

Unveiling White Supremacy in the Academy

by

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The project of genuinely decolonizing the university must be part of an inclusive task to transform the wider society of which the academy is an integral part. It is a long term undertaking which surely starts with the audacity to name the elephant in the room: white supremacy.

In Britain there has yet to emerge a movement to decolonize British universities, particularly in the fields of African Studies, the Humanities and Social Sciences along with an increased appointment of African scholars in these specific fields. Perhaps the explanation lies in the fact that there has not been a civil rights movement in Britain comparable to the struggles in America which demanded Black Studies and African history be taught in American universities in the 1960s and 1970s. People of African-Caribbean and African descent are only 2.8 per cent of the total British population, compared to African Americans, who were approximately 10 per cent of the American population during the 1960s and therefore the demographic weight of African Americans contributed significantly to achievement of their demands for changes in the curriculum.

Yet, there is something profoundly disconcerting when one looks online at the faculty of African Studies at the University College London (UCL) and at Oxford and hardly sees an African face within the faculty. I ask you the reader to take 30 seconds and scroll through these links and see for yourself the invisibility of African faces at UCL and Oxford. The visibility of African staff may perhaps be found in their cleaning staff, canteens and as security guards.

In 2001, the then director-general of the BBC, Greg Dyke, described that institution as “hideously white” and that its management structure was more than 98% white. During 2015 the Black British actor, Sir Lenny Henry, called for increasing diversity of ethnic minorities in British television, which raises questions as to how much progress has been made since Dyke made his comment 15 years ago.

The same “hideously white” characterization can be made of the current state of British universities. In a discussion with a male colleague who is also a Nigerian social science professor based in Canada, he gave an incisive response after looking at the links to the African Studies faculties at both UCL and Oxford. He replied: “There’s something fairly pernicious and contemptuously arrogant in that sneering ex cathedra way, that only the English can affect.”

In a 2011 *Guardian* article, it was revealed, “The Higher Education Statistics Agency figures show black British professors make up just 0.4% of all British professors – 50 out of 14,385. This is despite the fact that 2.8% of the population of England and Wales is African or African-Caribbean, according to the Office for National Statistics. Only 10 of the 50 black British professors are women.” This is still 0.4% of all 17,375 professors at UK universities. In regards to Black vice-chancellors, there are none. It was only in 2015 that Lady Valerie Amos of Guyanese ancestry was appointed the ninth director of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. Recent research in the USA has also unearthed low numbers of minority professors across 1500 US colleges.

“The Imperial/Racial Factor” is Linked to the Patriarchal Factor

Yash Tandon’s critique of Oxford in his recent article entitled, *The Rhodes Controversy: Storm in Tea Cup?* “that the educational system at Oxford University is fundamentally conservative – almost reactionary,” was almost spot on. However, in his analysis of the “imperial/racial factor” at Oxford (and many other UK universities), he fails to see that the “imperial/racial factor” is inextricably linked to the patriarchal factor. Neither does he address the lack of African people in the above mentioned African Studies Centre at Oxford.

It is time to make privilege visible and dismantle its invisibility. As the white male writer, Michael Kimmel, writes: “To be white, or straight, or male, or middle class is to be simultaneously ubiquitous and invisible. You are like water, like air.”[1] Furthermore, he argues: “There are consequences to this invisibility: Privilege, as well as gender, remains invisible. And it is hard to generate a politics of inclusion from invisibility. The invisibility of privilege means that many men, like many white people, become defensive and angry when confronted with the statistical realities or the human consequences of racism or sexism. Since our privilege is invisible, we may become defensive. Hey, we may even feel like victims ourselves.”[2]

This invisibility in the academy is both political and patriarchal. White privilege is structural and manifests itself in everyday life and what is taken for granted. The reality for many Black academics (both female and male in UK universities) is that many are part-time lecturers or on fixed-term contracts (which means job insecurity) as well as on low salaries in far greater proportion to their white counterparts. Many Black academics remain outside the doors of British academia due to institutional racism and sexism.

Reproducing Paradigms of Epistemic Asymmetry

The issue of unveiling white supremacy in the academy remains a valid problem in Britain and currently in South Africa with the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student-led movements. Underlying these struggles is a demand and desire by sections of these movements to decolonize the university structure, not only in terms of staffing but also in terms of the entire curriculum that continues to produce “black skins in white masks” in the twenty first century and leaves intact colonial patterns of control, domination and exploitation. For some elements in and outside the academy, the nakedness of white supremacy that pervades the university as a physical institution and as an intellectual domain one has to conform to in order to “succeed,” is evident and requires radical systemic change.

What is also scandalous is the arrogance, complacency and acceptance of many European academics who do not question this supremacy, for their right to dominate such institutions, and particularly African Studies departments, emanates from the imperial-racial-patriarchal mind-set that only Europeans “know” African realities on account of Euro-American adherence to “objectivity”, “neutrality” and “methodology.” It is only Europeans who can theorize and therefore produce epistemology or knowledge on or about Africans. This imperial-racial-patriarchal mind-set is also reflected, as Tandon correctly identified, in Ivy League institutions such as Oxford, where many European scholars rarely cite African scholars in their works but other Europeans (often their friends and colleagues in academic networks). In business parlance, these are called “old boys networks”.

Some years ago, I gave tutorials to second and third year students doing a module on African development and politics at Oxford. I was disturbed to see that in the three consecutive years I taught three different sets of all white female students who wrote essays on the topic of gender in Africa, these students could write about African women and feminism but failed to directly consult the works of African feminists on the designated reading list in their essays.

They would invariably consult and cite secondary sources by European writers and feminists who comment on these African female scholars, but rarely would the students directly read the primary work of African women scholars and directly cite them in their essays.

Bell Hooks (bell hooks) in her book *Teaching to Transgress* writes that: “white women have assumed positions of power that enable them to reproduce the servant-served paradigm in a radically different context” (p. 104). Patricia Hill Collins also points out that “one pattern of suppression is that of omission” of the works and contribution of women of color that is perpetrated by Western feminists but also European women unconscious of their racism. In short, I contend that these white female students were unconsciously or unwittingly reproducing a relation of domination by choosing to cite white authors on the reading list whilst the African authors who were also on the reading list were not cited. Therefore, it is necessary to ask: is it the case that only European/American women and men are custodians of ALL knowledge and truth?

“Coloniality Survives Colonialism”

The pernicious whiteness of UK academia parallels a recent British You Gov Poll in January 2016 that found 44 per cent of British people were proud of Britain’s history of colonialism while only 21 per cent regretted that it happened. 23 per cent held neither view. “The same poll also asked about whether the British Empire was a good thing or a bad thing: 43 per cent said it was good, while only 19 per cent said it was bad. 25 per cent responded that it was “neither”.” The atrocities of empire are usually downplayed and glossed over, giving British people an inflated and wholly distorted sense of themselves whilst belittling the impact empire had on the losers. Rarely is the experience of empire told through the eyes of the colonized. The notion of the benign empire in the minds of the British people conceals its character of plunder, rape and pillage, because there was nothing benevolent about empire whatsoever.

The binary classification of the British Empire as either “good” or “bad” is symptomatic of Western interpretation and classification of not only colonial history but a simplification of experiences, processes and the past. More importantly, this appears to be the manner in which empire is viewed in Britain, rather than as a project of imperialist global design that produced conquerors and victims; exploiters and the exploited; and how the legacies of this imperialist and racist project unleashed on non-European peoples in the world continues in what “decolonial” scholars argue is an ongoing and lived “global coloniality.” The world remains patterned and shaped by people who live in what such scholars define as the “Zone of Non Being” which is inhabited by people of color who largely constitute the South and the “Zone of Being” which is inhabited by Europe and North America. To put it differently, despite the formal end of colonial rule, “coloniality” remains in reconfigured forms of domination, control and exploitation of the rest of the world in authority, economics, knowledge, subjectivity, gender, sexuality and nature by the countries of the North over countries of the South.

Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Walter D. Mignolo and Anibal Quijano, decolonial scholars from Latin America, refer to this as “the colonial matrix of power”[3] in which beneath the benign face of “western modernity” is the concealed logic of “coloniality.” Underpinning this entangled web of asymmetrical power relations is a hetero-normative, racialized, patriarchal, and hierarchical world order which needs to be unveiled. This unveiling is necessary for its perniciousness lies not only in its predominance of Euro-American scholars in positions of power of “knowing” but also manifests itself in how “truth” is universalised. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, another decolonial scholar from South Africa, states:

“Since the time of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment, Westerners worked tirelessly to make their knowledge the only truthful and universal knowledge and ceaselessly spread it through Christianity and other means across the world, in the process appropriating and displacing existing African knowledges. Western knowledge and imperial power worked together to inscribe coloniality across the African continent and other parts of the non-Western world. That way, Western domination and Eurocentrism assumed universality.”[4]

Whereas colonialism came to a formal end with the withdrawal of colonial administrators from colonized territories at different points in time in colonially held territories, as Maldonado-Torres points out, “coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day.”[5] Coloniality mediates all relations into inferior and superior; it inserts hierarchy into the world, between human beings, the planet and nature. Decolonial thinking opposes this singular vision of structuring the world and human thinking.

Walter Mignolo advocates “pluriversality,” the persistent effort of unlearning universality, that is, there is only one world and recognizing that there are many. He contends it also involves “learning to live with people one does not agree with, or may not even like.”[6] This vision is reflected in the perspective of Subcommandante Marcos of the Zapatista Army of Liberation (EZLN) when the Zapatista uprising in early 1994 in Mexico attacked the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA : “We seek a world in which there is room for many worlds.”[7]

How Do We Decolonise Universities Both in the West and in Africa?

In March 2014 there was a livestreamed event at the University College London with the provocative and appropriate title “Why isn’t my professor black?” It was packed with students and academics of color. The panel was chaired by the white provost of UCL and six guest speakers; three Black female academics and three male academics who addressed the question and realities for Black academics and students in UK universities.

Whilst British institutional racism was identified as the elephant in the room in answering the question “Why isn’t my professor black?” little focus was given to the issue of how to change this deplorable state of affairs in Britain.

The question of how we decolonize the academy both in the West and in Africa is important to confront – for South Africa is not the only country in Africa that has Eurocentric oriented universities; the majority of African countries also remain epistemologically, ideologically and financially tied to Euro-American funding streams and paradigms. Such a project requires radical initiatives and political will on the part of the university management to not only listen to student voices as well as African scholars but genuinely implement change that is responsive to the demands of specific localities. In Britain, the alternative has been and continues to be for African and African-Caribbean scholars to relocate elsewhere around the globe, particularly to North America for what appear to be greener academic pastures.

In an interview with Rama Salla Dieng, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni pointed out that integral to the project of transforming African universities is the need to “de-racialise, democratise, detribalise, decolonise, and depatriarchize.” The five “ds” are essential to such a project and present challenges and openings for critically rupturing the status quo. For example, patriarchal attitudes are practiced by women just as they are endorsed and carried out by men. In January 2016 in Uthukela, near Durban in South Africa, a scheme that offered student grants to girls who remain virgins was initiated by the municipality’s female mayor, Dudu Mazibujo. It was made clear that beneficiaries of the grant would be subjected to regular virginity tests. The rationale for the scheme as the mayor said is ostensibly to “reduce HIV, Aids and unwanted pregnancy” in Uthukela. The People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA) and other human rights groups in South Africa criticized the scheme as a violation of the rights of young girls. That young boys are not subjected to such tests nor other ways to address the problem of HIV, Aids and unwanted pregnancy explored, testifies to the lack of imagination of a patriarchal society that appears to blame women and girls for such problems.

Crucially, using government grants for education as a means to extort compliance from girls fails to address the fact that boys and men evade responsibility for HIV, Aids and unwanted pregnancies. In addition, is it unethical that education for girls should be dependent on their remaining virgins? How can African universities genuinely decolonize when such patriarchal views of African girls and women prevail?

And if we were to engage in conjecture: what would happen to the education of a girl receiving such a grant who became pregnant through no fault of her own i.e. via rape by an older man or was pressured to have sex with a young boy her own age? What punishment – if any – would be meted out to the older man or boy who impregnated her?

In the context of decolonizing universities, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni points out in his interview, it is not simply about increasing the number of Black female and male scholars in universities when the structures, thinking, reins of power, epistemic body of knowledge remains thoroughly European/Eurocentric in orientation, despite a diversity box or equal opportunities box being ticked for doing so. Neither does it mean in relation to curriculum change that “we add black thinking to a white pot.” He contends that decolonizing requires “learning to unlearn in order to relearn” and accepting and acting on the principle that “knowledge is plural and equal;” Euro-American knowledge is by no means the only form of knowledge and is by no means superior. In order to acknowledge that “knowledge is plural and equal” requires intellectual humility or what he refers to as “modesty.”

There are a few progressive/radical European scholars male or female who are critical of white supremacy in the academy. Their challenge lies in not paying lip-service to the need for diversity and decolonizing the curriculum, yet changing little in their own privileged lives and day to day anti-racist practice.

Ultimately, the project to genuinely decolonize the university must be part of an inclusive task to systematically transform the wider society of which the academy is an integral part. Fundamentally, it is a long term undertaking which surely starts with the audacity to name the elephant in the room? Solutions to societal and institutional problems must initially start with recognizing they exist.

End Notes

[1] See “Towards a Pedagogy of the Oppressor” by M. Kimmel, in “Progressive Black Masculinities” edited by A. D. Mutua, (Routledge, 2006), p.64.

[2] Ibid, p. 66.

[3] See “The Darker Side of Western Modernity Global Futures, Decolonial Option” by W. D. Mignolo, (Duke University Press, 2011), pp.8-9.

[4] See “Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa Myths of Decolonization” by S. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, (CODESRIA, 2013), p.8.

[5] Ibid.

[6] See “The Darker Side of Western Modernity Global Futures, Decolonial Options” by W. D. Mignolo, (Duke University Press, 2011), p. 176.

[7] Cited in “Methodology of the Oppressed” by C. Sandoval, Minnesota University Press, 2000, on preceding page to contents page.