

# «Skipping Stones to the other Shore»

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Two beings, drenched wet,  
squeeze water out their bones  
purge it out of their hair.  
The water in their swollen mouths  
pursed like blowfish  
passed for generations  
from one mouth  
to another.

«Here, open your mouth,  
carry this water.  
This is water from that pale river,  
swallowed at our first crossing.  
With all its nectar, with all its silt  
You must pass it on.»  
The two beings do pass it on.  
They drip a few drops into each of our ears,  
and now we cannot un-see.

Bracketed by prominent roads and parks in Wedding district of Berlin, Transvaalstraße runs unremarkably for my uninitiated eye. With a shisha bar and Späti at its head, a Kita down the road, and the omnipresent physiotherapy clinic across from it, Transvaalstraße looks like any other Berlin neighbourhood. What about this street draws them? What about it makes them stop, look, shudder,

ponder and wonder? The artists Coila-Leah Enderstein and Nicola van Straaten walk ahead. Their comfortable gait next to one another tells me: here are two people who have taken many long walks together.

For the next hour, I and others gathered for the audio-walk performance are privy to their reflections from past walks down this very path – whose name holds an indelible place in their stories. I plug in my earphones and harmonise my body to their voices as we walk along Transvaalstraße.

The voice draws my attention to the signboard ahead of me – where the name of the street is scratched out. Luderitzstraße, named after the colonialist who established Imperial Germany's first colony in what today is Namibia. As I glean the force behind the scratches on the metal surface, we hear another voice declare a single statement on how power was wielded in another land. «138 years ago, lines were drawn in the sand, and a man forced another man's hand.» The artists tell me later that this statement was recorded on Independence Avenue in Windhoek, Namibia.

Here in Berlin, the performers mirror the voice in alluding to the colonialist legacy of the street under our feet. I see Enderstein lying across the road, obstructing vehicular traffic on Luderitzstraße as van Straaten keeps watch. In a quiet minute of solidarity through their bodies, they bring attention to the raw tension on this street. I see already: a street name can hold huge significance.

We forge ahead along the street as the artists' voices unspool the story of colonial legacies in South Africa, and specifically of Transvaal, an erstwhile province across the Vaal river. We hear about the Dutch-origin Boers and the British colonisers that settled on these lands over the centuries, dispossessing Bantu-speaking and other indigenous peoples. With detailed historical references, we hear about the way map-making became an integral means to establish power and legitimacy as a settler nation-state. Here in Berlin, on the WWWstraße, I get a taste of this experience.

Twenty adults with no children in tow, we enter a children's park and are invited to choose any spot in the sandy lot. The audio-guide then asks us to make a slow rotation – as if our body were a periscope – observing and absorbing what lies in front of our eyes. On my spot underneath a tree, I make a slow turn. As I survey the buildings and encroach the cars with my gaze, I sense my body expand and my feet settle in further. Merely looking closely without being looked back at, became a way of gaining knowledge and perhaps, a kind of power. I am aware, however, that I will never know the lives behind each window on this street. Much like the Boers who did not know the names of the trees they encountered or the river they crossed.

While following the artists' conversation about other lands, our bodies continue to follow the rules of Berlin. We walk single file on a very narrow pavement, being sure to avoid the empty bicycle path.

We are now led to a grass-covered field. The artists come in contact with one another. They lean on and push against each other's bodies, playing with weight and gravity. Meanwhile we hear them mull over themes that also demand trust and vulnerability. As descendants of European settlers in South Africa, van Straaten and Enderstein tread with sensitivity and critical awareness to coloniality. They engage with the topics of their own family legacies that came as a gift and a burden, the struggle between Afrikaans and British identities therein, and the effacement of certain identities and languages. Now living in Europe, they assuage varied feelings of affinity and difference in this ecosystem. They speak in sighs, often taking refuge in patches of soil and grass along Transvaalstraße. Keeping an active relationship with the actual land and geography of this site seems to carry them through this self-excavation.

*Crossing the Pale River* is a personal introspection and criticism of coloniality. It is more complex than anger or protest. The performance doesn't ask to remove the name of Transvaalstraße from the Berlin map. It doesn't ask us to celebrate it by any means. It offers us to hold new knowledge about our city and notice the stirring it causes. It demands us to take note of the complex river of history.

The river demands several crossings. Sometimes we may merely go and look at our reflection. Sometimes we may skip stones over the water, and perhaps they will reach the other shore.



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«CROSSING THE PALE RIVER»  
NICOLA VAN STRAATEN &  
COILA-LEAH ENDERSTEIN

AUDIOWALK



SEPTEMBER 17 – 18 + 24 – 25  
TRANSVAALSTRASSE IN  
BERLIN WEDDING