

NAVIGATING RACIALIZED SPACES IN ACADEMIA. CRITICAL REFLECTIONS FROM A ROUNDTABLE

Lai-Tze Fan
Concordia University

Anthony Jeethan
Lakehead University

Mary Grace Lao
York and Ryerson Universities

Andrea Luc
York and Ryerson Universities

Priya Rehal
York and Ryerson Universities

Abstract: *Despite an increase in the diversity of the Canadian post-secondary student population, diversity among academic faculty lags with 17% of identifying as a visible minority (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2010). This lack of diversity sends a message to all students that producers of knowledge are an elite few (Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2007) and remains an ongoing challenge among scholars of colour. Such challenges include: faculty and staff support, curriculum development, and feelings of validity. Reflecting back on discussions of race, it is important to note that these challenges are shared and valid.*

Keywords: racialization, diversity, post-secondary education, white supremacy, anti-black racism.

Résumé : *Malgré une augmentation de la diversité au sein de la population des étudiantes et étudiants postsecondaire au Canada, les professeures et professeurs s'identifiant comme une minorité ethnique ou culturelle ne s'élève qu'à 17 % selon l'Association canadienne des professeurs et professeures d'université en 2010. Le manque de diversité envoie un message fort à tous les étudiantes et étudiants : les créateurs de savoir ne sont qu'une élite minoritaire (Ryan, Pollock & Antonelli, 2007) et cela représente un défi perpétuel pour le corps professoral racisé. Ces défis incluent des difficultés sur le plan du soutien de la part des facultés et des employées et employés, du développement de leur curriculum et de leur sentiment de validité face à des institutions majoritairement blanches. En réfléchissant*

aux discussions sur la race, il est important de noter que ces difficultés sont valides et qu'elles sont partagées.

Mots-clés : race, diversité, éducation postsecondaire, suprématie blanche, négrophobie.

In January 2016, University of Toronto PhD student, Huda Hassan tweeted, “if you’re a black woman applying for grad school & would like a writer+phd student to revise your statement, email me.” In one month, Hassan’s tweet gained 2,598 retweets and 3,497 likes. In a recent interview on CBC’s *The Current* (2017), Hassan indicated that she had received 120 applications from black women (with some men) from Canada, the US, and East Africa. Hassan volunteered to review PhD applications without monetary compensation, which unavoidably takes time away from her own research. Responses from would-be applicants as well as established academics volunteering their own time and support for the cause brought forth questions of what diversity actually means in academia. In the very same interview, Political Scientist, Dr. Malinda Smith stated, “universities use the concept diversity and people actually think that includes racialized minorities... when you look at the practices that universities engage in, what they’re primarily doing is focusing on women.”

This experience is unsurprising: Among Canadian universities, although there has been an increase in the diversity of the undergraduate student population, this diversity continues to lag among academic faculty. Current and ongoing research by Smith and Kisha Supernant (2016) and others indicate that this imbalance remains true not just among professors, but also among senior administration being comprised primarily of white men. In looking at census data, Peter Li (2012) reported that white professors far outnumber professors of visible minorities. This employment gap remains even after only looking at younger professors (under age 32). These numbers reflect those of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), who in 2010, indicated that only 17% of university teachers identify as a visible minority.

In addition to representation, the CAUT (2010) reported that visible minority professors earned far less than the average among Canadian university educators. These discrepancies hold true for Li (2012) who suggested that systematic pay inequalities for professors that identify as visible minorities compared to their white counterparts, though further research is needed. It is

clear that in six years, the gap has remained relatively unaltered, despite calls for increased inclusion and diversity in higher education (CAUT, 2007).

These studies indicate that there continues to be ongoing challenges that scholars of colour face when navigating postsecondary spaces that have been predominantly white. As a predominantly white space, academia becomes a vehicle for white supremacy (WS). This application of WS is not one in line with its denotative and radically outdated meaning, but rather WS as an ongoing set of racial microaggressions. bell hooks (2012) argues that white supremacist thought is a product of socialization. How does the academy cultivate its emerging scholars when it can be an unsafe space for its scholars of colour?

Census and CAUT data indicate what scholars of colour have been stating all along, the knowledge that these experiences “remain personal and are told only anecdotally among ourselves” (Monture, 2010, p. 26). This concern led to our decision to organize this roundtable. Reflecting back on the stories and experiences shared during the roundtable, there were recurring challenges that echo similar concerns to Hassan, Smith and others. These challenges include (but are not limited to): finding support, curriculum development, validity and feelings of belonging as graduate students. These challenges do not occur independently but rather, intersect with one another.

Finding Support

According to Hassan (Radio broadcast, 2017), the premise behind her tweet was based on her own experiences as a PhD applicant. For Hassan, being a first generation graduate student in her family meant that she did not have immediate role models to assist her in her graduate school applications. Hassan’s experience runs similar to ours, as first generation graduate students, navigating through the application process and not knowing what university admissions offices are looking for in a candidate. Studies that have examined first generation college students found that parents who have gone to college understand and convey the benefits of post-secondary education to their children (Toutkoushian, Stollberg & Slaton, 2015).

As any scholar can attest to, having a role model or someone for which we can get support from is of utmost importance, especially in navigating through academia as an undergraduate student, graduate student, and as an emerging scholar. It is especially important to have this support in an environment that has been one where being a member of a historically marginalized group and bringing that discourse “[challenges] the historical configuration of the university” (Bramble, 2000, p. 274). Carl James (2000) reminds us that students seek out role models that are “able to navigate the social, economic and political systems, and negotiate the paths to their respective positions without losing sight of their goals or compromising their politics” (p. 97). As such, it is important for students to have a role model that aligns with their own needs and realities.

Adopting a Eurocentric Curriculum

Considering that post-secondary institutions are predominantly white, it is unsurprising that the dominant curriculum is Eurocentric, focusing on the work and amplifying the voices of white, male scholars. A Eurocentric curriculum does not magically appear in university, but rather begins in the public school system. Patricia Monture (2010) argues that “We need to question why knowledges other than Western knowledge do not form the core of what we are teaching” (p. 33). As such, by adopting a curriculum that is assumed to be white and Eurocentric, the message sent to both white and nonwhite students of whom authority figures are and who are producers of knowledge (Ryan *et al.*, 2007).

Didi Khayatt (2000) reminds us that we need to consider that the knowledge that is taught in a classroom is contextual, historically bound. For scholars seeking to do research within groups and communities that are marginalized, there may be a mismatch between the theories learned in the curriculum and the knowledge that is sought. In line with feminist approaches to methods, “traditional” notions of methodology and research practice have inherently been ones that, as Sandra Harding (2004) and others argue (e.g. Gray, 2014; 2016; McIntosh, 1988), make it difficult to understand that people’s experiences and activities are gendered. For Harding and others, traditional epistemologies project the voices of a dominant gender, class, and race while excluding others

as producers of knowledge. The privileging of one set of knowledge silences the knowledges of the Other. That is, knowledge about non-white peoples produced by those within academia are considered biased and subjective (Bramble, 2000).

Seeking/Reinforcing Validity and Feelings of Belonging

Without adequate support and a dominant, Eurocentric curriculum that may or may not align with research practice, scholars of colour are often left with feelings of invalidation. In sharing some of these stories, they are oftentimes dismissed as anecdotal. Smith (2010) argues that by dismissing stories and voices as anecdotal, merely due to it being a personal experience, delegitimizes stories of inequality. We are reminded of the words of Fyre Jean Graveline (2000): “When students/faculty/administration are uncomfortable, dis-satisfied, challenged to critically see what they have been conditioned to ignore, I cannot ignore it. My livelihood is challenged. My academic freedom is conditional” (p. 292).

Identifying as both scholar and as marginalized, scholars of colour must navigate a space of in-between: one of being a scholar and one as a member of a minority community. Echoing Erin Wunker’s (2016) sentiment of “how much space does one want to take up?” in issues surrounding our own privileges as scholars in a western-centric institution, where we are able to speak as an academic and speak in the dominant language easily. Academic spaces are not neutral or equally accessible. Henri Lefebvre (1976) argued that:

Space is not a scientific object removed from ideology or politics. It has always been political and strategic. There is an ideology of space. Because space, which seems homogeneous, which appears as a whole in its objectivity, in its pure form, such as we determine it, is a social product (p. 31).

Sefanit Habtemariam and Sandy Hudson (2016), both of whom are founding members of the Black Liberation Collective-Canada (BLCC), contextualized anti-black racism in Canadian post-secondary institutional spaces by addressing the stereotype that Canada is not as bad as its southern, currently Trump-led

neighbour. These two co-founders of BLCC reference their experiences at University of Toronto and University of British Columbia, and list the forms of representational issues and offenses ranging from complete erasure of black curriculum and courses to blackface (Habtemariam & Hudson, 2016). At the graduate level they note the complete lack of courses on black issues or black sociology. For example:

At our own institution, there are no courses where you can study black people at the graduate level. The school of Global Affairs is completely devoid of programs and courses that focus on the continent of Africa. This is the largest school in Canada, often touted as the best. It's difficult to imagine such an omission with regard to, say, Europe or Asia. Canada itself has a long and vibrant black history. Should we not be able to study it? (para. 3.)

The BLCC and other student groups continue to navigate administrations for change. But as Habtemariam and Hudson describe, the process continues to be disappointing and stunted by administrations. Beyond them, "the response from some in the academic community was reprehensible" (para. 6). Comparing Canada to the United States, the authors make reference to recent instances of anti-black racism, "At the University of Guelph, dozens of anonymous attacks on black students were made online in the form of discriminatory remarks, threats and harassment" (para. 6). Therefore suggesting, that the black academic experience is not distant from that of the United States after all. And so if the academy is this non-neutral white space, attached to white supremacist microaggressions, where do we go from here? How can we begin to validate emerging and existing scholars of colour?

Roundtable Reflections: Where do we go from here?

We don't know.

What we do know is that we continue to have these discussions, even in 2017, and the data has not substantially changed. This indicates that nothing has changed about the question concerning racial diversity in academia. As CAUT (2007) suggested, a lack of racial diversity can affect the diversity of pedagogical techniques used, research subject explored, questions posed, and

methodologies employed: things that we, as a roundtable discussed in our own experiences as graduate students. Thus, our argument does not stop at racial diversity, as the intersectionality of identities among marginalized scholars are oftentimes not considered. It is important to recognize that the issue concerning equity in academia not only affects scholars of colour, but also “the diversity of pedagogical techniques used, research subject explored, questions posed, and methodologies employed may also be limited” (CAUT, 2007) for all academics. In the words of Smith (2010), “All scholars come to their research and writing with a perspective as well as with certain disciplinary currencies and methodological investments” (p. 43). Thus, to change academia means a change from everyone involved, both the marginalized and allies alike.

Perhaps it begins with what Ryan, Pollock, and Antonelli (2009) suggest that a way to counter marginalization that we face is to occupy positions of authority and influence. But even before that, perhaps we need to begin by recognizing the current state that academia is in. University administrators, faculty, and graduate students need to recognize that more than just statistics will suffice in measuring the underrepresentation of non-white, non-male, trans, queer, indigenous, differently abled bodies in academic spaces. Rather, we must recognize that the experiences of marginalized scholars are real and valid. Echoing scholars of colour we look up to, the ones who contend that storytelling is political (Smith, 2010) and that discomfort is political (Graveline, 2000), our goal is to push for the amplification of marginalized voices, to validate them.

As a result of the discussion that took place following the relative roundtable, questions were raised by white male researchers and faculties about what is next, what would they like us to do. We respectfully ask[ed] that you disrupt white supremacy. Make your white peers uncomfortable, and amplify the voices of your racialized, trans, differently abled, and queer colleagues—as well as the voices of those who happened to be all four.

References

- Bramble, M. (2000). Being me in the academy. In C. E. James's (Ed.), *Experiencing Difference* (p. 271-282). Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.
- Canadian Association of University Teachers (2010). The changing academy? A portrait of Canada's university teachers. *CAUT Equity Review*. Retrieved from [https://www.caut.ca/docs/equity-review/the-persistent-gap-mdash-understanding-male-female-salary-differentials-amongst-canadian-academic-staff-\(mar-2011\).pdf?sfvrsn=12](https://www.caut.ca/docs/equity-review/the-persistent-gap-mdash-understanding-male-female-salary-differentials-amongst-canadian-academic-staff-(mar-2011).pdf?sfvrsn=12)
- Canadian Association of University Teachers (2007). A Partial Picture: The representation of equity-seeking groups in Canada's universities and colleges. *CAUT Equity Review*. Retrieved from [https://www.caut.ca/docs/equity-review/a-partial-picture-mdash-the-representation-of-equity-seeking-groups-in-canada-rsquo-s-universities-and-colleges-\(nov-2007\).pdf?sfvrsn=10](https://www.caut.ca/docs/equity-review/a-partial-picture-mdash-the-representation-of-equity-seeking-groups-in-canada-rsquo-s-universities-and-colleges-(nov-2007).pdf?sfvrsn=10)
- Graveline, F. J. (2000). Lived experience of an Aboriginal feminist. In C. E. James's (Ed.), *Experiencing Difference* (p. 283-293). Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.
- Habtemariam, S. & Hudson, S. (2016, March 1). Canadian campuses have a racism problem. *The Toronto Star*. Retrieved from <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/commentary/2016/03/01/canadian-campuses-have-a-racism-problem.html>
- Harding, S. (2004). Is there a feminist method?. In C. Seale (Ed.), *Social Research Methods: A Reader* (p. 456-464). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hassan, H. (2017, January 4). If you're a black woman applying for grad school & would like a writer+phd student to revise your statement, email me: hudamina@gmail.com [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/_hudahassan/status/816842091171115013?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw
- Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2007). Feminist research: Exploring the interconnections of epistemology, methodology, and method. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis* (p. 1-28). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hooks, B. (2012). *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- James, C.E. (2000). "You're doing it for the students." On the question of role models. In C. E. James's (Ed.). *Experiencing Difference* (p. 89-98). Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.

- Khayatt, D. (2000). Talking equity: Taking up differences in the classroom. In C. E. James's (Ed.), *Experiencing Difference* (p. 258-270). Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.
- Lefebvre, H. (1976). *The Survival of Capitalism*. London, UK: Allison and Busby.
- Li, P. S. (2012). Differences in employment income of university professors. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 44(2), 39-48.
- Monture, P. (2010). Race, gender, and the university: Strategies for survival. In S. Razack, M. Smith & S. Thobai (Eds), *States of Race: Critical Feminism for the 21st Century* (p. 23-36). Toronto, Ontario: Between the Lines.
- Ryan, J., Pollock, K. & Antonelli, F. (2009). Teacher diversity in Canada: Leaky pipelines, bottlenecks, and glass ceilings. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 32(3), 591-617.
- Ryan, J., Pollock, K. & Antonelli, F. (2007, May). Teacher and administrator diversity in Canada: Leaky pipelines, bottlenecks and glass ceilings. Paper presented at the *Annual Conference of the Society for the Study of Education*, Saskatoon.
- Smith, M. (2010). Gender, whiteness, and "other Others" in the academy. In S. Razack, M. Smith & S. Thobai (Eds), *States of Race: Critical Feminism for the 21st Century* (p. 37-58). Toronto, Ontario: Between the Lines.
- Smith, M. & Supernant, K. (2016). *The diversity gap in CRCs at U15 institutions*. Retrieved from <https://uofaawa.wordpress.com/awa-diversity-gap-campaign/the-diversity-gap-in-crcs-at-u15-institutions/>
- Toutkoushian, R. K., Stollberg, R. S. & Slaton, K. A. (2015). Talking 'bout my generation: defining "first-generation students" in higher education research. Paper presented at the *Association for the Study of Higher Education*.
- Tremonti, A. M. (2017). Black PhD students call out inequality in Canadian academia [Radio program]. In P. Mattar & S's Mohyeddin's (Producers), *The Current*. Toronto, Ontario: CBC Radio.
- Wunker, E. E. (2016). *Notes from a feminist killjoy*. Toronto, Ontario: BookThug.