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1. Introduction: Diversity, Academia, and the Public Discourse

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Cultural diversity forms part of our “common heritage of humanity” (UNESCO 62) and constitutes a fundamentally human need and a value in its own right. While the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (adopted in Paris in 2001) quoted here prizes diversity as a “source of exchange, innovation and creativity” (62) and eventually one of sustainability, diversity has over the past two decades risked declining into a catch-all term. It has been appropriated by a variety of interest groups for their very divergent agendas. By some, it has been ‘charged’ with activism, while at the same time, it has been institutionalised into BA and MA programmes at a number of universities and thus been demarcated as a study discipline of its own. Ever since diversity has been recognised by HR departments as a factor for economic success – one that can be generated through the synergy effects of pluralistic, international work teams, for example – diversity in the sense of ‘diversity management’ has become frowned upon, e.g. for its tokenism in workforce recruitment (Krell et al. 11). For psychologists and social scientists, on the other hand, *relational* diversity, the variety of one’s relationships and social bonds, has been recognised as an important factor for personal well-being (Nagel 232).

Diversity routinely refers to one or several of the so-called ‘big 8’: “race, gender, ethnicity/nationality, organizational role/function, age, sexual orientation, mental/physical ability, religion” (Krell et al. 9). All of these socially constructed categories of difference are interdependent, which invites for intersectional engagement. While an individual can identify as at the same time LGBTQIA+ and Muslim, to name but one example, “diversity is typically understood as a feature of a group or a collective [...] rather than as a feature of any particular individual” (Vitikainen 74). So while an individual can claim allegiance to a plurality of social groups or identifications, only a group of people can meaningfully be referred to as ‘diverse’. Diversity thus becomes a relevant category in “the workplace, education, different physical spaces (e.g. city or neighborhood), and local, national, and global politics” (74). It has “a profound effect both on the general organization of society, as well as on those bonds – identities, sense of belonging – that tie the members of these societies together” (74).

The ‘big 8’ are far from innocent categories and not all of them are equally visible, especially if “psychological tendencies, abilities, or preferences” (Jones, Dovidio, and Vietze 4) are added to these markers of difference. All of them, however, imply a human or cultural norm and thus entail hierarchies of power and different levels of agency. Any scholarly interest in diversity therefore always has to take into consideration “the underlying structures and patterns of e.g. discrimination and bias that are

often embedded in the social norms and institutional structures of society” (Vitikainen 75).

Diversity studies has emerged only recently as a transdisciplinary academic field in its own right, focusing on the essentially interdependent markers of social distinction – culture, religion, ethnicity, language, gender, sexuality, ability, age, or class – and investigating how these impact on social dynamics, mental well-being, political decisions, or economic developments and the ensuing systems of privilege and oppression. The co-editors of *Diversity Studies: Grundlagen und disziplinäre Ansätze* (2007) have assembled contributions from scholars working, among others, in fields as diverse as women’s and gender studies, ageing studies, migration and postcolonial studies, antisemitism research, and disability studies as well as anti-discrimination or equal opportunity research under the umbrella term of ‘diversity studies’. According to Vitikainen, major disciplines involved in the field are sociology, psychology, economics, law, political science, philosophy, and cultural studies. The ongoing establishment of the field can be seen in the foundation of diversity studies as a study discipline, e.g. at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and the University of San Francisco, the latter advertising their BA in Critical Diversity Studies as a means to study “historical and contemporary social constructions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and religion” (University of San Francisco, website). In 2026, an open access, German-language introduction, *Kulturwissenschaftliche Diversity Studies: Eine Einführung*, will be published, which, according to the editors Hanna Höfer and Sigrid Nieberle, is meant to bring to the fore the contributions of language, literature, and media in the critical reflection on socio-cultural diversity. And finally, the launch of the peer-reviewed *International Journal of Critical Diversity Studies* in 2018, based in Witwatersrand, South Africa, further attests to the maturation of the field.

With the essays from English Linguistics, British and American Cultural and Literary Studies assembled in this volume, we aim at making a further contribution to diversity studies from an English and American studies perspective. It was in May 2023 that we decided to dedicate an entire academic year (autumn 2023 to summer 2024) to the critical engagement with diversity. Students of two English-taught Master’s programme tracks at the University of Bamberg, the MA English and American Studies as well as the European Joint Master’s Programme in English and American Studies, were invited to approach the topic from various (trans-)disciplinary angles and to engage in a continued scholarly debate around the significance of cultural diversity for the future of the humanities, for themselves – forming part of an international student body –, for the international classroom as well as for society at large. In a variety of settings, students discussed diversity and plurality in the areas of language, religion, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, ability, etc. and their literary as well as cultural representations.

Little did we know that, when we first sketched out a programme for the upcoming academic year 2023/24, diversity would become even more topical and come under more fervent attack because of both new and ongoing – but newly accelerated – developments around the globe. To name a few, albeit disparate, examples: the pro-Palestinian protests at numerous universities following the eruption of armed conflict in Gaza in October 2023 sparked a debate around how to deal with political divides – and antisemitism specifically – in the student body. In the US, according to PEN America (Mehan et al. n. pag.), more than 4,000 books were banned during the school year 2023/24 – a sad all-time record. In many cases these were titles from young adult fiction featuring PoC or LGBTQIA+ characters. Only a year before, new legislation in states like Iowa, Florida or South Carolina had prohibited classroom debate around sexual orientation and gender identity, thereby promoting heteronormativity and stigmatising, among others, homosexuality, trans, and non-binary people. In very subtle ways, the increased use of generative AI chatbots also entails exclusion: AI comes with a white, heteronormative, ableist, and racial bias.¹ Laws regulating gender-sensitive language were introduced in Bavaria on 1 April 2024, a symptom of a larger political trend towards regulating the German language for the sake of ‘clarity’, thereby rendering non-normative persons – such as genderqueer, trans, or non-binary people – (linguistically) invisible. In a similar vein, the British Supreme Court ruled only a year later (April 2025) that the legal definition of the term “woman” must only apply to people assigned female at birth and thus classifies trans women as men; it understands sex as only binary and similarly excludes trans or non-binary people. In Bavaria, the official argument made in favour of the exclusion of special characters in written language signifying inclusion and diversity, such as asterisk or colon, is to keep an open discourse as befits an open, liberal society since certain individuals’ “missionary zeal” had led to a “factual coercion” to use gender-sensitive language.² In the UK, the Supreme Court ruling followed campaigns denigrating trans women driven by the need to protect women by disallowing men into women’s spaces. This very real need to protect women from (domestic) violence and abuse has however significantly imposed on the safety of trans women and all trans people as the ruling has now undermined gender recognition certificates (Human Rights Watch) and thus endangered the social group most likely to experience violence (trans and gay people) even more (U of Surrey).

A particularly overt example of a reactionary treatment of issues of diversity can be found in the 2025 US DEI debate, that is, the debate around how American programmes of diversity, equity, and inclusion were blamed for anything ranging from an aviation accident to an alleged accumulation of inadequate workforce who were

¹ See for example data journalist Meredith Broussard’s interview with *The Guardian* (Corbyn n. pag.).

² Our translation of Bavarian Minister of the Interior Joachim Herrmann’s words as quoted in Jerabek.

allegedly only hired because of the requirements of DEI. According to major news outlet CNN, DEI have not only “come under attack” but were “dividing America” as Nicquel Terry Ellis claims in her article (Ellis n. pag.). Very much unlike the academic discourse on the positive effects of DEI in practice, which Melina Duarte, Katrin Losleben, and Kjersti Fjørtoft show in their 2023 essay collection *Gender Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Academia*, US politics were quick to abolish DEI programmes and disputed people’s qualifications if they were in any way non-white or non-normative, (wrongly) claiming that DEI hiring policies have only led to the employment of unqualified personnel. Positive effects of DEI on society and economy, as outlined for example in a series of reports by McKinsey from 2015 to 2020 (one of which is aptly named “Diversity wins: how inclusion matters”), were negated in Donald Trump’s “war against such policies” (Ellis n. pag.). Trump’s argument in terminating DEI programmes is evident in the title of the respective presidential action published on the page of the White House on 20 January 2025: “Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing”. Diversity and the right to social participation are regarded as impediments to a positive socio-economic and cultural development – counter to any actual research conducted on the topic – and non-normative people are stigmatised, ostracised, and, at worst, prosecuted.

Generally speaking, populist political rhetoric and anti-immigrant sentiment have been on the rise throughout Europe, with very real repercussions for the safety and mental well-being of our international MA students. What is conspicuous in these examples is the ostensible need to protect ‘society’ from ‘ideology’ without further defining what is understood by ideology or how this ideology reacts to contemporary dominant culture. Denigrating any political opponent’s position simply as ‘ideology’ not only speaks to an ignorant use of the term, it also unveils the underlying populism of a debate that would rather resort to emotion-based populist discourse than fact- and science-based, neutral language. This, then, is what research and academic discourse has the power to do. By shedding light on the concepts of power, knowledge, and ideology in the public discourse and how they can and have been employed for cultural and political aims is one way of countering ill-informed polemics or outright misinformation. Given the sheer mass of opinion available online at any hour of the day – often presented as semi-scientific without being so – and the increased global hostility towards science and scholarship, questions of diversity and inclusion or representation of diversity are often led with particular vitriol. The popular discourse seems to be composed of opposing factions – proponents of a certain ‘ideology’ – and the actual concerns of non-normative people either get lost or are being weaponised. What, then, is the ‘purpose’ of a scholarly debate – if any at all? In this volume, we follow an understanding of academia as a necessary contributor to the public discourse that provides critical discussions of terminology, observes and describes public discourse, analyses the inclusion and exclusion of (in

the case of the current topic) issues of diversity in society and their representations in literature and culture at large. It would be a common misconception to assume that approaches to studying diversity necessarily must start at the ideological top, that is, by discussing the meaning of the term itself or the significance diversity holds for any given society. On the contrary, by looking into individual films or books, we are just as able to see the importance of a diverse and inclusive society on the microlevel of the analysis of the respective source. Challenges to a rigid normativity with all its negative repercussions on social cohesion, such as the strategic ostracisation of non-normativity for a variety of reasons, are just as visible in case studies as they are on the macrolevel of society as a whole. This is what this volume does, it challenges the idea that one certain norm exists and it shows that what is perceived to be ‘the norm’ is a construct based on assumptions of reality rooted in dominant culture’s reading of ‘truth’, a concept French philosopher Michel Foucault already heavily criticised in 1977.

In her introduction to the inaugural volume of the *International Journal of Critical Diversity Studies*, Melissa Steyn from the Wits Centre for Diversity Studies reminds us of the centuries-long debate around the “ideal incarnation of the human [...] [that] has enabled a small group of people to set the terms for understanding difference, establish the rules of engagement, and institutionalise social arrangements with themselves as a norm” (7), a norm that has been and in varying degrees still is at the same time “(West)Eurocentric, White Supremacist, Colonialist, Heteropatriarchal, Christonormative, Nationalist, Capital(abl)ist, Classist, Humanist/Anthropocentric, and Militarist” (7). She denounces those reactionary social and political developments that nostalgically strive to (re-)create “simpler, homogenous identities, times and spaces, organized along the lines of domination that are familiar and do not challenge the interests of the historical beneficiaries” (8). As teachers, our own critical engagement with diversity is informed by the ethical imperative to practice a lived “culture that values the variety of inputs from academics and organisational staff and students from different backgrounds and enables constructive encounters among them in the joint process of producing, disseminating, and receiving knowledge” (Duarte, Losleben, and Fjørtoft 1). As researchers, we align ourselves with the aims of the *Journal*, which envisions “an orientation of critical hope in the belief that scholarship can, in however a modest way, contribute to a social imaginary that envisions a more equitable, caring, safer and sustainable world” (Steyn 9). This, in effect, is what sparked our desire to engage with the umbrella term of ‘diversity’ on an academic level and in a teaching and conference environment.

Throughout the academic year 2023/24, MA students from Bamberg, Barcelona, Graz, Krakow, New York, Paris, Pécs, and Venice met online for a series of online lectures taught by professors from within the consortium of the European Joint Master’s Programme, giving students an opportunity to engage in discussion with MA

students and teachers from partner universities alike: Manfred Krug (University of Bamberg) inaugurated the series with a multimodal approach to a Michael Jackson music video, Andrew Monnickendam (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) introduced students to the transdisciplinary field of Food Studies, Roberta Maierhofer (University of Graz) contributed with a talk on Inter-American Perspectives in Cultural Studies, and Mena Mitrano and Pia Masiero (both from Università Ca' Foscari Venezia) invited students to think about the challenges and affordances of first person narration.

The lecture series was followed by two student and alumni conferences entitled “Diversity: Linguistic, Cultural and Literary Perspectives”, a title which reflects the three specialisations within our MA Programme – English linguistics, cultural and literary Studies. On 25 April 2024, twenty Joint MA students and alumni from all eight partner universities³, whose proposals had been accepted in a competitive selection process, gave their talks in front of fellow students, Bamberg teaching staff as well as the coordinators of the Joint Programme, who had all travelled to Bamberg for their annual meeting. This was the fourth student and alumni conference organised by a Joint Programme university and so far the largest of its kind and an excellent opportunity for Bamberg students to meet – face to face – some of the students and professors they had previously only met within the online lecture series. The conference was completed by two keynote lectures, one held by Wladyslaw Witalisz (Uniwersytet Jagiellonski w Krakowie) on the power of political farce in Carlos Morton’s *Trumpus Caesar* and one by Kedon Willis (City College of New York) on “Queer Literatures of the Caribbean”.

The second student conference, for students of the MA English and American Studies (regular track), took off with Chandni (Anjali) Rampersad’s (University of Duisburg-Essen) guest lecture on “Head-dresses, Hoops and Stays: Fashioning Ladies in the 18th Century” on 13 June 2025 and continued the next day with a full conference day started by Christoph Heyl’s (University of Duisburg-Essen) keynote lecture entitled “Miss Jones takes an omnibus to Baghdad: Perceptions of Urban Diversity in London”. It was followed by six papers delivered by MA students from Bamberg. This was the first instalment of what we have envisioned as a series of student conferences called “Building Bridges, Bridging Gaps”, to be continued in the summer semester 2026. Our goal is to give MA students a platform where they can practice

³ In April 2024, the partner universities of the consortium of the European Joint Master’s Programme in English and American Studies were the University of Bamberg, Germany; the Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz, Austria; the Université Paris Cité, France; the Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia, Italy; the Uniwersytet Jagiellonski w Krakowie, Poland; and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain with the City College of the City University of New York, USA, and the Pécsi Tudományegyetem / University of Pécs, Hungary serving as additional mobility partners. For more information, see here: <https://www.uni-bamberg.de/en/ma-jpeas/>.

academic skills in a safe environment and prepare for postgraduate academic challenges.

The present volume assembles the top nine student and alumni papers from both conferences and features the two lectures by Andrew Monnickendam and Kedon Willis, which frame the collection of student essays. In keeping with the overall topic, these essays provide highly varied approaches to diversity – topics that are as diverse as their eleven authors of all stages of university education from MA student to professor emeritus and hailing from seven countries. The following articles use literature since the nineteenth century, modern film, newspaper coverage, and even an entire branch of research to contribute their approach to diversity studies.

In the opening chapter, Kedon Willis focuses on a postcolonial reading of the representation of queerness in Marlon James's 2016 novel *The Brief History of Seven Killings* (ch. 2). Next, Kae Borkeloh takes an intersectional look at the 2016 film *Moonlight* to show how the film negotiates queerness and black masculinities (ch. 3). Ege A. Özbek continues the topic of filmic masculinity and analyses the connection of postfeminism and fatherhood in the 2018 film *Leave No Trace* (ch. 4). Then, Lara Brändle takes us to the Victorian Age and compares how the literary modes of Gothic and realism affect the representation of madness and sanity in murderesses (ch. 5). Using the rare poetic genre of the choreopoem, Katharine Wilson analyses black women's trauma in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (ch. 6). M. Angela Sperlí then looks at the literary representation of the "New Negro Woman" at the turn of the twentieth century in Jessie Fauset's novel *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (ch. 7). Next, Kristina A. Steiner uses her study on Walter Tevis's novel *The Queen's Gambit* to comment on the lack of representation of women in male-dominated sports (ch. 8). Following that, Anna Lorenzon analyses the character Joelle van Dyne in David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* to assess how the novel prioritises aural culture over the dominance of visual culture (ch. 9). Leonie Unkel contributes both to narratological theory and diversity when she introduces ageing as a category within narratology in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (ch. 10). In the only linguistic article in this collection, Eva Katharina Bauer presents her comparative study of the linguistic representation of climate change in news outlets with a focus on temporal perspectives (ch. 11). Rounding off the volume with another keynote, in the last chapter, Andrew Monnickendam introduces the rather young field of food studies and its contemporary issues and thus points to yet another future direction of diversity studies (ch. 12).

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