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challenging white privilege from a black perspective within the academy

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Henry, W, A. (2020), 'Who feels it knows it! Alterity, identity and 'epistemological privilege': challenging white privilege from a black perspective within the academy'

Introduction

My personal experience as a Black female academic over the past decade is of working much harder than my White peers – often on strategies to enhance race equality, while simultaneously being objectified, dehumanised and devalued, by students, staff and my institution. In common with the HE sector there is a lack of priority afforded to concrete measures to advance race and gender equality, beyond the usual generic statements of 'valuing diversity'...I have come to regard White female colleagues as largely complicit in our marginalisation within academia, since whenever the issue of White privilege is raised, they side-step the matter of their own privilege by laying blame squarely on White male patriarchy. (Gabriel, Personal Communication, 2019)

The paper considers some of the contemporary issues faced by black academics, denoting our constant struggles for equal and fair treatment, which are not based on what we bring to the table but the skin we are in. To do so I will utilise 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis' (IPA) because '[W]hen people are engaged with an 'experience' of something major in their lives, they begin to reflect on the significance of what is happening' (Smith et al 2009: 3). IPA therefore enables us to consider Gabriel's poignant reasoning as that which firmly locates the 'nebulous' concepts of whiteness and white privilege in a socio-cultural and historical context. She does so by interrogating and exposing the centrality of whiteness, making known that any discussion of the value of human life, in white racist societies, requires black voices to be at the forefront of discussions regarding, race, representation and belonging.

When negotiating identity through the lens of 'curricular decolonisation' or 'equitable inclusion', white faculty who know what the deal is but choose to 'side-step the matter of their own privilege' do so simply because they can. Racial discrimination is an overly abstract concept to many white colleagues; I get that, which is why I operate out of a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' (Ricoeur 1965), for we all have choices to make and positions to take based on the interior knowledges we bring to the table. However, in this empirical piece I will argue that the reality is that only 'white knowledges' seem to matter in a system that was deliberately set up this way. A

system that continues to privilege this discrete white racial group, especially within Higher Education (HE) institutions that are in too many instances confidence draining and soul-destroying work environments for black academics.

To continue to ignore the trenchant black voices that speak to our ongoing disaffection and deleterious treatment in white, institutionally racist, academic spaces makes perfect sense to those who wish to maintain the status quo. However, what is far worse for the overall mental, physical and psychological well-being of black faculty is these experiences of racialised discriminatory practices are not contained within university settings. This means it is prudent for us to not fall into the trap of separating and ignoring the overly negative and often times deadly experiences of black people, on a global level, in a minority white dominated world. Experiences that continue for one major reason, which is down to identifiable differences in complexion that are then reduced to levels of human worth, in line with Kant's 'this fellow was quite black...a clear indication that what he said was stupid' (Eze 1997). Consequently our, perhaps subaltern, black voices need to be at the forefront of these discussions, because they offer a more pragmatic take on what is really at stake in discussions about peripheral or marginalised identities. That is why the argument here features a series of reasoningsⁱ I have partaken in with fellow black academics about the best way to tackle 'curricular decolonisation' or 'equitable inclusion' within the ivory tower. I asked all of them a very simple question, which was: "What does whiteness and white privilege mean to you as an academic within UK HE?" The answers I received were so rich in detail that, due to the space allowed here, I have had to cut them right down but have included as much as I could due to the relevance and timeliness of this piece. Consequently, my role here is to facilitate a conversation where the central voices are theirs and not mine, which is why 'epistemological privilege', or 'standpoint epistemology' unapologetically takes precedence here. Also, those who wish to remain anonymous have been given pseudonyms, so I can give the reader a sense of an auto-ethnographic presence that is premised upon 'who feels it knows it' in a profoundly honest and insightful way.

The centrality of whiteness and the maintenance of 'acceptable' distance

The way we experience white privilege is both physical and psychological. The former is evident when you notice there are no black faces apart from yours in the department. Most departments don't have black academics at all and just appoint one at a low level. A classic case of tokenism. In illustrating the latter, I will use two words i.e. neglect and not enough. Neglect is when you are constantly not invited to a meeting where important decisions that affect you are made. Not enough is a feeling you get that no matter your level of professional performance, you are told you need to do a little more. The goal post keeps changing. (Taiwo, Personal Communication, 2019)

The above encapsulates the contemporary issues surrounding whiteness and white privilege within academia from the perspective of a black scholar who has been teaching for decades and has witnessed very little change. It is important for us to begin any discussion of discriminatory practices here, for by highlighting the notions of 'neglect' and 'not enough' we get a sense of the hapless situation far too many black academics are confront within the 'ivory tower'. More importantly, Taiwo makes known that to effect real change within this very insular 'academic world', the centrality of whiteness must be interrogated and deconstructed because 'the goal post keeps changing'. On this point Pete (2018: 177) suggests there is a need for 'two-eyed seeing when you can observe the colonial constructions around you and you can see the decolonial possibilities offered by indigenous ways of knowing'. The idea that there are alternatives, 'two-eyed seeing' is crucial here because it directly confronts and decentres whiteness. The suggestion is whilst many 'non-blacks' (Cleaver 1990) may offer their take on what is at stake in discussions about peripheral or marginalised black identities, they have never been able to challenge the centrality of whiteness as they are located within it. Indeed, '[I]f whites could 'see' themselves as others see them, perhaps they would see others differently too: the white aesthetic is an aesthetic of 'the dead' in the eyes of many others' (Synott and Howes 1996).

The social and historical factors that created and shape the 'white aesthetic' of the 'dead' need to be investigated from an epistemological standpoint that offers a

novel take on what is at stake in this type of discussion. Moreover, to focus on the specificities of how this 'white aesthetic' that underpins whiteness and consequently white privilege, directly challenges the 'myth' that we live in a 'post racial society' (Bhopal 2018). Indeed, the mere suggestion that there is mythos involved here enables us to place white privilege under critical scrutiny:

During the past eight years that I have been in academia, it has become very evident that there is an inherent disparity between pay and promotion within the two university institutions that I have worked within. 'Unconscious bias' between Black minorities ethnic (BME) groups and my white peers is very conspicuous. I have colleagues who are less qualified, comparatively inexperienced, who don't possess a PhD or an MBA, who are unpublished, in terms of peer-reviewed articles or academic books, who have less favourable student feedback reviews, but who are in more senior roles. It has come to my attention recently that a new white female member of staff, who joined as an associate lecturer, is being paid a greater salary than myself and other colleagues from ethnic minority backgrounds, again, academically less qualified and less experienced. (Anthony, Personal Communication, 2019)

Anthony, provides us with a practical example of how 'systemic racism' manifests within remuneration for academic staff, because a black and a white member of staff with the same experience etc. can be recruited to the same post/position; share the same academic title, but the white member of staff will start on a higher increment which naturally increases their salary. This I have known and experienced for a fact and the myopia that insulates privileged colleagues from seeing a truer reflection of what it means to be 'white', in a world that has been fashioned in a way to subjugate black others. Read as those 'who find themselves measured, not only by the abuses of overt racism but also by the insidious cultural orthodoxies of the academic imagination' (Keith 1992:551). The point is that within academia the decentering of the white dominant voice often translates as a vulgar promotion of particular forms of blackness, as:

Given that the diversity monologue has been ongoing for a number of years, it is clear that current efforts to address Blackness in academia reveal how stagnant institutions are and questions if the employing of

Black academics is really just part of a marketing strategy to widen participation. (Mullings-Lawrence, Personal Communication, 2019)

Mullings-Lawrence expresses an overly, and rightly in my opinion, cynical view of academic life, which on one hand speaks to the problem black academics face as employees, whilst on the other is tokenistic because 'widening participation' really means more, black student, bums on seats. Therefore, from the outside it looks like there are qualitative and quantitative changes within the diverse university setting as a whole, but these populist appeals do little to dismantle the inherently stratified nature of racial thinking. In actuality then, the power of white privilege remains largely unchecked because the real movers, shakers and gatekeepers, maintain the 'acceptable' distance between their dominant, non-black position and the subjugated 'reality' of black staff and students.

By conveniently promoting what is in essence a 'diversity monologue', identifiable differences between non-blacks and their black 'other(s)', undermines the social, cultural, economic, educational and political dimensions of 'race' as process and praxis. What is then on offer in the ivory tower, as well as the wider public arena, is an appeal to a common-sense understanding of difference that yet again best serves the status quo. A point that is perfectly captured in the wrongheaded declaration from the University and College Unionⁱⁱ (UCU) in November 2019, that "The UCU has a long history of enabling members to self-identify, whether that is being black, disabled, LGBT or women". Their approach totally ignores the historical legacies of dehumanisation and subjugation that negatively impact the post-colonial realities of their black membership, whilst collapsing an identifiable form of racialised difference into a pretty nebulous, meaningless, mass of nothingness. Therefore, it is prudent to give consideration to a racialisation process that gave birth to this dominant white aesthetic that enables one to 'self-identify', in the context of how it assists in the 'reconfiguring of blackness' (Henry 2012: 152).

People of color, including those of African, Asian, Latino and Native American descent who are socialised through Western influences, ultimately come to idealize concepts and behaviors that are of an alien origin. These alien ideals, which people of color internalize, become

standards of personal consequence. Such standards do not require litigation, although they maintain the support of both *du jour* and *de facto* institutions. (Hall 2012:1)

What Hall is speaking to is why people who are not classified as white, should be cautious when accepting an aesthetic that not only renders them invisible, but programmes them into embracing 'these alien ideals' to their personal detriment. Consequently, it is crucial that we make known how this form of scientific discourse has fed into the myth of racial equality, because despite constant refutations, this form of thinking negatively impacts our present social reality. As such, we must recognise that our ideas of history are what inform the present racialised reality and therefore need to be challenged from within by black academics. Crucially then, ignoring the manner in which the society you live in is structured along a racial hierarchy, where whiteness is valued and blackness is not, is tantamount to committing 'menticide', which Wright (1985) explains is 'the deliberate and systematic destruction of a person's or group's mind'. Thus, there is a need for a recognised platform for debating alternative models of social, economic and political discourse unapologetically, as we shall see in the next section, from a black cultural perspective based on recognising a commonality of condition.

The unbelonging: the black academic as 'insider-outsider'

I do not consider myself to be a person of mixed race although my father was African and my mother European. There is no such thing as race, just the human race. The false label of "mixed race" privileges people like me in that whiteness separates us from Blackness because less melanin "appears" closer to the "white" and is thus perceived to be superior to darker skinned people. This historical, religious, social and materialist belief is globalised and normalised through cultural conquest. (Dove 2019: 60)

Dove highlights what it means to partake in debates based on a form of dialectic certainty, that publicly speaks to the recognition of 'black' humanity yet obscures the systemic nature of ongoing black oppression through a form of 'soft power';

manifesting as ongoing 'cultural conquest'. Equally, Dove importantly addresses the 'false label of mixed race', a crucial aspect of our 'racial socialization' which 'is the process whereby we come to know our strengths, understand the world in which we live, and position ourselves to strive' (Leary, 2005: 200). I would add to Leary's observation, in line with Dove's perspective, that an awareness of the centrality of white privilege in Western societies, must be given primary consideration and be appropriately challenged in such discussions of racial socialisation. Otherwise, what then occupies centre stage is a double-edged stereotype that profits white society, because the 'inherent biases' that represent 'black reality' are the 'product of a certain kind of whiteness' (Ware and Back 2002: 314) that remains largely unchallenged within the hallowed halls of academia. Consequently:

Conversations with senior white colleagues who would refer to the importance of persons like myself, representing the diverse student body are telling of a silent narrative. One that features professional spaces dominated by old discourses of race and racism that are trying to add 'colour' to its white past by introducing a script that reads "we are diverse". There is also an unspoken logic that Black academics ought to be able to deliver on courses such as race and ethnicity, culture representation and difference, after all racism is a "lived experience". (Mullings-Lawrence, Personal Communication, 2019)

The 'unspoken logic' obfuscates the right for the black academic to be different in this context, as it negates a right to be treated as a social, cultural or political equal, who is free to express this 'difference', without being reduced to it. Therefore, due to the constant negative representation of black people in the wider public arena in 'every area of human activity' (Fuller Jr 1984), this notion of alterity becomes a marker of inferiority as well as difference. On this point, Reay et al (2007) state the need to 'develop critiques, which while recognising how people negotiate inequitable situations, also constantly keep in play the structural injustices within which they are situated' (Reay et al 2007: 1055). Interestingly then, the particular choice of words in a 'script that reads we are diverse', knowingly gives precedence to white norms and values, which are the 'centre—the standard', upon which social, cultural and political diversity are measured. These manifest as the 'grey' areas that contain the uncomfortable truths that many 'comfortable' blacks and complicit whites are

reluctant to tackle openly and honestly, especially when discussing change as aspects of academic life.

I have been in academia for 21 years and have taught at four universities. The longest serving of which I had a significant role for much of the 17 years I worked there. Within this time, it was clear that expressed commitments to support and advance Black students did not extend to Black academics. Unfortunately, my experience does not appear to be unique and is borne out by data confirming the experiences of other Black academics throughout the sector. One of the answers to this differing commitment I believe can be found in understanding the differences in potential threat to elevated White status within higher education institutions. The Black student does little to undermine the privilege of whiteness, but the Black academic's position can potentially undermine it. (Harvey, Personal Communication, 2019)

The suggestion from Harvey is that there is a sense of deliberation in the conventions that university life is premised upon that affect's black faculty in myriad ways; none more so than in the differential treatment they receive when compared to black students. I am not for a minute suggesting that the experiences of black students within HE is anything like it should be, for this is clearly not the case. Rather I am stating that Harvey's keen observation explains the whys and wherefores of visibly supporting a cohort who do not pose the same type of black threat to the white establishment. For any challenge to their white academic worth/merit is a challenge to their academic orthodoxy; that which is still haunted/shackled by an enlightenment view of the world. This explains why he states 'my experience does not appear to be unique', because such experiences are grounded in, a form of 'whiteness' that can only operate as a dominant 'self' to an inferior 'other', through reinforcing 'conventional patterns of power and privilege' (Parasecoli 2010: 451). Indeed, 'although white racism affects all "non-white" peoples, Africans and people of African descent are the particular targets of the resurgence of a neo-scientific racism' (Rigby 1996: 2/3). What then occupies centre stage here is a notion of whiteness as the 'ever-present non-presence that moulds and shapes reality' (Henry 2007: 39); that which profits the downpressorⁱⁱⁱ; the beneficiaries of white supremacist thought and action in every area of human endeavour. We must therefore be prudent when

evaluating the ramifications of a historical legacy that impacts the manner in which we explain black life, in the contemporary, because without taking these aspects into consideration the picture will remain biased and incomplete, because:

Whiteness and White privilege have shaped the lives and experiences of black folk in the UK academe as it has shaped that of white people. The permanence, pervasiveness and debilitating effect of whiteness and white privilege in shaping the experiences of black academics and professional services staff in the UK academy is likened to malignant narcissism, instituted to promote and maintain hegemony over the 'other'. To the black folk in the academe, Whiteness and White privilege is perceived as a super-structure which is ingrained into the fabric of the academe. As a vice, Whiteness and White privilege undermines and erodes a sense of belonging, resilience, wellbeing and ultimately academic confidence. (Thomas, Personal Communication, 2019)

It is understood that within the realms of academia there is no 'scientific' evidence to support any notion of an inherent superiority or inferiority, premised on phenotypic difference between the so-called races. Yet this does not translate to the lived experiences of ordinary people for as Thomas suggests scholars and staff within HE, are subject to the effects of this 'malignant narcissism', that is 'ingrained into the fabric of academe'; Rigby's 'neo-scientific racism'. As such, tackling the thorny issue of white privilege, must work from the premise that whiteness is historically embedded within the 'superstructures' of Western societies and thus permeates all aspects of our social worlds, because it is institutionalised and thus normalised. The rationale behind such thinking is through recognising that 'Whiteness and White privilege undermines and erodes a sense of belonging'. We therefore need to consider what provides blacks with a platform for debating alternative models of social, economic and political discourse, from their own cultural and epistemological standpoint within HE environments. That which provides a sense of 'ontological security' (Laing 1990), crucial to maintaining a viable sense of well-being; culturally, spiritually and psychologically in this place and at this time. Hence, 'we must acknowledge that whiteness is simultaneously visible and invisible in a broad range of circumstances including academia' (Fujikawa 2008:3), so those who are

negatively impacted should be the ones who detail exactly what it means to be on the receiving end.

Conclusion:

The argument here suggests there is an urgent need for a plurality of discourse, because the plight of black academics has become clouded under a politically impotent acceptance of a form of cultural diversity/inclusivity. That which essentially maintains the hierarchical nature of the 'irrational/unproven' racialised black 'other' as the antithesis of the 'rational/proven' white self. Simply put, white people do not really have to consider how their whiteness impacts contemporary forms of social control and exclusion; the very factors that ultimately determine which voices speak to a lived reality based on racialised registers of human worth. Hence, scraping off the veneer of respectability that presents 'whiteness as rightness', is crucial as it challenges white privilege head on and by using the voices of those who are most impacted by it, as I have done here, adds clarity to this pressing concern. For instance:

During my time in the academy in Britain, three of the most striking ways in which I have seen, and experienced whiteness and white privilege operating are: 1) the unyielding 'epistemic violence' (Dotson 2011, Sullivan and Tuana 2008) meted out at every level.

2) The extent to which intersectional anti-black racism is overt and not in the least bit subtle in the ways in which the narrative of British racism suggests (Tate 2018/19). This again manifests in issues recently appearing in the public discourse, like the utterly indefensible pay gap for academics racialised as black, in particular women racialised as black to the very blatant disparities in the way black academics are treated in the workplace.

3) The persistent reality that as a black academic, one's job, career and principles are perpetually at risk and that one can never feel 100% confident that one can rely on their white colleagues, even those alleged 'allies' to stand up against injustice. Even the most brilliant, accomplished, internationally respected academics racialised as black must have a perpetual plan B in place. White privilege operates as the antithesis of moral courage. (Geraldine, Personal Communication, 2019)

Geraldine's damning indictment is the perfect way to conclude this discussion as it speaks to why it is important for black academics to share their stories, because as long as we suffer in silence the 'epistemic violence' will continue to be 'meted out at every level'. More tellingly for me is her pointing out that black academics, despite their level, 'must have a perpetual plan B in place', which was the case when I was at Goldsmiths, University of London and was never shortlisted for the job (I applied on three occasions) I was actually doing between 2003 and when I left there in 2005. My 'plan B' was two-fold; firstly, I am a plumbing and heating engineer and secondly I was part of NU-Beyond Ltd: Learning By Choice' which was an independent educational consultancy I co-founded in 1999. That is why it was relatively easy for me to walk away from the 'blatant disparities in the way black academics are treated in the workplace', as I had viable ways to generate an income. This however is seldom the case for most academics, especially for young black academics who have gone the conventional route and achieved a PhD in their mid-twenties. Inevitably this means when they are confronted with the reality of how '[W]hite privilege operates as the antithesis of 'moral courage' they bear the brunt and can either 'put up', 'shut up' or leave. For as long as white privilege remains unchallenged within the hallowed halls of academia in particular and the wider public arena in general, its dominance and occupation of the centre ground will continue to negatively impact the lives of black people in every walk of life. As such, the argument here regarding the pernicious nature of ongoing white privilege within HE, is uncompromising and borne of the belief that we must have the right conversations now. For if we black academics cannot, collectively, make public our ongoing treatment within an institutionally racist sector that has an ever-increasing number of black students, then we are complicit in our own destruction because we perhaps lack the 'moral courage' to say enough is enough and change is a right not a privilege.

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Personal Communications

Associate Professor, Taiwo (Anonymised) Email response, 23 April 2019

Dave Thomas, Email Response, 21 April 2019

Dr Anthony, (Anonymised) Email response, 21 April 2019

Dr Deborah Gabriel, Email response, 21 April 2019

Dr Geraldine, (Anonymised) Email response, 22 April 2019

Dr Sireita Mullings-Lawrence, Email response, 22 April 2019

Harvey, (Anonymised) Email response, 22 April 2019

ⁱ This speaks to a methodological approach that utilises the biographical information I have collated from reasoning with fellow black academics that cannot be reduced to any orthodox interviewing method. This is because it is rooted in Rastafari reasoning which uses the notion of 'overstanding' as opposed to understanding so the issue is considered from all angles. See Henry (2020: 62) for an explanation of this concept.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/11/18/whites-can-black-wish-says-lecturers-union/>

ⁱⁱⁱ The rationale behind 'downpressor' is in line with 'overstanding' as Rastafari teach us that an enemy only 'presses you down'.