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## TRANSIT

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# Looks

by Hengameh Yaghoobifarah

## *TRANSIT* Your Homeland is Our Nightmare

*Translated by Jonas Teupert*

A friend and I walk through the museum quarter of a West-German city, surrounded by a throng of tourists. There are plenty of attractions here, but none seems to compete with the spectacle my body presents. Alongside their 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 up and down. “I think it’s your outfit. They’re just not used to such a wild 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 wild? Maybe at a monastic retreat. But not in a European metropolis where there are literally people out in clown costumes or painted like statues. “With all these bachelor\_ette<sup>i</sup> parties, I’m practically a wallflower!” I protest. For real, I’m not wearing anything 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 read as ‘different,’ as ‘freaky,’ 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*?<sup>ii</sup> 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 just too shocking for Annika. But are *all* these attributions even visible at first glance?

Obviously, I can’t hide my belly or my double chin. But the fact that I identify as neither 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 defining a supposedly German look: Of course, not every German looks like the kid on the “Rotbäckchen”<sup>iii</sup> juice bottle. But as soon as someone has thick, dark hair which requires more than a few brushstrokes to tame; a nose that isn’t just a tiny button; and a skin color that deviates just a shade from mayonnaise, a process occurs that’s generally referred to as othering—more concretely, as racialization. Someone’s gaze scans over you, and you realize: *The Kanak is present.*<sup>iv</sup>

Now, my skin is just 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 say my name. I don’t receive even a fraction of the racist violence that impacts people affected by colorism: those who are actually denigrated 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. The attribution of whiteness often depends on geographies and historical context. In Germany, I am not white. In Iran, I am.<sup>v</sup> There, I am not discriminated against according to perceived ethnic belonging because I’m part of the majority. Yet sometimes, 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 readable as white also means that white Germans will always categorize you in whatever way is convenient or even advantageous for them.

When they want to ask me inappropriate questions about where I'm '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 through 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*, too. In such instances, I seem to have expertise coded in my DNA; so much so that even as a teenager, I was drawn into discussions with white adults who asked me for my assessment of the current crisis. Needless to say, I should never forget to distance myself in the same breath from all parties involved in said crisis—lest I somehow render myself suspicious when 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, depression, and hobbies. Or let's say it would have been flattering, if it did not imply that, as a young German-Iranian, I was already expected to exhibit '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 that light-hearted 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 my life-long companion) does not apply to people like me. It is only now that I'm grown up and fighting back furiously against discrimination that this argument sometimes makes 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.

But 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 in order to render it impossible for those affected by discrimination to voice their own 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 of Annika from Wuppertal? Or does she look 'German enough' that it is clear that she and the three generations before her were: "quite boring, just from Germany."

In English, there is the term "white gaze." When this gaze is directed at People of Color, it defines and evaluates them from a white perspective. White gaze manifests itself when a white police officer sees a *Kanak*<sup>vi</sup> and asks him out of the blue 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 making strange gesticulations.

White gaze is construed as neutral and normative. This is why its partiality is often vehemently denied from a white perspective. What appears as 'normal' from this

perspective establishes 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, a person's attractiveness has a very definite impact on how they are treated by others.

Only since the advent of Instagram & Co., have aesthetic, self-determined, and positive depictions of bodies that defy these restrictive norms gained prominent positions. Because heteronomy and white gaze also mean that such bodies are mostly used as placeholders for limited and stereotypical roles in mainstream media. A female lawyer wearing a headscarf would overwhelm the *Tatort* audience,<sup>vii</sup> 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, capturing alleged realities in an extremely biased manner. It is always aimed at comparison with the self, always directed at 'others,' the 'foreigners'—whether this 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 impacts 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 young PoC long for an appearance that they will never obtain, or attain only under the utmost difficulties. In reality, they should never yearn for such a thing at all because this desire for assimilation is toxic. Bleaching hair or skin, altering facial composition through operations, or losing weight not only cost time, money, and energy, they also often increase the hatred for one's own body, especially if the sole motivation is conforming to white standards of beauty. Nevertheless, as a white-passing person, I do not condemn other PoC for undergoing such procedures. 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 to do so would be patronizing. It would also mean making someone feel like shit after undergoing what is usually an irreversible procedure. Such a move would be downright arrogant and cynical. Those who profit from colorism the way I and white people do, cannot imagine what this desire to modify the body through pain actually means—because it may ease a different pain for the person in question which we simply do not know. But what I can do, is reveal white gaze and disseminate positive examples by demanding representation and diverse role models.

My Instagram inbox is filled with messages from young People of Color, Muslims, and queers writing 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 simply because they don't receive appreciation and respect from most other venues of society. No one has to tell them: "I don't respect you, *Kanak\_in!*" The looks they encounter on a daily basis say enough.

People internalize white gaze already at an early age. A friend told me that her son is one of only two Children of Color in the entire *Kindergarten*.<sup>viii</sup> Already at the age of three, he was made 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. Racisms are proliferated here 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 Abdallah<sup>ix</sup> 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. If white lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, inter, and queer people (LGBTIQ) do not view Muslim gays as part of their community, this is a far-reaching problem that cannot be solved by a guessing game of “hipster beard or Quran-appropriate facial hair?” The more important question is: To whom in our community do we grant protection and whom do we identify as a nuisance from the start?

At the same time, it is not uncommon among both white queers as well as straights to fetishize people coded as Muslim. Maybe they’ve consumed too many European travel diaries about the ‘Orient.’ Or their parents forced them to watch the movie *Not Without My Daughter* on repeat to warn them about ‘Muslims.’

But it doesn’t matter whether it be for the exotic factor or simply because they want to fuck Muslim people as an expression of their own power under the banner of Western ‘liberation’: It is always racist and violent to impose stereotyping fetishes on other people.

For centuries, this hyper-sexualization of (as well as the obsession with) bodies read as female and non-white has served as the basis for legitimizing 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 new sneakers. It ensures that the stared-at person does not feel safe in their own body, feels ashamed of their own appearance, or that they blame themselves after experiencing violence—even though they are not responsible for someone else’s misdirected desire.

And now, in anticipation of the question that may already have entered the reader’s mind over the course of the last paragraphs: Can love really be wrong and desire racist? Is it not merely a matter of taste if 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 rule out matches with the profiles of 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 that a good thing? Isn’t it a positive development for someone to express their interest in someone else who was otherwise undesired? Some might think so. But what they fail to take into consideration, is that your body is neither a charity case for their conscience nor the merchandise for their racist fantasies.

Dominating, exoticizing, de- or hyper-sexualizing gazes rarely just bounce back off of you without leaving a mark. Typically, they stick. Because, often, this is not just about an individual perspective, but about widespread structural stigmatizations that you end up internalizing. These distort your self-perception, and it becomes more difficult to maintain autonomy over your own body and desire. These no longer belong to you at all; they become commodified by the cultural mainstream with its all-penetrating gaze.

Not only those affected by racism experience othering, but others do, as well, including (for example) people who are fat, queer, trans, disabled, or visibly poor. If several of these categories apply to you, ‘normal’ people stare all the more—particularly if you and your body and/or lifestyle do not conform to their worldview.

What does seem to go hand-in-hand for many Germans, however, is the idea of being both 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 payer. Like fat people. In this case, racism and the hatred of 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 the age of 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 labor—including that of demanding parents. Fatma Aydemir describes this, as well, in her own wonderful essay about work.

But I’ve also learned not to rub my achievements or successes in white Germans’ faces. Firstly, because I have no desire whatsoever to provide fodder for the successful integration story, and secondly, because I do not want to excite the envy of others. I could also say: to attract the evil eye. From an early age, 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 other people’s jealousy.

And I’ll admit that this blue, white, and black eye-shaped brooch—for many, just superstitious kitsch—does not prevent anyone from directing their gaze or camera upon me. But there are other more effective means for countering such things: like staring back or snatching the phones right out of their hands. Because while many Germans have little understanding of concepts such as ‘personal boundaries’ or ‘respect,’ ‘damage to personal property’ is a catchphrase that *will* sound some alarms. This becomes apparent in the fact that—while burning refugee shelters may fail to rouse the interest of mainstream society—burning cars elicit both cries of solidarity and panic. It does not matter then how little respect white Germans show for the boundaries and privacy of People of Color: If you touch their property, you suddenly speak a language they understand. And then, the multilingualism they otherwise so despise in PoC suddenly seems okay.

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<sup>i</sup> Where German noun endings are gendered, the author uses the ‘gender gap,’ e.g. in “Junggesell\_innen,” to express gender inclusivity.

<sup>ii</sup> The use of the gender gap in the self-attribution *Kanak\_in* expresses that the author neither identifies as male nor female.

<sup>iii</sup> A nutritional drink for children that features a blond, white child with rosy cheeks on its label.

<sup>iv</sup> English in the original.

<sup>v</sup> An additional note from the author, following the German publication: “In Iran, I am white passing” might be closer to the reality. Since the original publication, I have conducted additional research and found out more about the history of my own ethnic minority ancestors’ assimilation into whiteness in Iran.

vi 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.

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

viii Antiauthoritarian nursery for children.

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