

‘People of Colour’ and the Metropolis: Politicizing *Berliner Farben* (2017-2018)

Kanak Yadav, Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

1 In an interview, filmmaker Poliana Baumgarten provides the reasons for which she started the web-series *Berliner Farben* (2017-2018), which is freely available on Youtube and depicts the lives of racial and sexual minorities living in Berlin, Germany. In Baumgarten’s words, “I started *Berliner Farben* out of desperation. As a teenager, I realized that in Germany PoC [People of Colour] are rarely presented in the media. And if they are then it is done in a very stereotypical way. That’s why I wanted to create a platform where PoC [People of Colour] are portrayed and their individual stories and voices count” (Interview). Baumgarten’s project, thus, purports to render greater representation to ‘people of colour’ by embracing “the diversity of Berlin” (Description, Trailer). With nine episodes that resemble the format of a documentary but are equally ethnographic in nature, Baumgarten’s lens meets an activist, poet, journalist, rapper/singer, and female disk jockeys in order to capture their efforts towards visibility in Germany. While each episode stands out on its own, they remain disconnected given the scope of the project itself, which although ambitious, remains unclear.

2 The major problem of the series is that its ideological agenda remains confused. Whether it is Baumgarten’s choice of words in summarizing her project, or the people she interviews, the series appears variegated and does not come together to draw a holistic picture. Perhaps this is also the narrative’s political project to not unify but embrace multitude, mimicking the heterogeneous nature of the city itself, yet the disconnected narrative reveals greater problems than it resolves. For instance, in the trailer of the series, Baumgarten explains that it represents “People of color and Member[s] of the LGBT Community” (Description, Trailer), but a category like ‘people of color’ might not always be representative of non-white subjects because it erases the particularities of their racial experience. Hence, the use of an umbrella term to slot experiences of racial minorities seems as problematic as their misrepresentation, which the narrative aims to counter. Furthermore, such a methodology also turns a blind eye to the power dynamics prevalent between various ethnic groups, and it seems Baumgarten’s narrative also avoids addressing these issues by taking refuge in plurality. The narrative rarely questions the opinions of the people it represents, and part of this issue lies with the ethnographical nature of the series, such that the voice of the narrative becomes indistinguishable from the voice of the person represented. Few episodes in which the subjects voice their political positions starkly manifest how the pluralistic politics of the

series might run the danger of becoming apolitical, since the narrative's position remains ambiguous. In Episode 7, Halima Saroukh, "a born muslim" (Description, Episode 7) talks about how she recently arrived at the decision to start wearing *hijab* (the head scarf) and how the experience has been liberating for her: "I feel like it frees me of the schema: 'I need to be pretty or sexy in order to be accepted'" (*Berliner Farben* Episode 7, 00:05:23–35). It is interesting that unlike popular beliefs where *hijab* is seen as an extension of Islamic patriarchy, Saroukh asserts how she 'chooses' it in order to free herself from the demands of the beauty industry. However, Halima's experience might not account for every woman who wears it, and therefore presenting it uncritically poses concerns that remain unresolved throughout the narrative.

3 Despite the problems in the web-series elaborated in the paragraph above, *Berliner Farben*, (which roughly translates as colouring Berlin), is successful in portraying how certain spaces and practices could be empowering for racial and sexual minorities. Right from the first episode, which features Jumoke Adeyanju, creator of "The Poetry Meets Series," the narrative establishes how alternative spaces and forums might not only allow people to establish a sense of community but also enable them with a 'voice' (*Berliner Farben* Episode 1, 00:01:49–02:18). Similarly, in episode 3, viewers meet "non binary" women disk jockeys who started the event series "Hoe_Mies," "a party series" that aims to function as a subcultural space for women and the LGBTQ community (Description, Episode 3). While one may dispute that subcultural spaces are not necessarily utopian and may reveal underlying problems that are quiet similar to mainstream cultural practices, *Berliner Farben* successfully documents how minority groups require such spaces in order to make themselves visible. Whether it is events like the poetry series or the hip-hop parties, they are especially directed to enable women who are racial minorities to assert themselves. Moreover, by documenting such events, Baumgarten effectively portrays the multicultural nature of the city, Berlin.

4 Apart from revealing how specific spaces can be empowering for women, Baumgarten's subjects also speak about subtle forms of racism that have become normalized in society. For instance in episode 5, Mayowa Osinubi, a filmmaker, talks about her racial experience and how she often gets accused of "acting white" (*Berliner Farben* Episode 5, 00:02:47–57). Furthermore, she points out how she has received "back-handed compliments" because of the manner in which she talks and conducts herself (*Berliner Farben* Episode 5, 00:03:58). Such recollections reveal how racial prejudices continue to predominate the ways in which people perceive their racial

‘other.’ *Berliner Farben* is a step towards recognizing the existence of racial and sexual prejudices prevalent in society and an attempt to challenge such structures.

5 While the narrative touches upon many issues without unifying them in any manner, it deserves praise for representing the subjects without appropriating their voice. With lingering close-up shots of women’s faces juxtaposed with images of high-rise towers and city streets, Baumgarten’s camera foregrounds how the individual makes a ‘difference’ in the ‘big’ city (“Berliner Farben Trailer”). And in the scheme of documenting the efforts of the individuals represented, Baumgarten promotes solidarity by ignoring questions of ethnicity, and clubbing people under the homogenizing term, ‘people of color.’ In many episodes African subjects speak about their experiences, and yet the audience is never made aware about their nationality and other markers of identity. Such a limitation tends to become counter-productive for the series that otherwise raised significant issues about the overlaps between gendered and racial experience. This is not to discount how Baumgarten lucratively traverses under-represented spaces and, at a meta-textual level, even creates one such space where minorities can freely speak about their personal and political beliefs, but to merely gesture that the series would benefit even further if it becomes self-reflexive.

Works Cited

- Baumgarten, Poliana. Interview. *daddy.land*. Web. daddy.land/stories/berliner-farben-is-a-new-web-series-about-poc-the-lgbtq-community-minus-the-stereotypes
- Baumgarten, Poliana. Description, Trailer and “Berliner Farben Trailer.” *Youtube*. 14 Feb. 2018. Web. www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANV2d55c7Ts
- . Description, Episode 3 and “Berliner Farben. Episode 3: Hoe_mies mit Gizem und Lucia.” *Youtube*. 7. Aug. 2017. Web. www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOAaHMpmPMI
- . “Berliner Farben “Episode 5: Embracing Variety with Mayowa Osinubi.” *YouTube*, 5. Sept. 2017. Web. www.youtube.com/watch?v=WaytBksLCvk
- . Description, Episode 7 and “Berliner Farben Episode 7: “Wer ist wirklich frei? Mit Halima Saroukh.” *Youtube*. 10 Oct. 2017. Web. www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHQSDLg7tHw