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## TRANSIT

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Peer reviewed

## Insult

by Enrico Ippolito

### *TRANSIT* Your Homeland is Our Nightmare

*Translated by Michael Sandberg*

How many times had he heard it now? Twenty? Three thousand? However many times it's been, he can't count the number with just two hands. Every visit to the job center, his case worker would greet him with: "This isn't Italy here," or sometimes even, "If you don't like it, go back where you came from!" If she was in a good mood, she'd give him a well-intentioned yet back-handed compliment, like: "My, you speak German well." Each time, he would ask himself where he was supposed to go back to. He grew up here in Germany, but he had a name that wasn't Müller or Schmidt.

He rolls himself a cigarette, lights it, and blows out the smoke. Then he turns on the television. The images flicker past him and he hears only how the politicians talk about refugees. He doesn't even know what the topic is exactly, but he can imagine well enough: "How prone to crime are refugees?" "Refugees and Women." "Refugees and Integration." Or something like that. By now, he knows the televised scenes by heart; they're all reruns. *The refugees themselves never get to speak a word; instead, it's only ever about them and not with them*, he thinks as he turns the TV back off.

When this kind of talk show first emerged, he had written an email in which he explained why questions like these were, in his opinion, racist. He had even received a response which stated: "We do not view these questions as racist; we are simply engaging with topics that are of interest in Germany." He had briefly considered writing back that the two weren't mutually exclusive, but decided against it—it was already obvious how they would perceive such a response anyway.

He had had such conversations before, not just with strangers, but also with his friends. Even at the same corner pub where he now sat with a good friend. He had escaped to the pub because he couldn't handle being at home anymore: a locale, loud and full, which a bad novel would have probably described as colorful. As usual, the two are discussing this damn R-word. He's known her for twenty years. She thinks he's too sensitive because he sees racism everywhere and, in her opinion, the word is used too often. But is he really paranoid? Is he really trapped in some conspiracy theory about racism?

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It all started in elementary school. At least, that's how it had crystallized in his brain, where the memories nest somewhere in the hippocampus (or was it the cerebral cortex?). In elementary school, it quickly became clear that he was different. Different from the Michaels, Christians, and Julias. Not because he had felt different, but because they constantly made him aware of it. They gave him the nickname "spaghetti muncher." His nickname would later follow him into high school. The students didn't seem particularly creative with their insults. Though he wasn't so sure whether it was actually meant as an

expletive at all, or whether they actually wanted to hurt his feelings. Was “spaghetti muncher” as bad as “son of a bitch”?

Only many years later, when he was sixteen or maybe still a bit younger, did he learn the word for that thing which made him feel foreign: racism. An expression that bothered those who called him spaghetti muncher. The Andreas, Jennifers, and Susannes hated this word. They didn’t want to be racists. Every time he said it, they looked at him, first with great, big, blue eyes, which would then screw up and show their ire. No, their parents voted for the Green Party and, moreover, they had a Turkish cleaning woman and were very good to her. Racists—those were the others, the Nazis with shaved heads and bomber jackets.

It was the 90s, and the news was filled with reports from Hoyerswerda, Rostock-Lichtenhagen, Lübeck, Mölln and Solingen. Across Germany, refugee ‘homes’ were set ablaze. Everyone took to the streets to demonstrate against Nazis and rightwing violence. Even the ones who called him spaghetti muncher. And even back then, they told him how sensitive he was—after all, it wasn’t *his* house that was burning. He had it good here in Germany.

They were right, he had it good. Unlike others, he did not experience physical violence. Only later did he realize: Racism is not a competition, cordoned off into categories like “Gets Punched In The Face” versus “Not So Bad.” But he hadn’t known it back then, and wanted under no circumstance to be like the victims he saw on TV who only wailed, complained about Germany, and accused the whole society of racism. Victims were weak. The spaghetti muncher was strong. So, he tucked away the word ‘racism’ in the far recesses of his cerebrum and no longer used the term. He had kept it buried deep for a long time.

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“Another beer?” his friend asks, while the music in the bar gets louder. He nods. She stands up and clutches her purse tightly as some boys walk past who do not look white to her. He watches her and notices how she only relaxes once she’s at the bar and no longer feels in danger. Once she’s back with two Tannenzäpfle,<sup>i</sup> he confronts her about it. “I didn’t do that at all,” she responds. He smiles at her, she rolls her eyes and says: “What are you actually trying to say? Am I a racist, now, too?”

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At university in the post-90s, “multikulti”<sup>ii</sup> was the new catchphrase. Nobody called him spaghetti muncher anymore. Instead, everyone talked about power. Who has it? Who is deprived of it? Is it everywhere? Can we break away from it? Slowly, he also better understood what racism actually meant, how it functioned, how no one could escape from it. He began to use the word that he had hidden away for years. But the Steffis, Sebastians, and Nadines still never found it appropriate. Weren’t they also the ones who always wanted to know where he came from, and thereby let him know that he did not belong? “No, where do you *really* come from? Your parents, I mean?” All questions that never killed anyone. But still questions that single someone out as different. They all attended the same university courses, read the same texts. And still, they hadn’t understood. Or had he misunderstood something himself?

No, he hadn't. In the end, he was the one who couldn't find an apartment because of his last name. He was the one whom the supermarket security stopped and checked. And he was also the one who saw how people clutched their bags whenever he walked by them, only because he had black hair. They were small things, compared to what others experience. But did that really make them negligible experiences that could just be wiped away?

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"I'm not a racist," she repeats and takes a sip of her beer. "You know that." He knows this evasion tactic all too well. Like all the others, she believes in Duden's definition:<sup>iii</sup>

Racism | Phonetic Spelling: ['rā-,si-zəm]<sup>iv</sup>

1. Doctrines or theories (generally bearing ideological character, developed as justification for race discrimination, colonialism, and the like) according to which people or population groups with particular biological characteristics are considered as naturally superior or inferior to others based on their cultural capabilities.

2. A racially motivated disposition, frame of thought, or mode of action towards people and/or population groups with particular biological characteristics.

She believes in the biological—the Nazis'—definition. Racism is either a historical problem stemming from Hitler or Mussolini, or it's topographically far-removed—like, for example, in the U.S., where it's shitty for People of Color. "We've overcome all that in Germany. I think we're a tolerant society," she says with a certainty that frightens him. How can she be so confident? "Just look at how many people are demonstrating against the AfD.<sup>v</sup> How could they all be racists when they're against Nazis? That doesn't make any sense."

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How many discussions has he had with people who had read Michel Foucault, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Stuart Hall, Judith Butler, Frantz Fanon, and wrote discourse-analytical papers, yet still believed that there is only one form of racism? And this form was not defined by him, but by the others. They hated his definition of structural racism and talked it down because they couldn't bear to think about their own societal positions.

Then came 2010, and everything changed. Not for the spaghetti muncher, but for Germany. In this year, a book was published that made racist language and discussions socially palatable again—or at least that's how it's always described in hindsight. But the racism had never been gone. Up until then, it had just been expressed differently. Now everyone in Germany could publicly discuss whether people with migration backgrounds might have smaller brains, spend the whole day only fucking, and whether they would eventually take over the country because they didn't use contraceptives and would soon form the demographic majority.

Invasion, danger, physiognomy—these (nearly) forgotten words had made their way back into Germany’s active vocabulary. Ultimately, it was also discussed whether “the others”—that is, the non-Florians—were hurting the country. The reality—that they had helped build this country as guest workers<sup>vi</sup>—was repressed, sidelined, denied. Their codetermination of the future was undesirable. So, clear boundaries were drawn: The “We Group” was now “mainstream society,” and the “Foreign Group” was “the minority.”

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He actually doesn’t want to talk about racism anymore. No, not with her either. She is politically active, works with refugees, speaks out against racism. Still, she can understand why people believe the N-Word isn’t racist, she says: “Because they’ve always used it.” The same applies to the word ‘colored.’ ‘Gypsy sauce’ isn’t a racist term either, it’s just a kind of food. She even finds an explanation for why it’s still okay to write things like “no asians, no blacks” on dating apps: “It’s just about your own preference—taste is taste. Taste can’t be racist.”

She understands it all—she doesn’t think it’s right or good, but she can understand. He can’t. “You’re too intolerant,” she says to him. “Nothing’s going to change if you aren’t ready to talk with people that maybe aren’t *politically correct*. They aren’t racists—some people just don’t know any better,” she continues. “I’m going to the bathroom,” he says. He wants to buy himself some time. “Should I grab a couple more beers?” She nods.

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The people who want to grapple with their own behavior least often consider themselves to be leftists. They have sex with people who aren’t named Jens or Lisa. Sometimes these relationships even produce kids who aren’t white. The parents can then declare themselves to be experts—capable of defining the word ‘racism.’ And this is precisely the kind of logic that the spaghetti muncher knew too well. Again and again, he’s heard things like: “I have nothing against (im)migrants, my best friend is one,” or even “I don’t hate ‘em, I hook up with them.” But if racism is everywhere, if we’re constantly surrounded by it, perpetually reproduce it, how exactly can they claim to be free from it? Because they’ve written in their diaries about it? Because they have friends with (hi)stories of migration? Because they’ve taken in refugees?

The problem with the concept of ‘racism’ lies in its use. We need neither a new syntax nor a new semantics; we simply need to be more precise with our use of terms. Racist, Nazi, fascist, neo-Nazi, rightwing populist, rightwing extremist, and rightwing are not synonyms, but various concepts with semantic differences which sometimes—but not necessarily—overlap.

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When he comes back from the restroom and jostles his way to the bar, he notices how the men beside him put a hand over their pockets. Probably to secure their wallets. Is he too sensitive? He goes back, hands his friend one of the beers, and sits down. “Did you just see that?” he asks. She shakes her head. He tells her about it as she takes a sip of beer.

“You’re paranoid. How do you even know that? Maybe they’re playing pocket pool.” He doesn’t know what irritates him more: the flippant expression or her actually downplaying the issue. “Just look at those two guys. They look like the type who’d get scared as soon as they even see a *Kanak*<sup>vii</sup>—total potatoes, those two.” She rolls her eyes. He takes a listless sip of his beer.

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He can no longer remember the first time he used the word *Kanak*. He knows only how powerful it made him feel when he and the other Kanaks began to make German society aware of its racism. The Annes, Stefans, and Alexandras always responded with denial: “It’s really not that bad. Nobody died.” Or: “Oh, just suck it up for once! In other countries, people are shot by the police.” Or: “That’s not racism!” How was he supposed to respond to that?

He has known these reactions since his childhood. There are so many different forms of racism. But the potatoes, as he called the non-Kanaks, still only knew of one. They were blind to structural, institutional or everyday racism. Whenever he’d say: “You’re all racists. Germany is a racist country, through and through,” they’d always take offense. They would immediately answer: “No, we’re not!” Or: “What gives you the right to say that?” And sometimes, when they were especially pissed, it’d be: “You’d better look at what’s happening in your own country.” Provoked by the topic of racism, the minds of the Martins, Melanies, and Dominics would always dredge up the same stereotypical images: shaved heads, violence-prone people or also just more generally, all *Ossis*—East Germans.<sup>viii</sup> And those categories didn’t apply to them at all.

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“I don’t want to discount your experiences of racism,” the friend says after a while. He moves his head in her direction and asks: “What?” The music drowns out her words. She repeats her sentence, screaming: “I don’t want to categorically discount your experiences of racism, but...” There it was again, this qualifying “but”: “...but in this case, even you can’t know one hundred percent. Maybe you just interpreted it the wrong way.”

Had he? Has he, at this point, become so obsessed with the R-word that he sees it everywhere? At the U-Bahn-Station, at the bakery, in the shops? “I just know, it’s a feeling.” But a feeling, a look—those aren’t enough. In order to describe something objectively, she needs more. He has to convince her, and she gives him no benefit of the doubt. He has to prove it; only then will she believe him. Maybe.

“What’s more, you should also cut it out with the identitarian bullshit. You’re always setting up dichotomies: us against them, potatoes against Kanaks. That won’t lead to anything. We can only solve things together, and you know that, too.”

Does he? He feels how enraged he is gradually becoming, how the discussion about racism always brings him to a dead-end—not because he doesn’t have any arguments, but because he always has to prove himself anew. “Why don’t *you* cut it out? So now I’m ostracizing people because I call them ‘potatoes?’” Is that it? Do you not feel integrated now? Yeah, it’s shitty being constantly labeled. But like all of you always say: Words are

just words. They can't hurt you if they're well-intended. There's no reason to get offended," he hears himself saying, and already, in that moment, he regrets it.

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Words are never really just words. Now that the rightwing-extremist AfD has been elected to the German Parliament, everyone is even more nervous about calling the party what it is: racist. Suddenly it's better to develop a whole new vocabulary. Rightwing populist, yeah, that's what it is. But racist? No. Antisemitic? No. When Nazis in Chemnitz attacked people on the street whom they perceived to be foreign, it seemed clear to everyone: Those were Nazis. But those people who stood on the periphery—the same people who also didn't leave the demonstration when neo-Nazis gave the Hitler salute? Those were just normal citizens who were afraid. Fear is irrational and therefore not racist.

Racism is becoming something unutterable. It's no longer a word to mark a social structure and the analysis thereof; it's something which has already been overcome. Racism has been relocated, removed from one's own context. But the real problem remains, slowly bubbling under the surface. One part of the problem is those people who talk about restrictions on free speech or thought, those claiming that people can't say anything anymore, and then go on to write interminable editorials in the papers about how they can't say anything anymore. These people also have their favorite terms which they won't let go of—because they want to feel free in their language, as if each word really just stood alone without context or association and the only thing that really counted was one's intentions. A further part of the problem is those who claim to be antiracist—a claim which seems to free them from the obligation to self-reflect. They're the people who claim with one hundred percent self-certainty that they themselves aren't racist, only to then go out and reproduce forms of racism. Most of the time, these are also the same people who project the problem further and further away from themselves. This is much easier than reflecting on one's own privilege. Ultimately, everything should stay the same for them anyway. They're the ones who tell the spaghetti muncher: "You're too aggressive. It's because of you that there are rightwing populists in Parliament."

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His leg jumps around. He no longer has any control over his emotions, and he knows it. From now on, it's going to get emotional, he knows this, too. The discussion with her will take a turn: "I'm just so tired of it. Germany is a racist country. How could that *not* be the case? But I'm not allowed to say 'racism,' because it makes other people uncomfortable. Why should I care about your discomfort?" he says.

She swallows the last of her beer from the bottle, puts it down on the small, round, glass table and says: "Your discomfort? Who do you mean by 'your?'" Me? I don't have to feel good. That's not what it's about. I know that there's racism here. But you exaggerate it and see it everywhere, even in people who are clearly anti-racist and fight against racism. I don't think that's constructive. It just doesn't help the situation."

He hates it so much when he loses the upper hand in a discussion, when the power-relations invert and he's driven into a corner where he can only respond with rage: "What

the hell are you talking about? All these people use racist language every day, benefit every day from a racist system. And you know it. But I'm the one who's paranoid?"

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There's no place for rage in this society. Rage is often viewed as counterproductive, as something incompatible with this society. Composure, on the other hand, is always elevated. The fight against the right can only be carried out with composure, they say. But in the last thirty years, composure hasn't helped to dismantle structural racism, let alone talk honestly about it. For him, rage is the driving force. Because of it, he no longer cares about politely explaining what is racist about a given position; he is no longer well-mannered and pedagogical in every conversation, but direct and curt. The rage inside him is like a small flame that maintains his body temperature at a constant fever, waiting for the opportunity to rise to the boiling point. This rage frightens those around him. It's simultaneously his Achilles' heel, because they think he no longer has any arguments, only his rage. He knows he's fulfilling a racist cliché: the aggressive foreigner. But he doesn't care.

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It's late. He looks around. The men who stood at the bar have already left the pub. Besides the two of them, there's only a couple making out in the back corner. He rolls himself a cigarette, but his hands are shaking. She comes back with two fresh bottles of beer. How many beers is that now, he asks himself, but he has no answer. Does it even matter? He's more tired now than angry. These never-ending discussions wear on him. He rears up one last time:

"So, what ever happened to your 'welcoming culture?'<sup>ix</sup> You all talk about Muslim men like they're ticking time-bombs, waiting to rape your kids. You all talk about People of Color like they're slow-witted beasts, as if you were all still wearing your little colonial hats. You camouflage your racism with empiricism because it's supposedly objective. You all tell us we don't have any arguments when your only argument is: 'seen one, seen 'em all.'" He leans further and further into it; he can't stop himself anymore. The words just flow out. She listens and nods at the right moments, even if he sees how the generalizing "you all" bothers her; she doesn't interrupt. "We have to talk about racism differently, correctly for once and not always like a definition in a book. When racism is pervasive, entrenched in the system, established in its language, chiseled into its architecture, how can you or anyone else claim to be free from it?" he asks.

These sentences are always his last resort, an attack disguised in objective sentences. He doesn't know exactly what he wants from her. Is she supposed to say, "Yes, I, too, am a racist"? And then what? "I constantly have to listen to so much bullshit, even when you don't believe me, but I bite my tongue so often and just roll my eyes instead of entering into a discussion. And even though I hold back, you still think I'm paranoid." He looks at her, as if she now has to immediately react, immediately admit he's right. She does him no such favor. She looks at him, coolly—but not heartlessly—composed, like someone who is just about to play their ace in a game of cards: "And what about you? If what you say is true, then you'd also have to be a racist."



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He hates this question. He hates this friend because she dares to pose it. Is he also a racist? After all, he sometimes does have a millisecond of fear when he goes home at night and sees a group of young men who look suspicious—even though nothing ever happens. He often wonders where people come from, he just doesn't ask. And he grasps at his backpack in the U-Bahn when he thinks that someone could steal something, too. He considers how to leave her question unanswered and flee the situation.

He slowly takes a sip of beer and rolls a final cigarette. His hands shake even more and his leg hops up and down like the Energizer Bunny. He sneaks a glance at the exit. Just getting up in a rush and leaving would be one option. Then he could tell her later how insolent her question was. But that wouldn't make sense. They both know how this ends now anyway. He's boxed himself into a corner. He will have to answer the question with an unambiguous "Yes," otherwise his whole argument will fall apart like a house of cards. It's not that he hasn't asked himself the question plenty of times before; it's also not as if he didn't already know the answer. Still, he's hesitant to say it out loud in front of her because only then do some things really seem to become true. You can't just repress them and wait for them to disappear in your cerebrum. But most of all, he didn't want to give her the satisfaction of getting off so easily.

But he also grew up in a racist society. He also heard the stories of the "foreign man" as a child. He also reads the newspapers with the reports in which allegedly only people with migration backgrounds ever commit crimes. He also long believed that migrants have to speak perfect German to be perfectly integrated. And he himself had written scenes in which he acted like only white children had blue eyes or were named Christian or Julia.

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Of course, he is—I, the spaghetti muncher, am—a racist.

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<sup>i</sup> Rothaus Tannenzäpfle is a beer brewed in southern Germany.

<sup>ii</sup> *Multikulti* is a shortened form of the German *multikulturell* [multicultural]. It was the slogan of progressive parties in the 70s and 80s and became a defining term for public policy that embraced diversity of culture in society. Since then, *multikulti* has been used in both positive and pejorative ways, including Angela Merkel's 2010 pronouncement amid rising anti-immigration sentiment in Germany that *multikulti* was dead. See: "Merkel says German multicultural society has failed." *BBC*. 17 October 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11559451>.

<sup>iii</sup> *Duden* is a standard German dictionary.

<sup>iv</sup> The English phonetic spelling here is borrowed from: "Racism." *Merriam-Webster*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/racism>. Last updated 18 May 2021. Accessed 3 June 2021. German Original: "Rassismus." *Duden*. <https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Rassismus>. Accessed 3 June 2021.

<sup>v</sup> The AfD—the *Alternative für Deutschland* [Alternative for Germany]—is a far-right, anti-immigration political party, which gained traction in the 2010s.

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vi *Gastarbeiter* / *Vertragsarbeiter* [guest/contract workers] were migrant workers predominantly from Mediterranean countries or Eastern Europe who helped (re)build East and West Germany throughout the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the names imply, their labor and residence were considered temporary, despite their lasting contributions.

vii *Kanak* is a German slang word originally meant as a slur against migrants from Southern Europe, the Mediterranean, and West Asia. Since its introduction in common vernacular in the 60s and 70s, it has become a reclaimed word of self-empowerment within certain German-speaking communities.

viii *Ossi* is a term to refer to people either directly from or descendants of former East Germany. A common association with East Berliners in the era of Reunification, and of people from contemporary East Germany today is racism, neonazism, and/or rightwing extremism.

ix *Willkommenskultur* [welcoming culture] was/is a programmatic cultural disposition towards accepting foreigners and refugees. Its use as a political mantra skyrocketed in the 2010s during the so-called refugee crisis.