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Exclusionary Acts: The Un-Making of Black German Agency in Transnational Black (German) Studies 2/3

A Conversation between Nicola Lauré al-Samarai and Peggy Piesche. With paintings by Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi

This is the second part of a longer conversation between Nicola Lauré al-Samarai and Peggy Piesche. By discussing Black Studies in Germany and the US, the consumption of Blackness and the reproduction of exclusionary settings, they aim at opening up a critical transnational debate on forging strategies to create im-pertinent epistemologies and inter/personal politics of doing, both inside and beyond academia. The first part was published two weeks ago and the third of three parts was published - as well on transversal.at - on December 29th, 2017.

'EXPERIENCE' AND 'AGENCY': CANONISING THE STORY WILL NEVER DISMANTLE THE CANON



Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, *Obstacle*, 2015 (oil on canvas)

N.L.al-S.: Thank you for bringing up Adichie's important remark! Its relevancy for our discussion becomes even more obvious if we apply it to the problem of collective stories and read it together with Edward Said's consideration that 'the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging (...) constitutes one of the main connections between [culture and imperialism]'. [1] It is these processes of making a story 'definite' that, in the field of Black German Studies, have produced quite disturbing politics of representation. By saying this, I do not at all mean to disregard story-based approaches. I do think, however, that these approaches should be met with caution. As they are embedded in and subjected to a deeply unequal interplay of transnational discourses, they exhibit the effects of powerful structural

conditions while, at the same time, their *interpretative results* are located at the contradictory, multiple encoded interstice of hegemonic and resistant ways of knowledge production. The latter aspect is of particular importance if we want to discuss 'internal' processes, dynamics and pitfalls pertaining to interdiasporic Black politics of meaning (making).

Let me, therefore, stick with the 'story' for a moment. In Black American and Black German epistemologies the principle of the lived experience as a central criterion of meaning cannot be overestimated.[2] In both contexts, concrete experience is valued as an important source to identify self-determined – i.e. literally *authorised* – sites of subjectivity and resistance. What happens, though, if a marginalised yet authorised story or an entire yet always selective body of authorised stories is transferred to a marginalised yet more powerful definitional setting with dissimilar paradigms of perception and interpretation? How is a marginalised yet authorised story or an entire yet always selective body of authorised stories re/read, re/placed and con/formed within the determinations and delineations of a marginalised yet more powerful scholarly field? I am posing these questions because the very medium of the story exemplifies, par excellence, the contradictory relationship between discursive acts to narrate a story in order to re-possess it and discursive acts *to grasp*[3] a story in order to canonise it.

Even if we assume that interdiasporic Black efforts spring from a deeply felt *longing to make sense*, we still have to ask ourselves how corresponding processes of cultural translation are contributing to re/iterate, re/inscribe and con/form a universalising *desire to order the world*. To a certain degree, both the marginalised interdiasporic longing and the dominant western-centric desire follow similar and intertwined representational modes in the sense of 'speaking for' as

a proxy (*vertreten / an jemandes Stelle treten*).[4] Since the talk about Black Germans has replaced the work with Black German approaches, a collective Black German 'experience' can be narrated, presented and discussed without the agency of the actual protagonists. I would go even further and suggest that hegemonic approaches deliberately deploy the term 'experience' to individualise or, more precisely, to autobiographise agency, thus equating it with essentialist notions of 'unmediated-ness' and 'authenticity'. The numerous efforts to replace and erase *epistemological agency* through processes of expropriating knowledge, of appropriating re/sources and of disregarding a Black German theory production, especially one that is published in German,[5] have led to a retrogressive re-anthropologisation of Black German subjectivities.

P.P.: I wholeheartedly agree. And yet, at the same time, it looks like
we are trapped in a well-known dilemma: while our experience *does* matter and will always remain the driving force for us to generate and produce knowledge, notions of postracialism have found their way into the discursive practice of Black German Studies. As race and racism have increasingly been 'sourced out' to the 'subject-matter', we see how this is conveniently dissolved into not just the 'empiricism' of the studied protagonists but also the protagonists of the field itself. Activist-scholars, Black and of Colour, have once again become the carriers of race, i.e., the ones who are perceived as 'affected' (*betroffen*) by racism and are relegated to the role of playing the 'native informant'.

Albeit not a new phenomenon, postracialism needs to be understood as an important principle underpinning the very concept of racism itself.[6] In a predominantly 'raceless' research field on minorities within a racist institutional context wherein

which, in Alexander G. Weheliyes words, 'minority discourses seemingly cannot inhabit the space of proper intellectual reflection',[7] this trend has assisted to privatise racism. This, in turn, allows for disregarding the approaches of scholarly agents and for situating them as part of the 'subject-matter' of research instead. As a result it is safe to state that the respective body of work bears little or no relation to the lived experience of its main subjects. Experience, as I am here using it, does not at all refer to the already mentioned and entirely improper notion of an autobiographised 'unmediated-ness' or 'authenticity' but to the specific ways in which Black Germans and other racialised collectives express, think and conceptualise themselves. Postracialist scholarship is, thus, incapable not only of meeting or even of understanding the *cultural-political agency* of 'militant researchers' which is mobilised around the production and elaboration of new concepts as part of a *collectivist endeavour of activist scholarship*.[8] It also cannot respond to an ongoing racialised knowledge production for it is stuck in its own epistemic ignorance and thus fails to confront head-on the overt and latent legacies of racism – not only in German history but in Black German Studies as well.

The Black German experience is far more than just an unmitigated overview of a Black German history or a standard(ised) discussion of demographics, thematic developments and isolated events pertaining to the presence of Black people in Germany throughout the centuries. It requires far more than just making visible a marginalised group or embedding it within the narrowing discussions of race, nation and citizenship. The Black German experience, first and foremost, marks *a multiplicity of existences* – individual *and* communal *and* consciously communified – that is situated beyond the ramifications of a so-called 'critical mass',

beyond the epistemic framework of the transatlantic slave trade and, as a result, beyond corresponding attempts to present an overall, almost archetypical model of 'diasporic collectivity'. Quite unsurprisingly, such attempts, along with their observational lenses, analytical tools and interpretive methodologies, are considered unacceptable by many activist-scholars, Black (German) and of Colour, because they reinforce othering processes of less visible, seemingly 'deviant' diasporic formations and thus preclude opportunities of developing power-sensitive approaches to framing, locating and conducting research. If we read those attempts against the broader background of a – as Simone C. Drake puts it – 'global phenomenon of treating Blackness as a commodity whose value is elevated only when it serves the interest of a public whose greatest interest is in profit rather than in cultural appreciation',[9] processes of un-making agency reveal the violent institutional logics of gaining legitimacy. The very quest for pushing the merits of academic research on Blackness in Germany or the Black German experience while, at the same time, placing Black collectivist approaches to knowledge production outside academia's 'hallowed halls' and, hence, outside the social contract between an academic industry and a dominant society is part of a greater exclusionary structure. It exerts control by premising a 'public' we are not (necessarily) part of and its 'interests' we do not (necessarily) share.[10]

N.L.al-S.: I do agree that postracialist approaches in conjunction with other hegemonic and/or otherwise mainstream(ed) notions and concepts have substantially contributed to depoliticising the research field in question. I also think that the Black German 'case' is, unfortunately, not an exceptional one but rather serves as a magnifier for broader problematic trends within the landscape of

institutionalised Black Studies itself. What really concerns me, though, is an increasingly discernible detachment of current academic research from input and analyses, practices and re-evaluations provided by and linked with political activism. In view of the path-breaking, deeply committed activist foundations of Black Studies in general and Black German studies in particular, I am convinced that it is of utmost importance to reconnect epistemological agency with what you have aptly termed the 'collectivist endeavour of activist scholarship'.

As scholars, we are acting neither in an academic nor in a societal vacuum and should therefore be held responsible for our research – its mindset, the ways we conduct it, the decisions whom we share it with. If we seriously want to discuss agency (in the sense of a capacity to act) and activism (in the sense of radical social politics and practices of action) then we are required to leave the rather abstract safety net of 'discourse' and must re-situate ourselves, our scholarly intentions, our epistemological decisions and the impact of our work at the discomforting nexus between being individual agents who are taking an active role *and* our individual actions that are causing and producing material effects. Such a discussion would exceed the limiting and somewhat escapist scope of analysing 'discursive matters' within 'discursive formations' because it translates seemingly impersonal, seemingly distant discursive acts into the life-worldly nearness of the *inter/personal doing*: as 'actions of people in relation to other people'.[11]

The question is, however, whether or not there is an interest to develop strategies to challenge processes of canonising a story and of un-making agency beyond the realm of discourse; whether or not it is possible to subvert hegemonic strategies and techniques that do not only exert power over specific ways of producing and distributing knowledge but, first of all, affect the very modes and

practices of *bringing knowledge into being*. I think, there is a chance to encounter the multiplicity of our specific existences if we remind ourselves of the groundbreaking ethico-epistemological principles of Black feminism: the concrete experience as a central criterion of meaning, the uses of dialogue in accessing knowledge claims, the ethic of caring and the ethic of personal accountability.[12] As these principles are grounded in an inclusive, action-based concept of *research as conversational meaning-making*, they embrace the collectivist endeavour of activist scholarship, empower and facilitate a genuine collective practice and, to borrow a phrase from Kobena Mercer, place all of us 'in a condition of answerability'.[13] As long as racism, hetero/sexism, classism, ableism and other forms of discrimination continue to de/form the individual and the collective, I cannot think of any other way to foster agency. It would mean to keep cultivating a knowledge production that aims at cherishing, specifying and collectivising a deeply intersectional sense of self-hood (*Eigen-Sinn*) that bridges the gap between thought and action, and that attentively ponders the pitfalls of a 'theory void of experience' (*erfahrungsarme Theorie*) and an 'experience void of theory' (*theoriearme Erfahrung*).[14]

To be honest, I do not believe that these kinds of collectivist processes can be put into practise, let alone be carefully housed within the biased and rather unreceptive context of academia. Such approaches would, in fact, completely undermine the structural and notional normatives of the institution and, far more importantly, disrupt the very heart of what you have termed the 'social contract between the academic industry and the dominant society' – that is, the capitalisation of knowledge.

part 3 ->

[1] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage Books, New York, 1993, p xiii.

[2] For a discussion of 'Concrete Experience as a Central Criterion of Meaning' see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Routledge, New York and London, 1990, pp 208–212. For the Black German context see, for example, Peggy Piesche, 'Identität und Wahrnehmung in literarischen Texten Schwarzer deutscher Autorinnen der 90er Jahre', in Gelbin et al., *Kulturelle Produktionen*, op cit, pp 195–206; Eggers, 'Knowledges of (Un)Belonging', op cit; Nicola Lauré al-Samarai, 'Inspirited Topography: Haunting Survivals and the Location of Experience in Black German Traditions of Knowledge and Culture', in Lennox, *Remapping Black Germany,* op cit., pp 46–66.

[3] I am using the term in the Glissantian sense: 'We shall perhaps see that the verb *to understand* in the sense of "to grasp" [*comprendre*] has a fearsome repressive meaning here.' Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1997, p 26 (emphases in the original). In German, the inherent violence of the desire to understand can be made visible through a hyphenated spelling of the verb *be-greifen*.

[4] See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Patrick Williams, Laura Chrisman, eds, *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory. A Reader*, Columbia UP, New York, 1994, pp 66–111.

[5] The uses of language play an important role to exert and to transnationalise definitional power. In our case, the already frail

field in question is further fragilised by noticeable (scholarly) inadequacies of speaking and/or reading and/or writing (in) German. Taking for granted the powerful inherences of a seemingly common lingua franca contributes not only to mono-lingualise research as well as its outcome and corresponding discussions but also paves the way for an 'intellectual bootlegging' of less accessible thoughts and concepts that are uttered, written and negotiated in German. While it would be unthinkable to conduct serious research in English-speaking contexts without knowing the English language, these qualifying conditions are apparently considered as less relevant for other(ed) settings.

[6] For a more in-depth discussion on the state of postracialism in the US, see Barnor Hesse, 'Self-fulfilling Prophecy: The Postracial Horizon', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol 110, no 1, Winter 2011.

[7] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus. Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human,* Duke UP, Durham and London, 2014, p 6.

[8] For further discussions see, for example, Umut Erel, Jin Haritaworn, Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Christian Klesse, 'On the depoliticisation of intersectionality talk: Conceptualising multiple oppressions in critical sexuality studies', in Adi Kuntsman and Miyake Esperanza eds, *Out of place: Interrogating silences in queerness / raciality.* Raw Nerve Book, New York, 2008, pp 265–292; see also Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times,* Duke UP, Durham and London, 2007.

[9] Simone C. Drake, 'Out of the Mouth of Babes: When the Baubles of Diaspora are Up for Sale', posted July 16, 2014, available at http://www.newblackmaninexile.net/2014/07/out-of-mouth-of-babes-when-baubles-of.html (last access: October 27, 2016).

[10] In the German context, this contradictory facet is exemplified, for instance, by the erroneous causal argument that an institutionalised broadening of Black Studies would per se contribute to more visibility of the respective 'subject matters' in (German) society. Quite tellingly, the common(alised) 'visibility-talk' is not at all intended to challenge the hegemonic field in question, but instead is utilised to defuse fundamental critical debates by transferring them to the superficial site of systemically inbuilt sideshows.

[11] Susanne Kappeler, *The Will to Violence. The Politics of Personal Behaviour*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995, p 2.

[12] Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, op cit, pp 201–220. The central paradigms African American sociologist Patricia Hill Collins carved out to move toward an Afrocentric feminist epistemology correspond with concurrent attempts of Black German scholars May Ayim and Katharina Oguntoye. Their notional outlines of a Black German feminist epistemology created a seminal base for further readings, conceptualisations and constructions of Black histories and presences not only in Germany. Ayim, Oguntoye et al., *Showing our Colours*, op cit, pp 9–12.

[13] Kobena Mercer, 'Art as a Dialogue in Social Space', in *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism: A Postcolonial Exhibition Project in Five Acts, Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, Finnish Sápmi & Denmark/Finland/Norway/Sweden*, March 24–November 25, 2006, accessible online at http://www.rethinking-nordic-colonialism.org/files/pdf/ACT5/ESSAYS/Mercer.pdf, p 3 (last access: October 19, 2016)

[14] I am referring here to the important considerations of Maureen Maisha Eggers. Focusing on researchers-as-subjects (*forschende Subjekte*), she emphasises the contradictory gap between a seemingly reflected talk about oppression and social inequality and a concrete conduct of action. See Maureen Maisha Eggers, 'Kritische Überschreitungen: Die Kollektivierung von (interdependentem) Eigen-Sinn als identitätspolitische Herausforderung', in Ha, Lauré al-Samarai, Mysorekar, *re/visionen*, op cit, pp 243–257.