7 Listening to South African Apartheid on Swiss Radio: Athol Fugard's *The Blood Knot* and the Translation of Passing

Franziska Burger

Athol Fugard's play *The Blood Knot*[1] was given its first performance on 3 September 1961 in Dorkay House, a former factory building on Eloff Street in Johannesburg that had become a multiracial cultural centre in the 1950s and was home to both the Union of South African Artists and the African Music and Drama Association. The play had a cast of two, the brothers Morrie and Zacharias, who were played by Fugard himself and Zakes Mokae. This was, it seems, the first time in the history of South Africa that a Black and a white actor were on stage together in a play.[2] It was also one of the last for many years: The Group Areas Amendment, adopted in 1965, finally enforced the segregation of actors and audiences in South Africa's theatres.[3]

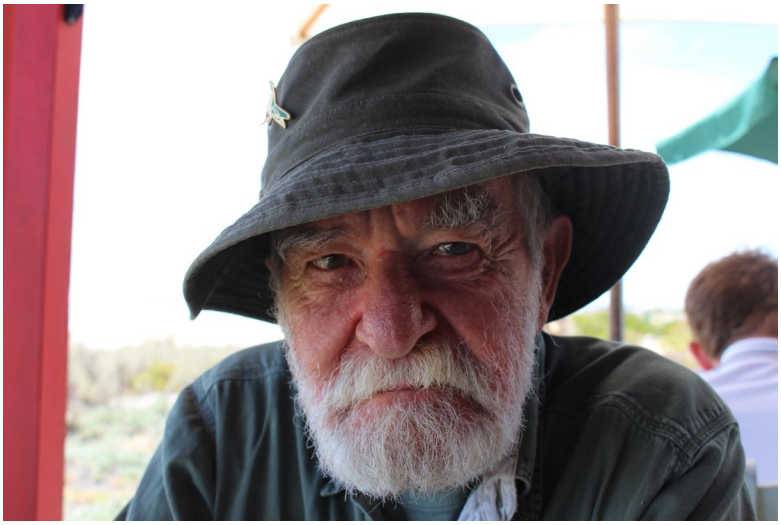

Figure 7.1. Athol Fugard. Photo by Paula Fourie. Private collection.

1 The play was later revised and the definite article dropped from its title; we retain the original title here.

2 Dennis Walder, *Athol Fugard*. London: Macmillan, 1984, 1.

3 See Loren Kruger, *A Century of South African Theatre*. London: Methuen Drama, 2020, 82.

The Blood Knot was staged at the Intimate Theatre on Rissik Street in Johannesburg two months after its world premiere, and afterwards went on to tour the world. It was Fugard's breakthrough as an internationally successful playwright. The South African literary scholar Dennis Walder describes it as "a passionate duet which probed and revealed the feelings associated with that perennial South African subject – race".[4]

Despite their specifically South African themes, Fugard's dramas were considered universal in import and received substantial international recognition.[5] In the 1970s, his plays were taken up by S. Fischer Verlag of Frankfurt am Main – also the German publisher of Samuel Beckett, Arthur Miller and others – and began to be translated and performed with regularity in the German-speaking countries.[6] Several were also given as radio plays at this time. The online database of radio plays run by ARD (the joint organisation of Germany's regional public-service broadcasters) lists German radio productions from the Weimar Republic to the present (including both the Federal Republic of Germany, hereinafter "West Germany", and the German Democratic Republic, hereinafter "GDR") and shows that there were seven adaptations for radio of plays by Fugard, five of which were produced by the Rundfunk der DDR ("GDR Radio").[7] Between 1976 and 1987, four plays by Fugard were also adapted as radio plays for Swiss-German Radio, DRS:[8] *The Road to Mecca*, *Aloes*, *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act*, and *The Blood Knot*. All four thematise race and depict the lives of people in South Africa during apartheid. It would thus seem that in terms of the dissemination of his work on the radio, the German-language reception of Fugard was focused on Switzerland and the GDR.

Switzerland and South Africa – Apartheid as a Global Problem

When the National Party began implementing its apartheid policies after coming to power in 1948, it enjoyed tacit support from the West, and there was initially little support for

---

4 Walder, *Athol Fugard*, 1.

5 Walder, *Athol Fugard*, 3.

6 The S. Fischer website gives details of the German first performances of Fugard's works. See www.fischer-theater.de/audio/autor/athol-fugard/t4061776 (accessed May 2024).

7 See https://hoerspiele.dra.de/kurzinfo.php?sessid=gpqifdhc80aqcij3u0v2fromv6 (accessed May 2024).

8 *Der Weg nach Mekka* (*The Road to Mecca*, 1987, directed by Klaus W. Leonhard, translation by Jörn van Dyck), *Aloen* (*Aloes*, 1982, directed by Klaus W. Leonhard, translation by Jörn van Dyck), *Aussagen nach einer Verhaftung auf Grund des Gesetzes gegen Unsittlichkeit* (*Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act*, 1977, directed by Mario Hindermann, translation by Jörn van Dyck), and *Mit Haut und Haar* (*The Blood Knot*, 1976, directed by Joseph Scheidegger, translation by Frank Heigert and Walter Czaschke). "DRS" ("Radio der deutschen und rätoromanischen Schweiz") was the name of the state German-Swiss radio station until 2011, when it was reorganised with Swiss TV as "SRF" (Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen).

the burgeoning anti-apartheid movement.[9] Calls for a boycott of the apartheid regime by decolonised countries such as India (1947) and Jamaica (1959) went long unheeded, not least because of the Cold War. South Africa was considered a bulwark against communist influences in Africa,[10] while the most important anti-apartheid organisations in South Africa itself, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the African National Congress (ANC), were openly supported by the Soviet Union. It is also in this context that we should view the popularity of Fugard's work in the GDR.[11]

From the 1960s onwards, human rights and the ethics of the market became increasingly important in the West. But while most Western European countries began to suspend their relations with South Africa, Switzerland – being an officially neutral, non-aligned country – did not participate in international boycotts and remained an important trading partner to South Africa until the final years of apartheid, especially in the diamond and gold sectors.[12]

When the economic crisis of the mid-1970s forced countries to intensify their participation in global markets, this went hand in hand with increased cultural transfer between different continents and countries. Human rights activism also experienced an upsurge, mainly in the Global North. The historians Knud Andresen and Detlef Siegfried have described how a broader understanding of apartheid as a global problem developed during the 1970s and 1980s that became gradually more detached from the South African context and mutated into an understanding of apartheid as an oppressive form of racial discrimination in its broadest sense.[13]

This view seems to find confirmation in an article in the Swiss daily newspaper, *Die Tat*, on 17 December 1977 about a radio programme on South Africa, presented by Swiss Radio DRS, that included a broadcast of two radio plays based on dramas by Fugard (*The Blood Knot* and *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act*). The author "sg" – Hans-Peter Sigrist, who was the editor in charge of film, TV and Radio at the paper – writes that "several aspects of life in South Africa will be shown" in the programme, and adds:

> Apartheid is not only a South African problem, but ultimately a worldwide problem: apartheid takes place wherever there are privileged and underprivileged people, and this does not only

---

9 See Knud Andresen and Detlef Siegfried, "Apartheid und Westeuropäische Reaktionen", in *Zeithistorische Forschungen*, 2, 2016.

10 See Sue Onslow, *Cold War in Southern Africa. White Power, Black Liberation*. London: Routledge, 2009.

11 See Andresen and Siegfried, "Apartheid und Westeuropäische Reaktionen", 198.

12 See Georg Kreis, *Switzerland and South Africa 1948–1994. Final Report of the NFP 42+ Commissioned by the Swiss Federal Council*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2007, 317ff.

13 Andresen and Siegfried, "Apartheid und Westeuropäische Reaktionen", 204.

refer to the different population groups within individual countries, but also to the relationship between the peoples themselves.[14]

In what follows, we shall investigate the way in which the radio adaptation of *The Blood Knot* engages with apartheid and race, how race is represented in translation and dramaturgically, and what this tells us about Switzerland's relationship to race and its position in relation to the apartheid regime.

The Blood Knot: Plot and Origins

As Fugard states in his introduction to *The Blood Knot* (1975), his early plays were written in part in response to his time working in a native commissioner's court in Johannesburg, where "non-white" people were tried for refusing to follow the apartheid-era restrictions on where they were allowed to live, work and travel. Failure to present a pass upon demand would often be punished by a short prison sentence. Fugard describes this job as an eye-opening experience that had an impact on his later work for the theatre, where he focuses particularly on topics of race and class: "The six months I spent in that Court Room was a traumatic experience for me as a white South African. I saw more suffering than I could cope with. I began to understand how my country functioned."[15] This was the time when he was writing and staging his first plays together with people who had almost no experience as actors.[16]

As already mentioned above, *The Blood Knot* brought Fugard his international breakthrough. It explores the exclusion suffered by people because of racial segregation during the apartheid regime by depicting the life of two brothers, Morrie and Zachariah. They live in a shack in Korsten, a "non-white" slum near the factories on the outskirts of Port Elizabeth. They are both coloured, but whereas Zacharias is perceived as being Black, Morrie can "pass" as white. When Morrie suggests that Zach – to overcome his longing for a woman – should answer a woman's ad looking for a penfriend, a series of events is unleashed. The woman, Ethel Lange, turns out to be white: "She becomes both a fantasy and a threat, the object of a legal crime in apartheid South Africa."[17] Zacharias encourages Morrie to meet

---

14 Sg, "Apartheid im Hörspiel", in *Die Tat*, 297, 17 December 1976. Translation by the present writer.

15 Athol Fugard, *The Blood Knot*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1975, v.

16 Regarding the reception of Fugard in South Africa see Hilary Burns, "The Long Road Home. Athol Fugard and his Collaborators", in *New Theatre Quarterly*, 18(3), 2002, 234–42; Kolawole Olaiya, "Deconstructing Apartheid's Global Gaze. Death and Resistance in Fugard et al.'s Sizwe Bansi is Dead", in *Global South*, 2(2), 2008, 75–91; Caroline Davis, "Publishing anti-Apartheid literature. Athol Fugard's Statements Plays", in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 48(1), 2013, 113–29; Khaya M. Gqibitole *et al.*, "Identity, Politics and Restriction in Athol Fugard's Art. Writing and Liberalism in Apartheid South Africa", in *Literator*, 39(1), 2018.

17 Kerry-Jane Wallart, "The Word and the Stare. Or the Intermediate Transparency in 'The Blood Knot' by Athol Fugard", in *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 35(1), 2012, 63–72, here 64.

Ethel Lange instead, since he can "pass for white". It transpires that Morrie has been living as white for some time before returning to his brother. When Zacharias returns home one day with a second-hand suit that he has bought for Morrie for his rendezvous with Ethel, this triggers memories of the trauma Morrie experienced when he began dressing as a white man and how, when living as a white, he too had taken advantage of his new social status and exploited Black and coloured people. Morrie hurls racial insults at his brother, who responds with threats of violence.[18] In the subsequent dialogue, the two brothers reflect on the question of how a white man behaves and performs his identity. As the South African literary scholar Loren Kruger has written, the different experience of race divides the two brothers: "the play depicts the intimate conflict between two differently black men who act out obsessions with race on each other's bodies and minds".[19] Having internalised apartheid deeply, the two brothers act towards each other in a mutually corrective way, inciting each other and pushing each other back into their respective social roles as a Black man and a man passing as white.[20] As the German literary scholar Haike Frank writes: "The brothers show to themselves, each other and the audience that apartheid is a form of theatre and theatrical performance."[21] Frank analyses Fugard's play from the point of view of social role-playing, but segregation also has major legal and economic consequences, some of which are material and affect lives at all levels. The concept of "passing" is dramaturgically central to *The Blood Knot*, and helps us to deconstruct race as a socially and politically constructed phenomenon.

The Radio Adaptation: Translating "Racialised" Bodies into Language

The Blood Knot was first translated into German by Frank Heigert and Walter Czaschke and published by Henschelverlag of Berlin (GDR) in 1974 (entitled *Mit Haut und Haar*, literally "with skin and hair", a German phrase meaning roughly "lock, stock and barrel").[22] Which translation was used at the play's first-ever production in German, at the Innerstadt-Bühne Aarau in Switzerland in November 1973, directed by Ingold Wildenauer, is unknown.[23] Heigert and Czaschke's translation of 1974 was used at what the literature er-

---

18 See Athol Fugard, *The Blood Knot*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968, 158–59.

19 Kruger, *A Century of South African Theatre*, 78.

20 See Kruger, *A Century of South African Theatre*, 81–82.

21 Haike Frank, *Role-Play in South African Theatre*. Bayreuth: Eckhard Breitinger, 2004, 76.

22 Athol Fugard, "Mit Haut und Haar. The Blood Knot. Ein Stück in Sieben Szenen". Translated by Walter Czaschke and Frank Heigert, in Joachim Fiebach, *Stücke Afrikas*. Henschelverlag: Berlin 1974, 159–256. Even though the publisher's information in this edition states that the first translation of the play was published in 1970 by Suhrkamp Verlag of Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp has been unable to confirm this when asked by the present writer, pointing out merely that S. Fischer Verlag was the actual owner of the performance rights.

23 See the review by "H.T." in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 194(519), 8 November 1973, morning edition.

roneously claims to have been the first production in German, at the Volkstheater in Rostock in the GDR in March 1975.[24] A second translation was made by Allison Malherbe (now as *Blutsband*) and published by S. Fischer Verlag of Frankfurt am Main in 1976.[25] This was used for what elsewhere has also been claimed to be the first-ever German production, this time in Cologne in 1976 (the Fischer Verlag website confuses matters even further by claiming that this translation was first performed on 19 April 1978 at the Staatstheater in Braunschweig).[26]

It was the version by Heigert and Czaschke that was used by Swiss Radio DRS for its adaptation in 1977, though the original 90 pages of the play were shortened by about a third for this purpose. The excisions were primarily of passages where the two protagonists refer to the Bible and their beliefs, but also where they recollect their childhood, especially their mother. Apart from the problem of length, adapting a theatre play for the radio brings several further challenges. One of these is that whereas in the theatre, bodies themselves speak, produce meaning, and embody meaning, in radio plays, everything depends on the language and the voice.[27]

The adaptation by Radio DRS starts with a prologue that is not in the original, and is given before the title of the play and the people involved are announced. It comprises fragments of the actual text of the play plus several small additions, and serves to introduce the two protagonists to the audience: "Ich heisse Zacharias Pietersen und ich bin Schwarz" ("I'm Zacharias Pietersen and I'm Black"), says one voice; "Ich bin Morris Pietersen und bin Zacharias Bruder" ("I'm Morris Pietersen and I'm Zacharias's brother"), says the other. There follows a short dialogue to contextualise their relationship:

> [Zacharias:] Morris, ich möchte dich mal genau anschauen.
>
> [Morris:] Den Bruder zum ersten Mal genau anschauen? Schliesslich bin ich schon ein Jahr hier.
>
> [Zacharias:] Du gehörst schon zur helleren Sorte, bist du überall so? Keine Stelle ein bisschen dunkel? Ich muss schon sagen, mit nichts an bist du schon ein strahlendheller Bursche.[28]

---

24 See Loren Kruger, *Post-Imperial Brecht: Politics and Performance, East and South*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 295.

25 1976 is the date given by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, see https://d-nb.info/770176054 (accessed May 2024). Loren Kruger in *Post-Imperial Brecht: Politics and Performance, East and South* gives 1979 as the publication date.

26 See www.fischer-theater.de/theater/stueck/blutsband/970395 (accessed May 2024).

27 See Dorothea Volz, "Fremde Sprachen, fremde Stimmen. Spielarten der Alterität", in W.-D. Ernst, N. Niethammer, B. Szymanski-Düll, A. Mungen (eds.). *Sound and Performance. Positionen, Methoden, Analysen*. Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann, 2015, 427–38.

28 This dialogue is a collage of fragments from scene four; see Fugard: *The Blood Knot*, 1968, 146–47 or Fugard, "Mit Haut und Haar", 223–24. Even though the radio version is officially based on Heigert and Czaschke's translation, it differs greatly from it.

This short passage is a collage of phrases from Scene Four of Fugard's play, presumably collated specifically by the translator or the production team to transpose the audio-visual material of the stage production, which presupposes the performative means of theatre, and make it suitable for the radio. The additions and ellipses in this passage are given here in square brackets:

> [Zacharias:] ... Morris! [...]
>
> I want to have a good look at you, man.
>
> [Morris:] It's a bit late in the day to be seeing your brother for the first time. I been here a whole year now, you know.
>
> [...]
>
> [Zacharias:] You're on the lighter side of life all right. You like that ... all over? [...]
>
> Not even a foot in the darker side, hey! I'd say you must be quite a bright boy with nothing on.[29]

This new prologue overall offers an important key to the main theme of the play: race and racial passing. This passage can be seen as a counterpart to the character description that also appears in Fugard's original text: "There are two characters, ZACHARIAH and MORRIS. ZACHARIAH is dark-skinned and MORRIS is light skinned."[30]

The translations by Walter Czaschke and Frank Heigert (1974) and by Allison Malherbe (1977) add similar introductions: The former states: "The play has two characters: Zachariah and Morris. Zachariah is dark-skinned, Morris light-skinned."[31] The introduction by Malherbe is slightly more differentiated, adding further information: "The play has two [characters]: Zachariah and Morris, both of them coloured, in other words not Black. Zachariah is dark-skinned, Morris light-skinned."[32] This indicates that Malherbe was more aware of the historical context of racial inequality in South Africa and the specific concept of coloured identity.

There is a second passage in Scene Five that differs from the original: In the English version there is a sentence in this scene that is spoken by Zacharias to his brother Morrie: "You must learn your lesson, Morrie. You want to pass, don't you?"[33] The context of this scene implies that Morrie should pass for white. In the radio play, however, "pass" was translated quite differently: "Du möchtest doch über die Runden kommen?" which means "You'd like to make ends meet, wouldn't you?".

---

29 Fugard, *The Blood Knot*, 1968, 146–47. In the version of 1975, 64–66, the second sentence is closer to what is used in the translation: "[Look at] your brother for the first time? I been here a whole year, now, you know".

30 Fugard, *The Blood Knot*, 1968, 88.

31 Fugard, *Mit Haut und Haar*, 161.

32 Athol Fugard, *Blutsband. Ein Stück in 7 Szenen*. Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer Verlag, 1977, 5.

33 Fugard, *The Blood Knot*, 1975, 78.

It is notable that this sentence as translated by Heigert and Czaschke, and used in the Swiss Radio production, is similar to the translation by Malherbe. The latter writes: "Du willst doch was erreichen",[34] meaning "You want to achieve something, don't you". Both imply here an accomplishment, a success, something that can be learned or achieved and is independent of one's racial or social status. It connects and equalises racial passing and social mobility. The idea is created that racial identity can be "earned", just like a social status that can be improved by one's behaviour and earnings. The translation "Du willst doch was erreichen", in Malherbe subtly reinforces this idea. It suggests aspiration and personal ambition, but crucially detaches the concept of "passing" from its racial and legal specificity within the apartheid regime. In foregrounding a generalised sense of striving or upward mobility, it neutralises the violence and risk that come with racial passing in the South African context. Like the Swiss Radio translation, it erases the coercive structures that make passing necessary in the first place.

Race in South Africa

In southern Africa during the apartheid era, coloured identity, as a historically specific and socially constructed phenomenon, referred to people of mixed racial ancestry descended from European settlers, slaves brought from the Dutch East Indies, indigenous Khoisan peoples and others of African descent.[35] When segregation was implemented by the colonial state, social identities such as coloured, Black and white became legal classifications. After the election of the National Party in 1948 and the introduction of apartheid, several laws were established to enforce this segregation: The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Immorality Amendment Act (1950) criminalised interracial marriage and sexual intercourse. Under the Group Areas Act (1950) "non-white" families were forcibly displaced to the outskirts of towns.[36] The coloured community's "intermediate status in the South African racial hierarchy, distinct from the historically dominant white minority and the numerically preponderant African population",[37] denied them membership of the "superior", white social group, while at the same time bestowing mild privileges when compared

---

34 Fugard, *Blutsband*, 1977, 190.

35 See Mohamed Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006, 469–70.

36 Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough*, 470–471. For a discussion of attitudes toward coloured identity in the anti-apartheid movement, see Mohamed Adhikari, "'You Have the Right to Know': South Africa, 1987–1994", in L. Switzer and M. Adhikari (eds.), *South Africa's Resistance Press: Alternative Voices in the Last Generation under Apartheid.* Athens, OH: University Press, 2000, 349–54.

37 Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough*, 469–70.

to the section of the population designated Black. The result of this is described as follows by the South African historian Mohamed Adhikari:

> Coloured assimilationism together with the insecurities engendered by their intermediate status meant that the most consistent, and insistent, element in their expression of identity in daily life was an association with whiteness, and a concomitant distancing from Africanness, whether it be in the value placed on a fair skin and straight hair, the prizing of white ancestors in the family lineage or taking pride in their assimilation to western culture.[38]

This status, Adhikari argues, led to coloureds becoming one of the most marginalised groups, notable for their "lack of political or economic power".[39] One of the most pernicious effects of being classified "coloured" was that the white minority continued to function for such individuals as a point of reference as they tried to defend the few remaining privileges of their designated racial status. This is evident in the attitude of Morrie, who ashamedly reports how he, when he passed as white, also reproduced derogatory and discriminatory attitudes towards Black people. As Adhikari puts it:

> As important as such measures imposed from above were, one cannot ignore the complicity of coloured people, both individually and collectively, in the implementation of segregation. They often exploited, supported and sometimes even demanded segregatory measures where these were seen to be to their advantage.[40]

The racial segregation that the apartheid regime implemented led to social, political and economic inequality. It is in this legal racial labyrinth that the idea of "racial passing" makes sense that is dramaturgically at the heart of the *The Blood Knot*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "passing" as follows:

> To be accepted as or believed to be, or to represent oneself successfully as, a member of an ethnic or religious group other than one's own, esp. one having higher social status; spec. (of a person of black ancestry in a racially segregated society) to be accepted as white. Later also: (of a transsexual) to be accepted as a member of a different sex.[41]

In the context of *The Blood Knot*, "to pass" means to pass as white, i.e. as a member of the supposedly superior racial and social class, with all its privileges and rights. The "instrumental and material motivations"[42] for Blacks to pass as coloured or for coloureds to pass

---

38 Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough*, 479.

39 Adhikari, *Genocide on Settler Frontiers: When Hunter-Gatherers and Commercial Stock Farmers Clash*. London: UCT Press, 2013, xix.

40 Adhikari, *Genocide on Settler Frontiers*, xiii.

41 *Oxford English Dictionary*, "Passing", at www.oed.com/view/Entry/138429?rskey=G39LMh&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid (accessed 1 May 2024).

42 Adhikari, *Genocide on Settler Frontiers*, xiv.

as white were the hope of acquiring social mobility in some cases, and full civil rights in others. The precondition in each case was anonymity, "permitting [individuals] to resort to imaginative role-playing in their self-representation".[43]

"To try for white" – as "passing" is also called in South-African English – but to be revealed as coloured would mean that one "would have suffered not only from legal prosecution but also from severe social stigmatisation".[44] "Passing" deconstructs the idea of racial essentialism and the idea that whiteness is a birthright – something so essential to apartheid. It is racial segregation that makes passing possible and necessary; it is "a response to policies, in this case, state enforcement of apartheid".[45] By translating "passing" as "to make ends meet", as happened in the German translation of *The Blood Knot* broadcast on Swiss Radio, this aspect is erased and no longer inviting of critical reflection.

Translating as a Way of Reading

The prologue at the beginning of the radio play is proof that those in charge had thought carefully about the transferability of a stage play and the representation of race to radio. In the case of the radio production of *The Blood Knot*, two translation processes effectively took place: one from text to radio, the other from English to German. "Translation" is here understood in the etymological sense of a "carrying over".[46] The prologue shows that both translation and the transfer into another form of representation can be understood as contributing to new forms of meaning-making. Both techniques aim to transfer content and to render the original meaning understandable. The theatre and translation scholar Sruti Bala has argued that "the practice of translation and the reflection on processes of translation are often stitched into the protocols of performance. The translator's note is thus not an appendix or preface to the performance, but woven into the textures of performance practice".[47] Translation therefore becomes inextricably integrated with staging a performance.

Nevertheless, asymmetries and gaps remain that cannot be overcome in language and performance. The Indian literary theorist Gayatri Spivak believes this is why translators should understand the process of translation as "reading". In a translation, every word opens up new dimensions for the readers that are not accessible to them in their everyday lives: "If you are making anything else accessible, through a language quickly learnt with an idea that

---

43 Werner Sollors, *Neither Black nor White yet both. Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, 47–48.

44 Frank, *Role-Play in South African Theatre*, 62.

45 Kruger, *A Century of South African Theatre*, 79.

46 Sruti Bala, "Necessary Misapplications: The Work of Translation in Performance in an Era of Global Asymmetries", in *South African Theatre Journal*, 33(1), 2020, 6.

47 Bala, "Necessary Misapplications", 7.

you transfer content, then you are betraying the text and showing rather dubious politics."[48] In the case of *The Blood Knot* this is true for the translation by Allison Malherbe (1977) as well as that by Walter Czaschke and Frank Heigert (1974). Not only the content of the text, but also elements of culture and identity should be part of the translation and transferred into the other language.

In order to overcome (colonial) hegemony, it is the responsibility of the translator to respect the asymmetry between original and translation. The prologue to the radio play of *The Blood Knot* can be read as a kind of translator's note, declaring the politics of the translator. The fact that the translators have not translated "passing" with an equivalent that allows the original meaning to remain, removes an important key to the interpretation of the play in the transferred language. Regardless of whether this is a sign of inaccuracy or ignorance, this mistranslation allows for certain deductions about Switzerland's attitude to racial issues.

If we combine these findings on the challenge of translating terms and concepts related to race and passing with Hans-Peter Sigrist's opening comment that apartheid is a global problem that affects all people (without even mentioning the concept of race on which apartheid in South Africa was based), the question arises as to what kind of understanding of race existed in Switzerland.

Switzerland: Whitewashing Racism

Whiteness is helpful in understanding the structural significance of race for the distribution of power and attention, which is exemplified by the translation and radio adaptation of *The Blood Knot* for Radio DRS.[49] Whiteness is used as a normative reference of social and political life in Switzerland, and in this analysis will be used as a "conceptual tool for analyzing Swiss society".[50] It describes a hierarchical social system that stems from imperialist colonial history[51] in which white people are assigned hierarchically higher positions in comparison to people classified or viewed as Black. These power relations permeate all social, cultural,

---

48 Gayatri C. Spivak, "The Politics of Translation", in L. Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 2012, 322.

49 See Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters. The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993; Ian Haney-López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1996; Patricia Purtschert, *Kolonialität und Geschlecht im 20. Jahrhundert: Eine Geschichte der weißen Schweiz*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2019; Jovita dos Santos Pinto et al. (eds.), "Einleitung: Un/doing Race – Rassifizierung in der Schweiz", in *Un/doing Race. Rassifizierung in der Schweiz*, ed. dos Santos Pinto et al. Zurich/Geneva: Seismo Verlag, 2022.

50 Anne Lavanchy, "Glimpses into the Hearts of Whiteness: Institutions of Intimacy and the Desirable National", in *Colonial Switzerland. Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins*, ed. Patricia Purtschert and H. Fischer-Tiné. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 278.

51 Ann Laura Stoler, *La chair de l'empire: savoirs intimes et pouvoirs raciaux en régime colonial*. Paris: La Découverte & Institut Emilie du Châtelet, 2013.

and economic elements of a society, and lead to non-white people being racialised, othered, exoticised and objectified; they inevitably have to negotiate their marking and deviation from the white norm. Critical whiteness tries to show structures, mechanisms and processes through which white people seem to profit from segregation and racism.

Noémie Michel and Manuela Honegger, the first scholars who engaged critically with whiteness in Switzerland, propose an understanding of whiteness as a "vanguard narrative that articulates together the modern ideas of 'race' and 'progress'".[52] In this context, it is important to keep in mind that the history of whiteness in Switzerland is, on the one hand, specific to its history and geography and, on the other hand, must be placed in the context of transnational processes, especially imperialism, colonialism and racism.[53] In the nineteenth century, Switzerland showed little ambition to become a colonial power. At that time, however, an image of Switzerland was formed that still has an impact today, as Michel and Honegger write: "A narrative claiming that the exceptional political institutions and values forming 'Swiss purity' had to be protected from any foreign elements legitimated this consolidation of a specific Swiss national space. We call this narrative the protection of Swiss purity."[54] This can still be observed, for example, in the context of the discussion about "Überfremdung"[55] (the state of supposedly being overwhelmed by foreign immigrants). Even in the 21st century, there is little Swiss awareness of Switzerland's role in the history of colonialism and the slave trade, as an important trading partner for colonial states, or through the missionary endeavour. Historical research is only slowly starting to show the extent of the country's involvement.[56] Allied to this lack of historical awareness is a persistent belief that racism is not a problem that affects Switzerland. Immigration by people with "other" origins has become racialised in the national discourse, just as discussions of "foreigners" almost exclusively take place in the context of migration and the asylum system.[57]

---

52 Noemi V. Michel and Manuela Honegger, "Thinking Whiteness in French and Swiss Cyberspace", in *Social Politics*, 17(4), 2010, 425.

53 See Anne Lavanchy and Patricia Purtschert, "Weissmachen der Nation. Intimität, Race und Geschlecht in der Schweiz", in J. dos Santos Pinto et al. (eds.), *Un/doing Race. Rassifizierung in der Schweiz*, 140.

54 Michel and Honegger, "Thinking Whiteness in French and Swiss Cyberspace", 431.

55 See Michel and Honegger, "Thinking Whiteness in French and Swiss Cyberspace", 432.

56 See Thomas David et al., *Schwarze Geschäfte. Die Beteiligung von Schweizern an Sklaverei und Sklavenhandel im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*. Zurich: Limmat Verlag, 2006; Kreis, *Switzerland and South Africa 1948–1994. Final Report of the NFP 42+ Commissioned by the Swiss Federal Council*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2007; Patricia Purtschert et al., *Postkoloniale Schweiz. Formen und Folgen eines Kolonialismus ohne Kolonien*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2012; Jovita dos Santos Pinto et al., "Einleitung: Un/doing Race – Rassifizierung in der Schweiz", in dos Santos Pinto et al. (eds.), *Un/doing Race. Rassifizierung in der Schweiz*; Dagmar Konrad, *Missionskinder. Migration und Trennung in Missionarsfamilien der Basler Mission des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Münster: Waxmann Verlag, 2023.

57 See Anne Lavanchy and Patricia Purtschert, "Weissmachen der Nation. Intimität, Race und Ge-

This lack of recognition of racism in Switzerland is also manifested in the lack of an appropriate vocabulary. In the context of current discussions on racism in Switzerland, Jovita dos Santos Pinto points out that there is not only a lack of awareness about whiteness, but that it is also obvious that a large part of society lacks the appropriate anti-racist terms to describe people of colour without having to resort to images such as the savage or the victim.[58] This is still the case. It is almost as if race does not exist in Switzerland, and is only engaged with as a reality if it exists outside its borders.

Conclusion

I argue in this essay that to translate "to pass" with "to make ends meet" disregards the full relevance of racial segregation and its consequences for the inhabitants of the country on which *The Blood Knot* is based. This mistranslation, I hold, builds on a long history of racial indifference and ignorance about Black people that has its roots in imperialism. Because – as Michel's and Honegger's work shows – Switzerland tries to uphold a notion of purity by geographically "outsourcing" racial questions, there is little direct engagement with race. Within this context, the mistranslation of the phrase "to pass" is evidence of a larger social erasure and negation. Down to the present day, as dos Santos Pinto notes, there is no adequate vocabulary for race in Switzerland.

My focus on the mistranslation of "passing" in the adaptation of Athol Fugard's *The Blood Knot* for Swiss Radio DRS invokes a broader background to show why translators might have "failed to read" the original text and all its subtleties. Just as Sigrist in *Die Tat* suggested that apartheid is a universal phenomenon wherever injustice occurs, racial issues are also seen as generalist problems that take place at an individual level. I argue that this negates the significance of state-imposed segregation and its impact, especially on the Black majority. Just as apartheid is seen as a general problem of hegemony, race is also universalised and thus racialisation is not only erased but made invisible. In the final instance, this instance of mistranslation shows how English is not simply English, but in its South African locution also conveys markers for racialised people to which translators should listen.

schlecht in der Schweiz", in dos Santos Pinto et al. (eds.), *Un/doing Race. Rassifizierung in der Schweiz*, 143; and Anne Lavanchy, "Racisme et racialisation – mettre en mots la discrimination raciale", in nccr (National Center of Competence in Research) on the move, https://nccr-onthemove.ch/blog/racisme-et-racialisation-mettre-en-mots-la-discrimination-raciale/, 2019 (accessed 1 May 2024); and dos Santos Pinto et al., *Un/doing Race. Rassifizierung in der Schweiz*, 18.

[58] Faulhaber, Daniel, "Wer sind hier die Affen im Zirkus?", in *Die Wochenzeitung WOZ*, 12, 21 March 2019. See https://www.woz.ch/1912/basler-fasnacht/wer-sind-hier-die-affen-im-zirkus (accessed 4 April 2025).

Stephanus Muller and Chris Walton (eds)

Cultural Relations between Switzerland and Apartheid South Africa

Basler Afrika Bibliographien 2025

The open access version of this book has been published with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Swiss National Science Foundation

Hochschule der Künste Bern
Haute école des arts de Berne
Bern Academy of the Arts

2025

Published by
Basler Afrika Bibliographien
Namibia Resource Centre & Southern Africa Library
Klosterberg 23
PO Box
4010 Basel
Switzerland
www.baslerafrika.ch

CARL SCHLETTWEIN STIFTUNG

The Basler Afrika Bibliographien is part of the Carl Schlettwein Foundation

Cover image: Niklaus Troxler's 1994 poster for the Willisau Jazz Festival. Courtesy of Niklaus Troxler

Cover design: Candice Turvey, Spiritlevel

ISBN 978-3-906927-74-9
eISBN 978-3-906927-75-6
https://doi.org/10.53202/LHFY9620

Contents