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The Aesthetics of Belonging and Longing for a Home in Toxi

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Dr. Maria Stehle for her assistance and her encouragement while i wrote this essay.

I. Introduction

Robert Stemmle's 1952 movie, *Toxi* addressed a very prominent question when it was released: the question of home for the displaced children of German women and men of color. However, it has also manifested itself differently in present-day society. Over 70 years after the fact, some of these children have found their parents and, in some cases, have reconciled with their heritage. However, they have also been dealt with severely by the society in which they grew up, as most of them had to grow up in foster homes. A lucky few were able to reconcile with their African-American fathers, and African-Americans adopted some of the children and moved them to the United States. *Toxi* addresses the topic of an appropriate home for these children. Scholarly debate on the subject of a home for *Toxi* has criticized the film's ambiguous ending, which promoted international adoptions as the solution to the issue of the *Mischlingskinder* (Fehrenbach; Sollors; Fenner).

Stemmle's film explores the search for "belonging" by Afro-German children in an inclusive, tolerant, and ideal home. The analysis of options for *Toxi* and the "Heimat" song supports the claim that *Toxi*'s best home is with the Rose family. However, not much has been said about the search for the ideal home for these *Mischlingskinder*. This search for a home deals with what I call "the aesthetics of belonging," as I attempt to determine how members of West German society determine where one belongs. The film's black-and-white aesthetics help differentiate and aestheticize *Toxi*'s otherness from the rest of the cast. The storyline explores how *Toxi* is intended to be different from the white German family that she stays with. However, her experiences show how similar she is to other members of the Rose household, starting with

her perfectly accented German. Language is explored as a way to show that she belongs, as she counts adorably to prove to her father that she understands English. The film also deals with various reactions to her skin color; the audience is introduced to the dilemma that occurs when she is with other brown children versus when she is with lighter-skinned Rose family members.

I intend to examine how Toxi deals with the topic of a home for West German mixed-race children while demonstrating Toxi's ideal home. The film explores multiple options in searching for a perfect *zu Hause* for Toxi because of her extenuating circumstances while also arguing for inclusion and tolerance in post-war West Germany. The situation of Afro-German children represented a necessary question essential to the reformed concept of *Heimat* that citizens were grappling with. The search for a perfect *zu Hause* for Toxi lasts throughout the film; its ending gives the audience a feeling that something is missing at Toxi's conclusion.

The film deals with different options for an ideal home for Toxi, with each option being rejected as part of its buildup toward a message of tolerance. I examine the film as a mini-scale model of West Germany and substitute inhabitants of the Rose house for citizens of West Germany. This substitution promotes my argument that various options considered as proper homes for Toxi contribute to the underlying fact that she belongs in the Rose family (and by extension, Germany).

II. West Germany in the 1950s

The 1950s in West Germany were different from previous decades as society was still reeling from war events while facing problems from East German migrants seeking better lives in the West. Toxi was released against this backdrop of socio-economic issues.

Toxi describes the adventures of the titular Toxi as she is left at the door of a middle-class West German family, the Roses. As a mixed-race child, her introduction to the family is chaotic as she brings with her not just an extra mouth to feed, but also the fear of social ostracization because of the prejudice against children of color. The film chronicles the search for Toxi's maternal grandmother, as well as the various attempts of the Rose family to situate her in a place where she belongs. The film also shows Toxi's acceptance into the Rose family with the final holdout; Theodor, accepting her as a child and not just a representation of the interracial relationship that brought her to life. Her birth father's introduction at the end of the film supposedly proposes the perfect solution, but it ignores the established connections and ties in favor of the supposed bond between blood relatives.

The movie starts with the 50th birthday dinner for Rose family matriarch, attended by members of the family, as well as their guests, Dr. Übelhack and his wife, Tante Wally (Dr. Rose's sister), and Robert (Hertha's boyfriend). The family members run around to make the final arrangements to make the evening a success; Theodor on how to approach Wally for a loan for his struggling pharmaceutical company and Hertha attempts to gather goodwill from the others on Roberts' presence at the dinner. As Theodor and Hertha go down to the kitchen to inform the Housekeeper about adding a couple of places for the guests, the housekeeper retorts that the "roast won't be enough if any more guests show up." This seemingly simple complaint subtly reflects the broader socio-economic challenges of the time.

The housekeeper's remark alludes to the socio-economic situation of Germany, especially with the dwindling resources which necessitated cutbacks. Fenner alludes to this in her reading of the housekeeper's remark about the "roast" not being enough to go around if any more guests

show up (53-54). The roast cleverly functions as both a literal meal and a metaphor for West Germany's economic state. This dual meaning invites viewers to digest not just the food, but also the country's financial health through a culinary lens. This is a necessary prelude to the evening's festivities as they would set the pace for the events of the evening as well as the movie in general. The guests in question are Tante Wally and Robert, both of whom stand on opposing ideas of the integration debate and inclusivity that will come up in the movie. The movie positions the guests at the table as a mock parliament that represents the different groups that called West Germany home.

The burgeoning question of Home was also on most peoples' minds at the time. The rubble left from the war meant that the citizenry was living in government-assigned quarters to combat the housing issues. Moeller exemplifies a woman, whom he names Frau F., who had to live with her husband, mother, sister-in-law, as well as their 3 kids in a 3-bedroom apartment (9-10). The Rose family members were the fictional representation of Moeller's example. They all lived in the same house, a fact to which Herr Dr. Ubelhack referred in his Toast to the celebrant. Her daughters, husband, son-in-law, and grandchildren made it impossible for the housing authorities to assign anyone else to live in the house with them. Their living situation was seen as desirable as it meant that a stranger would not intrude upon the familial bliss.

Furthermore, the housing situation and aspects of the economic situation raised a bit of nostalgia and longing for the days before the war made a mess of everything. Moeller further references Thurnwald's writing in 1947: [Thurnwald] found it remarkable that people were beginning to look back at the years before current struggles and appreciating their better life before the horrors of the war. (14)

Such statements showed how nostalgic the citizens of West Germany were for the stability the prewar German society offered them. This was also evident in their perceptions of themselves, as they still saw themselves as Germans and the divide which came after the war was treated as nonexistent. While West Germans were dealing with their new realities as well as their nostalgia for the relative stability of the pre-war society, several issues popped up that affected the very notion of German identity. The issue of mixed-race children was one of the most prevalent as it challenged the established notions of identity and also brought about a sense of crisis on how to deal with the children. The early 1950s were an important time to brooch the subject as these children were of an age to be enrolled in schools. Thus, it became paramount to discuss the issue of their origins and the place that they belonged in society. Fenner references several newspaper articles that discussed the origin of the children and where they fit in society. One such article stated:

> The indeterminacy and inconsistency of overall statistical figures themselves point to the larger challenges of identifying the demarcation lines of racial difference. In 1955, for example, among the 67,753 children registered in the FRG (including West Berlin) as fathered out of wedlock by Allied and Soviet occupation soldiers, 4,776 were classified as of 'coloured descent (farbiger Abstammung).' The latter term remains ambiguous in its mythical parameters, as it is unclear from the data provided whether the term is intended to encompass only people of African descent or also those of southern Mediterranean, South Asian, East Asian (i.e., Mongolian), Arabic, or Hispanic background. (26)

The lack of a definite term for these children as well as disagreement on their place in society continued and led to a restructuring of the existing racial classifications. As Fehrenbach aptly puts it:

> Scholarly, media, and social welfare discussions regarding the children not only invoked, but also reconstituted German understandings of race by revising racial classifications, often regarding contemporary American race relations and social science. These initiatives produced a new and peculiarly postwar taxonomy of race in the West German Federal Republic. (75)

Society problematized the idea that Mischlingskinder didn't belong in Germany and avidly discussed the matter. A newspaper snippet in Ika Hügel-Marshall's memoir "Invisible Woman" identified the children as a problem, as they were believed to be ill-suited to the climate and would never be Europeans even if they could act like them (Hügel-Marshall 21). The children were regarded as guests in a country most called home based on their maternal heritage.

By the time of the film's release in early 1952, it was believed that there were nearly 100,000 occupation children of Allied paternity. Although biracial occupation children constituted only a tiny minority of postwar German births (e.g., under 2% of out-of-wedlock births in 1947), contemporary estimates inflated their numbers to between 10,000 and 950,000, indicating the disproportionately great symbolic significance accorded these children in post-Nazi Germany. Media coverage of the children began in the period of military occupation (1945-1949) and intensified with the founding of the West German Federal Republic in 1949. By the early 1950s, West German journalists, social scientists, and officials cast these children as a premier postwar minority group and social problem. They were either pitied or pilloried due to

their colored paternity and the purportedly promiscuous behavior of their mothers, who fraternized with the non-white soldiers of enemy occupation forces (Fehrenbach, "Race after Nazism"). To the judgmental members of German society, those children were terrible memories of their losses in the war and the failure of Nazi ideology to establish the superiority of the Aryan race. These children simply didn't fit in.

III. Afro-German Children and Their Place in German Society

The film suggests that while Afro-German children may be able to find the necessary "Nestwärme" (literally, the warmth of a nest) in the private sphere of the home, their experience in public is fraught with dangers. Even the film's depiction of the home is ultimately unstable, as the child is bounced between an ailing white grandmother who can't care for her even if she wanted to; a home inhabited by a surrogate white family brought into conflict over her, and an institutional home peopled by abandoned children like herself. None are presented as optimal solutions or as places in which Toxi unambiguously belongs (Fehrenbach, *Race after Hitler* 4).

Toxi is introduced as an abandoned child, and like her, most Afro-German children were separated from their parents and abandoned in homes with the belief that they would have a better grasp of life in opposition to staying with their white families, where they would be a constant reminder of the perceived sins of their mother, by the more judgmental members of the society they lived in. A small number of mothers of black occupation babies were able to find husbands to help care for them, either because they were unable or unwilling to marry the fathers of their children or because their communities shunned them for their transgression. A third of mothers of mixed-race children had put them up for adoption or into orphanages by 1952

because they could not care for them or could not handle the strain of the humiliation placed upon them. The fear of societal prejudice as well as the limited financial means that were available to single mothers made it necessary for them to give up their children.

Most of the children in this case are abandoned not through faults of their own but because it is generally believed that it is better to separate them from the comfort of their home because they do not belong with a predominantly white family. It is also insinuated that the children are representations of the sins of their German mothers, a fact which would make both the children and their parents miserable. Toxi's introduction to the Rose family, in this case, is left to the imagination of the audience. Upon admission to the Rose home, she begins a felicitation spiel for Grandmother Rose. This spiel was initially meant to gain her shelter. Still, Theodor's quick identification of the "racial problem" makes it necessary for her to be brought to the orphanage as quickly as possible, thus beginning the search for her home and the place she belongs.

His conversation with Dr. Rose about her stay in the house conveys his views on the racial integration of children in German society:

- > Grandpa Rose: You'd instead put her out on the street, suitcase and all?
- > Theodor: If you want the child to stay in the house tonight, fine, it's yours.
- > But I forbid her to be with my children in the morning. (*Toxi* 18:30-18:35)

Theodor's insistence is contingent on his beliefs that the little Toxi is different from his daughters, even though he admits that she is also human. The child's skin color necessitates her separation from his children. The belief in separating Afro-German children from their white

counterparts is mainly held by the generation that grew up influenced by the Nazi belief of Aryan supremacy.

The different generations in the family explore the concept of home and belonging, as each has been affected by Germany's political and socio-economic situations in various ways. These influences shaped their identities and worldviews, reflected in their conduct in the movie. The older generation, including Dr. Rose, Helene Rose, Tante Wally, and Dr. Übelhack, formed their ideals during the Weimar Republic. While the Third Reich changed their perceptions and fortunes, they retained elements of their personalities, helping them navigate the changing society and maintain a stable notion of home.

Theodor's generation, which grew up influenced by Nazi philosophy, includes his wife Charlotte, Hertha, and her boyfriend Robert. This generation is divided: the conservative side, represented by Theodor, believes in regimented order, while Hertha and Robert portray a more liberal outlook adapted to the times. Charlotte, representing the proud Aryan mother, defers to Theodor's opinions despite the changing climate.

The children's generation mixes influences from the previous two. The Jenrich children see Toxi as a playmate, quickly moving past her skin color, likely due to their interactions with Hertha and their grandparents. However, some children at Susi's birthday party express prejudices learned from their parents.

Toxi is caught between generations with differing ideas about her belonging. The middle generation, like Hertha and Robert, and some older members see Toxi as just a child, awakening protective instincts. Ika Hügel-Marshall experienced similar protection, crediting her grandmother's love despite societal prejudice (Hügel-Marshall 36).

During a play session, Toxi confronts the issue of her skin color through a children's fairytale about Moors. Eager to prove her partial whiteness, she shows the white parts of her skin to the Jenrich children. Eley notes, "Susi and Ilse are as eager to see Toxi's foot as she is to offer up proof of her partial whiteness, and she strains to hold up her de-socked foot for the two sisters who lean their faces within just a few inches of the object of their curiosity" (40). This desire to belong makes Toxi emphasize her whiteness, unsettling her and prompting her to seek answers from Grandfather Rose about her place in German society.

Toxi's face evokes a sense of homelessness, reflecting her sadness at her otherness. The traditional concept of a welcoming home seems missing, especially given the genetic differences. However, despite her different appearance, Toxi fits in well with the children during play, for whom her difference is of little concern. Upon her arrival in Dr. Rose's office, he explains why her skin color is based on geography and tells her of a part of the world where she would not be different. His categorization conflates skin color with ethnicity, equating a phenotypic characteristic with regional and cultural differentiation. In this situation and in line with Grandfather Rose's logic, German-born Toxi is placed outside of the white world, and her identity is restricted to a foreign region and culture. The binary structure allows no room to account for the particularity of her bi-racial identity to afford her the other "half" of her ethnic heritage. She has brown skin, so she cannot "be white," and according even to the new definitions of post-fascist national identity, Toxi cannot be German (Eley,49). The white half of her heritage has been dismissed and in trying not to be racist, Dr. Rose has committed a blunder of race. He has associated her with the rest of the African continent, and in the views of the scriptwriter and the trusting audience, answered the answer of where she belongs. She doesn't belong in Germany with the whites for her brown skin. A factor that is not considered in this particular discourse is what happens to Toxi when her Brown skin distinguishes her from her darker-skinned African counterparts. The little Toxi accepts this

explanation, but I find this explanation extremely vague and obfuscating. It answers the question of a place where her skin is not unusual but doesn't answer the question of her place in German society.

The movie gives several options for the children to feel at home. The metaphorical homeland that is mentioned here is an option that would not really be a perfect fit for Toxi and other bi-racial children simply because they would fit in because of their skin color. No tie binds them to the African continent except a distant connection to the continent in their blood. However, this doesn't make it a viable option. The other option is staying with other Afro-German children in orphanages. This option is also dismissed as the movie insinuates that staying with the other children would hit on the fact that the children are all in the same fate of being homeless. Therefore, this option is negated, and the film presents the final option: being reunited with her African-American father and taken to the United States. This option is believed to be the best, especially in the light of the fact that the children are not legally entitled to German citizenship based on *Jus Sanguinis* (blood law). The adoption by the African-American fathers would provide the children with the American citizenship of their fathers while depriving them of their German heritage. That was seen as the best option. However, this option raises the question: was German society of the late 1950s different from Nazi society, or were the same Nazi prejudices still operating only under a different aegis and a new makeover?

IV. The Longing for a Home

The children's song in *Toxi* poignantly captures their situation:

- > "I would like so much to go home / To see
- > my homeland once again / I can't find my way on my own / Who will
- > love me and take me along?" (*Toxi* 35:05-35:38)

This song, while apt in describing the children's homelessness, is also deeply unsettling.

Fehrenbach interprets it as representing the children's homelessness, but this analysis may not fully convey the severity of their situation (Fehrenbach, **Race after Hitler** 15). It oversimplifies by assuming all children are homeless for the same reason, not accounting for those placed in homes due to societal prejudice rather than lack of love.

The children's presence creates what I term an "Oreo in a milkshake" situation, highlighted by a dinner guest's comment: "Oh look ein Schokoladenkind" (**Toxi** 13:08). Toxi's dark skin stands out among the Rose family's "milky white" complexion, symbolizing what Fenner calls "a symbol of another man's potency" (61). This visual reminder of interracial relations often led to assumptions about the circumstances of these children's conception, as demonstrated by Tante Wally's incorrect assumption about Toxi's parentage. However, just as an Oreo cookie enhances a vanilla milkshake, Toxi ultimately sweetens the Rose family's life. Fenner quotes an Alliance Press excerpt describing the "Toxismus" that infected the film's cast:

> Amid shooting in the studio, a disease previously unknown to medical doctors seems to have broken out. It has been named 'Toxismus' and appears to be contagious. Fortunately, those stricken with the illness are able to continue working. The cause of this disease is – yes, this is no joke, a five year-old 'lady' with brown skin, dark eyes, frizzy hair, and speaking authentic Munich dialect. In fact, she's the main star, in person, and everyone calls her Toxi. (145)

This "Toxismus" is reflected in the film as family members, including the initially resistant Theodor, succumb to Toxi's charm. The song's reference to a "homeland" is problematic, propagating the assumption that these children were not German, despite their German citizenship through their birth mothers. The synchronicity and emotionless delivery of the song by the children is particularly chilling, suggesting a loss of childhood innocence and hinting at the traumas they've endured.

The portrayal of these children as commodities waiting for adoption, preferably by African Americans or liberal younger Germans like Hertha and Robert, reflects the societal view that they didn't fit the aesthetics of German society. This attitude is exemplified by the real-life adoption of Elfie Fiegert by a couple who had lost their daughter during the war (Fehrenbach, "Race after Hitler" 108).

V. Spaces and Belonging

The use of spaces in *Toxi* also contributes to the aesthetics of belonging, as she is constantly on the move through different places. The home she is brought to is supposed to be where she will belong, surrounded by other Afro-German children. However, Dr. Rose quickly removes her from this place, as he doesn't believe she belongs there. The children's home is not appropriate for Toxi; she possesses a particular light that makes her stand out in her optimism and how she sees life.

Toxi's optimism on her first day is evidenced by how she acclimatizes to the space in which she finds herself. The optics of the building present it as a sort of hostel and refuge for children, but the uniformity present belies the feeling of homeliness that it should invite. As Toxi walks with Dr. Rose to the gate, the camera pans to the side, giving a view of the street and the yard from the house. The yard looks unkempt, with several strands of weed popping up in bits and patches. Several bedframes are propped up against the house, making it appear as a place where children who don't belong are left.

The uniformity of the children also makes it evident that they are Heimkinder. Except for Toxi, the children wear variations of the same attire. This uniformity marks them as belonging to

the home and contributes to the message that they are unwanted. Although Toxi is not alone in the home—there are other Mischlingskinder in the orphanage—the maid informs Dr. Rose that Toxi didn't cry upon arriving at the children's home, as another child invited her to play. The film depicts this as where she belongs, even though subsequent events would disagree with this solution; it was not the "right fit."

The movie's ambiguous ending offers a solution to the question of where Toxi belongs, but it is problematic as it advocates tolerance rather than integration (Fehrenbach, *Race after Hitler* 119). The kids put on a nativity concert for the family. Toxi sings the longing song again, but this time, it has a different meaning for her. Her intonation and the situation preceding her singing have given the song new meaning. The last line of the song—"Who will love me and take me along"—is addressed as members of the Rose family love her and want her to belong with them. She belongs in the family; her skin color does not matter to them. She has found her home; the homeland is just a symbolic place in her mind because she is now home. However, her birth father's introduction nullifies her belonging, as he is promoted as her relative based solely on their similar skin color, even though she does not know him. The United States is presented as a place where she will not stand out due to the presence of African Americans like her. In contrast, her presence in Germany is fraught with rejection because of persistent racist undertones in society. Despite the movie's convincing argument for Germany as a home for Toxi, societal prejudice leads to her unjust removal in favor of maintaining the status quo.

In conclusion, Toxi presents a compelling argument on issues of identity and belonging for mixed-race children in postwar West Germany. Although other options are presented as better alternatives, the film demonstrates that Toxi's true home should be in Germany—where

she and many other children have created families for themselves and where they feel happy. Throughout much of the 1950s, state officials, educators, and youth workers from across the political spectrum emphasized various forms of discrimination these children suffered due to their illegitimacy, foreign paternity, and racial characteristics or referenced these factors as demonstrating multiple ways in which they did not belong. The idea that these children were different was a prevalent ideology evidenced throughout the movie by Theodor's attempts to find Toxi a new place.

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