

“Critical Whiteness” Coming to Life: Antiracist Relationship-Building¹

by *Melanie Bee*

Since the Köln No Border Camp, a lot of white folks in political spaces around me (including myself) seem confused about how to take anti-racist action that is self-critical but also meaningful and effective. There’s a lot of conceptual debate but little feels like it’s changing on the ground when I attend Leftist event after event in Berlin that remain dominated by white German perspectives. I write from a place of anger about this, because I know us white folks can do better. As an outsider to Berlin who came of age in U.S. social movements, I’m fascinated and at times troubled by how those movements are then represented in the German scene. So I want to tell a cautionary tale about the dangers of uncoupling anti-racist theory from praxis, a process that I argue has occurred with the translation of “Critical Whiteness” concepts from the U.S. to Germany. Ultimately, I want to move towards a vision of relationship-building that can help white folks improve our praxis as allies.

No Theory without Praxis

I have written elsewhere about the curious history of “critical whiteness”,² a term from the U.S. academic-industrial-complex that’s been imported to Germany. “Critical whiteness” represents a niche within the larger field of “ethnic studies”, as it is often called in the U.S., or “postcolonial studies” as it is known in Europe. (No surprise: neither exists as it’s own department in German universities). How “critical whiteness” became such a hot pseudo-Anglicism term in the last few years in Germany, while remaining relatively uncommon among activists in the States, I cannot tell you. In the social-justice circles I was a part of in the U.S., words like “white privilege,” “white supremacy,” and “accountability” were more often used to describe the role of white people in anti-racist struggle.

Similarly worrying is a tendency in Germany to narrate the genealogy of “critical whiteness” as starting with Toni Morrison or crediting “intersectionality” entirely to Kim Crenshaw, both fantastic academics in their own right but academics nonetheless. But we must also recognize the role of activism in developing these ideas, like that of the Combahee River Collective, W.E.B. DuBois, or John Brown, to name a few. Academic fields like ethnic studies were born out of and are sustained by social movements, whose practices are largely *not being translated* into the German context.³ In other words, something’s missing.

White Privilege in the Limelight?

“Critical whiteness” has grown in Germany beyond an academic discipline and now signifies a more general political engagement among whites with their privileges. For

¹ This article was published in German as : “Das Problem mit ‘Critical Whiteness’” in Nov. 2013 in *an.schläge, das feministische Magazin*. <http://goo.gl/sFr7mK>

² See an article I wrote, “Critical Whiteness: False Friend?”. For the German version, check out the ZAG: <http://bit.ly/QMNe4v>. The English version is on my blog: <http://goo.gl/n7mGT3>.

³ Audre Lorde’s time in Berlin in the 80s and early 90s marks a notable exception to this. See Dagmar Schulz’s recent documentary, *Audre Lorde: the Berlin years. 1984-1992*.

this reason, when I talk about “critical whiteness” here, I refer to this wider, current usage in white-dominated spaces and not its original meaning in communities of color.⁴ While I think this confrontation with whiteness is a valuable step in the right direction, I have worries about how it can go off the rails if not done in way that are accountable to communities of color. For instance, why has “critical whiteness” come to be synonymous in some leftist circles in Germany with anti-racist work, when discussions about white privilege are considered merely one aspect of overall anti-racist practice in the States? The language I learned in the social justice movement there to talk about the role of whites in anti-racist work is the language of the ally: learning and listening to people of color, reflecting on our own racial privilege, and taking action in ways that are accountable to communities of color. Reflecting on one’s privileges (all of them, interdependently, not just racial privilege) is a crucial step in anti-racist praxis, but I want to remind us that it’s just one step.

I fear that empowerment, transformation, and safety by and for people of color, who should be leading the movement against racism, may get sidelined when white peoples’ processes of reflection are made the top priority. Are white people using “critical whiteness” to once again put themselves in the limelight? The severing of the relationship between theory and praxis that has occurred in the importation process of U.S. concepts to Germany gives us a clue. This distortion could explain how an anti-racist tradition in the U.S. that gives voice to experiences made silent by white hegemony is often reduced in Germany to a discourse all about that very whiteness. My experiences as a teacher in Germany have been similarly disappointing, as discussions of white privilege have tended to offer the microphone to other whites rather than encourage participation by students of color.

Confessions and Oppression Olympics

A number of people have recently been questioning the privilege and ally discourses in the U.S.,⁵ academic and activist Andrea Smith among them. Smith comments in a recent article that the typical workshop exercise of asking folks to list their privileges functions as a form of confessional. Its authenticity is then judged by the more oppressed person in the room, who can grant forgiveness or condemnation. “It did not appear that these individual confessions actually led to any political projects to dismantle the structures of domination that enabled their privilege. Rather, the confessions became the political project themselves. [...] Consequently, the goal became not to actually end oppression but to be as oppressed as possible. These rituals often substituted confession for political movement-building.”⁶ Smith says this often reinstitutes, rather than destroys, oppression because people of color become the material through which whites can stage their own self-reflexivity.

⁴ I got a much-needed lesson about the history of this term in Germany from Peggy Piesche & Lann Hornscheidt’s interviews in the Nov. 2013 edition of *An.schläge* in which this article (in its German version) was also published. It is clear to me now that the tendencies in “critical whiteness” I criticize here are the forms that have spread to the white-dominated communities I am a part of, and not the knowledge production about whites done as a “survival strategy” (Piesche’s words) by communities of color in Germany that first inspired “critical whiteness” and the landmark anthology Piesche co-edited, *Mythen, Masken, und Subjekte. Kritische Weisseinsforschung in Deutschland*.

⁵ See commentary on recent online meltdowns from ‘allies’ Tim Wise & Hugo Schwyzer, also Mia McKenzie’s blog post: <http://bit.ly/19TssEQ>

⁶ Smith, Andrea. “The Problem with Privilege.” <http://bit.ly/19pgLWW>

Ayşe K. Arslanoğlu, who humorously self-identifies as an “invisible, melancholic, heterosexual cis-German with a migration background”, describes in a 2010 article how this kind of claustrophobic navel-gazing is often on view in Gender Studies classrooms and beyond.⁷ As she explains, when reflections on privilege are not connected to political action, the goal is no longer social transformation but developing and maintaining “good” subjects, who each compete to be more pure and free of oppression than the others. The focus narrows from social structures to individuals and from transformative into moral politics. This leads to unhelpful expressions of identity, which become fixed rather than the product of social structures that can be changed through collective action.

Allies in Action

For me, a great deal of what I learned about being an ally from the work of people of color, especially womanists & feminists of color, only makes sense in a political organizing context. If I’m alone in my bedroom reading Audre Lorde, I’m not sure what it would mean to “step back and make space for the voices of people of color”. To whom should I “offer my privileges as resources” if I’m sitting in a classroom with people I don’t really know? Living breathing relationships need to come back into the picture.

In my dilettantish obsession with comparing the slices of the German and U.S. Left that I am familiar with,⁸ I have come to feel that these two often have inverse relationships to practice and theory. Whereas Americans have a tendency to leap first and ask questions later, Germans tend to value ‘good analysis’ over successful action. (It’s a whole other article to explore the historical and social reasons why this might be so). In the U.S. tradition of community organizing, people come together about concrete shared problems and build up to analysis from there, whereas political alliances in Germany often seem to function the other way around, from the head down. Leftists I know in Berlin tend to read and write books, then search for ‘sites of intervention’, sometimes instrumentalizing the precarity of people of color as a stage for their own political experiments.

I have witnessed many white activists utterly unable to organize with people who don’t seem to share their exact political positions, while not recognizing how their own socialized locations (including race) contribute to the formation of such positions in the first place. Moreover, many white Leftists seem disappointed when other communities don’t appear to match the radicality of their positions, unable to see that as privileged whites, they often “don’t fight to win because they can afford to lose.” It may be easier to perceive approaches for gradual concrete change as “reformist” in part because your survival does not depend on immediate changes to policies or because you risk less when taking radical positions than people of color do. This makes building relationships more difficult, as whites remain isolated in their communities, asking awkwardly “Where the people of color at? And... why don’t they want to join our discussion group?”

⁷ Arslanoğlu, Ayşe K. “Stolz und Vorurteil. Markierungspolitiken in den Gender Studies und Anderswo”. *outside the box – Zeitschrift für feministische Gesellschaftskritik*, 2/2010, <http://bit.ly/19Z3tWT> (PDF)

⁸ See my blog: ami-go-home.tumblr.com/

Relating Authentically

A number of experiences of Jewish and Israeli friends have shown me that many self-organized groups fighting anti-Semitism in Berlin seem to focus mainly on eradicating fascism but not on empowering Jews, building meaningful relationships with Jewish communities, or making space for Jewish forms of cultural life or expression (beyond treating them like an exotic curiosity).⁹ I've become cynical enough to feel that what is going on here is only about anti-Semitism or racism in the abstraction, because I'm not sure it can be more than an abstraction until one has real relationships with people of color. As queer Nigerian afrofeminist blogger Spectra says, "When someone fights for me, I want them to do so because they care about me as an individual – or as someone who reminds them of someone else that they care about – not just as some abstract theoretical concept. I'd rather that the 'white allies', the 'straight allies', the 'male feminists' of the world do the work to build authentic relationships based on real love and respect, not just politically correct lexicon and rhetoric."¹⁰

To be clear, I'm not encouraging white folks to run out and try to find a token black or Jewish friend, but to value and strengthen relationships that are already there. If white folks think they aren't already in relationship with people of color, they need only look around at their neighborhoods to witness the relationships they already have with neighbors, colleagues, fellow students, or regulars at the local bodega or bar. Fellow white folks: Step back, don't set the tone, and listen. Cultivate authentic, long-term relationships with people of color. Don't expect them to educate you about racism or even ever want to talk about it.¹¹ Find other points of commonality around which you might collectively take action – rent and gentrification are great topics for bringing neighbors together who otherwise only nod a hello at one another on the stairs. And rather than turning to the U.S. context to listen to folks of color, amplify the brilliance of anti-racist activists and writers of color in Germany. Two of the most exciting and powerful projects in Berlin are people of color-led, the Refugee Strike and Kotti & Co.¹² As allies, be a "megaphone and not a microphone".¹³

Organizational Racism Assessment

It's not so much about individual empathy as it is about "radical connection," which builds communities that can affect systemic change.¹⁴ Not only individuals but organizations need to be building relationships of allyship and earning the trust of

⁹ The secular within the German Left, which often regards forms of spirituality with suspicion as "esoteric", makes it more difficult to build relationships with religious communities. For contemporary discussions about the connection of spirituality and social justice, check out: „Out of the Spiritual Closet: Organizers Transforming the Practice of Social Justice“ from the Movement Strategy Center, <http://bit.ly/1gV9Jjz>.

¹⁰ <http://bit.ly/12PQbEp>

¹¹ These 'tips' are based on a variety of texts on anti-racist allyship that I've read through the years. For examples, check out <http://bit.ly/19ijzrv> for resources, or groups like the Catalyst Project and The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond.

¹² See <http://asylstrikeberlin.wordpress.com> & <http://kottiundco.net>.

¹³ This fantastic expression comes from the Crunk Feminist Collective: <http://bit.ly/1gVa2Lb>

¹⁴ For an explanation of "radical connection" see Kristen Zimmerman of the Movement Strategy Center, <http://bit.ly/15yma2q>

communities of color. Rather than seeking out token individuals to make an organization “more diverse”, organizations need to look systematically at how their organizational culture and norms are grounded in white or German citizen privilege (and related class and other privileges) :

- What language(s) do you use in meetings, events, and posters? How can you make your organization more accessible to non-native German speakers?
- When do you meet? Can you meet at times that allow working people or parents to join? Do you offer childcare at meetings & events?
- Where do you meet, have your office, or hold events? If those spaces are white dominated, could you meet in spaces more accessible to communities of color or immigrant communities?
- Does your organization have an analysis about racism – both structurally in society and how racism impacts the organization itself (its structures, its methods, its focus, its members etc.)? How could you institutionalize regular discussions and analyses of racism into the everyday work of your organization?
- Who occupies explicit or informal positions of power and leadership in your organization? Do they tend to have more free time (due to receiving unemployment or financial support) or a higher degree of formal educational background? How can decision-making and leadership roles be opened up to more diverse members of the organization?
- If your group has immigrant members or members of color, are they being supported to take on leadership roles and participate fully? What obstacles stand in their way?
- Do the images and language in your articles and posters, the food and music at your events, and the ways you communicate reflect the lived realities, cultures, and aesthetics of non-white communities? How can your organization move towards that authentically, a.k.a. in ways which don't tokenize or appropriate other cultures?
- Do you organize a lot of demonstrations that involve policing & police violence, which may pose greater risks for trans, female, queer, disabled, old, young, racialized, or undocumented bodies? How can you make those events safer for those bodies?
- Do you network and build coalitions with people of color-led organizations and support their projects and campaigns? How could you seek out input and guidance from organizations led by people of color? How could you involve them in strategizing and decision-making while organizing a campaign?
- If your group addresses issues of foreign policy and international solidarity (for instance, in the Middle East), do you consider how people of color in your local area are directly affected by those issues? How can their voices be involved in discussions?
- How can you establish mechanisms of accountability (getting feedback, engaging in dialogue, receiving critique) towards the communities most affected by the issues you organize around?¹⁵

¹⁵ These questions are based on the publication „Assessing Organizational Racism“ (2001) from the Western States Center. See here for a German translation: <http://bit.ly/16n8P7T>. For more detailed “anti-racism organizational development tools”, go to <http://racialequitytools.org> or read „Dismantling Racism: A Resource Book“ (2003) from the Western States Center, <http://bit.ly/W6LGjq>.