

In Touch with the Stage

By Charlotte Bomy & Lisa Wegener

Translated from the German by Jonathan Becker

In 2017, we presented our idea for an anthology titled *Afropäerinnen*¹ to the publisher of Neofelis Verlag, Matthias Nauman, which would become the second volume in the *Drama Panorama* series. *Drama Panorama* features plays about a certain topic or from a particular language area and is published by translators of an association of the same name. At the time, we had no idea how much work there was ahead of us as editors, and how much staying power we would need. Our initial idea was to translate and publish plays by four Black female artists, some of whom we had worked with before, to make their work accessible to a German-speaking audience—an audience that would include those interested in reading plays as classic closet dramas, but also theatre creators looking for radical content by B(PoC)² authors. In the end, we became intermediaries for a new generation of French and Belgian authors who take strong afro-feminist positions in their plays and performances: Rébecca Chaillon, Laetitia Ajanohun, Éva Doumbia, and Penda Diouf.

We began the project's conceptual phase by defining ourselves as theatre translators (one from French into German, the other from German into French) with a political orientation (antiracism, queer activism). As we entered the practical phase, it quickly became clear that we were both *white*³ editors of Afropean drama who—through the militant writing of these authors—would be confronted with their own position; who would have to continually question their own legitimacy, their qualification for and perspective on the work of translating these texts about Black identity; who would have to respond to doubts expressed at the time by some of our colleagues about the relevance of such a "niche topic", affirming that—to paraphrase Penda Diouf⁴—a Black woman's experience does in fact possess universality. We believe that through this act of mediation we can ignite a process of reflection—a process we know all too well, because we have been through it without ever being able to claim to have completed it or reached a destination.

Against the backdrop of these considerations, we realised that we would not be able to go it alone and that we needed a format that included staged readings, panels, a workshop, and an intense exchange between the French-language authors and their translators, directors, and actors in a German-language context. We needed a format that went beyond simply publishing a book, we needed the stage to overcome our *Berührungängste*, our fear of touch.

These thoughts led us to conceive a series of performances and readings that would lead up to the book's publication and was intended to create a space for an exchange between Black artists in France and Germany. The result was a reading series titled *Afropéennes - Afropäerinnen*, which was preceded by a lengthy effort to acquire funding that took place from 2017 until 2019 and in coordination with actor and director Lara-Sophie Milagro of the Afro-German art collective *Label Noir*. The book project became a performance programme, along with all that entailed: Venue selection, coordinating production and stage management, translation, publicity... In

September 2019 we were fortunate and proud to learn that the City of Berlin would fund a significant portion of the project and were thus able to begin planning the guest performance and staged readings for the spring of 2020.

On March 14, 2020, the series premiered with *Whitewashing*, a performance by Rébecca Chaillon (surtitles: Lisa Wegener), at the Flutgraben venue in Berlin—one day before the first official lockdown that would shut down Berlin's cultural sector for months. The event ended up being performed in front of production team members and was streamed online. Now, with the third Covid wave winding down, such a configuration has ostensibly become the norm, back then it decidedly was not; on March 14 it felt like a state of emergency that would leave its imprint on subsequent events in the series— planning under hygiene restrictions, another *fear of touch* we had to face. How could we have simply cancelled a project such as this one, which had been in the making for so long and had grown so close to our hearts?

The staged readings of *Die große Bärin* [Ursa Major] by Penda Diouf (translated by Yasmine Salimi, directed by Lisa-Sophie Milagro) and *LOVE IS IN THE HAIR* by Laetitia Ajanohun (translated by Yvonne Griesel, directed by Miriam Ibrahim) were rescheduled for the autumn and were performed for a small audience at the Lettrétage literature house, as well as live-streamed. The staged reading of *Drissa* by Éva Doumbia (translation: Akilah Silke Güç) had to be cancelled due to the lockdown. Instead, Dela Dabulamanzi created an "audio reading with radio play elements." The initial broadcast of *Drissa* is planned for the Fall of 2021 on SR 2 Kulturradio.

Postponing also means having more time, which typically benefits translation work. In the spring and summer of 2020, we dedicated ourselves—in addition to our own translation work—to editing the translations that had been created. We worked with a team of translators with diverse backgrounds, diverse perspectives on the discourse (Black, postmigrant, *white*), and a diverse wealth of experiences, which meant that we were able to, or even had to, learn from each other. Taking this path also meant making translational and conceptual decisions, and retracing decisions made by others without prejudice. Once again, the detour via the stage was of help to us, because a play text comes to life when it is spoken by actors. As a limited format that has to manage without significantly deploying media external to the text, staged readings are predestined to reveal weaknesses in rhythm and melody. The words leave the script—the comfort zone—and experience what it is like to be spoken in a public space, tested in it. Questions of representation, for example, can therefore be negotiated directly, and these processes then reflected in the translation.

The complex subject matter and the powerful linguistic expression of the four authors challenged the translators. How do we deal with the rhythms of other languages shining through or with a strong orality that signifies a specific social identity? What forms can we find for the racist attributions that Afropeans in France or Belgium are faced with day in, day out? From where do we draw a consciousness for the everyday actions of Black people, when our own frame of reference is primarily *white*? What concepts can we find for afro-feminist topoi, which, as Rébecca Chaillon puts it for instance, are part of Black culture? How does a German translation of a play written in a postcolonial tradition unsettle, galvanise, generate a consciousness of privilege, but without reopening old wounds by reproducing a terminology of violence? How does it avoid traumatising, or if it cannot, always do so with an empowering finality? To illustrate this process of reflection and interrogation, we want to take this opportunity to briefly elaborate on some of the corresponding difficulties encountered during the

translation process:

*Die Ananas ist nass, der Paradiesapfel wird gespalten,
Saft spritzt hervor, prickelnd wie ein Glas Caraibos.*
Rébecca Chaillon (Trans. Lisa Wegener)

[The pineapple is wet, the tomato is split,
Juice spurts forth, sparkling like a glass of Caraibos.]

For years, **Rébecca Chaillon** For years, Rébecca Chaillon has dedicated herself to "performative writing" and her text *Carte noire nommée désir* (German: *Trink mich – solange ich heiß bin* [Drink me – while I'm hot]) is a collage of different materials: classifieds, pop songs mostly from the nineties, advertisements, recipes, cocktails, game shows.... and poetic moments of great density and with a tendency towards the spoken word. Racist and sexist stereotypes, as well as colonial continuities, are deconstructed mercilessly, and the entire process rests on the foundation of a radical afro-feminist perspective. The translator is challenged by the countless intertextual references, scintillating verbal images full of realia, and the at-once playful and indicting negotiation of racialising attributions. Here, the translation can only act as a supporting element, at best as a reflection on a potential reconstruction. Because it is especially in those instances in which the translation requires local reference points for specific French Antillean references that actors, directors, and dramaturgs are needed who possess knowledge of, and a relation to, this cultural heritage, to the history of Black people in German-speaking areas. Much of the wordplay and many of the cultural references could only be decoded and recreated in close contact with the author, many translation solutions were presented to her for authorisation. Contextualising footnotes supported the historical and antiracist framing. What resulted was akin to a documented translation—a translation that does not repeat the violent dimension of racist stereotype but instead documents, contextualises, quotes.



Rébecca Chaillon and Aurore Déon in: Rébecca Chaillon, *Whitewashing*. Performance from: *Carte Noire nommée Désir*, Flutgraben, Berlin, March 14, 2020. Image & copyright: Leona Goldstein.

Und was machst du sonst so im Leben – außer weiß sein?
Laetitia Ajanohun (Übers.: Yvonne Griesel)

[And what else is it you do—other than being white?]

The starting point of **Laetitia Ajanohun's** play *LOVE IS IN THE HAIR* are people of African

descent in France or Europe who have decided to wear their hair in its natural form. The six characters of the play, who live in France, are driven by narratives surrounding the subject of hair—from endless sessions at the Afro-hair salon to the annoying question "Can I touch it?". Translating Laetitia Ajanohun is a challenge in itself because her writing is permeated by countless variants of the French language as it is spoken in places such as the Congos, Burkina Faso, Niger, Benin, or in Belgium. Translating the racist slurs, attributions, clichés juggled by the author poses another difficulty. The stand-up comedy format used contains double-edged racist jokes, countless litanies of slurs, and the written-out n-word. In Germany, the latter has not undergone the same political and artistic process of reappropriation as it has in France—there is, for example, the context of the *Négritude* movement, which spans the French-speaking world—and has been additionally charged with its own specific associations during the Nazi period. In this case, explanatory footnotes likewise aided with contextual positioning. We were truly fortunate that the translation ended up passing through the hands of director Miriam Ibrahim and her actors. Questions raised included: "What does this terminology do with me? What will it do with the audience? How can this text be carried?"⁵ The discussion of these queries produced concrete statements about how texts of this nature may be handled: "All traumatising terms in the play can be spoken on stage, as long as author and team are B(PoC) and the performance announcement contains a trigger warning."



Asad Schwarz-Msesilamba, Maya Alban-Zapata, Tarik Tesfu (left to right) in: Laetitia Ajanohun, *LOVE IS IN THE HAIR*. First German-language reading, Lettrétage, Berlin, October 22, 2020. Director: Miriam Ibrahim / Label Noir. Image & copyright: Leona Goldstein.

*In mir schwelt die glühende Wut.
Meine grenzenlose Wut verbeißt sich ins Megafon.
Ich werde nicht schweigen.
In mir ist die rote Gewalt.
Éva Doumbia (Übers.: Akilah Silke Güç)*

[A blistering rage simmers inside me.
My boundless rage clenches the megaphone.
I will not be silent.
A red violence is inside me.]

Drissa by Éva Doumbia tells the story of a family of Malian origin in the French countryside whose oldest son becomes a victim of police brutality. The French title *Le*

iench is an inversion of the French word for dog, "le chien", and as such borrowed from Verlan youth slang⁶ The title itself exemplifies the inherent difficulty of finding a form that represents this youth language, as the text draws its tension from the constant interplay between poetic monologues and naturalistic dialogue among a diverse cast of social actors: There are the twins Drissa and Ramata, their little brother Seydouba, and Issouf, the patriarch of the family, who left his native Mali and started a family in France, there is Mandela, who was born in Haiti and adopted by a now-divorced couple of *white* teachers, and Karim, who was born in France and whose grandparents were from Morocco. This juxtaposition of different sociolects is further complemented by a French that is permeated by the vocabulary and melody of Bambara, Mali's lingua franca. In this case, accurately representing these linguistic characteristics in the translation would have likely posed the most significant challenge.



Lamin Leroy Gibba and Zandile Darko in: Éva Doumbia, *Le iench / Drissa*. Audio recording of the radio play of the same name, December 2020, Berlin. Director: Dela Dabulamanzi / Label Noir. Image & copyright: Leona Goldstein.

*Du strahlst einen dunklen Glanz aus, mondgleich, einen Glanz aus Ahnenzeiten.
Wie diese uralten Weichtiere, die den Grund der Ozeane abkriechen und fluoreszieren.*
Penda Diouf (Übers.: Yasmine Salimi)

[You radiate a dark brilliance, moonlike, a brilliance from the time of our ancestors.
Like those ancient mollusks that crawl along the ocean floor, fluorescing.]

Die große Bärin by Penda Diouf is a remarkable text with a fantastical and symbolic dimension that unfolds in its second half, after the narrative initially opens with everyday dialogue in an ordinary family setting: A mother picks up her son from school. They sit on a bench, eat a piece of candy, and go home. Later, the mother is accused of having thrown a candy wrapper onto the ground. Although the accusation could not be any more absurd, and after extensive harassment by police and judiciary, she is sentenced to strict house arrest. But it was the mundane language of the play's first half, which happened to contain a word that became the subject of a communication between translator Yasmine Salimi and Lara-Sophie Milagro, who directed the staged reading: One scene involves the subject of hair care. The French word "démêler" can be translated into German as either "durchkämmen" [combing out] or "entwirren" [detangle]. In order to avoid attaching a disparaging connotation to the care of textured hair, the translator made sure to use a value-neutral and—of equal importance—commonly-used German equivalent term. Alongside the communication

with Lara-Sophie Milagro, another invaluable resource named by Yasmine Salimi was [Victoria Linnéa's website](#). Linnéa is a freelance editor and co-founded the online platform [sensitivity-reading.de](#), which advocates for non-sexualising, non-objectifying, and non-racist B(PoC) skin and hair comparisons.



Tibor Locher, Martha Fessehatzion, Maya Alban-Zapata (left to right) in: Penda Diouf, *La grande ourse / Die große Bärin*. First German-language reading, Lettrétage, Berlin, October 9, 2020. Director: Lara-Sophie Milagro / Label Noir. Image & copyright: Leona Goldstein.

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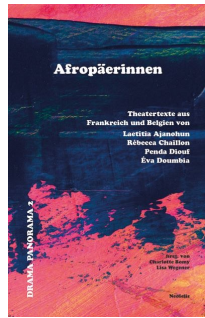
Because outlining the project in its entirety would be impossible in this essay, all that remains is for us to point the reader toward the book *Afropäerinnen. Theatertexte aus Frankreich und Belgien von Laetitia Ajanohun, Rébecca Chaillon, Penda Diouf und Éva Doumbia*, which was published in April 2021, and—for the time being—marks the end of this experience. Under the extraordinary circumstances imposed by the pandemic (among other things), we also found ourselves left with a considerable amount of video footage, which was eventually combined into a short documentary about the creative process that culminated in the reading series and the book. This documentary joins together the perspectives of the authors, translators, directors, and actors on their work with these texts. The at times very personal impressions and indeed fairly strong statements paint a striking image of the project at large.

Video documentary *Afropäerinnen. Book Presentation: Thoughts and Insights*.

https://player.vimeo.com/video/542767655?badge=0&autopause=0&player_id=0&app_id=58479

Endnoten

- 1 Charlotte Bomy / Lisa Wegener (eds.): *Afropäerinnen. Theatertexte aus Frankreich und Belgien von Laetitia Ajanohun, Rébecca Chaillon, Penda Diouf und Éva Doumbia*. Neofelis, 2021.



- 2 B(PoC) stands for "Black(People/Person of Colour)" and is a variation of BI(PoC), referring to "Black, Indigenous, People/Person of Colour". BI(PoC) is more commonly used in an Anglo-American context, whereas B(PoC) has been adapted to a European frame of reference. These are self-designations, which—like the category "Black"—are capitalised and represent the appropriation of a political ascription or, as is the case with "PoC", embody struggles against racist discrimination and oppression. The adaptation is based in the assumption that the term "Indigenous" refers to group of people and an experience of oppression that is specific to the American continent. The augmentation of the self-designation PoC with the B for Black people takes into account specific colonial racist experiences, along with the fact that Black people do not have the privilege of being read as *white*.
- 3 Following the lead of critical whiteness studies, we choose to italicise the term "*white*" in order to highlight the constructed nature of that designation. The term "Black", however, is capitalised to emphasise the "semantic level of Black resistance potential that has been inscribed into this category by Black people and people of colour." On this subject also refer to: Maureen Maisha Eggers, Grada Kilomba, Peggy Piesche, Susan Arndt (eds.), *Mythen, Masken und Subjekte. Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland*, Münster 2005, pp. 11–13.
- 4 See: panel discussion following the staged reading of *Pisten...* (by and with Penda Diouf), part of an event titled "Translation as a Practice of Decolonisation" held at the Theater Aufbau Kreuzberg (tak) in Berlin on April 23, 2021.
- 5 Miriam Ibrahim in conversation with Laetitia Ajanohun, panel discussion following the staged reading, October 22, 2020, at the Lettrétage Berlin, part of the event series "Afropéennes – Afropäerinnen".
- 6 *Verlan* is an argot prevalent in French youth language, in which syllables are inverted. Even the term *Verlan* is a *Verlan* creation, it derives from the French "à l'envers" (back-to-front). Source: Wikipedia.

#Theater, #Sensitivity Reading



Charlotte Bomy ©Dan Dansen, Lisa Wegener ©Leona Goldstein

Charlotte Bomy studied German literature, philosophy and theater in Strasbourg and Berlin. Since earning her doctorate in theater studies, she has written countless essays and articles about contemporary French and German drama, image-text relations in the visual arts, and the theatrical staging of protest. Since 2012, she has lived in Berlin where she works as a freelance translator of German-language authors into French. For her work, she has received numerous awards and fellowships. She edited the volumes *Afropäerinnen – Theatertexte aus Frankreich und Belgien* and *Surf durch undefiniertes Gelände – Internationale queere Dramatik*.

Lisa Wegener, was born in Leipzig and has earned degrees in translation and applied

literary studies. She primarily translates plays and essays from English, French, and Dutch, including works by Peter Brook, Dieudonné Niangouna, Jan Fabre, Virginie Despents, Ella Hickson, Léonora Miano, among others. Her work focuses on intertextual and intermedial phenomena in translating for the stage, strategies of decolonization, and the theory and praxis of queer-feminist translation. She edited the volume *Afropäerinnen – Theatertexte aus Frankreich und Belgien*.

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