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# Visible

by Sasha Marianna Salzmann

## *TRANSIT* vol. Your Homeland is Our Nightmare

*Translated by* Lou Silhol-Macher

I will never know what it means to be invisible. I will never know how it is to be able to kiss carelessly in the park, to just go for it. What it means to stroll in the streets and not have to deal with the fact that somebody might try and touch my hair as they walk by. How it is not to have to constantly self-soothe in monologues after a day of being asked multiple times whether one understands German. To dissolve in the crowd is not an option for me. I belong to several minority groups at once; to conceal this would entail more dangers for me than to name my positionalities.

*Your silence will not protect you*<sup>i</sup> is the title of a collection of essays by Audre Lorde in which she emphasizes the destructive force of self-imposed silence across several texts: According to Lorde, the only way to avoid having one's being turned against oneself is to speak out about it before others do. Otherwise, the attacks and judgements of others remain in the gray zones of society's perception, and it becomes possible for others to claim that they did not know.

I think about the Jewish people at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who were so busy trying to assimilate that Hitler had to remind them that they would never belong and never be wanted there. These people became Jewish through discrimination, through exclusion, through their death. Many of them thought that if they understood themselves as being part of Christian-German society they would become exactly that. Some of them believed the antisemitic propaganda and were ashamed of themselves: "For those who could or wanted to assimilate, anything that recalled the musk of Judaism was a kind of ugly atavism, like a fishtail that one drags along behind oneself after having made the first steps onto solid land," writes Maria Stepanova in her novel *Post-Memory*.<sup>ii</sup> The result of this is well known. Assimilation leads to a people's ruin. Why then do we try to belong? What promises does it hold, to be just like everyone else, to "be normal?" And can we really believe, after all the experiences of the past century, that one will be protected as a minority within a community if one is quiet and behaves as inconspicuously as possible?

At least in the Jewish context, this being-inconspicuous and not-naming-positionalities means that one disappears. If I do not celebrate my culture, it does not exist, I tried to explain to the woman who introduced herself as a Christian and pointed out to me after a reading that, for her, the way that I wear my Star of David visibly over my shirt is exhibitionism.

I had to think of this same woman again when I read in the report of the German Federal Antidiscrimination Agency that 43.8% of the German population completely or at least tendentially agree with the following statement: "Homosexuals should stop making such a fuss about their sexuality." For most of the people in this fraction, their sexuality is marked as the norm; they demand my silence, my discretion, and thus my disappearance when they imply that talking about homosexuality is not necessary anymore because homos are long since accepted everywhere these days. Even some high-placed politicians are openly gay, so the argument, and their lifestyle is living proof of the tolerance of a Western, Christian society. But if one looks closer at the history of queerness, it becomes clear how unsecured

and contested this territory is: The anti-gay law (Paragraph 175) that sentenced men engaging in homosexual acts to prison, introduced in Germany in 1872 and tightened by the Nazis in 1935, was only abolished in 1994. The rehabilitation of all those convicted and their sexual partners followed only in 2017: Many of them were already long dead.

So-called “marriage for all”<sup>iii</sup> was introduced in Germany in 2017, but it remains highly controversial and disputed.

Not until 2018, did the World Health Organization take trans-identities off their list of mental illnesses. And still, the people in question are required to produce two independent psychiatric reports if they want to start hormone therapy. The recently adopted law providing for a third gender option, which foresees a “diverse” option next to “male” and “female,” is meant for intersexuals, and not for trans-identifying and non-binary people. I, myself, as a non-binary person, grew up with the feeling that people consider the way that I see myself as a psychological disorder.

At the same time, it is true that lesbian and gay rights have now become a relevant card to play in political power struggles. According to its own self-conceptualization, Europe stands for the tolerance of sexual minorities. Not incidentally, each country wishing to join the EU allows a Gay Pride Parade to happen right after applying for membership. Most of the time, this is a first, and it comes with heavy police deployment meant to protect those marching and celebrating in the face of a raging mob. Not incidentally, Russia, which sees itself as radically opposed to the Union in which we live, calls us *Gayropa*.

And so we have this fairytale of the Good Gay here in our country. He is a) white, and b) desires the same things as any heterosexual person purportedly does: a partner, a house, cars, and a career. As I was writing this text, one of these Good Gays, Jens Spahn, was campaigning for chairmanship of the political party currently in power in Germany. He does not keep quiet about his sexuality, however, he admits that he was forced to come out, both publicly and privately, because of power struggles internal to the party. Furthermore, he does not tire from emphasizing that he will not participate in any “gay political clientelism.” He certainly does not want to stand out as gay. His trademark is his hatred for Muslims: He wants to forbid burkas, fulminates against Muslim men in fitness clubs who shower in their underpants, and draws parallels between criminals’ religious backgrounds and their crimes. But when it comes to finding arguments for his demagoguery, his sexual orientation is actually exactly what Spahn needs: He claims to be scared of Islam because his homosexuality would have him thrown off towers in a Muslim country, so he says. When asked by a journalist about the acceptance of gay marriage in the small, Christian town where Spahn comes from (Ottenstein, Westmünsterland), he answered: “Certainly there are some reservations. But just because someone has reservations, it does not automatically make them a homophobe.”<sup>iv</sup>

Following this logic, the hardliners in Hungary, Poland, Bavaria, and the Netherlands also were not homophobic, and probably neither were the one million protesters against gay marriage who marched in the streets of Paris just a few years ago. Only Muslims are the enemies of the gays in Spahn’s worldview.

There are national, patriotic, gay saviors of the Western World aplenty. This position is no invention of Spahn’s. With the concept of homonationalism,<sup>v</sup> gender theorist Jasbir Puar describes how members of excluded minorities forge their (career) path in a majority society: financially robust, (and mostly) white homosexuals arise as ambassadors of hard-won European rights, which they must defend against allegedly homophobic cultures.

Homonationalism is obviously not reserved for gay men: In a recent speech to the members of her party, the Alternative for Germany (*AfD*), Alice Weidel claimed that she would be a billionaire if she had received a penny for every time she was asked the eternal question of how she, a lesbian (with a partner from Sri Lanka and two adopted children, all

living in Switzerland), could represent a right-wing, nationalist party. A party which, in its program, contains little concrete propositions other than hatred for minorities. Hatred for this alleged “gendermania.” Hatred for “Islam.” You name it.

Weidel’s response is predictable and follows the same principle as Spahn’s argument: Her membership in the AfD is, of course, not negotiated against, but *motivated by* her homosexuality.<sup>vi</sup>

I observe the audience in front of which Alice Weidel gives this twelve-minute long speech about her sexual orientation. They cheer. Shriveled grandpas raise their thumbs. Women applaud with sparkling eyes, this close to standing ovations. I wonder what would happen if the same Alice Weidel now said: “My dears, the prosperity of our society is based on the massive exploitation of this planet and its peoples, and this is why I stand here today, and demand open borders and the resolute redistribution of goods.” I imagine how the woman with her backcombed chestnut hair and brownish-red lipstick applied well over the edges of her lips would nudge her neighbor with an elbow, and whisper in such a way that everybody in the room could hear: “She’s a lesbian, right?” In response to which, the man in the striped shirt with rimless glasses seated tightly on the bridge of his nose would raise his chin even higher, unfold his arms, and roll his eyes in disgust, maybe he would also say something with a derogatory grimace on his face.

I wonder whether Alice Weidel really thinks that these people accept her as a homosexual. Or whether she knows that her audience celebrates her for the hatred that she embodies, which had already been brewing for a long time under the lid of politically hackneyed phrases, and now exists out in the open in the explicit declarations of the AfD. Hatred for all things related to migration, hatred for the “refugees,” the “Turks,” the “Arabs,” as well as antisemitism, are highly popular in the AfD, which is currently the third most important party in this country.

Of course, Alice Weidel understands that the masses who applaud her are using her being a lesbian as an alibi against potential accusations of discrimination and racism. Of course, Jens Spahn knows that many a member of the Catholic community, including those in his beloved region of Münster, would have prescribed him a psychiatric treatment during his childhood, following the latest recommendations of the head of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis.

All the so-called world religions are used for the sake of exclusion, in order to justify homophobia and misogyny. Neither a liberal female imam, nor a queer female rabbi, nor an openly gay pastor can furnish counterevidence on that matter. But that is not what it is about for Spahn or Weidel. Both know that the way up the ladder for a successful career is much quicker with populist declarations than with debates about the complex topic of multiple discrimination.

Both of these homonationalists occupy top positions in the German political landscape, at a moment when the economy is flourishing, unemployment and crime rates are low, and the number of asylum seekers remains under the stipulated maximum limit. So the usual attempts to explain Germany’s swing to the Right are already ruled out.

“Unfortunately, it seems to be much easier to condition human behavior and to make people conduct themselves in the most unexpected and outrageous manner, than it is to persuade anybody to learn from experience, as the saying goes; that is, to start thinking and judging instead of applying categories and formulas,” Hannah Arendt writes in her essay “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship.”<sup>vii</sup>

The dynamics of violence, as sociological studies show, do not simply point like a straight arrow from perpetrator to victim; rather, they take the shape of a triangle. Discrimination, exclusion, and destruction thus take place in a field of tension between three parties: the attacked person, the attacker, and, thirdly, the group that fails to support

the attacked person and does not position itself as a protective shield in front of them. The group that looks the other way. Claims that nothing happened. Tries to make the event unrecognizable, and persuades the victim not to draw attention to themselves by making this aggression public. For the attacked person, the first, immediate evil comes from the attacker, but the second, lasting one actually comes from the group which looks the other way. For them, to be attacked by someone full of hatred against their lifestyle does not come as a surprise. But that people are watching and not intervening, not helping, maybe even retrospectively denying the event, that is what causes the wound that shakes them in their basic trust.

This experience becomes transcribed into a knowledge with which the person subsequently moves through the world. This knowledge forever affects the ways in which a marginalized body will relate to this third group that understands itself as the majority. It is not about the fact that this majority did not attack the person themselves—it is always single individuals who perform the aggression—but they also did not defend. Because the aggressions of single individuals arise from the structures of violence of this third group, the majority.

38.4% of survey respondents in Germany find homosexual kissing in public uncomfortable. 43.8% want me to be invisible. Since my childhood, in which I was put into clothes which attempted to misshape me; since puberty, during which my body started to change in a way that felt wrong to me; at the latest since my coming out, of which I did not yet know that it would be a permanent one, I am an *other*. I do not need a so-called integration in discriminatory structures. I know the mechanisms of assimilation, I already know the divide-and-conquer strategy as a Jewish person.

Just like gay rights have been made into a calling card for a liberal Europe, so, too, does Europe stand for the protection of Jewish people. This invention is called the “Judeo-Christian West.” Despite a growing antisemitism (after all, according to the 2018 study on authoritarianism from Leipzig, one out of ten people in Germany believes that “Jewish people have something particular to themselves, and do not quite fit in with us”), being Jewish in Germany offers many privileges, provided that one moves within a set of prescribed coordinates. Either one has forgiven the Germans, or one is the irreconcilable “angry Jew” who will never forgive the Germans.

Both positions mirror each other and revolve around the Shoah, which means that “the Jew” in Germany is unthinkable today outside the context of his attempted extermination. In the nineties, Germany imported its Jew from countries of the former Soviet Union in order to fill the gap created half a century before, and gave to him the special label of “quota refugee.” By this is meant a white, middle-class man who lives secularly or wears his star of David on a discreet necklace under his shirt. He can wear his yarmulke on November 9<sup>th</sup>,<sup>viii</sup> and he is asked about antisemitism now and again, whenever another embarrassing comedian adopts the wrong tone, or when people are looking to justify caps on immigration.

Since the debates around migration from Muslim countries have been dominating media, the Jew—similarly to the Gay or the Lesbian—has become interesting, provided he shows himself ready to testify against the Muslim (“My lesbian neighbor/my gay neighbor/my Jewish neighbor also doesn’t want Syrian people as neighbors”). As a reward, the promise of belonging, i.e. the integration in mainstream society, glistens from afar. This mechanism culminates in a kind of Jewish nationalism which has recently taken shape under the banner of “Jews in the AfD.” This group may not have a significant number of members, yet it has been effectively staged in the media.

Already some time ago, a weekly journal asked me if I wanted to talk about how I feel about the alarming societal changes induced by the vast numbers of Muslim immigrants.

As a countermove, I offered to write about living with my Syrian housemates: two young men who, at the time, had been in Germany for one and two years respectively. I was imagining a text in which I would give an account of my mother's visit in our then-shared flat. Of my fearing her potential antimuslim prejudices or the potentially inappropriate remarks of the two men about my mother. I wanted to tell about my own prejudice and how it expressed itself in ever-renewed conflict fantasies, while in reality, my mother, Mazen, and Yazan engaged in lively discussions about the living conditions in asylum centers—about the inevitably checkered shirts of the guards, about the smell in the communal kitchens, about how long it takes for the civil servants at immigration offices to pronounce one's name correctly. My mother assured the boys, that the latter moment would never come. They laughed a lot.

I stood behind the kitchen counter, and observed the three of them from the sideline. A doctor from Moscow, already in Germany for twenty years, by then with a German passport, flawless language skills, black curls, wide cheekbones, an appearance which always seems to give people the right to ask her about where she comes from. And two young men from Syria, both barely having come of age. The descriptive term for them is "refugee," their residence status is permanent. Their language school classes start early, sometimes they oversleep, sometimes they do not go because they are accompanying others to various state offices who have just arrived and know even less about their way around this country.

On that afternoon in our kitchen, my mother got worked up about how she wanted to buy me a Star of David, but none of the jewelers in the Lower Saxon city in which she lives had one in stock. I think it was Yazan who immediately exclaimed: "Abla, my uncle owns a jewelry shop around the corner, come by, we'll make you a Star of David. As many as you'd like."

Only after the weekly journal had refused my story did the ending for my text come to me: I would have told about how I went dancing with both of my housemates at the *Schwuz*, Berlin-Neukölln's legendary gay club. They may both be hetero, but they still like good music.

What do Alice Weidel, Jens Spahn, and the "Jews in the AfD" make of our Muslim-Jewish-queer dance culture? Of our friendships? Of our shared stories?

Where were the 43.8% of the population, who fully and completely or at least tendentially agree with the sentence, "Homosexuals should stop making such a fuss about their sexuality," when my girlfriend and I were assaulted on the Kottbusser Bridge in Kreuzberg, when I refused to swallow the "fucking lesbians" insult, yelled back instead, and the man started laying into me? I think they were there. I think they looked the other way. Those who came to my help were two passersby who phenotypically fell under the description "Muslim." I do not know them any further, we did not talk much after they had chased the assailant away. But I knew, when they offered me and my girlfriend a cigarette, that both of them understood the feeling of vulnerability we had in that moment. As different as we may be, our diverse knowledge about this not-belonging comes very close. Our common knowledge about never-being-normal. We are always visible.

Those two men from the Kottbusser Bridge and Mazen and Yazan are part of a large... part of *my* community. It is not one formed around sexual preferences, gender identities, or religion. We are the *others* who know that *normal* has nothing to say to us. *Normal* is not an authority for us. We will be there for one another, when mainstream society stands by and fails to intervene. We do not have to agree on everything, we do not even have to like one another. But we know about the power of alliances. And so we build our own structures, and when we are in danger, we will be able to depend on one another. We are the real Alternative for Germany.

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- i        Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (Silver Press, 2017) [posthumous].
- ii       The author is quoting from the German translation of *Pamjati pamjati. Romans*, a novel by Maria Stepanova (Novoe Izdatel'stvo, 2017). The novel has been translated into English by Sasha Dugdale under the title *In Memory of Memory* (New Directions, 2021).
- iii      *Ehe für alle*, gay marriage.
- iv      From an interview with Jens Spahn in the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, no. 20/2018.
- v        Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, (Duke University Press, 2007).
- vi      [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8\\_ozwNIhW4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8_ozwNIhW4) (The video has since been “removed by the user,” as of March 2020).
- vii     Hannah Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” *Responsibility and Judgment*, (Schocken, 2005) p. 37.
- viii    German Reunification Day, but also the anniversary of *Kristallnacht*.