

PLANTATION MEMORIES

EPISODES OF EVERYDAY RACISM

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1. "WHERE DO YOU COME FROM?" – BEING PLACED OUTSIDE THE NATION

People always asked me where do I come from: "Where do you come from?" And that was the thing... they asked me again and again and again... since I was a child, just like that! They see you and the first thing that crosses their mind is to check: "Where is she from?" They just walk in your direction and ask, without even knowing you. It does not matter where you are at: in a bus, at a party, on the street, a dinner or even at the supermarket (...) That is so racist, because they know there are Black people who are German and who even speak German better than them.

These are the words of Alicia, an Afro-German woman. From very early on, *white* people living around her have confronted her with questions concerning her body and her national origins, reminding her that she cannot be 'German' because she is Black. This constant questioning about where she comes from is not only an exercise of curiosity or of interest, but also an exercise in confirming dominant fantasies around 'race' and territoriality. Alicia is being asked in the first place because she is categorized as a 'race' that 'does not belong' (Essed, 1991).

The question contains the colonial fantasy that 'German' means *white* and Black means stranger (*Fremdler*) or foreigner (*Ausländer*). It is a construction in which 'race' is imagined within specific national boundaries, and nationality in terms of 'race.' Both *Blackness* and *German-ness* (or *European-ness*) are reproduced here as two contradictory categories that mutually exclude each other. One is either Black *or* German, but not Black *and* German; the '*and*' is replaced by '*or*,' making Blackness incompatible with German-ness. As Alicia explains, this misconstruction makes the question of where she comes from "so racist," because "they know there are Black people who are German."

It is precisely this incompatibility between 'race' and nationality that defines *new forms of racism* (Gilroy 1987).¹⁶ While *old* forms of racism ap-

16 The term *new racism* makes a clear distinction between the old 'scientific racism' of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the racism of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Such terminology emphasizes that racism is not a static and singular phenomenon; it exists in plural forms and, like any other social phenomenon, it is in a state of constant change.

pealed for 'biological races' and the idea of 'superiority' versus 'inferiority' – and the exclusion of those who were 'inferior' – *new* forms of racism rarely make reference to 'racial inferiority,' speaking instead of 'cultural difference' or 'religions' and their incompatibility with the national culture.¹⁷ Racism has therefore changed its vocabulary. We have moved from the concept of 'biology' to the concept of 'culture,' and from the idea of 'hierarchy' to the idea of 'difference.'

Within contemporary racisms there is no place for 'difference.' Those who are 'different' remain perpetually incompatible with the nation; they can never actually belong, they are irreconcilably *Ausländer*. „Where do you come from?“ „Why are you here?“ „When do you intend to go back?“ these questions embody exactly this fantasy of incompatibility. At first glance, the idea of superiority does not seem to be implied in new racisms, only the inoffensive thought that: “we have nothing against them, but those who are 'different' have their own countries to live in, and therefore they should return” as “their presence is a disturbance to the nation's integrity.” Racism is thus explained in terms of 'territoriality,' assuming an almost natural feature. The repetitive enquiry illustrates the *white* desire to make Alicia irreconcilable with the nation; whenever she is asked, she is being denied authentic national membership on the basis of 'race.' The question unveil the *white* subject's reluctance to accept that it is not that *we do have our own countries to live in* but rather that *we are living in our country*.

I cannot help remembering how the street where I grew up in Lisbon, Portugal, officially named *rua Dr. João de Barros*,¹⁸ became known as *rua dos Macacos* – 'The Monkeys' street.' Sometimes it was called 'República das Bananas,' an imaginary nation inhabited by monkeys. In the eyes of *whites*, we, the Blacks, were 'monkeys' who had recently arrived from formerly colonized Africa.¹⁹ On the one hand, the grotesque fantasy of classifying us as

17 The term *new racism* was first used by Martin Barker (1981) after analyzing the discourses of British Conservative politicians and other right-wing thinkers. Despite the evident racist tonality of their speeches, these conservatives never made reference to 'race'; instead, they talked about *difference* and the impossibility of living with people who are 'culturally different,' and appealed for the repatriation of such people in order to maintain a *pure* British nation (Barker 1981, Rattansi 1994).

18 The name of a well-known Portuguese doctor.

19 The two-kilometer long street was the first road to which Black people moved; the *white* population later left its surrounding streets and new Black neighbors moved in, very soon turning the area into a majority African neighborhood. In my neighborhood – Mercês – most people were from the São Tomé e Príncipe, Angolan and Mozambique

monkeys, reveal the need to assert our position as inferior - outside humanity. On the other hand, the need to imagine our street as an illusory separate country reveals this forced incompatibility of Blackness and Portugueseness. They wanted indeed to imagine us living in another country, not there, but outside, in our own Republic. Twice. Doubly excluded. Doubly placed as ,Other.' So every time we left our republic or *ghetto*²⁰, we were asked, "Where do you come from?" As a reminder of where we should be.

2. "(...) BUT YOU CANNOT BE GERMAN." – COLONIAL FANTASIES AND ISOLATION

And if I answer and say that I am German, they look confused, you know? They stop for a moment, like thinking: "German...?" Or they just start laughing, as if I misunderstood the question or gave the wrong answer, you know? And they go: "Oh! No, no! But you cannot be German. You don't look German (*pointing to the skin*). Where are you from?"

Being looked at and questioned are forms of control that of course embody power. Alicia is looked at – the "‘race’ in the field of vision" (Hall 1996) – and questioned because she is expected to justify her presence in *white* territory.

Those who question exercise a power relation that defines Alicia's presence as *Fremde* (stranger) and the territory as theirs, drawing a clear boundary between You, the racial 'Other,' who is being questioned and has to explain, and We, the *whites*, who question and control. This power asymmetry, common of *whites* in relation to Blacks, reminds me of an old and painful slave/master relationship: Alicia is being asked and not doing the asking because it is the 'slave' who has to reply and the 'master' who controls. Sometimes

diasporas, as well as Roma and Sinti, who had been taken from the central city areas and moved to the suburbs where the African communities were living. North of my neighborhood were people of the Cabo-Verdian and Guinea Bissau diasporas, and South, people of the East Timor diaspora.

20 The term *ghetto* is derived from the Jewish diaspora. Ghetto is the name of the island in front of Venice, Italy, where in 1516, Italian Jews were deported after being prohibited from living on the continent among the dominant national culture. The term *ghetto* was later adopted by other Diasporic people, such as Africans, to describe our experiences of exclusion and Apartheid (Jelloun 1998).

white people say that when they were on holidays, they too were asked where they are from, trying to equalize both experiences. These however cannot be equalized, for even when the colonized asks, it is colonizer who has the power. This explains why the question is so disturbing when posed by *white* subjects, but not when posed by other Black people or People of Color.

The expectation that racial 'Others' tell their origins and expose their biographies '*in the bus, at a party, on the street, a dinner or even at the super-market*' unveils a colonial dialectic in which the *white* subject presents itself as the absolute authority, the master, while the Black subject is forced into subordination. One suddenly becomes an object for *white* others to look at, address and question, at any time and any place. While the *white* subject is occupied with the question "what do I see?" the Black subject is forced to deal with the question "what do they see?"

Sometimes Alicia answers that she is German, but those who are asking insist on her foreignness. "German...?" they say "But you cannot be German." They point to her skin and recall its incompatibility with the national culture. This act of placing the Black subject outside the nation also warns us that we should 'know our place' instead of 'taking our place.' When Alicia says that she is Afro-German, she is 'taking her place' and at the same time reminding her audience that she, 'like the rest of them,' is 'at home' in 'her place.' But, her *white* surroundings react with nervousness, disquiet and aggression, promptly restaging a colonial order: "Oh! No, no! But you are not German (...) Where are you from?". Alicia's answer remains unheard: "They just start laughing, as if I misunderstood the question or gave the wrong answer." Indeed they fear to listen that Germany has, among others, an Afro-German history. The sound of contemptuous *white* laughter announce how the *white* subject is, de facto, invested in the fantasy that only *whites* can be German and that Germany is *white* – a fantasy that rules their reality.

Racism is not only insulting, but first of all, how people look at you... when people come to ask: "Where are you from? Why do you speak German that good?" This is racism... and these forms of racism disturb me even more.

Alicia describes the *white* subject's look as disturbing, for it reflects a frighteningly deformed self-image that she cannot recognize as herself: "what do they see?" The disturbance provoked by the *white* gaze is derived not from something missing or something the *white* subject does not see in Alicia, but rather the addition of something undesirable that the *white* subject

wants to see. In other words, racism is not a lack of information about the 'Other' – as it is commonly believed – but the *white* projection of undesirable information onto the 'Other.' Alicia can eternally explain that she is Afro-German, yet it is not her explanation that counts, but the deliberate addition of *white* fantasies of what she should be like: "Why do you speak German that good?"

Alicia may experience this contradiction as a painful inner splitting. On the one hand, she cannot recognize herself in the image they see; on the other hand, what they see separates Alicia from whatever identity she may really have. As she explains "these forms of racism disturb me even more."

3. "(...) THEY WANT TO HEAR AN EXOTIC STORY." – VOYEURISM AND THE JOY OF OTHERNESS

And also the fact of not being seen as German, but as an exotic. Especially when men come and ask... I know they want to hear a very exotic story. They want to hear that I come from somewhere in Africa or Brazil, or... whatever.

Here, Alicia adds another component: 'race' and *voyeurism*. People come to ask where she is from because they also have pleasure through the exhibition of Otherness. They are not interested in hearing that Alicia is German just like them; rather "they want to hear a very exotic story," where their colonial fantasies about the remote 'Other' are revived.

Alicia is expected to provoke pleasure. Impatiently, question after question, her audience searches for 'paradise:' "What about your parents, where are they from?" They keep asking until a fabulous exotic story is told. Exotic - Erotic. This is what has aptly been called *modern primitivism* (hooks 1992). Primitivism, in the sense that it constructs the Black subject as 'primitive,' as the one who is closer to nature, who possesses what *whites* have lost and what they are therefore excited by. Alicia then becomes the embodiment of exoticism and satisfaction. Sometimes this is called *positive racism*. But what a stupidity. Stupid indeed to call racism positive. This term this is a paradoxical one. It contradicts itself, as exclusion, isolation and racial exposure can never be positive.