

Commissioned Book Review



Inside the Ivory Tower: Narratives of Women of Colour Surviving and Thriving in British Academia by **Deborah Gabriel and Shirley Anne Tate**. Trentham Books, 2017. 164 pp., £24.99 (p/b), ISBN 9781858568485

Inside the Ivory Tower is a collection of autobiographical reflections of the intersectional lived reality of Black women of colour (BWoC) as they have made their way to and through universities as academics in the United Kingdom. It was developed for the Black Sister Network under the Black British Academics (<http://blackbritishacademics.co.uk>) network, created by Deborah Gabriel, one of the editors. Each chapter offers 1 of the 10 contributors' individual experience of 'surviving and thriving' within a university system that privileges Whiteness and Eurocentric ways of knowing. Drawing on Critical Race Theory, the stories are authored as autoethnography, which uses storying of personal experiences combined with academic literature to make sense of the same.

The underlying message is that BWoC academics unanimously have a combination of racism and sexism inflicted on them through obstacles that severely hamper their progression at work. They are routinely subjected to racist behaviour ranging from microaggressions and excessive scrutiny, to verbal and physical sexual abuse. On the other hand, these individuals are presented as trophies of diversity, but the stories reveal that the diversity agenda in British universities is tokenistic, merely exoticising academics of colour, and BWoC in particular.

In the introduction, Deborah Gabriel argues that the book does not aim to solely encourage more Black peoples to enter academia, but to identify and locate racism and sexism in universities in the United Kingdom. In addition,

the stories highlight strategies developed by the authors through lived experiences of institutional racism, which can be of help to other BWoC as they embark on their journey into the *Ivory Tower*. It is therefore at the onset that I recommend this book as an important piece of solidarity literature and scholar activism, and as an academic study on the experiences of racism in British academia. Here I will elaborate on this view.

The contributors themselves come from a range of backgrounds, despite falling in broader categories. This includes discipline (Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, and Arts and Humanities), geography (within the United Kingdom), types of universities (research intensive and teaching intensive, old and new), different career trajectories (direct education path, practitioner to education) and ethnic backgrounds within the broad category of 'Black British'. Yet, they all experience racism and sexism in academia. Each narrative flows into each other, supporting an interconnected web of experiences, enabling each story to stand-alone while contributing to a bigger picture. This makes it evident that this is not an isolated occurrence, but a sector-wide problem.

A further strength of this book lies in its method of storying. As Mirza stresses, 'we *must* tell our stories, or others will tell them for us ... our stories must be told!' (p.41; emphasis author's own). Gabriel goes further to argue that we must also talk back to power so that these stories are heard, disrupting the comfort of ignorance of others (p.28). They are endorsed by Jackson who reveals the importance of thinking through her experience and having her story shared through this book. A solemn encouragement is also made by Tate, who expresses the need to voice feeling hurt by experiences of racism and sexism so as to

confront ‘institutional melancholia’ which serves to uphold the rhetoric of post-race with the burden falling on minorities when such instances are reported (p.62). This method reveals the details of experiencing multiple instances of victimisation and harassment which often go unreported, particularly given the covert nature of racism and sexism in the United Kingdom, highlighted by Wilson (p.109) and seen through all the stories.

This process of storying also alludes to a critique of Whiteness and Euro-centrism within academia, alongside an objective to protect university (White)branding. This results in some forms of knowing and knowledge seen as better than others, which is steeped in a racist sentiment of superiority, and biases about who can and cannot embody this way of knowing. This manifested in Opara’s experience of seeking a promotion in which an external White male candidate was picked over her despite her meeting the criteria. This disrupted her science identity, a process of which she made sense through the work of Carlone and Johnson (2007). Eventually, she was urged by this instance to work towards empowering Black women in STEM. A similar situation confronted Richards who in order to improve the visibility of Black women in the creative disciplines proposed to set up ‘Shades of Noir’ (<http://shadesofnoir.org.uk>), a now successful resource for the mobilisation of capacities through collective action. Richards was met with hostility and mistrust from line managers and colleagues when attempting to access funding for the same (p.139).


The construction of knowledge from a White, Euro-centric perspective also severely hampers potential contributions from other ways of knowing, including practitioner-based work, as revealed by Kwhali whose trajectory is from social work and local government to academia. Similarly, community-focused work and impact also informed the motivation for Bernard and Douglas to focus their research.

This book touches on a range of other experiences in universities in the United Kingdom which a short review cannot cover.

These include sexual violence, isolation, lack of diversity that make spaces threatening for BWoC, a lack of appropriate mentors for Black women academics, among others. The narratives in the book present resilience built up by BWoC to defend against institutionalised racism and sexism, raising serious questions about dignity at work for BME peoples, specifically BWoC. It also directs to a need to challenge how knowledge is currently constructed and prioritised within this context, raising questions about whom the knowledge economy is championed to serve. Furthermore, if the equality and inclusion agenda is serious about addressing the problem, BWoC and BME peoples should not bear the burden of addressing the racism inflicted on them, though can be consulted for support. Instead, White privilege must be confronted where it is found – within White people and institutions built on the oppression of BME peoples.

Despite repeated hurdles and negative experiences, all stories reveal a sense of hope, and can work as potential tips for BWoC from various backgrounds attempting to create a career in academia, or even to move forward through one. It can motivate other WoC to share their stories, preventing what Bhopal et al. (2016) noticed as a flight of BME from British academia. The book is also relevant to a range of other audiences, including policy-makers, senior management who ought to make themselves aware of the experiences that can arguably be called victimisation and harassment of Black women academics; researchers with an interest in intersectionality; other academics to become aware of the realities of their colleagues; and students interested in taking a critical view of university and access to this sector.

Perhaps rather than just timely, this book can be timeless, though one would hope the situation changes for the better as BWoC continue to raise their voices and share their struggles.

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