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## Intertextual *Identittis*? Sanyal's Ambiguous Acts of Appropriation

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In 2021, Mithu Sanyal published her novel *Identitti*, which marked the author's turn to fictional formats and her debut as a novelist. Acclaimed by critics, feuilleton, and readers alike, *Identitti* simultaneously commits to and comments on the "boom of identity literatur" evoked in this special edition of *Genealogy+Critique*. This article argues that Sanyal's novel performs on the formal level what its story revolves around: ambiguous acts of appropriation. By scrutinizing concepts such as linear "genealogy" on the level of the content and defined "genre" on the level of the form, *Identitti* transgresses limits on various levels. With artistic strategies such as intertextual appropriation, the layering of different languages and linguistic registers, active and incessant (mis-)quotation, incorporation of different media, as well as the fictionalization of factual people and text, Sanyal's *Identitti* experiments along the possibility of "disingenuous," appropriated, adopted, and anti-genealogical aesthetics.

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– Als würden Sally Rooney, Beyoncé und Frantz Fanon zusammen Sex  
Education gucken –  
("Über das Buch," *Identitti*, 2)

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In 2021, Mithu Sanyal published her novel *Identitti*,<sup>2</sup> which presents itself as a comprehensive, yet fictional, evaluation of the status quo on the (German) discourse on identity politics. After her two academically and critically acclaimed books—*Vulva: die Enthüllung des 'unsichtbaren Geschlechts'*,<sup>3</sup> a cultural history of discourses on genitalia, and *Vergewaltigung: Aspekte eines Verbrechens*,<sup>4</sup> a political analysis of rape cultures from ancient to present times—, *Identitti* marked the author's turn to fictional formats and her debut as a novelist. Rather untypical for plot-focused formats such as the novel, however, the gist of the storyline is given away in the first chapter: Professor Saraswati, head of the department for post-colonial studies at the University of Düsseldorf and a spectacularly charismatic teacher, is found out to be "WHITE" (2)—not, as she had feigned successfully and throughout her entire career, of Indian descent and "brown." (78)

"Sie hat WAS geändert!?"

"Na, ihre Hautfarbe." (24)

For the most part, the story is focalized through Nivedita, a student of Saraswati's and a German person of color who regularly blogs about her experience as a non-white student living and working in a structurally and predominantly white society.<sup>5</sup> Nivedita's blog title and part-time pseudonym happen to be identical with the title of the novel: to her blog's and the novel's readers, Nivedita introduces herself as "Identitti." (3) Shifting between feelings of anger, heartbreak, and pangs of involuntary

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<sup>1</sup> This article is, in many ways, the product of conversation and collaborative work as well, and since the question of appropriation is in the center of this investigation, it is crucial to say the list of sources at the end would be incomplete without the following. My students, who discussed the text with me in a class on Genre & Identity: specifically, Elizabeth Raab, Dhruva Schlondorff, and Giovanna Truong. Their readings and critical questions recalibrated my take on the text in significant ways. Tunay Altay, Alwin Franke, and Simon Schoch provided me with invaluable leads, and I owe much of the text's intertextual grounding to their recommendations. Finally, Annika Klanke and Stephanie Marx swiftly helped me in giving the article its current shape. Their care and brilliant attention to detail improved the quality of this text in ways that cannot be overstated.

<sup>2</sup> Mithu Sanyal, *Identitti* (Munich: Hanser, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Mithu Sanyal, *Vulva: Die Enthüllung des 'unsichtbaren Geschlechts'* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Mithu Sanyal, *Vergewaltigung: Aspekte eines Verbrechens* (Hamburg: Nautilus, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> There are notable exceptions, and the occasional switch to an auctorial voice takes on a particular function for the text as will be shown in one of the close readings.

sympathy for her formerly glorified professor, Nivedita observes the events that follow the leak of Saraswati's identity scam in real time. Partly told by Nivedita in her blog, partly through Nivedita in a third-person-narrative, the story unfolds around the collapse of the acclaimed professor's carefully constructed public persona. Rather than its becoming (or *Bildung*<sup>6</sup>), the novel tells the downfall and painful disintegration of an identity—perhaps, one could speculate with a nod to the tongue-in-cheek title, and its double-function for the novel—the downfall of the very notion of *identity* as such, including *its* literature.

The more than 400 page-long, gradual disintegration of the identity "Saraswati" is accompanied by the disintegration of the text's formal structure. The lines between fact and fiction, between text and intertext, between novel and twittersphere blur as real-life scholars, journalists, and authors are cited into *Identitti*'s increasingly polyvocal texture. Well-known writers such as Fatma Aydemir, Kübra Gümüüşay, Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, and dozens of others weigh in on "#saraswatigate" and questions the scandal prompts, such as identity politics, authorship, and authenticity (particularly in academic contexts), genealogical lineage and adoption, adaptation and appropriation, and the possibility of "trans-racial"<sup>7</sup> identities. The (fictional) shitstorm following the (fictional) scandal around Saraswati's (fictional<sup>8</sup>) identity scam thus becomes very real. The fact that the scandal is effectively co-authored by professional content creators and writers, who are not just quoted by their names and existent twitter handles, but whom Sanyal asked to contribute original content for her novel, makes *Identitti* a remarkable experiment in collaborative writing.

This article argues that *Identitti* delivers an insightful and clever comment not just on the status quo of (German) identity politics and identitarianism<sup>9</sup> but also the consequences the debate has for formats that the market wants to sell as authentically authored—among others, novels. In his influential book *Populärer Realismus*,

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<sup>6</sup> Certainly, the genre of the Bildungsroman has undergone significant changes over the centuries and can no longer be subsumed under its initial genre description of the (male) protagonist finding his [sic] place in Western-bourgeois society. For insights on more recent developments within the genre, and a historic-comparative analysis of *Bildung* narratives in globalized and transnational contexts, please refer to Ricardo Vallejo's excellent study, published in the same year as Sanyal's novel. Cf. Ricardo Quintana Vallejo, *Children of Globalization: Diasporic Coming-of-age Novels in Germany, England, and the United States* (London: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> The term is taken from the book.

<sup>8</sup> Saraswati is fictional, yet the novel's afterword freely volunteers information regarding real-life scholars she and her case is inspired by, including US-based scholar Rachel Dolezal. And please see the "Post Saraswati" part of this essay for an update on the status of Saraswati's realness.

<sup>9</sup> For more insight on *Identitti*'s intervention into the concrete political situation of Germany at the time, including the terrorist attack in Hanau and neo-right politics, please refer to von Moltke's highly instructive article. Cf. Johannes von Moltke, "The Metapolitics of Identity: Identitarianism and its Critics," *German Studies Review* 45, no. 1 (February 2022): 151–66, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/847638>.

published about a year after *Identitti*, Moritz Baßler already cites Sanyal's text as an example for contemporary literature that challenges this dubious demand for authenticity, "das Bedürfnis nach Authentizität in Form persönlicher Beglaubigung [...] durch eine Autorinstanz."<sup>10</sup> Baßler engages classical theories of intertextuality—Mikhail Bakhtin's, most prominently—to grapple with *Identitti*'s polyphonies (and to gently remind us that novels are allowed—perhaps required, even—to interweave an abundance of voices). While I agree in principle with this analysis, I argue that *Identitti*'s poetic and formal practice is more radical. Surpassing classical theories of intertextuality, *Identitti*, to offer a preliminary thesis, could perhaps better be described as operating trans-textually;<sup>11</sup> across genres, fields, and disciplines, and without a clearly defined, necessarily authentic or locatable genre origin. Situating her novel and its iconic protagonists in the liminal spaces around the university, Sanyal cross-fertilizes the classical campus-novel with, as I will show, fantastic elements and thus puts her writing in the vicinity of the transrealist tradition—which, as has been argued, might just be considered "the first major literary movement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century."<sup>12</sup>

This article shows how by scrutinizing concepts such as linear "genealogy"—on the level of the content—and defined "genre"—on the level of the form—, *Identitti* aims for, and succeeds in presenting, radical (dis-)solutions and a new relationship with and to "reality" and realisms. With artistic strategies such as intertextual and literary appropriation, the layering of different languages and linguistic registers, active and incessant (mis-)quotation, as well as the fictionalization of factual people and vice versa—all while engaging an abundance of material, media and platforms—Sanyal's *Identitti* experiments along the possibility of disingenuous, appropriated, adopted, and anti-genealogical aesthetics of identity whose defining moment is openness rather than closure, and who exposes the blindspots of a realism that refuses to include and consider fabricated and fantastic facts. Transrealism, transtextuality and radical openness regarding the outcome, as will be shown, go hand in hand—in both negative and positive respects. Or, as Rudy Rucker put it in his "Transrealist Manifesto" from 1983: "The Transrealist artist cannot predict the finished form of his or her work"<sup>13</sup>—or, as we might add, the many ways it will be continued by its readers.

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<sup>10</sup> Moritz Baßler, *Populärer Realismus: Vom International Style gegenwärtigen Erzählens* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2022), 255.

<sup>11</sup> My distinction between inter- and trans-textuality is modeled after Irina Rajewsky's separation of inter- and transmediality. She argues that the intermedial phenomenon has a clear origin medium, while a transmedial phenomenon does not, it is non-media specific. Cf. Irina O. Rajewsky, *Intermedialität* (Stuttgart: A. Francke Verlag/UTB, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Damien Walter, "Transrealism: The First Major Literary Movement Of The 21<sup>st</sup> Century?" *The Guardian*, October 24, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/oct/24/transrealism-first-major-literary-movement-21st-century>.

<sup>13</sup> Rudy Rucker, "A Transrealist Manifesto," *Bulletin of the Science Fiction Writers of America*, 82 (Winter 1983). Reprinted in Rudy Rucker, *Collected Essays* (Los Gatos: Transreal Books, 2012), 6.

## 2. Appropriating An Act: Scenes of *Ethnic Drag*

After scooping the scandal in the first chapter, the novel, to all appearances, offers a return to more classical narrative dramaturgies and begins again: this time, with the beginning. "Als Nivedita Saraswati das erste Mal traf," (27) the novel's second chapter commences, and thus lures in the reader by promising her the background of the story, as well as some illumination of the reason for the strangely intimate relationship protagonist Nivedita has to her professor. Close readings of key passages reveal that Saraswati is introduced as character who performs her passing in acts of *Ethnic Drag* as described by Katrin Sieg: as "the performance of 'race' as a masquerade"<sup>14</sup> which—compared to other national environments—holds specific relevance in the German context, where the usage of the word "race" itself is surrounded by a taboo.<sup>15</sup> Saraswati performs her public persona within Germany in calculated and perfected acts of miming "Indianness," that render the question of the exact shade of her skin color secondary. Saraswati *acts* Indian, she *acts* "brown," and with that she successfully dupes her students, first and foremost narrator Nivedita, into seeing her as someone who she may not *be* but continuously *becomes* by means of her performance. In doing so, Saraswati seeks to establish her own rules of reading—or being read, rather—which causes latent genre trouble within the text.

Nivedita initially meets Professor Saraswati in the first session of a seminar the latter teaches: "Kali Studies"—a course that centers around the Indian Goddess Kali who also happens to be Nivedita's imaginary friend and conversational partner. (29) Saraswati's reputation precedes her: when Nivedita and her friend Lotte arrive, the classroom is already packed with students eagerly awaiting the infamous professor's arrival—"die Ankunft der sagenhaften Saraswati" (29). Saraswati, however, keeps them waiting. Appropriate for the star of a show, she is not just aptly—that is *cum tempore*, or academically—but inappropriately late.

Eine Viertelstunde nach der akademischen Viertelstunde stürmte [Saraswati] schließlich mit wehender Dupatta herein, schleuderte ihre Ledertasche aufs Pult und verharrte einen Atemzug lang mit dem Rücken zu ihnen vor der Tafel, als müsse sie sich erst sammeln, bevor sie sich dem Seminar stellte wie einer Herausforderung.

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<sup>14</sup> Katrin Sieg, *Ethnic Drag: Performing Race, Nation, Sexuality in West Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>15</sup> For further information on Germany's complicated relationship to the term, and the many problems thus arising for racialized Germans and people of color living in Germany, please refer to Fatima El-Tayeb's *Undeutsch*; particularly to the chapters entitled "Postmigrantisch und postrassistisch?," "'Fremdenfeindlichkeit' und Rassismusamnesie," "Weiße Wissenschaft und gesellschaftlicher Rassismus," and "Antischwarzer Rassismus und das staatliche Gewaltmonopol." Cf. Fatima El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch. Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der Postmigrantischen Gesellschaft* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016).

[...] Saraswati drehte sich perfekt durchchoreografiert um, hob die Brille, die an einer Kette um ihren Hals baumelte, vor die Augen und begutachtete mit gerunzelter Stirn die Reihen von Studierenden: "Okay, erst einmal alle *Weiß*en raus." (29–30)

The scene shows that Saraswati is someone who knows how to make an entrance, and how to set herself in scene. The description, focalized through Nivedita, spares details on her exact looks but focuses on Saraswati's gestures, the precise and deliberate timing of her movements, her engagement of in part ethnically, in part academically coded props—in short: her performance. The histrionic quality of her choreography thereby is easily palpable—even to Nivedita, a first-time spectator, whose observations guide those of the reader. Yet, the overly overt theatricality Saraswati displays does not mitigate the performance's effects. Quite on the contrary: to Nivedita, Saraswati is attractive precisely because she acts out a certain role, it seems, and because she transforms the classroom into a stage reserved for a show in which she cites markers of an ethnicity typically excluded from that very space in German academia.<sup>16</sup> Saraswati's charisma, in other words, is essentially performed; it is as effective as it is theatrical.

Nivedita, who is transfixed by Saraswati's act, perceives of the performance as "synästhetisches Gesamtkörpererlebnis," (30) as multi-sensual and unambiguously erotic encounter. From her first appearance, the text introduces Professor Saraswati as someone who stimulates intellectually as well as sexually—which raises questions of the degrees to which the academic setting prohibits, enables, or even requires these realms to meet—a debate that establishes a vector within the storyline. The scene is rather explicit about the somatic, psychological, and intellectual effects the performance has on the audience of students, or at least on Nivedita, who feels, quite dramatically, that from that very moment on her life will never be the same. "Es war, als würden sich tektonische Platten verschieben," the internally focalized comparison reads, "die Erde barst auf und etwas brach von Niveditas Kontinent ab und trieb hinaus in die See der möglichen Optionen." (30)

To Nivedita, a person of color and, as the readers have learned at that point, half-Indian herself, Saraswati's appearance introduces a moment of exceptional anagnorisis; she sees herself mirrored in the professor—a feeling she has never quite had

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<sup>16</sup> While there are PoC in German academia—including, of course, *Identitti's* author—the number of PoC in executive positions within higher education is and remains small. How small exactly, however, is hard to determine as Germany refuses not collect ethnic data (other than data concerning migration). The absence of data has often been criticized and makes it difficult to initiate—and register—change. Cf. Priscilla Layne's analysis in David Mathews, "German Academia Faces Reckoning Over Lack Of Diversity," *Times Higher Education*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/german-academia-faces-reckoning-over-lack-diversity>.

before, and a sense of "a sea of possible options," of unlimited potential and possibility takes hold of her. The narrative focus enables the reader to identify with Nivedita, and thus to second-hand indulge in Saraswati's perfectly coordinated performance. The extraordinariness of such a scene—of a (female) person of color unapologetically claiming her space in the academic realm—and, on top of that, radically prioritizing the experience of other persons of color—is mirrored in Nivedita's physical and emotional response to Saraswati's act. It shows—even and perhaps *especially* to the white reader—how rare and exceptional such radically inverted conditions of possibility are.

It is, of course, the novel's structure, with its dramaturgical presentation of the succession of events, that spoils the fun and gives the scene a bittersweet taste. As empowering as Saraswati's appearance may feel to Nivedita (and, by extension, the reader) in that moment, it also tells the story of a young and hopeful student of color being deceived. While the white students, including Nivedita's friend Lotte, eventually leave the room, only few of them protesting weakly—"Ich meine, das stand nicht im Vorlesungsverzeichnis," as Lotte notes (30)—, Nivedita and other students who do not identify as white stay. It seems like a win and is experienced as a boost of confidence at the time, but, of course, the story does not end there—rather, it is quite literally where it begins. By narrating the scene in retrospect, and at a point when the reader—other than protagonist Nivedita—already knows about Saraswati's whiteness, the professor's initial appearance is framed not merely as a successful theatrical performance that succeeds in stimulating her audience in more than one way, but simultaneously, as a white person's illegitimate act of appropriation.

This initial classroom encounter that—in a reference to Audre Lorde's alleged radical pedagogical moves<sup>17</sup>—culminates in (white) Saraswati's elimination of all (fellow) white people from the list of students is just the first in a series of such highly theatrical scenes initiated by Saraswati. She introduces herself unambiguously, repeatedly, and in just about every sense of the term, as the novel's main character.<sup>18</sup> That Saraswati's histrionic demeanor is not restricted to the classroom—and can therefore not be reduced to a particularly flamboyant teacher personality—is highlighted by scenes happening outside, or even in her own apartment. Still, the exact location of the inappropriateness of her performances remains hard to pin down—which, as Sieg argues, is rooted in the specificity of the German context, as "there is no critical terminology in German

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<sup>17</sup> In the afterword, Mithu Sanyal evokes Audre Lorde as one of the templates for Saraswati and her pedagogy. In the 1970s and during her tenure at FU Berlin, Lorde allegedly once exiled all white students from the classroom (cf. 300).

<sup>18</sup> For clarification of the turn and more recent semantic shifts it has undergone (including the TikTok trend), please refer to the online resource Urban Dictionary. Urban Dictionary, by .meagansmith "Main character," *Urban Dictionary*, updated May 19, 2020, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Main%20character>.

for racial masquerade or for the social resonances of this [ethnic drag] type of performance."<sup>19</sup> So what, exactly, is Saraswati's transgression? That she wears a dupatta to class?

Sieg's assessment of a lack of critical vocabulary within the German context rings true, even today, and it is precisely what *Identitti* plays with, and what makes it hard to put the finger on Saraswati's transgressions. In 1990, Sieg writes that

[...] the very extremity of scientific racism in the German past, combined with the contradictory imperatives operating in the country's democratization, produced the taboo on investigating "race" and its legacies in official contexts, including academia and politics. Yet [...] a range of Germans [...] continued to contend with "race" even in the absence of an official language about it.<sup>20</sup>

It is, in other words, precisely the absence of a critical discourse on race in German and Germany, and the simultaneous and continued presence of a deeply racialized society that creates the gap—or "Lücke,"<sup>21</sup> as Kübra Gümüşay dubs it in her 2020 book *Sprache und Sein*—that the performance addresses. What further complicates the constellation is that Saraswati, who, later in the novel, will have ample time to reflect on—and even partly justify—her actions, does not perceive of it as an act of pure performance: in fact, she rejects the performance/essence binary when it comes to identity in the first place. To her, her performances were—at least *also*—her lived reality, her truth. In one of the last conversations between Nivedita and her, Saraswati likens her own biography to Schrödinger's cat (225). When Nivedita asks what that is supposed to mean, Saraswati responds

"Dass ich euch angelogen und gleichzeitig nicht angelogen habe. Als trans Inderin hatte ich die Chance, ich zu sein, ein Ich, das ich als ... Deut... Weiße nicht sein konnte. Und nicht nur das, ich durfte sogar mehr als nur ich sein." (255)

The privilege to be "more" than just the self: Saraswati insists on the liberating aspects of a performance-based notion of identity, and with that implicitly puts herself in one lineage of a certain kind of thinking that seeks to de-essentialize the concept of identity. This, generally, is done as an anti-hegemonial act, and in the service of marginalized identities. In her account, however, Saraswati does the very same thing: she merely

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<sup>19</sup> Sieg, *Ethnic Drag*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Sieg, *Ethnic Drag*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Kübra Gümüşay, "Die Lücke ist politisch," in *Sprache und Sein* (Berlin: Hanser, 2020).



created the conditions of possibility to live her own truth through her performance—and even more than that: create the same conditions of possibility for others as well, as she echoes the feelings her student Nivedita had when attending her performance for the first time. Indeed, Nivedita's perception of a "sea of possible options" that had such an appeal and long-lasting effect on her were likewise felt by the performer herself: it is presented as surplus generated by the performance itself. These possibilities would, in other words, not exist without it.

That Saraswati fails to take responsibility for the sensitivity of context, specifically the German context, and that she capitalizes on her ability to perform the ethnic drag by taking up space others can therefore not take, is one problem. The other is that Saraswati's insistence on her identity as "trans" evokes the connotations of particularly vulnerable and marginalized groups of society Saraswati implicitly likens herself to. Saraswati, paradoxically, performs a re-essentialization of her identity: it is not framed by her actions, but by a state of being. She insists on having no choice, in other words, and on having had no choice; by claiming the prefix *trans* rather than admitting to *performing drag*, she victimizes herself from a position of privilege.

### 3. Appropriating A Body: Transgressive Pedagogies

In her performance of identity and also in its re-essentialization, Saraswati's body takes on an important role. It is not merely functionalized as the medium of performance, as shown in the passage above, but simultaneously as the subject matter that needs to be studied. Following the initial scene in the classroom, Saraswati is depicted as performing a series of meticulously choreographed acts that, in succession, work towards establishing the appropriated ethnicity as a fact: as part and essence of her body, and no longer circumstantial, for example by means of ethnically coded props and attire. Professor Saraswati achieves that by positing her body as the central signifier in- and outside of the classroom that demands to be studied as though part of the curriculum she teaches. In the interaction with her students, her body becomes a necessary function—it is not just the site of appropriation (of an ethnicity) but simultaneously an incessant producer of meaning.

Following the scene of Saraswati in the classroom—the *first* time Nivedita meets her—the next chapter commences with their most recent encounter: "Als Nivedita Saraswati das *letzte* Mal gesehen hatte [...]" (79, my emphasis).

[D]amals auf der Semesterende-Wiese – war das wirklich erst eine Woche her?  
– interessierte sich Nivedita stärker dafür, was Saraswati dachte [denn Heinrich Heine], bloß fand sie die goldbraunen Augen ihrer Professorin, die die Abendsonne

einfinden und zurückreflektierten wie ein Paar indischer Spiegelscherben, deutlich schwerer zu lesen als die leeren Replik-Augen des toten Dichters. Saraswati rückte auf ihrer Wachstumstuchdecke zur Seite und schwenkte das Weinglas vage in Richtung der wogenden und schwatzenden und flirtenden Studierendenschaft um sich herum. "Ist Realität nicht eine wunderbare Metapher, Darling?" (79)

Structurally, the scene is crafted in a striking analogy to the one discussed prior. Focalized internally at first, the narration switches to Nivedita's perception of her professor, and it closes with a powerful—and in this case less instructive, but likely intentionally cryptic—direct quote by the professor herself. Certainly, one could argue that Saraswati's choreography here bears only little resemblance to the dynamic act in the classroom. Yet again, the theatrical quality of the performance is hard to miss. Here, it resembles more a picturesque tableau: out on the grass, Saraswati is seated in the glistening evening sun, holding a glass of wine. As though to underline the statuesque quality of her performance, she positioned herself in immediate proximity to an actual statue—to that of Heinrich Heine, who happens to be the patron of the University of Düsseldorf.

For one, the setting exerts a relatively straight-forward *effet de réel*, and locals or affiliates of the Düsseldorf University (or anyone with access to google maps) can easily find out the precise spot of the professor's wax cloth blanket. More importantly, however, Saraswati's elected vicinity to Heinrich Heine's statue, and her performative embodiment of an artwork dedicated to a "toten Dichter[]," a protagonist of the classic dead-white-male canon, puts Saraswati's performance in the context of—and opposition to—the 19<sup>th</sup> century discourse on German identity—famously, an issue for Heine, too.<sup>22</sup> Rather than musing about Heine's thoughts, as she usually would when passing by the statue, Nivedita focuses on her professor. While "die leeren Replik-Augen des toten Dichters" (79) pose, by comparison, little hermeneutical challenge, she has difficulties guessing Saraswati's thoughts. Nivedita finds her professor's eyes, literally, "deutlich schwerer zu lesen" (79)—much harder to read.

Just like during their first encounter, Nivedita is mesmerized by Saraswati's performance and senses that reading her professor's body and the signals it sends forms an inextricable and integral part of understanding what Saraswati can teach her. It is,

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<sup>22</sup> In many ways, Heinrich Heine could be seen as early object—perhaps victim—of the debate around German identity and German writing. As a German-Jewish author who converted to Lutheranism for purely pragmatic reasons and a chance to keep publishing and pursue life as an academic throughout the first waves of German nationalism, the questions of "Germanness" and the "passing" of identity, affected him in many ways. Cf. for instance Jost Hermand and Robert C. Holub, eds., *Heinrich Heine's Contested Identities. Politics, Religion, and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999).

in other words, a question of studying Saraswati's performing body and *its* language: it is the performing body itself that teaches the students—and it does so by, in turn, activating *their* bodies. The importance of engaging in a particular form of hermeneutics, in finding a way to decode the signals Saraswati sends by means of her and her body's performance, is introduced as a cornerstone of Saraswati's particular pedagogy. Nivedita, the passage shows, is only too eager to learn to "read" that very language—to engage with her professor on a somatic level. The form of transgression is, to Nivedita, simultaneously appealing and a source of trouble.

At a later point in the book, Nivedita quotes Saraswati's advice for reading in one of her blogs: "Einer [Saraswatis] Ratschläge an uns lautete immer: Lest laut! Seufzt dabei! Flucht! Schlagt! Küsst Euer Buch! Lesen ist nichts, was im Kopf stattfindet, sondern im Körper!" (63) Reading—and any act of learning—requires committing to a somatic rather than a purely cerebral process. This is one of Saraswati's teachings Nivedita has learned to internalize. The elimination of a strict separation of body and mind for pedagogical purposes is certainly a rejection of another binary produced by Western thought. It also results in deliberate acts of transgression initiated by the professor—and accepted, even desired, by her student. This makes Saraswati an ambiguous figure with ambiguously defined function. The ambiguity arises from the fact that Saraswati's performative acts doubtlessly activate and involve her students—particularly the non-white ones—while they simultaneously cement a hierarchical constellation. The professor positions herself not just *in* but *as* the undisputable center of events: Saraswati, in other words, is medium, master, and material of the pedagogical process.

The scene in front of the library exemplifies the ambiguity and sense of transgression that characterize all encounters involving Professor Saraswati—be that in- or outside of a classroom. Here, Saraswati is positioned outside of the designated university space—but in its immediate vicinity—, she indulges in a glass of wine—a drink that is quite obviously intended to gesture towards the transgression of what qualifies as an appropriate drink at work—, and the liminality of the space she claims—a blanket on the grass, laid down temporarily—is complemented by the liminal quality of the particular moment the scene takes place: at the precise end of the academic term. Strictly (that is: etymologically-literally) speaking, the novel here performs as the campus novel it can also be categorized as, though the literal "Wiese," field or campus, is merely used as a point of departure. The rest of the plot will take place in Saraswati's apartment, on the street, and, finally, during a surreal-fantastic scene in the graveyard, where goddess "Kali" eventually appears in the flesh, and the novel departs from "straight"<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> "Who needs more straight novels?" Rudy Rucker asks in his manifesto to distinguish classical realist aesthetic from transrealism that does not shy away from including inexplicable or fantastic elements. Rucker, "Transrealist Manifesto."

realism most ostentatiously. The "Semesterende-Wiese" thus already signifies a certain in-between state of being, in which the borders between work and leisure time, between professional and private exchange, and not least between the literary canon and its critic and caricature have become precarious. In the end, Saraswati endearingly dubs Nivedita her "Darling," and she scootches over to make room for her on the blanket.

The two encounters—the one in the classroom and the one outside the library—frame Nivedita's relationship with her professor up to the initial turning point of the story: the moment Saraswati's scam is leaked. It remains unclear how much time, exactly, passes between their first and their most recent encounter—the beginning of one and the end of another semester—, but the scenes complement each other and frame the first part of their relationship. They show, above all, continuity: continuity in Nivedita's admiration for and devotion to her teacher, and continuity in Saraswati's histrionic demeanor. As the first encounter introduces the promise of a caesura of quasi-cosmological dimension, a desired intimacy between student and professor, the latter establishes it as a fact.

On an extradiegetic level, however, a significant difference, a certain (disconti-) nuance can be discovered. The choice of Saraswati's props—the dupatta in the first scene, most prominently—has helped inform and predetermine Nivedita's reading of the rest of her body. In front of the library, she reads her professor's body, not her clothes, as markers of an ethnicity Saraswati has successfully claimed as her own; even if she initially had claimed it only by means of a practice: her performance, her props and, as Nivedita eventually finds out, even vocal training and plastic surgery. When Saraswati's part-time lover Toni spills the beans, Nivedita is in shock and admits—if only to herself—that she had avoided, deliberately and even since the scandal was leaked, to think about the implications of Saraswati's body being the result of deliberate choices. Nivedita " [hatte] es geflissentlich vermieden, über das Gemachtsein von Saraswatis Körper nachzudenken." (149)

It is hard for Nivedita to let go of her idea of the "Indian" body Saraswati. Even if that body had become what it is through performance and praxis; its loss of "Indianness" means the loss of a central, anchoring signifier. The scene in front of the library, is reflective of this very loss. Nivedita is no longer able to indulge in Saraswati's mesmerizing gaze, to read "die goldbraunen Augen ihrer Professorin, die die Abendsonne einfingen und zurückreflektierten wie ein Paar indischer Spiegelscherben" (79). Now, when she looks at her teacher, all she can see are the effects of *face yoga* and surgery (149). Nivedita had used her professor's body as the evidence of an identity she herself struggled to find, and she was forced to acknowledge the precarity and limits of that

sort of pedagogy. The figure of Saraswati thematizes the status a pedagogy that deliberately looks for transgressions as it includes the multi-coded body and identity of the professor-as-performer: the color of their skin (including the identification it invites), their gender and sexuality (including the desires this arouses), their choice of attire and props (including what they communicate in terms of sex, class, race, and gender).

#### 4. Appropriating Polyphonies: *Decoloniz[ing] Your Soul*

Bodies and performance aside—in the center of *Identitti* rests a fictional book. *Decolonize Your Soul* it is called, a bestseller written by Professor Saraswati. The book is referred to several times throughout the novel. First, when Saraswati writes the title on the blackboard in class (36); second, when Nivedita quotes passages from the book to the readers of her blog (63f); third, as precious aesthetic object Nivedita keeps in her room and the cover of which she "andachtsvoll und vorsichtig mit einer Kunstpostkarte von Amrita Sher-Gil's *Bride's Toilet*<sup>24</sup> überklebt hatte" (189); and finally towards the end of the book, in a vulgar rant by Saraswati's brother Raji. At that point, the readers have found out that Raji is the one who initiated the scandal around his sister by leaking some photos that helped prove his sister's identity as a white German woman named Sarah Vera Thielmann. Raji was adopted as a child and he—not his famous sister—is Indian. In the confrontational showdown between the siblings, Raji puts the proverbial cherry on the top of the discourse around his sister's ominous book and ends the cycle of its citation with a bang. "Dein verdammter Bestseller hätte mir gewidmet sein sollen," he rages against his sister, and continues, "*Decolonize your Soul* mein Arsch!" (238)

The radical decline of the book's prestige, quite obviously, mirrors Saraswati's own downfall. Once her personal credibility and her integrity in the light of the public crumbles, her book—which, again, is completely fictional—begins to lose esteem, too. The catastrophe called "*Decolonize your Soul my ass*" might be served on the intradiegetic level, yet the questions it raises go beyond the novel or its limits. The fact that the book—any book or authored creation—remains so vulnerably bound to its fallible author, causes trouble—not least for Nivedita. She, who had identified so strongly with her professor's writings and teachings, even her body, is thrown into an existential crisis. In exasperation and the midst of the ongoing shitstorm against Saraswati on Twitter, the boulevard press, and on the part of the university administration, she

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<sup>24</sup> The reader who is familiar with Amrita Sher-Gil's oil canvas painting recognizes it as an *en passant* deployed clou illustrating the constellation. It shows a group of three women and two children, sitting, and in an intimate setting; the women touching and grooming each other. While all figures are dark-skinned, the woman in the center (presumably the titular "bride") sticks out as remarkably light-skinned.

pleads to the readers of her blog, to whom, as mentioned, she had regularly passed Saraswati's teachings on to. The question in the center, we begin to understand, concerns us all. The problem—not just for Nivedita—is to delineate what, when it comes to books, is real and what is not. Or, as Nivedita asks: "Sind die für meine Existenz so wichtigen Bücher von Saraswati jetzt auch nicht echt, wenn Saraswati nicht echt ist?" (63)

The crisis—this much is certain—is real. Not just to (fictional) Nivedita—who happens to share at least as many characteristics with her author as Saraswati does—but to any reader of "identity literature." Is, however, the same true for non-fiction books and for, say, theory concerned with decolonization? For it may be non-existent, but the title of Saraswati's fictional magnum opus is still conceived as amalgamation of several books, as the essence of a discourse crammed into a slogan. Saraswati, including her book, serve as the trans-textual switch point that opens Nivedita's as well as the readers' eyes to the worlds of post-colonial literature and theories of decolonization.

This is achieved in several ways. First, through Saraswati's classroom sessions which, apart from being theatrical, are also highly intertextual—and with that serve an educational purpose that moves beyond the intradiegetic realm. Saraswati packs her power point presentations with the canons of decolonization, with authors, activists, and non-white intellectuals or public figures from across the world. Her class on love as radical practice features bell hooks, Martin Luther King, and Mahatma Gandhi (26), her lesson on Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak"<sup>25</sup> is etched in Nivedita's memory as legendary (72). Some chapters are prefaced with notes Nivedita takes during her seminars—these notes consist of quotes by Homi K. Bhaba (100), Frantz Fanon (105), Salman Rushdie (131), Aziz al-Azmeh (161), and Audre Lorde (194), to name a few. Even outside the classroom and in random conversations, Saraswati frequently cites authorities to back her up, for example Maya Angelou (114) or Louis Althusser (90); usually, she does so out of the blue and to discursively disarm her opponent. Sometimes, Saraswati adds the names (for effect), but for the most part she does *not*. It is—if at all—in retrospect, that Nivedita finds out that a particularly effective quote by Saraswati is, in fact, not by her teacher, but by someone else. "Stehle immer bei den Besten!" (72) is Saraswati's aesthetic-pedagogical motto that Nivedita, much better at adding footnotes and references, is nevertheless fascinated by.

Saraswati's efforts to anchor and back up her performance in theory are matched and complemented by Sanyal's own: even theory and literature not mentioned explicitly

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<sup>25</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Can the Subaltern Speak. Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

in class or conversations is systematically cited in the book. Subtly, in the form of occasional references the reader can choose to follow up on herself, or almost blatantly, as exemplified in the book's table of contents and the names of *Identitti*'s chapters. The chapter titles, particularly in the second part of the book, do not necessarily have a connection to the contents of the novel, but it adds to the trans-textual texture of the book. They are, first and foremost, confusing, as these titles resemble more a theory reader than an overview of a novel's plot. "Woman, Native, Other,"<sup>26</sup> it reads, "Black Skin, White Masks,"<sup>27</sup> "Orientalismus,"<sup>28</sup> "The Location of Culture,"<sup>29</sup> "Can the Subaltern Speak?"<sup>30</sup> and "Decolonising the Mind."<sup>31</sup> The table of contents prefaces the novel with what, rather unambiguously, works as an imperative—an imperative to delve into the canons of literature on decolonization and post-colonial critique—but also as a point of confusion in terms of the book's authentic genre.

That the author is well-versed in the canon she cites, and that these texts and intertitles are not merely decorative, she proves in her comprehensive afterword ("Nachwort," 299ff.), and the chapter following the afterword, entitled "Saraswatis Literaturliste" (304ff.). Here, Sanyal adds the many citations and footnotes Saraswati tends to forget. Divided into "Zitate und Inspirationen," presented as a classical list of endnotes that refer to specific passages in the book, and "Und weitere Inspirationen, Bezüge, Empfehlungen," a list of (loosely) associated books she ends with the laconic phrase "Und viele, viele mehr," Sanyal, other than her fictional colleague Saraswati, adheres to the standards of academic integrity. Moreover, the author here speaks to the readers as herself—presumably at least. It is Mithu Sanyal who shares the list of must-read references pertaining the many questions *Identitti* raises, and—if we choose to believe the author—intentionally fails to resolve. While this is a gesture of modesty on the side of the author (the kind of modesty Saraswati lacks), the educational value of *Identitti* is remarkable. It puts the book in one lineage with Sanyal's earlier work, and faithful readers of hers will recognize the style and the richness of the intertextual network she spans also in her earlier non-fiction books.

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<sup>26</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

<sup>27</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 1952).

<sup>28</sup> This is the only chapter title that cannot be found in the list of references. It is also the only one, Sanyal uses evokes in the German translation. Cf. Edward Said, *Orientalismus*, trans. Hans Günter Holl (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

<sup>31</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: James Currey, 1986).

Indeed, in terms of intertextual grounding, *Identitti* is comparable to solid academic literature. In terms of the content, however, it takes the liberty to depart from academic epistemology. One of the final scenes take the ensemble—Nivedita, Saraswati, Raji, Nivedita's cousin Priti, and, most notably, formerly imaginary but suddenly perfectly *real* goddess Kali—to the graveyard where Saraswati's and Raji's parents are buried. Laconically, the exceptional and fantastic quality of the scene is put into perspective by an en passant switch to the auctorial perspective.

Die Prozession, die angeführt von einer blauhäutigen blutverschmierten lachenden nackten Frau mit wehenden schwarzen Haaren durch den Volksgarten zum Stoffeler Friedhof zog, hätte Aufsehen erregt, wäre an diesem gewittrigen Dienstagmittag außer ihnen jemand im Park unterwegs gewesen. (268)

The scandal this sudden break into the realm of the fantastic could cause remains hypothetical—"hätte Aufsehen erregt" (my emphasis)—if only someone had witnessed it. But: nobody did. Nobody saw the group walking down the landmark—except, of course, the auctorial voice only present and possible in a novel. In other words: the novel takes us into the trans-realm of reality, and the very sphere academic writing has no access to.

Ironically, its academic, intertextual, "theory-loaded,"<sup>32</sup> and "on the nose"<sup>33</sup> nature is the only thing that *Identitti* has been accused of by its otherwise generally benevolent set of critics. It is, I would argue, precisely its strength, and part of *its*, the book's, performance. Announcing itself as a novel—and easily passing as one in the shelves of the on- and offline stores—allows it to appeal to readers perhaps not immediately drawn to academic books and the discourse on decolonization. The book's layout and design raise additional expectations; the title separates "IDEN" from "TITTI" (with breasts featuring prominently in the book's introductory chapter) and the cover, also in the digital version, depicts goddess Kali, in the act of decapitating various male figures. Accusing the book of using the description "novel" as its marketing strategy, and thus capitalizing on fraudulent labeling, would therefore miss the point. So does lamenting

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<sup>32</sup> "So verheißungsvoll [der Plot] klingt, so zäh ist die literarische Umsetzung im Buch. Das liegt einerseits an den theorielastigen Dialogen, mit denen der Fall Saraswati abgehandelt wird, und viel mehr noch an den klischeehaften Figuren, die im Laufe der Geschichte nicht elementar an Tiefe gewinnen." Werner Schandor, "Im falschen Proseminar," *Wiener Zeitung*, February 22, 2021, <https://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/kultur/literatur/2093323-Im-falschen-Proseminar-Identitti-von-Mithu-Sanyal.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Johannes von Moltke uses the phrase in his article, yet in a distinctly relativizing manner, when he writes that "[...] *Identitti* is at times a bit on the nose, no doubt. And yet it would be difficult to fault the novel on this count since it wears its on-the-nose-ness so knowingly." Moltke, "The Metapolitics of Identity," 152.



the fact that the text is heavy on theory. The genre trouble character Saraswati's theatricality introduces is but one layer: the novel's play with audience expectation is another. *Identitti* is able to—to use Saraswati's own words—"be so much *more*" by juxtaposing academic debate with a plot grounded in trans-reality. By performing, dressing up, and adding fantastic elements, *Identitti* sells (and qualifies) as a novel. At the same time, *Identitti* also stays deeply, and rather unapologetically, indebted to theories of post-colonial critique—that is: other writers' work.

### 5. Adapting, Adopting, Appropriating: A Conclusion

I argued that *Identitti* is a radically trans-textual, trans-realist piece of work that outpaces traditional theories of intertextuality by criticizing—and simultaneously capitalizing on—acts of literary appropriation. I showed how, on an intradiegetic level, Saraswati is established as the central character whose theatricality seems to pose that identity is, in fact, nothing but performance. The particularly dramatic outline for Saraswati's character destabilizes the genre on an interdiegetic level. That Saraswati is a character who challenges the limits of the novel is highlighted, if nothing else, by the immediate and ongoing hype around *Identitti* theatre productions and the many adaptations of the text for the stage.<sup>34</sup> Saraswati's performances, of course, are deeply uncomfortable. Not necessarily to watch—in fact, they are perceived as liberating for both performer and audience—but to read. The character raises the question of *ethnic drag* in the German context; her acts of emulating and imitating "actual" scholars of color and presenting some of their slogans as her own confront the reader with the absence of critical vocabulary to express the character's transgressions, who even goes as far as to appropriate the prefix "trans" for herself. On an extradiegetic and poetological level, an analogous pattern of appropriation can be observed: the novel's educational value consists not least in its citation of other writer's content in its texture—popcultural, academic, and literary. The book does indeed arrange for Beyoncé, Frantz Fanon, and Sally Rooney to meet.

*Identitti*'s play with identities goes more than one way, which is encapsulated in the title itself. "Identitti" is, foremost, the title of the blog fictional Nivedita authors throughout the novel and which bookends the story. In that, (the fictional, intradiegetic blog) "Identitti" is the first of the many genres the novel invites into its structure.

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<sup>34</sup> Within the same year of the novel's publication, Sanyal was commissioned to write *Identitti* as a play for the Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf. The play has since been adapted to the stage multiple times, and at theatres across the German speaking scene—in Bern, Darmstadt, Freiburg, Linz, Graz, and Hannover, among others. Cf. the link to Rowohlt's Bühnenfassung. Cf. Mithu Sanyal, "Identitti: Bühnenfassung." *Rowohlt Theaterverlag*, last accessed March, 30, 2023, <https://www.rowohlt-theaterverlag.de/theaterstueck/identitti-2866>.

Sanyal also names *her* book "Identitti," however, to signal awareness for the fact that because of her own identity as an Indian-German female author the novel would be flagged as "identity literature" upon publication regardless of its content. By undermining this precise expectation and in fact presenting a highly intertextual, and in part openly appropriated piece of work under her name, and on top of that centering the story around a character who is making an art of dubious acts of appropriation, Sanyal forces the feuilleton to confront its own epistemes.

The fact that much of the textual content—and especially the content contributing to *Identitti's* educational value—is not original is precisely the point, which the author herself is the first to admit. In contrast to her character Saraswati, whose motto may well be to "steal from the best," Sanyal presents herself as the gracious acceptor of gifts—and as someone who is neither willing nor able to shoulder a meaningful contribution to the discourse by herself. In her afterword, she writes:

Das Ringen um Selbstbestimmung und Sichtbarkeit wird in den letzten Jahren oft Identitätspolitik genannt und mit aller Wucht und in größtmöglicher Vielfalt der Meinungen geführt. *Identitti* sollte die extreme Vielstimmigkeit dieses Prozesses widerspiegeln. Darum verdankt der Roman seine Existenz zuallererst den großzügigen Spender\*innen, die bereit waren, für mich einen oder sogar mehrere Tweets oder Instagram- oder Facebook-Einträge zu verfassen; so wie sie sie womöglich spontan getextet hätten, wenn sie eines Tages oder Nachts im Internet von einem "Fall Saraswati" gelesen hätten. Tausendundein Dank dafür [...]. (299)

It is important to note that I shortened the quote. What follows this passage is a list of more than thirty authors, journalists, and scholars who Sanyal cites by their name, and thus grants presence in her book. Sanyal insists on the polyvocality of the discourse on identity politics and proceeds to make a convincing argument for the necessity to represent it in the same manner. The novel's existence, she writes, is essentially preconditioned by the work of other writers. The particular wording—"owing the existence to"—almost exactly doubles Nivedita's own words about her existence and Saraswati's (fictional) books. So, Sanyal—while openly basing the novel's existence on the products of other writers' labor—still admits that the donations are not for the novel, strictly speaking, but "für mich"—for *her*, Mithu Sanyal, the writer who has the last call on what goes into the novel, and who ends up tied most visibly to the published product.

By scrutinizing concepts such as linear "genealogy"—on the level of the content—and defined "genre"—on the level of the form—, *Identitti* challenges both the feuilleton's and the market's dependence on categories and recognizable labels. Sanyal takes

the play with the unreliable narrator to the next level and confronts her readers with a book which will turn out to have a highly unreliable *genre*: neither Bildungsroman nor campus novel, though playing with and evoking both. The novel, I argued, the book which *Identitti* claims to be and as which it "passes" allows Sanyal to educate her readers and to confront them with theory that causes trouble for any notion of identity or reality as a stable, linear, or reliable concept. At the same time, *Identitti* also derives its strength from its transrealistic and fantastic elements, and from *not* being academic literature. Academic literature, famously effective in its ability to find ways to "talk about racism without talking about racism,"<sup>35</sup> needs to stay within certain lines *Identitti*—not least by means of its inappropriate protagonist Saraswati—is courageous enough (and mischievously delighted, it seems) to overstep. The text performs, in other words, what its story revolves around: ambiguous acts of appropriation, and the simultaneously problematic *and* creative, liberating *and* disciplinarian effects genre drag and trans-realist writing brings.

### PS, Post Saraswati, Or: Il n'y a pas de hors-texte

In March 2023, Mithu Sanyal, who regularly creates content on platforms such as Instagram and uses social media to promote her work, shared the news of a scholar who faked their ethnical identity. Followed by an exploding-head emoji, and tagging her own novel, she cited the case of yet another US-based public persona who—just a few years after Rachel Dolezal's case—was found out to have unrightfully claimed LatinX, South Asian, and Arabic descent. To boost her career as a political activist, that person, as Sanyal reposted, had changed her name from Rachel Elizabeth Seidel to Raquel Evita—*Saraswati*.<sup>36</sup>

Isn't reality indeed a wonderful metaphor, Darling?

<sup>35</sup> For a highly instructive, nuanced, and multi-faceted analysis of the university's complicity in upholding the structures it criticizes please read the round table discussion which also includes the quote at hand by Mike Laufenberg. Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, Kien Nghi Ha, Jan Hutta, Emily Ngubia Kessé, Mike Laufenberg and Lars Schmitt, "Race, Class and Gender at German Universities: A Round-Table Discussion," in *Beyond the Master's Tools? Decolonizing Knowledge Orders, Research Methods, and Teaching*, eds. Daniel Bendix, Franziska Müller, and Aram Ziai (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 170.

<sup>36</sup> For further information and more facts on the case, cf. Alice Speri, "Progressive Group Roiled by Accusations Diversity Leader Misrepresented Her Ethnic Background," *The Intercept*, February 16, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/02/16/american-friends-service-committee-raquel-saraswati/>.

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