

## **Critical Whiteness: False Friend?<sup>1</sup>**

*Teaching a U.S. anti-racism curriculum in Germany<sup>2</sup>*

by Melanie Bee

I have worked as an English teacher at the Schule für Erwachsenenbildung (The School for Adult Education) in Berlin for the last three and a half years, preparing students in a self-organized, leftist environment for their Abitur (A-levels). Because the English Zentralabitur in Berlin has long since abandoned things like Shakespeare in favor of contemporary issues like immigration and globalization, I've had the chance to teach social-justice-style workshops in my classes. We've used modal verbs to draft a safer spaces policy ("everyone should... no one must...") and learned about pronouns in order to discuss preferred gender pronouns (in English, one can use genderqueer alternatives like they or z, instead of 'he' and 'she'). I've constructed my curriculum to prioritize texts from people of color in order to give space for their voices and make their experiences visible in white dominated classrooms, without putting pressure on individual students of color to represent themselves. I teach a long unit on the African-American freedom struggle and in conjunction teach more personal anti-racist lessons from the sort of "Bible" for social justice educators in the U.S., *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*.<sup>3</sup> In applying a U.S. developed approach to anti-racist education in a classroom in Berlin, I encounter again and again the differences between concepts of race and racism in the U.S. and Germany. This article is an attempt to map out the contours of some of those disjunctures, in the hopes that it illuminates something for our translation process from one context to another (and preferably, back again).

### ***Race & Nation***

One of the first obstacles I encounter is using the word 'race' at all. I start by writing on the board, "Race is a fiction, racism is real."<sup>4</sup> With this I want to make clear that I use the words race and ethnicity to mean social constructs, not biological facts. Activists and critics in the U.S. continue to use the word 'race' with an understanding of this fictionality, whereas the word 'Rasse' in German has a Nazi history that renders it unspeakable or taboo. German society has thus produced a number of misnomers to replace that distasteful word 'Rasse,' such as "ethnische Hintergrund" (ethnic background) or "Wurzeln" (roots, my favorite), most of which circulate around the trope of immigration. My students often write "Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund" ("people with immigration background") in their papers when what they intend to describe are people affected by racism, who in a U.S. political vocabulary would be called "people of color." Now, I technically have an immigration background – actually, its so fresh we could call it an immigration foreground. But I was once advised at the Neuköllner Volkshochschule away from

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<sup>1</sup> In language teaching, a false friend refers to a pair of words in two different languages that look similar but in fact have different meanings.

<sup>2</sup> This article was published in German: "Critical Whiteness – ein falscher Freund? Antirassistische Lehrpläne für den Unterricht aus den USA und ihre Übersetzung in Deutschland" *ZAG antirassistische Zeitschrift* 61 (2012): 23-26. <http://goo.gl/fZS4by>

<sup>3</sup> Adams, Maurianne, Lee Anne Bell, Pat Griffin (ed.s). *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook*. Routledge, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> This slogan appeared on the sides of buses in the U.S. as part of an anti-racism campaign in 1998.

taking a German Integrationkurs (Language and “Integrations” course). The reason I’m not seen as an migrant in need of integration is because I’m white, middle-class, and well-educated. And the reason my born-and-raised-in-Berlin neighbors whose grandparents were born in Izmir are “migrants” is because they aren’t seen as white. I’m the white foreigner, the good foreigner, who “Fremdenfeindlichkeit” (xenophobia) barely touches. Or is this just my U.S. tendency to see everything through the lens of race speaking?

The obsession of Americans with race, which painter Kara Walker has called our “national pastime” and “love affair”,<sup>5</sup> and the German desire not to speak of race because of a genocidal history already lay bare the vastly different histories of racialization in the U.S. and German contexts. Similar to other settler colonies like Australia and South Africa, the U.S. built a political identity of whiteness that united certain privileged Western European ethno-cultural groups. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, whiteness was forged in a “melting pot”<sup>6</sup> that merged together the races of Europe into a white ‘super race’, allowing the Irish and Italians to shed their national and specifically Catholic identities and climb the ladder of privilege and national citizenship, so long as they pushed down the Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans below them.<sup>7</sup>

When I stand in front of my adult students, who are mostly white, and ask them “what race are you?”, many answer with the word “German”. National identity and racial identity are so tightly interwoven they are actually one thing in Germany. As a colonial metropole and fascist regime, Germany’s national identity has always been inherently ethno-cultural, the mythology of “thousands of years of Aryans” or what have you, a fiction which itself erases the migrations of Slavs and other groups throughout the region. No such trans-national or trans-ethnic history of whiteness exists in Germany, although the EU may be an attempt at a 21<sup>st</sup> century “melting pot”. (An advertisement for its most recent expansion campaign portrays Europe as a white woman fighting darker-skinned male capoeiristas and ninjas.)<sup>8</sup> But are some nationalities more ‘white’ than others in the EU? Are Spanish, Greek, and Italian citizens considered ‘white’? Have Polish immigrants to Western Germany become ‘Germanized’, and is that the same thing as becoming ‘white’?

U.S. national identity has always been more inclusive than European national identities and become more and more so, as people of color have fought for hyphenate identities, to be recognized as Latino-, Asian-, or Middle Eastern-Americans. Here, Afro-deutsch does not roll easy off most white Germans’ tongues. It cannot be denied that these differences are partly the result of the demographics: in 2010, a tipping point was reached and now more babies of color are born in the U.S. than babies identified as white. White people are estimated to become minorities in the nation by 2043.<sup>9</sup> U.S. national identity has shown a remarkably cannibalistic flexibility in the last two centuries. Similar to capitalism, it seems able to absorb almost anything (even resistance), defang it and repackage it into something “uniquely American.” Settler colonies like the U.S. have contained and controlled large number of racialized

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<sup>5</sup> <http://goo.gl/vQab24>, <http://goo.gl/8Fh8Ck>

<sup>6</sup> <http://goo.gl/x1UGXM>

<sup>7</sup> Ignatiev, Noel. *How the Irish Became White*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> <http://goo.gl/PCACSR>

<sup>9</sup> <http://goo.gl/mwpmU8>

“others” within national territories, whereas colonial powers like Germany sought to contain and isolate such persons in an “elsewhere” that should not breach the metropole through immigration. (Obviously the history of Jews and Sinti and Roma go against the grain of this narrative, and are thus an interesting point of debate I don’t have room to explore here.)

If race in Germany has historically been organized by *innen* and *aussen* (inside and out), in the U.S. it has been black and white, the enduring legacy of slavery as America’s #1 historical trauma (and there is room for only one, sorry indigenous peoples, just like Germany seems to only have room for one genocide, and colonialism gets overlooked.) Because African-Americans, as well as Native Americans, have been in the U.S. for just as long if not much longer than whites, race was formulated beyond the rubric of ‘foreignness’. In the multicultural chaos of U.S. identity, race became a more useful and disciplining social category than nationality, immigration status, culture, language, or ethnicity, for which it became a kind of short-hand condensing all of those into a distorted biological monster. Hence the problem that Caribbean Blacks, African-American descendants of West African slaves, and recent African immigrants to the U.S. are thrown together in one pot labelled ‘Black’ despite having serious differences in terms of culture, language, and history.

### ***Translating Transnationally***

So how translatable and useful are U.S. categories of race for discussion about racism in Germany? My guess is that importing “critical whiteness” concepts from the U.S. could help untie national citizenship from race in German discourse. My annoyance when teaching about racism is when people want to talk only about nationalities and minorities, out of a fear of addressing the taboo word ‘race’ and the realities of racialization and racism, thus obscuring the interconnections of race, culture, ethnicity, *and* national status. By reducing anti-racism activism to a focus on migration and border politics, Germans of color are erased from the discussion.<sup>10</sup> Reinscribed as foreigners, they are not seen as participants in or co-creators of German culture (a privilege many anti-national leftists would gladly destroy, *but an enormous privilege nonetheless*).<sup>11</sup> Talking about race as a semi-independent variable from national citizenship makes Germans of color visible again.

However, bringing the German or wider Western European lens of national identity and citizenship more strongly into the U.S.’s obsessive banter on race would deepen that discourse. As the Latino population in the U.S. eclipses the African-American population in size, this upsets the traditional black/white dichotomy of U.S. race relations. Because many of the estimated 11 to 20 Million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. are Latino, questions of immigration policy, inhumane detention and deportation, and brutal border patrols grow more pressing. Latinos also disrupt racial categorization in the U.S., since some identify as “white” and others as “people of color”. On the official U.S. census questionnaire, Latino is not listed as a “race” but under a separate question addressing ethnicity. Culture, ethnicity, language, and

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<sup>10</sup> See the Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland e.V., <http://www.isdonline.de/>

<sup>11</sup> On the word “Fremden” or “foreigners”, see *Der Braune Mob, e.V.: Schwarze Deutsche in Medien und Öffentlichkeit*. <http://goo.gl/IcmpWr> (PDF).

national status reemerge as equally if not more salient in this case than traditional understandings of race.

The Left in the U.S. has engaged with questions of nationalism mostly in terms of resistant nationalist movements (Black nationalism, Puerto Rican independence, Pan-Africanism) or by addressing types of discrimination that non-nationals face. But a truly critical confrontation with how dominant national identity is constructed does not appear to be a top priority in many activist and non-profit spheres. Nationalism feels to me so enshrined in U.S. culture that many social justice organizations can only speak about expanding its range of inclusion rather than dismantling it. A number of Occupy activists have claimed themselves as the true “patriots” embodying the real meaning of the Constitution, in an attempt to reclaim nationalist idioms from conservative clutches. Perhaps the German Left’s critical discourses on nationalism could contribute to a deconstruction of U.S. nationalism and the privileges of national citizenship. The “no human is illegal” and “no borders” memes in German anti-racist praxis express a kind of global identity based on human rights regardless of national citizenship, discourses which could be useful in the U.S. This would be a similar gesture to what critical whiteness has provided a German discourse on race – turning the finger back upon the privileged and deconstructing their dominant, in this case national, identities.

As a white teacher, I find myself in the dilemma of translating between these two national contexts. I present concepts of anti-racism that has been stamped with the approval of activists of color in the U.S. but that doesn’t mean they respond to the particular needs of people of color in a German context. Because I believe that experience and identity, including race and location, are the soil in which our ideas grow, I feel sure that people of color in Germany are growing their own theories and practices to address the nuances of the particular situation here. Which means a U.S. based concept can provide impulses for exchange, but cannot do the heavy lifting. And when the person transporting concepts from one context to another is white, that makes the translation all the more ethically complicated. When I’m struggling to present the results of years of activists in the U.S. trying to decolonize their minds, bodies, spirits, and communities, the gesture of imposing those terms, no matter how emancipatory they are, onto others may itself be colonial.

### ***False Friend?***

I’ve begun to wonder if “Critical Whiteness” is something akin to a false friend, something like “Handy” or “Beamer” (which comes from the verb “to beam” but is actually slang in the U.S. for a BMW, ironically enough). Or that Canadian pizza place with the sweet potato pizza in Kreuzberg – the German guy who owns it spent time in Canada learning pizza-making techniques, but my Canadian friends insist there is no such thing as uniquely “Canadian” style pizza. These “Scheinanglizismen” are words that appear to come out of the English language, and in this case, the North American context, but have a different meaning in the German than in the original English. As with every process of translation, fragments of the original meaning and context are transported intact, while other fragments are shaved off, broken, glued back on, mis- and re-appropriated for new purposes. The result is a kind of cultural hybridization, where new forms of culture are created as “fake

copies” or deformed parodies of the original (something akin to what Butler describes as drag’s performance of gender.)

“Critical whiteness”, also known as “whiteness studies,” appears to be largely an academic term in the U.S. for looking critically at the construction of ‘whiteness’ as a racial category. But a search of the term on Google turns up a large number of German-based or German-language entries, suggesting that the word has a life of its own in Germany. While the idea of criticizing whiteness is familiar to me from the U.S., the actual phrase “critical whiteness” was not a word I had ever heard until I came to Germany. In the U.S. social-justice circles I was a part of in the U.S., words like “white privilege,” “white supremacy,” and “accountability” were more often used to describe the role of white people in anti-racist struggle.

I think its worth noticing that a phrase from *academic* language was either consciously chosen or was the ‘first to arrive’ in Germany to describe critiques of whiteness, rather than words more often used in anti-racist *practice* in the U.S. This begs the questions: What kinds of elitism and exclusion are then transported in such a discourse?<sup>12</sup> Which perspectives, embodied practices, lived experiences, and ideas did not make it (back) across the Atlantic? And what does this tell us about how oppression and capitalism distort who has access to transnational exchange and translation?

I was writing a paper recently and wanted to give credit to the idea of “intersectionality” and my first thought was to write the name of Kimberlé Crenshaw, the famous legal scholar who developed critical race theory in the late 80’s and early 90’s. However, I was overlooking the Black feminist and lesbian authors of the Combahee River Collective Statement, who had been talking about “interlocking oppressions” as early as 1978. Group members included artists, academics, and activists including Audre Lorde, who were writing passionately about the struggles that came out of their activist work, not out of a purely academic context.

While anti-racist theory seems to have a sturdy pipeline from the U.S. to Germany, a number of effective and powerful anti-racist practices are not making it across the ocean to provide the fuller picture of the embodied context in which such anti-racist concepts were planted and make sense. These practices by marginalized, disabled, queer and trans-, low-income and precarious people of color and their allies may not be reaching German ears. Several that I think are particularly worth highlighting are anti-racist organizational assessment,<sup>13</sup> discourses on somatic body work and collective healing,<sup>14</sup> and accountability.<sup>15</sup> If those of us here in Germany want exchange with grassroots activists from the U.S. and other places, how can we use our resources, including academic ones, to prioritize that?

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<sup>12</sup> Of course, many of the pioneers of critical whiteness studies in the academy were themselves activists of color, such as bell hooks or Toni Morrison. However, the structure of academia still excludes access to large numbers of people.

<sup>13</sup> See [racialequitytools.org](http://racialequitytools.org), [arc.org](http://arc.org), and the “Dismantling Racism Project” von changework

<sup>14</sup> See GenerationFive, Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective

<sup>15</sup> See: Cushing, Bonnie Berman et al. (ed.s) *Accountability and White Anti-Racist Organizing: Stories from Our Work*. Roselle, New Jersey: Crandall, Dostie & Douglass Books, Inc., 2010. Chen, Ching-In, Jai Dulani & Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (ed.s). *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence within Activist Communities*. Brooklyn, NY: South End Press, 2011.

Moreover, why has “critical whiteness” come to be synonymous in some circles with anti-racist work, when discussions about white privilege in the U.S. are considered merely one aspect of an overall anti-racist practice? Empowerment, praxis, transformation, and safety by and for people of color, who should be leading the movement against racism, get sidelined if reflection on white privilege is always in the spotlight. And if we want to continue to use academic terms, why “critical whiteness” and not “critical race theory”? This would remove the over-emphasis on whiteness and contribute an understanding that all racial categories are constructed. While there are good reasons to be talking about whiteness, I worry that “critical whiteness” could lead to a closed loop where whites talk with other whites about (their guilt about) whiteness, which can further dominate discussion of anti-racism and takes attention and space away from the experiences and knowledge of those most affected by racism, people of color. If “critical whiteness” become unhooked from anti-racist practice and unaccountable to people of color, it runs the risk of turning into a monster.

And that monster is not unfamiliar to me: the last time I tried to write about whiteness, the racism of two white people writing about the ideas of our mutual friend of color without including her sunk the project. The letter from the editor of the zine in the next edition indicated that he would no longer use the zine as a space for white allies to process their emotions and wanted to prioritize people of color’s empowerment.<sup>16</sup> My co-author suggested that the answer might be for whites to be silent.

### *Accountability*

This strikes me as a kind of dead end: either the navel-gazing of a claustrophobic room full of perpetrators talking about their perpetration (sometimes this is how Germany feels to me), or becoming permanently silent in the face of your guilt and privilege. Maybe the U.S. concept of accountability could offer another way of framing the problem. The idea of accountability is that if privileged people (in this case, whites) want to work to end oppression (in this case, racism), they need strong relationships of accountability to members of oppressed groups (here, people of color). Accountability can mean a lot of different things: trust, solidarity, stepping back from leadership positions, being an ally, listening, supporting, asking for feedback, providing material and immaterial resources.

One of my favorite examples of effective ally work is the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a union of migrant farm workers, primarily Latino, Mayan India, and Haitian, who have successfully organized boycotts against major fast food and supermarket chains in order to improve their working conditions in the Florida fields picking tomatoes and other agricultural crops. The C.I.W., those most affected, are the leaders and decision-makers, the most vocal and most public in their campaigns. They have two major ally groups, made up of diverse individuals – one is a coalition of religious organizations that supports them on moral grounds (Interfaith Action); the other are students who are often the consumers of the places they are boycotting (Student Farmworker Alliance).

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<sup>16</sup> [http://www.racerevolt.org.uk/issues/issue%20five/2\\_intro\\_hs.htm](http://www.racerevolt.org.uk/issues/issue%20five/2_intro_hs.htm)

Relationships of accountability take time to be built. When whites want to burden people of color with “supervising” them, this isn’t going to work. White people have to earn the trust of people of color in order to build legitimate relationships of solidarity and safety, which then may offer the chance to work together with them to end racism. I can start by trying to be accountable to the students at my school, which this article gives me an excuse to do.

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