Lene Albrecht

White Spots

January 2024 . 256 pages

On the footsteps of German colonialism right into one's own family history

A young woman embarks on a journey to Togo, armed with a recorder and a questionable mission. Once there, she steps into the world of individuals who float between different continents: a dressmaker who left Germany before she was deported, a volunteer wrestling with his duties, and a librarian who draws her attention to the white people who populate the country like ghosts.

As she grows further embroiled in these lives, she becomes increasingly sceptical of the narratives populating the German library in Sokodé. She starts questioning the gaps not just in these stories, but also those in her own family history. Her uncle struck gold in Nigeria, while her great-great-grandfather only brought one of his three children from Panama to Hamburg. This leaves her pondering about her great-great-grandmother's identity.

Years later, back in her homeland Germany, she musters the courage to delve into her history. However, her quest is tainted by persisting doubts: Who has the right to tell whose story? And how should it be told?

Praise for *White Spots*:

"Rarely does someone have the gift of developing a language that is saturated with so much knowledge and so much empathy. [...] Lene Albrecht's every sentence is dazzlingly precise." – NDR Kultur, Lisa Kreißler

"Every passage, every paragraph, every linguistic image seems so accurate, so precise, so valid, as if the position and role in the novel had been meticulously thought through." – tip Berlin, Erik Heier

"[...] an important, cleverly composed book – Nadine Kreuzahler - RBB24

Lene Albrecht (1986), studied cultural studies in Frankfurt (Oder) and at the Literaturinstitut Leipzig. Her debut novel "We, in the Window" was published in 2019. As a member of the collective WRITING WITH CARE/RAGE, she organized a conference of the same name in 2019 on the question of the compatibility of care work and authorship.

Long Summary:

Part1

A young, nameless woman sets off on a trip to Togo, carrying a recording device and a few books in her luggage. En route and on location, she meets a number of people: a photographer who is supposed to take pictures of writers at a conference, a volunteer who is struggling with his mission in an orphanage and believes he is falling prey to the power of evil thoughts, the seamstress Amina, who lived in exile in Germany for a long time and is only hesitantly finding her way back into everyday life in Togo. A reverend who was educated in Heidelberg recapitulates the missionary history of his country for her and tells her about the so-called mass miracles, while German schlager super star Helene Fischer plays on the car radio and the narrator herself is driven to hospital with a broken leg. Gradually, the first-person narrator herself emerges through the fleeting encounters and gets deeper into a complex present that has been hidden from her until then and is permeated by the German colonial past. With each story, the web between yesterday and today, the African and the European continent becomes denser.

The family history of the first-person narrator appears in short sequences, spanning several generations; an uncle who became wealthy on the African continent and started a new life in Switzerland, as well as a (presumably black) great-grandmother who was deported from Panama to Germany as a child. In between, Neda appears again and again - as a friend, corrective and dominant figure in the life of the first-person narrator. Not all encounters in Togo are favourable; once the narrator is - as she says - "mistaken". Why, her counterpart asks, is she not answering her phone? And what about the help she promised in exchange for his story? The narrator has to face increasingly uncomfortable questions: What is she doing here, why and for whom? And she looks around her: What are all the White people doing, populating the country like ghosts? At the end of the first part of the novel, it becomes clear that she is conducting interviews for the Federal Ministry for Refugees and Migration on the topic of the causes of flight, which has led to a dispute with Neda. The theme of "white guilt" becomes more prominent in the overlapping of motifs, conversations and memories.

The second part begins when the protagonist Ellen, who is now narrated in the third person, has just returned from a trip within Togo and is lying in bed with a broken leg. She has fallen down a shaft in a German ruin in Togo. In an email to Neda, she recapitulates her stay in a hostel in the south of the country. Her narrative is interwoven with the story, in which Neda's parents' experience of racism and her arrival in West Germany in the 1990s also always played a role. An experience that separates the two because they cannot share it. While the first-person narrator waits for her recovery, the unconscious intrudes and the narrative becomes more restless, more associative. Rose - one of the acquaintances on site and known from the first part - talks about the door of no return (the door through which African people were shipped from West Africa to Central America and the whole world as slaves) during a visit. This forms the bridge to the third and final part, which tells the story of the great-grandmother.

Back in Berlin, the first-person narrator delves further into researching the alleged story of her own great-grandmother instead of finishing the report for the ministry. How can it be, she asks herself, that she hasn't asked any questions for so long? A woman - child of an Afro-Panamanian mother and a white German father - who was the only one of her father's three children to be brought (or abducted?) to Germany around 1900, destroyed all her papers during the Second World War in order to "pass" as white (the so-called "passing") and took his own life after the war. But how can you write about someone who always had to make herself invisible or exotic in order to survive? What facts remain when all documents have been destroyed? How far does the imagination reach? In an essayistic approach, the text draws on the lives of other black people in Germany before and during the Nazi era. The first-person narrator soon comes to the realisation that she will not find out what it was "really" like. Fiction allows her to come closer. It also raises urgent questions about contemporary literature: Who gets to write about whom and how? Although the description of "black" and "white" is very much used in the political debate about privileges, the novel also exposes skin colour itself as a fiction based on the movements of people between Africa, America and Europe.

White Spots describes an encounter with the German colonial past in Togo and Germany, which extends to the present day, and attempts to make something (still) invisible visible using literary means: the (crumbling) White self-perception.

Sample Translation: Katy Derbyshire
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GHOSTS

Only a few days after my arrival in Sokodé, the librarian alerted me to the existence of a man named Le Blanc, a man I was never really to set eyes on until my hasty departure in the coldest month of all, during the so-called African winter. We were standing side-by-side on the first-floor balcony. The librarian was resting his lower arms on the railing. Opposite the library, an almost mirror-image building huddled in the slim shadow of the courthouse. Right there, the librarian explained, pointing his outstretched arm at the other side of the street, was where he lived.

Everyone knew Le Blanc – the *W*hite man, that is – but no one he knew, the librarian said, had ever met him in person. It was mainly because he only left the house at night, apparently. People said he wore a long white robe, knotted together at the front with a belt.

Like martial arts masters, he said, his arms insinuating a combat movement.

From that day on, I noticed an occasional movement over there, out of the corner of my eye. A flutter. A small, uncontrolled flurry. But every time I focused on it everything lay still, as it did at that moment too; the flat roof, the garden with its neatly trimmed hedges and the relatively high walls shielding the property from the street.

He has thinning grey hair, the librarian described him, but he's neither old nor young, just lonely. That's more or less what people say about him. No one knows why he came to Togo and then stayed.

I tried to picture the man but all my imagination came up with was a kind of ghost, and I was definitely too old for that.

In any case, he's wealthy, the librarian added after a while. That much is for sure.

I looked into his smooth face, questioning.

All *W*hite people are here. They can afford the flight.

He paused; his eyes rested on me, taking stock as if to see whether I was really that naïve or just pretending. It costs a fortune, doesn't it?

He narrowed his eyes.

I smoked, saying nothing.

Below the balcony, which had a good view of the small west African city's administrative district, noisy students thronged up the steep hill to the grammar school. Some of them were using brightly coloured umbrellas to protect them from the sun's rays, already strong at this early hour. It had been hot and still for days, very dry, the sky had lost almost all colour, and I knew it couldn't stay that way forever.

I'd been staying for nearly a week. Only once so far had I entered the computer room on the ground floor, where training courses were held during the day. Most of the time I spent up in the reading room with the dark-stained bookshelves, the largest room on the first floor. There was also a small kitchen and two other rooms, normally inhabited by interns. The rest of the time, the rooms were empty.

The library belonged to an organisation that worked locally, but was financed – like most of the NGOs here – from Germany or another European country. As the librarian had explained, for a time it had been more lucrative for people to set up an NGO and collect donations than to invest in a business of their own, so they'd sprung up like mushrooms. He'd shrugged. Only the buildings with rust-spotted large-format signs still testified to their former existence. Semi-derelict, they were used for dubious dealings.

This house was different. In good condition. At its head was a wealthy family from Munich who had endowed their fortune and sent regular funds, but kept a strict eye on where they went.

Someone was burning trash behind the house. The acrid smell passed above our heads in dense grey smoke, breaking down into tiny particles until it eventually became invisible. I pressed my smoked cigarette into the shell of an old coconut. The improvised and overflowing ashtray was one of the

things my predecessors had left behind. Under the wardrobe, I'd also found a folded note with a handwritten list of email addresses. Alongside them the names of the people hoping for a message that would probably never reach them now. In the back corner of the wardrobe, I'd come across a pale blue, slightly dusty cotton shirt. It was pretty tight across my chest and shoulders but I still wore it almost every evening, when it got dark and the voracious mosquitos gathered.

Gradually, the town below us got moving.

People crossed the intersection. Someone clapped their hands. It sounded bold and joyful. My eyes fell upon a man with his head lowered and his hands cuffed behind his back, being led into the side entrance of the courthouse by two uniformed officers. The two – the sound of the clapping and the sight of the prisoner – seemed to be unrelated and simultaneously inextricably linked from that moment on. From the main road filtered the constant noise of trucks on their way to the north. Between them, goats' bleats sounded distressingly human.

I've got to start work now; the librarian nodded his head at the door and then shuffled inside. The backs of his leather slippers were trodden down and he wore one of those loose-knit sleeveless sweaters I'd only previously seen on old men, making me abruptly aware that the librarian would soon be part of that demographic. He was, as they say, getting long in the tooth, though he didn't yet have a single grey hair. His facial features were gentle and friendly, unlike the faces of older men I knew, which took on something relentless over time.

Any minute now, as every day (aside from Sundays), the library would open its doors for the school students who liked coming here to read at the large desks, do their homework or flick through sports magazines. Their small faces were highly concentrated; there was no need to remind them to be quiet.

I stayed where I was, stroked back my shower-wet hair. Only at that moment did I notice the students gathered at the foot of the stairs, now staring up at

me as if watching a stage. Automatically, I turned around, looking for something that might have caught their attention. But there was only the blackboard. A smooth surface, freshly wiped clean. The wetness was still visible, a dark grey cloud.

I was used to staying in the background; the inconspicuous person on the rear edge of a photo, looking like they were only coincidentally part of the composition.

A boy, wearing a khaki-coloured school uniform like the rest of the group, pointed at me. A girl with short hair laughed, hand in front of her mouth, and I raised my arm to greet them; I waved, uncertain of what they expected of me.

CRUSOE

On the long-haul flight from Paris to Lomé, I had been seated next to a photographer. He had a short dark cut with a few pewter-grey hairs standing out like loose ends on a coil of wire. He was clearly interested in making conversation, repeatedly clearing his throat and rearranging his far-too-long limbs, only to apologise for his restlessness. I was sleepy. Changing flights in Paris, I had got lost and ended up in a subterranean system of parking decks. In my desperation, I had previously asked a cleaner the fastest way to the terminal, since I hadn’t managed to decode the complex map of the airport building in the slightest.

Come with me, said the cleaner, resolute.

We got into a lift, went down. The trolley, equipped with a mop, various cleaning fluids and buckets, gave off an intense chemical scent.

I gave an embarrassed smile; the cleaner didn’t smile.

This way, the cleaner said. Keep going straight on. One hand pointed the way but the trolley stayed behind me. I walked for a while but couldn’t find an exit. From somewhere, I heard the scrape of the cleaning trolley’s wheels on the concrete. A rhythmic clatter echoed on and on without direction. The ceiling was low, the walls cast my footsteps back at me. As I walked, I imagined the bustle above me. The crowds being processed, scanned and

assessed for threat levels on the basis of their passports and their bodies. People crossing borders by means of complex bureaucracy, while I strode almost unnoticed down here.

Suddenly, everything stood out clearly as fiction.

I tried to envision the precise procedures: the French uniformed officers with their batons and machine guns, hands on the shaft, the flight attendants in pencil skirts and stiletto heels crossing the terminals in diffuse formations. People herded in groups along narrow corridors, designed solely to increase their appetite for spending. Stimulation, cardboard displays, moving images, metal benches, glass walls; and outside, the shadows of the planes taking off over the asphalt.

It was too warm for the end of September.

I cast a glance at my phone as I walked. No service down here. But I did have a new message. Neda wishing me a good flight and, in a rather cryptic aside, hoping I'd find what I was looking for. My heart skipped a beat. I heard her voice: What are you afraid of?

Neda wouldn't have stopped asking until I'd said that the cleaner was a man and Black and I was ashamed to have even registered either of those things.

One of the first times we'd met – it must have been before or after a first-semester seminar on social anthropology, on the stone staircase during a smoking break – she had told me this story. It was mainly going around in the 80s. An older single woman flies to New York. With crime on the rise she's concerned for her safety, so she checks into one of the most expensive hotels in the city, far beyond her budget. After a long stroll around town, she gets into the elevator one evening. Just before the doors close, a Black man with sunglasses jumps in. He's got a big dog on a leash, a Great Dane. As soon as the elevator starts moving, the man mutters from behind his sunglasses: Lie down. The woman does what he says; stiff with fear of what awaits her. But the man takes a step back, away from her. Actually, he says calmly, I meant the dog.

Neda had laughed at the story, as she did: drily. As if she were above it all. And yet it still affected her, every day; she just didn't know that back then. She laughed about how a *w*hite woman's racism reveals itself.

*W*hite women, she said, are part of the problem, especially because they often don't want to see it for themselves.

In one version of the story, the man was Lionel Richie; in another, a long-forgotten soap star who sent a bouquet of expensive lilies to the woman's room afterwards. Because she'd got such a shock, Neda said. Thirty years had passed since then.

I slowed my pace.

The air down here was cool and dusty, the light fell white from above, utterly artificial. I was sweating between my shoulder blades, under my arms. The footsteps still at my back, distant now. Eventually, I reached the right part of the building, as I could tell by a large, sober capital letter on the wall. At last. I got into the lift and as soon as the doors opened at the top I was suddenly back in the midst of the crowds.

Now, sitting on the plane, I smelled my cooled sweat, beneath which my skin was strangely tight. Though my body was tired I felt refreshed and clear, like after an ice-cold shower. I read, and for most of the flight I managed to keep the photographer next to me at a distance. But he behaved as if he had a right to find out who I was, and at some point it got harder to evade his gaze than simply to meet it. On my right sat a delicate older woman, watching a film I didn't know on the little screen, her eyes half-closed. She'd pulled the blue blanket printed with the airline's gold logo up to her chin. Her head would nod down onto her chest, then she'd pick herself up. I envied her that moment, in which consciousness seeps out of the body and everything grows light and heavy at once. A bottomless moment, a fall without impact.

The photographer cast me a glance, apparently to create some kind of alliance between us, though the only thing we had in common was that we were both awake, while the third person was more or less asleep. Finally, the photographer asked what I was reading. I closed my book, resigned to talk to

him. He had a young face; only his eyes looked tired. As though they had aged too fast for the rest of him. He smiled.

Robinson Crusoe, seriously?

Do you know it?

Who doesn't? He laughed as if I'd asked an utterly absurd question, but then paused. I mean, he said, everyone knows Robinson Crusoe, don't they?

It's interesting, I said, how many people think they know the book without ever having read it.

He folded his arms, jamming his fingers under his armpits.

I don't read a lot, on principle. I'm not interested in literature. If I do pick up a book, it's non-fiction. Or it has to be entertaining, you know, very entertaining; is it?

Not at all, I said; it's hard work. We both smiled, reconciled again. One of the things that surprised me, I told him, was that the part where Crusoe lives on the island only takes up a small part. The book was a real hit on its publication in 1719. It was soon followed by a second part and then even a third. Before I'd started reading it I'd come across an article speculating on the real person behind the character; a sailor who'd been marooned on an island and miraculously survived. Defoe, who was actually born Foe and added the prefix to make himself look aristocratic, had probably met the sailor, or at least read about him. All the newspapers of the day reported on the Scottish seaman, who had survived four years and four months all alone on an abandoned island. Aside from that framework, however, the Scottish original was nothing like Crusoe. There was no Friday, no cannibals, no one far and wide whom he could have educated to be Christian, apart from himself, since he'd originally only ended up on board ship because he'd been in trouble with the law on land. His journey had been a form of flight, as such. He was said to have refused to continue the route because the vessel had a leak and he suspected it would soon sink. The captain thought differently, and so the Scottish sailor was forced to choose between two scenarios: if he went on board he'd drown; if he stayed put he was highly likely to starve.

As legend has it, I said, the seaman called after the departing ship that he'd changed his mind.

The photographer chuckled. He was presumably imagining what everyone envisaged at this point; the fear-driven sailor running after the ship into the waves, standing there up to his neck in the shit until the ship vanished on the horizon. A vanishing that also meant his own vanishing. Comedy inevitably arose where desperation prevailed.

A wise decision. Shortly after that, the crew did go down. But the sailor's survival wasn't due to any premonition; it was thanks to the goats that the first Spanish settlers had left on the island as a kind of edible reserve. The Juan Fernández goat, as it is now called, was a kind of feral domestic goat that had reproduced so rapidly that the lower part of the island was eaten bare in only a short time. The entire ecosystem was destroyed, to this day. Not too long ago, so I'd read, there had been a bounty of sixty cents per goat's tail; the animals were therefore very timid now. Aside from that, wild brambles introduced by Europeans overran the island and took the light away from the native vegetation.

Rats gnawed at the sailor by night, I said, and he grew sick. So as not to lose his mind, he later told journalists, he had sung hymns to himself. The buccaneers who eventually found him and rescued him wanted to shoot him at first, thinking he was a wild animal. He was wrapped in goatskins and his hair was matted into a single knot.

This detail always made me wonder what exactly was human about his appearance that had kept the buccaneers from shooting at him. Their decision must have been taken in a matter of moments. And what would have happened if they had shot after all?

It must have been something that awakened empathy in them, the photographer speculated. When he'd become a father, he'd been surprised that what we call the angel's smile in newborns was a reflex to ensure their survival. It's harder to leave behind a cute baby than one that spends all day crying and sleeping.

He took a pack of gum out of his jacket pocket, unwrapped a strip from its silver paper and put it in his mouth in one piece. I could see his jaw muscles working; one of the strongest muscles humans have.

Want one? he asked.

I said no, thanks. The interesting thing, anyway, I said, was that unlike Crusoe, the sailor didn't have a happy ending. Despite his fame, he drank, got in fights – just like before – and ended up dying a pauper. It was astounding how the contours of the narrative matched but the content was the reverse. Like looking at a negative and the photo it became. If you placed one on top of the other, the pictures disappeared entirely.

The photographer shook his head vigorously, cleared his throat. The woman next to me, who had only just fallen asleep, jumped slightly but didn't open her eyes.

Strange that we're talking about this, the photographer said. He had recently been thinking about the relationship between reality and fiction. As a photographer, he had the impression that – as soon as he raised his camera to his eye – he undertook a framing; in other words, fiction was composed quite naturally of the detail, perspective and focal length he selected. The two were not to be seen as opposites, but as each other's vanishing points. The present, after all, couldn't be read without a story, he said; and stories existed per se in a relationship to reality. One only had to think of buildings, monuments. As a Berliner, I must know the terrible fate of the Berlin Palace? A spot precisely in the centre of the city that gaped like a horrific wound, a space rebuilt and torn down over and over. It embodied the centre of power, he said, an empty bullet casing. The foundation, the only remaining material of the palace, had been covered in wet gravel, he had read in the newspaper, to prevent mould spreading from below. This image, he insisted, clearly showed people's immense fear of their own history, trying to nip it in the bud, render it invisible. Our cities were imbued with fictitious formations. No matter where he went, whichever city – and he had got around a lot over the past few years for his job – he always asked at least five people to explain its main landmark and how it came about. Usually, everyone told the story slightly differently, but in essence they were always the same; that was astounding, wasn't it?

A flight attendant passed soundlessly along the aisle. When she got to our row she bent down and picked up the blanket that had slid off the sleeping woman's chest. The casualness of her care touched me. The photographer

seemed not to have even noticed her gesture. He went on speaking, as if he'd just been waiting until we were undisturbed again.

Something strange happened recently, he said. He glanced at the night-dark window. He seemed to find the story unpleasant but still needed to get it off his chest.

I nodded my encouragement.

You always assume, he said, that you know the people closest to you the best. But perhaps the opposite is the case; if you love a person too much, you make them disappear, in a way. It becomes impossible to really see them or anything other than the story you share with them. I've shot portraits of people from almost all parts of the world by now, but I've never photographed my wife professionally, only with my phone, a snapshot here and there. Or on holiday. She never complained or found it odd, or at least I firmly believed that, until this day a few weeks ago. We'd been out for a meal together, drunk too much, something we never usually do; I don't really drink, you see, I haven't drunk any strong alcohol for years now. But we had something to celebrate that night. A publisher had just agreed to bring out a book of my photos. My wife ordered one gin and tonic after another; we were in a wonderful mood. Her eyes were shining, I was very happy. It seems the question of why I never wanted to photograph her had been on her mind for a long time. At some point, she came out with it; my head was spinning, the air was stale, the waiter wanted to close up. Right then, that night, I promised to take her photo.

Had you really never thought of photographing your wife before? It seemed unlikely to me, but not impossible.

I can't even explain it properly to myself, he answered; perhaps it was self-preservation, because what came next was a complete disaster. I wanted to try really hard. Oddly enough, I was nervous, although my wife has often watched me work; just never as a model. We were both stiff, and the longer I stared through the viewfinder, the paler she got. There's a tree in our garden, an old cherry tree. She went and stood in front of it. It was a good motif, but none of the pictures was good enough. Sometimes her eyes were closed, or she was involuntarily pulling a face. Her figure, actually beautifully

curvy, looked unflattering. When she saw the developed photos she lost her temper and cried; was that really how I saw her? I didn't know what to say. The storm's cleared now, at least for my wife. But I just can't get the pictures out of my head; I keep looking at my wife but only seeing the terrible photos, and now I've even started wondering whether they contain more truth than I could admit to myself; whether our marriage is over.

Maybe you should take new photos, I suggested.

He seemed a little ashamed, fiddled with the ends of his seatbelt. The luminous signs above our heads had long since gone out. The photographer thought for a while, staring out of the window. He probably hadn't been listening to me; in the end, he told the window, oblivious, that the best photos came about when you didn't know your subject at all. He looked like someone desperately seeking himself out there.

In Togo, he was planning to photograph a series of writers at a conference. Absurdly, most of them were travelling there from France, just like him. Now he was flying all the way from Paris to Lomé, just to meet people he could have run into right outside his own front door.

I said the really astounding thing was that they were flying him in instead of commissioning someone locally.

Of course, he said. It wasn't really surprising, though, since the event was organised and above all funded by a French cultural institution. He ought to have pointed it out to the organisers, sure, but between the two of us – he held one hand in front of his mouth, as if whispering a secret – he could use the money.

He looked at me, a moment too long for it to be a coincidence.

Let me know if you ever need photos of yourself, the photographer said; I'd really like to photograph you. You've got something austere about you, very interesting.

He nodded his approval. In the row in front of us, someone burst out laughing. I instantly wondered whether the laughter was related to our conversation, and the photographer's gesture was too lewd.

I took his business card and inserted it without comment into a slit in my handbag, demonstratively careless. Our conversation petered out and I

actually managed to fall asleep. After our arrival, he waved at me from a distance at baggage collection; I pretended not to have seen him and the next time I looked in his direction he'd vanished in the airport crowds.

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The first night, I wrote a text message to Neda. Said I'd arrived safely. And asked if she could think spontaneously of a book, maybe a classic, in which the protagonist was read as female and was travelling alone.

I waited.

My nightclothes were at the very bottom of my luggage. I'd packed head over heels, and now I lay under the provisionally installed mosquito net in only my underwear, stuck to my sweat-soaked backside, listened to the lively night, and lost my courage.

The accommodation had once been a seamen's hostel, the doorman had told me on my arrival, that was why it was right on the seafront. When I tuned out the voices in my head I could hear the ocean. The building was now run by the German state; it was where it housed its guests in Togo. Outside the balcony stood a single ragged palm tree; its dry leaves rubbed against each other in the wind. It seemed like a gigantic foreign body in the overly tended grounds. The lawn was mowed short; over the fence you could see the dimly lit, very tidy street. The night porter's desk was unoccupied.

I'd have so liked to have a beer with someone or exchanged a few words.

For a while, I tried to remember what I'd listened to in Berlin before I fell asleep (cars driving over cobbles, branches of a tree scraping the window glass in the wind, a dog?), but I was already unable to summon up the individual sounds.

I kept looking at my phone. Neda didn't answer.