

Africans in Academia – Diversity in Adversity*

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Zusammenfassung

Grada Kilomba gelingt eine Gradwanderung aus persönlichen Erfahrungen als schwarze Wissenschaftlerin in Deutschland und den rassistischen Implikationen von weißer, eurozentristischer Wissensproduktion, die zunächst als Tatsache festgestellt wird. Da Wissen jedoch immer eine bestimmte politische Implementation aufweist, auch wenn es noch so sehr nach objektivierenden Kriterien produziert zu sein scheint, lässt sich die in ihm aufzeigbare Perspektivität nach Kilombas Ansicht auch anders besetzen. Bereits an gewählten Forschungsfeldern bzw. ihren Rahmenbedingungen, Begriffen oder auch Ausdrucksweisen oder vom unberücksichtigt Bleiben nicht-weißer WissenschaftlerInnen bzw. ihrer Publikationen, zeigen sich ausgrenzende Praktiken. Damit fängt der Rassismus im Feld der Wissenschaft weder an, noch hört er dort auf, wie Kilomba fortführt.

Every semester, on the very first day of my seminar, I play a game with my students. I quiz them. We first count how many people are in the room. Then I start by asking very simple questions, such as: What was the Berlin Conference of 1884-5? Which African countries were colonized by Germany? How many years did German colonisation over the continent of Africa last? I conclude with more specific questions: Who was Queen Nzinga and which role did she play on the struggle against European colonisation? Who wrote *Black Skin, White Masks*? Who was May Ayim? Who knows what? And who doesn't? And why? What do we want to know? And how is that related to racism?

This exercise shows us how the concepts of knowledge and the idea of what scholarship or science is, are intrinsically linked with power and racial authority.

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What knowledge is being acknowledged as such? And what knowledge is not? Whose knowledge make part of the academic agendas? And whose knowledge does not? Moreover, who is acknowledged to have the knowledge? And who is not? Who can teach knowledge? And who cannot? Actually, who can indeed speak? And who cannot?

White Space

These questions are very important to be asked because academia is not a neutral location, it reflects the political interests of the *white* society. This is a *white* space where Black people have been denied the privilege to speak. Historically, this is a space where we have been voiceless and where *white* scholars have developed theoretical discourses which officially constructed us as the inferior 'Other' – placing Africans in complete subordination to the *white* subject. Here, we were made inferior, our bodies described, classified, dehumanized, primitivized, brutalized and even killed. We are therefore, in a space which has a very problematic relationship to Blackness.

Here, we were made the objects, but we have rarely been the subjects.

This position of objecthood which we commonly occupy, does not indicate a lack of resistance or of interest, as it is common to believe, but rather a lack of access to representation by Blacks themselves. It is not that we have not been speaking, but rather that our voices – through a system of racism – have been systematically disqualified as invalid knowledge; or else represented by *whites* who ironically become the 'experts' of ourselves. Either way, we are locked in a violent colonial hierarchy.

Neutral vs. Personal

As a scholar, for instances, I am commonly told that my work on everyday racism is very interesting, but not really scientific, a remark which illustrates this colonial hierarchy in which Black scholars reside: 'You have a very subjective perspective'; 'very personal'; 'very emotional'; 'very specific'; 'Are these objective facts?'

Within such masterful comments, the discourses and perspectives of Black scholars remain always at the margins – as deviating – while *white* discourses

occupy the centre and remain the norm. When they speak is scientific, when we speak is unscientific.

Universal / specific;
objective / subjective;
neutral / personal;
rational / emotional;
impartial / partial;
they have facts, we have opinions;
they have knowledge, we have experiences.

These are not simple semantic categorisations, they possess a dimension of power. We are not dealing here with a ›peaceful coexistence‹ of words but rather with a violent hierarchy, which defines who can speak.

Objective vs. Subjective

Because structures of knowledge validation, which define what true and valid scholarship is, are controlled by *white* scholars, both male and female, as long as Black people and ‘people of colour’ are denied positions of authority and command within the academy, the idea of what science and scholarship are, prevails, of course, intact – it remains an exclusive and unquestionable ‘property’ of *whiteness*.

Science is, in this sense, not a simple apolitical study of truth, but the reproduction of racial power relations which define what counts as true and in whom to believe. In other words, it is not an objective scientific truth that we encounter in the academia, but rather the result of unequal power race relations. The themes, the paradigms and the methodologies of traditional scholarship – the so called epistemology – reflect nothing but the specific political interests of a *white* society.

Epistemology derives from the Greek words: episteme=knowledge and logos=science, the science of the acquisition of knowledge. It determines, therefore, which questions merit to be questioned (themes), how to analyse and explain a phenomenon (paradigms) and how to conduct a research to produce knowledge (methods). And in this sense, it defines not only what

true scholarship is, but also in whom to believe and trust.

Of course my questions, as a Black woman, differ from the questions a *white* woman and/or man might pose. As our experiences and realities differ. The themes, the paradigms and the methodologies to explain my reality might differ from the themes, the paradigms and the methodologies of the dominant. But that does not mean that I am unable to produce knowledge, instead it means that I produce knowledge that transgresses traditional scholarship. Scholarship needs to be decolonized.

Masters vs. Slaves

Interesting, they say, but not scientific, but subjective, but personal, but emotional and partial, “you do over-interpret,” said a colleague, “you must think you are the queen of interpretation.” Such observations, reveal that endless need to control the Black subject’s voice and the longing to govern and to command how we approach and interpret reality. By using these remarks the *white* subject is assured of his/her sense of power and authority over a group which he/she is labeling as ‘less knowledgeable.’

The last comment, in particular, have two powerful moments. The first moment is a form of warning, which describes the standpoint of the Black woman as a distortion of the truth, expressed here through the word ‘over-interpretation.’ The female colleague was warning me that I am reading over, beyond the norms of traditional epistemology, and therefore, I am producing invalid knowledge. It seems to me that this idea of over-interpretation addresses the thought that, the oppressed is seeing ‘something’ which is not to be seen, and is about to say ‘something’ which is not to be said. ‘Something’ which should be kept quiet, as a secret – like the secrets of colonialism that most of my students could not answer.

Curiously, in feminist discourses as well, men try to irrationalize the thinking of women, as if such feminist interpretations were nothing but a fabrication of the reality, an illusion, maybe even a female hallucination. Within this constellation it is the *white* woman who irrationalizes my own thinking, and by doing so, she defines to the Black woman what ‘real’ scholarship is, and how it should be expressed. This reveals how complex the intersection between gender, ‘race’ and colonial power is.

In the second moment, she speaks then of hierarchical places, of a queen she fantasizes I want to be, but who I cannot become. The queen is an interesting metaphor. It is a metaphor for power. A metaphor, also of the idea that certain bodies belong to certain places: a queen belongs to the palace, but not the plebeians; they can never achieve the position of royalty. They are sealed in their own subordinate bodies.

Such demarcation of spaces introduces a dynamic in which Blackness signifies 'being outside place' while *whiteness* signifies 'being in place.' I am told to be outside my place, for in her fantasy, I cannot become the queen like her, but only the plebeian. I am not interested on being neither one nor the other, but that seems to be her concern. She sees my body as improper, and she is concerned with it. Within racism, Black bodies are constructed as improper, as bodies 'outside place' and, therefore, as bodies which cannot belong. *White* bodies, on the contrary, are constructed as proper, they are bodies at home, 'in place', bodies which always belong. Through such comments, Black scholars are persistently invited to return to 'their place,' 'outside' academia, where our bodies are at home.

These violent comments reveal the inadequacy of dominant scholarship to relate not only to marginalised subjects, but also to our experiences and discourses. They perform a fruitful combination of power, intimidation and control which succeeds in silencing oppressed voices. Fruitful indeed, for after this last episode I remember I stopped writing for more than a month. I became temporarily voiceless. I had a *white-out*, was waiting for a Black-in.

Pain and Anger

These experiences announce that the academia is not only a space of knowledge and wisdom, of science and scholarship, but also a space of violence. The violence of always being placed as the 'Other' of the *white* subject. That is the essence of colonial violence – one remains at the periphery, while *white* others speak in our name, at the centre.

Speaking about these positions of marginality evokes, of course, pain, disappointment and anger. They are reminders of the places we can hardly enter. The places we never 'arrive' or 'can't stay' (Hooks 1990). Such pain and anger must be spoken and theorised. It must have a place within discourse,

because we are not dealing here with 'private information.' Such apparently 'private information' is not private at all. These are not personal stories or intimate complains, but rather accounts of racism. They mirror the historical, political and social realities of 'race relations' within the academic spaces, and these should be articulated in both theory and methodology.

Therefore, I call for an epistemology which includes the subjective as part of the academic discourse, for we all speak from a specific time and place, from a specific reality and history. There are no neutral discourses. When *white* scholars claim to be neutral or objective, they are not acknowledging the fact that they too write from a specific place which, of course, is neither objective nor universal, but rather dominant. It is a place of power. As I said, scholarship is neither neutral nor objective, but rather personal and subjective. So, if this essay today seems to be preoccupied with narrating my emotions and subjectivity as part of theoretical discourse, than it is worth remembering that theory is always placed somewhere and always written by someone, and besides that the heart has its reasons. (This is in Remembrance of Our Ancestors)

Literature:

Collins, Patricia Hill (2000) *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.

Hooks, Bell (1990) *Yearning. Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press.

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