

Introduction

“Anti-Blackness is universal, but is Blackness?”¹

This question is the basis for this book. Is Blackness² universal? If so, what kind of politics can claiming Blackness enable? How might Blackness as a central basis for political life change the world?

This book is situated in postwar Germany, that is from World War II to the present, and set in a contemporary theater in Berlin. It is a theater founded primarily by non-Black People of Color where I observed, over the course of eleven years, Turkish and Turkish-German, Arab and Arab-German, and African and African-German people taking up Blackness in order to claim space in a predominantly White country that had both historically orchestrated genocidal violence but also become a global leader in the politics of atonement. Unfortunately, Germany’s global leadership resulted in regulating what constitutes racism and who could demand redress. For many Turkish and Arab people (or those with Turkish or Arab heritage) residing in Germany, identifying their own experiences of racism becomes equated with Holocaust denialism. The underlying logic understands racism in Germany in relation to genocide, and therefore suggests that individuals not experiencing mass murder or anything directly linked to mass, systematic atrocity cannot claim racism. Claiming an affiliation

with Blackness, though, has emerged as a way to create a different kind of globalized agency. It offers a critical way to engage the past, present, and future, linked to prior and ongoing examples of Black struggle. One could be Black or claim an affinity with Black struggle without denying the Nazi-orchestrated Holocaust.

Germany has thus become an important site for analyzing the efficacy of these claims while also highlighting the inadequacy of Enlightenment or post-Cold-War pronouncements of “freedom” to fully liberate Black people. Examining claims to universal Blackness is relevant, as one persistently sees, not just in Germany but also across the world. Importantly, universalized claims to Blackness must be held accountable to Black people, or to those who are the primary and persistent targets of anti-Blackness, or what geographer Ruth Gilmore (2007) describes as those systematically exposed to premature death.

This book thus links mutual struggle to political possibility. It worries about the universalized Enlightenment claims of “freedom” and argues that we need to make Blackness, not Enlightenment, the basis for assessing liberation. It’s one thing to theorize liberation from the perspective of an Enlightenment philosopher and quite another to have to theorize it historically from the position of a slave—for whom it means something much less abstract (see Buck-Morss 2000).

Black people, and those who align themselves with a politics based on Blackness, are persistently being undone by the institutions—from schools to hospitals—that claim to both educate and protect them. Such institutions, however, can inflict violence or even death on those they profess to support. There are often certain truths that White peers and educators do not want to hear about the institutions they both produce and sustain. White supremacy is embedded in the everyday. In this sense, inclusion, even for Black people, means complicity with sustaining these institutions. Centering the present and future on Blackness, however, offers a different potential outcome.

THE THEATER

Who would imagine that theater would be so central to living? When I started this project, I began by investigating processes of democratization

in contemporary Berlin, but came to understand that democratization usually means killing the spirit of those who are to be “included” in the democracy. If we begin with and center Blackness, then we feature a different orientation, a different roadmap, a different trajectory for political articulation. For Black people, living the contradictions of democracy is everyday life. Establishing other kinds of spaces becomes necessary to a kind of living that will not ultimately kill one’s spirit at the same time. Otherwise, it seems a matter of time before that death ultimately comes.

I am thus writing this book to call for the establishment and funding of more spaces in which we, as Black people, can express our displeasure without fear, where we won’t have to restrain our critique, where we can express the truths of our existence. The theater, as I will show, can provide a possibility for this kind of living. Here, the theater not only takes on the questions of democracy, but also the questions of capitalism and living space. Inasmuch as it also involves the body, it does this not only in terms of abstract theoretical trajectories, but also as everyday practice.

In this particular circumstance, as demonstrated in the following pages, because the theater’s building was connected to a church, it was able to offer its noncitizen actors and local residents sanctuary (in this case church asylum, or *Kirchenasyl*). This meant that the police would not enter in the middle of the night to remove residents, which can happen in regular apartment buildings. Most recently, through one of the theater group collectives, also as a result of some struggle, being trans, or gender-queer, or non-cisgendered is openly discussed and lived in the theater. In all of these cases and in others, the theater offers a way to live.

Over a decade of doing research in and collaborating with Theater X, the same group of people, alongside many new participants, have remained. Officially, the theater gets state funding through pots established for youth work and youth theater. The stigma of “migrant” or post-migrant theater being viewed by arts funders as more documentary (Stewart 2021), based more on experience and less on artistic training or imagination, also applies here. But even if this theater does social work, it also wins prizes for its art. It sends members to famous acting and film schools. It collaborates with other theaters around the world. It also has established a film collective alongside its theater work.

Truth was at stake for this theater. This was and is not the polite, White, institutional, mainstream, form of truth, but the truth on which the collective's thriving was dependent. The participants wanted to get it right without regard for careerism. Getting it right meant establishing spaces where those who acted, made films, did the lighting, and organized the publicity would flourish.

BLACKNESS AS POSSIBILITY

This is what this book is examining in everyday practice. Beginning with the Haitian revolution and moving through the examination and even critique of "Diasporic Aesthetics" with Stuart Hall (1990; see chapter 1), this book thinks through Blackness historically, but also without trying to reproduce anything like national affiliation or loyalty. Black people need Blackness as a basis for establishing a different kind of world, not Blackness as a limit. In this book, living with and thinking through Blackness with Theater X becomes a way to think about and establish a different world.

In observing and analyzing the politics of claiming Blackness, I have organized this book into three key sections. The first offers a historical and theoretical background to Black claims. It addresses the relationship between the particularity of Black suffering and how Blackness then becomes a universal kind of claim. This section thinks critically about the shift in Germany, Europe, and the world, from a rhetoric of Black men raping White women when the French placed French African troops to occupy the German *Rheinland* following the First World War (Campt 2004) to a shift in the reading of Black occupation. After the Second World War, many West Germans saw Black American occupiers as liberators they could trust. Because they felt that they were also being oppressed by White Americans, there was an additional opportunity for Black affiliation—an affiliation that corresponded with a global shift. The presence of Black occupiers also called attention to the contradictions in American occupation and thus American democracy. If Black people were not free in the United States, as Jim Crow was still law in the American South, what did American freedom and liberation mean in Germany? While "American lib-

eration” addressed the specificity of German atrocity, at least as it concerned the politics of mass murder, it did not universally address racism.

Segregated clubs where White German women went to meet Black men and vice versa suggested a shift in the meaning of occupation, at least as it concerned these relationships. Black troops were also thought to be more generous to the German public—initially a starving public grateful for gifts of candy—than White American occupiers. Then the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power provided another opportunity for affiliation, again, even for White Germans, particularly those on the left (Ege 2007). Through historical events, political movements, and globalizing culture, including music, film, and television, Blackness gained a foothold in the popular imaginary and also found space for a different kind of allied affiliation.

The second section of this book brings these historical contradictions between democratization, rights, occupation, and participation into relation with Holocaust memory and processes of democratization in Germany. With the waning of formal American occupation, it shows how Germany began to master its own discourse of atonement and accountability. While this process began with the activists of the 1968 generation, in addition to holding the parents of that generation to account for their complicity with supporting the Nazis and anti-Semitism, it takes on the accountability of the children of the so-called “Guest-worker” generation (Chin 2007), including Turkish-Germans, and also the children of Palestinian refugees. Largely in schools and other kinds of formal and informal educational institutions, the ‘68 generation works to hold society as a whole accountable for the memory of genocide and the politics of perpetration.

When atonement for the Nazi-led Holocaust is linked to democratic participation, the consequences for Turkish, Turkish-German, Arab, and Arab-German (non)citizens becomes entangled with dominant assumptions that such populations are inherently anti-Semitic. This puts individuals and communities in a position of having to prove their trustworthiness in order to also have a say about the direction of the democracy. One might ask, however: how can they be held to account for a politics in which they, themselves, did not participate? Beyond the lack of historical participation, though, state actors, journalists, and others want people from Turkey and primarily Arabic-speaking countries, as well as Turkish-Germans and

Arab-Germans,³ to account for and even admit to being anti-Semitic. As a country that led and orchestrated the Shoah, Germany feels responsible for administering a global kind of accountability. Within this system, claiming any kind of equivalence to the experience of genocide has been taboo. Claiming Blackness, though, has emerged as a different kind of possibility, which does not preclude one from also addressing anti-Semitism.

The last section of this book, then, thinks through Blackness as possibility, even for those who do not necessarily think of themselves as Black. Even in cases in which anti-Blackness is emergent, Black struggle suggests the possibility for mutual struggle (see also Alsubee 2020). In this context, images, sweatshirts, and t-shirts of Muhammad Ali are ubiquitous. Pictures, stickers, graffiti, and other public portrayals of the 1968 Olympics with Black athletes standing with raised and clenched fists, and images of Angela Davis, even in the 1990s and 2000s, also suggest a coming together of White, Turkish, Arab, Turkish- and Arab-German, and Black American affiliation.

This section further investigates the possibilities that emerge from these links. It takes seriously what these connections might mean amidst new trends in immigration, structured, in part, via the theater, a central site of this investigation, but also via the politics of the so-called “refugee crisis” beginning in the summer of 2015, when Germany formally accepted nearly one million refugees, most of whom had come from Syria. Between Blackness and noncitizenship, the last section challenges the reader to think critically about making Blackness more central as a means to open up space for engendering other, more accountable and more liberated, ways of living.