

'Shutting up the crazies': reflections on feminists, whiteness, intellectuals and black aliens inside and outside the academy.

Presentation for Colloquium in Honour of Professor Teresa Barnes: Transforming Higher Education and Knowledge Production since 1994: Perspectives in 2008.

(30-31 May 2008)

Many thanks to Desiree and Mary for providing this space to honour the work of Terri Barnes, and allowing me to express my thoughts on academic transformation. I began thinking about this presentation in terms of social science research organisations, and the ways in which the humanities and specifically, feminist epistemologies and methodologies, are marginalised in favour of more empiricist, traditional social science theories and methodologies. This is an important issue, with the volumes 8 and 9 of the journal *Feminist Africa* on 'Re-thinking Universities' interrogates in some ways, and which was mentioned by Enver Motala in his presentation yesterday. But the more I tried to plan this presentation, the more my thoughts took me back to the early 2000s, when I worked, on a contractual basis, in the English department at the University of the Western Cape, as a junior lecturer.

Terri Barnes (2007) discusses the practices and processes in the post-colonial university, and the general acknowledgement by higher education institutions that transformation of processes and practices need to take place. What I've decided to do, then, is speak directly to the link between the personal and the political in ways that firstly, attempt to honour the hard and radical work of Terri Barnes, and secondly, allow me to make sense of the brutality that accompanied

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the silencing and invisibility black academics in the department of English were subjected to.

I realize now that I had, in many ways, repressed my experiences in the department because it simply was traumatic. Until now (and I'm still finding it difficult), I have been unable to articulate in a less emotional, and more coherent way, the kind of violence I and other black academics in the department were presented with. It is important to note that at no point while I was located in the department did I feel paralysed by the dehumanization. I think this was because I was registered for a PhD in the Women's and Gender studies programme at UWC, which, although also wrought with problems, was my intellectual home. I tried to use agency to confront and highlight the racism in the department consistently – hence, I suspect that in order to get rid of me, my contract was terminated. My black colleagues, most who were quiet on the subject because they needed to keep their jobs and pay the bills, understandably, remained in contracts in the department. In many ways, I feel that I am speaking out in a public forum, for the first time after I was exited out of the department. I will not name the academics responsible for these dehumanizing tactics, but I do think it is important to name the department at the university where these events took place because of its historical location as a Department of English. In many ways, then, what I discuss here speaks directly to Angelo's notion of white mediocrity, and the ways that the black academics, in their complicity with the hegemony, speak with this mediocrity.

I want to insist that when I refer to 'whiteness', I am not suggesting that there is an essence to being white in South Africa, or elsewhere. Instead, my use of the term attempts to problematise the racial construction in view of human agency - as with all identity constructions, there is an element of agency involved in choosing how to think and how to act on one's thoughts. As Steve Biko noted in 1978, if whiteness is understood as a racialised position constructed on privilege,

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and on attitudes and behaviours based on these privileges, it follows that white South Africans can choose not to be white, i.e. in terms of how they choose to locate themselves within the transformation process, and how they self-reflect on the privileges they continue to hold.

We know that, as in most spaces, internalisation of white supremacy within higher education settings has not disappeared in South Africa after apartheid, and the levels at which transformation is taking place, if at all, in particular departments, is striking. Despite our colonial history, whiteness in the South African academy, and the role of white academics within the transforming university, has not been interrogated sufficiently. Except for a few, white academics continue to hold relatively stable positions across higher education institutions, maintaining agendas and curricula which has not been injected by African epistemologies.

I want to zone into the Department of English at UWC here, where at senior lecturer and management levels, there were approximately 10 white female and male academics, and two black female academics in the early 2000s. Except for 2, all junior lecturer staff were black, and all taught foundation courses.

International and local literature on studies of whiteness has revealed that the normality and invisibility of whiteness is apparently most difficult to see from the position of the white individual. White academics are not immune to this apparent inability to see how their whiteness filtrates into teaching, research and relations with those identified as white or non-white. Lionel mentioned this yesterday, and a lot of my work revolves around how maleness and whiteness, heterosexuality both inside and outside academia, operate as unnamed, unmarked centres. As Richard Dyer (1988: 1) maintains, "As long as race is something only applied to non-white people, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people." My experience as a junior lecturer in the English department at UWC attests to how some white academics *may* not see how their whiteness plays itself out

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when confronted with the black alien in 'their' department. When race, racism and classism are raised as issues to be confronted, a number of defensive reactions come into play. One example of this is when I enquired in a staff meeting about the number of black students registered for phds in the department. The response from one senior black female academic who had lived in the UK for many years and studied for a Masters degree at Cambridge, and who reminded me of this a few times, saying that she didn't have to teach at UWC, was that "black students don't want to be academics."

"I love opera. We are intellectuals...this is not a political space"

When I took this up in the department, in terms of what kinds of processes were in place to recruit more black MA and phd students, many discussions ensued, all which involved the head of department, and some of his followers, as part of a strategy in silencing the issue. Others simply detached themselves, but it was clear where their loyalties were. This was not an isolated incident – many culturally discriminating, racist comments were made by individual staff members in a normative fashion. When I confronted this racism, the responses were outright dismissal and/or evasion of the possibility that educated whites could be racist and/or classist, to silence around any issues regarding race in the belief that race does not exist as a determining factor in the lives of black people since it is a socially constructed category. The idea of intellectualism, as separate from the transformation the university was apparently committed to, and separate from the social, particularly issues of race, gender, class and sexuality, was mentioned a few times. It is important to note that a huge amount of students (most who are black) have to pass through the English department's foundation courses (English for Educational Development), whether they are registered for Law, Accounting, Arts, Science or Community and Health Sciences, and they are taught by academics who don't see or reflect on their whiteness, specifically, as Jane mentioned yesterday, their cannibalization of black others. I think there are differences in the kind of racism perpetrated by white academics against their black colleagues, and white academics and their black students, the latter which I

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think is based on lecturer-student relations where students seldom critique the knowledge or subjectivities of their white lecturers, who hold the power.

Politics was defined as the sphere of the black alien; the non-intellectual who used what they called the “race card” to deal with the racism in the department, and in an accent and tone considered ‘native’. On a few occasions, the suggestion was made that intellectualism needed to be taught by white academics to black natives, like myself and my black colleagues. The one black female senior academic in the department was seen whispering with her white colleagues behind closed doors, probably on how to deal with this ‘inconvenience’. Closing doors, and no greeting followed for months after this, in an effort to invisibilise my presence and ignore my concerns. In my discussions with black academics who had left the department and a black visiting professor from Cape Town who is living and working abroad, it became apparent that these kinds of practices had taken place many times before, and was continuing to occur presently. In fact, the visiting professor had confessed to me how she was reprimanded when she too critiqued white academics’ role in the transforming university in a public seminar at the university, and how she was disciplined thereafter for her views by the then, head of department.

This denial of black intellectuals in ‘their’ space, and the evasion of the ‘real’ effects of racialised constructions serves to effectively reproduce and maintain white privilege not to see; to sustain the invisibility of whiteness and to ignore the ways in which the experiences and understandings of those who are not white are invalidated, undermined, questioned. The ultimate white privilege is, as noted by Robert Jensen², “the privilege to acknowledge that you have unearned privilege but to ignore what it means.”

I’ve found that the internalization of white patriarchy had been taken on quite seriously by black women academics, some who call themselves feminists, and who indeed, utilise feminist epistemologies and methodologies in their ‘gender work’, particularly the notion of self-reflexivity in locating themselves

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methodologically. What does this mean? The abuse of black women academics by senior black women is not a new phenomenon, but it is a little understood, and little theorised one. Are there linkages here between the xenophobic attacks, the killing of African people by African people and the brutality of black women academics against their black female colleagues, sometimes in the name of African feminism? Just a thought, and I need time and space to interrogate this.

² In Helfand and Lippin (eds). 2001: 51.