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"Skype Dialogue"

Tanya Ury & Claude Desmaris

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DIALOGUE: TANYA URY AND CLAUDE DESMARAIS

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 7TH 2012. COLOGNE, GERMANY / KELOWNA, BC, CANADA.

TANYA: Something really weird happened. It might be appropriate or not. I'll just quickly tell you. A couple of weeks ago, I was contacted by a theatre director in Ulm, which was the town my father came from. Basically, they told me about something that was already a fait accompli: a theatre production about the life of Rommel with a Jewish ghost, and they chose my grandmother Hedwig Ury to be the Jewish ghost. It was very, very weird because they told me this, like, a week before the premiere. I have to admit that it was a bit upsetting, but anyway, on Sunday I'm going to go to Ulm to see the piece. Sort of strange; it was a bit like being visited by a ghost of the past.

CLAUDE: Do you know why they picked your grandmother?

TANYA: No. I don't know why. They didn't say why.

CLAUDE: What do you know about her?

TANYA: There is some documented material, and the strange thing is because I'm translating articles that I wrote for the book I'll be producing this year, I was looking at that article again. A woman called Resi Weglein, who came from Ulm, was a friend of the family. She was with my grandmother in Theresienstadt, and she has written about all of the people that she knew in the camps she survived; she was a witness, so to speak, and wrote about everybody she knew, including my grandmother. And this paragraph, which I read for the first time about 20 years ago about her and my grandmother in Theresienstadt was really very upsetting. It was about how she and another accompanied a wagon of corpses to the edge of the concentration camps with the rabbi, saying their prayers. And I know now that it made a picture of my grandmother very real, although I had never really known anything about her before. Before she was sent to Theresienstadt, she went to a home where the Jewish people in Ulm were sent to before they were sent to [the camps]. She looked after all the people there before she was sent to Auschwitz. The place had previously been in Esslingen, a house where Rommel had lived. And that's why this theatre piece involves two aspects of what happened in the house. I thought you might be interested.

CLAUDE: No, that's quite fascinating. If you think about it, now we're talking about quite a number of years since the war and the Holocaust, the Shoah, and yet these things are still so present in Germany, you know.

TANYA: Yes, I know.

CLAUDE: I find it very interesting the discourse in North America is still very much about the Cold War, and Germany as part of the war has to do with the Second World War of course and the Cold War, but... um... around me and in all this area are the First Nations. In fact, British Columbia is the place where the fewest treaties have been signed.

TANYA: What do you mean by treaties?

CLAUDE: Well, in the Eastern part of North America (and Canada) treaties were signed between the First Nations peoples of Canada and the colonizers, basically reducing indigenous people's land claims to reserves. But here in B.C., there are very few treaties, so that means that the claims of the First Nations to the land are still very much real. You can't just take the land, and not have a treaty and think that it's yours. And the thing is, we do not have the Shoah, but we definitely had a genocide here [Editor's note: This is sometimes falsely reduced to a cultural genocide, whereas in reality this genocide involved many different reprehensible and criminal acts, including murders] and the one large-scale event most discussed is the residential school system as an assimilationist tool to destroy the First Nations culture. Whereas in Germany, it is part of the official discourse that this [the Shoah] happened, and then there's negotiating in that society. Here, there's part of the society that recognizes that, but the official discourse, apart from the few of the "Oh, we're sorry about what

happened," there's really not anything as advanced as in Germany.

TANYA: That's disgraceful. Why is it? I don't understand that. I mean if you think about what's still going on in Turkey, where the Armenian genocide is still being denied, and I mean, I know a Turkish writer here, Dogan Akhanli, who lives in Cologne. He actually has done a couple of prison terms in Turkey because he has publicly voiced his personal disapproval that the genocide is not being talked about and admitted to. Ignoring something completely is impossible. It's just so disrespectful to the people and the memory of the people in the following generations.

CLAUDE: Yes, well there's that moral imperative, and I think it's sometimes in our world we have a really hard time making those moral imperatives valued. And there's another side to it, and that's simply that a society that doesn't look at its past critically and deal with the past is always going to be losing out. There's a very real loss, which isn't just one person, isn't the original victims, but it's all those cycles of victimhood, which are just perpetrated and re-perpetrated. I look around here; this is a beautiful area, and I look at how the area is dealt with and I say to myself, this is because that whole colonial and I don't say colonial in the sense of all the people back then, I'm talking about this life right now, the colonial experience hasn't been worked through and Germany shows that this working through such things is almost always difficult—and then there is the continuing discrimination in Germany and all other countries—, but..

TANYA: —but it's possible—

CLAUDE: Oh yes, and Germany has gone through all sorts of stages and still needs to work through quite a few things though. But back to your story, you are going to Ulm; they invited you to come to Ulm?

TANYA: That is incognito (laughs). I'm going incognito, on my own and in my own opinion...

CLAUDE: Did they invite you or did they tell you about it? Did they ask or did they say we'd like you to come?

TANYA: Yes, but I mean, personally, I would have preferred it if they'd been in touch a couple years ago when they started writing the project; that would have been respectful.

CLAUDE: And what do you think kept them from being respectful? I think this might point to one of the dilemmas Germany is facing; before the Shoah and before WWII, Germany/Eastern Europe was full of vibrant Jewish-German communities. If you ever go to Yad Vashem you see all the communities that were destroyed in the genocides and for me, that was a more telling experience because it wasn't about a number, it was about all these communities that had been destroyed and—

TANYA: —and the culture.

CLAUDE: Yes of course, the culture. And the impoverishment of the culture –

TANYA: —the general culture.

CLAUDE: Yes, definitely. And the present state of Germany to be described by comparison as one where there are very few Jewish people living in Germany. And if you live outside of Berlin and Cologne...

TANYA: —there is a community in Munich.

CLAUDE: Yes, Munich and Frankfurt. There are communities, and I think once you start looking, you will be surprised at how many Jewish communities there are in Germany; there's many more than one would think, right? Maybe it's surprising, but the day-to-day interaction with people who are of Jewish heritage, culture or religion—this is much less than it was prior to the war and the Shoah and so here comes my question, do you think that in Ulm they're just without contact with any people who are Jewish-Germans or Jewish, and therefore, they didn't think of it?

TANYA: Yes, and I will tell you what I feel and it's utterly unfair towards them, but I have my own emotional response before I've seen the piece. They just didn't think, and I wrote them an e-mail saying they are privileged, belonging to the generation after an entire nation of criminals. And they have the privilege of

choice, whether to deal with this subject matter or not, and I don't have that choice and I think that is why I felt rather upset. They have a choice and of course it's wonderful that they are dealing with this subject matter, but they didn't really think about the implications and what it might mean to the families. It only occurred to them a week prior and it would have been so easy to have done some research. We know the former head of the NS-Dokumentationszentrum der Stadt Ulm (National-Socialist Documentation Centre in Ulm), Silvester Lechner, who is now retired—he would have put them in touch with us and they would have just; you know, one e-mail to the Documentation Centre …

CLAUDE: Can I push you a bit on that point in two ways? One is that I would say, actually, although they might not be as personally implicated—I'm not counteracting your idea—they have a choice because they're in the majority culture, right? And they have all sorts of privileges attached to that, but in a way, Germans don't really have a choice if one is looking at it from a point of view of their own well-being. Because if one looks to the so-called national liberated zone in Mecklenburg, I believe it is, where these people with the neo-Nazi ideology are trying to take over the schools and such things, they don't have a choice, because with this heritage, there are two choices—you either work through this heritage in a critical way and try to go beyond it or it is going to come back and revisit you.

TANYA: Yes.

CLAUDE: So, would you . . .

TANYA: Okay, maybe they imagined that they have a choice (laughs).

CLAUDE: Okay (laughs), that's interesting. The other thing I would say is they imagine they have a choice and the idea that Germans can live their lives in the main as part of the majority culture without really thinking about the minorities among them and this can be true about the Turks, the East Germans, Jewish-Germans—German-Jews whatever terminology one wants—and this creates a kind of blindness. I'll give a comparison. Here, where I live in the Okanagan valley, you *could* possibly think about incorporating someone from the Silyx First Nation into a story or theatre piece without consulting with them; you could, but it would be pretty hard—

TANYA: Incorporate into what?

CLAUDE: I could imagine a play about some character from the past, and I could incorporate a Sylix First Nation character without consulting that community; but it would be very hard [and wrong] for me to do [so], because they're quite present and it would be disrespectful in my view. So what I'm saying is in Ulm, is it possible that the Jewish community, the Jewish past is not present, because even in Munich and Frankfurt where there are Jewish communities, people can live their lives without any real interaction with that community?

TANYA: I can't really say, because I have nothing to do with Ulm, so I really can't answer. But I do know that in England, when I was living in England, this is going back twenty years or so, nobody then would have dreamt of writing a play without consulting a community because it wouldn't have been considered PC, whether it's really about people's feelings or not is another matter, but it's sort of part of the culture now that you have to be politically correct and that means talking to the people before you write a play.

CLAUDE: Do you feel that speaks to a cultural difference in Germany or just a lack of awareness of what that kind of appropriation of a history does or can do, or the dangers behind it? [In other words,] is it a cultural difference between England and North America and Germany, or is it about not being aware of the tricky territory of appropriating cultural memory?

TANYA: I guess Great Britain has had longer to deal with their colonial history and the immigrants who came from Jamaica or Pakistan or India are very vocal and have been since the 60s and in Germany there wasn't a community to be vocal; all of the talk was going on outside Germany. I reckon because there's been less discourse about communicating and the Germans have done their re-appraisal (reprocessing) [Editor's note: in Germany, the term commonly used to describe this process of confronting this past has been *Wiederaufarbeitung*)] on their own more or less, because

the Jewish communities are smaller. It often doesn't occur to people there might be a community there at all, or people who are relatives of those who were murdered in the Holocaust.

CLAUDE: So if you go and they invite you up to say a few words at the end...

TANYA: I'm going incognito. I would have loved to have done something if they had contacted me a year or two ago, but I feel very awkward, and actually I feel awkward now talking about this in the way that I am, because I should be showing more gratitude. It is really wonderful that my grandmother is being remembered in this way. But I think, you know, she's not being insulted at all (laughs), but I am.

CLAUDE: Yes, it's a process. Tanya your appearance in a group announces your commitment to art right? If I'm in a group of people and I see you, I would say "Okay, this person is an artist" and I'm thinking of Ulm, the theatre crowd that's going to be there, people who know each other, right? And then there's going to be this artist person there, yourself, who people don't know and they have probably seen photos of you, right? The people who are organizing it—

TANYA: I'm not famous.

CLAUDE: I know, but still, people can go on the Internet. So I'm just guessing they're going to know it's you; they're going to speak to you; they're going to thank you for coming; they're going to ask you how you feel about it, and they might ask you to talk. So, just saying this all happens, and they do ask you to talk, what would you say to them?

TANYA: Well, I wouldn't say what I've just said to you (laughs). Of course, I need to see the play first, but assuming that it's a good play and I'm sure it will be, because I looked on the Internet and the people who wrote it and the director have an interesting history behind them. [Editor's note: The play *Rommel—Ein deutscher General*, by Stephan Suschke and Michael Sommer (director), first played January 25, 2012 at the Theater Ulm]

CLAUDE: Do you think it's going to be a good piece?

TANYA: I expect it will be a very interesting and well-written piece, and I think if I were asked to make a comment, I would express my gratitude. I'd talk about re-appraisal [reprocessing] in Ulm, that it's great that they're doing that. I'm really unsure because they did tell me in an e-mail that the woman who is taking on the role of my grandmother, the Jewish ghost, has a double role and will also be playing Hitler.

CLAUDE: Will also be playing Hitler?

TANYA: Yes, I'm sort of confused and wondering how on earth that is going to work.

CLAUDE: That could be very interesting (laughs).

TANYA: I think at the moment it does upset me. I think I just want to go incognito and make my own mind up and maybe I'll get in touch with them afterwards.

CLAUDE: This might be a big jump, but it's something that wasn't covered in the questions, yet they are similar in some ways. The materials you've brought to the Cologne Archives—on the artistic or the German art scene— all the documentation you brought to the Cologne Archives; it was a very conscious decision about preserving history and history being tied to its locality. Then what has happened there with the accident and I'm wondering—although I'm sure it's very fresh in your mind—where your thinking is about all that right now and how that's maybe impacting your art and your work?

TANYA: The whole episode for people who don't know what happened here in Cologne, on the third of March 2009, the Historical Archives in the city of Cologne just collapsed. And this was a very important archive, one of the largest this side of the Alps, with documents which were up to 2000 years old and many documents from over the last hundred years of lots of artists, writers, people like Heinrich Böll, whose entire archive was there and I don't think they have recovered that yet—same with Günter Wallraff.

CLAUDE: Those two writers give an idea of the importance of the archives.

TANYA: Peter Busmann, who is the architect of the Museum Ludwig Köln and the concert hall in Cologne, his archive was lost.

CLAUDE: Could you talk now a bit about the actual event and your personal interest?

TANYA: That is what happened: it collapsed. For me, it was an extremely emotional thing. I was very upset by this. It was the history of a Jewish family that had been exterminated. I had options, but I decided they (the archival documents of various family members) should all be together in Cologne, rather than [go] to the Leo Beck Institute in New York or the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Then to lose it was really dreadful, and I became very active shortly after that: wrote four articles for a newspaper; I did a couple of television interviews. In the archive, [there were] a lot of photographs, super 8 films of my childhood but also (material) of my great uncle, photographs of his generation going back to before the war. My father had been a composer when he was a young man—he had worked together with Peter Zadek when they were young and in Great Britain before Zadek went back to Germany and became the most important theatre director in Germany, up to a couple years ago when he died. But he and my father were friends in England in the 50s and my father wrote music for all of his productions in England—so all the original material was in the archive. And my grandfather was a writer, and also a scriptwriter for the Ufa (film) Studios; he was the *Chef Dramaturg (Head Scriptwriter*), so I'm talking about all of his material. A couple of months back, the archive got in touch with me to say some material had been recovered.

CLAUDE: Oh okay, that's excellent. How did you feel when you heard that?

TANYA: I'm not sure if this should be in the interview, but I'll leave that up to you. As I said, the whole thing upset me so much, and I actually decided to distance myself from the whole subject. I haven't actually gone to look at the material yet; I need to get on with my life and the work that I'm doing. So I've been overwhelmed with work and that's just one of the things that I have not dealt with yet.

CLAUDE: Well, I don't think you need to apologize for that. I think what you're saying about your own work is important. I mean, if you look at your family, your grandfather and your father, they didn't have an impact by saying, "Well, I'm going to look at what my father did"; they did something. And by giving the materials to the Cologne archive, you gave it to specialists whose job it is to look after things.

TANYA: Exactly and they failed miserably.

CLAUDE: Yes so, I guess what you're saying is that if it does play a role in your work right now, it's not really something that you thought about at length or because you know, your work, if one contextualizes your work, you're an artist in Germany, but you could also say you're an English artist in Germany, you're a Jewish artist in German, you're a German-Jewish-English artist in Germany; I don't know how that framework for interpretation has changed over the years, because you've now been in Germany for a number of years. So how long have you been in Germany and how have you seen the development now that you've lived in Germany for a longer time?

TANYA: Which development?

CLAUDE: Well just how the context has changed from when you first arrived in Germany and where you are now.

TANYA: I've left Great Britain behind, you know. I'm there very rarely, maybe once a year just to see friends or my nieces or relatives. It doesn't interest me that much, and I'm pretty well established here. In the last year, a lot has happened for me in Cologne, so I would say that I'm actually definitely established in Cologne. This is the place I belong to, though I would never say a place is my home or that I have a feeling about a country that it's my homeland; this is where I'm at home; my friends, they're here; I have friends here; I have friends in Berlin too; I have friends in Canada.

CLAUDE: Yes (laughs), so are you a *Lokalpatriotin* (a patriot/supporter of the city you live in) or is that word just as anathema to you?

TANYA: Yes, I wouldn't want to use that kind of word (laughs). I'm a local matriarch, sorry.

CLAUDE: Yes, okay, a local matriarch. I can see that. How has your interaction and discourse with Germans and Germany and with art changed over the years. If you're asked to look back, what do you see as a kind of development, what would you say if you were trying to create a grand narrative?

TANYA: My goodness. I think in the last twenty years I've said a lot of what I needed to say and then I got ill and I think I mentioned in the interview that there were a couple of projects that were quite important to me which I just stopped doing because it was too much. And now I'm doing this poetry which is almost like improvised poetry, but I'm also doing improvised poetry with musicians and although I don't do that more often than once every 3 weeks, that is a really big difference; it's completely new in that I've only been doing it for the last year. And I allow myself subject matter that can be anything. It can be really absurd, it can be funny, serious, and it can be any topic, so it can include the serious topics that I used to handle. But it can also just be on absolutely anything, and to be honest, it's a real relief to be able to do that. And I wouldn't say that I'm making poetry about silly love songs or anything like that; you can still try to achieve some sort of depth in the moment—tthat is also possible. And nevertheless, it is such a relief to let go of the very, very heavy subject matter that I have been dealing with for the last twenty years. Having said that, I'm not going to leave it behind at all; I'm going to be doing both parallel, so that is a difference, yes.

CLAUDE: So, this new sense of freedom and of not having this obligation to constantly deal with certain matters with the past, is what "femininiation" is about?

TANYA: There are two versions. The other one is "femininity" and the reason it was called "femininity" was because there's "Nini" in the centre of it, and my sister's name is Nini, short for Ninette.

It's an initiation; it's about initiation.

CLAUDE: Okay, yes. It also has "nation" in it.

TANYA: Yes.

CLAUDE: And if you think of the whole discourse about identity and the past, this whole idea of Germanness, which is still at work in Germany and other countries, this sort of ethno-racial fallacy is essentialism; inserting the feminine in nation is also an act of disrupting that essentialist identity construct, right? Because the national identity construct that's essentialist is predicated on excluding the feminine, the Other, etc. It uses those things as the Other, but doesn't include them in its construct. So, what I'm getting at it is, here's the local matriarch, who has reclaimed the feminine, the womanly, whatever term we use, then it's about the nation being forced to really play a secondary role to that.

TANYA: Well, I can shout as loud as I want to; it usually gets ignored. I'm not really sure it's making any impact, at all. Still carry on.

CLAUDE: How do you find, in Germany, the openness to wide ranging discussions about the roles of women, the roles women can take or have in society, and the political discourses? Do you find it's quite progressive or do you find it's quite retrograde? I mean in terms of the whole discourse of women's rights and such things?

TANYA: My goodness…

CLAUDE: I'm asking this because I'm wondering how that inflects on your role as an artist.

TANYA: Well, what came to mind just then is a friend of mine who is a professor of Art History at The Hochschule für Bildende Künste (HBK) Braunschweig (Braunschweig University of Art), Katharina Sykora. The last time we met up for dinner in Berlin, she mentioned how privileged she was; she said the fact is that in Germany only six percent of the professors are women, so that tells it all about the cultural scene. One would be blind to say equality is there. It's something that one has to fight for, even if young women would like to think that feminism is something that belonged to an era past. Unless everyone involves themselves in it, now as well, things are not going to improve.

CLAUDE: And how is the art world for you, in that sense?

TANYA: Similar. And I remember I was involved in a very large art exhibition some years ago, about 6 years ago, at the Museum Bochum. They decided to do a sort of retrospective of artists coming from a Jewish background, and now I don't have the statistics at hand, but there were many artists invited or represented from the past as well—I remember, I felt honoured to be part of the project and I then sort of added up all of the names, and again, it was this six percent. It just pops up, of women—from a marginalized group.

Skype dialogue transcript edited and abridged by Claude Desmarais, Reichwald Professor in Germanic Studies (FCCS) at UBC, Okanagan Campus. Thanks go to Margo Tamez, Professor of Indigenous Studies and Gender-Women's Studies at UBC, Okanagan campus for her insight into the genocide against indigenous peoples in North America/Turtle Island.