RACISM IN THE ACADEMY:
IDEOLOGY, PRACTICE, AND AMBIGUITY

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Introduction: The Context of Racism in the Academy

The academy is a complex domain permeated with ideologies that parade as theories and academics who fabricate paradigms to explain the physical and social behaviors of objects and things. Academics are trained to be master builders seeking explanations of natural and social phenomena. At the same time that the academy is parochial and provincial, it is also cosmopolitan and universal. It is an intimate part of the social milieu in which it operates and yet, it is tied to the production of ideas that transcend immediate circumstances. Its members are the product of history and yet they are the producers of history and authoritative interpretations. Contemporary academicians enjoy the status that accrues to them of being of and within the “Ivory Tower”; they are part of the illusion which they and others have created. And yet, they exist as workers performing their activities within the mundane demands of every day life. There is, in fact, nothing special about them. They are of society and by no means outside of it. Thus, they share the same beliefs and prejudices as their fellow workers and operate from and within the dominant ideological frames of the time.

Within the United States racial ideologies and racism have been pervasive and enduring. They have neither temporal nor spatial boundaries. They lie at the core of American history, permeate the fabric of American society and are manifest in the activities of everyday life. Thus, it is not surprising to find them deeply embedded within the academy. But, it is not always easy to identify racism in the academy. The participants may not themselves be fully conscious of their racial views and racist actions. Thus, there is considerable leeway for ambiguity and multiple interpretations.
Three Domains of Racism

In this essay I wish to distinguish three domains of racism. I do not present them as original but as derived from lectures given by my distinguished colleague Professor Derald Sue (a Counseling Psychologist) (n.d.); my general reading of scholars such as Professor Anthony Kwame Appiah (a Philosopher) (1992); long term discussions with Professors Martin Kilson (a Political Scientist) (forthcoming); Marion Kilson (an Anthropologist) (2001); and Walton R. Johnson (an Anthropologist) (1994).

In the first domain racism is deeply embedded in the structural arrangements of the academy. It operates at the macro level of the institution. It can be seen in statistical patterns of hiring and promoting women and minorities. Affirmative action has sought to correct this structural pattern of exclusion. In the second domain, racism is manifest in micro-interactions. It occurs in the every day activities of the workplace, such as teaching. In the third domain structural and individual acts of racism intersect. This situation often occurs at critical moments in academic careers such as hiring and reviews for promotion and tenure. My intention is to focus on racism and its ambiguities in the last two domains.

Like many of my colleagues, I have experienced racism within these three domains. One never quite learns how to live with it especially in those microaggressive interactions which are found in classrooms. They are overwhelming and eat at the soul. Moreover, to focus on personal vignettes at this level is often interpreted as indulgent and self serving, as attempting to cloak incompetence and protect it from careful scrutiny. The charge of racism is a powerful screen covering a variety of actions.

Microaggressive Interactions

None the less, with this caveat, now let me give three examples from my own experiences of microaggressive interactions within the classroom, the central workplace of my profession.

Expectations and Projections: The “Street Negro” vs the Oxbridge Don

White students often express discomfort with me as their teacher. The first time I encountered this discomfort I thought that they were dissatisfied with the subject matter, the substantive content of the course. But this was not the case. Eventually, a student could no longer contain her discomfort. She raised her hand and expressed her chagrin at my style of lecturing. As a young insecure associate professor, I stopped the lecture and asked her and others to express more fully their complaint. To my great dismay I discovered that the students were questioning my accent, my vocabulary, and pattern of speaking. I asked them to give me an example of how they expected me to speak and deliver my lectures. Without hesitation they presented a stereotypic imitation of their impression of how black folk talk and behave. The caricature was a composite of the commercialized “Street Negro”. My presentation of self did not conform to their stereotypic image of a black man. Their expectation was for me to somehow change myself, to
return to my true being. I would cease to be something other than what they expected and by revealing my true nature they could then accept me and learn from me.

The confrontation reminded me of my high school roommate’s mother, the wife of a Harvard professor, asking me if I played the banjo. She was quite puzzled when I told her I did not. At first she thought I was hiding that I could in fact play this instrument and this disturbed her to no end. Realizing that I was telling the truth, she expressed her regret that Negro children were losing their cultural heritage. Now I was confronted with white students who wanted me to use the “language” of Ebonics and take on the gestures and postures of an upper rung black pimp.

Not too long ago at a college-wide diversity meeting the faculty was arranged in break out groups. I was seated at a table with a senior administrator. We were asked to present accounts of our experiences of racism at the college. I related the above experience to my colleagues, pointing out that it was not an unusual occurrence. After the expected sighs of sympathetic astonishment by my faculty colleagues, the senior administrator turned and looked me straight in the eye and said “but you do speak and behave strangely anyway, don’t you?” There was a calm, measured seriousness in his tone that let me know that his interpretation was not the same as mine.

But on this particular subject matter there is a related story. In one of my classes I taught a young man from South Carolina. He was white and sat in the front row. Though he had a pad and pencil, he rarely wrote. Most of the time he kept his eyes closed. After one class I approached him and asked whether he was disabled and needed assistance. His reply astonished me. He said that he kept his eyes closed so that he could listen more attentively to my voice and thus dream that he was at Oxford or Cambridge. He did not want me to change my style of lecturing and my pattern of speech. With his eyes closed he could pretend that he was in England and that I was English. But then, with his eyes closed, how could he take notes? He could only fulfill his intellectual dream by negating my physical appearance. From his perspective (and I discovered by talking to him that other students felt the same), my courses would have real class, if only one kept one’s eyes closed and thought of me as English and not of African descent.

The Enemies of an Open Society
Let me now turn to a third case centering on micro-interactions within the class room.

My practice is that on the first day of class I introduce a course by going over the syllabus, the major points of the up-coming lectures and the cast of scholars and peoples who will be discussed. In the case of this particular course the condensed overview included references to scholars such as Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber as well as W. E. B. Du Bois, St. Claire Drake, Claude Levi-Strauss and Clifford Geertz. It also established the fact that much of early
anthropology was based on the study of the peoples of Africa, the Americas, and northern England. I had thought that this class meeting had gone smoothly. I was, however, unaware of an undercurrent of apprehension over the inclusion of black scholarship and black peoples.

During the second meeting a young white student raised her hand and asked whether this was a course in Black Studies. I replied that it was a general introduction to anthropology and the social sciences. Her query was why then was there so much material by and on people of African descent? She informed me that her other courses did not have this emphasis. The white students seated around her nodded their heads in agreement. The two black students in the class were disconcerted by her line of questioning and I must confess that I too was perplexed. After some discussion she announced that she was not interested in taking a course on Black Studies and that she and her colleagues would have to find another course. Needless to say, she and her companions dropped the course.

When I discussed this experience with a white colleague, he advised me that I should not be oversensitive and that I should look for a non-racist explanation of the student’s behavior. His reaction puzzled me. Why did neither he nor the student ask whether my course fell within the domain of White Studies, Jewish Studies, or Christian Studies? He confessed that his courses had never undergone this type of scrutiny and ultimately dismissed my experience and the student’s behavior as oddities. For him they were exceptions and did not count.

However, half the class left the course muttering “Black studies.” On further investigation I discovered that the student was a leading light in her program and highly thought of by faculty members and students. This course was now labeled and its content misrepresented. Fortunately I had tenure and could continue to include black scholars and peoples in my courses.

These three vignettes point to the tenuous position of blacks in the academy and its central work place, the class room, and the attempt of black academics to maintain an open society against its enemies. But, not all black academics have been that receptive to the inclusion of their younger black colleagues in the academy. There is that peculiar syndrome or ambition of wanting to be the only one. Individuals are singled out as the exception and given considerable privileges and power over their junior colleagues. This situation was particularly so in the generation above mine and among the designated “gate keepers”.

The Middle Range: Structural and Individual Intersections

Elitism and the Ideology of Race

Many white academics quite firmly believe in George Foster’s (Foster 1965, 1974) notion of the limited good. From their perspective there are only a limited number of highly educated blacks with sufficient qualifications to join their departments. Until a few decades ago faculty members at historically black colleges and universities were not usually included in the pool of suitable candidates. Thus, artificial boundaries were set and
the number of highly qualified candidates was indeed limited. Candidates were sought from the major predominantly white universities. I think that it is not incorrect to say that black institutions of higher education still remain at the periphery of the dominant white academic stream.

To my great dismay as a member of academic search committees I discovered that not only were colleges and universities ranked, but also ranked were academic journals and that full merit was not always given to articles published in leading minority journals such as *Phylon*, *The Journal of Negro (African American) History*, and *The Journal of Negro Education*. That is to say, it was not only the article that was evaluated but also the journal. During that period of intense black struggle and black pride many of us consciously sought to have our articles published in black academic journals. Thus, it was disconcerting to discover that many white members of search committees had to be convinced of the quality of these minority journals and the articles published by them.

Once recruited into the predominantly white academy, many blacks are defined as exceptional and consider themselves to be so, especially if they are promoted to tenure. Though at prep school I grew up under the weight of this ideology, I began to understand its full import as I navigated the terrain of the predominantly white academy. In my opinion, to believe that one is the exceptional black, a chosen one, is to buy into the dominant racist ideology and perpetuate its existence. In many instances, this elitist racist ideology justified having only one tenured American black in a department. That is, within the departments of anthropology at major white colleges and universities in the United States it has been rare to have more than one tenured American black. Until recently, blacks have been just as likely to gain tenure in the professional schools as in the fields of their academic discipline. The history of this practice is a long standing one going back to Allison Davis’s appointment in the Department of Education at the University of Chicago in 1942 and not in its anthropology department (Low 1981). Blacks who were promoted to tenure within anthropology departments were at the center. They were the exceptions and thought to be quite exceptional, especially if they held tenure at one of the major white research universities such as Columbia, Stanford, or the University of California, Berkeley.

*Gate Keepers*
Within the academy I discovered that there were black “gate keepers,” the chosen ones. The gate keepers were senior academics at major research institutions whose opinions were sought by their white colleagues. They stood at that juncture of structure and process where authoritative decisions are made about academic careers. So situated they could amass considerable power. In my field I can identify three central gate keepers; two have recently died. They had considerable control over the destiny of junior black academics and quite often, the access of these young scholars to academic posts, conferences, and invitations as participants on foundation committees.
They had the opportunity to become “ethnic” power brokers and “spokesmen” for their black brethren. Racism, in part, defined who and what they were and could do.

The one I worked with most used the ideology of race to help establish his position within the academy and the wider world. He thought of himself as exceptional. Within his general academic domain, whites fearing being accused of racism relinquished their responsibilities toward their junior black colleagues. They also put aside their study of peoples of African descent. Though they represented themselves as champions of liberalism and sometimes even more radical positions, their claims remained primarily at the level of rhetoric devoid of practice. They hastily retreated on issues of race, intimidated by the potential charge of being a racist. The other “gate keeper,” the one I knew best, very rarely used racism to accomplish his goals; he was the one who promoted his junior colleagues most. He valued the intellectual accomplishments of his black colleagues and in a quiet non-racist mode, pursued their individual and collective interests.

An Opinion: The Intruder

Now, in more general terms, it is sometimes thought that racism within the academy is the sole purview of whites acting on blacks. From my experience there is no question that this occurs. I can marshal anecdote after anecdote to support this position. My academic career has been both promoted and hindered by racism and the location of my first piece of field work determined by it. But racism is the property of neither black nor white; it has often allowed for the promotion of personal interests, the subjugation of scholars, and the acceptance of incompetence. It has also been used to justify the exclusion of black scholars and to diminish the quality of their intellectual contribution and their accomplishments. It is not unusual to have whites attribute the success of black colleagues solely to their being black. Their view is that if the person were not black neither he (she) nor his (her) work would have received recognition. Thus, in dealing with white colleagues one is often not sure of their integrity. They too wear masks. This leads to uncertainty and promotes ambiguity; I am never sure when they will attribute the presence of a black colleague to his (or her) being an Affirmative Action selection and thus, from their perspective diminishing his or her qualifications. Thus, American blacks within the academy are often considered to be deficient, objects of interest but not quite up to snuff. They are intruders, outsiders, requiring special attention and guidance. The academy remains pretty much a closed shop and blacks within the field of anthropology are often treated as if they were the “other.”

Concluding Observations: the Racialized Other

This essay has unfolded as a series of short vignettes, as composite, stereotypic examples of the experiences of a single individual who is often treated as the “other.” It has attempted to interrogate the meaning of these fabrications, to understand them as markers designating the collectivity to which they,
my colleagues, have assigned me. In this designation, I have been set out as both object and subject. Thus, I am not my own reality but a fiction that is constantly being constructed and deconstructed, named and renamed, classified and declassified. The properties identified as the basis for establishing order, my generic classification, frequently depend on the nature of the situation, the circumstances and the intent and interests of the observer. I am within the academy but not of it. I am rarely fully deracinated. I have remained the construction of the racialized other. This “other,” however, is something more than invisible and yet, he, she, it remains vague and ill-defined, a shadow in the dark corner of the imagination of the academy; a being that has potential and with the proper tutelage that potential can be realized. But, left to its own devices, the other may become the savage within. To be accepted within the academy one must conform to the projected stereotypes set out by whites; they have power and resources.

Very often in my dealings with senior white administrators I have been treated as the “native other.” I am at once the simple-minded noble savage and at the same time the beguiling conniving duplicitous knave. They are suspicious of me and have felt it necessary to apologize to members of the Board of Trustees for my behavior, especially on issues of racism. But what profoundly disturbs me is that my protestations and their reactions may be no more than one of the expected stereotypic scenarios.

Yet, I have found that many white colleagues find it disturbing to have to confront the “savage native” on their own home turf. And if I were they (my colleagues), I too would be disturbed by this, our unstable and unpredictable, creation. I say our, because there is a degree of collusion and collaboration in the making of the “other” and by using “our” I attempt to take into account both my and their participation in this journey of fabrication and discovery. There is, however, the need to tame and domesticate the savage—that is, in the language of the academy, to transform the savage into a good citizen, someone who plays by the rules and choses intellectual pursuits that conform to the dominant academic paradigms. But the domestication of the other is complicated. As the academic “other,” a black American colleague is expected to be the same, that is, just like “us,” and yet, different; on the one hand, a rational child of the enlightenment, a master of things technological and on the other a sensitive, emotive bricoleur capable of interpreting exotic behaviors.

Blacks within the academy are supposed to conform to these stereotypic projections, projections which tell us about the subtle workings of the academy. When these projections are probed they reveal the academy as an intimate part of the social order. They help to unmask academics and to reveal them as ordinary citizens who share in the dominant ideologies of the period. Because racism is so deeply embedded in American society, it is no surprise to find it within the academy as well.
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