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Peer reviewed

Stranger Shaming

by Katja Huber

TRANSIT vol. 11, no. 2

Translated by Ida Sophie Winter

Translator's Introduction

Katja Huber was born in Weilheim in 1971. She has worked for the Bayrischer Rundfunk since 1996, where she has produced and contributed journalistic and literary pieces. She was awarded the Ravensburger Media Prize in 2007, and is the author of four novels and a collection of short narratives.

This translation of the poem “Stranger Shaming” is one of several that Professor [Sean Franzel](#) and I are compiling from the 2015 anthology *Fremd*.¹ Edited by Fridolin Schley, *Fremd* examines interactions between ethnic Germans and migrants. Schley writes that the idea for the book came from his discomfort first with group think—be it racist or anti-racist, instead of individual critical thought—and then with the elitism associated with aloof criticism of social movements. Schley and his friends felt that there must be a better way to fight German xenophobia than through “us versus them” battles, choosing instead to combat idealism and elitism through writing self-critical texts in which they examine their own “gray areas”—expressing “nuances, doubt, anger and fears” without immediate condemnation. In several essays, authors examine their own less-than-politically-correct thoughts or express empathy for jihadists produced by the German-speaking world.

In “Stranger Shaming,” Huber illustrates a tense subway conversation in which a German woman tries to determine whether another woman belongs in her country. The incident represents the kind of daily “micro-aggressions”² faced by Germans who are seen by some as outsiders or foreigners because they do not “look” German enough. While trying to capture Huber’s message in English, I drew on experiences shared by people of color across America, many of whom go through daily interactions like that of Huber’s narrator. This translation was also inspired by the work of photographer [Kiyun Kim](#), who compiled photos of friends at Fordham University holding up signs displaying micro-aggressions they experience. Kim’s work has received further attention through its circulation by Heben Nigatu of [BuzzFeed](#).

The narrator of “Stranger Shaming,” describes sitting down in a train next to a smiling woman who makes room for her. As the woman begins to probe the narrator about her ethnic heritage, the rhythm of the poem stutters. It breaks into a back-and-forth dialogue in which the narrator attempts to negotiate the woman’s motives. As the ride goes on, they

¹ Katja Huber, “Fremdschämen,” in *Fremd*, P. Kirchheim Verlag, 2015. 32-34. Print (for audio of the author reading her work, please follow the [link](#)).

² Derald Sue defines micro-aggressions in this context as “the brief and everyday slights, insults, indignities and denigrating messages sent to people of color by well-intentioned White people who are unaware of the hidden messages being communicated” (Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*, Wiley, 2010).

fall into an awkward silence. Finally, the narrator takes up the poem's initial rhythm as she deliberates on how to defend herself the next time she faces a stranger who assumes she doesn't belong.

Translation

A head bobs
Curls tinkle
without a sound
A woman over there nods
in rhythm
A woman over there looks
up
and I smile,
I think, when
she smiles and
nods
when I ask
if there's still room
beside her.
She nods as I sit
and we
breathe in
and out
and in
and out
and completely
coincidentally,
completely
in synch,
completely together.
Grant me an escape hatch,
I think
when she
pulls an ear bud
out of her ear
and
Jay Z
penetrates
my ear,
and she does right after:
"Do you understand me?"
she asks in English
And, when I nod,
makes a
- LIKE! -

sign with her thumb,
and,
when I nod and
say "Ja" instead of "Yes,"
Asks in English,
"Completely?"
"Everything," I say in German.
She smiles.
"Okay."
Blushes.
Jay Z goes silent.
She still bobs,
maybe now
more energetically than ever.
Says in English,
"Sorry.
You never know."
Corrects herself, in German, "you never know,"
continues, "Now that we no longer know
who"
- hesitates -
"belongs here and"
- hesitates -
"who doesn't."
Even before she draws another breath,
mine catches.
When she breathes in,
My breath stops.
"Sorry ..." she says in English,
giggles. In German,
"Sorry ..."
she says.
My breath is still.
"...But for real now, in German and from the beginning,"
she says,
and I
huff
puff
blow.
Because holding my breath
until everything
is put back in its place
reset
cast in the light-right
is—
can't be done.

"From where?"
she asks.
"Doesn't matter," I say.
"Maybe not for you!" she says,
"No, it matters for me,"
I say,
"especially for me,"
I say and
think,
grant me an escape hatch!
"Fine," she says.
Puts in her ear buds.
Shakes her head.
Presses the button.
Head bobs
Curls tinkle
Woman reflects only
on herself.
Woman nods
only to herself
not to
me
anymore.
Kangaroo!
Next time, I'll say I come from a kangaroo.
A kangaroo, the Congo or Kathmandu.
And most important, in broken English.