

Community Statement:
“Black” Studies at the University of Bremen

- To the Initiators and Junior Scholars associated with
 - Black Bremen Studies (BBS / University of Bremen)
 - Black Knowledges Research Group (BKRG / University of Bremen)
- To the President und Board Members of the *Collegium for African American Research* (CAAR)

Prof. Dr. Sabine Broeck (University of Bremen, Germany)
Dr. Silvia Castro Borrego (University of Malaga, Spain)
Dr. Patricia Williams-Lessane (College of Charleston, USA)
Prof. Dr. Heike Raphael-Hernandez (University of Würzburg, Germany)
Dr. Gundolf Graml (Agnes Scott College, USA)
Prof. Dr. Jean-Paul Rocchi (University of Paris-Diderot, France)
Prof. Dr. Magdalena Zaborowska (University of Michigan, USA)
Prof. Arlette Frund (University of François-Rabelais, Tours, France)

- To the Affiliates of the Institut für Postkoloniale und Transkulturelle Studien (University of Bremen), which coordinates the activities of *CAAR*:

Prof. Dr. Sabine Broeck
Prof. Dr. Gisela Febel (1st deputy spokesperson)
PD Dr. Natascha Ueckmann (2nd deputy spokesperson)

- To the Editors of *Black Studies Papers* (University of Bremen)

Dr. Carsten Junker
Dr. Marie-Luise Löffler

- To the members of the proposed Creative Unit: *New Black Diaspora Studies: Ethical and Aesthetic Challenges of the 21st Century*:

Prof. Dr. Sabine Broeck	Dr. Carsten Junker	Michel Büch, postgraduate
Prof. Dr. Gisela Febel	Dr. Matthias Zach	Samira Spatzek, postgraduate
Prof. Dr. Rebekka von Mallinckrodt	Dr. Karen Struve	Sebastian Weier, postgraduate
Prof. Dr. Axel Dunker	Dr. Marie-Luise Löffler	Marlena Teitge, postgraduate
Prof. Dr. Dorle Dracklé	Dr. Karin Esders	Max Gabel, postgraduate
Prof. Dr. Michi Knecht	Dr. Katrin Berndt	Paula von Gleich, postgraduate
Prof. Dr. Norbert Schaffeld		Sarah Lentz, postgraduate
Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Arend		
PD Dr. Natascha Ueckmann		

We, the here undersigned, condemn the way Black Studies has been mobilized at the University of Bremen. We specifically criticize the organization and management of the Creative Unit: *New Black Diaspora Studies: Ethische und ästhetische Herausforderungen des 21. Jahrhunderts* (English: “New Black Diaspora Studies: Ethical and Aesthetic Challenges of the 21st Century”). According to the research proposal submitted by Prof. Dr. Sabine Broeck, Prof. Dr. Gisela Febel, and Prof. Dr. Rebekka von Mallinckrodt the Creative Unit has the following goals: “For the first time in German Humanities, the Creative Unit establishes a platform for the interdisciplinary investigation of literary and visual practices and discourses of the Black Diaspora, and it creates an international research network. [Its] empirical and hermeneutic work [...] will establish a framework that aims at promoting further structural development through funding as an international research unit’ by the German Research Foundation and as a future transnational research network of the European Union.” It is doubtful, however, to what extent the proposed Creative Unit “pioneers” Black Studies in Germany, generates “strong international visibility beyond the German academy,” or functions as a future concept for “thematic renewal, internationalization, interdisciplinarity and (inter-)disciplinary innovation”, given that in its current form the Unit consists solely of white professors, white post-doctoral fellows, and white graduate students.

As can be seen from the biographies on the university website, most of the faculty and students affiliated with the Creative Unit work in literary and cultural studies as well as anthropology and postcolonial studies. Nevertheless, it is not evident whether most of these individuals have had prior research or teaching experience in Black Studies. While the fusion of academic fields and researchers might seem interdisciplinary, it also implies that Black Studies requires no in-depth knowledge or preparation; that it is not a serious field of intellectual inquiry with specific disciplinary protocols. The significance of this is underscored by the fact that German academia has heretofore not supported, and, in fact, often actively worked against existing infrastructures and scholarly approaches in Germany and German-speaking countries relevant for the study of Black diasporic cultures.

In light of the obvious, proactive exclusions, the more or less predetermined configurations of the working groups, the various personnel overlaps and the pre-existing connections to other research projects of the Creative Unit, the criteria for funding and personnel matters in this case remain unclear, especially since this includes: 1 postdoctoral position, 4 doctoral fellowships, 2 partially funded dissertation fellowships, and 4 research assistantships. In addition, the university has advertised a vacant position for a senior scholar (W2-Professur) in Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures with an explicit focus on Black Atlantic Diaspora Cultures. As can be seen in the following description of the position, the successful candidate would potentially play a significant part in the shaping of the proposed Creative Unit and provide a real opportunity for change within the German university system:

Applicants should have internationally recognized expertise in Postcolonial Literary and Cultural Studies with a specific focus on Black Atlantic Diaspora cultures. Candidates will be expected to demonstrate research with respect to the interaction between the Enlightenment and colonialism. The professorship is meant to address colonialism, slavery, voluntary and

forced migration, and the (post)colonial hybridisation and confrontation of cultures. The focus on the Black Atlantic Diaspora will entail research of persisting structural conditions of racism, ethnic othering, and discrimination. Candidates will also be asked to show a willingness and ability to engage in long-term collective research activities which explore aporias of modern Atlantic societies in terms of addressing the legacy of humanism as well as to take part in research on postcolonial practices and epistemic decolonisation.

According to the proposal, “the number of female researchers is above average on all levels of the Creative Unit.” Aside from an antiquated understanding of gender which is far from intersectional, the current hiring practice amounts to little more than thinly disguised affirmative action for white academics, while German academia continues to systematically exclude Black scholars and other scholars of color due to the absence of legal mechanisms in Germany to ensure that underrepresented and marginalized groups participate in the life of universities as students and faculty.

We, the here undersigned, are furthermore shocked that the proposed Creative Unit includes a component about the history and conceptualization of the Black diaspora in German speaking countries. Although Black German researchers pioneered this historiographical and conceptual work, they remain mostly at the margins of the white German academy or have had to leave the country to seek academic employment elsewhere. These scholars are nowhere to be found in the proposed Creative Unit. It is scandalous that Black German scholars and activists were not consulted during the creation of this unit while their published work is systematically omitted yet many of their names were listed in the proposal as “current” or “prospective” cooperating partners without their consent. Moreover, the research of those Black German scholars, who have been working and publishing on this topic *in* Germany for many years are only mentioned within the context of a “grassroots activism of black diasporic writers” which is why they – according to the proposal – “enjoy only a very precarious visibility on the fringes of academic scholarship or outside of academic disciplines.” The reasons for this “precarious visibility,” however, are neither discussed in the proposal nor does it lead the authors to consider changes in their own hiring and funding practices.

In other words, while the financial resources of the Creative Unit will be used to fund the employment of white scholars, the names of Black scholars/activists, if mentioned at all, are wielded as tokens without their permission. This is not only procedurally egregious and unethical but also reinforces the colonial model of expropriation: Black Germans can serve as the “raw resource” or “native informants” for white academics but are not permitted to act as scholars in their own right. White German academics and graduate students, however, stand poised to reap even more monetary and symbolic capital as part of the proposed Creative Unit.

In the US, Black Studies departments were initially created because student and community groups pressured universities to recognize and financially support the production of knowledge about and by (!) Black people. Because Black Studies and Black people were long forbidden from being a part of the university system in the US, its institutionalization has been significant on three levels: it has been established as a rigorous academic discipline in its own right, it is recognized as a political project, playing a key role in the work of deconstructing, decolonialising and dismantling oppressive academic structures

and practices, and it has created concrete hiring practices that have enabled the professionalization and visibility of Black scholars (and those from other racially marginalized groups) within academe and beyond.

In the German context, Black people have been the targets of multiple forms of racism, and they remain acutely affected by institutional racism in the education system, including higher education. Given the fact that Black people have yet to be legally recognized as an oppressed group in Germany, the lack of data/research about Black experiences of racism and practices of empowerment in Germany as well as the structural absence of Black scholars appears particularly egregious. Thus, any attempt to institutionally establish Black Studies in Germany must not only take into account this specific context and the important role that knowledge production plays in addressing the complex realities of anti-Black racism but it has to actively pursue structural changes and hiring practices. In a world in which the killing of Black people and the wanton expropriation of Black intelligence is the norm, the inseparability of the academic *and* political found in Black Studies offers as a significant defense against intellectual and physical violence.

What our colleagues in Bremen clearly do not seem to understand is that Black Studies exists in part to ensure the abolition of racism in the realm of ideas but also in practical terms, in particular alleviating the structural limitations placed on non-white bodies within the university system and beyond. While much of the critical, poetic, qualitative and quantitative work produced in Black Studies has focused on the experiences, political struggles, and cultural productions of Black populations around the world, the theoretical and methodological protocols of Black Studies have always been global in scope. As such Black Studies exemplifies a vital critique of western modernity and a sizeable archive of social, political, and cultural alternatives. As an intellectual enterprise, Black Studies investigates processes of racial subjugation with a particular emphasis on the shifting structures of blackness around the globe. This is a fundamental and vigorously fought for dimension of Black Studies as it is practiced outside of Germany.

Since the necessity for critical scholarly self-reflection in German academia in many cases seems to have transmuted into a set of superficial rituals in the form of trendy buzzwords, albeit without palpable practical consequences, essential questions about the structural positionality of white German scholars are performed in a monological and monocultural vacuum without the input of those most acutely affected by academic racism, i.e. Black scholars. Consequently, it comes as no great surprise that in its current form “Black” Studies in Bremen actively contributes to recentering hegemonic white power structures as well as setting up a framework of research that is academically exclusionary, non-activist and potentially hetero-normative.

We protest against the appropriation, academification, and depoliticization of Black Studies in Bremen the strongest terms, especially in light of the whitewashing that has accompanied the recent institutionalization of gender and queer studies, post-colonial studies, and critical whiteness studies in the German system of higher education.

Given that the university has already denied the funding application of the creative unit: “New Black Diaspora Studies,” we demand:

- that the committee refrain from an internal revision and resubmission of the proposal, and, instead, the university initiate a **public and open** discussion of the structural questions and ethical breaches in the application process
- that Black German scholars in Germany and abroad, Black German activists in German-speaking countries, and critical networks of Black and scholars of color play a central role in this discussion
- that the selection of discussion participants be undertaken by an external committee unaffiliated with Black Studies Bremen, in which Black scholars and activists are represented proportionally, and for which they will be adequately acknowledged and remunerated
- that, in case the committee resubmits their application for funding, the revision must be based on the foregoing discussion so as to include Black scholars and activists (those working in Germany and abroad) as equal partners in both the conceptualization and in the practical implementation of the Creative Unit
- that, in case of a resubmission, the allocation of paid academic positions be undertaken in accordance with the “Diversity-Strategie der Universität Bremen”, outlined in a paper published in June 2012 on its website called “Diversity: Vielfalt als Chance erkennen, fördern und gestalten. Grundlage der Diversity-Strategie der Universität Bremen” (“Diversity: Identifying, Promoting, and Shaping Diversity as an Opportunity. [Foundations of Bremen University's Diversity Strategy](http://www.unibremen.de/fileadmin/user_upload/chancengleichheit/Uploads_Diversity/Grundlagenpapier_DiversityStrategie_UniBremen_Juni12.pdf)”), [which can be found here](http://www.unibremen.de/fileadmin/user_upload/chancengleichheit/Uploads_Diversity/Grundlagenpapier_DiversityStrategie_UniBremen_Juni12.pdf):
http://www.unibremen.de/fileadmin/user_upload/chancengleichheit/Uploads_Diversity/Grundlagenpapier_DiversityStrategie_UniBremen_Juni12.pdf
- that, in case of a resubmission, the university takes appropriate steps to offer preferential treatment to Black German, Black European, and Black African scholars

In other areas, the University of Bremen explicitly expresses their preference for particular groups of applicants, such as the [post-doctoral position](#) open only to women. There is precedence within the University of Bremen to provide privileged treatment to applicants of marginalized backgrounds in recognition of the fact that they bear the burden of multiple layers of institutional and structural discrimination.

In order for such a constructive rethinking to produce concrete and lasting results at the institutional level, we request that the office for Interkulturalität und Internationalität at the University of Bremen initiates an investigation into how and why the Creative Unit has failed to conform to the tenets of the university's diversity strategy (based on anti-discrimination, equality, support of underrepresented communities, and the facilitation of communication), makes the results of the investigation available to the public, and issues a statement of intent concerning what steps will be taken to rectify the serious and numerous offenses which have taken place.

Berlin / Hamburg / Chicago, January 2015

List of Undersigned

ORGANIZATIONS AND MEMBERS OF THE BLACK COMMUNITIES IN GERMANY AND AUSTRIA

ISD Bund e.V. – Initiative of Black People in Germany

ADEFRA e.V. – Black Women in Germany

PAMOJA – Movement of the Young African Diaspora in Austria

Black_Women*_Space – Black LGBT Women in Vienna, Austria

der braune mob e.V. – Nonprofit Organization for Political Education

Prof. Dr. Nana Adusei-Poku

Applied Research for Cultural Diversity, Rotterdam University, NL

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Media Consultant, Berlin, Germany

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Nicola Lauré al-Samarai

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Sandrine Micossé-Aikins

Art Historian, Curator und Activist, Berlin, Germany

Barbara Mugalu

Communications und Graphic Designer, Krefeld, Germany

Dr. Yvette Mutumba

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Against Epistemic Violence at the Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany

IniRromnja, Berlin, Germany

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Mind the Trap – Alliance of Critical Cultural Practitioners, Berlin / Munich, Germany

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