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Call it by any name... from ‘Multikulti’ to ‘diversity’

Madhusree Dutta

The brief of this essay is to write about diversity in the context of my engagement with the Ruhr region, and the experience of presiding over an art institution in Cologne from 2018 to 2021. Apparently, it was a simple enough brief and only required some polishing up of my field notes. Especially since government statutes always remind people like us, who are employed in a position of certain policy- and decision-making within the cultural sector, to be responsive to the cause of diversity. Every year, I need to fill out multiple questionnaires on how my institution is attending to the call of diversity.

In this text, I would like to register certain discomforts that I have experienced while filling up these ‘must do’ columns. It comprises certain perceptions of the specific histories of the region, as well as my own ways of thinking, which are deeply related to my experiences of living in another part of the world. The word ‘diversity’ – in this context that is specific to Germany, and more so to Ruhrgebiet – has developed through a complex trajectory of agendas and ideas over the last centuries. These extend from the accumulation of assets and labour power extracted from colonies to the post-war surge in sourcing and importing migrant industrial labour, to the call for internationalism in the Eastern Bloc, to political guilt about colonisation and xenophobia, to the drive for integration in the post-wall era, to the vision of a globalised market in the late twentieth century, to the twenty-first century refugee issue, and so on. The question of how to live together – or, in a pragmatic sense, how to live in a synchronised fashion under one governmental and social system – has been approached at different times under different keywords: decolonisation, anti-racism, *Multikulti*, diversity, and so on.

While trying to write about it I increasingly felt that it should be more about foregrounding the simultaneity of cultures and not about the diversity of cultures. Putting it differently, it should be more about collating and disseminating through

many ways of translating, and not about reaching 'out'. The exercise of reaching out, almost invariably, determines the position of a centre, as a vantage point from which the journey to the margins needs to begin. This, in a certain way, formalises and fixes the territorial and hierarchical positions of lived-in practices: where some people are located is the centre and thus this centre is something that always existed. And where some others are located is considered as the margin and thus something which had come in later in the historical chronology and need to be assimilated, to be taken in. This mirrors former concepts and categories in area studies, such as 'Far East', 'Middle East', etc., which were determined by the proximity to Europe, and thereafter became universal standards for mapping. It completely ignores the fact that Frantz Fanon so eloquently explored in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), namely, that "Europe is literally the creation of the third world". Taking a slight detour from Fanon's original argument about the de-humanising of colonised natives, I would like to place this quote in the context of arguing how multiple and simultaneous the local cultures have been.

Non-white, non-male, non-gentrified, non-Christian, non-classified-as-European cultures are neither off-shoot nor foreign to Europe. Both the chronological and the territorial markings are faulty here. These components have been integral parts in the evolution of the system of signage that are markers of European culture, and are regarded as pivotal to Western modernity. In short, no lived practices, and especially in the case of Western Europe, have ever been monochromatic. A genuine move towards decolonisation therefore also needs to be pursued through a de-structuring of what Europe perceives as the centre or the self. However, the scope of this essay is the contemporary call for diversity, not the history of colonisation and territorialisation. So I would restrict myself to the brief. This introduction was required only to point out that the target groups of the diversity call should not be treated as a bunch of foreigners or interlopers.

In the span of the last few decades, *Multikulti* has been proposed as a concept, following the clues from the political promise of decolonisation and cultural assertion of post-colonial articulations. The emergence of cultural studies, foregrounded by figures like Stuart Hall in the 1970s, became some sort of touchstone for the political will to recognise the presence of multiple cultures. In terms of cultural strategies – the emergence of biennales as against the art market, localised archival initiatives as against museum-based displays of colonial possessions, various formations and infrastructures built around Commons as against the privatisation of knowledge, translation initiatives as against the hegemony of monolinguality, etc. – pushed the discourse into the field of practice. Practices that have been commonly considered marginalised have attained, if still in a limited way, a certain visibility.

Then, in the last decade, the German State formulated a call for diversity. This call tries to ensure representations of 'marginalised communities' in institutions, in state-funded programmes, and in distributions of funds that are earmarked for culture.

Unlike the loosely formulated campaign for *Multikulti*, the call for diversity has been structured around certain evaluation criteria and a few action plans. Our institution, Akademie der Künste der Welt, was founded in 2012 under the same brief. And so was the project Interkultur Ruhr, the publisher of this anthology, in 2016. The call for diversity has a special significance in North Rhine-Westphalia because of its mixed population, which has evolved through aggressive industrialisation since the mid-eighteenth century and then the violent de-industrialisation from the late twentieth century onward, and even after that through the efforts to revitalise the region through land re-use, research establishments, cultural industries, and the platform economy. The region that was valorised and maligned, almost in equal measure, for its filth, smoke, contaminated water, barracked life, football, working-class culture, and robust trade unionism throughout the last century has turned into a land of parks, woods, studios, concert halls, research laboratories, museums, and festivals. But a major part of the demography still remained more or less the same – a layered population of white German working class, non-German migrant workers, and non-European ‘guest workers’. This former industrial class has become redundant in the post-industrial scenario of the twenty-first century. I suspect that the issue of assimilation has grown urgent now not due to the ethnic or language disparities, but because their productivity needs to be revitalised for newer kinds of production. Certain intermediary efforts and facilities need to be offered to realise this transition. Hence the call for diversity is not about non-Germans in Germany but actually about a certain category of Germans in contemporary Germany.

My interest in the Ruhrgebiet precedes my stint at Akademie der Künste der Welt. I am artistically and politically interested in post-industrial culturoscapes. I grew up in an industrial city in India called Jamshedpur. As one of the earliest heavy-industry ventures founded by a local entrepreneur in the colonised subcontinent, it attracted people from diverse ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds – my family among them. Half a century later, my engagement with lives in industrial settlements brought me to the Ruhrgebiet. But unlike my home town, the Ruhrgebiet is not one centralised industrial city, but actually a cluster of many small- and medium-size towns. Most of these towns were developed through the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries around a particular factory or mine, or around a few interdependent industrial units. In earlier times, the workers’ daily routine, living facilities, entertainment – in short, their territory – was marked by the company they were working for: the Thyssen neighbourhood in Hattingen, the Krupp empire in Dortmund, nearby Ford settlement in Köln-Niehl and so on. There were also coal mines of different sizes and the miners’ quarters across the regions. These settlements were dotted by kiosks, *Trinkhallen* (literally meaning ‘drinking halls’), beer gardens, hobby centres, football fields, etc., where workers used to assemble after the work shift. They were the centres of male *bonhomie*, relaxation, and gossip, and occasionally of initiation into union activities. Most of the times these facilities and the people who assembled there belonged to a particular ethnic group – Turkish, Lebanese, Italian, Greek, Polish, etc. This worked well for the migrant workers, as

well as for the management. No drive to diversity was needed to extract the productivity of these people. In fact, more the workers stayed within their ethnicity-based settlements, the easier it was to manage them. Though there had been notable political efforts to mobilise the different sectors of workers in a single factory, or even across different factories, with union-based solidarity, the social and geographical layout of the Ruhrgebiet continued to depend on factory-based territories and sentiments. So you had the Turkish workers in Duisburg or the Polish workers in Bottrop, Herne, or Bochum. Within the radius of their own territories they were at the centre. Their status vis-à-vis the nation-state was irrelevant.

But now, as factories and mines have ceased to be anchors, a whole lot of peoples with diverse languages, religions, and hair and skin types have come out of their quarters and become a general mass. This, then, is when the question of assimilation becomes important – almost 60 years after this phase of importing industrial labour began. These people, perceived as different and categorised by the official term POC (people of colour), are not fringe people, nor have they lived their lives in Germany in a vacuum. Within their spaces they lived full lives of fear, aspiration, achievement, failure, and creativity. One prime example is *Dergi / die Zeitschrift*, the journal that was published in Turkish by a literary circle in Duisburg every two months between 1985 and 1993ⁱ. *Dergi* chronicled lives in the Ruhrgebiet, and should be considered as one of the main sources of local history. It was not a stray or marginalised effort but a central part of the German literary, economic, and political legacy – written in Turkish. Initiatives and actions like that need to be recognised as such, and not as practices that are distinct from the ‘real’ or ‘original’ German history.

The second issue is of ‘other urbanity’. As a cluster of multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual industrial settlements, and also as a war-ravaged border state, the Ruhrgebiet has developed a specific urban culture. This is distinct from the urbanity of cities that have been seats of political power and centres of knowledge accumulations, and thus, in some sense, are landlocked – cities like Berlin, Munich, or Cologne. Some signs of this different urbanity still lie in abundance in the region’s lowbrow entertainment locales – tabletop dance halls, tattoo parlours, tanning salons, public baths, shanty cinemas, etc. – and in its many histories of street battles, some fought for honourable and some for not-so-honourable reasons. As the region determinedly moves towards revitalisation by ushering in a more gentrified version of urbanity, a sense of redundancy and melancholy is setting in in certain pockets. It will require a different policy approach to address this melancholy. A standardised national policy may not work.

Moreover, when a settlement or people are relegated to the margins, they also get homogenised / flattened. The presumption is that the centre is made up of a lot of different layers. But the margins would be simply monolithic. This personally bothers me a lot, as I come from a country (India) where one-sixth of the world population

lives. Yet when people like me visit Europe as artists, we are often asked to prove how 'Indian' our works are. As if it is possible for there to be one kind of 'Indianness' for a population of 1.3 billion people; as if works from India must appear Indian, and cannot be evaluated in terms of other parameters such as ideology, form, technology, and imagination. Margins are supposed to be on the slope, and hence must be kept thin and flat to maintain balance. Whereas the centre is the tabletop, where different layers of reality can accumulate vertically. This is how art institutions such as ours are expected to present communities from the margins – unicellular victims, without any contradictions and inner conflicts. Generic events like 'Arab music festival' or 'Mediterranean food festival' may fulfil the diversity protocol of the state, but they are unlikely to make any impact at either end.

Power structure is a ladder, and it repeatedly gets replicated as our lives expand outwardly – first in the family, then in the community, then in the peer group, then in the country, then in the world ... Art is mandated to fight the status quo in each of these registers. But when the institutions with resources and visibility appoint themselves as mediators between a community and the general public, they often end up producing newer status quos. Certain evolved and articulate people become the star representatives or self-professed guardians of a community, and thus occupy the centre position by making newer margins within the community. For example, the issue of trans-rights within the hegemony of homonormativity in a persecuted-close knit community or the immigrant communities' dubious attitude towards certain right-wing nationalist proclamation (especially in regard to one's country of origin) or the class conflict between those who have already entered European territory and those who are trying to cross the border now – such tensions are common in any pocket of urban life. They are inherent contradictions, but also signs of plurality, and the reason for the call for intersectionality.

These intersectionalities need to be recognised and provided visibility. This is a complex process that requires nuanced and sometimes extremely stressful negotiations. The simpler would be foregrounding certain brilliant, beautiful, angry, and articulate POC individuals who can eloquently play the victim card and provide a cathartic release for white guilt. This phenomenon is well known by now as the flip side of identity politics. A commitment to many cultures needs to continuously balance between all these registers through complex and open-ended processes. It is unlikely to be addressed by designing more and more Excel documents in which to fill in the number of POC artists included in a programme, or POC staff members at an institution.

I argue for – simultaneity, many at the same time and at any given site, together yet autonomous, insistent translations across practiced languages and 'créolités' – rainbows, not monochromatic, living together, not getting assimilated ...

¹ Literary and cultural studies scholar Nesrin Tanç (also one of the editors of this anthology) has painstakingly retrieved copies of these journals from the private homes and collections. No official archive either in Germany or in Turkey has ever made any effort to collate or preserve them. In an exhibition titled Ghosts, Traces, Echoes: Works in Shifts, curated by Eva Busch and Madhusree Dutta in 2020-21, Akademie der Künste der Welt presented Nesrin Tanç's collection and her reading of the phenomenon that Dergi was and still is.