

# From Postmigrant to Posthuman

## The Performance of Simone Dede Ayivi

*Priscilla Layne*



Towards the end of her solo performance *Krieg der Hörnchen* (War of the Squirrels, premiere at Theaterhaus Hildesheim, 2013), Simone Dede Ayivi dons a full-body costume of a red squirrel, including a hood that looks like a squirrel head, and approaches the front of the stage. The silence of the confused audience is interrupted suddenly when Ayivi begins making squirrel noises and grabbing her stomach, writhing and grimacing as if in pain. She drops to the floor. This performance of death takes place in front of a white media cabinet with shelves; a door on one side can open to reveal the shelves. When the cabinet door is open, you can see that Ayivi has placed a number of red and gray squirrel magnets on the inside of the door. She then swiftly draws a black line below them. She acts out the death of the red squirrels, falling over each time, then placing one red squirrel magnet at the bottom of the door, indicating that it has died. As she acts out the death of the red squirrel—an animal native to the German forest and something of a national symbol—the audience laughs. It is unclear whether they are just laughing at Ayivi's theatrics or at what they perceive as the absurdity of red squirrel extinction (even though they are in decline), which can be read as a metaphor for fears of “white genocide.” Perhaps the audience is laughing at both. When there are only two squirrel magnets remaining, Ayivi, a Black woman born in 1982 in Hanau am Main and based now in Berlin, abandons the theatrics and just collapses to the ground.

*Krieg der Hörnchen* was the second production Ayivi directed. The first was *Der kleine Bruder des Ruderers* (The Little Brother of the Rower, 2012), a play about anti-Black racism in France by Togolese French author Kossi Efoui, staged a year earlier at the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse Theater in Berlin. For *Der kleine Bruder des Ruderers*, Ayivi was working with a published text. *Krieg der Hörnchen* was Ayivi's first postdramatic performance. In this work, Ayivi uses projections, audio recordings, dioramas, and props to create a macrohistory of Germany, recapping everything from the origin of life on earth to the origin of the German forest—as well as, on the microlevel, foreign gray squirrels “invading” German forests. With *Krieg der Hörnchen*, Ayivi combines post-humanism and postnationalism, using German fears about invasive gray squirrels colonizing the habitat of native red squirrels to reimagine xenophobic and racist debates about migrants “invading” Germany. In this way, Ayivi participates in a tradition Una Chaudhuri describes as people using animals in the theatre as “mirrors for themselves” (2017:3). But Ayivi's performance goes a step further. She not only invites us to see ourselves in the squirrel; she also asks us to question our assumptions about society and our behavior by centering squirrels' experiences. By making the history of the world, or at least Germany, about the history of squirrels, Ayivi asks us to decenter the human perspective. Since the category of the human is a historical concept, which at one point in time only described *white men*, decentering this definition of “human” also asks us to temper our arrogance about whom the earth belongs to and whose agency pushes history forward. By focusing on the red squirrel, not humans, as the original inhabitant of the German forest, she displaces white Germans' claims to an inherent right to the space the nation occupies.

At the outset, the stage set for *Krieg der Hörnchen* consists merely of Ayivi, who looks professional, wearing a black blazer and black jeans, like she's ready to give a lecture or a TED Talk, along with several props arranged on the shelves of a white media cabinet, no bigger than five feet tall by two feet wide. Inside the cabinet, there's an old cathode-ray tube television, a diorama depicting a forest, a toaster oven, a plate with cookie dough, a microphone, and a tape recorder. Rather than a linear narrative, the performance is a collage of scenes arranged associatively around the theme of demographic changes in German squirrel populations. Ayivi introduces the production by speaking the day, time, and place of the performance into a tape recorder. In later scenes, she plays an art video by Norman Grotgut; films a diorama of a German forest; and shows on the TV an extended talk show-style interview between a microaggressive journalist and one Herr Gray—a gray squirrel who was born and raised in Hessen, Germany, but who is not, the journalist repeatedly points out, “native.” Real-time videos from her hand-held camera, projected onto the open door of the cabinet, show close-ups of the forest or of Ayivi's hand as she turns the pages of a storybook about red squirrels. By shifting the focus of history from the human to the squirrel, Ayivi interrogates assumptions about who has a claim to German soil. This creative form of storytelling asks spectators to reflect on a series of questions from a postnationalist perspective: Who are the *Ureinwohner* (native inhabitants) of a space? What violence is necessary to make nature fit within a national framework? How might nationalist fervor negatively affect all aspects of life? And to what extent does the maintenance of the nation state *always* come at the expense of those who are excluded?

*Figure 1. (previous page) Simone Dede Ayivi uses a handheld camera to zoom in on a squirrel figure in the diorama and this image is projected onto the white cabinet where it can be seen by the audience. Krieg der Hörnchen by Simone Dede Ayivi, Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, Berlin, 5 September 2013. (Photo courtesy of Simone Dede Ayivi)*

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While a majority of the creative works produced by Black Germans since the 1980s have been autobiographical books, since the late 2000s Black Germans have become increasingly active in theatre, particularly in the *Freie Szene*—the German independent theatre community.<sup>1</sup> Ballhaus Naunynstrasse in Berlin-Kreuzberg, an independent space, has been especially important for racialized directors and actors in Germany, including Black Germans. The 2012 departure of Shermin Langhoff and the 2013 arrival of Wagner Carvalho as the new director shifted the theatre's focus from Turkish German to Black German theatre, while maintaining the label "postmigrant." Some Black German performances have extended their reach beyond the postmigrant to be even more critical of nationalism and national aesthetic traditions.

Ayivi offers a particularly useful example of this shift, as she has been active at Ballhaus during both Langhoff's and Carvalho's tenures, as well as at other independent theaters in Berlin. In addition to *Der kleine Bruder des Ruderers* and *Krieg der Hörnchen*,

she has also made several performances with a more postcolonial perspective. In 2014 she created *Performing Back*<sup>2</sup> (Sophiensaele Berlin, 2014), in which she confronts Germany's colonial legacy in part by projecting colonial monuments onto the stage and playing recordings of interviews with Black German activists. In *Queens* (Sophiensaele Berlin, 2018), she interrogates the politics of museums and the exclusion of Black female representation from Western history, working once again with projections to turn several blank screens into living portraits of famous Black women throughout history. She unites the themes of fantasy and representation in the Afrofuturist performance *First Black Woman in Space* (Sophiensaele Berlin, 2015), a meditation on Black German women's hopes for the future. And her performance *Solidaritätsstück* (Solidarity Play; Sophiensaele



Figure 2. Wearing all black, Simone Dede Ayivi stands before the white media cabinet and uses a tape recorder. *Krieg der Hörnchen* by Simone Dede Ayivi, Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, Berlin, 5 September 2013. (Photo courtesy of Simone Dede Ayivi)



Figure 3. Simone Dede Ayivi stands behind the open media cabinet revealing all of the props inside. *Krieg der Hörnchen* by Simone Dede Ayivi, Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, Berlin, 5 September 5, 2013. (Photo courtesy of Simone Dede Ayivi)

1. Some examples of these autobiographical texts are Hans Jürgen Massaquoi's *Destined to Witness* (1999), Ika Hügel-Marshall's *Dabeim unterwegs* (1998), and Marie Nejar's *Mach nicht so traurige Augen, weil du ein Negerlein bist* (2007). For an extensive discussion of Black German autobiography, see Götttsche (2012); and chapter five of Layne (2018). Regarding Black German theatre, Jamele Watkins has written the first comprehensive account of Black German theatre in her dissertation (Watkins 2016).
2. Ayivi sometimes uses English for the titles of her performances; titles here in English were originally in English.

Berlin, 2019) engages with neoliberalism, gentrification, and the local politics of Berlin. While each of these performances arguably promotes postnationalism from an African diasporic perspective, I am particularly interested in how Ayivi establishes a postnational critique with the help of posthumanism as articulated in *Krieg der Hörnchen*.

When Langhoff conceptualized postmigrant theatre in 2012, she explained that she had first heard the term in the American context to describe the self-understanding of a pluralist society. In Langhoff's words, "postmigrant theatre explicitly deals with the diversified plural society of the city" (Langhoff 2012).<sup>3</sup> Thus, while white German hegemony may continue to debate whether or not Germany is a country of migration and whether or not immigrants have integrated, postmigrant theatre starts by acknowledging that the German nation is *already* multicultural. In recent years, Black German scholars like Peggy Piesche and Fatima EL-Tayeb have questioned to what extent an identification with the nation can really protect Black Germans from anti-Black racism. Piesche and EL-Tayeb reject the notion that a postmigrant era would necessarily be one absent of anti-Black racism (EL-Tayeb 2016; Piesche 2016). According to Ayivi, postmigrant theatre's "sehr klassisch und sehr deutsch" (very classical and very German; 2018b) aesthetic, as well as its content—telling the stories of individual struggle—focus on pluralism *within* the nation. But for Ayivi, such content and structure are not enough to create a truly antiracist theatre. Olivia Landry (2022) finds that postmigrant theatre and Black German theatre do share some attributes: (1) focusing on histories that have been otherwise made invisible; and (2) introducing new techniques to make the space of the theatre more culturally inclusive. Both postmigrant and Black German theatre struggle with and make demands for recognition within the predominantly white institution of German theatre. But for Landry, what sets Black German theatre apart is its focus on utopia—a future not yet realized. In Ayivi's case, *Krieg der Hörnchen* presents a future that may *never* be realized, namely one in which not only are animals valued as much as people, but in which animals can speak to humans. By entertaining this fantastical setting, Ayivi encourages German audiences to recognize the absurdity of their discourse about *human* migrants in light of the absurdity of their discourse about *animal* migrants.

## Black German Presence, That Is, Absence, in Mainstream Theatre

Black Germans' growing engagement with theatre could possibly be linked to the increasingly public presence the Black German community achieved with the creation of Bündnis Bühnenwatch (Alliance Stage Watch), founded in 2011 to tackle the problem of blackface on German stages (Otoo 2012; Sieg 2015). Announcing its formation, Bühnenwatch published a statement on its website declaring: "It is our intention to prevent any future racist depictions of blackface and racist discrimination against actors of color" (Bühnenwatch 2011). While this critique of blackface garnered a lot of attention, Ayivi, a founding member of Bühnenwatch, insists the campaign was never just about blackface: "Blackface and the reproduction of racist images and racist language were understood to be symptoms of an industry that would rather paint *white* actors Black than employ Black actors in their ensembles. It's also an industry that can't even imagine a Black audience" (Ayivi 2018a:76).

Writing from the standpoint of 2018, Ayivi later reflected that while representation had improved, there still existed a discrepancy between the number of Black Germans in state theatre ensembles and those active in the independent scene. There have been a few instances of state-funded theatres in Germany featuring performances that include Black German actors or Black German directors—for example Michael Klammer's performance as Karl in Antú Romero Nunes's production of Schiller's *The Robbers* at the Staatstheater in Stuttgart in 2013, and director Anta Helena Recke's so-called *Schwarzkopie* (black copy) staging of Josef Bierbichler's *Mittelreich* with an all-Black cast at the Munich Kammerspiele in 2017. But most state theatre ensembles

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3. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

limit the number of Black actors to one, if that. As Jamele Watkins indicates in her dissertation (2016), in contrast to state theatres, most Black German theatre takes place in informal spaces that are precarious and experimental. For example, Olumide Popoola's *Also by Mail* (2013), a play about a Nigerian German family, was never given a full-scale production; it was performed in staged readings outside the German classical theatre network, in nonconventional spaces such as "Westwerk in Hamburg, Circus in Frankfurt and the English Theatre Berlin," with ticket prices set at only five euros (Watkins 2016:143). The readings happened in Germany, but were performed in English. Popoola describes herself as a "London-based Nigerian German writer and speaker who presents internationally" (Popoola 2023).

There are reasons why Black German theatre has found more of a home in the Freie Szene. These playwrights, directors, and performers are often relatively young and they present new work, rather than staging classical dramas. But, of course, there is also the undeniable factor of race. Black German actors have a difficult time finding roles—a problem that is the focus of Label Noir, an all-Black artist collective whose members "broker and connect Black actors for theatre, film, and television productions" (Label Noir n.d.). Furthermore, as Katrin Sieg points out, Black Germans might have a more difficult time getting funding and gaining access to established institutions if they wish to center the issue of race in their performances (2015:254). Race is seldom a welcome topic of discussion in Germany (Chin and Fehrenbach 2009:19).<sup>4</sup> Black German artists like Ayivi have also remarked that Black Germans who are naturalized citizens or are born in Germany often do not have a right to state funding set aside for projects by or about migrants, a problem related to the double bind in which Black Germans find themselves. Race is not recognized as a legitimate category in Germany, so in statistics Black Germans are often counted as simply German citizens. They are officially invisible as minorities, but in everyday life, they are hypervisible and often marginalized and discriminated against. The white hegemony refuses to recognize them as German and insists any act of racism be collapsed into issues concerning migration.<sup>5</sup> In her aptly named essay "Internationalität ≠ Interkultur. Eine Schwarze deutsche Kritik" (Internationalism ≠ Interculturalism: A Black German Critique), Ayivi remarks that white Germans in charge of funding theatre projects seem to think that the solution to addressing racism and representation is to invite more Black performers from abroad. But, as Ayivi states at the beginning of her essay: "An international focus and intercultural dissemination are two completely different things" (2018a:76). The problem is that by inviting Black artists from abroad, theatres maintain neat binaries that designate whiteness as German and Blackness as Other, tolerated only temporarily.

Despite these challenges, one should be careful not to view Black Germans' participation in the independent theatre as being a last resort or solely the result of exclusion and marginalization. Ayivi remarks, "Black artists [have] developed a growing understanding that they are a part of the theatre industry, that their own topics and artistic questions need to be taken seriously, and that it is important for Black artists to communicate with each other" (2018a:76). Critics must consider the agency of Black German artists who must produce art in the Freie Szene, outside of state institutions.

Arguably, both the impermanence of performances in the independent scene and the scene's existence apart from institutional (state-funded) theatres align well with Black German artists' interest in decolonization. Black German theatre pieces frequently privilege performance over text, an artistic

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4. Rita Chin and Heide Fehrenbach state that the word *Rasse* (race) became taboo after the end of WWII. They argue that Germans tend to associate racism with the Nazi period and therefore refer to discrimination against people of color in contemporary Germany as xenophobia (2009:125–26). But the label "xenophobia" of course doesn't account for the fact that Black German citizens, born and raised in Germany, are also discriminated against.

5. This is one of many topics addressed in the book *Farbe bekennen* (Showing Our Colors, 1986), edited by May Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye, and Dagmar Schultz, which presents interviews with Black German women of several generations about their experiences living in Germany.



decision that resists the colonial categorizing and collecting tendencies of the archive, recalling Diana Taylor's juxtaposition of the archive and the repertoire (2003).<sup>6</sup>

It is no wonder that Black German artists would be skeptical of the archive. Black Germans have, historically, been (mis)treated by scientists and historians, their remains and cultural artifacts stolen and misused *for* the archive, and their history often left out of the archive altogether.<sup>7</sup> Examples of how Black bodies have been misused for the purpose of the national archive reach as far back as skulls stolen from victims of the 1904–1908 German genocide against the Nama and Herero, in the then colony of German Southwest Africa (Namibia), as well as concentration camp photos of Black Germans interned in Europe (see Kössler 2015; see also Kelting 2023).

A more recent example would be the controversy surrounding the Humboldt Forum. The Humboldt Forum, directed by British art historian Neil MacGregor and the President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, Hermann Parzinger, presents the collections from several museums in the newly constructed Berlin Castle. These collections contain objects from around the world, including former German colonies; how they were acquired is left unclear.<sup>8</sup> Despite critics' insistence that it is unethical to display cultural goods taken during the colonial era without critical reflection, the Foundation for the Humboldt Forum has adamantly stood behind the project. In November 2018, Horst Bredekamp, a member of the founding directorship of the Humboldt Forum, suggested on the German radio program *Deutschlandfunk* that Germany's dealings with such artifacts and archives is not problematic because it was not one of the "large colonial powers" (Rollhäuser 2018).<sup>9</sup>

Still, in the case of Black Germans, we have a population that has long provided written accounts of their own experiences, going as far back as Anton Wilhelm Amo's thesis *Dissertatio Inauguralis de jure Maurorum in Europa* (Inaugural Address on the Rights of Moors [Blacks] in Europe; 1729). These written accounts were often ignored and, in the case of Amo's thesis, conveniently lost (Ndikung et al. 2021).<sup>10</sup> And as Maisha M. Eggers points out, "Black knowledge about *white* hegemony [also] functions as an archive of knowledge" (2012:230). So for a performer like Ayivi, it might be a question of which acts of resistance should be archived and which ones work better as a performance. Furthermore, considering Ayivi's frequent engagement with digital technologies, we might ask: how can the digital be used as a tool of resistance alongside embodiment, rather than in opposition to it?

## From Postmigrant to Posthuman

### *Ayivi's Development as an Artist*

Ayivi is one of several German theatre artists of color who studied in the program for Cultural Studies and Aesthetic Praxis at the University of Hildesheim; others include Anta Helena Recke, a Black German performer and director known for staging an all-Black production of *Mittelreich* at the Münchner Kammerspiele in 2017 (see Berliner Festspiele 2020); Olivia Wenzel, a Black German author and playwright known for her play *Mais in Deutschland und anderen Galaxien*

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6. Katrin Sieg makes a similar argument about Turkish German theatre, arguing that "the potential of live performance" can "contest the sedimented *archive* of official and subaltern speech" (2015:166).

7. Some examples of how scientists have oppressed Black Germans are the medical doctors who forcibly sterilized many Black Germans during the Third Reich, and the social scientists who, following WWII, insisted on essential, inherited cultural differences separating Black Germans from the rest of the population (see Fehrenbach 2005).

8. Due to restrictions in place during the Covid-19 pandemic, the in-person opening of the museum was postponed to 2021.

9. Numerous academic texts have sought to discount this claim and uncover Germans' colonial fantasies and colonial endeavors. See for example Zantop (1997); Friedrichsmeyer, Lennox, and Zantop (1998); and Brahm and Rosenhaft (2016).

10. There is documentation that he successfully defended his dissertation, but we do not have the actual dissertation.

and her novel *1000 Serpentine Angst* (see Fischer Verlage 2023); and Hieu Hoang, a Vietnamese German theatre performer who collaborated with Wenzel on the production *We are the Universe* at the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse Theater in 2016 (see Ballhaus Naunynstrasse Theater 2016). This program is unique in Germany in bringing together different artistic media and emphasizing both theory and praxis. According to Annemarie Matzke, professor of theatre studies at Hildesheim and a member of She She Pop, the Hildesheim program “reflects strongly about structures, taking a critical approach to questions of authority and questions of normalization, with an emphasis on collective work. [...] You ask yourself, ‘How does that relate to my biography, with my personal experiences,’ and you bring that into an artistic form” (Matzke 2018). Performance studies is also part of the Hildesheim program, which features a “polyaesthetic education” bringing together different kinds of artistic practice—theatre, literature, music, visual arts, media, dance, and film. Matzke considers Ayivi to be rooted in performance art because Ayivi focuses on her own body on the stage and emphasizes her own participation in the performance. “Her performance is strongly oriented towards performance art. [...] It’s a critique of text and the authority of text. [...] The artist says, ‘I am responsible for what I speak onstage’” (Matzke 2018). By insisting on speaking on her own behalf, rejecting speaking any text she has not authored—in effect, rejecting the archive—Ayivi comments on power relations in the German culture industry. Ayivi’s rejection of text written by others could also be read as an attempt to introduce subjugated knowledges otherwise ignored in German theatre.

If one contextualizes Ayivi’s work within a “Hildesheimer school” that values performance art and nontraditional narratives, the problems Ayivi has with postmigrant theatre become clearer. During our conversation in November 2018, she praised postmigrant theatre artists’ attempt to make theatre more accessible for the community, but she lamented:

Aesthetically, no experiments were risked. And, for someone like me who places a lot of value on a correspondence between form and content, it’s difficult to say, most artists are taking German theatre as it is classically performed and just giving it a different content. [...] Things like more kinds of experience, the experience of bilingualism, experiencing discrimination from a negative side, or the experience of lived interculturality from a positive side—those things are present in the text of a play, but not in the form as you see it onstage. (2018b)

In place of the classical three- or five-act form used by many postmigrant theatre artists, Ayivi structures her performances as nonlinear scenes, collages of audio, video, and monologues that mix facts, personal or historical, with absurd fictions. But even if nonlinear, Ayivi’s work is “narrative performance,” as described by Claudia Breger, who quotes Gérard Genette to further explain them as events that consist “of someone recounting something” (2012:12). At the start of *Krieg der Hörnchen*, after Ayivi records herself stating facts about the performance, the lights are turned off, and Ayivi retreats behind the white cabinet at the center of the darkened stage. She is no longer visible. We can only hear her voice, accompanied by abstract, electronic music, as she recaps natural history, starting with the origin of life on earth. While she speaks, shadows projected against the cabinet create abstract shapes and lines. Midway through the performance, Ayivi shifts from the global history to the local level, narrating the origin of the German forest and the “invasion” of gray squirrels with the help of a forest diorama created with model train miniatures. As Ayivi narrates the story of the squirrels and the German forest, she uses a handheld camera to zoom in on the diorama, projecting the images onto the white cabinet where they can be seen by the audience. *Krieg der Hörnchen* conveys what Breger describes as a “scenic, presence-oriented” narrative in opposition to “theatricalized narratives” (43). While the kind of postmigrant theatre Breger examines is typically linked to documentary forms, Ayivi’s performances balance facts and fantasy. While her declarations about the origin of the universe are based in science—she mentions the big bang and how it is connected to the emergence of life—she slips into fantasy when she attempts to speak from the perspective of squirrels and when, at the end of the performance, she becomes a squirrel herself by donning a squirrel suit. When Ayivi wears the squirrel suit, she is using her Black German body as one of her most important props to address the real-world problem of racism.

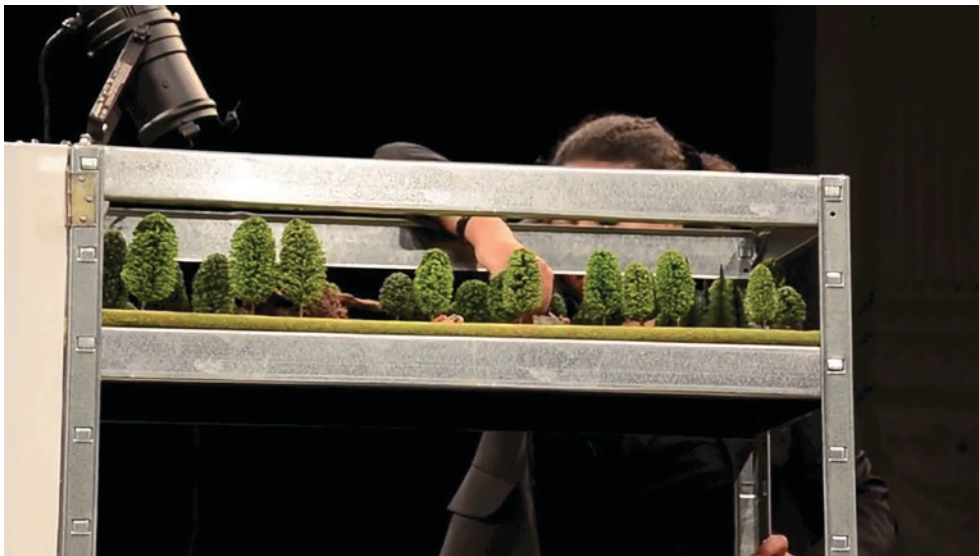


Figure 4. Simone Dede Ayivi stands behind the media cabinet and adjusts some of the miniature trees in a diorama of the forest. *Krieg der Hörnchen* by Simone Dede Ayivi, Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, Berlin, 5 September 2013. (Photo courtesy of Simone Dede Ayivi)

Ayivi said that she distances herself from postmigrant theatre in part because of what she described as its lack of a unique aesthetic: “It focuses strongly on individual biographies, and I would say it’s actually a shame that a postmigrant aesthetic was never developed. This has resulted in a kind of theatre that is actually very classical and very German” (2018b). Ayivi’s work is autobiographical in the Hildesheimer sense: she draws on her own experiences with issues like racism to inform her critique of it on the stage. But it is not autobiographical in the sense of postmigrant productions like Necati Öziri’s *Get Deutsch or Die Tryin’* (Maxim Gorki Theater, 2017), which is a straightforward, personal narrative about the experiences of Turkish German guest workers and their children. Instead of fact-based autobiography, *Krieg der Hörnchen* offers fantastical posthumanist scenarios. For example, when she plays the video of the red squirrel journalist interviewing the gray squirrel about his migration history, Ayivi is posing the following questions: What if animals could talk? What if the political narratives we employ to describe the migration of people were used to describe the migration of animals? And what if animals, in this case squirrels, contested white Germans’ claims to a native right to Germany?

In our conversation, Ayivi was particularly critical of the reliance of postmigrant productions on humor in order to make white Germans feel more comfortable. She sees a danger in taking such an approach to racism: “I find that a lot is simplified through humor. And sometimes I think that is good, because a certain absurdity is depicted or you can laugh against racism, so to speak. But sometimes, I find, [...] it’s as if we are supposed to just laugh off the fact that we still have this exotic status on the stage” (2018b). It is not the case that Ayivi’s work is never autobiographical or absurd, but there are significant distinctions between the way Ayivi draws on these techniques and how they are used in postmigrant productions. For example, she draws on her own biography in order to create the fictional character of the gray squirrel, Herr Gray. Like Ayivi, Herr Gray may be descended from migrants, but he clearly considers Germany his home. His belonging is reflected in his Hessian accent, a characteristic he shares with Ayivi. Furthermore, by rewriting her experience with racism into a narrative about a squirrel who is told he doesn’t belong in Germany, Ayivi employs absurdity to point out the incongruity of racist and nationalist discourse *while also* introducing a posthumanist perspective that invites us to call into question established, oppressive



categories. She drives this point home at the very end of the performance, when she reemerges from behind the white cabinet. Now she is dressed less formally, discarding her black suit. The wardrobe change might indicate that she intends to speak candidly with the audience. Ayivi now has the tape recorder hanging from a strap on her arm and she is wearing headphones. She speaks into the tape recorder, but projects her voice outward to the audience. She appears to be in conversation with someone; but we don't hear her interlocutor. It's as if she has taken over the role of Herr Gray, bringing the performance back to reality. This hysteria about red and gray squirrels is absurd, and Ayivi refuses to choose which group has more of a right to exist. She complains about how the German media reports on issues of race and she asserts her agency, demanding to be called Black and not *farbig* (colored).

Postmigrant theatre's position vis-à-vis the nation makes it especially constraining for a Black German artist like Ayivi. In *Performing Unification: History and Nation in German Theatre after 1989*, Matthew Cornish describes postmigrant theatre as "part of a nation reexamining its past and finding difference, strengthening a hybrid identity and, simultaneously, slowly giving up its nationalism in exchange for the even larger common, conflicted ground of Europe" (2017:189). Despite what seems like a positive description of postmigrant theatre's ability to fight ethnonationalism, Cornish invokes Katrin Sieg's critique of postmigrant theatre to question whether or not its pluralist representation of Germany and Europe is enough to counter exclusions and hierarchies, or if merely new exclusions and hierarchies are being created (189; see Sieg 2011:173). How radically different is a "hybrid identity" if, following Homi Bhabha's understanding of hybridity, it still reproduces the notion that there are separate, distinct cultures ([1994] 2004:113)? Sieg's remark that postmigrant theatre is still steadfastly holding on to a "humanist self" (2011:180) raises the question of whether a humanist theatre can really convey the conditions under which Black people in Germany live, when in fact *all* Black people in Germany — citizens, immigrants, and refugees — are still fighting to be recognized as fully human. If white Germans claim that Black people and gray squirrels are foreign to Germany, if the same language of invasion is used to describe the migration of nonwhite people and the migration of animals, does Germany's humanist tradition value the lives of all humans? Or can some humans conveniently be turned into animals if they are perceived as a threat to the nation? When Ayivi dresses in a giant red squirrel suit and acts out red squirrels dying, this may evoke laughter from the audience, but she is ultimately asking a very serious question: whether she, as a Black woman, has to disguise herself as a beloved animal in order for her life to matter in Germany. Thus, by introducing a *posthumanist* critique, Ayivi uses fantasy to dismantle normative binaries including white/Black, human/animal, and German/foreigner. Postmigrant hybridity leaves normative binaries intact and can only "explore[...] the spaces in-between" (Bhabha [1994] 2004:113).

In addition to *Krieg der Hörnchen*, the two productions of Ayivi's in which fantasy are most prominent are *First Black Woman in Space* and *Queens*. *First Black Woman in Space* references both Mae Jemison — an African American astronaut who embarked on a mission to space in 1992 — and Nichelle Nichols who played Uhura, the first Black woman on the crew of the Enterprise in the TV series *Star Trek* in the 1960s. At the start of the performance, Ayivi does not yet appear onstage. Instead, the stage is completely dark, with two chairs stage left. One chair is empty; in the other there is a silver-colored, shiny space suit slumped over. To the right of these chairs there is a blank screen that appears dark due to the lack of lighting in the room; several white lights are projected onto the screen, giving the appearance of a constellation. We can hear Ayivi's voice as she shares an anecdote about Jemison and Nichols. As she speaks, the location of the lights on the screen keeps changing, as if shifting from one constellation to the next. In her anecdote, Ayivi relays that according to Jemison, seeing Nichols play a space traveler on television is what inspired her to become an astronaut. By opening with this story, Ayivi inspires us to reflect on why positive representations of Black women (in the future) are so necessary for future generations of Black people. As in *Krieg der Hörnchen*, costuming is important in *First Black Woman in Space*. Ayivi first takes the stage in *First Black Woman in Space* after she is finished relating the anecdote about Jemison and Nichols.

At the very end of this monologue, she quotes African American civil rights activist Marian Wright Edelman (b. 1939) with the lines: “You cannot be, what you cannot see,” one of the themes of the performance. Edelman’s words have become an important mantra among Afrofuturist artists. After quoting Edelman, Ayivi declares, “let’s see what we can see” as the stage is illuminated and she stands up from a seat in the first row of the audience and walks onstage. Initially, Ayivi is simply wearing an all-black outfit, black overalls and a sleeveless black shirt underneath, which is covered in abstract, white graphics. However, similarly to *Krieg der Hörnchen*, there is a costume change midway through the performance. This time, Ayivi puts on the shiny, silver space suit, transforming herself into a space traveler. Also important to the production is the music; she employs a variety of songs, all from Black female artists. In the following order, Ayivi plays excerpts from Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” (1967), Missy Elliott’s “Work It” (2002), Miriam Makeba’s “Pata Pata” (1967), Nina Simone’s “Young, Gifted and Black” (1970), X-Ray Spex’s punk track “Oh Bondage! Up Yours!” (1978), and finally “Denk mal nach” (Think; 1976) from Fasia Jansen, the Black German folk singer who survived Nazi persecution and forced labor in a work camp. Finally, Ayivi also incorporates several video interviews with Black German women. The women are Black German activists from the community, including some public figures like the author Sharon Dodua Otoo and the academic Peggy Piesche. There are nine women in total and one girl, Efa, whose age is not clear. When the video recordings are introduced, the screen that initially displayed the constellations now illuminates and we watch a video that spends a few seconds on a close-up of each woman (from their chest up). Each person has their eyes closed and starting with the first person, Ayivi counts down from 10 to 1. With each number, a different person is shown on screen, opening her eyes, until the recording cuts to a close-up of another person. This act of counting down reminds one of the countdown to a rocket or spaceship launch.

In *Queens*, Ayivi creates a shrine to Black women’s history. When the performance starts, we see five white screens inside picture frames onstage, hanging from the grid above. In front of them there is a blank bench, something one might find in a museum for visitors to sit on and rest. Ambient instrumental music plays. The screens are illuminated from behind, but nothing appears on them. Four of the screens are rectangular and hang side by side; the fifth is an oval that hangs lengthwise above the frame farthest to the right. Three of the rectangular screens are about six feet tall, while the fourth, farthest to the right, is four feet tall. From offstage Ayivi, miked, poses questions about what our typical experience of a museum might be like: Who do we see? Who is excluded? She then takes the stage, not appearing before the audience, but rather hidden behind the second screen from the right. All we see is her shadow: her curly hair, her legs, and what we will later learn is a robe thrown loosely around her shoulders. Ayivi states, “I want us [Black women] to take up space. Sometimes I ask myself, what is it that I don’t know. And why don’t I know it. Or what do I think I know and how does that affect my self-image” (Ayivi 2017). Ayivi’s intention is to turn this space on the stage into a museum honoring Black women. When she is finished speaking, backgrounds begin to appear on the five screens around her. Her robe is white and soft, adorned with large, three-dimensional black cones cut in half. After the backgrounds appear, Ayivi begins another monologue, ending with “Let’s paint the most beautiful images of ourselves. Let’s look into the past and proceed regally as queens.” Then she steps out from behind the frame and onto the stage.

Onstage, Ayivi proceeds to sit in profile on a rattan chair, almost a throne, that is placed stage right. The chair sits against a purple background, and in front of Ayivi is a digital camera on a tripod, next to a spotlight; to her right is a large rectangular 2'x2' light. This digital camera projects her onto the second screen from the right, framing her sitting in the rattan chair to appear like a monarch in a royal portrait one might find in a museum. Underneath the white robe, Ayivi is wearing a tightly fitting black leather dress, a black leather jacket, tan-colored stockings, and black knee-high boots. She first states a mantra she will repeat several times: “I step onto my throne and wear my jacket fit for every political climate.” Each time she repeats this mantra, she goes and sits on the bench before the screens and an additional “queen” appears in the empty frames. And with each “queen” that appears, Ayivi switches out her regal costume piece so that it reflects a prop one of the other women is wearing. First she changes out her robe, putting on a

large, broad, gold-and-white collar reminiscent of ancient Egyptian culture. Finally, she switches out the collar for a unique crown: a shiny, gold band about two inches thick with an adornment that looks like a spoon, sticking up about four inches high. After all of the other queens have appeared, Ayivi once again takes a seat in the rattan chair and places a gold-colored assault rifle next to her. The pose she strikes, with her right fist up in the air, is reminiscent of the infamous 1960 poster of Black Panther Party founder Huey Newton sitting on a “rattan peacock chair, clutching a spear in one fist and rifle in the other” (Budds 2018). Thus, Ayivi transforms herself into a figure of Black history, a militant in the style of the Black Panthers. Ayivi gives no indication of the “queens” names or whether these are meant to be real, historic queens or figments of her imagination. The women appearing within the frames wear a variety of costumes and are positioned in front of different locations. They range from a woman in Egyptian-style clothing, reminiscent of Sun Ra’s costume on the cover of the album *Space Is the Place*, to a woman wearing a golden skirt of bananas—clearly a reference to Josephine Baker—and another woman, in the oval screen, lying across a small model of the White House. The queens move throughout the performance bringing history to life, so to speak.

### Exploring Posthumanism in *Krieg der Hörnchen*

“Posthumanism” best expresses Ayivi’s experiences as a Black German artist, distinguishing her work from classical German theatre, postdramatic variations on the canon, and postmigrant theatre. At the end of *Krieg der Hörnchen* Ayivi plays the recording of the interview between the journalist and the gray squirrel. The stage is pitch black; Ayivi is still wearing the squirrel suit. She turns on the boxy television sitting on the media cabinet that is the performance’s main set piece. On the TV screen, spectators see a vague background of red and light blue, divided into rectangles by two lines. In the video’s foreground a red squirrel puppet appears with its back facing the viewers. When the camera in the video zooms out, it reveals two squirrel puppets—a gray one sitting on a wall and a red one down below—having a conversation. We come to understand this conversation is the interview between the red squirrel journalist and Herr Gray. Ayivi shot this footage herself using puppets she made out of paper. The camerawork is perfectly synchronized with the voices as it alternates between including both squirrels in the shot and zooming in on one or the other speaker. The audience can clearly hear that Ayivi plays both roles, but when voicing the journalist she speaks standard German and when voicing Herr Gray she speaks with a Hessian accent, reflecting Ayivi’s roots and a performance of local belonging, despite the journalist’s attempts to exclude Herr Gray from the national community. Because the conversation is prerecorded, Ayivi can pace around the stage silently in the background, creating the illusion that this interview is real, instead of something she has constructed.

As the gray squirrel, Ayivi recounts the origins of her family line and explains how her ancestors got to Germany. The scene is posthumanist not only because Ayivi narrates from the perspective of a gray squirrel, but also because she defends the gray squirrel against actual nationalist attacks who say gray squirrels (that is, “foreigners”) have no right to be in Germany. It is of course absurd that a squirrel could talk, much less give an interview. The fact that the squirrels in the video are too far away for us to see whether their mouths are moving helps maintain the fantasy. There is also absurdity in the line of questioning directed at Herr Gray. The journalist uses racialized, nationalist language about the “origins” of gray squirrels in order to Other them, when national boundaries make little sense for describing the migration patterns of animals. The interview begins:

ROTES EICHHÖRNCHEN: Viele Naturfreunde sind sich nicht sicher, ob sie zu einheimischen Kulturlandschaften passen. Herr Gray, ich möchte Sie jetzt fragen, als Vertreter ihrer Gruppe fragen, wie Sie eigentlich hierher gekommen?

GRAUES EICHHÖRNCHEN: Also meinen Sie jetzt heute ins Fernsehen?

ROTES EICHHÖRNCHEN: Ja ich meine ursprünglich. Sie kommen ja eher von weiter weg.

GRAUES EICHHÖRNCHEN: Also so weit ist es auch nicht, also ich bin hier von der Hildesheimer Börde.

ROTES EICHHÖRNCHEN: Nein, ich meine wo kommen Sie wirklich her? Man sieht Ihnen an, dass Sie kein einheimisches Hörnchen sind.

GRAUES EICHHÖRNCHEN: Also ich bin sozusagen von der Börde...ich bin in der Börde geboren.

ROTES EICHHÖRNCHEN: Aber hier in der Börde, da gab es nicht immer Grauhörnchen. Wir erinnern uns ja alle daran, dass es vor ein Paar Jahren in der Hildesheimer Börde noch keine Grauhörnchen gab. Ja, wie ist es denn, mit der Herkunft ihrer Familie?

GRAUES EICHHÖRNCHEN: Meine Großeltern, also Oma und Opa, also die sind net von hier. Die haben sich...über Thüringen und den Harz rübergemacht. Und deren Eltern jetzt wiederum, die kamen eigentlich aus dem Süden, das weiss ich auch nicht jetzt so genau.

ROTES EICHHÖRNCHEN: Das habe ich mir gedacht. Also das ist ja häufig so. Sie sind entwurzelt Herr Gray. Ohne Wissen über ihre Herkunft und ihre Kultur. Haben Sie denn wenigstens Kontakt zu britischen Verwandten?

GRAUES EICHHÖRNCHEN: Ich habe jetzt keine britischen Verwandten. Das ist vor ungefähr 60 Jahren war das. Da war ein italienischer Diplomat in den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika, der hat die Ahnen quasi mit nach Turin gebracht.

ROTES EICHHÖRNCHEN: Und wie reagieren die Einheimischen auf ihre ungewohnten stammländischen Sitten? Wie schaffen Sie es, Ihre Kultur zu bewahren, und gleichzeitig offen gegenüber den roten Eichhörchen zu sein. Das muss doch sehr schwer sein. *(Schnitt/Applaus)* Jetzt möchte ich, dass Sie einmal wirklich nachdenken, bevor Sie antworten, ja? Liegt es vielleicht daran, dass Sie nicht in der Lage sind, sich in den vorgefundenen Wälder zu integrieren? Sich anzupassen an Begebenheiten? *(Schnitt/Applaus)* Wir hören jetzt viel von der Kultur, die Sie mitbringen. Aber was ist mit der Kultur des deutschen Waldes? *(Schnitt/Applaus)*

GRAUES EICHHÖRNCHEN: Also ich kenne den Wald jetzt nur so, es scheint uns auch ganz gut zu passen. Es ist eher so, ein symbiotisches Verhältnis. Das was vorher war, das weiss ich jetzt auch nicht. Also Sie können mich jetzt nicht mehr Fragen. Ich verstehen auch nicht was das sein soll, Kultur des deutschen Waldes." *(Schnitt/Applaus)*

(RED SQUIRREL: Many friends of nature aren't sure whether you can adapt to indigenous cultural landscapes. Herr Gray, I would like to ask you, as a representative of your group, how did you get here?

GRAY SQUIRREL: You mean on television?

RED SQUIRREL: No, I mean originally. You are actually from very far away.

GRAY SQUIRREL: Well, it's actually not very far away. I'm from the Hildesheimer Börde.<sup>11</sup>

RED SQUIRREL: No, I mean where you're *really* from. One can clearly see that you're not an indigenous squirrel.

GRAY SQUIRREL: Well, I'm actually from the Börde. I was born in the Börde.

RED SQUIRREL: But there have not always been gray squirrels here in the Börde. We can all remember that years ago there were no gray squirrels in the Börde at all. So how is it, dealing with your family's heritage?

GRAY SQUIRREL: My grandparents, so my grandmother and grandfather, aren't from here... they made their way from Thüringen and the Harz mountains.<sup>12</sup> And my parents on the other hand, they came from the South, but I'm not exactly sure where.

11. A natural reserve about 8km from Hildesheim.

12. Both about 218km southwest of Hildesheim.

RED SQUIRREL: That's what I suspected. It is often the case. You are alienated from your roots, Herr Gray. Without knowledge of your heritage or your culture. Do you at least have contact with your British relatives?

GRAY SQUIRREL: I don't have any British relatives. That was maybe 60 years ago. There was an Italian diplomat in the United States of America. He basically brought my ancestors to Turin.

RED SQUIRREL: And how do the natives react to your unfamiliar habits from your ancestral home? How do you manage to maintain your culture and simultaneously be open towards the red squirrels? That must be difficult. Now I would like you to reflect before you answer, OK? Could the problem, perhaps, be that you aren't able to integrate into the forests here? You cannot adapt to the everyday habits? *[Cut/Applause]* We hear a lot about the culture you bring with you, but what about the culture of the German forest? *[Cut/Applause]*

GRAY SQUIRREL: I only know the forest as it is and it seems to be a good fit for me. It's more of a symbiotic relationship. I don't know what used to be here, so you can't ask me about that. I also don't understand what you are getting at with the culture of the German forest. *[Cut/Applause]*

One can clearly see from the absurdist tone of this dialogue that Ayivi's Herr Gray is undermining German nationalism by employing a naïve point of view. Herr Gray either does not understand or is pretending not to understand the nativist undertones of the interviewer's questions. When the interviewer asks stereotypical questions posed to migrants like "How did you get here," or "Where are you from," Herr Gray takes these questions at face value, refusing to succumb to her attempts to Other him, to locate his identity outside of Germany. His statements about the German forest also indicate a postnationalist attitude towards space. He is focused on the present: the German forest has provided him with a home. Herr Gray maintains a symbiotic relationship with the forest: he eats products of the forest and he spreads seeds helping the forest to flourish. He cannot be concerned with what came before him or where his family lived 60 years ago, especially given the short lifespan of an adult squirrel (six years). Herr Gray is content in the present; he sees no significant differences between red and gray squirrels that would make cohabitation impossible.

Ayivi's nod to the racialization of animals and the dehumanization of people of color sets her work apart from white artists engaging with posthumanism. According to Magda Romanska:

The postmodern philosophical concept of the "posthuman" developed in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the poststructuralist lineage, and in response to the traditional Renaissance-era humanist ethics and aesthetics, which presupposed a coherent vision of the human being imbued with certain essential characteristics (i.e., "soul" and "human nature") and visually represented by the intact body. (2019:84)

Cary Wolfe adds that because "Humanism is a historically specific phenomenon," posthumanism can be understood as something both before *and after* humanism (2010:xv). But one must also realize that by decentering the human, posthumanism can describe a fantasy of a world in which the human perspective is no longer dominant. As a theatre scholar, Romanska contemplates what a posthumanist perspective brings to a contemporary theatre otherwise dominated by the post-dramatic: "postdramatic theatre unravels the concepts of drama, plot, character and even the human body, but posthuman theatre unravels the very notion of human agency and subjectivity" (2019:84). What postdramatic and posthumanist theatre share is a rejection of the body as a stable signifier and an endorsement of a "non-hierarchical consideration of both subjects and objects," as Romanska puts it (83). Both forms see the human body as just one component of the theatrical landscape. But from the standpoint of critical race theory, posthumanists fail to critique humanism's exclusions (see Ellis 2018). Though Romanska briefly discusses how the category "human" excluded certain racialized others, she does not entertain the possibility that such racialized others have unique stakes in posthumanist theatre, as I believe they do. The inevitable question arises: is posthumanist theatre an opportunity to address a kind of universal human alienation, or can it be used strategically by racialized others to address the alienated experience of *not* being recognized as a subject by other humans?





Figure 5. Simone Dede Ayivi wears a squirrel costume and distorts her face as if she were in pain. *Krieg der Hörnchen* by Simone Dede Ayivi, Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, Berlin, 5 September 2013. (Photo courtesy of Simone Dede Ayivi)

*Krieg der Hörnchen* is post-humanist in two distinct ways. First, by focusing on the experience of squirrels, Ayivi decenters the human experience. Secondly, she shifts the focus away from her own human body, elevating the function of costumes and props. Ayivi spends much of the performance in a full squirrel costume; she is frequently hidden behind a large cabinet, the site of much of the action, with its television set and tape recorder.

After her opening introduction—recording the date, time, place, and name of the festival, the number of spectators, and the sponsors for the performance—Ayivi rewinds the tape, presses play, and walks behind the white cabinet. She places the tape recorder out of sight from the audience and walks offstage. Even though they no longer see her, the audience still feels Ayivi's presence because they hear her voice on the tape recorder. Ayivi plays with ideas of history, evidence, and truth: The audience saw her make this recording; they can testify to the truth of *some* of the information—the date, the place, and the estimate of people in the room. She then rewinds the tape and plays it back, and leaves the stage. Once her original statement has ended, however, we hear background noise that would indicate the tape is being fast-forwarded or perhaps even switched out with another tape. We now hear Ayivi giving a brief history of the universe with the same humorous, ironic tone of Herr Gray's interview. Some facts are included, like a description of the big bang: "In the beginning there was nothing. And then it exploded. But the nothing was not really nothing. Rather, it was something that was almost nothing. This almost nothing exploded 13.7 billion years ago. Today we call it the Big Bang." Later on, she makes claims about the universe that seem in direct service to the performance's focus on squirrels. For example, she states "during the ice age, 2.6 million years ago, the first version of our modern-day squirrels developed. [...] Thus we can assume that the squirrel watched us as we learned to use tools and farm plots of land, to domesticate animals and build houses." By preceding this narrative about squirrels with a statement of facts about the time, place, and setting of the performance, Ayivi presents her narrative in the guise of objective, recorded truth. Here Ayivi's performance engages with the concept of the archive, while simultaneously interrogating the archive through live performance. As she explained to me, "That was about archiving, about taping and playing back. Well, and also rewinding. Repeating what has been said in order to give it importance" (2018b). For Ayivi, giving importance to the information she has recorded means drawing the audience's attention to things they may otherwise take for granted. She is stressing the structural underpinnings of the performance: who her sponsors are, the name of the festival where she is performing, and the number of people in the audience, which indicates who might consider her performance worth funding and attending. Furthermore, by turning her spoken text into a part of an archive, Ayivi sets herself up potentially to change the narrative. And as we will discover, the narrative she is attempting to change relates to the history of Germany as a nation as well as who can lay claim to the space that is Germany.

While the tape plays, a video by Norman Grotgut—a play between light and dark lines—is projected on the back of the cabinet. Ayivi's performance contains several competing media depictions of origin stories, of German identity, and of migration. On the one hand, she incorporates actual media. For example, she uses the soundtrack from a TV documentary about the Teutoburg Forest battle in 9 CE, when the Teutons defeated the Romans and ended Rome's expansion into what became Germany. Ever since, the report states, the forest has been

a *Verbindetete* (ally) of the German people. There are also brief clips of radio reports warning about the possible extinction of German red squirrels: “squirrels observed us,” she says, “as we continued to take up increasingly more territory.” Ayivi interweaves bits of media with her own recorded text to tell an alternative narrative. But Ayivi never tells us the source of any of the media clips she uses or indicates when she is incorporating them instead of using her own recordings. What the audience experiences are alternative histories presented with as much authority as the clips taken from German media.

Since the focus of the performance is Germany, why does Ayivi begin as far back as the big bang? By beginning with the big bang, Ayivi is able to contextualize the topic of the performance, namely the fear of *Überfremdung* (foreign infiltration), within the indescribably long history of the earth, billions of years, counteracting those who dehistoricize migration and cause panic. Ayivi is being ironic. On the one hand she is arguing that in order to understand Germans’ fear of contemporary migration, we have to contextualize it within a greater period of time. On the other hand, by going as far back as the origin of the universe, rather than returning to the origin of the German nation state for example, Ayivi is incorporating much more information than is necessary. From a posthumanist perspective, she is also beginning the narrative *before the human*, which sets up her later version of Germany history told from the perspective of squirrels.

The decentering of humans becomes clear as Ayivi tells us that at one time not only were humans outnumbered, but that rodents, squirrels in particular, were the most intelligent of mammals. So it is from their perspective that the narrative unfolds. The squirrel becomes the witness of history and of time passing. At this point, the visual focus of the performance shifts from the video of abstract shapes and their distortion to the small diorama that Ayivi has built (together with designer Henrike Terheyden) to represent the German forest. We are told that the squirrel has a particular, superior perspective of the human world because it remains largely above ground, in the crowns of the trees, giving it an overview of all activity, including that of humans, while keeping it safe from predators. Thus, because of their long existence on earth and their panoramic perspective, the history of squirrels is presented as a history of the world.

Ayivi attempts to give us a squirrel’s perspective on life by employing tiny squirrel figurines in her model forest, with video cameras providing close-ups of the forest. Prior to the next phase of the performance, a surtitle is projected above the stage: “Chapter Three 1864”—seven years before the founding of the German nation, further emphasizing that *Krieg der Hörnchen* includes a *prehistory* of the German nation. After her brief history of the world has concluded, the lights come back on and Ayivi opens the cabinet door. A recording of Ayivi’s voice plays in the background while she organizes objects in the diorama. During our conversation, Ayivi told me that “the trees and animals came from a model train set. Those are things [the train sets] that are very well-known and important in Germany and they are closely associated with a particular kind of German mentality. A kind of hyper-Germanness” (Ayivi 2018b).

The miniature forest serves two functions: it allows Ayivi to play with a feigned realistic view of a squirrel’s life, while also undermining German provincialism, with its petty bourgeois activities like building model trains. In Ayivi’s analysis, model train sets reflect something sinister in the mentality of white German men, especially because this model forest includes a sign with the words “Jews are not desired in our German forests.” The sign is a reminder of how frequently space is demarcated to exclude groups of people both from banal everyday activities as well as from the nation as a whole. In order to enhance the realism, Ayivi also employs sounds, like birds chirping, bees buzzing, and dogs barking. And she occasionally uses music, most notably Josef von Eichendorff’s 1810 song “Abschied” (Departure), which recurs several times in the performance. The first strophe of the song is particularly insightful, equating the forest with the nation.

O Täler weit, o Höhen,  
O schöner, grüner Wald,  
Du meiner Lust und Wehen

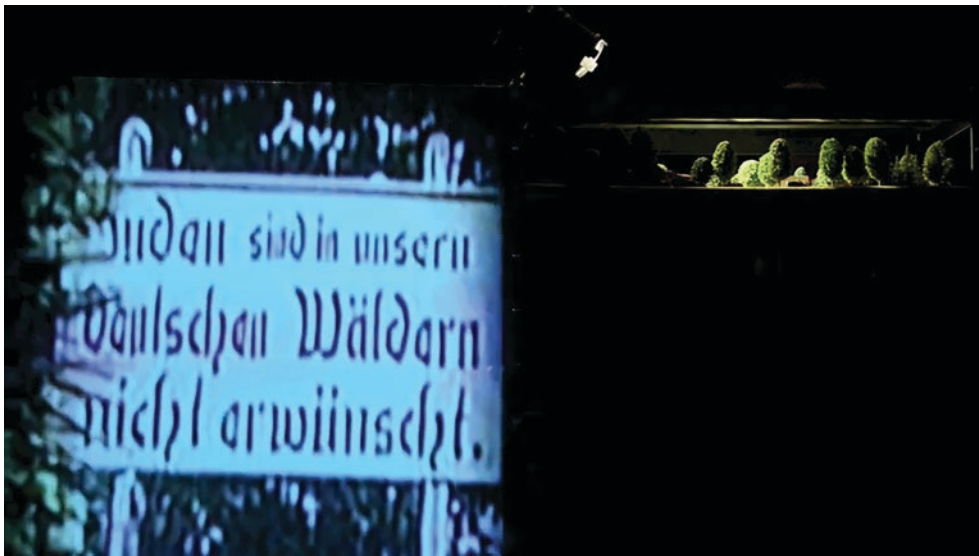


Figure 6. A close-up of a sign in the diorama that reads “Jews are not desired in our German forests.” *Krieg der Hörnchen* by Simone Dede Ayivi, Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, Berlin, 5 September 2013. (Photo courtesy of Simone Dede Ayivi)

Andächtger Aufenthalt!  
 Da draußen, stets betrogen,  
 Saust die geschäftige Welt,  
 Schlag noch einmal die Bogen  
 Um mich, du grünes Zelt! (von Eichendorff 1810)  
 (O, broad valleys, O heights,  
 O, beautiful, green woods,  
 Devoted place  
 Of my desires and sorrows!  
 Out there, in constant betrayal,  
 Pounds the tawdry mart.  
 Draw, once more, around me  
 Your canopy of green!)

The forest is presented by von Eichendorff as a shelter, protecting the singer from a frightening outside world. While this song is playing, we see projections of close-ups of the forest; the camera occasionally shakes as we hear something walking through the forest. Presumably we are looking through the eyes of a squirrel observing human activity. Ayivi presents the squirrel as the native inhabitant of the German forest.

Ayivi’s use of television and cameras promises spectators a peak into the hidden life of squirrels, while simultaneously reinforcing the postcolonial message that it is impossible for them to know everything or see the entire picture. Ayivi is not telling the audience it can actually see the world from the perspective of a squirrel. Rather, she challenges them to disrupt their accustomed hierarchies, to consider that a squirrel’s perspective might be equally important. Squirrels might see a side of the world that humans will never be able to understand—or will help humans rethink their own perspectives. When I asked Ayivi, she explained how she encountered the fear of a gray squirrel invasion in Hildesheim while she was still a student there. According to Ayivi, this fear was not based in any reality:



*Figure 7. Still wearing the squirrel costume, Simone Dede Ayivi has now collapsed on the stage, lying on her back. Krieg der Hörnchen by Simone Dede Ayivi, Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, Berlin, 5 September 2013. (Photo courtesy of Simone Dede Ayivi)*

No, they were afraid that there could be some [gray squirrels]. And then the red squirrels would become extinct. And if the red squirrels become extinct, then the entire German forest would die. [...] I am of a generation that grew up with this term *Waldsterben* (dying forest syndrome), for which there is actually no translation in other languages. (2018b)

So why does Ayivi choose to decenter the human in this story about migration? After Ayivi shoots these close-ups of her model forest, she prepares several squirrel-shaped cookies, rolling out the dough, cutting the shapes with a cookie cutter, and then placing them in a toaster oven to bake. While the cookies are baking in real time, the stage goes dark again and we hear a cacophony of recordings—a collection of media clips discussing migration overlaid with classical music and ambient sounds, making it difficult to hear what’s being discussed in the recordings. She then places the cookies on a tray and approaches the audience with them, bending down to a squatting position and making clicking sounds at them, as if they are squirrels she is attempting to lure. When the spectators don’t react, she begins tossing cookies at them. Ayivi seems to suggest that the audience can become “the Other” by consuming “the Other,” reasoning taken from postcolonial studies on race and consumer products: from a Western, colonial perspective, chocolate and coffee were frequently associated with Blacks due to the products’ dark color and their “exotic” places of origin (see Ciarlo 2011).<sup>13</sup> This is when Ayivi puts on the squirrel costume and performs the deaths of red squirrels.

After the last squirrel’s death, Michael Jackson’s “Never Can Say Goodbye” begins playing. The lights go out and Ayivi heads back behind the cabinet, projecting images onto it of other things that are long gone: the Deutsche Mark, replaced by the Euro; Erich Honecker, the last president of the German Democratic Republic; the People’s Palace, an East German building demolished after reunification; and finally, a German red squirrel. Presumably, the pairing of the slide show with the music is meant to be ironic. Though some people may be nostalgic about the Mark and the DDR, the reality is that Germans have learned to live without them. One wonders, would people really

13. Some examples of German products that employ this marketing strategy are the Sarotti Mohr chocolate company and the coffee company Julius Meinl.

miss red squirrels? Or is the hysteria about gray squirrels and other allegedly invasive species really hiding something else beneath the surface? A German xenophobia that can be directed at humans and nonhumans alike? In the last few minutes of the performance, Ayivi makes the political undertone of the performance clearer as she transitions to discussing current political issues for Black Germans stemming from racism.

## Shared Space

Ayivi's use of animal metaphors to discuss racism and xenophobia seems all the more relevant when one considers how racist political parties have, throughout history, used animal metaphors to dehumanize undesirable groups. The Nazis depicted Jews as rats infesting the country in the film *The Eternal Jew* (see Hake 1998:173); they were "parasites" and "subhuman." In fact, Germany's far-right populist party, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), has recently used animals as a metaphor for foreign invasion.<sup>14</sup> They even warned about a Russian conspiracy to introduce genetically modified wolves to extirpate "racially pure" German wolves: AfD member Jens Krause suggested wolves be tested to weed out the truly "German" wolves from the foreign ones (Bennhold 2019). Right-wing populism thrives on fear, particularly the fear of contamination and contagion. And if there are not enough people who read as foreign to fan the flames of fear, then they take examples from the animal world to suggest that the entire German biosphere is under attack. Ayivi's performance makes a mockery of fears of the decline of the Western world and ethnic replacement (*Umwolkung*), especially in the last series of absurd questions the red squirrel poses to Herr Gray:

ROTES EICHHÖRNCHEN: Sie gehen ganz stark in Abwehrhaltung. Ist es hart für Sie ein Grauhörnchen zu sein? Sie sind ja quasi gefangen zwischen zwei Kulturen. Haben Sie überhaupt Freunde, die rote Eichhörnchen sind? Fühlen Sie sich wirklich heimisch? Sehnen Sie sich eigentlich nach Amerika?

GRAUES EICHHÖRNCHEN: Mit Amerika habe ich jetzt nichts zu tun.

ROTES EICHHÖRNCHEN: Träumen Sie nicht eines Tages in Ihre Heimat zurückzukehren? Möchten Sie nicht in einem Land leben, in dem alle Hörnchen so aussehen wie Sie? Und wo Sie nicht als fremd bezeichnet werden?

(RED SQUIRREL: You're being very defensive. Is it difficult to be a gray squirrel? You are basically caught between two cultures. Do you even have friends who are red squirrels? Do you really feel at home here? Don't you long for America?)

GRAY SQUIRREL: America is of no interest to me.

RED SQUIRREL: Don't you dream of one day returning to your homeland? Wouldn't you like to one day live in a country where all squirrels look like you? And where you aren't referred to as foreign?)

By decentering the human, posthumanism allows us to attempt to see our culture from the outside. Presumably, such questions posed to a squirrel are ridiculous because a squirrel can live anywhere there is food and shelter. It wants to survive. Why then, do we expect things to be different for human beings?

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14. See for example a poster with vultures sitting on a (border?) fence, which reads: "Sozialstaat? Braucht Grenzen!" ("Welfare state? Needs borders!; Olschanski 2017).



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