

## **Africans in the Academia: Diversity in Adversity**

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Every semester, on the very first day of my seminar, I play a quiz with all my students. We first count how many people are in the room, in order to see how many will be able to answer. 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, such as: 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?

Not surprisingly, most of the *white* students are unable to answer the questions, while the Black students answer successfully most of them. Suddenly, those whose knowledge has been hidden, become visible, while those who have been over-represented become invisible. Those who are usually silent start speaking, while those who always speak become silent. Silent, not because they cannot articulate their voices or tongues, but rather because they do not possess *that* knowledge.

This exercise makes us understand how the concepts of knowledge and the idea of what scholarship or science is, are intrinsically linked with power and racial authority. What knowledge is being acknowledged as such? And what knowledge is not? Who is acknowledged to have the knowledge? And who is not? Who can teach knowledge? And who cannot? Who is at the

centre? And who remains outside at the margins? Finally, who can indeed speak in the academy? And who cannot?

At the present these questions are crucial because academia is not a neutral location. 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 formally constructed us as the inferior 'Other' - placing Africans in complete subordination to, the so called, *white* subject. 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 valid knowledge; or represented by *whites* who ironically become the 'experts' of ourselves. Either way, we are locked in a violent colonial hierarchy.

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*?'.  
Universal / specific;

Within such masterful descriptions, the discourses and perspectives of Black scholars remain always at the margins - as deviating, while *white* discourses occupy the centre. 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 own a dimension of power which maintain hierarchical positions and upheld *white* supremacy. We are not dealing here with a >peaceful coexistence< of words but rather with a violent hierarchy, which defines *who can speak*.

Since long that we have been speaking and producing independent knowledge, but when groups are unequal in power, they are also unequal in their access to the resources which are necessary to implement their own voices (Collins 2000). And because we lack control over such structures, the articulation of our own perspective outside the group, becomes extremely difficult, if not unrealisable.

Moreover, the structures of knowledge validation, which define what true and valid scholarship is, are controlled by *white* scholars, both male and female. So, 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.

So, it is not an objective scientific truth, which we encounter in the academy, but rather the result of unequal power race relations, which define what counts as true and in whom to believe. The themes, the paradigms and the methodologies of traditional scholarship - the so called

epistemology - reflect nothing but the specific political interests of a *white* colonial patriarchal 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. Who defines which questions merit being asked? And who is asking them? Furthermore to whom are the answers directed?

Because Black people experience a different reality than *white* people, we also question, interpret and evaluate this reality differently. The themes, the paradigms and the methodologies to explain our reality might differ from the themes, the paradigms and the methodologies of the dominant.

Interesting, but *unscientific*, 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 comments, 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 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, and how the idea of a unitary category of women based on the assumption of an absolute patriarchy which divides the world into powerful men and subordinate women is problematic: for it neglects *white* women's role as oppressors and the reality of oppression experienced by both Black women and Black men.

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 or a king do naturally belong to the palace of knowledge, 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 be the queen, only the plebeian. My body is seen as improper. 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' academy, where our bodies are seen as proper and at home.

These violent remarks 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*.

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 at the margins, 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. They are reminders of the places we can hardly enter. The places we never 'arrive' or 'can't stay' (hooks 1990). Such pain 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 and the emotional as part of the academic discourse, for as I mentioned earlier, there is no neutral scholarship - we all speak from a specific place and time, from a specific history and reality.

(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.