For those who have been in crisis

Sharon Dodua Otoo

As part of the lecture series on solidarity, Nicole Schneider presented her talk: "Black Lives Matter and the Images of Protest". I watched her lecture to help prepare for my own. I was interested to see which connections Schneider would make between art and activism, as well as to see how she would handle the question of her own political identity in relationship to her research. Those were the scholarly reasons. The other reason I listened to her talk was because, as far as I can tell, she was the only other participant in the series who did not hold a professorship. I was relieved for a moment – only to discover that she had in fact just completed her doctoral thesis. I do not have this either. However as I had already accepted the invitation to participate in this series, I continued to watch.

While Nicole Schneider spoke from a different position, about a different field in a different national context, I do think our work is in dialogue with each other. In my lecture I will also consider the connections between art and activism, but instead of photography and visual images, my focus is on creative writing and literary images. I will also reflect on identity, but whereas Nicole Schneider positioned herself as a white academic who researches Black protest in the United States, I speak as a Black writer-activist directly involved in Black protest here in Germany.

Solidarity is often conceived of as something we perform, or should perform, for the benefit of others. For example, white people engaged in antiracist activities, should have the benefit of Black people, Indigenous people and other people of colour as their priority. I believe this to be true, but also insufficient. Already in the 1970s, a group of Aboriginal rights activists from Queensland, Australia stated: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together"- a quote which is often attributed to Lilla Watson, a member of the group, but she insists that the principle was formulated collectively. Another example is Taiwan's exemplary handling of the COVID-19 crisis. The nation's Digital Minister, Audrey Tang, attributed their success to the strategy of appealing to the rational self-interest of its citizens. According to Tang: "If you say: Wear a mask to protect the elderly, then people who do not live with the elderly or do not care about them will not wear a

mask" whereas "If you say: Wear a mask to protect yourself from your own unwashed hands, then that affects everyone."

The concept of solidarity must take the fact that some individuals are unspeakably selfish more seriously – and I definitely include myself in the group of "some individuals". As my children will attest, I apply the "first put own oxygen mask on in the event of an emergency" principle not only in aeroplanes, but for other aspects of parenting, too: The only way my family can do well is if I'm doing well.

Another aspect of solidarity that I would like to think about is how it ties in with privilege and marginalisation. Nicole Schneider ends her talk with the example of two non-Black people who met at a demonstration commemorating the 50th anniversary of the civil rights marches in Selma, Alabama. One carried a backpack full of water, one carried umbrellas. Both had understood that their role would not be to take the lead or to centre themselves in any other way, but it would be to provide Black protestors with refreshments and shelter from the sun. She calls this supportive solidarity.

Unlike Nicole Schneider herself and the two people she mentions in the scenario above, I am speaking from within a Black movement, so my concept of antiracist solidarity is tied very closely to the aeroplane oxygen-mask self-interest paradigm. However, also within Black movements there are varying levels of privilege and marginalisation. For example, these can be measured across class, religion, gender, disability status, refugee status, age and/or sexuality. And within Black communities there are real challenges around colourism, around social proximity to whiteness, as well as anti-Africanism, which typically results in media attention being most afforded to those members of the Black community who are light-skinned, who have at least one white parent and/or who sound or appear "non-African". Therefore, even within Black movements there are questions of positionality. Who speaks? And who is therefore side-lined? And how do these decisions reproduce and manifest structural forms of racism at an individual level? How does supportive solidarity work there?

As far as I can tell, of all the invited speakers, I am the only Black person. And we have already established that I am the only one without a doctorate. Considering that countless conferences and panels in German-speaking countries take place with no Black participants at all, this can be regarded as progress. However, I know of at least two other professors in Germany who would have been more than qualified to speak on the subject of solidarity: Professor Dr. Maisha Auma of the Hochschule Magdeburg-Stendal and Professor Dr. Louis Henri Seukwa of the Universität Hamburg. Both of them are Black. I ask myself and I ask us all: how does my presence here, in this context, reinforce certain damaging stereotypes about Black people of African descent in German academia?

It's important that we keep questioning positionality, of ourselves and others. Groups of marginalised people are not static homogeneous entities but are more

akin to fragile solidarity alliances. Our strength comes not from absence of conflict, but from our ability to negotiate it. It is absolutely in my own self-interest to stand in solidarity with individuals and groups who are marginalised in ways in which I am privileged. Why? Because injustice is ambitious.

Almost a year ago in March 2020, following news of the outbreak of a global pandemic, Germany went into national lockdown for the first time. The severe restrictions on public life introduced by the government due to the outbreak of COVID-19 overwhelmed almost everyone. Many individuals had up until that point not experienced any existential limits at all to their freedom of movement, civil rights or bodily autonomy. Quite unlike those people who, for example, have known how it is to be restricted by the so-called *Residenzpflicht*. This is a law, unique to Germany, which forbids asylum applicants, or those who have been given a temporary stay of deportation, to move beyond certain geographical boundaries – not for temporary visits, not for a day trips, even medical appointments or meetings with legal representatives require permits.

Suddenly privileged people were also confronted with restricted access to their health care, childcare, public transport, social networks and family support. Suddenly they were losing paid work or struggling to juggle home office with home schooling. Suddenly they were in new territory, desperately wondering how they would survive.

Many parents, particularly young mothers in heterosexual relationships, shared their stories under the hashtag #CoronaEltern (corona parents). For me, one of the most interesting parts about the stories they shared was how similar they were to experiences I also had during my time as a single parent of three pre-school and school-aged children. More awareness and more solidarity from other parents at that time might have led to policy changes then, which would have benefited all parents now. More generous sick leave provision, for example, or unconditional basic income, consultation on childcare needs, and the possibility of digital schooling. In cisgender heterosexual relationships, women typically take on the bulk of childcare and household responsibilities. A fact which has a significant impact on their so-called work-life balance, their professional options and career trajectories. If this imbalance had been a priority cause of concern *before* the pandemic, the political response to the situation for many parents *during* the lockdown may have looked very different.

There are of course other more life-threatening examples. If we as a society truly valued Jewish life in Germany, the response of non-Jewish Germans to the gun attack on the synagogue in Halle in 2019 would not be limited to simply hiring more police officers. If the lessons of the genocides in Nazi Germany had truly been learnt, the Deutsche Bahn in 2020 would not even have considered dismantling a monument to honour the Sinti and Roma murder victims, in order to make way for the extension of an urban railway line in Berlin. If public health was of serious concern to the federal

government, mass accommodation centres for people seeking asylum, like the one in Lindenstrasse in Bremen, where at least 200 of its inhabitants became infected with COVID-19 also in 2020, would have been closed right at the beginning of the pandemic. The crisis in democracy is ongoing and people at the brunt end of it have been warning everyone else for decades. This is where I write.

As a writer I feel powerless to protect synagogues and I cannot single-handedly abolish inhumane refugee camps. But I can bear witness. I can use my literature in the service of Black lives. I have been asked why I do this and I have been warned not to do this. But as the multiple award-winning Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe once said:

> Those who tell you "Do not put too much politics in your art" are not being honest. If you look very carefully you will see that they are the same people who are quite happy with the situation as it is […] What they are saying is don't upset the system.

For marginalised people, the system desperately needs to be upset. For those who have been in crisis, writers can transform our collective pain – reimagine our humanity – and hand it back to us as art. This is why I write.

Writing is for me a community endeavour. I write creative fiction in order to depict Black lives in a way that does not tokenise, retraumatise, ridicule or further erase members of my community. I think carefully about my position and make an effort to include Black figures in my writing, who are marginalised in ways that I am not. And because my knowledge and my imagination are constrained by the same dominant messages that we are all subject to, I particularly look to share and discuss drafts of my work with people who experience forms of discrimination that privilege me. This is how I write.

I would like to share two examples of my written work. These are extracts from short stories published in a collection called "Winter Shorts" edited by my colleague, Clementine Burnley, and me. The first story, "Whtnacig Pnait (Watching Paint)", is inspired by my third son, Lewis and his experiences in an education system which does not understand dyslexia, a learning disability that affects a person's ability to read, spell and write. Writing this story was one way for me to show that I was listening and trying to understand. In this scene Mustafa, an older friend, is persuading Anokye, the main character, to go to school. Anokye is a 12-year-old Black British boy who has recently moved to Berlin and does not yet speak fluent German.

Extract from "Whtnacig Pnait (Watching Paint)"[1]

Mustafa crossed the street one final time that morning, eating the apple as he approached me.

"Let's go" he said, before taking another bite.

"Where?" I said. "To school? Forget it…"

"Let's go!" Mustafa interrupted me.

And that was that. I had not wanted to go, but I didn't really have anything else to do. And even if Mustafa didn't care about me, at least he was bloody good at pretending that he did. Since moving to Berlin, Mustafa was just about the only person I saw outside of school. Apart from my mum.

As we waited on the platform at *Kottbusser Tor* my mood finally got better. Mustafa stared straight ahead and whistled. He was calm and that helped me to feel the same. I was already standing quite close to Mustafa, but I leaned a little closer and hoped he wouldn't notice. I closed my eyes and breathed in: a mixture of cigarette smoke, coffee, sweat and cheap after-shave filled my nostrils. I stifled a cough. No wonder this guy was still single.

"Eh! Was machst du?" I opened my eyes and looked up. Mustafa looked slightly disgusted and pushed me away. "Hau ab!"

I took a couple of steps back and said nothing. Luckily in that moment the train arrived. He watched me warily and made sure that I got on first. There were enough free seats for us to be able to sit down next to each other: the first miracle of the morning. Normally the U8 is standing room only at seven fifty. I fixed my gaze on the view through the dirty, scratched up window. My vision was no longer distracted by the tiny images of the Brandenburg gate tattooed all over it.

As the train left the station, Mustafa asked "Why you don't like school?" I simply carried on looking at the various shades of black that whizzed before my eyes. I could see absolutely nothing and that's about how much I felt like saying, in answer to such a stupid question.

"*Junge, Schule ist wichtig*", Mustafa added. I know he knows I didn't understand so I just carried on ignoring him.

"I didn't finish school," he continued "You did know that before?"

Actually, I didn't. I didn't care either. I looked at Mustafa and raised an eyebrow. It could have meant "so?" or "really?" depending on how generous Mustafa's interpretation was.

"Or did you think I dream all my life of being a carrot seller?" Mustafa laughed. His laugh turned into a lengthy smoker's cough. But at least the questions had

1 Sharon Dodua Otoo: "Whtnacig Pnait (Watching Paint)" in: Winter Shorts, eds. Clementine Burnley and Sharon Dodua Otoo. Witnessed Series – Edition 5. edition assemblage, 2015, p. 67ff.

stopped. For now. I sighed and rolled my eyes as I thought about the 20-minute journey ahead of me. And about how long Frau Dernburg would most likely shout at me for being late when I did finally reach school. And then how much she would shout at me again, a few minutes later, for not having done my homework. And then again, maybe an hour later, for not having made any notes throughout her lesson. I thought about how I would probably once again spend the entire lunch break sitting outside Herr Fischer's office: watching them, watching me. How I would receive another letter to take home to my mum. Of course, the evening ahead of me would mostly be taken up by her shouting at me for my "terrible behaviour this morning", for breaking my new glasses, for me losing my drink bottle and for me bringing home yet another red card from school. No one ever said anything good about me. There was nothing good to say. My life was a collection of disastrous moments knotted together by a desperately thin string of hope that there was some point to it and that I would understand it soon.

I spoke after Mustafa had finished coughing.

"I would rather be a carrot seller than a school kid, Mustafa. Trust me." I looked at him straight in the eye. "School is so boring…it's like watching paint dry. It's killing me."

Mustafa sighed, but didn't say anything. The train pulled in at the next station – screeching in fact, because the brakes needed oiling. All the passengers winced, except Mustafa and me. *Moritzplatz*. I knew it was *Moritzplatz* because the recorded voice announced it. And because I have travelled this line now so often, I would recognise it even if I was listening to music and couldn't hear the voice at all. Or even if I was listening to music and had my eyes closed, I would be able to feel where we were by counting the number of times the train had stopped. What I definitely would not be able to do would be to read the station's name. And that wasn't because of my cracked lens. Not the newest glasses, not even a telescope could help me, because the letters in the words I read just don't stay still.

Moritzplatz.

Could also easily be *Mtroizpaltz* or *Mrtiozpatlz* or Mitorzpltaz.

It makes no difference to me at all.

I wiggled my loose tooth with the tip of my tongue again.

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The next extract is from the story "The Romantics and the Criminals". This was inspired by several conversations I had with the refugee activist Bino Byansi Byakuleka. I met Bino while he was on hunger strike at Oranienplatz in Berlin during the protests which took place there between October 2012 and April 2014. At the time there were various initiatives to support the refugees. Certainly, many of us wanted to show our solidarity with the movement. However, what I learnt

from Bino was that it made little sense to do "for" the refugees. It was important to understand that they were the experts of their situation. They understood best what their needs were. And, most importantly of all, that their needs were not so different to our own. That whatever human rights abuses were meted out on these people, some of the most vulnerable of our society, could easily be extended and applied to increasingly more groups. For example, the Residenzpflicht is in another form applied to people on state benefits (so-called Hartz IV). They are also required to get special permission before leaving their home area. After visiting a refugee group in 2015, Angela Davis said: "The Refugee Movement is the movement of the 21st Century".

"The Romantics and the Criminals" is a short story that I wrote with Bino. In the following extract, Happy, the main character, is in a conversation with two police officers. It is the early hours of the morning at the refugee protest camp. Vera, a white German supporter, is also present.

Extract from "The Romantics and the Criminals"[2]

"Stand up." Officer two commanded. There was a menacing tone to his voice. Happy saw two chances: simply comply and have an easy night, or play a bit, but forget about any kind of rest. It wasn't hard to choose.

"Why?" Happy answered. "I haven't done anything wrong. Why should I stand?"

But by now Vera was heading towards Happy and the two officers. Happy could not be sure that she would stay calm.

"Stand. Up." Officer two repeated. He touched his baton. This was a tiny gesture, but it sent a clear signal which immediately refreshed Happy's memory of one particularly fierce beating he had taken at a demonstration last month.

"What's going on?" Vera asked. She was breathless and agitated. She turned to officer two. "*Was wollen Sie von ihm? ICH bin die Ansprechpartnerin!*"

"It's ok, it's ok" Happy said, slowly rising to his feet. "Here you go, I'm up." He smiled cheekily at officer one and then gave officer two his best poker face expression.

"Are you the one they call Happy?" Officer two asked, looking him squarely in the eyes. Happy did not blink. He simply responded: "I am he."

Officer one shifted nervously from one foot to the next. Officer two stood firm.

"Where are the documents for the registering of this protest?" he asked.

2 Bino Byansi Byakuleka & Sharon Dodua Otoo: "The Romantics and the Criminals" in: Winter Shorts, eds. Clementine Burnley and Sharon Dodua Otoo. Witnessed Series – Edition 5. edition assemblage, 2015, p. 37ff.

Happy sniggered. Always the same. Always the same. He looked around at the thirty-something tents, some in better conditions than others. In the moonlight the place looked calm and peaceful. *Oranienplatz* had looked like this since the refugees and their supporters had arrived last October. How would it even be possible for this protest to have been going on for so long without the correct documentation? Happy would have loved at this point to have asked the officer for evidence of *his* permission to ask to see evidence of *Happy's* permission to protest. There was bound to be a paragraph so-so-and-so about it somewhere. Germans loved nothing more than laws and documents. Everything in this country was surely regulated by a stiff-looking East German woman sitting behind a desk surrounded by a collection of pens and rubber stamps.

"*Das hatte ich aber gerade schon mit ihren Kollegen durch!*" snapped Vera. She was cold, exhausted and frustrated. She had changed so much since the beginning of the protest. Happy didn't yet understand enough German to know exactly what she was saying, but he guessed from her tone and her body language that she was telling the officers that the paperwork had already been checked.

"*Ich rede mit dem Asylant hier…*" started Officer two. Officer one took a step back. Vera's face flushed bright red. Happy had heard that word "*Asylant*" before. Almost always from Nazis. Or people who were not too good at disguising their right-wing allegiance. Someone in one of the nearby tents coughed.

"*Er ist eine geflüchtete Person!*," she hissed. Clouds of warm air left her mouth as she spoke. Happy studied her face carefully to try and work out what was now going on.

Officer two smirked. "*Wie dem auch sei…*"

"*Hier sind die Papiere…*" Vera held up a folder. "*Nun lassen Sie ihm in Ruhe!*"

Happy held the – by now – cold cup in his left hand and reached out to Vera with his right. He pulled her to one side while the officers carefully studied the folder she had given them.

"Listen Vera," he whispered, "please, please stick to English when I am around, ok?"

She nodded. Ashamed. He had told her and the others several times that this was a refugee protest. Not a Good-German-Person-Charity-Event. The refugees were to represent themselves at all times. The supporters could translate, but could not simply take over.

"He just wanted to see the registration documents. It's just games…"

"And why did you get angry?"

Vera looked at the ground and adjusted her hair. As usual, it was tied back in a ponytail. Whenever she got nervous, she would try to make it even tighter. "He used this word: *Asylant*. It's a racist word for refugees…" She then looked back up again at Happy. "Fucking hell."

Happy watched the officers poring over the folder, trying to find something that they could complain about.

"Well at least this way, they are showing who they really are…" Vera sighed.

"Exactly!" Happy smirked "They are being honest – not bad!"

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One difficult aspect of collaborations like these is the question of renumeration. How ethical is it for artists who claim to stand in solidarity with marginalised communities to profit financially or otherwise from their creative work with or about them? Where, for example, a white photographer captures award-winning images of Black people protesting? Or where a non-refugee author wins prizes for a novel based on the experiences of asylum-seekers?

None of the authors whose work was published in the short story collection that my two stories also appeared in was paid. "Winter Shorts" is part of a book series that I curate in partnership with the Münster-based publishing collective edition assemblage. The book series is called "Witnessed" and provides an English-speaking platform for people of African descent who have lived in German-speaking countries to commit their experiences and analyses to paper. I founded the book series because I wanted to share my access to the publishing industry with other Black writers. This was intended as an act of solidarity. However, this book series is unfunded and this needs to change.

Since I initiated the Witnessed Series, back in 2012, I have become a professional creative writer. This has given me opportunities, for example access to a much wider audience, but it also presents difficulties. Can I write in solidarity with Black communities while accepting paid reading and lecture engagements based on an expertise that I have gained through my activist training?

My interim answer is: Take the money! This is an aeroplane in trouble situation! But to use my relative safety to hand out oxygen masks to others: Use my influence to highlight the work of my siblings, while at the same time reflecting on my own implications in discriminatory structures, and to keep chipping away at them.

It's a process. I don't presume to get it right. But I do hope that with every piece of creative writing, I will improve.