

Editorial Feature, issue 21.3

As my time as editor of *MPE* comes to a close at the end of this volume, my outgoing editorial piece is given over to a conversation with Deborah Gabriel, founder and director of Black British Academics and editor of *Transforming the Ivory Tower*. The reason for giving this space over to the discussion will be obvious as the conversation unfolds. But its pertinence was (further) reinforced during an editorial board meeting about the future direction of the journal and the importance of diversity. In occupying the editorship of this journal for several years, in combination with a Professorship – with all of its affordances to speak and be heard, write and be read -, leading a research centre, running a doctoral programme and convening a conference, I have enjoyed the usual privileges of a White, male space whilst, intentionally or unconsciously, acted as gatekeeper to researchers' access to the pages, multiple spaces and discursive framings of *MPE*'s community of practice. This is all the more problematic, given the desires and ideal subjectivities of media practice research to be about transformation, praxis, de-centering, transdisciplinarity voice and change. So it was a necessarily uncomfortable exchange, but for that reason it seems the right way to 'sign off'.

Julian McDougall, July 2020

Can We Talk? A White, middle class male's perspective on *Transforming the Ivory Tower: models for gender equality & social justice, through the Black feminist approach of participatory witnessing*

Deborah Gabriel, with Julian McDougall

In the introduction to [*Transforming the Ivory Tower* \(TTIT\)](#), the sequel to [*Inside the Ivory Tower* \(Gabriel and Tate, 2017\)](#), I share my reflection on the first volume and the impact it appears to have had on White males, in particular. Through data collected in a reader survey and impromptu emails, White male academics, many of whom are professors 'said they found our narratives constructive and insightful' and 'had been inspired...to think differently' (Gabriel, 2020:2). Despite this positive engagement, recent studies show little change in the race and gendered disparities that Black women and women of colour experience in academia (Baker, 2019). At the heart of *TTIT* is my contention that we transform the racialised spaces we work in, and that is our primary motivation for remaining within institutions in which we are marginalised. Thus, the key objective of the book is to provide 'examples for Black women and women of colour of how to swim against the tide, how to transform the spaces we work in and how to transform ourselves' (Gabriel, 2020:2). Although White males are not the target audience for *TTIT*, I remain

curious as to how those that do read it, engage with it and what they do with this new knowledge. This will inform my current work and forthcoming publication focused on the principal social actors at faculty level and what informs their delivery of institutional policies and academic practice (Gabriel, 2021). This paper draws on participatory witnessing, 'A tool within the repertoire of Black feminism' aimed at promoting 'critical self-reflection' through 'theoretical conversations' (Gabriel, 2020:2-3).

The Conversation

Deborah

Julian, I am interested to know what insights you have drawn from *TTTT*, and importantly how you will carry them forward. What actions will you take in your role as Professor and Head of the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice (CEMP) to advance race and gender equality, which necessitates actions towards addressing White privilege?

The reason this conversation is significant, is due to my recent epiphany that arose during an intense exchange with a White, male publisher on the importance of acknowledging Black British Academics' work in the publication attribution process, which I subsequently shared in an impromptu email exchange with coincidentally, a White, male Associate Professor. For context, I will share here what I wrote:

I have come to learn, painfully at times, that White people, especially White men, see the world differently to us because of their experiences as the norm, the authority, the superior etc. It means they are often oblivious to our pain and the ways they dehumanize and devalue us - even when we explain this to them. Unfortunately, unless White people are convinced we are victims/in pain, they ignore our oppression because it has become normalised in their psyche.

This has profound implications for White privilege in higher education, since most middle and senior management posts at faculty and leadership level are occupied by White men. If they/you are not convinced that race and gender inequality is a problem 'to you' (our experiences are often ignored), then no action is deemed necessary – which is why none is ever taken. But events of 2020 have muddied the waters where 'race' is concerned, so that it is increasingly difficult to claim ignorance

of structural racism or to be ignorant of structural racism, as this implies complicity. So what did you take from the case studies, mine especially, since it is focused on media education and practice?

Julian

In your own case study on 3D Pedagogy (decolonizing, democratizing and diversifying the curriculum) you both outline the process and account reflexively for its development and your resistance to its appropriation, institutionally. As we started the 'pivot' to online due to covid-19, it struck me that this could be an opportunity, as institutions were also in rapid response mode to the Black Lives Matter protests, to redesign learning and teaching with 3D at the heart of the shift in mindset. But reading your chapter made me realise that this is probably an appropriation, or a hegemonic 'fast track;' way of thinking about what you describe as a sustained, situated response to epistemological racism. Being honest, this kind of reaction is easier, finding a space for agency within the structure. But in reading the chapter, we can see how the kinds of dialogic pedagogy that embed 3D as a collective aim require a sustained community building. Clearly I don't want to think of myself as being oblivious to pain but in responding to your (rightly) challenging questions here, there's a sense of sidestepping the full acceptance of that in favour of a superficial action. In terms of the media practice focus of your case study, there's the double layer of challenging the intersection of inequalities in both higher education and the media you are teaching about or preparing students to work in. So those radical and critical interventions from your own lived experiences need to be taken forward into the 'second space' of media practice itself. Returning to your opening question about actions that I can take, and indeed the next editor(s) of MPE can take, the priority has to be on a radical epistemological shift so that we are doing more than facilitating new and more equitable spaces for agency within the structure but being prepared to accept our complicity in structural inequality.

Deborah

Julian, you have clearly taken on board my concerns about the unsuitability for 3D Pedagogy to online teaching, and more importantly demonstrate understanding of the reality that what undermines the dismantling of White privilege is the tendency to try to 'fit diversity' within existing Eurocentric, patriarchal, hegemonic structures.

This is a breakthrough! However, your response is also measured and controlled and to an extent, descriptive of my chapter, avoiding deep engagement with my narrative around the ‘pain’ that White privilege causes us, as Black women. I am getting a sense that when it comes to race, White people are comfortable focusing on themselves from a ‘diversity’ standpoint; expressing commitment to ‘diversity’ but stop short of engaging with us as Black people on the level of your White privilege, in terms of the ugly truth – ‘our’ truth, of what White supremacy inflicts on us. It is impossible to achieve racial *equity* without delving into the depths of what it really means to be White, and what it means to be Black, and female. I feel as if the goal for you – and White academics in general, is not dismantling White privilege but offering ‘gestures’ as if this is about goodwill, you doing something to ‘assist’ us, rather than *payback*.

I would like you to think about how you can contribute to racial *equity* rather than how you can ‘increase diversity’. I have just finished writing an article for the MeCCSA (Gabriel, 2020:b) newsletter, where I make this point:

Equity requires recognition of the social, cultural, political, and economic benefits that White privilege has brought people racialised as White for centuries, through systemic racism. *Equity necessitates that positive actions are taken to redress the racial advantage of whiteness before equality can be achieved.* Racial *equality* cannot be achieved without racial *equity*.

So, what I am arguing here is that ‘equality’ is focused on goodwill gestures and framed without reference to White privilege, while ‘equity’ is all about *payback*, as equity recognises White privilege is responsible for racial inequality so there needs to be reparation in order to balance things out. Barbara Applebaum (2008:293) rightfully asserts that ‘power circulates through all White bodies in ways that make them directly complicit in perpetuating a system they did not, as individuals, create’. She is not referring to ‘unconscious bias’ but the reality that ‘all Whites are racist or complicit by virtue of benefiting from these privileges, even though these privileges cannot be voluntarily renounced through individual action’. I would like you to engage with this in the context of my chapter and the pain I share about my experience of teaching in a White, privileged environment that devalues my knowledge, skills, experience, intellectual and cultural capital.

Julian

I see that distinction, between equality and equity and can therefore get why my response is insufficient. The reason for describing aspects of your case study is because this discussion is a more critical alternative to a review for the journal's readership, but I am not going to argue about the direct complicity. Clearly just saying that I have enjoyed privilege, before stepping down as editor voluntarily, is no act of reparation. If we are talking about reparation for epistemological violence, which Kwhali (2017) writes about as being not only a matter of curriculum design and career structures but rather to do with a failure to even acknowledge the experience of Black female staff and students in being mandated to subscribe to a 'White criteria of meaning', then we can't pretend that the editorial and peer review practices of a journal like this are enacted in a different or more inclusive space. In your chapter you reflect on White students and staff becoming active participants in challenging whiteness, which is very different to just reflecting on our privilege. White men in positions of power becoming allies or agents of change in deeds as well as words, that's going to have to be about opening up new spaces for research to be published and valued but also for the kinds of case studies you curate in TTIT to be valued *as* research. So the work of understanding how 'our' epistemology dominates and excludes in universities needs to be extended to a radical acceptance, and desire to change, the methodological violence that pervades in research discourse. If so, then we'd like to think that MPE is in a place to do that work, since it has published aims and scope which speak to decentering 'what counts' as research. But this is another gesture or good intention and doesn't go very far towards engaging with your pain. TTIT is about transformation, not observation or acceptance / confession, so focussing in on the experience you reflect on in your 'Teaching to Transgress' chapter, that pain is about the failure of the academic career pathway to recognise your critical pedagogy as research in its own right, or that your scholar-activism is 'robust' and generates 'new knowledge' but also about the structural inflexibility of universities giving with one hand (funding) but taking away with another (time) and in that way treating the 3D workshops as just another 'unit of resource', rather than prioritising them for the urgent social justice activism they mobilise. I can no more 'disown' the decisions made in the academy that caused you this pain (on the grounds that 'it wasn't me') than I can claim that publishing this conversation in my outgoing editorial is an act of deep engagement, however much I might want and hope for it to be. But I do think it's a process and reading your book has certainly

moved my thinking on, I suppose from cosy ideas about ‘giving voice’ to facing up to how privilege and complicity are hegemonic and how, to use your words in the later critical reflections chapter, you have had to circumvent that hegemony. The key point being that I can’t just ‘apologise’ for my benefitting from this hegemony as, in the social practices of my being in HE with others as a White man in a senior position, I reproduce and reinforce it. Put simply, it’s the inconvenient truth that when you talk about your knowledge, skills, experience, intellectual and cultural capital being devalued, you are not talking about ‘other White people’.

Deborah

Julian, you have clearly reflected deeply in this conversation about complicity and White privilege, both in terms of my own experience theorised in my chapter, and the wider experiences around epistemological violence in academia as documented in both volumes. While you acknowledge the impossibility of avoiding complicity in that process, I challenge you to move beyond a gesture of goodwill with regards to MPE in terms of your suggestion of ‘opening up new spaces for research to be published and valued but also for the kinds of case studies you curate in TTIT to be valued *as research*’. For if equity is the aim (payback) and not equality (goodwill), then ‘we’ should surely be thinking of a collaborative process of developing that equitable space together? It is not something that should be done ‘for us’ but ‘with us’. As Black feminists, we know best what that space should look like to accommodate our needs and how it should operate in a mutually beneficial way. That in my view, would represent a move towards racial equity and social justice, as opposed to a gesture of goodwill. This is crucial since racial equity necessitates the decentring of whiteness and need ‘to avoid using dominant standards that likely result in recentring whiteness’ (Patton and Bondi, 2015: 490) who observe that ‘White allies tend to direct others, take leadership and focus on self, rather than listening to and partnering with nondominant populations’.

Upon receiving an insightful 5-star review on Goodreads by a White, male Associate Professor (Malcolm, 2020), in using his own words I tweeted: ‘White, male, middle-class blokes’ can be allies’. I would like to leave you with this advice from Patton and Bondi (2015:490) on how Whites can help dismantle their privilege in academia:

Allies for social justice recognize the interconnectedness of oppressive structures and work in partnership with marginalized persons toward building social justice coalitions. They aspire to move beyond individual acts and direct attention to oppressive processes and systems. Their pursuit is not merely to *help* oppressed persons but to create a socially just world...’.

Julian

Yes, for sure, the new editor(s) will need to enable the kind of dialogue that leads to change. In your conversation with Shirley Anne Tate in TTIT, she says, about the White value regime at work in research metrics, *‘the point is they can’t judge our research as they don’t understand it’*. I think I am struggling for the right word, as even to ‘enable’ is about goodwill and gesturing, perhaps, but that’s not what I mean. In the other discussions you publish in the later section of the book, your contributors talk about the supposedly apolitical commodification of research being far from neutral and share their painful experiences of acts of ‘decolonial’ appropriation that elevate White, male academics, so as I write this I am (rightly) anxious as firstly I am clearly ‘passing the buck’ as I step down and secondly because creating the enabling space together needs more than words on the page. Your colleagues in the Black British Academics network write about the methods required for such spaces to be productive for levelling work, collectivism, protest and action. These are participatory, reflexive and, perhaps most challenging for a peer reviewed journal, non-hierarchical. These ways of being together in and against the academy – *‘learning to work through the pain we feel’* are very different to the way that research gets processed and either published or not in a journal like this. So it is about taking your approaches to transformational social justice pedagogy into research practices at every stage, every level and matching good intentions for social justice research with actions that instil social justice in every conversation about research, from what gets to happen to what gets funded and what gets published. What I can say is that the editorial board of MPE have the stated intent, as they begin the recruitment process for my successor, to not only enact decolonisation within media practice research but in so doing to renew the journal’s commitment to anti-racism and build methods for support to under-represented and under-resourced communities. To answer your question more personally, the experience of writing

this with you has been an uncomfortable but necessary ‘privilege check’ but the urgent task now (for all of us who benefit materially from interlocking power structures whatever we say or think we do) is to shift from reflective to *reflexive*, from media practice to *praxis*, to dismantle the normative criteria we use in research, rather than just critique them but carry on regardless. I think that’s the move from ‘diversity’ appropriation, consciously intended or not, to an explicit antiracism. And whether it’s in the social practices of running a research centre, hosting a conference, supervising doctoral research, editing a journal or writing a grant application, it’s the shift from ‘for’ to ‘with’ that I will take from *Transforming the Ivory Tower* and this exchange.

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