CIRCE

Germany – Creative Impact Fund

Black European Academic Network (BEAN)

Working to overcome the limited access to quality education available for Black Europeans

Final Report

BEAN - The Black European Academic Network

1. **Summary**

The Black European Academic Network (BEAN) was founded in 2012 to build a community and support, advance knowledge and research, address issues of racism and discrimination, promote professional development, foster connections and collaborations and empower Black communities. In March 2023, we - Professor Dr. Natasha A. Kelly and Professor Olive Vassell, founding directors - released a groundbreaking book, *Mapping Black Europe: Monument, Markers, Memories*, mapping cultural contributions by eight Black Communities in Berlin, Brussels, London, Luxembourg City, Oslo, Paris, Rome and Warsaw. On the basis of this publication, we planned to develop and design an online course for distance learning which would address Europe's need for education around the continent's cultural diversity, including the Black European experience. This

would be primarily for Black communities, academics, and experts in the creative industry. Studies and findings by international and national bodies have demonstrated that Black Europeans have limited access to first-hand knowledge by and about themselves. The asynchronous course would be a prototype for future educational modalities. It would be offered for a fixed fee, and participants would receive a certification on completion. The process was multi-phased: In Phase 1, we traveled to the eight European cities portrayed in our book, conducted personal interviews with local residents, civic and cultural groups, and collected material (e.g. photographs and audio) of people and/or places. In Phase 2, we focused on development and design. We reviewed and categorized the material we had collected from each city, which also mirrored the experiences of Black residents in each country. We then defined the course's learning outcomes and organized the collected material, based on those learning objectives. The assembled materials were initially to be used as the basis for an 8-module-course that would be structured according to the subchapters of our book: activism, locations, philosophies, and community organizations. The decision was made, following review, to focus on testing only one module to get a feel for participants' engagement with the material and to avoid overwhelming them. This factor stems from the course being in English, while a significant number of the targeted audience would speak English as a second or even third language. Phase 3 involved designing the one-module trial course, and a survey that would solicit feedback on audience experience and demographics. During this and other phases we interacted with mentors provided by CIRCE, who advised about various aspects of the process including survey content and platform selection. In phase 4 we reviewed the submissions to the module and analyzed the results of the survey. In collecting and analyzing participants' feedback we gained valuable insights into customer satisfaction with the module's content, its popularity and sustainability, as well as audience demographics.

2. **Journey**

Our journey began with conceptualizing how to gather the information we would use for our course. We agreed that we would collect audio-visual content from each of the cities in the book. During our first stop in Oslo we interviewed our local expert on her experience of Being Black in Norway. Norway is known for being a relatively homogeneous society, with a majority of the population being white. As a result, people of African Descent stand out in terms of physical appearance. Furthermore, our interviewee, a US-American immigrant who has been living in Oslo for over 20 years, also encountered learning the language to be existential for her work in the creative industry. This proved to be the case in each country we visited and highlighted the necessity to offer multilingual courses in the future.

With the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 being the starting point of each chapter in our book, we had the chance to visit an exhibition in the Norwegian capital which documented BLM Oslo and had been curated by our interviewee. The exhibition encompassed a wide range of elements that effectively communicated the goals, messages, and experiences associated with the movement. Its purpose was to raise awareness, educate the public, and foster dialogue around issues related to racial injustice, police brutality, and systemic racism. Filming the exhibits allowed us to capture their comprehensive and multi-faceted narrative, and contribute to a broader understanding of the issues surrounding the significance of the movement for the cultural sector. Following the colonial imprints in the locations of the former human zoo in Oslo, it later came to our attention that these colonial exhibitions were not unique in the national context they were set up in, but were examples of colonialism as a pan European project. Thus, they had left traces in each city.

After visiting the first location, we found that the itinerary was not sustainable and therefore made adjustments in our approach. Our initial idea to collect comparative audiovisual material could only be fulfilled to a certain extent, as we were subject to the events taking place during each of our visits. We therefore categorized a table according

to the possibilities and sought to cover as many fields as possible in each country during our stay. The following table allowed us to structure our visits more effectively.

	Berlin	Brussels	London	Luxembourg	Oslo	Paris	Rome	Warsaw
Intro by authors	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Interview with authors	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
city tours	Black History Tour	Decolonize Brussels (CMCLD)	Black History Walk	Postcolonial Tour	-	Black History Tour	-	-
exhibitions	Diek Family	No Name	No name	-	BLM Protest	Henry Roy photography	1. Phono Museum 2. Bettina Lopes	No Name
entrepreneurs	Aidia (Hamburg)	Book shop	No name	-	-	Little Africa Cultural art space	African Film Festival	entrepreneur
Organizations	Pawlo Womens Org	Groupement des Femmes Africaines Inspirantes et Actives,	Windrush Foundation	Finkape	Black Nordic Theater (Michelle)	Justice for Adama	-	organization
markers in the book	May Ayim Ufer	Patrick Lumumba Square	Mary Seacole (MS Trust)	Pharmacy (included in city tour)	1. Ruth Reese 2. Human Zoo	1. Paulette and Jane Nardal 2. African Tirailleurs	Dogali Statue	1. Josef Sam Sandi Plaque 2. August Browne Plaque
Other markers (not in the book)	?	?	Claudia Jones statue	Statue of Cape		?	1.Willy Monteiro	

This table demonstrates the joint focus of material collected in each city. The black text shows the material that we were able to collect, while the text in red highlights information still to be gathered. The cities highlighted in yellow are locations we plan to revisit, as we discovered important topics while on the ground. Alongside the language challenges there were a variety of important factors that we needed to take into consideration. These included booking accommodations well in advance, as well as planning our transportation to, from and within the destination, according to the differing transportation schedules, especially as we were traveling during the peak travel season. In this concern, the main challenges that we encountered during phase 1 were related to time constraints. Alongside tight scheduling, we limited our stay in each location to 2 to 3 days but could easily have spent more, as our network grew constantly once we were on site. We got to know many individuals and organizations that were not mentioned in our book and therefore we had to scale back the activities we planned for each location to a minimum.

Unfortunately, we encountered unexpected challenges due to a general strike in Rome which hindered us from continuing our journey to London and Warsaw. Instead, we were forced to stay in Rome longer than expected, but used the time to conduct further interviews and visit the African Film Festival that was taking place at the time. In an interview with the festival director, we learnt a lot about the history of Ethiopia, Ethiopian migration to Italy, and the creative approaches of many Black filmmakers dealing with this topic. Nonetheless, we remained flexible and open-minded, having visited 6 of the 8 cities we planned to go to.

After sorting and reviewing the material, we defined the learning outcomes and learning objectives, the expected achievements and skills that learners should gain through the learning experience in phase 2. First and foremost, we aimed for learners to gain a deep understanding of Black Europe from experts with lived experiences, by incorporating historical, cultural, social, and contemporary perspectives and testimonials. By the end of the initially planned 8-module-course, students would be able to describe the history of the Black presence in each city, describe one maker in each city relating to people of African descent, identify one pioneer of African descent in each city, compare Black organizations in the two cities, and examine the role of BLM in each city.

As explained above, we took the decision in phase 3 to adjust our deliverable to a free one module trial course that focused only on Brussels. The module was divided into sections to ensure logical flow of information and designed to be taken at participants' own pace. After reading the book chapter on Black Brussels the participants needed to watch a video that we produced from the recorded material and offered a real-world example. This work involved external support from a video editor who created a video on Black Brussels. Here our expert spoke of his experience growing up Black in Brussels. We had numerous virtual calls with him and other team members, many of whom are contributors to *Mapping Black Europe.* To reinforce learning, we included quizzes and provided clear instructions for participants on how to navigate the module and engage with the content. We determined the appropriate duration time to take the module and

ensured that it is long enough to cover the material but not too lengthy to lose participants' interest.

Once we had created and launched the trial module for the course, we worked to develop feedback that would help to tailor our offerings for our target audiences. This process involved designing a survey, which consisted of 19 questions that would provide key information about participants' view of a course on Black Europe, including its relevance, potential subject matter, frequency of offerings and cost thresholds. We then launched the trial module, along with the survey for a six-week period. A sample audience was selected using BEAN's social media networks as well as the listserv of the Afroeuropeans Network with a total of 1017 people.

The measurable participants in the survey were less than we anticipated or hoped - representing about 1.9 % of the 1017 people targeted. However, while survey participation may have been low, the responses received carry significant weight, underscoring the importance of the project to those who engaged with it, namely People of African Descent (PAD). Results showed that the majority of respondents (71%) were Black, suggesting that we should focus on this demographic exclusively. They were also younger – 42% were between the ages of 25-34, indicating that Gen Y, or Millennials are our target audience. Some 47% of participants were willing to pay for a course, with the majority choosing 75-90 euros as the ideal price point.
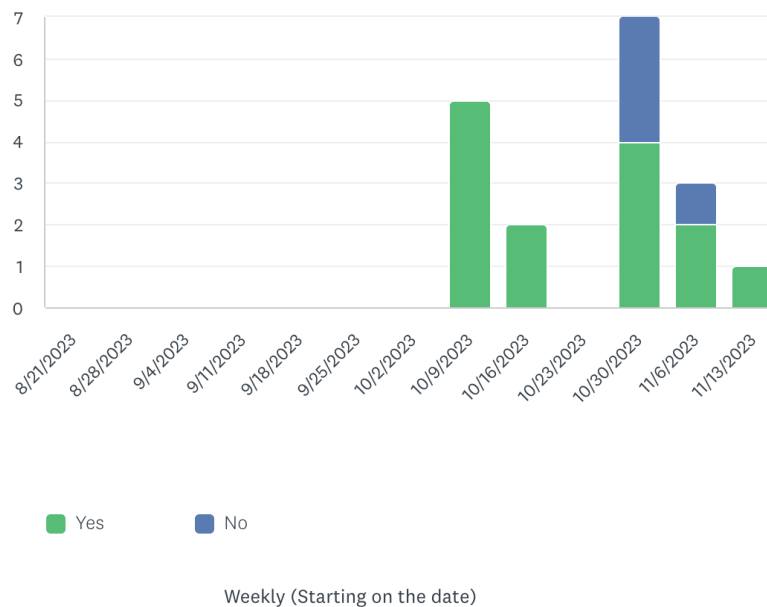
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Are you a member of the Black Community in your country?

Answered: 18   Skipped: 0   First: 10/9/2023   Zoom: 8/21/2023 to 11/13/2023


■ Yes   ■ No

Weekly (Starting on the date)

After consultation with our CIRCE mentors, the initial version of our survey was revised to gain further insights, including information on why participants who took the survey did not always interact with the course. During the second CIRCE symposium, we also made an effort to increase participation by offering visitors from the public as well as from the CIRCE network the possibility to actively participate in our trial module and survey via a QR code. We received a total of 12 scans, two of which participated in our module and survey.

In the final analysis, despite some interest, we concluded that the course is not viable as a business at this time. Instead, focus should be placed on gaining support from stakeholders who serve the potential demographic or are willing to support them. This could mean further outreach with academic institutions and community organizations serving the targeted age group.

3. **Innovation**
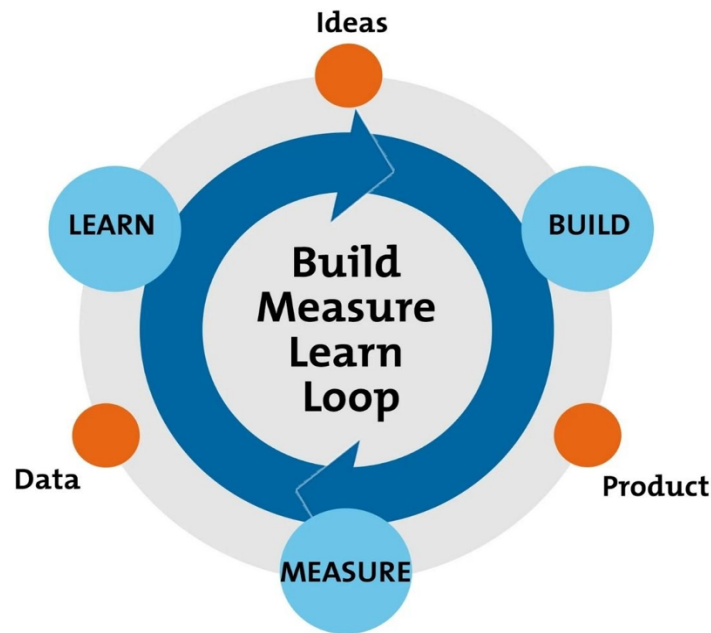
Focusing on the "Build, Measure, Learn" framework, each phase involved specific actions, challenges, and factors for success:

- In the "Build" stage, the focus was on creating audiovisual material. This involved brainstorming sessions to translate ideas into tangible media products. We were forced to balance time pressures but profited from the flexibility of our partners who showed high interest in the project as the knowledge on Black Europe is limited to the national context and lacks institutionalization in each country. Compared to the United States, Black Studies, for example, are not as institutionalized in European academic settings. There are only a few dedicated departments or programs, which are mentioned below. Despite limited institutionalization throughout Europe, there is a growing interest in the study of Black history, culture, and experiences throughout the continent. Scholars and activists have been advocating for increased visibility and recognition of the subject matter within academia for decades. However, European universities often approach Black knowledge, history, art, and culture solely through the lens of ethnicity, rather than race (as a manifested social construct). Activist movements and advocacy groups, many of

which are our stakeholders, have been working to raise awareness about the importance of the distribution of Black knowledge in Europe, pushing for curriculum changes, and addressing issues of racial inequality within and outside academic institutions. Challenges that exist include a lack of diversity among faculty, and the need for more comprehensive approaches to addressing historical and contemporary racial issues. The strength of our project lies in the fact that teaching Black knowledge by Black individuals brings several important advantages and perspectives to the educational experience. These include the authenticity and lived experience that provide students with first-hand perspectives on the issues and topics covered, cultural competence, and a nuanced understanding of the cultural, historical, and social contexts central to Black Europeans, as well as representation, guidance, and mentorship that go beyond academic content. This includes navigating challenges and promoting personal development. All these factors were the focus of our building process, allowing deeper insights into the historical and contemporary experiences of Black European communities.

- The "Measure" stage involved deploying the trial course and survey to the target audience and collecting data on user interactions and feedback, as well as user analytics to understand their behavior and preferences. This way we considered both quantitative and qualitative factors. By combining the trial module and the survey we gained a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' reception to learning about Black Europe. The community engagement by our partners and stakeholders initially indicated a recognized need and interest in the subject. These strong collaborations also demonstrated a recognized need beyond academia. The pan European comparisons of non-profit organizations provided especially valuable insights. Incorporating the expertise of community members in our course ensured that the academic study of Black history and culture remains connected to the lived experiences and perspectives of the communities being studied. This lived experience is invaluable in understanding the complexities of Black history and culture, as community experts have an intimate knowledge of the cultural context within Black communities. This expertise is essential for

accurately representing and interpreting cultural practices, traditions, and expressions. Furthermore, community experts possess local knowledge and insights into the unique histories, challenges, and contributions of Black communities in their respective countries. In the interviews that we conducted our community experts provided alternative historical narratives that are not well-documented in mainstream sources. This helped to challenge and broaden the understanding of historical events from diverse viewpoints. At the same time, they challenged stereotypes and fostered a deeper appreciation for the diversity within Black communities.

- The "Learn" stage was about extracting insights from the measured data and user feedback to inform future iterations and improvements. By continually evaluating and reflecting on the effectiveness and impact of our concept, we contributed to the ongoing improvement and enrichment of the knowledge on Black Europe in both scholarly and societal contexts. Fostering a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of Black history, culture, and experiences can lead to the enhancement of Black knowledge into school and community curricula, as well as cultural programmes in the creative industry. Additionally, ongoing evaluation can contribute to the identification of gaps in research and areas that require further exploration. This can lead to an expanded research agenda that addresses emerging issues and perspectives. Most importantly, our evaluation can inform the development of effective community engagement strategies. This may involve establishing partnerships, involving community experts, and creating opportunities for mutual learning and collaboration. Future iterations may incorporate more global perspectives, recognizing the interconnectedness of Black diasporic experiences worldwide. This can contribute to a more nuanced and expansive understanding of the subject. Last but not least, we want to highlight the advancements in technology that may be leveraged to enhance the delivery of our course content, making it more accessible through the design of our own online platform that offers additional virtual resources, and interactive learning tools.

4. **Impact**

In recent years, the landscape of education has undergone a profound transformation with the rise of online learning. This shift, accelerated by advancements in technology, has brought both opportunities and challenges to diverse communities around the world. Thus, our project proved to be impactful from its inception. Stakeholders in the Black communities we visited welcomed our work. For example, our Italian interviewee, a member of Questaèroma in Italy, confirmed that a lot of people in her community are interested in gaining digital access, especially on Black Rome. She suggested that a podcast might also be one potential future option. However, the language of the podcast would also need to be taken into consideration.

Furthermore, the direct impact of the communities in online learning extends far beyond the virtual classroom, playing a pivotal role in creating a rich, collaborative, and supportive educational environment. Educator, librarian and the owner of the bookstore *Pépite Blues* in Brussels, for example, hosted a special event in December 2023, stemming from our visit with her in July. The event drew over 20 people, half of which are interested in topics on Black Europe and also showed interest in actively participating in the development and dissemination of our course.

Meanwhile, a French artist took us on a tour through his photography exhibition at Little Africa in Paris. It was not the first time he showed his photography. Some 20 years ago he had exhibited the same works to harsh criticism. However, the political moment of the 2020 Black Lives Matter demonstrations, provided an opportunity for him to relaunch his works last year. Including his images on a digital learning platform would not only broaden his audience and offer a creative approach to reeducating participants about the Black presence in France over the past 20 years but also show the impact politics has on arts and culture and how its reception needs to be controlled by us. This aligns with the educational premise of our project.

These examples show how community impact is important to our project and the continuity they have had as an unseen source for cultural and creative impact. The major goals are to make the Black presence in Europe visible, create cohesion and bridge divides between Black communities in the various European countries, as well as the majority populations. The desired outcome is to motivate and empower learners and facilitate them to take action for social justice and change.

Connecting with organizations and individuals who work in these communities across multiple areas including political, financial, educational, artistic, and civic lines prove the validity of our concept. Forging relationships with organizations such as the above mentioned activist group Questaèroma, the artistic and cultural space, Little Africa in France and Lëtz Rize Up in Luxembourg, a social and cultural association, strengthened our network as a whole.

In our meetings with these representatives of communities across several sectors, we discussed the importance of sharing our stories through and creating connections across the continent. This is already happening on the national level, e. g. in Italy at the Phonomuseum. Participating in a guided tour, we learnt about the local immigrant communities of Rome, including People of African Descent (PAD) and People of color (PoC), imagining a distopic future where languages will be extinct.

Youth organizations were especially important to us. As educators, our commitment to inform the next generation led to interaction with groups such as Young Gifted and Black in Europe, a potential target group for our course. At the beginning of the project, we made a presentation at their yearly gathering. The attendees were very interested in the course's potential for helping them to navigate their studies and to connect with other young people of African descent across the continent. In a Q & A session they mentioned their needs which reached from personal to structural experiences. Connecting to the communities in this way provided a value-added opportunity. As we liaised with one group, it would connect us to others, allowing us to create additional relationships and

engage with even more potential participants.

Despite its current unsuitability as an economic venture, the academic impact of our project remains important for those wishing to learn about Black Europe. There are few options for such studies. The latest data shows only a handful of educational opportunities in this area. Most courses focus on individual countries like Birmingham City University (UK) BA(Hons) Black Studies, or University of London's (SOAS) BA Africa and Black Diaspora. There is a new pan-European offering between the University of Bayreuth, Germany, the Bordeaux Montaigne University, France, and the University of Porto, Portugal who offer a European Interdisciplinary Masters in African Studies, as mentioned above. Thus, the importance of this project's potential to create the framework for a learning modality which is open to all, regardless of socio-economic status, cannot be underestimated. We believe that it holds future potential to herald a new era where Black European studies is integrated into curricula in education at all levels -- in community organizations, cultural institutions, as well as traditional educational establishments across the continent.

5. **Learnings**

CIRCE offered us a valuable learning opportunity that helped refine and validate our idea, identify potential challenges, and make informed decisions on how to proceed with full-scale development. We learned many lessons throughout the process, which are outlined below.

Content Collection

<u>Time management</u>
We realized when we visited our first location - Oslo, where we had scheduled a series of activities, including interviews and location filming - that we would be unable to complete the assigned tasks in the timeframe (2 days) that we had allotted. We quickly adjusted the schedule for the remaining 7 cities that we were scheduled to visit.

We found that creating alignment with content helped in streamlining this process. That meant that in each city, we would follow the same format, such as conducting an interview with the contributor to our book on which the course is based and spotlighting an organization or business and so on.

<u>Scheduling</u>

The physical capacity to complete the ambitious schedule we set became an issue as the project progressed and as we traveled from location to location. Events, beyond our control, such as a national airstrike in Italy, derailed some of our planned activities. The former, for example, caused us to miss a live event in the UK which could not be replicated. The lesson here was to have a more flexible schedule and divide activities into larger blocks of time.

Course Scope/Requirements

<u>Audience Needs</u>

Identifying the needs of potential audiences before creating the course, was one area that also provided a learning experience. Our assumption that the course would sell itself, as it has no direct competition - the only comparable offering is The Black Europe Summer School, a two-week intensive course held each summer in Amsterdam - should have been supported by data. This was the area of our greatest learning. Also knowing the answers to questions such as whether subject matter should have a general pan-European focus or be more aligned with national interests, would have been helpful in setting stricter parameters for creating the course. We selected English as the language for delivery, as this was used in the foundational text. However, questions such as the effect of language barriers on the acceptance of the course could have been examined before this selection - only one city had a native English-speaking audience and in some cases potential participants spoke English as a third language.

The main lesson for us and advice for creators of similar future projects: Get as much data as possible at the outset about audience needs and design plans for "what and how" before beginning the project.

Partnerships & Promotion

The promotion of the course needed additional attention before the project began. Key would have been to establish partnerships and have exploratory talks with organizations and individuals to support the promotion of the course. However, to some extent this is a "chicken and the egg" dilemma, since we met many of the organizations and individuals who would have helped us shape the course, once we were in the locations we visited. A longer timeline between the content collection and launching of the trial module would have helped to solve this problem. It was clear as we moved into the later stages of the project, as we sorted data, that this is an area of improvement for ourselves and one we would recommend that future participants in similar projects prioritize. In short: no matter how excellent or innovative your project, marketing, promotion and partnerships are the keys to reaching your desired audience.

Feedback

Data Collection

Our work around data collection began with the survey which questioned participants in the trial course about their experience of it, as well as about their demographic details. The survey was comprehensive, but tailored to avoid audience fatigue, while allowing us to collect information that will be useful moving forward as we built out the course. Challenges were identified as we received initial responses to our survey. We noted that more participants were taking the survey than trialing the course. In order to understand this (and thus find ways to better engage audiences), we revised the survey, adding additional questions around the reasons for participating/or not in the course.

Challenges

As we look back on the project, in hindsight, of all the challenges we faced, we can identify audience reach as the most significant one. However, we experienced many others previously noted. They included personnel needs - our team of two had a lot to juggle - researching, reviewing, creating and finalizing content; learning modalities - accessible

and affordable platforms, audience-friendly design, among them. Through the project, we felt stretched with the volume of tasks we faced, but also encouraged as we saw our output taking shape.

Future Plans

We are pleased with the work we have done, especially with the opportunity it provides for multiple applications. The ability to use and reuse content in this way is an exciting prospect and speaks to the importance and validity of the project. In the coming months, we plan to review all our content, collect more as needed and package into various forms of educational content. Selecting how material will be processed will be based on advice from potential stakeholders including community groups, educational institutions and cultural enterprises.

6. **Link back to Circe**

Connecting to other Black experts in the CIRCE network who were dealing with the cultural and social impact in Black European communities, helped us to shape our own narrative, as well as our understanding of creative industries, cultural policy development, and advocacy efforts. Our CIRCE appointed mentors provided valuable, ongoing critique which spurred innovative options to challenges we faced. Participating in the first CIRCE symposium in St. Sebastian, Spain offered us a multitude of benefits, including networking opportunities, knowledge exchange, and international cultural exposure. The interdisciplinary environment encouraged the exchange of ideas and perspectives, fostering a more holistic understanding of technology and digital innovation, which both play a significant role in the creative industries in general and in our project in particular. With our online course we hope to enhance our reach and accessibility through technology. Presenting our concept at the symposium also provided an opportunity to receive direct feedback from the CIRCE network and at the same time allowed other members to learn from our experiences and insights. Presenting our interim research at the CIRCE convention in September in Berlin, allowed for direct engagement with individuals from different CCE backgrounds. The collaborative environment encouraged the exchange of ideas that were shaped by diverse cultural perspectives. Furthermore,

CIRCE encouraged a transdisciplinary approach, bringing us together with an architect and urban planner who rekindled enthusiasm for our initial work on *Mapping Black Europe*, encouraging us to explore new directions in the future.