

Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 3
May Ayim

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast, I'm Susan Stone.

The Dead Ladies Show is dedicated to celebrating forgotten and also infamous women who achieved amazing things against all odds while they were alive. The show is recorded in front of an [live] audience at ACUD in Berlin, and here on the podcast, we bring you a special selection of talks from these events.

Today we are doing things a little differently. This episode's lady is May Ayim, she was a Berliner, an Afro-German poet and an important activist. Dead Ladies Show co-founder Katy Derbyshire told her story at a recent event, and there was a little problem with the recording, so we're taking this as an opportunity to have her tell it again, just for you. We also have a special guest later in the program. We'll be hearing from Mara Sanaga, an award-winning poet, author and spoken-word-artist. She says May Ayim inspired much of her work, including many poems, articles and essays, that would not exist without her." So stay tuned for that special conversation.

But first, welcome Katy, and please, tell us a bit about yourself...

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hi Susan. It's strange telling you about myself

(BOTH LAUGH)

SUSAN STONE: I mean, I know it all -

KATY DERBYSHIRE: We're friends, we've been friends for a while. Yea, I'm um, I'm a literary translator, I translate contemporary German writers into English, and I do some other work and I've been doing the Dead Ladies Show for, ooh I think about coming up for two years now. Originally, I enjoyed sharing the writers I love, but now I enjoy telling people about these inspiring ladies.

SUSAN STONE: You also are, I would say, almost an activist for German literature, which I think is great, oh an enthusiast maybe is more fair even, but I want to tell people about a book that you translated that was recently announced on a longlist of a special award.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: That's exciting news yes, the book is called *Bricks and Mortar* by Clemens Meyer and it's long-listed for the International Dublin Literary Award. Sounds very impressive, it is impressive, but there are also 149 other books from all over the world long-listed for that prize, so you know I am pleased and very happy, but I'm not spending my winnings quite yet.

SUSAN STONE: Well reading is certainly something that you love to do, as do I and you're a dedicated reader and, as I said, a promoter of German authors and German writing in English, which is great and we are talking today about a German writer who has also been translated into English, and she's primarily a poet but also wrote essays and other works, and it's kind of a sad story. A lot of our stories do have sad elements and there are glorious elements to May's story too, but I do just want to say to people, that if, for any reason, you're quite sensitive to issues surrounding mental illness and ending one's life, then this might not be the episode for you. But I hope that you will listen anyway and at least then find May Ayim's poetry. We'll just spell her name out for you, that's M-A-Y A-Y-I-M and here's Katy talking about May.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: This is really just an introduction to May Ayim for you today. She's a woman who had and still has really quite a presence in Berlin. When we did the show there were a couple of people in the audience who had been friends with her, but a lot of the English-speakers hadn't heard of her.

So, May Ayim was born in 1960 in Hamburg to a young white German woman, Ursula Andler, and her father was Emmanuel Ayim, who was a Ghanaian medical student at the time and later became a professor in Kenya.

She was put into a children's home and then in 1962 she was fostered by the Opitz family. They were a white family, and they gave her their surname. You'll notice that I'm talking about May Ayim the whole time because she took her father's name as a pen name later on, after her strict family weren't really very happy with what she was writing. And you know, she may have wanted to reinvent herself, like we've all attempted to do sometimes, I think.

She had sporadic contact with her father, and she met her mother once as an adult. Let me just get this part over with, she committed suicide in 1996. But let me let her introduce herself first of all.

MAY AYIM ON VIDEO IN "HOFFNUNG IM HERZ": My name is May Ayim. I was born in Germany, in Hamburg and grew up in smaller West German cities and since 1984 I live in Berlin.

My background is Ghanaian and German, so my father studied in Germany, but I grew up in a white German foster family and in orphanages, but most of the time in the foster family.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: So that was May, that was her gorgeous voice that you heard there. It was taken from the film "Hoffnung im Herz" by Maria Binder, which you can find on the internet. Anyway, May moved to Berlin in 1984 and loved it. She became a poet and an activist, and now I'm going to play you a little clip of her doing both those things at the same time.

MAY AYIM ON TAPE READING 'grenzenlos und unverschämt':

grenzenlos und unverschämt – ein gedicht gegen die deutsch sch-einheit

ich werde trotzdem

afrikanisch

sein

auch wenn ihr

mich gerne

deutsch

haben wollt

und werde trotzdem

deutsch sein

auch wenn euch

meine schwärze

nicht paßt

ich werde
noch einen schritt weitergehen
bis an den äußersten rand
wo meine schwestern sind
wo meine brüder stehen
wo
unsere
FREIHEIT
beginnt
ich werde
noch einen schritt weitergehen und
noch einen schritt
weiter
und wiederkehren
wann
ich will
wenn
ich will
grenzenlos und unverschämt
bleiben

KATY DERBYSHIRE: That was the poem 'grenzenlos und unverschämt' which is translated as 'borderless and brazen', and I promise that's the last long piece of German in this little presentation. In it she states her position as an Afro-German in the wake of Reunification, we'll come back to that, and one of the things she's saying is that she's German AND African and that she's part of German culture, whether the racists like it or not, and that she'll come and go as she pleases.

I think that's still a really important message and that's something we can really aspire to. But how did she get to that position where we saw her there, or heard her in fact? (LAUGHS) In the mid-1980s, when she'd just moved to Berlin, May met Audre Lorde in Berlin. She was a guest lecturer at the Freie Universität at the time. You'll probably have heard of her if you're listening to this, at her introductory lecture in Berlin she said of herself Audre Lorde "I, black, lesbian, mother, feminist, warrior, poet, I am here to do my work." So Lorde encouraged May Ayim and another woman called Katharina Oguntoyen to publish a book, which they co-edited with Dagmar Schultz, I've got it right here, no I haven't haha, I've got some other ones right here though too, and it's called *Farbe Bekennen. Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte*. And they published it, it came out in

German in 1986, and you can read it in English too, it's published as *Showing our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out*, and it was translated by Anne V. Adams.

Now this was a groundbreaking publication. About a third of it was May's diploma thesis, which was about the history of Black Germans, going right back to the Middle Ages, and that was the first time anyone had done that. The book also featured interviews and discussions with Afro-German women of all generations about their lives and their histories, and some of May's poems.

It was a real game changer in terms of three big things in May's work, three things that I make out when I'm reading her work: representation, memory, and words. The book wrote Black women into German history and made them visible for the first time. Germany does have a colonial history, and there have been Black people here for centuries as the book showed, but both those things tended to get swept under the carpet and still do today. So many women and men have benefited from the book since then, and it's still really relevant. May became a sought-after speaker and performer, and she began traveling widely. She went to Senegal, Brazil, South Africa, Canada, the UK, Finland, Cuba, the USA and glamorous Belgium, among other places.

She was a co-founder of what was called the Initiative Schwarze Deutsche in 1986, which meant the Initiative of Black Germans and it's now called the Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland, to include people who might now have German nationality but are still Black in Germany. You can find their website at <https://isdonline.de/> and they're still working today, representing Black interests in Germany, supporting Black projects, highlighting and fighting discrimination and racism. What they were doing in the mid-80s was, a key part of that was, coming up in discussions with the term 'Afro-Deutsche' or 'Afro-Germans' as a positive description to replace the racist terms that had previously been used and May really made that word her own, 'Afro-German'. She wrote two really darkly funny poems with that title.

So 1986 was a busy year. May Ayim also went to Ghana for a three-month work camp, and while she was there she ended up more or less coincidentally meeting her Ghanaian family, with mixed feelings. I think it was a difficult situation, but she came close to some of her family members. There's a great photo, I'll put it in the show notes, of her with her grandfather Ruben Ansah Ayim, aged 80, and she wrote about their parting:

"When I said goodbye, my grandfather gave me a loving wink and looked both serious and expectant, as he told me not to think so much about Germany. It was better to think of him, he said, of Ghana. And to bring back a little of the light that the whites had carried away from Africa. I'm not sure what of that light can be carried back, nor what can be made of it, here or there."

She was a thinking woman.

Another aspect of her work that was important, was working on memory, and she talked and wrote about Afro-German women who came before her. She dedicated poems to them and to other role models like Audre Lorde. Obviously speaks to me as a fan of dead ladies. One of the women May included in *Showing Our Colors* was Fasia Jansen, who was born in Hamburg in 1929. She was the daughter of a Liberian diplomat and a German maid. She had to perform forced labor in a concentration camp under the Nazis, but later became a singer-songwriter and a peace activist.

In the show notes I'm going to put a beautiful, super 70s photo of Fasia Jansen, playing the accordion with some really super grumpy-looking children, I love that photo.

Music, speaking of accordions, music was very important to May and you can tell that if you read her poetry collections. One of her own Dead Ladies, if you like, was the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, and her poem about 'Mahalia' was published after May's death. I'm going, I just did a very quick translation of it, which I'm going to read to you now:

'Mahalia

sounds in my ear

she has the voice of the blues

velvet and deep

like the river on the banks on the other side of life

slavery, exile, crime, consolation

generations, old women and children, died, remembered, reborn

women and men in one person

Mahalia's voice rises to the heavens

swims to the banks of death

sounds in my ear, undying

people smile and pray

call out a song to my heart

Mahalia

an echo from history, the future

Mahalia

love, hope and pain

Mahalia

blues in flesh and blood'

Written in 1995.

Let me just gather up my notes here a little bit. Okay, so we're moving on a little bit. We're going to hear May again, talking about how she wrote poetry.

MAY AYIM SPEAKING ON TAPE: If I say that I'm a poet, people say, "Oh no, poetry, I can't stand it" because the way you learn poetry in school, at the end of school you have learned to hate poetry and in Germany it's always very elite. See, only a small circle of people is into poetry, and then they read from their papers and very serious and often you don't get the message, I mean, what is this poem all about. So my way of writing has always been, I want to get a message across and I want it to be understood. And I recite poetry without reading it, I just speak to people, but for that I don't have any role model in Germany. Rather outside Germany, in the United States or in Britain or even here in South Africa, there is a strong tradition of oral history, of oral poetry and I think in, in almost all African countries.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: So May's first book of poetry *blues in schwarz weiss*, which I do have here, was published in 1995, and it gained May a lot more recognition, including in white literary circles. She gave all of these TV interviews and she read poetry all around Germany. Her work used a lot of wordplay, which apparently, she loved off the page as well, and it

includes moving pieces exploring her memories of childhood and encounters with racism. There are angry poems, there are love poems, it's funny and ironic. And in English, you can read a collection of her poems, including essays and conversations, translated again by Anne V. Adams, it's called *blues in black and white* and I really recommend you look that up and read her work.

Words were so important to May and she also campaigned for German speakers to think about their words, and how they used them and how they could hurt people. Maria Binder's film "Hoffnung im Herz" includes a video clip of May silently eating what we now call a Schaumkuss, which is a kind of sickly sweet chocolate coated marshmallow treat that used to have this overtly racist name. I'm not going to play it for the podcast, because all you can hear is traffic (LAUGHS) but she's standing outside Mohrenstrasse Station in Berlin as she eats this sweet. May wrote about how this station was renamed after Reunification.

It was called Tiemannstrasse, after a dead man, communist man, it was renamed to the original racist name, meaning something like 'Moor Street'. And she called that a sure sign that racist language and corresponding thinking is tolerated and traditional, even at the highest white ranks of the new Republic.

Now the campaign to rename that street is still going on, unfortunately, but at least that questionable chocolate treat she enjoyed quite visibly in the clip no longer has the offensive name.

May also trained as a speech therapist and she wrote her thesis about riding teaching material of racist terms and images, which is another thing people are still working on in Germany. Reading her essays and her academic writing, I felt that a few things have changed, since she was working in Germany, but many of the issues she raised are actually still horrifyingly relevant. Another thing May wrote about was the psychological strain of racism in general -- she'd studied psychology -- and her own struggle to maintain her mental health. Early in '96 she went into psychiatric hospital and she went on medication for depression. She was released, but that summer, she suffered a lot of strain of organizing Black History Month and she went back to hospital.

While she was there, for some reason she was taken off her medication and then diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and sent home. So, although she had a lot of support from friends, life just became too much for her. May was a woman for whom words were really important. She worked with a speech therapist with MS patients, and she felt she had lost her words. She committed suicide on the 9th of August, 1996 by jumping from a 13th floor window.

After her death, a new collection of her poems *nacht gesang* was published, it was compiled by Ekpenyong Ani. I know it's easy to read too much into writing when we know somebody killed themselves after they wrote it, but actually, the book does contain a lot of dark poems. It's about burning refugee homes in the wake of Reunification, it's about autumn and winter, there are difficult friendships, there's a lost love, and the title poem ends "I love you, I won't wait anymore."

The last poem in *nacht gesang* is called 'Abschied', meaning farewell. In it, May thinks about her last words and her last deeds and her last wishes. "What should the last thought be. Thank you? Thank you."

Well, May Ayim had an incredible legacy as an agent of change. There's a great book, came out 20 years after her death, it was called *Sisters in Souls: Inspirations through May Ayim* edited by Natascha A. Kelly. It's a collection of Afro-German women remembering their first encounters with her and her effect on their lives and work. It really really looks to the future, and if you read German, find this book, read it, I really recommend it.

Let me read you a piece from May's poem 'Remembering Audre Lorde'. It's called Soul Sister, and I think it fits here.

'we mourn the death of a great Black poet

a sister, friend and sister-in-arms

her work lives on in her works

our visions carry experiences of her words'

As I said, she's had a great legacy, and she now has her own street in Berlin, called May-Ayim-Ufer, which is a short but sweet little road, right by the river in Kreuzberg. I think that would make her laugh, I think she would be triumphant and happy about that. And once again, of course, that name change was the result of years of anti-racist campaigning, because the road used to be named after the German colonialist Otto Friedrich von der Groeben, who has a long list of crimes to his name.

There is another dedication to her by another poet and a friend that I'd like you to listen to if you get the chance, and I think it's a really fitting tribute. It's Linton Kwesi Johnson's song 'Reggae fi May Ayim', and in it he thanks her for her life and her light and her memory. I think it's a great song.

May's work is still really influencing people to write and campaign and take action, inside and outside of Germany, and that's a great thing, and I hope you have the chance to look up her work and listen to her poetry, or read it or take inspiration from May Ayim's impressive life. Thank you.

SUSAN STONE: Katy Derbyshire on the life of May Ayim. Here with me to talk a bit more about May's work and legacy in Germany and beyond is Mara Sanaga, also known as Chantal Sandjon. She's an award-winning poet, author and spoken-word-artist and also writes nutrition books and is the mom of a young daughter. She's an Afro-German Berliner and has been involved in the Black community for many years. Amongst other publications, she's contributed to the books *Afro Shop* and *Black Berlin* where she wrote about May Ayim. Welcome!

MARA SANAGA: Hello, thank you for having me, hi!

SUSAN STONE: Mara, you wrote to me that May Ayim inspired much of your work. When did you first learn about May?

MARA SANAGA: Mmmm, that was probably my teens, because I was very much involved in the Black community in Berlin from when I think I was eleven or twelve, so I really met her work very early on. That was a real fortune, I feel like, because well it spoke to me in so many different ways, especially as a teenager at that time and just for once finding words for what you feel and finding them in such a poetic way.

SUSAN STONE: And was this something that you learned about through friends, or was it ever talked about in school, her work?

MARA SANAGA: No, not at school. I think I did a lot of like, alternative education for myself, I was just involved in, for instance, a newspaper for Black teenagers, which was called *Blite*, it was a project by the ISD, Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland. We just educated each other, in a way, and we got a lot of really good role models. We met Katharina Oguntoye a lot, I met Ekpenyong Ani, editor at Orlanda Verlag. That just helped a lot to learn about May Ayim, to learn about our history as well and the history of Black Germans, in for instance, NS time.

SUSAN STONE: And NS meaning National Socialism or Nazi era?

MARA SANAGA: Yeah. (BOTH LAUGH)

SUSAN STONE: Which is kind of one of the only things people really know about German history unfortunately outside of Germany. You were born in Berlin and grew up here in the 1980s, um we talked a little bit about your reading her writings, but how did some of the things she talked about connect with your actual experiences?

MARA SANAGA: I found it very interesting, that still until today, a lot of what she wrote feels very much up to date, which is a little bit unfortunate, but for me as a writer it's also a relief, because I feel like she did a lot of groundwork for us. I don't have to repeat a lot of things, I don't have to say it like 'Oh they touched my hair' which is very important, and we have to talk about that, like all of us have to deal with these experiences of everyday racism, and just being, yeah, presented as the Other and outside of this German context. But she did a lot of the work that I don't have to repeat. I feel like there are these great poems like 'Afro-German I' and 'Afro-German II' for instance, I can rely on these, I have the space that she created.

SUSAN STONE: And how do you see the Afro-German experience today? I mean as we've said, it's still, there's a lot of work to be done.

MARA SANAGA: Yeah, yes, (BOTH LAUGH) as always I think there's still a lot of progress, but there's also a lot of experiences where you feel like, wow, we're still there? So, like for instance, my child, which is also Afro-German of course, and just, it's very interesting how people position us so differently, because she's, she has a darker skin but she has more straight hair, so she usually is positioned somewhere closer to India from white people in Germany, and it's just very interesting how people just keep repositioning us, without us asking for it, and how interesting it is for them to know, or they have to know about where you are 'really' from. And that is still happening, and you feel like wow, that's 2017, I can't believe that.

Yeah, stuff like that still happens, you know, people telling me I have a Spanish accent (LAUGHS) when I speak in German, which is the only language where I don't have an accent. Yeah, we still have a lot of everyday racism and also a lot of positive racism as well. I think you see more, more that light skinned Black people are more and more like fashionable nowadays, and there is this positive idea of being different and being so-called exotic. I mean it's still all mixed up in having experiences of racism that attack you personally. Everybody knows somebody who has been in some kind of really life-threatening situation as well, so you still know the areas where you wouldn't go in Germany and even close to Berlin or even in Berlin. Yeah all of that is very sad, but then I also see, I see my daughter who goes to an Afro-German Kindergarten we started, I see all of them together now being young and being the next-next-next Generation, I see that still there's a lot happening, like this reality they have now and even the people I meet in their 20's now, they just still have a little of a different kind of self-esteem that we had to work more for. It's just more given for them to have Black role models, to know Black people they look up to and to just see Black faces wherever they go in a way. So that makes a big difference.

SUSAN STONE: Do we, do we know how many Afro-Germans there are in Germany?

MARA SANAGA: No, we don't, because here in Germany we have this, or we don't have any statistics that are based on race, because yeah, Germany is very afraid of talking about race because of it's history. There are some numbers where they say, okay, there are about 500,000 Black people, but I don't really know on what that is based, because as long as you don't openly talk about race, and also how do you define Black people? Is that only people who do not have a, who do have a different passport, like an African passport? Then it's a very skewed number. You only get Black Africans, and you would probably also get some white Africans in that number, so yea, there is no information, about okay who defines as Black, who defines as mixed-race, who would define as Asian, and who also defines as German, because it's not, like, exclusive, which is an idea that a lot of people do have in Germany, that you are either Black or African or you are German.

SUSAN STONE: And this is a legacy of the Nazi era that was in a sense designed to prevent abuse of these kinds of figures, but in fact I think, I mean do you feel that maybe it a little bit takes the power away when we don't know what are the numbers of groups who have strength?

MARA SANAGA: Yeah, I definitely do think so, because for instance, I do feel like right now Black people in Germany, we do have numbers and I do think it's much more than 500,000 people. For instance just the fact that we don't really have a lot of books, like children's books, with Black protagonists, but we do have a lot of Black children and also a lot of Black children who are mixed-race and who may not have a lot of Black role models in their immediate surroundings, like in their family, who grew up in mainly white families, and I do think that's really an issue if you don't talk about that. And you do have that in all communities, you have that in the Turkish-German community, you have that in the Arabic-German community and all these communities of color, but as long as there are no numbers, you can also not say 'Hey, we do matter, we're here and it's not just a small number', but more people do want books that include people of color and that are not based on racist stereotypes. As long as you don't have those numbers, it's very easy to say 'Okay, those people who are complaining', for instance about representation or about some figures in a movie that are represented in a racist way, as long as you don't have those numbers, you also can say, well it's just very easy for the majority to say 'Okay, those are just very few people who don't have anything else to complain about, and that's just PC talk' so it would be good to know.

SUSAN STONE: And in terms of role models, it sounds like May was really role model for you.

MARA SANAGA: Yeah, definitely. She, I've never met her personally, but yeah, I've met a lot of people who were very close to her, also the way they talk about her gave me an experience of her spirit as well as of her personality. Just having her poems and not just her poems but also her academic work, yeah as I said that's really like groundwork for me as well. I really enjoyed, or I really appreciate how she was able to use German in a way that made it her own, to make our experiences so poetic as well, and to not limit herself, to for instance just being, in a way, a report of racism, like we're always reduced to that. But she said, 'Okay, I'm not just gonna talk about racism, I'm very multi-faceted and I have poems about laugh, I have poems about emotions and feelings and the future' and I just love that about her, how she just chose to be everything, like everything she is.

SUSAN STONE: What do you think May would think about today's Berlin and today's Germany?

MARA SANAGA: Oh (LAUGHS) Hmmm that's a good question. I think she would really appreciate and also celebrate the steps we have made, like having May-Ayim-Ufer for instance, which is also I would say a community effort. Yeah, I think she would still write very powerful poems about a lot of the hypocrisy as well, that is happening, or the like, right now it looks like we have moved forward a lot and there is a lot of progress, but there is still like this whole situation where everywhere there is this move to the right for instance. This idea of the middle ground, like the German majority that does consider themselves to be not racist, to be not part of the right, who still has a lot of spots they don't identify about themselves and a lot of everyday racism that just goes unnoticed. Yeah, I think there would be great poems about that. It's hard to imagine, what they would look like, maybe we would have a YouTube channel by May Ayim, which I would enjoy very much.

SUSAN STONE: Thank you so much Mara!

MARA SANAGA: Thank you very much!

SUSAN STONE: That's it for this episode. Thanks for joining us. You can find out more about Mara Sanaga's work and May Ayim's work and other ladies of renown at our website deadladiesshow.com. If you have comments on or suggestions for our show, please do

drop an email, info@deadladiesshow.com You can also follow us on Instagram or Twitter, @deadladies, and subscribe to the show and rate us on iTunes or your podcast venue of choice.

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

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