The Private/Plural Selves of Afro-German Women and the Search for a Public Voice

Carolyn Hodges

Journal of Black Studies, Vol. 23, No. 2, Special Issue: The Image of Africa in German Society (Dec., 1992), 219-234.

Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-9347%28199212%2923%3A2%3C219%3ATPSOAW%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Y

Journal of Black Studies is currently published by Sage Publications, Inc..

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/sage.html.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

http://www.jstor.org/
Wed Jun 30 02:18:02 2004

THE PRIVATE/PLURAL SELVES OF AFRO-GERMAN WOMEN AND THE SEARCH FOR A PUBLIC VOICE

CAROLYN HODGES
University of Tennessee

Africanist George Shepperson (1982), considering the global dimensions suggested by the concept "African diaspora," spoke of it as being an intrinsically comparative idea which "has everything to gain by approaches through other languages" (p. 49). He goes on to insist that the fullest development of African Diaspora Studies and an understanding of its relationship to other disciplines require that Africanists look further outward by conducting research in languages other than English in order to assess more completely the impact of other cultures directly or indirectly involved with the dispersal of Africans and their descendants throughout the world. A similar idea turned *inward* must also be applied to German Studies, whose expansive breadth and diversity cannot be fully appreciated without study of the impact of minorities, in this case Africans and their descendants, on the language, literature, and culture.

Certainly the African presence within German culture contrasts sharply with the experience of French- or Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries, whose colonial ties to Africa were more firmly and widely established and lasted much longer than the ties initiated by Germany. Although Germany's colonial interests in Africa were severed by the end of World War I, the brief colonial connection, along with subsequent wartime occupation (during both World War I and World War II) and peacetime migration, brought an influx of Africans and descendants of Africans—primarily from France and

JOURNAL OF BLACK STUDIES, Vol. 23 No. 2, December 1992 219-234
© 1992 Sage Periodicals Press

the United States—whose presence further expanded the African diaspora through children born as a result of the mixing of the two cultures.

During the last 25 years, interest has flourished in what Georg Gugelberger (1986) has termed "geo-thematics," defined as:

> the treatment of nations, countries, social groups, and classes by other countries and social groups, in particular the treatment of the Third World people in the literature of Europe and the United States . . . and, reciprocally, the treatment of Europe and the United States by Third World writers . . . . A shift from literocentricity to social issues is clearly intended here, and the term "theme" is to be understood in the nonliterary sense given it by Paulo Freire, who . . . spoke of "generative theme," "meaningful thematics," and "people's thematic universe."[1] (p. 91)

German research in African culture and African studies since just before the turn of the century owes a great deal to the ethnographic research of Leo Frobenius, who conducted 12 expeditions to Africa between 1904 and 1935 and published 60 books and hundreds of pamphlets related to his studies, and to the work of Jahnheinz Jahn, who coined the phrase "Neo-African literature" to describe African, African-American, and Caribbean literatures in the literary history and bibliographies he wrote between 1958 and 1972 (see, for example, Jahn, 1961, 1969). It is only in the last 15 years, however, that sustained studies of geo-thematics which link Blacks and German culture have appeared, for example, in two collections of essays (Gilman, 1982; Grimm & Hermand, 1986).[2] An anthology edited by Gisela Fremgen (1984) continues that aspect of geo-thematics with personal accounts of non-German Black women. This article treats yet another extension of geo-thematics by focusing on a marginalized group within Germany, namely, Afro-German women, who write about themselves and their experiences in a country to which they are inextricably bound and in which they are, at the same time, isolated by virtue of their mixed heritage.

The text in which they are featured is *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte*, edited by two Afro-Germans, Katharina Oguntoye and May Opitz, and a German,

Dagmar Schultz and published in 1986. Along with three extensive essays providing historical background on pertinent social and political issues, it contains interviews, autobiographical sketches, and poems of 14 Afro-German women who grew up in Germany and whose collective lives span approximately 75 years, from 1915 to the present. They are a diverse group, coming from towns and cities all over Germany, representing several ethnic backgrounds (some with fathers from Cameroon, Ghana, or Nigeria, others with African-American fathers or with an Afro-German parent or parents), and emerging from various social surroundings (life with the natural parent or parents, with adoptive parents, in foster homes or orphanages, some with German brothers and/or sisters). They came together to understand themselves better and to see themselves in relationship to Germans and other Afro-Germans. In undertaking the work, which became a retelling and writing of an all but ignored history of a group as well as an act of self-discovery, the editors adopted the term *Afro-deutsch* (Afro-German) as a concept which, modeled after *Afro-American*, would more positively reflect their mutual concerns about identity and community than the commonly used epithets, such as *Mischling* (half-breed), *Farbige*, (colored), and *Mulattin*, designations which, depending on suggestion, may be mildly pejorative or clearly insulting and which express a limited biological affinity, ignoring more complex personal and social issues. Conceiving of the term Afro-deutsch as an expression of self-definition, the editors (Oguntoye et al., 1986) stress its constructive intent:

> Mit dem Begriff "afro-deutsch" kann und soll es nicht um Abgrenzung nach Herkunft oder Hautfarbe gehen, wissen wir doch allzu gut, was es heißt, unter Abgrenzung zu leiden. Vielmehr wollen wir afro-deutsch den herkömmlichen Behelfsbezeichnungen wie "Mischling" oder "Farbige" entgegensetzen, als einen Versuch uns selbst zu bestimmen, statt bestimmt zu werden. (p. 10)

In their stated intent to uncover and rewrite their past and to some day attain the point when they will not have to explain themselves, or their heritage (Oguntoye et al,, 1986, p. 10), these women

approach Francoise Lionnet's (1989) understanding of the concept and potential of *métissage*, described in her book *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, and Self-Portraiture* as a braiding of cultures which suggests solidarity, that is, a unified plurality; Lionnet sees this as a common theme or underlying framework which emerges in the works of marginalized writers and which is especially central to women's autobiography (pp. 4-9). In her analysis of the autobiographical fictions of selected women writers from different cultural contexts, Lionnet contends, "the possibility of emancipation is indeed linked to an implicit understanding of *métissage* as a concept of solidarity which demystifies all essentialist glorifications of unitary origins, be they racial, sexual, geographic, or cultural" (p. 9). The self-portraits and the poetry presented by the women reveal that a braiding of the plural selves has occurred in varying degrees—in some cases still rather tenuously—but the fact that it has begun to take place within this marginalized group and the manner in which it is expressed call attention to issues of racism and sexism which parallel those raised elsewhere in feminist literature and in African-American Studies.

Farbe bekennen (Oguntoye et al., 1986) contains a mixture of original works—personal histories, poems, group discussions—by the women (including the two Afro-German editors) and essays by one of the editors, May Opitz. In addition, the appendix features a self-portrait of an Afro-Dutch lesbian group, Sister Outsider. The essays, which are included to provide a sociological and a historical overview of the contact between Blacks and German culture, are organized under three major categories:

1. "Rassismus, Sexismus und vorkoloniales Afrikabild in Deutschland," an essay that begins with speculation on the earliest Africans in Germany and ends with Africans and Afro-Germans under National Socialism
2. "Afro-Deutsche nach 1945—die sogenannte Besatzungskinder," a discussion of the situation after World War II among the so-called "children of the occupation"
3. "Rassismus hier und heute," an analysis of the current racial issues affecting Afro-Germans.

The group discussions, personal histories, and poetry which are interspersed throughout add creative expression to the background material and provide the reader with vivid images against which to view their collective history.

In making a connection between the historical information and the personal, testimonies, Opitz (Oguntoye et al., 1986) places a great deal of emphasis on the parallel aspects of racial and sexual oppression. For her, the gender-specific role to which women were relegated in the 18th-century thought of Rousseau and Fichte led to consequences which are equivalent to practices of racial discrimination and which continue to have reverberating punitive effects of 20th-century Afro-German women. Thus, she writes, "Die Projektionen, die das Herrschaftsverhältnis von Männern gegenüber Frauen als verfügbare Natur rechtfertigen, entsprechen dem sterotypen Bild der Zuschreibungen, das auf die für primitiv befundenen "Naturvölker" (Africans) projiziert wird" (p. 27). She draws parallels between racism and sexism, concluding that they function on the same principle: Distinctions in social behavior are attributed to unalterable biological differences, which are used to justify the power exerted by men over women or one race over another (p. 90). Her assessment of the effect of such a stance on the present situation of Afro-Germans and her own personal testimony recalls W.E.B. Du Bois's (1979) idea of "double consciousness," expressed in *The Souls of Black Folks* to describe the dilemma of Blacks living in a dominant White culture. He wrote:

> The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness. (p. 3)

Discussing women's autobiography, Susan Friedman (1988) notes that women, by virtue of their gender, also must function from the position of this dual consciousness, that is, "the self as culturally

defined and the self as different from cultural prescription," but in her view that dilemma may be turned to advantage, for it is a position which can provide, through the act of writing, an opportunity for escaping alienation through collective solidarity with other women (pp. 39-40). Friedman continues, "In taking the power of words, of representation, into their own hands, women project onto history an identity that is not purely individualistic. Nor is it purely collective. Instead, this new identity merges the shared and the unique" (p. 41).

The recurring expression of a loss of identity and a lack of a community with which to identify is rooted in the precarious and, indeed, paradoxical situations in which these women found themselves at various stages of their lives. Although they come from diverse home environments, all speak of constantly being admonished to do nothing in school that would bring attention to themselves, to "nur nicht auffallen" (Oguntoye et al., p. 117). At the same time, however, many were pressured to excel in school, that is, to exceed expectations in order to justify their presence by defeating the stereotype image of inferior intelligence.

As many of them matured into young adults, they were constantly warned, again, to be inconspicuous, to play down their looks and not seem too feminine, not to dress in a manner that suggested sexuality; gradually, many came to believe they were regarded as having no feelings and, finally, viewed themselves as invisible and as having no identity. At the same time, though, despite their care to seem sexually nondescript, they could not escape being victimized by the mythological image of the wild, exotic Black woman. Helga Emde, born during the occupation after World War II, observes that she was often complimented on her facility with the language and was asked about her origins; yet such encounters with Germans left her feeling debased, for they conveyed to her no genuine interest in her ideas or feelings but an attempt to somehow uncover the exotic, mysterious roots of a nature that endowed her with such gifts (Oguntoye et al., p. 105).

Similarly, in a discussion among the editors, Oguntoye (Oguntoye et al., 1986) comments on the concept of exotic Black beauty and its attendant problems, claiming "Afrikanerinnen fallen aus dem

europäischen Schönheitsideal raus; für sie gibt es nur die Rolle der 'exotischen Schönheit' " (p. 146).[3] Consequently, two of the few jobs easily available to many Afro-German women were in stage musicals and in films, where they were hired to appear (often in the nude) as alluring and untamed exotic sexual objects. Children and adults alike were cast in the films, the earliest of which, according to 65- and 75-year-old sisters Frieda and Anna, were to be used for propaganda (p. 78). The good pay, along with the company of other Africans and multinationals, helped to make this a positive experience for some, although for most it was but a temporary haven and escape from the social problems they daily confronted.

The feeling of being constantly underestimated and devalued manifested itself in many forms of self-hatred, all of which suggested the desire to be invisible, to disappear, or to somehow blend in so as not to be noticed. For some, a resolution is reached in accepting the designation *Black* or in seeking a melting pot environment, as in the case of Helga with her multinational circle of friends and Corinna with her life in New York, "ein Schmelztiegel aller Nationen der Welt" (Oguntoye et al., p. 187). In that melting pot, Corinna is truly able to disappear ("untertauchen"), which she notes in a poem "New York"; the deadly dangers of the city, which inspires images of a "black hole" and of a "burning Babylon," pale before the comfort of being able to truly blend in among all others:

> Du bist mein Tag, du bist mien Nacht
> in Dir gehe ich spazieren mein Babylon
> ist der Tod vorne, ist der Tod hinten
> so werde ich lachen . . .
> ich brauche mein schwarzes Loch
> mein brennendes Babylon . . .
> ist der Tod vorne, ist der Tod hinten
> so werd ich lachen
> jetzt weiß ich, daß ich lebe. (p. 188)

A close reading of the testimonies and poems of the women, however, reveals an even more complex perspective, an expression of multiple jeopardy that has dominated their lives and is mirrored in diverse configurations of nationality, gender, race, class, and

patriarchal oppression. Andrée McLaughlin (1990) refers to this idea in describing Black women writers in a quest for self-definition and autonomy; because of various factors rendering them politically and economically powerless, they express their experiences and activism through "multiple perspectives and concepts of being" and portray "not one truth but many" (p. 176). Discrimination and isolation based on either race or gender are not sufficient to assess the multiple perspectives through which such writers, like these Afro-German women, must view themselves and see themselves in relationship to others. Thus, in an interview with the oldest women among the group, the editors of *Farbe bekennen* (Oguntoye et al., 1986) introduce sisters Frieda and Anna, born to a mother from East Prussia and a father from Cameroon, who relate how their relatively carefree early years suddenly turned in the early 1930s into a nightmarish struggle to exist, to escape sterilization and the concentration camps, and to reclaim citizenship. Their mother lost her natural citizenship which was ironically restored on the day of her burial, and their father, who had bought his citizenship in 1918, never reclaimed it. Returning to Danzig after the war, Freida found that little had changed; she continued to be regarded as an outsider and to have to make adjustments. She notes, "Ich konnte mich immer einstellen, einmal war ich schwarz, einmal war ich weiß. Aber meistens war ich Mulattin" (p. 78). Nightmares of the Nazi era remained with Freida for 40 years, until the school she attended during that time burned to the ground. She and her sister struggled 16 years (1947-1963) to reclaim the citizenship that was their birthright.

Forty-year-old Helga Emde did not share the terrifying experiences of Anna and Frieda, but she did suffer a great deal of humiliation as she grew up, feeling very much an outcast in a period that was still strongly marked by a recent past dominated by National Socialism (Oguntoye et al., p. 103). Her story and those of the others convey the same sense of fear and isolation. Although growing up in peace time, when presumably there were increasing numbers of Afro-German (no absolute numbers were available), they experienced isolation because most Germans categorized them as "foreigners"; this was compounded by isolation from and, iron-

ically, consequent fear of other Blacks and Afro-Germans. Analyzing her fears as a youth, Helga confronts her own self-hatred as she explains:

> Weder in meiner Kindheit noch als junge Erwachsene hatte ich das Glück, in meinem Umfeld mit anderen Schwarzen in Kontakt zu kommen. Es gab einfach keine. Als Kind begegnete ich lediglich scharzen Soldaten, vor denen ich in Angst und Schrecken floh. Diese Furcht zeigt deutlich, daß ich schon sehr früh die Vorurteile und den Rassismus meiner Umgebung verinnerlicht haben muß. Schwarz gleich beängstigend, fremd, unheimlich und animalisch. Denn wie ist es sonst zu verstehen, daß ich mein eigenes Schwarzsein nicht als solches empfand? Schwarz gleich nicht existenzberechtigt. Und genauso fühlte ich mich. (p. 104)

In describing her experiences, Helga traces her long and difficult path from self-hatred to a feeling of having no identity and eventually to self-acceptance and the building of a circle of multinational friends—after two failed relationships with a Black soldier and a German, with each of whom she had a son—among whom she has found a sense of community. One of her poems, "Der Schrei" at once describes her (Oguntoye et al., p. 113), progression and expresses her bewildered feelings during the journey to self-acceptance: the rejection of her childhood companions ("ich möchte zu euch gehören. aber sie waren einfach weg./Sarottimohr, Mohrenkopf"); as a young adult, the attempt to be as "White" as possible and to overcome the repeated disappointment in being designated as exotic and wild ("schaut, ich mache mein haar glatt/meine lippen schmal und kleide mich hübsch/Exotin"); the denial of her family and friends, who tried to dissuade her from seeking further education after she became a nurse ("aber versteht mich doch, ich will gleichwertig sein/aber doch bitte nicht wie wir!/du gehörst nicht zu uns/Hilfe sie wollen mich steinigen und fast schaffen sie es").

One step Helga took to find a group or community to which she could belong was a trip to Africa, during which she spent 2 months with friends in Zimbabwe. Most of the book's testimonies include a trip to Africa—or desire to go there—and almost without exception the women report disappointment and disillusionment about

their experiences there. Most went to Africa, not only expecting to be warmly greeted and received among friends, but more importantly, hoping to escape the label *foreigner* with which they were generally branded in Germany because of their dark skin. Opitz expresses her continued frustration with this reaction, which despite whatever she says or does, is based entirely on assumptions made because of her color. She notes:

> Ich erlebe oft, daß die Leute ihre Erwartungen über das stellen, was ich ihnen sage. Wenn ich erzähle, daß ich hier aufgewachsen bin und mein ganzes Leben hier verbracht habe, kann es dennoch sein, daß hinterher die Frage kommt: "Ja, und wann gehen Sie zurück?" . . .
>
> Ich habe ab und zu das Gefühl, nirgendwo hinzugehören. (Oguntoye et al., 1986, p. 150)

In many cases, the high expectations about their reception in Africa were replaced with disappointment that, because of their light skin, inability to communicate in the local language, and their manner, they were perceived as European and in some cases White.

Thirty-year-old Ellen Wiedenroth, who for many years knew nothing about her father and who traveled throughout Africa in search of some feeling of solidarity, reports her astonishment at hearing young children in Liberia calling behind her, "Weiße, Weiße"; she later realized that there was something about her behavior which identified her as White:

> Mein Benehmen, die beobachtende Distanz, hatte mich verraten; ich war an jene Szene einerseits zu distanziert und andererseits zu interessiert für eine Einheimische vorbeigegangen. Mein Verhalten hatte ich als Europäerin gekennzeichnet. Da im Klischee die Europäer weiß sind, so war ich eben in diesem Moment zu einer "Weißen" geworden. "Weiß" war in diesem Fall eine soziale Kategorie, nicht anders wie es sich mit der Zuordnung für "Schwarz" verhält. (Oguntoye et al., 1986, p. 170)

Twenty-six-year-old Corinna, born of an Ethiopian father and German mother, spent several years in a foster home and then in an adoptive home. Although she was 25 years old before she found

her mother, who had been separated from Corinna's father since her birth, she had remained in touch with her father, and through him with other Africans. She notes, however, that when she was among Africans, she often had the feeling that she belonged nowhere and had, in effect, fallen between two stools: "Ich konnte nie zu der einen und nie zu der anderen Seite gehören" (Oguntoye et al., 1986, p. 183). She expresses this dilemma in a poem titled "Vater," where she laments her knowledge that although she is his flesh and blood, she is also some indefinable, fragmented "other"; she is not, as suggested in the opening stanza, a reflection of her father but is instead, in the following verse, a young, unstable tree bending left, then right, struggling not to break and searching for a reflection of herself in her father's face:

> Ich bin nicht dein Spiegelbild
> ich sitze zwischen zwei Stühlen . . .
> für dich bin ich ein verwilderter Garten
> wie ein Baum neige ich
> mich links, neige mich rechts
> bleib stehen, biege mich
> um nicht zu zerbrechen
> an deinem Arsch wächst
> der Teufelsschwanz
> wie eine Schlange
> kriechst du zu mir
> willst schauen in deinen Spiegel
> Splitter fallen dir entgegen
> ich bin dahinter
> dein Fleisch und Blut (p. 184)

The search for community, then, is often expressed in the attempt either to find or build a secure bond with the father, who often represents the link to the missing community, but that search, too, most often ends in disillusionment and shattered hopes. May Opitz, who was raised by German foster parents, describes her memories of visits from her African father. Unable to bring herself to call him *father*, she refers to him, as does the German brother with whom she was raised, as "Uncle E.":

> Mein Vater war Onkel E. Er war Onkel E., weil er für meinen weißen Bruder Onkel E. war, und er war Onkel E., weil er für mich nicht mein "Vater" war. Er blieb für mich Onkel E., auch als ich in Briefen an ihn irgendwann anfing, "lieber Vater" zu schreiben. Mein Pflegevater wünschte es so. (Oguntoye et al., 1986, p. 206)

She continues with this same theme in her poem "Vatersuche," which expresses her dreams about the father whom she knows only from a picture and her disillusionment and feeling of abandonment when that dream is destroyed:

> als ich dich brauchte
> hielt ich das bild an der wand
> für wahr
> das schönste was ich von dir hatte
> und das einzige
> . . . .
> wortlos hab ich das bild
> erhängt
> das den traum vom vater mir
> träumte
> zartbitter der abschied
> ich gehe und staune (p. 209)

The search for a closer bond with the father is in many cases accompanied by rebellion against the mother, whose fears and shame resulting from social ostracism were projected onto her child, or by rebellion against foster parents, who were often overly protective and severely strict in their parenting. At various periods in German history, any number of reasons were offered to explain the presence of Afro-German children, and whatever those "circumstances," they cast a negative light on the mother. Women who bore children of mixed heritage as a result of the occupation after World War I, when many black French soldiers were in Germany, were invariably regarded as victims of rape, left saddled with a social burden. There was no question, either on the part of the women or the government authorities concerned with the issue, of admitting a voluntary relationship with an African or African-American. Opitz notes:

> Die Geburt von schwarzen Kindern in den besetzten Gebieten wurde lange Zeit weder in der Öffentlichkeit noch im Reichstage diskutiert. Zum einen, weil sich die Aussagen der Mutter nur schwer mit dem Bild vom "scharzen Vergewaltiger" in Einklang bringen ließen . . . . Das freiwillige Zusammensein einer deutschen Frau mit einem dazu noch farbigen Franzosen mußte von deutscher Seite einfach übersehen werden. (Oguntoye et al., 1986, pp. 50-51)

Anna and Freida speak bitterly of their mother's loss of her citizenship, and Helga Emde, whose father was an African-American soldier, talks about her mother's self-blame and self-punishment. Her mother's guilt and shame, like that of many others, were manifested in her behavior toward her daughters: She was often either excessively indulgent or excessively harsh. Thus, Helga remembers being constantly stuffed with food and plied with toys, but for her it was a poor substitute for the love she saw offered to her German sister. She writes, "Ich wurde gemästet wie ein Weihnachtgans!. . Statt mich mit Essen vollzustopfen, hätte mich vielleicht etwas ganz anderes gesättigt. Zum Beispiel Liebe" (Oguntoye et al., 1986, p. 104). Although wanting for nothing at home and outfitted with the best of clothes and books, Ellen Weidenroth, who spent her first 7 years with two different foster families, remained bewildered by her mother's refusal to discuss why she was sometimes ostracized at school or on the street. Although she was sensitive to and pained by Ellen's problems, her mother had never discussed them. For her, "Hautfarbe war kein Thema" (p. 166). Ellen turned to thoughts of running away and thoughts of suicide. It was not until she left her mother, met Africans at the university, and traveled to Africa and the United States (where she found her father) that she was able to begin her search for self on a new level and to return to Germany and think of it as her home.

Corinna's disappointment at age 8 in finding out that her Ethiopian father's wife was not her natural mother was compounded by her father's constant reminder that males were more worthy than females. As a child she often ran away from home and constantly dreamed of being a boy. She writes, "Mein größter Traum war damals, nach Monaco zu gehen und mich zum Jungen umoperieren zu

lassen. . . . Es wirkte sich so weit aus, daß ich nur Selbstvertrauen hatte, wenn ich Hosen trug" (Oguntoye et al., 1986, p. 183).

The paradoxes faced in their daily lives did not naturally and immediately draw the women together. Interestingly enough, their fear and isolation worked to alienate them from one another. At once drawn to and walled off from one another, many reported the desire to meet other Afro-German women but also recorded the gnawing fear they felt when given that opportunity: on the one hand, there is the fear of being rejected, of offering a story that is somehow invalid or untrue; on the other hand, perhaps even stronger, ironically, is the fear of being accepted and therefore having to compete. Many report the annoying problem of being mistaken for another Afro-German by other Germans—these women were usually obviously dissimilar in appearance; thus, in the presence of one or two other Afro-German women (the numbers were never enough to make a meaningful difference), their uniqueness or exclusiveness, albeit more often painful than rewarding, was threatened. Katharina Oguntoye recalls her ambivalent feelings toward Laura Baum on the occasion of their first meeting: "einerseits wollte ich mich dir gegenüber solidarisch zeigen und andererseits dachte ich, wenn sie mich als Konkurrentin sieht, werde ich sauer und verhalte ich genauso" (Oguntoye et al., p. 161). Telling of their diverse yet common stories, though, is an act which brought them together in a collective expression of the self, and each testimony was a singular experience through which the elusive *I* of the individual became a part of a whole, an unwritten history. Doris Sommer (1988), writing about women's autobiography, underscores this as the prime purpose of personal testimonies, which are at once private and public and provide an escape beyond helpless solitude (pp. 109-110).

Despite the lingering misgivings of some who feel, like Angelika Eisenbrandt, that "Die Schwierigkeiten mit meiner Hautfarbe . . . ich noch nicht ganz abgelegt [habe]" (Oguntoye et al., 1986, p. 193), or others, like May Opitz and Ellen Wiedenroth, who worry about neo-racism and neo-Nazism, as a group the women feel very positive about having offered their personal testimonies as a means of finding the self and a community and of celebrating their collective history. Their creative works reflect the changes they

have undergone, and their testimonies reflect the largely positive attitude they have attained. Oguntoye, who lived in East Germany, Nigeria, and West Germany, speaks positively about the process of growth and self-acceptance which has come as a result of the unique and sometimes still painful experiences shaped by the fact of her Afro-German heritage:

> Ich bin froh über die Vielseitigkeit meiner frühen Erfahrungen, so wie ich auch nicht mit meinem Leben als Afro-Deutsche hadere. Mit der Mitarbeit an diesem Buch hat für mich ein Prozeß begonnen, in dem ich lerne, bewußt die Möglichkeiten zu nutzen, die sich aus meiner Herkunft und meinem Leben ergeben. (p. 213)

NOTES

1. Gugelberger uses Freire's notion of theme as expressed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970, p. 86)
2. Other works of interest on this topic include Lester, 1982, and Harris-Schenz, 1981.
3. For further discussion of this topic see Gilman, 1985.

REFERENCES

DuBois, W.E.B. (1979). *The souls of Black folk.* New York: Dodd, Mead.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Herder & Herder.

Fremgen, G. (1984) . . . . *und wenn du noch dazu schwarz bist: Bericht schwarzer Frauen aus der bundesrepublik.* Bremen: Edition CON.

Friedman, S. (1988). Women's autobiographical selves: Theory and practice. In S. Benstock (Ed.), *The private self: Theory and practice of women's autobiographical writings* (pp. 10-33). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Gilman, S. (1982). *On Blackness without Blacks: Essays on the image of the Black in Germany.* Boston: G. K. Hall.

Gilman, S. (1985). *Difference and pathology: Stereotypes of sexuality, race, and madness.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Grimm, R., & Herman, J. (1986). *Blacks and German culture.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Gugelberger, G. (1986). Theme in our literature and we in theirs: Geo-Thematics reconsidered and reversed. In R. Grimm & J. Hermand (Eds.), *Blacks and German culture* (pp. 87-112). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Harris-Schenz, B. (1981). *Black images in eighteenth-century German literature*. Stuttgart: Akademischer Verlag Heinz.
Jahn, J. (1961). *Muntu: An outline of the new African culture* (M. Greene, trans.). New York: Grove.
Jahn, J. (1969). *Neo-African literature: A history of Black writing* (O. Coburn & U. Lehrburger, trans.). New York: Grove.
Lester, R. K. (1982). *Trivialneger: Das bild der schwarzen im west-deutschen illustriertenroman*. Stuttgart: Akademischer Verlag Heinz.
Lionnet, F. (1989). *Autobiographical voices: Race, gender, self-portraiture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
McLaughlin, A. N. (1990). Black women, identity, and the quest for humanhood and wholeness: Wild women in the whirlwind. In J. M. Braxton & A. N. McLaughlin (Eds.), *Wild women in the whirlwind: Afra-American culture and the contemporary literary renaissance* (pp. 147-180). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
Oguntoye, K., Opitz, M., & Schultz, D. (Eds.). (1986). *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche frauen auf den spuren ihrer geschichte*. Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag.
Shepperson, G. (1982). African diaspora: Concept and context. In J. E. Harris (Ed.), *Global dimensions of the African diaspora* (pp. 46-53).
Sommer, D. (1988). Not just a personal story: Women's *testimonios* and the plural self. In B. Brodzki & C. Schenck (Eds.), *Life/lines: Theorizing women's autobiography* (pp. 107-130). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Carolyn R. Hodges is an Associate Professor of German in the Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. She holds a B.A. degree in French from Beaver College (PA) and the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Germanic Languages and Literatures from the University of Chicago. Her major interests are 19th- and 20th-century German literature and comparative literature. Her articles and reviews have been published in scholarly journals such as Studies in GRD Culture and Society, Die Unterrichtspraxis, The Langston Hughes Review, *and* Urban Education.