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Exclusionary Acts: The Un-Making of Black German Agency in Transnational Black (German) Studies 1/3

A Conversation between Nicola Lauré al-Samarai and Peggy Piesche. With paintings by Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi

This is the first part of a longer conversation between Nicola Lauré al-Samarai and Peggy Piesche. By discussing Black Studies in Germany and the US, the consumption of Blackness and the reproduction of exclusionary settings, they aim at opening up a critical transnational debate on forging strategies to create im-pertinent epistemologies and inter/personal politics of doing, both inside and beyond academia.
The second of three parts was published on transversal.at on December 15th, 2017.

PRE / TENSIONS



Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, *University (After Unisa)*, 2014 (oil on canvas)

In February 2015 the University of Bremen received an open letter. Undersigned by organisations and members of the Black communities in Germany and Austria and supported by Black / of Colour activist groups, cultural workers, representatives of civil rights movements and activist-scholars from Germany and abroad, the large-scale protest sought to interfere with a concrete, heretofore unrivalled, powerful attempt to incorporate Black Studies into German academia. The letter was addressed by name to not only the all-white academics in positions of responsibility and decision-making but also to the predominantly white postgraduates, junior scholars and members of the scientific community affiliated with 'Black Bremen Studies' and its multi-branched institutional and individual-related 'in-house' network. [1} Regardless of quite a history of preceding interventions and a continuous critique of racist hiring and funding practices, an increasingly disconcerting whitewash of critical epistemologies and a fast-growing exploitation of knowledge productions of Black people and People of Colour, no-one in Bremen seemed to be bothered about pro-actively disinviting the Black Diaspora in Germany from conceptualising and discussing matters of the Black Diaspora at a German university. Moreover, and for the umpteenth time, along with the groundbreaking work of Black German activist-scholars who pioneered the field of Black German and Black European Studies nationally and internationally, also the body of current theory and thought was relegated to the fringes of academic scholarship and disciplines.

However preposterous the efforts of white German scholars to monopolise 'Black' Studies may appear, they did (and do) comply with the demands of a globalised academic market and corresponding economies of attention where 'Blackness' as a

commodity can be consumed and, if inappropriate at a particular moment in time, be as easily dismissed.[2] Within the comprehensive context of maintaining, redefining and re-establishing exclusionary settings, controlling sites of access and entry and dictating segregative codes of conduct and practice, the events in Bremen are, of course, far from being exceptional.[3] Be it academia or art scene, cultural field or intellectual circles, political activism or civil society: the countless acts of producing violently pacified operational vacuums and nowadays gainfully huckster them by using a euphonic vocabulary (and a few right-looking or right-named people) have proven to be very effective.

Still, the 'Bremen case' exemplifies an especially glaring reification of white dominance in German academia as the blunt striving to exercise epistemological power by expanding it over a multiple marginalised scholarly field brings to the fore a complex annihilating momentum. By emphasising its epistemic intricacies and consequences we can hopefully start an immensely urgent transnational discussion with discomforting yet crucial questions such as: What prevents current Black (German) Studies approaches from including the diversified histories and foundations, legacies and voices, epistemologies and conceptualisations of the field? How does a body of research present itself when the deliberate omission of agencies and the discursive denial of perspectives are inscribed within it? What does it mean for Black scholars and scholars of Colour in Germany and abroad to build their scholarship on a body of knowledge manifesting itself in such a way? How can we describe or, more importantly, recognise strategies of subverting and challenging notions of what have become 'new' epistemic norms? And finally, how could such strategies differ from white and other critical approaches?

To put it in a nutshell: we need to talk.

DECEIVING APPEARANCES: CON / FIGURATIONS OF TRANSNATIONAL DISCOURSE[4]



Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, *Sighted*, 2015 (oil on canvas)

Peggy Piesche: Let me start by throwing a glance at the current discursive landscape that is relevant to our conversation: firstly, because it has turned into an increasingly obfuscating terrain; secondly, because it is important to understand the varied appearances of transnational discursive formations that are shaped,

among other things, by hierarchical structural interdependencies of access and entry, visibility and perception.

In German academia, white scholarship on race, Blackness, diversity and corresponding matters pertaining to specific conditions in Germany can be considered a relatively recent phenomenon. It is downplayed, however, that this scholarship owes a major part of its existence to a preceding theory production by Black (German) scholars / (German) scholars of Colour, who, as early as the mid-1980s, started to transform the humanities by introducing novel epistemologies and research focuses. Although their intersectional and interdisciplinary groundwork substantially impacted conceptual paradigms of historical, social and cultural sciences, and opened up several fields of critical theory,[5] these particular references are either omitted, reduced to footnotes or simply denied, which is why respective current research is dramatically marginalised, or more precisely, is *perceived* as such. As part of a greater hegemonic structure, this 'perceptional shibboleth' has become a powerful and very beneficial notional tool for white academics to reaffirm putative 'lacks' (with regard to research) and 'absences' (with regard to people) during the last decade. Corresponding attempts to study, to categorise, to compartmentalise and to, finally, absorb a Black knowledge production have made it unnecessary to further 'drag along' Black protagonists and thus effectively contribute to *de-visibilising* an existing body of thought of Black (German) scholars / (German) scholars of Colour especially in Germany. In the US-academia, on the other hand, comparable research has been evolving in the broader field of German Studies for many years. Furthermore, over the course of the past decade, Black American and US-based Black German scholars as well as scholars of Colour have been advancing research questions with interdiasporic approaches and transferred

them to the academically established field of Black Studies. However, in many works that are part of a fast-growing body of research discussions of what is generally referred to as the 'Black German experience' are often based on hegemonic historiographies, which narrate a collective Black German history and presence without the agency of the actual protagonists.

Despite indisputable achievements, either constellation appears to be problematic, yet for very different reasons. It gets even more challenging if we take into consideration the inextricabilities and distinct nuances of transnational discursive dynamics, competing academic networks and normalising hegemonic trends. Forged by different awarenesses and dissimilar possibilities of participating in the German *and* in the US-American Black (German) Studies fields, these co-active conditions have been causing unequal opportunities to enter into the findings of cross-Atlantic research.

Nicola Lauré al-Samarai: Isn't it somewhat revealing that we, at this juncture, have to start a conversation on Black German matters in transnational academia with multiple 'de-constructive breakdowns'? In view of the already mentioned structural imbalances and a conflicting plurality of actors, I would like to follow your sense of direction from the more general outside constituents to the interior specifics of the field and add a few thoughts on what I would call 'correlating field-effects' on both sides of the Atlantic.

Generally speaking, any attempt of researching the Black German Diaspora takes part in shaping a very fragile scientific chronotope. Despite numerous and partly long-standing efforts to unearth and conceptualise a Black German history and presence, the larger field still is emergent, scattered and ambiguous. Its provisional, if not

exploratory state is exemplified by at times striking lacks of critical systematic framing, informed reference and a secured standard (of) knowledge, which sharply contrasts convenient notions of 'reasoned' research contexts, 'consistent' paradigms and a 'reliable' discursive base, and rather serves the purpose to reassure credibility and to claim legacy. To avoid misunderstandings: I really appreciate the idea of a free-floating and fallible scholarly field in progress. Unfortunately, neither quality can be brought in accordance with current structural conditions.

Following up on your initial remarks and relating them with the hyper-fragility of the field in question, I see two major problems that prevent transnational Black German / Black European / Black Diaspora approaches from being developed and, far more important, from being *negotiated* appropriately. In the German academia, the institutional non-existence of Black and Minority Studies correlates with a blatant absence of Black professors and professors of Colour, which has led to a severe discursive whitewashing and academic 'mainstreaming' of Postcolonial, Gender and Queer Studies. Moreover, despite the already mentioned fact that the entire field of what could be called 'Black German Studies' was opened up and significantly shaped by Black German activist-scholars, notably by feminist/queer women, their theoretical approaches have increasingly been marginalised within the last ten years. The obvious tendency to exclude Black German professionals from teaching and research in the academy as well as to overwrite or simply ignore a corresponding theory and knowledge production is especially disconcerting if one recalls the many scholars who, in the mid-1990s, were more or less forced to leave Germany because it was nearly impossible to work on Black research topics in the humanities. In the German context, this Black brain-drain has contributed to a considerable strengthening

of white academic power-structures and a re-occupation of the field by white German scholars. In an international, primarily US context it has, on the other hand, inaugurated discursive formations that are relatively self-contained and are negotiated in rather small scholarly circles.

If we, as you've been rightly suggesting, take these discursive appearances seriously, I cannot but to counter-read them as *distortions of discourse-as-participation*, which also means to take serious and counter-read corresponding *modes of silencing-and-conforming*. Both aspects, because of their tightly interdependent processual character, are co-operating in mutually reinforcing ways and thus considerably densify the putative yet de-visibilising 'lacks' and 'absences' you have already brought up: while the distortions of discourse-as-participation are fostering the dispensability of a Black German (scholarly) *presence*,[6] the modes of silencing-and-conforming are promoting the futility of a Black German (scholarly) input. All in all, these dynamics have become manifest in a transnational talk over our heads.

P.P.: This is exactly the reason why I came to believe that we are now at a point where it is fundamentally necessary to engage in a historically rooted dialogue. Rather than contributing to an increasingly inflationist and integrationist body of research within the context of a more and more hegemonic field of research on the 'Black German experience', we should reflect and analyse its determining factors and consequences. Marking certain absences in the current body of academic scholarship might help to bring into view a multi-sided problem on both sides of the Atlantic: the uneven relationship between a structurally embedded racism *and* disparate research approaches *and* corresponding trends of objectifying (a) Black German research subject(s). To put it clearly,

the pressing question is not whether or not a certain kind of academic scholarship is racist but, rather, how and why it has become acceptable to exclude the very foundational pattern of structural racism from one's own research.[7]

Dismissing the notion of racism as an essential problem in scholarship of and within Black German Studies does, in fact, not only falsify one's findings, but also promotes debates that are fundamentally distorting the very context of research itself. The plea for a new direction in the field touches the core of what can be understood to be at stake in academia itself, namely, to open an inclusive and creative intellectual space. To transform the narrow normative of a nationally inflected, colonial model of 'area studies' that Black German Studies have turned into, it would be far from being sufficient to simply 'enrich' the field with 'alternative' interdisciplinary and international approaches or selective insights. It would instead, and first of all, require a comprehensive critique of individual *and* collective positions of respective speakers in relation to research and impact. The question 'Whose story is being told by whom?' is not a simple variant of the question 'Who can speak?', but rather points to a powerful discursive dispositif where that which is being told is that which can be made 'intelligible' and 'comprehensible' – i.e. digestible – to the canon. Quite symptomatically, a significant part of this canon is referred to as being the 'archive of the Black German experience'. This misinterpretation reaffirms the violent assumption that any experience can be analysed by anybody and thus dislocates corresponding appropriations of individual and collective experience as 'legitimate' representations. Chimamanda Adichie has already pointed to the 'danger of a single story', reminding us that '[p]ower is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person'.[8]

part 2 ->

The conversation at hand was edited by Nicola Lauré al-Samarai. It is partly based on an interview with Theodor Wonja Michael and Nicola Lauré al-Samarai, conducted by Susann Lewerenz in November 2014, entitled 'Contested Terrains, Contentious Access: Black German History, Memory, and Historiographical Writing', and the paper by Peggy Piesche, 'Black Collective Narratives Changing the Epistemic Map: Theorizing Political Activism', seminar at the 40th GSA Conference, panel Political Activism in the Black European Diaspora: From Theory to Praxis, September 29 – October 2, 2016, San Diego. The interview with Michael and Lauré al-Samarai is published under the above title in The BDG Network, ed., The Black Diaspora and Germany, *edition assemblage, Münster, 2018, pp 50–66. A shortened version of Piesches paper is available online at http://www.academia.edu/23234061/Towards_a_Future_African_Diasporic_Theory_Black_Collective_Narratives_Changing access: October 20, 2016).*

We are most grateful to Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi for the generous permission to publish her artwork and for sharing her thoughts. For more information about the artist see http://thenjiwenkosi.com.

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[1] Present_Tense Scholars Network, 'Community Statement: "Black" Studies at the University of Bremen', January/February 2015. For the German version see https://blackstudiesgermany.wordpress.com/community-statement-black-studies-an-der-universitat-bremen-deutsche-version/. For the English translation see https://

blackstudiesgermany.wordpress.com/statementbremen/ (last access: September 21, 2016).

[2] In Bremen, the disbanding of the 'Black Knowledges Research Group' – hastily announced by its white members in a most defensive internet statement – exemplifies the skittish handling of the community-driven intervention. Dismantling a research group apparently sufficed the purpose to avoid discussions and, far more convenient, concrete action to challenge both the epistemic notions and the material effects of power, privilege and complicity in a hegemonic research field that feeds itself from the margin. For the exact wording in German and English see http://www.fb10.uni-bremen.de/inputs/pdf/BKRG_Aufoesung-Disbanding_deu-engl.pdf (last access: October 20, 2016).

[3] Similar developments, as for instance at the English Department of the University of Münster, might have attracted less attention but are equally exclusionary. See, for example, current activities and research focuses – such as 'Afroeuropeans', 'Encyclopedia Afro-European Studies', 'Transmigration', 'Network Postcolonial Germany and Britain' or 'Open Cities' – in relation to participating scholars: https://www.uni-muenster.de/Anglistik/en/ptts/Muenster/currentresearch/index.html (last access: October 3, 2016).

[4] Our conversation is going to emphasise discursive configurations in Germany and the US. Despite this specific focus we do believe, however, that elaborating a certain discursive relationship might be helpful for discussing problems of other transnational inter-relatednesses and discursive entanglements as well.

[5] Referring to particular names and works is always risky because there are always names and works to be forgotten. In view of the chasm between exclusionary hegemonic trends and ongoing processes of decolonising and self-empowering our own epistemic grounds, we do think, however, that it is important to provide current research with (alternative) sources and therefore present a selected chronological overview of works from Black / of Colour perspectives: May Opitz [Ayim], Katharina Oguntoye et al., eds, *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte,* Orlanda Frauenverlag, Berlin 1986 (in English: *Showing Our Colors. Afro-German Women Speak Out*, trans. Anne V. Adams, foreword by Audre Lorde, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1992); Marion Kraft, Ruskhana Shamim Ashraf-Khan, eds, *Schwarze Frauen der Welt. Europa und Migration*, Orlanda, Berlin, 1994; Kien Nghi Ha, *Ethnizität und Migration*, Westfälisches Dampfboot, Münster, 1999; Cathy G. Gelbin, Kader Konuk, Peggy Piesche, eds, *Kulturelle Produktionen von Migrantinnen, Schwarzen und jüdischen Frauen in Deutschland,* Ulrike Helmer, Königstein/Taunus, 1999; Fatima El-Tayeb, *Schwarze Deutsche. Der Diskurs um 'Rasse' und nationale Identität 1890–1933*, Campus, Frankfurt/Main, 2001; Hito Steyerl, Encarnción Gutiérrez Rodríguez, eds, *Spricht die Subalterne deutsch? Migration und postkoloniale Kritik*, Unrast, Münster, 2003; Maureen Maisha Eggers, Grada Kilomba, Peggy Piesche, Susan Arndt, eds, *Mythen, Masken und Subjekte: Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland*, Unrast, Münster, 2005; Kien Nghi Ha, Nicola Lauré al-Samarai, Sheila Mysorekar, eds, *re/visionen. Postkoloniale Perspektiven von People of Color auf Rassismus, Kulturpolitik und Widerstand in Deutschland*, Unrast, Münster, 2007; Maureen Maisha Eggers, 'Knowledges of (Un)Belonging: Epistemic Change as a Defining Mode for Black Women's Activism in Germany', in Ulrike Lindner et al., eds, *Hybrid*

Cultures – Nervous States. Britain and Germany in a (Post)Colonial World, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2010, pp 189–202; reprinted in Sara Lennox, ed, *Remapping Black Germany. New Perspectives on Afro-German History, Politics, and Culture*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 2016, pp 33–45; Fatima El-Tayeb, *European Others. Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2011; Peggy Piesche, ed, *Eurer Schweigen schützt Euch nicht. Audre Lorde und die Schwarze Frauenbewegung in Deutschland*, Orlanda, Berlin, 2012; Maureen Maisha Eggers, Sabine Mohamed, 'Schwarzes Feministisches Denken und Handeln', in Yvonne Franke et al., eds, *Feminismen heute. Positionen in Theorie und Praxis*, transcript, Bielefeld, 2014, pp 57–76.

[6] The English term 'presence' has two German translations that are not synonymous: *Anwesenheit* and *Gegenwart*. While *Anwesenheit* connotes a physical present-ness in space, *Gegenwart* includes also the temporal aspect of the present. I here refer to both meanings.

[7] With regard to Bremen, this also contrasts hegemonic perceptions of the community-driven intervention where activist-scholars responded to the structural relevance of racism rather than accusing individuals of 'being racist.'

[8] Chimamanda Adichie, 'The Danger of a Single Story', transcript from a TED talk, October 16, 2009, available online at http://ssw.unc.edu/files/TheDangerofaSingleStoryTranscript.pdf (last access: October 12, 2016).