



“Ich bin kein Nazi!” – The Blackface Debate in the German Mainstream Media

Julia Lemmle, 20 May 2014

This essay summarizes examples of the most common rhetoric figures, topoi and strategies of argumentation used in mainstream media by white journalists talking about blackface, the critique of blackface and the critics.¹ These strategies can be described as tools (used consciously or unconsciously) to achieve three effects. First, to obtain the power of definition in the discourse. Second, to reject the demand to reflect one’s own white position. And third, “to keep white rooms white.”² These effects, of course, were not defined by the authors as topics or goals. What was said openly and loudly during the discussion often had the function to drown the complexity of the interweaving of the artistic and the political side of the practice of blackface. But to categorize blackface as a specific artistic method, which should not be turned into a political one, is not only naïve – as all cultural statements occur in a political and social situation and therefore have a political dimension – but a distraction tactic. The use of blackface in the almost exclusively white environment of German theatre speaks always about the continuity of colonial imaginary in Germany, where colonial history has not been worked off at all. White protagonists – whether director, author or actor – often claim that they use blackface in an emancipated and enlightening way, to draw attention to the topic of racism. This laudable goal, however, was not achieved as these protagonists were not aware either of the colonial history and contemporary effects of blackface or of the mechanics of everyday racism – as became clear from articles, interviews with artists and the reactions to the protests. How can white cultural producers talk about “reclaiming” a racist practice (which does not insult them) when they usually never address white identity and privileges on stage.

¹ The examples are taken from print media articles in the period from January to May 2012. All translations are by the author of the essay.

² Wachendorfer, U., “Weiße halten weiße Räume weiß,” in M. Eggers, G. Kilomba, P. Piesche, S. Arndt (eds.), *Mythen, Masken und Subjekte. Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland*, Münster: Unrast, 2005, pp. 530–9.

1. Defending the White Self-Image

“In my mentality, there is absolutely no room for racism,” Dieter Hallervorden justified his decision to use blackface in the play “I’m not Rappaport” in January 2012.³ His press officer Harald Lachnit fleshed this statement out like this: “For sure, we do not want to insult anyone. Of course, we are against racists and Nazis. We simply did not find a 60-year old black actor for the part.”⁴ If racist actions were only driven by mere ignorance, the persons in charge of the Schlosspark Theater could have reacted by asking further questions or informing themselves. Instead, they reinforced their perception of themselves as well-informed, democratic, enlightened artists. The simplistic definition of racism as equating National Socialism and Neo-Nazis is strengthening this self-perception: “I am not a Nazi, I have nothing to do with racism.” The first step out of this limited view consists in accepting a more complex definition of racism as a structure and system of images, vocabulary, and behavior which has a history that goes beyond the NS period and is linked to European colonialism. At that point, white identity is confronted with another challenge.

Ursula Wachendorfer describes *whiteness as a conflict*. For white people, it seems difficult to deal with their position in the power structures. Why is that so? Why do they try to find as many arguments as possible, and as absurd as they may seem, just to prevent themselves from acknowledging their own privilege? Wachendorfer refers to the psychological concept of the *cognitive dissonance*: “When we are confronted with two contradictory pieces of information, we experience a conflict which has to be solved somehow. With regard to our topic, this means that a white person who perceives themselves as liberal and democratic and committed to humanity, equality, and justice, is trapped in a cognitive, emotional, and ethical conflict, if they acknowledge the discrimination of Black people and find themselves siding with the powerful.”⁵ Transferring Wachendorfer’s explications on many reactions similar to those above, shows that the conflict was “solved” by remaining in an ignorant state of self-defense. As the white self is not moving, it finds reasons outside of itself to prevent the conflict. One strategy was to blame the critics for accusing the “wrong” person: “Can you really blame Hallervorden for

³ Although Hallervorden himself is not a journalist and has not written on the topic, both his statements on Facebook and the letter by the theater were quoted in detail in several newspapers, while the critics did not get the same attention and space.

⁴ Both quoted in Laudenbach, P., “Schwarze anmalen verboten,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 10 January 2012.

⁵ Wachendorfer, U., “Weiß-Sein in Deutschland. Zur Unsichtbarkeit einer herrschenden Normalität,” in S. Arndt (ed.), *AfrikaBilder. Studien zu Rassismus in Deutschland*, Münster: Unrast, 2006, p. 96.

not being an expert for blackface shows?”⁶ Or it was said that the critics choose the wrong subject: “I am disappointed that the debate was not more substantial. With that production, we wanted to address the way foreigners are dealt with, and discriminated.”⁷ Both examples show how the white self refuses to acknowledge the conflict that could be defined as follows: *I am a critical thinker, enlightened, progressive, competent, empathic. But I have ignored the knowledge, perspective and work of Black thinkers and academics. I am not capable of dealing with these topics. I have hurt people through reproduction of racism and ignored painful effects.*

Dealing with one’s own white socialization and identity includes emotionally and psychologically challenging processes. For the white self, it also entails the giving up of controlling and ruling and the acceptance of the pupil’s position, of the one who listens and learns.

2. Obtaining Definitory Power – The White Perspective as Universal Perspective

Critical whiteness theory defines as one important sign of white identity the blindness of one’s own perspective and of its limits. White persons see and describe themselves not as “white” but as “man”, “woman”, “grandfather”, “manager”, and so on. For the white self-image, racial assumptions seem to be unimportant, as it is never confronted with discriminatory acts. Therefore, white people tend to see their view of the world as “the view of the world”, that is to say, as universal. Toni Morrison explained this construction and the consequences for artistic imagination based on US literature. But we can transfer these questions easily to the conditions of German theatre. “What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level *always* conscious of representing one’s own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be ‘universal’ or race-free? In other words, how is ‘literary whiteness’ and ‘literary blackness’ made, and what is the consequence of that construction?”⁸

During the blackface debate the perception of white theater makers, journalists and audiences was taken as if it were everyone’s perspective. That blocked out Black protest and agency: “Since its first performance, the play has been staged by 40 German theaters, and only two productions had a black actor for the black part. Nobody had the

⁶ Laudenbach, op. cit.

⁷ Pilz, D., “Es sind lange Wege,” (Interview with U. Khuon, artistic director of Deutsches Theater), *Berliner Zeitung*, 25 May 2012.

⁸ Morrison, T., *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992, p. xii.

idea that the choice of a white actor with blackface could be racist.”⁹ The white self declares that there has not been any protest against blackface / racism on stage because it cannot remember it.

The assumption of the white perspective as the universal perspective is also linked to the idea that “the” human being is a white person. “In the course of the play, the colors smear, the light skin color cuts through. The symbol is about the mission of tolerance: to recognize, to appreciate the foreigner as someone who in principle is not different from ourselves.”¹⁰ This statement suggest that in order to feel empathy and solidarity, it is very important for the assumed white audience to identify with the protagonists – and this can only happen if the other person is white, too. Lack of empathy towards the constructed “others” is another characteristic of racism.

3. Reversal of Roles: Becoming the Victim – Becoming the Hero

The last two statements lead already in the direction of the third strategy used by white defenders of blackface: the reversal of roles. The offenders become the offended, the insulted become the insulters, the censors, the terrorists. This reversal of roles is well known and discussed in Critical Whiteness theory as *blaming the victim*. It is a common reaction of white people confronted with their own power and privileges. Often people get very emotional, even cry – and blame the person of color for making them feel so bad.¹¹ The media statements went further as they did not talk about the feelings of the white persons but constructed an aggressive image of the critics, so it seems quite rational and natural that the white self feels threatened and endangered. “This is about two questions: (1) Are blackfaced actors allowed although spectators are hurt in their feelings? [...] The internet page [...] goes by the martial name of ‘Bühnenwatch’ – the dictatorial announcement is [...]. This is very inconvenient for the theater and very inconvenient for the actors who have to feel offended as persons – and this on the part of borderliners who obviously cannot distinguish between the theater as a space of reflection and acting, and reality.”¹² While there are only abstract spectators with hurt feelings, the actors are persons who are offended in their personality. The critics are labeled as “martial” and “dictatorial” – the question is whether blackface is “allowed”. The powerless become martial dictators who allow and forbid, while the poor white actors are not responsible for

⁹ Laudenbach.P. op. cit.

¹⁰ Schütt, H.-D., “Unschuld?,” *Neues Deutschland*, 26 March 2012.

¹¹ See, for example, Schultz, D., “Witnessing Whiteness – ein persönliches Zeugnis,” in M. Eggers et al., op. cit., p. 524.

¹² Seidler, U., “Das Deutsche Theater Berlin schminkt sich um,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 23 March 2012.

their performance and personally offended. “And now an internet-controlled smear campaign descends on the little, brave, privately-run Berliner Schlossparktheater [...]. It produces Gardner’s comedy, a likeable geriatricity [...] This harmlessness has been shown for forty years on all kinds of German stages.”¹³ Emphasis is laid on the “harmless” but “brave” victim, while agency and responsibility of the theater producers are not mentioned. What is interesting about the article by Matthias Heine is that it quite clearly names the protagonists on both sides: “On the one hand, there are elderly white men who innocently refuse to believe that something that was not meant to be racist might nonetheless be perceived as racist. On the other hand, there are young people, mostly with a migrant background who do not want to be told by uncomprehending white people when their feelings are hurt and when not.”¹⁴ Unfortunately, this does not lead Heine to a discussion of power structures. As it seems inappropriate to justify the defense of blackface by referring to the interests of elderly white men, Heine finds a more suitable goal: art.

The statements which put white offenders in the role of victims are followed by the announcement that these threatened victims will not give up but fight. Fight – for what? “Artistic freedom stands against the sensitivity of migrants”, runs the title of Heine’s article. And he further explains: “Maybe some Afro-Germans have been hurt. But until now this risk was justified by the sanctity of artistic freedom. The principle of theater is that people put themselves in the roles of others, and that, then, they sometimes do things not everybody likes.”¹⁵ Now the reader knows why it is right to stand on the side of the elderly white men – because they are actually fighting for something bigger than their own interests, namely for artistic freedom. “Freedom” is a topos so over-used in pathetic movies but still powerful in any argumentation. How selfish appears the critique which has no bigger aim than not being discriminated any longer? Seidler concludes his article on a note full of heroic pathos: “Must the bell of artistic freedom really be rung, and the horn of principle stickling be sounded? Here, too, the answer is a simple Yes! No regard for spoilsports!”¹⁶ People who denounce racist practices are called spoilsports. The “game” that the spoilsports disturb without respect – art as defined by white protagonists – is something so fundamentally important that a “stickling for principles” does not seem exaggerated but appropriate.

¹³ Stadelmaier, G., “Angeschwärzt,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 January 2012.

¹⁴ Heine, M., “Rassismusvorwurf gegen Dieter Hallervorden,” *Die Welt*, 10 January 2012.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Seidler, op. cit.

Conclusion & Outlook

The mentioned strategies to obtain white definitory power in discourses are not limited to the blackface debate but can be observed in any discussion about racism where white people are challenged to question their own perspective. The so-called “Kinderbuch-Debatte” (children’s books debate), which has been going on since January 2013, shows the exact same topoi and argumentation patterns as the blackface debate one year ago.¹⁷ The perspective of white journalists and authors is presented as universal, the fight for artistic freedom – this time in literature – is a holy goal while people who do not want to read racist terms to their children are insulted as censors.¹⁸ The book and the blackface debates were linked most obviously when Denis Scheck, a literature reviewer, performed in blackface and white gloves (a clear reproduction of the minstrel shows) while repeating most of the arguments mentioned in this essay.¹⁹ Blackface was – whether intentionally or not – his chosen instrument to insult and mock (Black) critics. It was an act of violence towards the voices of Afro-Germans who – a year after the blackface protest again – explained to white Germans how structural racism works. One should have that dimension in mind when talking about blackface as something that belongs to the field of art. Blackface can never be constructively discussed from an aesthetic point of view – nowadays in Germany it is a politically-used instrument to deny white responsibility.

¹⁷ The greatest attention came from *DIE ZEIT*, which published a dossier and a front page article entitled “Children, these are no N!” The issue (17 January 2013) also included the following articles: Hacke, A., “Wumbabas Vermächtnis;” Greiner, U., “Die kleine Hexenjagd.”

¹⁸ One might see a positive development in the fact that the voices of Black critics received – if too late – more space in the printed media than in the previous year; see, for instance, Ayivi, S. D., “Rassismus in Kinderbüchern: Wörter sind Waffen,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, 18 January 2013.

¹⁹ “Denis Scheck über Sprachexorzismus” (linguistic exorcism), *ARD*, 29 January 2013.

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