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Looks

by Hengameh Yaghoobifarah

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Translated by Jonas Teupert

A friend and I walk through the museum quarter of a West-German city, surrounded by a bunch of tourists. There are plenty of exhibitions, but none can compete with the spectacle my body seems to present. Besides piercing gazes, I notice a few Annikas aiming their phones at me and, without asking for permission, taking pictures as though I were a Banksy graffiti. “Ey, they’re taking pics of me again,” I whisper to my friend. She looks me over. “I think it’s your outfit. They’re simply not used to such a crazy style.”

My aesthetic is many things: It’s camp, it’s queer, it’s femme; it’s the popular kid from junior high 2003 and simultaneously the misfit from 2007. But crazy? At a cloister retreat maybe. But not in a European metropolis where there are people out in clown costumes or painted like statues. “With all these bachelor_ette¹ parties, I am almost a wallflower!” I protest. For real, I’m not wearing anything that no one else would.

And yet, situations in which I am stared at by bystanders or photographed without my consent happen to me on a daily basis. I am perceived as “different,” as “foreign.” I’m never quite sure exactly why. Is it because I’m fat? Because I’m queer? Because I’m a *Kanak_in*?² Or is it really my style? Maybe it’s all of the above combined. Maybe a fat, queer *Kanak_in* with a bomb outfit is too shocking for Annika. But are all these attributions apparent at first glance?

Obviously, I can’t hide my belly or double chin. But the fact that I identify neither as female nor male is not written all over my face. Most of the time, people read me as a cis woman. Whiteness, too, often lies in the eyes of the beholder. Say, for example, when the supposed German look is defined. Of course, not all Germans look like the child on the “Rotbäckchen”³ juice bottle. But as soon as someone has dark hair that’s thicker than the teeth of a comb, a nose that isn’t just a tiny button, and a skin color that deviates by a shade from mayonnaise, a process occurs that’s generally referred to as othering—more concretely, as racialization. Gazes scan over you, and you realize: *The Kanak is present.*⁴

Now, my skin is as mayo as Annika’s. Unlike my parents, I’m sometimes read as Southern European, sometimes simply as white, as long as I don’t declare my name. I don’t even receive a fraction of the racist violence that impacts people

¹ Where German noun endings are gendered, the author uses the ‘gender gap,’ e.g. in “Junggesell_innen,” to express gender inclusivity.

² The use of the gender gap in the self-attribution *Kanak_in* expresses that the author neither identifies as male nor female.

³ A nutritional drink for children that features a blond, white child with rosy cheeks on its label.

⁴ English in the original.

affected by colorism, those who are actually devalued on the basis of their skin color. My skin color doesn't get compared in a dehumanizing manner to either groceries or dirt. I don't stand out as a *Kanak_in* immediately, as do other people in my family.

The borders of whiteness always run parallel to the power structures of their respective society. Its attribution often depends on geographies and historical context. In Germany, I am not white. In Iran, I am. There, I am not discriminated against according to supposed ethnic belonging because I am a part of the majority. Yet sometimes, the perspective decides where I am situated socially. As if by magic, my position in society can switch completely without me moving at all. But being also readable as white means that white Germans will always categorize you in a way that is convenient or even advantageous to them.

When they want to ask me inappropriate questions about where I am "really from" or, alternatively, about the saffron prices in Iran, I am a *Kanak_in*. When I'm out with my family, I'm a *Kanak_in*. Hunting for an apartment or passing border control, I am definitively a *Kanak_in*. And when people debate about the conflict in the Middle East or talk about integration, I am most certainly a *Kanak_in*. In these instances, I seem to have expertise in my DNA, such that, even as a teenager, I've been drawn into discussions with white adults who ask me for an assessment of the current crisis. Needless to say, I ought not forget to distance myself in the same breath from the different parties involved in the crisis. Lest I render myself somehow suspicious when my being "in-the-know" gets confused with being in cahoots.

It is flattering that already at an early age I was deemed capable of dealing with world politics alongside school routines, clique dynamics, depressions, and hobbies. Or let's say it would be flattering, if it did not imply that, as a young German-Iranian, I was already expected to exhibit a common knowledge in junior high that is not even expected of most white German adults.

This demonstrates that Children and Youths of Color are not merely held to the same standard of achievement as adults. They are also deprived of a levity which is naturally conceded to their white peers. The legitimating argument "But they're just a child!" (a presumed innocence, the lack of which I would later recognize as a life-long companion) does not apply to people like me. Only now that I am grown up and fight furiously against discrimination, does it sometimes make an appearance. In such cases, the violent offenders gladly see me as nothing more than a defiant child who cannot discuss things rationally and reacts with too much sensitivity.

However, I also experience the opposite effect: When I critique racism, white Germans suddenly see me as white myself and assume that I wouldn't know how racism really feels. Denying my experience and identity is supposed to strip my critique of its legitimacy. People in positions of power employ this form of silencing as a method which renders it impossible for those affected by discrimination to voice their experience: Because they consider me either too agitated to speak with reason or too calm to be actually affected.

The people who try to deflect or devalue my political analyses by forcefully defining me as white are the same people who can't pronounce my name and want to know where I am really from within two minutes of becoming acquainted. Do they ask the same question to Annika from Wuppertal? Or does she look "German enough" that it is clear that she and the three generations before her were "quite boring: from Germany."

In English, there is the term "white gaze." When it is directed at People of Color, it defines and evaluates them from a white perspective. This white gaze manifests itself when a white police officer sees a Kanak⁵ and out of the blue asks for his papers. Or when a white woman clutches her purse on the subway when a Romani woman boards the train. But also when white students encounter a Black person and suddenly start talking to them in an affected slang and using strange gestures.

White gaze is considered neutral and normative. This is why its partiality is often vehemently denied from a white perspective. What appears as "normal" from this perspective counts as the norm. It includes, for example, Eurocentric ideals of beauty that are decisive in establishing which bodies count as beautiful, desirable, and thus also worthy of protection. Because in our society, the attractiveness of a person has a strong impact on how they are treated by others.

Only since Instagram & Co., aesthetic, self-determined, and positive depictions of bodies that defy limiting norms have gained prominent positions. Because heteronomy and white gaze also mean that those bodies are mostly used as placeholders for narrow and stereotypical roles in mainstream media. A female lawyer wearing a headscarf would overwhelm the *Tatort*⁶ audience, some TV guy claimed at the panel discussion, "Crime Scene Immigration Society – The Responsibility of Television."

In this sense, white gaze is a sort of camera lens that captures alleged realities in an extremely biased manner. Comparing them with the self, it is always directed at "others," the "foreigners"—whether it be through ethnographies, orientalist travel writing, or blogs reporting on a Voluntary Year of Social Service in Ghana or a vacation in India. White gaze becomes a pair of binoculars on the world.

For People of Color (PoC), this also pertains to the perception of one's own body. Because the omnipresence of the white (yet normalized) gaze distorts the self-perception of those who do not comply with Eurocentric ideals of beauty. Rather than celebrating the diversity of bodies, many PoC long for an appearance that they will never obtain, or attain only under the utmost difficulties. Actually, they should not yearn for this at all because this desire for assimilation is toxic. Bleaching hair or skin, altering facial composition through operations, or losing weight not only costs time, money, and energy, it also often increases the hatred for one's own body, especially if the sole motivation is conformity to white standards of beauty. Nevertheless, as a white-passing person, I do not condemn such

⁵ Footnote in the original: To answer the question straight away: Yes, it is racist when white people use the term *Kanak*. The mere fact that I do it doesn't mean that white Germans can.

⁶ Literally meaning "Crime Scene." A weekly TV show watched by millions of Germans each Sunday.

procedures for other PoC. Particularly if we remain with the example of lightening one's skin. First of all: Everyone is in charge of their own body. To voice my opinion on such a personal and sensitive topic without first being asked would be patronizing. It would also mean that I made a person feel shitty after they underwent a largely irreversible procedure. Such a move would be downright arrogant and cynical. Those who profit from colorism like I and white people likewise, cannot imagine what this desire to modify the body through pain actually means—because it may ease a pain for the person in question which we simply do not know. What I can do, though, is to reveal white gaze and to disseminate positive examples by demanding representation and diverse role models.

My Instagram inbox is filled with messages in which young People of Color, Muslims, and queers write that my pictures make them feel empowered and seen. On the one hand, this is quite flattering. On the other, it troubles me that selfies of me squinting into the camera with half-closed eyes seem to be a source of inspiration for so many young people only because they do not receive appreciation and respect in most other venues of society. No one has to tell them: “I don't respect you, *Kanak_in!*” The suggestive gazes they encounter on a daily basis are enough.

People internalize white gaze already at an early age. A friend told me that her son is one out of two Children of Color in the entire *Kinderladen*.⁷ Already at age three, he was the scapegoat for everything that went awry. Something would break, and the children would call his name even if he was in a different room. White gaze works in a very simple way, and everyone rehearses and reenacts it time and again. In illustrations and caricatures about sexualized violence, for example, the victim is most often a white woman and the perpetrator, a man with dark hair. Gaze divides people based on their appearance—usually, according to phenotypical traits: into good and bad, but also into “normal” and “exotic.”

It is telling that the term “white gaze” sounds like “white gays” because in queer spaces, too, not everyone is equal. Here racisms are being proliferated just like anywhere else. Many People of Color, especially femmes, are denied queerness, even by other queers. The white mainstream has long been chewing on a mystery that not even Aiman Abdallahs can solve for them: If *Kanak_innen* always hate gays and are never queer themselves, how can people like me exist?

And to be clear, I am not the exception that proves a racist rule. When white lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, inter, and queer people (LSBTIQ) do not see Muslim gays as part of their community, this is a far-reaching problem that cannot be resolved by a guessing game of “hipster beard or Quran-appropriate facial hair?” The question rather is: Whom in our community do we grant protection and whom do we demarcate as a nuisance from the start?

At the same time, it is not unusual among white queers as well as straights to fetishize people coded as Muslim. Maybe they devoured with fascination too many European travel diaries about the “Orient.” Or their parents showed them the film *Not Without My Daughter* on repeat to warn them about the “Muslims.”

⁷ Antiauthoritarian nursery for children.

⁸ A German television presenter of Egyptian descent, who moderates the popular science show *Galileo*.

But no matter whether it be for the exotic factor or because they want to fuck Muslim people as an expression of their own power under the banner of Western “liberation”: It is racist and violent to impose stereotypical fetishes on people.

For centuries, this hyper-sexualization of (as well as the obsession with) bodies read as female and non-white has served as a basis for the legitimization of violence against women coded, for example, as (South-)East Asian, Black, and Muslim. A predatory gaze can be more repulsive than stepping in dog shit with brand new sneakers. It makes sure the person stared at does not feel safe in their own body, feels ashamed of their own appearance, or after the experience of violence, blames themselves even though they are not responsible for the misdirected desire of others.

In anticipation of one question that may already have entered the reader’s mind over the course of the last paragraphs: Can love be wrong and desire racist? Is it not merely a matter of taste when some people exhibit a strong preference for certain bodies? After all, it’s common practice on gay dating platforms like Grindr or Planet Romeo to foreclose matches with fat, Black, East Asian, or feminine people. If there are people out there whose type is, for example, always Black or East Asian, isn’t it a good thing that someone takes a liking to those who are otherwise undesired? Some may think so. What they fail to take into consideration, however, is that your body is neither charity for their conscience nor merchandise for their racist fantasies.

Dominating, exoticizing, de- or hyper-sexualizing gazes rarely just bounce off you. Typically, they stick. Because often this is not about an individual perspective, but about structural and widespread stigmatizations you end up internalizing. They distort your self-perception, and it becomes more difficult to deal with your desire and body autonomously because it never really belongs to you but to the mainstream and its piercing gaze.

Not only those affected by racism experience othering, but also (for example) people who are fat, queer or trans, differently abled, or visibly poor. If even several of these categories apply to you, “normal” people stare at you even more, especially if you and your body and/or life are not in accordance with their worldview.

What does match very well for Germans, however, is being fat and a *Kanak_in*. Because this combination operates in wonderful harmony with the stereotype that “immigrants” are lazy and dirty and live a comfortable life at the expense of the German tax payers. Like fat people. In this case, racism and the hatred against fat people go hand in hand. The fact that (post)migrant people usually can’t afford to be lazy plays no role in this narrative. At age 23, I would not have become editor of a magazine—struggling yet highly coveted by feminists of all gender identities as it was—if I had spent most of my life chilling out. Behind each and every successful Person of Color, there is hard work—as well as the work of demanding parents. Fatma Aydemir describes this as well in her wonderful essay about work.

Yet, I’ve also learned not to rub my achievements or success in white Germans’ faces. Firstly because I have no desire whatsoever to be the successful

integration story, and secondly because I do not want to incite the envy of others. Or, as I might say: That they give me the evil eye. From early on, I was socialized to wear a Nazar-amulet against the evil eye and regularly burn incense in my room. That's supposed to protect me from malevolent people.

The blue-white-black brooch of an eye—superstitious kitsch for many—admittedly does not prevent anyone from directing their gaze and camera upon me. But other means are effective against these: staring back and snatching the phones out of their hands. Because while many Germans have little understanding for terms such as 'personal boundaries' or 'respect,' damage to property is a buzz word that sounds some alarms. This is apparent not least in the fact that burning refugee shelters fail to awaken the interest of mainstream society while burning cars provoke expressions of solidarity and panic. No matter then, how little the respect white Germans have for the boundaries and privacy of People of Color: If you touch their property, you suddenly speak a language they understand. And then, even the otherwise despised multilingualism of PoC suddenly seems okay.