

# **I Am Not You: On the Need for Distance**

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I believe that one of the main problems in many conversations about race, class, and privilege today is not too much distance, but rather too little. Or to be more precise, too little recognition of the importance distance plays in our interactions with one another. One manifestation of this phenomenon is mistaking empathy for shared experience. The language we use to talk about how we relate to other peoples' experiences encourages this conflation—we talk about “walking in someone else's shoes” or “seeing things through their eyes.” This notion that one can truly know someone else's experience, that complete knowledge and identification are the goal, makes it too easy to assume that one's own experience can be applied to everyone else's. This misunderstanding shows up often in our public and private conversations: for example in arguments using the rhetoric of “special treatment” in which some minorities and non-minorities alike assert that since they succeeded within the supposedly universal standards that currently exist, that there is no need for policies that encourage diversity in student populations or the work place. The result of these supposedly color-blind meritocracies is a silencing of dissension and an inability to see that universal and objective criteria are rarely universal for everyone, nor even remotely objective.<sup>1</sup> An even more insidious manifestation of too little distance is the belief that distance means a failure to understand and that if the gap cannot be closed, one should give up. In other words finding another's experiences and subject position too other, too foreign and therefore illegible. Accepting distance as an integral part of understanding other experiences, acknowledging that one can never achieve a full and complete understanding is not the end of the conversation, nor is it an invitation to abandon the attempt. Instead it is the starting point and a call for continual engagement, for constant and ever-changing interactions that create connections and bridges between people without having complete identification as the goal. It is not about my taking your place, not about making your experience mine, but rather about thinking about what role my position and actions play in shaping the world in which your position and experiences also exist.

What I am presenting here is a small part of a larger project in its early stages. I draw on post-colonial discourses and theories, as well as those of minority/ethnic studies, gender studies, and affect theory to think about how this concept of distance applies not only to German studies and cultural studies more generally, but to broader debates about power, ethnicity, and gender. This project is both a continuation and a departure from my previous work which explored questions of privilege, power, and ethnicity in relation to German Jewish intellectuals during the Weimar Republic. In particular I looked at the ways in which their writings utilized concepts of timelessness and strategies of abstraction to legitimize a historically specific outsider position, creating a dynamic set of

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Robcis.

interventions and interactions that simultaneously challenges and acknowledges the limitations of an outsider's agency. In this current project, I reflect more broadly on the question of how to build a relationship to, and an understanding of, a position that is not one's own, often involving great disparities in experience and power. Yet while my last project was focused on how others find ways to speak, I have come to realize that in order to actively participate in the conversation, I also need to speak about myself. Thus the shift in focus is motivated by my decision to investigate my own subject position as a Korean American scholar of German studies and how the relationship between this position and the object of my study has shaped my relationship and definition of American cultures, German cultures, and the field of German studies.

A large part of this project has actually been my reluctance with taking it on; thus I feel compelled to explain this reluctance as well as the need to confront it. For most of my career up to this point I have avoided explicitly talking or writing about my ethnic identity in any kind of professional context. I have let my name and appearance "speak" for me, taking advantage of the fact that few colleagues and students were willing to risk seeming unenlightened or worse still, racist, by broaching the topic directly. I have done my best to pursue topics in which my ethnicity and my gender do not play an obvious role, while knowing that my authority to speak about the minority positions of German Jewish intellectuals stems in part from my own position as a minority. More often than not I implied rather than explicitly articulated this position, and found it an intellectually productive one. Yet gradually I have become suspicious about my comfort with this particular form of silence. The advantages this silence confers upon me are contingent on a complicity with certain concepts of race, privilege, gender, and intellectualism that course through the world around me, the institutions I work in, and my own relationship to my work. To give voice to my objections and critiques, I find that I need to also articulate my subject position in a more direct manner.

This need to explore my position within my field and my work is inextricably tied to my work on representations of the Holocaust. I also entered into this field with more than a little reluctance. My scholarship usually drives my teaching, but this was not the case here. I had known that it is something of a rite of passage for academics working in German Jewish topics, particularly those focused on the twentieth century, to teach a Holocaust class. So it was not a huge surprise when I was approached to fill this gap in our German course offerings. Armed with the motto "Wenn schon, denn schon," I decided to design a course that was in keeping with my own approaches and interests. The first step, however, was to question why I had thought these approaches and interests were incompatible with Holocaust topics in the first place. As a high school and college student I had actually been interested in learning more about the Holocaust and had taken a number of classes on post-war German literature and film in which the Holocaust played a central role. Between college and graduate school I spent a year in Germany studying documentary theater, focusing on Peter Weiss's 1965 play on the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, *Die Ermittlung*. It was after this last experience that I decided to steer clear of the Holocaust in my graduate studies.

My early engagements with the Holocaust were impacted by a problematic, limited, and limiting conceptualization of the relationship between emotions, identification, and understanding. Discussing anything Holocaust-related meant performing affect, making it clear to others that I understood the gravity of the events we were discussing. I conflated

an empathetic response with understanding—the deeper the one, the deeper the other. On some level I saw the ultimate goal as an ability to identify with the victims, to erase the distance between my position and theirs, or at the very least to feel some kind of immediacy, some kind of an intimate emotional connection to the events and the victims. As a non-German and non-Jew, my version of this affect remained unsatisfyingly vague and inauthentic to me. I did not experience that moment of rupture that Susan Sontag writes so eloquently about in her frequently cited description of the first time she saw the photos of the camps.<sup>2</sup> Rather, I wanted to feel that rupture, but knew on some level that it was not mine. This is not to say that I didn't experience an emotional response to the material, but the concentration camps remained an atrocity in the broadest and most general sense; I was more often confronted with what I thought I should feel than with what I felt. Compounding this conflicted relationship to an emotional response was the belief that scholarly work necessitated an emotional neutrality, which at the time I took to mean erasing visible emotional responses in my own writing. I could write about emotions, but it would weaken any argument if my own emotions and subjectivity bled into my argument.<sup>3</sup> These conflicts remained unresolved and dominated my engagement with Peter Weiss's play: while trying to say something about the play I felt bad when I felt bad, I felt bad when I did not feel bad and I continued to oscillate between variations of these two states throughout my project.

This experience, although not the deciding factor, influenced the direction of my future studies and the shift to focusing on the Weimar Republic. In graduate school I found sound intellectual footing for pushing the Holocaust toward the periphery, particularly as I moved into German Jewish topics. In the field of German Jewish studies, this de-centering is part of a strategy to recover the possibility of agency within German Jewish identities. This strategy challenges us to think about the outsider position as one of privilege as well as potential victimhood, and to rethink assimilation not as capitulation but as a continuous interaction between uneven positions of power, something that resonates with work done in postcolonial studies and ethnic studies. This particular path and focus also helped me situate myself within my work. I was drawn to these approaches and these topics as they allowed me to make use of my own ethnic minority position. I could mobilize this position both within my object of study and as a scholar not only as a position of difference but also one of privilege. In an oblique way, my focus on German Jewish intellectuals of the early twentieth century allowed me to explore what the outsider position means in academia today, to be wary of conflating

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<sup>2</sup> “Nothing I have seen—in photographs or in real life—ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood what they were about. What good was served by seeing them? They were only photographs—of an event I had scarcely heard of and could do nothing to affect, of suffering I could hardly imagine and could do nothing to relieve. When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying” (*On Photography* 19). It should be noted that Sontag's own ambivalence concerning this reaction to the photographs can be seen both in the passage cited itself as well as in the fact that this description precedes a warning against the numbing and normalizing effect photographs can have on our understanding of violence and catastrophe. This ambivalence is revisited and revised in Sontag's later work, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

<sup>3</sup> While I will not go into detail about this here, I do think that this is a general bias in academia, but one that is further complicated by gender politics

suffering and authenticity, but also to be wary of unquestioningly celebrating the outsider position as one of objectivity and disinterest. Yet as I see it now, the opportunity to explore these questions at a remove, not to have to explicitly connect them to my own identity and positioning, was a not insignificant part of the appeal. And this remove made it easier to ignore or at least not to probe too deeply into the more difficult and uncomfortable aspects of these questions, particularly as they apply to my own position.

On a broader scale within German studies, this shift in focus away from the Holocaust can serve as a counter to backshadowing,<sup>4</sup> as a way to prevent allowing the effects to create the causes, a position that not only impacts how we view history, but also how we view the relationship between cultural production and its socio-historical context. This shift can lead us to consider why we have privileged some texts over others (I am using text in the broadest sense of the word here to include films, radio, and other media as well as written texts) as well as see some of the more canonical texts in a different light. It is about disrupting one narrative of continuity and rupture to foreground other continuities and other ruptures.<sup>5</sup>

For most of my graduate school experience, I was happy to focus on what could be gained by not focusing on the Holocaust, happy to leave the topic as something one is obliged to acknowledge but then can quickly move away from. And this is where my involvement with the topic remained until I was asked to teach a class on the Holocaust. I set about to make the class about theories of truth, authenticity, and representation, thinking that the students already knew enough basic information about the Holocaust. I was disabused of this notion time and time again as I taught the class the first time and then repeatedly in its subsequent iterations.

Last year I heard Khalil Gibran Muhammad from the Schomburg Center speak about the absence of the Civil Rights Movement in American school curricula. He made a comment that if schools spent just part of the time they dedicated to the Holocaust on the Civil Rights Movement, American children would have a very different understanding of race relations both in the past and today, with the implication that this would also change our future. Although this comment was only part of a small anecdote about his children, and not the central point of the talk, it stayed with me. It was not the discrepancy in curricular focus that struck me, as this was something of which I had already been aware. What struck me was the thought that given how much time we spend on the Holocaust in our schools, how little is actually taught about it. Through informal polls in my classrooms, I knew that Muhammad's experience with the heavy focus on the Holocaust in primary education curricula was not an anomaly. Yet as I talked with the students, I despaired at what I saw to be the ineffectiveness of this attention. I struggled to reconcile the disconnect between the sophisticated and nuanced approaches within Holocaust scholarship and representations of the Holocaust, and the more rigid and often deeply rooted perspectives some of the students had. What I saw was a paucity of facts; the students knew little about German culture, German and European politics, about World War II, about concentration camps other than Auschwitz, and even about Auschwitz itself. Even more troubling was their tendency to identify certain emotions as "appropriate" and relegate the rest into "disrespectful" or even "antisemitic" and to apply

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<sup>4</sup> cf. Bernstein.

<sup>5</sup> An excellent example of the merits of such an approach can be seen in: Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War*.

the same affective evaluations to the texts and films we discussed. I saw first-hand what a colleague refers to as “the Holocaust face,” the air of solemnity and gravitas that some students put on like a mask as they entered the classroom. In other words, I saw in these students versions of the very attitudes and ideas I had held as an undergraduate and sought for ways to intervene.

I began to realize that the way to use representations of the Holocaust as a platform for broader concerns and questions in the humanities was not to try to sidestep the Holocaust, but rather to integrate it as fully and completely into the theoretical and critical approaches as possible. In other words, it is only when the students understand the Holocaust differently that they can begin to engage critically with related discourses of truth and representation, just as the reverse is true. This of course holds for all topics, but because the students often come in with very set ideas about the Holocaust with an intensity and conviction not often seen elsewhere, the relationship between representations and the represented is all the more crucial and all the more contested. I saw that the students really did not know that much about the Holocaust, but that the real problem was that they thought they did; many were made uncomfortable by ideas and approaches that did not conform to what they expected. They wanted victims they could “relate” to, they wanted to feel sad and horrified at the barbarity of the Nazis, they wanted to be overwhelmed by the inhumanity of it all. I am exaggerating a little, but I tried to focus on getting them to confront their expectations, about how these expectations privilege certain narratives, certain representations over others, and how these expectations impact their understanding of the Holocaust. I wanted them to think about what it means if we, as scholars such as Georges Didi-Huberman and Giorgio Agamben challenge us to do, integrate the Holocaust more fully into our understanding of the world. For example, how does it impact our understanding of humanity and ethics when we acknowledge that the concentration camps were full of humans who tested the limits of what it means to be human rather than looking at these events within the binary of human/inhuman? I wanted them to think about what it means to explore the gap between what can be known and what there is to know, and about the need for personal involvement and engagement with the materials in order to understand. Most importantly, I wanted the students to see understanding as a constantly shifting and never completed series of interactions that contain a distance that can never be overcome, a distance that is in fact integral to this understanding. I use the word “wanted” here deliberately, as I am aware of the fact that I was not always successful in these endeavors, but teaching these courses gave me new perspectives on the threads that connect all my classes to one another, to what I view as the central questions and themes of the humanities.

As I continued grappling with these questions and ideas, my research and my teaching began to overlap. What surprised me most was that these emerging research interests did not correspond to a radical shift in methodology or approaches, and it was only then that I realized that I had somehow expected that they had to, that as long as I viewed the Holocaust as a radical historical break that I also expected a corresponding radical break in theoretical framework or archival research. I am of course not advocating for a dismissal of historical specificity, nor am I proposing that one can take a theoretical approach from one context and unquestioningly apply it to another. Instead, I am proposing a re-examination and re-questioning of the role that concepts of continuity and rupture play in our understanding of both German history and German culture on the one

hand, and critical theory and methodology on the other. This approach pulls the Holocaust back into history, and refuses to allow it to be isolated and removed as an exception; it refuses to allow these events and the people involved in them to be considered so different that they must be removed from our notion of reality. At the same time, such an integration allows us to look at what is unique in this particular set of ruptures. It is isolation that commits the Holocaust to the status of the indescribable and unspeakable, to the status of absolute difference, whereas positioning it within history allows us to work towards narratives that connect what came before with what came during and afterwards in a way that allows for breaks but not for an absolute one. And in order to explore these topics, I need to take a closer look at my own subject position, to think about the ways in which my notions of ethnic identity, gender, and academia have not only impacted my development as a scholar and teacher, but also my understanding of one of the central questions within both Holocaust scholarship and the humanities in general: How does one understand another person's experiences when there is a wide gap between those experiences and one's own?

I never really abandoned the topic of the Holocaust; even as I shifted away from it I was constantly aware of the need to position myself in relation to it. As I attempt to integrate the topics surrounding the Holocaust into my teaching and into my research, I also find myself needing to investigate more thoroughly and make visible my own position within my work and to rethink the relationship between authenticity, affect, and identity. The topics I once avoided because I felt that I had no connection to them have been the very ones that have forced me to re-examine my position, to see it as distanced but connected, interactive and constantly changing, and more openly subjective and personal.

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