Reflections

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A souvenir from Britta Ries-Drygall, Cologne, October 2025

The public sharing: Do mothers have a country?

During my residency at Quartier am Hafen, Cologne, supported by Tanzrecherche, NRW KULTURsekretariat, I developed an evening of live performance alongside a short video collaboration with Syrian\German artist Shams Kassab. Inspired by Virginia Woolf's words, "As a woman, I have no country", the evening was titled 'Do mothers have a country?'. In my performance, I displayed texts I collected from my interactions with mothers in Delhi and the NRW region that hint at their experiences of wars, migration, childhood fantasies, and desires for mobility and love. By dancing through these narratives, I tried to explore what weaves them together into a community, a map, and how they empower the body and prepare her for a stronger future while she continues to remember unhealed wounds of the past. I employed the contrasting materialities of yarn and stones to suggest how motherhood is a multilayered state of fragility, resilience, and resistance. Through the video, comprising body movement and voice, Shams investigated motherhood from a non-binary perspective. Taking inspiration from Shirin Neshat's Women without Men (2009) and Nawal El Saadawi's The Hidden Face of Eve (1977), they problematised the biological centrality of the uterus in the mother-child relationship. Their key emphasis was to address the paradox of mothers raising sons into men—closer to State and God—and daughters into obedient women. This process involved a lot of intimate exchanges between Shams and I about our respective relationship to our mothers, our religious, cultural, and gendered upbringing we received from them, as well as reflections on the kind of childhood and youth our mothers lived while growing up in extremely patriarchal families. At this point, we have landed upon, such as, Do mothers have a gender? Whose children are these mothers? Do they have a land, a home, they can call their own? Whose lands do their bodies become? What is their past? Can an artistic process help us untie the knots of shame, longing, and loss of dignity that have marred the past of these mothers? Can we rethink constructions of patriarchal histories as well as hegemonic\exclusive forms of white feminism by rethinking and deconstructing this figure of a 'mother'?

Conflict: claims of diversity

Shams and I ran into a huge conflict during our collaboration. The conflict was about our claims and rights on what we were producing as artists. It was about comparing our vulnerabilities based on where we come from, how our bodies are trained and gendered as performers, and then it was about our strengths that we derive from those very vulnerabilities and those that we wish to share as our worth in this world. Shams taught me much. They made me confront the ethical complexities of working with personal testimonies and biographies, and make space for emotions in my practice. They made me reflect that works of 'diversity' and 'inclusion' are not like cars that can be produced with capitalist efficiency. Germany is excellent when it comes to producing cars. But then, German art institutions are also quite excellent in producing culturally diverse works of art as well as artists. This dialectic is what always draws me back to Germany. Arriving here was not easy with respect to the visa complications I ran into, and that I have previously written about. I was told time and again that delays in visas are never politically intended, they happen often due to bad luck, because German offices are over-worked and

under-staffed. I understand this indeed, since Germany is one of the most welcoming European states for immigrants from every part of the world. In general, people in Germany seem over-worked and busy. It is a country with enough jobs and therefore people are busy or have perfect holidays when they are not. Even artists are very busy and can go on holidays, which I see as a sign of a prospering art market that has something to offer to everyone, and where all are welcome. And since all are welcome, 'international diversity' in the arts gets produced in abundance. The question that I have now is if this abundance is a good or a bad sign. To be honest, this question is not so much a critique projected outwards but at my own self. The conflict with Shams kept me thinking about why I was doing what I was doing. And I am still looking for an answer. In the end, abundance must make one question their purpose.

New stories, friendships, beginnings

Despite all the over-filled calendars involved, I am grateful to Quartier am Hafen for providing me space and time to participate in questions of art, dance, and cultural complexities. This residency led me to many new encounters, some of which I would like to share here. Staying in Kalk with Elli, a theatre artist, was an absolute pleasure. She shared much about herself and her mother, a pianist, and how their lives changed after Elli's father, an American soldier, went to war in Vietnam. Bibiana, a Columbian choreographer now based in Cologne, talked to me about her journey between Columbia and Europe as a dancer and a mother. "You build a life around them, and then the children leave once they grow up. So dance is my way of rooting myself, when I move between borders, or even when I cope with the threshold between myself and my child", she said to me. I happened to meet Britta, a painter at one of the ateliers in the house, when I went looking for a colour pencil for my performance installation. We met for a coffee after my performance and she talked much about her complex relationship with her own mother and how she experiences motherhood herself with her grown up daughter. "I gave birth because I wanted to contribute to the world, not to society", she remarked many times. Britta's grandparents arrived in Germany after they fled Czechoslovakia during the war. She told me she has never quite felt at home in Germany, even though this is where she was born. With Julia, a performance theorist and a friend I met long ago in the year 2022 over a whatsapp video call, there was much to talk about white feminism, and the generational gaps in feminist thought that she often runs into with her mother. We had a fun evening roaming inside Museum Ludwig for the opening of 'Five Friends' exhibition, and discussing Merce Cunningham's 'chance encounters'. To Reut Shemesh I will forever be grateful that she invited me for a cake, told me how love has its own language, and let me warm up for the day's rehearsal with a game of musical chairs with her little ones.