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Coming Out as a Migrant Diversity Worker: The Perspective of a 360° Agent at the Bücherhallen Hamburg

In October 2020, I was asked by Studio Marshmallow to moderate a conversation within the Fluctoplasma Festival programme. The first of its kind in Hamburg, a festival for and by Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC), Fluctoplasma 2020 brought together artistic explorations of the festering open wounds of our society, with ‘Blue Burning’ as a motto. At that point, I was only a little more than two months into my employment as an *Agentin für interkulturelle Öffnung* at the Bücherhallen Hamburg. The conversation was joined by a small round of actors who are engaged in the city’s cultural scene on both the institutional and grassroots levels. Right before we kicked off, a participant – an older white German man – approached me with a remark along the lines of “*it is very brave of the Bücherhallen to hire someone like you for this position*”.

My initial reaction, naturally, was self-defence: “*what do you mean ‘someone like me’?*”

I am a woman who arrived in Germany in the post-2011 wave of Arab migration to Europe that has been continuously morphing in the past decade. I, and several of my generation, have not had a ‘smooth sailing’ into accessing the culture scene in Hamburg, having initially been barred by language and other systematic tools that enable individuals such access. This, in turn, entailed a non-linear learning process as a diversity worker. I could not un-see how, all along, a primary component had been missing in the equation of the labour we do: emotions. That diversity work is, inherently, psychological in its very essence. Now, several months into my time at the Bücherhallen, I certainly have acquired a different disposition to that man’s question. I will never truly know what his intentions were, but I can agree with him on one thing: it is indeed brave – and it is precisely this bravery that should be the primary driving force for both cultural institutions and minority communities in our way forward.

In a way, it has certainly been a process of coming out, too. Being a diversity worker has been a critical point in the continuum of my long-term relationship to the migration experience – as an individual and as part of the Arabic-speaking diaspora in Germany. This new generation of immigrants has only re-

cently begun to tap into its distinctive, independent voice between the *here* and *there*. And it is time we came out, and bravely so.¹

Diversity Work as Emotional Labour

The conversation and discourse on diversity work is classically dominated by two famous core components: theory and practice; thought and behaviour; abstraction and implementation. In the theoretical realm, social scientists and researchers have made greater strides than ever in untangling the composite mesh behind intercultural communication and societal inclusion in the 21st century (Schramm et al., 2019). There is a whole industry of “diversity speakers” who have worked with institutions, public and private, to communicate thought-provoking models, some speculative, some applicable, in an endeavour to integrate diversity-oriented practices in institutional structures (Deardorff, 2009; Leung et al., 2014).² Meanwhile, the implementation, the labour, has been nothing short of challenging. Society has been evolving at an exponential rate, and this evolution is yet to be matched by an equally rapid transformation within the cultural institutions serving the public. Only very recently have these institutions begun to question their ability to maintain their relevance to society in the future. It does indeed take time to integrate or adapt certain structures and practices into workflows and establish a sense of regularity within larger systems in the public domain. Processes are slow to change, let alone instil. Nevertheless, these difficulties do not excuse the public culture sector from the responsibility that lies upon its shoulders. The difficulty level might as well prompt some to start asking: “We’ve been doing quite alright; why not just leave things as they are and hope for the best?” As you have gathered throughout this volume, the motive to strive for better is clear: cultural fairness. It is about the identity and the cultural belonging of the people who live in our urban society. About cultural citizenship – *kulturelle Bürgerschaft*.

Shortly after the encounter at Fluctoplasma Festival, I delved into the nitty gritty of my work. The hand I was dealt was far from easy to play: a 15-hour workweek, 35 different locations spread across the city, over 400 employees, a

1 I would like to thank my colleague and the editor of this volume, Sylvia Linneberg, who was first to mention the term “coming out” in discussing the first sketch for this article and inspired its writing.

2 These models include the Multicultural Personality Model, Global Leadership Competency, the Developmental Model of Cultural Sensitivity, amongst others. See Leung et al.’s “Intercultural Competence” for further examples.

100-year-old institution, and only 20 months to generate and implement a comprehensive strategy for community outreach and participatory event formats. Not accounting for the hampering restrictions imposed upon the culture sector, nationwide and globally, owing to the COVID-19 outbreak. Obstacles notwithstanding, it has been quite the stimulating experience. I gradually started realizing that diversity work is not merely the aggregation of socio-scientific thought and its application in the real world. As other contributors to this volume have highlighted, diversity is a mindset that one adopts – an attitude.

Taking the “attitude” as a point of departure has allowed me to contemplate the triangulation of its three main components: thoughts, behaviours, and feelings. I noticed that, while we spend a lot of time and effort contemplating ideas and their implementation in practice, we have yet to start seriously discussing the emotional component underlying the work we do as diversity workers. This reflection has been bidirectional – both inwards and outwards, the self and the other(s).

Inwards: The Process of Coming Out

Probing inwards, I realized that I am in a situation where I am both the beneficiary and the enactor of the work I do, as a brown queer woman and an institutional diversity worker in the public culture sector. There have been many parallels and points of intersection between my personal experiences and the work I do – the inner often being a microcosm of the outer world. Meanwhile, I was zealously reading the work of Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), and Nina Simon, *The Art of Relevance* (2016) – literature that strongly reaffirms my worldview. Their work stems from, reflects, and encourages a global intellectual and grassroots-led movement towards the intersectional dismantling of repressive social structures, ideally supported by institutional work. One cannot simply speak of gender representation within institutional structures without considering the fights for the social, economic, political, and cultural rights of BIPOCs, queer individuals, or people with disabilities. Historically Excluded Groups (HEGs), marginalized due to ethnicity, place of origin, gender, sexual orientation, age, or bodily limitations, are finding their voices united by an intersectional ideology of questioning, deconstructing, and dismantling. Racist, colonial, and patriarchal structures, which reinforce sexism, heteronormativity, ageism, and able-bodyism, are being challenged by HEGs and their allies. Add to that the complexity of 21st century migration as a temporality, a point in history, a backstory upon which all these different forms of civic action move, in-

teract, and complement one another. A significant portion of this civic action aims at the right to emancipate, disclose, and represent the self (Batzke, 2019). It is an announcement of divergence from the “norm”, or societal constructs of *how things are done*. Essentially, it aims at coming out.

In queer studies, the notion of coming out entails a *process*. It does not entirely spin around or orient itself to a singular, defining moment, but rather a continuous labour of weaving narratives into one’s own identity work. Surely, some individuals choose to come out through the pinnacle of public announcement, a one-time life instance. However, all coming out experiences are extended and perpetual – encompassing the lifespan (Ali, 2015; Gray, 2009). With an intersectional approach in mind, I wondered: How could I fruitfully borrow the term “coming out” from queer theory and apply it to the cultural rights context? What is its discursive and heuristic place in this equation? In the realm of psychology, coming out is understood as a process that comprises three different layers: awareness, assessment, and decision. The recognition of one’s own identity is followed by a conscious and subconscious analysis of whether it is necessary, warranted, or appropriate to disclose oneself, as well as an exploration of alternatives regarding action or inaction. Finally, there comes a decision: a commitment to disclosing or withholding one’s identity (Ali & Barden, 2015).

With these layers in mind, I was prompted to narrativize my coming out experience as a migrant in terms of my encounters with culture in Hamburg, my so-called “host city”. In this introspective self-narrativizing experiment, I recalled many events, places, individuals, plot twists, climatic moments, and disappointments. I recalled how, for many years, I barely spoke a word of Arabic with anyone in my physical vicinity, to the point that I forgot the Arabic word for *eggplant* in a telephone conversation with my mother. That was the case from July 2014 until March 2017, when I finally met a community of like-minded Arabic-speaking people with whom I could vent my frustration with the Egyptian military dictatorship through sarcasm and memes. I recalled how, for many years, I was unable to find a space in the city where amateur writers could share their poetry in English or Arabic. And how, in 2018, I started getting paid for performing my own monologues at a state theatre in Hamburg. I recalled being unable to pursue certain career paths because they would not qualify as sufficient reasons to convince the German state that I was worthy enough of being granted the basic right to stay. And how, in 2016, I was confronted with a drunk man with a knife on the bus who muttered racial slurs at me following the AfD’s win in parliamentary elections. I also recalled dancing in demonstrations against racism following the Chemnitz events in 2018. And how now, I am able to contribute to an edited volume where I have the validated space to disclose,

represent myself, and share my experience as a migrant and a diversity worker – to come out and to participate.

To me, migration is not only a temporal backdrop, but a self-evident point of departure.

Awareness: Becoming a Migrant

I have been a migrant for most of my life, having spent less than half of it in Egypt, my place of birth. But I was not always aware of my semi-perpetual status of migration. When I was 40 days old, I migrated with my family to Kuwait where my father worked. In this Arab quasi-*Gastarbeiter* narrative, migration did not play such a profound role in my childhood. I owe this to a privilege – the prioritization of education in my family, who sent me to a British school that prided itself on including students, teachers, and workers of 64 different nationalities. My classmates were Sri Lankan, Syrian, British, Kuwaiti, Palestinian, and South African. In this constellation, my Egyptianness was not relevant. Nor was my Arabness, my ethnicity, or my skin tone. Nobody talked to me about it; it was almost not part of my conscious experience. Although, as a child, I was oblivious to my national or racial identity, my parents felt quite differently about it – something I would only learn way later in my life. In 2000, my family moved back to Cairo, which I ended up leaving two weeks after the 2013 mass massacre perpetrated by the military against the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters, also known as the Rabaa Massacre. I left Egypt to become a scholarship student doing her master's degree in Europe – first in Denmark, then in Germany.

The awareness of migration as an integral component of my identity only occurred to me in Germany. Although I went to journalism school in Egypt, formal education on racism or migration studies were simply not included in my generation's curricula, and the public discourse was flooded with other issues at home, the revolution against the Mubarak regime basking in the limelight of our consciousness. Everything was spun around the revolution; every narrative extracted its validation or legitimization from its dialectic. When I moved to Europe in 2013, I started off with a typical "international student" experience; my cohort boasted of a diversity of 109 students from over 45 different countries. In my eyes, this kind of diversity was rather axiomatic. I did not take the opportunity for granted, but it was nothing entirely new to me. Meanwhile, the place and time, Europe in the 21st century, were preoccupied by a broader discourse on migration, and the discourse contributed to shaping my consciousness. I

even participated in this discourse as a young journalist and a media studies student. I accompanied my European classmates as a “fixer” of sorts on their trips to Bazaar Vest where they would write about “Arab migrants in Denmark”, pitching their stories to digital news outlets to improve their journalistic portfolios.³ Back then, I did not identify as an Arab migrant myself; I was simply a student of journalism and a peer to my (mostly white) colleagues who were narrating stories about a societal phenomenon. I had not yet placed myself in the discourse – a subconscious act of dissociation.

I cannot pinpoint the exact moment where I became aware of my place in the migration narrative, but it must have happened after the arrival of Syrian refugees en masse to Germany in 2015. This coincided with my decision to stay in Germany, when I started realizing that *how things are done* was working against *me*. That my lived experience and the broader discourse on migration were intertwined, that the personal and the political are inseparable, and that my experiences occur in a broader context and are a reflection thereof. The stories of daily racism I read about and empathized with could no longer be categorized as isolated incidents; they have been, all along, symptoms of systematic repression. I recognized that there is *us* and *them*: those who are white, and those who are not. In this narrative, I am part of the suppressed group, those who are not white – a suppression that was imposed on me, one that I naively had not anticipated. As if the privilege of neo-colonial education had created some sort of division between the personal and the worldly. I realized that I am an immigrant, and I had to locate and position myself in the broader migration narrative. And this awareness was fairly revealing.

Assessment: (Neo)colonial Anxiety and Anger

Have you ever read someone’s work and felt an immense gratitude for their ability to precisely capture a feeling you never really had words for? Frantz Fanon does that for me.⁴ His work was among the first to speak to speak to me on a

³ Bazaar Vest is the famous Arab market of Brabrand, the underserved “ghetto” of Aarhus. I experienced it as a parallel universe to Aarhus, the city, where Arabs and migrants of other ethnicities lived with very little interaction with Danes – an implicit geographical segregation.

⁴ Fanon did not have a very long life; born in 1925 in the then-French colony of Martinique, he moved to France to join the French Free Forces at the age of 18, where he was first confronted with his own blackness. He returned to Martinique in 1945 but left again only a few years later to study medicine and psychiatry in France. He actively campaigned for the liberation of Algeria from French colonialism and died from leukaemia at the age of 36. He was buried in Algeria.

wavelength I had not yet grasped, to confront me with a reality I did not want to see. Set in a different time and space, Fanon's writing on the psychology of colonialism is a timeless contribution to intellectual history and the history of ideas that are relevant to this day – fortunately or unfortunately.

Fanon contextualized his lived experience and his expertise as a psychiatrist, most notably in *Black Skin White Masks* (1967) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963). In *Black Skin White Masks*, he psychoanalyzes the colonial experience from the perspective of the Black man, highlighting how colonialism is internalized by the colonized, resulting in the inculcation of an inferiority complex and a performance of 'whiteness' as a reaction thereto. The first 'mask' refers to the dialectic of recognition; the second to the affirmation of the self – self-perception as inherently inferior and the enactment of the self that ensues. Together, internalized and societal racism function as controlling mechanisms which maintain colonial relations as 'natural' occurrences (Dorlin, 2016).

Historically, it must be understood that the Negro wants to speak French because it is the key that can open doors which were still barred to him fifty years ago. In the Antilles Negro who comes within this study we find a quest for subtleties, for refinements of language – so many further means of proving to himself that he has measured up to the culture (Fanon, 1967, pp. 38–39).

Fanon's work resonated with me quite profoundly. It made me wonder; is the colonial experience of the black man and the neo-colonialist experience of the Arab migrant comparable? Am I the black man in Fanon's story? Had I internalized racism myself? And how had I not seen it before? It was as if the ocean I had been standing in front of, constantly observing, had finally crashed a wave on me, leaving me soaked; there was no alternative to jumping in headfirst. Becoming a migrant in Europe entailed accepting fear as part-and-parcel of my life: fear of losing basic life security, of being perceived as a lesser creature, of not being treated humanely. The average migrant's encounters with fear and anxiety are countless, but as Fanon shows, one could simply start with something as instantaneously rudimentary and complicated as language. Language is so obvious and so subtle, something we use rather intuitively and daily. It is an acquired skill that contributes to the formulation of our thoughts and emotions, the ability to express them through participating in discourse, as well as the ability to assert the self. Language is weaponized when it is used to "objectify, depersonalize, dehumanize, to create an 'other'" (Pipher, 2007, p. 4). It is a fundamental cornerstone of power and, in this case, a tool to counter the (neo)-colonial inferiority complex.

Up until the point of acknowledging migration and its multiple connotations as part of my identity, I could simply afford to avoid questioning my rela-

tion to the colonial aftermath. This is a privilege that directly stems from the fact that I had packed a colonial language in my arsenal, having received education in English my entire life. My language skills were applauded by others – especially in Egypt, a former British colony. Language was a primary factor, if not the most important one, in my professional advancement in life. Coupled with and surrounding this language is an entire persona that speaks, acts, and performs it. I realized that my entire behaviour, my performance, in the first four years of my experience living in Europe, was a subconscious endeavour to self-assimilate. My internalized racism manifested itself in a perpetual self-enacted whitewashing through language, clothing, social behaviour, and other aspects of cultural expression. In this performance, I incessantly tried to wipe off any traces of where I come from, in attempt to create a world where my ethnicity and my faith were entirely irrelevant, and to distance myself from my identity as an Arab. There was no urgency to realize let alone question this performance; many white people would tell me I was “progressive”, “not like other Arabs”, and not fitting “the stereotype” – things they presented as compliments. What such compliments actually meant was that nothing about my cultural performance made them feel uncomfortable. I exhibited absolutely no symptoms to Arabness. My relatively smooth so-called integration was conditional on me not performing my culture in any way, not disrupting *how things are done*. I was a good immigrant – a performance I subconsciously crafted out of fear. The fear of rejection and inferiority worked together with my desire to prove my worth in the eyes of the society I was navigating. This is by no means unique to my case or that of Arab migrants and displaced individuals (Pyke & Dang, 2003; Pattynama, 2000).

(You might) sense something is amiss. You have to get closer to the feeling; but once you try to think about a feeling, how quickly it can recede. Maybe it begins as a background anxiety, like a humming noise that gradually gets louder over time so that it begins to fill your ear, cancelling out other sounds. And then suddenly it seems (though perhaps it is not sudden) what you tried so hard not to notice is all you can hear...Attending to the feeling might be too demanding; it might require you to give up on what otherwise seems to give you something; relationships, dreams; an idea of who it is that you are; an idea of who it is that you can be. You might even will yourself not to notice certain things because noticing them would change your relation to the world; it would change the world to which you exist in relation (Ahmed, 2017, pp. 27–28).

Fear is a reaction to protect and maintain the self and the constructs one takes for granted about oneself and the world. Although Sara Ahmed was explicitly writing about feminism, one could replace feminism in this narrative with any movement standing for the rights of HEGs. The anxiety she speaks of is so famil-

iar; it is a tiny flame signalling *this feels wrong*. But in the moment, one cannot isolate this feeling and or delve deeper into it. Perhaps one cannot afford to question *how things are*. The moments then start accumulating, and this aggregation becomes scarier; it begins to burn. The burning turns into a wound, and the wound eventually turns into anger.

The bad news was that my identity confusion was a by-product of (neo)-colonialism. The good news was that I got angry.

Both anxiety and anger, in my opinion, are emotions plugging the grey zone between the harsh reality and the ideal imaginary, or *how things are* and *how they should be*. And although anger has quite a bad reputation, I am a fan. Unlike anxiety, which was rather paralyzing, anger was a productive emotional reaction; I started to connect the dots much faster and much more intuitively. Gradually, somewhere on the anxiety/anger nexus, I start seeking comfort in confirmation, in verbalization, in expression and self-disclosure. The “this is exactly how I feel!” confirmation coming from someone else – a community of like-minded individuals – was a gamechanger.

Decision: Community and the Grassroots Level

Like language, space is power. We often overlook space as a very basic requirement for people to be able to commune, to get together. Physical space and the built environment play quite a critical role in people’s ability to navigate their cultural and ethical identities. In fact, there is a dialectic relationship between this built environment and the abstract “space”; space can emerge from space. This means that physical space can enable and reinforce discourse and culture, and vice versa, which is particularly relevant for diasporic communities.

By 2016, two of Hamburg’s biggest theatres, Thalia Theater and Kampnagel, had dedicated physical spaces on their premises to alternative creative projects. Kampnagel describes Migrantpolitan as “a place that leaves behind the social classifications of ‘refugees’ and ‘locals’ and whose actors jointly create cosmopolitan visions – (a) constellation of people, opinions, artistic and political practices (that) has given rise to concepts that are already bearing fruit in the Kampnagel program...” (Migrantpolitan – Kampnagel, 2017). Similarly, the Embassy of Hope Café, located in the foyer of the Thalia Gaußstraße, was dedicated to serving the legal, social, and (eventually) cultural needs of People of Colour, especially refugees. In parallel, both spaces have been managed by Syrian men. They started off by utilizing the creative skills and artistic talents of the Arabic-speaking migrant community to build their program, while including and col-

laborating with other communities as well in multiple formats. While I regularly frequented Migrantpolitan, I was personally invested in the Embassy of Hope.

By 2017, through Thalia's Embassy of Hope, I became part of an ensemble that is now known as *Stimmen aus dem Exil*. What started off as a simple *szenische Lesung*⁵ organically evolved into an events series that reverberated in the cultural scene in Hamburg. Arabic, Farsi, English, Turkish, Korean, Spanish, and German were spoken and heard. Amateur writers, students, performance artists, and professional actors and technicians worked together. Our audience grew. We collaborated with musicians and collectives from other cities, too, even beyond Germany. At the intersection of the migration experience and our love for theatre, we formed a community, one of the first of its kind in Hamburg. Every six-to-eight weeks, we critically engaged with compelling themes that mattered to us: identity, belonging, longing, family, racism, multilingualism. We artistically articulated our thoughts and feelings: our fear, rage, and frustration, our selves. And in the summer of 2019, we travelled beyond Hamburg as part of a campaign against right-wing extremism ahead of the state elections in Saxony and Brandenburg.

Reaching the point where we felt like the artistic 'product' we created was sufficiently valued or appreciated was not smooth or effortless. There were, as one would expect, challenges and setbacks in our attempt to grow and take up the space we felt entitled to as residents with authentic cultural input in the city. The Embassy of Hope manager often had to scramble for resources. Most of the time, we, the writers, performed our pieces and expected nothing in return. But it was worth it, and we persisted. Because it was *our* project. Taking ownership in a competitive cultural environment is tricky, especially for those who did not have a straightforward path to taking up cultural space. For our group to take up space and be on stage, the only requirement was interest and the quality of the work one presented. None of us had a degree or a career in theatre, but we created art, participated, learnt, grew, and evolved – as individuals and as a group. By late 2020, *Stimmen aus dem Exil* published its anthology to mark its conclusion, a collage of its many episodes, with texts in their original languages accompanied by German translations (Fig. 3).

5 German for a staged reading of poetry or prose.

Fig. 3: Cover of the *Stimmen aus dem Exil* Anthology (Copyright: Larissa Bertonasco)

So what made this experiment work?

What guaranteed the success of *Stimmen aus dem Exil* was its grassroots participatory nature. Thalia Theater did not conceptualize the events series, but it made space (both physically and in its program) for a community of diverse people to co-create something valuable. Together, we were *Kulturschaffende* – creators of culture. The ensemble worked with directors, actors, and technicians from the theatre, and it was a mutual learning process. And this co-creation was relatively accessible; one did not have to work for a cultural institution to

qualify. Even though the institutional structures imposed some relative restrictions, the classical barrier between institute and community was blurred. And because *Stimmen aus dem Exil* was ours just as much as it was Thalia's, its sustainability was a mutual effort. As a community, one main reason why we persisted is that we had recognized our right to take up space and language. We did not want to be perceived as inferior, as a charity project, or some pseudo-art-therapy happening. We had to speak for ourselves and demand cultural space that we rightfully earned, especially amidst a toxic discourse of conflicting opinions about migration at large. We claimed a legitimate platform for expressing our anxieties, our stories, our anger – for coming out.

When we arrived in Germany, we were confronted with a world of limitations – legal, linguistic, and financial, just to name a few. These limitations characterized the first few years of our reality as migrants. As long as one is barely surviving, contemplating one's own visibility in culture feels like a luxury problem. But once a certain threshold was crossed, we were here to stay. We had to be brave enough to position ourselves in the discourse and to act upon this positioning.

I realized that, in Hamburg, the only cultural spaces where this first generation of Arabic-speaking migrants could represent and speak for themselves were not more than a quota – an insignificant portion handed out by larger, established institutions. But after six years of residing in Germany, I was finally at a point where I could play my part, and that is when I landed at the Bücherhallen Hamburg. Although I had been flirting along the margins of the culture scene in the city for several years, the Bücherhallen marked my first hands-on institutionalized encounter in the manner of formal employment. One particular reason why I had the courage to apply was a statement in the Bücherhallen's job ad, that applications from BIPOCs, migrants, and refugees were strongly encouraged. I had never had the courage to formally engage with the culture sector out of the assumption that I would not be able to undertake my job in German, to put an application together, let alone go through an interview process, compete with qualified fluent German speakers, or communicate effortlessly in an unfamiliar institutional setting. Looking back, this fear was some unfounded insecurity. Luckily, my frustration with *how things are* was much more potent, and the vacancy's announcement was both motivating and fitting to my profile. Since August 2020, I have shared the position as a diversity worker with my colleague Sylvia Linneberg, who has been incredibly supportive with all the experience and knowledge she shares with me.

A Way Forward: Participation at the Institutional Level

What happens when you discover that becoming relevant to a community of interest requires profound institutional change? At that point, you have to make a decision about your willingness to restructure your room for this community. Transformative relevance work is intense. It takes time. It requires all parties to commit. Institutional leaders have to be willing and able to reshape their traditions and practices. Community participants have to be willing to learn and change too. And everyone has to build new bridges together (Simon, 2016, p. 173).

What distinguishes the Bücherhallen as an institution is the duality of being instantaneously centralized and decentralized, an aspect that eases accessibility. It has the advantage of being spread all over the city with 32 district libraries, 2 book-buses, and a central library (Barckow, 2019). The Bücherhallen set itself on a goal to “open” its doors – doors which were never closed to begin with. But the questions were: How can the institution’s efforts to diversify its practices become more authentic, more impactful? How can it truly strive for cultural fairness and ensure better representation of the city’s diverse communities? And instead of talking about minority groups in our contributions to public discourse, what if we talk *to* them?

At the very core of my work is the design and implementation of a strategy for *35 Offene Türen*, or 35 Open Doors, an initiative that aims at inviting members of the city’s different communities to co-create the Bücherhallen’s cultural programme. So far, the programme has been typically designed on the receptive and interactive levels, where the public is a mere recipient of culture and is occasionally given the room for feedback and suggestions. But co-creating goes one step further: the collaborative and participatory level. Members of the city’s diverse communities are invited to join us on an eye-level platform, converse with us, express their wishes, and contribute to conceptualizing our cultural output. In the participatory scenario, the institute’s relevance is derived from society itself.

So here is the equation: one goal, one strategy, and 35 locations, right? Wrong. I found myself in a living example of what Nina Simon calls a “one core, many doors” setting, whereby the institution has one mission and many ways for many people to participate. As Simon (2016) remarks, “this is the strongest path – and the most difficult. It takes courage and focus to maintain one core. It takes open-heartedness and humility to open many doors. It takes trust to hold it all together” (pp. 156–157). There was no way one could implement the same practices and have the same conversation with everyone, espe-

cially in a city like Hamburg, where the multiplicity of the urban setting dictates a unique urban makeup for every district. Moreover, taking the psychological aspect of diversity work into consideration entails understanding that the goal, the attitude, was to be communicated and strategized in a way that is adaptable and humanly relatable to an incredibly diverse set of people: my colleagues working at the district libraries.

Participatory practices are brave, and that goes for both the community and the institutional levels. Along with the urgency to remain relevant, it takes courage and stamina for institutions to structurally and behaviourally adapt themselves and their working cultures. For decades, institutions have been fundamentally built upon top-down philosophies, a dynamic that has only fortified barriers to accessing culture as creators and producers, rendering it exclusive to those already at the top of the cultural rights hierarchy. The participatory approach, on the other hand, prioritizes the grassroots level. It places the institution in the position of the mediator and the facilitator who makes room for different stakeholders to take ownership of culture. It requires flexibility, change, conversation, trial and error, and is prone to negotiation and change. For an institution, this is a tedious and laborious task that takes many years to accomplish. The task we are undertaking, for now, is only the first step in the right direction, laying the foundational bricks for the future.

In fact, we are not only working on laying these foundational bricks, and this is precisely why cultural diversity work is so demanding. Intrinsically, diversity work is a labour of disruptive nature. It aims at interrupting, even breaking, continuities. It is a labour of change, of rewriting systematic norms that triumph (and are upheld by) white, cis-gendered, and heteronormative actors. These “norms” have centuries-old historical roots that are deeply entrenched in society’s ways of being, our ways of doing. We commonly hear of diversity practitioners experiencing institutions as resistant to their work. We hear of rigidity, lethargy, and brick walls (Ahmed, 2012). That is because the labour we do is an act of simultaneous doing and undoing. Building and destroying. Wiring and unwiring. Undoing the work of structural, systematic repression that has, for centuries, been passed on, reproduced, and channelled through cultural dynamics, institutions being representative thereof. And this process of simultaneous doing and undoing is de-facto psychological labour.

“Mrs El Hariry, by the end of your time here, you will have learnt quite a lot...,” Susanne Wilkin, Head of the District Libraries Department, once said to me.

“About German working culture?” I interrupted.

“No,” she said. “About people.”

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