



RESEARCH ARTICLE



BLACK SHAME/WHITE DISGRACE: “RHINELAND BASTARDS” AND THE NAZI CONSTRUCTION OF BLACK IDENTITY IN HANS MASSAQUOI’S *DESTINED TO WITNESS*

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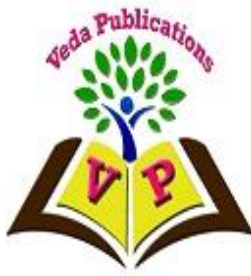
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ABSTRACT

Much has been written on the Holocaust, but the subject of “Rhineland bastards” as Hitler’s black victims of the Holocaust has not received much scholarly attention. They were marginalized and no one paid attention to their stories as victims of the Holocaust until the first study on the “Rhineland Bastards” was published in 1979 by Reiner Pommerin. In the wake of this initial scholarly interest in them, some of the “Rhineland bastards” started sharing their lived experiences through interviews, books, and autobiographies such as Hans Massaquoi’s *Destined to Witness* (1999). This paper investigates Massaquoi’s attempt to fit into German society. It also traces the process by which the Nazi construction of “Rhineland bastards” was extended to the entire black community in the Third Reich, eventually consolidating racism against blacks in Germany in the aftermath of the Nazi regime.



Keywords: *Afro-German, Identity, Migration, Nazism, Race.*



INTRODUCTION

The post-World War I period of Germany started with a campaign of calumny against the “Rhineland Bastards” who were products of the relationships between the occupation black French soldiers and German women. Campt argues that the German society’s first responses to the black population were articulated through a discourse of purity and pollution that constituted Black Germans as a danger to the German body politic (Campt 44). The presence of black French soldiers and their romantic relationships with German women put the spotlight on the black community in Germany which was not given attention to prior to that period due to the small number of Blacks living in Germany during that period. Many relationships and marriages resulted from those soldiers' presence in the Rhineland. From these relationships were born brown “Mischlinge,” “mixed blood” or “half breed” children.

Before Hitler’s rise to power, there was therefore a small but invisible Afro-German community consisting of offspring from relationship between German women and black French soldiers, which, according to the Nazi terminology were called “Rhineland Bastards.” As Campt explains, the term “Rhineland bastard” was coined during a 1919-22 newspaper campaign. The image of the black population was created by four powerful discourses:

First, as a scientific discourse on race as a biologically immutable category of human difference. Second, as the consequence of racial mixture seen as endangerment and a threat to racial purity. Third, as a colonial discourse on racial mixture based on the debate of mixed marriages in German colonies.

Fourth, as the discourse of German victimhood (Campt 67).

The presence of “Rhineland Bastards” stirred up hate in German nationalists who began an anti-black campaign in newspapers, books, pamphlets, and caricatures. Felix Ayanbode posits that the identity construction of black people in Nazi Germany was also shaped by the colonial encounters of Germans with Africans (Ayanbode 227). Nazis perceived the existence of the “Rhineland Bastards” as a humiliation and a reminder of Germany’s defeat in World War I; Hitler called them a national shame to Germany and a threat to the purity of the “Aryan race.” Thus, the “Rhineland Bastards” became the “Other,” that is the other from within rather than without. Ania Loomba suggests that “colonialism had a lot to do with the objectification of the ‘other’ and the propagation of subjectivities about the ‘other,’ i.e. other races who were considered to be inferior to the Aryan race” (Loomba 47). In the case of the “Rhineland Bastards,” their “Otherness” was disturbing in its visibility and therefore generated fear and panic. As Michelle Wright puts it, “the respective constructions by Jefferson, Hegel, and Gobineau of the Black as either an Other-from-within or an Other-from-without produce different variations of Black Others (and white subjects) that are important to understanding the variations in Black subject construction that are ultimately derived from these original discourses” (Wright 13). Hence, as insiders they became outsiders because of their skin color.

Romantic relationships and sexual encounters of African soldiers with German women were seen to lead to racial pollution and miscegenation. Thus, the



children from those relationships were kept out of the “Volksgemeinschaft,” a Nazi term to indicate a people’s community, knit together by blood and history and having a national sense of community and nationhood. This paper argues that the Nazi construction of black identity made them consider Afro-Germans as a danger to Aryanisation, enemies of the Germanhood and outsiders even though they were insiders. It investigates Massaquoi’s attempt to fit into German society. Furthermore, it also traces the process by which the Nazi construction of “Rhineland bastards” was extended to the entire black community in the Third Reich, eventually consolidating racism against blacks in Germany in the aftermath of the Nazi regime.

“RHINELAND BASTARDS” AND THE NAZI RACIAL STATE

The foundation for the discourse on the “Rhineland Bastards” was laid during Germany’s colonial period and the resulting debates on the legitimacy of “Mischehen,” mixed marriages, between German men and African women. The issue of the legality and citizenship of the progeny of “Mischehen” was later the subject of heated debates in the German parliament of 1912. The pre-WW I discourse on mixed marriages was articulated along the lines of racial mixture, racial pollution, and racial parity. Some German parliament members could not imagine a “Mischling” – a “mulatto” who is not a pure Aryan – claiming German citizenship. The “Mischling” therefore becomes a common enemy to German racial purity and embodies the danger of racial pollution. As Chukwudi Eze explains it, “Enlightenment philosophy was instrumental in codifying and institutionalizing both the scientific and

popular European perceptions of the human race. The numerous writings of Hume, Kant and Hegel played a strong role in articulating Europe’s sense not only of its cultural but also racial superiority” (Eze 5). All these discourses were already ongoing in Germany and other parts of Europe before the First World War.

The campaign against Rhineland Bastards emphasized that the Black French soldiers were rapists thereby neglecting the fact that most of these relationships were consensual and based on love. German men and women joined hands in this campaign. Julia Roos posits that “The men joining the black horror campaign was more about the fear of emasculation due to the loss of German colonies” (Roos 3). She suggests further that “Some police reports and victims’ testimonies suggested that sexual and violent crimes were perpetrated by colonial troops. However, evidence shows that European soldiers were much more involved in such practices. How then does the black have an uncontrollable sexual appetite? What about the civilized white soldier?” (Roos 4). Hans Massaquoi was born in 1926 during the hate campaign against these mixed-race children. The correlation of these children’s births with Germany’s defeat made life very difficult under the Nazi regime. Lusane Clarence suggests that “Between 1935 and 37, at least 385 Rhineland children were sterilized according to available documents” (Lusane 127). After World War II, there was silence about the plight of these children until the publication of Reiner Pommerin’s *Die Sterilisierung der Rheinland Bastarde* in 1979. Mixed-race children themselves also started speaking out about their experiences during and after the Nazi



regime. The literature concerning Germany's "outsiders" or "others" grew after the landmark publication of Tiffany Florvil's *Farbe Bekennen: Afro deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* in 1986, which was the first book that collected autobiographical narratives by Afro-Germans describing their racialized experiences and battles with identities as Germany's "others." It was later translated into English as *Showing our Colors* (1991). Florvil argues that the book's publication was an attempt at achieving visibility in a society that neglected and made the Afro-German community invisible. Besides, it was an effort to "discuss the challenges, meanings, and consequences of growing up black in Germany" (Mehring 142). Further, Florvil maintains that the creation of Afro-German groups by women as well as the books and article publications on the racial experiences on Afro-German women in Germany helped Afro-Germans generally create an identity for themselves as Afro-German. This identity creation counteracted a racial identity construction by German society, which considered them as outsiders. As Fatima El-Tayeb puts it "German blood is traditionally seen as a necessary prerequisite of national belonging" (El-Tayeb 27). Their outsidersness is due to the fact that German identity has been construed in terms of whiteness.

AFRO-GERMANS AND THE BATTLE FOR IDENTITY

This publication and many others made visible the experiences of Afro-Germans during the Nazi regime and how the constructed identity of Afro-Germans by the Nazis affected the lives of Afro-Germans in the post-Nazi era. Rhineland Bastards and Afro-Germans

Nazi identity construction was in terms of danger and enemy to racial purity. They were perceived as outsiders and too black to be German or belong to the Volksgemeinschaft. Many of the Afro-German authors chose to write their accounts of victimization of growing up Black in Germany using the autobiographical style. According to Leigh Gilmore, "as a genre, autobiography is characterized less by a set of formal elements than a rhetorical setting in which a person places herself or himself within testimonial contexts as seemingly diverse as the Christian confession, the scandalous memoirs of the rogue, and the coming-out story in order to achieve as proximate a relation as possible to what constitutes truth in that discourse" (Gilmore 3). This autobiographical endeavor relies heavily on memory—the memory of the authors or their family members or the memory of the locations of the happenings of the recounted events. In this case, we speak of autobiographical memory. As Robyn Fivush notes, "autobiographical memory is the core of identity. To a large extent we are the stories we tell about ourselves" (13). In other words, our stories play a major role in our identity construction. Autobiographical memory contributes to personal, social, and cultural identity construction because individual stories are reflective of collective stories and collective stories can share elements of individual stories. Julia Creet suggests further that "memory provides continuity to the dislocation of individuals and social identity" (Creet and Kitmann 3) through the focus on location and place, which "is one of the most evocative and powerful imaginary aids for the artifices of memory" (Creet and Kitmann 8). According to Richard Terdiman, "we construct the past. The agent of that construction is what I term



'memory.' Memory is the modality of our relation to the past" (Terdiman 7).

Hans Massaquoi's *Destined to Witness: Growing up black in Nazi Germany (1999)* is an attempt at retelling what it meant to be a "Rhineland Bastard" in the Third Reich. Although Massaquoi was not himself a Rhineland Bastard, he was mistaken for one because he was born in the post-World War I season and was Afro-German. This work is typically classified under the subject heading "Holocaust," which has long focused on the experiences of Jews: "His 1999 memoir, *Destined to Witness*, is being marketed by Harper Collins in the U.S. under the rubric of 'Holocaust Studies.' The publicity flyer announces the story of a 'young black child growing up in Nazi Germany' and hails Massaquoi's 'account of surviving the Holocaust'" (Mazon and Steingrover 1). *Destined to Witness* complicates our understanding of the Holocaust by portraying how Blacks were also victims of the Holocaust. It is a work that shows the passage from Nazi slavery to freedom. What differentiates Massaquoi's experiences from other Afro-Germans is its transatlantic, transcultural and transnational nature: It is actually an Americo-Afro-German account of a life lived across three continents, highlighting identity issues and outsidership and racisms. His triangular, transcultural, and transnational background influenced his attitude towards racism and the writing of his book.

Born in 1926 to a German nurse mother and a Liberian father who was the son of an African diplomat, Massaquoi spent his childhood in working-class neighborhoods in Hamburg with his paternal grandfather, Momolu IV who was the first African ambassador at the time representing Liberia in

Germany. Living with his paternal grandfather, the young Massaquoi associated black skin color with prestige and honor because he witnessed the honor and respect Momolu IV commanded both from the Whites and the Blacks at the time, "since my grandfather-a very dark man- was the dominant figure of my universe, with most whites playing deferential if not subordinate roles, I came to regard a dark complexion and kinky hair as superior attributes and accepted the celebrity treatment accorded me by the public as my well-deserved value" (Massaquoi 13).

However, he begins to experience racial discrimination after the departure of his grandfather. In point of fact, this departure would change his life and that of his mother entirely as it led to a change in social status and change of neighborhood-They would move from a highbrow area of Hamburg to a working class neighborhood. His primary school years were marked with several racialized experiences that left an impact on him till adulthood. The racial stunts played on the young Massaquoi came from his teachers, schoolmates, and strangers culminating sometimes in exclusion from the public sphere, "looking back, I can recall quite a few people who caused me grief when I was a child, but not one of them was quite as relentless, as consistently mean-spirited and cruel in his effort to make my life miserable as Herr Heinrich Wriede, our new school principal" (Massaquoi 67).

Growing up in Hamburg, young Hans Massaquoi had always thought himself to be a German who belongs to the German society until his various racialized experiences begin to question his Germanness. Unknown to him, he did not fit to the



German nation the Nazi were building. In an attempt to fit and belong to a society that sees him as an outsider, young Massaquoi ask his aunt to sew a swastika on his sweater as a sign of patriotism, pride and love for Hitler and the Nazi regime. Little did he know that his racial woes were linked to the Fuhrer, "thus, when I had gotten my hands on an embroidered swastika emblem, I had Tante Möller-who didn't know any better-sew it on a sweater of mine, where it remained until my mother removed it over my vigorous protest" (Massaquoi 41). By sewing the swastika to his sweater, Massaquoi identifies with the Nazi party and Hitler who he loves dearly and sees as the redeemer of Germany while being ignorant of Hitler's hatred for non-Aryans. He sees himself fit to identify with the Nazi party whereas the Nazi party seems him as unfit to put on the swastika being an outsider to the Volksgemeinschaft. Further, while Massaquoi's mother is aware of his unbelonging to the Nazi state, he is delusional about his belonging to the Nazi state.

Furthermore, with the euphoria of Hitler's rise to power and the establishment of the Hitler Jugend, Massaquoi makes another attempt to fit into the German society by applying to join the youth organization. Massaquoi's insider/outsider's status is revealed when he tries to join the Hitler Jugend, an organization that many of his classmates and colleagues had already joined based on his class teacher aggressive drive to recruit young volks into the *Jungvolk*, and he is considered to be ineligible, "when it came to what I thought was my turn to explain, I opened my mouth, but Herr Schürmann cut me off. 'That's all right; you are exempted from the contest since you are ineligible to join the

Jungvolk'. The teacher's words struck me like a bolt of lightning. Not eligible to join? What was he talking about? I had been prepared to tell him that I hadn't quite made up my mind whether I wanted to join or not. Now he was telling me that, even if I wanted to, I could not " (Massaquoi 99). Massaquoi's was made ineligible to join the youth organization based on his non-Aryan status. Thus, he was unfit to be part of an Aryan dominated youth organization. In an attempt to prove his teacher wrong, the young Massaquoi pressures his mother to accompany him to a nearby Jungvolk Heim in the neighborhood to apply for membership. Unfortunately, his application is rejected, "since it hasn't occurred to you by now, I have to tell you that there is no place for your son in this organization or in the Germany we are about to build." (Massaquoi 101). Again, Massaquoi fails in his attempt to fit into the German society. His application rejection shows that he does not belong, he is an outcast and an outsider. He is told not only to be a different German but an inferior one.

Moreover, Massaquoi tries to fit into the German society when he tries to date a white German girl named Gretchen despite the Nuremberg laws that forbade any sexual relations between Aryan Germans and non-Aryans, "gradually our secret relationship blossomed and our meetings after dark increased both in frequency and intensity. For a while, I didn't know what to do with my nonplatonic feelings for Gretchen and how to express the romantic urges inside, until one evening she broke the ice. I was just about to say goodbye in front of her house, as I had done many times before, when, without warning, she put her arms around me, held me tightly, and kissed me squarely on the mouth" (Massaquoi 171). By



engaging in a romantic relationship with an Aryan girl, Massaquoi knew the magnitude of the risk he was taking. However, his action is his way of fitting into a society that has declared him unfit. By doing that, he shows his equality to other boys and questions his inferiority that hinders him from enjoying what his agemates enjoy. When the second world war broke out and Germans were compelled to enlist in the army to defend the Vaterland, Massaquoi saw it as an opportunity to fit and belong to the society that as treated him as an outsider even as an insider. He was shocked when he was deemed unfit to fight for the Vaterland.

The loss of the second World War seems to have humbled Germans and sent Nazis into hiding which culminated into the reduction of racism and racialized experiences for Blacks and Afro-Germans. However, with the recent rise of neo-Nazis groups and the increase of racial attacks on people of color in Germany, the country seems to be operating under the Nazi racial theories that led the world into war. A clear example is that of Alberto Adriano, a native of Mozambique and who was brutally attacked and murdered by a right-wing youth gang in Dessau on June 12, 2000 after having lived for twelve years in Germany (Berman 5). Thus, the post-WWII progress that Germany seems to have made concerning racial discrimination seems to have been eroded. Nowadays, black immigrants can not move without fear of being lynched or killed and when such happens, the culprits are rarely brought to book. As Massaquoi puts it, "while it would be an exaggeration to say that, racially speaking, Germany is back at square one, the sad fact remains that racism in

Germany is far from a thing of the past" (Massaquoi 436).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Nazi identity construction of Rhineland Bastards was drawn from the racial theories of the German Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was constructed in terms of blacks being inferior to Whites thereby being a danger to the purity of the Aryan blood. Thus, this ideology was extended to Afro-Germans and Blacks throughout Germany in the Third Reich. In point of fact, Massaquoi's racialized experiences and his attempt at fitting into the German society were the result of the Nazi identity construction of Blacks.

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