

# Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

---

Volume 47  
Issue 1 *Centering Black Cultural Production in Translation*

Article 7

---

2023

## Feeling Beyond Words: Ineffability and Haptic Translational Praxis of Black German Writings

Adrienne N. Merritt  
University of Colorado Boulder, adme5021@colorado.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [Africana Studies Commons](#), [German Literature Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Translation Studies Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Merritt, Adrienne N. (2023) "Feeling Beyond Words: Ineffability and Haptic Translational Praxis of Black German Writings," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 47: Iss. 1, Article 7. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2244>

This Special Focus is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

---

## Feeling Beyond Words: Ineffability and Haptic Translational Praxis of Black German Writings

### Abstract

In this article, I focus on selections from Black German essayistic and creative writings that center experiential knowledge that is personal and often multisensory. My case studies are excerpts from *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (1986), its English translation by Anne V. Adams (*Showing Our Colors* 1992), and Natasha Kelly's collection of interviews from her documentary film, *Millis Erwachen (Milli's Awakening)* (2018), which Kelly herself translated. These texts, I argue, explore the ways in which words fail to fully express the visceral reaction of living while Black in Germany, particularly those that seek to make connections across geographic, linguistic, and generational differences. Focusing on the concept of *transvivência* (Araújo, Silva, and Silva-Reis) and hapticity of Black life (Tina Campt), I propose a model of translation that acknowledges the limitations of spoken and written words to convey all meaning and yet suggest that awareness through annotation, page format, and explanation might gesture toward more nuanced cultural references and ineffable experiences. Translation of Black-authored works into another language suggests a two-fold translation, from experience into language, from one language into another. I argue that hapticity combined with translation as *transvivência* has the ability to bridge what is felt and experienced with that which is read and observed. I conclude with a discussion of my own experience of translating Sharon Dodoa Otoo's essay "Liebe" 'Love' from *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum (Your Homeland is Our Nightmare)*.

### Keywords

Black German studies, Black diaspora, Translation

### Cover Page Footnote

I want to thank Beverly Weber and Lauren Stone for reading through an early draft of this article. Soundtracks / playlists are incredibly important to the creative process. The final revisions of this article were musically guided by Lizzo's album, "Special" (2022).

Feeling Beyond Words:  
Ineffability and Haptic Translational Praxis of Black German Writings

Adrienne N. Merritt  
*University of Colorado Boulder*

In her first published volume of poetry (1996), Afro-German poet, activist, and educator May Ayim touched upon the connections made through Black German activism and organizing to reflect upon her lived experiences and to push back against white Germans' erasure and silencing of everyday racism in Germany. Her poem "schwester" 'sister' borrows Black diasporic usage of "sister/brother" to denote belonging to a global community (Adams 213). It also addresses the intimacy Ayim discovered through Black German community activism:

warum durchbohrst du mich / mit deinen blicken  
warum willst du alles verstehen  
den schmerz / hinter meinem lachen / anfassen  
die müdigkeit / in meinen augen / befühlen  
die furchen / auf meiner stirn / zählen  
die narben / unter meiner haut / betrachten  
(*blues in schwarz weiss*, 114)

why do you pierce me / with your eyes  
why do you want to understand everything  
touch / the pain / behind my laughter  
feel / the weariness / in my eyes  
count / the furrows / on my forehead  
examine / the scars / under my skin (Ayim, Ani 30)

The emphasis on active verbs ("anfassen" 'touch,' "befühlen" 'feel,' "betrachten" 'examine') gestures toward connection, not in a superficial sense, but one that is more intimate and knowing of the acknowledged and unacknowledged markers left on the body from living in Germany while Black ("die furchen" 'the furrows,' "die narben" 'the scars'). Placing the German poem side by side with the English translation by Ekpenyong Ani establishes both more connection and distance—linguistically and in the form—than one might notice in the single-language publications. The juxtaposition of active verbs in the English translation and traces on the body in the German original creates parallel yet not synonymous understandings of Ayim's poetics and reflection upon her life. The aesthetics of the format remaps the landscape of experience present in the poem and its translation. In turn, the body of the poem becomes altered in the English translation as the

speaker invites the “schwester” to examine, touch, and feel the residual traces of her body and explore an intimacy of understanding.

In cases where Ayim expresses sentiments that are full sentences or questions, the translation organization and structure mimic the aesthetics of the German poem. However, as the thoughts become more abstract and appear more difficult to translate from experience and feeling into words, even Ani’s skilled translation work does not carry over Ayim’s sentiments in the same aesthetic form. Formatting and poetic aesthetics are an integral part of Ayim’s poetic style. The spacing between words and line organization cannot be separated from the overall meaning of the poem and often point to deeper meanings behind the words in Ayim’s poetry. While the general meaning of the words in the poem exists in Ani’s translation, the reorganization of Ayim’s poetic structure alters the emphasis and connections between the speaker’s body (“die narben,” “die furchen”) and the reaching yet careful actions of the “schwester” ‘sister’ of the poem’s title.

The German original fleshes out a landscape of residual traces on the body—“schmerz” ‘pain’ (l. 4), “müdigkeit” ‘weariness’ (l. 7), “furchen” ‘furrows’ (l. 10), and “narben” ‘scars’ (l. 13)—from the experience of being both Black and German in postwar Germany. By mapping these markers, the body and perspective of the speaker are read and understood, and, with acknowledgement of those markers, solidarity and sisterhood develop, being finally seen, perhaps for the first time, through the careful gaze of the observing “schwester.” “schwester” therefore portrays the intimacy that develops through the connection of community and shared understanding of experience. Rearranging the poetic structure in the English translation changes the focus from the list of residual traces—traces presumably shared with the speaker—to verbs that dissect the speaker’s body, as if it were an object in a museum, and rather than feeling through or across experiences (as seen in the German version), the English translation recasts the intimacy as an invitation. Despite aesthetic differences and emphases, both versions center the hapticity of Black experience in Germany and the ways that being seen and finding community and solidarity exposes a vulnerability and intimacy that is unexpected if still welcomed.

In this article, I focus on selections from Black German essayistic and creative writings that evoke multisensory and ineffable experiences that reach out to the reader but are at times difficult to “carry over” in translation. I do so to outline what happens to nuanced and personalized expression of lived experiences and interior discourse in the process of translation. My case studies are excerpts from *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (1986), its English translation by Anne V. Adams, *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out* (1992), and Natasha Kelly’s collection of interviews from her documentary film, *Millis Erwachen: Schwarze Frauen, Kunst und Widerstand / Milli’s Awakening: Black Women, Art and Resistance* (2018), which Kelly herself

translated. These texts explore the ways in which words fail to fully express the visceral reaction of living while Black in Germany, particularly words that seek to make connections across geographic, linguistic, and generational differences. I highlight the intersection of textual embodiments of lived experiences and the hapticity of Black life in diaspora. Linguistic repertoires are insufficient to fully capture the essence of being in what Christina Sharpe calls the wake—that is, living in the aftermaths of colonialism, imperialism, and enslavement. They can, however, point to it, and the multifold understandings of the texts, whether in German or translation, gesture toward the vibrancy of lived experience and intersecting yet differing literary understandings.

I posit that there is an ineffability to the Black diasporic experience that already prefigures textual praxis and at times evades translation, in line with Brent Hayes Edwards’s discussion of Edouard Glissant’s concept of “detour.”<sup>1</sup> It is a misrecognition of this complex relation to ineffability that sometimes leads the translation of these texts to misrepresentation of Black thought and sentiment by translators unfamiliar with the reality of living while Black in Germany and other areas of the diaspora. Translation is therefore relational and intimate and requires an understanding of experiential knowledge and broader conceptualizations of Blackness that exist globally. The corpus of the Black experience details a collective consciousness that, although not universal in its expression or specific details, remains accessible if not translatable by others within and with ties to Black diasporic communities. This point is demonstrated by the transatlantic borrowings and inspiration from Black radical theorists, poets, and musicians (Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, Angela Davis, May Ayim, and others). Focusing on the concept of *transvivência* (Araújo, Silva, and Silva-Reis) and the hapticity of Black life (Tina Campt), I propose a model of translation that acknowledges the limitations of spoken and written words to convey all meaning and yet I suggest that awareness through annotation, page format, and explanation might gesture toward more nuanced cultural references and ineffable experiences. The ineffability or untranslatability I connect to Emily Apter’s work on world literature and translation, pushing back against her reading of “the Untranslatable” to outline how living in the Black diaspora blurs distinct lines between national and cultural borders. Thinking along these lines, translation of Black-authored works into another language suggests a two-fold translation, from experience into language,

---

<sup>1</sup> In *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003), Edwards explains that Glissant “suggests that populations formed through forced exportation and exploitation are traumatically wrenched away from their habitual social forms and into a specific kind of colonial context: not one formed by hostile incursion into a homeland, but one of ‘uprooting’ (déracinement)” (22). The concept of detour, in Glissant’s words, “is the ultimate resort of a population whose domination by an Other is concealed: it then must search elsewhere for the principle of domination, which is not evident in the country itself: because the mode of domination (assimilation) is the best of camouflages, because the materiality of the domination [...] is not directly visible” (cited in Edwards 22–23).

from one language into another. I argue that hapticity combined with translation as *transvivência* has the ability to bridge what is felt and experienced with that which is read and observed. I conclude with a discussion of my own experience of translating Sharon Dodua Otoo's essay "Liebe" 'Love' from *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* (*Your Homeland is Our Nightmare*).

### Lifelines and Bridges: Translation and Hapticity

As evidenced in Ayim's poem "schwester," Black-authored works, in particular those that address lived experience, require a certain level of understanding that may not be accessible to all who initially read a piece. Idiomatic phrasing, purposeful rejection of standardized / normalized grammatical rules, pidgin and creole patois, and neologisms are just a few examples of the ways in which Black authors approach their craft. By writing beyond the norms of standardized versions of expression dictated largely by white, Eurocentric linguistic expression, Black refusal, as Tina Campt articulates, "embraces the radical possibility of living otherwise" (41). I extend this concept to literary endeavors, to speaking and writing. The concept of Black refusal is reflected in everyday conversations, expressions, and references that merge with textual representations thereof, connecting speech act and gesture with the written word. These traits are not unique to Black-authored works, nor is there a monolithic version of Black authorship. However, there is a sense of knowing how it is to move through the world as a Black person, particularly those who live in predominantly white societies and are familiar with colonialist and imperialist legacies that are intimate and incredibly visceral.

Cibele de Guadalupe Sousa Araújo, Luciana de Mesquita Silva, and Dennys Silva-Reis point out that Black authors, especially Black women, nonbinary, and trans persons, use translational praxis to transform their multifaceted lived experience into words: "The texts of black [*sic*] women are the staging of their speeches, actual linguistic performances of their bodies and experiences. Therefore, translating is not just a transposition of linguistic material from one language to another, but rather a *transvivência*" (15). Through the "staging of their speeches" and "linguistic performances of their bodies and experiences," Black women writers transfer aspects of themselves and their lived realities into textual forms or bodies. The emphasis on the multidimensional and multisensory nature of Black-authored texts suggests that, although some aspects of lived experience carry over into the textual form, there are limitations to how much of that life, that reality, that body can be enfolded within it. *Transvivência* plays upon both "translation" and the process and/or praxis of living (*-vivência*) and builds upon a term developed by Conceição Evaristo, *escrevivência*, pointing to "that notion of a particular relation between writing and living" that Geri Augusto translates as "*livature*," inspired by

her familiarity with Jamaican patois (Augusto 634). *Transvivência* is a two-fold process of translation that mirrors W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness: the initial translation of the experienced, the felt, or the affective into words (*livature / escrevivência*), followed by the secondary translation from one linguistic set into another (*transvivência*). On many levels, the initial translation through *livature / escrevivência* constitutes the textualization or embodiment of the inner life (thoughts, imagination, experiences, memories) that manifests into spoken or written words. The duality of translation parallels the duality of corporealization—as embodied textual experience(s) and as bodies that move through the world. The translation of Black-authored works is a conscious move that seeks to create connection across the diaspora but also (re-)present the multifaceted and diverse Black experience globally.

These translations allow the possibility to read and reread, interpret and meditate upon the embodiment of experience for both the writer and reader, translator and wider readership. Discussing his role as a translator, John Keene considers his “translation projects as a lifeline linking [him] to other writers and cultures across the globe—a lifeline to bring them into English, keep[ing] us—[him] and all who read [his] translations, however flawed—into conversation, communication, and contact.” Keene’s sentiments align with Audre Lorde, who writes: “[Poetry] forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and address, toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action” (37). In essence, embodied textual experience is also written or performed lived experience, as it represents the inner thoughts and reflections of a person whom the reader can glimpse into and understand by way of memory and experience translated into words.

#### Untranslatability and Ineffability: Black Diasporic Connections

In *Against World Literature* (2013), Emily Apter explains that “the Untranslatable” “can construe a translational humanity whose fault lines traverse the cultural subdivisions of nations or ‘foreign languages’ while coalescing around hubs of singularity” (31). Apter defines untranslatability as the difficult and differing space between languages and cultures, not simply in word forms but also usage that at times defies clear-cut translation (3), or as she later clarifies, “the Untranslatable” is “an incorruptible or intransigent nub of meaning that triggers endless translating in response to its resistant singularity” (235). Dividing literatures and languages through national borders and cultural barriers, however, fails to attend to the reality of diasporic dwelling, which often draws together influences from myriad cultural and linguistic backgrounds that are not always birthed within concepts of nation, national identity, or belonging. Furthermore, the concept of “the Untranslatable” is rooted in a white Europeanism that defines and

resituates even the definition of culture and nation. As Apter outlines, “[e]ven the term ‘translation,’ which in a sense signifies language in a state of non-belonging, or nationalism degree zero, is nationally marked,” using the difference between *dolmetschen* ‘to translate by way of Germanizing the text’ (coined by Martin Luther) and *übersetzen* ‘to translate, literally to carry over’ (36).

In my discussion of translation and untranslatability, the potential for super- or translingual understanding is explored, and I place emphasis on intimate knowledge beyond or behind sentiments expressed within a given text that transcend imagined borders and barriers. Katherine McKittrick reminds us that

[t]he relationship between black [*sic*] populations and geography—and here I am referring to geography as space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations—allows us to engage with a narrative that locates and draws on black histories and black subjects in order to make visible social lives which are often displaced, rendered ungeographic. (x)

If concepts of space, place, and location are made to “appear to be safely secure and unwavering,” they obscure the reality that “we produce space, we produce its meanings, and we work very hard to make geography what it is” (McKittrick xi). The hapticity and intimacy of conscientiously translating Black-authored works relates not simply to the transgressing or breaking down of boundaries, but the production of a space where Blackness is communicated in a way that attends to both the commonality of living in the Black diaspora and its differences. Translating the Black lived experience into textual form creates connection through *transvivência* and bridges the internalization of experience with textual production and embodiment through *livature / escrevivência*.

With Black-authored works, and in particular Black and Afro-German authored works, the two-ness of being both Black and German is not always recognized within a society that considers itself “racially and culturally as a relatively homogeneous society, signified by the racial, cultural, and political signifier *das deutsche Volk*, though allowing that many ‘foreigners,’ several generations in residence, also share German physical space as fellow citizens” (Adams 211). Therefore, in the Black German context, the question of who translates the text becomes more significant. As translators Barbara Ofosu-Somuah and Candice Whitney outline, narratives written by Black diasporic writers living in Europe often “resonate with aspects of [translators’] own experiences of living in Black bodies in the United States and made clear that Black existence and meaning-making, regardless of borders, is a process that is always relational.” However, the connection to personal experiential knowledge is not a sole determining factor in one’s ability to translate a text. Ofosu-Somuah and Whitney

explain that they continue to research current events and “stay knowledgeable of pieces written by contributing authors” of the volume they are translating. Through this careful process of reading and processing the texts, Ofosu-Somuah and Whitney seek “to understand [the texts and their authors] in today’s every-changing climate, rather than to crystalize them,” which enables them “to hold present that Blackness is, at once, both a historical construct and an entropic experience, continually shifting in context.”

Describing translation as a “relational process” also directly connects to concerns about who may translate whom, particularly in the case of experiential narratives that express trauma, pain, and other emotions. Şebnem Susam-Saraeva directly addresses the question of whether experiential narratives need to align with aspects of the translator’s own ethnic, racial, sexuality or gender identity. Susam-Saraeva convincingly argues that “having experienced ‘the same’ life event is never sufficient” and instead draws upon the concept of the “translator as secondary witness,” referencing Deane-Cox’s work on Holocaust narratives (Susam-Saraeva 3). A secondary witness is “one who listens to the [survivor’s] testimony with empathy and helps to record, store and transmit it” (Assmann, cited in Deane-Cox 310 and Susam-Saraeva 3). The translator as secondary witness reflects “the desire to assist the original” and also “testifies, in both senses of the word: to be present as a listener, and to support the transmission of their testimony” (Deane-Cox 312, cited Susam-Saraeva 3). Since no individual experiences the same event identically to another person, the intervention that Susam-Saraeva proposes through Deane-Cox’s concept of secondary witnessing is the recognition that, whether one has first-hand knowledge of a given life experience or not, the translator must approach the narrative “through attentive listening and conscientious mediation” and “must listen perceptively; that they must strive towards an analogous reconstruction of the original testimony, its choosing and imaginings, its analytical attempts and its communicative intentions” (Susam-Saraeva 4; Deane-Cox 321–322 cited Susam-Saraeva 5). Translation as secondary witnessing is intimate and requires empathy. It is relational and draws upon experiential knowledge mediated through research and broader understandings of Blackness in the case of Black-authored works.

Touching upon experience as an affective response is not often connected to the act of translation. At the same time, translation can (and I would argue, should) entail an intimate process of textual engagement and realization that becomes a dialogue between reader / translator and author. As Tina Campt outlines, hapticity is “the labor of feeling across difference and precarity”; it is “the effort of feeling implicated or affected in ways that create restorative intimacy” and “how we feel with and through another in the absence of touch” (Campt 42). More directly and particularly in the case of Black-authored works, hapticity is “the labor of feeling beyond forms of alienation produced by the negating gaze of white supremacy, which can only image blackness [*sic*] as abjection or supplication” (44).

If the translation of Black-authored works seeks to create connection across the diaspora, to provide a means of approaching—of reaching out to touch those distant from us—how might hapticity be present within a praxis of Black translanguaging translation? What is a potential praxis that can attend to the multisensory and multifaceted experience of living in the Black diaspora?

According to André Lefevere, translation between two or more code systems “involves an activity not merely about ‘fidelity’ but rather a double move: translating both the textual and the conceptual, both of which are the ‘result of a socialization process’” (cited in Augusto 634). After all, “translation,” in its more obscure usage, connects to “the action of transferring, conveying, or moving a person or thing from one place, position, or person to another” (OED Online). Writings composed and created in diaspora therefore suggest a translation on multiple levels: a “carrying over” of inner and outer senses, of words, of the experienced from one language culture into another. Discussing living in diaspora, particularly as a racialized, marginalized, and gendered identity, Augusto explains that, “in a manner of speaking, such lives are a translation, sometimes a productive one” that can lead to “emancipatory projects” that establish and perform “provocative notions” about personhood, belonging, and space/place (632).

Black-authored works require knowledge, not simply of two language systems, but of nuanced and colloquial expressions, patois, and creole language forms that often develop through subversive rejection and retaliation from colonialist and imperialist oppressive control. The presence of code switching can signal to the reader a shift in situation or environment, perhaps even a marker of feeling uneasy or potential discrimination in a predominantly white setting or environment. Furthermore, Black language forms reflect and mimic language in the form of gesture and facial expression, at times connected to specific phrases and idioms.

Gestures and facial expressions can be reflected through aesthetic textual form, for example page format, including spacing. Symbolism adds a further possibility, particularly as visible markers that convey meaning without words. Ayim, whose father was from Ghana, integrated the use of Adinkra symbols, traditional Ghanaian ideograms that “represent a language of ‘abstract proverbial expressions [...] meant to warn, encourage and counsel the living’” (Goertz 311, citing Glover 4). In her collection of poems and other writings, *blues in schwarz weiss* (1996), Adinkra symbols appear throughout the volume, as well as on the cover, often as the sole image or writing on a page and dispersed between poems written in German (see Figure 1). Ablade Glover explains in the afterword that “[d]ie ghanaische Kultur ist in erster Linie eine Kultur der Symbolik” ‘Ghanaian culture is first and foremost a culture of symbolism’ (Ayim 129, my translation). Karein Goertz notes that Ayim “introduces the visual language of Adinkra symbols as a parallel text alongside and on equal footing with the German language text,”

in essence drawing together her exploration and performance of her identity, of her Blackness and Germanness (Goertz 311).

womit  
demnach vermutlich  
gesagt werden muß  
daß

vorworte  
mindestens so  
unerquicklich sind  
wie nachworte und

vorsätze  
sind erst recht  
entsetzlich



Figure 1: *blues in schwarz weiss*, pp. 12–13. This is third-party content and not licensed under the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.<sup>2</sup>

In the English translation by Anne V. Adams, *blues in black and white* (2003), published by Africa World Press, the Adinkra symbols are absent, the organization of the book changed, and its contents combined with a posthumous publication of another set of Ayim's poems, *nachtgesang* 'night song' (1997). As one might expect, the afterword explaining the Adinkra symbols is also omitted from the English translation. Whatever the reasons for these omissions, the Adinkra symbols' visual meanings and annotation to Ayim's German poems are obscured from the reader in English. Adams, who "liv[ed] and mov[ed] in the German community off and on for a total of five years over a twenty-year span" as a "Black foreigner," was aware of the realities of what it meant to be living while Black in Germany (*Showing Our Colors* 236). Despite this experiential knowledge, the absence of the Adinkra symbols causes me to ask further questions about the changed aesthetics of Ayim's poetry in English.

This absence of the symbols' supplementary meaning also denies the reader an example of Black refusal. I read these ideograms as a purposeful act of refusal that sought to foster connection to Ghana and other areas familiar with the meaning behind the symbols, presenting meaning without a German translation. Situating the Adinkra symbols alongside German poems, May Ayim places white readers and others without prior knowledge of the symbols in a position where they must work to find meaning and journey outside their sphere of influence and comfort.

<sup>2</sup> This Item is protected by copyright and/or related rights. You are free to use this Item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s).

As Campt outlines in “The Visual Frequency of Black Life” (2019), one way Black artists, in particular filmmakers, respond to media preoccupation with Black trauma and depiction of racialized stereotypes is through a practice of refusal. Campt defines the practice of refusal as “the rejection of the status quo as livable. It is a refusal to recognize a social order that renders [Blackness] fundamentally illegible and unintelligible” and “a refusal to embrace the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented and to use negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise” (Campt 25). Thinking about translation, the practice of refusal that appears in the source materials and text may be carried over to various degrees, but it presses us to ask whether that move of translation betrays the initial practice of refusal integrated and integral to the author’s work. In the practice of refusal, what potential space and potentialities come into view when explanations are not given? When carefully composed and curated, Black-authored works— affective or otherwise— refuse to engage with potential white consumers? And how does refusal and its practices become a generative spacetime<sup>3</sup> within which personhood, subjectivity, and self are performed and imagined without centering whiteness that might force Black (textual) bodies to live solely in the wake?

How do we approach creating lifelines, to reference Keene, through the translation of personal reflection and linguistic expression, when those expressions are not accessible/ approachable in the same way across languages? Significant for this article is the question of how and whether there is a meaning beyond words— not simply script, but also symbols, like the Adinkra ideograms in May Ayim’s *blues in schwarz weiss*. Can we translate the inexpressible in a meaningful way and gesture toward the “subtle, often almost imperceptible (to the outsider) cues” that allow for a “density of meaning,” a feeling, knowledge, and understanding beyond speech (Augusto 634)? I propose that translators consider how hapticity can function within the process of Black translation. If affective labor is the unacknowledged “yet intense work embedded in producing and managing our emotions (caring, listening, comforting, reassuring, smiling)” (Altomonte, cited in Campt 28), how can we reach across and through the page for meaning particular to an individual life or perspective? And finally, how can the frequencies of Black life, existence, and persistence throughout the Black diaspora attend to the fact that these frequencies are either ignored or remain unapparent to those who do not have to move through the world while Black?

---

<sup>3</sup> Michelle M. Wright discusses the concept of “spacetime” in her monograph *The Physics of Blackness* (2015) to posit an understanding of Blackness in the postwar moment that occupies both space and time and outline what she terms “epiphenomenal time.” See pages 4–5.

*Transvivencia* and *Livature* as Black Transnational Translation Praxis

Addressing these questions, it is important to note that translators of Black-authored works are often tasked with the responsibility to bridge Black diasporic experience into language for broader readership. The transference of something multisensory, drawn from memory that then takes form on the page, is a complex undertaking. Translating these works compels the reader-translator to become a secondary witness and listener (to reference Susam-Saraeva). This act of reading and translating is not passive and can elicit sensory responses, particularly when the depictions in that writing touch upon one's own lived experience. With writers of the Black diaspora, especially Black intersectional identities, there is an "all too real" sensation at times by readers and translators who have faced similar situations. Memory and rememory<sup>4</sup> collide, textualized experience and corporealized response intermingle in ways that language at times fails to describe. For example, in the "Translator's Afterword" of *Showing Our Colors*, Anne V. Adams discusses the intersection of lived experience and her process of translating *Farbe bekennen*. Adams remarks that it was

only through reading *Farbe bekennen* and remarking upon the surprising similarities of my own experiences as a Black person, and particularly as a Black woman living in Germany [...] that I came to realize the dissimilarities in effect and reaction between myself and these writers. (237)

Adams expounds upon these dissimilarities, explaining that, although she encountered similar utterances and questions about her nationality, heritage, and linguistic ability living in Germany, these occurrences failed to impact her in the same ways that they did for Black and Afro-Germans. Whereas Adams could draw upon connections from her Black experience in the United States and push back against racist and racialized notions of heritage and belonging, Afro-Germans, she explains, encountered "perpetual psychological trauma that such day-to-day incidents generate," in part because they are "unequipped with the protective 'antibodies'" that helped Adams to resist or reject microaggressions (237). Adams recognizes both the similarity and difference between Black identity in the US and Germany. At the same time, her description of Afro-Germans as "unequipped with the protective 'antibodies'" is a US-centric way of attending to difference between her reaction and experiences and that of the Afro-German women in *Farbe*

---

<sup>4</sup> "Rememory" is a term developed by Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved* (1987): "Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world" (35-36).

*bekennen*, connecting back to Susam-Saraeva's discussion of the translator as secondary witness and empathetic listener.

In my reading, Adams identifies in the "Translator's Afterword" a sense of the concept of *transvivencia*, the translation or transference that experience and understanding of seemingly similar quotidian forms of everyday racism (*Alltagsrassismus*) are not read or even met with the same reaction, depending upon the position and perspective of a given individual. Despite an intimate understanding of being Black in the German context, Adams is not German, thereby differing her reaction to questions about her heritage and belonging. For Afro- and Black Germans the questions "where do you come from?" and "how do you speak such good German?" undermine their ability to belong within German society and culture, reaffirming the (erroneous) perceived notion that Germanness is synonymous with whiteness and that their Blackness must thereby be foreign and situated outside of Germany's borders. While a literal translation might get the "gist" of what the essays, interviews, and poems in *Farbe bekennen* portray, the meaning behind those words, the transference from lived experience and affective response to those situations—that *transvivência*—may be lost in translation if the translator is not mindful of what that lived reality might look, smell, and feel like in comparison and contrast to their own.

Navigating the language and landscape of Black-authored texts calls for a level of intimacy with the text that often moves away from normalized concepts of personhood, linguistic expression, and societal expectations. In "The Politics of Translation," Gayatri Spivak posits that "the person who is translating must have a rough sense of the specific terrain of the original" (188), going on to state that, "if you want to make the translated text accessible, try doing it for the person who wrote it" (191). The process of translation Spivak outlines is "more erotic than ethical" (183), wherein the translator is tasked with "facilitat[ing] this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her [*sic*] imagined or actual audience at bay" (181). For Spivak, translation is a *transvivência*, as "the most intimate act of reading" during which the translator "surrender[s] to the text" and through which "[t]he translator earns permission to transgress from the trace of the other—before memory—in the closest places of the self" (180). Surrendering to the text, in this context, suggests an act of intimate knowing of a text that seeks to understand the body and influences apparent within its lines rather than re-mold the text into the reader-translator's preferred form. Central to Spivak's politics of translation is the realization that language has its limitations, and that the language used by the colonial and/or marginalized voice is emitted from a body shaped by a politics that stereotypifies, others, and often seeks to silence it from being heard. Subversive and coded forms of language and expression become necessary, at times to process daily interactions and acts, at others to gesture toward deeper meaning that remains

unexplained and yet “readable” for those who share those experiences. A key example of “readable” or even “translatable” quotidian experience without explanation is the care for Black hair. The feel and smell of the hot comb or iron, cocoa and shea butter aromas, the patience required of both the hairdresser and recipient, evoke an intimate, commonplace occurrence throughout the Black diaspora. While linguistic expressions and slang may differ, the sensory experience crosses borders and boundaries beyond language and nationality. Translators are tasked with making that experience accessible to readers in varying cultural and linguistic areas while still preserving the text the author created.

In the Black German context, Ayim’s poems, “afro-deutsch I” ‘afro german I’ and “afro-deutsch II” ‘afro german II’ capture the repeated talking points from white Germans about the nationality and belonging of Black Germans living in Germany. For the sake of brevity, I focus on “afro-deutsch I”. Written as a string of comments and questions by a white German woman, the other person is omitted from the page, present only peripherally in spaces and silences:

Sie sind afro-deutsch?  
. . . ah, ich verstehe: afrikanisch und deutsch.  
Ist ja ‘ne interessante Mischung!  
Wissen Sie, manche, die denken ja immer noch,  
die Mulatten, die würden’s nicht  
so weit bringen  
wie die Weißen

Ich glaube das nicht.  
Ich meine, bei entsprechender Erziehung . . .  
Sie haben ja echt Glück, daß Sie  
*hier* aufgewachsen sind  
Bei deutschen Elteren sogar. Schau an! (Ayim, *blues in schwarz weiss* 18)

You’re Afro-German?  
. . . oh, I see: African and German.  
An interesting mixture, huh?  
You know; there are people that still think  
Mulattos won’t get  
as far in life as whites

I don’t believe that.  
I mean: given the same type of education . . .  
You’re pretty lucky you grew up here.

With German parents even. Think of that! (Ayim, Müller 1)<sup>5</sup>

The language throughout both versions of the poem is conversational with colloquial expressions common to mainstream society. The “fraying of language,” as Spivak phrases it, occurs instead in the aesthetic of the poem as it takes on a body or voice of its own. In the German original, the use of indentation represents the ongoing comments by the white speaker on a superficial level. More subversively lies a secondary expression, one all too familiar to marginalized persons living in Germany and elsewhere: the backpedal, commonly used to talk one’s way out of a situation when they suspect that they may have said or done something that caused offense. The cascading remarks (“Ich denke” ‘I think’, “Ich glaube” ‘I mean’), layered one after another with ellipses and fragments splinter as the white speaker utters racist stereotypes and assumptions aloud. What occurs “off stage,” as it were, Ayim does not detail, leaving the reader to traverse territory that, without markers or concrete information, may be unfamiliar to them.

The translation of this poem by Ilse Müller, a white German woman, alters the formatting and punctuation, changing the aesthetic body of the poem in the process. Through the adjustment of the indentation and reorganization of word order from inverted (verb-subject to subject-verb), the sentence takes on a more assertive and proclamatory nature. Furthermore, the redistribution of the lines “die Mulatten, die würden’s nicht / so weit bringen / wie die Weißen” to ‘Mulattos won’t get / as far in life as whites’ alters the emphasis placed on the stages of separation between “Mulatten” and “Weißen,” the border or barrier established by the line “so weit bringen” ‘as far in life’ (Ayim, Müller 1). Müller’s translation conveys the basic linguistic meaning of Ayim’s original text. However, as I outlined previously, translation exists on more than one level in “afro-deutsch I”, which is altered in the aesthetic of Müller’s English translation. The presence of the Afro-German person, the second person in the conversation, exists in the poem through its spaces and ellipses and is implied through the reaction of the speaker. That presence is an absence. While some might read this as emblematic of the erasure of Black and other marginalized voices in Germany,<sup>6</sup> this lack of textualized presence is also a frequency of refusal, which “embraces refusal as a way of thinking beyond hierarchal structures of power/ resistance as the primary schematic for representing the relationship of black [*sic*] subjects to power” (Campt 26). By refusing to make the utterances of the Afro-German concrete in the text, the emphasis is placed on

---

<sup>5</sup> Müller’s translation and all translations used in this article are included in Anne V. Adams collection *blues in black and white*, although Adams is listed as the primary author. The volume is the synthesis of selections from two of May Ayim’s publications, *blues in schwarz weiss* (1996) and *nachtgesang* (1997). To this date, only a selection of Ayim’s poetry has been published.

<sup>6</sup> Michelle Wright reads the absence as “the metaphorical erasure of self, or material existence, that the Afro-German undergoes in German racist discourse” (299).

the script of the white German, how she iterates and reiterates her misplaced stereotypes about the other person, race, Germanness, and the entire African continent. The white German is collapsed into these linguistic expressions and through the practice of refusal, the Afro-German cannot be flattened or stereotyped: not her joy, not her gestures, not her being. While some have focused on the humor in this poem (Colvin 2022), which is also documented in the filmed reading of the poem in the documentary *Hoffnung im Herz / Hope in My Heart* (1997), the inability to translate that silence and space into an understanding is an invitation to white readers to question how they engage with Afro-Germans, the possibility of being Black and German, and Afro-Germans' acceptance by white German society and culture.

*Farbe bekennen / Showing Our Colors: Life in Translation / Livature*

The invitation to approach and begin to understand the Black German experience is outlined multifold in *Farbe bekennen*. Coincidentally, “afro-deutsch I” appears in this text (138–39). Encouraged by Audre Lorde to “[make] their ideas, identities, and struggles legible within Black and German circles,” Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye, and others collaborated on a volume of experience that ranged from interviews, conversations, and autobiography to historical research and poetry in *Farbe bekennen* (Florvil 33). In the collection, the voices of Afro-German women born throughout the twentieth century are present alongside historical essays by Ayim from her university studies that not only question how German history is taught and told but also how lives were impacted by the national legislature and everyday actions of white German citizens.

While my examples have focused on Ayim and her poetry thus far, her writings connect in various ways to other people in *Farbe bekennen*, including Helga Emde, who contributed a short autobiography to the collection and two poems as an epigraph. Her section subtitled “Als ‘Besatzungschild’ im Nachkriegsdeutschland” ‘An “Occupation Baby” in Postwar Germany,’ details the conflict of being both Black and German living in postwar Germany and growing up without the presence or knowledge of her African American father, who was stationed in Germany prior to her birth. Adams’s translation carries over the heart of her story, which is outlined in a conversational tone, at times mingled with poetic expressions. In many ways, the two poems at the end of her section summarize Emde’s experience in a way that invites the reader to engage with her autobiography more deeply and presently through the use of imperative and active verb forms. The first poem, “Der Revolutionär” ‘The Revolutionary,’ is voiced through her ex-husband’s perspective, as if he were speaking with his family about his relationship with Emde. The poem begins,

nein mutter, ich sage dir nicht, dass ich mich von  
deinem gott losgesagt habe  
—ich bin ein revolutionär  
ich weiß, dass ich euch alle damit treffe, nur deshalb heirate ich  
sie, die  
schwarze, die nicht zu uns passt  
—ich bin revolutionär. (*Farbe bekennen* 112)

no mother, I tell you I've  
renounced your god  
—i'm a revolutionary  
i know i'm hurting you all, that's the only reason i'm marrying her,  
the black girl, who doesn't fit in with us  
—i'm a revolutionary. (Adams, *Showing Our Colors* 110)

Similar to “afro-deutsch I,” Emde’s poem focuses on the voice of her white husband to draw out the irony of the poem’s title, “Der Revolutionär,” placing herself as a reference or object that the speaker uses to push back against his family. Emde is both present and absent from the poem, creating a practice of refusal that situates the source of pain and trauma squarely within the words of her ex-husband. The long dashes emphasize the repeated statement “i’m a revolutionary,” which serves to break up the string of proclamations and aesthetically draw out the irony of his self-designation as a revolutionary. In contrast with the translation of “afro-deutsch I,” Adams retains the aesthetics of “Der Revolutionär,” particularly the formatting and spacing, while simultaneously bridging the meaning from the German original into English. As mentioned above, Adams lived in Germany and worked as a translator for Audre Lorde at times. She had connection to and knew the Afro-German community. In my opinion, Adams’s translation represents the secondary witnessing through intimate and haptic reading of Emde’s experiential writings in both prose and poetics.

The second poem, “Der Schrei” ‘The Cry,’ departs significantly from “Der Revolutionär” in structure and voicing. Written from a variety of perspectives, including Emde’s own, “Der Schrei” addresses the quest for belonging and the treatment by those around Emde. At times the poem is conversational, at others Emde poses questions that remain unanswered. The final lines of the poem use conversational language and aesthetic form to articulate her struggles of being both Black and German and the responses she receives from white Germans:

ich bin ein mensch, ein weibliches wesen, versteht ihr mich nicht?  
Sex.  
ihr macht mich ungleichwertig.

hausfrau und mutter.  
Neinnnnnn. bitte, versteht mich denn niemand.  
Doch.  
wir alle. aber bleibe wie du bist und verändere dich nicht.  
nein, keine bildung, wo bleiben sonst wir????  
aber versteht mich doch, ich will gleichwertig sein.  
aber doch bitte nicht wie wir!  
du gehörst nicht zu uns.  
HILFE sie wollen mich steinigen und fast schaffen sie es. (*Farbe  
bekennen* 113)

i'm a human being, a female person, don't you understand me?  
Sex.  
you all make me unequal.  
housewife and mother.  
Nooooo. please, doesn't anyone understand me?  
Sure.  
all of us. but stay as you are and don't change.  
no, no education, where will we be then???  
but understand me, i want to be equal.  
but please not like us!  
you don't belong to us.  
HELP they want to stone me and  
They're almost succeeding. (Adams, *Showing Our Colors* 111)

The cry for help reverberates throughout the poem but rises to a climax in its final lines quoted above. The exchange, marked by different lines in the poem, details continued rejection and lack of belonging. Voicing the poem in the present active verb tense ushers Emde's life experience into the here and now, not something that has happened at some point in the past but unfolding before the reader's eyes. Adams's translation aids the reader in distinguishing the different voices in the poem through formatting, at times breaking up lines to distinguish thoughts and utterances, as well as the careful use of capitalization to draw the eye to certain words (e.g., "Sex," "Sure," "They're").

Thinking back to Spivak's discussion of translation, the concepts of hapticity, and *transvivência*, I consider Adams's translation work in the example of Emde's poems as an intimate and careful lifeline from German into English, one that touches upon the importance of connection and understanding, not only of Blackness, but what it is to be Black in a predominantly white German society. I turn now to Natasha Kelly's translation that, I believe, goes a step further to

promote connectedness across the Black diaspora, visually, linguistically, and communally.

### Haptic Secondary Witnessing: *Millis Erwachen / Milli's Awakening*

As a bilingual companion volume to Natasha Kelly's Biennale film of the same name, *Millis Erwachen / Milli's Awakening* made the interviews available in full without the editing that occurred in the film (Kelly, *Millis Erwachen*, 7). In the introduction, she explains the significance of the book as in conversation with the film: "Ausschlaggebend für mich war, dass die einzelnen Bausteine ein großes Ganzes ergeben, d.h. dass sie in afrokultureller Tradition wie ein Quilt aneinander gesteppt werden können" (Kelly, *Millis Erwachen* 7) 'Crucial to me was that each episode amounted to a whole, i.e., that they could be sewn together in afro-cultural tradition to create a quilt' (*Millis Erwachen* 7). Some women who participated in the interviews spoke in English, others in German. However, rather than only translating the English sections into German, Kelly presents both languages throughout (see Figure 2). Select quotations appear in larger font, offset within the textual body on the left-hand page in German (see Figure 3) and the right-hand page in English (see Figure 4).

Presenting both languages on one page, Kelly weaves English and German together across the diaspora, joining them like the African tradition of the story quilt (Kelly, *Millis Erwachen* 7). The languages are organized side by side, existing in parallel and in tandem with one another, appearing simultaneously, irrespective of if the speaker expressed her words in English or in German. The transparency of the two languages presents a mode of translation that seeks to draw together different timelines, lives, and moves within the Black diaspora. My emphasis here is not simply the aesthetic form, as I recognize that this format is not always possible with publications. Moreso, I point to the direct connection between and across diaspora that both embodies and exemplifies Black German organizing and activism, centering it in a global conversation that is not overwhelmed by US definitions of Blackness. At the same time, Kelly's model of textual formation does encourage conversation and knowledge-sharing as an embodiment or performance of commingling discourses that crosses back and forth across the Atlantic, as Afro-German women travel to Ghana, Nigeria, and Namibia. Her aesthetic form of translation ignores borders that seek to situate Blackness either within specific confines of belonging or outside of national borders and claims to citizenship.

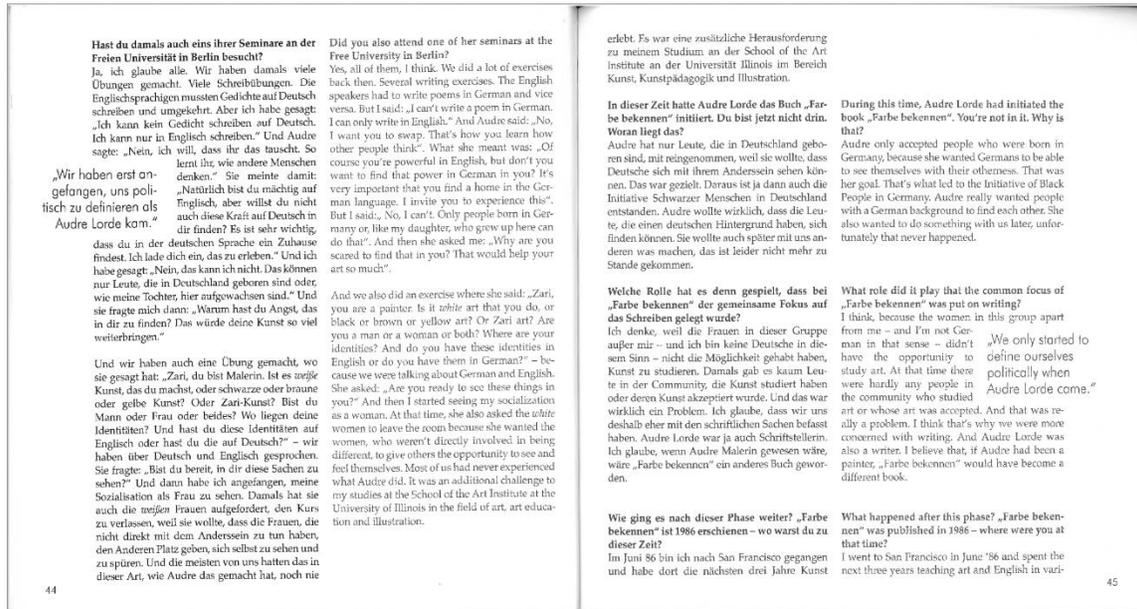


Figure 2: Facing pages from Kelly's *Millis Erwachen / Milli's Awakening*, pp. 44–45. This is third-party content and not licensed under the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.



Figure 3: Left-hand page example from *Millis Erwachen / Milli's Awakening*, p. 44. This is third-party content and not licensed under the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

te, die einen deutschen Hintergrund haben, sich finden können. Sie wollte auch später mit uns anderen was machen, das ist leider nicht mehr zu Stande gekommen.

**Welche Rolle hat es denn gespielt, dass bei „Farbe bekennen“ der gemeinsame Fokus auf das Schreiben gelegt wurde?**

Ich denke, weil die Frauen in dieser Gruppe außer mir – und ich bin keine Deutsche in diesem Sinn – nicht die Möglichkeit gehabt haben, Kunst zu studieren. Damals gab es kaum Leute in der Community, die Kunst studiert haben oder deren Kunst akzeptiert wurde. Und das war wirklich ein Problem. Ich glaube, dass wir uns deshalb eher mit den schriftlichen Sachen befassen haben. Audre Lorde war ja auch Schriftstellerin. Ich glaube, wenn Audre Malerin gewesen wäre, wäre „Farbe bekennen“ ein anderes Buch geworden.

also wanted to do something with us later, unfortunately that never happened.

**What role did it play that the common focus of „Farbe bekennen“ was put on writing?**

I think, because the women in this group apart from me – and I’m not German in that sense – didn’t have the opportunity to study art. At that time there were hardly any people in the community who studied art or whose art was accepted. And that was really a problem. I think that’s why we were more concerned with writing. And Audre Lorde was also a writer. I believe that, if Audre had been a painter, „Farbe bekennen“ would have become a different book.

„We only started to define ourselves politically when Audre Lorde came.“

Figure 4: Right-hand page from *Millis Erwachen / Milli’s Awakening*, p. 45. This is third-party content and not licensed under the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.<sup>7</sup>

The interweaving of German and English becomes a practice of haptic translation, a *transvivência*, that evokes an intimacy between interviewer and translator (Kelly) and speaker. The practice of haptic translation in Kelly’s book constructs a textual landscape that visibly and physically draws together voices from the diaspora into a communal or community space. Like with the figure of Afrekete—a goddess of language and knowledge referenced in Afro- and Black German feminist communities and the name of one of their newsletters—the boundaries of linguistic expression are diminished, not in an act of trickery, but one that encourages sharing, acknowledgement of others, and a refusal to flatten the vibrant frequencies of Black life. As Kelly explains,

Zu häufig haben wir es versäumt, die (sozial-) politischen Entwicklungen hierzulande und unsere damit zusammenfallenden individuellen Erfahrungen aus der eigenen, selbstbestimmten Schwarzen Perspektive festzuhalten. Dadurch fehlt es den nachfolgenden Generationen häufig an Identitätsangeboten und an Best-Case oder Worst-Case-Beispielen. Diese Diskontinuität wollte ich, wie schon viele vor mir, weiterhin aufbrechen. Denn einen Platz in der Gesellschaft können wir nun dann für uns als

<sup>7</sup> The Items in Figures 2, 3, and 4 are protected by copyright and/or related rights. You are free to use these Items in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s).

Community beanspruchen, wenn wir auch unseren Platz dauerhaft einfordern. (Kelly, *Millis Erwachen*, 7–8)

Too often we have failed to capture the (social-)political developments in this country, and our individual experiences that arise hereof from our own self-determined Black perspective. As a result, the following generations often lack identity models and best-case or worst-case examples. Like many before me, I wanted to break down this discontinuity. Because in order to claim a place in society for us as a community, we need to demand our place permanently. (7)

Speaking directly to members of the Black community in Germany, Kelly draws together her book with activism and works that have come before, especially *Farbe bekennen* and other autobiographical publications. The connectedness and community Kelly emphasizes in the above citation are reflected in both content and form. Perhaps more importantly, English and German are in conversation on the page aesthetically, encouraging the reader to bridge the original with the translation. With this format, Kelly underscores that the translation is not an exact replica of the original. However, translation can gesture toward an approximate meaning and foster communication across linguistic borders. The presence of English and German allows the reader to navigate back and forth across the pages, connecting meaning between words.

That said, the aesthetic of Kelly’s translation holds within it the underlying concept that understanding of Blackness, in any language, holds the possibility for connection and conversation. It embodies the possibility of lifelines within and across the Black diaspora. The process of haptic translation as seen in Kelly’s edited volume establishes a practice of refusal, a love act that strives to see, commune with, and reflect upon the translator’s relationship with and to Black precarity that refuses to separate the women in the documentary based upon spoken language.

#### Love Moves: Translating Otoo’s “Liebe”

I shift now to discuss my own process of translating and how it connects to haptic translational praxis and *transvivência*. It was Spring of 2021. I was drafting a job talk for an upcoming interview and knew that I wanted to focus on Black joy and community in the German context. I had been reading bell hooks’s *All About Love* and Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake*. At the same time, just up the freeway from where I was living and teaching, a trial was underway. It was the Derek Chauvin trial, and my thoughts returned many times to George Floyd and his final words: “I can’t breathe.” I was tired. As a Black mother of sons, I felt weighed down. I was also tired of the ongoing preoccupation with Black suffering, trauma,

and death. Black mothers specifically have been the heart and organizational force behind grassroots movements to change the suffocating situation of living while Black in the United States, and, admittedly, globally. I did not want to focus on that pain, although I knew that it would still exist. I knew I wanted to celebrate the joy of love in / and community. That is when I found Sharon Dodua Otoo's essay, "Liebe" 'Love' in *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum (Your Homeland is Our Nightmare)*. I read through the essay, saw the epigraph from bell hooks about love—"Love is . . . about what we do not just what we feel. It's a verb, not a noun"—and it struck a chord.

Working my way through the essay, even then the experience was more than just reading. I felt those words. I journeyed through the pages in silent repose and yet heard the voices of a mother and son. It was more than an essay. It was the embodiment of an experience, translated across time and distance, from the quiet quotidian moment in the solitude of her home to the harsh black and white of the printed page, from one colonial language to another. *Schwarzweiss*.<sup>8</sup> Somehow this conversation was one that I knew and felt all too well. Not for the reason that it was a memory of my own or identical to my own lived experience. Otoo's essay reached beyond the page, or rather I reached toward it, drawn together by an understanding of living in Black precarity and doing one's best to be a mother. Without realizing it, it was an experience of rememory; I was brushing up against Otoo's relived memory made present and translated into the textual form. I began that day translating the piece into English and found that within just an hour or so, I had the initial draft in front of me.

While researchers and scholars emphasize the praxis and method of translation, it is not lost on me that translation is also a personal endeavor. There is a care and concern for the original words but, especially in this case where the essay depicted a conversation that had actually taken place, there existed feelings beyond words that I knew I needed to find a way to preserve, to carry over into English like the protective and cautious hands of a parent holding their child. It was a heavy undertaking because I sensed deep down that there was something incredibly special and significant in this essay. Otoo's words made the nebulous and often mystified concept of systemic racism more apparent for white readers. She wove a tapestry of incidents and situations into her words but did so in a way that non-Black readers could catch a glimpse of that harsh reality. And yet, for Black and other marginalized readers, a knowing hand extended from the text, an invitation to sew themselves and their own versions of those incidents alongside hers into that discourse—into that quilt—through the process of reading. Otoo's essay signified (at least for me) the embodiment of love: Love for her son, Tyrell, love for her

---

<sup>8</sup> "Black and white" in English. I use this here to reference May Ayim's poem "blues in schwarz weiss" 'blues in black and white' to think about the impact of imperialism, colonialism, and white supremacy.

community, an ever-deepening love and appreciation for her Blackness. I had to ask myself how I could translate all those feelings and motivations, pains and concerns, as well as the words on the page.

After I had finished the translation and the job talks were over, I reached out to Otoo to thank her for the essay and let her know that I had worked on a translation for a recent job talk. I did not really think about where that contact might lead, but I thought that it was somehow significant to let someone know when you appreciate and really connect to something they have written. A few weeks later, maybe even less, Otoo reached out to me, asking whether I would be interested in publishing my translation of her essay in the online journal *Transit* alongside translations of other essays from the volume *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum*. I began by reading through it again, circulating it to a few friends and working with the editor to fine tune some of the wording. The process became a conversational and intimate one shared amongst people who knew me, Otoo's writings, and the difficulties and pitfalls of translation. My original draft got the underlying points across, but I sensed that the translation remained in a very nascent form. After a couple rounds of edits, the editor of the special issue, Jon Cho-Pozzi, shared it with Otoo. Following years of working on medieval texts, there was a fair amount of excitement on my end about the opportunity to learn from and discuss texts with an author who was still living. Otoo, who grew up in London, has published in both English and German. Our correspondence took place in English, mirroring in some ways the conversations Otoo had with her son, Tyrell. Through email exchanges, I learned more about some of the conversations that Otoo had with her son, and that the essay was also quite special for her because it integrated Tyrell's own words. She carried over his utterances, mingled with her own, to form the body of the essay.

For me, this was more than an essay. It was the admixture of interview, conversation, and preservation. I came to realize that through this essay an archive of experience had been collected and shared, between mother and son, speaker and listener, reader / translator and author, if only fleeting and brief. That glimpse embodied within Otoo's "Liebe" mapped a geography of influences, across generations, continents and bodies, that gestured toward a process of understanding and acknowledgement more intimate than a linear narrative. That intimacy, that hapticity echoed loudly in Otoo's careful and reflective construction of her essay, speaking simultaneously to herself, to her son Tyrell, and to communities beyond.

Translating the essay led me to reconsider some of my understanding of the text, in particular sections that reflected actual conversations Otoo had with her son in English. A translation of a translation can create distance, and the process exposed for me how relational and contextualized language can be when the text embodies experiential knowledge and/or memory. The final lines of the essay, utterances that arguably get to the heart of the entire essay, had to be altered to

reflect Tyrell's original words in English, rather than its translation in the German text. The lines in the German essay read: "Mein Zuhause ist ein Ort, für den ich gekämpft habe. Ich habe gekämpft, damit ich mich wohlfühlen kann, Berlin als meine Heimat zu bezeichnen. Diesen Kampf zu führen ist Teil meiner Heimat geworden. Inzwischen liebe ich es" (Otoo 68). My initial translation of these lines was: "My home is a place that I fought for. I fought so that I could feel comfortable calling Berlin my *Heimat*. Fighting this fight has become a part of my *Heimat*. I love it now."

I initially wanted to preserve "Heimat" in German because the concept is complicated and expresses more a sense of belonging than it does a physical space / place. For Afro- and Black German people, being both Black and German often complicates a sense of belonging, in particular belonging associated with the word "Heimat."<sup>9</sup> Through conversation with Otoo, she shared with me what Tyrell had said, which appeared in the published version of the translation: "Home for me is very much a place I fought for. I fought so that I can feel comfortable calling Berlin my home . . . and proving that home is home has become part of home for me . . . these experiences, I've come to love them."

Although the difference between my initial translation and the excerpt from the conversation that Otoo shared with me are slight, the emphasis on home, self-agency, and love come to the forefront in the second, arguably original, version. Specifically, the line "proving that home is home has become part of home for me" resituates what home / "Heimat" can mean with regard to Blackness in Germany. "Home is home" reclaims "Heimat" from an abstract concept of belonging determined and defined by Germanness as whiteness tied to action—a verb—that reflects hooks's sentiments at the beginning of the essay ("[Love]'s a verb, not a noun"). In addition, the use of ellipses depicts a process of thinking out loud, of carefully considering one's words to express something that is a part of experience and intertwined with a sense of identity and self-becoming. The change also highlights the importance of translating in collaboration with the author and developing a relationship of understanding that represents the intimate nature of translation.

## Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have proposed a model of Black translational praxis that is in conversation with hapticity. Translation is labor, it is an art of feeling across and beyond linguistic boundaries to immerse oneself within the textual landscapes and worlds built, recreated, and obscured. Through the process

---

<sup>9</sup> I was also thinking about ways that the title of the volume, *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* (*Your Homeland is Our Nightmare*), exposes the space between "Heimat" and marginalized identities in Germany and their ability to claim Germany as a "Heimat."

of translating Black-authored works, the realities of Black precarity intermingle with expressions of joy, celebration, reflection, and self-affirming personhood, complicating any attempt to disengage from either pleasure or trauma. Haptic translation denies the ability to remove oneself from the process of textual engagement and understanding. The merging of life / lived experience and translation is expressed with *transvivência*, which presupposes a move that acknowledges the vibrancy and multifaceted existence of the author and their created world, one that is living, changeable, modulating, and approached from various paths by the reader. *Transvivência* as an art and practice / praxis of translation and textual engagement gestures toward bridging the gap between that which is said and that which is felt, viscerally and corporally. Furthermore, *transvivência* presents a labor of love and care, one that does not shy away from Black precarity and brings to the fore a concept of uniting translation with Black feminist traditions that situate an understanding of Blackness with care, habituation, and habit (Camp 44). While this is only one potential approach for translating Black-authored works, especially by Black diasporic writers in Germany, I hope this concept of translational praxis, at the very least, initiates more discussion about the intimacy, hapticity, and care required to engage with Black-authored texts in translation.

#### Works Cited

- Adams, Anne. "The Souls of Black Volk: Contradiction? Oxymoron?" *Not So Plain as Black and White: Afro-German Culture and History, 1890–2000*, edited by Patricia Mazón and Reinhild Steingröver. U of Rochester P, 2005, pp. 209–33.
- Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. Verso, 2013.
- Araújo, Cibele de Guadalupe Sousa, Silva, Luciana de Mesquita, and Silva-Reis, Dennys. "Translation Studies and Black Women in the Light of Feminism," translated by John Milton. *Revista Ártemis*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2019, pp. 14–24. <https://doi.org/10.22478/ufpb.1807-8214.2019v27n1.46695>
- Augusto, Geri. "Language Should Not Keep Us Apart!: Reflections towards a Black Transnational Praxis of Translation." *Callaloo*, vol. 37, issue 3, 2014, pp. 632–47. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2014.0081>
- Ayim, May. "afro-deutsch I." Translated by Ilse Müller. In *Blues in Black and White: A Collection of Essays, Poetry, and Conversations*. Africa World Press, 2003, pp. 1–2.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *blues in schwarz weiss*. Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1996.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Blues in Black and White: A Collection of Essays, Poetry, and Conversations*. Translated by Anne V. Adams. Africa World Press, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "sister." Translated by Ekpenyong Ani. In *Blues in Black and White: A Collection of Essays, Poetry, and Conversations*. Africa World Press, 2003, p. 30.
- Campt, Tina. "The Visual Frequency of Black Life." *Social Text* 140, vol. 37, no. 3, September 2019, pp. 25–46. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-758503>
- Edwards, Brent Hayes. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Harvard UP, 2003. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674034426>
- Florvil, Tiffany. *Mobilizing Black Germany: Afro-German Women and the Making of a Transnational Movement*. U of Illinois P, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.5406/j.ctv1f884c1>
- Goertz, Karein K. "Showing Her Colors: An Afro-German Writes the Blues in Black and White." *Callaloo*, vol. 26, no. 2, Spring 2003, pp. 306–19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2003.0045>
- Keene, John. "Translating Poetry, Translating Blackness." *Poetry Foundation*, Harriet blog, Apr. 2016, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2016/04/translating-poetry-translating-blackness>.
- Kelly, Natasha. *Afrokultur: der Raum zwischen gestern und morgen*. Unrast Verlag, 2016.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Millis Erwachen: Schwarze Frauen, Kunst und Widerstand / Milli's Awakening: Black Women, Art and Resistance*. Orlanda Verlag, 2018.
- Lorde, Audre. "Poetry is not a luxury." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, edited by Cheryl Clarke. Crossing Press, 2007, pp. 36–39.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New American Library, 1987.
- Ofosu-Somuah, Barbara and Candice Whitney. "Translating Italy, Translating Blackness." *Public Books*, 22 Dec. 2020, <https://www.publicbooks.org/translating-italy-translating-blackness/>.
- Opitz, May, Katharina Oguntoye, and Dagmar Schlutz, editors. *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte*. Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out*. Translated by Anne V. Adams in cooperation with Tina Campt, May Ayim, and Dagmar Schultz. U of Massachusetts P, 1992. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2nhq3wn>
- Otoo, Sharon Dodua. "Liebe." *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum*, edited by Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah. Ullstein Verlag, 2019, pp. 56–68.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Love." Translated by Adrienne Merritt. *Transit: A Journal of Travel, Migration, and Multiculturalism in the German-speaking World*, December 2021. <https://doi.org/10.5070/t70055562>

- Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. “‘Rememory’: Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison’s Novels.” In *Contemporary Literature* vol 31, no. 3, 1990, pp. 300–323. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208536>
- Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke UP, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822373452>
- Spivak, Gayatri. “The Politics of Translation.” In *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. Routledge, 1993, pp. 179–200. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203440872>
- Susam-Saraeva, Şebnem. “Representing experiential knowledge: Who may translate whom?” *Translation Studies*, 2020, pp. 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2020.1846606>
- Wright, Michelle M. “Others-from-within from without: Afro-German Subject Formation and the Challenge of a Counter-Discourse.” *Callaloo*, vol. 26, issue 2, 2003, pp. 296–305. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2003.0065>
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*. University of Minnesota P, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/97808166887268.001.001>