

## UoM Black Students Matter- OPEN LETTER

The following letter is the result of a meeting that took place amongst black students about the need to tackle the systemic racism that the French department at the University of Manchester is actively perpetuating.

Support us in calling on UoM's French department to take on our anti-racist demands, to improve the experience and well-being of black students. Our demands call for language guidelines, a programme review, curriculum changes and anti-racism training. Please find more about these demands below, and how we have come to ask for them, and scroll to the bottom of this letter to sign in support.

A condensed timeline of the specific incidents that prompted us to write this letter can be found [here](#)

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Dear Professor Thomas Schmidt,

For too long, the dominance of whiteness and a culture of racism has been tolerated within the French department at the University of Manchester (UoM) at the expense of students of colour, particularly black students. Much of this letter will focus on the Programme Director, Dr Barbara Lebrun, who has consistently perpetuated racism as a lecturer. However, her actions represent just the tip of the iceberg as there is a broader, entrenched pattern of teaching that upholds white supremacy within the course she oversees.

### **The issues**

#### The n-word

Dr Lebrun has been witnessed saying the n-word several times in lectures and seminars since 2021, in both English (n\*gger) and in French (n\*gre).

The first incident we are aware of took place in autumn 2021. In a seminar on human zoos, she was explaining the meaning of the word 'n\*grillon' (which roughly translates to 'piccaninny') when she claimed that the connotations were particularly not offensive and said that it was like 'the difference between the word negro and n\*gger'. Barbara did not read out the n-word from a text: she, as a white woman, went out of her way to deliberately say this violently anti-black word. In September 2022, at the start of this academic year, a black student who was present in the class reported this incident to Dr Sheena Kalayil, the head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) for the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures (SALC). In October 2022, via Dr Kalayil, Dr Lebrun communicated to the student who made the complaint that she 'would very much appreciate' meeting with them 'to apologise'. The black student responded, turning down this proposal, instead requesting that Dr Lebrun 'address a written apology' to the entire seminar group. Additionally, this student wrote an impact statement which they asked to be read to Dr Lebrun where they articulated how they 'cried walking down Oxford Road after that

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seminar' and how it 'fundamentally changed' how they viewed their relationship with 'the university as a whole'.

Dr Kalayil confirmed via email in early November 2022 that she met with Dr Lebrun and read the student's statement, saying that Dr Lebrun 'accepts' what this student 'says' and that she 'apologises fully'. However, at this point, their wish for an apology to their entire seminar group had not been fulfilled. When later pushed further as to why a written apology to all the students who witnessed Dr Lebrun's racist actions would not be feasible, Dr Kalayil admitted that she (a non-black person of colour), Dr Lebrun and Prof Juila Dobson, Head of Modern Languages and Cultures (both white women) all sat down and collectively decided 'particularly on Julia's decision- which' Dr Kalayil 'agrees with', that 'they would not put this forward'.

This case is disturbing for a number of reasons as it reveals a comprehensive failure to take anti-black racism seriously. This student's one request of Dr Lebrun, for her to publicly take responsibility for her actions, was not only denied, but this evasion of accountability was enabled by senior figures within SALC. Dr Kalayil said that an apology to the whole seminar group would not be possible because it 'would involve other students', who 'have not complained about the incident'. This is absurd. There are many reasons why a student may not wish to subject themselves to the gruelling complaint process, so just because other black individuals chose not to formally come forward does not mean that they were not harmed or affected. They deserve an apology too. What's more, the French department has also let down white students, by making them think that the use of racial slurs is acceptable, so they, too, should have been able to witness Dr Lebrun own up to what she did.

Dr Kalayil recognised the 'toll' Dr Lebrun's actions have taken on the black student who came forward and yet by coming together with her and Prof Dobson to block an apology to the seminar group affected, these non-black staff members from three different levels of the university have conspired to ensure that this incident is swept under the rug. Let's call this what it is: institutional racism. This lack of accountability has consequences- it allows anti-black racism and a culture of white supremacy to thrive within the department.

Consider the very first lecture Dr Lebrun delivered this semester of the second year 'Race and Empire in the French-speaking world' module. On 30/01/23, Dr Lebrun, when reading from a slide on her powerpoint said the n-word *again*, except this time, in French. White students in the class told us that at first they did not even realise what she had said because she actively misled the class about the connotations of the word: she repeated the slur and said 'the word n\*gre is unfortunate but normal for authors in the 1950s up until the 70s really in France. It means black'. This is false. We know from consulting black native speakers from France, as well as the Oxford Hachette French Dictionary, that this word directly translates to 'n\*gger'.

After 21 years of working at UoM, after almost 3 years since the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 and after a mere 4 months since having been talked to by EDI officials about her racist behaviour, Dr Lebrun *still* felt she could use this word. Her actions indicate how white academics within the department can demonstrate contempt for black students with impunity.

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These incidents have caused serious distress to black students who have experienced them- some have even deliberately avoided taking the Race and Empire module because they know that Dr Lebrun is the course convenor and they have no confidence that this class would be taught sensitively. Ultimately, we are being sent the message that it is okay to use words that belittle people who look like us in the classroom. We are being sent the message that our feelings do not matter. We are being sent the message that dignity is not guaranteed for us as French students at UoM.

### Telling (black) students not to be angry about racism

To be clear, the issue of systematic discrimination within the French department extends beyond using the n-word. There is a wider culture of academic racism in the department that exists to the detriment of students of colour.

One example of this is feedback a black student was given on an essay plan for a question that in essence asked them to evaluate whether the French nation guaranteed 'legal equality for all... without distinction of origin, race or religion'. In 2022, over email, Dr Lebrun told this student explicitly, that they should not be 'tempted to use the essay as a platform for personal exasperation or indignation around racism'. So not only are black students who take French at UoM subject to the racial humiliation of lecturers using slurs, they are also undermined and put in their place by white academics for trying to write about racism in a question that requires them to discuss race. This happened to the same student who complained about Dr Lebrun saying the n-word in 2021 and so this additional 'hurtful' and 'demeaning' incident was also covered in the impact statement that she, Dr Kalayil and Prof Dobson are aware of. Dr Kalayil communicated via email in November that Dr Lebrun 'apologised fully' for this.

Why is it then that at the very end of the first 'Race and Empire' lecture she repeats this same harmful narrative? Despite knowing exactly why it is inappropriate to tell black students not to be angry about racism and apparently being sorry for doing so in the past, at the end of the lecture on 30/01/23, she told students that when analysing racist imagery we should be 'intellectual about it. Not to say 'Ah! It's awful' and 'disgusting' and [not to be] indignant about racism'. Clearly she has learnt nothing.

The description of the French module on Blackboard says that it aims to enable students 'to share intellectual tools with which to articulate our emotional response to racism, racial representations and race relations.' Anger *is* a legitimate emotional response to racism. We do not believe that the work of academia can be separated from our lived experiences and our emotions: everyone has their own subjectivity and to expect black students, and people of colour more generally, to detach ourselves from the pain of the discriminatory realities we face is neither reasonable nor fair. The implication is that by being angry at racism, your work is tainted, whereas those who can remain neutral about racism (i.e. white people) presumably can create superior, more rational arguments. This is yet another example of academic racism within the French department.

### Eurocentricity and the supreme lens of whiteness

Finally, we believe that the entire French course is pedagogically flawed in how it allows European perspectives to dominate and overshadow opportunities for holistic and critical thinking about the Francophone world. Once again, the 'Race and Empire' module epitomises this: despite the fact that the majority of the module concerns constructions of black femininity, out of the 26 readings suggested there is not one black female author cited on the general reading list for this class, the bibliography is instead dominated by white academics (as is in line with many other French modules). This results in lectures, such as the introductory 'Race and Empire' session, which are woefully inadequate in terms of the perspectives they offer students, regardless of race. Entry-level black feminist frameworks (such as 'misogynoir') were not referenced at all in this specific foundational lecture, despite these theories being undeniably relevant to the study of black women in the Francophone world. There is a wealth of literature and history, written by and concerning people from former colonies, that is being systematically excluded from the French curriculum. As a result, students are robbed of the opportunity to read work that could challenge and critically enrich their understanding of France's sociopolitical history.

What's more, there is a lack of contextualisation when it comes to how French history is taught, with essential events being omitted or minimised because their inclusion provides the opportunity to be critical of France. In the first 'Race and Empire' lecture, which was meant to provide a theoretical grounding for understanding constructions of blackness, the word slavery was mentioned just once in the 62 powerpoint slides. Dr Lebrun's powerpoint makes reference to when France abolished slavery, but conveniently does not go into detail about the centuries of oppression African people suffered at the hands of the French and how the institution of slavery shaped what it means to be black. Similarly, in the first year 'French Identity' module, there is only one seminar in the entire year that addresses the history of colonialism, despite the fact that French imperialism dominated the modern period that the module claims to cover. Even then, this seminar obligates students to look at people of colour through a colonial lens and offers no insight into the independent thoughts or actions of those subjected to French rule. The French department should be offering a plurality of texts and perspectives as opposed to ignoring literature that challenges the idea that only the actions and thoughts of white French people merit exploration. To be clear we are not calling for white authors to be completely removed from the French course. What we want is for the curriculum to be fundamentally reframed: the history and perspectives of France and its colonies are not separate, the two are mutually constituted. The lives and actions of people of colour under French occupation can no longer be sidelined and ignored by the department- to continue to do so is to fail to provide a rigorous, holistic education about the Francophone world. The department must do more than just throw in a tokenistic reference to Frantz Fanon or Stuart Hall because ultimately, this staggering failure to *meaningfully* engage with thinkers and events from former French territories upholds the colonial idea that in the Francophone world, white France remains supreme.

## **Our demands**

### Language guidelines

- The French department must create robust guidelines around the use of derogatory language and slurs in the classroom, so that there is a policy to hold staff members to in future, if this kind of discrimination happens again.
- We demand that these guidelines are co-created with students from marginalised backgrounds.
- Additionally, any students who help create these guidelines (e.g. through focus groups) should be paid for their time because to ask minority students to provide free consultancy about such a distressing topic would be exploitative.
- Students should be paid a minimum of £10/ hour in money, not vouchers.
- Dr Lebrun should not lead on this work and we will not accept any guidelines she attempts to draft.

### Programme review

- The French department must begin conducting a new programme review immediately.
- Every course periodically completes these reviews which enable departments at the university to evaluate their approaches and identify areas to improve.
- As we have explained in this letter, the problems in the French department extend beyond one individual or one module- the pedagogy of the entire course must be urgently and holistically reviewed.
- Having talked to academics from other departments at the university, we know that for a course the size of French, it would be feasible to complete this work in as little as 6 months. So we demand that the review is finished before the end of 2023.
- The final review and its recommendations must be published in full (with names redacted) so that this can be scrutinised.
- For this review to be meaningful there must be transparency and accountability. So, we are adamant that neither Dr Lebrun nor Prof Dobson lead on this piece of work, in light of their past actions.

### 50/50 split between France and the Francophone world

- We demand that the department overhaul the first year 'Identity in Modern France' module and instead shift to the 50/50 model used by the Spanish department, in which lectures alternate each week between looking at the colonial metropole (in this case France) and its colonies (in Africa, the Americas, Asia etc).
- The equivalent Spanish first year module 'Spanish Themes' is effective because this strict, equal split between Europe and the colonies it oversaw enables students to critically analyse political and cultural interactions between the metropole and the continents it conquered.
- If the French department is really committed to the rigorous study of 'key French and Francophone events', then there is no reason why students should not be able to have a lecture and seminar on the French revolution one week, and the Haitian revolution the next, for example. Both of these events had seismic impacts on the Francophone world

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and global politics more generally, and yet only the revolution led by white people is explored in the 'French Identity' module. The erasure of these events and perspectives is something that can be easily remedied through a commitment to a 50/50 model.

- We demand that this redesign begins immediately and that the new content starts being taught in the academic year 2024-2025.
- This module should be redesigned with the consultation of students, who should be paid for their time in the same way they would be for helping craft the guidelines about derogatory language.
- We will not accept any redesign of this module that is led by Dr Lebrun.

### Anti-racism training

- Staff members within SALC and the French department recognise that there is a need for training and discussions about race- in response to the first incident we know of Dr Lebrun saying the n-word, every department in SALC had to do a 'refresher' EDI session. What's more, instead of apologising to the seminar group where she used the slur, it was communicated via email that Dr Lebrun plans on delivering a session on 'French nationalism and their attitudes to language/ race'. This is like asking an arsonist to deliver a lecture on firefighting.
- We demand that the French department immediately contract external anti-racism practitioners to deliver regular, mandatory, in-person training that specifically addresses how whiteness and power affect education.
- We have created a shortlist of black organisations and individuals who we would like the department to choose from as we have confidence that these people are qualified to deliver the extensive training the department so clearly needs.

We really did not think it would come to us having to write this letter. After the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, the university released a statement saying that the UoM is 'categorically clear that we will never accept discrimination in any form'. Clearly the French department does not think that this applies to them. If black lives really matter to the university, if black *students* really matter to you, Professor Schmidt, as the Head of SALC, then you will help us to implement the changes we have outlined above to ensure that the French department is no longer complicit in structural racism.

We expect an initial response from you by 5pm on 20/02/23 and we look forward to hearing what you have to say.

Signed,

A collective of black students who study French at UoM

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### **Adding your signature**

If you want to sign our letter, email this address [uomblackstudentsmatter@protonmail.com](mailto:uomblackstudentsmatter@protonmail.com)

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### **UPDATE**

Prof Schmidt has responded to us, however we reserve judgement about whether the university will actually take action to address our concerns. Our full response can be found [here](#).

*13/03/23*

We have begun to engage in dialogue with senior academics at the university, and so we will no longer be adding signatures to our letter. This document will be updated shortly with the names of everyone who has signed the letter.

We thank everyone who has supported our campaign so far- you have shown that the university can't ignore all of us.