

Encounter#2

Golschan Ahmad Haschemi

Dear organizers and attendees, thank you for inviting me to this inspiring gathering coinciding with the beginning of spring. To those of you who celebrate Nouruz, I would like to say: Nouruz Piruz, Happy New Year, Eyd Mobarak!¹

My name is Golschan Ahmad Haschemi, and I am a performer, a political educator and a cultural scholar. My work oscillates at the interface between artistic, political and scientific theory & practice and includes the intersectional topics of Queer-Feminism, Anti-Racism, Postcolonialism and Anti-Antisemitism.

My primary means of expression are performance art, music and theatre, through which I examine ways of Empowerment on both theoretical and practical levels, blending arts, politics and science. One of my engagements at the moment is with the Performance Collective Technocandy, with whom we are currently playing two performances at Theater Oberhausen. I will be talking more about that later.

The topic I will be discussing today revolves around structural racism, arts and cultural education and what we, as BIPOC², experience within these topics:

The experience of *being* – as I am currently living in Germany – and at the same time *not being* part of the German mainstream society is one that I share with quite some of the people in the audience today, as well as with the two people I will be sharing the panel with³.

We have a *situated knowledge* that makes us understand quickly in which surroundings we are welcome, in which we, our bodies, are treated like aliens and in which ones we can simply be. Oftentimes, we can read a room and its atmosphere within minutes: is this a hostile environment? Are we being seen as the Other? Are we being treated as a token? Do we have to play the role of the counterpart to an otherwise paternalistic setting? Or is this really a space where we can do whatever it is that we want to do and what we are good at, without being stopped, slowed down

1 This lecture was part of the conference POST-HEIMAT – Encounter#2 which took place at the Theater an der Ruhr in Mülheim an der Ruhr from 21 – 24 March 2019.

2 BIPOC = Black, Indigenous and People of Colour

3 Panel-talk with Nora Amin, Golschan Ahmad Haschemi and Fatima Çalışkan

or distracted since distraction is – according to Toni Morrison – the severe function of racism?⁴

Also: who is this “We” I am referring to? When I say “We”, I am not talking about a homogeneous group of so-called „Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund“. I am not talking about having one uniform identity, nor do I claim that every BIPOC, every Migrant, and every racialized Person has to deal with the same kind of racism. Also, there are a lot of other terms and different (self-)identifiers surrounding people who experience racism. Hence, the “We” I am talking about is not *One* but multifaceted.

Within our many dimensions of being, we can connect through shared experiences. Experiences of racism, sexism, and antisemitism, amongst others, and their intersections. But also experiences of solidarity and empowering one another. I am talking about the acknowledgements we can give each other while sharing our manifold experiences and perspectives.

Now, while my wish would be that it is us who shape, form and determine how and by whom these topics are tackled, the status quo tells a different story:

I constantly observe our society's different discourses and dialogues, dealing with terminologies such as cultural diversity, multi- and transculturalism, integration, and assimilation. It is quite telling that a lot of times, these discourses are led without those having a say who actually are the ones affected most by structural and societal oppression. This imbalance in *who participates how* in social life and *who gives shape to society* also determines who shapes the landscape of arts, culture and theatre in Germany.

If we take a look at the ensembles and casts in most German theatres, we stumble upon a gap: We are barely there. The act of *not appearing* in German school books, not being mentioned in what is called German literature, arts and culture, being replaced on stage by white actors, e.g. in blackface, in racialised costumes or blandly white-washed, and then being told that the lack of our representation is due to a shortcoming in Black artists and artists of Colour – all these examples make quite clear who is part of the play, whose stories are told and what does and does not belong to the normative society we live in.

The problem is that it is not just a play but that these acts construct realities. They produce a status quo which does not offer a place for all members of society. The assertion of a norm leads to the exclusion of many who live in this reality but have no

4 “[...] the function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.”; Toni Morrison's Keynote at Portland State University, May 30th 1975; last visited July, 1st 2021. https://www.mackenzian.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Transcript_PortlandState_Tmorrison.pdf.

space for identification or not one that they can choose. Instead, we are *given* spaces that we are “allowed” to occupy, which is neither self-determined nor liberating.

So, what should we do, in order to keep our sovereignty of interpretation? And what really *can* we do? The reality is that we are living in a society that is based on structural racism and still has a long way of decolonization to go before we reach a point where we can really feel safe. I would even say that point is still a utopia. Nonetheless we have to try. We have to fight. And we must carry on, no matter how small or big the steps are, that we take.

So now I would like to share a part of my life where I took some steps which right now influence not only my artistic work but also my political work as well as my everyday life:

Earlier, I was talking about Solidarity and Empowerment. One way of expressing solidarity is by sharing knowledge so that our siblings can benefit from it. The theatre director and curator Julia Wissert did exactly this. I met her last autumn at the Clinch Festival in Hannover – a festival on postcolonial arts, culture and politics – where she gave a lecture and shared her experiences on the question, “How can theatre be decolonised?” She talked about going into and working within the institutions being as valid as deciding against that step. She talked about taking care of oneself and activist burnout and said that there is never a final answer to all the pressing questions we have surrounding these issues. She talked about trying to change things while being aware of the toll that *trying to change things* within white institutions can take on one. What she described as most helpful was practical advice and tools. And that she likes to share them with everyone who would want them. Julia Wissert talked about a clause on racism that she had developed together with the lawyer Sonja Laaser. This clause can be used within the framework of a contractual relationship in order to protect parties from racist comments or assaults by the employer’s staff.⁵

Basically, this means that if I, as a performer or director, enter into a contract with, for example, a theatre or any cultural institution, I could include this clause in my contract to “protect” me from possible racist actions by the staff and employees of the theatre, the theatre being the employer. “Protect” means that there would be actions and consequences in place if there were a racist incident.

My colleagues and I approached Julia Wissert, and she agreed to use the clause. Sonja Laaser sent it to us. The clause provides that if there has been any kind of racist action, the affected party can report it to the artistic director, who will have to deal with the situation. Hence, the responsibility for dealing with a racist incident, comment, or violation does not lie solely with the affected party, but there is an official handling in place that has to take care of the situation. One possible example of

5 For more information on the clause and its development see: <https://www.antirassismusklausel.de/>; last visited July, 1st 2021.

taking care of the situation would be the artistic director in state obligatory workshops for their staff to learn about racism, power structures and power imbalance and what it means that they are part of a society that is based on structural racism. These workshops would not only help the artistic director and their staff with closing a professional gap within their profession. But it also takes away the focus from the person who had to suffer through the racist incident and puts the obligation to act where it belongs: on the one who committed the racist act.

If the employer or staff fails to fulfil their contractual obligations, the affected party can withdraw and terminate their contract immediately. Of course, this would only happen in a worst-case scenario, as no performer, artist or director really wants to interrupt their artistic work suddenly and would only do so as a last resort to an otherwise terrible situation.

During our ongoing contract negotiations as Technocandy with Theater Oberhausen, we inserted the clause into the contract. We sent it to the theatre administration so they could finalize the contract. The administration took quite some time before they sent the contract back for us to sign. By then, we had already started working on our performance at the theatre. To our surprise, the contract, which we needed to sign for us to be legally protected, was missing the anti-racism clause. After some back-and-forth with the administration and seeing that they weren't cooperative, we contacted the artistic director of Theater Oberhausen to introduce the clause into our contract. We explained the clause and its purpose to him, and he agreed to add it to our contract.

Fast-forward to today: the theatre administration refused to include the clause in our contract. Until a week before our premiere, we did not have a contract, and the theatre administration also claimed that the clause had no legal basis. This is untrue, as a lawyer has developed it and has been legally examined. During our negotiations with the artistic director, we clarified that we would be taking action if we still didn't have a contract shortly before our premiere. We decided to bring up the issue in an interview we were giving about our performance in the national newspaper *taz*. We gave the artistic director, on our part, the generous opportunity to read the interview a couple of days before it was published in order for him to be able to give feedback if there was anything he wouldn't want to be printed. He read the article and didn't object to its publication. Nevertheless, since the interview was published, our Performance Collective has suffered persistent attacks via media outlets, theatre staff and local newspapers. What we, as a Performance Collective that deals with racism, queer- and trans-issues, have allowed ourselves to do, is unthinkable for a white institution: instead of being thankful that we, as a Performance Collective that usually works in the precarious independent scene, were allowed by a white institution to work in their halls, we were criticizing them. And not only that, but we were criticizing them publicly.

The backlash, the shitstorm and the punishment that we, as a group as well as individuals, have endured since are too many to recount here.

What I think is important and what I want to stress and share with you all is that it only shows how important this clause is. The moment we found a tool which would protect us from racist acts from individuals as well as structural racism by a white institution and their administration, this administration immediately pulled out all the stops on their patriarchal and hegemonic power to protect themselves and the dominant order. This can be described as a logical reaction within a system in which it is not *us* who hold the sovereignty of interpretation on what is a racist act but that this sovereignty stays with the dominant power.

Right now, I am talking about an institution, not theatre groups and collectives working within the independent theatre scene. But that doesn't mean the clause can't be applied to the independent scene, either. It is quite important to understand that this scenario could have happened very well in any free theatre group. We have to understand that it is not "the bad institutions" versus the tolerant alternative theatre scene but that structural racism interlaces with any and every part of society, arts and culture. Hence, it is vital that also we, in this space, whereas I understand – most of the people work in free theatre- and performance groups, adapt our given working conditions and circumstances and see how we can responsibly apply this anti-racism-clause to our work, as well as other tools, to deal with racism and other forms of discrimination. Declarations of intent, for example, the „Erklärung der Vielen“, don't do anything for us, who are affected by racism daily, as long as they don't go beyond mere lip service and actually have formulated (legally) binding standards and policies.

I would like to end my input with a tweet I read the other day. It's quite cheesy, but I still like it:



Thank you for your attention!

