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Seen as Friendly, Seen as Frightening?

A Conversation on Visibilities, Kinship, and the Right Words with Mithu Sanyal

Leila Essa

CAMDEN HOUSE
Rochester, New York

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10: Seen as Friendly, Seen as Frightening? A Conversation on Visibilities, Kinship, and the Right Words with Mithu Sanyal

Leila Essa[1]

The act of rewriting identities is at the heart of Mithu Sanyal's debut novel *Identitti* (2021), in which Saraswati, a celebrated and supposedly Indian professor, turns out to be a white German woman who considers herself transracial. While her questionable case presents the most obvious changed identity in the text, it functions as a narrative springboard for examining the ever-ongoing identity reformations of its other characters.[2] In particular Nivedita, the novel's protagonist and one of the students of color previously awed by their professor, interrogates her own difficult path toward identity claims as a person of mixed heritage—and Saraswati's crucial role in this process. Set in motion through the latter's identity scandal, the dialogue-driven plot accompanies the characters up until the moment each one finds their form of moving forward from it.

All this unfolds in Oberbilk, the Düsseldorf neighborhood where both Sanyal and I grew up and where we also met for this conversation in January 2023. Overlooking its rooftops, much like the characters in *Identitti*, we discussed ways of being seen (and heard!), writing in community and degrees of marginalization, anticipated audiences and living characters, her next novel, uneasy labels, and shared challenges.

Leila Essa: Recording! We're officially talking. And *have* been talking about our work on various occasions in the past, so you already know

1 This research was funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO): VI.Veni.211C.012. I have obtained approval for the interview from the Faculty Ethics Assessment Committee Humanities at Utrecht University (reference number 22-181-01) and edited it for length and clarity.

2 Mithu Sanyal, *Identitti* (Munich: Hanser, 2021). I analyze how the novel formally reflects the continuous change described above in "Die Wir-Identität," ZEIT ONLINE, March 23, 2021, https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2021-03/mithu-sanyal-asal-dardan-cancel-culture-rassismus-identitaet-marginalisierte-gruppen.

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that my current research project focuses on authorial strategies against exclusionary discourses, particularly in Germany and Britain. I'm interested in the decisions authors from marginalized communities take inside and around their fiction when facing exclusionary cultural scenes, but also exclusionary societies. How do artistic interventions in public discourses, individual and collective ones, aim to reach and possibly even teach wide audiences? Questioning that, I want to rethink the significance of authorial intention for literary studies more widely. And I'd also like to begin our conversation today by thinking through intention—or through what you have once called your core work ethos: "Literatur muss freundlich sein" (literature must be friendly)! That's how Ronald Düker cites you in a portrait for *Die Zeit*, in its very title actually.[3] I was wondering if you could unpack that today. Friendly in what way? And friendly to what end? And *must* it really always be friendly?

Mithu Sanyal: I don't think I ever said that! [*Both laugh.*] It's one of those instances: that's what was understood. What *I* want when I'm writing is that my literature has a warm view of the characters. They belong to groups that haven't been written about much in Germany—or that have too often been written about with a dehumanizing gaze. Writing is always a conversation with everything that's been written beforehand—and what I'd like to bring to that is this warm gaze. I have a sneaking suspicion that I, as an author, would make myself invulnerable if I were very caustic and ironic instead: then nobody would be able to pinpoint me. I want to make myself—yes, vulnerable. That's when things kick off in literature! "Friendly" sounds like I don't want to hurt anyone, be inoffensive. I think you can work with hurt, though, get quite close to it, as long as you're warm. It's not a formula, and I will make mistakes, but this warmth is very important to me.

LE: Düker paraphrases you on the ideal relationship between your characters and your readers: that you neither want anyone to look down on your characters, nor to feel small themselves.

MS: What I'm aiming for is that the characters speak to you directly. Not me saying, "Oh dear reader, this is my index finger!" [*raises said index finger educationally*] or "Aw, these poor characters!" I don't want to look down on or up to my readers from my perspective as author, either. You know, this interview for the *Zeit* portrait: it was a lovely conversation—probably the first one about the book!—but I didn't recognize myself in the finished piece. That's something I experienced a lot after the publication if *Identitti*.

3 Ronald Düker, "Literatur muss freundlich sein," *Die Zeit*, February 11, 2021, 52.

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LE: Rereading that particular piece, I was struck by a line that also resonates with a wider response to your novel: it suggests the label of "*Love-and-Peace* Roman" for *Identitti*.

MS: And there *is* a love-and-peace ending in it, but also a whole journey to get there! People often jump the parts beforehand.

LE: Yes, the reception really highlighted the aspect of forgiveness: indeed often skipping how hard-won it is for the characters, but also what happens *after* the moment of reconciliation between protagonist and professor. Something I've barely seen mentioned is the final revelation that Saraswati has planted the scandal as a strategic career move.

MS: Absolutely! There are alternative endings, in a way. You offer people different readings and they're all right readings. But from an academic viewpoint, at least, it's important to account for *all* these endings.

LE: And the way they're in interplay with each other! What you say about different readings brings me back to the notion of literature's "friendliness." You have now clarified this to be an approach to your characters rather than your readers. At the same time, your novel also displays an active openness to readers joining its discussions from all sorts of perspectives.

MS: That is definitely true for the novel's theory aspects, but when I first constructed *Identitti*, it was my priority to center Nivedita, to position her view of the world as norm. The novel is very open to different viewpoints, but you still have to get into her skin. Toni Morrison said that she's not writing for white readers, but for Black readers. Which doesn't mean that white readers aren't allowed to read her books, but that the books' reality is that of Black readers. The reality in mine is that of "post-migrational subjects" [*she speaks the quotation marks*], uncompromisingly. Others are invited, too, but they do not get explanations for my "weird" reality. Intellectually, all kinds of readings are possible, but emotionally every reader has to make their way toward the novel first.

LE: Anticipated audiences: let's talk about this more. One idea I grapple with in my research is that of *didactic* art. That, of course, has a bad reputation—very much in line with that raised finger! If a reviewer calls a novel didactic, they are usually decrying an aesthetic failure. I see some parallels to the way German-language media employ "activist" as a derogatory adjective for art engaging with marginalization.

MS: Even "political" is often used in that derogatory way, automatically meaning "didactic."

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LE: Yes! And the necessary pushback to this "it's activism, not art" criticism then all too often insists that the supposedly didactic or activist work is not on *this* side of the suggested binary, but, in fact, on the correct one: art. It's a frustrating dynamic because closely reading a text *as text* and paying attention to its aesthetics does not, in fact, preclude attention to its didactic and/or activist potential. To me even your process of centering—or refusing to center—specific experiences could be called didactic, especially in the context of your novel being so directly set in spaces of learning, demonstrating its high stakes, its possible pitfalls. Saraswati is the goddess of learning and knowledge after all—and, in your character's case, an imperfect goddess. Your novel really questions what we *can* teach, what we *can* learn, everything that can go wrong in the process. Which, to me, shows that "didacticism" does not deserve its trite, one-dimensional image! Since you're both a writer and a critic of literature, I wondered how you'd respond to the idea of literature, in general, or of your novel, in particular, being didactic?

MS: I have so many thoughts now! First of all, I believe that all literature is political. If I write a love story about a heterosexual couple, that might go unnoticed, but if I write one about people who don't have passports, it's obvious to everyone. Which stories do I want to tell? How do I want to tell them? These are all political *and* aesthetic decisions. Only when the political aspect becomes *more* important, there can be issues. I understand the "didactic" criticism in the case of novels that seem to take their message more seriously than their story. In my works, I always want the story to be more important: even if you're not interested in the message, I want you to follow the characters emotionally. Right now I feel convinced that I've achieved this, but I might read over my work again in ten years and see it differently.

LE: I haven't come across texts that criticize *Identitti* as the bad kind of didactic, by the way, but I've seen a couple praising it precisely for *not* being didactic . . .

MS: Which is also weird! What matters to me is that my writing isn't only important because it's about an "important theme." That seems to be an easy strategy in reviewing at the moment: spotting the important theme. Ideally, a book should have an emotional impact on us readers and also offer us all these other levels to engage with it: politically, psychologically. The wonderful thing about writing stories is being able to work with time: showing a conflict and asking what it looks like nine months later or ten years later. How do people develop? In *Identitti*, all the characters are upset about what Saraswati has done, but their reasons are all different and connected to their own past, to what made them the people they are

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now. So when I see a reviewer dismiss it as "just about politics," that just doesn't strike me as accurate.

LE: There seems to be so little acknowledgment of the fact that the political and artistic dimensions of a work cannot be neatly separated. Political impulses—or didactic ones, in my positive use of the term—don't come at the expense of being formally inventive either, quite the opposite. One way of playing with the conventional boundaries of the novel comes to the fore in your choice to invite a whole host of other writers to contribute the tweets or blog posts they *would* write if the Saraswati scandal was real. The resulting multivoiced nature of *Identitti* already questions the authority of a single person imparting knowledge to others just as much as its plot does.

MS: I write reviews myself, so I know: you only have so much time, you only get paid so much. My recent nonfiction book about *Wuthering Heights* was the first time I got to write about a text after thinking about it for thirty-five years—a luxury![4] Of course you can't expect that level of engagement regularly, but I still think literary criticism has a lot to answer for. I'm part of the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize jury now and I have huge respect for that responsibility: talking about people's work while they are sitting there! I've always been preaching that juries need to be more diverse and now I've been asked to join quite a few. I said yes to that of the Bachmann and the Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels. I'm very grateful to be part of them, but it also makes me nervous!

LE: This issue of juries often being homogeneous of course also points to the wider literary field.

MS: And the juries are still homogenous! The fact that I've been asked to be on so many of them makes me think that I'm seen as less frightening than others—whether rightly or wrongly so. I've been inside the literary system for a long time as a journalist; I know the codes. So whenever people want to diversify anything, they turn to me because they feel I won't rock the boat.

LE: Can you spell out what you mean by frightening a bit more?

MS: There are quite a few potential invitees who'd be a lot angrier, who'd say "this isn't working, we need to change the entire thing." Many who invite me focus on the aspect of forgiveness and resolution in my writing—and that's incredibly important to me, but I'm also fifty-one! I have been *very* angry for a long time and if they'd asked me in an earlier phase

4 Mithu Sanyal, *Über Emily Brontë* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2022).

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of my life I'd have interacted quite differently. And it's not just generational. I've been to university, I have a PhD. And I've been in a translating role all my life. Between older and younger feminists, between all these different camps, between my father and bureaucracy. It would be interesting to invite someone to join these juries who doesn't translate. It's brilliant that the system is rethinking itself. Yet every time it does, it opens up to people who might have made it in the system anyway, or who *have* made it. I've said yes to those juries to which I can genuinely add something—bringing the authorial perspective to the Bachmann jury, for instance. My previous work aligns with the work of these juries. That's not the case for all invitations that I receive in the name of diversity, and I can't diversify anything by simply being there! Overall, it's an odd experience to become part of the establishment because my emotions and my brain need to catch up. I can't really say I'm marginalized, but I do still encounter people who are simultaneously quite patronizing toward my literature and really frightened of me: "Am I allowed to ask this question, Mithu?"

LE: This simultaneity in how you're seen says so much: not as frightening as others; not *not* frightening either. I often use the phrasing "authors from marginalized communities"—which is quite a mouthful—because I want to account for different forms of marginalization but avoid "marginalized authors." For, exactly, it isn't necessarily the individual author who is marginalized in the literary scene. And yet, as your answer also highlights, BIPOC authors, for example, are constantly perceived in contrast with each other, and too often pitted against each other. Can you say more about this process of becoming more visible in the establishment? And about the push toward further change?

MS: I don't really use the word *visibility* as much as *becoming a voice*. To me it's more about being audible, being listened to. I always felt visible in a way. You can't do anything about that, but in the past, I couldn't speak with my own voice and had others speak about me. Of course this dynamic also fueled my literature. So, I really hope becoming established won't make it impossible for me to write! [*Both laugh.*] That's a real identity crisis in the best possible way and I wouldn't want it any other way. With increased audibility or visibility—or whatever you call it—comes responsibility. Noticing that your position has changed means opening doors for other people. I think the next big issues to address in the literary scene are class and health. Intersectionally: they aren't white issues.

LE: Yes, holding doors open for each other, working together: these are much more joyful reasons to group authors from marginalized communities together. Authors actively grouping *themselves* together, rather

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than being weighed up against each other from a hegemonic perspective. Thinking through such networks is also central to my research and there's so much happening right now! You were part of *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum*,[5] freshly translated as *Your Homeland Is Our Nightmare*.[6] Its editors, Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, appear in *Identitti* through the tweets they wrote for you. Your fellow contributor to their anthology, Simone Dede Ayivi, is currently preparing a theater production of your novel and its reception for the Schauspielhaus Graz. Authorial intention—when it is taken into account—is so often discussed in terms of an author's individual decisions, but I'm fascinated by collective choices, collective intentions. Could you talk about the role of collaboration and solidarity in your work? Is there such a thing as shared strategizing, both artistically and beyond?

MS: I think so because it's an amazing moment: there is a community. And we've been connecting since before we were perceived as connected from the outside. I was incredibly lucky that so many other books came out when mine did and am still figuring out what our common denominator is. There is this feeling of kinship and I almost don't want to question it too much because there could be an identitarian idea in that kinship. But maybe there isn't! It's like mutual recognition. And it's not just being the only other non-white face in the room, either: we don't share all our strategies, but we're all storytellers. If I may be very generalizing, there's been a lot of walking-around-literature and looking-at-things-literature in German. It's not that ours can't be experimental, just look at Olivia Wenzel's *1000 Serpentinen Angst* and its collage approach.[7] Rather, the novels that come to mind all *also* tell stories about specific characters and communities, like Fatma Aydemir's, Shida Bazyar's, Sasha Salzmann's . . . What I loved about the discourse around Fatma's *Dschinns*,[8] for instance, were comments in the vein of "I don't like her politics, but I like the novel." It's impressive that it gets through these filters. And I think it does because it tells its story well.

LE: On this worry about creating an exclusionary countercommunity: I like how Nikesh Shukla tackles that in *The Good Immigrant*.[9] As you

5 Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, eds., *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2019).

6 Fatma Aydemir, Jon Cho-Polizzi, and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, eds., *Your Homeland Is Our Nightmare: An Antifascist Essay Collection* (Berlin: Literarische Diverse, 2022).

7 Olivia Wenzel, *1000 Serpentinen Angst* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2020).

8 Fatma Aydemir, *Dschinns* (Munich: Hanser, 2022).

9 Nikesh Shukla, ed., *The Good Immigrant* (London: Unbound, 2016).

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know, I'm thinking about *Eure Heimat* in comparison to this British essay collection a lot. Back in 2019, you and I even had a wonderful event on both anthologies and the politics of storytelling together with Vinay Patel, one of its contributors. While *Eure Heimat* directly announces itself as a response to the "Heimatministerium,"[10] *The Good Immigrant* really started being perceived as a political intervention in relation to the Brexit vote shortly after its publication.[11] Originally, it had mainly taken aim at UK publishing and at this sentiment of "Oh, we wish we could diversify, but alas!"

MS: "So difficult!"

LE: "We just don't know how to find the writers!"

MS: "There *are* no writers!"

LE: Exactly. The idea was to offer an answer to this supposed conundrum in book form, showcasing twenty-one BIPOC writers.[12] Shukla even goes so far to playfully say that he's happy to admit nepotism, that he presents "a brand-new old boys' network"[13]—which of course doesn't actually consist of old Eton boys or even "boys" at all. I don't see any issues with forming specific networks that aim to invite others in.

MS: Of course there are always people missing, too. Even in our own circles, some positions are marginalized.

LE: For sure. While such collections only offer a selective snapshot, I find it encouraging that they also tend to inspire further ones, and new networks.

MS: Speaking of: so looking forward to *anders bleiben*![14]

LE: Thank you, it's very exciting to be part of an anthology myself now. Let's zoom in from collective publishing to the supposedly individual creative process, though. In *Identitti*, you include a highly detailed

10 See Aydemir and Yaghoobifarah, "Vorwort," in *Eure Heimat*, 9.

11 As Shukla and his coeditor Chimene Suleyman state in their introductory words to a follow-up collection focused on the United States. See Nikesh Shukla and Chimene Suleyman, "Editor's Note," in *The Good Immigrant USA: 26 Writers Reflect on America* (London: Dialogue Books, 2019), xii.

12 See Shukla and Suleyman, *The Good Immigrant USA*, xi.

13 Shukla, "Editor's Note" to the initial, UK-focused *The Good Immigrant* (2016).

14 Selma Wels, ed., *anders bleiben: Briefe der Hoffnung in verhärteten Zeiten* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2023).

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afterword—a gift to the curious!—in which you list all those who have actively contributed their words or otherwise influenced you, alongside a long bibliography. In a previous interview for my piece on Asal Dardan's and your writing, you mentioned that conversations with colleagues had caused you to make changes to the already published novel.[15] And you even went on to make another one afterward: adding the tweet on Saraswati that Dardan sent me for that same text. All of this strikes me as an extraordinary openness to—and about—other people's input.

MS: Where theory is concerned, I'm incredibly open; less so on an aesthetic level. I'm in very close conversation with my partner when I write, though, and recently he said, "No, of *course* not, she wouldn't do that" about one of my characters. It's excellent having someone who really knows the characters, too. They are like living entities, so people can suggest things, and if it's in the character's nature, I might put it in. But if not, I just can't—because I can't make the character inconsistent. Well, human beings *are* inconsistent, but the characters can't be . . . inconsistently inconsistent. [*She laughs.*]

LE: Now I'm thinking of Toni Morrison's introduction to *Song of Solomon*. She begins it by stating that she used to scoff at other authors' talk about "voices" that determine their creative process until her father's death, until that novel, when she just followed this absolutely assured voice.[16] Was there a particular point where this certainty about the characters changed for you, too?

MS: For me it changed when I started going as far away from myself as possible, when I said: "all of this is fiction." Back when I started out writing, twenty-five years ago, it was much more autofiction and the characters didn't speak to me because they *were* also me. Once I decided that I can just tell a story, it felt like the characters had the freedom to talk to me. Only when I started writing, though. You start doing it, start making them out of mud and then they react to you. It's very interesting to think about the writing process changing for Toni Morrison after her father's death now. Death and its aftermath are such important aspects in my new novel.

LE: That *I* cannot wait to read.

15 See Essa, "Die Wir-Identität."

16 See Toni Morrison, "Foreword," in *Song of Solomon* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), xi–xii.

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MS: Writing with the certainty that people will read it this time around is amazing. It gives your characters more power. At the same time your internal sensor starts being louder than before.

LE: You're more aware of your audience while writing this second one?

MS: I'm afraid that I am. It's very different to *Identitti*, but suddenly I look at it and think: could it be construed as being similar on this aspect or that? Of course, on some levels it's *me*: I can only write about things I'm interested in because it takes so long. [*She laughs.*] I'm also spending a lot of time thinking through one big challenge in this one: it centrally features Savarkar as a character.[17]

LE: Yes, I can only imagine fictionalizing him to be a tough task.

MS: I'm writing about him as a very young man, in his early twenties. So that's a different character from the person he becomes later in his life. My protagonist, however, travels through time from the present day. That means she knows about his impact and that'll color the way she sees him.

LE: And that main character has grown up in Germany and brings all the knowledge about fascism there with her, right?

MS: Yes, that's in there, too!

LE: So you've set yourself a real double-challenge in terms of audience: besides the question of how it's received, there's the question of how much context to provide. For *Identitti*, you already figured out how to write for readers that know its core debates intimately, while also making sure that those who have never heard about any of it can follow. And now Indian and British colonial history: there isn't nearly enough knowledge about it in the United Kingdom, let alone in Germany.

MS: Exactly! These are my main conversations with my editor right now: why is this story important for Germany? Not because *he* doesn't believe it is, but to tease it out, clarify it. Colonial history and the fight against British colonial power are central to the novel. If I were writing it in England, it would be self-evident that all this matters for the way people live now. But even apart from the fact that India wasn't among the German colonies, postcolonialism has been discussed very unproductively here in the last few years.

17 Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966) was an Indian political thinker and the founder of Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) ideology.

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LE: "Postcolonial" as the new pejoratively used adjective to join "political" and "activist"?

MS: There were even statements like "postcolonialism is fascism"—which is just shocking and antihistorical.

LE: My final point of discussion for today actually relates to the usage of "postcolonial"—and that of another "post-". One word that doesn't appear in your novel but *does* appear in its reception is "postmigrantisch."

MS: Oh! Not even in the afterword?

LE: Not according to my computer search at least—I'll double-check![18] But this past autumn you've curated a panel discussion with Professor Riem Spielhaus and author Deniz Utlu at the Wuppertaler Literaturbiennale to dissect the positive potential and downsides of the term, particularly of labeling *literature* as postmigrational.[19] Around the same time "Postmigration Reloaded" was published in *PS Politisch Schreiben*: a written conversation between the literary scholars and critics Jeannette Oholi, Maha El Hissy, Maryam Aras, and Kyung-Ho Cha.[20] While completely independent of your event, the four of them talk about very similar dynamics—and actually mention the three of you: Utlu's and your literary writing, Spielhaus's research.

MS: I want to read that! The discussion in Wuppertal was so important. We need a label, but labels always have problems. I want to be able to talk about being in the world as a postmigrational subject, to talk about postmigrational stories. About different kinds of belonging and not belonging—and their effects on creating literature, creating art. But how exactly do we define postmigrational literature? In Deniz's second novel, *Gegen Morgen*, it doesn't matter whether the characters are postmigrational or not.[21] So is it supposed to be a postmigrational novel just because he's postmigrational? It was great having him and Riem at the same table, him commenting on the aesthetic aspects more and her on issues of reception.

18 No mention detected.

19 For a write-up of the discussion, see "Labeln oder nicht labeln? Die Wuppertaler Literatur Biennale diskutiert über "postmigrantische Literatur,'" *Auf der Höhe*, September 17, 2022, https://aufderhoehemagazin.com/2022/09/17/labeln-oder-nicht-labeln-die-wuppertaler-literatur-biennale-diskutiert-uber-postmigrantische-literatur/.

20 Jeannette Oholi, Maha El Hissy, Kyung-Ho Cha, and Maryam Aras, "Postmigration Reloaded," *PS Politisch Schreiben* 7 (2022): 62–73, https://www.politischschreiben.net/ps-7/postmigration-reloaded-ein-schreibgesprch.

21 Deniz Utlu, *Gegen Morgen* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019).

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I'd love to hold a whole conference because there's so much more to think through!

LE: Please do! Regarding definitions: in "Postmigration Reloaded" the discussants very much position themselves against the idea of postmigrational literature as a *genre* and define it rather via its destabilizing perspective. They especially talk about the subversive origins—and possible futures—of the concept, with Jeannette Oholi tracing it from Shermin Langhoff's emancipatory approach in the theater of the early 2000s to the "weichgespülte," softened version now circulating in white cultural criticism.[22]

MS: As a box that you can put people in.

LE: Yes or, sometimes, a box so wide that everything and anything seems to fit in. What's particularly interesting for me as a comparatist is how specific *any* usage of the term now is to the German cultural scene or its study. On the one hand, that makes sense, given how much it was shaped by cultural practitioners themselves here. On the other, it actually first appeared in academic scholarship outside Germany, in UK anthropology and political science, and with a comparative angle.[23] Yet it doesn't hold much sway in contemporary discourses around British literature, for instance. So one thing that's on my mind a lot and that I'd love to hear your thoughts on is Maha El Hissy's argument in the "Schreibgespräch" that the term and category of *postmigration* has become so urgent in Germany precisely *because* of the strong reluctance to engage with postcolonial theory here.[24] "Das Postmigrantische als die bravere, deutsche Antwort auf das Postkoloniale"—that's how Maryam Aras sums up El Hissy's line of thought there: postmigrant approaches as the tamer, German answer to postcolonial ones.[25] How would you respond to this? Especially as someone who's written a novel that directly incorporates postcolonial theory and that bridges discursive gaps between English-language and German-language contexts.

MS: That's *really* interesting. I fully get this argument and think I'd ultimately agree, but there are also issues that "postmigrational" helps to make visible in a way that "postcolonial" doesn't. I can definitely see the danger of the term being watered down—maybe all the more so because

22 See Oholi et al., "Postmigration Reloaded," 63–65.

23 See Anna Meera Gaonkar, Astrid Sophie Øst Hansen, Hans Christian Post, and Moritz Schramm, "Introduction," in *Postmigration: Art, Culture and Politics in Contemporary* Europe (Bielefeld: transcript, 2021), 14–16.

24 See Oholi et al., "Postmigration Reloaded," 68.

25 Oholi et al., "Postmigration Reloaded," 68.

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it's not vilified as much. People can use "postmigrational" to gloss over differences between visible and invisible backgrounds of migration, when postmigrational subjects are not, in fact, racialized equally. Nevertheless, I want to be able to talk about what *is* similar about their experience, too. So I think that both terms can still be used productively: with a clear focus, but also inclusively. For there are quite a lot of people whose experience falls through all the cracks—and that's something I'm always interested in.

LE: Like your characters in *Identitti*! Yet they do find the tools they need to understand their individual experiences in postcolonial theory, right?

MS: Absolutely. Though when it comes to understanding one's experience, another thing that is very important to me is holding both the specific and the universal in balance. I remember a phase in my journey as a feminist, in which it felt really powerful to me to emphasize that men had not had the same experiences, that we're not the same. But in one form or another we will all experience being an outsider—at the very latest when we're old. Whenever I feel that I veer too much in one direction, that I focus too much on specific experiences or too much on universal ones, I try to correct it.

LE: When I wrote out my questions to you, I noticed that we start at the question of literature being friendly and arrive at that of literary discourses becoming too tame. That made me think of a different kind of tension, or aspiration: being friendly without being tame. Just like approaches to postmigration don't have to be tame and can still be subversive, friendliness or rather warmth, as you put it, can definitely be radical in its impact.

MS: I often struggle with this question of being too tame, too friendly—because that's a problem. At the same time, friendliness *is* part of my political program. And maybe I'm even more worried about being too hard, about being excluding, being hard in our own circles. The way we're living our politics should correspond to our aims and it doesn't always. My research into love politics is related to that. How can we achieve such politics without pretending that everything's fine? I do criticize, but I'll err on the side of being too friendly.

LE: The great thing about being in kinship with others is that it also applies to such shared challenges, right? Am I too hard, am I too friendly, does my behavior align with my politics? It's a relief not to be alone with one's own approach, that a community can bring together different ones. Even us two sitting here and having this conversation, as researchers and writers and just people in the world. And talking about your conversation in Wuppertal, and the written one in *Politisch Schreiben*, ours being

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printed in a joint volume that contains further conversations. It strikes me as a hopeful approach to the work of literature and literary criticism. And I'm sure we could continue much longer, but . . .

MS: Oh, we could talk for hours more!

LE: . . . it's ten to four!

MS: I've got to be there at five! [*Recording stops.*]

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