

"A lot of little drops that come together to make a difference."

Katharina Oguntoye in conversation with Lena Fritsch and Mathilde ter Heijne

Katharina Oguntoye is an Afro-German writer, historian, activist, and poet. She founded the nonprofit intercultural association Joliba in Germany and is perhaps best known for coediting *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out*. Oguntoye has played an important role in the Afro-German movement.

This conversation was recorded in Berlin on April 26, 2019, as part of the artistic project *Assembling Past and Future*, which was later expanded for Mathilde ter Heijne's exhibition *Women to Go: The Personal and Impersonal in Presentation and Representation* at the Grassi Museum in Leipzig.

Mathilde ter Heijne: What does it mean for your life to be an activist? Was there a moment in your life when you realized that I have to get involved, I have to become active to improve the unjust situation I observe?

Katharina Oguntoye: In 1986 May Ayim and I published "Farbe bekennen, Afro-German women on the traces of their history" [see footnote 1] and that was the first book about black people in Germany. It was also the first written use of the term Afro-German. There were two older women of 60 and 65 years who co-wrote and the youngest was 14 years old. This means that we could look back on history. The older women writers were schoolgirls and became young adults during the National Socialist era. The youngest spoke about her own experiences as a young adult. As a historian, I have set myself the task of verifying these lived stories. The so-called 'oral history', which was told as a family tradition, in order to put these stories into the context of documented history. We worked on it for two years and our main goal was to make a book. The book was only made because it was a project in the women's movement and was then accepted by a small feminist publishing house. A bigger publisher would not have accepted it. They would have said that the subject of racism is much too complicated and so on.

Lena Fritsch: Was there someone between the different feminist voices with whom you could identify yourself as an Afro-German?

Katharina: Audre Lorde was then, in 1984, in Berlin and taught at the Free University. She asked us, May Ayim, and me to introduce ourselves as black women with our experiences, among each other, and also to the world. This assignment was something very special for us. We were young at that time, 23 and 25, and to be asked to speak for a large group at that age was a great challenge, but it was clear that we should take this opportunity. Also, because otherwise, we would not be able to complain later and say that others are doing everything wrong, or if others would speak for us.

At that time, people in Germany had started to think about xenophobia. It was slowly noticed that Turkish guest workers* were declared fellow citizens*. But nobody had thought that the history of German colonialism also meant something to black people in Germany. That black people are not only in the colonies but also in the metropolises in Germany and that they have their center of life there.

It was then important that we as a group, following the book "Farbe bekennen", developed this concept of Afro-Germans and Black Germans, to say that we are socialized here in Germany, we are also at home here and otherwise, we have equal rights. We can stay here, we can leave here. That is actually self-evident. Probably still small children grow up with people saying to them: "Why do you speak German so well and when do you want to go to your daddy's country?" That was the reality, the isolation, the stigmatization, the advantages and we just wanted to counter that with knowledge and reflection.

When we met with about 30 people in the "Black Germans" initiative, we mainly discussed topics such as what does it actually mean to be Afro-German in our lives? First, we agreed on this term, but then we also discussed in the group why some people prefer to say Black Germans because they don't want to refer to their African background but to their American background. We then said that both are possible, but that none of us will accept the "N-word". And that held. I find it fascinating that in such grassroots movements such decisions are worked on and also work.

Mathilde: What did this kind of work mean for you personally? And what did you achieve? In retrospect, what was central to bring about changes?

Katharina: For me, as one of the older members of the initiative "Black Germans", it was simply exciting to be in a room where only blacks are. To experience me in a different situation. Nobody comes up to me. Otherwise, I am always the only black among the white people and either people look at me or they want to talk about their holidays in Africa or something else. So, I always have to react to what is offered to me and then I had to do nothing at all. And that if I want to get to know someone in this group of black Germans - and later we were in Holland with black people - then I have to do something now. That was a new situation for me to be thrown back on myself and not to act on the situation as something special or different. ... I don't know if this is really a kind of healing, but maybe it's just a way of going on the road and being able to experience yourself in different ways and then having the opportunity to deal with the challenge in a different way.

Lena: How, would you say, have the challenges you have met over the years affected the goals and results of your work?

Katharina: At that time the edition of "Farbe bekennen" of 2000 copies was not sold in over three years. For a publishing house, this is of course a financial flop. But during that time May and I have continuously organized events and done a lot of public relations work. I thought that if I find

this information important, then I have to try to connect many different people with it. It's about the experiences of a whole group. May Ayim and I have given a lot of interviews in the next 10 years. With the initiative "Black Germans" we had an association in which many black people in Germany came together. We read to each other from the book, organized poetry lectures, and other events to make the German public aware that we are there and that we are a very valuable part of this discourse. And "Farbe Bekennen" always worked because it worked in the group, the community. It was reprinted again and again and there were still four editions in total that were published. The publicity effect of the book was very high. The book is still read by young people.

This process was very important. At the same time, "Farbe Bekennen" was part of a larger process in society in general and also in German society, where awareness of racism took place. It started in the USA and also in England, and I then also worked with colleagues from Canada. From then on, I am sure I have given at least ten workshops a year for 5 years to learn as a society. The subject of racism is very distressing, but nevertheless, the questions about the definition of racism and its mechanisms are important. The central question is: How can I become empowered to act?

We have been doing this work for a long time and 8 years ago there was suddenly a huge discussion in Germany about blackfacing. That was interesting because it has hardly taken place for 30 years. And then the "N-word", which is still in many old children's books, was discussed again. Take Pippi Longstocking, for example, her father was in Africa and the "N-word" was used all the time. The third thing that was then discussed in public was racial profiling; for example, that people are treated differently just because they are black, something that also mostly affects black men, they are often stopped by the police. How do I stay cool when I'm really stopped on the street three times a week, searched, and asked for identity papers?

These three issues that were negotiated in these years were, I think, a result of the grassroots movement with its racism awareness activities. The theory was already there and the discussion then took place in broader society as the next step.

The first step is that when someone is confronted with an accusation of racism, the person usually reacts with rejection: "That's not true". And that is what we have experienced as a huge explosion here in Germany. That was due to very crude racism. There was already a community around us back then. We had found a community out of positive motivation. But now there was suddenly also a large group of people who knew the theory. Then "Bühnenwatch" (2011) came into being with happenings and went into discussion with the German theatres.

In the 1980-is the accusation of racism was very loud, a taboo had to be broken. At that time the discussions became very heated because they were about lived experiences and stories. But that was important and good. Later, with a new generation, it was different, they were able to articulate themselves because they knew the theory and exchanged ideas.

I have noticed over the last 30 years that our work has worked. The terminology has slowly

changed. It took a long time, but at some point, people stopped using the "N-word". Then there were the words mongrel or mulatto. No one knew what to call themselves now. Everyone somehow found their own definition. And in the end 'colored' disappeared from the public, because 'color' is not a real word, but a euphemism, because you are colored. People just didn't want to say black. So, an important result of "Farbe bekennen" was to have introduced a new terminology.

Mathilde: How did you manage to create structures in which the necessary changes, so that people can confirm each other and stay together in the struggle, can last? Your activist work was and is strongly influenced by enabling dialogue and giving space to and creating opportunities for other people to perform?

Katharina: In 1997 we founded Joliba (<http://www.joliba-online.de/>). Joliba means a big river and is the name of the Niger. That was our image that in Joliba there are many small drops that come together to make a difference. It was very difficult at the beginning. Germany was quite good in the 1980s. Projects were supported there, culture was supported there and when we started, unfortunately, that was just over and we could not get any financial support. In other words, we were dependent on each other. Many people volunteered. That was difficult, but also an advantage, because the people who were in the project wanted to be there, they were there because of the content and topics.

Joliba is an association in which social work is done, and on the other hand, art and culture are very important. Art was always important to me personally. Because art can be wonderfully used to work on this topic. Because racism is about trauma, injuries, about the unspeakable, art is a way to bring this up. In art, it is possible to explore and express social connections. And art can then communicate this to society. Of course, art also has the element of healing, which is included as an option: the cathartic overcoming of pain and separation.

In the USA, there has been a Black History Month for a while now, where information about black culture and history was provided, and we introduced a Black History Month in Germany 12 years ago. And when we stopped after 10 years, a colleague came to us and said that there are so many black artists in Berlin now and they don't have the opportunity to perform. And so we started the "Black Basar", where, for almost 10 years, we made Black History on one day every month with exhibitions, performances, and afterward music. It was important to show: "Look, anything is possible, anything exists." Today there are many other institutions that have taken over our role. Savvy Contemporary, for example, exists since 2009 and other great institutions have taken over our work. Then we gave up that part of the work and did a closing event.

That's how I approach my activist work, first of all, to always find positive and interesting elements. I don't want to constantly deal with how terrible the world is. And if you are dealing with this issue of racism or you try to live together with several cultures, if you want to bring this into society in a positive way, then you have to find motivation: Why do I want this and where is

my limit? That's what's a bit missing in Germany, that people don't know what it means to be German. But for the Afro-Germans, it was so that they had to think about it because they were always denied it.

1. Edited by the authors' May Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye, and Dagmar Schultz at Orlanda Verlag. The collection is a compilation of texts, testimonies, and other secondary sources and brings to life the stories of black German women living in Germany amidst racism, sexism, and other institutional constraints. The book takes up themes and motifs that predominate in Germany from the earliest colonial interactions between Germany and black "otherness" to the lived experiences of black German women in the 1980s.