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## **Opening of the Doctoral College for Intersectionality Studies**

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### **Political Intersectionality as Intervention into Futures**

(speech script)

I.

Welcome to the opening of the doctoral college for Intersectionality Studies at Bayreuth University. Funded by the Hans-Böckler Foundation, the doctoral college for Intersectionality Studies is designed to offer an institutional frame of doing political intersectionality and intersectionality as intervention.

This is most needed and pertinent inasmuch as intersectionality provides us with answers to most pressing questions, not just of our time, but of all times, like: why do human beings, who are capable of setting up Artificial Intelligence that can even leave our solar system or why do human beings, who spend billions of dollars for producing and watching blockbusters about love and peace in the dream factory – why do these very human beings feel way too often at ease with violating or exploiting other humans?

Indeed, it is one of humanity's most devastating modes of being in this world that some believe that they are entitled to have a better life than others – at the cost of others, and at the cost of violating, exploiting or discriminating against others.

II.

Yesterday, on February the 12<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Berlin had its infamous repeat election. One of the parties, tried to gain votes with this slogan: “unlimited long life for all”. This is sort of funnysad. In my mental cinema, this slogan features humans, who live stapled in the streets and in the midst of dying woods, causing the planet to die even earlier. So, eventually I see the unlimited long life versions of us, of ‘all of us’, floating through the universe for good, as alive as lost. But, this is not what the predominantly *white* male German party has in mind. Because they do not mean “all” in the true sense of “all of us”. No,

this “all” means the privileged ones, only. Without even bothering to stress it, though.

And this is what social orders, that humans have constructed, throughout so many centuries, have always been about: Privileging some over others, while taking privileges for granted to an extent of not even naming them, or taking responsibility for what they do to Others.

### III.

All social orders that we have known so far have followed this very principle. Some have more than others. Some have a privileged access to economic resources, to land and housing, or to being heard and seen, and to being represented, by structures or by narrations. And they have a privileged access to all of this at the cost of others.

This is not a lottery though, this is organized systematically by power and domination and respective processes of Othering.

Those who hold power seek to maintain it by granting privileges to those who are deemed to be part of the dominant group. In doing so, power defines a ‘norm/ality’ - by demarcating it from the ‘Other’. By Othering. Another vicious circle.

And since privileges are privileges, because they ‘belong’ to some only, while those who cannot access it are even forced into paying the respective bills, the latter experience this as exploitation, discrimination, or violation.

This is what social inequality is all about. It is an interplay of privilege and discrimination as tuned by power.

### IV.

This power-coded social inequality has been secured by structures and institutions as well as knowledges and moralities.

As for structures and institutions, throughout many centuries, discrimination was not against the law, but rather even in line and

supported by it. Such laws, in turn, have been affecting and shaping moralities and knowledges.

One example: Until 1919, the law prohibited German women to vote. Accordingly, most Germans would be upset or amused when being confronted with the idea that women could desire to have a passive and active voting right. After voting rights for women were implemented lastingly, moralities started to shifted towards not minding voting women. And yet, women are still underrepresented in politics and other realms of public life.

The underlying logic of this cycle is boiled down philosophically by Immanuel Kant like this: Since women were inferior to men it would be unfair to grant them the same rights as men. And if they wish to learn Greek or discuss the laws of mechanics, they could even wear beards.

This is an easy shortcut into sexism's keeping male spaces cis-heterosexual male.

Sexism insists that women are born to bear children and that this also comprises to care for them by staying at home. Since men had allegedly nothing to do with this (?), it were men's rightful destiny to rule the public life – which would make sense anyways in as much only men were capable of reason and knowledge-production. This again allegedly required that men were also destined to rule the home and control women and their bodies. This heteronormative order also discriminates against all genders that happen to resist this ideological circle of patriarchal heteronormativity.

And why did Europe, including most suffragettes, feel at ease with conquering wide parts of the globe or with enslaving more than 20 millions of Africans? Because racism as colonialism's sword and shield was constructed to state that *white* people were superior to all other 'races'. By claiming that BIJPoC would be lacking full humanity, racism offered *white* perpetrators the comfortable message that it would be totally ok to steal resources, goods and labour from

the Global South, while calling this Christian salvation or ‘civilization’, at that.

This whitewashing of colonialism and its violence also disguised that the industrial revolution was built on stolen land, resources and labour and on genocidal policies that have drained the colonized societies with most longstanding effects.

In other words, racism and other ideologies have generated lies and diverting narrations to both mask and justify the structures and institutions of (global) inequalities, and vice versa.

Thus framed, social inequality has positioned all of us into social positions that cannot be undone yet.

V.

To be discriminated against does not leave you any choice but to notice this. Being discriminated against causes awareness for the social position of being discriminated against. This feeds into moulding (collective) identities that are also lived individually.

Being in power, being the normality, however, comprises the privilege to not even be aware thereof. Consequentially, many privileged persons fail to see how privileges position them socially and how this also affects their identity.

Yet even though, for example, *white* people tend to consider it a liberal gesture to not identify themselves as *white*, whiteness is what frames their standpoints and worldviews.

The so called “refugee crisis” in 2015, for example, was very much about whiteness as big elephant in the room that was loudly silenced. After all, the term refugee crisis did not name that war and other catastrophes forced people into taking refuge from crisis. No, it was Germany that was claimed to be in crisis. Yet, in fact, Germany was not facing an economic, logistic or bureaucratic crisis. The crisis was all about “identity” and the claim that Germany and its resources and futures do belong, first and foremost, to *white* Germans.

This claim is also at work when *white* Germans start a conversation with a Person of Colour by asking: “Where do you come from? No, I mean, where do you really come from?” A question out of curiosity? No. Rather, this is a mode of Othering claiming that being German and *white* is Germany’s very norm/ality.

## VI.

To acknowledge the power of social positioning helps to see that such individual experiences or actions are repetitive because they have a system. Afro-Germans are asked these and similar questions again and again; and *white* Germans keep asking them. Therefore, such experiences and actions keep happening repeatedly in one single life – as well as to many people, as everyday racism.

To be aware of this does not make being discriminated against any easier for the respective individuals, nor does it free privileged people from taking responsibility.

But to be aware of discrimination’s systemic omnipresence, helps to become aware of the fact that discrimination is repetitive, because it is driven by power-coded structures and discourses, systematically.

And this helps, in turn, to see that discrimination is not about having an opinion, but about systemic structures and discourses that cannot be fought but systematically – and that means structurally and discursively, within institutions and against power-coded canonical narrations.

This does not bereft individuals of doing something against discrimination. To the contrary, structures, institutions and discourses do not simply exist, they are moulded by individuals. And individual interventions are needed. But they need to be systematically embedded into interventions into structures, institutions, moralities or knowledges.

VII.

Rather than pursuing this goal, though, the contemporary debate about discrimination in Germany has gotten stuck with the “Whether-question”. Not whether its raining or snowing outside, but whether discrimination should be discussed at all. Most needed debates are dismissed as “political correctness” or “identity politics”, as if identities were fancy choices rather than caused by power-coded social positions.

Part of this problem is also the idea that discrimination is only about the discriminated ones: “If you see inequality as a “them” problem or “unfortunate Other”, states Kimberlé Crenshaw, that is the actual problem. Because since when is social inequality not also about the privileged ones.

What makes things even worse is that those who fight discrimination are often blamed for tearing the society apart - as if harming by segregation were not what discrimination itself is all about.

Not minding this is a political stance, and one that protects segregation at that.

While many privileged people still do not invest their agencies into most needed interventions and transformations, others hold that it will do to claim: I do not discriminate anybody. I am not a racist. I am an anti-racist. Full stop.

But true intervention is in need of structural interventions that are informed by expertises and literacy. So, let’s face the “How?” rather than the “Whether?” question: How to intervene into discrimination, as pillared on expertises and competencies as well as knowledge that also dares to un-learn.

VII.

True, this literacy has advanced. And so have systemic interventions. Power’s powerful history of building social orders of inequalities, has been met with literate agencies of intervention that have been powerful, too. Resistance, as fueled by solidarity, has won many

battles. Transformations have caused changes. But this has never amounted to ending discrimination.

For example: The German constitution grants equal rights to all and the German Allgemeine Gleichbehandlungsgesetz (General Equality Law) offers some tools to sue discrimination.

And yet a judicial literacy is needed that does justice to the fact that a law that treats discriminated and privileged ones equally, is not yet guaranteeing true equality.

Discrimination is also ongoing, because interventions did not yet manage to overcome the single-story or the single-issueness of resistance.

Many social movements have oftentimes failed to look beyond their immediate concerns, while even reproducing other dominant power structures.

Suffragetism and feminism in general, for example, have been eager to gain equal rights for women.

Yet until very late in 20<sup>th</sup> century, ‘women’ meant *white* middle class women without even naming this limiting usage of ‘women’.

Whiteness as “unmarked normality” was taken for granted – even to the extent that *white* women spoke on behalf of Black women, while actually silencing them.

In need of intervening into this intervention, Black women have fought for intersectionality as a prism that sees and as a tool that addresses the specificity of both racialized sexism and of racist feminism.

## VIII.

In a polylogue with many Black women\* and women\* of Color, Kimberlé Crenshaw conceptualized intersectionality. In doing so, the law-professor and activist used the case sample of the law case de

Graffenreid vs. General Motors that addressed the specifics of intersectional discrimination against Black women by General Motors.

Starting off from there, intersectionality addresses that power is all about intersectional complexities. Racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and adultism act simultaneously along similar yet different patterns, while shaping each other.

We often say this multitude of power constellations is too complex to ever be grasped. But to simplify those given complexities amounts to not being able to undo them.

This is why intersectionality looks at the multitude of power constellations and respective modes of privileging and discrimination in given complexities

In doing so, intersectionality has to stay true to its origins and reasons for being implemented in the first place.

Intersectionality cannot be detached from anti-racist reflexivity and sincere interventions into any silencing of women of colour – and their agencies.

Thus tuned, intersectionality forms solidarity across positionalities and social movements.

This is how intersectionality eventually piles up sand in the gear of social inequality. In doing so, it criticizes what has been, while also envisioning and building alternate futureS.

FuturES? The future does not happen; and it does not exist in any kind of singular. FutureS are made, polyphonously.

IX.

Our doctoral college for Intersectionality Studies is eager to become such transformation-maker for alternate futureS.

Yet we have to acknowledge that all institutions of (universitarian) knowledge-making that we have known in Germany so far, are deeply



indebted to epistemological structures that are moulded by racist, sexist, ableist or classist knowledge production and respective canonisations and institutional patterns. Being implemented from within these structures also affected the founding pillars of our doctoral college for intersectionality studies.

So far, we are a predominantly *white* structure. For example, 6 out of 8 Principal Investigators, including me, are *white*. Being aware thereof, we are eager to develop strategies that grant that intersectionality is NOT appropriated, de-politicised or white-washed.

This means to me many things, amongst others: That the work of Black women\*, of women\* of Colour, is acknowledged and represented in our work - in terms of whom do we rely on when doing research as well as whose research is funded etc.

Not to appropriate intersectionality also means to me, for example, to understand intersectionality as political intervention, which also comprises that intersectionality without awareness of sexist racism and racist sexism is not intersectionality, but sexist racism.

Accordingly, we have to cope with the fact that our doctoral college or political intersectionality in general cannot simply move into already given universitarian structures that, for example, still celebrate rather than criticize their indebtedness to the *whitecismaleness* of Enlightenment or modernism.

Rather, we have to reconfigure such structures and find modes of undoing the hyper-representation and privileging of able-bodied, *white*, male and income-privileged educational (collective) biographies and epistemologies over those who have been discriminated against intersectionally.

In order to break with such universitarian structures and procedures, our doctoral college will practice a research ethics that will rely on awareness, intervention and solidarity as well as on transdisciplinarity.

Transdisciplinary means, for one thing, to overcome any binarism of academia vs. activism, university vs. social movement or theory *or*

practice. In fact, political intersectionality is not a theory as a kind of meta-levelled gaze, but a political intervention into all societal realms (including universitarian structures) that intersects scholarly research and activism.

Inasmuch as systemic power is affecting every single pore of societal or cultural dynamics on an everyday systemic basis, expertises from various academic fields of humanities, natural sciences and the law need to converse and cooperate. The thus needed overcoming of conventional disciplinary boundaries is a second layer of transdisciplinarity. This transdisciplinarity is put into practice by the disciplinary polylogue as embodied by the Principal Investigators and further Senior Members of the Doctoral College for Intersectionality Studies as well as many International Fellows.

Believing that doing Intersectionality is to inhabit an ongoing circle of transdisciplinary analysis, communication and intervention, the doctoral college will be organised along the intersectional interaction of four working groups.

Three of them follow the core categories analysis, communication and intervention. The fourth one merges these angles by focusing on the empirical fields of labour and solidarity.

For all working groups and projects, the cooperation between academia and social movements is core. Accordingly, mentorates that supervise PhD theses will host both scholars and activists, in given intersections. They will offer expertises in various fields such as transferring a topic into an objective or research questions, or like formulating a state of the art of research or adjusting methodology to academic activism.

These structures profit from the work of activist scholars of Colours from all around the Globe in general and members of our Advisory Board or otherwise pertinent structural pillars of the doctoral college for intersectionality studies like Obioma Nnaemeka, Maisha Auma, Peggy Piesche, Ulrike Lembke and Shankar Raman.

In line with respective resources and many other Germany-based scholar-activists, you, dearest doctoral scholar\*activists, of the doctoral college for intersectionality studies, will also profit from you as the architects of political intersectionality in Germany and beyond.

I could not be more grateful for being allowed to gain intersectional literacy at your side. I have never felt more at home academically, than in the midst of your visions.

Thank you!