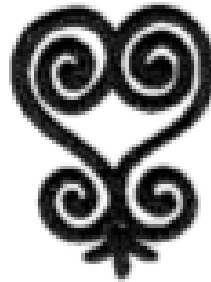
(25). Again, we see a type of “multiple belonging”¹⁸ presented here— the relationship between life and death in one person and/or group of people.

In many ways, the collection of poetry that Ayim presents to us is representative of the traditional stamped cloth, Adinkra, which were used and worn in Akan funerals. In turn, the actual symbols that are stamped on the cloth can mirror the poems within the collection. Each poem represents a variety of meanings and truths that are then placed on a single piece of “cloth”, in this case, the collection as a whole. Ayim herself is the wearer of this cloth, which has its own special significance within this Akan culture. “The wearing of the cloth is an expression of a person’s sentiment and is literally a departing message to the dead in his or her journey to the spirit world” (Willis 26). One can then say that she is not only the wearer of the cloth, but the maker as well, allowing us to see the ways that she “counsel[s], guide[s], and interpret[s] patterns or symbols that are appropriate for the individual’s cloth” (Willis 27). This echoes Brommel’s sentiment mentioned earlier about “the lick” “reproducing and extending the past” and being “cultural memory at work and in the making” (199). Using this tradition of Adinkra symbols within her volume of poetry not only extends the tradition into the present day, but it also allows the cultural memory that is connected to Adinkra symbols to continue to be creatively active. In other words, it is not fossilized as only a historical artifact, but is something that grows and changes, just as any active language does over time. How then is May Ayim using these Adinkra symbols, which were originally for funeral rites

¹⁸ Concept comes from the article “*Fluidity and flexibility of ‘belonging’: Uses of the concept in contemporary research*” by Lähdesmäki, et. al., which states: “Notions of belonging as intersectional and multiple emphasize the temporal and processual nature of the concept: belonging is perceived as situational, constructed across one’s lifespan, and constantly being negotiated” (237).

but have since evolved into usage in daily wear and cloth? How do these symbols incorporate and enhance the meanings of her poetry within *Blues in Schwarz Weiss*? We can see “the lick” she is creating by looking at which Adinkra symbols she chose to put into her work in juxtaposition to the German language section titles, the poems that make up each section, and the significance of their placement.

The first Adinkra symbol she uses is *Sankofa*, which, according to W. Bruce Willis, means “Go back to fetch it” (188). One must then ask, what exactly is Ayim



[Figure 2: *Sankofa* Adinkra symbol from *Blues in Schwarz Weiss*, pp. 9]

attempting to go back and fetch? Is it herself, her sense of belonging in two different worlds, her personal culture that she chooses to claim? Perhaps she is not even talking about herself at all, but is rallying those who would seek out the meanings of these symbols in order to charge them with the same task. It could be that she wants others to go back to fetch whatever it is that they have lost, or what was taken from them. Willis states that this is a “symbol of the wisdom of learning from the past to build for the future” (188). So the “call to arms” if you will, is to learn one’s past so that she, and those who read and understand the symbol, can use it to move forward to a better future. While this Adinkra symbol has no German language section header in the book, the poem that

comes directly after this symbol is titled “vorwort”, a poem that talks about the difficulties of beginning something new and how things are always easier to talk about after everything is over, regardless of whether or not the facts are true.

“vorworte
sind immer etwas
länger und ergiebiger
als nachdenkliche
kurzatmige nachworte

weil
am ende
schon alles gesagt ist
egal ob wahr
oder nicht”

(Ayim 11).

This coincides with *Sankofa* because only after one has begun and, in this case, written the things they need to write, can they start learning from what was created, thus forging a better and stronger future. The “vorwort”, or “foreward”, is Ayim’s opportunity to start fresh in order to make sure that the end of her story is as true to her as she can make it.



[Figure 3: *Bi-Nka-Bi* Adinkra symbol from *Blues in Schwarz Weiss*, pp. 31]

Next we will look at a section of this text that has an Adinkra symbol, a German section header, and a portion of poems to follow. I begin with the Adinkra symbol *Bi-Nka-Bi* (Ayim 31). This symbol literally means “no one should bite another, outrage or provoke another” (Willis 86). This is the “symbol of justice, fairplay, freedom, peace,

forgiveness, unity, harmony and the avoidance of conflicts or strife” (Willis 86). The German header for this section, which comes on the next page, is titled “zeitenwechsel” (Ayim 32), working together with the Adinkra symbol to push for a change in the times and create an opportunity to move forward. The first poem that comes after these two “section headers” is “ein nicht ganz liebes geh dicht”, which can be used to anchor the overall themes Ayim wants to present in this part of her collection. In this poem, the “speaker” of the poem talks about how she loves someone and they love her in return, but the relationship is not necessarily a positive one, “favoriterrorisiert^{19/} nanntnennen wir uns^{20/} zum trost” (33). In spite of this constant battling back and forth, the tensions and problems that arise from this “relationship” do not keep them apart. In the end they still love each other, even knowing that they are not safe with each other.

“doch noch lieber bliebbleiben wir
 drinnen und drannen
 aneinander beisammen
 sicherlich nicht
 ganz dicht”

(Ayim 33).

Ayim uses this Adinkra symbol ironically, exposing the ways in which we do not adhere to this Akan proverb in our everyday lives. Instead we provoke and outrage ourselves and those around us. The poems that come next, “ansichtssache” and “selbstgespräch”, directly show how opinions differ and diverge from one another, and how we, as people,

¹⁹ “Favoriterrorisiert” is a word that Ayim constructed herself. I have interpreted this to mean “a favorite terrorist who terrorizes”, but because this is a word Ayim created, its interpretation is definitely up for deeper study. But, for the analysis needed to explain my point, I believe this personal translation is adequate.

²⁰ In the same vein as the previous note, “nanntnennen” is a combination of two tenses of the verb, nennen, or “to name”. In using a past and present tense of the same verb, Ayim is highlighting the way that “favoriterrorisiert” describes the couple’s volatile and dependent relationship that should have ended, but still has not.

choose to stand stronger in our opinions without staying open to how other people may think and feel differently. The poem “zeitenwechsel”, with the same title name as the section header, demonstrates how quickly times change and go by, and how the way that one reads that time in the poem can also be relative. While one reader may only see morning, evening, and midnight in a literal sense, others may see morning as a metaphor for new beginnings and midnights as the struggles.

By thinking about time and change in a variety of ways, the poem “afrekete”, found second to last in this section, depicts Afrekete, the name of an African trickster-goddess in charge of the crossroads between worlds, as “simultaneously standing still and moving, in the present and dreaming herself into another place” (Goertz 310). This references another “zeitenwechsel”, or time shift. At the same time, because she is a trickster goddess, she plays with perspectives that for others may appear mutually exclusive, “such as disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty” (Goertz 310). Just as the Adinkra cloth is supposed to do during funeral rites, and just as Ayim’s positioning as a member of Germany and the African diaspora does, Afrekete’s role as “the guardian of the crossroads who mediates between the worlds of the sacred and the profane” (Goertz 310) shows the ways that life and death, something else that is seemingly direct opposites, are actually directly related and need each other to exist.

The African trickster goddess, Afrekete, leads to my final representation of Ayim’s matchless “lick”: the application of African folklore to supplement and connect the issues that are in German society. In fact, Goertz states that “folklore often depicts her [Afrekete]²¹ with two mouths to represent her double-voiced discourse” (310). While

²¹ My own clarification added in brackets

there is only one poem in *Blues in Schwarz Weiss* that directly talks about Afrekete, she “serves as a central metaphor for Ayim’s poetic project to resignify the German language with African and African-American tropes” (Goertz 310). In other words, May Ayim is able to use the goddess Afrekete, as the guardian of the crossroads, to manage a conversation “between two worlds and between oral and written forms of discourse” (Goertz 310). How do we see this play out in her poetry? We can use the poem “afrekete” itself to support the goddess’ prior description, as well as establish her significance in the new space Ayim has formed through her work. We see this reference to being between two “worlds” or being at a crossroads through the first few lines:

“ich sehe dich
im garten
stehend
träumend dich bewegend” (Ayim 40).

The direct opposite meanings of “stehend”— to be standing or to be upright— compared to “träumend dich bewegend”— dreaming of moving or being in movement— shows the ways that Afrekete can fluidly move in and out of positions and places. “Ayim presents the goddess as simultaneously standing still and moving, in the present and dreaming herself into another place” (Goertz 310). Next we can see the importance that Ayim gives Afrekete through the interaction that happens within the poem. The “speaker” of the poem seeks to have a deeper connection to the goddess and wonders what she is thinking, while also reflecting on a previous moment where the goddess smiles at her and holds her hand, showing that the two have become closer over time.

“ich wüßte gern
mit wem du sprichst
und mit wem nicht
und
was es noch gibt

außer dir und
mit dir
in dir

du hast mich
einmal angelächelt
weißt du noch
und meine hand gehalten
braun wie deine
du kamst ein bißchen
näher

ich wüßte gern
ob du
bleiben wolltest”

(Ayim 40).

This is important to note because this interaction could be a poetic illustration of Ayim coming into the knowledge of who Afrekete is, what she represents in African folklore, and how her personal ties to Ghana and the African diaspora allow her to access a personal relationship with Afrekete.

Because Afrekete functions between multiple worlds and spaces, she “thrives despite dislocation and fragmentation— even in Germany” (Goertz 310). This is why Ayim is able to incorporate this goddess’ essence into all parts of her collection, whether Afrekete is mentioned directly or not. It is the fragmentation that many Black Germans identify with, being a piece from “here” and “there” all at once, that so mirrors the role Afrekete plays in folklore. She is able to speak from different perspectives at one time and in one place, just as Ayim does in her poetry. We see this fragmentation, and the perseverance in spite of it, through the poem “aus dem rahmen”. Being “out of the frame” can also symbolize this “blue note” or extra “piece” that does not successfully fit into the societal frame of mind of what is “typical” German.

“ich male dir
ein dunkles gedicht

für dein weißes
gesicht
mit einem rahmen
aus dem du
 fällst
so wie ich
auf neuen boden
ich male wort
für wort
dir
SCHWARZ
vor augen und ohren
ein dunkles gedicht
fürchte dich nicht
bleichgesicht

ich bin's"

(Ayim 67).

The audience that is being addressed in the poem is presumed to be white readers because of the lines “für dein weißes/ gesicht”, which plays on the word “weiß” as being either about “knowledge” or about the color “white”. She wants to present a poem where *they* fall out of the frame, just as she and those like her do in real life. Through the capitalization of the entire word “SCHWARZ”, we again see how she connects more significance to Blackness. Many times Blackness is the factor that keeps one “out of the frame” and is usually the “blue note” or fragment in German society. But in this poem, Blackness is the one thing that the white audience does not have, keeping them from participating in this “dunkles gedicht” or literally, “dark” poem, the way they may want to. Instead she places a marker on *them*, calling them “bleichgesicht” or pale face, when usually they are the standard and place identities or demarcations on others. This discourse between who is “out of frame” and in what ways they are “out of frame” reflects back to Afrekete’s power as “one who undermines rigid, exclusive, and hierarchical notions of identity” (Goertz 310).

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION: *BLUES IN SCHWARZ WEISS*' MULTIPLICITY IS NEEDED IN GERMAN LITERATURE MOVING FORWARD

The ways in which May Ayim's collection *Blues in Schwarz Weiss* uses the blues music features to directly mirror her societal and personal experiences as a Black German lesbian woman living in Germany are incredibly unique. Those paradigms within blues music that establish the dialogue within the song reflect the ways that German literature, and the current canon one can see within German Studies, continue their same speech in the literary world. What Ayim is able to accomplish through the breaking up of this routine exchange completely imitates what blues music does in comparison to the western music traditions. Intonation in blues allows the musician to "bend" one note to lean more closely to other notes (Brommel 197). In the same way, Ayim's intonation in her poetry allows her to also "bend" those societal "notes" that are usually much more separated, closer towards each other. Blues music is constantly moving in and out between the European music tradition and African musical influences— "between a system of sounds approved by a society and a systematic interpretation of those sounds by those whom that society oppresses" (Brommel 197). This skill of intonation is used by Ayim to highlight that system and start changing how one interprets the sounds or "notes". This "bending" of notes in blues music, and the discourse that they create, propels the musician to have a real conversation, also known as "call-and-response", either with the audience, the community they are a part of, or with any particular individual. A lack of response²² on the part of the audience or the musician themselves is

²² In my opinion, I do not believe that silence should always be seen as a lack of response in regards to Ayim's work, because she uses silence multiple times in her poems to represent the "response" given by certain parties. Silence is sometimes used to represent one side "waiting their turn", and just because the reader may not hear the response in the poem does not mean that they do not reply.

a clear marker that the music might not be blues music (Brommel 198). It is through the responses of both sides that challenges can be made or comfort can be given. The uniqueness of a musician's musicality— how they piece the notes together and what is stressed or inflected— is the “lick” in blues music. Ayim's “lick”, as it is reproduced in her poetry, is the specific hybridity or multiplicity between her Blackness and her Germanness, how she navigates those two groups within herself and the expression of them both through the various styles and types of language that she employs.

Why is any of this important or relevant to German Studies in the United States? How can this exceptional piece of literature be used to create innovative and forward-moving teaching material within the study of the German language learning and German literature overall? Using a piece of work like *Blues in Schwarz Weiss* helps German Studies continue to be relevant, promotes the idea of globalization, and answers the question that Peggy Piesche proposes in her reflections on Audre Lorde and the Black women's movement in Germany: “How can we deal with an academic archive that has mostly ignored black literary and cultural interventions in Germany?” (Piesche 224).

Ingeborg Henderson states that foreign language programs are especially equipped to address diversity because “our objectives have always included the promotion of a global perspective...” (Henderson 5). The integration of a variety of perspectives is what is needed in German Studies programs in order to stay relevant to the ever-changing make-up of university students, and their prospective goals as they continue their studies. Henderson explains that the growth and continuation of German

Studies is reliant upon the inclusion of Students of Color (4). Priscilla Layne propels this argument further by directly asking the following question:

“In this volatile political climate that is producing students who want to have conversations about race, gender, sexuality, class, citizenship, and (dis)ability, how do we ensure that German Studies is in dialogue *with* departments like Ethnic Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies rather than ignoring the powerful relevance of the work such departments do altogether and dismiss it as irrelevant to the work we do in our programs?”

(Layne 84).

We should be inclusive of these many perspectives not just for Students of Color, but for the entire student body that is seeking a richer and more diverse curriculum, regardless of subject. In Ayim’s poem “künstlerische freiheit”, we see this desire for her work to be seen on an equal level as others, regardless of where the author may have been born or where their family originated.

“alle worte in den mund nehmen
egal wo sie herkommen
und sie überall fallen lassen
ganz gleich wen es
trifft”

(Ayim 78).

Just like the Akan proverbs and Adinkra symbols that Ayim uses in her work, what is needed and relevant morphs and changes over time. “Blue notes” cannot be relegated to one time, place, or even degree in a chord, because “the texture of ‘blue harmony’ rarely stays in one scale or modality for very long” (Weisethaunet 109). If “blue notes” in a musicological sense cannot be constrained to one type, time, or place, why would one decrease the impact of literature by restricting it to one era, one type of people, or one representation of a society? Ayim emulates this lack of relegation seen in “blue notes” by expanding the content, context, and creativity that German literature can and should have, and it is up to us, the current scholars, to continue this work. How can we “bend” those

established notes within German literature and the canon to include the previously left out “blue notes” that are Authors of Color’s work?

I believe May Ayim’s writing is just one example of the rich and far-reaching impact that German Studies can have on the field of higher education. Yet we should not just push for a diversification of material, but the decolonization of these same programs. Layne states that “decolonizing the German canon does not mean throwing out all of the ‘dead white men’, but instead, it means that including and incorporating Authors of Color in more general themes help students see these authors as *belonging* to the canon of German literature (98). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Friere talks about how “it is a farce to affirm that men are people and thus should be free, yet do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality” (26). In other words, in order to claim a move towards diversification and decolonization, we as German Studies programs must make tangible efforts to alter dialogue, just as Ayim does through her usage of blues music forms and the expansion of Germanness.

As one can see through my analysis of Ayim’s poetry, there are a plethora of ways that a piece of German literature like hers can be used to teach those paradigmatic literary styles, while also allowing today’s students to encounter and work through those issues of race, gender, sexuality, and so on. *Blues in Schwarz Weiss* is an incredible roadmap in how to diversify the perspectives students and faculty alike not only see, but value. Work by Writers of Color expands the impact that one previously thought German Studies could have on any one person, and it broadens what persons are included in that impact. Through Ayim’s work, those who belong to a variety of interests can find something to connect to in her poetry, whether it be through music, poetry and literary

forms, politics, history, the issues between East and West Germany, the “city” as a new social landscape, and even questions of race, identity, and belonging. As Layne states, these diverse perspectives and experiences within German culture and society are “*already present*” (99), it is simply up to us to bring them into the classroom. I believe an analysis like the one I have presented above through *Blues in Schwarz Weiss* gives significant evidence towards the value of Black Germans’ experiences to German Studies as a field, and I believe the curriculum has the ability to better reflect these powerful contributions.

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