

A dance of words, but it's not a romance:

In the FOREGROUND, a figure appears. Her skin hardens, her heart sinks, and an abysmal sense of terror rises to a feeling of being thrown back in time. This feeling returns. It is an all-too-familiar feeling that makes the words needed to express it seem trite, obvious, too obvious, yet so obvious (!).

Her BACKDROP, the (a)scene unfolds:

"If they (black folks of African descent) are not happy, they could just go back home" — a response by a cultural worker to a conversation regarding the complexities of geopolitics.

"Take your feminism back to where you came from, where it's needed" — curator/programmer's remark on my decision to develop a work with women/femmes.

"You should perform at the Brazil Festival. Here we do contemporary dance" — a curator's remark on my interest in a residency program hosted by their institution. I remind this curator I'm not Brazilian. Their response, when flooded with the shame of ignorance — "I don't know, I'm white. What can I say?"

"I didn't see you were black. I only saw three beautiful performers" — a colorblind remark from a prominent figure in the scene on a work of mine that explicitly deals with blackness/anti-blackness.

A Kanye West track plays. The n-word utilized in the song is sung along by a non-black theater director. He sings along with ease.

"Black girl, move!" — a white choreographer calling me when he forgot my name. This same choreographer continues to get structural funding from Berlin to make work "about" blackness.

"I've started to read about Martin Luther King Jr." — a white choreographer confronting me for the first time about my difference from the rest of her all-white cast, perhaps an attempt to try to make me feel more comfortable.

I entered the "scene" over fifteen years ago. First as a dancer, then as a choreographer. These statements, all of which were uttered to me across the years of my working in the field of dance and choreography in Berlin, might seem complicated to imagine for some; and even more so that this is a shortened list due to the character restriction of the publication. What's even harder to guess, I suspect, is that I expect to hear more of this kind of rhetoric. And what's impossible to imagine for the non-black reader is the psychic burden I (we) carry in our (blackened) bodies, partly from such rhetoric.

I've had the misfortune of intimately knowing the limits of Berlin's dance discourses, an ongoing problem that inevitably sets the tone for these reflections. When Micha first asked me to reflect on the scene, I thought, great. I could address the more general and perhaps obvious (economic) structural problems of the lack of resources in Berlin, a challenge dance makers continue to face. Here, I would be staying in line with Frank Schmid's 2000 articulation of the same problem, which I must say is very disheartening to witness and experience some twenty years later. But with more profound engagement, I recognized a need to make a dramatic departure. After all, what is my ethical obligation to this scene that I've supposedly

been situated in for many years but never felt part of? How do I reflect, then, on a scene that, from what I observe (etymology: attend to by looking at), seems to fail to observe itself?

Meanwhile, there is another burgeoning scene, with a dynamism of content and inquiry that exceeds the reduction “conceptual dance”— a phrase I was always at odds with (after all, what dance does not try to mean something, does not try to inject a life of thoughts into its being?). Yet, for those of us raced black, our field does not permit the same level of critical inquiry and engagement, let alone sustainability of practice. The rub lies in this structural inconsistency.

In a market-driven scene where all components of artistic expression, including discursive, become part of the market, coupled with the backdrop I described earlier, black artists are consistently disadvantaged. We are either expected to, if not made to, appease white guilt or caused to be the native informants that explain blackness to our others or bear the burden of authenticating it. And when we finally speak truth to power, we get pushed to the margins and categorized as “difficult.” And if not this, we are fetishized for our “particularity” — fetish, another market logic, where our bodies are made to do the symbolic work of maintaining some pretence of contemporaneity within the field. Meanwhile, the backdrop/landscape stays the same. Ultimately, what I’m trying to say is black artists cannot be seen in this kind of scene.

I guess one can sense in my words a desire to remove the romantic veil of “togetherness” that cloaks the Berlin dance scene because the question— Who is narrating that story? matters. Those who fear that question might fear the disassembling of such a term, but I fear what it continues to obscure in the Berlin dance scene. Bodies make words. Words make worlds. The cat is out of the bag. There’s work to be done!

**** written in solidarity with all the black artists, curators, cultural workers, and educators in Berlin, past and present, that continue to work ceaselessly towards transformation and equity.*