Race, Law, and Liminality: The Poetics of May Ayim

Eddie Bruce-Jones

Abstract

This article examines the poetry of the late Afro-German poet, May Ayim (1960-1996), and the theory and politics of her work at the juncture of law, Blackness, and Germanness. The article demonstrates that Ayim, through the images, themes, and devices that she employs in her writing, theorizes race, belonging, and citizenship in Germany by troubling the parameters of domestic, insular, and largely ahistorical focus of popular social thought around being both Black and German. Ayim draws on geographically and temporally liminal sites in which her experience and knowledge are situated, which forces the reader to engage with the importance of historical events, the immediacy of transatlantic discourses of racial violence, and the persistent legal, social, and political bifurcation of Europe and Africa. Ayim's insistent centering of liminality in her work allows her readers to identify resonances between her work and critical scholarship in a search for ways to more faithfully articulate the past and envision a diverse democratic order.

Key Words: poetry; Afro-German; Black diaspora; law; politics

May Ayim wrote at a crucial time in the changing social and political landscape of Germany—in the mid-1980s and into the mid-1990s. This period marked the end of the Cold War era, and the pivotal political turn, *die Wende*, marked by German Reunification in 1989 / 1990. It was also a period in which the European Union was refining its consolidation around not only a single market, but a burgeoning concept of European citizenship, as the European Community changed in 1992 with the Maastricht Treaty into the European Union and its subjects into citizens with changing rights, privileges, and expectations (Shaw). Ayim, rather than explicitly thematizing legal rights, reflects on the ma-

terial conditions of everyday life and articulates the need for space and language to express one's heritage and identity, and she thereby communicates a great deal about human dignity in contemporary Germany.

Ayim's poetic and academic work is important as a contribution to political and legal thought, owing to several factors. A primary factor is that she brought her own experience of identity and observations about power relations to a readership largely unaccustomed to a Black woman articulating her own conception of German life. Her ability to capture the moment in which she was living, and to do this as both a creative writer and a social scientist, blending affective writing with careful documentation and analysis, helped Ayim to persuasively express what life was like for racialized minorities generally, and Black people in particular. She authors a way of seeing and evaluating German life, from domestic ideas about race to immigration politics to Germany's standing in the global order, and she refracts the legal and political shifts of the era through the lens of her perspective. One second factor, as mentioned, is that she brings together broader political frames on German identity—both in the context of the global political order and its history of colonialism, as well as in the context of German reunification—as she considers life as a Black German woman. Whilst Ayim did not tend to frame legal and political issues as explicitly in her poetic writing as she did in her academic writing,[1] certain themes, references, and techniques are apparent in her poetry that engage with important aspects of the post-Cold War era of race and colonialism in Germany.

I argue in this essay that Ayim, in her poetic work, advances elements of a moral framework for evaluating and intervening in the logics governing race, Germanness, and difference at a crucial time in contemporary German history. As a close reading will show, several of her poems address continuities between colonialism and the present in order to locate Germany morally and historically. Ayim uses the theme of liminality to throw into crisis both German identity as such, as well as geopolitical borders and forms of racial capitalism that, in her writing, work against the moral integrity of a future she elicits in the imagination of the reader. In this way, some of Ayim's poetry can be interpreted to reflect not only the contemporary political and social moment, as artistic work generally does, but also a particular intellectual and ethical project that strives to both educate and inspire in its readership the vision of a possible future.

The Importance of Poetry

> We can train ourselves to respect our feelings, and to discipline (transpose) them into a language that matches those feelings so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream or vision, it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. (Lorde 36)

1 See for example *Farbe bekennen* (1986) and *Entfernte Verbindungen* (1993). *Farbe bekennen*, first published in 1986 and co-authored by Ayim, is widely regarded as a pioneering work that laid the foundation for much of the subsequent historical and political writing by Afro-Germans.

not the color of skin
the color of power
decides
for or against life (Ayim, *Nachtgesang* 72)[2]

Poetry is often able to convey complex social, personal, and political concepts and articulate patterns at the margins of recognition. As a form, poetic verse has the capacity to elevate experiential knowledge to a place of immediate social worth, by capturing banal moments of social life, in all their imperfection, which resonate with the experiences of its readers. Poetry is important because it reflects how people experience the world. It helps us to connect and, as Audre Lorde observed, it is "not a luxury," but a necessity for survival (36-39).

May Ayim is renowned for having translated her experiences with German racism into poetry and essays that would be studied, recited, and recognized by Black Germans for generations to come. Ayim was conscious of the significance and affective power of her story as an Afro-German woman, and she deliberately juxtaposed her poetry with critical political essays in the 1993 edited volume *Entfernte Verbindungen* to draw out the connections between these two modalities of writing. In her essay "Das Jahr 1990: Heimat und Einheit aus afro-deutscher Perspektive,"[3] Ayim describes societal changes that occurred just after German reunification, which resulted in increased violence against Black people in Germany as well as others labeled as foreigners (211). Ayim describes the marginalization of "non-Germans," racial violence in the streets, and new restrictions placed on the movement of asylum applicants from outside of Europe (211). During this time, Ayim wrote poetry, and she mentions that she began the year 1990 with a poem called "grenzenlos und unverschämt: ein gedicht gegen die deutsche sch-einheit," which translates to "borderless and audacious: a poem against alleged German unity." The German word that Ayim poetically invents, "sch-einheit," which roughly means "the condition of seeming or appearing" contains the word "Einheit" meaning unity, alluding to the process of East and West German political unification in 1989 / 1990. By situating this poem and its message centrally within her essay, reflecting on her experience of the year immediately following reunification, Ayim mirrors her poetic voice back into her political writing and social organizing, describing the continuity of experience across her different forms of writing, rather than maintaining a contextually disconnected body of poetic work. Ayim, after all, wrote poetry throughout the 1980s and 1990s, alongside historical and political essays on Afro-Germans.

Ayim's Moral Framework

Ayim, through several cues in her poetic work, gestures to the reader that conventional public discourse and, by extension, official and literary forms of expression in Germany marginalize voices like her own

2 Excerpt from "die farbe der macht" ["the color of power"]. All translations are by the author, unless otherwise indicated. Original: "nicht die farbe der haut / die farbe der macht / entscheidet / für oder gegen das leben."

3 Translation: "The Year 1990: Homeland and Unity from an Afro-German Perspective."

in relation to the ability to produce knowledge about German identity on the one hand and racialization on the other. These gestures can be found in both the content and form of her poetry.

In "einladung" ("invitation"), Ayim addresses race and the production of knowledge in a direct way, offering an illustrative example of a scenario meant to resonate with German readers as a familiar vignette from everyday life in Germany. In the poem, Ayim writes from the point of view of a White German person. The speaker explains to the listener, perhaps another White German, the characteristics of a particular Black woman. Ayim writes:

> it's best if you act
> very very normal
> just don't say negerin
> that would be catastrophic
> of course she knows what potatoes are
> no, you don't have to fry them you
> can go ahead and boil them
> her skin is black
> her hair is kinky
> : welcome home (Ayim, *Nachtgesang* 67)[4]

This poem is a commentary on the domestic racial order, at least as pertains to the racialization of Black people in Germany. The image of cooking in the kitchen as a vignette for exploring identity alludes to the powerful parallel symbols of the house as a physical signifier for home and the nation as an imagined home-territory. For Ayim, "home" becomes a metaphor for nation, and she juxtaposes the conversational tone established in this poem with the language of hospitality. In German, the term "Gastfreundschaft" usually means "hospitality," and refers to a way of welcoming an outsider into one's own domain of familiarity. The speaker instructs the listener on how to behave around the guest, the Black woman subject of the poem: how to speak to her, how to prepare food for her, and how to describe her appearance. The instructions are simple, and they read like a manual issued from a White German perspective, creating a paradigm familiar to Black people in Germany that, on balance, divests Black people from authoring the parameters of Germanness.

The bigger issue at play, however, is that the White person is not speaking *with* the Black woman, to ask for her feedback or to involve her in the conversation, but only speaking *about* her. In some sense, the White person speaks *for* the Black person ("of course she knows what potatoes are"). Knowledge about difference, following this observation, may be understood by the speaker as legitimate only if authored by the White subject. This brings into question the receiver of the phrase "willkommen zu haus" at the end of the poem. The colon before the phrase could indicate a break from the first part of the poem, which could take the form of a change of speaker or listener, for example. In

4 Excerpt from poem "einladung." Original: "am besten ihr verhaltet euch / ganz ganz normal / sagt bloß nicht negerin / das wäre katastrophal / natürlich kennt sie kartoffeln / nein du brauchst sie nicht braten du / kannst sie ruhig kochen / ihre haut ist schwarz / die haare sind kraus / : willkommen zu haus." Note: The term "Negerin" remains untranslated due to its complexity and context specificity—having the rough equivalence to the English term "negro" in some contexts, and particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, but having the sharp offensiveness of a racial slur in other contexts, and particularly today.

this reading, perhaps both the speaker and the listener change—perhaps this is spoken by one Afro-German to another, reflecting sardonically on the type of exchange between White Germans witnessed by Afro-Germans. The colon could also represent a causal or direct relationship between the first part and the second part, which would suggest that "welcome home" contains an ironic subtext that this uncomfortable exchange is a characteristic marker of the home that is Germany. Both readings are possible and likely to resonate with any reader who has encountered this dynamic.

Beyond making this point about White knowledge production in "einladung," Ayim gestures in other poetic works towards similarly aligned critiques. She centers the lived experiences of Black people, particularly Black women, and other marginalized groups in her way of conceptualizing Europe throughout her work, which, for a reader of American letters, may recall Toni Morrison's novels and her reflections of this perspectival choice in her essay *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (3-11). For example, in her poem "blues in black and white," Ayim reframes the global order, inverting the concept of the minority. She writes:

> it's the blues in Black-and-white
> 1/3 of the world
> dances over
> the other
> 2/3rds
> they celebrate in white
> we mourn in Black
> it's the blues in Black-and-white
> it's the blues (Ayim, *Blues in Black and White* 4-5)[5]

This inversion reframes the centrality of White perspectives in the situations she describes in her writing. It echoes the dynamic in the previous piece with regard to authorship of knowledge, but it also responds to a broad sense in which the perception that Black people in Germany, and Europe generally, as a result of constituting a small statistical demographic, are capable of issuing only insignificant political demands. Elsewhere, her consistent engagement with Black music and thought and the history of colonialism[6] creates a certain temporal openness that would demand that seemingly contemporary local problems be addressed with attentiveness to historical and global power relations. Her analysis of the structure of racism in Germany draws the colonialist past into the present post-colonial arena and sets the stage for imagining a future for Black people in Germany (Arndt and Ofuatey-Alazard 521, fn. 1).[7] In "blues in black and white," Ayim makes the connection between the legacy of colonialism, contemporary global geopolitics, and life within unified Germany, marking that the celebratory turning point in present-day legal, political, and social life would also be an opportunity to reflect on the state of German racial politics. This is a contribution to a type

5 Excerpt from May Ayim's "blues in black and white" (translation by Tina Campt). For the original version, see Ayim, "Das Jahr 1990" 211-12.

6 Ayim, "sein oder nichtsein" (*Nachtgesang* 17), "jazz" (70-71), "die farbe der macht" (72).

7 I use the phrase "post-colonial" in the way that Joshua Kwesi Aikins and Rosa Hoppe, in their essay "Straßennamen als Wegweiser für eine postkoloniale Erinnerung in Deutschland" ("Street Names as a Guide for Post-Colonial Memory in Germany") describe it, not as an era after colonialism, which suggests a critical rupture from colonial logics, but rather a continuity of colonial logics even after the formal constitution of colonial regimes in Africa have ceased to exist.

of civil rights analysis, even if it is not framed in such terms, as it places racial equity at the center of the work's engagement with social justice.

Liminality and Ayim's Critique

The late 1980s and early 1990s marked a period of social, political, and indeed legal change in Germany and in the rest of Europe with regard to race. Legal scholar Mark Bell describes the 1980s as an era in which the social policy of the European Community (now the European Union) shifted to include measures to combat racism, alongside initiatives to coordinate migration policies of member states. This followed concern at the European Commission about the rise in European fascism, as evidenced by the increasing representation of far-right political parties across Europe (Bell 59-60, 61). In Germany, there was a rise in racial violence against the Turkish community, non-White people, and refugees (Panayi 265-66).

Ayim's poems collectively tell a story that provides valuable and highly relevant social observations that describe what it could mean to be "at home" in a place. The nation is often characterized as a type of household in public discourse, with the state as its protective, paternal head (e.g., the German term "Vaterland," or "fatherland," illustrates this). This characterization can also be seen in cultural criticism and legal scholarship regarding sovereignty, state coercive powers, and the rule of law (Butler and Spivak 1-6). The metaphor of the home as a physical and conceptual space, in turn, preconfigures the ways in which we talk about national and European identity on the one hand and what can be thought of as a choreography of people in time and space on the other. Even if the language of home proves too simplistic to be mapped onto the multi-valenced subject position of European identity, it is worth considering the privileges of feeling *at home* because the aesthetics of the discussion can add significantly to the stakes of belonging to the nation-state from the perspectives of Black people in Germany. However, it is also important to understand the limits of a concept of a stable static home, represented by the physical coordinates of a place, just as it is important, in metaphorical as well as legal-theoretical terms, to understand the limits of a state frame for understanding belonging, history, and the complexity of living, as Ayim states, "between the chairs" (Ayim, *Nachtgesang* 15).

The metaphor of home, introduced by way of Ayim's texts, elucidates the aesthetics of becoming a subject vis-à-vis a place. This guides the text through the processes of recovery, historical self-inscription, a sense of how space is regulated, and an awareness of one's own body and the violence perpetrated against it. This is an aesthetic that guides personal and political sensibilities of exclusion, injustice, and remedy in a broader sense. The metaphor of the home-place extends in Ayim's work to claiming a space, negotiating safety and privacy within the home, and

expectations around home improvement. With this general metaphor in mind, one is able to keep sight of the privileges and responsibilities that accompany having a home. It also evokes the English adages "to feel comfortable in one's own home" and "not under my roof," reminding us of the expected pleasures and ethical responsibilities of good governance and the privilege of participation.

Home and Refuge

Over the last few decades, the European Union has developed from a primarily economic community to an ever more integrated social and political union in which a single market has emerged and in which a large degree of freedom of movement has been established for its citizens. The coherence of the EU is foundationally linked to the relaxation of internal borders, but this has been coupled with the strengthening of external borders—the effect of which has been colloquially referred to as the creation of "Fortress Europe" (Engelbert et al. 136-39). The rights of European Union citizens have also been articulated in contradistinction to the more limited rights of non-citizen residents within EU member states (Sánchez 137-39). As a result, people living in Europe are not uniformly entitled to equal treatment or equal access to human rights, and indeed, many people who migrate to Europe from outside its borders are often met with the double burden of racism and specific types of anti-immigrant hostility (Engelbert et al. 139-40).

In her essay "Das Jahr 1990," Ayim notes that physical violence against non-White members of German society rose sharply after German reunification in 1989, citing asylum applicants in particular (218). When reflecting on her experiences shortly after reunification, she mentions the burning of an asylum residence (218). Her reference here resembles the notorious 1992 burning of a residence in Rostock-Lichtenhagen by members of the general population, including many self-identified neo-Nazis who traveled to the small city expressly for that purpose.[8]

In her poem, "die unterkunft" ("the accommodation"), Ayim offers poignant commentary about the burning of asylum residences as a structural phenomenon (*Nachtgesang* 73). She indicates both the deficiencies of the structure of the edifice itself as well as the inability for this type of housing to provide mental calm or physical protection or security. This housing, precarious and subject to literal destruction, extends the past violence of torture survivors into their present lives in Germany. She writes:

those who have the say
say it is a home
it is
not even a house

8 August 2022 marked thirty years since these disturbances took place. However, the twenty-year anniversary in 2012 prompted renewed interest in this event and coverage of the broader issue of right-wing violence and xenophobia in mass media. See, e.g., Dieckmann.

just a few walls
lots of people between them
a roof on top

[…]

fatima
searches at night for hands
of her children
screams
scare her
from every dream

in the unknown is
loneliness
in the distance is
the homeland
no home

in germany, united fatherland
another asylum home
burned
roof and walls are gone
the people are dead
only ash and smoke
charred
bones and skin

those who have the say
say nothing
most others
stay silent
too (Ayim, *Nachtgesang* 73-74)[9]

As horrific as it may sound, asylum residences have been burned on a number of occasions in parts of Germany over the decades since Ayim wrote (Fekete 19-41). Some of the incidents have been documented in mainstream publications; others have not (Jansen).[10] In October 2022, an asylum residence near Wismar in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, housing mainly asylum seekers from Ukraine, was burned in what is a suspected arson (Bayerischer Rundfunk). Ayim refers to "Germany, united Fatherland," which is a line from the national hymn of the former German Democratic Republic. The burning of asylum residences is a sad but significant part of the post-Cold War era in East Germany in particular, given the international recognition of the pattern of neo-Nazi attacks on homes and people, which highlighted the need to address racism and xenophobia in Germany and the rest of Europe. The European Race Directive was conceived and passed with the political leadership of a group of legal activists, individuals, and organizations, known as the Starting Line Group, whose aim over the proceeding decade was to develop an approach to countering racial violence in Europe (Case 221-26).

9 Excerpt from "die unterkunft." Original: "die die das sagen haben / sagen es sei ein heim / es ist / nichtmal ein haus // nur ein paar wände / viele menschen dazwischen / ein dach obendrauf // […] fatima / sucht nachts nach händen / ihrer kinder / schreie / schrecken sie / aus jedem traum // in der fremde ist / die einsamkeit / in der ferne / ist die heimat / kein zuhaus // in deutschland einig vaterland / ist wieder ein 'asylheim' abgebrannt / dach und wände sind fort / die menschen sind tot / nur noch asche und rauch / verkohlte / knochen und haut // die die das sagen haben / sagen gar nichts / die meisten anderen / schweigen / auch."

10 *Der Tagesspiegel* published a special article in May 2012 that catalogues physical attacks by right-wing extremists over the last twenty years, and several of the attacks have involved burning asylum homes or family residences.

Ayim describes the residence before and after it was destroyed not only to show the contrast, but also to note certain continuities. While the burning itself is horrendous, Ayim describes the conditions before and after the fire as equally tragic. Even before the house was in ruins, it was not an inviting space, "not even a house," much less a home. This highlights a tragic irony that distinguishes official discourse (this is an asylum home) from lived experience (it is not even fit to be called a house). It was gray; neither flowers nor colors adorned it. This imagery conveys the sense that the space, even in its intended condition, was ill-equipped for sustaining healthy life.[11] The house has burned down by the poem's eighth stanza, "the roof and walls are gone / the people are dead." Ayim, however, makes this description general because the reader is to lay these images over the imagined persecution faced by the asylum applicant in her country of origin. The asylum residence was not fit for purpose, even before it was destroyed by neo-Nazis. The conditions of the protagonist's reception in this small German city, meant to ensure her safety, seem not to have been engineered to support her survival.

This extension of the traumatic violence of refugees from their countries of origin to the countries to which they migrate is not conventionally described as a continuum of violence in law or policy discourse (Bruce-Jones 176-80), but Ayim's sharp characterization of the near indistinguishability of the persistence of abject violence in Fatima's life pierces through this omission. Part of this tragedy is that "those with the say / say nothing / and most others / are silent too." In other words, just as no one dares to speak of the burning, no one cares to speak of the conditions facing asylum applicants to begin with. For Ayim, this is not about the neo-Nazis burning asylum residences, but about the social silence around pervasive structural and institutional racism and xenophobia. The type of violence that Ayim describes is still a feature of the lives of refugees today and constitutes a key issue of concern for human rights advocates and social movement activists (Grieb).

In her poem "auskunft," Ayim reimagines the stillness in the in-between spaces as partially constitutive of her conceptual homeland (15). This in-betweenness is crucial for her, as it reflects the reality of her life, which exists in a format that is unspeakable with the available language and illegible in the conception of a home as a bound, static space. She writes:

> my homeland
> is today
> the space between
> yesterday and tomorrow
> the silence
> before and after
> the words
> the life
> between the chairs (*Nachtgesang* 15)[12]

11 This alludes to the sunflower mosaic that indeed adorned the side of the asylum residence in Rostock-Lichtenhagen, which was burned in 1992. Perhaps this allusion references the mere illusion of refuge that an asylum residence has come to symbolize.

12 Excerpt from the poem "auskunft." Original: "meine heimat / ist heute / der raum zwischen / gestern und morgen / die stille / vor und hinter / den worten / das leben / zwischen den stühlen."

Here, the poem's speaker insists on living "between the chairs," and having a "homeland" in the "silence before and after the words." Through an insistence on living within the spaces and silences, with their ambivalences and tensions, the speaker gestures towards an opening—one that inverts the meaning of the time-space of home and suggests an alternative mode of seeing the world. By extension, it does not privilege German nationality for its empowered position at the apex of citizenship rights or social status, but rather embraces the hybridity and transience of the "homeland" idea by investing in existence as "both and" and "neither nor." This in-between position for Ayim, being of both Ghanaian and German heritage but also inhabiting the *tense space* between these conceptual markers of her identity, resonates with the story of Fatima, albeit somewhat indirectly. Both women, Fatima and the author, have seen beyond the veil of the concepts of home, safety, and belonging and have experienced the limits of their serviceability; they have recognized the importance of their own positionality, along the lines of race, gender, and perhaps legal citizenship status, in being made to confront and ultimately divest from the equivalence presumed uncritical to exist between race and nation, safety and place, and legal and moral frames.

Conclusion: Contested Futures

> I began to get annoyed at the East-West celebrations and events, which never included the North-South dialogue. And in the women's movement, German-German was debated and celebrated, as though Germany were exclusively white and the center of the world. (Ayim qtd. in Piesche 59)[13]

Ayim's work is so important partly because of the time period in which it became well-known among Black activists and organizers in Germany—during the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s. Her observations about German life in that time period are as salient now as they were then, and she makes crucial observations about power and difference by engaging with precisely the types of metaphors of home and belonging that seem important in this context. Poetry in general and Ayim's specific poetic commitment to portraying Black life in Germany help to reveal what may have been important to many Black Germans, outside of legal or academic spaces. Ayim's experiences were, of course, not universal to Black people in Germany, but they did describe aspects that others could relate to (Hügel 30-32). More precisely, Ayim's poetry is important in shaping a social movement (Mysorekar 110).

May Ayim means a great deal to the Black German community and, indeed, her poetic work can be found rearticulated in other texts written by Black Germans over the last twenty years. Through her life's work, she created a discursive space that is still difficult to recreate in academic and political venues—a space that has been most vibrant in the creative world of art, music, and poetry. This space is one that births a new

13 Original: "Ich begann, mich über die Ost-West-Feste und Veranstaltungen zu ärgern, die den Nord-Süd-Dialog nicht einbezogen. Auch in der Frauenbewegung wurde Deutsch-Deutsches diskutiert und gefeiert, als wäre Deutschland ausschließlich weiß und das Zentrum der Welt."

language with which to describe power, exclusion, intimacy, belonging, difference, violence, and nation, among other things, as faithfully as possible to one's experience. These facets of social experience and political life are central to the project of human dignity, as they are accountable to those who have shared these lesser-known experiences. By opening a conversation in this space, one is able to communicate about the silence that enshrouds and threatens to smother it—and to comment on the unspoken erasure of everyday racism and build capacity for envisioning a future that answers her critique.

Ayim has contributed to political thought and the ways we might conceive of rights as well as the authorship of knowledge and identity in Germany. Does her focus on racial justice necessarily mean that her work is, at its core, civil rights work? It certainly was adjacent to the type of struggle that sought to achieve durable change and meaningful space for Black Germans in the fabric of German society. It was not bound to the language of rights as such. Her narratives were broader than this. Rather than focus on human rights in a conventional politico-legal sense, Ayim's work demonstrates the importance of truth-telling in the context of envisioning a diverse democratic order.

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