



THE BIG POND

A US-GERMAN LISTENING SERIES

Showing Our Colors

by Jocelyn Robinson

Jocelyn Robinson: I'm Jocelyn Robinson, and this is a story about identity. Some might think it's a story about race, but let's be perfectly clear: race is a social construct, an idea or notion that people agree to accept as reality. The truth is, there's no biological basis for differences in skin color or hair texture or eye color, they're merely adaptations over time to a given environment. If anything, we're all the same race, the human race. So, while race may not be real, the experience of race, is very real. And historically, that experience has been complex. It's even more so for people whose parents have different racialized identities. I should know: my dad was a Black airman from Ohio, and my mother a white shop girl from Liverpool, England. I've lived that complexity all my life. In the U.S., laws prohibiting people of different so-called races from marrying one another had been around since the 1690s. In order to perpetuate slavery, they dictated who was Black and who wasn't. The last of those laws finally fell in 1967 with the Loving vs. Virginia Supreme Court decision, but they continue to have an effect on how we understand the concept of race today. To get a better grasp of this, I spoke with scholar Rainier Spencer from the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. As a philosopher guided by logic, Dr. Spencer rejects the idea of race, and questions the notion of one drop of Black blood, or hypodescent, determining one's identity. He says it's as much about whiteness as it is about determining who is Black.

Dr. Rainier Spencer: Hypodescent is the idea, the notion that when you mix these two biologically, the resulting child takes the lower status, so if you have a white person and a Black person who have sex, whether it's a white woman and Black man or a white man and a Black woman, the resulting child takes the lower status, which is going to be the Black status. So, we can say that the child is Black or if we want to be a little more nuanced, we can say the child is mixed. And that's, I mean that's essentially the definition of hypodescent.

Jocelyn Robinson: Or the one drop rule, as it is known.

Dr. Rainier Spencer: Right, but what folks don't see about hypodescent is that it also includes the idea that whiteness is purity, if whiteness is mixed with Blackness or anything else it

becomes non-white, so there's two sides to hypodescent. One is the side that says if you're mixed, you're Black, but the corollary of that is that you can't be white if you're mixed. As important as framing Blackness, hypodescent is about maintaining white purity, because it implicitly is, you know, a kind of admission that whiteness is superior.

Jocelyn Robinson: Spencer understands this fallacy all too well; he's also lived this experience. His parents met in Nuremburg in 1954. His father was a Black soldier from Oklahoma, and his mom was a German woman who worked in the PX. They married and moved to the states, and Spencer was born in '56. His sense of identity was largely shaped by the mostly African American community in Brooklyn, NY, where he was raised.

Dr. Rainier Spencer: So, in this environment my earliest recollection, all of the friends in the neighborhood were Black, and my earliest recollections were one, just understanding that I was Black. However, my mother would often interject, she would always say, you're mixed. So, I never got that from my mother, my mother was always you're mixed, but then I'm living in the Black neighborhood and there are people of all complexions, some lighter than me, many darker than me, so it's just the atmospheric understanding. There's never a moment, right, when I, I never thought I was white or unraced, and then realized I was Black, right? It's just the atmosphere was always I was Black and from my mother that I'm mixed. So I never had any kind of epiphany that all suddenly I'm Black. So for me it was just growing up in this the entire culture, right, I mean hypodescent, you know, you have a Black parent, you have this skin color, or this hair texture, and you're obviously Black, so that was always the norm to me to understand myself as being Black.

Jocelyn Robinson: Obviously, this interplay of Black and white isn't uniquely American. But the American legal codification of race informs the identities and experiences of people of African descent all over the planet. And sometimes it does so in subtle ways. I was reminded of this at an art exhibit in – of all places – the heart of Berlin, Germany.

[MUSIC "BLACK MONKS OF MISSISSIPPI"]

Jocelyn Robinson: That's the sound of *The Black Image Corporation*, on display at the Gropius Bau art museum through July 2019. It's an interactive installation curated by American artist Theaster Gates that gives insight into the formation and maintenance of African American identity. Using archives from the Johnson Publishing Company, the Chicago-based publisher of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines from the 1940s to its recent bankruptcy, Gates engages the Berlin audience in exploring representations of African American beauty, culture, and identity. Walking through the gallery, the viewer sees stacks of the two periodicals in display cases. There's also a table holding dozens of black and white photos. Taken for the magazines, they are images of everyday Black folks doing everyday things, and of famous Black Americans, like Muhammad Ali, Coretta Scott King, and Eartha Kitt. The photos can be handled and examined after donning white cotton archivist's gloves. Large scale photos of stunning Black fashion models hang on the white gallery walls, and free-standing cabinets contain smaller framed photographs that visitors can peruse and select for display. A monitor loops a video featuring shots of the company's stylish Michigan Avenue headquarters, filling the space with the experimental soundtrack of Theaster Gates' musical project, *The Black Monks of Mississippi*. All the materials convey a sense of African American cultural aesthetic, that of 'Black is beautiful.' The importance of this archive was demonstrated by its recent acquisition by four powerful U.S. foundations, the Ford, Mellon, and MacArthur Foundations, and the J. Paul Getty Trust. They came together to purchase the entire collection for \$30 million dollars in Johnson Publishing's bankruptcy proceedings. The archive contains over four million images and ten thousand hours of audio-visual materials that chronicle African American life in the 20th century. It will be donated to the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture and other cultural organizations. The exhibit reminded me that in the US, the Black community forms and reinforces Black identity. Seeing images of people who look

like you is vital to knowing who you are. We take for granted how a critical mass of darker-skinned people of every shade gives us a sense of belonging, how even those magazine images reinforce our sense of self and where we fit in.



Jasmin Eding: I was unsure, I never knew my identity. I knew I was different than the rest of my surroundings and my friends, family, and I didn't have the right term. Some called us mixed, like 'Mischling' but I never liked this term because it's like mixed up, like 'Mischling' like a mule is mixed, so and I had no other term for it.

Jocelyn Robinson: That's Jasmin Eding. She lives in Berlin now but was born in Bavaria in 1960. Jasmin is one of the tens of thousands of Germans with a non-German father born in the post-war years. Her dad was also a Black GI from the US. But Jasmin did not have a community that looked like her to help shape her identity as a German of African descent. There were no Black magazines, no Black teachers or next-door neighbors, no Black community to provide role models for her and her six siblings.

Jasmin Eding: Only after a while, after a long while, then you know we learned that we are not mixed, not the n-word or so, or mulatto, or half-caste or something, the term Afro German came up or Black German. So, it was the beginning for identity, or new identity, so with this I can live much better.

Jocelyn Robinson: As she speaks, I'm struck by the language she uses to describe our common experience. In English, whether we acknowledge race as a biological reality or not, we use a term like 'mixed race' as sort of short-hand for the complex reality of it. But in German, there is no direct translation of the term. If anything, it's considered derogatory. It was a book published in 1986 that changed Jasmin's life. *Farbe bekennen: Afro-Deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichten*, or *Showing Our Colors: Afro German Women Speak Out*, gave her the language she needed. Its stories of empowerment raised the consciousness of a generation of Germans and helped inspire organizations that continue to work toward bettering the lives of People of Color in Germany today.

Jasmin Eding: Actually, Katharina Oguntoye, she was the one who created or invented or who came up with the term Afro German, she's one of the authors from *Farbe bekennen, Showing Our Colors*, which you might know. Yeah and after I read *Farbe bekennen*, after we founded our women's organization ADEFRA or even ISD - Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland - Organization of Black People in Germany. So that was the beginning of getting more in touch with other Black people, with Black German people. In our organization in the beginning mostly Germans, Black Germans were involved, like Africans and African Americans came later. From this day on, it was like a Black coming out, from this day on, I showed my Blackness, yeah.

Jocelyn Robinson: Jasmin Eding's story of self-discovery has been captured along with those of others born of Black American fathers and German mothers after the war, many of whom were raised in orphanages, or adopted by Black families in the United States. Some never knew another Black person until well into their 30s or 40s. Another book published in Germany just three years ago puts these stories into historical context. The English translation, *Children of the Liberation: Transatlantic Experiences and Perspectives of Black Germans of the Postwar Generations* will be out in the fall of 2019. Like Rainier Spencer, from whom we heard earlier, author Marian Kraft, a retired literature professor, used exploration into her own identity to inspire a long academic career. I visited Dr. Kraft at her sunny home office near the shores of Lake Tegel.

[BIRD AND NATURE SOUNDS AT LAKE TEGEL]

Dr. Marion Kraft: I'm not so much a person who want to focus on the tragic of any life stories, but when it comes to Black people in Germany in particular people of my generation, I mean I'm 73 now, was born a year after the war, and of course I know personally there are, of course, tragic stories. But there also are other stories, and even when it comes to the tragic stories, I think it doesn't help to focus on the tragic if you want to empower people. You have to focus on the successful life stories. I don't mean as far as the economy is concerned, or education or something. With success I mean if you can identify with yourself, if you can say 'well, this is who I am.' In Germany there are many Black people of African American and German descent who have been active in various political movements – starting with the peace movement in the 1970s, to the feminist movement, some are very active in education...of course, as I said not all of them, but there are these positive stories that can empower also those who perhaps had not that much success or possibilities or opportunities in their lives. It's very different if you compare the United States with Germany and in particular if you compare Black people of German and African or African American descent in the United States. These people still are in search for their identity and they focus very much on wanting to find out the history of their biological German families and thus have a very, sometimes a very idealized image of Germany, whereas in Germany it's the other way around of course, many have been in search for their African American fathers. There is a difference, but I must say there are also similarities because in both countries Black people in particular right after the war have experienced racism and exclusion and marginalization and discrimination, so these are things these different groups could come together over and unite.

Jocelyn Robinson: According to an article on the Black German Cultural Society website, nearly a hundred thousand babies with foreign fathers were born in Germany in the postwar years, and about 5,000 of those had African American fathers. But Germany isn't the only country where American servicemen found themselves in the decade after World War II. In the early Fifties, my own father was stationed at Burtonwood Air Force Base in the North of England, where he met and married my mom. Just like Rainer Spencers' parents, they married in '54, and I, too, was born in 1956.

Dr. Marion Kraft: Black people in Germany of the post war generation like me or the adoptees of that generation in the United States, there is a similar situation, I just saw, I guess it was in The Guardian or The Guardian Online, these children who were left behind, meaning children of Black servicemen who were stationed in Britain and white women, and I think these connections are very important to have, too. What I personally, and again we come to language, then the title of that piece was "Brown Babies," and I really get angry, I must admit, when I hear that term. I said years before when somebody asked me, "Are you a brown baby, too?" I said, "No, listen, I stopped being a baby a long time ago, and I'm not brown, I identify as Black." And it comes to language, this is important to recognize. It's a matter of self-definition, and a matter of power. And if I use any term of which you tell me it's hurtful for you, I better not use it again. And not insist on my privilege to have the power to use it. I myself, of course, I am German, I identify as German, but I also identify as Black, and Black in the political meaning of the word, not referring to skin color, but referring to Black history, not only in Germany, not only in the United States, but, not only in Africa, but worldwide. So just next week I'll be attending in Portugal the *AfroEuropeans* conference, because there are Black people all over Europe, even in Sweden or in Russia. And this is a thing many people just don't know about.

Jocelyn Robinson: So what galvanized Black German people into self-awareness wasn't the critical mass of a Black community or the corporate image of Black American progress and achievement as seen in *Ebony* magazine. It was a "black lesbian feminist mother warrior poet."

Audre Lorde (in *The Berlin Years*): I feel a real lift in coming to Berlin. I think that the women's movement in Berlin is, how do you say, 'stark'? ... it has a lot of life and vitality, and it makes my heart sing to see what is possible.

Jocelyn Robinson: In 1984, poet and activist Audre Lorde arrived in Berlin to teach at the John F. Kennedy Institute at the Freie Universität. *Showing our Colors* may have fanned the flames of Afro German consciousness, but it was Audre Lorde who lit the match.

Audre Lorde (in *The Berlin Years*): I never thought of Afro German as a positive concept before," she said, speaking out the pain of having to live the difference that has no name ...

Jocelyn Robinson: Audre Lorde died in 1992, but her effect on Black German women was lasting. Twenty years after her death, the 2012 documentary, *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years 1984-1992*, produced by Dagmar Schultz, a feminist scholar and friend of Lorde, provides an overview of the influence she had on emerging Afro German identity.

Audre Lorde (in *The Berlin Years*): I am excited by these women. By their blossoming sense of identity, as they begin to say in one way or another: 'Let us be ourselves, now, as we define us.'

Jocelyn Robinson: Dr. Kraft, also a friend and colleague of Audre Lorde, is among the voices featured in the film, and the founding members of ADEFRA, Jasmin Eding, Ria Cheatom, and Judy Gummich offer their memories of Lorde in the documentary. On a hot summer afternoon, I sat in Ria's Kreuzberg kitchen with her, Jasmin, and Judy. All three are children of the liberation; and more than friends or colleagues, they've been in sisterhood for over three decades. We talked about their lives, their activist work, and the continuing impact of Lorde's time in Berlin.

Jasmin Eding, Ria Cheatom, Judy Gummich: Like, Audre Lorde, she was the spark who make the movement going on, ja, she also told us we have to write our stories, we have to write, you know, and that's what we did. We did. Thank you, Audre. Yeah, and she came, what you said, Ria, really to look for Black people because she said, our brothers, our fathers were here, there must be, there have to be some Black children or some Black people, and she was looking for us, and met Katharina and May Ayim ... and I remember one of, it wasn't at a conference, but she was talking in Stuttgart, and there was a lot of white people, of course, and few of us there sitting, you know like this, spread out, and before she ended up her speech, she said, 'OK, and now I want that all white women go out from the room and Black people stay there and go not before they have make connection.' And this what we did.

Jocelyn Robinson: Make connection. And thus, make community. This solidarity changed the lives of Germans of African descent, paving the way for future generations to self-define their identities. And community continues to be defining when it comes to people of dual heritage, whether in Germany or in the United States.

[DAPHNE WARREN GIVING A GERMAN LESSON]

Jocelyn Robinson: That's Daphne Warren demonstrating circumlocution, or language acquisition through using context. She's a high school German teacher in Plano, Texas, and she was born right around the time that Audre Lorde sparked the Afro German movement. Unlike the children born in the post-war years, she's always been able to claim both her Black and German roots.

[DAPHNE WARREN GIVING A GERMAN LESSON]

Daphne Warren: I was born in Germany, I come from an interracial relationship, my mother is from Germany and my father is from Memphis, he is African American, my mother is Caucasian. And I personally identify as African American German. Sometimes that changes, depending on the convenience. I remember one time going to the airport and needing to justify that I had a German passport because I was questioned and held up, and it was very convenient for me to answer in German and to emphasize that I am German.

Jocelyn Robinson: Daphne's parents lived in the US for a time, but they relocated to Germany when she was a child; her sister lives there, too. The town of Högel, far in the north, is home, and as much a part of Daphne's identity as Memphis, she still speaks with her mother on the daily. But she returned to Tennessee during high school to live with her grandmother, even working in her aunt's soul food restaurant, and now married with two boys, that's where she feels most herself.

Daphne Warren: Now that I am in my thirties, I feel like I fit more in when I'm in Memphis, even being in Texas I feel out of place and I don't know if it's because I was around the Southern culture so much that it's just ingrained in me, but I, there's just something about being around People of Color, African Americans, my other half, that makes me feel whole. I don't feel that I have to pretend, I don't feel that I have to be a certain way, I do have to wear my hair a certain way unfortunately, 'cause if I wear my hair curly they're like 'Girl, you need to do your hair,' so that's something that my grandmother would always say, but I feel a stronger connection to my paternal side than my maternal side, and that could also be because on my mother's side I was never close to my uncles, my mother has two brothers and we never formed a close knit relationship – that's probably also cultural as well. In America we spend every holiday together, we celebrated together, and because of the restaurant background we always cooked together, so that was just, that close-knit feeling was always there. And I miss that a lot, but that's where I feel most myself, when I'm in Memphis. Yeah.

Jocelyn Robinson: As a language teacher, almost every year Warren takes students abroad to visit her home country. They're often surprised at the diversity they encounter, especially in a city like Berlin.

Daphne Warren: I try to educate my students as much as I can. Many come to me thinking that Germany is just a certain look, and I have to let them know, no, we are a rainbow of so many different kinds of people, and when you walk the streets you will never know that you are standing next to a native until they open their mouths, based on your assumptions. And it's the most interesting and magical experience, I should say, to see that. I have recently been following some young mothers who are African and German on Instagram and listening to the conversations that they record with their children, it just warms my heart, because I remember being that young biracial child, and people looking at me funny, but I could speak the language and them not expecting it. As we all grow older, us mixed children, we are getting a stronger voice, and I feel like it is, thank goodness for social media, being spread and being disseminated much faster than it could ever be, so the fight continues, shall I say, and I'm happy to be a part of it.

Jocelyn Robinson: Whether Afro German or African American, Black, white, or mixed, race is still a social construct, and one drop of blood doesn't define identity. But shared history does. Being connected does, even if it's digitally. And community does, family does, whether it's through blood or by choice. Telling our stories does. It strengthens us, it empowers us to show our colors. And that's how we know who we are.

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