Blacademics, blacademia and the representation imperative

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Introduction

Debates about the representation of Black academics/professionals in the higher education workforce in the UK have emerged forcefully in recent times attracting some considerable media debate (e.g. Adams 2017, Amos 2018), in particular following work done by Bhopal (2014, 2015) and the publication of Gabriel and Tate's *Inside the Ivory Tower* (2017). In the UK, the Equality Challenge Unit conducted research in 2009, 2011 and 2012 aimed at capturing the experiences and career progression of black and minority academics, returning to the field in 2015 to reveal what they called 'academic flight' and considering what needed to be done to retain black and minority academics within the UK higher, education system. The HESA statistics for 2016/17 indicated just 115 of the 19,000 professors in the UK were Black and only 25 of these women (Adams 2018). For senior leadership the figures were even more startling with the HESA data confirming that no Black academics have worked in senior management (as managers, directors and senior officials) in any British university for the three preceding years (Adams 2017). The figures indicate that universities employ more black staff as cleaners, porters and receptionists than they do as lecturers or professors.

This phenomenon has international parallels. Much attention has been given to the barriers to achievement for blacademics (my term, Williams 2014) and the knock-on effect this has in terms of promoting diversity in student populations and pedagogically, in terms of impact on the content of the curriculum and on learning experiences (e.g.: Why isn't my professor black movement). A considerable academic literature exists internationally attesting to the quantitative and qualitative issues associated with being black in academic space (inter alia Puwar 2004, Mirza 2006 for the UK, Ospina and Su 2009 for the USA, Ramohai 2014 for South Africa, Lander and Santoro 2017 for Australia). The headline evidence of the experiences of those within HEIs suggests that minority ethnic leaders and faculty feel under greater scrutiny, have to work harder to prove themselves, feel less likely to be able to exploit productive networks and are less often encouraged to go forward for or be successful in promotion applications and have doubts in relation to equality in pay
(Bhopal and Jackson 2014). At the same time, they experience a greater sense of responsibility in relation to support of black and ethnic minority students and undertake often

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unacknowledged work in relation to advancing equality and social justice issues within their institutions.

Blacademic achievement in a neo-liberal framework

The representation issue, trends and rates of appointment and other equality statistics carry significant political import and particularly so in the neo-liberal framing of the issue as 'lack of diversity.' This framing presents an all too conspicuous challenge to notions of meritocracy, to the social justice rhetoric and to the anomaly of meritocratic showcasing. The perpetuation of known barriers to advancement calls into question the liberal values underpinning an assumed meritocracy (Littler, 2017) and imply an interrogation of the notion of merit itself. Accordingly, this positivist measure of the neo-liberal ideal speaks to black success and black achievement in terms of 'climbing the rungs of the academic ladder' in against the odds discourses and deploys the tools of affirmative action as re-dress – i.e., deploying strategies "designed by others to promote their purposes not ours," as Delgado points out (Delgado 2009, 111). This double whammy framing provides the organising principle for blacademic achievement, manifest in such discourses/narratives as (a) "we are from a disadvantaged group and surviving against the odds," or (b) "our success stories are circumscribed by the context of politicisation of affirmative action. Accordingly, we are proffered a no-win escape from 'cultural deficit'." Cuadraz uses the concept of the 'politics of exceptionality' to describe the ways in which minority group achievement is not considered to be the norm but treated as 'exception' not only to the presumed meritocracy but also to the expectations of their own racial group. Her argument is that narratives of achievement "are subject to an array of political interests" and service the dominant paradigm of cultural deficit theory by which achievements of minority groups are understood (Cuadraz 2006, 87).

Racial representation in the academic workforce itself is no good measure of transformatory change. For example, Ramohai in the South African context argues that despite progress in terms of black representation in academic life – beyond access there is the culture of white led HEI's that produces what she calls "marginalised access" for black academics based on equity quotas (Ramohai 2014, 2979). She argues that excluding cultures in HEIs thwarts "upward mobility" as blacademics, particularly women, struggle to "climb the ladder" without support, know how, capacity to navigate (2980); are denied epistemic validation of the knowledges they bring to the institution, and are too frequently challenged on their 'content knowledge,' not being seen as competent or having the confidence to defend their academic capabilities and research focus. The qualitative and experiential dimensions of this phenomenon are well summarised by the accounts in Tate's *Inside the Ivory Tower* (2017).

Meritocracy has always been raced. From the bell curve, Cyril Burt's 11+ to the Oxbridge applications scandal there exists an ongoing critique of the "unbearable white-

ness of merit" (Littler 2017, 147). It is particularly egregious in the coupling of race and gender. The evidence suggests that merit and its tools (positive action/equal opportunity) don't work in redressing discrimination, disadvantage and the poor experiences of blacademics as all too frequently the goal posts change and mutate. As Johns and Jordan succinctly put it: "If we accept that diversity brings certain merits in its train, then it seems equally acceptable to train merit in a different way" (2006, 280). That is, having systems and processes that valorise other types of contribution and accepting that traditional equal opportunities policies have failed to accommodate the known fact that "different people bring different experiences, cultural influences and perspectives to their work" (1280).

"Blacademics": Work in progress

In the full version of this paper (cf. Williams 2018), I utilise as my 'case study' the contemporary narratives of 10 black female academics as presented in the text *Inside the Ivory Tower* (2017). I utilise these autoethnographic accounts to demonstrate how such narratives are vulnerable to political reading, locating them in the milieu of competing constructions of meritocracy that can be seen as both progressive and regressive, contributive and counter-narrative to the neo-liberal moment. In doing so I seek to demonstrate some of the often-overlooked complexities apparent in the scripting of narratives of achievement, some of the gaps and omissions and considerations that they throw up. In advancing of ideas of meritocracy, I argue for the need to move beyond the 'post-colonial selfie' of the illustrative storying of distress to grapple with issues of context, complexity and change and assert political advocacy. Arguably such 'overcoming the odds' parables reveals how minority members both internalise and perpetuate inherent inequalities. Their intervention paradoxically services the meritocratic ideology in reinforcing the politics of exceptionality.

          In addition, they may be contributing to a quite static and homogenised picture of the academy, somewhat decontextualized from socio, legal, politico environment. Scripts are political acts, but they are also read politically and reflect particular 'moments of racial time' (Lewis 2000). Thus, we require a critical and ethical framework for locating the scripts to take us beyond the pitfall of a homogenised black positionality and beyond static portrayals of the academy. Our storying must grapple with the complex changing relational politics of the institution and beyond, must accommodate both success and failures, structure and agency, steps up, across and down the matrices of achievement and be able to present an achievement ideology that is patterned with reference to multiple accountabilities – in my view, a mesh not the ladder. Where are the spaces of possibility? How do they work? How can they be made to work? For example, Konyali (2014, 109) refers to institutional settings as 'social construction sites.' His study of elite narratives amongst minority actors in the corporate sector considers the ways in which his narrators turn 'disadvantage into advantage' (118) in a neo-liberal context that commodifies diversi-

ty and how they implicate themselves as a 'meaningful and valued social entity' (110) to a global economy.

Standing betwixt and between conceptualisation of achievement as mutuality/collectivism or individualism (hero/failure scripts) lies creative space in which we might demonstrate how 'mutuality' works, project and legitimate alternative and compelling status and accounts of our power and authority, formulate our agency as "Catalysers" (Williams 2014) 'loose canons' (Gates Junior 1993) – as key actors in the scrabble for critical and alternative thinking, foregrounding new ways of doing, other knowledges, advancing alternatives and other ways of being. The term 'blacademic,' I suggest, signals our integration and transformation of the conventions of the academy.

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