

Guilty Until Proven Innocent: Reflections on Encounters with Whiteness in an Academic Institution

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Abstract: Using selected personal experiences, this article reflects on my lived experiences of being a young black academic at an institution that is considered “white” in character and composition. From selected encounters with colleagues and students, I reflect on how blackness tacitly exposes black people to presumed incompetence and criminal culpability within the zone of whiteness and white privilege. Through these selected incidences, I also show how being white insulates white people from systemic and systematic injustices.

Keywords: race, racism, South Africa, academia, university

Introduction

I largely grew up in a “black world,” and encounters with white people in my first 23 years of existence were rather brief and occasional. It was a rarity. As a result, I was largely oblivious to issues of race and racism. Racism was in my view a past lived reality of our parents who had lived under colonialism. I assumed that with the coming of independence and black majority rule in all African countries, we had managed to usher in a new era of race relations in which equality for all races was assured. So, in my mind, I was existing in a fair world in which all races co-existed and lived amongst each other in peace and harmony. I was rather naive and failed to even realise that my existence in largely “black spaces” (township, schools, churches, and sports facilities) was actually reflective of the racial disparities and privileges that existed. I had failed to realise that I had largely inhabited spaces that were unworthy of white existence. I knew very little about “white spaces” and the white world that existed within the dual racial societal arrangements. I had not seen the other world, so in my mind it did not exist.

At the age of 19, I packed my bags and left my country, Zimbabwe, to go to a university in South Africa. I did my first degree at what is considered a historically disadvantaged black institution—the University of Fort Hare. By its nature and character, it was very much black. The student body was almost completely black apart from a few international exchange students that would occasionally enroll at the institution. The only time I encountered white persons was when we had a white lecturer or when I saw them from a distance in their offices and at staff restaurants. Thus, in many ways, my first four years of undergraduate studies mirrored my past 19 years in Zimbabwe. I was inhabiting predominantly black spaces, and I lived in a black world. I assumed it was a fair world after all.

The context I framed above is important as far as it demonstrates how I had hardly ever looked at the world through a racial lens. I was oblivious to the multiple realities that existed based on racial differences. In a few modules of my undergraduate degree in social work, I had covered a few topics on racism, but this was largely historical reflections on apartheid. Most textbooks that we used did not highlight the systemic and systematic discrimination against blacks as a lived reality, causing structural imbalances that continue to exist despite the end of apartheid as an

official government policy. For most scholars, the fall of the apartheid government in South Africa ushered in a new era, and they pointed to the new policies that were formulated based on principles of racial equality and justice as evidence that the curtain of apartheid had completely fallen. Looking back at it now, I realise that it was largely white scholars telling the story from their vantage points of white privilege. Books or academic articles from black scholars were non-existent. It is only recently that critical black scholarship in social work is beginning to emerge within the South African and African context. The lack of critical scholarship made many of us as students oblivious to systemic, institutional, and structural racism. I failed to realise that my existence in a historically disadvantaged black university was itself a reminder of the ugly apartheid phenomenon in terms of not only its historical past, but also as a current lived reality due to its enduring consequences.

The Innocence Broken

After completing my Bachelor of Social Work degree, I moved from a rural setting to a major city in South Africa. For the first time in my life, I began to see a new world and new realities based on racial lines that had hitherto not existed in my consciousness. For the first time I realised that as a black person my existence had been at the margins, which I had mistakenly come to normalise as a universal reality. I had enrolled at a bigger institution of higher learning—an institution considered to be historically advantaged. It was predominantly a space of “whiteness.” I had long appreciated what I thought were high standards (infrastructure, ambiance, and services) at the University of Fort Hare. However, my new reality at a historically advantaged university that had benefited from the apartheid government’s preferential support as a white space made me realise my naivety. It was worlds apart compared to my alma mater. For the first time, I was inhabiting a space in which whites seemed to outnumber blacks. Outside of the university, my place of residence was largely “white” in its composition and character. Slowly, the glaring disparities of the black and white world became very clear. Everywhere I looked, I could not help but see the contrasting difference of whiteness and blackness. The race of students streaming from car parks at the university, to the race of those going to wait for the bus, told a story. It was from these observed realities that my consciousness about racial privileges began to develop. I moved from “magical consciousness” (Ledwith, 2016, p. xiv) and later to “critical consciousness” (Ledwith, 2016, p. xi). At the level of magical consciousness, I thought of myself as largely an unaffected observer. However, I was soon to experience racism at a personal level both systemic and systematic. It was at this point that a shift from false consciousness to critical consciousness was birthed (Ledwith, 2016).

Guilty Until Proven Innocent (Even Blacks Internalised Inferiority)

Soon after completing my postgraduate qualification in social work, I was recruited to join the social work department at the same institution I had enrolled in for my postgraduate studies. It was a rare privilege indeed. I would never have expected this in my wildest imagination. I had been awed by the reputation of the institution compared to many other universities in Africa. As such, it was a privilege to be a student at this great institution. Being recruited as part of the faculty was unexpected, albeit welcome. A majority of lecturers in most departments of the university were white, and it was not uncommon to find only one person of colour or none at all

in many departments. As noted by Mabokela (2000), the demographics in the higher education landscape in South Africa are still dominated by whites and not reflective of the national demographics. This is why I would never have thought it possible that I could one day work in such a space. Nevertheless, I found myself employed at this great institution a few months after the completion of my post graduate qualification.

My very first day in the lecture hall was a baptism of fire and a dose of reality which told me I did not belong in the space that I was. Consistent with the assertions of Sian (2017), who notes that black people often occupy the position of “outsiders” (p. 2) within white dominated academic contexts, I realised that as a black person at a white university, I occupied the role of an outsider. The role of the “other.”

I was a 25-year-old black man standing in front of a class of mixed race, with many of the students being of the same age as I was, and a few older than me. As soon as I finished introducing myself as the lecturer for the module that I had been assigned, a number of students began to murmur. Some burst into laughter. While I may not have been able to hear what was being said, there was no doubt that the students never expected such a young black person to stand in front of them as a lecturer. I could see some expressions on their faces, which seemed to show doubt and despondency. Instinctively, I knew that they doubted my ability, suitability, and competence to teach. It did not matter that they had never been taught by me before; the colour of my skin was enough reason to be pronounced guilty until proven innocent. As argued by Puwar (2004), black people are an unusual and unexpected phenomenon within universities and are thus often doubted whenever and wherever they are found. I really felt doubted, belittled, and struggled to hide my nervousness. After a few minutes of their mumbling, I calmed the class down and began my lecture.

I favour a student-centred approach to teaching which encourages active participation, but I was not going to take a chance with that. In that first lecture, I realised that I was on trial and I had to acquit myself. As such, I made the lecture about me rather than them. For the next 30 minutes of the lecture, it was a monologue, and I was simply “downloading data” from my brain to the students as I introduced the module. I discarded the use of PowerPoint slides and simply spoke from my mind to try and prove that I knew what I was doing. Each concept that I explained was punctuated with some use of big words which I knew they did not understand. The idea was to prove to them that I knew better than them. The whole essence of the lecture was lost as it became about me rather than them, and at that point, I couldn’t care less. I felt that I was fighting for my reputation and survival in a space of whiteness.

As I used more big words and complex theory to explain simple things, I could see the shift in expressions on many students’ faces. Most of the black students were smiling; my focus was however largely on the white students. I saw no smiles from them. Theirs was an expression that seemed to portray some confusion and disbelief. It was as if they were saying, “Ok, let’s hear you out,” and hear me out they did! As soon as I finished my adumbration, I paused and asked if anyone had a question. I was given a standing ovation by the black students. I did not know what it meant at the time, but I soon came to understand. Two white students raised their hands in response to my invitation for questions and comments. Three questions were asked. The way

the students asked the questions never seemed to be a genuine desire to understand. It seemed to be an issue of testing my knowledge—somehow you can tell by the expressions not just of the person asking but of the neighbouring students. I could see these were deliberately planned questions coming from a group of students that were seated together. Whether or not I was right in my interpretation, I had to keep my guard up and go on the intellectual offensive to acquit myself. I cheekily started by correcting the way of questioning and clarified to the student more clearly what she wanted to say. This was deliberate. I wanted to assume intellectual higher ground. As soon as I finished correcting her in the way she was asking the question, the black students laughed. I did not know why at the time, but I also soon came to know. I then proceeded to give what I thought was a brilliant articulation of issues in response to the questions posed. As soon as I finished, I got another standing ovation from the black students and with that, I exited the lecture hall and started my long walk to the office.

A few black students followed me on my way out. They wanted to shake my hands and congratulate me. “Sir, you have done us proud,” one of them said. “You know what, sir, we gave you a standing ovation because you proved those white students wrong. They always assume that black lecturers know nothing. But today you made us proud. When you introduced yourself at first, we were really worried if you were really competent enough. We thought you would really embarrass us as black students. We have had a few black lecturers that did not speak English well, and this has always been used against us. You black lecturers in this university are seen as undeserving equity candidates, and you are just here to make up the numbers.”

“Oh really,” I responded.

“Yes sir, and you know why we laughed when you corrected the question before answering it?” I didn’t. “These students always do it to black lecturers,” the student told me. “They plan to ask what they think are difficult questions to try and embarrass the lecturer if they think one would not be able to deal with the questions. It is not the first time they have done this. At some point a black lecturer failed to answer the questions and wanted to do some research first. The white students used this as a reason to prove to us that black lecturers are not competent and are therefore undeserving to be at this institution.”

When I asked how sure the student was about these claims, he said, “Hundred percent, sir. We always discuss these issues with white students, and today we will be laughing at them.” One white student later remarked, “I never thought you could be that good. You teach better than our white lecturers, and I can’t believe it.”

I was not flattered. This was not a compliment, but rather an insult to black people. Such was my reality as a black person. In the eyes of many white students, before I even uttered a word, I had been judged to be not good enough because of my race. The colour of my skin was enough measure to pass “judgement before trial.” If not racism, what would this be? As the days went by and I started teaching new classes, this same pattern was replicating itself in almost every class that I taught. For me, this experience was a confirmation of the fact that “the university

classroom is not race-neutral” (Sian, 2017, p. 11) and that it is a highly politicised space and a struggle terrain for race wars (Chan et al., 2014).

Beyond the classroom, I would periodically be asked by some colleagues whether or not I was going to be able to meet my probation requirements. “Why are you asking me such a question?” I would ask. “You know what Victor, there are many black lecturers who have failed to meet their probation requirements and were released by the university.” We existed in a context where one had to publish, have excellent teaching evaluations, be part of administrative activities, and have community engagement reflective of the ever increasingly neoliberalised context in which universities operate—a space in which “academics of colour are at greater risk, who alongside keeping up with new needs and demands, must also continue to put up with embedded practices of racism” (Sian, 2017, pp. 2–3). My colleagues who would often ask if I would meet the requirements knew about the struggles black academics faced. I am however not sure of how they interpreted them, which could either be from the perspective of structural and institutional disadvantage or a racist blaming approach which looked at blacks as being not good enough for academia.

I was very appreciative of the opportunity I was given to be at this great institution, and I still am grateful to this day. The reality however is that for many black people navigating white dominated spaces like the institution I was at, it is a daily struggle. The perception of black incompetence is real. Policies such as affirmative action which are meant to transform these institutions to be representative of the national demographics have been weaponised against black people. For many white people (students and faculty), black people who exist in these white dominated institutions are nothing more than quota candidates that are recruited to meet employment targets for transformation. As such, my existence in this space of whiteness was an undeserved one. I was guilty of incompetence until proven innocent. I had to constantly deliver and work under pressure to ensure that I not only met targets but had to excel. In such spaces, no one invites you for co-authored articles or other developmental opportunities. You have to swim or sink alone. Over the years, I saw how new white lecturers would be easily integrated into the networks of senior academics who also happened to be white. Within one semester of being at a university, some white colleagues can easily have more than three academic papers on which they were simply invited as co-authors by experienced academics. Such invitations are hardly ever forthcoming for many black academics. In this regard, many white academics get ahead easily because the system is in their favour. The colour of one’s skin determines the level of tacit institutional support that one gets. It is easy for my colleague to get five invitations for co-authoring and thereafter get a promotion. Whilst I have to write those five papers alone. As such, we progress differently. What I need two years to achieve, a fellow colleague may need only five months to attain. These are some of the unspoken manifestations of white privilege. On the surface of it, many people get ahead because they worked hard for it. However, on closer analysis, it is because of extraordinary support that comes from networks which provide easy access and better mentoring. Such is the face of systemic racism. I learned that as a black person I have to fight so many extra battles to survive within white spaces (institutions) that allow entry but fail to provide adequate support for black people to thrive.

This is why some of my colleagues were worried about me being able to meet my probation requirements. In the face of it they assumed it was not easy to do so. However, the reality was that there wasn't enough tacit support given to black academics. If you cannot be part of a "club" (white networks) you have to work extra hard to achieve what some colleagues manage without a drop of sweat. This is so because beyond getting entry into the system (academic institution), they also got access (informal opportunities for support, which leads to success). It is access that is most critical. As a new academic, no one taught me how to write an academic article, how to apply for a research grant. No one taught me about academic conferences and how to access funding. These are "simple tricks of the trade" that one needs in order to be established as an academic. By the time you get to know, it is often too late.

The Missing Milk

A year into my employment, rumours began circulating in my department that someone was illegally helping themselves to the milk from the "staff tea club." I never really bothered myself with these rumours. After all, I did not use milk, and my family did not use milk either. Never in my wildest imagination would I have ever thought that anyone could suspect me of being responsible for the missing milk. Moving from just overhearing the rumours, some colleagues began to ask me if I knew anything about the missing milk. I simply said no and left it at that. I was oblivious to the fact that I was a suspect in this case. I was naive to not realise it when I was first asked. Later on, another white colleague came to me and asked again, "Victor, are you really sure that you know nothing about the missing milk? Someone has been stealing some milk from the cupboard." At this point, I realised that I was actually a suspect in this case. When you ask me if I am really sure that I do not know after I have already said "I do not know," what does that imply? I really felt offended, but I had to hide my emotions. Several of my white colleagues had asked me about the missing milk, and I could sense that they thought I was actually responsible or that I knew what was happening. Daily, I walked the corridors of my department with shame. The shame of knowing that deep down these white colleagues think that this "black boy" is stealing milk.

The secretary later whispered to me that "these people think it is you who is taking the milk." She also told me that she knew who was responsible and was fearful to speak out. It was a fellow white colleague. Their whiteness was, however, enough of a shield to never be a suspect in this case. The person used their white privilege to the fullest extent knowing that some "black boy" would be held accountable. I really felt disgusted by this but could not speak out. When you are black, you have to be pliable and navigate the system delicately in order to survive in it. You have to walk on eggshells daily just to avoid ruffling feathers. Such was the burden of my existence in the white space. I really reflected long and deep. These guys know I do not use milk, and I am not even part of the tea club though I give my monthly contribution. Why then suspect me? Such is the burden of blackness. These are some of systemic biases against people of colour. When things went wrong in the department, it had to be that black boy—he was presumed guilty until proven otherwise. When I saw on the news the incident in New York of Keyon Harrold's 12-year-old son being falsely accused of having stolen an iPhone (Zavari, 2020), it really triggered me. I felt a deep sense of shame. I had to relive the shame of being suspected of stealing milk. I thought I had managed to achieve some "high status" of being at

such a glamorous institution of higher learning, only to realise that it was not enough to rid white people around me of prejudice. My existence was at the margins. An outsider to the system and never fully accepted and integrated.

But We Are Always the Best

One afternoon three white students came to my office. They indicated to me that they were not happy at all with my marking. They said, “Look Victor, in most of our modules we usually are top of the class. Why is it that in your module black students are doing better than us?” I was really shocked with such a claim. I asked them if they thought that black students cannot perform better than them to which one of them responded, “We are not saying that, but it’s worrying that in the modules we are taught by white lecturers we perform very well and the few modules we are taught by black lecturers we do not do that well.”

“Have you ever bothered to compare your marked scripts with the ones of students who did better?” I asked.

“No,” one student responded. “We are the better students so there is not much to learn from them.” I asked the students to come back at a later time for us to map a way forward.

When the students came back, I had collected several scripts from black students, and I gave them the scripts and asked them to compare and tell me if my marking was biased. After several minutes of scrutinising the papers, I asked them what they thought, to which one of them remarked, “I never thought these guys can write like this. Look, to be honest their work is good. I see areas that I could have improved.” That was my cue to give them a brief lecture on racial prejudice. I thought to myself, “Is it possible that some black students were not getting the marks they deserved in these other modules?” After all, some black students had complained that white lecturers always favour white students. I could not prove this so I had to let sleeping dogs lie, notwithstanding my many unanswered questions. I was however satisfied that at least the prejudice that these students had against their fellow colleagues had been unmasked. I could not do much about the situation though. Silence is safety. One has to know when to speak and what to speak about.

What Is to Be Done?

I could go on and on about the racist encounters I experienced at my workplace, but the key question is about finding answers to the problem of systemic and systematic racism. Below I provide a few suggestions about what can be done to tackle racism in institutions of higher learning.

Introduce a Compulsory Module on Race Relations in Schools and Institutions of Higher Learning

Racial prejudice is a learned behaviour and attitude. In most instances white people who grow up in white dominated spaces learn and internalise racism from an early age. These racial

prejudices picked up in the early stages of life go unchallenged and never get reflected on. It then becomes “truth” until people do the deeper work on race and racism without which they may carry prejudice throughout life. To this end, the education about race and critical race relations needs to be introduced in the schooling system at both lower and higher levels. This will create better awareness and tolerance. It will also unmask structural and institutional factors that advantage other races while causing the oppression of people of colour. White privilege will likely endure until the end of time, but awareness about it for all races is important as it can lead to tolerance and better institutional reforms that lead to enhanced racial parity.

Tackling Systemic Racism and Appealing to Conscience

In many institutions, it is a given that white people have had access to the system for a long time and are the gatekeepers of the same. To this end, policies need to be formulated to tackle systematic and systemic discrimination. This may among other things include the following: creating mentorship mechanisms for persons of colour which go beyond mere formalities, providing incentives for mentorship of persons of colour, and eliminating negative recruitment practices where less qualified black persons are employed to perpetuate the myth of black incompetence. Tackling systematic racism requires the willingness and cooperation of those who are beneficiaries of white privilege. Thus, beyond the changes in policy, procedures, and practises, the willing cooperation of whites is necessary. This is especially true in instances where informal institutional networks exist to perpetuate white privilege. This is difficult to deal with apart from appealing to the conscience of individuals. This can be done through debate platforms, educational programmes, and seminars that deal with the race question.

Create Black Networks of Support

In most institutions of higher learning, there are now enough black academics to start black-owned initiatives to support each other. Highly experienced academics should worry less about fighting to be included at the “white table.” They will never fully belong. Rather, focus should be placed on grooming the next generation of black academics and professionals who will excel at what they do. Such initiatives should happen within and across several institutions. With enough effort and possible government support, there will be a massive pool of black academics that will scale the academic ladder and also take positions of leadership in what is currently a white dominated higher education landscape in South Africa.

Concluding Remarks

The issue of racism within white dominated institutions in South Africa is a lived reality that continues to affect many black academics and students. Blackness in and of itself is a factor enough to lead to prejudice in white dominated spaces. While a lot can be done at the structural and institutional levels to tackle the problem of racism, there is a need to acknowledge the tacit advantages that whites will always have which cannot be tackled by any means apart from individual decisions to change. White privilege is a lived reality that has endured since time immemorial, and it is therefore important to realise that change will not happen overnight. A gradual systemic and systematic dismantling of economic arrangements that sustain and

perpetuate white privilege in Africa is needed. White privilege was birthed and is sustained in the womb of colonial and neo-colonial dispossession which led to the economic marginalisation of blacks and economic empowerment of whites. In this regard, a transformation of African economies is needed. The means of production cannot remain in the hands of the privileged minority while the majority of black people live in conditions of squalor and economic deprivation. The process of economic restructuring needs to start with land redistribution and ensuring that blacks participate in commerce and industry. Increased access to better equipped schools and medical facilities for the black majority is vital. As such, African governments need to prioritise the funding of rural and township schools where the majority of blacks live to ensure parity of access to opportunities for early childhood development, primary schooling, and secondary schooling which are vital foundations for future success. Many universities in Africa and South Africa in particular remain white enclaves in terms of both the faculty and student composition. In this regard, it is important for the government to push for equitable access to such universities for all race groups. Such measures need to be codified into law and policy. Punitive measures such as defunding non-complying institutions should be considered.

On the other hand, more research efforts that look at the lived experiences of black academics in institutions of higher learning is needed, especially in a context such as South Africa where many institutions remain largely untransformed. Such studies are vital in not only bringing better awareness, but also in informing policy changes that are needed in order to decisively deal with institutionalised racism.

Future research can also focus on the formal and informal arrangements which perpetuate racism within the higher education landscape and how these arrangements can be dismantled. For example, it is my experience that many black graduates are first generation degree holders who cannot afford to stay in universities and pursue post graduate studies. They have pressure from their family to find work and help to relieve the financial burden. In this regard, access to fully paid scholarships for part time studies by black people is vital. This will ensure that a significant portion of the black population can gain industrial experience while at the same time furthering their studies to be able to take up positions at universities. Recruitment strategies can also be changed to ensure that priority is given to black candidates when vacancies arise. It is common that informal networks largely determine who gets to be employed in many universities and other workplaces. Thus, a dismantling of such networks and the development of new pathways for recruitment which give a fair chance to black candidates, who largely lack social capital to access such privileged spaces, is needed.

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