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Some Notes on Affect and Discourses of Social Tense in Tense Times

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2011, I sat with a friend, D., on his balcony in Berlin, Germany. I wanted to know what effect the publication and media firestorm surrounding Thilo Sarrazin's controversial book *Deutschland Schafft Sich Ab* (Germany Does Away With Itself) had had on the kinds of queer and anti-racist politics I knew D. to care deeply about in the year since its publication. He sat for a moment, silently searching for the right words. "With Sarrazin, it's like a bomb went off." We both contemplated his answer. "Do you mean, his book and the national debate that followed left something exposed that was covered up before?" "Yeah, okay, maybe that too. But I meant, it sent racism out in every direction, really violently." I wondered to myself where D. reckoned the epicenter of this cultural blast, but before I could follow up with a clarifying question, D. went into an emotional monologue for 20 straight minutes about the traces of the Holocaust he sees around Berlin and the *threat* he feels in the presence of racist German nationalism. "Your main topic is not a happy one," he concluded. "Understanding Islamophobia and racism here in Germany—it's important, but it's also very depressing."

Almost a year later, standing among the mostly white, queer crowd of the Motzstraßenfest, an annual street fair in the center of one of Berlin's most concentrated queer neighborhoods, I am spoke with J., a man in his late 40s who, like D., is also a queer anti-racist activist. We were reflecting on the day's events. Earlier, we both took part in a demonstration at the street festival with GLADT, which stands for "Gays and Lesbians who come from Turkey". GLADT is a social and political organization for LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and allies – from here on out, I'll use the shorthand *queer* to denote this broad constituency) activists, and its membership is drawn from recently migrated Turks and Kurds as well as non-white Germans (with mostly Turkish, Kurdish or Arab backgrounds). GLADT had written the organizers of the festival in March, expressing their concern for the banal kinds of discriminations that GLADT members and other non-white festival-goers in the recent past have experienced. The festival organizers replied in a terse letter that such discriminations are fictitious, since they were not reported to the police or festival authorities. To dramatize both the festival organizers' response to their query, as well as the kinds of discrimination that targets non-whites, GLADT staged a funeral procession for "Discrimination". At the busiest hour of the first day of the festival, GLADT organized a solemn march through the packed streets, with one spokesperson on a megaphone at the front, folks holding signs and banners at the back. J. and I were two of the four pallbearers who carried a rented coffin, decorated with white flowers, in the middle of the procession. The reactions from the crowd varied from vocal support ("what you're doing is important!") to vocal opposition ("how dare you politicize an unpolitical street fair!"),

culminating in a uncomfortable confrontation with the police, who were called to stop the disruptive march since GLADT had not obtained any official permits.

J. was disturbed that the (white) festival organizers had called the police on us. He was disturbed, though not surprised, by some of the comments from the onlookers he heard and which were reported by other GLADT members during and after the march. I asked him what he thought about the climate for queer anti-racist demonstrations and political organizing in Berlin, especially following the Sarrazin mediastorm. "Look, I know this may sound crazy, but I honestly believe it. I miss the days before 1989, before Unification. Really." I raised my eyebrows to ask him to go on. "At least then fascism was fully against the law and was not tolerated. After German unification, since the early 1990s, fascism and racism have become more and more open and…" He trailed off. "But how does Sarrazin's book and that whole debate mark a change then, if the spread of fascism goes back to the early 1990s?" I asked. He explained that racism, social Darwinism, anti-immigrant xenophobia—these things are not the sole property of Nazis anymore. After all, Sarrazin is a Social Democrat, and his party didn't even kick him out! And he's become very rich from his book! For J., one of the worst outcomes from the Sarrazin debate has been how he has credentialed and circulated the idea that racism in general, and anti-racism in particular, are not pressing social problems.

SOCIAL TENSE IN TENSE TIMES

Studying German multicultural politics from the perspective of queers with a "Migrationshintergrund", or a "migration background", as is said in German, provides a important vantage point from which to observe the complicated ways social difference is produced and made meaningful in contemporary Germany, in sometimes drastically uneven ways. Why? Because race and racism, on the one hand, and discourses of sexuality and gender, on the other, have been continuously marshaled as sense-making devices to partition the "good" and "bad" immigrants internal to European societies, as well as to morally elevate the putative culture of the "civilized European West" over and against the "uncivilized Rest" (El-Tayeb 2011, Partridge 2012). Queer non-whites are thus discursively pulled in incommensurate directions—their queerness marks them as "enlightened", perhaps "integrated" and almost "European", while their ethnoracial difference usually marks them as "suspect" and even "un-European", especially for those queers who come from Muslim families, who maintain Muslim religiosities, or who are socially apprehended to be ethnoracially Muslim even if they are secular atheists with a "Middle-Eastern-sounding" last name or phenotype. In a groundbreaking volume of essays by queer non-white activists titled *The Career of a Constructed Opposition: 10 Years of 'Muslims vs. Gays'* (2011), this problematic is analyzed, troubled and forcefully confronted by queer writers and activists of color. Queer non-white activists in Berlin who I have come to know are reflective of the complicated, perilous political terrain they find themselves in, and tuning into their frequency reveals important affinities between inclusive multicultural politics and variously aggregating forms of exclusion.

D.'s description of my academic interests as "depressing" and J.'s defeatist account both indicate a mood, an atmosphere, that I have encountered throughout my most recent fieldwork in Berlin. It is this mood, and the narrative forms my informants use to express and articulate it, that I am thinking about with this paper. The high-profile declarations of the "failure of multiculturalism" proffered by Cameron, Sarkozy and Merkel in 2010-2011 signaled this shift in mood as much as they provoked it. Drawing on recent theoretical

writing about affect and social tense, I want to draw attention to some of the ways in which the very recent cultural politics of multiculturalism invoke and entail a felt sense of impasse (Berlant 2012), that is, impasse as an affective fact. Taking Southwood's (2011) turn of phrase to describe the emergent precarity of labor and life in the contemporary moment, we might call this impasse *non-stop inertia*. The routinized scandals and counter-scandals that are too easily pointed to as evidence of the failure of Muslim integration and multiculturalism in Europe form an iterative series, a kind of repetition waiting for a breakthrough.

I have found Elizabeth Povinelli's writings extremely valuable as I try to understand the particular contours of multicultural Germany. There are many ways in which her writings can help bring the tensions and stakes of European multiculturalism into better focus. Here, I want to confine my interest in her work to what she has called "social tense", that is, the sociopolitical mobilization of grammatical tense, which linguistic anthropologists define as the metapragmatic ways in which speakers distinguish an event from the moment of said event's telling (2011). Here I want to suggest how Povinelli's groundbreaking work on the "tense-laden discourses" which she argues take center stage in the contemporary neoliberal/late liberal moment can help anthropologists better clarify not just how racist exclusions internal and external to Europe are accomplished and reproduced, but also how counterpublics (like queer immigrant activists in Berlin) and other minority social projects experience, explain and contest their predicament. In D. and J.'s comments to me about the Sarrazin affair is at one moment is figured as a kind of event—sudden, crossing some threshold. And later in both interactions, affect-laden stances like depression and nostalgia are differentially marshaled to narrate the experience of the new present. They express tense to narrate racism as event (the Sarrazin scandal) and racism as durative process which is ongoing. Time and tense—and the affective orientation towards the world which both exceeds *and* takes its direction from how time and tense are articulated—are important resources of social maneuver and personal experience for subjects differently interpellated by the knot of discourses commonly called "multiculturalism", counter-publics (Warner) and beleaguered majorities alike.

Povinelli identifies a number of global discourses of social tense. For example, we can witness an eschatological discourse of social tense in the nationalist justifications of war, which rely on a logic of the future anterior to justify the loss of life and the wartime allocation of resources as having redemptive value for the future of a nation ("this soldier's death, these millions spent *will have been* meaningful once the enemy is vanquished"). A similar logic underpins neoliberal "restructuring", which so clearly harms actually existing people for the sake of a promised social good, again deferred to the future. Povinelli has devoted a number of her recent works (2005, 2006, 2011, see also DiFruscia 2010) to elaborating two especially salient discourses of social tense, what she calls "autology" and "genealogy". Autology refers to a diverse set of discourses about the self-authoring and self-determined subject of freedom and the Enlightenment; genealogy refers to a diverse set of discourses about various kinds of inheritances like kinship, tradition or religion that are said to determine the subject. Both of these discourses are "animated by an imaginary of national and civilization tense" (2011: 27). Take for example the very recent regional court opinion about male circumcision (Schaff 2012). The court, relying on a discourse of autology, argued that the child's well-being and self-determination is threatened by the imposition of circumcision. By declaring male circumcision "inhumane" because imposed, the court

engages a social tense. This brief discussion of social tense is not intended to be exhaustive. I will have more to say about social tense below.

READING SARRAZIN IN BERLIN

In the Summer of 2010, Thilo Sarrazin began an aggressive promotion campaign for his book, *Deutschland Schafft Sich Ab,* which was published in late August. The book's main thesis—that Germany's unintegrated Turkish and Arab Muslim communities are lazy, biologically predisposed to stupidity, overly fecund, culturally backward, and far too dependent on Hartz-IV and other social entitlement programs—carried for many conservative and centrist Germans the force of "uncomfortable, unspoken Truths". He was lauded for his bold stance against what the Ayaan Hirsi Ali in a speech in Berlin in March 2012 dubbed "the agents of silence"—so-called "multiculturalists", Muslim radicals, and others who support the silencing of critique of backwards Muslims. There was also fierce opposition to the book's argument and the myriad, unsettling comments Sarrazin made during his media blitzkrieg. Sarrazin was forced out of his position on the Board of Directors for the Deutsche Bundesbank and nearly outsed from the Social Democrat Party. He also earned a lot of money; his book became a German-publishing sensation. Within a year, a veritable industry of Sarrazin commentary and criticism emerged.

In a close analysis of "migration-attitudes" over 2010 and 2011, Diehl and Steinman (2012) have argued that the "Sarrazin debate", while consuming a huge portion of media reports in Germany from the late summer 2010 through November 2010, actually had little impact in changing German minds about their attitudes towards immigration in general or Muslim immigrants in particular. Opinions hardened rather than changed. How, then, to square this sociological finding about the statistical durability of national opinion with the claims of most activists with whom I've spoken about the Sarrazin book and media spectacle who purport that anti-Muslim racism in particular and racism in general appear all-too-flagrantly in the present? This is what I mean by impasse, non-stop inertia. Eventful activity (re)producing deadlock.

ISLAMOPHOBIA AS THREATENING AFFECTIVE FACT

The societal awareness of "Islamophobia" has reached a critical mass. I don't have the space here to elaborate how social scientists, media pundits and producers, political activists, civil societies or variously situated legal orders have differentially taken up the term (Sweetapple n.d.). With every passing year since the 11th September terror attacks, the recognition of Islamophobia as a real social problem hedges more and more into mainstream Euro-American discussions and discourse, provoking denunciations of the term and those who advocate a narrative of ongoing social harm which the term seeks to name. Anders Breivik certainly didn't help his cause or political kin with his own horrific brand of narrative, which demonstrated the brutal danger of the festering and weirdly metonymic resentment against Muslims, feminists, "liberals", and "multiculturalists" harbored by what we might call (following Bunzl's <2007> analysis of contemporary European anti-Semitism) "Islamophobia deniers". And for his part, Sarrazin serves as a confirmation and alarming mainstreaming of anti-Muslim racism qua Islamophobia for many, while simultaneously serving a pressure-release function for others who see Islamophobia as a dubious pseudo-problem.

In his essay "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact", Brian Massumi brilliantly examines how "threat" has become a vital political catalyst for what he calls the "operative

logic" of societal securitization. The rollback of civil liberty protections, the hysterical overreaction of national security states to that which has not even yet occurred, and the preemptive military and police tactics rationalized by the logic of containing "threat" have raised terror-as-a-threat-to-our-way-of-life to the level of fact-to-contend-with. This kind of fact, Massumi argues, is affective: "Threat is capable of overlaying its own conditional determination upon an objective situation through the mechanism of alarm. The two determinations co-exist, threatening and objective. However, the threat-determined would-be and could-be takes public precedence due to its operating in the more compelling, future-oriented and affective register" (2010: 58). Alarm is a particular "sign-body" relationship in which the hostile future impinges on the present not via a linguistic-symbolic route, but rather via the body itself—drawing on Pierce, Massumi reminds the reader that there is no "actual" referent for indexicals like alarm except the "innervated flesh to which the sign performatively correlates" (ibid.: 64).

There are many important implications that follow from Massumi's argument about the way contemporary preemptive power emerges through "*semiosis*" (63, italics in original) and thus requires an accounting of "the metaphysics of feeling" (ibid.), but I want to connect this argument to questions I just raised about Islamophobia. As I just mentioned above, there seems to now be a recognition that Islamophobia is a thing, and thus a requisite position in relation to this thing publicly called Islamophobia is called for. Some agree that it's a social problem; others don't. I suggest that we pay attention to the ways in which public spectacles about Muslims (like the Sarrazin book debate, or the 'failure of multiculturalism' meme) are narrativized through a deployment of a discourse (or even several discourses) of social tense in order to better understand two interrelated points about this differential reckoning of Islamophobia. First, anti-Muslim racism qua Islamophobia is, for some, an affective fact *as well as* an actual fact. That is, its material existence is confirmed not just as an actual fact through recourse to publicly recognized forms of knowledge (social science or journalism for example); it is also a *felt force* in/on/within embodied individuals, as threatening and alarming to Muslims and those socially lumped in with Muslims as so-called Islamic terrorism can be for others. And second, affective facts (like all forms of culture and knowledge, we might say) are *sociopolitical distributions* that (can) aggregate into interpersonal alliances, social scenes, communities of interest or identity, and political causes—*or not*.

To take a detour away from Islamophobia for a moment: in 2011, following the disastrous events in Japan, the German public began to understand nuclear power as a threat. This affective reckoning laid the groundwork for German politicians to then move away from nuclear power policy. The arguments against nuclear power didn't change: the affective apprehension of nuclear power did. A threatening future was imaginatively conjured and experienced as impinging on the present; it was narrated in the present-continuous (we *are relying* too much on nuclear power *now*) in order to socially calibrate a new future.

Discourses of social tense provide a narrative structure for subjects to locate, stage and experience their felt understandings of the world while simultaneously reproducing and sometimes even upending received distributions of social goods and social harms. In this moment, when hostile attitudes toward Muslim migrants are affectively apprehended as either a felt fact or a bogus exaggeration (but in either case, as a fact that must be contended with), an ethnographic focus on how discourses of social tense are mobilized in real time experience, as well as a focus on how discourses of social tense lie at the heart of debates

about integration, cultural distance and civilizational security, may shed some needed light on the confusing simultaneity of inclusion and exclusion which is the hallmark of this moment in the social life of multiculturalism.

CONTESTING HOMOPHOBIA AS A RACIAL PROBLEM

In mid-June, I attended a public presentation hosted by Die Linke ("The Left", which is the rebranded former PDS, or Communist Party of East Germany) titled "Is Neukölln more homophobic than Schöneberg?" Neukölln is a centrally located district conventionally associated with Muslim migrant communities in the popular Berlin imaginary. Schöneberg, on the other hand, is figured as the home to a very visible, middle-class and largely white population of gay men. Neither of these representations of either city district captures the demographic truth of these districts, but the logic that identifies Neukölln as a possible location for immigrant-executed homophobic violence and Schöneberg as a queer safe haven from immigrant homophobia is regnant. The room was packed with about 40 people. The four presenters, interestingly, were non-white, ethnic Turkish migrant activists. Two were from GLADT, which I discussed at the beginning. Another speaker came from LesMigras, a political-activist organization that seeks to advocate for lesbians and transfolks of color. The fourth presenter was a well-known activist from Die Linke. The speakers from GLADT and LesMigras addressed the presentation's title question immediately in their talks. They spoke eloquently about: how Muslim immigrant and queer communities are rhetorically figured as enemies; about how structural conditions of racist, sexist and homophobic exclusion in Germany go unnamed in this pervasive discourse of homophobic immigrants and victimized queer citizens; and about the kinds of political work their organizations pursued to combat this idea that white queer citizens should fear the immigrant for their backwards gender and sexual ideologies. One of the speakers has recently published his doctoral dissertation on these themes (Çetin 2012).

After their speeches, a very lively discussion with the audience took place. One audience member (a Jewish Israeli) introduced what he saw as a missing element in the four talks—the ongoing gentrification of Neukölln, for which this white-queer vs. immigrant-homophobe logic provides cover and legitimacy. Another audience member (a white German) took issue with the term "Islamophobia" brought up by several of the talks; he boasted, "As a gay atheist, I am religion-ophobic!"; he suggested that all religions are backward-oriented threats to queer security and humanism. Yet another audience member (who identified as a "person of color") pointed to what he saw as a major accomplishment of this particular panel—that four queers of color were speaking for themselves and their communities, rather than well-meaning whites speaking for them. He also pointed out that the audience was still largely white, and that real progress on these issues will have been accomplished only once more queers of color feel empowered to populate the audiences of presentations like this one. In these moments of local debate, we witness a number of deployments of tense as a resource to relay experience and cast problems—like Islamophobia, gentrification, or the lack of non-white participation in an anti-racist presentation—into a graspable-thus-actionable relation for actually living subjects.

CODA

The Sarrazin book scandal, discourses of social tense, Islamophobia as an affective fact, the racializing dynamics of a hegemonic discourse of Muslim immigrant homophobia—I know I've covered a lot of ground, some of it perhaps too hastily. There's so much more to be said about these topics. Furthermore, the ethnographic moments I isolated above compel further unpacking and analysis. To conclude, I want to return to the GLADT "funeral" protest I mentioned at the beginning. To refresh your memory, GLADT marched through a busy street festival with a megaphone, banners and a coffin in order to literalize the "death of discrimination" at the festival in two senses: (1) to mark how it was declared by the festival organizers to be a non-existent problem, and (2) to mark how the festival organizers' methods of apprehending ethnoracial discrimination (that only cases or instances of discrimination reported to the police or to the designated festival discrimination authority count) amount to a declination to take discrimination seriously. Despite the moments of fun, before, during and after the demonstration, the funeral-as-demonstration itself conveys the dark mood or atmosphere I alluded to at the beginning. Despite the moments of connection and positivity, the uglier moments of roused confrontation, especially with the police, index the impasse I was also alluding to earlier: as these activists respond to the affective fact of racialized discrimination and potential violence, their very response is contained as a species of threat, its own affective fact. The coffin satirized the discourse of social tense provided by the festival organizers— the ongoingness of ethnoracial discrimination is expressed as its staged death. Time, tense and affect are all at the heart of how contemporary multiculturalism is expressed, contested and politicized. As notions like "a politics of fear" and even, as I have been suggesting, "Islamophobia" harden into common sense discursive objects and become part of the public language of how social goods and social harms are justified, attending to the mobilization of discourses of social tense and their affective dimensions can help analysts better come to grips with how locally situated actors in the national and civilizational drama(s) of liberal multiculturalism make "good of its goods and good of its harms" (Povinelli 2011: 24).

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