BOOK REVIEW

WILEY

INSIDE THE IVORY TOWER: NARRATIVES OF WOMEN OF COLOUR SURVIVING AND THRIVING IN BRITISH ACADEMIA

edited by Deborah Gabriel | Shirley Ann Tate

Before we start our review of *Inside the Ivory Tower*, we premise our engagement with the book by stating the following two simple facts:

1) UK government data (Runnymede Trust, 2017) indicates that there are 350 Black women professors employed by universities. That's 350 out of a total of 18,000 professors across the country

2) British academia has not employed a single Black woman Vice-Chancellor or Principal in its 922-year ancient history. Baroness Amos, as the most senior Black woman in British academia, is only the Director of SOAS University of London, which describes itself as the 'world's leading institution for the study of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East'

Women of colour (WoC) working in British academia have been waiting a long time for a book like *Ivory Tower* to be published by a British publisher. Since, for far too long, our stories, experiences and marginalization have been ignored or left unattended to by the university sector we work in. In the post-feminist post-race university (Tate & Bagguley, 2017) women have been encouraged to identify only one area of difference that determines their marginalization by structures of power — their sex (Lorde, 1984; see also Liu, 2018). This narrow focus on sex permits a sector-wide fictionalization of WoC's career trajectories that occludes Whiteness and class from an analysis of why WoC in academia are the most bullied, precarious, underpaid and junior workers in a given faculty (Runnymede Trust, 2017). By centering and drawing on Black Feminisms, *Ivory Tower*, as an edited volume of ten chapters written by ten British women academics of colour, supplies multiple counter-narratives to the post-feminist post-race fictionalization. Drawing on similar projects from across the Atlantic (e.g., Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012), these narratives are published in the hope that they may spark critical consciousness among their readers who can then take the steps of informing others that WoC exist in British academia and that they are needed (Wilson, 2017). To this extent, *Ivory Tower* is much more than a book, writes Gabriel (2017, p. 3) in her introduction, it is a 'collective research project centred on discursive activism'.

British academia overlooks Whiteness as a system of privilege and oppression, preferring to reframe inequalities as issues to do with the individual ('lean in') or lack of representation ('diversity'). The post-feminist post-race fiction entrenches ideas of blackness and brownness as lesser, amateur and un-aspired, identifying instead the White feminist and/or patriarchal figure as deserving of accolades and promotions. While individual contributions from WoC have gained currency in contemporary British 'diversity' discourses (e.g., Ahmed, 2012; Mirza, 1992), these have more often been used to promote a representational agenda whereby the appearance of Black bodies in the workplace is used as evidence of equality, as though by employing a WoC, an organization can claim it is diverse

(Ahmed, 2012). This claim serves to mask the systemic impediments that truncate WoC's careers and opportunities to thrive. Unlike in North America and Australasia, where Black liberation movements and indigenous rights have respectively had (albeit limited) material and operational support from within the university sector, the UK has been persistently negligent of, and consistently reluctant to respond to, Black power movements and the high levels of discrimination WoC face in universities. This has left Black and anti-racist activism in the UK academia bereft of an analysis that effectively overturns faith in British meritocracy and fairness.

Arguing that statistics provide a partial knowledge (and therefore a skewed politics) about the marginalization WoC encounter in academia, *Ivory Tower* focuses on narrating the lived experiences of ten WoC in academia. These narratives provide multifarious micro-contexts that augment the generalizations 'diversity' statistics reproduce. By giving voice to the women who have knowledge about university oppression and how it operates to devalue WoC in higher education, *Ivory Tower* uses narrative analysis as a methodology and a Black Feminist framework to encounter racism in women's university careers. The narratives also function to leave a breadcrumb trail of information, insider knowledge and structural analysis for WoC entering the academy without a Black or Brown mentor to make sense of the White university. Statistics do not provide this kind of detailed analysis, and not all academics of colour will share these truths with you either.

In the opening chapter, Josephine Kwhali (2017, p. 5) offers an incisive analysis of working in a White cultural context where 'complex issues of identity, belonging, racism and cultural assimilation have consistently featured'. White cultural contexts are often critiqued for demanding that the Other adopts certain behaviours or aesthetics to fit in with Whiteness. Kwhali, drawing on Fanon's (1986) psycho-social histography of colonial selfhood, goes much further in her narrative analysis connecting material impediments to her career to White Supremacy and the peculiarities of university elitism. 'Epistemology', she writes, 'has become interwoven with the voices and narratives of the dominant, whose inability to stand outside that privilege is equal only to their resentment of any challenge to it' (Kwhali, 2017, p. 20). Kwhali's chapter interlocks the political, affective and analytical to make visible the continuities and particularities of contemporary racism in higher education with its past. She uses a narrative methodology transgressively to undo the myth that Black women succeed and/or decline due to individual merit or personal deficit by drawing on a psycho-biographical lens to highlight how career trajectories become tacked onto the structural barriers that materialize through White enclaves that make up promotion and recruitment panels, publishing gatekeepers and grievance panels. The damaging consequences of this racist and sexist configuration abound in *Ivory Tower*'s stories: the White Male university leadership for whom diversity means simply populating White spaces with Black or Brown bodies, irrespective of how hostile and demeaning those spaces are for non-White people; the danger of speaking out against racism, thereby losing the 'White mask' and becoming demonized by the institution; students' racism towards Black teachers and the institution's failure to protect those teachers.

Appended to the narrative chapters are expressions of triumph, stories of success or personal tales of overcoming. This is a conscious strategy for Gabriel, and for the *Ivory Tower* project at large; it is a means to spark activism and empower women, especially Black women, who face the worst impediments to promotion and a supportive working environment. Drawing on hooks (1991), Mirza (2017, p. 45) calls for a distinction to be made between 'our [usual] survival strategy ... to work hard at "being seen" to be assimilated' and a writing strategy that uses 'experience as "standpoint", offering a mediated interpretation of the social world'. Where the former is a tactic that operates to muzzle alterity, the latter is a political methodology for making other ways of knowing possible; it is a break from oppressive conventions that ask WoC to become included in a violent structure. Mirza (2017, p. 51) asks that we recognize the broader politics that this book is located in, the 'organic social movements' that have collectivized 'Black and ethnicized student "post-race" voices, mobilized in the fight against racism and gender discrimination'. She cites *#whyismycurriculumwhite*, *#Rhodesmustfall* and *#IamtooOxford* as markers of the broader social context that *Ivory Tower* is an important contributor to. To this, Mirza could have added: *#whyisntmyprofessorblack* and *#blacklivesmatter*. There is a global resurgence of Black liberation politics and it has been taking form as an interventionist social media politics for at least five years now. Perhaps, this is what has made *Ivory Tower* resonate with so many of its WoC readers.

But, are we, based on these networked and mediated anti-racist politics, permitted to be celebratory of Black women's achievements in the White academy? Can we, by citing the existence of *Ivory Tower*, annotate White knowledge with a breach prised open by Black academic women-centred activism? Not quite, not yet. No — we are nowhere close. In a university sector that is calibrated by a neoliberal political economy, stories of triumph can be assimilated into a liberal politics celebrating the individual, as if collective organizing is not an option or that it doesn't happen. As WoC in academia, when we speak of our achievements and of thriving in the British higher education sector, we must keep celebrations of the individual to a minimum. There is still much work to be done on ourselves, with each other, as well as in our institutions. We need to keep our anger at the surface, we need to recognize the emotions that we have not been permitted to feel for White fear of what voicing those feelings could mobilize and what changes *that* could bring about.

Shirley Ann Tate's (2017) chapter surfaces at about midway in the edited volume. 'How do you feel?' her chapter asks the reader — and underlining this probe is the subtext: what are we permitted to feel, to give voice to, to change? Taking 'well-being' as her point of engagement with people management strategies in UK universities, Tate puts feelings of shame and managing those feelings at the centre of her understanding of racist anti-woman governmentality. Tate (2017, p. 55) asks us the question, 'How do you feel?' to implicate all of us as we 'read and vicariously experience' the 'racist shaming event' that the chapter recites. Tate is asking that we, and especially our White colleagues, recognize shaming as a racist, anti-woman strategy deployed by university management as a way of silencing WoC. Shame is induced by fictionalizing racist accounts, by denying racism occurs, by stating WoC are exaggerating issues and need some help to deal with — what (White) managers perceive to be is — ordinary life. When we read Tate's chapter, the reading arises out of a collective experience of pain, hurt and shame. But the shaming occurring in British universities takes the collectiveness out of the managed relationalities, leaving the woman of colour with a sense (it is a feeling) of being alone. This fiction is perhaps the central fiction that *Ivory Tower* demythologizes and overturns. We need to change what we know and how we behave with each other.

This volume is not the story of ten Black women — it's the experience of all WoC in higher education. When you read the edited volume, feel some sense of responsibility. White colleagues do not need to know about our lives to get on in their lives. Our marginalization will not impact our White colleagues' lives adversely. But, the institutional fiction demands that you need to know about our lives.

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