

Who speaks for whom and with which words?

By Eva Bonné & Marion Kraft

Translated from the German by Bradley Schmidt

It is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence.

These words from Audre Lorde have been a leitmotif for our exchange concerning the translation of *Sister Outsider*. They influenced our conversations about commonalities – such as enjoying the text and its challenges – but also about our differences in terms of familiarity with the author and the perception of temporal and cultural distance. Did we also have *Berührungssängste* – fear of touch, contact, engagement? Is curiosity about the unknown and the experience of encountering it not always accompanied by a sometimes incomprehensible, other times well-founded alienation? And how does creativity arise from the acceptance of differences, not only with regard to textual matters? This is what we asked ourselves in retrospect regarding our work together – as two women who not only differ in their professional focus with regard to literary texts, but also in regards to age, range of experience, and identity. As two heterosexual German women translating the essays – still highly relevant philosophically and politically – of an African-American lesbian, feminist poet. Our thoughts on *Berührungssängste* while translating *Sister Outsider* are fragments of a mirror of insight that we gained as the result of engaging with the work of a Black feminist.

Eva Bonné

Last year I was asked by Hanser Verlag if I would be interested in translating Audre Lorde together with someone. I had hardly any experience with co-translation, but my initial response to the suggestion was positive, and I didn't have *Berührungssängste*. Or so I thought.

Those fears only arose later, when I read *Sister Outsider* and felt – what else could be expected – that someone was speaking to me directly. I'm one of those white feminists from the university that Audre Lorde refers to so often. The interaction with Marion was very helpful when it came to overcoming my discomfort and arriving at a constructive approach: about the source text and the guilt it provokes in a white and perhaps male readership, about my own translation mistakes, and about the author herself, who had a remarkable (and remarkably dry – I can recommend Dagmar Schultz' film) sense of humor despite all the rigor revealed in her writing.

Sister Outsider takes up a clear position – *we're on our way, with or without white women*, as Lorde quotes Angela Wilson – and yet continues to make proposals. Audre Lorde spares no one with her painful analyses, not even herself, but she always keeps in mind her vision of progress for which a united women's movement is just as

necessary as the solidarity of men. *I can't do anything with your feelings of guilt* is one of her statements that goes beyond accusation and can be turned into action. And that differences are indeed something that can be harnessed creatively was apparent to us in the end phases of translation, when sparks actually did fly, especially concerning Lorde's bold metaphors and the formal design of the text. Should "Black" be capitalized, "white" italicized? Gender asterisks – in or out? We didn't always agree immediately, but in the end we had something that was better than anything that either of us could have done on her own.

Incidentally, the *Berührungssängste* between the translators were quickly dispelled. On the one hand, as Marion writes, our task was front and center from the start. We were both determined to live up to the text and achieve the best possible translation we could. And the similarities we discovered in the course of working together certainly didn't hurt – we are mothers with daughters, both have a dog, sometimes smoke even though we shouldn't, and come from Westphalia.

Marion Kraft

Differences must not be merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.

I was surprised by my vague hesitance toward texts that have been so familiar to me for so many years. Perhaps because I knew how difficult the transfer can be linguistically, particularly in cultural terms, when the text explicitly demands transforming language into action for the realization of positive visions of a different world. In addition, there was the "fear" of meeting Eva for the first time. We had committed to working together without knowing each other personally. And third, there was the recurring question: will "my" text – because the translated text is independent – do justice to that of the author and her voice? Perhaps these *Berührungssängste* were overcome so quickly because there was a focus on the author, her work, and the current influence of her political and poetic thoughts. This was the initial spark of a creative flame.

And of course, I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.

As an author and literary scholar, but also as a translator, I know that a text is your private possession as long as you're working on it, on every passage, every sentence, and frequently, every word. No one looks over your shoulder, no one comments or criticizes, and the trashcan – even the virtual version – is patient. Upon publication, "your" text belongs to everyone who reads it. And they have different prior knowledge, expectations, literary criteria, political positions, and experiences. You bare all this to the attentive reader, even in relationship to yourself. Criticism is inevitable. But if it is constructive, it contains the possibility for creative discourse. In this particular case, it started with how the text was still exclusively ours, even before the first sentence was written and I was determined to face the danger of self-revelation.

For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it.

There is a view that translators immerse themselves in their own particular way and

with each new text, they dive into the author's world of thought and experience, transforming the language into their own. But two very different worlds usually come together in the process, two languages, one of which must appropriate the other and at the same time preserve and transform it. And what if one's own language doesn't have concepts for the content in the original, its characters' life setting? What does the translator's "individual language sensibility" unleash in a diverse audience of readers if it leads to inaccuracies or even errors? This may be a purely linguistic problem in the case of a text from a kindred cultural environment. However, when it comes to transferring different worlds of experience, this can be the occasion for social and literary discourses that go far beyond the translation of the text in question. If experiences of racism are the focus – and these are the starting point for *Sister Outsider* – such discourses tend to lead away from the actual subject matter instead of living up to the intention and voice of the original. And what effect does every incorrect word choice have on the reader? How do I translate terms whose connotations are incongruent in German and English? Should I keep offensive terms as they are because their meaning lies entirely in the original – for example in dialogues, quotations or historical texts – or are there alternatives? There are countless such examples. Is this perhaps why I initially had *Berührungssängste* when I started to translate *Sister Outsider*? Certainly not with regard to my familiarity with the historical dimension and the author's oeuvre as a whole. But I did when it came to translating into my own native language, which has no fitting words for so many things, a language in which it is so difficult to formulate in a gender-neutral manner, and which often lacks terms for sexuality beyond heterosexual norms. This aspect of language sensitivity needs to be discussed and reflected upon again and again.

We will begin to see each other as we dare to begin to see ourselves.

This quote from Audre Lorde's essay "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger" is an invitation to Black women to value themselves and each other, and to overcome and creatively use the deeply-engrained experiences of centuries-old racism in this acceptance of the self. What does this mean in the German context, on the one hand, for readers in black communities, and on the other hand, for the white majority-society? Perhaps my initial fear – not with this text, but with its transmission – was based upon an avoidance of the criticism of people who share these experiences, or of the white gaze? Or the challenge of maintaining, even in the translation, the wonderfully poetic language with which the author deals with the causes of Black women's distance and self-denial in a personal, political, emotional, and rational way? The text itself, its call to transform silence into language and action, ultimately made me overcome these fears.

My anger is a response to racist attitudes and to the actions and presumptions that arise out of those attitudes.

There was no cause for anger in our work together – or with the publisher. However, there have been many fruitful discussions about the power of language and its sensitive use. However, I did have cause for anger in Audre Lorde's tradition during the weeks of media hype surrounding a debate that overtook us after our work was finished. It followed the ridiculous headline of "Whom is allowed to translate whom?". It wasn't the first time I'd translated; I'd done it alone, together with others, even with white women – which I'd never considered worth mentioning – including collections of poetry by Audre Lorde and texts by white authors. I saw myself suddenly reduced to the "color of my skin" by the debate. The requests stacked up, and my opinion was

desired – not as an expert and translator of a Black feminist icon, not as a literary scholar and author, but as a black woman. I was supposed to comment on another translating team, which was characterized as the “renowned translator, [...] the Black [...] and the Turkish German”. I was supposed to engage in debates about artistic freedom and “identity politics”. In my opinion, there’s no such thing as art free of values because “Freedom is always the freedom of dissenters” (Rosa Luxemburg) and identity politics are the politics of socially dominant groups (Gayatri Spivak). This debate is about claims of interpretive supremacy and that group’s never questioned privileges, not whether one has to be dead to translate Shakespeare, or Black to translate James Baldwin or Audre Lorde. Even in Black communities, this question is not even asked in this generalizing way and with such polemical force. However, the question of the unreflected use of language emerges in several – unfortunately even new – translations.

Yes, it makes me angry when *race* or *color* becomes “Hautfarbe” [skin color]; when *other* – as a term for identities not conforming to the white, binary, heterosexual norm – is translated as “etc.”, *mixed-race* as “Mischling” [mongrel] – a term I only use for dogs – and *colored* or *People of Color* as “farbig” or “Farbige” [colored], or when there are no explanatory notes attached to the German and English use of the N-word in historical texts. Such mistakes could be avoided, were it not for publishers’ widespread *Berührungssängste* towards experts outside the mainstream.

At the very moment I’m writing this, the book is lying right in front of me, hot off the press: Audre Lord: *Sister Outsider*. Essays. Translated from English by Eva Bonné and Marion Kraft – with afterwords by Marion Kraft and Nikita Dhawn. A treasure trove for everyone who doesn’t want to obsessively separate lyrical language and politics, and those who have no *Berührungssängste* regarding the sources of their privilege. A voice of Black feminism, about whose last collection of poems Adrienne Rich wrote: “Listen to this rich and raging voice. This voice of oceans, of city concrete, of honey, of fracture.” A voice about whose first book of essays the Guardian noted thirty years later, “The truth of her writing is necessary now more than ever.”



Eva Bonné © privat
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