



May Ayim's Legacy in World Language Study

At last year's Foreign Language Association of Northern California Conference (FLANC 2011) I had the pleasure to present a double session on May Ayim (1960-1996), an extraordinary Ghanaian-German poet, scholar, activist, and speech therapist. Although Ayim was a prolific writer, she has remained relatively unknown to many Germans *and* teachers of German. However, her work should not be confined to German studies and deserves to be brought to a global public. I believe students of other world languages will benefit greatly from Ayim's writing. She integrated poetry with cultural diversity and anti-racism work, which stimulates students' engagement at middle, high school and college levels.

Some of Ayim's poems have been translated into English and Hindi but why stop there? Based on the presentation at our FLANC sessions, I'd like to introduce May Ayim and her critical contributions to German language, literature, and culture. I'll provide examples of (the breadth of) her poetry in both German and English and give some suggestions for how to use her work in teaching.

Ayim's *Diplomarbeit* (thesis) "*Afro-Deutsche. Ihre Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte auf dem Hintergrund gesellschaftlicher Veränderungen*" ("Afro-Germans: Their Cultural and Social History on The Background of Societal Change") in 1986 was the first scholarly work on Afro-German history spanning the Middle Ages to the present. Her thesis provided the foundation of the book *Farbe bekennen*, published one year later. *Farbe bekennen* was fundamental to the Black German movement and has inspired work in Germany and beyond its borders. *Showing Our Colors*, its translation, has made this knowledge accessible to English speaking audiences. Ayim was also a co-founder of the *Initiative Schwarze Deutsche und Schwarze in Deutschland* (Initiative of Black Germans and Black People in Germany, ISD).

Ayim was one of the first in the new Afro-German movement who dared to publish her powerful and often intimate thoughts. I want to focus here on her poetry, which has reached an international audience. Her first collection of poetry, *blues in schwarz weiss* (blues in black and white), was published in 1995 and her second, *nachtgesang* (nightsong), in 1997, with poems she had left behind. A translation of some of her poems, essays, and conversations, entitled *Blues in Black and White*, was published in the United States in 2003.

What makes Ayim's poetry so different from that of most other German poets? Her language is accessible, not limited to those whom she called "elite." Much of Germany's institutionalized racism was intertwined with her life, which she made public through her poetry. In the book *Farbe bekennen* (*Showing Our Colors*), Ayim exposed German colonialism and racism, which is still pervasive. Following oral traditions, she performed her poetry without reading it. She brought her verse alive and engaged her listeners' senses. She literally "painted" her poems.

The following "nachtgesang" / "nightsong" is an example of Ayim's *Wortmalereien* (word paintings), beautifully spoken in the documentary *Hoffnung in Herz: Mündliche Poesie – May Ayim* ("Hope in My Heart: Oral Poetry– May Ayim"), produced by Maria Binder and Dagmar Schultz in 1997.

nachtgesang

ich warte nicht mehr
auf die besseren zeiten
schwarzblauer himmel über uns
silbersterne dran
hand in hand mit dir
den fluß entlang
bäume links und rechts
sehnsucht auf den ästen
hoffnung im herz

ich räume mein zimmer auf
ich zünde eine kerze an
ich male ein gedicht

ich küsse mich
nicht mehr deinen körper entlang
durch deinen nabel hindurch
in deine träume hinein
meine liebe in deinem mund
dein feuer in meinem schoß
schweißperlen auf der haut

ich ziehe mich ganz warm an
ich zeichne die lippen rot
ich spreche mit den blumen

ich lausche nicht mehr
auf ein zeichen von dir
hole deine briefe hervor
schaue deine bilder an
diskussionen mit dir
bis nach mitternacht
visionen zwischen uns
kinder lachen uns zu

ich mache die fenster weit auf
ich schnüre die schuhe fest zu
ich nehme den hut

ich träume nicht mehr
in einsame stunden
dein gesicht in die zeit
dein schatten ist nur
eine kalte gestalt

ich packe die erinnerung ein
ich blase die kerze aus
ich öffne die tür

ich warte nicht mehr
auf die besseren zeiten

nightsong

i no longer wait
for the better times
midnight blue sky above us
silver stars upon it
hand in hand with you
along the river
trees right and left
desire in their branches
hope in my heart

i straighten up my room
i light a candle
i paint a poem

i no longer kiss my way
down your body
through your navel
into your dreams
my love in your mouth
your fire in my lap
pearls of sweat on my skin

i dress myself warmly
i paint my lips red
i talk to the flowers

i no longer listen
for a sign from you
take out your letters
look at your pictures
conversation with you
till midnight
visions between us
children smiling at us

i open the window wide
i tie my shoes tight
i get my hat

i no longer dream
in lonely hours
your face into time
your shadow is only
a cold figure

i pack the memories up
i blow the candle out
i open the door

i no longer wait
for the better times

ich gehe auf die straße hinaus	i go out into the street
blütenduft auf der haut	scent of flowers on my skin
den schirm in der hand	umbrella in my hand
den fluß entlang	along the river
schwarzblauer himmel über mir	midnight blue sky above me
silbersterne dran	silver stars upon it
bäume	trees
links und rechts	left and right
sehnsucht auf den ästen	desire in their branches
hoffnung im herz	hope in my heart
ich liebe dich	i love you
ich warte nicht mehr	i wait no longer

aus: may ayim. *blues in schwarz weiss*, S. 120-121

1992 May Ayim. *Blues in Black and White*, pp. 163-165 (Translation by Tina Campt)

Apart from discussing the content, rhythm, and tone of this poem (in all languages), students—in groups or individually—can paint scenes from the poem, make a video clip or music that corresponds to the text. Tapping into the life experiences of students, they could be encouraged to share in small groups or as a partner exercise (in the target language) what they would do in a similar situation of waiting and no longer waiting. Another suggestion is to ask students to imagine what would happen if the beloved person does re-appear and/or whether they also have “hoffnung im herz”/“hope in [their] heart.” A class project could be that students write their own poems and/or songs or create visual images (allowing students to borrow from “nachtgesang”/“nightsong”), thereby transforming the original poem into their own personal piece.

Furthermore, in the German language classroom, “nachtgesang” (“nightsong”) is a fantastic example for the study of grammar topics. For instance, students can identify separable prefix verbs in context, such as *auf•räumen*, *an•zünden*, *hervor•holen* etc., and their repetitions. Also, there are numerous two-way prepositions in the poem. After the teacher explains when the *Akkusativ* or *Dativ* is used, students can analyze the usage of either case in each instance. Finally, as Ayim did not use capitalization of nouns and punctuation in “nachtgesang,” students can employ their prior knowledge by capitalizing nouns and applying punctuation to the poem.

Ayim was born in Hamburg, Germany, as a daughter of a white German mother and a Ghanaian father. As a baby, Ayim lived in a children's home, was adopted in 1962 and grew up in a white foster family in Westphalia. She studied Psychology and Education at the University in Regensburg and moved to Berlin in 1984, her main residence, while traveling and working internationally. In 1992, she adopted the name Ayim as a pen name (formerly May Opitz). Her poems were often dialogues, sometimes with white Germans whom she mirrored and gently critiqued. For example, in her poem “afro-deutsch I,” she mocked the everyday racism she encounters.

afro-deutsch I

Sie sind afro-deutsch?
... ah, ich verstehe: afrikanisch und deutsch.
Ist ja 'ne interessante Mischung!
Wissen Sie, manche, die denken ja immer noch,
die Mulatten, die würden's nicht
so weit bringen
wie die Weißen

Ich glaube das nicht.
Ich meine, bei entsprechender Erziehung ...
Sie haben ja echt Glück, daß Sie
hier aufgewachsen sind
Bei deutschen Eltern sogar. Schau an!

Wollen Sie denn mal zurück?
Wie, Sie waren noch nie in der Heimat vom Papa?
Ist ja traurig ... Also, wenn Sie mich fragen:
So 'ne Herkunft, das prägt eben doch ganz schön.
Ich z.B., ich bin aus Westfalen,
und ich finde,
da gehör' ich auch hin ...

Ach Menschenskind! Dat ganze Elend in der Welt!
Sei'n Sie froh,
daß Sie nich im Busch geblieben sind.
Da wär'n Sie heute nich so weit!

Ich meine, Sie sind ja wirklich ein
intelligentes Mädchen.
Wenn Sie fleißig sind mit Studieren,
können Sie ja Ihren Leuten
in Afrika helfen: Dafür
sind Sie doch prädestiniert,
auf Sie hör'n die doch bestimmt,
während unsereins -
ist ja so 'n Kulturgefälle ...

Wie meinen Sie das? Hier was machen.
Was woll'n Sie denn hier schon machen?
Ok., ok., es ist nicht alles eitel Sonnenschein.
Aber ich finde, jeder sollte erstmal
vor seiner eigenen Tür fegen!

aus: may ayim. *blues in schwarz weiss*, S. 18-19

afro-german I

You're Afro-German?
... oh, I see: African and German.
An interesting mixture, huh?
You know: there are people that still think
Mulattos won't get
as far in life
as whites

I don't believe that.
I mean: given the same type of education...
You're pretty lucky you grew up *here*.
With German parents even. Think of that!

D'you want to go back some day, hm?
What? You've never been in your Dad's home
country?
That's so sad... Listen, if you ask me:
A person's origin, see, really leaves quite a
Mark
Take me, I'm from Westphalia,
and I feel
that's where I belong...

Oh boy! All the misery there is in the world!
Be glad
You didn't stay in the bush.
You wouldn't be where you are today!

I mean, you're really an intelligent girl, you
know.
If you work hard at your studies,
you can help your people in Africa, see:
That's
What you're predestined to do,
I'm sure they'll listen to you,
while people like us -
there's such a difference in cultural levels...

What do you mean, do something here? What
On earth would you want to do here?
Okay, okay, so it's not all sunshine and roses.
But I think everybody should put their own
house in order first!

1985 May Ayim. *Blues in Black and White*, pp.14-15
(Translation by Ilse Müller)

Ayim stressed that her humor had saved her. What else sustained her in a racist society like Germany? She loved her mother tongue, as biased and hostile as it is toward People of Color. She masterfully turned the tables, swung her pen as a sword, her humor as a shield, weighed every letter of the alphabet carefully, decided when to mold or discard it.

In the world language classroom, there are innumerable ways to teach Ayim's work. For instance, the teacher can ask students what they know about hybrid identities, such as Afro-German, and discuss this concept in the target language and/or in English. In the San Francisco Bay Area, it is likely that many students are familiar with and can relate to Ayim's struggles. Students can work in teams/pairs and create a dialogue, imagining what Ayim is saying in response. "Afro-deutsch I" also gives students an opportunity to reflect on the tone of voice of the speaker, her/his assumptions and prejudices. Students can read the poem out loud according to their understanding of the dialogue. As an assignment, students can present a similar dialogue, possibly reflecting on an experience their own, in multi media, e.g. as spoken word, essay, skit, slide show, drama, cabaret, talk show, or short film. I would suggest giving students guidelines for appropriate language use.

After meeting Audre Lorde and other Afro-Germans, Ayim found herself not so isolated anymore. The Afro-German movement was growing and then—the wall came down. Her experience after November 1989 she described vividly in the poem "*deutschland im herbst*" ("autumn in germany") as well as in an interview in the documentary *Hoffnung in Herz* (*Hope in My Heart*).

deutschland im herbst

es ist nicht wahr
daß es nicht wahr ist
so war es
erst zuerst dann wieder

so ist es

kristallnacht:
im november 1938
zerklirrten zuerst
fensterscheiben
dann
wieder und wieder
menschenknochen
von juden und schwarzen und
kranken und schwachen von
sinti und roma und
polen von lesben und
schwulen von und von
und von und von
und und

erst einige dann viele

immer mehr:
die hand erhoben und mitgemacht
beifall geklatscht
oder heimlich gegafft
wie die
und die
und der und der
und der und die
erst hin und wieder
dann wieder und wieder

schon wieder?

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

ach ja

autumn in germany

it is not true
that it is not true
that's how it was
first at first and then again

that's how it is

“kristallnacht “:
in november 1938
first shattered
were windowpanes
then
again and again
human bones
of jews and blacks
of the weak and the sick
of sinti and roma and
poles of lesbians and
gays of and of
and of and of
and and

first a few then many

more and more:
arms lifted and joined in
applauded clapping
or stealthily gaping
as they
and them
and he and she
and him and her
first once in a while
then again and again

again so soon?

a singular incident:
in november 1990
antonio amadeu from angola
was murdered
in eberswalde
by neo-nazis
his child born shortly after by a
white german
woman
her house
shortly after
trashed

ah yes

und die polizei war so spät da daß es zu spät war und die zeitungen waren mit worten so sparsam daß es schweigen gleichkam und im fernsehen kein bild zu dem mordfall	and the police came so late it was too late and the newspapers were so short of words it equaled silence and on TV no picture of this homicide
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zu dem vorfall kein kommentar:	no comment on the incident:
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im neuvereinten deutschland das sich so gerne viel zu gerne wiedervereinigt nennt dort haben in diesem und jenem ort zuerst häuser dann menschen gebrannt	in the newly united germany that so much likes to likes too much to call itself re-united it happened that here and there it was first houses then people that burnt down first in the east then in the west then the whole country
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erst im osten dann im westen dann im ganzen land	first at first and then again
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es ist nicht wahr daß es nicht wahr ist so war es	it is not true that it is not true that's how it was
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so ist es: deutschland im herbst mir graut vor dem winter	that's how it is: autumn in germany i dread the winter
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aus: may ayim. *blues in schwarz weiss*, S. 68-70

1992 May Ayim. *Blues in Black and White*, pp.
109-111 (Translation by May Ayim/
Ekpenyong Ani)

This poem can be used in teaching to explore German history from the Third Reich (Nazi terror regime, 1933-45) to today. Prior to reading the poem, I would ask what students know about Germany's past and discuss it in class. After introducing the poem, students may have many questions, which need to be addressed. Then, students could engage in some historical research projects on German history, study key terminology and current anti-racist initiatives and organizations (in Germany) on the Internet and in print. Teachers can prepare and provide some leads to resources, for instance, to the Amadeu Antonio Foundation. Teachers may also use this poem to discuss different kinds of oppression, such as racism, sexism, classism, homo- and transphobia in their respective socio-historical and cultural contexts. Beside all these lessons, grammar-wise "deutschland im herbst" ("autumn in germany") lends itself to analyze tenses and moods (*Präsens*, *Präteritum*, *Perfekt* and *Passiv*-present tense, simple past, present perfect, and passive voice).

These are just a few of my teaching suggestions. I ask that participants of our May Ayim sessions at the FLANC conference as well as teachers, who have integrated May Ayim's work into their classrooms or are interested to do so, send their suggestions to the FLANC newsletter so that this discussion can be continued.

Ayim left us a rich legacy. The courage to be true to herself, to fight racism with dignity and humor, and to be vocal and visible. Her poems are timeless, yet set in time, and in times like these we need to re-read her poems carefully, share them with our students, and encourage students to be(come) active world citizens. Fifteen years after her death, Ayim continues to live on in her poetry and scholarly activist work. Her passionate spirit stays alive in the documentary *Hoffnung in Herz (Hope in My Heart)* which I would suggest to show students after introducing Ayim and her writing.

A street in Berlin-Kreuzberg, formerly named after a German colonialist, was re-named in her honor as May-Ayim-Ufer, in 2011. Everyone is welcome to visit this street. How about a field trip with your students (or by yourself) to Berlin?

In closing, Ayim's poem, called "abschied"/"departure" seems appropriate. This piece speaks for itself, about how to say farewell. It is so accessible that students in the first year of language instruction can use it to study ways to say goodbye, the imperative, and modal verbs, as well as reflect on the existential question: how do we leave?

abschied

was sollen die letzten worte sein
lebet wohl auf wiedersehen
irgendwann irgendwo?
was sollen die letzten taten sein
ein letzter brief ein telefonat
ein leises lied?
was soll der letzte wunsch sein
verzeiht mir
vergeßt mich nicht
ich hab euch lieb?
was soll der letzte gedanke sein
danke?
danke

aus: may ayim. *nachtgesang*, S. 99

departure

what should the last words be
fare-well see you again
sometime somewhere?
what should the last deeds be
a last letter a phone call
a soft song?
what should the last wish be
forgive me
forget me not
I love you?
what should the last thought be
thank you?
thank you

May Ayim. *Blues in Black and White*, p. 166
(Translation by Dagmar Schultz)

P.S. As I am writing this essay in January 2012, I learned that Dagmar Schultz's film *Audre Lorde – The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992* will premier at the Berlin International Film Festival in February 2012, documenting Lorde's leadership in creating the Afro-German movement. Schultz will be touring the United States later this year with a Film and Cultural Festival, entitled "Audre Lorde's Legacy," including the May Ayim documentary.

Marion Gerlind, Ph.D.

Director, Gerlind Institute for Cultural Studies, Oakland, CA

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