Open Letter to the University Board at the University of Bayreuth

In early January 2021, Dr. Hans-Thomas Tillschneider, a member of the state parliament in Saxony-Anhalt for the populist far-right AfD party, triggered a flow of racist and sexist invectives against Prof. Dr. Maureen Maisha Auma, who holds the professorship for Childhood and Diversity Studies at the Hochschule Magdeburg-Stendal. Picking up on Prof. Auma’s observation in an interview with the German daily Der Tagesspiegel about the severe underrepresentation of Black and People of Color (BPoC) scholars at German universities, Dr. Tillschneider has accused her of “reverse racism against white people” and demanded that she should be “put in her place,” thus implying that being Black is incompatible with being German and having the right to shape German academic landscapes.

More than other universities in Germany, some of which already publicly affirmed their support of Prof. Auma, the University of Bayreuth (UBT) needs to take a clear and unequivocal stance in this matter. This urgency stems from the fact that Dr. Tillschneider has the status of a Privatdozent at the Faculty of Languages and Literatures, which makes him an affiliate of our university with a one-course teaching load per academic year. Also, the UBT is home to the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence, a flagship institution on our campus that enjoys a wide international reputation in African Studies and has hosted Prof. Auma on several occasions. As part of its agenda of reconfiguring African Studies, the cluster actively seeks to contribute to changing the researcher demographics in German higher education by increasing the number of BPoC scholars in academic positions. Even though Dr. Tillschneider has targeted Prof. Auma directly and personally, his outrageous assault is equally directed against all BPoC scholars and, by extension, against a research community such as the Africa Multiple Cluster that is firmly committed to creating a transformative space in African Studies and academia more broadly.

We, the signatories of this open letter from professors, lecturers, researchers, students, and staff at the UBT as well as members of the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence based at the African Cluster Centres and other universities, acknowledge that keeping silent amounts to being complicit in Dr. Tillschneider’s abuse of white privilege. Following 772 academics from Germany who signed an open letter to the president of the Deutsche Hochschulverband, and over 300 international signatories of an open letter to the leadership of the University of Bayreuth, we hereby express our solidarity with Prof. Auma. We stand with her, we commend her intellectual rigor, outstanding scholarship and political conscientiousness, and we strongly defend her right to critique structural inequalities and exclusionary practices in higher education contexts in Germany.

Moreover, we strongly believe that our university leadership must not condone this appalling attempt to threaten and intimidate one of the few Black professors in Germany and, by extension, all BPoC scholars and students at the UBT and in the German academic system. While we understand that possible sanctions against Dr. Tillschneider are pending as long as his violation of the UBT anti-discrimination guidelines is under investigation, we do see the necessity for the UBT leadership to take a public stance and renew our university’s commitment to the principles of equality and diversity. Members of the University Board, we ask you to take up your responsibility to implement these principles and values, and to uphold them against all attempts at racist and sexist oppressions. Affirming the UBT’s credibility is even more important against the backdrop of the promise to create a “climate of tolerance and appreciation,” as emphasized in the Structure and Development Plan 2025 and as reflected in the recent adoption of the anti-discrimination guidelines.

Dr. Tillschneider’s advocacy of a far-right islamophobe, xenophobe, sexist, racist, exclusionist worldview is the opposite of what we stand for. He is a disgrace to the Faculty of Languages and Literatures, the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence, and the UBT as a whole. Therefore, Dr. Tillschneider’s affiliation to our university needs to be terminated, whether by revoking his status as Privatdozent or by urging him to renounce it.

Bayreuth, March 2, 2021
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299. Julia Spitznagel, Schulpädagogik, University of Bayreuth
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