

LETTER TO MEMBERS OF DECOLONIZE BAYREUTH

Tanu Biswas
21.03.2021, Bayreuth

Dear Members of Decolonize Bayreuth,

With this letter I would like to appeal for respecting Anna's dignity, a resident of Bayreuth and UBT student who is traumatised by repeated legal actions of a teacher due to a painful conflict that unfolded after a UBT seminar-session on 'power-critical theater didactics'. Please take care not to perpetuate further injustice towards her in thought and action. An article about this case appeared in Falter recently which was shared in your group. There has been a reaction from the teacher's assistant who testified against Anna in court. The teacher's assistant is contesting two paragraphs in a special statement by some members of the GeQuInDi Network. I am a co-author and co-signatory of that statement – and I was one of the persons who argued to keep the particularly contested paragraph in the statement. The goal expressed in the statement is to work towards a more cosmopolitan educational culture at UBT. Signatories are not inviting any competition of 'who is more marginalised' etc. and call for cooperation for constructive engagement to especially improve current research and education practices in interest of BPOC students and junior scholars.

My appeal especially goes out to the student members of this group who might equate 'learning' with intellectual and emotional loyalty to teachers who have power to design curriculum and award grades for performing the tricks they want you to do. My own skin colour, gender, migration and discrimination history in Bayreuth is **not** the motivation of my appeal.



My appeal comes from my professional commitment to adultism-critical pedagogical philosophy and decolonisation through pedagogical practise. Most importantly, my appeal comes from a place of profound empathy and solidarity for Anna, who is legally silenced and psychologically traumatised.

The teacher's legal case against Anna was **not**, as falsely reported in your group, due to a classroom audio recording. As reported by a local newspaper, the central legal argument rested on an accusation of 'character assassination' (Rufmord Kampagne). The trigger for this case construction was the first Falter article which the teacher falsely claimed was authored by Anna. In court, the accusation was not substantiated in the eyes of the judge. Anna **did not** conspire a campaign of 'character assassination' against the teacher. On the contrary, I argue that the teacher's actions have damaged Anna's trustworthiness and image in her university peer group.

As an educator and qualified expert of adultism-critical pedagogical philosophy, I find the manner in which the teacher constructed the legal case e.g. collected 'evidences' etc. is unethical. I find that the way in which the students of the seminar and student representatives of the faculty seem to uncritically accept the pedagogical rationale of the teacher and 'criminalised' Anna, catalyses the injustice. In my view, there is a huge gap between theory and practise here. In my knowledge, there is also no credible decolonial stance where this pedagogical rationale can be justified.

The teacher has repeatedly, not only once – as falsely reported in your group - traumatised Anna, with legal actions. Anna does not have the same access to financial and legal resources or an experienced big city lawyer like the teacher. Sadly, even members of your group who are aware of this, including students and student representatives, seem to silently watch and applaud the use of 'intra-BPOC identity politics' to defend the teacher's pedagogical approach. That deepens the ongoing racism and adultism. To secure one's own legal rights by targetting the weakest and vulnerable is unethical, in my view. The ethical balance lies between what one 'can do' and what 'one must do'. A teacher **can** but **must not** drag a student to court to score a *sense of justice* for themself.

As a teacher it is very easy to argue that a student does not understand theory because they missed class or they did not officially sign up etc. That is one of the powers one gets when one designs a curriculum and could be presented as part of the German concept of a teacher's scientific freedom in Germany. However, such arguments cannot be the basis of instigating doubt, non-compassion and non-empathy towards a student among her peers. That is what Anna seems to be subjected to. Anna must learn to live the rest of her life with some kind of 'trauma management'. This is in addition to her publicly unknown biographical history of growing up as an Afro-German person in German society and educational institutions. The trauma will be part of her future life in Germany and is not comparable to what other actors involved in the court trial (and connected legal actions) will suffer because they were not the primary direct target of legal action and its psychological impacts. I especially invite students of that seminar to reflect whether they find this reality compatible with the theory they learnt as part of their curriculum - if they wish to embrace some philosophical reflection on pedagogy and injustice. I have often wondered: is their experience of witnessing the consequences of the teacher's legal actions contributing to clarity in terms of how they will deal with conflicting situations with their future students in Germany?

The capacity to 'listen deeply' is something educators, especially those committed to decolonialisation through their pedagogy, must persistently strive towards. Developing this capacity includes, learning to understand and respect the resistance of young students, especially those from minority backgrounds. There are pedagogical moves one can make to integrate the resistance as part of the collective learning process. This is by no means easy and very few educators succeed in getting there. Nevertheless, most educators would agree that developing this capacity is pertinent to a project of decolonialisation through pedagogy. From what is revealed about the classroom in the statement shared in your group, it appears rather to be a 'divide and rule' pedagogical strategy where two minorities were pitted against each other in order for the German lecturer to defend that her theory is correct. The point here is that a teacher in Germany can use her scientific freedom to empower or oppress the scientific freedom of the students. For transformative outcomes practices like deep listening, compassion and empathy are necessary. Kindly note, that didactics is not to be confused with pedagogy, and pedagogical philosophy. Didactics have more to do with the subject, pedagogy has to do with relationships and pedagogical philosophy as that which underlies how one navigates the relationships. The details revealed about the classroom pedagogy by one of your members signal that there was a serious quality assurance problem. At least from from an overlapping diversity and pedagogy point of view.

I think that a pedagogy and a pedagogical philosophy where minorities are pitted against each other in order to prove that a teacher is intellectually correct, is an example of bad practise. I also think that accessing students' private communication in order to construct a legal case of 'character assassination' against a minority student is unethical. If a teacher defends this in the name of pedagogical responsibility, students have an additional responsibility to examine the argument critically before simply showing loyalty to a teacher.

Injustice ruins human relationships because it deepens existing non-empathy, non-compassion and invites further fighting. It is the responsibility of all members of both Decolonize Bayreuth as well as GeQuInDi to ensure that this injustice does not instigate further differences among BPOC community members in Bayreuth. My primary appeal to this group is to respect Anna's dignity. There are legal restrictions on Anna placed by the teacher hence she may not freely post statements like your members. In addition, the past two years have left a deep trauma that will be a defining part of her memories of university-life in the German society.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, Anna is a highly intelligent young person, she has a peace-loving character and could never be interested in assassinating anyone's character. Her question regarding the appropriateness of the teacher's pedagogy for herself as an Afro-German person was and remains legitimate. She is very cooperative when she is given a fair chance and treated respectfully. Even if your group members succeed in establishing that the particular moment in the classroom was not racist or adultist, what unfolded over the last two years and its traumatic impact on Anna is an example of high levels of racism and adultism. Therefore, at least in this group – I plead that members do not perpetuate further hate and doubt towards Anna and respect her dignity in thought and action.

Sincerely,

Dr. Tanu Biswas

Post Scriptum: I welcome further correspondence with me directly via email:

Tanushree.Biswas@uni-bayreuth.de / or via the contact form on my website here:

<https://www.tanubiswas.net/contact.html>

You may freely write in German or English (French, Portuguese, Italian, Hindi, Marathi or a Scandinavian language is also fine). The language is not important as long as the intended communication is respectful, plausible and will contribute to positive transformation.