

Elisabeth Wellershaus - Where Foreignness Begins – English Proposal

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Strangeness is a phenomenon that journalist Elisabeth Wellershaus has known since early childhood from the attributions of others. In her book, she traces how much more complex, ubiquitous and enriching she perceives foreignness itself - and why it connects us.

Wellershaus grew up in the middle-class district of Hamburg-Volksdorf with her white grandparents and white mother. Her father lived on a cocoa plantation in Equatorial Guinea as a child and moved to the Costa del Sol in the 1960s. As a Black German between Hamburg, Malaga and her parents' lives, she has come to know foreignness as a complex construct. After years of study in London, she lives as a journalist with a classical nuclear family in the gentrified part of Berlin's Pankow district. Today she belongs to the privileged middle class, and simple narratives of belonging no longer apply. In her book, Wellershaus explores contexts in which foreignness is not immediately apparent: in friendships, work relationships, neighbourhoods, the family - in close proximity. She tells of indecisive biographies, complex identities and links others' perceptions of the world with her own. In this way, she succeeds in an inimitable way in broadening the identity-political perspectives of the present.

- ‘A family life split between Hamburg, Malaga and Malabo: in between is the place where my self combines with the complex experiences of others.’
- An important broadening of the horizons of contemporary identity politics
- About the various forms of exclusion in our super-diverse society – and what binds us together in spite of them
- For readers of Alice Haster’s ‘Was weiße Menschen nicht über Rassismus hören wollen...’ and Kübra Gümüsay’s ‘Sprache und Sein’

Elisabeth Wellershaus works as an author and journalist. Among other things, she writes reports, essays and features that deal with the attribution of foreignness and the confrontation with belonging. She is part of the editorial team of the feminist column "10nach8" at ZEIT Online and works as an editor for the magazine "Contemporary And", which negotiates contemporary art from Africa and the diaspora.

Sample translation

1 - Everywhere

I could have called or written, that would have been more elegant. But now I'm standing in front of the house, I might as well ring the bell. Next to the floorboard window, among ivy that grows over old clinker bricks, there is a bright yellow sticker. It gruffly explains to me that I have no business here: 24-hour video surveillance, there are probably big dogs. I take a deep breath and imagine who lives here behind well-protected walls. For the umpteenth time, I smooth out the folds of my summer dress. It's a similar color to the security company's advertisement.

As the footsteps in the hallway get louder, I'm still not sure what I'm doing here. My great-grandparents lived in this house more than a hundred years ago. For a long time, I've been wondering how history has continued behind its walls. But so far I have always turned around at the last moment. Right in front of my family's old front door, uncertainty always grabbed me abruptly by the scruff of the neck: "Do you really belong here?"

The S. family's house is a few hundred yards from the row house where I grew up. My great-grandparents built it shortly before the First World War. At the beginning of the 20th century, there weren't yet a thousand people living in Volksdorf - a green suburb on the outskirts of Hamburg that became a recreational destination for stressed city dwellers. And now I'm waiting outside the door: an Afro-German woman in a garish summer dress, which anticipatory underlines the supposed strangeness between them and me. The Volksdorfer in fourth generation is certainly not what the current residents imagine. Because the photo album is still in my pocket: the house from the outside, from the inside, the garden. My grandma, romping across the grass with a dog, her sister sitting on her mother's knees. In the background Anton - the fat little electric locomotive that first connected the suburb with the city at the beginning of the 20th century for the first time. The pictures tell the story of a house, of which I know the beginning - and the woman who now faces me, the provisional end.

She is in her twenties, blond, wears a T-shirt and jeans, and listens to me attentively. Only when a young man and an older woman appear do I meet skeptical glances. I still manage to get rid of a few catchwords like "journalist" and "autobiographical research". Then the first defensive reflexes set in. "Why don't you try the neighbors?" the family politely waves me off. "They know a lot about our area, too." "I know the neighborhood ...", I put in. And then the lady of the house says something that takes my discomfort in new directions, "We just had a bereavement."

My last sentence lingers in embarrassed silence, and the imagined uniqueness of our encounter crumbles. No one slams the door in my face because I enter the sealed-off refuge of prosperity as a conspicuous stranger. The members of the S. family do not point racist guns at me - they mourn. And I burst into the middle of their mourning. Stammering apologies, I look into their faces, in which I suddenly read not defense but exhaustion. "You couldn't have known," someone says, and it almost sounds comforting. When the door slams shut, they still don't know that my great-grandparents welcomed or turned away other people here a hundred years ago. I should have called - now I will write. A petty disappointment accompanies me to the other side of the street, to my mother's house. I had set out to explore untapped aspects of my family history. And already at the first attempt I fail because of perhaps the most decisive characteristic of the stranger: his unpredictability. Only when I bring the letter to the S. family to the post office a few days later, I realize that I have already stumbled at full speed into another life.

The answer follows a few days later by e-mail. Mrs. S. apologized for her brusqueness and said that she was genuinely pleased with my letter. In an aside, she mentions that her husband had died two days before my visit - three weeks after the diagnosis. She opened my letter on the terrace, looked at the pictures of my grandmother that were in the envelope, and now she writes that we had a lot to tell each other.

Our short correspondence easily withstands the strangeness that used to dominate my everyday life. Maybe it's because I'm no longer the little black girl whose stinky sweaters seemed to cut a pitiful figure in front of the brand-name sweatshirts of some of my classmates. That my mother's beautiful old Beetle no longer sneaks past garages where sleeker second and third cars lonely under plastic tarps. The Volksdorf villa panorama no longer intimidates me as it once did. It simply remains foreign to me.

Thirty years ago, I would have been surprised by the warm, generous tone in Mrs. S.'s lines. The obvious strangeness of our experiences would have pushed itself mercilessly between us. Too often at that time I had been rejected, trusted only where the everyday life of others was also "out of the ordinary." I felt at home in households where other mothers also worked in consuming jobs. Where other parents were also separated. Where diversity was part of everyday life and where friends lived in a similar way as I did: in close quarters and estates that were on the edge of the bourgeoisie.

On one side of the street was Mrs. S.'s villa, on the other our row house. My great-grandmother is said to have been very attached to her house. Her father, who was considered an impostor in my family, had gone to great lengths to pave her way into the bourgeoisie. It is said that she was an *emancipated* woman. She spoke several languages, was a passionate traveler, and cared little for the suburban conventions of her environment. She allegedly met with politicians like

Gertrud Bäumer and sympathized with feminist movements. She sent her children to the Lichtwark School in an educationally progressive way and gave them anthroposophical initiation ceremonies. For years, a stuffed raven stood on her desk. Perhaps to scare off those who disturbed her thinking.

I could imagine that she would have been happy to have a journalist in the family. However, today we would probably quickly find ourselves at loggerheads. We would get caught up in convictions that are separated by decades, wars and a few world-historical aha experiences. Two stubborn people who wouldn't mind arguing about (de)colonial world views or gender-equal language. It is also possible that we would fail on questions of belonging, nationality and privilege. But perhaps our curiosity would also keep the differences in check - the experience of never quite fitting into the environment that Volksdorf was for both of us.

You can still see from the accurately trimmed hedges how much some people here cling to social etiquette. Red clinker bricks greet on the right and left - familiar, but careful to keep a polite distance. From some houses, a quiet defensiveness still wafts toward me. A reminder of days when my presence disturbed above all those who worried about belonging to the Volksdorf bourgeoisie.

I feel *at home* among the thatched houses and new housing developments that have been added in recent years. But the strangeness from my childhood days runs deep. After visiting the S. family, I take a good look around Volksdorf for the first time in a long time. Of course, the place is more than the sum of its alarm systems. There's the toboggan hill by the subway tracks, the wine store by the park that used to be an ice cream parlor, the *carnival* on the market square, the library where I spent hours. I remember wonderful teachers, nice neighbors, fields, forests, elementary school and high school, to which I walked in a troop with other children of the "village". Endless possibilities for all those who were not given any obstacles due to their origins - and mostly for me, too.

Probably everyone pays a price for the feeling of belonging. Whether it is the imitation of well-off sovereignty or the adoption of righteous and tidy suburban attitudes. When my grandparents died, my bumpy attempts at adjustment began. For ten years, my mother and I had lived with them. With the two old-timers, we had fulfilled the ideal of the ideal nuclear family in a displaced way. Without them, we suddenly stood out unpleasantly.

All of a sudden, the row house we lived in seemed too quiet, the homogeneous suburb in which it stood too cramped. A black girl with a vacationing father who lived in Spain didn't seem to fit in any more than an overworked, single nurse on shift duty. The fun, eccentric family we had been with my grandparents was no more. Just a misplaced mother-daughter team that

didn't stand up to convention. Suddenly I was ashamed of our otherness and kept it hidden as best I could.

I was ashamed of the old-fashioned furnishings my grandparents had left us. For the microwave dinners that we henceforth had, for the crumbling of family traditions that fell victim to the stress of single parenthood. I did not understand the abrupt aloofness with which my mother hid from the world in those years. Why her self-determination, her autonomy, tolerance and her huge heart without the support of like-minded people threatened to wear itself out in everyday life.

After a few years she found her way out of the hole my grandparents had left behind, and back to her old form. There she was again: the woman who, like her mother and grandmother, stood up against the conventions in the affluent Volksdorf milieu. The one who lived our life between between Spain and Germany and taught me that the frowns of some of our neighbors only concealed a longing for for their own outbursts.

Beyond the summer, we saved for family life, which took place during the vacations with my father. For weeks in Andalusia, which gave us experiences far from the tidy suburbs. From stories, I knew stories about the Guinean family, and they reminded me of Volksdorf relatives: a grandmother who ran a farm on Bioko, an aunt who lived as a psychologist in Spanish exile, cousins who were preparing for diplomatic service at Jesuit schools. From abroad, they confirmed what had already been foreshadowed in our Hamburg row house: Identities were more complex and life paths more changeable than the rest of my environment had led me to believe.

But not in my wildest dreams could I have imagined how dealing with diversity would change. I could not have foreseen how much the homogeneous understanding of society that I had known from my childhood would be overturned in the 21st century. How the façade of a supposedly homogeneous population would crumble. Today, activists are drawing attention to intersectional mechanisms of oppression in a variety of contexts. Scholars animate research with superdiverse views of belonging. Media have appropriated a social science vocabulary, that makes the diversity of social experience more tangible.

And yet, a stubborn resistance remains in the society. One that rebels against the ever louder demands for equality and participation. One that resists the intertwining of diverse realities of life. It is a resistance that has accompanied me for decades. To this day, it drags the doubt about my of my affiliation behind me.