

May Ayim, “The Year 1990: Homeland and Unity from an Afro-German Perspective” (1993)

Abstract

May Ayim was born in Hamburg in 1960 and lived in Berlin from 1984 until she committed suicide in 1996. Under the name May Opitz, she was a coeditor of the groundbreaking 1986 essay collection *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women on the Trail of Their History*. Her collection of poetry, *Blues in Black and White*, was published in 1995. In 2010, Berlin’s Gröbenufer street, which was built for the colonial exhibition in 1896 and marked the border between East and West Germany during the division of Berlin, was renamed May-Ayim-Ufer.

Source

[...] I scroll back to my thoughts at the end of 1989 and into 1990, to the confusion and contradictions, the departures and disruptions, the memories of repressed experiences, the new discoveries. At the time, I felt as though I were on a boat in choppy waters. I was so preoccupied with not getting ship-wrecked in the whirl of events that I could barely differentiate and process the events happening around me. In hindsight, I see only the shadows of some things; others I can make out much more clearly from a distance. [...]

Talk in the media was of German-German brothers and sisters, of unified and reunified, of solidarity and togetherness. Yes, even concepts such as homeland, people, and fatherland were suddenly—again—on many tongues. Words came back into official circulation that had not been used without hesitation in either German state since the Holocaust, words that were frowned upon generally but enjoyed uninterrupted popularity in right-wing circles. Times change, people too. Perhaps the Contemporary questions change only slightly, and humanity’s answers to them almost not at all. [...]

In the first days after November 9, 1989, I noticed that there were hardly any immigrants and Black Germans visible in the cityscape, at least those with dark skin. I asked myself how many Jews were (not) in the streets. A few Afro-Germans, whom I had met the year before in East Berlin, crossed my path by chance, and we looked forward to new opportunities to get together. I was alone, wanted to experience a bit of the general enthusiasm, feel the historical moment, and share my cautious happiness. Cautious because I had heard of the impending legislative restrictions on immigrants and asylum seekers. Like other Black Germans and immigrants, I knew that even a German passport did not constitute an invitation to the East-West festivities. We sensed that an increasing dissociation from the outside would accompany the imminent German-German unification—an outside that would include us. Our participation at the party was not requested.

The new “we” in “this country of ours”—as Chancellor Kohl loved to say—did not and does not have room for everyone.

“Get lost, nigger, don’t you have a home?”

For the first time since I moved to Berlin, I have had to defend myself on an almost daily basis against blatant insults, hostile looks, and/or openly racist defamations. I began again—as I had in the past—to look for the faces

of Black people while shopping and on public transportation. A friend was holding her Afro-German daughter on her lap in the subway when she heard, "We don't need people like you anymore; we've got more than enough now!" A 10-year-old African boy was thrown out of a full subway car onto the platform to make room for a white German. . . .

These incidents took place in West Berlin in November 1989, and since then, reports of racially motivated assaults, primarily against Black people, have increased—mostly in the eastern part of Germany. Officials took little notice of these reports of violent riots, which were first acknowledged only in immigrant circles and among Black Germans. [...]

I began to get irritated with the East-West festivities and events that did not include the North-South dialogue. German-German was discussed and celebrated even in the women's movement as though Germany were exclusively white and the center of the world. Congresses and Seminars were organized, complete with travel vouchers for women from the GDR, without simultaneously thinking about asylum-seeking women, who—regardless of whether they were in East or West Germany—had to live on the edge of subsistence. Such treatment was consistent with the inadequate and half-hearted solidarity activities staged on an administrative level by the "know-it-all West Germans" for the "poor East Germans."

Looking back, I remember a movie advertisement promoted by the Berlin Senate: East German workers at a construction site in West Germany. A voice offstage explains that these women are citizens of the GDR who are taking underpaying jobs that are unappealing for West Germans. The commentator implores the audience, urgently yet pleasantly, to graciously accept "the people" who have come to "us" in the last weeks and months. Why are only white German men featured when the topic is respect between men and women from both parts of Germany? I wholeheartedly support a call for solidarity but not one that leaves unmentioned the fact that the least attractive and lowest-paying jobs are taken by migrant laborers from European and non-European countries. Where is the call for solidarity with those people who, in the face of the German-German appropriation and competition, are the first in jeopardy of losing employment opportunities or housing, positions and apprenticeships?

There are no widespread solidarity events for asylum seekers with catchy slogans and reduced admission prices. On the contrary, new legal measures have drastically reduced the right of residence, particularly for people from mostly impoverished non-European countries. Moreover, until the end of 1990, white citizens and politicians—East and West German—watched the increasing racist violence on the streets with the greatest degree of passivity. I found the "receptiveness" and "hospitality" toward white GDR citizens duplicitous considering the constant warnings to our so-called foreign fellow citizens that the "boat" is full. [...]

In 1990, I found this silence and resistance surrounding racism, even among "progressive" leftists and feminist women, frightening and shocking, and yet I was hardly surprised. To be sure, discussions on the topic of a "multicultural Federal Republic" have occurred more frequently since the mid-1980s. Only in exceptional cases, however, have these discussions changed lives and political connections in such a way that an uninterrupted, equitable collaboration with immigrants and Black Germans would become an indisputable given and the analysis of racism a permanent undertaking. The Second Women's Refuge in Berlin and the Orlanda Women's Publishing House belong to the few autonomous women's projects fighting for a quota of posts reserved for immigrants and Black women. [...]

The voices of immigrants, Black Germans, and Jews finally gained an audience in the election campaigns in late 1990. At the time, conferences and events concerning racism multiplied but were mostly and almost exclusively

organized by white Germans. Such was the case, for example, at the Conference “Exclusion and Tolerance” that took place in Eindhoven in November 1990. Of course, Black as well as white scholars from the Netherlands and the Federal Republic gave lectures and seminars on the topic. However, Black women did not take part in the conception and realization of the Conference. Fortunately, at several other events, such painful offenses did not occur, and fruitful impulses materialized toward a real collaboration between Black and white women. [...]

Discussion has intensified in recent weeks about the Situation of marginalized youth, who are currently the main perpetrators of neo-Nazi attacks. Discussions about the causes behind refugee movements have not taken place, nor about measures that could put an end to hunger, war, and environmental destruction in impoverished countries ultimately kept dependent on Europe. A hasty and strident encroachment on the asylum law is dauntingly imminent; and for the foreseeable future, asylum seekers will not be lightheartedly referring to the Federal Republic as their “homeland.” Immigrants, Black Germans, and Jewish people, who have lived here for a long time or their whole lives, will be just as reluctant to do so.

The blatant violence on the streets is in Step with the words of leading politicians and is part of their practical implementation. But I am convinced that we—and by that I mean all the people in this country who will not tolerate racism and anti-Semitism—have the will and the capacity to form alliances. There are examples that we can follow and with which we can connect. One such example is the Black Germans Initiative, which arose out of a small group of Afro-Germans in the mid-ig80s and currently has working groups in numerous cities throughout the Federal Republic. Organizations of immigrants, Black Europeans, and Jews network their groups and activities beyond national borders. [...]

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