Silvia Wojczewski

AFRODIASPORIC IDENTITIES IN GERMANY

Life-Stories of Millennial Women

From:

Aminata Camara, Maya K., Lafia T., Oxana Chi and Layla Zami are middle-class, highly educated women in Germany and come from families of mixed African European heritages. This ethnographic study traces the coming of age as person of African descent in Germany born in the 1980s with a focus on the city of Frankfurt. Silvia Wojczewski follows the paths of five women and shows how the practice of travelling is used as a way to connect to transnational families and to an Afrodiasporic heritage. Zooming in on five lives, she reveals the ways in which class, diaspora and kinship relations influence how the women understand themselves and their position in the world.

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Abstract

This book examines the making of African diasporic identities among middle-class women born and raised in the German city of Frankfurt. It approaches this by considering practices of travel, care, activism and storytelling on various spatial scales: local (Frankfurt), national (Germany) and global.

Employing ethnographic methods of participant observation, life-story analysis and family ethnography, the study – for which fieldwork was carried out in 2017 and 2018 – reflects on the lives of five Afrodescendant women in Germany, members of the second generation as children of at least one migrant parent. The author of the study was herself brought up in the same Frankfurt neighbourhoods as her research participants, which gave her intimate knowledge of the study contexts and privileged access to interlocutors. The book studies the formation of diaspora identifications through kinship on two levels: 1) the individual and intimate making of diasporic identity via engagement in transnational family life and history, including travelling to 'origins', as well as 2) the collective creation of diaspora and 'chosen family' through coalitions in Black (feminist) political communities.

The book is structured along three dimensions. The first, employing historical analysis and bibliographical data, locates specific case studies in the more general historical context of the African diaspora in Germany and Frankfurt since the early twentieth century. The second, employing life-story interviews and participant observation, explores the relations between dwelling and travelling among the study subjects over a timespan of more than 30 years. It analyses experiences as well as strategies and practices that the women applied to build Afrodiasporic identity. These range from seeking identification in Black American cultural production as teens in Frankfurt, via engaging actively in anti-racist activism, anti-racist education and literature for themselves and their children, to positive encounters with places of ancestral origin as adult women. The third dimension deals with travelling as an important practice for negotiating Afrodiasporic identity. The lived experience of being mobile is of particular importance for building transnational kinship relations and diasporic communities. The travels undertaken by the women range from a three-week trip to meet (previously unknown) family members to a full year's work placement abroad. Such diasporic journeys differ from both traditional

roots tourism and ordinary transnational family visits. Building kinship is only one among several motivations driving the women's mobility: others include learning and practising particular parts of their selves, seeking to embody Afrodiasporic identity in places they consider to be origins, and connecting with transnational Black (political) communities. Travel changes perspectives on identity narratives and allows subjects to build new forms of relationships, networks and actions. Last but not least, the book analyses coming of age stories and stories of travelling as narratives of the self.

Résumé

Ce travail explore la construction d'identités diasporiques africaines des femmes issues de classe moyenne, nées et socialisées à Francfort, en Allemagne. Il aborde ce thème en considérant les pratiques de voyage, de soins, d'activisme et de narration et en explorant différentes échelles spatiales : locale (Francfort), nationale (Allemagne) et mondiale.

Avec des méthodes ethnographiques d'observation participante, d'analyse des récits de vie et d'ethnographie de famille, employées lors d'un travail de terrain réalisé en 2017 et 2018, l'étude interroge la vie de cinq femmes afrodescendantes, faisant partie de la deuxième génération d'enfants né d'un parent migrant. L'auteure, élevée dans les mêmes quartiers de Francfort que ses participantes, présente une connaissance intime des contextes d'étude et un accès privilégié aux interlocutrices de l'étude. La formation d'identifications diasporiques est étudiée par le biais de la parenté à deux niveaux: 1) la formation individuelle et intime de l'identité diasporique en s'engageant dans une vie et une histoire familiale transnationale, y compris les voyages vers les « origines », et 2) la création collective de la diaspora et de la « famille choisie » par le biais de coalitions dans les communautés politiques (féministes) noires.

L'étude est structurée en trois dimensions. La première s'appuie sur des données bibliographiques et une analyse historique qui situent l'étude de cas dans le contexte plus général, depuis le début du vingtième siècle, de la diaspora africaine en Allemagne et à Francfort. La seconde, qui s'appuie sur des récits de vie et des observations participantes, explore les relations entre habiter et voyage. Elle analyse les expériences ainsi que les stratégies et les pratiques appliquées, sur une période de plus de 30 ans, par les femmes pour former une identité Afrodiasporique. Il s'agit de la recherche d'une identification dans la production culturelle noire américaine lors de l'adolescence à Francfort, de l'engagement actif dans l'activisme antiraciste, de l'éducation et la littérature antiracistes pour elles-mêmes et leurs enfants ainsi que de l'effort de construire une relation positive avec les lieux d'origine ancestrale en tant que femmes adultes. La troisième dimension concerne le voyage comme pratique de construction d'identité afrodiasporique. L'expérience vécue de la mobilité est particulièrement importante pour la construction de relations de parenté trans-

nationales et de communautés diasporiques. Ces voyages vont d'un séjour de trois semaines pour rencontrer des membres de la famille (inconnus jusqu'alors) à une année de stage à l'étranger. Ces voyages diasporiques diffèrent à la fois du tourisme de racines et de visites familiales transnationales. La création de liens de parenté n'est qu'une des nombreuses motivations qui animent les femmes. La possibilité d'apprendre et de mettre en pratique certaines dimensions de leur vie, d'incarner l'identité afrodiasporique dans des lieux qu'elles considèrent comme des origines, ainsi que le souhait de se connecter à des communautés (politiques) noires trans-nationales motivent également ces mobilités. Le voyage change les perspectives sur les récits identitaires et permet aux sujets de construire de nouvelles formes de re-lations, de réseaux et d'actions. Enfin, l'étude analyse les récits de passage à l'âge adulte et les récits de voyage en tant que récits de soi.

Par ses résultats, l'étude contribue à des discussions théoriques plus larges sur les relations entre pratique diasporique et conscience générationnelle; entre la classe, le genre et les expériences de racisme/racialisation en Allemagne ; et entre la pratique du voyage et la renégociation de la parenté.

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1. Introduction

Vignette 1: Afroeuropeans conference, July 2019

Sitting in front of the University of Lisbon with Mélanie P., a Swiss PhD student in sociology and also a Black activist involved in two Afrodiasporic and anti-racist collectives,[1] we compare this year's Afroeuropeans conference to the one that took place in Finland two years earlier. It was there, in Tampere in 2017, that I started my ethnographic fieldwork, an event that Mélanie P. had also attended. There are panels about police violence, structural racism and the notion of 'race' and how it still very much matters today in a variety of different contexts. Many Black political collectives from different countries are present: Afro-feminist collectives that have emerged in the last ten years; such as the Swiss *CAS* (Collectif Afro Suisse, founded in 2009), *Mwasi* from France (founded 2014), or collectives founded in Portugal in 2016, such as *Djass* and *Femafro*. The members of these collectives are largely women, partly because most of them have feminist roots. They connect with each other inside and outside the lecture halls at side events, discuss strategies and goals and share food and drink. After the 2017 Afroeuropeans conference in Tampere, Mélanie P. suggested that we organise a panel together in Lisbon with another colleague of hers, Paméla O.; fortunately, we now find ourselves doing just that. Our panel is about Afroeuropean and Black life stories. In the call for papers, we invited people to present their work on Afroeuropean life stories/(auto)biographies and specified that we particularly welcomed proposals that involved the creative performance of life stories:

> We invite contributions that can either be scientific papers that include Afroeuropean (auto)biographies or (auto)biographic presentations in the first person in all its expressive forms (performance, dance, spoken word, stand-up comedy).

Although our panel is the only one that specifically addresses life stories, this theme does appear in several other panels as well. Many people – scholars, activists, artists

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1   I use Black with a capital B to underline that this term does not simply refer to skin complexion. Rather it refers to an emic category used by people of African descent to indicate a political affiliation with other racialised people (hooks 2020).

– talk about their own life experiences in order to reflect on themes of home, belonging, diaspora, transnationalism or racism.

In our panel, we welcome two women who present their own life stories in a creative way.

One is a woman from Galicia, Spain, whose mother is from Equatorial Guinea, the other a woman from Portugal with a parent from Angola.

The Spanish presenter impresses me in particular. Tiffany López Ganet begins her talk by saying that she travelled to Equatorial Guinea a few years ago, which is the country of origin of her mother who migrated to Spain. Tiffany travelled there because throughout her life so many people had asked her: *Where are your origins? What are your roots?* She therefore felt impelled to go and 'find her roots'. She showed us a photo from the island where she had been: 'I can already tell you that I did not feel totally at home there, but well…', she tells the audience without going into further detail. It seems people in the audience know what she means as you can see many nodding heads. In her paper 'Black Microtales: Recreating Memories of a Bubi Afro-Galician Using the Visual Arts', the PhD candidate in Architecture and Education explains the stages she went through while dealing with her African descent in Spain. Tiffany talks about experiences of racism and being racialised while growing up. She remembers looking at a class picture and realising that she was the only brown girl. She remembers dancing a Galician traditional dance, how it felt completely natural to her because she was Galician, but how she was confronted with being seen as exotic by others who looked at her performance.

Today she reflects on these experiences as instances of racialisation, of being othered. Then Tiffany narrates the importance of finding relief as a young adult in a community of other Spanish Afrodescendant young women and becoming a member of an Afro-Galician collective. It was there that Tiffany could forge her own Afrodescendant identity in a positive way, feeling connected to others, sharing a racialised subject position in Spain with others who were also Black in Spain or Black and Spanish – with Black here referring to a shared experience and conscience of racial discrimination. After this Tiffany moves to another stage of her life, it is the stage that she is in at that moment as an adult woman, as she turns to her own personal Bubi family heritage, originating on an island in Equatorial Guinea, and a former Spanish colony (1778–1968). This is the land her mother, who migrated to Spain many years ago, comes from.

Through her photo collages (see Fig. 1), which she labels 'Autoethnographic microtales' (2017) in a published paper of hers, we can follow her life story. A thread running through her narrative is the care she takes combing her hair and how she uses the time spent on this task to reflect on her life – how with time, hatred of her Afro hair gradually changed to love – an important topic in Afrodiasporic movements around the world, where Afro hair has political connotations. In the collage we see an old class picture in which Tiffany is a young child, it marks her experience of being

'*la unica marron*' (the only brown person) (López Ganet 2017, p. 142) in her class. Then we see the face of her mother next to a man wearing blackface – it marks her mother experiencing being 'mistaken' by children for the daughter of Balthazar, one of the Magi or Three Kings in the Christian nativity story. We also see the author in front a mirror as a little girl – this refers to her wish to have straight hair like the other kids. Then we see her sitting with her Equatorial Guinean grandfather in a festive costume, and standing with her mother against the background of a Bubi village. In the final picture, we see Tiffany combing her hair. The combing of her hair becomes the arc for her personal narration of self; she finally learned to deal positively with being of mixed Bubi-Galician heritage and with being an Afrodescendant woman in Spain.

Figure 1: Collage and self-portrait, 2017 © Tiffany López Ganet

After Tiffany's presentation, Mélanie P., herself a Swiss person of African descent, thanks her and remarks that many things resonated with her own experiences of growing up in Switzerland – she can identify with her in many ways.

Vignette 2: On life-story sharing at the Afroeuropeans conference, Lisbon, July 2019

My intention in going to the conference is also to present my ongoing PhD research on Afrodiasporic identities in Germany, in which I use a life-story approach. I present one such story at a panel. It is the story of Aminata, a German-Guinean woman and friend of mine raised in Frankfurt in the 1980s and the life story of her father Lamine Camara, who came to Germany in the 1970s on a student scholarship from Guinea. I relate how Aminata told me about her life; how she went through different stages of dealing with her African descent (more of her story features in the next chapters); how she lived in Guinea for a few years with her Guinean father and German mother as a child, feeling more like a German expat than a Guinean repatriate; how she turned to Black American culture for identification as

a teenager as a way to define her African descent other than through her Guinean father and how today, as an adult woman with children of her own, Aminata is again seeking to learn more about her West African and Guinean origins and include this understanding in her everyday life.

After my presentation, I take a question from a young Portuguese Afrodescendant woman, she must be in her late twenties or early thirties. She wonders if I am planning to make a model out of the case that I presented. 'A model…?' I ask. The young woman goes on to specify that the process I describe for Aminata resonated with her own experiences. Being Portuguese, she did not grow up in Germany like Aminata, but she too had a father who emigrated from an African country and also grew up heavily influenced by Black American culture in her self-identity as a teenager. Moreover, as an adult woman today, she too has begun to deal more consciously with her African heritage and family history.

Problem statement and research questions

The biographies of young women and men of African descent presented at the various panels using diverse artistic and academic means at the Afroeuropeans conference in Lisbon – although being different in many personal or social and cultural aspects – also have certain aspects in common: Most of them grew up in the 1980s as children of African migrants and are thus part of the so-called second generation; as it is an academic conference, they are highly educated and mostly belong to an urban middle class. Many of them have experiences of being 'migrantised',[2] a term used by the German historian Fatima El-Tayeb (2016). Migrantisation in this sense means the act of treating people with a non-European background as eternal newcomers in public discourse – no matter how many generations they have already been living in a country.[3] The women grew up in surroundings where they were perceived as different from the norm of what it meant to be Spanish or Galician, German, French, Swiss or Portuguese, because they were perceived as not white. They were influenced by African American cultural production in their personal identification as Black people when they were teenagers. Many began to search for collectives formed by people of African descent with whom they could share their experiences of racialisation and racism. And, last but not least, many began to engage with

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2   The original German term is *Migrantisierung*.

3   This process is well exemplified in the practice of naming children of non-European migrants 'second generation migrant'. It is a form of racialisation, because it applies mostly to people who are considered as non-white. The term racialisation refers to the process of constructing differences between people based on phenotype but without the hierarchical judgement that is inherent in racism (Guillaumin 1972).

their own particular African origins and the search for family history by travelling to their parents' countries of origin or countries with which they felt a sense of cultural closeness when they were adults.

The two vignettes this book begins with speak to the role of life storytelling and sharing in constructing Afrodiasporic identities, which is what my work is about. It is specifically about the making of diasporic identities for young middle-class Afrodescendant women in Germany. Both vignettes speak to an intersubjective construction of self: how others can identify with the stories we tell. In the first vignette, Tiffany Lopez Ganet described different stages of dealing with her Afrodiasporic heritage, and they resonated with other scholars of African descent at the conference – especially with the younger generation. In the second vignette, the story I presented of Aminata and her father was a stimulus for the young Portuguese woman to think about her own life. She saw similarities between herself and Aminata.

I am very glad to have had that young woman tell me how she could relate to the story of Aminata. I informed her that, although I was not planning on defining a model, I was indeed interested in researching the connection that she felt. The reason I do not want to define a model is because a model is a rigid and predictive construction which tries to take the personal out of the equation; my take on researching Afrodiasporic identity constructions is more dialogical and personal. However, I am still interested in looking at differences, similarities and patterns that do emerge in the life stories I analyse. What I want to describe are the processes that make it possible for a person to identify with others from the same generation across different countries and continents. I seek to explain the process that leads an Afrodescendant person to identify with other Afrodescendant people in Europe; to analyse the common mechanisms of construction of self that result from shared experiences. I do not want to stop at the single story but to draw comparisons and explore larger connections. My rejection of the possibility, put to me in a question, that I was constructing a model is typical of anthropologists, who focus on the particular. In anthropology we do not do models, I thought. We illustrate complex realities and never take the subject(ive) out of the analysis. Yet this is not completely true. I do seek to objectify subjective reality by trying to understand under what circumstances (personal and structural) a subjective understanding and construction of self emerges and how it relates to others: Ethnographic work should create a ground for comparison and should contribute to answering the question of how the particular, the unique, speaks to the general. Webb Keane calls for a 'productive understanding of objectification' (2003, p. 223) when criticising recent anthropology for favouring epistemologies of intimacy, rather than estrangement, as sources of understanding. He contends that an epistemology of intimacy is crucial for ethnographic fieldwork, essential to capture local meaning, but also asserts that, for understanding individual experiences, 'the estrangement' or analytical distance that follows fieldwork is as crucial.

Keane suggests that even self-interpretation does not stick to the particular; the very action of self-interpretation already assumes some ability to self-objectify. Objectification in that sense relates to the ability to see your own experience as relatable to and co-dependent on others – as intersubjective.

The book engages with the lives of five women of African descent in Germany, who were all born in the 1980s and are children of migrant parents. Through their life stories, it explores experiences of growing up in a German city and follows the relations they built to their respective places of ancestral origin. In the cases of the women I follow for my work, hearing and reading about the lives of other women of African descent helped them to de-singularise their own experiences. One important part of their life stories are experiences of travelling to ancestral homelands – where 'origins' are not necessarily the places of origin of their parents but closely related; these experiences are connected to their coming of age as Afrodescendant people in Germany. This book examines how practices of kinship, storytelling and travelling contribute to self-construction and the creation of belonging to Afrodiasporic communities. It shows how becoming part of different communities (transnational families, political networks), sharing experiences and dealing with personal family histories of migration plays a role in the women's understanding of self as young middle-class German women of African descent.

The questions my work poses are: How are diasporic identities formed by people of the second generation, children of African migrants who grew up in a German city (Frankfurt)? What is the role of the country of parental origin in the lives of these women, how does it evolve and change throughout the course of their life, and how is the practice of travelling to one's 'origins' related to the construction of diasporic identity? And, last but not least, what is the role of life storytelling for the construction of self and community?

In examining the diasporic identity-building processes of the women, this book emphasises their socioeconomic conditions, taking the intersection of race/racialisation, gender and class as the basis for analysing their accounts and experiences. The additional dimension of kinship also emerged as important on two levels for studying the creation of African diasporic identities: In terms of both the individual and intimate making of diasporic identity by engaging in transnational family life and history, including travelling to origins, and in the form of the collective creation of diaspora communities through coalitions in Black (feminist) political communities where life stories are used as vehicles to convey a sense of community and 'chosen family' (Weston 1997). These identity-building processes are examined through three spatial scales: the local/national – looking at how the women grew up in the German city of Frankfurt; the transnational – focussing on the construction of transnational family ties in the African countries of ancestral origin; and the global – considering the connections with globally entangled African diaspora communities.

The aim of this work is to contribute not only to the presentation of life stories but also to the analysis of how stories of a life can reveal identity-building processes, how they are used to create a coherent self and to connect with others. The person-centred approach of following the lives of five women in depth allows me to delve into the everyday practices and understandings of these women's self-fashioning and to learn about their relations to parents, extended kin and friends. The fact that I have known two of the women since we were children in school allowed for an in-depth understanding and situating of their lives. It also let me examine their situated understandings and presentations of self – in forums ranging from public events and conferences, to everyday conversations and experiences. The five women I worked with for the research all have academic degrees and are experienced in reflecting and talking about their lives and selves. Such an intimate methodology also facilitates analysis of how identifying as Afrodescendant is just one part of an understanding of selfhood that intersects with other selfhood markers such as gender and class.

Working with women

The study centres on women for three reasons: One is simply that I activated my circle of intimate friends in Frankfurt, which happens mainly to be female. I chose to include two women I went to school with and have known for almost all my life. It is through them and through our shared history that I was able to reconstruct what it was like to grow up in Frankfurt. Many of the results that I present in my thesis are the product of intimate conversations where they narrate their biographies and travel experiences. In some of these remembered moments I was there with them, in others this was not the case. It is especially our shared teenage years that bind us together to this day and which gave me the curiosity to explore further this crucial time in their lives and the significance of growing up as a woman of African descent. In particular, I am intrigued by the role of the particular 'geography of Blackness' of the city of Frankfurt, which was influenced by the presence of US troops and their entertainment infrastructure in and around the city and which we were part of.

The second reason that I focused on women is because I collected data at Black political network meetings at international conferences and these networks often have a feminist history and background. In these networks most (though not all) of the members are female.

And third, and finally, there are analytical reasons why I work with women: There is a gender component to my work because there are particularities about growing up as a woman of African descent – these particularly concern *techniques of the body*, a concept Marcel Mauss described in 1936. Thus, I explore how women who have been racialised learn to use their bodies in specific ways – how they move, feel and are affected by the gaze and actions of others at different times of their lives. And how they learn to take care of their bodies or to see and use their bodies differently by turning

to Black feminism. The most striking use is certainly hair and hairstyle, the use of the Afro and braids as a Black feminist symbol. Learning to take care of their curly hair and thinking critically about the use of chemical relaxer is a learning experience most of my interlocutors have gone through, and there are certain techniques and products that are associated with it – as Tiffany López Ganet explains in the first vignette: Learning to care for her hair has been about learning self-care too. This connection between body, care and politics will be explored through various examples throughout the life stories of my interlocutors.

The practice of travelling is also crucial as it facilitates a focus on the embodied experiences of the women. Being and living in the places they relate to via ancestral origins makes them experience their bodies in different ways, as well as experience different gender norms. This is why I chose to work with an intersectional approach (see below, section on 'Analytical approaches') that takes race/ethnicity, class and gender into account in the analysis of these women's lives.[4]

In my work, I have traced in depth the lives of six women, most of whom were born in the 1980s; five of them appear in this book. I will now briefly introduce the women and their families,[5] the main characters in this study. While writing my thesis, I asked my partner if he would draw my research interlocutors. Drawings have the advantage of being more anonymous than photography (in drawings you can play more with the features of a person to make them a bit less recognizable), yet they are still very intimate, as the person who draws is trying to capture a unique facial expression and indications of personality. The drawings I asked my partner to do are also meant as a homage to the women and as a sign of respect and gratitude for their collaboration. Mostly they underline that this work is based on intimate relations that I was able to rely on as well as to build further during the PhD process.

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4   Although the people I follow in depth are all women, men are not excluded from the study, as they are often an essential part of the lives of the women and appear as life-partners, fathers, sons and brothers.

5   For the sake of anonymity, I have changed almost all names of the people appearing in this thesis except for Oxana Chi, Layla Zami and Lamine Camara as it was important to them to be included with their names.

Aminata Camara

Figure 2: Aminata, 2020 © Christophe Schwartz

Aminata is an old friend from school in Frankfurt, the city where we both grew up. She was born in the 1980s and has two young children with her husband Albert. His parents are from Ghana, and he was born in Frankfurt. Aminata's father migrated from Guinea to Germany in the 1970s on a student scholarship; her mother is from Frankfurt and studied there in the 1970s too. Today, Aminata's mother works for a development cooperation agency and her father is a retired business consultant. They all live in Frankfurt. Aminata was actually born in Colombia, when her mother went there as part of an academic exchange programme for two years to teach German, where she was accompanied by her father. Soon after returning to Frankfurt, the family relocated to Conakry, Guinea, in the 1990s. They went back to Frankfurt again when Aminata was ten and was soon to enter high school, which is when we met and became friends. After finishing school,[6] Aminata studied French, Culture and Economics in Mannheim and today works as an independent media and public relations agent and does a lot of work as a moderator for events for and put on by Black people and People of Colour in Frankfurt, as well as for migrant organisations. For a few years Aminata has been co-organiser of the Afrika-Fest in Frankfurt.

Maya B.

Maya was born in the 1980s in Frankfurt. After finishing high school she studied tourism and urban planning, taking part in an exchange programme with a university in Kenya. Maya's father is from Sierra Leone and her mother from close to Frankfurt. Today her family is transnationally dispersed: Her mother lives in Germany,

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6   With the *Abitur* qualification, the holder is entitled to attend university.

her father in Sierra Leone, her younger brother in the USA. She is in regular contact with her brother and father via phone. Maya's husband Otis is from Frankfurt. His mother is German and his father is African American. They both work for a big development cooperation agency. In 2018 they moved to Nigeria for work and because Maya wanted to try out living in West Africa, but they kept their flat in Frankfurt. In 2019, Maya came back to Frankfurt to give birth to her first child.
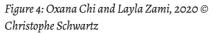
Lafia T.

Figure 3: Lafia, 2020 © Christophe Schwartz

Lafia was born in Heidelberg in 1986 but moved to Frankfurt when she was little. Her father is from Senegal and her mother is German. In Frankfurt I only knew her by sight – Lafia is a friend of friends and we made contact via Facebook. She has two children and is married to David, an Irish-German from Frankfurt. Lafia grew up with her mother and visited her father regularly. He lived in Heidelberg with his second wife and one son, Lafia's half-brother. Today, Lafia is a writer and a trained psychotherapist for children and teenagers. She is pursuing a PhD in educational sciences and holds a teaching position in psychology at the Goethe University of Frankfurt. Lafia's mother is from a small German town; she moved to Heidelberg as a young adult, inspired by the 1968 generation. She met Lafia's father through friends in her left-wing liberal circle. He had come to Heidelberg on a student scholarship and was studying economics. When Lafia was little, her mother moved to Frankfurt for a job while her father stayed in Heidelberg. Her father unfortunately died in 2018 in Senegal. A few months earlier Lafia had visited Senegal for the first time with him and he had stayed on after her visit.

Oxana Chi and Layla Zami

Figure 4: Oxana Chi and Layla Zami, 2020 ©
Christophe Schwartz

I met the married couple Oxana and Layla in Tampere, Finland at the Afroeuropeans conference 'Black cultures and identities in Europe' in 2017.[7] Oxana is a dancer, choreographer, filmmaker, writer and Afro-feminist activist in her fifties. Her father is from Nigeria. Her mother is German. Oxana was born in Frankfurt and grew up in Bochum, where she went to a Waldorf school, a private alternative school usually associated with alternative left-liberal circles. Layla was born in Paris in 1985. She is a teaching scholar, musician, poet and filmmaker. Layla wrote a PhD in Gender Studies about diaspora and dance. She has German Jewish grandparents; her father is French-German Jewish, and her mother is from Martinique and lives in France. Layla lived in Berlin for many years during her childhood and moved there again in her twenties.

Oxana and Layla met in Berlin at one of Oxana's performances. Today, they travel and perform together and both are active in Black and feminist networks. Oxana and Layla generally live between New York and Berlin and travel a lot for their work and artist/research residencies. The performances usually include themes related to the African diaspora, exile and feminism. I went to conferences in Cannes and Toronto with Oxana and Layla, when they were invited as keynote performers, and visited them in their homes in Berlin (2017) and New York (where they were based between 2018 and 2022).

Nina M.

Nina does not feature in this book because I chose to focus only on women who grew up in Germany so as to capture specific racialisation processes and experiences of

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7   Oxana Chi's website is oxanachi.de and Layla Zami's is laylazami.net.

racialisation and racism for children of the second generation who grew up in Germany. I have decided to mention her here nonetheless in order to show that even if she does not feature in the text directly, she has informed much of my thinking. Nina was born and grew up in Uganda in the 1980s. She has lived in Wuppertal for more than ten years now after originally moving there as an au pair. She is currently finishing her PhD in English studies on Black British literature. She has a blog called *The Afrodiasporan*, which she started after arriving in Germany.[8] I met Nina at the conference in Tampere, where she presented herself as 'somehow Afro-German'. After that I met her again at a summer school in Frankfurt and conducted a life-story interview with her in Wuppertal soon after. In 2018, we went to a Black travel symposium together and explored the city of Brussels. My encounter with Nina was very important because it was particularly through discussions with her that I started to think more about class and education when researching Black and Afrodiasporic identities. She also sparked off a lot of ideas for research on the generational question. Nina has a great deal in common with the other women in this study; although she grew up in Uganda, she shares many cultural references when it comes to Afrodiasporic cultural production, and especially media production. I wrote a fieldnote for the anthropological blog *Allegralab* in which she features (Wojczewski 2019).

Life-stories and anthropology: Between method and object of study

In this section I will outline the main methodology used in my thesis: reflecting on the role that life stories and family ethnographies have in the discipline of anthropology and their importance for my fieldwork, as well as considering the life story as object of study in itself. I will also outline how I analyse the life stories. In addition, I reflect on the themes of the fieldwork both 'at home' and 'on the move' in a subsection on positionality.

Although at the outset, life-story narration was only supposed to be a method for recording ethnographic data, it soon emerged as a central theoretical component of the research itself, once I found that it had an important place at Black identity events and for the construction of activist identities. Hence, in my research the life story is more than just a means to an end. I do not only use the life story as a method to research a particular problem but also examine the importance that it has in and of itself in the construction of self and community. I present and examine the life stories of the women I work with and at the same time I look at how they use stories of their lives and stories about travelling in everyday situations and at events and conferences and how this creates a dialogue.

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8   Nina's blog is at www.afro-diasporan.com.

The biographical or life-story approach is an essential part of my fieldwork; I collected life-story material from my research participants during fieldwork at home as well as while on the move. This material came in various forms: In many cases, I conducted biographical interviews, holding between one and three sessions and recording the results. This was the case for Aminata, Oxana, Layla and Lafia, and the results were very diverse, ranging from intimate conversations to more distant interviews where I felt that the interviewees were rather following a script. Often the interviews were a mix of biography and recollections of travel experiences at different points in their life.

The interviews were certainly all very different. Lafia, for example, asked if she should talk about her life in relation to being Afro-German. Yet since the question came from her, and because my idea of the interview was that she could tell me whatever she wanted to in that moment, I indicated that she should just tell me about growing up. With Aminata, the prompt 'So, tell me about your life' was all that was required. My discussions with Oxana and Layla revolved more around their travel experiences and how these were linked to their lives.

Interviewing was only one method of research. I also observed how life stories unfolded directly on various occasions during fieldwork. These included stage performances by Oxana and Layla as well as many informal conversations with Maya, Lafia and Aminata. Besides biographical interviews, I also conducted several interviews on travel experiences – travels that my participants perceived as existentially important to them and important in shaping their lives in various ways.

Although it is not the most common method, anthropology has a long tradition of using life stories to illustrate how life is lived and perceived in a certain time and place. These biographical narratives have the power to illustrate both the possibilities and limits that a person has as an agent in various organisations (family, the state, the system of production) and shows how they negotiate belonging to these different groups, taking into account a larger historical context. The autobiographical accounts are not objective illustrations of facts; they are experiences turned into memories and shaped to make sense and to present a coherent version of self (Linde 1993). The anthropologist Annika Lems, who used the method of life story in her work writes that 'life stories focus on the cultural scripts and narrative devices that individuals use to make sense of experience' (2018, p. 43). Through telling the stories of particular individuals – or rather, letting them tell their stories – showing a specific lifeworld and specific practices, ethnography seeks to demonstrate how the meaning of the world and of the self is produced by a person.

The use of life stories has a particularly long tradition in the anthropology of women and feminist anthropology (Birx 2006, Hopkins 2001). It started with Marjorie Shostak's classic *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (1981). Shostak includes many transcripts of the life story told by Nisa in her own words. These direct citations alternate with Shostak's own introductions of given aspects of !Kung life.

The two voices remain separate in this ethnography. This is not the same in other examples: Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman* (1993) and Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (1991) also focus on the life of one particular woman in their participatory fieldwork. In those ethnographies, the authors place a particular importance on the relation between themselves and their main characters and reflect upon their own role in the field while also giving space to the voice of their interlocutors. The relationship and the auto-ethnography are included as organic parts of these books. It is this possibility of including the dialogue and relationship between interlocutor and researcher that motivated me to use the life story as a method.

Other ethnographies utilise the life story as well. They include Sidney Mintz's *Worker in the Cane: A Puerto Rican Life History* (1974), Gananath Obeyesekere's *Medusa's Hair* (1984) and Lila Abu-Lughod's *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (2008 [1993]). These works focus on the lifeworlds of particular subjectivities to demonstrate how people not only negotiate, embody and challenge a range of identities and cultural symbols through their engagement and relations with the world and the people surrounding them, and how positions evolve over a lifetime; they show how people cope with certain social and economic developments depending, for instance, on their class and gender. Another aspect that most life-story ethnographies have in common is that the researchers have already known their interlocutor(s) for many years and have engaged in previous fieldwork with them. In my case this is even more pronounced: I have known some of the women I work with since childhood, which allowed for a very intimate and in-depth portrait of their lives. While most ethnographers use the life story as a method, they do not analyse the function it has for the person telling it, which is one important focus of my work.

The important dimensions for the analysis of life stories in this work are temporality and rupture in the accounts as well as self-interpretation with the help of fiction and the sharing of stories, which allow the women to identify with a larger Afrodiasporic culture. These two dimensions are important for understanding how my interlocutors make sense of their African heritage as part of themselves.

How can life stories include both the idea of a dynamic self and of a stable one? I analyse how life stories are used to create identity in the sense of Ricœur's narrative identity (1988). He argues that the act of narrating a life or life events mediates the knowledge of oneself to the self and to others and is thus a way to mediate and interpret experience. The individual does not know their own self as such, s/he has to use resources to interpret and mediate it for herself and for others. Ricœur's two conceptions of identity, which suggest a certain permanence in time of the self – identity as *idem* and identity as *ipse* – are brought together dynamically in the form of narrative identity. Identity-idem refers to the character of a person that is perceived as stable trait of self, while nonetheless being the fruit of history; while identity-ipse refers to an awareness of change in time but with an effort to stay the same.

For Ricœur, the narration of identity allows the combination of both dimensions of identity – the stable and the dynamic dimensions. It includes different stages and experiences of life and brings contradictions and change together in a single narration of self. In the case of my research here, narrative identity is an important concept because it focuses on how, through narration, self-identity is created but also on how identification with others – the construction of community – becomes possible through narration and the interplay between listening to and telling life stories. It is not the life history – a factual account of someone's life – that I am interested in, but how people put their experiences into stories in order to interpret who they are or were. The life stories of my interlocutors reveal the tensions between permanence and change, especially with regard to growing up in Germany as people of African descent. The othering they had to deal with in the society in which they were socialised led to specific forms of engagement with their African heritage during the various stages of their lives. Temporality is one means of connecting continuity and change in a single narrative strand. The temporal dimension in the life story, according to linguistic anthropologists Elinor Ochs and Lisa Kapps (1996), focuses on the transition from one stage to another and looks at how past, present and future become connected. Consider, for example, the life stories I presented in the two vignettes at the beginning of this book: The stories relate to past events, yet through performance at the conference they are connected to the present, mediated by the teller and a listening audience. The function of telling stories of the past is to make sense of the present and to construct the future, as one aim of the telling is to build Black communities through the sharing of experiences.

In my analysis, I draw particular attention to the importance of anticipated or unexpected 'turns of events' (Ochs and Kapps 1996, p. 27). Travel experiences are often described as such turning points in the lives of the women and for their construction of diasporic identities, especially through meeting with transnational kin.

The other key aspect of analysis is how these personal stories are inspired by history and fiction, and the ways in which these help to shape understandings of self. Ochs and Kapps suggest that knowledge of self becomes possible indirectly, through the use of cultural signs and symbols – tools that help a person make sense of their existence. How do the women in my research make use of history, fiction and other people's stories to make sense of their lives? And how does this help them to relate to a larger Afro-diasporic culture?

In their life narratives, the women become a kind of fictional character not only because they narrate themselves, but even more than that, because in order to understand their lives, the women refer to many African American cultural symbols, and use fictional characters from African and African American authors or other people's biographies to interpret their experiences. The narration of (parts of) their lives helps them make sense of transformations and change, and reveals how ruptures, contradictions and tensions are also part of a single life.

The purpose of telling stories about one's life to others and to oneself is to create coherence over an existence which is full of contradictions, coincidences and things that might not easily make sense. It can help create a sense of a coherent self or bring coherence into the events of one's life (Bourdieu 1986b, Linde 1993). The life stories that I heard were sometimes rather elaborate, as was often the case when someone was already used to telling (parts of) her biography because she was active in Black identity movements. The women would not always narrate their whole biography but rather bits and pieces to different people in different situations. On other occasions, I heard life stories that were less clearly developed and evolved. In these cases there were more moments where contradictions and conflicts evolved in the narrative spontaneously and were dealt with ad hoc by the person telling her story. It was never told in a coherent way from beginning to end, but the women always chose to draw connections between past and present; they talked of a past event and thought about it in light of the present. For example, when Aminata told me about school, she also reflected upon her experiences with the 'racial lens' she had developed as an adult. And sometimes, when she would talk about herself as a child, she would make a loop to her own daughter and reflect on her life.

Yet life stories are not only found in individual life-story ethnographies, they matter in many different ethnographies and notably in family ethnographies.

Family ethnographies

I have also sought to include the perspective of my participants' parents and was able to interview Aminata's father, Lamine Camara, in Frankfurt. Our conversation provides a good frame for the exploration of African diaspora throughout generations in a family (see Chapter 4 'Family affairs'). The interview with Aminata's father added a new dimension to my work. It gave insights into the history of African student migration to Germany after 1945 and how it was connected to the 1968 student protests in Germany. It also added the perspective of how a person who actually migrated developed a new relation to his country of origin. This interview shows how Lamine Camara deals with questions of national and diasporic belonging in relation to his children who were born in Germany. In the biographical interviews of the women in this study, the parents or the necessity to speak about one's parents is an important concern. On becoming adults, the wish to understand where the parents come from, the often difficult though loving relationships they have or had with their parents and the wish to build a connection to their countries of ancestral origin became increasingly pertinent. Lafia informed me that the migration history of her father and his country of origin, Senegal, began to be a matter of interest to her only when she became an adult herself, and that 'at a certain point after I started working in a migration project I realised that he must feel homesick from time to time'. Family also becomes important for my interlocutors when they have founded families

of their own. The fact of having children themselves and being confronted with the question of what they want to transmit to them culturally and politically also makes them deal more empathically with their own parents.

Including the family histories of my interlocutors responds to the idea already posited by migration scholars such as Abdelmalek Sayad (1979) and Stéphane Beaud (2018) that a family history of migration does not start or end with the arrival of a migrant in another country. There is a before and an after, too.

As long ago as the 1970s, the sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad brought a consideration of family and an intergenerational aspect to the study of international migration when researching Algerian immigration to France from the 1950s onwards and the different generations of descendants of migrants (2006 [1979]). Sayad uses an in-depth biographical interview of Zahoua, the daughter of a couple who came to France from Algeria in the 1950s. It is only after their conversation that he adds his analysis and some context. The contextualisation is supposed to give the reader the chance to understand and objectify to a certain extent the subjective account of Zahoua's life – to place it in a wider context.

A sort of continuation of Sayad's work can be found in the family ethnography of Stéphane Beaud, who in *La France des Belhoumi* (2018) writes with and about a family of Algerian origin in France, painting the portraits of three generations in France following the father's arrival in 1971. The anthropologist also gives a lot of space to the narratives of his interlocutors, especially the daughters of the Belhoumi family, the second generation in France, and less to the analysis of the accounts. Much like in the ethnographies of Behar or McCarthy Brown, the relation between researcher and family members is prominent in the works of Beaud and Sayad. Beaud often refers to conversations he had with the daughters of the family, how they exchanged text messages and newspaper articles, which gives clues about how much Beaud was able to learn from this very participatory approach with the Belhoumi family.

One of the reasons I chose to engage with life stories and family ethnographies is that it allows room to contextualise and reflect upon the relation between researcher and interlocutor, while also giving the interlocutors' voices time and space to develop. Yet I opted to take a somewhat more interventionist approach to the narratives of my interlocutors. I chose certain citations to discuss, brought up particular themes and circumstances in order to draw comparisons or to add a personal description. Description, analysis and context are connected in my work. Nonetheless, I also leave space for some stories to develop in their own rhythm and only intervene afterwards. Sometimes a direct citation is only a catalyst to discussing a broader situation. Bourdieu calls for an embeddedness of life histories or biographies in a broader context, as only that context makes it possible to give sense to the narrative itself (1986b). The context in which the interview took place is also relevant. Where was it, who was there, who spoke? What sort of relation is there between interviewer and interviewee? The interview situations were a common experience between me

and my interlocutors in which, by posing questions about their life, I tried to support a potential for self-analysis and hence a potential for objectification of self-experience. But it is important to keep in mind that this self-analysis is limited to the point that it is still a performance towards me as interviewer/friend with a recording device (in many cases) and that some insights might not be shared with me (especially when the recording device is on).

Most of the people I write about are in their thirties and fourties and have begun to found their own families – whether with or without children. Many of the discussions and interviews I had with them included reflections about their parents or about themselves as parents – as if the process of coming of age and of feeling that they reached adulthood brought about the need to reflect upon their parent's lives and sensibilities. In my research, which focuses on the topic of being of African descent, these reflections tend to turn around their African parent, most often their father, but their mothers are no less important in their reflections. In the cases of Aminata, Maya and Lafia (my research participants from Frankfurt), the relationships with their fathers during their teens were difficult and a refusal to deal with that relationship in the past has turned to a wish to reflect and engage with it as an adult. Yet the family ethnography that I propose goes beyond immediate kin. It includes transnational family relations and the challenges and opportunities they pose for the diasporic identities of the women. It follows the efforts, challenges and tensions of my interlocutors to become truly part of transnational families and to transform distant kin into family.

Positionality: Fieldwork 'at home' and 'on the move'

The life-story or biographical method is used frequently in the anthropology of travel and tourism, yet usually travel itself is at the centre of the research, as the researcher tries to encounter the person during their travels (Picard 2013, Leite 2017, Simoni 2018, Harrison 2003). I decided rather to place an emphasis on the home context, to really understand where the people are coming from and how their diasporic travels are a small piece in the bigger picture of their lives; being able to engage with my interlocutors over the long term was an advantage in that regard. First, exploring their home lives placed the diasporic travels of my interlocutors in a wider context – showing how they are connected not only to the pasts of these women, but also to their future plans and endeavours. Second, it revealed how these journeys are not only an important objective in themselves but also enabled new relationships to emerge and transformed existing ones at home.

Travel opens up new paths. For me, as an author, researcher and friend, the desire to reflect on personal history was something that drove me to include Frankfurt – the city where I grew up – in my work; my research is therefore in many ways an 'intimate ethnography' (Waterston 2019, p. 10) of a native anthropologist. I decided

to include close friends in the research so that we could reflect and analyse together how the city and our upbringing shaped us, but more specifically how it shaped the Afrodiasporic identification processes of my interlocutors. In this way, I was able to draw on more than 20 years of friendship and living in Frankfurt together. For my six months of fieldwork in Frankfurt in 2017/18, I tried to 'transform home into a field of study' (2000, p. 34) as Noel Dyck expounds in his essay 'Home field advantage?' Exploring the ways in which Frankfurt is and is not my home is important in order to explain my own position in the field. Frankfurt is my home in the first place because there are people there with whom I have shared intimate relationships over a long period of time, my family and friends. Peter Manning (1987) explains that there are two strategies for doing ethnographic fieldwork: Either you go into a field that is totally strange to you and try to make it familiar or you go into a field you suppose is familiar and try to make it strange again. The anthropologist Florence Weber has called the two types 'investigation through distantiation' and 'investigation through familiarisation' (Beaud and Weber 2003). The first field (the strange one) is well represented by the Malinowskian tradition of fieldwork and the social anthropological tradition, while for the second (the familiar field), the works of members of the Chicago school of urban sociology are a good example. All those researchers chose familiar surroundings of a sort, usually an urban setting, but still entered an unknown world within this familiar setting. The study by William F. Whyte, *Street Corner Society* (1943), is one early example of this approach, in which he undertakes lengthy ethnographic research in an Italian neighbourhood of Boston, Massachusetts. In a way, he was at home, if you consider his home to be an urban environment on the east coast of the USA. However, in many regards the field was unfamiliar to him, and he was not a part of the group he studied. He was still mostly an outsider in his field and needed to become familiar with the people and the neighbourhood he was studying.

Then there are other examples of researchers who went back to their native places to study a milieu that they had left and where a large social distance had grown between them and their birthplace. They had formerly been insiders in the milieu they studied. For instance, bell hooks studied the importance of class within families in her book *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2000) and described how it was for her to grow up in a Black working-class family and later engage in class mobility by means of higher education, becoming a university lecturer. More recently, Didier Eribon explored and reflected very personally on the habitus of the white working class in France in his own family in *Retour à Reims* (2009). These authors returned to their origins long after a distance had been created by social mobility enabled by higher education. They had, in one way or another, cut the ties to their working-class origins and returned more as outsiders than insiders. But they also explore how these class origins (intersecting with gender and race) influenced their social mobility and their lives in their academic milieus.