

# *transact!* <sup>6</sup>



## **HOW IS YOUR LIBERATION BOUND UP WITH MINE?**

**IDEAS ABOUT  
MIXED ORGANISING-PROCESSES,  
THE POWER OF DEFINITION  
AND CRITICAL WHITENESS**

**ENGLISH VERSION**



**Pictures frontpage and here:  
Action of the NoLager-Network  
in the Refugee Camp  
Bahnsdorf/Brandenburg, 2005**  
[Photo: Fadl/Umbruch Bildarchiv]

## Transact

*A slogan, which expresses our common conviction, that regional, trans-regional and transnational struggles have to be interlinked with each other. Accordingly we are looking for possibilities of a "Crossover", of bridge-buildings between different sub-movements and between more or less radical leftists. We are out for the links between different social realities and struggles - which is for us a central condition in order to tackle the global exploitation divide. Hereby we refer to diverse day-to-day-struggles and social movements, also if these are not (yet) politically articulated. "Transact" is beared by activists from Berlin, Bremen (NoLager), Hanau (kein mensch ist illegal) and Vienna. We do not organize actions of our own, but rather participate in a number of networks and projects - since 2009 especially in Welcome to Europe and Afrique-Europe-Interact.*

## Publishing information

### Languages

This brochure is available in German, English and French. We are happy to send more copies on a small donation by request. In addition, the PDF-versions respectively the texts as doc files can be downloaded at our website or at → [www.afrique-europe-interact.net](http://www.afrique-europe-interact.net) in order to spread them in any number.

### Translations

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### Pictures

The pictures in this brochure document actions of the NoLager-network (2002 - 2007), of Boats4People (2012), of Welcome to Europe and of Afrique-Europe-Interact. With this we also want to refer to those transidentitarian und transnational processes of organizing, from which the examples in our texts are mainly taken from. Many thanks to the photographers: Jasmin Alt, Leona Goldstein, Makombe, Marily Stroux, Umbruch Bildarchiv and Tim Zülch.

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## EDITORIAL

# How did this leaflet come about?

This leaflet is a result of the highly controversial debates that took place during the Nobordercamp in Cologne in the summer of 2012. In essence, the debate centered around basic concepts such as Critical Whiteness, Power of Definition and trans-identity or transnational organisation. The background to this were the questions of how far racist behavior of white activists exists within anti-racist networks and alliances; how to deal with this; and what this would mean for the everyday cooperation between activists with different social statuses. What was crucially missing in Cologne was that the conflicts were so polemically fought by individual groups that a productive understanding of different experiences, beliefs and practices was not in

the slightest bit possible. The Cologne No-bordercamp was instead accompanied by numerous hurtful insults, disappointments and disillusionment. This was fatal not only because of the political clashes - including individuals withdrawing and general turmoil - but in addition, both the Power of Definition and the Critical Whiteness concept had increasingly lost their original meaning and consequently fell into disrepute.

This is precisely the reason why with this leaflet we want to contribute to substantial reflection and through this the development of associated questions and challenges. It is fully recognized that things such as violence, discrimination or dominance will largely be found in social movements - simply because activists are always part of the very social



**Pictures: NoLager-activists at the G8 summit in Heiligendamm, 2007** [Photos: Umbruch Bildarchiv]

order that they are trying to overcome. However, it is not true (as repeatedly claimed in Cologne) that the anti-racist movement has been united in denying this in the past 20 years, and white activists would therefore need to be forced to confront their own racism, dominance and unquestioned privileges. It is worth noting however that there is already a lot of experience on how to deal with such behavior so that it doesn't provoke disagreements leading to a deepening of the social divisions and hierarchical structures which would perpetuate anyhow. Our aim is therefore to provide – in our eyes - proven handling methods stemming from two very different areas of experience: on the one hand from our participation in anti-sexist struggles in the 1990s; on the other hand from our years of involvement in mixed organising-processes, e.g. local residence rights struggles, cross-regional activities such as NoLager network (2002-2007), Afrique-Europe-Interact, and Welcome to Europe (both since 2009).

Important for us in particular is an historical awareness of the activist movement in this context. Because of personnel changes the processes of social movements are becoming faster, among other reasons because

many activists are only involved actively for a few years (or less). The result is a general historical amnesia, and as a consequence many debates start all over again without considering the mistakes or achievements that have already been made. Such idling or standing-still we cannot afford, regardless of the angle we're coming from.

But back to what has already been achieved: It is important to us for pragmatic reasons to emphasise not least what has already been achieved in the positive sense. Even so we do not wish to talk down the problems we are discussing. Precisely because we are involved every day in mixed organising-processes we are almost constantly confronted with very real contradictions, differences and rifts within our own structures. So it is no coincidence that we deal with these questions in detail in the two articles in Part III of this booklet. Moreover, we can well understand (also from experience) that people who experience discrimination, exclusion and violence may often burst with anger - regardless whether they are people of colour, refugee activists, women, LGBTI ( Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transexual and Intersexed ) or corpulent. Yet we find many of the conclusions drawn in Cologne just

plain wrong. This is the reason why we want to share some of our experiences in this leaflet. Not because they would contain perfect recipes (because there is no such thing), but because they're a way of understanding how difficult conflicts can be resolved jointly and in a solidary way in heterogeneous networks.

Finally, a word on transact: Consisting of several groups and individuals the transact initiative is in gender and other respects a relatively mixed collective albeit with predominantly white Western European views on refuge and migration experiences. We have therefore decided to interview refugee activists, whom we have long been working together in different contexts, regarding the issues covered in this leaflet (and explicitly add that one of the interviewees is themselves active in transact). In this way we want to ensure that all such voices are effectively represented, even if they are a minority in the context of transact - with special consideration to the question of whether and/or how it is possible in a society marked by racism that trans-identity and/or transnational organising-processes can be tackled in a consistent manner for all concerned. ○

**TRANSACT**



Bamako-Dakar-Caravan: Theatre performance about the life story of Oury Jalloh in Kayes/Mali, 2011 [F: Leona Goldstein]

# “Let’s not wait till things escalate”

## INTERVIEW CONCERNING VARYING EXPERIENCES WITH THE POWER OF DEFINITION SINCE THE EARLY NINETIES.

*The debate concerning the Power of Definition is not only old, it also again and again goes round in circles – not in the last place, because experiences already gained are only seldom taken into account in current discussions. Against this background activists from NoLager Bremen<sup>(a)</sup> have held a self interview about some of their respective experiences – from the discussions of sexism in the early nineties, some conflicts in the antiracist field, to the question how the support of people who have experienced violence and the contact with perpetrators has changed over the years. The interview is closely connected with the text that was also written for this brochure by NoLager Bremen: “The Power of Definition newly defined”.*

**In the nineties you fought in various places for the Power of Definition. What was the general point of departure in those days?**

**Volker:** In the years following the discussions concerning sexism on the occasion of the mobilization against the summit meeting of the IMF and the World Bank in Berlin in 1988, pro-feminist autonomous groups of men were founded in different places. Nationwide meetings were organized and with the anti-patriarchal men’s newsletter, they even had their own circular. At university the first debates were held concerning the social construction of gender in general as well as the patriarchal conditioning of boys and men. There also were militant actions against the places of this patriarchal conditioning, such as for instance Regional Offices

for National Military Service in the context of conscription. All this was, on our side, a first reaction to the very considerable organization of women/lesbians and corresponded to a demand made by autonomous feminists upon their political comrades. I do not think that a sexist transgression was always and everywhere the direct cause for organizing ourselves separately as men. I would maintain though that there always was concrete criticism and pressure from women/lesbian groups. It was about how men of the scene misappropriated scene locations, about dominant behaviour in discussions, about machismo in militant actions, about ways of dealing with sexuality and much more. But as far as I know, plenary sessions of men from different scenes were only held when a transgression had been talked of.

**Franzis:** In the early nineties, when I started to become active in leftist-radical as well as autonomous environments, a separate organization for women/lesbians - this was the used term at that time - was self-evident for feminists. I joined an autonomous group of women/lesbians, learned feminist self-defence, went to several 'men-free' seminars at university and later lived on a floor for women/lesbians of a Berlin housing project. On the principle that 'the private is political', we talked a lot about our own sexist experiences and could in this way come, more or less, to terms with the shame and loneliness associated with it and the feeling of 'it being your own fault, because you did not really defend yourself'. At the time many of us withdrew completely from the so-called 'mixed structures' and also had love affairs exclusively with women/lesbians.

**Okay, that was the general situation, but what specific role did the concept of the Power of Definition play in those days?**

**Franzis:** Ultimately, the concept of the Power of Definition - which postulates that only the persons, who have experienced the violence are able to say where limits have been overstepped and what they experience as violence - was more or less the basis of this fundamental atmosphere. This expressed itself through the empathy and partiality

felt for one another and also in the willingness to support one another in concrete actions, e.g. by making a situation public or by telling a guy unmistakably that his behaviour had to stop. Dependent on the vehemence of the actions, this approach was not appreciated by all, but there nevertheless was a rather broad consensus that it was in some way necessary. To which I would like to add that many also felt the need to reduce their contacts with men to an absolute minimum (which was relatively easy in big cities) in order not to have to exhaust their energy within certain structures of everyday life.

**Volker:** I believe that at the time, many personal experiences of violence were talked about with people one was close to. I also think it is important to become aware again and again that the discussions concerning the Power of Definition were only partly public and that this is likely to be the same today. Only a few people or even only two know to this day about many of the transgressions that are talked about. And certainly not each transgression that is mentioned has led to a separation or a major conflict. Sometimes all those who were involved said after a couple of years that the way things had been dealt with was okay. As far as the public debates are concerned, in leftist circles of the early nineties it was not even generally acknowledged to do lip service to being against sexism and for the Power of Definition. In fact people were reacting in a variety of ways, from showing a certain openness to proceeding tactically and from attempting to keep out of everything to a clear defamation of feminist positions. In my opinion though, it was more difficult than today not to relate to the matter at all, because there were more binding group structures than today, where some people would then put the subject on the agenda.

**What did the concept of the Power of Definition change for you - what was new?**

**Franzis:** It obviously was new to make certain male behaviour public and to denounce it publicly and, in doing so, to make clear that one was not getting away with things anymore as easily as in the past, when it had been a successful strategy to simply retort by defa-

ming women who had criticized certain behaviour, as being inhibited. This was not only happening in our own autonomous circles, sexist transgressions of for example professors were denounced as well.

**Volker:** In the circles in which I moved, things were indeed a lot about self-reflection and it was clear that sexist structures also played a part in our relationships or flat sharing communities. But, and this was new in my opinion, the debates concerning the Power of Definition were about more than opposing a view or only private self-reflection. They were also about the fact that leftist men ought to give up power and control directly. I do not believe that this was at all easy to do for anyone.

**From your current point of view, how do you see the limits of the debates in those days?**

**Volker:** At a certain moment we all knew we were required not to voice a critical opinion about the Power of Definition in public, but we hardly debated the subject among ourselves anymore and when a new transgression was then talked about, this became quickly obvious. Personal reflections on questions concerning power and powerlessness were a rarity as it is.

**Franzis:** I think that in the atmosphere of those days some acted too quickly. I know some who to this day are uncomfortable with the fact that they ran off on demand and spray-painted 'here lives a rapist' on a house. Yes, and for those who had experienced violence it certainly was not always helpful either, that things were discussed against a background of eviction, exclusion or revenge. At the same time this kind of thing could be very liberating and a first step towards self-empowerment, as well as a sign saying 'Beware, we are not putting up with everything anymore'. This simultaneously led to certain men in certain circles simply having acquired a certain code of conduct, in order not to be challenged any longer. All things considered we should take into account that it is quite normal that those who fight for certain rights or opinions and who in doing so break new ground, are not as differentiating as those

who, on the basis of this pioneering work, then start differentiating and can learn from the mistakes of their predecessors.

**Volker, your groups have also always searched for the debate with male perpetrators. Could you tell us more about that?**

**Volker:** Our starting point was that not only structures had to change, but people as well. Because if we simply exclude the people, the risk is relatively much higher that they will transgress again, than when we offer them a confrontational debate. It was also clear that men had to assume responsibility for the critical reflection and for changing the behaviour of perpetrators. In the cases in which I was involved, this also was an expressed wish, or even demand, of the affected persons or their environment. To which point I like to add that the work with perpetrators does depend on a good contact with the support structure. Work with perpetrators, without also an opportunity for the violated person to reflect, together with others, on a transgression towards them and to think about their own needs and demands on the perpetrator, is in my view rather questionable and I would not do it.

**But what did your actual approach look like? And how did you deal with the fact that the men were partly from your own groups, flat-sharing-communities etc.?**

**Volker:** A part of those processes took months or even years. Often the contact with perpetrators was a simple discussion about concrete agreements concerning the use of public rooms or similar things, e.g. when it was clear that the affected person demanded that the perpetrator did not use the soup kitchen anymore, or only participated in every second plenary session. But at a certain moment it became clear that for such processes a perspective in time was required as well; indeed at some point the question arose about at what time the perpetrator would be allowed to go to the soup kitchen again, after one year, two years or never? And since the concept of the Power of Definition cannot provide this perspective, the obvious next step for some was to simply withdraw from the scene altogether.

**Franzis:** Because sexism and sexist violence was no longer in the first place about the brutal, alien rapist on the street, but also about transgressions in one's own (close) environment, the subject has confronted us all in a quite different way. This has led to people keeping their distance on certain occasions, because it is mostly not possible to be supportive to the person who has experienced violence and simultaneously to be close to the person who has transgressed. But such constellations could dissolve again after some time, whereas – as Volker said before – not each transgression does necessarily lead to a lifelong severing of the relationship. To experience – as a direct concerned person, but also as part of the environment – that the transgressing person reflects on his behavior, respects such consequences as staying away from certain places and takes serious action to the effect that such a situation will not reoccur in the future, can also create a bond despite all intervenient estrangement. At this point I would like to say also that transgressions are not only perpetrated by men towards women, but also among all gender, that means among women/lesbians, in the queer community, among men, towards children of both gender and in rare cases also by women towards men. It was a very important step to more and more acknowledge this fact and not to persist with the well-known picture of the woman as the victim and the man as the perpetrator and in doing so to condemn the persons concerned to silence.

**Franzis, you have worked in the nineties in Berlin at the emergency number for raped women, lesbians and girls. Did the experiences you gained there also affect the debates within the political scene, and if so in which direction?**

**Franzis:** Certain positions – such as referring to violence among women/lesbians, or insisting on the fact that posing questions is not synonymous with calling the Power of Definition into question, but can on the contrary be very helpful for the violated person – were more easily put forward with a reference to the experiences gained from my work at the emergency number. The

emergency number had already become a kind of feminist agency and the experiences gained there were taken seriously. If we could, for instance, report that the affected women, as a first step, often simply needed room for their own experiences and that it is not automatically helpful when the patriarchal system is immediately and furiously put in the pillory, people would listen.

**What is your opinion on how the political debate has further developed since the end of the nineties?**

**Volker:** From my observations there were and still are certain prevailing trends – as with all leftist themes. But today it is certainly not so easy anymore to deny that there is a problem at all, after the motto: we are organizing a leftist camp and have therefore nothing to do with sexism. And I think it is more obvious than it used to be, that in a camp there are very different people with many varying experiences with discrimination and violence. I even consider the trauma support groups that were founded a few years ago to be a reaction to this.

**Franzis:** Anyway we succeeded in making major themes of sexualised violence and sexist behaviour, themes which cannot simply be brushed aside, and in establishing certain standards of associating with each other which make the mixed organization more pleasant than a few years ago. Insofar I would say we have made bit by bit some progress.

**How did it happen that in 2003, at the Cologne Border Camp and at the NoLager Action Days in Fürth, you participated in a contact group in cases of sexualized violence?**

**Volker:** At large mobilisations, transgressions had again and again been named in the past; also at the Jena Camp the year before, which in fact would hardly have become known, if there had not been some activists who at the beginning had formed a contact group for incidents like that. At that event various inconsistencies became evident as well. The perpetrators were from a nearby refugee camp. Their eviction was justified in my opinion, but for them it also repeated





their very normal experience of being socially excluded; particularly because no-one discussed the matter with them, for instance outside the camp, nor were they heard anywhere. The people of the self-organized refugee groups equated this last fact in particular with the arbitrariness of the police in their countries of origin. Today we would probably say that they were severely triggered by this approach. Indeed, during the recap it became evident, that a concept that is clear to all is needed, and intensive preparation with each other in the group, as well as in the overall camp society. That is why we then decided to debate the problem beforehand and we came to the conclusion that the contact group for people affected by sexist transgressions belongs as much to a camp as the soup kitchen or the protection group. That was decided at the nationwide preparation meeting, which was a good thing for in this way the concept was supported by many from the beginning. I also think in general, that an adequate approach to transgressions has to be discussed beforehand.

#### What experiences did you gain in Cologne and Fürth?

**Franzis:** On the whole our experiences were rather positive. Our very existence has made it evident that this is not about fighting for the recognition of sexist transgressions, but that it is clear to all that these unfortunately belong to everyday life in a camp. This took the sting out of the subject. In our concept we wrote that together with the concerned

person we will see, what that person needs, what feels right for him or her and also that for us the confrontation with the perpetrator is part of the job. A consequence was that people also turned to us in situations where it was not about throwing the perpetrators out of the camp, but about confronting them and claiming a specific behaviour for the remaining time spent together in the camp. For instance, a woman turned to us, who had been harassed in a sexist way by a group of men in the soup kitchen area. The confrontational discussions were on the one hand about the men having to keep a certain distance toward her, but on the other hand also about related subjects, such as being lesbian or gay, or about the fact that women should not be stared at.

**Volker:** At the action days in Fürth we had mostly to deal with a severe sexualised transgression by a camp participant towards two boys, who were 12 and 14 years old. First we supported the boys' wish that the perpetrator be thrown out of the camp. The next day we started an argument with him that took several months. The major reason was that, in his job as well as elsewhere, the man was in close contact with other children and we had the feeling that we could not simply let the matter rest, just because the camp was over. We then made further demands on him, in particular that he had to make it known in his environments that he had recently perpetrated sexualised violence towards two children, that he had to do the same publicly at his job, that he also had to meet

any further demands the boys might have, and first and foremost that he had to start to therapeutically elaborate his actions with a specialized therapist. Eventually the focus on the violated persons led to us giving a statement to the police, after the perpetrator had been reported to the police by the boys. Subsequently the perpetrator, with his statement, spared the boys having to go to court themselves to make their statement.

#### The composition of the contact group was rather unusual, can you say something about it?

**Franzis:** Well, I do not know if I would really call the composition of our group of ten people unusual. For us all it was important that the group should reflect the composition of the camp population. That is why it consisted of activists from women/lesbian groups, anti-racist groups and from self-organized refugee groups. Many of us knew each other from no border camps in the years before.

#### What was the differentiation between contact group and awareness group at the Anti-Lager-Tour 2004 all about, why such a differentiation?

**Franzis:** The discussions about the concept of the contact group made it clear that between refugees and non-refugees – these are the designations used at the time – there was a highly-felt need to exchange views concerning one's limits and needs, before situations would escalate, in which case one would only have been able to work with the



Activists from Afrique-Europe-Interact in the Office du Niger (Mali), 2012 [F: Makombe]

concept of the Power of Definition. Indeed, many refugees said that they considered the concept of the Power of Definition not applicable to the situations they criticized. The awareness group, which had a mixed membership with respect to gender and origin, therefore made it its purpose during the Anti-Lager-Tour, to champion respectful interrelations and to encourage the participants to tell each other about the overstepping of limits and in doing so to increase the mutual awareness of such situations. It was important that it was as much about sexist as about racist situations. This has created room for refugees to talk about which conduct they experience as discriminating or racist.

**You have since then been involved in several events and have also situationally taken responsibility, but you did not participate in contact groups anymore. Why?**

**Franzis:** Within a movement, a concept that is only successful when it is carried out by specific people, does not make sense in the long run. Add to this the problem of the extent of power such a group had, but Volker can probably say more on this subject.

**Volker:** The concept of the Power of Definition rightly includes a considerable amount of power to impose sanctions. I did explain before, all the things we demanded from the perpetrator in Fürth. If only for this reason everything argues in my opinion in

favour of rotation, flexibility and transparency. At a certain moment we also missed that for us there was no corrective, no-one who looked and asked what exactly we were doing. It was indeed an uncomfortable feeling, this absolute power we suddenly had towards the perpetrator in Fürth. I do assume that we did not abuse the power of imposing sanctions or enforcing, but I considered at the time that, if many people would once participate in a contact group during a camp, this would also be good for the cause, in that all of us would then share similar experiences and might in this way be able to further develop the concept.

**How do you deal with such questions in your private life or your immediate political surroundings? Is there an established culture of speedy intervention?**

**Volker:** It is no use waiting till things escalate. Advertising an appropriate conduct, taking action is possible, boasting about changes – that is effective...

**Franzis:** ...exactly, in the end it is all about establishing a culture together, where behaviour which is experienced as a transgression is brought up for discussion early on. And where the person who brings it up, can then be sure to find a willing ear, as well as people who will then take action, meaning who do

not recoil from setting limits to another person and making clear that certain behaviour will not be tolerated. ☉

<sup>(4)</sup> NoLAGER BREMEN IS A MIXED GROUP WITH RESPECT TO GENDER AND OTHERWISE. WE DO NOT HAVE PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AS TO THE SUBJECTS OF REFUGEE, MIGRATION AND RACISM, BUT HAVE BEEN ACTIVE SINCE 2002, MOSTLY IN MIXED COALITIONS OR NETWORKS – INITIALLY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NoLAGER NETWORK (2002-2007) AND AS OF 2009 WITH AFRIQUE-EUROPE-INTERACT. WE HAVE CONTINUOUSLY BEEN DEALING WITH SEXUALISED AND OTHER VIOLENCE FROM THE EARLY NINETIES – PARTLY AT A PERSONAL, PARTLY AT A POLITICAL AND PARTLY AT A PROFESSIONAL LEVEL.

# For another understanding of the Power of Definition

## KEYWORDS CONCERNING THE COLLECTIVE HANDLING OF SEXUALIZED, RACIST AND OTHER VIOLENCE IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

*Preliminary note: For a long time controversial, at times also escalated debates about the concept of the Power of Definition have been coming up on a regular basis in left movements. For almost two decades the handling of sexualized violence was in the focus, in the meantime it is also about racist and other forms of discrimination respectively violent behaviour. This is the reason why we<sup>(1)</sup> on the occasion of the Nobordercamp in Köln in July 2012 have put our own experiences in the practical application of the Power of Definition once more to the test. The result is the present text, which promotes an understanding of the Power of Definition, which follows in particular two aims: On the one hand to do justice to the complexity and inconsistency of the diverse power relations; on the other hand to clearly mark the area of application respectively the limitations of the Power of Definition. We consider the text being an offer for discussion, not least there, where we critically deal with other versions of the Power of Definition – for example with the 'extended concept of violence', which has in the past 5 years lead to a – in our mind – high grade problematic extension of the area of application of the Power of Definition (at least there where this is referred to in a positive manner).*

### 1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The controversy over Power of Definition dates back to the 1970s, when the new women's movement formed around the "right of self-determination over one's own body" and the global right to abortion. Subsequently, in the mid-1980s the concept of Power of Definition (Definitionsmacht) emerged in the context of the autonomous grassroots (womanlesbian) movement. In the extensively discussed book "Antisexismus\_reloaded"

(2007), this concept is defined as the exclusive right of women who have experienced assault - of any nature - to define what is perceived as violence; where violence starts and where boundaries have been crossed.

This concept of Power of Definition is primarily a reaction to the fact that sexual violence has been repeatedly trivialized in society as a whole. Secondly, that rape and sexual assault tend to be limited legally to a few legal offences and thirdly that women who denounce sexual violence are often pathologized and not taken seriously. It is often implied that they brought the violence on themselves - in court as well as in the left wing context. In other words, it can be stated that "the history of women's Power of Definition is the history of the politicization of unequal gender relations" (Group FeS, 2001). We should add that it has been in particular feminist counselling centers, therapists, women shelters and publishers who have been intensively studying sexual violence since the 1970s and have gradually turned it into a publicly discussed topic. Nevertheless, the enforcement of Power of Definition was not easy within the left or autonomous grassroots movements. Rather, it came to fierce confrontations in the entire 1990s, mostly sparked by actual incidents. For example, in 1999/2000 an altercation ignited after an allegation of rape was made against a member of AAB (Anti-Fascist Action Berlin - now ALB) sparking a vicious debate, which can to this day be followed online. As a consequence, so-called sexual assault response and support groups began to be established in 2003; at the 5th Anti-racist border camp in Cologne, for example. These sorts of groups have offered support since 2007 on an ongoing basis in Berlin. Since 2002 the debates have

taken a new twist. In reference to their own experience with arbitrary treatment at the hands of government and judicial institutions, refugee activists began to question the practice of dealing with perpetrators within the Power of Definition concept. In particular, they have been challenging the fact that alleged perpetrators are seldom given the chance to address the allegations made against them.

### 2. POWER OF DEFINITION AND PARTIALITY

Without sympathetic support for people who experienced abuse the Power of Definition would not be effective. Without this type of support, it would be impossible to assist those who have experienced sexual, racial and/or other assault in regaining their sense of self-determination and ability to act after suffering an experience of powerlessness – sometimes involving a massive loss of control. However, it should not be overseen that the affected persons are often unsure of their own perceptions and feelings - as illustrated by three examples.

Some assume that their intense feelings of anger, fear or powerlessness are due to an increased sensitivity and blame mainly themselves. Others go to the opposite extreme and ascribe a quality to their experience which it did not actually have; but they themselves can only see this after some time has passed. And yet others are just emotionally numb and switch off. Against this background it should be clear that the assumption made in almost all publications that the Power of Definition - specifically the power to define when a transgression has taken place - lies only with the person concerned is not precise enough. In most cases, the person is only in



a position to make such a definition after going through a long and drawn out process.

Correspondingly, most of the time the need to be supported in sorting one's own thoughts, feelings and perceptions is in the foreground. This includes assessing whether or how the current experience corresponds to past experiences. In practice, this means that in the counselling and support of people who experienced sexual violence and other assaults, it is necessary to gently ask questions. This means that the supporters will have to face the challenge of developing a willingness to get themselves into problematic grey areas as well as ambivalences and internal conflicts, which is not always easy.

### 3. THE POWER TO IMPOSE SANCTIONS AS A CONSEQUENCE OF THE POWER OF DEFINITION

From the experiences outlined above, it also follows that the Power of Definition does not mean that the decision regarding what consequences are in store for the perpetrator should be solely imposed onto the concerned person, as many people erroneously believe. People who have experienced sexual, racial and other assaults are often completely unsure of what they really need. It usually requires long reflection in order to decide whether a

personal confrontation with the offender is required, for example, or whether the perpetrator should be confronted by others or whether a safe space needs to be created. This last option would mean barring the offender from shared spaces such as political groups, parties and flatshares.

It is also possible that the concerned person might make requests or demands that are perceived by her or his supporters as being inappropriate; they may appear to be politically and ethically questionable, disproportionate or even harmful to herself (for example, when a woman from a women's shelter wants to go back to her violent partner, or when a person initially insisting on publicizing an attack afterwards feels acute shame, as is often the case with talk shows on TV).

The practice of gently questioning the affected person and of formulating assessments does not equate to inflicting further powerlessness on them, as it is often suggested. On the contrary, people in emotionally vulnerable and sometimes extremely difficult positions are dependent on supportive feedback, especially where they are in danger of getting carried away (from the perspective of observers).

### 4. CONFRONTATION WORK WITH OFFENDERS

The concept of the Power of Definition is not rigid, rather, it is a guideline for a highly complex process with a variety of actors. Therefore, it is from our perspective, a grave mistake when an initiative such as the support group GAP ("Anti-sexist practice"), that has been working in Berlin for years, states in their publication "Was tun, wenns brännt?" ("What to do in case of fire?") that "the welfare of the offender is not a priority".

Moreover, they argue that "the alienation of offenders and their exclusion from left wing spaces is a necessary component of anti-sexist policy". Somebody with views like this not only ignores valuable experiences like those had by the camp support group at the camps in Cologne and Fürth in 2003 (involving several authors of this text) but also fails to recognize some fundamentals, not least the following: It is important in the context of the Power of Definition that the offender is always dealt with deliberately and that he does not just disappear from the left wing scene. This is important because structures only change when people change. Therefore, it is essential that from the start a dialogue is held with the offender about how to proceed (from our perspective, a mixture of personal engagement with the

social context and professional support through therapists and /or counselling makes the most sense).

Additionally, certain wishes of the person affected can only be addressed if there is contact with the offender. For example, the concerned person may wish to attempt a clarification by talking to the perpetrator face to face. Or they may wish to press charges against the offender and their supporters may, in this case, negotiate with the perpetrator about his making a confession, which would save the concerned person having to undergo an extremely stressful cross examination in court.

This was the case with two boys who were subjected to massive sexual violence at the 2003 NoLager days of Action in Fürth by an activist. It is also absolutely crucial that people who are accused of assault have the right to be heard and to present their own perspective. To emphasize this right does not limit the Power of Definition of the affected person in any way. It is very rare for a person to make a false accusation of assault. In this respect, the risk of a person

being unfairly forced to leave collective structures is many times smaller than the inverse risk of a person who has experienced sexual or any other form of abuse suffering additional trauma when their Power of Definition is undermined (for example by questioning their credibility). This means that the right to be heard may not be exercised in public but only in a small circle preferably in direct contact with people from the support group. It should be explicitly stated at this point that the right to take a position on the allegations was mainly introduced by refugee activists from African countries such as Cameroon, Togo and Nigeria. That is, by people who have firsthand experienced arbitrary treatment by judicial institutions or illegal detention and punishment - whether in their countries of origin, on the run or in Europe as an asylum seeker.

#### **5. NO POWER TO IMPOSE SANCTIONS WITHOUT SPECIFICATION**

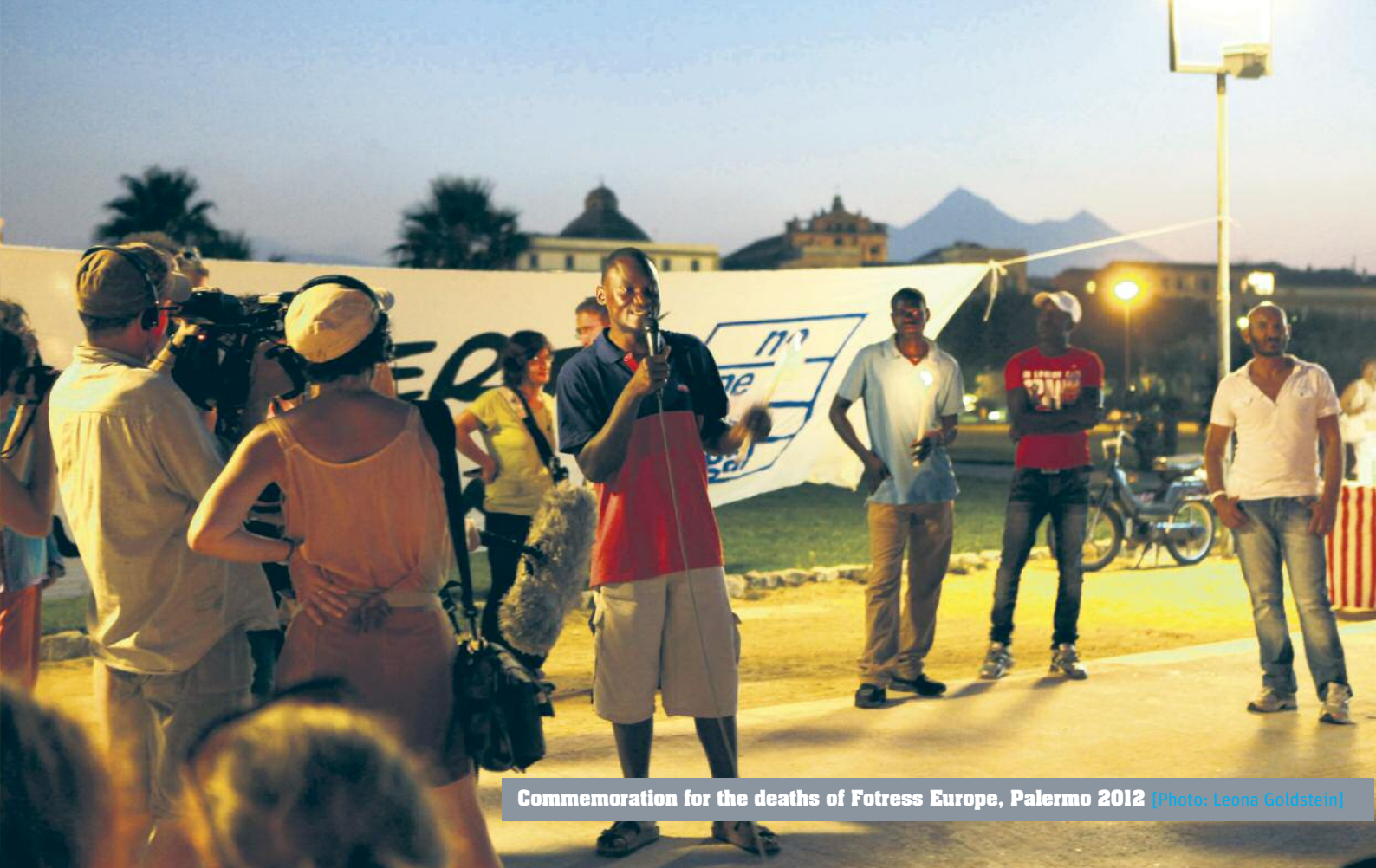
Within the context of the Power of Definition, the right of those affected by humiliation or violence to determine how the community

deals or interacts with the perpetrator, is a powerful instrument. This is especially true when victims claim a safe space, and for a prolonged period of time. In view of this, we reject the popular idea that it is not necessary to provide a specific allegation.

To the contrary, at least the perpetrator should be told, directly or by a third party, what they are accused of, even if only in a broad sense. This is important, firstly, so that everybody can exercise the above mentioned right to give their view, an essential mechanism to avoid mix-ups or misidentifications as well as false accusations. Secondly, it is important to name the cause of criticism so that the perpetrator has the chance to engage honestly with the problem, as many perpetrators at this stage are not aware of any wrongdoing. Thirdly, a clear articulation of the cause for any accusations prevents the perpetrator, their allies and others from speculating, when and what kind of violence was committed, speculations that often go hand in hand with scandalization and only produce further harm and help delegitimize the power of definition.



**Bamako-Dakar-Caravan: Demonstration in front of the French embassy in Bamako/Mali, 2011** [Photo: Tim Zülch]



Commemoration for the deaths of Fortress Europe, Palermo 2012 [Photo: Leona Goldstein]

Finally, as elsewhere, refugees emphasized that the specification of any allegations of wrongdoing is essential to maintain democratic principles, an argument that was in large part informed by refugees' personal experiences of police and judicial arbitrariness.

#### 6. EXTENDED CONCEPT OF VIOLENCE

For a significant period, calls for an extended use of the Power of Definition have utilized the phrase "extended concept of violence." For instance, a text produced in the aftermath of the NoBorder camp in Cologne included the following:

"Yet, all dimensions of human life are 'prone to injury'. Any damage to any of these dimensions is ... a form of violence and can be identified as such by the person subjected to it. These forms of violence include verbal abuse, threats, violation of boundaries, the use of force, or harassment."

Generally, we share such an assessment. Nonetheless, one ought not to blur the difference between verbal, psychological, and physical violence and discrimination. Verbal abuse, for instance by insensitive naming

practices, inconsiderate statements or taking up too much space in conversations, does not produce the same effects of feeling threatened, scared, or powerless that result from violent assaults or other violations of personal boundaries. An exception to this distinction is when insults, threats or humiliations are articulated in a distinctly aggressive manner and thus produce similar feelings of anxiety, fear, or powerlessness, and eventually result in shock and unsettlement. No matter which relationship of power is in question, we argue that instances of verbal discrimination should not allow for individuals to impose sanctions, a power that is often closely connected with the Power of Definition. Rather, we need to find other ways to clarify the situation, for instance in the form of mediated conversations that include a third party, or simply by confronting people about their discriminating language, without a further exchange of arguments.

#### 7. RETRAUMATIZATION & TRIGGERING

A differentiation similar to the one described above (in section # 6) must be made in cases of retraumatization and triggering experi-

ences, two phenomena that have been discussed extensively in recent years. These are extremely difficult issues to broach, in part because not only can repeated experiences of violence or critical behaviors, such as insensitive use of language, careless use of specific images or indifferent questioning, function as triggers, but also certain body shapes, smells, the sight of a beard, hearing a specific song, or seeing a specific car can trigger reflexes and reactions related to previous experiences of violence and abuse.

People can experience feelings or emotions that are similar or equal to those that they had in the situation of the initial trauma, for instance, when they were raped, subjected to police brutality, a deportation or a fire disaster. Retraumatization here means to relive a previous trauma by re-experiencing a concrete threat to life, limb, or soul, often by confronting images of violence or experiencing dissociative emotions (s. info text on trauma). In short: If a person experiences powerlessness and injury as a result of specific triggers (which, by the way, happens much less frequently than ongoing debates might suggest), the concept of the Power of Defi-

definition should guide the further course of action only and exclusively when the key stimulus itself was violent and had the potential to produce anxiety and fear.

Obviously, distinctions will never be clear-cut, but the more respectful and constructive conversations and negotiations around these issues are (which does not rule out confrontational actions), the more likely it will be to come to an agreement on how to judge specific behaviors.

## 8. MUTUALLY AGREED UPON RULES

The Power of Definition is grounded in an individual's action to identify violations, but at its core is a collective process of identifying problems. The Power of Definition and the power to impose sanctions will remain useless if there is no support group or environment that forces the perpetrator to cooperate. Therefore, it is essential to have a group as large as possible to define rules for addressing sexual, racist, or other forms of violence.

Specifically, it will be useful to agree upon such rules during citywide assemblies or, as in the case of activist camps, in advance of the meeting, i.e. before any violation takes place. Secondly, it will be productive when individuals involved in activist projects learn about possible instances of violence and forms of intervention, including those of self-care, during workshops or discussions, or by working with counselors. Thirdly, it seems useful to clearly define roles for every-

body involved in cases of conflict resolution, for instance, assigning specific individuals to support the violated person, work with the perpetrator, or contact members of the perpetrator's circle of friends and allies.

(This is in part to ensure that those who support the concerned person and those who work with the perpetrator are not the same people, unless the concerned person explicitly requests a direct meeting of the supporters with the perpetrator.) Finally, all involved persons - those supporting the concerned person, those in contact with the perpetrator etc. - should rotate their position from time to time, in order to avoid the emergence of new hierarchies of authority. This is important, for instance, in moments when safe spaces are enforced, because this results in absolute power for a few people.

## 9. RESPECT AND CONFRONTATION

There are few debates within left movements that regularly escalate into unresolvable differences other than the debate about how to properly use and apply the Power of Definition. Among others, this can be observed in the case of several groups, such as the aforementioned GAP (Berlin), that have treated persons identified as "perpetrators" in extremely patronizing, disrespectful, and intimidating ways. More often than not, such behavior is justified with the argument that only such a clear stance would allow honoring

the concerned person's need for protection without allowing new forms of traumatization.

We do understand this logic, but we would like to point out that the success of such an approach is not borne out by our own experience: Respectful and thoughtful forms of interaction are especially important in highly charged situations, as only such behavior opens up the possibility to reach out to those who, more often than not, reject any discussion, namely, the perpetrator or their supporters. To be blunt, over twelve years of working in mixed networks (primarily within the NoBorder network, Welcome to Europe, and Afrique-Europe-Interact) we noticed that treating each other with respect is an essential precondition for controversial debate, whether it is guided by the principles of honoring the Power of Definition or other modes of conflict resolution. ☉

**NOLAGER BREMEN**

<sup>(1)</sup> NOLAGER BREMEN IS A MIXED GROUP OF ACTIVISTS WITH DIFFERENT GENDERED AND OTHER IDENTITIES. WE DO NOT PERSONALLY SHARE THE EXPERIENCE OF REFUGEES, MIGRANTS, OR PEOPLE WHO ARE SUBJECTED TO RACISM, BUT, SINCE 2002, HAVE BEEN PART OF VARIOUS MIXED COALITIONS AND NETWORKS SUCH AS THE NOLAGER NETWORK (2002-07) AND AFRIQUE-EUROPE-INTERACT (SINCE 2009). WE HAVE DEALT WITH INSTANCES OF SEXUALIZED OR OTHER FORMS OF VIOLENCE AS INDIVIDUALS, ACTIVISTS, OR PROFESSIONALS SINCE THE EARLY 1990S.

# Trusting relationships to other people are essential

## TRAUMA, TRAUMATISATION AND TRAUMA SKILLS

### WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE TALK ABOUT TRAUMATISATION?

Generally, the word "trauma" refers to a "wound" that occurred as the result of a physical or emotional injury. Psychologically, it is assumed that a harrowing experience under certain circumstances can result in a long-lasting traumatization. These could be experiences such as severe car crash, an earthquake or the sudden death of a close relative or friend. This text focuses on trauma that occurs as the result of violence caused by other people. Sexual or physical abuse, imprisonment and police brutality, war-time experiences, and experiences during migration such as witnessing death while crossing the desert or the ocean.

### POSSIBLE REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

Re-experiencing the traumatic event: this includes nightmares, flashbacks, intrusive memories, the feeling of not being able to let go of the event, etc.

Avoidance/Suppression such as: memory loss, heightened alcohol- or drug-consumption, social withdrawal, avoidance of everything that reminds one of the experience, etc.

Hyperarousal: as demonstrated by insomnia, irritability, emotional outbursts and rage, anxiety, panic attacks, difficulty in concentration, jumpiness, etc. This is not supposed to be a check list but guidance for affected people and their supporters. Some of these reactions can occur sequentially, parallel or simultaneously, some might not occur at all. Individually, all of these are "normal" reactions to a extreme experience, but nonetheless they can make life much more difficult. If symptoms have not started to settle after 6 weeks, we believe it may be beneficial to

seek the help of a professional or someone with experience of trauma.

### TRIGGERS

Many people suffer long-term if through certain stimuli (triggers) they are repeatedly being emotionally propelled into the same powerless situation in which they first experienced the violence. Triggers can be a new violent experience or something harmless by comparison, such as a person who reminds me of someone, an anniversary, music, certain words or a smell. Some triggers are so subtle that even the traumatized person themselves is unaware of them, neither can they be recognized by someone else nor avoided. This can make the situation very complicated. As a result, one of the important aims during the healing process is to gain the ability to distinguish between triggers and a new traumatic event. I will be able to tell apart if I actually experience new violence or if I am being triggered and it just feels as if it is happening again. Ultimately, I will gain more self-determination and agency.

### WHAT CAN HELP?

Nonetheless, having experienced violence does not necessarily result in traumatization. It has to be decided on a case-by-case basis if a person needs support after such an experience and if so, how. To decide what kind of support is needed, depends - among other things - if it was a single traumatic event in the past or a series of experiences that might be ongoing. The most important thing is of course, to do everything to stop the violent experiences and if possible ensure that new violence will become less likely. One of the central requirements is to have people by

my side who believe me, who are able to relate to my reactions, who support me, who listen to me. Trusting relationships to other people are essential for healing!

Not all people affected are aware that they are traumatized. Explanations of typical stress reactions and results of trauma can be helpful for some in order to understand their own reactions better. Many are relieved to hear that their reactions can be understood as "normal" reactions to "abnormal" circumstances. Some traumatic events happened a long time ago. Maybe I did not have a choice but to down play the event(s). Maybe today I cannot remember what happened. These are some reasons why it can be so difficult to resolve the problems that originate in a traumatic experience. That is why many people choose to seek professional help.

The after effects of a trauma caused by violence are quite complex and follow certain dynamics which are often neglected by existing psychological and medical assessment methods. And, even if the symptoms often look similar: a car crash is very different from rape in the context of relationships of power and violence within a society. In the worst case scenario, therapists or counsellors might try to put their own view of things onto others or might reduce the violence to the psychological effects. However, in our opinion, it does not support the healing process if the societal and political conditions that contributed to a trauma are ignored. It suggests that the problem is an individual one and I just have to lean to adjust better to the existing societal conditions. Therefore, especially activists, must carefully select a suitable therapist.



We believe that effective trauma treatment focuses on what the person defines as their problem, what difficulties they have in their life and how these can be solved. Such a treatment assesses the existing resources of the support-seeking person and attempts to establish a dialogue between equals. Most traumatised persons have developed their own survival strategies. Counselling can help to use these strategies more consciously. Self-determination and retrieval of agency should be the focus of trauma treatment.

#### SELF-HELP TIPS

A number of us have at different times sought the help of psychotherapy in the form of counselling or stays in hospital. But we still regard self-help attempts and practical support as equally important to changing traumatising circumstances. If someone experienced violence within the activist context, like a protest camp, raising awareness among the other participants can help the person affected to cope, because they realise something is being done to prevent the same thing from happening again.

There are many strategies to cope with trauma that I can learn without the support of professionals, depending on which suit me. Most of them have essentially been derived from strategies of traumatised persons,

for example imagery exercises can help a person feel more grounded. Other methods can help to deal with intrusive memories, dreams, nightmares and flashbacks. Hands-on day-to-day support such as a “trauma first-aid kit” can be beneficial during a crisis. Many discovered different forms of bodywork for themselves, for example Yoga or Qigong. Of course, anything that assists falling asleep is also useful. We also have had positive experiences with Energy Psychotherapy (Tapping) or Progressive Muscle Relaxation.

#### TO OFFER SUPPORT AFTER TRAUMA

As mentioned before, the most important thing in supporting people affected by trauma, are the supporters. But to support others on a regular basis and to do this without harming oneself, requires a certain practice and practical knowledge about self-care. It is possible to be damaged by violence even if only being exposed to it indirectly. The phenomenon of supporters who have not experienced the violence directly, developing similar symptoms to those directly affected, is called vicarious trauma. This is an important topic for everyone involved with trauma, for professionals but especially for those working in contact groups or within awareness-structures. ○

NOLAGER BREMEN

## Recommended links

**Reader for affinity groups with tips for activist practise during direct actions (German)**

● [www.aktionsnetzwerk.de/cms/images/stories/Material/demo1mal1/bezugsgruppenreader.pdf](http://www.aktionsnetzwerk.de/cms/images/stories/Material/demo1mal1/bezugsgruppenreader.pdf)

**Thoughts about communal support in cases of intimate violence**

● <http://www.transformation.blogspot.de>

**Information and tips in English and French**

● <https://www.activist-trauma.net>

**About psychological effects of repression and violence**

● <https://www.outofaction.net>



**Bamako-Dakar-Caravan: Demonstration at the beach in Dakar where thousands of boat people started in 2005/2006** [Ph.: T. Zülch]



Spontaneous contacting of inmates of the refugee prison in Moria on Lesbos; 2013 [Photo: Welcoem2Europe]

# If there is the wish to move on together

## ANTI-RACISM AND DIFFERENCE IN MIXED ORGANISING-PROCESSES

**O**ctober 2013, Lesbos, Greece: People descend from multiple cars in front of the military area in the proximity of the village of Moria, where the new prison for refugees on the island of Lesbos is hid, which had been opened two weeks previous. Their personal histories are bound up with the protests against refugee detention in varied ways. Many of them met during the last days of Pagani, the notorious former lock-up-facility of the island, that had to be closed due to heavy protesting and revolts in 2009. One camera, thrown inside the prison premises, had produced pictures that went around the world<sup>[1]</sup>. Some had experienced these last days on the inside of the

prison, burnt their own cells, the memory of the smell of burnt mattresses still stinging their noses. Others had been taking part in protest actions during the No Border Camp, such as roof occupations and demonstrations. The encounters at the fence sometimes developed into friendship, across borders and across the years.

The wall surrounding the military area at Moria, the location of the new fence and cage structure with containers, is too high to bring in a camera or to communicate with the people within from the outside. But, as it happens, the gate to the street is not locked. There is not a moment of hesitation: Everyone spontaneously walks through

the gate into the restricted military area. The particular residence status of each individual is of no importance to anyone at that moment: There is no need for further talk. All want to see and comprehend with their own eyes and mind what goes on behind these walls – right there and right at this moment. In a matter of less than 30 seconds people talk to each other across the inner fence in many different languages. The people within do not want fences and walls, they want freedom and they want to continue on their respective ways. Some will indeed be released in the following days. Several have made the arrangements at the fence a reality and are in contact again after their arrival in Frankfurt or Stockholm. Many more have, however, first vanished into the big camps on the Greek mainland, in the worst case for 18 months of detention prior to deportation.

### **COMMON BORDER(LINE) EXPERIENCES**

The spontaneous Go-In was part of a journey back to the border organized by activists with and without a history of flight of their own who had met during the No Border Camp on the island of Lesbos in 2009 and together formed the network „Welcome to Europe“. Many of the youths and young adults, who in the meantime have a secure residence status in Germany and Sweden, have furthermore self-organized as „Jugendliche ohne Grenzen“ (Youth Without Borders)<sup>[2]</sup>. In October 2013 they traveled back to the place of their first arrival in the EU, with the declared aim to encourage newcomers and to pass on the solidarity they themselves had received during their own journey. Traveling to the external border of the EU in a mixed group constitutes a new step regarding common organizing. All who were part of it say that it has been – in a twofold sense – a unique border(line) experience full of in part distressing memories, felt most of all at a memorial ceremony for the people who had died at this border. But there has also been a new and moving quality of fighting together with extremely diverse preconditions. The Go-In into the new EU-funded „Pagani of the Troika“ had been precluded by joint plenaries, in which the people

who had just been released emphasized the necessity of abolishing this prison and everyone, given the experience of the shutdown of Pagani, firmly agreed on closing down this new prison, as well.

The encounters with the newcomers on this journey were not simply a recurrence of the common experiences of 2009, where in the course of the No Border Camp the Infopoint<sup>[3]</sup>, a circus tent in the harbor of Mitilini, had accommodated the newcomers. This was a new constellation, with a mixed set-up from the start and with multiple cross connections. A basis of trust had grown and had enabled an intensified contact, a socio-political intercourse, from which may stem something communal, even though it will not altogether abolish the differences. Old categories shifted while new divisions started showing. The journey was an opportunity for friends to meet who had come to Greece together but whose routes had since parted. Some had embarked on this journey full of a new-found self-assuredness while others were marked by four hard years during which they had not managed to move on. This resulted in an emotional rollercoaster, ranging from deep sadness to solace for everyone involved. What other group set-up could have provided better conditions for the chains of empathy to unfurl?

Time and again the mixed set-up of the group led to a productive chaos. A characteristic situation: It is 4 o'clock in the morning, when a young Afghan, who has meanwhile moved to Sweden, and his new Moroccan friend, who had established contact in the context of the hunger strike of the 300<sup>[4]</sup> in 2011 and now accompanies two Sudanese friends from the Welcome-Island-Apartment in Athens<sup>[5]</sup> to Lesbos, look at the clock: „Damn! There are not many more hours left for us until we have to leave tomorrow and we have to hurry to finish telling each other about our whole lives.“ This does not only speak volumes about crazy friendships, but also gives a notion about the problems stemming from the hurry we are constantly in. There are as many stories unfolding simultaneously as there are people involved. There are frequent misunderstandings that need time to clear up. Suddenly everything revolves

around the question of respect and what is perceived to be disrespectful. Sometimes the speed in which conflicts develop is enough to drive one to despair. A lot of interpersonal devotion is needed so that no one numbs emotionally and gets left behind. As a result of the many traumatizing experiences people made in their past, there is a lot of mistrust and stress levels are high and the atmosphere is sometimes dominated by fear. When this happens, the people involved easily reach their personal limits and new conflicts evolve out of this notion of being overwhelmed. However, these common processes of organizing also result in a high amount of spontaneity and curiosity – a major asset which has been keeping them going every time.

### **WELCOME TO EUROPE**

In this process, those who do not have an individual history of flight are not simply supporters, they have unique political positions and an individual history. The challenges faced by them had been clearly stated by the newly arrived at the Infopoint as far back as 2009: „Be careful“ they said when some of us started crying, “You are not used to war and a life like that, stop listening if you can't stand it any more. Take care of yourself. We need people like you being our voices as long as we have to stay hidden.“ The constellation that presents itself today, is marked by a variety of voices and seasoned activists come from very different backgrounds. Still, all people involved stress how important it is to encounter activists with an European background, who absolutely identify themselves with the common struggle. To be sure, the experience of war and disenfranchisement has not become part of their individual history, it has, however, become part of a shared everyday practice. After all these years of experience it is nevertheless almost unbearable to have friends vanish in prisons for many months, simply because they had been attempting to travel or mourn relatives who have fallen victim to a bomb attack in Pakistan or Sudan. Especially the pain involved in encounters with relatives of people who have disappeared or lost their lives at the borders is only endurable up to a

certain extent. The telephone calls from prison, the desperate calls for help from snow-covered woods, the tears of relatives who are searching for the loved-ones they lost at the border: Over the course of years together they had to painfully learn that they cannot hope to be able to accompany all and sometimes no more can be done than to refer people to the tracing service of the Red Cross. At locations of great suffering, deciding on who receives support and – as the day only has 24 hours – who does thereby not receive support can pose a real difficulty. The decision on who gets to stay at the Welcome Island, a small apartment in Athens, can ultimately only be based on subjective criteria – it is only a drop in the ocean. When having to make such decisions an aid can be the orientation on people who are themselves vital to others because they act in solidarity. But still, this is not always without conflict. Again and again there are disputes about injustices in the extent of support offered to individuals. In this context, it is important that, in order to come to an understanding, subjectivities are acknowledged: “We do what we do, among other things, out of affection and friendship, we are not objective”. Disappointments are the order of the day – sometimes with hurtful consequences.

If there is a desire to keep on working with one another, it is possible in most cases to explain one's positions to one another. Sometimes an interval of non-communication of several weeks is needed, but, in most cases, at some point communication becomes possible again. This is the case because something new and carefully respectful has developed from the shared longing for “overcoming the boundaries between us”, everyday anew: “They did nice things here in this gathering for the refugees. And great parties! During these parties I could not do anything but say thank you. And my thoughts cannot collect all the ideas and my pen cannot show all the good things that I found here. Welcome to my heart when you told me ‘welcome in Europe.’”<sup>[6]</sup> It may seem strange to some European activists: Together we have arrived in a new culture of saying “Thank you”. During the journey in Mitilini there was a

farewell-plenary which lasted for more than two hours and which everyone involved considered important. It constituted exclusively of mutual expressions of thanks and paying respect. One could glimpse a level of basic respect and estimation in the way people dealt with each other, that can be a foundation in conflicts to come – and come they certainly will.

The history of Welcome to Europe started only in 2009 at the No Border Camp on Lesbos when 500 activists from Europe met with hundreds of newly-landed migrants – and where attempts to establish manifold and durable connections between these very different worlds were successful in a way possibly unique in the history of No Border Camps.

### SELECTIVE FAST MOTION

At that time, the movement we will in the following call the anti-racist movement<sup>[7]</sup> could look back on twenty years of history. A selective time laps run-through: In the beginning of the 1990s, predominantly white and German activists initiated first nationwide meetings and campaigns against Lager and deportations. They continued after the factual abolishment of the Right to Asylum in 1993.

Refugee protests or revolts in deportation prisons were important points of reference from the very beginning, even though the self-organizing of the persons affected only was of limited continuity and mostly formed along ethical community lines. Although the initiative *kein mensch ist illegal* (no one is illegal), which was founded in 1997, offensively claimed the decriminalization of the *Sans Papiers* and the Right to Rights, it mostly remained a predominantly white and German support network, which took up the cause of “flanking the self-organization” and in which the question of difference and the network's own paternalism were definitely reflected<sup>[8]</sup>.

In 1998, the first nationwide cross-community self-organization developed: the *Karawane für die Rechte der Flüchtlinge und MigrantInnen* (The Caravan for the rights of refugees and migrants). The Voice, a self-organization largely made up of African refugees, is part of the *Karawane*. In the same

year, *kein mensch ist illegal* initiated a first No Border Camp near Görlitz, thus creating a new form of protest against the border regime. More and more discussions were taking place with people affected by the border regime and with the self-organized on the occasion of further camps on the Eastern border and 2001 at Frankfurt Airport. These discussions resulted in the fifth No Border Camp taking place in Jena in 2002. This way, the focus should be put on the “interior borders” of the *Lagers* and *Residenzpflicht*, a proposition which had been put forward by The Voice.

### EXTRA-MEETINGS TO DISCUSS DIFFERENCE

During one of the preparatory meetings for this No Border Camp in Jena in the summer of 2002 the participants' individual ideas concerning the further perspective and possible follow-up projects came up for discussion. In this circle, two statements marked the radically different positions from which the people involved were speaking from: While a white German activist stated that his further engagement was depending on yet to be made autonomous decisions about his university studies, a refugee activist described his individual threat of being deported and the externally determined uncertainty bound up with not knowing if he would still be in Germany at all in a couple of months.

The gulf between these two statements could hardly have been greater. However, the mutual interest in seeking an intensified communication about this difference (or at least try it) prevailed, and started a series of so-called extra-meetings. Their main concern was “to sit down together outside of the preparatory meetings for the No Border Camp, which were marked by time pressure and organizational needs. The goal was (and still is) to name and, as the circumstances require, talk out the differences created by racism and diverse experiences (concerning political strategies, thematic priorities, specific interests, identity and self-conception, etc.). In the long run this was – as some extra-meeting activists put it programmatically – a matter of developing a common WE, which would, however, be always fractured and

kept fluid. There was even talk about (trans-identity) hybridization.

Time and again, remarkably open debates were possible in the course of these mixed meetings. They were based on a shared intent to get to know each other better and learn from one another. An example from a summary: "For some refugees there is uncertainty because white Germans can discard their anti-racist motivation anytime, and turn towards private life, money-making or other political fields. On the other hand, some white Germans stated from their point of view that some of the refugees would only be interested in anti-racist activism until their own status would be secured and would afterwards try and get a comfortable position in so-called normal life." For several years, extra-meetings were not only the locus of debate about the different positions that people came from, but also where polarizing topics could be discussed, ranging from the complex situation in Palestine and Israel to debates about the "autonomy of migration"<sup>[9]</sup>.

One main focus of contention, on a discursive as well as a practical level, repeatedly was the relation between sexism and racism. At the anti-racist No Border Camp in Jena there had been a severe sexist assault. In the course of the resulting disputes, which were taking place in a very diverse make-up, emotions were running high. It is due to the firm will to fight together, with and in spite of the differences in complex power relations, that in the follow-up to the camp it was possible to concede each other mistakes and to intensively exchange views about which hurts and mental overloads had been playing a role in the process. One result was the installation of contact groups for sexualized assaults and transgressions<sup>[40]</sup> as integral part of the infrastructure of major action camps.

Finally, a whole cycle of anti-racist campaigns, namely the NoLager tours of 2003 to 2007<sup>[41]</sup>, would hardly have been conceivable without the extra-meetings. In fact, it was only in these mixed debates, that the basis for numerous protests and actions in and against the Lagers was developed. These actions, in turn, pushed forward self-organization and mixed projects.

## **CARAVAN PROJECT OF WESTERN AFRICA AND AFRIQUE-EUROPE-INTERACT**

The proposal for a caravan project in Western Africa had its origin in Lesvos 2009, as well, when activists from Mauritania and Mali had been invited as delegates to the No Border Camp. They asked: Why not organize a major (No Border) project in Western Africa? Would the planned World Social Forum of 2011 in Dakar not be a possible occasion to address Frontex and the externalization of the EU border regime?

It would take one and a half years of hard work from this *idée fixe* to the actual realization of a caravan of five buses from Bamako to Dakar and to the foundation of the network Afrique-Europe-interact. In the preparation and, even more so, in the realization of the project with 250 people of mixed backgrounds, the central challenge of such a project became utterly clear: How can it be possible to work together at eye-level, given the incredible gap in resources in one of the poorest regions of the world? How can be dealt with a situation, in which not even the people participating in the caravan have enough to eat? In which deportees from Mali or, even more so, transit migrants from other counties, have to daily struggle for their bare survival? In which "precarity" has a far more existential significance, compared to the situation here? Can such differences ever be bridged in a supposedly common political project?

For many, the caravan project may have been a clash of worlds in the start, but this was a beginning. It was a coming together, an exchange, not at small delegation-based level, but in the direct and immediate contact of the many. In the preparation, common preliminary decisions were made that gave the project a direction. The demand would have to be twofold: It had to be about freedom of movement AND just development, about the right to leave AND the right to stay. The reasons for flight and migration would constantly have to be addressed, the neo-colonial relations of dominance and exploitation, which essentially shape the difference, the gap and which have to be fought in joint interaction from both continents: Afrique-Europe-Interact! This transnational approach

has been stabilized in the course of the past three years. There have not only been projects in Mali, but also activities in Tunisia and Togo<sup>[42]</sup>.

## **CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES**

Many discussions about the experiences laid down here have shown that difference and paternalism can not easily be overcome, just like the border regime could not be abolished in the last 20 years which form the empirical background from which this text has been written. Many of the questions of the extra-meetings ten years ago are the same that are posed today in mixed and transnational organizing attempts. Still, the current dynamics of self-organized protests of refugees as, for example, the group "Lampedusa in Hamburg" profit today from the continuity of the protests that had preceded them – among others from the support received through the "Karawane für die Rechte der Flüchtlinge und MigrantInnen"[13], which can look back on a history spanning more than 15 years and can contribute and convey experiences from these long years of transnational organizing processes.

Many things have changed on a social level – sometimes almost unnoticed. In European societies, the dramatic gap of disenfranchisement is contrasted with a basic sense of having arrived, which cannot be reversed. This notion makes itself felt in the common protests on the street, in the self-evidence of fighting abreast. A current example: The massive struggles in October 2013 in France, when thousands of students protested against the deportation of the 15-year-old Leonarda to Kosovo, who had been dragged from a school bus to the deportation. The pictures of these demonstrations of students speak a language of their own: The protesters are young people in Europe, it seems almost unimportant, if their parents have a history of migration or not. In the first line, in confrontation with the police, they all stand together. This protest has overcome paternalism and generally shows: They all do not want to live in a society in which their class-mates are deported by force to countries where they do not feel at home. All who are here are from here!

Looked at before this background, networking projects like “Welcome to Europe” and “Afrique-Europe-Interact” are no more and no less than search processes in the quest for the development of transnational solidarity in mixed organizing. When looking at it closely, maybe the friendships that have developed despite all the differences symbolize best the changes that have already taken place. If we contrast the pictures of the French students with pictures from the activities in Bamako or Mitilini, one thing becomes immediately obvious: Common organizing under extremely diverse start-out positions is no exotic phenomenon anymore.

We have long since begun to shape our everyday life together. ☉

**MARION BAYER & HAGEN KOPP,  
KEIN MENSCH IST ILLEGAL HANAU**

<sup>[1]</sup> THE VIDEO „VOICES OF PAGANI“ HAD BEEN RECORDED BY UNDER-AGE REFUGEES THEMSELVES, THE CAMERA HAD BEEN THROWN BACK OVER THE WALL AT THE NEXT ENCOUNTER: [HTTP://W2EU.NET/2009/08/20/VOICES-FROM-THE-INSIDE-OF-PAGANI-DETENTION-CENTRE/](http://w2eu.net/2009/08/20/voices-from-the-inside-of-pagani-detention-centre/).

<sup>[2]</sup> JUGENDLICHE OHNE GRENZEN (JOG) IS A NETWORK OF YOUNG REFUGEES THAT WAS FOUNDED IN 2005 IN GERMANY. SEE ALSO [HTTP://JOGSPACE.NET/ABOUT/](http://jogspace.net/about/)"[HTTP://JOGSPACE.NET/ABOUT/](http://jogspace.net/about/).

<sup>[3]</sup> AN EXTENDED DOCUMENTATION OF THE DAYS AT THE INFOPOINT IN MITILINI IN 2009 CAN BE FOUND IN THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE BROCHURE „INFOPOINT DURING NO-BORDER LESVOS 2009“: [HTTP://W2EU.NET/FILES/2010/03/INFOPOINT.PDF](http://w2eu.net/files/2010/03/Infopoint.pdf)

<sup>[4]</sup> IN MARCH OF 2011 A HUNGER STRIKE OF (MOSTLY MOROCCAN) UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS IN ATHENS AND THESSALONIKI ENDED AFTER 44 DAYS. THEY TEMPORARILY OBTAINED DOCUMENTS WHICH ENCOMPASSED A RIGHT TO WORK AS WELL AS THE RIGHT OF ENTRY TO AND DEPARTURE FROM TO MOROCCO AND BACK. A PARTIAL SUCCESS OF A MASSIVE PROTEST, WHICH MANY PEOPLE IN GREECE DEEMED IMPOSSIBLE: [HTTP://W2EU.NET/CATEGORY/HUNGERSTRIKE300/](http://w2eu.net/category/hungerstrike300/).

<sup>[5]</sup> WELCOME ISLAND IS AN EMERGENCY APARTMENT OF THE NETWORK „WELCOME TO EUROPE“ IN ATHENS, IN WHICH UP TO NOW REFUGEES FROM SUDAN HAVE BEEN LIVING IN VARYING CONSTELLATIONS. FURTHER INFORMATION CAN BE FOUND AT: [HTTP://WOHNSCHIFFPROJEKT.BLOGSPORT.EU/WILLKOMMENSINSELN/KONZEPT/](http://wohnschiffprojekt.blogspot.eu/willkommensinseln/konzept/)

<sup>[6]</sup> NNOUR NAWAR, A REFUGEE FROM SUDAN, CAME FROM ATHENS TO THE MEETING IN MITILINI. THERE IS AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF HIS ARABIC TEXT WHICH CAN BE FOUND ON THE BLOG „BIRDSOFIMMIGRANTS“. IN THIS BLOG THERE ARE ALSO SEVERAL OTHER TEXTS THAT HAVE BEEN CREATED DURING THE JOURNEY TO MITILINI IN OCTOBER OF 2013: [HTTP://BIRDSOFIMMIGRANTS.JOG-SPACE.NET/2013/10/15/MY-FIRST-TIME-IN-MYTILINI/](http://birdsofimmigrants.jog-space.net/2013/10/15/my-first-time-in-mytilini/)

<sup>[7]</sup> THE POINT OF REFERENCE IS THE “AUTONOMOUS” ANTI-RACIST MOVEMENT THAT HAS BEEN CONSTITUTING AS A NATIONWIDE MOVEMENT FROM 1991 ONWARDS. WE DO NOT AT ALL WANT TO IGNORE THAT ANTI-RACIST MOVEMENTS AND ANTI-RACIST ORGANIZATION HAS BEEN EXISTING AS EARLY AS THE 1970S AND 1980S (WITHOUT NECESSARILY CARRYING ANTI-RACISM IN THEIR NAMES)

<sup>[8]</sup> CROSS THE BORDER (HRSG.) (1999): KEIN MENSCH IST ILLEGAL. EIN HANDBUCH ZU EINER KAMPAGNE.

<sup>[9]</sup> AMONG OTHERS, SEE THE DEBATE: „KEINE ROMANTISIERUNG BITTE“ [HTTP://THECARAVAN.ORG/NODE/19](http://thecaravan.org/node/19)"[HTTP://THECARAVAN.ORG/NODE/19](http://thecaravan.org/node/19).

<sup>[10]</sup> EXT OF 2003 ON THE PROCESS LEADING TO THE CREATION OF THE CONTACT GROUP DURING THE ANTI-LAGER-ACTION-TOUR: [HTTP://DE.INDYMEDIA.ORG/2004/09/92300.SHTM](http://de.indymedia.org/2004/09/92300.shtm)

<sup>[11]</sup> MANY TEXTS ON THE ANTI-LAGER-ACTION-TOURS AND –ACTIONS BETWEEN 2003 AND 2007 CAN BE FOUND ON THE ARCHIVE-SITE OF THE NOLAGER-NETWORK: [HTTP://WWW.NOLAGER.DE/BLOG/NODE/72/](http://www.nolager.de/blog/node/72/)"[HTTP://WWW.NOLAGER.DE/BLOG/NODE/72/](http://www.nolager.de/blog/node/72/).

<sup>[12]</sup> MANY ADDITIONAL TEXTS AND INFORMATION CAN BE FOUND ON THE WEBSITE OF „AFRIQUE-EUROPE-INTERACT“ :[HTTP://WWW.AFRIQUE-EUROPE-INTERACT.NET/](http://www.afrique-europe-interact.net/).

<sup>[13]</sup> WEBSITE OF THE CARAVAN FOR THE RIGHTS OF REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS: [HTTP://THECARAVAN.ORG/](http://thecaravan.org/)"[HTTP://THECARAVAN.ORG/](http://thecaravan.org/).

# Critical Whiteness as a catalyst

## EXPERIENCES WITH TRANSIDENTITARIAN AND TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZATION

*Preface by Transact: This text is the slightly shortened version of an article that was published with a different heading in the journal Phase 2 after the NoBorder Camp in Cologne in 2012<sup>(1)</sup>. Printing the text once more in this brochure has nothing to do with us wanting to seamlessly continue the debates that have started in Cologne (as it has been explained in the introduction.) For us it is more important that this text, referring to the practical experiences of the work in transidentitarian and transnational networks (NoLager-Netzwerk, Afrique-Europe-Interact and Welcome to Europe), draws up an understanding of Critical Whiteness, which is mainly concerned with the question of how we can handle the unequal starting conditions, privileges and dominances in a productive way within these heterogeneous networks.*

### LOOK BACK

In 2003 the series of anti-racist noborder camps, which had started in 1998, ended due to massive conflicts within the preparation group.

The major problem was the question whether a left anti-racism should always and from the beginning on be organized as a mixed or transidentitarian cooperation, at least when started off by German whites. In the context of the border camps this demand meant "refugees"/"non-refugees". And yet: These conflicts turned out as very productive and during the following years numerous transidentitarian projects emerged like for example the Nolager Network (2002-2007)

or the two transnationally anchored networks Welcome to Europe and Afrique-Europe-Interact, which both started in 2009. Again and again the internal debates – using keywords like "hybridity" and "transidentitarian organization" – circled around the question of how an egalitarian cooperation could be accomplished at all, considering the unequal starting conditions. From the beginning on important keywords came from the Critical Whiteness approach, which had originally been imported from the USA.

This approach states that in dealing with racism in a scientific, artistic or political way, we should not only look at the deprivation of the rights of black people or others affected by racism but the criticism of white supremacy and the privileges which come along with it should also play an important role. It was all the more incomprehensible, yes even grotesque, what happened at the NoBorder camp in Cologne - by the way on exactly the same meadow as nine years before. Once more there were serious disagreements, this time, however, they came from the opposite direction: Not white or radical autonomous groups questioned the cooperation with the self-organized refugee groups.

This time some PoC (People of Colour) and white activists applied their own authoritarian ideas and identity policy to the Critical Whiteness approach. It was criticized aggressively that some white participants of the camp had actually or supposedly been involved in racist behaviour and dominances.

As it had been the case in 2003, this criticism was articulated in such a rude way that numerous refugee activists felt their own political matters were being pushed out of the focus of the debate. Some examples: On the third day of the camp demands on a complete ban on alcohol and drugs were made, claiming this would ensure the safety of non-white participants. Furthermore some white camp participants with dreadlocks received small flyers demanding them to cut off their hair and accusing them of a so-called "culture cannibalism". Unwelcome terms were also being criticized in a forceful way. During the final plenary meeting, for example, a Nigerian activist of The Voice Refugee Forum was asked in all seriousness not to use the term "victim" when referring to himself, but rather to speak of "a person negatively affected by discrimination". Two acts of repression can be seen as the peak of the crisis of the camp: After there had been discriminatory behaviour by some white camp participants during the first "Agisra" workshop (which is an organisation of migrant women), the second workshop was cancelled without authorization by Agisra (which Agisra has criticized vehemently for several times). Secondly there was an attempt to exclude a white activist from the camp without any further explanation after accusing her of a racist insult. Six weeks after the camp it turned out that there had been a mistake and the wrong person had been accused<sup>(2)</sup>.

What happened in Cologne raised numerous serious questions. But one thing

should be emphasized from the beginning: The subject of discussion is not the Critical Whiteness approach itself, because this approach is originally neither authoritarian nor identity. On the contrary Critical Whiteness understands racism as a system of finely graded inclusions and exclusions, which opens or denies access to resources. The approach refers to the regimes of representation which have developed during the era of colonialism, categorizing people by the colour of their skin and other ostensibly significant criteria of differentiation. People are categorized as being "black", "white", "arabic" etc. and are therefore made to become members of different groups – including ethnicizing their body. In tangible terms: When "white" people, "black" people or People of Colour are mentioned, this does not refer to skin pigmentations or other specially marked characteristics. These terms rather refer to social positionings going along with socio-economically, culturally and politically different, even opposing experiences.

Accordingly some activists in Cologne called themselves PoC who purely visually could belong to the majority group in society (keyword: passing) but have experienced social discrimination because of non-German sounding last names or their family backgrounds. In other words, the conflict that erupted in Cologne is about the different understandings of the Critical Whiteness approach and about the question how and why authoritarian and identity ideas were connected to it. Attention should be directed to the experiences which have already been made during transidentitarian cooperations. Against this background, the weaknesses and contradictions of the Critical Whiteness practice which was pushed through in Cologne will become comprehensible. For it is a simple and fundamental observation, that the question of dealing with dominances and privileges comes up by itself any place where activists with different backgrounds and starting conditions are working together.

## TESTING CRITICAL WHITENESS IN PRACTICE

Theoretical or academical studies of the Critical Whiteness approach have never been in the centre of attention within the transidentitarian projects such as the NoLager network or Afrique-Europe-Interact – it would hardly have been possible because of the completely different educational backgrounds. But the debates which came up in the everyday organization process evolved around the topics, questions, problems, and challenges, which undoubtedly are at the core of the Critical Whiteness discourse. We want to show what this means specifically with a few brief examples from the last 10 years, putting a special emphasis on how privileges and dominances are handled in our daily work<sup>(9)</sup>.

a) Several times in the past there have been sexual harassments by male refugees during anti-racist activities like NoBorder-camps or congresses. However, instead of trying to find intervention and prevention strategies together with all participants, some white groups repeatedly told the self-organized refugee groups to observe the men they had mobilized. They furthermore demanded that anti-sexism should become a prerequisite for anti-racist cooperation – this was explained in a much-discussed open letter to The Voice Refugee Forum written by participants of an anti-fascist camp in Weimar in the year 2000. Of course there were fierce reactions not least from the people who had been addressed. On the one hand they were angry about being seen in the light of a deep-rooted stereotype of the colonial representation regimes saying sexism was a special problem of black or non-white men. On the other hand the critique in the open letter was seen as a disguised threat with which the white anti-racists would show their white XXL privilege, that they themselves could decide if, how and with whom they would do their anti-racist work. This would include the option to separate themselves from other groups, dividing participants of an event along constructed racist lines, instead of tackling the problem as a conflict existing within the whole movement. It was all the

more important, that during the intense debates of the development phase of the NoLager network, we came to the conclusion, that racism and sexism are equally problematic as well as interrelated and should therefore by no means be hierarchized.

This decision was also expressed at the border camp in Cologne in 2003 as well as during the anti-lager- action days in Fürth. At both of these events there was a group which could be addressed in case of sexual harassment. This was a transidentitarian group with the participation of The Voice Refugee Forum.

b) One of the most fiercely conflicts between German activists from the noBorder camp preparation team and The Voice Refugee Forum was about the campaign against the so-called "Residenzpflicht" (residency obligation) which was launched at the refugee congress in Jena in the year 2000. The Project was labeled "humanitarian" and therefore "politically limited for the refugee struggles". Furthermore The Voice Refugee Forum – due to a sometimes somewhat propaganda-style persistence – was confronted with the accusation to "surf" on the bad conscience of European activists with the sole aim to recruit so-called "campaign soldiers". But these accusations were criticized just as harshly. It was pointed out, that the negative attitude against the campaign showed the white ignorance against the racist regulation of the "Residenzpflicht", being an experience of humiliation, isolation and intimidation which affected the complete daily lives of the refugees. Thus, this regulation was significantly responsible for the fact that many refugees couldn't do political work or organize themselves, although it should be their right to do so. In addition, the dominant and self-righteous way of how the criticism of the campaign had been brought forward, was rejected, as it had failed to recognize that for the refugees actions like anti-racist no-border camps were not symbolic playgrounds (as the popular saying "holiday communism" suggested), but a political space promising real support and networking. Many participants of the border camp community came to the result, that anti-racism should be ori-



ented much stronger towards the refugees', migrants', and PoC's everyday, sometimes barely visible struggles. This is an approach that has been described by kanak attack as an "empathetic identification with the migrants' subjective reproduction interests". It has been crucial for many basic decisions, including the founding of the NoLager network..

c) When working together closely, confidentially, and continuously in transidentitarian constellations, it is absolutely important how we handle the major differences of privileges. In 2004, for example, refugees showed up for the anti-lager-action-tour, who had literally been vegetating in different isolated camps in East Germany. And in 2011, in the course of the Bamako-Dakar-Caravan, European activists stayed at the house of a self-organized refugee group, where they met 50 people who had been deported from Libya just shortly before the Europeans arrived.

Against the background of these experiences the concept of "accountability", known from Critical Whiteness debates, has emerged as a practical maxim. With this concept white activists practice the so-called "powersharing". They systematically share their material, symbolic and timewise resources and can therefore become allies for the refugees, migrants and PoC. But of course it was always recognized that the structural in- and exclusions would not disappear through individual actions. The suggestion was rather to use the concept of accountability to break up the racist structure of the us-them dichotomies deeply rooted in society, at least for the field of anti-racist work itself. This also happens, because in the course of organizing processes like these automatically secondary concerns of racism occur. An example would be that your own comrades or friends are threatened by deportation or are suffering from malaria. Or you are trying to fight together for your common interests

against the racist harassments of the registry or immigration office.

d) As a framework for this and similar processes a maxim has emerged, which was originally created by the (Australian) Murrri-activist Lilla Watson, and was printed on T-Shirts by the Flüchtlingsinitiative Brandenburg in 2003: "If you've come here to help me, you're wasting your time. But if you've come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." We want to point out three things which this maxim has been standing for until today: Firstly, there has to be the willingness to take the concept of accountability seriously. Secondly, there has to be an openness for political debates, even if it might hurt.

Within the NoLager network – to name just another example – there have been fiery debates about history and politics again and again. One of these arguments was about the (dis-)continuities between the crimes of



**Demonstration of family members of missing boat people in Tunis, 2011** [Photo:Leona Goldstein]



Preparation of a commemoration ceremony for boat people who drowned in Thermi/Lesbos, 2013 [Photo: Marily Stroux]

colonialism and the Nazi killing machine. Refugee activists criticized a eurocentric view at history including a hierarchy of victims. Thirdly, there has been the effort to compensate uneven starting positions and to avoid dominances in the course of the everyday cooperation. This includes: providing translations, a careful handling of public speaker positions, taking into account the fact that not everybody has equal access to internet, telephone or writing, establishing multilingualism, the support of self-organization as an important part of transidentitarian organization, collective financing of political work etc.

### CRITICAL WHITENESS FACING IDENTITARY AND AUTHORITARIAN PERSPECTIVES

On the NoBorder camp in Cologne the explicit linkage of Critical Whiteness to transidentitarian organization was repeatedly denounced as a kind of wellness program for whites. It was claimed that in the joint cooperation white dominance behaviour would not be analyzed enough. However, against the background of the experiences

outlined above, it should become clear just how far away from reality this criticism stands. Additionally, such a focus on white dominance also involuntarily shows a great measure of paternalism. The non-transidentitarian Critical-Whiteness group ascribed the marginalization of the political concerns of the refugees in Cologne exclusively to the dominant behaviour of whites. They didn't take into consideration at all, that the majority of the refugee activists unequivocally criticized the "isolation and ignoring" as well as the "monopolization of the camp by a certain group" (meaning the Critical Whiteness group mentioned above). Other comments by refugee activists talked about an "atmosphere of fear and uneasiness" and that white activists made inadequate statements of solidarity, just because of their fear they could otherwise be called a racist. It shall briefly be shown in the following that the occurrences around the NoBorder camp in Cologne were primarily an expression that the Critical Whiteness approach had been misunderstood.

Although the Critical Whiteness discourse emphasizes the construction of ethnicized

identities (just like the construction of two genders), essentializing and dichotomizing concepts were predominant. It seems fatal that this even included a focus on pigmentation, as can be read in an open letter that was written on the occasion of a similar conflict in Berlin: "Us whites (white people), our bodies, our voices, our thoughts are always racist. (...) If we are not asked we shut up!" Social struggles, personal change or transidentitarian organization seem to have disappeared from their world, instead the social actors are getting pinned down to their social starting positions. So it's probably not a coincidence, that the Critical Whiteness group which we are criticizing here has ignored systematically the references to transidentitarian projects before and during the No-Border camp. This included, that they claimed over and over again, that white activists weren't interested at all in a self-critical analysis of privileges, dominances and violations.

But the dichotomies and polarizations of identity policy in Cologne wouldn't have had such a powerful effect, if they hadn't been connected to a whole set of authoritarian and repressive practices – including a variation

of "Definitionsmacht" (power of definition), which we are criticizing in this brochure.

All in all the pitfalls that have been mentioned have led to an extreme moralization of the political discourse in the course of the NoBorder camp. During an interview the co-founder of kanak attak Vassilis Tsianos aptly called it "disciplining the subjects through moral appeal" (4). This moral appeal included that the communication was regulated continuously. The demand to talk of "people who have fled" instead of using the term "refugee" was just one example. Speakers named their own privileges in a ritualized way, especially at the beginning of their speeches, when they made their obligatory as well as superficial statement of their social position. ("I am speaking from a white perspective, I am womanized, I am middle class and am privileged because of ableism.") Additionally they didn't spare blatant double standards. The accusation was repeatedly made, that if white activists would positively refer to the refugees' critical statements they would show a strategy of ruling and dividing deeply rooted in colonization. On the other hand the statements by PoC who belonged

to the Critical Whiteness community were seen as an unquestioned law. Although the terminology of transidentitarian organization, that has been focused on in this text, has emerged from the practical debates at the 5th anti-racist border camp in Jena in 2002, theoretical concepts played an important role there as well – not least the work of the Israeli social scientist Nira Yuval-Davis, which has been inspired by Israeli-Palestinian peace initiatives. For in her book "Gender and Nation" which was first published in 1997 she has developed the highly influential concept of "transversal politics", referring to postcolonial theorists like bell hooks and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Her concept is based on two premises: On the one hand there is the possibility of "transversal dialogues", out of which could emerge "knowledge communities" or alliances based on common "systems of value", despite different social positions. On the other hand it is clear that not every "conflict of interests" will be reconcilable and dialogues will inevitably come up against limiting factors. It shall be highlighted that both of these perspectives have been of great value for the everyday work in

heterogeneous networks and have therefore become something like a practical foundation of Critical Whiteness, especially in answering the question how different starting positions, dominances and privileges can be handled in a non-authoritarian and non-identitary way ☉

**OLAF BERNAU –ACTIVIST OF NOLAGER  
BREMEN AND AFRIQUE-EUROPE-INTERACT**

(1) "IN DER AUTORITÄTS- UND IDENTITÄTSFALLE. STICH-  
WORTE ZUR DEBATTE UM CRITICAL WHITENESS ANLÄSS-  
LICH DES DIESJÄHRIGEN NOBORDERCAMPS IN KÖLN",  
PHASE 2, NO. 44

(2) DETAILS ABOUT THESE EVENTS CAN BE FOUND IN A  
REPORT PUBLISHED ON INDYMEDIA BY NOLAGER BREMEN  
ON JULY 25TH.

(3) SEVERAL TEXTS FROM THE YEARS 2002-2011, CO-  
VERING THE CONFLICTS AND DEBATES MENTIONED ABOVE,  
CAN BE FOUND ON THE WEBSITE "WWW.AFRIQUE-EUROPE-  
INTERACT.NET

(4) SEE JUNGLE WORLD NO. 32, AUGUST 9TH, 2012

**12-years old boy on Lesbos, thinking about the next step of his journey, 2013** [Photo: Marily Stroux]



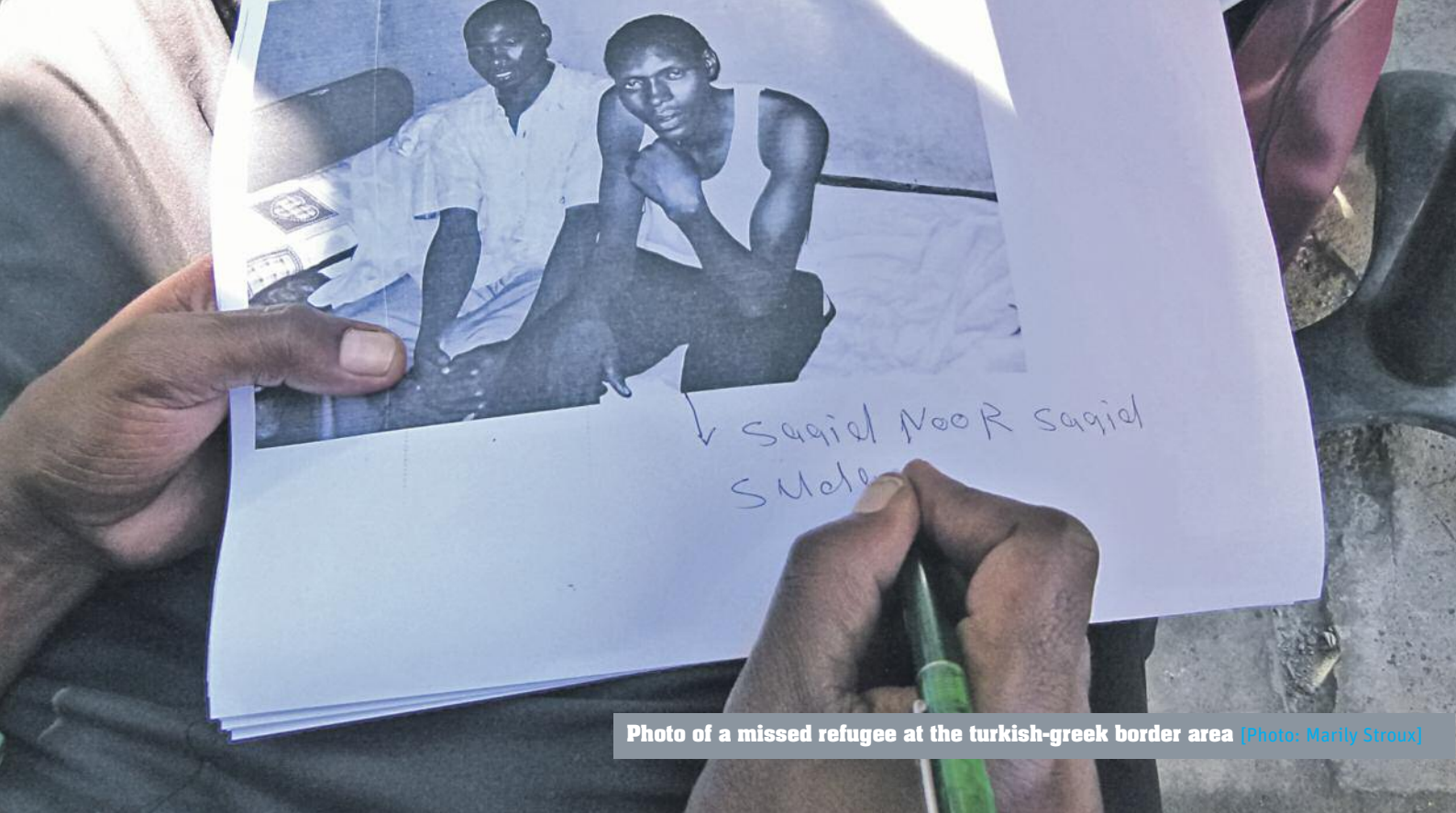


Photo of a missed refugee at the turkish-greek border area (Photo: Marily Stroux)

# "The supporter-stigma as a tool for escapism"

## AN INTERVIEW WITH REX OSA (THE VOICE REFUGEE FORUM)

**Rex, in several discussions you have mentioned that you don't like the term "supporter". Can you explain why?**

Refugee and non-Refugee Activists has been my usual character to identifying activists in the movement for the rights of Refugees and migrants. Unfortunately, I find myself using the word 'supporter' unconsciously, because it's kind of very popular in the struggle today. From critical point of view analysis, being a supporter is kind of ignoring responsibilities in the movement. There are cases where some activists present themselves as 'helpers' which makes it even worse.

This stigma of supporter became stronger after the Noboder Camp 2012 in Köln as non-Refugee activists adopted the habit of guilt without conviction to shy away from

being accused of reproducing hierarchy at any assumed attempt of dominance either through contributions in terms of ideas especially on issues concerning migrants and Refugees. The whole scene at the NBC turned into an atmosphere of isolation as the non-Refugee activists reduced themselves being reserved in pretense of complimenting all that comes out from victims of racism even when it obviously makes no sense. It was actually a horrible situation of false solidarity „Guilt without conviction“. Such situation was for me a sort of high level mockery.

**What do you mean by responsibility. What are the responsibilities of German activists in common struggles?**

We all have to accept the fact that we owe every responsibility to make the world a better place to live in, because we all are faced with problems at different levels. These problems are all connected to the system of absolute control enforced through unjust and brutal mechanisms to serve imperialist ideology. There is no doubt that Refugees are the most vulnerable with no place back in their home country and in this Imperialist World, where security is expected to be guaranteed. It is also important to take note of the situation that people are faced with here not withstanding the privileges available to them at our expense, because of the continuous destruction of our countries to build the west. The responsibility from non-Refugee activists starts from understanding the fact that we have been undergoing centuries of slavery, exploitation, racism and extinction for the sake of the privileges they enjoy today.

That responsibility starts with the conviction to denounce all structures that legitimate segregation, racism to exploit, exclude and confine humans into class. Because dignity is the bonafied right for every creature without racial distinction or otherwise. Taking responsibility means sincere solidarity that involves empowerment of the oppressed people against every structure of injustice and colonial persecution that has always been enforced to serve the future of the

West. I mean to say, we have to work together to pull down the strongholds of the State policies of brutality and militarisation, exploitation and discrimination, every structure that promotes classes amongst human race. This affects the Europeans also.

That fear of been confronted with reproduction of racial dominance hinders many non-refugee activists from making inputs to critical decisions on Refugee struggle is for me also racist, because you may be convinced with some negative impact that may have been ignored in the planning but remain reserved to let the poor refugees do what they wish and disguise that act for respecting self-organisation. On the other hand, some Refugee activists are being instrumentalised to see the role of non-refugee activists just as supporters – with no say in the decision process but just staying passive. But as for my conviction, self-organisation does not create room for disrespect of the engagement of non-refugee activists. The habit to exercise self-organisation in the form of „We do it anyway we feel and nobody has to question it“ is very problematic for the way forward in the entire movement. Phrases like „I’m not in the position to decide“ have become very popular with many left activists, although some of such activists engineer the concept from behind and pretend in the open plenary.

The way the idea of supporter appears to me would seem like this: the protesting Refugees decide to call for solidarity to get drowned in the Mediterranean sea as signal to generate public pressure on situation of refugees.... Who amongst the so-called supporters would join this action ? Even at the hunger strike, how many so-called supporters could join it ? This 'supporter' stigma stands as a tool for escapism for many left activists who may not have been committed to practically confront the injustice of the state but rather to compliment it in disguise to struggling for equal rights and freedom for all.

**Does it mean that self-organised refugee struggles and common struggles are belonging together instead of being some kind of contradiction - just in the sense of the famous slogan „How is your liberation bound up with mine“?**

All in all, there is a border line on which we have to build our solidarity. It has to be connected to a sincere identification of demands of the affected persons without compromising the actual meaning dignity and freedom. That we take the space to speak for ourselves, that we believe in civil disobedience against racist laws, that we demand the abolition of food packages - food-coupons - lager etc needs no negotiation that reduces such demands for our bonafied rights to dignity.



Goodbye in the harbour of Mytilini (Lesvos), 2013 [Photo: Marily Stroux]

We all owe that responsibility to make the world comfortable for everyone of us who exist in the world.

**Nevertheless you have experienced discrimination, domination or even racism in the cooperation with German activists. Can you give two or three examples?**

The abolition campaign was a very important experience for me. The problem was having to do with paternalistic expertise that undermined our potentials as being elementary to the change. It started right from the first preparation meeting in Nürnberg as we tried to find a suitable name for the campaign. In this meeting where Refugee activists were very few, the activists tried to push for a vote to throw out a name that included 'persecution' with the excuse that 'Verfolgung' (persecution) reflects a difficulty that could mobilize the solidarity in Germany as against naming the repression exactly the way it is. It continued until the last preparation meeting which took place in Berlin from where the same reproduction of hierarchy and knowing what best must be in the campaign. Personally, I would find it hard to identify any concrete impact reached by abolish campaign, nevertheless I do acknowledge the fact that every attempt against state injustice is never wasted. Just that a well articulated action makes a whole lot of impact of change that empowers the self determination of the oppressed - i.e the development of the Refugee movement has confirmed that our obvious presence makes a lot of difference in the struggle to break the isolation and liberate the oppressed people of the world.

**How do you look at it today?**

From my experience so far, I do believe we need lots more of tolerance to understand our positions much better. Conflicts we surely cannot absolutely avoid, but we should be open to express our criticism in a manner that respects our engagements at the least. If the abolition campaign had taken place today, I would have personally reacted differently and see the problems as part of our challenge in the movement.

I think the situation of the preparatory phase of the NBC 2012, I mean the conflict that almost rocked the preparation phase of the planned NBC 2012, could be seen as a typical example. I have learned to realize the fact that we have different backgrounds that require us to engage in a continuous atmosphere of tolerance to our different points of view. This tolerance would pave way for better understanding of the connection of our different struggles. We have to learn the culture of understanding, that what affects me affects you also, and to understand the power of fighting together.

**But what does it mean if serious conflicts are coming up? How should the conversation work from your point of view?**

It's no theory to say every white person is born and socialized with an ideology of racism. It has to do with all aspects of the social development. Being a revolutionary activist from the left scene doesn't exonerate that in this case.

The orientation of racial superiority is always there. So I do believe that reflecting on this fact in a very constructive way is always important, because as humans we are always in the process of learning to develop our orientations which may take a whole lifetime for some people also. It all boils down to patience and tolerance as the key to constructive discussion and exchange to understand each other much more and correct some habits that unconsciously exhibit discriminatory tendencies - i.e you may have unconsciously acted in such a way that I felt racially harassed or otherwise. If I decide not to find that space to discuss it with you, based on the idea of no justification, then I may not be helping you as this act will continue on and on. I owe that responsibility to clear such treatment if possible. This does not stand as a justification for every act of discrimination or whatever.

My reflection to this concept of „STOP“ that took the scene of the NBC 2012 meant an act that exhibits the same hierarchy we tend to address. This may be connected to my own social background, because we discuss problems of harassment no matter how traumatizing it may be. That is our cultural

way of solving dispute. It's just like losing someone, the possibility to grieve and cry helps you get over the pains in your heart, because not crying stores the grief which is unhealthy.

What I actually meant to say is, we need that space for clarifying issues, it may be very horrible and full of conflict. We cannot live with these conflicts just like that. We need conflicts to get somewhere. It is our everyday challenge. The process of eradicating such behaviour of discrimination, racial superiority and all that sort is a life time process. What is really important is that we learn how best we could handle each other with respect. This is the key to overcoming our conflicts and seeing ourselves as partners in changing the system.

**Ok, this sounds very reasonable or even sophisticated. But what do you do if a person can't stand a situation like this. How to act if a refugee or a woman feels really humiliated or even threatened by other activists?**

On the issue of sexual harassment, I think it is possible to learn how to say No when it's the case. My experience from the case of a Refugee whose knowledge of English was not so perfect had expressed his emotions to a German activist by sms „I like to fuck you“. Such text may seem very arrogant and disrespectful to some people. But a clear understanding of the fact that the expression doesn't reflect arrogance, but just the way he could manage to express his emotion for a relationship could solve the situation of escalated harassment.

We must also not undermine the treatment of being human, be it as man or a woman. We are born with emotions which are internally generated. Therefore, the space to reflect on issues opens a clearer understanding of the basis of our acts so as to regulate our reactions. We need to understand both stand points. ☉

INTERVIEW: **DORETTE FÜHRER**



## „If something annoys me, I say so“

### AN INTERVIEW WITH NEWROZ DUMAN (YOUTH WITHOUT BORDERS)

What kind of discriminating behaviour have you experienced in the cooperation with, for example, German activists? What were difficult situations for you?

I'd have to think about this more closely – in general, I had a lot more positive experiences than negative ones. Maybe I have been cooperating with the right kind of people, those that are not too complicated, and very devoted to making cooperation work. However some things will never change, simply because I have lived through different experiences from the ones you have had in your life – and the other way around. But we can bring our mutual experiences together, and if we achieve that, we'll both profit.

Looking back on our relationship, it seems to me that harm was most likely to be in-

flicted in situations implicating family, and conversations concerning the meaning of family - I think that sometimes we had strong arguments that also lead to transgressions.

I am not sure whether I would define this as discrimination, but fact is that questions of family are really important to me. What is the meaning of family in my community and my culture? Do I have to give up on that to improve our cooperation? Can others accept what family means to me? When I say: "I do this now for my family, because in this situation, they are what is most important to me" than this is my personal choice, and I expect my decision to be met with respect. But sometimes my German friends will argue "you can't do this. You have to think of yourself and your own interests first" – which makes me angry,

because I think "this is MY life, why can't you let me take my own decisions". German friends often do not understand the way family relations work for me. That hurts, and it makes me sad. Often this reaction comes from people that are close to me, and that I have otherwise good communications with.

**So how do you deal with this?**

I have made my decision with regard to that matter, and I follow up on it. I do not say "shut up, that's none of your business". Instead I try to explain why it means so much to me. They usually leave me alone after a while, but unfortunately not because they understand and accept my reasons, but just because they know that I have made that decision, and won't change my mind.

You have been involved with „Youth wit-

**hout borders“ for a long time now. Have there ever been problems with transgressions or racism among the Youth on the conferences?**

That's the good thing about JOG: there are so many youth from all sorts of countries. We also have Youth from countries that are at war with each other, or where there's a lack of mutual understanding. Often we harbour the political views of our families, and that could easily result in conflict. But actually political discussions about the situation in our countries of origin, or the oppression of distinct groups are rare, as our debates are mainly about the situation here. During this interview I came to realize that racism within the group has actually never been brought up as an issue, or maybe I simply missed out on it. I think that such a thing could happen, but we may not perceive it as being racist, also because we do not want it that way. Or maybe it really isn't an issue at all, and such situations simply do not arise because we are so focused on structural racism. In my view, we really don't have to engage in a debate on this; we understand each other, get along well and first and foremost work together very well. We all have lived through all sorts of different experiences, and we talk about those a lot. The conferences

are also a venue where we have room for exchange about what happened when we were fleeing our countries, and this helps us to come to terms with what happened, and also creates a strong bond between us, which ultimately forms the basis for our individual strengths.

**Lately we had also talked about situations when, for example on large conferences or protest camps, some men are hitting on women, and how we experience this. On earlier No Border Camps, before the time you joined, we had many arguments about sexism, racism and how they relate to each other. In the brochure for which this interview is being held those discussions will play a role, too. Do you want to comment on that?**

Now I have to say that, fortunately, I have never been in a situation where I felt that this was giving me too much trouble. Maybe I just got lucky and have never encountered the really crazy bastards. Of course it is annoying when I am getting molested, and it does happen fairly often. But I believe when I am being very clear and distinct, nothing bad will happen. Real problems start when we hesitate, for example because we are concerned that we might be perceived as being

racist. I think that for some women, this concern makes them afraid to draw a clear line, and makes it difficult to plain and simply say: "Stop. Please do not behave like this towards me, you are invading my space." Maybe it is because of my evil gaze (laughs), that they don't dare to get back at me when I say that. I think that body language and expression play an important role in this, too. I have never had to, like, hit someone in order to make them stop. If someone asks me "do you have a boyfriend" and I simply answer: "I don't want one, and I also don't want to discuss this with you", I have yet to meet the person that won't get the message. If you are being straightforward, in my experience it very rarely happens that someone keeps coming on to you. Of course that can happen, but I don't think it is very common, and most situations can be settled without further stress, if you communicate clearly. If I do not like something, I can say so, no matter what my colour of skin is. I am a human being, and if something annoys me, I will say so.

**Are there situations, no matter whether the discrimination is directed against women, or in a racist way, where you would say: Stop, end of discussion, no more! And**



**Spontaneous party with released refugees on Lesbos, 2013 [Photo: Welcome2Europe]**





**Bamako-Dakar-Caravan: Public screening in Nioro, 2011** [Photo: Leona Goldstein]

**where you'd say this is where my Power of Definition begins, and that includes the possibility of sanctioning behaviour?**

Several situations from last year come to my mind. It started at the No border Camp in Cologne. Then there was the refugee congress in Munich. I had hoped that the groups involved would join together and come closer again. But then I felt clearly that some people had organized in advance in a way to foster separation. The preparation committee had made very clear statements on how the struggle of refugees had worked out over the last year, and how that was supposed to be organized from now on. From the beginning it was said that only refugees would have the right to speak, and other activists would not. I can see that there are activists who talk too much, with the consequence that refugees may not dare to speak up, okay, then you can call for more respect. But when the group was separated in "citizens" and "non-citizens" depending on their papers, that was too much for me. Those that had a resident permit for a year were declared citizens, even though they have by far not the same rights as German passport holders. I had not realized in advance this would happen, and when I got asked at the door what kind of passport I had, I simply lost it. That's totally beyond limits for me. I firmly believe that it is possible to cooperate amongst very different people. Unless there are people

who claim to have the right to decide who has to keep their mouth shut in which situation. And claim the right to decide who is to do which job – activists with more than a "Duldung" (exceptional leave to remain that has to be renewed regularly) may then organize the logistics while the real refugees talk. There must have been some activists that silently supported this approach – else they would not have been co-organizing the event. But for me, there are limits to cooperation. I did voice my view in Munich. That got ignored. Then I simply withdrew from the cooperation and left the workshop. I find this form of separation to be utterly wrong, and I will not take part in it. A few of us from JOG were participating, and we also issued a joint statement afterwards. Of course this is also related to my personal – or rather our collective – history. Many from our group by now have a status, but we have all been in that same situation, and we managed to get out of that mess by organizing against it together. But the people in Munich did not care at all what my background is, what I have been through or what I do at the moment. I have my own history with the flight, and then a long time with Duldung (see above). You have a different background, and different experiences. But you know all this, because you are here with all your heart, just like me. If something is really im-

portant to you, you will manage to get along with others, and we can integrate our perspectives and complement one another.

**Is there anything else you'd like to add before we close?**

Yes, the language issue: sometimes in conferences, or certain political meetings, I get the feeling that I can't participate, because the way people talk is so complicated. A lot of time is being wasted by theorizing. We need more room for practical action. I have ideas, visions and goals, and that's what I want to work on, I want to change things. I have a hard time relating to long debates about terminology and how exactly things should be expressed in written calls. In big meetings, it is important to pay attention to who is actually participating, and how we can create a space where language is not a barrier, in order to enable people with different experiences and backgrounds to equally follow the conversations. As far as I can judge, our networks and collaborations have been expanding continuously – at least from my point of view. Maybe there are groups who are focused on that issue, that have a different impression and could name 125 examples for discrimination within our movements. Personally, I don't find that so important, because it is my experience that it helps to talk to each other. ☉

INTERVIEW: MARION BAYER



Bamako-Dakar-Caravan: Plenum, 2011 [Photo: Leona Goldstein]

# "To meet without there being this gulf"

## AN INTERVIEW WITH RIADH BEN AMMAR (AFRIQUE-EUROPE-INTERACT)

**Riadh, you came on a visa from Tunis to Germany and stayed here when the visa expired. You then lived for four years in a reception centre for asylum seekers in Mecklenburg. Can you tell us how your political activism began from this situation?**

I remember this one image, when no-lager activists [struggling against collective camps for asylum seekers] came to our camp. In the beginning I was a bit sceptical because as a so-called 'fraudulent asylum seeker' I had the feeling I didn't have a right to asylum in any case. That's why I kept asking myself: do I have the right to take to the streets and protest? Which rights do I have? In my po-

sition as a Tunisian who has no right to asylum, it was a bit difficult to show my involvement. But within the camp, there was a large group from Togo and they did more at that time. I accompanied them to get out of the house for a while. In the beginning that was important: to be somewhere else on a weekend. At the start of it all I thus wasn't a convinced activist, but with time some things in my life changed. The decisive moment was the opportunity to move into a shared flat in Rostock, where my housemates prepared the protests against the G8. There I had the opportunity to live in the city, to live normally in a flat. The flat was very special for me as well, as there was a lot of

information I received: information about capitalism, about migration... about why I was in a camp, why I wasn't anymore in Tunisia, why it took me many years of my life to get a visa. This time was the beginning for me, the beginning of changing my perspectives on things.

**After the G8 things continued, and by now you work regularly on various political projects, for instance Afrique Europe Interact, of which you are a part and with whom you participated in the Bamako-Dakar-Caravan in Mali in early 2011. Or also boats4people, with whom you travelled several times to Tunisia. Can you tell us a**

### **little bit about how that was for you?**

In the framework of the G8, I did a lot of PR work on 'no-lager' topics; I became more self-confident and realised that also for 'fraudulent asylum seekers', it is important to fight for our rights. At the same time, I also got in touch with other activists, with international activists, and after the G8 the themes Africa/Europe/the border regime continued to occupy me. That is why I joined Afrique Europe Interact, a network that advocates freedom of movement and just development. It was an important decision after I had received my residence permit in 2009. I asked myself: what do you want now? Now that you have the residence permit, you can work. But for me things turned out differently. Also the revolution in Tunisia played a role in this, it further inspired me to keep working on the topic of borders.

**You said that it took several years until you received your right to remain here in Germany. Being without that was clearly discriminatory of course. Now that you have a secured residence, do you nevertheless experience discrimination?**

Also in the political part of society?

**Of course, especially also by German activists.**

At the beginning of the process of organising the G8 protests, when I met people from the radical left for the first time, there was – well, what does discrimination mean; for me it was for instance the clothes that people were wearing.

I was wondering, what do clothes and politics have to do with each other? And because I was wearing normal clothes – what does normal mean, I mean normal, somewhat fancy shoes – then for instance there was a stupid comment by someone at a plenary about my shoes. For me, that was discrimination. Also when I saw the 'no-lager' activists and their clothes for the first time, I wondered, why are they so different than the citizens in Germany – sometimes that really troubled me. And of course, with the authorities; even if you can speak German well, the authorities give you the feeling that you speak no German at all.

Also in the camp I experienced discrimination, I was the only Tunisian there. In the large group of Togolese, I was always the 'faut blanc', the 'false white guy'. Most of the time we were joking about it, but sometimes it hurt.

**I have another question following up on the discrimination in your political environment. You cooperate in your political work with Germans, who consider cooperation on a par to be very important. Would you say that that is working out?**

For me it was always important to not only organise in pure refugee groups; for me the goal was always mixed organising. Simply because I am against groups which are founded only on the basis of nationality or skin colour, and which exclude others. I prefer it when the movement in which I am active stays open. For me it was important in the cooperation with German activists to learn the German language, also to break my isolation. I would not have managed to do that had I only organised with people in the asylum seeker camp. And I would like to make another point regarding the situation in the camp: of course we tried to organise things from there. But that was difficult; by far not everyone participated and for us it was also difficult to motivate ourselves. I think the role of supporters here is very important, no matter if they are German, Turkish, or Tunisian.

**I also remember though that you were, at times, rather annoyed at the common political work. For instance with boats4people when you had the feeling that you were seen only as the Tunisia expert. Or in Tunisia in the refugee camp Shousha, when the Sub-Saharanans were interested only in the white activists and ignored you as a Tunisian.**

Ok, now you move on to the transnational work. That's another topic than the movements here. Travelling to Tunisia with Afrique-Europe-Interact was an important part of my political development. Sometimes it was a bit difficult, for instance in the Shousha camp. I had the feeling the refugees there did not take me seriously, but the whites they did. Also the Tunisian activists notice

you, the white activists, more than me. And I was thinking, damn, what is going on, don't you see me? I also talked to a Turkish friend about this once, how difficult it is when you have been outside of your country to then get involved politically there again. That was difficult at times, and that is not your fault, that has to do – well, with the border. Since the people there don't know you, they are curious. And me, they know me already. You know, this isn't racism, it's curiosity. The border, it transforms you into 'extraterrestrials'. The border is the problem! That's our goal as well, that people can meet without there being this gulf, without thoughts such as 'can you help me get a visa?' ... could you repeat your question once more?

**I asked you whether you become, as a Tunisian, often pigeonholed.**

No, that is also because of my own attitude as I was always scared of the expectation of the people who I work with – would they keep up or not? With the Germans with whom I travelled around in Tunis I always had the feeling that they were looking for action, they wanted to see things. But often there was no action. It is a long process in which we are involved.

**And back to Germany, and not only within the project boats4people: do you have the feeling to be pigeonholed?**

It is right, for a while I had the feeling that in Afrique-Europe-Interact it was expected of me to deal with the things concerning Tunisia because I am from there. I wanted to be with you on the same level, I did not want you to look down on me. I did not want to have the feeling to be favoured because I am a Tunisian. And I do not want to benefit from that and I also want others in the group to take responsibility and read about Tunisia if they want to go there. And when I talk about Tunisia I feel a lot of responsibility as it is always my point of view on things.

**The year before last there was a noborder camp in Cologne. A lot of discussion revolved around the idea that People of Co-**

**lour, who have often experienced discrimination here, could utilise the concept of powers/monopoly of definition. What do you make of it?**

I don't know. I have problems with „the victim is black, the perpetrator is white“. I do not always see it like that.

**I think the question has two dimensions. Do you sometimes feel hurt? “Discrimination” is always a big term so do you, with Germans, sometimes have annoying experiences, such as the situation with the shoes? And if so, do you then have the feeling that Germans take you seriously?**

We discussed this a lot during the nolager tour. We always experienced the issues of sexism and racism during the tour. There was always space to talk about it. I am always a bit scared that refugees exaggerate in order to benefit from it. In order to gain power and money. I always have these thoughts when refugees say: “absolutely united, Riadh. Absolutely without the Germans”. Also when only refugees come together there will be two or three people who speak more. At times one realises, of course, that Germans have more possibilities because they are from here and know the country. And for

us everything is new. I believe in a joint process. It is important for me to learn from one another through personal exchange. It is important for me to talk about it when there is a problem. And I have learned that the movement is always willing to talk about it. The part of the supporters is very important: when I was new there was a lot that I did not get. Without the nolager-people I would not be here as an activist. .

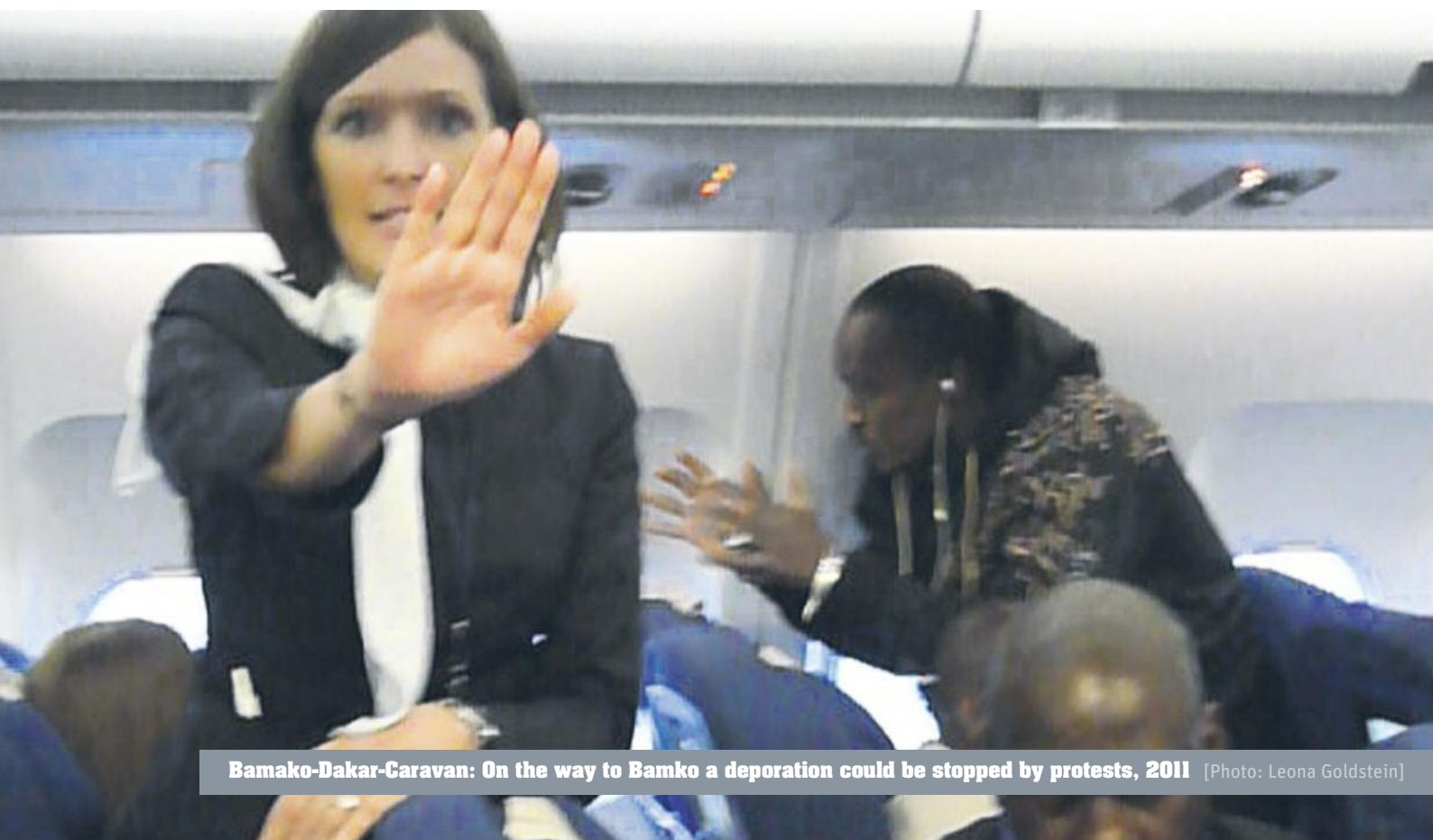
**And what motivated you in the last years to be an activist?**

When I received the residence permit after 10 years I thought: should I now go work and continue my life as if nothing had happened? It took me 10 years to leave Tunisia. When I was 17 I wanted to go on this journey, and then with 27 I received a visa. When I was 27 I got out, with 37 I received residence. I had difficulties to bear this pressure, without an education, without anything: it is your fault.

You did not succeed, in 20 years. And for me the G8 and the trip to Mali were very important: to see the deportees in the desert of Mali, the suffering of the people, and to meet the young African people who are on their journeys – this touched upon my own

memories. This is why I worked for merely 2 years in a nursing home in Hamburg as a scourer and then I thought: no. When I came back from Mali I decided not to continue this line of work. I returned to Rostock. As an activist. And it went well there; with the Stop It campaign we did a lot of publicity work, went out on the street a lot, talked a lot: for me this was also a discovery. I did not know that I could talk. This also brought me at some point to the theatre. The Tunisian revolution inspired me further. Also because of that I am a convinced noborder-activist; I continued travelling to this region, South-Italy, Tunisia, in the last few years. During each journey I realised how important it is for the borders in the Mediterranean Sea to disappear and the dying to stop. I am from the coast of Tunisia and it hurts me that young people who just want to see something else die on the journey. I have the feeling that if I hadn't received the visa I would have also taken a boat. And I find this unfair: I did not want to come to Europe to find work. I wanted to go to Europe because I just wanted to get out. ☉

INTERVIEW: CHRISTOPH ARNDT





Bamako-Dakar-Caravan: Demonstration in Nioro/Mali, 2011 [Photo: Jasmin Alt]

# „Our Aim is to Form a Block“

## AN INTERVIEW WITH ALASSANE DICKO FROM THE MALIAN ASSOCIATION OF DEPORTEES (AME) IN BAMAKO

**Alassane, you have already been to Europe several times, mainly in France and in Germany. What are your experiences regarding the cooperation with representatives of NGOs as well as social movements? Have you encountered discrimination, insensitive behaviour or racist prejudice?**

I must say, that considerations about this have taken centre stage at the beginning of my visits to Europe – simply because I wanted to understand the attitude of the partner-NGO and activist friends. As I didn't arrive with ready-made opinions, I spent rather more attention to gestures and words. On the whole working with NGOs one always acts within a working context; right from the beginning the tasks are clearly delineated so that the relationship is generally

more of an administrative character. In social movements on the other hand, things are more easygoing. There are always new discoveries to be made which give food for thought. Thereby I noticed cultural differences and also compulsions that pertain to the way things are done, for example how people deal with time, but no attitude that I would term as racist.

**That sounds rather diplomatic ...**

Well, I have indeed not had experiences that could be called discrimination or racism, if so, I would certainly talk about it.

**O.k., I got you. But maybe we should not focus so much on hard terminology like “discrimination” or “racism”. It is also**

**about subtleties which can be hurtful too, especially amongst people who feel relatively close on a political and personal level.**

On the level of examples I can give one straight off from 2009 when I entered the office of a partner-NGO in Germany. Only one person knew who I was and all people gave me a friendly welcome. But when the press relations officer welcomed me I noticed how self-conscious and doubtful he was. He took me aside in order to discuss with me. It was a kind of language test. He asked me to deliver an improvised presentation to any old subject simply because he wanted to assure himself that I am in command of the English language and that I am on top of the upcoming tasks. That evening we were supposed to moderate an event for the donors

of the organisation. Until today, I ask myself what made him doubt my skills despite knowing my written work. Concerning social movements I have experienced outstanding friendliness or better: encounters in which everything else became insignificant. Despite this however, there were rarely any chances to link up further in order to stay in contact. For this reason I never know if my presence merely serves as an additional enrichment or if the struggle I am fighting is actually of common interest. It is our aim to form a block and not just to bring together varying initiatives in order to showcase that everybody is busy with something. In short: there is social affinity amongst activists, but people remain in their respective realities. Thereby the majority prefers countries that are less tough, less far away and which the public is potentially interested in. Very often I hear: It is so hot in Mali, poverty is extreme there and the like. That has nothing to do with discrimination, but I can't help but to take note of the fact that sometimes decisions are made according to geographic preferences.

**What a diplomatic characterisation again! The decisions described by you could actually be circumscribed as cynical indifference or the usage of the privilege to simply blank out the world in its entirety.**

Yes, you are right. It is difficult to lead the discussion in a more substantial way precisely because there is always this thing about the different realities and contexts, which to me appear as a wall built by subjectivity. Today you simply can not fight capitalism or neo-colonialism without taking an interest in the impact that the goings-on of the financial markets yield - be it in the desert or in some village.

**And what do you think about co-operations that actually exist, like for example the ones within Afrique-Europe-Interact? Do you believe that in the long run it will be possible to establish equal relationships between activists in Africa and Europe despite their diverging starting points?**

The bridges have been built and I believe that the European activists will gain a better understanding of a number of current problems such as how political decisions in the North structurally determine migration in Africa. In the long run European activists will put the differences of social realities into perspective because more contacts between various groups will be established and the number of meetings to think about transnational struggles will rise. The involved individuals will increasingly familiarise themselves with the local realities of capitalism and scrutinize the profit or value chain down to its respective region. As living conditions are by no means the same, equality is not material but moral. To overcome the exotic image entailed in supporting struggles in the Third World activists have to get to know themselves better. To this effect I would say that inside Afrique-Europe-Interact the exchange is on equal terms, because we mutually consider each others suggestions and approaches. Regarding the financial support by the European section we in Mali remain absolutely independent when it comes to our activities and political statements. I can wholeheartedly put forward that we have developed a participative approach and a structure that allows for collective decision-making.

**To get back to the issue of discrimination: If you were to experience something like that, how would you react?**

As I said, I have never become victim of an assault like that, but I can simply not comprehend if one activist discriminates another one - be it because of the colour of his skin, his weight or because of another feature. And I don't believe I could remain silent if I would experience or witness a situation like that.

**How do you deal in Mali with problems like that?**

We have the institution of the firstborn which allows us to quickly find an impartial mediator to solve problems like that directly. Additionally, it is possible to consult an external figure of the movement to get the two sides on one table. If this also doesn't work, it has to be checked which side remains inflexible and this group will not be invited or receive information any longer just as no-one will participate in their activities anymore.

**Are there also solutions in which apologies play a role?**

Yes, in cases of severe insult or humiliation if the wrongdoer acknowledges his misconduct. In this case a ceremony of symbolic apology can be held in order to pacify the mood in the group and appease the social environment. Because behind the involved persons there are people, who could try to use the conflict for their own interests. The ceremony closes an old chapter enabling all who were involved to free themselves from bitterness. ○

INTERVIEW: OLAF BERNAU

# For further reading

There is plenty of activist and academic literature as well as fictional works available on each of the topics in this brochure. Therefore we only want to give a few hints here (whereupon only a few texts are available in english):

## ● **Mixed organisation:**

For us mixed organisation primarily means practical intervention; therefore we want to hint exclusively at websites of such networks, in which we are predominantly active:

### **Welcome to Europe**

→ <http://infomobile.w2eu.net>

### **Webguide for Refugees and Migrants**

→ <http://w2eu.info>

### **Afrique-Europe-Interact**

→ [www.afrique-europe-interact.net](http://www.afrique-europe-interact.net)

### **Watchthemed**

→ <http://www.watchthemed.net>

## ● **Power of Definition:**

On the website ( → <http://kritikderpraxis.blogspot.de>) at the menu item "weiterlesen: links!" one can find the probably biggest collection of texts and references to debates about the Power of Definition since the late 1990s. We also want to point to the website "Transformative Hilfe" ( → <http://transformation.blogspot.de/>) with the very inspiring text 'Thoughts about community support around intimate violence' (direct link to the english version: ( → <http://transformation.blogspot.de/images/TransformativeHilfeEnglisch.pdf>).

At last, the evaluation text of the contact group of the 6th Bordercamp respectively the NoLager action days in Fürth (summer 2003), which was co-authored by transact-activists can be easily googled under the title: "Anspruchgruppe für sexualisierte Übergriffe: Zwischen Parteilicheit und Täterkonfrontation".

## ● **Critical Whiteness:**

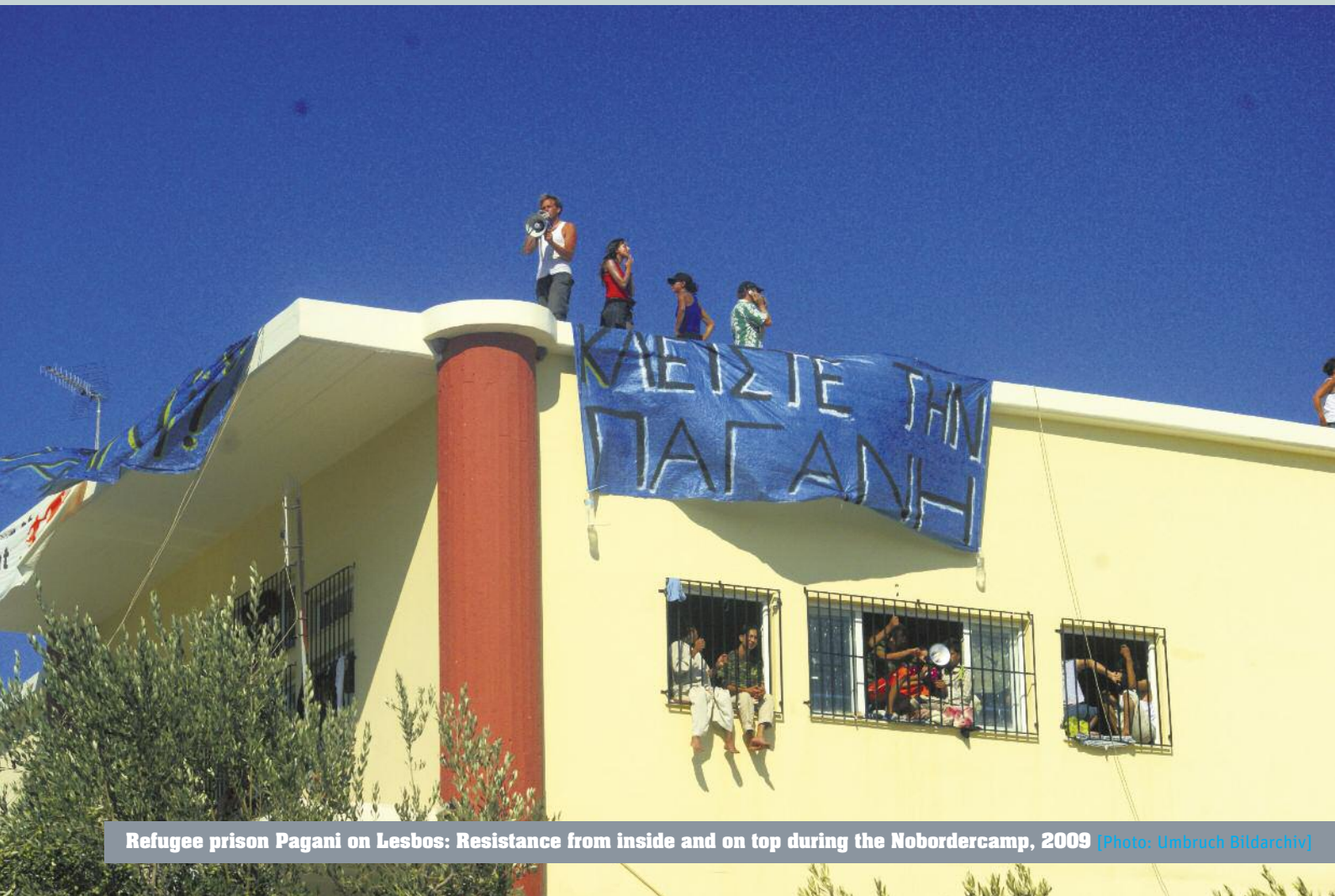
The Wikipedia article with the same name serves as a great introduction - including numerous references for literature. Also helpful is the special edition on Critical Whiteness, which was published by the monthly analyse & kritik in autumn 2013.

→ <http://www.akweb.de>

In this country it was at the Crossover-Conference, which took place in Bremen in the beginning of 2002 that Critical Whiteness was discussed for the first time in a context of political activism - on the basis of the experiences of the 3rd and 4th antiracist Noborder camps. The reader with texts concerning very different topics of crossover can be recalled in german and english here:

→ <http://www.summercamp.squat.net/reader.german.pdf>

→ <http://www.summercamp.squat.net/reader.english.pdf>



Refugee prison Pagani on Lesbos: Resistance from inside and on top during the Nobordercamp, 2009 [Photo: Umbruch Bildarchiv]

*transact!*