



# A MASTER IN CRITICAL DIASPORA RACE AND LIBERATION STUDIES

## SUMMARY BLUEPRINT STUDY

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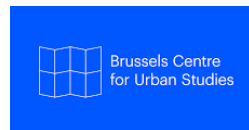
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## Summary Blueprint Study

**A master in Critical Diaspora, Race and Liberation Studies:  
Why do we need it and what should it look like?**

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# INTRODUCTION

Calls to decolonise the university in South Africa and the United Kingdom also occurred in continental Europe. In the Netherlands, students occupied the University of Amsterdam in 2015, hanging a banner on its main administrative building 'het Maagdenhuis', stating 'No Democratisation without Decolonisation' (De Jong, Icaza, Vasquez and Withaekx, 2017:1).

In Belgium, student associations started to organize with similar claims in 2017. These calls grew gradually and intensified after the Black Lives Matter global uprising of 2020. Demands to decolonise the University connect to previous anticolonial struggles in the Global South as well as to the calls in the margins of academic institutions in the Global North, voiced by African American, Black, Muslim, feminist, Indigenous and other racialised scholars in the USA and other parts of the Global North. In the wake of the 2015 and 2016 #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, and #Why is My Curriculum White? student movements questioned the high fees, the white curriculum, the white professors, the eurocentrism and the racism in their institutions.

Decolonisation can be defined as an intellectual endeavor and a social justice project that questions a western knowledge production that considers itself superior and neutral and that obscures nonwestern forms of knowledge. It also questions the deliberate exclusion of the role of colonialism, coloniality, race and racism in understanding current realities (Grosfoguel 2007; Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mbembe 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015). Can universities be fully and structurally decolonized? Probably not.

What is certain, is that certain initiatives can contribute to more racial justice for students and communities of colour. One of the possible initiatives in that strand is **the creation of a Master Programme in Critical Diaspora, Race and Liberation Studies.**

In his chapter 'Ethnic studies majors and archiving initiatives as crucial tools of Liberation', Adefioye (2021) argues that 'we need to continue to do the work to stop centering white European intellectual production by anchoring our understanding of black studies as a degree course' (Adefioye, 2021: 214). He further cites Kehinde Andrews, who created the first Black Studies programme in the United Kingdom, arguing that 'Black studies is also vital because it not only aims to change the face but also the nature of universities. Any approach rooted in the experience of black populations will quickly realize the serious issues of discrimination and exclusion faced across the globe. We therefore cannot be content to gain access to academia and we have to ensure that black studies can be used to connect the university into the struggles to improve conditions in the wider society' (Andrews 2016 cited in Adefioye, 2021: 214).

Creating a master programme inspired by the Black Studies examples in the USA and elsewhere, and formatted to the European and Belgian context, can bring new, or silenced and better knowledge, while contributing to more racial and social justice.

The idea to create such a master programme starts from the notion that racialized and marginalized people's lives are not sufficiently registered within European and Belgian society. The contribution of racialized minorities to the arts, sciences, philosophical debates, and mobilizations for social justice is not known widely, and is not sufficiently taught at universities.

This knowledge gap and the exclusion of minority perspectives and contributions prevent a better understanding of issues of racism and discrimination today. The creation of a master programme in Critical Diaspora, Race and Liberation Studies could archive, valorise and teach these contributions, create safer and braver spaces for racialized students and deliver a modest contribution to more racial justice and decolonized knowledge production.

The **Blueprint Study for a Master in Diaspora, Race and Liberation Studies** is based on qualitative research with people of colour. Grounded in research including a literature review and three focus groups with students, professors and significant actors within minority communities –and four interviews with changemakers in the field of Black studies, racism and decoloniality in the United Kingdom, Belgium and the Netherlands, this study has three objectives.

The first part aims to review how black studies programmes in the USA have contributed to more racial justice and literacy.

The second part of the study explores black studies in the United Kingdom and burgeoning decolonial practices that exist in the Netherlands and Belgium.

The third part presents a vision for an ideal master programme in 'Critical diaspora, Race and Liberation studies'.

The final part concludes with remaining questions, possible traps and pathways for the realization of the master programme.

Using African–American studies as a template from which we can learn given its history of more than fifty years and a journey that has been complicated, and contested with varied iterations, this study aspires to create a program that is rooted in the different racialised groups in Belgium and specifically focuses on (the intersections of) Sub–Saharan, North African and Middle Eastern and South–eastern European communities.

## PART 1

### The black studies reference

Black Studies in the USA are known by different terms such as Africana Studies, Black Studies, Afro– American Studies, African– American Studies, or African Diaspora Studies (Fenderson et al., 2012: 2). Based on the name and location, these programmes embody a discipline that is infused with varying levels of radicality and beginnings (Aldridge and Young, 2000). What is important to notice is that these study programmes were born out of Black struggle, both within and outside the university. They were not top–down initiatives created by a university administration. They were born out of student occupations, sit–ins and mobilizations by black and other minority students and their allies in the 1960 and 1970s. These mobilizations were also transnationally linked to the anti–colonial and independence struggles in Africa. The creation of the Black Studies programmes can be seen as a continuum to the Black Liberation Movement, both the Civil Rights struggle from 1955–65 and Black Power that spans from 1965–75 (Stewart, 2004). Thus, when thinking of Black Studies, it is more appropriate to envision it as a Black Studies movement (Fenderson et al., 2012).

#### *Not all that rosy*

Black nationalists had defended the understanding that without its own institutions where new knowledge could be cultivated, Black people would not progress and could never be fully valued citizens of societies like the United States.

The Black Studies programmes were a middle–ground position. They are 'own' departments and 'own' study programmes but integrated in the often white–led universities. Black studies departments were thus being kneaded into the fold of the university structure. Often and until today, scholars must spend countless hours in meetings trying to prove the worth of their departments, convincing university

administrations of needed budget and more faculty staff. The institutionalization of black studies went hand in hand with a loss of radicalization and politization (Rojas, 2007). At the same time discrimination of Black and other racialized groups and personnel in universities continues, as well as the fight against underfunding of Black Studies departments. The establishment of Black Studies programmes was thus no miracle tool, and can, by itself, not decolonize a university. However, it did set important steps towards more racial justice.

### *The contribution of Black Studies towards more racial justice*

Knowing that Black Studies programmes alone cannot lead to a full decolonization of the University, how did they contribute to more racial justice?

Instead of changing the institution at its root, the creation of Black studies resulted in the creation of another type of expression, a different type of approach and new paradigms. Although white institutions continued to create policies and bureaucracies that consolidated white power, black studies departments 'set in motion a repertoire of practices, of intellectual technologies, that have essentially transformed the study of the human sciences in the United States' (Spillers, 2020: 6). Rejecting colonial patriarchal thought, black studies have uncovered different angles of histories and fostered a "multidirectional flow of information, knowledge creation and archiving" by including oral traditions and other non-Western knowledge in what we know, how we learn, do research and commemorate (Spillers, 2020).

Black Studies continue to contribute to histories and epistemologies that might have not made it into institutions or into archives. These programmes allow black students to know their histories away from the hierarchizing anthropological white gaze. The contributions to racial literacy benefit all students following these research programmes but is also valorised beyond the Black Studies programmes and the



university walls by teachers, schools, civil society movements and citizens. Black Studies have contributed enormously to new forms of knowledge production and understandings of mechanisms of racism and discrimination and the impact thereof.

These legacies and achievements are unseen in Europe, a continent in which these topics are still dominantly studied without making use of the experiential knowledge of those living it as a daily reality.

As a result of Black Studies and Women's studies movements, many other programmes, such as black women's studies, Chicano/a Studies, Indigenous Studies, Asian/Pacific Island Studies, queer studies, , were later developed at American universities (Guy-Sheftall, 1992; Jones et al. 1994; Rodriguez 2000).

In summary, one can say that the relationship between Black Studies departments and the university is a mutually agreed on relationship that appears to be symbiotic. Although white institutions continue to maintain power, Black studies departments were given legitimacy as their produced knowledge was part of the 'university', the site par excellence that represents 'true' knowledge. At the same time Black studies departments have given the university validation, showing that they are evolving and stay current (Rojas, 2007).

## PART 2

### Beyond the USA. Black studies in the United Kingdom and burgeoning decolonial practices in the low countries.

Based on interviews with key figures, Kehinde Andrews, professor in Black Studies at Birmingham City University and Zawdie Sandvliet, lecturer in Social Studies and Afro–Dutch Studies at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, this second section explores European developments in the creation of black studies or alternative decolonial practices and mobilizations.

#### *Black studies programme at Birmingham City University*

The relatively long history of Black Studies in the US is not to be found in Europe. As Kehinde Andrews, founder of the first and only Black studies programme in the United Kingdom explains: 'the first attempts though, to introduce the idea happened ... at the University of Kent in the 1970s, and there have been courses on African history and Black Studies ideas brought into the university by Black scholars (Andrews, 2020)'.

These attempts were not full-fledged programs that only came more recently. A full Black Studies degree, with a cohort of staff who do research in the field, was established at Birmingham City University in 2017 and is pioneering. 'Most important is that Black Studies is about liberation and transformation and less steeped in colonial history' (Andrews, 2020). In other words, this is a very different approach from many African or Caribbean Studies programmes, often set up as colonial projects with a Eurocentric approach. These are or were often programmes that primarily aim to study the "native" other, whereas in Black studies programmes, "studying" Black people is not central to the aim. 'The Black Studies program at Birmingham is not born out of nothing. It stems from 50 plus years of work that has been done outside the Universities' walls, by the Black supplementary school

movement's work in the community, creating new knowledge and pedagogy often taught on Saturdays to Black children whose parents wish to provide them with knowledge and perspectives not taught at schools, and to complement for the impact of racism in regular schools' (Andrews, 2020).

### *The example of the study programme Afro-Nederlandse Studies*

The idea for a course in 'Afro-Nederlandse Studies (Afro-Dutch Studies) was first proposed by Zawdie Sandvliet when the University of Amsterdam launched a call to allow individuals to propose a course that had the chance of being offered by the university. Sandvliet proposed the idea of the Afro Nederlandse Studies and was able to make it to the 2nd round of the selection process. The institution first did not want to go ahead with Sandvliet's proposal because they claimed there was already a similar course on offer, referring to a course called 'Wing of Slavery', given by a white Dutch lecturer Michiel van Kempen.

Sandvliet realized that if one wants to build on the idea of such a study as the one he proposed, which focusses on historical corrections offered by Black teachers from a decolonial perspective, one must go outside the University. Eventually, following initial complications, another faculty picked up on Sandvliet's subject and the course was organized at the University of Amsterdam for 1 year.

Pointing at a reality where white male teachers push underrepresented experts to the margins, Sandvliet calls for a cooperation in which experts of colour in the margins can move towards centre. Sandvliet searched for people who he could talk to. Both Black Dutch scholars like Frank Dragtenstein and Gloria Wekker and white Dutch scholars such as Elizabeth Buettner proved to be allies. In October 2018, the first classes began, consisting of field trips and six guest lecturers. The course comprised a historical and thematic section, like some African American studies courses in the United States. The theoretical section was based on the books by African-American historian and scholar Joe William Trotter Jr.

After UvA, the subject went to the Hogeschool van Amsterdam (College of Amsterdam, HvA) since the department of social work secured a grant for organizing the course (a student engagement and social impact grant). Later, there was an occupation at the social studies department at UvA, to diversify the curriculum and students at UvA also asked for the subject to return.

The example of the initiative on Afro-Nederlandse studies by Zawdie Sandvliet highlights how allies within the university are crucial to set up similar initiatives, but also how organizing such a course outside the university can be empowering and liberating. Moreover, experience from the Afro-Nederlandse studies course shows how students benefit. They are stimulated to self-organise, and further become allies pleading for the need of similar initiatives within their institution. Another example of a burgeoning decolonial practice is the Fatima Mernissi Chair at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB).

### *The Fatima Mernissi Chair at the VUB*

Fatima Mernissi, a renowned Moroccan sociologist and one of the founders of Islamic Feminism, died in Morocco on 30 November 2015. Two Belgian-Moroccan alumnae of the Free University of Brussels (Vrije Universiteit Brussel, VUB), Saida Sakkali, Senior project coordinator King Baudouin Foundation and Yamila Idrissi, lawyer and former Belgian politician, recall the liberating role Fatima Mernissi played in their lives and are committed to keep her legacy alive. Sakkali and Idrissi stressed that fact that Mernissi and other important Muslim feminist voices were not taught at the university, highlighting the continuing Eurocentric approach to university knowledge. Sakkali and Idrissi decided to approach the university hierarchy and addressed the creation of a Fatima Mernissi Chair or Fatima Mernissi Award at the VUB that could play an important societal role by offering a space for non-Western scholars and knowledge.

With support of allies such as Professor Karen Celis and Professor Sarah Bracke and backing of the president of the University Caroline

Pauwels, the provost Patrick Stouthuysen and the Dean of Faculty of Social Sciences & Solvay Business School Joël Branson, the VUB Fatima Mernissi Chair was officially launched on 26 January 2017 with Iman Lechkar, a Moroccan Belgian anthropologist as the chair holder.

The Chair aims to reorient questions on Islam and Gender introducing new knowledge, research questions and research fields. An important achievement of the chair is the creation of the course Islam & Gender which offers a decolonial perspective on the subject by offering an extensive reading list featuring important contributions by scholars of colour and by creating a platform for people of colour to present their work in guest lectures.

The Fatima Mernissi Chair cooperates with other universities, secondary schools and civil society organizations and actors to develop yearly programmes outside the university to co-create and support spaces where marginalized groups of the European metropolitan capital can express their aspirations and frustrations, and where they can compare their experiences to other struggles against dominant patriarchal, colonial and imperial structures.

Since 2017, the Fatima Mernissi Chair is looking for pathways to embed the course and activities outside the university wall in a larger master programme with a decolonial approach.

## *Belgian and Dutch student mobilizations in the wake of #RhodesMustFall*

In the wake of #Rhodes Must Fall, there were different movements to challenge hegemony, the curriculum and the white university. In February of 2015, an important building of the University of Amsterdam was occupied. A part of the building was months later renamed 'The University of Colour' (Okinyi, 2015; de Jong et al., 2017). In the same year, a student organization called The New Urban Collective focused on the need for academia to be more inclusive, asking the very direct question of why the university was white. The collective also pointed to the work Dutch scholars like Zihni Özdil and Gloria Wekker had done.

In a lecture given in March 2015 at the 'University of Colour', at the occupied Maagdenhuis location, Wekker pointed to the fact that the kind of contestation that was happening at the time made her "elated" since it is work she had been doing for thirty years.

Also inspired by #Rhodes Must Fall and #Why is my Curriculum White movements in combination with the impact of the Black Lives Matter on global scale in 2020, various student organisations in Belgium such as WeDecolonizeVUB and Umoja Ghent started working on decolonizing the university and tackling the dominant Eurocentric, patriarchal and white character of the institution. This was in solidarity with other student organisations like Karibu Leuven, Undivided vzw and Ayo Antwerp. WeDecolonizeVUB was officially founded in September 2021. As a student project it aims at recentring racialized students and their knowledge at the university by creating a safer space for the racialized students and events to counter the western dominated knowledge production.

In December 2020 Umoja Ghent wrote an open letter demanding change and outlining how decolonization at an UGhent could occur. In March 2021, Undivided launched the DecolonizeKULEuvenManifesto, 10 demands to decolonize KULEuven. In May 2021 the Flemish and Brussels student organizations: Ayo, ASCOM, Karibu, Undivided,

Umoja and WeDecolonizeVUB held an event to discuss the decolonial parcours they walked in past academic year after BLM. This was the first event of its kind; the main takeaway was that the urgency of decolonization is not recognized by the university and as a result it rests on the shoulders of racialized students. However, this is not a task for students alone as this is a structural and institutional matter.

In order to create a decolonial shift in academic institutes different types of engagements and cooperation are required. Whilst the initiatives in Belgium and the Netherlands listed above are far from exhaustive, they show the increasing call for decolonized curricula and universities, less Eurocentric teaching and an awareness of how race, racism and colonialism persist in current academia. A master's programme in Critical Diaspora, Race and Liberation Studies can contribute to these legitimate demands. In the following part we will discuss what an ideal master should look like.

## PART 3

### The Ideal Master's. What does it look like? What should it do?

The third section of this study presents a vision of what an ideal Master programme in Critical Diaspora, Race and Liberation Studies might look like and how it can contribute to racial justice. It draws further on the literature review, the interviews and focus groups. Four individual interviews and three focus groups were organized with a total of 15 individuals: racialized activists, racialized students and professors.

Building on the rich work on the decolonization of universities by Olivia Rutazibwa (2018), we have partly organized the rich information collected under the three de-colonizing strategies Rutazibwa proposes: de-mythologizing, de-silencing and de-materializing. This format did not inspire our interviews before-hand. However, after intensive readings of the transcriptions and analysis of the interviews and focus groups, it appeared that the key messages voiced by the activists, students and professors are very much related to these three possible strategies.

Firstly, the interviewees all pointed to the need for such a masters because of the need for new, different and more pluriverse knowledge than the knowledge that is dominantly transmitted in white-led universities. This very much refers to the de-mythologizing strategy as named by Rutazibwa inviting us to reconsider how we understand the world and our social reality. It asks to de-mythologize the European myth as a world without racism, but only racists, to de-mythologize the modernity of enlightenment, democracy, human rights and industrial revolution as 'white innocence' (Wekker, 2016) without mentioning the role of the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism and the colonized therein.



Secondly, interviewees referred to the important task of a Master in Critical Diaspora, Race and Liberation studies to re–think the

questions of who the experts are and what we consider as legitimate expertise. This closely relates to what Rutazibwa calls the 'de–silencing' strategy of colonized education: "who has the microphone and why? who/what type of knowledge is (not) around the table and why' (Rutazibwa 2018).

Thirdly, the interviewees deeply reflected on what this programme should do, and why it matters. The interviewees forcefully pointed to the need for this programme to contribute to social change, racial justice, feed back to the racialized minorities and the re–distribution of power relations. This closely ties to what Rutazibwa has called the de–materiality strategy, the contribution of the knowledge for 'thinking the world otherwise', to contribute to more social and racial justice, to free the world from global injustice, to 'liberate' oppressed groups.

These three types of decolonizing strategies that the new master should pursue, 'de–mythologizing', 'de–silencing' and 'de–materiality' can also be referred to as what Patricia Hill Collins has called the liberating potential of new knowledge making (1991).

## PART 4

### Remaining questions, possible traps and concrete steps to be taken for the creation of the master

#### *Racialized and/or white students and how?*

A central question discussed during the focus groups and interviews was how to organize the actual exchanges between racialized students and white students. Whilst the needs and benefits to organize this master for racialized students are clearly highlighted above, some community activists also pointed out that is important to consider the white students, as they are the dominant group, and 'the ones that need to drastically decolonize themselves'.

In the focus group with the students there was a notable difference in terms of how to organize the actual exchanges between racialized and white students. While some believed that a platform needed to be created for racialized students only to be able to openly and safely voice their views as well as learn, some added that this should include white people in order to make them aware of the reality of racialized people.

One student offered a very important argument, countering that the mixed approach “can be so exhausting and especially when it is about you. It can be triggering and draining, you are explaining your identity and existence” emphasizing how this takes a mental toll. It was therefore argued that for mixed group discussions “you need the right people to guide, the organizers of the course” and that “The faculty should have the right guidance offered, student counsellors, mental health experts”.

In setting up anti-racist initiatives and discussions, it is crucial that the chosen guestlecturers or moderators are not put into positions where they must cater overwhelmingly to the needs of white students at the cost of further marginalizing racialized individuals in the class context. To potentially prevent or at the least decrease such triggers,

according to the participants, the use of an entry test, essay or interview in the VUB context, could be valuable.

Additionally, one of the community activists argued that to address racist behaviour but also to learn, there also has to be safe space for white people with a white trainer, a space for “that white fragility, to talk about whiteness”.

### *Possible traps*

Respondents warned at several times that the creation of a master in Critical Diaspora, Race and Ethnic studies should not become an operation of 'window dressing' or 'diversity washing'.

As one of the VUB professors underlined: "We should warn for the dangers of diversity washing where there is no discussion that the institution of the university is racist in and of itself. We should be reminded that we should be humble, that this is a small part of the big structure of institutional racism. “Who produces knowledges, whose work is legitimate, we should be aware that this cannot be dismantled, we should be aware that it (the master) is just a small part. The university does not operate in a vacuum, a little humbleness should be embraced. Being reflexive of the structure of racism helps be aware of how much we can do and what to tackle next.”

The existence of the master should not be used to show that the university is anti-racist whilst the core of its practices remains unchanged. This refers to the pitfalls highlighted regarding the Black Studies master programmes in US universities, wherein Black Studies programmes were sometimes used as a recruitment practice, whilst at the same time the discrimination in hiring and in teaching practices continued in other departments, the curricula remained white, and the Black Study departments had to continually struggle to be attributed sufficient funding.

### *Concrete steps to be taken*

What can be done to realize the creation of a master in Critical Diaspora, Race and Liberation Studies at VUB or beyond? From the foregoing, it must be clear that this master programme cannot be created by just joining a couple of courses that already exist within the university and are often given by white professors. However, we identified some 3–4 courses within the faculties of social sciences, law, languages and humanities that could be part of the new programme. Whilst working towards the possible creation of the master, new electives could be created by professors of colour to be hired and with sufficient community input and impact.

This master could also be created as an inter–university master. This would allow a connection of the expertise of the few available courses in other Flemish universities by racialized professors, using decolonial strategies, theories, methodologies and pedagogies.

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