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Internship Report on working with International Women Space*

Earlier this spring, I was really looking forward to applying whatever skills I am gaining in academia in the real world. I was frustrated with the world that I lived in-in the clouds, reading Aristotle's politics, and discussing how a perfect city should be while being ignorant of the multiplicity of realities in the city I live in.

That was the time when I started interning with International Women Space* (IWS), a grassroot feminist organization whose work is catered towards migrant women in Germany. IWS* not only supports and empowers women on the ground, who are most affected by institutional racism of the German government, but since its inception ten years ago, it has been collecting and archiving the experiences of migrant women in Germany in the form of podcasts, interviews as well as reports. They have compiled these stories of resilience that uncover women's fight in Germany and their home countries in multiple books, such as *We Exist, We Are Here, Als ich nach Deutschland Kam* as well as *In Our Own Words*; which are all self-published. I spent a big part of my internship time familiarizing myself with the work IWS does, and being socialized in a fast-paced "productive" environment, it was not easy.

As an intern, and a migrant woman in Germany myself, I was encouraged to observe, and simultaneously think about the unspoken biases I came with. I was socialized in Germany after all, came as a minor and lived with a host-family, which partly meant that I lived on the margins, not belonging to either German or Syrian society for a long time of my stay here. One of the first things I found

myself questioning was the workspace dynamics. IWS prides itself on being a non-hierarchical workspace where women create their own tasks based on their strengths and where they see themselves most useful. I was reminded of the material I studied in my Feminism and Community course, most vividly of the theory of conviviality discussed by Magdalena Nowick and Tilman Heil in their lecture *On the analytical and normative dimensions of conviviality and cosmpolitanism*, which is a term, I find, that describes the spirit of IWS and their anti-hate struggles in their multifaceted shapes.

Nowick and Heil explain that etymologically "conviviality is based on the Latin roots of 'with' and 'living'" and "that the term 'conviviality' has long been associated with sociable, friendly and festive traits." (ibid, page 1). Here I am thinking about one of the first events that marked my belonging to IWS*, namely the wedding of L*-who is a Kenyan refugee that faced the threat of deportation , and a simultaneous celebration of her finally legal and long term status in Germany. Furthermore, Norwick and Heil explain one of the first scientific normative proposals concerning conviviality, namely that developed by Ivan Illich in his 1973 "Tools for Conviviality" (ibid, page 5). Norwick and Heil write that "For him, social tools, such as social institutions, could be fashioned in a way to help people live compatibly in complex social systems. The 'convivial society' of Illich is such a political arrangement which guarantees the protection of survival, justice and self-defined work" (ibid. p5). Additionally, they argue that for him, a convivial society is a post-industrial one, the model for a future that all societies could implement in their own, localized way" (ibid, page 5), which is informed by his background as a priest and critique of maximal rationality (ibid, page 5). A convivial society is one that is non-hierarchical, in which individual members can

participate fluidly and organically, and can carve out their own grooves and be the authors of their own stories and place in society.

This has been a feature of feminist communities since before the term feminism was coined. The cultural Salons which were widespread during the 19th century Jewish enlightenment such as that of Raheel Varnhagen is one example. Ideas emerge creatively in such a work space, which is something the German socialized version of myself did not understand at first, sitting quietly in the Wednesday meetings taking notes, while all the women conversed, hugged, cooked, made milk tea and discussed the agenda of the next project. I came with a bias which quietly screamed that only a hierarchical workspace is legitimate. Little did I know that as much-if not more, gets done in the convivial way, without having to sacrifice oneself in the process. This is the first lesson I learned about hate. We as migrant women in Germany, are socialized to hate ourselves, depart from our ways of doing and encouraged to demean ourselves and our communities. That is why the first fight against hate is a personal one. Not hating oneself, not battling oneself by applying white centric modes of existence and work as the default. Fighting hate by creating opportunities for ourselves, erupting in a space that was not designed for us. Jennifer, one of the three main founders of IWS, while narrating to me a little about IWS history said: “We made work for ourselves, no one wanted to hire us”. IWS’ office, was for a long time a squatted building in Kreuzberg-Neukölln, until enough funding was gathered to start operating in the current office in Manteuffelstraße.

This in fact has been theorized, as I recently learned in my Social Justice and the Body Course. As Iris Marion Young theorizes in *Five Faces Of Oppression*, organizing a socially productive activity outside of the wage system through for

example public works or self-employed collectives, is a way to address the right of participation which many marginalized social groups find themselves rubbed from (ibid, page 20). This is especially true of women of color in Germany, who tend to be relegated for caretaking roles that no one wants to perform. A stark example of this is how many migrant women of color from so-called safe countries who arrive in Germany, tend to be pushed to pursue a specific practical training (Ausbildung), called “Altenpflege” or seniors/elderly care. It is a very well-paid apprenticeship comparatively speaking, but it binds migrant women to work that is not desirably performed by the children of the elderly for example, and that often includes intimate tasks that involve psychological burdens. We casually talked about this job in IWS*, and my own mom was asked to pursue it by the social welfare agencies.

For migrant women from so-called safe countries, it is a very pivotal decision because if they do not have a long term job and pay taxes by a certain amount of time (usually a year of their asylum request or less), they face the threat of deportation. This makes what Jennifer casually told me, namely that “we are hiring ourselves at IWS*” extends from a sentence that initially sounds humorous, to a political statement, and a form of deliberate action against structural racism and patriarchy. Iris Marion Young in fact explains in detail how women are usually the ones who suffer the heaviest burdens of what feminist moral theorists call “public patriarchy” (ibid, page 16). IWS* faces such moral questions every day. Consisting of a marked social group (migrant women of color), who are daily subjugated to distributive injustices that marginalize them and forcibly tries to push them into positions of powerlessness, IWS* women need to fight for their rights because the only alternative is being under the sword of social welfare agencies and their bureaucracies that deprive them of equal participation, subjugate them to arbitrary

authority, or relegates them to unwanted care taking roles. If self-organized work and self-employment is not practiced, many women at IWS would have been in isolation in camps at the edge of the city where barely any public transportation arrives and where the residents were historically bound to stay where they were without even being able to commute to the next town 5 km away under "the Residenzpflicht law" (residence duty law) that IWS* fought to abolish. This is in fact how the Break Isolation Group, a segment of IWS* was born, where former camp resident women go to the camps and educate other women about their rights in Germany, conduct workshops for community building and free socializing in order to face the institutionally forced isolation of migrants. Injustice of marginality in fact is further enacted and reinforced in the form of uselessness, boredom and lack of self-respect (ibid, page 20), which is something that the asylum system makes sure to keep in place. This is how workspace dynamics become an intentional tool to battle institutionalized hate present in the form of public racism, public patriarchy and xenophobia.

The above mentioned example is not to be mistaken as a critique of care practices, in fact the IWS* community is built on care. Iris Marion Young also talks about the significance of care as a way to battle oppression. Young says: "Although dependency produces conditions of injustice in our society, dependency in itself need not be oppressive… children, sick people, women recovering from childbirth, old people who have become frail, depressed or otherwise emotionally needy persons, have the moral right to depend on others for subsistence and support" (ibid, page 19). She adds that feminist moral theory has exposed "the deeply held assumption that moral agency and full citizenship require that a person be autonomous and independent" is "one that is derived from a specifically male experience of social relations, which values competition and solitary achievement"

(ibid, page 20). The central and decisive difference between being pushed into caretaking roles and choosing to partake in them is a question of freedom and equal participation in decision making. Rather than being forced to undesired work, working with people who are already marginalized and abandoned by their own families, IWS*, because of its self-organized nature, practices care of its own accord and out of a real want. Older women in fact are being cared for within the IWS* frame, but not within an institutional structure that often rubs older people of their dignity despite the presence of adequate resources. I believe that the dignity of older people would be restored on some level if the caretaking responsibilities were partially performed willingly by their next of kin. It is a hard job and I know this because of personal encounters with situations in which family and host family members had to care of an aging person, however, it is worth noting that the main reason why people in Western European countries, especially in Germany, refrain from partially taking care of their elder parents is because of financial reasons, which is a symptom of global capitalism that conditions one to filter even care through the lens of profit. The welfare system and its social institutions fail at providing the active, authentic and loving care present in communities, and it is I believe what is needed to combat hate present in the form of marginalization on the level of communities.

Through my time at IWS* and as elucidated above, I have thought about hate on an individual and communal level, and I was highly looking at it through the intersectional feminist lens. What remains is the examination of hate through a societal scheme, that encompasses different communities and social groups, the ones IWS* interacts with on a daily basis and oftentimes, has to fight. During one of our Friday workshops with the Break Isolation Group, we watched a documentary about the brutal incidents of Rostock Lichtenhagen in 1992, as a

preparation for the Rostock demonstration commemorating the 30 year anniversary of the violent attacks. For five consecutive days, a building that houses migrant so-called “gast-workers” (gastarbeiter in German) of mostly Vietnamese roots was sieged and attacked, starting off with stones and escalating to large scale fires, vandalizations and “hunting down” of the building’ residents by breaking their windows, climbing in their houses and forcing them to move up into top floors to hide together, with no police interference at all. The documentary shows how the police was literally standing by, watching the white Germans perform their hate crimes, with a guised countenance that is masked under freedom of speech, but is I believe a vicious symptom of a much infectious disease namely hatred. Many of the women watching the documentary and I myself were shocked, we were trying to understand what is going on in the minds and hearts of those people who perform such crimes. The women in IWS* seemed to stop being interested in the why, and I cannot blame them, because these crimes after all leave a very physical and tangible impact. Even hate speech leaves a traumatic impact, similar to physical pain, as many studies on trauma conducted today show, let alone a planned and large-scale institutionalized hate crime that even implicates the police. I was still interested in the psyche of the oppressor, thanks to being lucky enough to read professor Zygmunt Bauman’s revealing text titled *Europe of Strangers*.

Professor Bauman argues that the state of angst prevalent in modern European societies, which is a combination of uncertainty, insecurity and a lack of safety, best described in the German word *Unsicherheit*; is in large part due to the fragility of the nation state structure that we live under today (ibid, page 7). This tension is starkly present in the context of the European Union, which is supposedly unified yet nonetheless is made up of differentiated nation states on the basis of an arbitrarily chosen ethnic tribe (and its dialect), as a default and an entacter of

national identity. Along with the increasing presence of foreigners, especially people of color, this becomes problematic to the way group and individual identities are formed, Bauman argues. This is further exacerbated by the instability of the global liberal hegemony and the arbitrariness and ruthless unpredictability of so-called “market-forces” which are the birthmarks of capitalism that looms over large portions of our lives. In such an environment, governments consistently lose their role and influence on the decisions that affect the livelihood of their subjects, leaving them less secure in the state of law in procuring their rights. In such situations, right wing extremism emerges, and it takes refuge in postulated group identities that build high and thick fences against the “stranger”, the one who does not belong.

Bauman says: “Unsicherheit tends to be experienced as a total condition and to breed nervousness and frantic search of solutions often unrelated to the problems they are hoped to solve. One could say that the complex experience of uncertainty produces a considerable amount of diffuse angst, anxiety and free-floating aggression - all in search of an elusive target” (page 8). This elusive target, according to him, tends to be the identifiable stranger. “because the sources and causes of individual insecurity, the mysterious "global financial markets", are much less visible to an unarmed eye than are the ostensible threats to collective security: in our world of massive migration, in the world increasingly populated with voluntary tourists and involuntary vagabonds, it is difficult not to notice the stubborn and vexing presence of foreigners, aliens, strangers. Or, rather, the already anxious and sensitive eye is more likely than not to frame the unfamiliar workmates, neighbors or passers-by into the generic figure of the alien, ill-willed and threatening stranger. And since invisible, difficult to grasp phenomena tend to be explained by the tangible, close-to-hand experience - the mysterious and elusive

threats to individual identity tend to be placed at the doorsteps of an all-too-tangible enemy: the stranger next door." (ibid, page 8) This is, I believe, an appealing explanation, and one that takes into account the other side. I can already however, argue against it from what I believe IWS*'s lens would be.

Throughout my time at IWS* I found myself attracted by explanations like those of professor Bauman. I also experienced this while drafting my podcast script on institutionalized racism in the education system that clearly favored white Ukrainians over BIPOC people despite them fleeing the same war and pursuing the same degrees. Some could stay and some could not, and that simply was the law. In my script I was bashing the German government, but I was wondering, what do Germans think? How much do they know about European border politics? Why do they justify Frontex's push back on the European borders? Why is it not problematic for them that a medical student in her last semester fleeing Ukraine has to return to Kenya because she does not possess the right passport? I wanted to understand their angst, their process of justification, in order to know what went wrong. I sincerely believed that people are good in nature, and that they make mistakes because they are driven by a sense of insecurity, because they are masking an unworked-through trauma. However, I am left with the difficult question, where is the line between understanding and justification? When is it beyond repair? These hate crimes in Rostock have caused grave psychological harm. German institutionalized racism is destroying people's lives by deporting them to unsafe countries, and by constantly terrorizing people of color, to the extent of justifying murder. Why does the one who is at the receiving end of the arguably globally deposited hate need to carry the burdens of maturity and understanding? Why can't the oppressed be angry? Why can't they hate back? This

was one of the conversations that IWS* had with a group of students from Ireland also conducting a hate study who asked IWS* to speak at their conference.

It was difficult for me to swallow at first, but now I understand IWS* stance. In a time and place where most governmental institutions are systematically questioning you on an individual and targeted level, trying to fragment your communities, you have no time to question yourself, and you will inevitably end up fortifying the boundaries of your community just like everyone else. One's energy, especially in a grassroot activism context, needs to be directed at trying to save and urgently interfere in civil society injustice cases where the unmet needs by the government are left in vacuum. When the system fails, the only ones left, namely NGOs and grassroots organizations, are forced to clean up after the government, and it's never enough. There doesn't seem to be a space for inter-communal work, or a directed "educational" mission, because there are simply not enough resources if the most pressing cause is continued existence. With IWS* however, such a need for survival is framed differently. It is indeed resistance and empowerment. Currently, a huge chunk of IWS* work is work on the ground, in light of the Ukraine project contracted until the end of the year, that has a law-based aspect which aims to support people with practical legal advice with the provision of lawyers and free consultation hours. It also operates in a tangible sense present in the form of filling papers, helping in finding work and a place to stay for BIPOC refugees from Ukraine. Despite the precariousness of such a situation, women are encouraged to join in, in building and strengthening this community. Many women have joined, despite the lack of security of whether or not they can even stay. They have been active in the Break Isolation Group, and a new communications team has been formed and it started operating fully a month

ago. I wish I could think of a useful way to merge the institutional aspect with the community work, and I wish it did not always have to take the form of a fight.

Sources:

Nowick, Magdalena and Heil, Tilman. *On the analytical and normative dimensions of conviviality and cosmopolitanism*
Young, Marion Iris. *Five Faces of Oppression*
Bauman, Zygmunt. *Europe of Strangers*