

Cassis Kilian

**If only the Führer knew
Vernacular Cosmopolita-
nism in Berlin's Anglo-
phone Comedy Clubs**

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Abstract

Berlin is characterized by national, religious, and linguistic diversity and attracts young people from all over the world but there is no research on how they cope with their experience of dislocation. Insights from participant observation undertaken between 2017 and 2019 in the Anglophone comedy clubs that popped up like mushrooms after rain suggest that they developed what Homi Bhabha referred to as "practices of vernacular cosmopolitanism".

Indians, Israelis, Palestinians, US citizens, Russians, and Ukrainians got in touch and laughed at ethnic and racist stereotypes performed on stage and even jokes about the holocaust. There was hardly a show without references to the Third Reich – almost as if their laughter celebrated the Führer's defeat in a city that had once been the capital of Nazi Germany. Their ostentatious light-heartedness must be taken seriously because the new Berliners demonstrated their presence in the German capital and stubbornly enjoyed being in Berlin.

Keywords / Schlagworte

Humor, ethnicity, racism, migration, comedy, cosmopolitanism, Berlin / Humor; Ethnizität; Rassismus; Migration; Comedy; Kosmopolitismus; Berlin

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Introduction¹

About twenty years ago, Klaus Wowereit, the then mayor of the German capital, asserted that “Berlin is poor but sexy”² ... it became hip (Schulz 2018). Today, it is a metropolis affected by gentrification and characterized by national, religious, and linguistic diversity that attracts many mostly young people from all over the world who often decide to stay there. I will ask how they cope with the challenges in the German capital and argue that they have developed practices of vernacular cosmopolitanism (Appiah and Bhabha 2018: 188) and that humor is a means for doing so.

The new Berliners mostly communicate in English. When Jens Spahn, former Federal Minister of Health, complained that, as a result, Berlin’s waiters address every client in English, newspapers avidly took up the catchy topic: the spread of English in the German capital (Bollmann 2017). However, the “largest English-speaking comedy scene in a foreign-language country” (Webb 2022a: 124) bypassed journalists’ attention. Before the boom came to a halt due to the coronavirus pandemic, Anglophone comedy clubs had sprung up like mushrooms after rain. Club owners, hosts, most comedians, and members of the audience were immigrants.

About 100 years ago, Berlin had also attracted many young people who settled there and supplied the city with a flair often referred to as ‘the roaring twenties’. Siegfried Kracauer ([1930] 1998), a contemporary sociologist, thoroughly scrutinized what was going on in Berlin at this time. He was not only one of the first who discerned the impact of new media, such as radio and film, but also drew attention to the growing group of salaried employees who mostly came from elsewhere and belonged to neither the working class nor the bourgeoisie. They were highly visible, but it was difficult to grasp how they coped with the challenges with which they were confronted in Berlin. Kracauer had an ingenious idea to find out more about these people: He explored their leisure activities and followed them into Berlin’s “pleasure barracks” that he considered the “shelter of the homeless” ([1930] 1998: 88). I drew on Kracauer’s example and conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Berlin’s Anglophone comedy clubs from 2017 until 2019.

I was immediately confronted with a paradox: Comedians often ignored norms of political correctness and currently circulating codes of conduct – not least those published on the websites of the clubs. On stage they reproduced ethnic and even racist stereotypes but that did not hinder people from very diverse backgrounds getting in touch, rather on the contrary. My academic bias initially prevented me from comprehending what was obvious: Resulting from experiences of dislocation, these people had developed skills to cope with the perception of differences in a way that does not fit into academic concepts.

It was significant that they met in the German capital at a time when world politics had taken an intriguing turn. I often found myself in the densely packed auditorium of Cosmic Comedy Club, where many people spoke English, some Spanish or other languages. Dharmander Singh, the host, jumped on stage and asked whether there were any US-citizens in the room –

¹ The fieldwork this working paper is based on was made possible by the financial support of the Goethe University Frankfurt. It was conducted as part of preliminary research for the ERC-funded project ‘No-Joke: Humour as an epistemic practice of the political present’ headed by Mirco Göpfert. A draft of this paper was presented at the 17th EASA Biennial Conference 2022 in Belfast. For critical comments, I am grateful to Franziska Fay, Mirco Göpfert, Matthias Krings, Theresa Mentrup and Friederike Vigeland.

² “*Arm, aber sexy*” [my translation].

a few barely audible yeses here and there. Singh observed that answers depend on politics: During the Bush era, US-citizens would have outed themselves rather reluctantly; when Obama became president, everybody would have shouted, “Yes, we Americans voted for this black guy”. Now that Trump had come into power, they almost hid under their seats, similar to Britons after Brexit. At the moment, nearly everyone felt ashamed because of their nationality; the only people who had reason to be enthusiastic then were the Germans. Singh asked them, “Are you enthusiastic?” The few Germans in the room answered rather hesitantly, but Singh goaded them to respond louder and louder before he hissed, “But don’t become too enthusiastic”.

Sure, Singh evoked the German past, a nation hailing the Führer. However, he also alluded to Angela Merkel who was chancellor when I did fieldwork and Singh insinuated that the Germans had reason to be enthusiastic – because of her, the image of Germany abroad substantially changed. In 2018, Kwame Anthony Appiah and Homi Bhabha published a conversation on world politics because it challenged the concepts the doyens of postcolonial and cosmopolitan thinking had put forward. Like Singh, they referred to Trump’s presidency, Brexit, and other examples of xenophobic politics. Following Appiah, they provoked what he denoted as “a sense of collective shame”, a feeling incited by the inhuman immigration policies (Appiah and Bhabha 2018: 171). In this context, Bhabha drew attention to Merkel and stated that “her leadership in the midst of the migration crisis was exemplary” (Appiah and Bhabha 2018: 176) when she opened the borders for refugees from Syria.

A German politician! “*Wenn das der Führer wüsste!*” (“*If only the Führer knew!*”). German humorists often quote this well-known Nazi phrase (Titanic 1984) when they celebrate a policy that is diametrically opposed to Nazi ideology, such as Merkel’s decision regarding the refugees. However, as Singh observed laconically, politicians come and go, and collective feelings change. It seemed initially as if Germany was transported by a wave of enthusiasm that supported Merkel’s political program, “*Willkommenskultur*” (“*Welcoming culture*”), but the mood quickly tipped and right-wing politicians ironically referred to Merkel’s famous phrase: “*Wir schaffen das!*” (“*We can do this!*”).

Appiah states that “the world gives us the problem, which is how to live together” (Appiah and Bhabha 2018: 186). He famously promoted cosmopolitanism as an “ethics in a world of strangers” (Appiah 2007) and reminds us that “in the etymological sense, cosmopolitanism is about what it is to be a citizen of the world” (Appiah and Bhabha 2018: 187). Appiah observes that problems of living together are not solved by what he calls “platinum frequent flyer cosmopolitanism” (Appiah and Bhabha 2018: 189) because platinum frequent flyers never converge with anything. Bhabha states that a “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (Appiah and Bhabha 2018: 188/189), a cosmopolitanism rather of necessity than of luxury, is more apt to confront the challenges imposed by dislocation.³

In this article, I will ask how Berlin’s Anglophone comedy clubs provide a space to confront the challenges imposed by dislocation. I briefly outline my approach to the field of research and what other scholars working on humor, ethnicity and racism have been concerned with

³ Appiah and Bhabha focus foremost on the challenges with which severely destitute migrants are confronted, such as Filipinas who try to make a living in the US. Bhabha tried to put forward the notion of “vernacular cosmopolitanism” to denote “a cosmopolitanism of necessity, rather than free choice. To survive, people have to learn new moral idioms, strange habits of life, and vernacular ways of speaking and living” (Appiah and Bhabha 2018: 188/189).

so far. I then consider practices of vernacular cosmopolitanism in Berlin's comedy clubs and explore why humor facilitates coping with differences that result from experiences of dislocation. By way of conclusion, I point out why it is significant that the practices of vernacular cosmopolitanism in Berlin's comedy clubs have developed against the backdrop of Germany's sordid past, and that the laughter celebrated the victory of cosmopolitanism in a city that had once been the capital of Nazi Germany.

Discourses versus Practices

I had not arrived in Berlin as a platinum frequent flyer. However, I arrived in the comedy clubs as a German platinum cosmopolitan. I had never been to a comedy club before; given that I had worked for more than twenty years as an actress, I frequented temples of high culture, the famous avant-gardist theaters in Germany. When I became an academic, I studied ethnicity from what anthropologists denote as an 'etic' point of view. The reference to ethnic stereotypes in Berlin's Anglophone comedy clubs was unbearable for someone trained in social constructivist discourse analysis, such as me, and I considered jokes on the length of Asian, African and European penises racist. I often thought of leaving a show – I stayed because paradoxically I felt comfortable in these clubs: I simply enjoyed having a beer there; it was cozy and very easy to get in touch with other people. It took me a while to understand what I will refer to as practices of vernacular cosmopolitanism in Berlin's comedy clubs. Similar to Bhabha, I apprehend vernacular cosmopolitanism not in a linguistic sense, that is to say, as deviation from a standard language that "represents a subaltern agency of translation" (Appiah and Bhabha 2018: 189); I rather conceive it as a practice. This difference is crucial: It is impossible to comprehend what happens in the clubs by analyzing what is said on stage with the tools of linguistics or discourse analysis – one has to converge with the event as a whole.

I had initially concentrated on the comedians, but my attention shifted increasingly to the clubs, because I soon became aware that the shows were more an occasion for coming together. Humor was not only in the punch lines, it was somehow in the air and wrapped up the new Berliners in a unique atmosphere that made the clubs attractive. I consider three clubs that were different regarding the comedic genres and the audiences they addressed. The owners came from countries other than Germany, the same as most performers and members of the audience. I performed in two of the clubs, but I deal with this experience elsewhere. I analyze here what I experienced watching performances and learned from owners of the clubs, hosts, comedians, staff members, people in the audience, and by just sitting in venues without talking to anyone. I deemed formal interviews inapt in these settings; my following considerations are based on memory protocols and notes from my field diary. I thoroughly scrutinize how my perception was biased by my artistic curriculum, academic socialization, and my own stereotypical concepts. In view of the integrative potential the practices of vernacular cosmopolitanism in the clubs unfolded, it is elucidating to analyze how – notwithstanding my reluctance – I got involved in the gatherings so that I could finally discover something I had not expected. In retrospect, the tension between my aversion and my fascination for what happened in the clubs proved to be of great epistemic value because it excited my curiosity.

The clubs had a cosmopolitan agenda and codes of conduct⁴ that aimed at preventing racism. However, it is arguable whether the comedians respected them since they referred abundantly to ethnic stereotypes. Anthropologists know that such categorizations can hardly be distinguished from racist categorizations (García 2017). Numerous scholars of the social sciences, critical race scholars, and researchers of other disciplines deem humor at the intersection of ethnicity and racism an important topic; broadly put, they all ask, “how serious are ethnic jokes?” (Kuipers and van der Ent 2016: 605). Their studies are exciting because the scholars struggle hard to answer it: Do these jokes “validate racist assumptions” (Hirji 2009: 567) or do they help to engage discussions of diversity? Why are jokes targeting a comedian’s own group considered less problematic? Are they displays of ethnic pride, “a reverse form of cultural assimilation, outsiders need” (Kuipers 2006: 145; Nickl 2020: 52)? Or are such jokes a sort of “self-flagellation” (Pérez 2013: 483)? And what do “hurt lines” (Pérez 2013: 487) that distinguish acceptable jokes from those that are deemed unacceptable reveal about contexts of reception? Most scholars concerned with such questions hesitate to refer to theories on humor, such as the superiority theory or the relief theory, because they might seduce them to “just brush over” (Rappoport 2005: 31) the many paradoxes with which they are confronted.

The more I converged with my field of research, the more I agreed with James M. Thomas, who suggested thinking of a comedy show no longer in strictly discursive terms “that overdetermine the roles of particular agents (i.e. comics)” (2015: 166). I felt that what happens in the clubs “is more than joke-work, more than a particular type of interaction between comic and audience members” and, what is most important, it is “more than a series of speech acts” (Thomas 2015: 169). The environments in which the performances occur are crucial for the dynamic encounters in the clubs. They are embedded in a variety of contradictory practices, the affective labor the staff provides, and the venue’s spatial-sensual properties (Thomas 2015: 169).

In what follows, I analyze profiles on websites, the neighborhoods where clubs were located, the arrangement of the seating, and the lighting. I often consider in detail what was performed on stage, but I invite readers to keep in mind that this stage was situated in a cozy club where people sat closely together, saw each other, and had drinks and snacks. My aim is to show how the owners of the venues, the hosts, and the comedians made the members of the audience feel at home in Berlin and in which respect the location in the German capital impacted on the atmosphere in the venues.

The cityscape of Berlin can be deciphered as a palimpsest of the comparatively short history of the German state: The traces of the empire founded in 1871, when the city became the German capital, the roaring twenties, two World Wars, Cold War, various promising socialist utopias, a disenchanting communist dystopia, and neoliberalism constantly emerge and vanish – those of the German colonial past are currently brought to light. Berghain, a famous techno-club, has become a chiffre for an excessive nightlife – in fact, a misleading term because parties may start in the morning. Past and future collide in the graffiti on bullet-scarred buildings and the cracked walls of fancy vegan restaurants and bars where youngsters with laptops on their knees develop projects that will be hopefully given a try somewhere in the city. Vintage accessories help establish the Berlin style in clothing stores, but it is difficult to describe

⁴They were meant for comedians willing to perform in the clubs; during the pandemic the clubs mostly deleted them.

because there are actually no “no gos”, rather a predilection for what is edgy and queer and a certain dislike of what looks excessively expensive.

Did this amalgam incite the curiosity of the young people who came to Berlin and decided to stay? Anyway, it seems that neither what is considered German culture, nor the German language are pull factors, rather the contrary. Many of those who have settled in Berlin do not speak German or prefer to speak English. In Berlin’s Anglophone comedy clubs – and not just there – German culture is considered a culture of fusty obedience, almost as if it were the antipole of what makes the German capital attractive.

Teaching Arrivals – How to Become a Berliner

The Kookaburra, Berlin’s first comedy club, was founded by Sanjay Shihora and his wife Svenja in 2002. He was born in Rajkot, India, and told me that his aim was to revive the prolific culture of cabaret in Berlin in the 1920s. Other than in the numerous new clubs that focus on stand-up, jugglers, illusionists, and singers performed as well. The club was in Berlin Mitte, the district where the main tourist attractions are located. One of the shows on the program was scheduled every Tuesday. It was performed by Karsten Kaie and entitled “How to become a Berliner in one hour”. The show was promoted as a comedy “100 % in English, 100 % German Humor” (Kaie 2021). It was conceived to attract tourists and other arrivals. I often saw this show and talked to members of the audience and Kaie himself.

The comedian, a tall broad man in his forties, always appeared in an Aloha shirt. He carried a towel, threw it on a bar stool, snapped that he had, thus, made a reservation, and asked why Germans have such a bad reputation. He then wanted to know where the members of the audience came from. Some of them were indeed tourists, from the US, Latin America, Asian, and European countries, or other parts of Germany. They sometimes arrived in huge groups by bus, others lived in Berlin. Kaie considered those who came from other parts of Germany – let us say from Flensburg or the hinterland of Berlin – no less foreign than those who came from Texas or Kyoto. After he had identified almost everybody in the audience as a foreigner, Kaie explained the need to teach the arrivals several lessons, because whatever they might think they know about life, “in Berlin, it’s a little bit different!”.

The lessons were all built on the same structure: Kaie first demonstrated how a tourist would behave when confronted with a Berliner in a certain situation, namely, amiable and polite. He then warned the audience, “Don’t do that, don’t act like a tourist!” and demonstrated how a Berliner would behave in this situation, namely, blunt and as bearish as possible. In the next step, the comedian invited members of the audience to come on stage and practice the adequate conduct in a certain situation.

The audience learned how to behave in public transport, how to shout back at barefaced conductors, and how to counter waitresses and shop assistants’ brazenness by being more brazen. Kaie ostentatiously referred to stereotypes of “real Berliners” and those attributed to the respective ethnicity of the members of the audience he invited to come on stage. However, when members of the audience were confronted with him on stage, a student from Texas, a stylish youngster from Bangkok, or a stout girl from Saxony, the protagonist framed his antagonists to their advantage: They all appeared amiable and friendly against the backdrop of his bearishness. Berlin’s heraldic animal is a bear and Kaie acted like a rough but inoffensive Berliner teddy bear.

Scholars often point out that jokes targeting the comedian's own ethnic group are deemed less problematic (Kuipers and van der Ent 2016: 606/607; Pérez 2013: 490) and comedian Judy Carter (1989: 91) teaches aspiring comedians that self-deprecating humor makes the audience feel comfortable. However, another aspect might be more relevant here: Cultural difference was not at the center of the comedy, but how one might learn to cope with such differences. It might seem farfetched to compare Kaie's lessons to Appiah's famous courses on "global learning" and "cosmopolitanism" (Appiah and Bhabha 2018: 187; FIU 2010). However, similar to Kaie, Appiah had a comparative approach: He found it helpful to "see weaknesses in traditions" he himself "grew up with academically" and observes that it "sharpens one's grasp of the weaknesses to see another tradition, which also has its weaknesses" (Appiah and Bhabha 2018: 183). According to Appiah, comparison is a premise to become a cosmopolite; his proceeding is not so very different from Kaie's approach, just as the comedic lessons the academic courses were about finding a common ground. Appiah and Kaie highlight differences to demonstrate the importance and possibility of learning from each other.

At the end of each show, Kaie invited someone to pass an exam on stage and ran through the exercises he suggested before. The examinees received a diploma confirming that they had become real Berliners. Some of them revealed a remarkable comedic ability, not least because Kaie's stage directions helped them. However, he sometimes discovered a real talent, such as Tommy, a weedy youngster from Hong Kong, whose attempts to perform ostentatious unfriendliness evoked gales of laughter. "How to become a Berliner in one hour" was conceived for a broad public: Those who arrived with a booze cruise in Berlin did not feel excluded by a too sophisticated humor, and even when stylish Berlin hipsters stumbled into the show, they did not act as killjoys, rather the opposite. The comedy that excited laughter by drawing on ethnic stereotypes had an integrative effect. Everything Kaie did on stage communicated: "Welcome to Berlin, I'm happy that you are here!"; he actually promoted *Willkommenskultur* (*welcoming culture*).

This programmatic impetus was imbedded in the setting of the venue: A lot of people who had seen the show stayed for a while and talked to Sanjay Shihora – the owner tapped beer, his wife Svenja prepared snacks. Others talked to Kaie and some approached those he had invited to come on stage. The notion of a comedy club in Berlin is more than a label borrowed from famous venues in the UK or the US: The word 'club' hints at what distinguishes these venues from Berlin's theaters. Considering the many habitués, one might even claim that it is more adequate to speak of members of a club than of members of an audience. The clubs are not exclusive: Everybody is welcome – they are what Kracauer denoted as a "shelter of the homeless" ([1930] 1998: 88). I often saw owners, hosts, and staff approaching new visitors who had come alone and looked lost. A lot of those whom I met during fieldwork told me that the Kookaburra or another club had become a sort of living room for them.

Responding to the Nazi Salute

Teaching and learning are often part of the community building on which Berlin's comedy clubs depend. The Comedy Café Berlin presented itself on its homepage as "Berlin's first international, alternative comedy stage, school, and bar". It invited those interested in the school "who identify as Black, Indigenous or a Person of Color" to apply for a BIPOC Scholarship Program. The club promoted BIPOC representation but acknowledged that, so far, "we have

failed to actively promote racial diversity". Who were "we"? The homepage listed Noah Telson and Leah Katz as owners of the club; both came from the US.

Comedy Café Berlin (2021) made extensive use of its acronym CCB for branding and offered CCB unisex hoodies with the slogan "This theatre kills fascists" or CCB onesies for babies with the slogan "This baby kills fascists". Before the pandemic, one could sign up as a volunteer, which I did. I learned that the club disposed of a well-organized network of volunteers who control tickets and clean the rooms. Emily, a student from Norway, who had volunteered in a club in Oslo previously, told me that this is an effective means to get in contact with other people. This is similar to the shows, where everybody willing to do so could perform – the so-called open stages.

Although CCB deplors that it failed to encourage BIPOC representation, I have never seen shows displaying more diversity. "*As-salāmu 'alaikum*" – Toby Arsalan, the host, always got an immediate many-voiced "*wa-alaikum s-salām*" in reply. A lot of Muslims in the show tonight, he stated. However, a lot of comedians and members in the audience identified as Jews and/or Israelis. For Arsalan, it was fun bringing them together: "They have so much in common; an important book, an important god, and circumcision". Precisely circumcision would be a vantage point for a powerful ecumenical movement. "Scissors could be a brand! Rock, paper, scissors ... You know the game?" Arsalan imitated the movement of scissors with his fingers and asked, "Wouldn't these scissors be an appropriate response to the Nazi salute?".

The audience learned that Arsalan is a German Pakistani who grew up in Syria and South Africa. He had been to an international college and lived in the US. When he came to Europe, everybody made fun of his American accent, so he decided to adopt a British accent, and to speak like David Attenborough when the latter was describing nature for Planet Earth. His mocking the English broadcaster was hilarious. Grada Kilomba (2008) and many other people of color consider the question, "Where are you from?" an experience of everyday racism. However, it depends on who asks this question: for hosts such as Arsalan it is a possibility to warm up the audience. People in the audience came from Australia, Singapore, Tunisia, Egypt, Great Britain, France, and many other countries – Germans were definitely in the minority. Once Arsalan mistook a student from Albania for an Italian and then asked him which stereotype refers to Albanians – "drugs and mafia" he responded and Arsalan stated, "Italy after all!".

Numerous comedians referred to ethnic stereotypes without such an ironic turn. Most of them started their performance by relating where they came from. Comedians from Poland, Scotland, and Sweden described their home countries as regions where only drunkards live, just as Russians and Ukrainians who, thus, discovered a common ground. One could get the impression that Berlin is a refugium of sobriety. A Muslim comedian did not share this view. He came from India – "no not from Pakistan, from India and, yes, there are Indian Muslims" – and related that when he arrived in the German capital, he stopped praying five times a day, got a tattoo, and started drinking ... Applause!

It is a ritual in Berlin's stand-up shows that hosts teach audiences to clap as enthusiastically as possible. Many comedians and members of the audiences from the US reported on hecklers. The practice of heckling is implicitly prohibited in Berlin's stand-up clubs: Hosts ask the audience to look at the performances with benevolence and firmly require respect for those who expose themselves on stage. Since it has a rather active part in a stand-up show, the audience is mostly visible and not able to hide in the anonymity of a dark auditorium, this might

facilitate articulating rejection; if members of the audience expressed repudiation at CCB it was barely perceptible.

The audience applauded dutifully when a comedian from Indonesia claimed that German menus list only potato soup, potato salad, mashed potatoes, and potato dumplings. It clapped, although rather reluctantly, when he related that all Germans drink sparkling water and would always let rip. He finally stated that most Germans are racists. Although this comedy was received with restraint it is symptomatic for a paradox I often came across: When I talked to comedians, staff, and members of the audience, I got the impression that Berlin is highly popular among youngsters and considered as the best place to be right now; but on stage everything considered “German” was depreciated, foremost the German language. Everyone who claimed that it was ugly evoked roaring laughter. One could argue that jokes about Germans and Germany are to be considered what comedians often refer to as “punching up”. Concerning this matter, CCB’s (2021) code of conduct reads thus: “Our expectation is that, to the extent that performers/performances critique anyone, they attack the establishment, not the downtrodden”.

Kuipers and van der Ent (2016: 606/607) state that ethnic jokes regarding privileged groups – in this case Germans – are mostly accepted, whereas jokes that reinforce ethnic hierarchies are often contested. Raúl Pérez (2013: 487) makes the same point concerning racial hierarchy. It is striking that comedians often establish an inverse racial hierarchy with reference to the male sexual organ. At CCB, a comedian who identified himself as Japanese-German,⁵ reported on a visit to a museum. A girl considered the penis of a white marble statue rather small, he objected that it was normal size – if she wanted to see a bigger one, she should look for statues made of black marble. Arsalan, similar to other hosts, rejected any responsibility for what people would perform before the show, but he told me that it often disgusted him. It was not easy to evaluate how the audience perceived such performances during the show. However, after it, people stayed, talked and those who had performed got feedback. The new Berliners sometimes joined in small groups and went to one of the many bars nearby.

The CCB is located in Neukölln. Before the fall of the Berlin wall, Kreuzberg was the center of an alternative youth culture, then post wall, Prenzlauer Berg and Friedrichshain became more attractive until these districts were heavily affected by gentrification. It is foreseeable that this will also happen to Neukölln, which is currently considered hip, although some already claim that Wedding is hotter. Rents are still affordable in Neukölln and many of the people one meets in the clubs live there. They often share an apartment or temporarily squat on the couch of a friend (see also Webb 2022a: 81). A lot of those who frequented CCB corresponded to the stereotype of new Berliners that was often a topic in comedies and conversations: They were rather penniless but spurred by the hope of realizing one of the many projects they had in mind – any start-up enterprise concerning urban gardening, vegan cooking, knitting, or perhaps founding another comedy club ...

Laughing at the Holocaust

In the context of my research, it was important to confront my own biases and stereotypical views; this confrontation was most evident at Cosmic Comedy Club, the third club I consider

⁵ I modified his identification to anonymize the comedian. See my remarks on his performance page 16.

here. I will focus on the first of many other visits to the venue because this initial contact was significant for my self-reflexive process.

The Cosmic Comedy Club was situated in the basement of Belushi's bar in Berlin Mitte, the same area as the Kookaburra club, however, in a part of Mitte that brings Berlin's socialist utopias to mind. The club was right across from a theater that opened in 1914; as the theater's name, "*Volksbühne*" ("*People's theater*"), indicates, it was conceived for the underclass. I had been there just before deciding to go to the Cosmic Comedy Club and attended "The Factory" by Mohammad Al Attar and Omar Abusaada, an enthralling play on the situation in Syria. Analogous to every actor, the *Volksbühne* is a significant venue for me. The theater, with its highly ambitious experimental productions, is one of the most important in the world. It has become a temple of high culture and does not reach the audience it was conceived for in 1914.

The mention of the theater and my visit there is important because this is the background against which I experienced what happened at the Cosmic Comedy Club. Even as I was looking at its homepage, I perceived this venue as an antipode of the *Volksbühne*. The club promoted "English Comedy with Free Vegetarian and Vegan Pizza & Shots" and a photo showed a densely packed auditorium: People formed a "C" with their fingers – apparently this gesture was a sort of branding – and many of them lifted their beer to the camera. Considering their behavior and outfits, I assumed that this club attracted exactly the audience the *Volksbühne* fails to reach.

When I came near the club, a spindly guy with tousled dark hair and dark skin approached me with compelling friendliness and gave me a flyer. Falling for my own racist stereotypes, I wondered whether the club had employed a refugee out of charity and told him that I had come with the intention to see the show. He welcomed me as if I were some long-awaited parent and developed a sort of hospitable hyperactivity to make me feel good: I would have to wait a little bit for the pizza but the show would be really nice and "in no way offensive against women". His whole demeanor was irresistibly cheery and engaging. Apparently, I incited his compassion because I had come so early and all alone – he probably took me for a very lonesome person, so I told him that I did research on comedy in Berlin. As soon as he had realized that I was not pitiable, I became aware that he was a comedian, if not the owner of the club. He said that it would be his pleasure to answer questions and presented a stout Briton to me. Again, falling for my stereotypical views, he reminded me of the guys who come to Berlin by Ryan Air to get plastered as quickly and cheaply as possible.

Pizza was announced at 8:15 p.m. and the show should start at 8:45 p.m. Most members of the audience came around 8:30 p.m. and they were exactly what I had imagined them to be. I heard mostly American English, sometimes Spanish, Italian, or a Scandinavian language, and very little German. Meanwhile, I had found out that I had talked to Dharmander Singh, one of the two owners of the club. He invited me to take a seat on the red sofa just in front of the stage. I hesitated because comedians mostly address people in the front row, and clubs lure members of the audience with the most comfortable seats, but I followed his invitation because I did not want to sit on one of the unpadded chairs. This was revealed to be a wise decision because it was 8:00 p.m. and no pizza was in sight. People drank a lot, mostly beer, and this was obviously the scheme behind the delay.

Finally, Singh started warming up the audience: "If you've been here before, say, 'I have!'" . The response proved that, similar to the other clubs, most people in the room were regulars. The host replied: "Welcome back! We love you! We missed you!" and asked those who had

not been to the club to respond, "I'm sorry!" which they did. Singh declared: "We're glad you finally made it! By walking through that door tonight, you have become part of the Cosmic Comedy family". He then asked members of the audience where they came from. Given the obviously sozzled state of many, he judged it necessary to advise them to take care of their bottles during the performance and observed that the Germans in the audience were now reassured because they had been waiting impatiently for him to announce the rules for the show. After all that, he concluded: "It does not matter whether you have been here before or where you come from, because this evening we are one Cosmic Comedy family".

The show started. After having presented themselves as a German, a Ukrainian, and a Pole, three comedians reproduced the stereotypes of their respective home countries and incited gales of laughter. The performances bored me stiff, but then a comedian from Lithuania really startled me. He claimed that the Russians could be compared to the Nazis but that the latter would have been better for Lithuania because they created jobs. There was affluence in the country; under Russian dominance one could not buy anything. Enough was enough! I thought of leaving the club in the interval, but I decided to queue for my free shot. A girl in the queue asked me where I came from and presented me to her friends. Soon other people who none of them had ever seen before joined us, everybody chatted with everyone, and I giggled without knowing why.

The interval in this venue was very different from that in the *Volksbühne*. It is unlikely that people mix together in such a theater: If people address each other, they take care to find a sophisticated turn for doing so, first and foremost if they consider someone important, which is constantly evaluated during the intervals. It is easy to distinguish those who belong to the inner circle, that is, actors, directors, and students from prestigious acting schools, from ordinary members of the audience. Critics, politicians, and academics form other groups. They enjoy a certain respect but are considered rather philistine by the artists. Ordinary members of the public are looked upon and subscribers are considered a necessary evil, such as are discussions with the audience. A comparison of an interval at the *Volksbühne* to one at the Cosmic Comedy Club would be apt to prove Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theory on how the performance of aesthetic preferences permits distinction concerning the distribution of cultural capital.

After the interval, I enjoyed how Singh performed emblematic film scenes in Bollywood style. His adaption of the famous scene from *Titanic*, in which Jack drowns was just grand, but when he announced a scene from *Schindler's List* in Bollywood style, even the audience of Cosmic Comedy Club was obviously shocked. He had anticipated this effect and smirkingly declared: "Enough Holocaust jokes today". Pérez (2013: 489) notes that many stand-up comedians are taught that the best performances relate to potentially offensive discourse; the challenge is to get very close to what is considered a "hurtline" without actually crossing it. Whether Singh crossed the hurtline is a question of taste; some might claim that he got his act together. According to my "judgment of taste" (Bourdieu 1984), the American and the Finnish comedian who performed next definitely did not. However, other members in the audience deemed it funny to hear that an average German penis is 14.5 centimeters long, a British, in contrast, much shorter. The reference to ethnic stereotypes often turned into racist jokes towards the end of the show but at least there was something like a happy ending: The last comedian drew on the outworn stereotype of the Scottish drunkard, but his performance was hilarious to the point that it made me laugh together with the others. It was the guy Singh had introduced me to, Neil Numb, the other owner of the club.

Singh then invited the members of the audience to form a “C” with their fingers and shot a photo – the photo I had seen on the homepage was probably also taken during this apparently well-established ritual at the end of the show. Singh stressed that because we are “one Cosmic Comedy family”, even jokes about the Holocaust are allowed. I suppose he also found the joke about the Nazis in the Baltic states problematic but didn't want to stab the comedian in the back. Maybe Singh improvised the joke on *Schindler's List* to water down this revisionist joke. Anyway, he asked everybody who liked the show to post comments on social media but begged all those who had not liked it to talk with him at the bar, he would embrace criticism. His invitation to discuss with the audience bespoke a lot more openness for what people thought of the performance than any invitation to an audience discussion I had ever heard in a theater. Certainly, any negative comment on social media would be fatal, a critical article as well. I suppose that was why Singh immediately invited me for a drink and told me that another researcher, Hillary S. Webb, had already written a book on the club. I kept back my doubt that any of my academic colleagues would consider Cosmic Comedy Club a worthwhile topic for a monograph, pleaded tiredness, and left the venue with paradoxical feelings.

I did not deem what I had seen to be “a nice show”. What had been performed on stage annoyed me, but I felt that Singh and Numb had done a good job concerning the promotion of cosmopolitanism. The event as a whole had an inclusive not exclusive effect. How did Singh and Numb succeed in doing so? Andrew Bulkeley notes in a local newspaper that their club became popular by offering free shots and pizza and “Singh's high-energy hosting” (2021). He quotes Numb, who states: “What you want is that when the show starts, the audience have gelled into one unit”. My first visit was an important lesson: A platinum cosmopolitan began to suspect that there might be something such as a vernacular cosmopolitanism worth being considered more closely.

Surfaces and Light Hearts

Pérez (2013: 498, 487) considers comedy clubs in the US sites where racial discourses are “tested and normalized” (2013: 498) and studied stand-up courses to analyze how comedians learn to “make racism funny” (2013: 487). One of the strategies that safeguards performers because it allows them to reproduce racial stereotypes and to deny literal racist claims is also used in Berlin's Anglophone clubs. Comedians come close to the hurtline that separates acceptable jokes from those which are not and find a twist before crossing it. Kookaburra, CCB and Cosmic Comedy Club warned comedians against racist jokes, but CCB (2021) acknowledges that such warnings actually refer to an open-ended debate about hurtlines: “We expect performers to treat sensitive and risky subject matter carefully and with emotional intelligence. Performers should be open to having a constructive, open conversation about a performance afterwards if the occasion arises”.

However, Pérez observes that “the comic is typically not regarded as racist” (2013: 497) and this prevents comedians from being held accountable. I agree but doubt that I, a white German academic, should accuse young non-white comedians of racism: I know the name of the comedian who compared the length of white and black penises, but I did not mention it here and let him off the hook. The next time he seized the opportunity to put his jokes to a trial on an open stage he had deleted this racist joke. Comedians often told me that they are ashamed of jokes they once thought acceptable. Hirji suggests that although there is the “constant possibility of legitimizing racist thoughts and discourse”, jokes referring to stereotypical concepts

can offer a possibility “for discussing stereotypes about race and culture” (2009: 568). Those stereotypes circulate notwithstanding and even because of intensified global entanglements. When I first saw Singh and Numb, my own racist and ethnic stereotypes popped up as well. They also determine the perception of academics who have learned to deconstruct them – one might even detect a certain voyeurism when they are obsessed with analyzing how others refer to or reproduce problematic concepts. Hirji argues that ethnic stereotypes in comedies reveal a need “for frank and engaging discussions” (2009: 567) of diversity. However, it is debatable whether such stereotypes were actually discussed in Berlin’s comedy clubs. As far as I can judge, not too often and certainly not in depth, but it was generally acknowledged that many jokes, foremost on open stages, were rather questionable. However, they seemed a necessary inducement to relax together: When the new Berliners laughed, they acknowledged that those stereotypes exist. When comedians came close to the hurtline, potential conflicts popped up, but at least, what happened on stage was not taken seriously – just as Singh claimed: “All this does not matter, because we are one Cosmic Comedy family”. What matters was that people from diverse backgrounds came together, and that the new Berliners found venues where they all felt at home.

James M. Thomas has done research in “The Comedy Kitchen”, a club in a medium-sized city in the Midwest of the United States. Similar to me, he found that studying the construction of punch lines is insufficient to understand what happens in comedy clubs (2015: 168). However, after a rigorous analysis of “the relationship between performances, the environment in which they occur, and the interactive processes that both shape, and are shaped by this dynamic encounter” (Thomas 2015: 167), he found that the environment reinforces the discriminatory discourses on stage. By contrast, this dynamic encounter in Berlin’s Anglophone comedy clubs translated into practices of a vernacular cosmopolitanism, and ethnic stereotyping was part of it! Humor is a mode to cope with dissonant experiences – ethnic stereotypes separate, laughing together connects – if the jokes are daring, people laugh even louder to demonstrate that the connection is stronger. This becomes obvious considering jokes on the holocaust: In this case, the connection is fostered by a disconnection from Hitler’s ideology. I repudiate Holocaust jokes, but I acknowledge that in the final analysis, the laughter they evoked in the clubs proved the Führer’s defeat. I was amazed by the integrative potential the shows unfolded because I had never experienced such a dynamic in one of the prestigious theaters I had been to before. Moreover, the clubs reach much broader and very diverse audiences, people I never saw in Berlin’s theaters.

When I expressed my excitement about how people learn to cope with challenges that result from dislocation in a proposal for a special issue, an anonymous peer reviewer deemed my observations “light-hearted and superficial”. I was at a loss how to proceed and remembered the author Singh had mentioned and looked her up on the internet. Hillary S. Webb’s homepage introduced her as a cultural anthropologist and presented a book entitled *The Friendliest Place in the Universe: A Story of Love, Laughter, and Stand-Up Comedy in Berlin* which had not yet been published.⁶ I sent her an email – she sent me the manuscript.

Webb transgresses the conventions of academic writing. She mentions none of the seminal publications on stand-up or humor, none of the anthropologists considered important today, but often refers to Edith Turner’s book on *Communitas* (2012). I am critical about Webb’s reference to a rather vague concept of communitas for analyzing what she experienced in the

⁶The book has now been published (See Webb 2022a).

Cosmic Comedy Club, however, she gives a very personal and capturing account of her encounter with the German capital and this venue.

After the election of Trump, Webb was desperate and deeply affected by a sense of what Appiah denoted as “collective shame” (Appiah and Bhabha 2018: 171) and decided to go on vacation to Berlin. She had heard that it was an experimental field for new forms of living and stumbled rather by chance into the Cosmic Comedy Club. Webb was thunderstruck because she had found what she had been looking for without actually hoping to find it: World politics had turned “toward what appeared to be a kind of hyper-xenophobia” but down in that “beer-soaked basement”, Singh and Numb had “gathered a group of culturally and demographically diverse comedians and audience members, transforming them from strangers into supportive allies” (Webb 2022b).

Since Webb had just arrived in Berlin, other new Berliners felt the need to guide her, explained what they had escaped from, what they found, and what fascinated them. A lesbian guide from South Africa trying to figure out “why this ugly, strange city” had taken hold of her said, “I have never felt so free as I do here” (Webb 2022a: 15). A male comedian, who similar to “ninety-nine percent of all Berliners” had got projects in the “pipeline”, mused that Berlin was a city where he could “become a feminist filmmaker – porn, but not with humans. Alien porn” (Webb 2022a: 46). When Webb declared that she loved the grey cold weather, she was told “if you love Berlin at this time of year, you are a true convert”, and she was thrilled to be admitted into “an inner circle reserved for those who regarded the city with an almost religious zeal” (Webb 2022a: 63).

The new Berliners will probably – and sadly – be deceived one day, but they have to be light-hearted to confront the many difficulties that result from dislocation. Webb’s enthusiastic report on Berlin and her experiences at the Cosmic Comedy Club are superficial. However, it is exactly the gaze that Kracauer calls for. He warns scholars against neglecting phenomena that are too obvious to be considered and reminds them of the purloined “Letter to Her Majesty” in a tale by Edgar Allen Poe: “Nobody notices the letter because it is out on display” ([1930] 1998: 29). Kracauer’s observations on lived experiences in Berlin in the 1920s are so pertinent because he focused on surface phenomena (Allen 2007) and took people’s light-heartedness seriously; the same holds true for Webb’s representation. Through alienating the lens of her considerations, I had another view of my own work. I understand why the anonymous peer reviewer detected something light-hearted and superficial in my observations, but I am now convinced that what he or she rated as a shortcoming is a quality. I consider what makes Berlin attractive for young people and why they meet in comedy clubs to cope with differences that result from their experiences of dislocation. Their knowledge of the city is still superficial and they probably overestimate the possibilities it actually will offer them, but this is advantageous when confronting challenges that result from dislocation and for developing practices of vernacular cosmopolitanism. Their light-heartedness is a strength!

Conclusion

I started this article referring to Appiah and Bhabha, two important proponents of postcolonial thinking who seemed somehow stranded when they reflected on possibilities of cosmopolitanism confronted with the xenophobe backlash in world politics, of which Brexit and Trump’s presidency were just two symptoms. Against this backdrop, they contemplated what gave them hope: Merkel’s immigration policy and migrants who practiced what Appiah and Bhabha considered a vernacular cosmopolitanism. After this establishing shot, I zoomed in on the

German capital and focused on the new Berliners and the Anglophone comedy clubs, where they met to study practices of vernacular cosmopolitanism. Thomas (2015: 174) mentions the tightly arranged seating in comedy clubs and reports that the staff pushed tables and chairs together. Kookaburra and the Cosmic Comedy Club also put reservations on the seats in the last rows to avoid empty spaces. It was important that the new Berliners literally got in touch when laughing at the ethnic and racist stereotypes performed on stage; it was a prerequisite to practice vernacular cosmopolitanism.

The coronavirus pandemic thwarted the boom of Anglophone comedy clubs in Berlin.⁷ Further research will be needed to explore how they cope with the challenges imposed by the pandemic. Meanwhile, the SPD, the Social Democratic Party of Germany, is providing the new chancellor. Merkel retired and Friedrich Merz became chairman of her party, the CDU. Merz, now a potential candidate for chancellor, introduced the expression “*deutsche Leitkultur*” into the political debate on immigration, thus, advocating an assimilation to what he considered German core culture. The acquisition of the German language is a central demand in connection with an immigration policy aiming at assimilation – its peculiarities are a reoccurring issue in Anglophone comedy clubs. Notably, the German compound nouns provide rich material for punch lines. Webb (2022a) reports on a comedian who reflected on the meaning of the compound “*Kinderschnitzel*”. Should it be translated as a “schnitzel meant for children” or a schnitzel “made out of children”, given that the compound is used in a country that has “a history of throwing children into ovens”? The comedian crossed a hurtline but dissolved the resulting tension in the audience with the claim: “That was clearly a reference to Hansel and Gretel”.

I rarely saw a show without a reference to Nazi ideology or the Third Reich; there was usually more than one. It sounds strange but I wonder whether Germany’s sordid past is a constituent of Berlin’s attractivity: Those who come to Berlin do not have to admire a cultural tradition because the Nazis contaminated the concept of a German core culture when they were in power. The new Berliners acclaimed Merkel’s politics against the backdrop of the often xenophobe politics of their home countries, but German politics had been even worse before and that tempered what Appiah denoted as a “sense of shame” concerning the politics of their home countries. Humor permitted the development of a subversive attitude to the turn world politics had taken in the era of Brexit and Trump; in the comedy clubs, one could laugh at the painful consequences of xenophobia.

Kracauer reports on a girl who explains why she tried to avoid serious conversations in the shelters for the homeless of the 1920s: “Serious conversations only distract you from surroundings that you’d like to enjoy” ([1930] 1998: 88/89). Kracauer concludes: “If distracting effects are ascribed to serious talk, distraction must be a deadly serious matter” ([1930] 1998: 89). The ostentatious light-heartedness in Berlin’s comedy clubs must be taken seriously because the new Berliners escaped the separating centrifugal forces resulting from xenophobe world politics and demonstrated their presence in the German capital: They stubbornly enjoyed being in Berlin.

If only the Führer knew what happened in Berlin’s Anglophone Comedy clubs – it would be a supreme pleasure for me.

⁷ Just one example out of many: In spring 2021, the Shihoras gave up and sold the Kookaburra club to Singh and Numb. The Cosmic Comedy Club has now moved to the new location.

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