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*“Wir wollten ein Zeichen setzen”:*

### Performance and Protest by Minorities in German Theatre

*“Wir wollten ein Zeichen setzen”*. (“We want to send a signal”).—Bühnenwatch

On 12 February 2012, the evening of the performance of *Unschuld* (*Innocence*) by German playwright Dea Loher, a group of approximately 40 activists, who had met through a Facebook group called Bühnenwatch, gathered in the foyer of Deutsches Theater Berlin (DT Berlin).<sup>1</sup> The protest was organised carefully; the activists had decided in the night to stage the protest the following day. They bought tickets separately and scattered themselves among the audience. At the first sight of a white actor in blackface on stage, they silently but simultaneously stood up and left the room. Their actions did not go unnoticed. The blackface actor stopped his performance and screamed at them: *“Was wollt Ihr denn?”* (“What do you want?”). They remained silent.

Back in the foyer, the activists handed out flyers, explaining their silent intervention in the theatre space.

*Liebe Theaterbesucher\_innen,*

*Sie haben sich gerade Unschuld von Dea Loher in einer Inszenierung von Michael Thalheimer angesehen. Vielleicht haben Sie sich gefragt, oder gewundert, warum ein Teil des Publikums in dem Moment des Auftritts von Elisio und Fadoul, die hier von den weißen Schauspielern Andreas Döhler und Peter Moltzen mit schwarzer Schminke an Gesicht und Händen dargestellt wurden, aufstand und den Saal verließ. Wir wollten ein Zeichen setzen: dass wir eine Weiterführung der Tradition des Blackface und von allem, was damit zusammenhängt, nicht akzeptieren können und wollen.*

(Dear theatre audience,

You have just seen *Innocence* by Dea Loher, directed by Michael Thalheimer. You might ask yourself, or wonder, why part of the audience stood up and left the room at the moment when Elisio and Fadoul, represented by the white actors Andreas Döhler and Peter Moltzen, appeared on stage with black make-up on their faces and hands? We want

to set a sign: that is, we cannot and will not accept the continuation of the tradition of blackface and everything that is connected to it.)<sup>2</sup>

The head dramaturg at Deutsches Theater Berlin, Sonja Anders, spontaneously organised a talk for the audience, inviting the activists to discuss their intervention with the actors who had impersonated the black characters on stage. The discussion was rather unproductive, reproducing violence on an epistemic level rather than smoothing things out. For the next two or three shows, the theatre makers of DT Berlin changed the blackface into “white face,” which had the white actors putting on white make-up, but eventually they returned to some form of blackening the face of the white actors. Nonetheless, this intervention marked the first public appearance of Bühnenwatch, an advocacy group against racism and (post)colonial images and stereotypes on German theatre stages. That moment was remarkable because from then on, the theatre discourse on colonial legacy and racism (as well as historical German anti-Semitism) could no longer be denied; from that point forward, these issues would go on to be addressed on German stages.

This was not the first time that a marginalised group had to stage an intervention in a German theatre to be heard. In fact, it has been an effective tool for different minorities to protest their representation not only in German theatre, but also in German society. The lines between art and activism overlap, especially when immigrant artists and artists of colour have not been given the space to interact on the so-called “main stages” (i.e., the well-funded German state and city theatres) and are instead placed with other immigrants, on the margins of German society. Artists of colour are still fighting to be present and represented within German theatres.

Before exploring this notion in further detail, an explanation of my engagement with “people of colour” or “artists of colour” must be provided. The use of these terms is connected (and, in some ways, a response) to the ongoing debate regarding German nationhood and identity that is still very much connected to the idea of *jus sanguinis* (Latin for *right of blood*), placing non-ethnic German outside this narrative. As Fatima El-Tayeb states, non-white Germans are labelled “others”, never being fully included in the ideas of the German nationhood project as well as the European identity (El-Tayeb 2011, 3). Because of these political and social circumstances, all minorities in Germany are affected by othering and exclusion.

This article examines from a historical perspective how marginalised minorities and minoritised communities in Germany have had to intervene in public discourse, especially in theatres, to be heard. The intertwining of protest in different public spaces as well as the link between artists and activists within these communities as a historical reality in German have led to a reflection upon anti-racist protests, labour worker protests and protests that were staged in German theatres by different marginalised groups.<sup>3</sup> First, this article focuses on the historical conjunction and continuity of the achievements of anti-racist resistance and empowerment movements of migrant activists and labour workers that have led to the increase of black and people of colour self-organisations in Germany. It will, therefore, also focus on the German theatre context with a focus on the groups

Bühnenwatch and Bündnis kritischer Kulturpraktiker\*innen. Second, this article examines the aesthetic link between protest and performance in terms of strategies of self-representation and audience involvement as well as the addressed opponent.

### **Performance and Protest**

Throughout history, theatre has been used in political movements and protests have made use of theatrical forms. Lara Shalson examines the relation between theatre and protest, identifying the historical intersection of communities of theatre makers, performance artists and activists and their “shared attention to theatrical and performance elements” (Shalson 2017, 18). Florian Malzacher argues that it is not only theatre makers who are inspired by the numerous political movements of recent years and who try to bring some of this momentum into their art but vice versa: performance, performative actions and theatre have long been part of the creative repertoire of activism (Malzacher 2015, 28). In his reflection on the possibilities of modern political theatre that is intertwined with and stimulated by political movements, Malzacher cites Chantal Mouffe’s notion of public space, which “is a battleground on which different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation” (Mouffe 2007) stating that “[o]n a small scale theatre can create such spheres” (Malzacher 2015, 27).

While Malzacher’s affirmative perspective on theatre, especially political theatre today, suggests agency for the artists and performers of political actions, Christopher Balme’s perspective doubts the engagement with the public sphere. Balme’s historical approach to the transformation of theatre “from a rowdy, potentially explosive gathering into a place of concentrated aesthetic absorption” states that this has “been obtained at the cost of theatre’s very publicness” (Balme 2014, 3). Conversely, Baz Kershaw argues against a “political theatre” in a traditional sense and in favour of a “radical performance” that goes “beyond theatre” (Kershaw 1999, 16). “Performance beyond theatre” provides powerful sources for the radical, “because its excesses are more directly shaped by the cultural pathologies that threaten radicalism in the theatre” (16). His rendering of radicality refers to the possibilities and effective power of such performances in the political sphere. The examples discussed in this paper concern the intertwining of theatre and protest in their form, aesthetic and ways of action.

Shalson suggests three central distinctions in which theatre and protest have come together, at least in the West: protest against theatre, protest by and in theatres and theatricalisation of protest. In the first form, protest against theatre, she identifies most tension between the areas of theatre and protest because the aim of such protest is often to stop a production from being staged. While protest can be violent towards theatre makers, what Shalson calls “peaceful protest” can be a way of engaging with theatre (Shalson 2017, 29–30). The second intersection between protest and theatre—protests by and in theatres—involves theatres choosing to enact protest as an aesthetic and formal method (44). Finally, Shalson discusses theatricalisation of protests, which she places beyond the space of theatre per se (61).

The distinctions Shalson has made are relevant to my own investigation insofar as the examples discussed in this article are forms of theatricalisation of protests and protests against theatre that use theatrical strategies and different modes of protest to intervene in public spaces in which protesters' voices were and are not heard.

### **Protesting Exploitation: The Guest Workers Go on Strike, 1973**

After World War Two, Germany was in desperate need of labour workers and made labour recruitment agreements with several countries considered "poor" at that time, such as Turkey, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Tunisia. Among those who came to Germany as labour workers were theatre makers and artists who used this opportunity to immigrate to Bertolt Brecht's country of origin, because their work was highly inspired by Brecht (Gezen 2018). In his research, Erol Boran (2004) identifies theatre makers from Turkey who came to Germany in the 1960s and 1970s. Manfred Brauneck's research on "*Ausländertheater*" (theatre of foreigners), which was also the only research of its kind conducted in German theatre studies in the 1970s and 1980s, reveals that due to the political and social circumstances of immigrants, immigrant artists were never funded and fully recognised; rather, their theatrical work was classified as "amateur theatre" (Brauneck 1983, 34). However, the groups Brauneck identified in his investigation were largely based within the different labour worker groups; one could assume that those theatre makers who also had to undertake labour work deliberately used the possibilities of theatre and performance to create a community and find a way to articulate their experiences.

Taking the circumstances of immigrants in Germany then and now into consideration, protest and resistance by immigrant labour workers were crucial for the transformation of German society from a post-Nazi era to what is now called a "post-migrant" era (Foroutan 2016, 227). A key example that highlights such protest by immigrant workers is one particularly outstanding protest by female migrant workers in the 1970s, which has been researched and described in detail by Manuela Bojadzijeve in her book, *Die windige Internationale – Rassismus und Kämpfe der Migration (The Dodgy Internationale – Racism and Fights of Migration)* (Bojadzijeve 2012). This protest was notable because it was uncommon at the time for female migrant workers to be visible in Germany.<sup>4</sup> It was also unusual because the women used performative resistance strategies to make their protest visible to the German public and to invite their German peers to provide solidarity and support for their strike.

The women's fight at the Pierburg factory in Neuss, West Germany, in 1973 can be considered one of the groundbreaking migrant worker strikes, effectively changing the discourse on migration and labour workers in Germany (Bojadzijeve 2012, 163). The working conditions at the Pierburg factory in the 1970s were gendered and race-bound. Particularly, the payment differed drastically between German and migrant workers; female migrant workers were ranked the lowest payment group ("*Leichtlohngruppe II*"), receiving less than both male migrant workers and German female workers. Besides poor working conditions, female migrant workers were also affected by racism and sexism that extended beyond their working conditions, influencing and structuring their private lives (Bojadzijeve

2012, 165). The female migrant workers' strike in 1973 was, therefore, not only a call for better payment but also a protest against the discrimination that migrant women were facing in their work and life environments. The strike extended over a few days and had different phases. In line with Shalson, this paper argues that protest itself is a form of performance and that staging protests is "site-specific", in the sense that they are performed in symbolically significant or practically relevant locations and engage explicitly with the environment in some way (Shalson 2017, 17).

On the first day of the protest, around 20 migrant (male and female) workers went on strike. Shortly after, the police arrived and began beating the protesters, men and women alike. However, the police did not dissuade them, instead fuelling an atmosphere of anger and solidarity that caused more workers to strike. On the second day, more female migrant workers went on strike; when the police arrived and started beating the workers, the media were present and scenes of the escalation were broadcast on local and national television. These images generated wider solidarity within different major labour unions and the same day production in the factory ceased (Bojadzijeve 2012, 167). On that same night, female migrant workers decided to go to bars and pubs that were mostly visited by German male workers. Despite racist verbal attacks by some of the white workers, the female migrant workers fought back verbally and demanded equal rights, both as women and as workers. This particular move—arriving at the spaces of white workers and standing their ground—secured the female migrant workers the support of German male workers (Bojadzijeve 2012, 168).

On the third day of their strike, the female workers became more visible. They distributed red roses and tulips at the factory entrance. They presented a big bouquet of flowers to the skilled (supervisor) workers and a card with the words: "greetings from the striking women of the factory. Please support us!" This became the turning point at which the male German skilled workers gave management an ultimatum. On the fourth day, the women again distributed flowers at the entrance but this time the whole town of Neuss came to support the strike. As Bojadzijeve states:

The work premises completely changed character: children were playing football, people were eating and flirting. Someone brought a musical instrument and people started dancing. "This is the best day of my life", an older German worker said, "today we all stick together, I have never seen that before. Pierburg cannot divide us".<sup>5</sup> (Bojadzijeve 2012)

The strikers were successful with their demands, although they had to fight after the fight to maintain what they had achieved.

The body is, as Susan Foster argues, "an articulate signifying agent" (Foster 2003, 396). The bodies of female migrant workers, then, signify the intersection of race, class and gender—the forces that have shaped their lives and work experiences. As Bojadzijeve has emphasised in her research, the protest of female migrant workers—those whose lives (including their private lives) were controlled by their employers and factory owners—were successful

because they consciously used their “articulate signifying” bodies as well as other performative strategies to make their conditions and their demands visible. Their embodied protest was crucial in contesting their subaltern status within both the factory as well as German society.

### **Protesting Racism and Anti-Semitism: 1985 and Beyond**

The Pierburg female immigrant workers’ need to be heard and supported by other workers and citizens evidently required a variety of performative interventions and “disruptive” strategies, ranging from strikes to symbolic demonstrations of solidarity. It is an entirely different case in relation to German theatre, as theatre—particularly German theatre, following Bertolt Brecht and Heiner Müller—is considered an anti-racist space that is critical of discrimination. However, as I have demonstrated in my other studies, this assertion does not always prove to be true (Sharifi 2011; Sharifi 2013; Sharifi and Mikossé-Aikins 2017). In fact, German theatre is a white, Eurocentric space like other German (and European) cultural institutions. In this space, minorities and non-whites are constructed as the “other”; they remain in the margins and are, at best, represented as objects of the colonial gaze, almost never gaining power over their own characters and story. To exemplify this assertion, I now turn to two important historical interventions in German theatre, where minorities went to great lengths to protest the role they had been assigned within the institution.

In 1985, members of the Jewish community Frankfurt am Main, including Ignatz Bubis, the chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, occupied the Schauspiel Frankfurt at the premiere of Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s play *Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod*. Their action prevented the opening of the play but also had more far-reaching consequences. Historian Michael Brenner emphasises the impact of this protest: “for the first time, leading representatives of Jewish life did not rely on the old-fashioned diplomatic channels to signal their protest, but stepped into the public to express their frustration” (Brenner 2013).<sup>6</sup> The intervention marked the first appearance of the Jewish community in the German public after the Second World War. It became a turning point in the way that “*Jüdisches Leben*” (“Jewish life”) was present and represented on “stage”—in theatre as well as in German society. It also became a turning point regarding how minorities resisted hegemonic representation in the form of images and stereotypes in mainstream German culture. Although in this resistance there is not necessarily a continuity in which the one group relies, reflects or draws a line from one protest to another, there is a contingency in the way that the protest or intervention into the hegemonic space is repelled by those who hold the power over the spaces, mainly white theatre practitioners.

*Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod* is based on the novel *Die Erde ist unbewohnbar wie der Mond* (*The Earth is Inhabitable Like the Moon*) by Gerhard Zwerenz (1973). It deals with gentrification of a city as an allegory of the then urban conditions of Frankfurt am Main. The main character is Roma B, a sex worker who is mistreated by her procurer. Roma B meets a client, a nameless real estate speculator, simply referred to as the *Reiche Jude* (rich Jew). He is not interested in her sexually but wants her to listen to his suffering and even

uses her to take revenge on her father, who is revealed to be a Nazi. This is an example of a play that intends to use stereotypes to deconstruct them, but which instead serves to perpetuate and, therefore, stabilise the hegemonic narrative. In the ensuing legal case, it was revealed that Gerhard Zwerenz had based the character of the *Reiche Jude* on Ignatz Bubis (Widmann 2015). This description is stereotypical and seamlessly linked to anti-Semitic models in German literature, as examined by Martin Gubser in his analysis of literary anti-Semitism (Gubser 1998, 84).

Debate on the play continues to question its underlying power structure. Sigrid Weigel, for example, emphasises how it has been occupied and disguised by complex interracial power plays (Weigel 1996, 166). Nike Thurn focuses instead on the text of the play, suggesting a transformation of the power dynamics of the characters; by his reading, the *Reiche Jude* becomes the first figure on a German stage who is not only an object but an empowered subject who takes matters into his own hands (Thurn 2012, 287). Overall, however, whose perspective is presented on stage and for whom the play constructs or deconstructs stereotypes and narratives is not closely examined. The Jewish community or the *Jüdisches Leben* was never included, acknowledged or properly heard when members voiced their anger against the way their culture and identity were represented.

The following section focuses on examining the controversy surrounding Jewish voices and their arguments and demands within a debate about the representation of Jewish people in German theatre. In 1985, despite protests and a legal battle fought by the Jewish community of Frankfurt concerning anti-Semitism in *Die Erde ist unbewohnbar wie der Mond*, the theatre Schauspielhaus Frankfurt announced a new staging of the play. The artistic director of Schauspielhaus Frankfurt Günther Rühle stated in an interview with the newspaper *Skyline Frankfurt*: “it must be possible to criticise Jews again...rather than keeping them in a sanctuary” (Schueler 1986).<sup>7</sup> On the opening night, around 1000 people, mostly members of the Jewish community in Frankfurt, protested in front of the theatre, while “a good two dozen Jewish representatives” (Nord 2009) occupied the theatre to stop the premiere. Dieter Graumann, the chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany from 2010 to 2014, who had participated in the protest in 1985, published his recollection of the night 24 years later in the *Jüdische Allgemeine*. In a highly emotional manner, he describes how he and other members of the Jewish community participated in the protest. He begins his recollection by connecting the date of the premiere—the last week of October—with the historically important date of 9 November—Kristallnacht—recalling it as tasteless: “a wave of outrage is moving through the Jewish community. We all feel it with every fibre and we say it aloud: this play is anti-Semitic! With disgusting and ugly sentences” (Graumann 2009).<sup>8</sup> He and his friends were part of the protest. They prepared banners and posters and debated emotionally within the Jewish community in Frankfurt. Before the event, they produced fake entrance tickets to gain entry to the theatre. Most of them stood outside the theatre to “welcome the fine opening night audience with booing” while a few went in with the fake tickets to conduct an intervention to prevent the performance (Graumann 2009).

However, this was not the end of it: at the Jewish Museum Berlin, where the protest is exhibited as part of the permanent exhibition, there are photographs of physical fights between the protesters and the theatregoers. Here, it is fitting to include a personal recollection of the night. One of my close friends is the daughter of one of the protesters. One Shabbat night, her father told his side of the story. At the time of the protest, he was young and an active member of the Jewish community in Frankfurt; he wanted to personally support Ignatz Bubis. He also told me that a picture of him getting “physical” with someone from the audience is now on display at the Jewish Museum in Berlin. While I know that this gentle-natured man condemns violence, the physicality of his commitment is, I understand, a sign of how important it was for him to show resistance against an oppressive system. In an interview, Ignatz Bubis explained the criticism of the Jewish community against the play and Rainer Werner Fassbinder himself:

If only he had created a Jew, a Jew with a name ... But I do not accept Fassbinder’s positioning of himself as a supporter of minorities, including Jews. For Fassbinder, the poor Jew is a minority, the persecuted Jew is a minority. The rich Jew, however, is not a minority for Fassbinder. (Der Spiegel 1985)<sup>9</sup>

Graumann states that “the dispute was for many Jewish people in this country, and also for me, a political ‘awaking experience’” (Graumann 2009).<sup>10</sup> In another interview, he articulates the importance of the intervention:

We have set a sign. It was the beginning of a self-aware public presence of the Jewish community in Germany. [Ignatz] Bubis taught us, that we have stand up for our concerns without fear. It was the first time that we loudly showed resistance for our causes and went onto the street for them. (Kneier 2010)<sup>11</sup>

Despite the resistance of the Jewish community and a legal decision in 1986 stating that Günther Rühle could not stage the play as long as he was the artistic director of Schauspielhaus Frankfurt, the play was staged again in 2009 at Theater an der Ruhr by its artistic director Roberto Cuilli. This was once again accompanied by a protest from the Central Council of Jews in Germany. Theatre critic Stefan Keim, who wrote about the opening night, stated that the theatre offered a discussion after the premiere but that no member of the Central Council showed up. He concludes that this was a “compulsory exercise” rather than being motivated by “real indignation”, as the artistic director is “certainly not an anti-Semite” (Keim 2009). The argument of not having anti-Semitic or racist intentions is one of the most common defence strategies and this mechanism will be further explored later in this paper. The call for the inclusion of the voices and perspectives of those who are affected by anti-Semitism and racism has been generally disregarded in Germany, especially in German theatre. This also applies to other marginalised subjects and groups, for example, black people.



In 2003, the play *Black Battles with Dogs* (*Combat de nègre et de chiens*) by French novelist Bernard-Marie Koltè was staged at Volksbühne Berlin. While in the English version the derogatory N-word is consciously replaced by the term “blacks”, in the German play the word is deliberately used, even though the colonial and racist history of the word in the German context has been affirmed by scholars and historians (Sow 2009, 126). Volksbühne Berlin decided to promote the play through a big banner placed in front of the theatre upon which the N-word was displayed in large letters. The Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland (Initiative of Black People in Germany) protested against the usage of the word with its violent colonial history. Abini Zöllner wrote an article titled “Do Not Call Me N\*”, in which she concludes that the Volksbühne, represented by its former director, Frank Castorf, wanted to provoke and did not care about causing offence in the process: “Provocation belongs to the work of art” (Zöllner 2003).. She continues that this provocation cannot be understood in a general sense but can be understood as a personal degradation of black people. Zöllner describes the systemic imbalance as follows:

Our society likes to ignore the self-definition of black people. The tenor: “Now the minorities groups want to decide what they are called ... ” Everyday life in our society can be seen as a reflection of what happens on stage. It is always the same: the non-affected explain to the affected person, they should not be so affected. Black people have to put up with it, even at their own expense. (Zöllner 2003)<sup>12</sup>

Despite the difference between the concerns of the Jewish community and Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland, their protests and critique are similar: they call for a right to inclusion and self-representation in social, political and culture discourses. Further, analogically, they are ignored or denied this right by the majority of society. Therefore, their public protest was therefore important for their communities and the German society. In fact for both communities, the protest was a historical milestone of self-representation and public declaration of discrimination.

### **Protesting for Representation: 1998 and Beyond**

Although the interventions by minorities discussed above did not change the hegemonic discourse, they empowered the minority communities involved to become more visible and make a public stand. Moreover, they inspired other marginalised minorities (and their allies) to organise protests and intervene in German society. The most prominent organised interventions were initiated by the activist group Kanak Attak, which was founded in 1998 as an intervention against the German debate on migration that was depicting an image of immigrants in a negative and distorted way (Müller 2015, 84). The group was formed by white Germans, people of colour and second-generation immigrants. On its website, it describes its mission as follows: “our common position consists of an attack against the ‘Kanakisation’ of specific groups of people through racist ascriptions, which denies people their social, legal and political rights” (Kanak Attak 1998). “Kanakisation” is understood here as a systemic racialisation of people of colour and non-white immigrants. “Kanake”, presumably rooted in anti-Slavism and nineteenth-century colonial expansion in the Pacific

(Ha 2009), later became a politicised and derogatory slur for guest workers from southern and eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa (Füglein 2000).

Kanak Attak has, on a political level,<sup>13</sup> reclaimed the term “Kanake” as an anti-racist strategy—or, as Kien Nghi Ha describes it, as “postcolonial signifying” (Ha 2009). They have heavily intervened in public discourses in academia, politics and culture regarding migration, labour work, race and racism and many similar subjects. Their interventions, which are well documented on their website, have triggered a fundamental alteration within the migration/integration discourse. For example, Manuela Bojadzije, who was one of the founding members describes their intervention as follows:

One of our goals was to reconstruct the history of anti-racist resistance by immigrants, an unknown and unwritten history. We wanted to uncover a tradition which has operated only subliminally and was lost until now. The idea was: if you have your story/history, you become powerful, you can refer to it by what is passed down and appropriated. (Bojadzije 2001, 14)<sup>14</sup>

Within the theatre discourse, Shermin Langhoff and members of Kultursprünge e.V. (like Tunday Kulaoglu) have significantly influenced the German theatre scene. Their launch of Ballhaus Naunynstrasse and its label post-migrant theatre can be considered an intervention into the mainly white German theatre discourse. Post-migrant theatre can be described as a theatre movement in which German society is reflected through the heavy influence of migration and in which the aesthetics and narratives are mainly based on the experiences of immigrants, particularly those of the second and third generations (Sharifi 2011, 35–46; Sharifi 2017, 326–27). In a very short space of time, post-migrant theatre opened the field to artists of colour who, until then, had been denied access to public funding and participation within the public funded state and city theatres. Post-migrant theatre heavily affected the discourse of colonial representation in German theatre.

To return to the group Bühnenwatch whose most famous intervention opened this paper and whose presence and intervention are the reasons that colonial representation and racism on stage can no longer be denied or brushed aside. The beginnings of the group will now be outlined and the reasons that their interventions are important and necessary will be investigated. At the end of 2011, posters of a white male actor in blackface surfaced across the city of Berlin, promoting the play *I am not Rappaport* by Herb Gardner, which premiered at the Schlossparktheater Berlin. By the beginning of 2012, the Facebook page of Schlossparktheater Berlin was filled with emotional posts by people referring to the colonial subtext of blackface and its racist connotations. First, artistic director Dieter Hallervorden published a personal statement on his own Facebook page: “in my thoughts, racism has no place at all. Before anyone can claim such an accusation one should see the production ... Where is the problem in 2012 that wasn’t there in 2010? ... Let’s think the accusation through to the end: can Hallervorden play a Jew although he is not a Jew?” (Lemle 2012).<sup>15</sup> People quickly pointed out that while in his “thoughts” there might be “no place for racism”, it did not change the fact that blackface has a specific colonial and

racist stereotype and that representation based on a stereotype—be it of a black person or a Jewish person—is the core of racism.

It is appropriate here to briefly address the German discourse on blackface because in public debate, there were theatre makers and theatre critics who defended blackface arguing that Germany did not have a history of colonial representation of black people. Blackface is the theatrical make-up whose roots date back to 19th-century North American minstrel shows, which had a tradition of presenting stereotypes of a black person. The depiction of this stereotype was a “pitch black face, bright red and exaggerated lips, emphasized by the unnaturally widened eyes of the actors” (Mikossé-Aikins 2013). Frederike Gerstner studied the history of blackface in Germany and concludes that the first theatre production in which actors appeared in blackface in Germany was a staging of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* at Viktoria-Theater in Berlin around 1900 (Gerstner 2016, 115). Sandrine Mikossé-Aikins explores stereotyped depictions of black people in other media throughout history in Germany: “From the mid-19th century on, advertisement, a domain that relies more than any other on the power of imagery, began to play an important role in the way that black people were seen in Germany” (Mikossé-Aikins 2013). She points out that beside minstrel shows, “human zoos” toured through Europe until the beginning of the 20th century, also and propagating a derogatory image of black people. However, the greatest impact she identified was in the promotional posters for these shows. David Ciarlo further emphasises this impact: “the vast majority of Germans never saw such a show; they encountered only its visuality by means of planographic reproduction” (Ciarlo 2011, 256). This particular style was adopted by advertisers, artists and musicians and permeated various spheres of German cultural production (Mikossé-Aikins 2013).

Shortly after Hallervordens’ personal statement was issued, Schlossparktheater Berlin published a statement, asserting that “casting a white actor for a black character has a long tradition in the German-speaking area that is not racist. There is no theatre ensemble in Germany, Austria and Suisse where black actors are included. Because the theatre repertoire does not have enough roles during their seasons, this simply does not justify a permanent position” (Wissert 2014, 7–8).<sup>16</sup> The combination of the denial of the racist connotations of blackface and the assertion that black actors can only play black roles and were, therefore, not included in state and city theatres lifted the controversy to another level. The protesters on Facebook decided to organise themselves and shortly after, Bühnenwatch was founded. The group describe themselves as follows:

Bühnenwatch is a platform with the aim of ending racist theatrical practices on German stages. The group emerged from the controversies surrounding the racist blackface production at Schlossparktheater Berlin and the ensuing debate. We aim to prevent racist portrayals such as blackface and race-related discrimination of actors of colour in the future. We want to encourage people to become active themselves—to write open letters, organise events and actions and to educate themselves.<sup>17</sup>

Bühnenwatch is an association of (mainly female) people of colour, black and white activists. Their previously discussed first public appearance was the heavily debated intervention at DT Berlin. The debates surrounding the intervention were controversial and largely negative; theatre critic website *Nachtkritik* labelled it an “anti-blackfacing disruptive action” (Nachtkritik 2012). The protest was mostly dismissed because it was positioned outside the theatre and the protesters were considered unable to understand freedom of speech. In *Theater der Zeit*, a major German theatre journal, Matthias Dell revealed that the theatre critics called Bühnenwatch “misled manner guards, political correctness ethos police, virtue guards and moral apostles” (Dell 2013, 65). Here, I argue in line with Shalson and Balme that “most theatre spectators and advocates of artistic freedom privatize theatrical space in order to enjoy the freedom” (Balme 2014, 167). Within the idea of privatisation is the sense that not everyone is invited (Shalson 2017, 35).

Even the few considered and, therefore, differentiated contributions to the discussion, such as that by theatre scholar Ulf Schmidt, categorised blackface and the depiction of black people as an aesthetic dimension in which differentiation depends on skin pigmentation rather than a reproduction of a construction of race (Schmidt 2012). The members of Bühnenwatch have stated on various occasions<sup>18</sup> that the criticism of blackface does not simply concern theatrical make-up, but rather the representation of black people and people of colour in German theatre. Bühnenwatch did not act from an absence of knowledge, “but from a recognition that performances in the theatre both enact power relations and influence how people see the world” (Shalson 2017, 35). In fact, they provided the missing historical and theatrical context regarding colonial structures in German history that are consciously and unconsciously produced and reproduced through images, gestures and narratives.

While the reluctance of the mainstream German theatre scene to enter into this debate persisted, the shift of the discourse could be observed in 2013, when a well-known German television show, *Wetten dass...?*, invited the local audience to appear as the highly-celebrated children’s book character Jim Knopf, who is black. The host of the show gave the instruction that “Jim should of course be in full make-up by using shoe polish, coal, whatever” (ISD 2013). This time, mainstream media criticised the racism of this instruction, referring explicitly to Bühnenwatch and their contribution to the debate (Adeoso 2013).

### **Coalition Building, Counter-narratives and Counterattacks**

As El-Tayeb argues, the position of racialised minorities is the very essence of a European and German counter-identity in “non-Europeanness” (El-Tayeb 2011, 3) and “*Undeutsch*” (“Un-Germanness”) (El-Tayeb 2016); minorities have used subversive manoeuvres in different contexts to resist exclusion, discrimination and marginalisation. Helen Tiffin (1995) states that subversion is characteristic of postcolonial discourse. Debated from a hegemonic, postcolonial perspective, protests and criticism can be understood as a counter-hegemonic intervention. If marginalised positions are not heard, they must break into the hegemonic space, subverting it, resisting it and creating counter-discourses that inscribe their own perspective and position upon these spaces. Postcolonial

thinkers and writers and their critics bear witness to the need to intervene and create counter-discourses in general (Tiffin 1995, 105). These subversive strategies can be understood as counter-discourses to articulate a symbolic resistance against the dominant discourse. Richard Terdiman states:

[C]ounter-discourses are always interlocked with the domination they contest ... Like all subversive thought, the counter-discourse is intense ... parasitic upon its antagonist ... [I]n the opposition to the dominant, counter-discourse functions to survey its limits and its internal weaknesses. (Terdiman 1985, 68)

Such postcolonial counter-discourse is dynamic; it evokes textual strategies that continuously use stereotypes to expose and erode those of the dominant discourse (Tiffin 1995, 105). Gayatri Spivak proposes that these counter-discourses also run the risk of maintaining the norms and values of hegemonic (colonial) discourse as “repetition in rupture”. She argues that “without the supplementary distancing, a position and its counter-position ... want to keep legitimising each other” (Spivak 1998, 345).

Minority communities and marginalised groups are still not visible and now, more than ever, continue to be victims of political, epistemological, symbolic and physical violence, particularly in the political nationalist and far-right climate in Europe and Germany (Castro Varela and Mecheril 2016, 18.) Muslim communities are obvious targets of racism and xenophobia, portrayed by the media and right-wing political parties as the the biggest threat to domestic safety and order, including the threat to the supposedly protected Jewish community. Conversely, the alliance between the Jewish and Muslim community grows stronger and has been cooperated on several major occasions when one or the other community was targeted. The solidarity between marginalised communities has become a significant factor within civil society.

The Maxim-Gorki-Theater in Berlin has become a prominent example of how “Muslim–Jewish” collaboration and coexistence in particular can be critically examined and celebrated at the same time. Since 2013, under the leadership of Shermin Langhoff, the Maxim-Gorki-Theater has produced performances and theatre productions and hosted panel discussions and conferences on racism, anti-Semitism and Jewish–Muslim allegiance within the mainstream discourses and debates. The ensemble includes actors, directors, curators and dramaturges of both Muslim and Jewish faiths. The reflection of Jewish and Muslim life has never before been as present on (and behind) the stage in a German state theatre as it is at the Maxim-Gorki-Theater.

In 2015, a group called Bündnis kritische Kulturpraktiker\*innen (Alliance of Critical Culture Practitioners) organised an intersectional and inclusive conference called “*Vernetzt Euch! Strategien für eine diskriminierungskritische Kunst- und Kulturszene*” (“Get Connected! Strategies for an Art and Culture Scene Without Discrimination”). The preparation took almost two years; the group invited and included people from various marginalised communities and groups to create a space that was approachable for all the participants.

In something of an epilogue, two of the organisers have published their own critical perspective on the production and implementation of the event. As a final conclusion, they request spaces where minoritised subjects and groups can be creators and recipients with their own topics, methods and perspectives. In such spaces, these groups should not be dependent on dominant norms, but free to experiment, fail, reflect, create new visions and develop new aesthetic formats and instruments (Name and Mikossé-Aikins 2017, 151).

This paper has focused on how different minorities in Germany have intervened into hegemonic spaces in to be heard, consciously choosing to make explicit use of their history. The intention to emphasise the link between protest by labour workers and by artists and activists from minoritised communities derives also from the rebuke of the theatre scene to acknowledge that German theatres, like all other public spaces in Germany, are framed through class, race and gender; in these spaces, people of colour are constantly excluded or, at least, not intentionally included. Therefore, protest is an inevitable part of the discourse of not only German theatre and aesthetics, but on a larger scale, German nationhood and identity.

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## Notes

1. In her article '(Ab)using Fadoul and Elisio: Unmasking Representations of Whiteness in German Theatre', Sharon Dodua Otoo disassembles how colonial construction of the 'other' is repeated through the 'African figures' of Fadoul and Elisio (Dodua Otoo 2014). Conversely, Katrin Sieg analyses the play itself as a reflection of the ambivalent discussion around race in Germany, in which race is acknowledged but marginalised through various historical representations of black people (Sieg 2015, 117–34).

2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. Rather than reproducing the original in-text, the passages will be footnoted for the remainder of the article.

3. The following examples used in this paper are inspired by the research conducted by Bahareh Sharifi for a panel discussion called 'In-/Exclusion and Self-Empowerment in the Cultural Business' at the Jüdisches Museum Berlin in October 2017.

4. In 1991, the feminist female migrant organisation FeMigras (feministische Migrantinnen, Frankfurt) formulated a critique against the representation of female migrants in Germany as 'politically immature', 'sentimental' and 'emotionally involved'.

[https://www.nadir.org/nadir/archiv/Feminismus/GenderKiller/gender\\_5.html](https://www.nadir.org/nadir/archiv/Feminismus/GenderKiller/gender_5.html)

5. My own translation.

6. The original reads: "Erstmals verließen sich führende Repräsentanten jüdischen Lebens nicht auf die altbewährten diplomatischen Kanäle, um ihren Protest zu signalisieren, sondern traten im Rampenlicht der Öffentlichkeit auf, um ihre Frustration kundzutun."

7. After the Holocaust, the trope of the untouchable or non-criticisable Jew existed incessantly within German society but was only used behind closed doors. Nowadays, anti-Semitism has resurfaced, particularly under the fixed term *'Israelkritik'* ('criticism of Israel') (Schwarz-Friesel 2015).

8. The original reads: "Eine Welle der Empörung geht durch Teile der Jüdischen Gemeinde. Wir spüren es mit jeder Faser und sagen es laut: Dieses Stück ist antisemitisch! Mit ekelhaften, hässlichen Sätzen."

9. The original reads: "Wenn er nur einen Juden geschaffen hätte, einen Juden mit Namen...Aber so akzeptiere ich das nicht, dass man Fassbinder die Rolle zuschreibt, er habe sich immer der Minderheiten angenommen und damit auch der Juden. Für Fassbinder ist der arme Jude eine Minderheit, der verfolgte Jude eine Minderheit. Der reiche Jude ist für Fassbinder keine Minderheit."

10. The original reads: "Diese Auseinandersetzung war für viele Juden in diesem Land, auch für mich, ein politisches »Erweckungserlebnis«: Vor allem Ignatz Bubis hat uns gezeigt (unterstützt von dem damals noch sehr jungen Michel Friedman), dass sich Juden auch in Deutschland laut und kämpferisch einmischen können. Und bereit sein müssen, für sich selbst zu streiten. Das hatte es so noch nicht gegeben im Deutschland der Nachkriegszeit. Was seinerzeit antisemitisch war und so empfunden wurde, ist heute nichts anderes. Antisemitismus hat keine Verfallszeit."

11. The original reads: "'Wir haben ein Zeichen gesetzt. Es war der Beginn eines selbstbewussten Auftretens der Jüdischen Gemeinde in Deutschland. Bubis hat uns gelehrt, dass wir für unsere Belange eintreten müssen, ohne Angst zu haben'. Es sei das erste Mal gewesen, 'dass wir kämpferisch und laut für unsere Belange eingetreten und auf die Straße gegangen sind'."

12. The original reads: "Unsere Gesellschaft überhört gern die Selbstdefinition der Schwarzen. Der Tenor: „Jetzt bestimmen schon die Randgruppen, wie sie gern genannt werden möchten...Da spiegelt sich doch schon die Gesellschaft im Alltag so kommentarlos wie auf der Theaterbühne. Es ist immer dasselbe: Die Nichtbetroffenen erklären den Betroffenen, sie sollten nicht so betroffen sein. Schwarze Menschen haben sich damit abzufinden, auch wenn es auf ihre Kosten geht."

13. In the 1990s, young second- and third-generation immigrants, mainly of Turkish and African heritage, started using 'Kanake' as a term of self-identification (El-Tayeb 2004, 97).

14. The original reads: "Eines unserer Ziele war, die Geschichte des antirassistischen Widerstands von Mi-grantInnen zu rekonstruieren, eine ungeschriebene und auch unbekannte Geschichte. Wir wollten eine Tradition freilegen, die zum Teil nur untergründig gewirkt hat und verschüttet war. Die Idee war: Wenn du eine eigene Geschichte hast, bist du macht-voller, kannst du auf etwas verweisen, was überliefert und angeeignet werden kann."

15. The original reads: "In meiner Gedankenwelt ist absolut kein Platz für Rassismus. Bevor jemand einen diesbezüglichen Vorwurf erhebt, sollte er sich die Vorstellung ansehen...Wo ist 2012 das Problem, das es bis 2010 nicht war??...Denken wir die Vorwürfe zu Ende: Darf Hallervorden einen Juden spielen, obwohl er kein Jude ist?"

16. The original reads: "Unsere Besetzung des „Schwarzen Amerikaners' mit einem „weißen Schauspieler' folgt einer langen Tradition im deutschsprachigen Raum, die nicht rassistisch ist. Kaum einem Ensemble eines Theaters in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz gehören

schwarze Schauspieler an. Allein deswegen, weil das Stückrepertoire der Theater ihnen zu wenige Rollen, in einer Spielzeit bieten könnte, die ein Festengagement rechtfertigten.“

17. The original reads: “Bühnenwatch ist eine Plattform, die sich zum Ziel gesetzt hat, rassistische Praktiken an deutschen Bühnen zu beenden. Die Gruppe ist aus den Auseinandersetzungen um die rassistische Blackface-Inszenierung und anschließende Debatte am Berliner Schlossparktheater hervorgegangen. Es ist unser Anliegen, sowohl rassistische Darstellungen wie Blackface als auch rassistische Diskriminierung von Schauspieler\_innen of colour in Zukunft zu verhindern. Wir wollen Leute ermutigen, selbst aktiv zu werden – offene Briefe zu verfassen, Veranstaltungen und Aktionen zu organisieren und aufzuklären.“

18. Bühnenwatch protested during several Berliner Theatertreffen (an industry-renowned German-language theatre festival) and was invited to participate in discussions surrounding these issues numerous times (<https://theatertreffen-blog.de/tt13/2013/05/14/kunstmittel-oder-beleidigung-vier-stimmen-zum-blackfacing-in-der-heiligen-johanna-der-schlachthofe/>).

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