

Dear white Germany,¹

We need to talk. We *still* need to talk. We still, still, still, *still* need to talk.²

Here we are. We are talking. We are being permitted to talk.³ We do not know yet, whether we will face repercussions for talking, for raising our voices. Will we be denounced or stigmatised? Will we be de-platformed or de-funded? Will we be slandered in the pages of the taz or the Axel-Springer-Press in the days to come?

Yes, we are needing to ask ourselves such questions in Germany in 2024. Understandably, at this moment—in the wake of a seemingly endless [rash of cancellations of exhibitions and cultural events](#), which has adversely impacted dozens of artists, cultural workers and intellectuals—many among us have every good reason not to talk, not to speak up. And yet, as Audre Lorde has warned, our silence may not protect us. Lorde acknowledges the very deep and very real fear that can trap us in silence. She nevertheless encourages us to consider the power that lies in language; the necessity of collectively reclaiming the language that has been made to work against us:

“We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid, in the same way that we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialised to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.”⁴

Dear white Germany,

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Hannah Arendt contends that the power of totalitarianism lies in its ability to, “dominate and terrorize human beings from within.” In [a letter written to Karl Jaspers](#) from New York in 1953, Arendt describes McCarthyism as a chilling example of how “human beings can be dominated and terrorized from within.”⁵ Describing the climate for cultural workers and intellectuals during the frenzied days of McCarthyism, Arendt writes:

“In this self-censorship, everyone actually censors himself. It all functions without any application of force, without any terror. Basically, nothing at all happens—and yet the whole thing eats its way farther and deeper into the society. Just about anything is possible here at the moment, among other reasons because neither free speech nor a free press are *de facto* prohibited. It is not the case, either, that one cannot publish. On the contrary. What is typical in this situation is that one can very well express one’s ‘opinion,’ but editors will as a rule refuse to publish straight facts and reports. I’m telling you all of this in detail in spite of my fear that you’ll think I’m exaggerating, because it seems important to me that you be informed.”⁶

Dear white Germany,

When I draw on Hannah Arendt⁷ and Audre Lorde to suggest that our silence will not protect us in the current geopolitical climate, I do so not because I wish to make a literal call to everybody who is gathered here today⁸—or to everybody within cultural community—to raise their voices. Nor do I do so in judgement of those who feel they cannot raise their voices. For there are many among us—people who are not protected by whiteness and a number of

other social and political privileges and advantages; people who are economically, politically or emotionally precarious; people who do not carry the advantages and protections of citizenship—for whom the price of speaking up would simply be too high. My call goes out, instead, to those among us in the cultural community who are at the least risk; those among us who are best equipped to survive the stigmatisation and other repercussions that may well follow when we speak out, the increasingly inevitable consequences of choosing to break the weight of the silence that is choking us collectively.

As the death toll in Gaza continues to escalate grotesquely—with over 12,000 Gazan children and over 8,000 Gazan women already having been killed in the wake of the horrific and absolutely chilling events of the 7 October 2023, with more than half of Gazan homes having been decimated, with close to a hundred journalists having been eliminated, with hospitals and universities lying in ruin, with nearly ninety percent of Gaza's population having been driven out of their homes, with disease and famine closing in as we watch—it is the collective responsibility of those of us who can, those of us who face the least risk in doing so, to break the silence that is tacitly imposed on us in this country (via the looming threat that we may lose our jobs, our platforms, our social status and/or our livelihoods, if we do). It is our responsibility, as Masha Gessen has put it, “to prevent what we know can happen from happening.”⁹ And those of us who are white Germans¹⁰ or white South Africans—those of us who descend from perpetrator communities¹¹—ought to be especially invested in the possibility of “preventing what we know can happen from happening.”

Dear white Germany,

The International Court of Justice recently determined that Israel has (and is) engaging in acts that could plausibly constitute violations of the Genocide Convention—both genocidal acts and incitement to genocide. The court has ruled, almost unanimously (with the exception of votes cast to the contrary by two judges from Israel and Uganda), that there is already sufficient information available to make such allegations plausible. The court has concluded, in other words, that Israel—a state that was created to protect those who had been subject to the horrors of the Holocaust—is currently the subject of plausible claims that it is in violation of the Genocide Convention, a convention that was, in large part, created to the ends of preventing genocides like the Holocaust from ever happening again. When asked what he means by “total victory”—a phrase that he uses frequently (the word ‘total’ is one that should always prompt us to pause, not only in the German context)—[Benjamin Netanyahu has invoked chilling metaphor](#), explaining how one first smashes glass “into small pieces, and then you continue to smash it into even smaller pieces and you continue hitting them.”

Dear white Germany,

In the event that South Africa's claims against Israel at the International Court of Justice come to be (even) more broadly regarded as legitimate at some point in the future, how does this position us as witnesses in the here and now, as people who may plausibly be witnessing a genocide unfolding before our very eyes in real time? “We are not any smarter, kinder, wiser, or more moral than people who lived ninety years ago,” Masha Gessen has said: “We are just as likely to needlessly give up our political power and to remain wilfully ignorant of darkness as it's dawning. But we know something they didn't know: We know that the Holocaust is possible.”¹² The conclusion that Gessen derives from this knowledge, should be painfully obvious to us all at this point in history. They conclude that it is our collective responsibility, “to prevent what we know can happen from happening.” What Gessen is saying here is more than: “Never Again.” What Gessen is saying here, is: “Never Again for Anyone.”

Dear white Germany,

Forgive me for calling you ‘white.’¹³ I know it makes you a little grumpy and defensive, just as many white South Africans get squeamish when the adjective is applied to them (to us). We have more than a little in common, you and I, white Germany.

When I refer to myself as a ‘white South African,’ I do so to register the ongoing impact of South Africa’s violent recent past on its present. When I refer to myself and other white South Africans as people who grow out of apartheid’s perpetrator class—in other words, as ‘Menschen mit Apartheidhintergrund’ (people with an apartheid background)—I do so to acknowledge the historical and material conditions that have eased my own path through life, relative to the paths that most Black and Brown South Africans have had to travel. I do so to resist historical amnesia. The phrase operates (as does the descriptor ‘white’)—no matter how inconveniently or painfully—as a reminder that the past cannot be erased. We must live with the past; not in it.

The term ‘Menschen mit Apartheidhintergrund’ is, of course, a riff on the term ‘[Menschen mit Nazihintergrund](#)’ (that is, ‘people with a Nazi background’). The latter term—deftly coined by Sinthujan Varatharajah and Moshtari Hilal—offers a useful distinction between white Germans (that is, those whose ancestors collectively perpetrated the Holocaust) and, on the other hand, Germans whose ancestors neither played a role in perpetrating the Holocaust’s horrors, nor enjoyed the benefits afforded to those classified as belonging to the ‘Aryan race.’¹⁴ We can argue the history away (at times, it’s hard to imagine how either the Holocaust or apartheid were ever possible, given how many white Germans and white South Africans are prone to insisting that they and/or their ancestors were, in fact, aligned with ‘the resistance’), or we can accept that there is a material continuity between these monstrous pasts and our being in the present.

What we have in common, dear white Germany—you and I—is that we continue to benefit from having been born into societies that have been deeply shaped by white supremacist ideology, whether we subscribe to that ideology or not. While race may be a dangerous fiction, for as long as it continues to exert real and violent consequences, we cannot allow ourselves the comfort of shrugging off the descriptors—the adjectives and hyphenations—that continue to determine who is welcome and who is not, who can speak their minds openly and who cannot, who can move safely through public space without fear... and who cannot. Whether one is Black or white still goes some way to determining one’s relationship to this country, dear white Germany. Whether one is of Jewish, Muslim or Christian extraction, unfortunately still too often has a bearing on the extent to which one is able to feel truly at home in your midst.¹⁵

Dear white Germany,

About a week ago, I signed [an open letter](#) that was written to protest the fact that Kristin Brinker and Ronald Gläser—two members of the [AfD](#) (Germany’s stinking racist, stinking antisemitic, stinking Islamophobic far-right party)—had been [warmly invited to the opening ceremony of the Berlinale](#), this nation’s most prestigious film festival. You really can’t make this shit up, white Germany. While progressive Jews and Palestinians—and the many other ‘others’ who have spoken out in relation to the brutal death toll in Gaza—are increasingly excluded from publicly-funded discourse and cultural exchange in Germany, while you largely watch in silence as we are de-platformed and de-funded and swept aside, right-wing extremists continue to receive gold-plated invitations to attend prominent cultural events.

Kristin Brinker—who, last I checked, was planning to attend the opening of the Berlinale, despite the letter of protest (and the obscenely [delayed response](#) of the Berlinale to that letter)—is, in fact, the chairperson of the AfD in Berlin. Brinker recently attended a clandestine event held in Potsdam, a gathering that brought together a terrifying crowd of radical right-wing extremists, neo-Nazis, AfD demagogues and CDU politicians. They met in Potsdam to formulate an ominous “masterplan,” one that would involve the organised deportation of millions of refugees, migrants and foreigners who have settled in Germany. The gathering was secretly filmed—and consequently exposed—by [a collective of investigative journalists](#) who described the proceedings in Potsdam as a “dystopian drama,” elaborating that: “Their shared goal is the forced deportation of people from Germany based on a set of racist criteria, regardless of whether or not they have German citizenship.”¹⁶ The so-called “Re-migration Plan” [sic] proposes the expulsion of a couple of million people to an imagined “model state” in North Africa. It is an even darker version of the British government’s notorious ‘Rwanda Plan,’ in that this plan extends to just about any non-white individual who is deemed to have inadequately “assimilated” to white Germany.

Dear white Germany,

Why would Berlin’s most prominent film festival want to have right-wing extremists and ethnonationalists of this kind rubbing shoulders with local and international guests of honour at its celebrity-studded opening ceremony? How is it possible, in light of the alarming rise of right-wing extremism in this country, that you appear to be hell-bent—on the one hand—on continuing to [zealously stigmatise and denounce humanitarian thinkers](#) who speak out against the ongoing suffering and incessant death that Gazan civilians are enduring (via the [cynical weaponization of hollowed-out charges of antisemitism](#)¹⁷), while—on the other—it remains perfectly acceptable and digestible, in the eyes of far too many who constitute white Germany, to mingle with neofascists at cultural events that are underwritten by public money?

After I had signed the open letter that was written to protest this farce, no fewer than seven German newspapers and television stations reached out to me. Why, they wanted to know, had I signed the letter protesting the guest list of the film festival’s opening event? I wrote a statement in reply. I sent it to all who had approached me for comment. One by one, the polite responses came back. I was told, in a variety of ways, that my statement was too long and “too complicated” to publish.¹⁸ Since I took the time to write the statement, allow me to share it with you here, in case you too might be curious as to why I would want to sign such a letter:

"I signed the letter, first and foremost, because I view the fears that it frames as legitimately and compellingly grounded in the ongoing struggle to rid German society of racism, antisemitism and Islamophobia. But also, because the letter points to the painful hypocrisy that is rampant in the German public sphere at present. On the one hand, [mass protests](#) held in cities across the country suggest that there is a broad desire to reject the deeply hateful and racist political fantasies of the AfD and other right-wing extremists. On the other, the vast majority of white Germans are not willing to raise their voices to express concern in relation either to the potential threat of genocide that has been articulated by the recent judgement of the International Court of Justice, or the [serial denunciation, de-platforming and de-funding](#) of those who have criticised the right-wing Israeli government in relation to the disproportionate and catastrophic loss of life in Gaza.

Some will argue, invariably, that there are ‘[good intentions](#)’ underlying the systematic stigmatisation of voices that are not willing to give a blank check to the State of Israel as Netanyahu’s government continues to press for “total victory.” The ongoing muting and censoring of such voices nevertheless inevitably points to a future public sphere in which whiteness will be centred and prioritised. I’m not aware, at this point in time, of any white Germans who have been denounced or stigmatised for speaking out about the utter nightmare that Palestinian civilians continue to face. Approximately thirty percent of those cultural workers who have had events cancelled or infinitely ‘postponed’ for doing so since 7 October are, in fact, progressive Jews—although Jews constitute only around one percent (or less) of Germany’s inhabitants.¹⁹ The remainder are Palestinians, Muslims, Arabs and other racialised individuals (who are too often perceived as ‘other’ to white Germany). The long list of cultural workers who are currently facing demonisation for taking a humanitarian stance in relation to Israel’s relentless bombardment of Gaza—in other words—are, tellingly, precisely the kind of people that the AfD would be delighted to expel from Germany.

Mainstream Germany seems to desire a whiter future, one way or the other. While the opinions of progressive Jews and Palestinians—and their many and diverse allies who are equally invested in “preventing what we know can happen from happening”—are at this point far from welcome within many public institutions and on a wide range of public platforms, rubbing shoulders with neofascists at Germany’s most elite film festival, remains more or less kosher. This should make Germany hang its head in shame.”

Dear white Germany,

Please don’t take my words personally. They are not intended as such: “I’m telling you all of this in detail, in spite of my fear that you’ll think I’m exaggerating, because it seems important to me that you be informed.”²⁰

Mit freundlichen Grüßen,

Candice Breitz

¹ This spoken letter was written as a contribution to Tania Bruguera’s performance, ‘[Where Your Ideas Become Civic Actions \(100 Hours Reading *The Origins of Totalitarianism*\)](#),’ which took place at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin. Scheduled to unfold continuously over 100 hours (between 7-11 February 2024)—and involving over 100 contributors, who were invited to read from and reflect on Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951)—the performance was broken off by Bruguera roughly 12 hours before planned completion, after it was unexpectedly interrupted by pro-Palestinian activists shortly after 8pm on 10 February, during a reading by Mirjam Wenzel. This letter was read to the public in attendance a couple of hours prior to the activist intervention. Because the text turned out to be too long for the allocated timeslot, a couple of paragraphs were spontaneously skipped during the reading. This written version includes the sections that I did not have the time to read on the evening. All footnotes were added retrospectively.

² In May 2022, [We Need to Talk! Art-Freedom-Solidarity](#), a series of events that was planned to take place in the run-up to Documenta 15 (as a platform via which to address the role of art and artistic freedom in the face of rising antisemitism, racism, and Islamophobia in Germany) was controversially ‘suspended.’ Documenta’s website offered this explanation: “At this moment, Documenta’s intended goal for the series of talks—to open a multi-perspective dialogue beyond institutional frameworks in the run-up to documenta fifteen—is unfortunately not realizable.” In December 2022, a symposium titled *We Still Need to Talk: Towards a Relational Culture of Remembrance*—put together by myself and Michael Rothberg to take place at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin

in early 2023—was vetoed by the academy's senate (under the leadership of the filmmaker, Jeanine Meerapfel). Germany's Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb / Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung) stepped in as a new institutional partner. The symposium was reshaped in dialogue with the bpb's Iris Rajanayagam and Peggy Piesche, this time to take place at the Futurium in Berlin in early December 2023 (under the same title). On 24 October 2023, citing the Hamas attacks of 7 October, the bpb announced that the symposium was being [cancelled for a second time](#) (using the term 'postponed,' which—like the term 'suspended'—has been normalised as a euphemism for 'cancellation' in Germany in recent times). The bpb offered this explanation: "In the current situation, we do not see ourselves in a position to lead and moderate this debate constructively in order to achieve the desired educational goal in an objective and respectful manner." The twice-cancelled symposium had sought, as per the bpb's now-deleted online announcement, "to invite reflection on the interwoven histories of various victims of National Socialism; consider the relationship between that violence and other traumatic histories perpetrated by the German nation; probe the ethics and aesthetics of relating to the suffering of others; and seek to better understand the relationship between antisemitism and other prevalent forms of hatred, given the increasing normalization of rightwing ideology within political discourse in Germany." In [an open letter dated 31 October 2023](#), which was circulated widely, Michael Rothberg and I articulated our frustration at this repeat [cancellation](#): "It is a bitter irony that our speakers have been prevented from entering into public dialogue at a time of horrific violence in Palestine and Israel, as well as in light of a related and escalating crisis in the public sphere in Germany itself." On 10 November 2023, [a Jewish-organised peace protest](#) featuring 20 speakers from a variety of lived experiences (approximately half of whom were Jewish), took place in Berlin. Those who spoke at the protest—which took place in the absence of national flags, and was titled [We Still Still Still Need to Talk](#)—aligned to mourn lives lost to carnage in Israel-Palestine and to call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and the release of all Hamas-held hostages. Several speakers additionally addressed conditions in Germany in the wake of 7 October 2023, as per the call to protest: "We gather also to protest the ongoing erosion of the German public sphere, via weaponised charges of antisemitism that often amount to thinly veiled Islamophobia and racism. In recent years, there has been a narrowing of space for cultural events. It has become increasingly hard for certain voices to be heard. Symposia, public talks and academic events have been cancelled. Concerts, performances and theatre pieces have been disallowed. Book prizes remain ungiven. Invitations to artists and cultural workers have been withdrawn. Our cultural events are frequently cancelled because their content is "too sensitive," because "it is not the right time" for us to come together to talk, to perform, to write, to sing, to exhibit, to protest and/or to mourn. They are cancelled "for the sake of our own safety," we are often told. All the while, neo-Nazis continue to march the streets of Germany under police protection and the AfD sits in the Bundestag. How is it possible that our voices—as cultural workers—are deemed more dangerous to society than those of white supremacists and the far right? Silencing voices that are inconvenient or uncomfortable is a feature of authoritarian regimes, as is the stigmatising and side-lining of progressive intellectuals and artists. A healthy democracy must allow for the inclusion and participation of a broad range of voices, including voices that are critical of mainstream narratives. This protest will be led by a coalition of leftist Jews and/or Israelis who work in the realm of culture. We invite allies of all descriptions to join us in protest. We are tired of being silenced in the country that murdered our ancestors. We refuse to remain silent as peaceful Jewish and Palestinian voices are stigmatised and censored."

³ This letter was written (and read in public) before Tania Bruguera's performance was cut short—by the artist herself—in response to an intervention by activists on the evening of 10 February 2024 (more information is available via the first footnote above). Before Bruguera shut the performance down, it had been broadly regarded as holding the potential to explore a less repressive institutional approach to opening up fraught but necessary conversations in the current climate, conversations that have been hard—at times, even impossible—to have within state-funded German cultural institutions in recent years (even more so since 7 October 2023). See the footnote preceding this one for several examples.

⁴ Audre Lorde, 'The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action' (1977), published in: *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (Silver Press, 2017) p. 5-6. I would not want to imply, here, that my own position is comparable to that of Audre Lorde (to do so as a person who carries the privileges of whiteness would be absurd). Her reflections on the manner in which fear can translate into self-silencing and self-censorship nevertheless have a resonance for the moment we are living through in Germany. Lorde's text continues as follows: "The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken." (p. 6)

⁵ McCarthyism has been described by some as an 'inverted totalitarianism.' This is not the place to dive into a detailed analysis of the ways in which repression of key civil rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of political opinion can occur without the support of state legislation (and contrary to the constitutional rights of those being repressed), and of course the political climate in contemporary Germany differs from that of the McCarthyist era in a number of significant and nuanced ways. That said, there are increasingly undeniable similarities between the dynamics of fear and intimidation that structured McCarthyism, and the dynamics of fear and intimidation that have come to be characteristic of 'anti-antisemitic' discourse and practice (denouncement is certainly a key feature of both). I continue to find Susan Neiman's term, 'philosemitic McCarthyism,' productive for the moment we are living through: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2023/10/19/historical-reckoning-gone-haywire-germany-susan-neiman/>. *Jewish Currents* offers an informative overview of how anti-antisemitic dynamics play out in Germany, via an editorial essay titled: ['The Strange Logic of Germany's Antisemitism Bureaucrats'](#). Emily Dische-Becker maps

the history and evolution of anti-semitism in Germany in 'The German Question,' a podcast recently hosted by *The Dig* (<https://open.spotify.com/episode/4f4oOU8cdt5nqdBR9CmvUI>).

⁶ Within the current political climate in Germany, a similar parastatal logic is often at work when it comes to the cancellation of cultural events. Cultural workers have every right to the free expression of political opinion as per the German Constitution, as the argument goes—but it is not the obligation of state-funded institutions to offer a platform to those holding such opinions. The argument is applied, more and more commonly, even to cultural events focusing on content that has nothing at all to do with the 'offensive opinions' of the particular cultural workers who are being censured via exclusion from state-funded platforms (in a country in which the vast majority of culture is state-funded). Although freedom of expression and freedom of non-violent political opinion are enshrined in the German Constitution, German cultural institutions are increasingly taking it upon themselves—in a distinctly McCarthyist fashion—to deny platforms to cultural workers whose views are not consistent with the *raison d'état* (*Staatsräson*) of the German state, almost always because such cultural workers have been critical of Israeli state policy in one way or another. Ironically, the application of institutional boycotts of this nature to cultural workers, is increasingly regarded as appropriate; while boycotts that operate in reverse (a number of cultural workers have withdrawn their labour from German institutions that are publicly funded in support of censored cultural workers) are typically frowned-upon and critiqued as unreasonable and unproductive. See <https://www.instagram.com/strikegermany/> for a prominent example of such withdrawal of labour. See <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/dec/07/a-frenzy-of-judgement-artist-candice-breitz-on-her-german-show-being-pulled-over-gaza> for an example of an exhibition that was cancelled as a result of critical views I had expressed in relation to Israel's bombardment of Gaza, although the exhibition itself would have carried completely and utterly unrelated content.

⁷ Hannah Arendt was unable to rid herself of anti-Black racism. Kathryn Gines (among other scholars) offers a systemic analysis of Arendt's anti-Black racism in her book, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* (also see the work of Ayça Çubukçu, including [this essay](#)). *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (and other texts by Arendt) are littered with racist language and racist assumptions that cannot be ignored. The chapters that focus on race nevertheless remain insightful when it comes to tracking techniques of violence that were developed by German (and other) colonialists on the African continent, techniques that would eventually be applied 'back home' by the Third Reich. In two chapters of the book in particular—'Race-Thinking before Racism' and 'Race and Bureaucracy'—Arendt connects the dots between the white supremacist ideology that legitimized colonial intervention in the South African context, and the white supremacist ideology that underwrote the Holocaust.

⁸ In other words, at the Hamburger Bahnhof on 10 February 2024 (See Footnote 1).

⁹ Masha Gessen, 'Comparison is the way we know the world,' in: *Die Zeit* (Hamburg: December 18, 2023). This is the published version of the talk that Gessen gave after receiving the Hannah Arendt Prize in Bremen in December 2023. The prize ceremony was scaled-back dramatically (and Gessen was widely denounced in the German public sphere) in response to an article that appeared in *The New Yorker* a few days prior to the ceremony, in which they compared Gaza to pre-WWII Jewish ghettos. For that comparison (and other stark insights), see Masha Gessen, 'In the Shadow of the Holocaust,' in: *The New Yorker* (New York: December 9, 2023).

¹⁰ While Ashkenazi Jews have slipped in and out of 'whiteness' at different moments in history and in different social contexts, Nazi ideology racialised Jews as a whole, defining Jewish people—among many other 'others'—as inferior to the 'Aryan race.' In light of this history and its ongoing legacy in Germany, I do not include German Jews (many of whom identify as 'white' at this historical juncture) among the addressees of this letter. This is in no way to suggest that those of us who identify both as Jewish *and* as white in the present moment, do not benefit from access to the privileges that whiteness affords (especially, but not only, as compared to Jews of Colour, who must negotiate both antisemitism *and* racism).

¹¹ Michael Rothberg has done important work to deconstruct binary thinking around perpetratorship and victimhood, incisively pointing out that many of us do not fall neatly or simply into one category or the other [South African Jews of Ashkenazi extraction, for example (especially those from families that were impacted by the Holocaust) certainly know what it means to be victimized on the basis of identity. On the other hand, light-skinned Jews (such as myself) were categorized as 'white' by the apartheid regime, positioning us relatively favourably within the country's race-based hierarchy]. This short text does not allow for a more nuanced consideration of the intersectional nature of 'implicated subjectivity' (Rothberg's term). For deeper reflections, please see Rothberg's book: *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford University Press, 2019).

¹² Masha Gessen, 'Comparison is the way we know the world,' in: *Die Zeit* (Hamburg: December 18, 2023).

¹³ It is inevitable that the title of this spoken letter ('Dear white Germany') will be met by kneejerk defensiveness and pushback of the 'not all white people' variety—and that the adjective 'white' will be received painfully literally by more than a few. A journalist who was present to the live reading of the letter on 10 February 2024, was quick to get the ball rolling: "On Saturday evening, around two hours before the [activist] disruption, Candice Breitz read a letter titled 'Dear white Germany' at the Hamburger Bahnhof (...). In her letter, she revealed the same focus on appearance that was already present in her exhibition *Whiteface* (...). Skin colour seems, time and time again, to be the only variable of political relevance for the South African artist, who herself once lived under apartheid" [see Jens Winter, 'Ihr performt doch nur,' in: *taz* (Berlin: February 12, 2024)]. Though it is eye-rolling to have to make this clear in 2024, my use of the word 'white' in the title of this letter—as well as in the title of my work, *Whiteface*—does not refer to 'skin colour' or 'appearance' at all, but to 'whiteness' as a socially and politically constructed

category of race (with no biological or scientific foundation). ‘Whiteness’ is a system of power that is undergirded by constructed racial categories, just as ‘patriarchy’ is a system of power that is undergirded by constructed gender categories. The quote from Winter’s article was originally published in German; the translation is mine.

¹⁴ Sinthujan Varatharajah: “In a way, the term ‘Menschen mit Nazihintergrund’ is a reversal of the term ‘Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund’ (‘people with a migration background’). We use the term to mark the part of society that otherwise constantly and unquestioningly marks others. The interest in where people come from—which actually expresses an interest in what they are, who they are and how they got to where they are now—is often one-sided. We want to reverse these roles and ethnographic analyses. The origin of ‘Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund’ is not a purely geographical question, but a historical, economic and ideological one that must be located in the context of the history of this country.” See Moshtari Hilal and Sinthujan Varatharajah, [‘Es geht uns nicht um Boykott, sondern um Transparenz,’](#) in: *Die Zeit* (Hamburg: March 19, 2021). The quote included here was originally published in German; the translation is mine.

¹⁵ Polls indicate that every fifth German is favourably inclined towards the AfD (the country’s most rabidly racist, antisemitic and Islamophobic parliamentary party).

¹⁶ See Correctiv’s website: <https://correctiv.org/en/top-stories/2024/01/15/secret-plan-against-germany/>

¹⁷ The snowballing instrumentalization of charges of antisemitism in the German context has come to serve as a violent and cynical distraction from the actual antisemitism that remains dangerously present in Germany.

Legitimate criticism of Netanyahu’s right-wing government is habitually conflated with antisemitism, often with reference to the IHRA definition of antisemitism. Kenneth Stern, the lead writer of this definition, has commented frequently on its misuse, including in the German context (for example, here [in English](#) and here [in German](#)).

¹⁸ The phrases “too complicated” and “too sensitive” have become almost synonymous with discourse around Israel-Palestine in the German context. They are often used to deflect conversations around (or mute discourse pertaining to) Israel-Palestine. See footnote 2 for several examples.

¹⁹ The statistic is from the [Diaspora Alliance](#), an international organization that is dedicated to fighting antisemitism and its instrumentalization. The fact that the vast majority of antisemitic incidents in Germany are actually perpetrated by white German ethnonationalists, neo-Nazis and far-right extremists, renders the accelerating tendency to hold progressives Jews accountable for antisemitism (almost always on the basis of their critique of Israeli policy), all the more questionable and—frankly—alarming. For more in this regard, see:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/feb/11/denouncing-critics-of-israel-as-un-jews-or-antisemites-is-a-perversion-of-history>.

²⁰ These last words, of course, belong to Hannah Arendt (<https://brooklynrail.org/2006/03/express/a-letter-from-hannah-arendt-to-karl-jaspers>).