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## **A Day in the Life of a Geographer: 'lone'<sup>i</sup>, black, female.**

Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, Durham University

### Biographical Note:

Divya P. Tolia-Kelly is a Reader in Geography at Durham University, and is an ILM qualified HE coach and mentor. Her research focus is the geographies of race, representation, affect and postcolonial approaches to identities and cultural heritage. She is currently writing a monograph entitled '*An Archaeology of Race at the Museum*' with Routledge.

ABSTRACT: This piece is a narrative representation of the experience of being black and female in the discipline of geography in the UK and beyond. The aim is to share an ethnographic research on race in geography, based on day-to-day experience in the academy. The piece expresses some of the morphologies of black geographical life in everyday academia. The material has originally been shared in coaching and mentoring relationships with me. The quotes included have been sanctioned for use in this particular piece and have been sent to me in individual emails in January 2017.

Keywords: race, decolonising geography, everyday life, institutional racism.

### **Introduction**

Overall, this piece is borne out of reflections on discussions across the student body and with colleagues in academia for a need to engage with the race equality charter (ECU, 2017) and the 'decolonising the academy' (El Magd, 2016) agenda. This call for engagement with a critique of university's commitment to imperial, European frameworks of knowledge, philosophy and its oeuvre, occurs alongside the exponentially growing dissatisfaction with institutional and social racisms. These racisms are both experienced and accepted as being ironically, 'beyond the pale' amongst staff and students within the walls of the academy. However they continue to be present, and part of the fabric of everyday life in H.E. Concurrently, the *Black Lives Matter*<sup>ii</sup> and *Why isn't my professor black?*<sup>iii</sup> Movements, have

become sites where these debates and antagonisms are aired and coalesce. As Peake & Kobayashi, (2002) have made clear, a revitalisation of attention towards race this millennium is essential. It has to however, include strategies beyond having race on the teaching curriculum. This is not an adequate response. Black bodies and black intellectual thought need to be part of the current re-evaluation (Bhopal, 2015). Actually feeling and having empathy (not pity) is also a critical starting point (Ahmed, 2012). The felt *violences* that are part of the fabric of everyday life for our students, researchers and academic colleagues within institutions, are not simply a recent phenomenon, that have occurred as a result of the 'Brexit' vote in the UK or indeed the election of Donald Trump in the US, in 2016. These events have simply revealed the degree to which inequality is felt, how it is distributed and how institutional racism is in need of attention.

The voice used in this piece is an amalgam of voices of black female academics<sup>iv</sup> in UK and US Geography departments. It is not a voicing of my experiences. Simply put, I have written in a singular voice, to protect identities, but also as a mechanism to represent the layers and thickness of the repeated textures of experience, echoed by colleagues, whilst being in a variety of institutions. This piece is based on five years of mentoring and coaching with a score of black (those racialized as being not white British) female academics across the discipline in the UK and US. In the face of Athena Swan successes the piece underlines the importance of calls for race equality do effect change in the everyday experience of racisms within academia, beyond paper policies. Ultimately what these collaged extracts show is that the experience of the flawed 'meritocracy' in which we work, and how it feels for racialized colleagues. In the face of racisms that are expressed here, an empathetic approach to the treatment of black colleagues is necessary. Our practices could be reversed from seeing a white landscape as the norm, and could perhaps enable the discipline to become an academic *home* for all of us, and not more of a home for those who benefit from class privilege, an inherited sense of entitlement and a culture of male patronage. The piece does not engage with the structural inequalities and economies of casualization, zero hour contracts, scarcity of permanent posts, and the white, male dominated management structure of universities. At present the University College Union is the one body that has a commitment and has been actively approached to assist black academics, albeit problematically (see Morgan, 2014).

## **Scene I: Coffee before Campus**

7am: Background Noise: Radio 4, intermittent 'talking head' segments of the Today Programme:

*"Brexit because immigration must be controlled. We have floods of migrants. . ."*

*"Protests in Ferguson followed Michael Brown's death and a grand jury declining to charge the officer with murder. . ."*

*"I don't think we have ever had a president so publicly condescending to what black politics means".*

Each day the world seems to get more oppressive, worse, it's giving permission to all to put into practice racist ideas and actions. These remind me of getting hit by a fascist skin-head in the 1970s, my mum being threatened at work by racists because of her ethnic clothes, it was terrible for us then. We smell. Our food smells. We take their jobs. We don't speak English properly. Everyone is scared of immigrants whilst they are hurting, and dying in their thousands; a silent, cruel holocaust. My sadness is heavy; a life of paper-cuts, layer upon layer, that accumulate 'like death by a thousand cuts' (Hunt, 2016). OK I'm now taking my medication to try to stop feeling this way. Need to feel OK. Need to stop the nausea. OK ginger tisane, good for nausea. Check in the mirror, must get it right, the best look possible; there is extra scrutiny, must make sure there are no glitches, I must look 'in-place', fitting-in, modern.

## **Scene II: Arrival**

### Invisibility Cloaks

8am: arrival in the department. Walk past Professor White, and Dr Smith, no eye contact, no acknowledgement, my invisibility cloak must be on again. I have to keep narrating to myself "mustn't let these micro-aggressive acts undermine, rise above these childish taunts; must be resilient, twice as resilient. It's the institution, not them, not me."

*“Accumulatively, I think each day ‘I’m not sure this job is for me. Am I invisible? Or is it that I just don’t belong? I am constantly reminded that perhaps I am out of place.”*

Over time these inner reconciliations have an impact on writing, research and mental health (Green, 2016). Often when aired the response is ‘oh don’t be so sensitive, you are reading far too much into things, perhaps they just had a bad day’. One colleague coined this in a phrase ‘they call it being oversensitive, we call it racism’. It has stuck with me, helpfully, through the years. Also, the repetitive nature and thus accumulation of these violent experiences tells me that they are real and substantially represent a system of habits embedded into the very infrastructure of a university, a department, a research group. They hurt.

*“Being silenced; trying yet failing to make your-self heard in the context of meetings because you are ‘talked over’ and rendered silent. Subconsciously you begin to wonder whether what you have to say has currency - is it valid? Almost as if being given the opportunity to speak validates you in some way. Your experience, seniority counts for nothing; these things are overlooked as often (white) junior colleagues are given the chance to have their say; their chance to shine.”*

Nothing has changed. For decades (B.B.C. 1999).

### **Scene III: University Office**

#### Being Seen In Particular

10am: Just spoke with a member of the panel for my interview feedback. One of them (a feminist Professor) said ‘well your lipstick was very good!’ This reminds me of Franz Fanon, you’re constant awareness of the mask you must wear to conceal, to constantly regulate, and reconcile with what is expected. The facile condescension of commenting on my make-up rather than the serious focus on appointment processes is also an evasion often experienced by black women in academia. It’s easier for the senior women to communicate through superficial advice on dress, lipstick, spelling errors and grammar, than actually engage with patronage towards career development, or indeed recognising you as a significant scholar with skills to shape the discipline, or even the department.

*“During my time spent at a Russell Group University, the feeling of invisibility could be striking- while walking into the corridors or sitting in meetings and not being acknowledged by senior white male academic peers. On applying and being short-listed for a permanent academic post in the department. I was not offered the post and subsequently asked for feedback. I was told that I was appointable by one panel member. By another, I was told that I needed ‘to learn to have more of a presence with men’. Certainly, constructions of gender and femininity are present, but so is the racialisation of gender and privilege. I have wondered if this would have been said to a white woman in the same position.”*

‘Presence with men’ sounds like a call to be a different kind of body. Presence and absence are expected simultaneously; but only in an acceptable template, no room for manoeuvre / me. Do I need to be more ‘decorative’ or ‘available’? Or ‘be like a man?’ ‘Trying to ‘blend in’ also makes me invisible. I lose my skin, my culture, my accent, my heart. I want to be myself. But my body is not what they want. I endeavoured for assimilation; however, being one-with-them means that I become invisible, I lose my identity, integrity. I risk being broken away from my anchors. Everything is at stake. When experienced by racialized communities, the ‘imposter syndrome’ is enhanced and we/I am called to think ‘Can I really do this? ‘Am I good enough? These accumulate as continuous doubts of not being good enough for a long time. And then I’m told women do not put themselves forward. They don’t take leaps of faith, and risks like their younger counterparts. If I speak, you do not hear. When you hear, you do not expect me to be speaking in the same language. When I ask for my rightful place at the table, I am told that I’ll have to change, get a chair or that I do not quite understand. There are no others, no black Professors (Adams, 2017). I am ‘out-of-place’.

#### **Scene IV: Going for a morning Coffee B r e a k**

##### Out-of-Placeness

11am: One of the most frequently mentioned experiences of black academics include repeated episodes of being shown and reminded that your body is *out-of-place*; ‘*you are a fish out of water*’. These include in meetings where people do not acknowledge your *belonging* in the discussion, or indeed ‘making space’ even as simple as having a chair ready

for you as they would for other equivalent colleagues, or indeed a conscious disregard for your legitimate portfolio expressed through a lack of listening or cognition of your role and experience. An uneven recognition of rank, position or indeed expertise exists in the everyday environment of academia, including our 'social' spaces of taking a break or a meal outside of the working day. Many black colleagues recount how they feel that an invisible wall between 'others' and those in the 'inner circle (white and male)' is palpably felt and worked around.

*"there are certain practices that accentuate the process of 'othering' in academic life –a disregard for my personhood by colleagues, one look at the surreptitious delineation of the Staff Room during the coffee break (a visible apartheid of a sort) has made me ask the question repeatedly: 'Where the brown folks at in an 'international' department such as this?' I know that I am not alone in experiencing these frustrations. It is a source of grievance for us (labelled) 'foreigners' in the department"*

*"On my first ever entrance to the staff common room, I was met with the blank stares and averted eyes of supposed "colleagues", in whose presence I felt like a servant, the temp, the hired help rather than a scholar of international standing."*

There are costs to feeling this sort of negation on a daily basis, without a strong sense of self-identity, black staff are vulnerable to anxiety, stress and undermining that accumulates over a series or repeated experiences, each reinforcing others gone before.

*"The feeling of discrimination was reinforced by a total lack of support and mentorship. Others held full patronage, grooming even to be part of the long term fabric of the university. Whereas I, was given a series of promises of meetings with my allocated mentor, which never happened. This affirmed my sensation that my post was irrelevant in the economy of the department."*

It is clear from hearing colleagues, that the language of diversity doesn't have any impact in terms of the reconciliation needed (Ahmed, 2007). In fact the bodies, committees and training elements of diversity at university level seem to operate as temporary salves that take the place of effective strategy and actions.

*"There's also a tendency to infantilise; you are forever 'young' and inexperienced no matter how many years of experience you have. I've been told by a white (feminist) professor that I'm a brilliant researcher; you know, my field research was second to none but my writing needed a lot of work. These words stay with you, so much so that you hear them whenever*

*you have to write a paper. They are words that cut deep and which sap your confidence; they also give truth to the lie that you are not worthy of being an academic – a seed that is planted long before you become one...”*

## **Scene V: Who do you think you are?**

### Race is a mythology

2pm: For many academics teaching becomes the space for job satisfaction and pride, where feedback is instantaneous. However for some, it is just another site where race and racism play out. The motto ‘you have to be twice as good’ to be black and get successful at teaching chimes with many black academic colleague’s experiences. As a black academic (as with gender), the teaching on race becomes somehow automatically part of our role. And often when teaching you are not in the lecture hall with the equal authority as other colleagues. Teaching can become difficult. You may feel vulnerable, as your authority is not always recognised and can be /is indeed challenged. Recently, a black academic was teaching about the myth of race based on Stuart Hall (1997) and recent debates in popular culture (see Adiseoye, 2008). The discussion was focussed on the discrediting of racial science. In response, the students dismissed her argument. Their responses included ‘it’s proven scientifically, race does exist.’ ‘It is biological. Look at our skins.’ Also to prove their point, students started ‘Googling’ for evidence whilst in the lecture theatre. ‘Look here’s the evidence!’ said a throng, whilst looking at a sports piece arguing for recognition of biological differences between white and black runners, in capacities for running (e.g. Isaksen, 2016). In that space, her authority, expertise were placed on an equal or lesser platform to the students. One experience that is rarer for other colleagues.

In another non-Russell Group university, one colleague on receiving critical feedback on her teaching stating that she ‘was confusing’, ‘not clear’, ‘could not be understood’, or that ‘she was not a good lecturer’. She was asked by her head of department to do a university language training course in English. This was posited as a supportive act, to prevent future injury. The lecturer held both a degree and PhD. from Cambridge geography and it was clear that the ‘ethnicity’ of accent was being criticised and not the content of the lectures. Thus in the university’s ‘supportive’ act of ‘training’, there was an unconscious compounding of the effect of the student’s claims of inferiority and incompetence, thus strengthening the bias against ethnic accents. (Note however, white Irish, American, Australian, Canadian and



indeed Scottish accents are not necessarily received in this way). This colleague was understandably disheartened by this event. She has left academia.

In an era where student feedback is sovereign, there are unrecognised biases in student feedback. The expectation of 'brilliance' from lecturers often tallies with axes of colour and gender. "Male professors were described more often as 'brilliant' and 'genius' than female professors in every single field we studied - about two to three times more often." (Staufenberg, 2016). Another study showed that students who thought 'genius' was a precursor to success most often belonged to subjects where African-Americans and women were underrepresented. "Both of these groups are stereotyped in a similar way about their intellectual abilities and therefore are potentially affected in a similar way by the amount of emphasis that's put on brilliance." (Cimpian, 2015, cited in Staufenberg, 2016).

These in turn add to the layers of other experiences that are compounding the message that universities themselves produce racisms (Williams, 2016), including in the intellectual realm (Bonnett, 1997) and that:

"Universities are white spaces, in which whiteness – and white privilege – dominates. Our research shows, for example, that black and minority ethnic staff are very scared to make complaints about racism. And when they do, it's either dismissed as a 'clash of personalities', or it's seen as taking something out of context. So what happens is the victim becomes the villain and white identity is protected at all costs." (Bhopal, 2015).

### Home Time

7pm: Living for work is a habit for me. I get such exhilaration sometimes. But body feels heavy. No energy to write and think creatively. I need to contact friends and family. Need them a little closer to get perspective. Have to find an intellectual *home*; a safe, workplace, with dignity and respect. And to feel *in-place*.

**END**

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<sup>i</sup> 'lone' is used here as a narrative device to reflect the fact that despite the experiences outlined are collectively experienced, often we feel that we are alone, isolated and an anomaly. This is a reflection of several women's experiences, in different geography departments in the UK and beyond.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://blacklivesmatter.com/>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://blackbritishacademics.co.uk/2014/03/12/why-isnt-my-professor-black/>

<sup>iv</sup> Quotes in italics are quotes from black female academic mentees received in written correspondence.