

## **Overcoming objectification and dehumanisation in academia**

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‘Domination always involves the objectification of the dominated’.

(Maynard cited in Collins, 1986: S18)

### **Introduction**

This chapter is a critical reflection and analysis of being objectified and dehumanised as a Black female academic. Objectification and dehumanisation as the ‘other’ is a typical component of Black women’s raced and gendered experiences (Collins, 1986, 1989). Through critical reflective analysis I aim to highlight the role that objectification and dehumanisation play in maintaining our status as ‘others’ and keeping us on the periphery of academic life. Using Black feminist theory as a critical lens helps me make sense of my experiences through a unique standpoint of and for Black women that involves self-definition and self-valuation as tools of resistance (Collins, 1989). In this chapter I also highlight the role that community networking and sister relationships has played in supporting my survival and progress within academia.

### **Objectification and dehumanisation**

Objectification is defined as treating people like objects, while dehumanisation refers to seeing and treating people as if they are not human (Gervais et al., 2013). Dehumanisation can involve the denial of human attributes to groups or individuals (ibid.,) as is the case with people of African descent, or those of us racialised as Black. Throughout history Black people have been subjected to objectification and dehumanisation, with many of the ideologies that underpinned our systemised dehumanisation during European slavery being espoused during the Enlightenment by celebrated White philosophers. For example, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of*

*World History (1822-8)* Georg Hegel, proposed that Africans remain in a perpetual child-like state of being where they have no consciousness of their existence as human beings (Eze, 1997). In 1775, in his essay *On National Characteristics, So Far as They Depend Upon the Distinct Feeling of the Sublime*, Immanuel Kant suggested that Africans are incapable of moral and aesthetic feeling (ibid.). Kant regarded objectification as the denial of humanity which results in objectified people being perceived as existing purely to serve the ends of others (Loughnan et al., 2010). The sexual objectification of Black women was most pronounced during European slavery when the rape of Black female slaves was legitimised through their interlinked status as chattel and concubines (Jordan, 1962) and through their construction and representation as hypersexual, amoral beings —the antithesis of White female virtue (Craig, 2006). The present-day dehumanisation and objectification of Black people should therefore be regarded as legacies of White European slavery and colonization which are rooted in White supremacy.

When I was undertaking my PhD from 2010-2014 in media and cultural studies, I taught on undergraduate degrees in journalism and during my first year became the object of racist and sexist discourse exchanged between a group of White students on Facebook, three of whom were females. Their online conversation, during which they referred to me by my race and gender in animalistic and graphic sexual terms, took place during my class where they laughed openly, though at the time I was unaware I was the brunt of their jokes. While their actions enraged me, I also felt a profound sense of disappointment — not least because I had gone to great lengths to support some of those very students who had come to me for additional assistance with their work, which I had happily provided. Their behaviour demonstrated not just a deep lack of respect for me as their tutor, but also spoke to

their rejection of me as a human being worthy of respect. Racist and sexist ideologies are often expressed in animalistic terms (Collins, 1986) whereby controlling images of Black women help to normalise racism and emphasise our outsider status. It is a way of signifying our un-belonging (Collins, 1990).

A key reason why as Black women we are frequently objectified as the 'other' is because we do not conform to the dominant, normative conception of an academic, which is a status reserved for White men, primarily, but also for White women. The term 'space invaders' describes the status of Black women as outsiders in British academia occupying a White, male-dominated space Puwar (2004), where marginalisation, over-scrutinizing and the absence of a sense of belonging characterise our experience (Wright et al., 2004). Space invaders is an apt definition, given it is argued that we do not embody that which is deemed as 'normal' or 'natural' and in this regard, are perceived as alien others, since 'the White male body is taken as the norm' (ibid.,149). The experience of being over-scrutinized in academia is not limited to staff, since there is also a tendency among students to question the credibility of Black academics. Discrimination is sometimes projected through negative comments on course feedback that are often personalised (Bhopal and Jackson, 2013). During my academic life, students have made personalised comments in course feedback at different universities I have taught. On one occasion, I was compared unfavourably to a White, female colleague who I taught with on the same course and whose style of teaching is similar to my own. But of course, I was not evaluated in the same way since 'Black bodies entering spaces not traditionally reserved for them are in a tenuous position' (Wright et al., 2007:149). I have come to believe that just as during European slavery Black women were constructed as the antithesis of White females, so as women of colour academics we

are perceived as the opposites of our White female colleagues and are therefore perceived as being 'out of place' (ibid.). Dominant, western ideologies racialise Black people in oppositional terms, not merely as different, and objectification is a key part of this process (Collins, 1990). Being objectified means being defined, labelled and positioned by others, and thereby subordinated.

My PhD thesis focused on Black bloggers in the UK, examining their motivation, gratification and use of blogs as discursive activism. Most of the participants were women, many of whom shared their experiences of raced and gendered discrimination:

There was that whole thing about the lecturer who said that Black women weren't attractive. I was pissed off about that and ...it really got me thinking, you know, how we are seen. We are either demonised or fantasied, it's one extreme to the other.

Chioma, cited in Gabriel, 2014: 129.

My doctoral thesis drew theoretically and conceptually on Black feminism and critical race theory. I found that analysing the experiences of the participants, that bore similarities to my own biography, helped me to better understand my raced and gendered experiences in academia. It highlighted how Black women speak up and speak out as a response to being objectified and dehumanised in the media and popular culture and the importance of creating spaces to enhance our voice and visibility and to counter marginalisation and exclusion.

Ironically, while invisibility is a key dimension of our experiences as Black women in higher education, hypervisibility is equally problematic. We may not fit the

normative identity of an academic, but as Sara Ahmed (2009) argues, we are the embodiment of diversity. Our presence symbolises visual diversity, often taken as a sign of progress, since diversity is frequently approached through higher education policy as a numbers game, where the aim is to add colour to the sea of White faces. Such approaches promote a conceptualisation of Black people as additives to the existing structures and systems, which mean that the institutional culture, which is the problem, remains unchanged while we get added to a system that was not created for us. Since we are accommodated into a White system, we are supposed to be grateful and therefore come under pressure not to talk about racism. As others occupying spaces in someone else's system, 'it is this very structural position of being the guest or the stranger, the one who received hospitality, which keeps us in certain places' (Ahmed, 2009:42). It is for this reason that Ahmed calls on us to 'reclaim the figure of the angry Black feminist' (ibid.; 41).

### **Talking back**

My isolation as a PhD student at a northern university hundreds of miles away from family and friends in London and the south, increased my sense of vulnerability, coupled with the racism and sexism I experienced, to which I referred earlier. This motivated me to establish Black British Academics in 2013, with the aim of creating a community; a critical mass to give us voice and visibility. My aims were to highlight the value of our intellectual and cultural capital and contribution to the knowledge economy. The findings of my PhD thesis highlighted that building intellectual and cultural capital is something Black people do very well, though it goes unnoticed and unacknowledged. I was frustrated by the lack of priority afforded to race equality in higher education and felt that people of colour should be defining and leading on strategies and initiatives. Ahmed (2007) argues that in recent years, equality and

diversity documents are imbued with a performative quality, in that they are frequently regarded as delivering equality simply by expressing commitment, with insufficient emphasis on monitoring whether the equality measures are put into practice. Higher education institutions frequently make reference to ‘valuing diversity’ usually accompanied by images of ethnically diverse students in marketing materials implying that diversity already exists within the organisation. However, the absence of either a strong economic or moral association means the emphasis on diversity is merely one of difference as opposed to justice, and therefore lacking any substance in terms of addressing racial inequalities. Other critics make similar arguments — that the diversity agenda merely acknowledges difference rather than highlighting that people are discriminated against on the basis of race, class, gender, age and other characteristics (Jones, 2009). Merely writing equality policies is insufficient to engender institutional change as to do so requires policies to be put into practice (Ziegert and Hanges, 2005).

The academe is a space where colour blind ideologies that normalise the dominance of Whites in society while obscuring processes of racism and racialisation are developed, maintained, reinforced and embedded in curricula, policies and practices (Leonardo, 2004). The starting point for understanding racial oppression should be critical analyses from the experiences of people of colour (ibid.,). Sharing our experiences as Black women in academia is significant in terms of providing experiential knowledge to generate understandings on the dynamics of race, ethnicity, culture and gender and how they influence structural power relations. ‘Talking back’ in a Black feminist context, means speaking in a compelling way to make our voices heard and not just listened to (hooks, 1989).

During 2013, the year that I established Black British Academics, I wrote a series of articles about the experiences of Black academics in the UK, that were published in the Independent and Guardian: *Self-empowerment is the best way to defeat racism in academia*, (Gabriel, 2013a); *Ethnic and gender inequalities in postgraduate study still aren't being addressed*, (Gabriel, 2013b); *Race equality in academia: Time to establish Black studies in the UK?* (Gabriel, 2013c) and *Race equality in academia: We've got a huge way to go* (Gabriel, 2013d). My aim was to 'talk back', to tell it how it is — how racism manifests in higher education and why it persists. Ironically, my first article written for the Independent came about because I 'talked back' in response to an article another writer had written about Black academics that I was interviewed for, but which was headed by a photo of Cornel West. 'I admire Cornel West' I told the editor, 'but he's an African American — the story is about Black 'British' academics — this is just another way to make us invisible' I said. The editor understood where I was coming from, changed the photo to one I supplied and invited me to write a piece to give our perspective. It's great when you talk back and people listen.

There are few occasions that inspire me to talk back in a way that truly expresses anger and resentment as advocated by Ahmed (2009). However, one such incident occurred during July 2016 when I met with one of my former students while in London, who had recently graduated and who I was immensely proud of for her dissertation on cultural appropriation of Black women's bodies from a Black feminist perspective. Shortly after meeting her she became visibly angry and distressed as she recounted her experience of objectification and dehumanisation when a White student donned blackface at the university summer ball and refused to remove it when asked. Her plea fell on deaf ears — not only the blackened ears of the offending student, but

of university staff and a campus policeman who were present. My anger increased when she showed me a picture of the student on her phone — then all at once I saw an opportunity to talk back and to make her voice heard this time, to make my voice heard by the university leadership and the voice of Black students who are routinely dehumanised in their everyday experiences within a Eurocentric environment. I felt I had a moral obligation to speak and adopted resistance poetry as the mode of address with *In critique of blackface and institutional resistance to racism* (Gabriel, 2016a). I felt like the proud ‘Angry Black Woman’ talking back ‘without a hint of regret’ that Rachel Alicia Griffin (2012:140) unleashes in her autoethnography as the words ‘Neanderthal’, ‘imbecile’ and ‘fool’ rolled off my lips as I typed them into the computer. I published the article on the Black British Academics’ website and across social media. Colleagues I passed by in the corridor would remark how much they enjoyed my poem and it formed the basis of alliances within the institution that are helping to chip away at the Whiteness within our university. As Black women, we may be ‘disciplined’ (ibid.; 39) not to talk back, but sometimes talking back is very necessary.

### **Raced and gendered oppression by White women in the academe**

‘Of white feminists we must ask, what exactly do you mean when you say we?’

(Carby, 1997: 52)

Hazel Carby posed this question in her provocative chapter *White women listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood*, which succinctly explained why the needs and interests of Black women should not be an afterthought or additive to a Eurocentric White female agenda. That 10 years later we are still having to call out White women for marginalising and excluding us from gender equality spaces in academia is the biggest reason why we must continue to talk back as Black women.



The occasions on which I have felt most compelled to talk back as the Angry Black Woman have been when I have been approached by White women who subscribe to Emmanuel Kant's notion that people are objectified to serve the interests of others, in this case that Black women exist to serve the interests of White women. A few months ago, I was approached by two White female academics who were guest-editing the special issue of a journal focused on gender and intersectionality who asked if I would review an article on gender issues in Uganda. My first feeling was of being approached as an afterthought purely because of their likely inability to relate to gender issues outside their own Euro-centred context, as opposed to involving women of colour from the onset in the editorial process. I was not impressed. But on reading the call for papers documentation I became incensed, when despite the inclusion of the term 'intersectionality' there was no reference to raced and gendered experiences other than that of White women and the tokenistic theme 'gender and multi-ethnic families'. Part of my response to them was:

I am disappointed that your call for papers that you attached demonstrates the exclusionary Whiteness which I so often find among gender scholars. There is little in your call that engages with raced and gendered experiences despite the fact that you have appropriated the term 'intersectionality' developed by the Black feminist scholar and critical race theorist, Professor Kimberley Crenshaw. How dare you appropriate the intellectual capital of Black women and then use it outside its original context and meaning, erasing us in the process. It incenses me when we, as women of colour are marginalised and de-valued in this way.

Black feminist scholar Nikol Alexander Floyd (2012) argues that Crenshaw's seminal work which was intended to draw attention to the limitations of (White) feminism has

been appropriated in a manner that subjugates Black women's knowledge. To be fair, some White feminist scholars have also critiqued such use. Sirma Blige (2013: 405) defines such appropriation as 'whitening intersectionality' which forms part of a neoliberal agenda and has a depoliticizing impact on Black feminist construction of intersectional experiences. Meanwhile, Anna Carastathis (2014: 304) asserts that the appropriation of intersectionality within White-dominated feminist discourses 'serve to obscure its origins in Black feminist thought'. Black feminism has always been a politically-oriented mission, whereas the appropriation of intersectionality by some feminist scholars reduces it to a fanciful term in academic writing without even acknowledging its origins.

If such experiences — of being asked to serve the needs of White women and further enhance their privilege, were isolated experiences it would not be so bad, but they have become almost routine. Just last month a White female academic contacted me to ask for myself 'or someone' in Black British Academics to sign a letter of protest at the exclusion of women from a major event in the north. The letter read: 'Only 13/98 13% (13/98) speakers were female and press releases uncovered "all male' panels"'. 'What consultation will occur in advance of 2018 to ensure diverse representation including ethnicities/disabilities?' I was yet again incensed and offered a swift reply:

Having read the letter it appears that the concern of the signatories lies purely with the gender imbalance - there is nothing other than a cursory mention of racial exclusion in the second paragraph where people of colour are not even referred to as people but lumped together with disabled people: 'ethnicities/disabilities'.

This really says a lot. That if you are White you are valued as a person and can be referred to as 'female' and 'women' but if you happen to be a person of colour you are marginalised and merely an afterthought in the quest for (White) female equality. I wonder how many of the 98 speakers were non-White or how many of the signatories actually care.

Black British Academics was not established to fight equality battles for White women who never consider women of colour in their quest to be on an equal footing with men and who have no real interest in race equality or stop to think for a moment about their own White privilege.

So like Hazel Carby (1997: 52), I must also ask of White feminists 'what exactly do you mean when you say we?'

### **The role of allies in the struggle for equality**

In classes I have taught where the topic of discrimination has surfaced, I always say to students: 'You don't have to be a person of colour to speak out against racism'. I do this to create inclusion around race equality issues and a sense of responsibility, advocating that 'we should all speak up against all forms of discrimination'. That some White students and staff routinely fail to see the ways in which Black women and people of colour generally, are discriminated against through everyday practice is further evidence of just how normalised our dehumanised status is. Whiteness is a word that rarely crosses the lips of the dominant group in academia because they never stop to reflect or think about their White privilege or the ways in which they benefit from it, yet it would be extremely valuable 'to self-reflectively examine how White racism works' (Scheurich, 1993: 5). On many occasions, I have been in conversation with White colleagues (within and

outside my institution) where I have shared an experience of racism and the response is a look of sympathetic bewilderment. Students also rarely possess a consciousness of White privilege as an active process that confers disadvantage on people of colour because 'their textbooks reinforce the innocence of Whiteness' (Leonardo, 2004: 138). In order to transform the institutional culture within academia to one that is culturally democratic and equitable, White students and staff need to become active participants in challenging Whiteness. I firmly agree with Scheurich, who happens to be a White scholar, that the starting point for addressing racism is to acknowledge that everyone is impacted in significant ways by their membership of a racial group.

Whites need to study and report how being white affects our thinking, our behaviours, our attitudes and our decisions from the micro personal level to the macro social level... All Whites are socially positioned as Whites and receive social advantages because of this positionality. No individual White gets to be an exception because of his or her antiracism.

Scheurich, 1993:9

### **Career development and progression**

At my interview for a role as a lecturer at Bournemouth University in July 2014, I spoke proudly of being the founder of Black British Academics and its contribution to the higher education sector. When I subsequently joined the institution, the acting head of department ensured that Black British Academics was included in my workload plan under professional practice. It has been a key dimension of my role as an academic, profoundly shaping the three key areas of my academic role in teaching, research and professional practice. I attribute my

promotion in 2016 to senior lecturer, to my association with Black British Academics, as I argued in a post I wrote for my blog: *Another year in the life of an early career researcher* (Gabriel, 2016b). My key contributions to teaching have involved the innovation of pedagogies of social justice and cultural democracy as an approach to diversifying the curriculum and transforming the institutional culture. This originated from consultancy work undertaken through Black British Academics with Aisha Richards at the University of the Arts London, through the programme she pioneered called Shades of Noir. This inspired me to develop a new final year degree option called Media Inequality, aimed at enhancing the representation of people of colour in the communication industries. These contributions to teaching helped me to gain fellowship of the Higher Education Academy and I am now involved in mentoring staff through our internal scheme and in assessing applications as a panel member. I have recently won two internal awards connected with curriculum diversification through social justice pedagogy to extend its implementation across the institution and develop a research impact case study. Some of my research has been devoted to examining the dynamics of race, ethnicity and culture in higher education. This book is one such project, initially developed through Black Sister Network — a dedicated space within Black British Academics for women of colour. Another book project with Trentham emerged from the PhD Network within Black British Academics co-authored with Professor Kevin Hylton: *Sense of belonging: race, ethnicity and culture in higher education*. In addition, external opportunities have been offered to me where Black British Academics has been mentioned in the invitation, such as editorial board and chairing opportunities, as well as guest and keynote lectures. My assertion in my blog post, is that while my institution has introduced positive measures, offering accessibility to staff development and

transparency in the promotion process through independent pay and promotion panels; such initiatives can sometimes be undermined by cliques at faculty and departmental level, where the roles and opportunities that contribute to meeting the criteria for promotion to a higher grade are not always made available to everyone. While cliques often form through gender and class associations, I have sometimes felt isolated, because of my critical focus on race within my research and teaching practice. Thomas et al. (1999) argue that marginalisation and isolation of Black academics is partially attributable to the divergence between dominant, traditional approaches to subject areas and research, and our aims of integrating a social justice focus linked to our experiences as racialised minorities. Approaches that seek to expose and challenge the centrality of Whiteness are often relegated in favour of mainstream, dominant world views. Despite this reality, I feel that race, ethnicity and culture have played a significant role in my career progression thus far as it has imbued me with a political identity, strength and voice — an experience shared with other Black women. Alfred (2001:123) argues that within institutional cultures premised on White, male hegemony (and I would add to that White female hegemony), Black women develop bicultural competence by accessing their 'bicultural life structure'. This is defined as 'the nucleus from which people of colour evoke the power to contest the terrain of differences that contribute to their marginal positions in White-dominated organisations' (ibid., 123). The on-going struggle against White, hegemony within academia promotes agency, through which we, as Black women develop successful strategies for navigating culturally dominant organisational environments. The integration of Black British Academics to my role as an academic creates synergy between the key dimensions of my role, which has created opportunities for collaboration and collective activism both within Black

British Academics and the wider community of staff and students in higher education committed to racial equality. Collectively we resist the dominance and centrality of Whiteness that exists in academia as an active process of self-determination and participation in self-empowerment (Karenga, 1980).

### **The value of community and sister relationships**

Black feminist thought reflects a positionality by and for Black women, of which two key themes are self-definition and self-valuation (Collins, 1990). The former involves challenging external, stereotypical constructions of Black womanhood and the latter involves replacing such constructions with 'authentic Black female images' (Collins, 1986: S17). Dominant, stereotypical constructions form part of the dehumanising process that contributes to the exploitation of Black women and is a mechanism for suppressing our resistance. Self-definition is an important component of self-empowerment, since it is not merely about challenging what is said about us as Black women but of challenging the act of others defining us. In defining ourselves as Black women we promote self-empowerment by reclaiming our humanity, which is a form of activism in itself (ibid.,).

In the acknowledgements page of my PhD thesis, I express admiration for participants in my study, who are also members of an online community I set up called Black Bloggers UK and International Network, before embarking on my research. I dedicate my thesis to my siblings, my late parents and my late grandmother and thank my sister friends for their encouragement and support. They have all played an important role in defining who I am and helping me to develop and retain a critical consciousness: 'the "inside" ideas that allow Black women to cope with and, in most cases transcend the confines of race, class and gender

oppression' (Collins, 1990: 93). Black British Academics fulfils the same need to be culturally connected in order to feel whole; encapsulated in the Ubuntu philosophy 'I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am' (Nussbaum, 2003: 21). Black communities are important in providing platforms 'where safe discourse can potentially occur...' and 'a prime location for resisting objectification as the other' and developing 'a culture of resistance' (Collins, 1990: 95).

## **Conclusion**

Self-definition and self-valuation are supported by values present in social relationships such as community networks, family, and that key element of Black women's culture: 'sisterhood'; 'the interpersonal relationships that Black women share with each other' based on common experiences of oppression (Collins, 1986: S22) that promote 'solidarity and a sense of connection and community' (Oyewumi, 2003: 8). The support and encouragement of my sibling sisters has been a vital component of my survival through the most challenging times as an academic. Throughout my journey, I have also maintained close sister relationships with fellow women of colour academics and these are immensely important. One relationship in particular, is a beloved friend, colleague and associate. We engage in weekly discussions when time permits, during which we share and analyse our experiences as sisters, daughters, aunts, mothers, wives and importantly as Black women academics. Sometimes the stories are funny and we laugh, sometimes they are hurtful and we empathise and resolve to stand firm and support each other to rise above our oppression — and always to challenge the structures, systems and people at the source of our oppression. I attribute my resilience, determination and motivation to survive and thrive, to my family, community networks and especially, to my sister friends. These relationships are acknowledged as vitally important in Black feminist theory, not only



for the empathy expressed through dialogue, or through the acquisition of experiential knowledge, but through the consciousness that such interactions foster, that sharpen our understandings of oppression and influence our actions (Collins, 1986).

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