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## **A genealogy of migrant organising by Germany's Asiatische Deutsche: Presencing the Asian Film Festival Berlin**

Feng-Mei Heberer

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### **Abstract**

The first film festival of its kind in Germany, the Asian Film Festival Berlin (AFFB), was run by multiple generations of Asian German organisers from 2007-2017. In 2020, the festival came to a halt due to lack of resources. The recent disruption of the AFFB leads us back to the festival's roots in migrant labor organising by South Korean guest workers in 1970s West Germany. This harbinger labor movement sparked by migrant women inspired the creation of two important diasporic Asian grassroots collectives based in Germany, each of which would respectively host the AFFB: the Koreanische Frauengruppe and *korientation*. To excavate these genealogical connections is to document an interconnected history of community organising that remains overlooked in official postwar history, and that highlights the unique cyclicity of the AFFB as part of ever-evolving minoritarian movements that positively advance documentation, inclusion, and social justice.

### **Keywords**

film festivals, activism, anti-racism, migrant labor, Cold War

After a week full of film screenings, panels, and meet-and-greets at the great Ballhaus Naunystasse in Berlin's Kreuzberg neighborhood, celebrated by pundits as the engine of Germany's postmigrant theater and culture, the fifth and final Asian Film Festival Berlin came to a close in October 2017, with mighty performances by an intergenerational Asian cast of performers from Germany, Austria, and France. Performances featured singing and dancing, spoken word, storytelling, and some comic relief. The final acts began with the reading of a letter written decades ago, catapulting us back to Cold War-era West Germany's guest worker (*Gastarbeiter\*innen*) regime. Read out loud by a cast member, the

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letter was written by Chu Jae Su, one of almost 11,000 South Korean nurses and nurse aides who arrived in the Federal Republic during the 1970s to work in the country's postwar flagging healthcare industry.[1] The letter described how Chu's German dormmates asked that she and the other Korean women stop eating kimchi, garlic, and other 'weird smelling' foods. 'Germans sweat a lot but don't seem to clean themselves sufficiently', she wrote, adding that 'curiously, Germans are characterised as clean and orderly. Orderly they are, but clean not so much.' In the background, performers could be seen preparing kimchi, vigorously cutting, mixing, seasoning, and massaging napa cabbage.

Another great act was performed by five women in their sixties and seventies. Like Chu, they were former healthcare workers and members of the Koreanische Frauengruppe in Deutschland (the Korean Women's Group in Germany). Dressed in factory attire, the women sported bandannas on their heads that read 'Fight!' in Korean. As the sound of classical Korean drumming filled the room, the women danced and began to sing an old workers' song, invoking the foundational yet little-known migrant activism of the 1970s onward in West Germany, a women-initiated history that led to the first state award of work permits and permanent residence to guest workers, and eventually to an innovative series of film festivals between 2007 and 2017 that would end with the Asian Film Festival Berlin (AFFB).[2]

The AFFB was the first film festival in Germany to feature Asian and Asian diasporic films through a uniquely intersectional lens. Initially called the Asian Women's Film Festival Berlin and held in 2007 and 2009, the first two editions of the festival highlighted the interplay of gender, labor, and migration from the perspective of Asian women. The festival's grassroots organisers would later rename it more simply as the Asian Film Festival Berlin, programming feminist, queer, and diasporic films, and shepherded its successes in 2011, 2013, and 2017. In total, the event took place five successful times within the span of eleven years.

I joined the small AFFB organising team back in 2008. In addition to contributing to film programming, grant writing, and outreach, I helped with many of the numerous and unsung tasks that workers in the nonprofit cultural sector must do in order to move their projects forward, and to achieve their community goals. While originally conceived as a biannual event, limited resources put the festival repeatedly on hiatus. In 2020, the first year of the pandemic, AFFB organisational activity was again disrupted by a lack of funding and came to a halt. At the time of writing, we do not know whether the film festival will take place again.



Fig. 1. AFFB closing night, 2017; courtesy of Dong-Ha Choe.

## The cyclicity of film festivals

Film represents, puts on screen, makes things public, and offers a powerful medium for marginalised groups to tell their own stories. Unlike the screening of a single film on its own, film festivals provide spaces where all participants can experience being part of a greater collective. Festivals are known to 'bring communities together' over an extended period of time, typically in annual cycles.[3] Marijke de Valck has observed that until the late 1960s in Western Europe, film festivals were seen as 'showcases for national cinemas' and represented specific national agendas.[4] Largely informed by US pressures to liberalise national economies, film festivals emerged as sites where Cold War politics and conflicts were negotiated through the cyclical curation, showing, and viewing of films in public.[5]

With the rise of independent programming in the 1970s, film festival organisers explored new freedom with regards to selecting films. Driven by aspirations of arts and radical politics as well as by the new accessibility of 'media production technologies', grassroots and identity-based festivals became increasingly popular.[6] The 1990s inaugurated a new phase of international networking and professionalisation characteristic of a 'well-oiled' global festival market.[7] 'Festivals could still get away with haphazard activities and last-minute decisions', writes de Valck, though 'changing circumstances over subsequent decades would demand responsible economic management in addition to feasible objectives'.

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'What happens when film festivals can't happen?' ask Antoine Damians and Marijke de Valck.[8] 'Until March 2020', they write, 'this question was not on anyone's mind: festivals have been typically conceived as recurring, cyclical celebrations – as an integral part of the cultural life of towns and communities.' The recent pandemic has disrupted the cyclical structure of film festivals, causing serial delays, cancellations, and shut-downs. Resourced festivals were able to quickly move online while others lacked the means to do so and have not been able to recover. Skadi Loist and others have highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic not only exacerbated an already underfunded culture sector, but also amplified ongoing uncertainties about the future of film festivals – especially with regards to digitization.[9] Yet it is important to note that community-driven and identity-based grassroots projects like the AFFB have always had to grapple with additional barriers to success. If chronically 'diminished resources' and immanent insolvency shape the regular work experience of grassroots organisers,[10] the AFFB's struggle to survive is also symptomatic of the ways in which migrants, people of color, and other marginalised communities continue to be excluded and structurally absented from mainstream German history and cultural legacy.

The 2020 disruption of the AFFB offers us an opportunity to identify and document the festival's roots in a unique history of migrant political organising that began before German unification, by way of the approximately 11,000 South Korean nurses and nurse aides who mobilised in the 1970s to fight for their right to work and to live permanently in West Germany. The harbinger Korean women's labor movement would inspire the creation of two important grassroots collectives in Germany, both of which would respectively host the film festival: the Koreanische Frauengruppe, founded in 1978; and *korientation*, the community network founded in 2008, whose scope would gradually expand to include a range of Asian minority groups in Germany. This genealogy of the advancement of minority rights in Germany, like others, continues to be overlooked by official state accounts of postwar development and migrant worker history as well as in studies of diasporic cultural production. To document these unknown connections, then, is to identify disparate and forgotten forms of community organising that are historically significant and interconnected. It is also to contest their absence in hegemonic systems of knowledge.

This article contributes to the work of what feminist scholars and organisers Gail Lewis and Ifeanyi Awachie refer to as *presencing*, a tactical 'move through which counter-histories, counter-spatialities, subaltern epistemologies and modes of being are created and announced'.<sup>[11]</sup> The difficult work of *presencing* the unknown realities of grassroots activism serves to underscore the 'slow and urgent time of movements', of community-building, and of ground-up organising as described by Angela Y. Davis, Gina Dent, Erica R.

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Meiners, and Beth E. Richie, activist scholars whose work emphasises 'collective practices of safety, accountability, and healing' in the context of transience, disruption, and loss.[12] Drawing on the work of feminist of color writers and activists, and my many conversations with AFFB and korientation organisers Sunju Choi, Jee-Un Kim, and Kimiko Suda, I discuss the AFFB as part of the 'slow and urgent' community-organising legacy of Asians in Germany, a group that some organisers have begun to refer to as 'Asiatisch Deutsch', or Asian German. As we will see, the particular cyclicity of the Asian Film Festival Berlin is one shaped by disruption, uncertainty, and transformation.

### **The AFFB**

During its first two seasons as the Asian Women's Film Festival Berlin (AWFF), the film festival was promoted as a platform for feminist Asian cinemas. Expanding a male-heavy Asian film canon, the week-long program sought to contest narrow representations of Asian women on screen and spotlight their creative productions. Both in 2007 and 2009, the festival featured over thirty films by East and Southeast Asian artists, including Yasmin Ahmad, Ann Hui, Zero Chou, Pimpaka Towira, Doan Minh Phuong, Yang Yong-hi, and Renee Tajima Peña, that brought to focus issues of 'gender, ethnicity, and class'.[13] This decidedly transnational and intersectional lens distinguished the festival from other Asian film programming in Germany at the time, most notably Asian Hot Shots Berlin (for which I programmed as well) and the Frankfurt-based Japanese film festival Nippon Connection. The AWFF also offered an alternative to the then newly-merged Internationale Frauen Film Fest Dortmund+Köln, the largest women's film festival in Germany, and similar feminist film initiatives focusing primarily on productions from Europe and the United States.

As the film festival transitioned to the next generation of festival organisers and took on the name of the Asian Film Festival Berlin, its identity also transitioned. The AFFB broadened the program's scope and began to focus on diasporic Asian and queer storytelling, as it gradually developed into one of Germany's first cultural venues for Asians in Germany and beyond. In light of an emerging generation of filmmakers that had recently begun to identify themselves as 'Asiatische Deutsche', the final festival of 2017 highlighted themes of migration through the lens of Asian and Asian European films. It also offered a film production workshop for young local talent and featured a panel called 'Forging an Asian-European Film Network' with speakers from Germany, England, and France. The festival's shifting venues over the years – from Berlin's primary arthouse cinema Arsenal, to the internationally-oriented Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of World Cultures), and to the postmigrant cultural center Ballhaus Naunynstrasse – similarly reflect its developing

identity from a festival of (inter)national cinemas into a key site for diasporic self-representation and transnational community building.

The AFFB is best understood as part of a transnational network of Asian film festivals that function as counter-hegemonic spaces of gathering and discourse, or 'counterpublics' linking various communities together locally and globally.[14] From its founding, the festival collaborated with other feminist and social justice-oriented film networks in Asia like the Seoul International Women's Film Festival, and expanded its partnerships with queer and diasporic projects like the Beijing Queer Film Festival and Amsterdam's CinemAsia Film Festival. Increasingly, the AFFB invited Asian North American filmmakers to promote networking opportunities for local creatives, finding inspiration as well in Asian American film festivals that are rooted in the community engagements and political consciousness of civil rights movements.[15]

Film festival scholars have highlighted the connection of curation with 'curing' and 'caretaking' (derived from the Latin word *curare*).[16] I suggest that diasporic grassroots festivals like the AFFB additionally carry what Terri Simone Francis calls 'care responsibilities', which duly arise in the slow work of representing and 'presencing' underrepresented social groups and building support networks for minority artists.[17] By engaging a wider public, the AFFB's role also as a public educator makes visible everyday challenges of diasporic communities in white majority spaces. In Germany, for example, there still is no academic equivalent to the field of ethnic studies as it is known in the United States. Attempting to respond to this gap, the AFFB has organized festival panels to discuss structural barriers faced by Asian diasporic creatives in a white-dominated film and television industry. The following section contextualises the AFFB's political commitment within the organising history of first-generation Korean immigrant women and labor activists in Germany.

## **Documenting Korean women's labor in West Germany**

From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, West Germany recruited approximately three million guest workers as a response to the nation's acute labor shortages. Under guest worker programs based on bilateral agreements, the majority of imported labor arrived from Southern and Mediterranean Europe. Many were recruited from developing economies in Africa and Asia, including Tunisia, Morocco, India, the Philippines, and South Korea. Eventually providers of vital labor support to East and West Germany's Cold War economies, these so-called developing and newly independent 'Afro-Asian countries' were

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initially 'avoided' by West Germany as labor-exporting allies due to German concerns about cultural compatibility.[18]

By 1970, half of West Germany's nursing force hailed from the developing nations of South Korea, India, the Philippines, and Jordan.[19] As the women's movement took shape in West Germany in the 1970s, young German women increasingly refused to enter the healthcare industry due to what they saw as the underpaid and difficult nature of care work. The simultaneous lack of European healthcare workers available to work in West Germany also contributed to a dilapidated national industry progressively dependent on the labor of Asian women. Expected by employers to selflessly offer their unconditional care and service, thousands of Korean nurses arrived to fill the labor gap in West German hospitals and care facilities during the official recruitment period. Most were uninformed about the precarious state of the national healthcare system. Contracts printed in German were unintelligible to many, and obscured how South Korean recruits were generally overqualified for their newly assigned jobs.[20] 'Lured to Germany by the promise of a high-quality nursing education', migrant women healthcare workers 'spent most of their time cleaning toilets and mopping floors'.[21] In addition, 'many of them were forced to work in psychiatric institutions avoided by German nurses'. Discriminatory practices were common and often swept under the rug as unavoidable cultural misunderstandings. Korean authorities urged the women to stay quiet. 'We were not supposed to make trouble for the Germans and exhibit Korean respectability. So no resistance and no demonstration.'[22]

From 1963 to 1977, West Germany recruited a total of 18,000 guest workers from South Korea, where the Park Chung Hee regime's 'militaristic push'[23] toward South Korea's economic 'self-reliance' was designed to resuscitate the country after the devastation of Japanese colonialism, the Second World War and US occupation, and the Korean War.[24] The entry of South Korean workers into the West German workforce was notably gendered, with over 10,000 women arrivals joining the low-paid healthcare sector, and approximately 8,000 men entering the mining industry.

Miners performed hard physical labor underground. Many developed coal workers' pneumoconiosis, or 'black lung disease', from inhaling coal dust over years. The assignment of Korean and other guest workers to their respective professions thus simultaneously relegated them to the '3Ds' - i.e. dirty, dangerous, and difficult working-class jobs. While feminised Asian healthcare labor in the Federal Republic arguably rescued the West German healthcare system from collapse, it also relied upon Asian women workers as providers of 'reverse development' aid.[25] As East Germany and West Germany raced to



be seen by the international community as the more developed and beneficent nation of the Global North, the Federal Republic proved its postwar redemption as a newly democratic state through its recruitment of South Korean workers, which was touted as an economic assistance program for an impoverished and war-torn country of the Global South. Cold War international relations with South Korea, Young-sun Hong has noted, were largely defined through 'humanitarian, development, and medical aid programs' that set a resource-rich, industrialised, and democratic Global North apart from the transitioning rest of the world.[26]

Conceived as natural caretakers, the assignment of South Korean nurses and aides to the German healthcare industry was underwritten by racialised conceptions of Asian femininity as selflessly and unconditionally giving. Described by the German press as 'always cheerful, and popular with doctors and patients',[27] they found themselves simultaneously treated as 'backward peoples' in ways that justified their continuous disciplining and denied them the capacity to speak up for their rights.[28] According to the Koreanische Frauengruppe, promised wages were not always paid, and holiday pay was often denied. Repeated threats of dismissal for invalid reasons were also reported.[29] Nonetheless, for thousands of Korean women, to work as guest workers in the Federal Republic was an exceptional and prestigious opportunity to live and work in Western Europe, and to contribute to their families. Back in South Korea, the expatriate guest worker nurses and miners were often considered heroes and key contributors to South Korean development. During the official recruitment period, they sent back over 100 million US dollars in remittances.[30]

## Organising

The oil crisis of 1973 triggered an economic recession in West Germany and led to an official ban on migrant recruitment (Anwerbestopp). The crisis provided a state rationale to prohibit the immigration and settlement of foreign workers and their families. Work and residence permits for foreign migrants already working in West Germany were not eligible for renewal. This exacerbated racial biases against workers from Asia and Africa, and was aligned with official development aid policies demanding that foreign workers with 'advanced training' from West Germany 'return to their home countries' to apply their newly-acquired skills back home.[31]

Many Korean women had become deeply invested in their lives overseas and saw West Germany as home. 'We were brought when we were needed, we gave our best here, you can't simply chase us away now. We are humans, not commodities.'[32] Having lived in

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West Germany for up to a decade, the guest workers were enmeshed with their local communities, and had pursued independent lives far from the Confucianist patriarchy of their traditional Korean upbringing. As the women insisted on their right to stay and work in West Germany, they began to organise. They created study groups and came together at local chapters to share knowledge about their rights and mobilising tactics. They held protests in front of government offices to call attention to their unjust treatment. They wrote to federal ministries and regional state authorities to demand formal intervention, and placed themselves strategically in front of hospitals to educate colleagues, patients, and passersby. Supported by various women's groups, human rights organisations, trade unions, and church associations, they launched a campaign that received 11,000 signatures, and continued to put pressure on authorities via the press and appearances on television.

The organising incited by the Korean working women yielded results. Two years after the United Nations proclaimed the 'Year of the Woman' in 1975, West German authorities agreed 'to extend residence permits for Korean nurses as long as they were working (and, in case of unemployment, to make them eligible for at least a year of unemployment benefits)'.<sup>[33]</sup> The state also agreed to 'make all foreign workers eligible for continuing residence after they had lived in the country for five years'. In 1978, after the 'slow and urgent' time of its activism and outreach, the group of women guest workers was finally awarded by the state with work permits and permanent residence in West Germany.

### **The Koreanische Frauengruppe**

That year, members of the women's labor movement above founded the Koreanische Frauengruppe, a community organisation whose local chapters were all committed to advancing gender equity, migrant justice, and labor rights in West Germany, South Korea, and beyond. Fueled by the rise of feminist movements globally, the Frauengruppe continued to organise political workshops and educational seminars on, for example, the history of South Korean guest worker nurses, women's movements in Korea, and Islam and feminism in Germany. These inspired several publications. The Frauengruppe also offered German language classes and Korean cultural events for the local community, performed theater, and established an anonymous support hotline for Korean women in Germany. It mobilised protests and open letters against racism and violence against foreigners in unified Germany, including repeated arson attacks on asylum centers throughout the 1990s, and for the rights of comfort women and women workers in South Korea under exploitative labor conditions.



Fig. 2. Solidarity protest for workers fighting in Korea, 1988, Berlin; courtesy of Koreanische Frauengruppe in Deutschland.

The organisation, notes Kook-Nam Cho-Ruwwe, 'was set up from the beginning in such a way that all decisions were made together. This was and is exhausting, but in this way everyone can feel that they have contributed to the decision with their own opinion.' [34] The women's group worked hard not only to implement participatory grassroots practices in a stuffy German context, but also to create a more inclusive space through decentralised decision-making and nonhierarchical communication – that is, in ways that differed from their experiences in a South Korean and explicitly patriarchal society.

We did not want to repeat the patriarchal form of violence – despite knowing that the hierarchical structure is part of us because we grew up with it. For example, we established that we call each other by our first names, because it is more neutral, which is absolutely not common in Korean. There, you are addressed as 'mother of XY' or 'daughter of XT', and the reference is mostly male. [35]

Group members were often avoided by other Koreans due to their radical views. Korean husbands feared the tight-knit political network dissuaded the women from their childcare and household responsibilities, and discouraged them from pursuing further activist work. 'For me, it was absolutely right and important that we women joined together', writes Hyun-Sook Song. 'If Korean men were present, then we just became quieter or went into the kitchen to entertain them.' [36] Simultaneously, as working-class migrants in Germany, the Frauengruppe contested the patriarchal foundations of political participation in ways

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that highlighted the failure of nation-based women's rights discourses to account for differential and lacking access to citizenship. It is perhaps little surprise that the activism and persistent organising work of Korean women guest workers of the 1970s, like other migrant, Black, and people of color feminist movements in the 1980s and onward, remain outside both national History and official narratives of German feminism.[37]

Germany's democratic image is unthinkable without the labor and activism of Korean women and other migrant feminist, guest worker, and marginalised groups.[38] And yet, it continues to obscure the ongoing, laborious, and creative organising efforts of these communities, which also include the activist involvement of migrant workers in the wildcat strikes and trade union and student movements during the 1960s and 1970s. 'To this day', observes Goeke, 'the collective memory of the Federal Republic's migration history appears largely free of resistant acts'.[39] Instead, the formal recognition of minorities continues to be widely perceived as an organic outcome of the patriarchal state's democratic governance – whose record of temporary and disposable foreign labor belies the hefty contributions of migrant guest workers to Germany's widely celebrated economic and democratic development.

The Koreanische Frauengruppe has been dedicated to documenting migrant women's political struggles through different forms of cultural organising, including theater, workshops, and publications, as mentioned above. In 2007, they co-founded the film festival with the goal of advancing public discussion about the place of Asian women in Germany's past and present, and of mobilising the next generation of Asian diasporans in the spirit of countering the absencing of migrant communities in German common sense.

### **korientation and the widening scope of the AFFB**

The Koreanische Frauengruppe inspired the formation of political and cultural organising among a new generation of Koreans in Germany that grew up in 1970s West Germany. These include korientation, the small collective initiated in 2008 by first- and second-generation Korean diasporans. The originally volunteer-run nonprofit promoted community activism and engagement, research projects, grassroots publications, educational workshops, art exhibitions, and film festival work. As a ground-up initiative that initially looked to document and share knowledge about the history and experiences of Korean diasporans in Germany, korientation's board soon expanded to include members of other East Asian and Southeast Asian communities in Germany, in a reflection of its broadening mission to empower and represent a wider range of Asian-affiliated groups.

In 2012, *korientation* changed its mission statement to describe itself as a 'migrantische Selbstorganisation von Deutsch-AsiatInnen' (migrant self-organisation of German Asians). Since 2015, the collective describes itself as a network for Asian German perspectives. In response to community calls to expand *korientation*'s focus and scope, it began to work toward prioritising its structural inclusion of South Asians and other less visible Asian diasporans in Germany. The collective network also built cross-communal bridges and collaborated with other minority groups such as the Black German and Romani communities. It is also one of the driving forces behind *Vielfalt im Film* (Diversity in Film), the first large-scale survey on diversity and discrimination in the German film and television industry.[40] With *korientation*'s launch of its four-year MEGA (Media and Empowerment for German Asians) project in 2020, it was able to change its status from a volunteer-run to a government-funded organisation. For the first time, the collective network could hire full-time employees, rent a permanent office, 'build up an infrastructure and plan over a longer period of time'.[41]

### **'Asiatisch Deutsch'**

In popular mainstream usage and perception, the German word *Asiatisch*, or 'Asian', conventionally refers to people of East Asian and Southeast Asian descent. Increasingly used today in diasporic, activist, and academic discussions about identity and belonging, the compound term *Asiatisch Deutsch*, or 'Asian German', was not in popular circulation when I left Germany to study in the United States in 2008. At the time of this writing fifteen years later, the term tends to be used exclusively among German speakers who identify as part of the one million people of East, Southeast, and South Asian descent living in Germany as of 2020. As compared to the Turkish- and Muslim- identified residents of Germany whose numerous and ostensibly uncivilised presence continues to be depicted as a national problem by state and mainstream discourse, Asians in Germany have conventionally been considered a numerically and politically insignificant minority.[42]

Elsewhere I have discussed how the perceived educational, financial, and relatively unneedy performance of select Asian groups in Germany is used to criminalise other minorities, for example in the common portrayal of Muslims as a threat to national safety.[43] Yet Asians in Germany continue to experience a vexed relationship with Germanhood, as recently evidenced in the nation's pandemic-fueled rise of Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism.

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However flexible or controversial, the term 'Asiatisch Deutsch', as Kimiko Suda has shown, is illustrative of new and current 'forms of postmigrant activism in Germany' that draw inspiration from longstanding Black German and Asian American activism.[44] More recently, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that grew in the United States during the pandemic garnered intense visibility and resonance in Germany, further prompting both politicians and the press to recognise and openly discuss the fact of racist violence. At the beginning of the BLM movement in 2020, notes Natasha A. Kelly, Germany was inundated by organised protests parading 'signs and slogans stating Germany is not innocent'.[45] Suda has also discussed the shift in public acknowledgments of racism in Germany that year after a white gunman killed nine people and injured more in the city of Hanau. The victims of the terrorist attack were predominantly Muslim.

In the community, 'Asiatisch Deutsch' arguably serves not as a fixed or essentialist identity, but as a political positionality with a precedent of commitment to anti-racism and minority solidarity. As AFFB co-directors Sunju Choi and Kimiko Suda note, the term has been understood as one of alliance and solidarity.[46] Described by Kien Nghi Ha as a 'permanent work-in-progress',[47] Asiatisch Deutsch is part and parcel of the continuously developing racial and solidarity politics of German times, and a means of asserting and presencing the persistent organising work of migrant and diasporic communities in Germany.[48]

### **Presencing**

Festivals like the AFFB are usually run by feminist, queer, and trans of color organisers, and often receive limited, one-time funding to raise a city's multicultural and anti-racist image. Cultural and activist organisations advocating for marginalised communities are more readily funded for short-term projects rather than 'over a longer period of time' (korientation). Longer-term funding, as many entities know, would allow more sustained work on networking and building infrastructure, like the work that korientation is currently able to do. Studying queer film festivals, Loist has noted how the underfunded cultural sector renders most film festival work precarious.

Despite the (supposedly) prestigious status of film festival labour, most people working for festivals find themselves in insecure working conditions. The festival organisations are often precarious entities themselves, struggling for funding and usually operating on a bare minimum, with only very few full-time and year-round employees, some seasonal staff, in low-pay or entry-level positions, and supported by interns and volunteers. This is true for most festivals (even at A-list events such as Berlin, Cannes, and Venice).[49]

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The final festival held by the AFFB in 2017 was funded by the coveted Hauptstadt Kulturfonds Berlin, a grant dedicated to enhancing the city's cultural image. In 2020, AFFB organisers reapplied for the grant and were rejected. Our proposed festival theme was 'Solidarities Unknown', in emphasis of the urgency to fight anti-Asian sentiment and build solidarities with other marginalised communities, both locally and around the world. Given the rapid rise in anti-Asian sentiment and racist violence in Germany with the onset of the pandemic, the rejection felt like a missed opportunity.

As I have mentioned, there are unique challenges for community-focused and diasporic festivals like the AFFB that are often funded by public and private entities committed to promoting diversity, but for a limited amount of time. Notwithstanding growing volunteer support and the occasional availability of a lucky paid short-term position, it was a challenge for our small AFFB team of four to five women to plan beyond urgent tasks and grant deadlines, and to organise in ways that could ensure the festival's future. Unpaid film festival work is unsustainable. As organisers, our paid jobs and obligations left us with insufficient time to get everything done. Short-term funding requires a great deal of slow-time commitment, as organisers must work harder to persistently justify and pitch different projects to a range of audiences and sponsoring institutions, which often leads to unwanted competition between distinct yet overlapping grassroots projects. Let us also not forget that new and innovative projects are commonly the first ones to go when money gets cut.

Onur Suzan Kömürçü Nobrega notes how 'the structural dynamics of precarious labour' in the cultural sector and the ways that funding is distributed cannot be divorced from racial politics.[50] Historically underrepresented communities do not have the same kinds of access to professional and informal networks with policy makers, grant jury members, and potential sponsors available as those who have always operated as part of the majority. Yet these structural barriers are hardly considered in dominant narratives of success and failure. Damiens points out how film festivals with 'longevity and continuity' are seen to historically matter,[51] whereas 'festivals that failed or that happened only once' are likely to be quickly forgotten.[52] What does this mean for film festivals whose disruption is intrinsic to what they do and whom they represent?

Referring to the abolition of the prison system as a grounding force of the racial capitalist state, Davis, Dent, Meiners, and Richie offer a 'feminist abolitionist' perspective through which we might revisit the disrupted life cycle of the AFFB as part of a larger minoritarian struggle. The authors detail the ways in which community work is often advanced by 'scattered small grassroots campaigns and organizations' that are seen as 'disconnected,

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potentially even as failed projects, a laundry list of small organizations that fizzled without passing legislation or achieving anything'.[53] The scholar-activists insist that such invisible behind-the-scenes efforts are often foundational 'harbingers' of political and social transformation, and have histories that ought to be documented and recognised. The slow and urgent time of movements means that some of the most critical relationships and shifts are often unrecognisable as 'wins', but these rarely acknowledged and sinewy genealogies that tether movements and campaigns across time and place continue to spark freedom. Knitted together in delicate relationships, these organisations are shifting power, building new languages, and doing the hard work to forge radical possibilities.

The disruption of the AFFB and its genealogy of political organising highlight the need for 'taking time and spending time' with respect to the building and documentation of activist movements.[54] Grassroots movements unfold slowly, across generations and configurations. Their 'growth requires time', add Robyn Magalit Rodriguez and Diane C. Fujino. Despite the AFFB's absence and invisibility with respect to developmentalist perspectives of linear and fiscal progress, as a grassroots initiative it bears its own transformative form of cyclicity. Again, to document the AFFB as a site of connection and continuity between different forms and generations of organised activism also allows for the presencing of otherwise illegible cyclicity of political organising in Germany and elsewhere.

The AFFB's community-focused work, including but not limited to its film programming, can also be seen as part of longstanding practices of 'presencing' as self-organised migrant community caretaking. In using the term 'presencing', I draw on Awachie's discussion via Lewis of Black feminist practices of documentation that contest the gaps created by hegemonic archives and majoritarian memory. For Awachie, presencing is an act of declaring one's ongoing presence where, when, and in ways that one should not appear. She cites Lewis' engagement of 'presence, or in fact the verb "presencing"' as a means to preserve and continue minority histories.[55] The formation of related political and cultural organising in Berlin, at times collaborators or otherwise inspired by the AFFB, including ongoing film initiatives like BAFNET (Berlin Asian Film Network), un.thai.tled, and SİNEMA TRANSTOPIA, continue the important work of presencing, addressing and bringing together various minority audiences today.[56]

The collective efforts of Asian Germans and other minority groups have substantially contributed to a broader awareness of racist realities in Germany. The 2021 shooting of six Asian women by a white US gunman in Atlanta triggered powerful responses from the Asian German community whose members pushed for anti-Asian racism to be recognised



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by the larger German public. Drafted by *korientation*, a [widely-supported open letter](#) demanded that the German government recognise Asians 'as a vulnerable group worthy of protection'. The letter also highlighted the need for anti-racist education and more 'adequate' representation of Germany's racial and cultural diversity, especially in 'the media sector' – a goal also shared by the disrupted AFFB. Ha has noted the 'groundbreaking' support these demands received by bringing together various Asian diasporic organisations and migrant groups, 'NGOs of Color', and other allies in Germany.[57] 'The intergenerational, cross-cultural and socially inclusive composition of supporters from very different Asian communities is also striking: it ranges from cooks, security professionals and tradesmen to the usual suspects including activists, academics and cultural workers.'

In early 2023, the German government published its first report on racism: a 104-page document titled 'Racism in Germany'. It features an eleven-page section on five types of racism: anti-Black, anti-Muslim, anti-Romani, anti-Asian, and antisemitic. The sole page dedicated to anti-Asian racism concludes that very little is known about the extent to which Asians in Germany are affected by racism, as 'there are hardly any studies' on the subject.[58] And yet, there is a wealth of community knowledge with respect to race and racism, and histories of grassroots mobilisation against racist structures. However inconsistently, Asian German organising work has been ongoing since at least the 1970s, and under nearly impossible conditions. Though there was certainly a more palpable flurry of anti-racist campaigns during the Covid-19 pandemic, the organising efforts of Asians in Germany have neither been sporadic, short-lived, nor unsustainable before it. Rendered invisible 'by dominant metrics for success and failure created by the very systems and institutions that reproduce and naturalize racist and heteropatriarchal violence', such organising efforts were just not as widely noticed.[59] Disruption can also be a strength, the feature of a cyclicity that is not about 'scaling up or through institutionalised forms of power', but rather about ever-evolving and unpredictable vectors that positively advance documentation, inclusion, and social justice.

In May 2023, *korientation* hosted a week-long festival to celebrate its fifteen years of activist work, and its role as a critical force of Asian diasporic community organising in Germany. The event in Berlin featured film screenings, community hangouts, educational workshops, and speaker panels that united Asian diasporans from all over the country. A multi-part exhibition documented *korientation's* history of organising and showcased posters that featured the ongoing community projects of 32 other Asian diasporic organisations and individuals. One of *korientation's* key projects, the Asian Film Festival Berlin featured prominently at the event. As I walked through the AFFB exhibition section,

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immersed in old festival photographs, posters, flyers, and video excerpts from the closing night, I overheard a visitor ask one of the staff if the AFFB would be held again this year. The answer came as expected. Yet who knew that, just three years after its 2020 disruption, the festival would be memorialised among community networks and projects that (including the Koreanische Frauengruppe) continue to do the slow work of organising, documenting, and presenting the evolving worlds of Asians in Germany, each in their own way. In conclusion, I list them here.[60]

[Angelika Kim](#). Political educator, coach and empowerment trainer, and healer.

[Anjali Aggarwal](#). Scholar of South Asian Studies and medical anthropology.

[ALPAS \(Alternatibong Pangarap para sa Ating Sambayanan\) Pilipinas](#). Filipinx/migrant activist collective.

APAL ([Asian Performing Artists Lab](#)). Independent platform by and for Asian artists.

[BAFNET](#) (Berlin Asian Film Network). Critical anti-discrimination in film initiative.

[Belle Room](#). Discussion space for critical and intersectional perspectives and design practices.

[curry on!](#). Podcast on themes from the South Asian diaspora.

[Olivia Hyunsin Kim/ddanddarakim](#). Choreographer and curator with queer feminist and postcolonial focus.

[Gabriela Germany](#). Dedicated to the national liberation of the Philippines.

[GePGeMi \(Gesellschaft für Psychosoziale Gesundheitsförderung bei Migrant\\*innen\) e.V.](#). Society for the promotion of migrant psychosocial health.

[Hamam Talk](#). Podcast about identity, politics, culture, sexuality, and racism.

[Henerasyon 2.0](#). The German-Pinoy podcast.

Jana Est. Art mediator with focus on discrimination-sensitive cultural practices and representations.

[KARAKAYA Talks](#). Talk shows and news for millennials and Gen Zs of color.

[Korea Verband](#). Nonprofit organisation dedicated to democracy and solidarity for Korea.

[Koreanische Frauengruppe in Deutschland](#). Resistance and empowerment for Korean migrant women.

[Leh Hwang](#). Illustrator and designer for political and critical design.

[Maangai](#). Podcast for diversity in the queer South Asian community.

[Masala Movement e.V.](#) Platform for transcultural creativity.

[Melting Pot Collective HD](#). Association of those affected by anti-Asian racism in the Heidelberg area.

[My Migrant Mama](#). Migrant women-managed publishing house.

[Pako Nam](#). Independent author with focus on Thai-diasporic lifeworlds.

[PERILLA](#). Zine by and for people of the Asian diaspora in Austria.

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Phường Thúy Nguyễn. Independent researcher, political educator, artist, and cultural worker with East German-Vietnamese background.

South Asian HANGOUT. A space by and for second-generation South Asian migrants.

[Töpferworkshops bilingual](#). Bilingual pottery workshops for Vietnamese families.

[Versammeln Antirassistischer Kämpfe](#). Historical perspectives by Viet-Germans in East Germany.

[Vietkieu 2.0](#). Podcast with themes from the Asian-German community.

[Vina Yun](#). Author and journalist; Korean diaspora in Vienna.

[Queer Squad](#). Chinese-language queer-feminist community in Frankfurt am Main

[ZhongDe](#). Collective and online magazine of the Chinese-German diaspora.

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### Notes

- [1] In the following I also refer to Korea and Germany.
- [2] Simultaneously, the song and dance reference the minjung movement protests against the South Korean military regimes of the 1970s and 80s.
- [3] Damiens & de Valck 2023, p. 1.
- [4] de Valck 2007, p. 53.
- [5] The rise of film festivals in Asia during the time was similarly shaped by the anti-communist Cold War cultural policies of the United States. See Lee 2020.
- [6] Hicks-Alcaraz & Oishi 2019, p. 25.
- [7] de Valck 2007, p. 192.
- [8] Damiens & de Valck 2023, p. 1.
- [9] Loist 2023.
- [10] Francis 2022, p. 160.
- [11] Lewis 2017, p. 4.
- [12] Davis et al. 2022.
- [13] Suda & Choi 2014.
- [14] Wong 2016; Kim 2007.
- [15] Hoegerle 2020.
- [16] See Dramani-Issifou 2023.
- [17] Francis 2022, p. 160.
- [18] Lee 2014.
- [19] Hong 2015, p. 266.
- [20] Friedrich Ebert Stiftung et al. 2016, p. 14.
- [21] Hong 2015, p. 250.
- [22] Cho-Ruwwe in Cho-Ruwwe et al. 2006, p. 18 (my translation).
- [23] Kwon 2023, p. 12.
- [24] Ibid., p. 13.
- [25] Their recruitment prompted a shortage of skilled medical workers in South Korea, where German nursing licenses were also not recognised. Lee 2014.

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- [26] Hong 2015, p. 3.
- [27] Süddeutsche Zeitung, 'Das Streiflicht', 9 May 1977, cited in Hyun 2018, p. 339 (my translation).
- [28] Hong 2015, p. 254.
- [29] Bojadžijev 2008, p. 143.
- [30] Kim 2023.
- [31] Hong 2015, p. 282.
- [32] Bojadžijev 2008, p. 143 (my translation). See also Koreanische Frauengruppe 2023.
- [33] Hong 2015, p. 282. The activists further extended their rights to their Korean guest worker spouses.
- [34] Cho-Ruwwe et al. 2006, p. 26 (my translation).
- [35] Ibid., p. 27 (my translation).
- [36] Ibid., p. 25 (my translation).
- [37] Gutiérrez Rodríguez & Tuzcu 2021.
- [38] Goel notes that various Asian guest worker nurse groups organised along 'ethno-national culturally-defined' lines (my translation). Goel 2019, p. 100.
- [39] Goeke 2020, p. 11 (my translation).
- [40] <https://vielfaltimfilm.de/>
- [41] korientation, exhibition text at zu(sammen)künfte 2023 (my emphasis and translation).
- [42] See also Banerjee 2006.
- [43] Heberer 2023.
- [44] Suda 2023, p. 9.
- [45] Kelly 2023, p. 26.
- [46] Choi & Suda 2014.
- [47] Ha 2021b, p. 13.
- [48] While the term's open-endedness is perceived as empowering and enabling cross-communal alliances by some, others have highlighted the limits of its usefulness by suggesting how its political vagueness might obscure power discrepancies and the risk of becoming a newly state-sanctioned category of racial surveillance. See rive & Ehrich 2023.
- [49] Loist 2011, p. 268f.
- [50] Kómürcü Nobrega 2011, p. 98.
- [51] Damiens 2020, p. 57.
- [52] Ibid., p. 40.
- [53] Davis et al. 2022.
- [54] Rodriguez & Fujino 2022, p. 12.
- [55] Lewis 2017, p. 4.
- [56] See Utamachote et al. 2022.
- [57] Ha 2021a.
- [58] Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Migration et al. 2023, p. 40 (my translation).
- [59] Davis et al. 2022.

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[60] See <https://www.kororientation.de/festival-2023/festival-2023-ausstellung/festival-2023-ausstellung-vernetzungs-space/>.