

## (German) Academia and White Supremacy

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ABSTRACT: This collaborative project extends the discussions of White supremacy to the space of German academia by offering personal reminiscences and reflections on experiences as a Black and as a white scholar in this system.

KEYWORDS: Academia; Black (Female) Scholars; Germany; Racism

### “Why Isn’t My Professor Black?”<sup>1</sup>

Ever since we began drafting this piece a couple of years back, it seems that the discussions on academia, White supremacy,<sup>2</sup> and structural racism in academia have become more numerous and more public. In 2014, a live panel discussion at the University College London asked “Why isn’t my professor black?”—pointing at the fact that “only 0.4% of professors in the UK [were] black” at the time (Jahi). This question could and should easily be asked in the context of German academia, where numbers are equally low, if not lower.<sup>3</sup> Just in the past five years, social media, particularly twitter, have given outlets to campaigns such as #CampusRassismus, #MeTwo, or #vonhier, which forcefully underline that the mechanisms of keeping a(n) (academic) space white, the questions of structural racism, and “embodied representation” concern schools, the university, and German society at large (Arghavan et al 9).<sup>4</sup>

A few recent publications speak directly to the concerns of this contribution, because they have addressed the fact that academia in Germany, from a humanities perspective, works to

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<sup>1</sup> Many of these reflections were possible through the succinct remarks of our reviewer and editors. For this, we are thankful to both.

<sup>2</sup> In the context of academia, we understand White supremacy to include the normalization of whiteness, as in for example white teaching bodies, white-centered knowledge production, the marginalization and infantilization of scholars of color, their work, and their feelings.

<sup>3</sup> As Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez explained in 2016, “[wie] ein aktueller Bericht der University and College Union (UCU) im UK zeigt, sind nur 85 der 18.500 Professor\_innen im UK Schwarz, und nur 17 Schwarze Frauen (UCL, 2014; UCU, 2013). In Deutschland zeigt Forschung über die Internationalisierung der Forschung ähnliche Ergebnisse (Bakshi-Hamm 2009, Bakshi-Ham/Lind 2009, Lind/Löther 2009, Neusel 2010, 2012, Neusel/Wolter 2014).”

<sup>4</sup> The Twitter hashtag #campusrassismus was initiated in 2015 by the People of Color Student Group at JGU Mainz (Gerstlauer); in the summer of 2018, Ali Can started #MeTwo to describe experiences with everyday racism in Germany, which quickly became a viral hit (Waechter); in early 2019, *Spiegel* columnist Ferda Ataman’s hashtag #vonhier (German, from here) began as a reaction to TV-talent show juror Dieter Bohlen’s exchange with a five-year-old contestant, in which he insisted on the question “where are you (really) from?” and inadvertently displayed a common attitude among white Germans to disavow the identities of Germans of color (Ataman).

remain a white-dominated space excluding and disadvantaging students and scholars of color. As Arghavan, Hirschfelder, and Motyl point out, this includes, for example, disadvantaging students of color in the education system from early on through an “emphasis on meritocracy and its early segregation” after grade four and continues at university in a lack of diversity, for instance, in PhD programs (10).

First, the Gunda Werner Institute (Heinrich Böll Foundation) and the Center for Intersectional Justice have taken the thirtieth anniversary of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s coining of the term ‘intersectionality’ as an incentive to publish *“Reach Everyone on the Planet...”* (2019), a collection of essays and reflections by scholars, activists, and scholar-activists that engage the concept’s meaning in several areas of (German) life. This look at intersectionality ‘at 30’ specifically wants to “disband the norm that upholds *white* people without impairments as the standard and degrades People of Color, queer and trans people.” In so doing, it frames “intersectionality [as] [...] a political project” that gestures at large-scale social change to “make [...] people visible and empower [...] them” (13).

At the same time, the editors of *“Reach Everyone”* are aware that intersectionality has undergone a process of “depoliticization and whitening” over the years (15).<sup>5</sup> This process accompanied the term’s move from North America to Europe, according to the editors, and reflects something that Iyiola Solanke (now chair in EU Law and Social Justice at Leeds) first noticed as a junior scholar and faculty member in the UK. In her contribution, she reflects on the “transformation” that intersectionality underwent in Europe, to the extent that its “origin and objective were hardly visible in the works [...] by European scholars and researchers” (48). Depoliticization and reappropriation, however, already affected intersectionality’s particular “conceptual lives” (1) at universities and in the popular discourse in the United States, as Jennifer C. Nash lays out in her most recent critical review of the term in *Black Feminism Reimagined*. Subtitled *After Intersectionality*, Nash presents two major shifts of the term. First, she discusses how intersectionality, originally rooted in Black feminism, became anchored in women’s studies, often to perform “corrective ecological work [for] academic [and possibly, white, N.B.] feminism” (2).<sup>6</sup> Today, however, intersectionality has long crossed academic disciplinary boundaries and has even moved outside of the academic into more popular contexts (2-3). Still, Nash observes that it has

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<sup>5</sup> In her seminal paper “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” Crenshaw establishes intersectionality to show Black women’s “multiply-burdened” experiences that, before Crenshaw’s writing, were not adequately represented discursively in “feminist theory and antiracist policy” (140). Crenshaw, coming from a legal background, shows that what she calls the “single-axis framework” that explains oppression along a single-issue line not only fails to understand Black women’s claims but “erases Black women” altogether (140). Looking back in an interview in 2017, Crenshaw critically observes the appropriation of the term: “Some people look to intersectionality as a grand theory of everything, but that’s not my intention. [...] intersectionality can get used as a blanket term to mean, ‘Well, it’s complicated.’ Sometimes, ‘It’s complicated’ is an excuse not to do anything.”

<sup>6</sup> Nash specifically discusses intersectionality’s “fraught relationship” with Black feminist theory and Black feminists, which she outlines in her introduction (2-6; 13-16).

become an uncircumventable term that is “require[d for] an understanding of the contemporary university” (2).

If we believe that this last observation holds true for a European, and more specifically the German context, it is because Nash describes how such an understanding is marked by a second significant shift of the concept intersectionality: in times of the “corporate,” and, we would add, neoliberal university, intersectionality has been “symbolically collapsed into diversity” and thus become part of university strategy management and corporate branding (11). Thus, Nash’s reflection on “the term’s capacity to allow its reader to imagine its analytic import” (11), i.e. its conceptual elasticity, has led to a repoliticization of sorts in so far as it has been appropriated for the university’s marketing concept. As Nash outlines, intersectionality as a marketable strategy affects the organization’s training and hiring practices, and its access to resources (17-18). Arghavan, Hirschfelder, and Motyl describe the rise of diversity and the “bureaucratic-managerial approach” in German (public) universities in similar terms (19). Hence, celebrating thirty years of officially coining intersectionality is also an invitation to consider its viability in and for academia.

Such probing also forms one part of Arghavan et al.’s edited collection *Who Can Speak and Who is Heard/Hurt?* (2019), which looks at the humanities, and particularly American Studies, in Germany.<sup>7</sup> We consider it a milestone publication because it openly addresses head-on the structural and institutional racism, as well as the academic practices as they play out in this discipline (though applicable to other humanities areas, as the essays suggest). As scholars of American Studies and History, we therefore take particular interest in their contribution to the challenges to our disciplines. The imperative role of publications like these lies not simply in pointing out such issues but in challenging those of us who are white scholars in this field to do better by putting forth mandates for individual scholars, departments, and disciplines. It is in this way, for example, that we read the editors’ (rhetorical) question whether “it [is] not more ethical [...] to explicitly reflect one’s own positionality and to make one’s political commitments (and potential blindspots) transparent, as the scholar-activist does, rather than to pretend one does not have any?” (Arghavan et al. 16). For us, too, this means thinking about how White supremacy in particular works in the academy and in the classroom, and how it affects these positionalities.

Some of the central recurring issues the collection highlights helped us understand the context of our own contribution better. This is, for example, the acknowledgment that as individuals in public spaces we must stop looking for isolated incidents of “explicit racism” committed by “bad individuals” (DiAngelo) and instead acknowledge the internalized idea of White supremacy. For DiAngelo, this internalization means the accepted normalization of white skin color, or the avoidance by white people to acknowledge their race, which also

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<sup>7</sup> The collection also offers comparative perspectives between disciplines in Germany and the US or the UK.

consists in the fact that white people are primarily seen as individuals rather than as the representatives of a group. DiAngelo signals that white people should move away from the question “Am I a racist” to “How is racism expressed in my life?” (DiAngelo, our translation). This shift also means recognizing the university as a space that reproduces “racialized power structures” that find expression, for example, in the failure to “*retain* a robust percentage of students of color” for postgraduate education and hiring practices that work against scholars of color (Arghavan et al. 11). Arghavan et al. also outline the mountain of work for white academics in acknowledging their “failure [and responsibility] to position themselves when working on topics dealing with race” (Layne 222, 223). On the other hand, the essays also offer concrete steps, or mandates, that the university should adopt as a “unique opportunity to lead the way in helping the academic and local community understand” mechanisms of Othering and exclusion (Singletary 309). From decolonizing the canon (Layne 227) to recreating the university as a “multicolored space” (Singletary 305), we consider personal reflection and dialogue to be one of these mandates. We therefore offer the personal as a vector to continue the above conversations. At the same time, we add our reflections on how the personal intersects with the larger institutional framework of German academia.

## **Rahab Njeri**

My narrative here is framed around a series of critical incidents I encountered. By re-centering my lived experiences from the margins to the center of scholarly discourse (bell hooks), my plight as a young Black scholar in German academia and the decision whether to stay in academia or leave becomes clearer.

I recognize by virtue of my race, gender, and even class that my journey in German academia has not been easy and is more complex and challenging than those of Black male scholars and white German women scholars. Despite institutional language or policy around ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusion,’ diversity usually means everything but Black women, and tenure/tenure-track ‘hires’ typically mean white women who continue to benefit from the exclusion of Black women and men in German universities. I am sure that other Black female scholars in Germany have not had an easy journey either because German academia is too white. With ‘white’ I mean that the content and methodologies that are taught at the universities are fundamentally centered around perspectives of white scholars. For example, Postcolonial Studies is a relatively recent field of study in German academia, which is quite astonishing considering Germany’s colonial history in Africa. Because this colonial history is excluded from the German grand narrative as such, Black people in Germany are conventionally not understood to belong here.

German academia is a challenging space for Black scholars. As a Black scholar, one is always under greater scrutiny and implicitly driven to work harder in order to prove that one has a right to be there. Once we have obtained a PhD, we are less likely to be encouraged to

pursue the habilitation, a second extended thesis that still represents an almost exclusive pipeline to permanent integration into German academia through tenure.

However, I do not walk alone. I am guided by those Black female scholars who came before me and fought so hard for me to be where I am today. These women's courage has been essential to young scholars who struggle for survival in academia, freedom, and self-determination. I use my voice in this way as a young Black woman in German academia to avoid what scholar Nzegwu posits as "misrepresentation" by others (104). Nzegwu states that our "voice, anger [and] pain are cognitive acts that must be systematically conveyed; they cannot be captured by someone else, lest they be erased" (104). Through narrating my own experiences in German academia, this article speaks of our silenced voice, and shares the stories of others that have been silenced in German academia.

Talking about our own experience is one strategy that we as Black scholars can use to highlight White supremacy in German academia and to develop counter narratives. Since Black women have contributed to the Black community's educational advances at the familial and community level, their narratives are instrumental to the Black German community in overcoming barriers to quality education.

The question of race is something that is rarely spoken about in German academia. Race extends beyond the Black/white binary and also encompasses dimensions of ethnicity, citizenship, the racialization of language and religion, as well as their intersections.<sup>8</sup> The silencing of issues that are concerned with race makes it even more difficult to talk about racist exclusions in German society as well as in academia. This contributes to the idea that German society follows race neutrality, as Article 3 of German Basic Law stipulates: "no person shall be favoured [sic] or disfavoured [sic] because of [...] race." In other words, Germany often pretends not to see race. Racial categories that are commonly used in North America or in Great Britain such as Black, white, or Asian are not used in German state instruments such as the census. German society thinks that by not using racial categories racism itself will be eradicated. Yet, the lived reality and experiences of people of African descent in Germany clearly prove that, yes, Germany sees color. Not talking about race does not prevent racism. There is deep-rooted structural discrimination in terms of education, employment, and the policing of Black and Brown bodies in Germany. In the academic space, this interaction of structural racism and supposedly race neutral politics ultimately means that mostly white people are hired under the guise of meritocracy and in the absence of data on racial statistics.

Many German universities see no real reason to change their existing hiring practices, which radically disadvantage Black professors and Black early career researchers. When the

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<sup>8</sup> See the title of Arghavan, Hirschfelder, Kopp, Motyl: *Who Can Speak and Who Is Heard/Hurt?*

question is raised why my professor is not Black, this question is always represented as something new, or discussed as something that is surprising or unheard of. Silence makes one complicit and so do empty words and undertaking zero practical measures to counter racism. Structurally speaking, there are, in fact, a number of movements and resources (e.g. ADAN Afro-Deutsches Akademiker Netzwerk, ISD Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland, Diversity Roundtable of the GAAS), but until now they haven't been successful in pushing anti-blackness to the center of debates around structural change in the ivory tower. Consequently, Black scholars are often forced to leave academia and switch careers. The university cultivates White supremacy through the perpetuation of structures, processes, and traditions that implicitly reinforce racial subordination. Bonilla-Silva argues in "Rethinking Racism" that the racial group placed in the superior position within a racial structure (i.e. white people) (a) receives primary economic, social, and political positioning; (b) is granted higher social attributes (e.g. considered as smarter or more beautiful); (c) has the privilege to draw physical (segregate) and social (racial etiquette) boundaries between themselves and the other races; and (d) is allotted a "psychological wage" (469-70). For the German university context this means that white people not only have primary access to job opportunities but that Black scholarship as such is not met with the same level of academic recognition and that Black scholars, and particularly Black women, do not correspond to a hegemonic idea of what a scholar should be like.

The historical legacies of racism and their perpetuation through structures of power produce outcomes that make it appear normal not to have Black professors and researchers in most German universities. Not having a Black professor has been normalized through a naturalized ideology of professors as male and white. Upon closer examination, then, the lack of Black professors is not surprising at all and, yes, race does matter when it comes to hiring. German universities see color and walls of whiteness provide protection for white privilege in the everyday operation of higher education. Silence or resistance to acknowledging Black scholars and ignoring Black scholarship reinforce ever-present White supremacy.

There are some Black professors in German universities but there are no concrete estimates. It is difficult for an individual to have access to statistical data on race in Germany. Germany does not collect racial statistics and, therefore, one cannot really say how many Black scholars or professors there are. What the German government does collect and document is a person's country of origin so that race is referenced only obliquely when classifying German residents into first- or second-generation immigrants from specific countries. In other words, even the German government does not exactly know how many Black people exist in Germany. The lack of this data also holds back Black people as a political force in Germany. Formally speaking, they just do not exist.

The fact that there are no estimates of Black professors at German universities highlights how Black scholars are rendered invisible by the systemic neglect they often experience

from within their institutions. At the same time, Black scholars are hypervisible because they tend to make up a very small percentage of the full-time tenured faculty. Those who have made it have had to go through hard times in order to be where they are now. For example, Iyiola Solanke's career as an academic in the UK—which in 2018 “[still] ha[d] fewer than 30 female professors of African-Caribbean heritage out of a total of 18,000” (47)—is built upon her experiences with marginalization, underrepresentation, and being rendered silent and invisible. She recognizes, therefore, her crucial role as a Black woman academic (in the UK) in terms of serving as a role model to others in “the absence of a critical mass of Black professors conducting research from the perspective of and on the experiences of Black Europeans” (49).

There were many explicit and implicit instances where, as an undergraduate student, I was faced with racism at the university. In one incident I was reported by a student who had come to the library where I was working; she had complained that I was unfriendly because I did not smile at her when she entered the library. I thought this was really awkward and at the same time humiliating because it was not my job to smile at library users. What was even more humiliating was the fact that one of the personnel responsible for library matters summoned me to his office and told me that I had to apologize to that student for not smiling. Her story held power because she was a white student complaining about a Black student in racially coded ways. This student's narrative view was held up as the allegedly innocent norm. This white female student felt challenged and threatened by me as a Black woman because I did not present myself in a subordinate manner. It was not about me not smiling; it was about race. As such, symbolic walls of whiteness protect white students.

When I asked who the student was and why the student did not come straight to me, the person in charge told me that, firstly, that I did not have to know the identity of the student and, secondly, that it was my job to smile when people enter the library. For whiteness to survive it requires the complicity of whites regardless of their class, such as library personnel in this context. As such, racism isn't limited to individual acts of prejudice, either deliberate or accidental. Rather, racism is built into the institutions that shape our lives through the accumulation and incorporation of long-standing racialized practices into our social system of power. The white academy functions by way of practices of administration and discourses that police and discipline Black bodies. This is the normative functioning of whiteness in the academy. By being summoned and made to apologize to a person that I did not even know, whiteness had won. It had done so as an invisible site of power that gains its force through its invisible centrality (Yancy). Because whites dominate all significant institutions, they still benefit from the distribution of resources controlled by these institutions.

I experienced another such encounter while a student at the department of English in my home university. There was one Black professor and the only thing that looked similar was our hair; otherwise, both of us looked very different. But in many cases, white students would mistake me for her and address me by her name because, according to some of the

students, all Black people look the same. When I confronted some of these students, they could not see anything wrong with their remarks. Some even went as far as comparing the professor and me to the singer Tracy Chapman. However, the same students would not have compared their white professors with random white musicians or actors or even utter the thought that white people all looked the same on the account of their shared racial identity.

While Black professors are underrepresented in German universities, Black women are especially underrepresented, and stereotypes about Black people and about Black women in particular continue to call into question their very presence in the ivory tower. Longstanding sexualizing stereotypes around Black women (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 2) position them outside the role of the intellectual scholar and leader. Within the larger white German society, Black women are usually ignored. Black women are primarily seen as toilet cleaners at Burger King's or McDonald's, as nannies or as caregivers, but they are rarely represented as scholars, educators, or even as professors. Black women in Germany rank at the lowest social level. Therefore, the challenge is indeed greater for Black women to enter and stay in German academia.

Even while being a tutor in Postcolonial Studies, I experienced similar encounters with white students. In one instance, a student claimed that the department should hire a white person to do the job. But I was lucky because I had a great teacher who understood the politics of the university and the everyday struggle of Black people in Germany. I had a few good students, but also others who were very difficult. In another instance, students outright refused to read assigned texts—such as Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back*, or John McLeod's *Beginning Postcolonialism*—that were a requirement for the seminar. Others came and left as they pleased, and still others just stared at me and made sure to disrupt the seminar. The intersection of patriarchy and White supremacy positioned me as the 'wrong' kind of scholar.

In one session, I had an incident where some students felt that the assigned texts were somehow racist because they had been written by Black authors. While making these remarks, these students' whiteness was assumed as neutral, objective, and universal. These students had failed to see "their complicity with the systemic workings of white supremacy" (Yancy 4). However, to their surprise, none of the texts that we read had actually been written by Black authors. When I challenged this white male dominance, I had my words and ideas taken out of context and I was flooded with hateful remarks. I was in a vulnerable position as a Black female scholar. But I had challenged white authority.

My presence in certain seminars at the university made some students and professors very uncomfortable. Some of the professors just ignored me and could not relate to me in any way. As for the students, some felt constrained in the way they addressed race. With me in the room, they would switch to what they considered innocuous words like 'farbig'



(colored), 'dunkelhäutig' (dark), 'maximal pigmentiert' (maximally pigmented). Yet, these terms, as author Noah Sow unpacks in her book *Deutschland Schwarz Weiß: Der Alltägliche Rassismus*, are racist because they frame Black people as a deviance ('farbig') and naturalize whiteness as a silent norm. Moreover, these students claimed that there were no proper terms to describe Black people in the German language in contrast to the English language. Time and again, the same question was directed towards me and other Black students was 'wie soll man euch nennen?' (what should we call you?). I would always answer by saying my name.

In another seminar on race, a student tried to argue that it was not offensive to use the n-word when referring to people of African descent. She supported her claim by invoking Black friends who had never felt offended by the term and she concluded by insisting that she was not a racist ('aber ich bin keine Rassistin'). This student took it upon herself to be a speaker and voice of Black people in deciding which terms were offensive and which were not. Not once in this conflict did she consider her action as an expression of white privilege. In this example, we can see how White supremacy works at different levels. This student clung to a word that had been created by White supremacy to radically denigrate people of African descent through language and in concert with physical domination (Kennedy). She positioned herself as the discursive authority over Blackness via explicit reference to Black 'friends' and on the implicit basis of her whiteness as the source of superior knowledge.

The English department constituted an important structural support for those students who stamped us as racist when we critiqued whiteness and White supremacy. In doing so, the English department administrators became complicit in the structures of whiteness and enabled violence against me and my friend so that, ultimately, we allegedly became the 'problem.' As two Black scholars, we did not have the same academic freedom (see Euben) as our white students because we had to navigate the possible dangers of white backlash. Black academic freedom is always already fragile and fleeting. As such, the question of academic freedom and integrity—that is, the question of whether or not one should fully and rigorously interrogate and criticize White supremacy within and beyond German classroom—becomes a dangerous task that Black scholars in Germany have to negotiate in the course of their regular research. By the end of the seminar, I and my friend were accused of being racist. Some of the students reported this to the department and, as a consequence, my friend was never asked again to teach in that department.

Another incident I experienced was during my visit at the University of Mainz, where I was invited to give a talk on Malcolm X. For most of the students, it was the first time ever to have a Black person give a talk in an academic context. At the beginning, they did not know how to react to my presence. The students were nervous. While some kept looking at the floor, others stared at the board and some even turned red. Over the course of my talk, I would elucidate the historical background and the significance of Malcolm X. When I finished my talk, however, the students were unwilling to ask questions. This was not the first time I

had experienced this and I had to break the ice by asking them some questions, by talking about my own experiences and about how the work of Malcolm X had an impact on my own personal life. Once the ice was broken, the students felt comfortable to ask questions.

As a Black scholar, you often have to get personal first so that students can slowly break the racial barrier between yourself and them. There is no such barrier between a white scholar and white students when it comes to studying race. Teaching classes on race represents a particular challenge for Black scholars in the German academia. Ideally, such experiences teach us survival in predominantly white academia. But these experiences can also break us and wear us down. We have to make ourselves visible and heard by any means necessary.

## Nele Sawallisch

### Germany and #academiasowhite

It was only after I attended my first conference with a majority of Black speakers that I realized how transformative this conference was as a learning experience. This has to do with the fact that I was born and raised in Germany all my life. I have experienced its educational system from kindergarten to university. Thinking of many former classmates and fellow students, it is not that I had not had experienced ethnic diversity in classrooms before attending this conference. Yet, what I had never experienced was having been taught by a scholar of color—neither at home nor in the two countries in Europe and North America where I spent time as an undergraduate. Not at school and not at a university which boasted a strategy to internationalize curricula, the student body, its teachers and staff (before it created a mandate to actually *diversify* them). In this way, my own trajectory in Germany reflects the still valid condition that in Germany, as Arghavan, Hirschfelder, and Motyl explain, “a pupil’s educational opportunities [...] are strongly determined by his or her family’s socio-economic background” (9). Relying on the “PISA” study, for example, they outline how the “exclusionary tendencies of the secondary-education system” (10) for pupils of color (with the infamous ‘Migrationshintergrund’) continue at German universities as well.

At this conference, however, I was exposed to Black scholars discussing a great variety of topics. I was uncomfortably aware of the tensions in the air, as scholars openly discussed central questions of white scholarship on Black subject matters, challenging the local white organizers and, consequently, white German academia’s implicitly colonial underpinnings. They resisted being turned into “the object of research” by white scholars whose self-understanding possibly implicitly always positioned themselves as authorities in the field (Arghavan, Hirschfelder, and Motyl 14). At the time, I was a good year into my dissertation, but for the first time became aware that I was a *white* young scholar doing research on Black authors and their shared history of enslavement and discrimination.

In the process of my academic socialization in Germany, this had never been problematized before, and I had never been challenged to position myself. In short, I had never displayed the “care, humility, and [...] willingness to be criticized and work hard to become less of a problem” (Linke 211). If that had been the case early on, I would probably have emerged as a different scholar. What this conference taught me, in turn, was that my home country and its academic sphere still understood themselves as homogeneously white. I personally take much from Kai Linke’s case study “Keeping Academia White,” in which he attempts to critically reflect his own scholarly and activist behavior as a white academic. His statement that, though white academics often mean well or voluntarily engage in “anti-racist or decolonial initiatives,” they are still “part of the problem” (211), also resonates with Kimberly Alecia Singletary’s more general comment that institutions of higher education “often celebrate diversity while actively silencing People of Color” (301). For example, Singletary explains that faculty of color are often fighting the “willful ignorance,” or even worse, “racialized and/or racist comments and behavior” (301), on the part of those white scholars who refuse to accept them as professional equals. In addition, she argues that the illusory, yet dominant idea of race neutral meritocracy in academia “silences People of Color by positing that color [...] does not matter or is less important than gender, class, or sexuality” (298). These observations take me back to the conference I discuss above because they had been raised there as well. It was a performative moment in which Black scholars effectively ended this silencing but which, in turn, also laid bare the structural and institutional confines of an academic landscape that is built by and around predominately white personnel.

### **Receiving a Black Scholar in the Classroom**

In the winter term of 2015-16, I was still a PhD student teaching a seminar on autobiography and my own dissertation research on Black Canadian life narratives. As much as I was ecstatic at the prospect of teaching what I was passionate about, I was also nervous. The seminar was not my first-ever teaching experience, but it was the first time that I would be teaching African American and African Canadian literatures aware of doing so as a white instructor. It took the attendance of several conferences with a majority of scholars of color as well as years of learning in order to locate this nervousness and understand it as the responsibility to acknowledge my privilege as a white teacher (Piesche qtd. in Layne 223). This privilege had put me, first, in the position as an adjunct (and later, faculty member) and, two, granted me the chance to choose, at relative liberty, to teach this particular topic on Black North American literature without the responsibility to justify or explain to anyone why. Finally, my position as the teacher of this class, attended by an overwhelming majority of white students, my choice of materials and course structure, remained unquestioned.

The last few sessions of my seminar were dedicated to Black autobiographical writing in the twentieth century. I wanted my students to think about if and in what ways the slave narrative still influenced twentieth-century literary and autobiographical production. I divided the group to read Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery* (1901) and Toni

Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). A third group studied Malcolm X's *Autobiography, As Told to Alex Haley* (1965). Since I knew that Rahab was an expert on Malcolm X, I asked her to join us and share her knowledge on both the historical figure and the autobiography. In hindsight, I realize that this was a classic strategy that white scholars will often adopt, i.e. inviting Black scholars in "the role of 'the Expert'" on Black culture (Linke 198). In my mind, Rahab was speaking to us as an expert on Malcolm X, but in fact, Rahab's expertise was called upon far beyond Malcolm X. As the Q&A session revealed, she was also speaking about what it could mean to be Black in Germany, something that neither I nor my students had talked about before or would, after.

The day of her lecture, something happened I had not expected. Rahab first gave her presentation on Malcolm X and the *Autobiography*, but during the Q&A I felt the session slowly shifting in focus: Rahab's talk on Malcolm X as a young Black academic eventually opened the floor for much wider discussions. Her willingness to talk about her own personal experiences encouraged students to ask questions, after some initial hesitation. Just like myself, none of them (of about 30-35 present) had been taught by a Black professor before. Rahab was frank about how this had affected her growing up and as a student at university herself. I could see how her stories about being exposed to various forms of racism, direct or indirect, left students speechless in many instances. Some started to share their own stories or those of their friends, who were experiencing discrimination because they were not part of what Germany still likes to foreground as its 'white majority.' I also dare say that Rahab's reflections on the importance of role models and representation struck a chord with the students of color in the room. Others, I saw, were unwilling to accept her assertion that hiring committees would often decide against scholars of color in favor of their white peers. One white student insisted on the story of her own experience as a 'minority' at school even though we tried to explain that as a young white woman in a Western European country, she was not at all exposed to racial discrimination. In Robin DiAngelo's terms, she was not only struggling with her "white fragility" but also offered defense mechanisms such as "I have been a minority [too]" to avoid discussing her own implication in a system of structural racism (DiAngelo). Overall, the session showed that most of my students had shared the same educational system and were currently sharing the same academic space, but could not demount their conceptual barriers and (willful) ignorance: mediating the stories of other (absent) peers as well as the insistence on a fantasy of 'white discrimination' were signs of white privilege, as I understand now. At worst, it can make it "unbearable for people of color to share their experiences with racism" (DiAngelo, our translation) and, in turn, uphold White supremacy, for example, in the classroom.

During the session, I was thankful to Rahab for allowing our discussion to move in this personal direction, but again, I am now aware that this was a kind of labor that she was

called upon to perform as a Black woman scholar, like so many other scholars of color in white classrooms, and that I, on the contrary, will never be affected by the same task.<sup>9</sup>

The session, to me, was powerful because it demonstrated that Germany (and the German university) is a place where racism and discrimination are discursively outsourced to other places. It was a confronting session because it pointed to the amount of work that still needs to be done by white scholars (and students) in German academia. I felt that the question “Why is my professor not black?” was the elephant in the room and remains one to be asked in Germany. This was the most important session of the seminar. Through Rahab’s presentation, (I hope) my students were made aware not only of the ongoing relevance of Malcolm X’s writing out of and about the United States but, even more so, of the relevance of addressing forms of racism and discrimination on German campuses, in classrooms, and outside of those settings. The in-class discussion left me with the impression that students feel the need to address these issues when given the chance and the space—this has to be the most important lesson for us as teachers. Linke’s question continues to stick with me: “What would happen if those of us who are white were open to interrogating and having interrogated the way we do ‘business as usual’—the way we do research, what we teach, how we teach, who and how we mentor” (212)?

### **This Is Not A Conclusion**

We set out to present our personal experiences as a dialogue of sorts, in order to keep thinking about how the academy in Germany continues to exclude or marginalize scholars of color and their scholarship. Instead of framing these experiences as singular or random occurrences, we see them as embedded in a system that is set to produce precisely such disparate experiences for, in our cases, Black and white scholars, respectively. In so doing, the academy does not act in isolation from other learning institutions: Aside from school curricula, scholarship foundations are powerful institutions and satellites of the academy. Funding PhD or post-doctoral candidates, they exude impressions of predominantly selection of the best, meritocracy, and elitism. But they often sustain white privilege in allegedly race neutral quality control that has repercussions for further applications and hiring processes.

At the university level, there are some Black scholars in, for example, African studies or ethnology. It is much more difficult to find Black professors teaching medicine, law, history, philosophy, or particularly German Studies in German universities. When present, these scholars hardly ever hold high positions in these institutes. A part of this academic conservatism also lies in the culture of hierarchy and the rejection of the American model of

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<sup>9</sup> As Nash writes, “the symbol of black woman is incessantly called upon to perform intellectual, political, and affective service work for women’s studies” (4), and it resonates with more general practices outside of that discipline, too.

“activist scholarship” even within American Studies in Germany, which Arghavan, Hirschfelder, and Motyl ascribe to “a wariness that arises from the historical awareness of academia’s ideological Gleichschaltung during the Nazi and SED regimes” (23; 24). The aversion towards a “scholar-activist mode” (23) is also related to how knowledge production is theorized as either “objective” (16) or subjective/biased. Community-oriented activism in Germany is split from academia and often looked down upon because it is thought to produce ‘subjective,’ and therefore un-‘serious’ scholarship. This line of thinking constructs academic scholarship as objective and unpolitical. We hope to show through the nature of our contribution that this separation is hardly possible. The same logic often positions scholars/students of color as too “betroffen (affected) to speak ‘objectively’” about their history, culture, and experiences, while only white scholarship on either white or Black subject matters is perceived as viable (Layne 220). On the contrary, white scholarship on white canonical authors is very rarely framed as a form of whiteness studies. As Linke describes, white scholars of race in Germany “have a tendency to see [them]selves as completely separate from the reality [they] study, as if racism had no bearing on [them], [their] research, and the material effects [their] research can have in the world” (201n8). We, too, see such power play as symptoms of White supremacy at work in the academy.

A part of how knowledge is produced in the academy also includes the exploitation of scholars. In this way, many scholars of color are drained off their knowledge but never credited for it, as when they are invited at individual moments as “experts” (Linke 198) without the perspective of full positions or even tenure. Instead, their former students may become fully employed and end up being their superiors. Black scholars often do not get promoted but are made to work like horses, having the same position for years, which may result in long and tiring academic trauma. Nash describes for the US context how the mechanism affects Black women academics in referring to the academy’s “systemic extraction of knowledge and service from black women, alongside the university’s continued inattention to the structures of violence that mark Black female faculty’s day-to-day experiences” (19). As recent publications suggest, this exploitation echoes perhaps no less forcefully in the German context. Her assessment that Black women scholars are “both desired and disavowed in the academy” adds to the reading of the university as a plantation (19).<sup>10</sup>

German academia is particularly conservative and continues to remain a politically contested, predominantly white, space where Black students and Black scholars experience exclusion, invisibility, and alienation.<sup>11</sup> German academia needs Black scholars because their work entails studies of race and critiques of White supremacy in German universities.

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<sup>10</sup> A part of Nash’s critical reading is her observation that “black feminism has remained oriented toward the university despite this violence” (4).

<sup>11</sup> The lack of racial diversity at university is not representative of German society at large. However, Arghavan, Hirschfelder, and Motyl argue that particularly in American Studies, “there is a robust (if disproportionate) degree of ethnic diversity [...] at Humanities departments” (10).

Without the research and voices of Black scholars, conversations about race, which are much needed in German academia, would be much more sanitized and misinformed than they already are. Most German students, either in school or at the university, have never had a Black teacher or professor. When they think of the words ‘teacher’ or ‘professor,’ in most cases, they see a white man or woman but rarely imagine someone Black.

If we had more Black scholars in German academia, the representation of a teacher or professor as only someone who is white would be deconstructed. As such, having Black scholars and teachers would no longer be a surprise, and this will bring about new fundamental changes in the German education system and teaching curriculum. The German education system would be forced to include Black histories into the curriculum, not only at the university level but also in kindergartens and schools. The purpose of Black female narratives in German academia is to make racial, gender, and social injustices that perpetuate German university inequity visible, which might lead to political change in the hiring of Black scholars and researchers. Therefore, Black women’s lives are a life of ‘politics’ through their encounters with sexism and racism. The implication of this phenomenon is such that what is paramount to Black women’s survival is their ability to gain wisdom and knowledge about the dynamics of race, gender, and class oppression (Collins, “Towards an Afrocentric Feminist”). It is this wisdom that will help guide us in Germany’s academic politics and the changes that we aim for. Effective, compelling public narratives are essential to transform power, end white privilege, and provide meanings that will galvanize possibilities for equitable cultural change.

As Black scholars we would indeed benefit from establishing mentor relationships with senior Black scholars. Locate each other and build networks that will enable us create our own spaces where we can speak and name our experiences in academia unapologetically without fear. By doing this we will be able to have counter narratives that will force German academia to hear our voices.

Younger generations like myself must always acknowledge those Black scholars who have come before us to pave the way.<sup>12</sup> We must find a way to light each other’s light in moments of darkness and walk that walk together. This includes encouraging one another, circulating information about conferences, job positions, or publications to build a counterweight to the social capital from which many white colleagues benefit. Our experiences as Black students and as scholars unite us rather than divide us, regardless of our different academic fields. To survive in German academia we need each other, we need to be each other’s brother’s and sister’s keeper. Solidarity with other people of color will help us form strong allies for our course toward the decolonization of German academia. We were always here and will continue reclaiming our space.

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<sup>12</sup> The list is extensive but includes, for example, Marion Kraft, Peggy Piesche, May Ayim, Fatima El-Tayeb, Natasha A. Kelly, Maisha-Maureen Auma, and Noah Sow.

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