

Speaking for others

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ABSTRACT

At an event at Soas, University of London earlier this year, Joan Anim-Adoo, professor of Caribbean literature and culture at Goldsmiths, pointed out that despite a surge in course offerings in "post-colonial literature", English literature has been particularly resistant to letting "others" in - both on its bookshelves and in its academic departments.

FULL TEXT

Lucinda Newns confronts the tensions in the field of post-colonial studies and her own unease at the lack of non-white voices

Why isn't my professor black? It's a pressing question that was asked in an important event on race and the academy at University College London earlier this year.

As a part-time lecturer and doctoral student in the field of post-colonial and diasporic literature, I've recently attended a number of events on similar topics that have been both intellectually stimulating and deeply affecting: on an academic level and on a personal one because I share in the anger at the under-representation of non-white voices and experiences within UK academia.

However, they also brought to the fore an uneasiness that has been with me since the beginning of my doctoral studies, when I was asked to assist on some undergraduate modules as part of the now sadly closed Caribbean studies degree at London Metropolitan University. Its students at the time were primarily black and tended to have links - either through birth or family background - to the Caribbean, neither of which I could claim. The lecturer (who was black and Caribbean) kept reassuring me that I knew more than the students, but I couldn't shake the feeling that personal experience would invariably trump academic knowledge when it came to questions of race.

It is often said that "impostor syndrome" is a common experience among PhD students, but does my whiteness make me an impostor in some academic spaces for reasons beyond my novice status? My partner, who is not white, has joked that I should bring him along to academic events as a way to increase my "street cred". Yet the issue goes far beyond a question of academic credibility (or lack of it) to one of institutional power structures around race and the question of who gets to (or should be able to) speak about black experience. Put in the context of debates around the question "Why isn't my professor black?", there is the possibility that my appointment to a permanent academic post (should I be lucky enough to obtain one) could be a result of the very hegemonic structures that my work and politics purport to resist.

I can take some comfort in arguments such as those put forward by the post-colonial feminist scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha, who asserts that "the understanding of difference is a shared responsibility, which requires a minimum willingness to reach out to the unknown" - in other words, that resisting racial hierarchies should not be the job of only those who experience racism.

My presence at these events and the fact that my research addresses racial power structures as a central concern could be cited as evidence of my willingness to "reach out to the unknown" and forge networks of resistance across racial and ethnic lines, but the uneasiness remains - and with good reason. A recent article on the Media Diversified website describes a controversy that overtook the 1992 international conference Women in Africa and in the African Diaspora, held in Nigeria. It centred on the question of whether white women should be able to

present papers on black women's experiences, those opposing arguing that the sessions should be a safe space away from white women whose collective complicity with racial discrimination is well documented. Similar debates are nowadays played out on social media, particularly Twitter, where white feminists are frequently called out for a lack of attention to their/our own privileged positions. As the author of the Media Diversified article rightly points out, the anger exhibited at the conference and in the so-called "toxic wars" on Twitter has an important history that must be acknowledged. We must remain on guard for those times when "solidarity" is actually tantamount to erasure (as the hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen draws attention to).

We often see literature as outside this kind of identity politics, and teaching literature (as opposed to something such as, say, sociology) somehow avoids the question of whether I personally have lived experience of the topic at hand. Perhaps this is because when we read literature we are to a certain extent always brought into a world not our own. But English is also one of the areas in the UK that is the most whitewashed. At an event at Soas, University of London earlier this year, Joan Anim-Adoo, professor of Caribbean literature and culture at Goldsmiths, pointed out that despite a surge in course offerings in "post-colonial literature", English literature has been particularly resistant to letting "others" in - both on its bookshelves and in its academic departments. This is in contrast to the US, where African American literature has a more prominent place in American literary history. This difference between the UK and the US has a lot to do with England's colonial past and the central role that English literature played in shoring up "Englishness" abroad, but it also has to do with the continuing perception in the UK that non-white populations are newcomers, making them seem like "add-ons" to the established canon of "Great English Literature". And in times of austerity, such perceived "add-ons" are always the first to be under threat. At academic events on race, my whiteness seems to be the proverbial elephant in the room. However, at literature conferences, even those aimed at "post-colonial" themes, the prevailing whiteness of the delegates guards against any such "uncomfortable" encounters. This discrepancy is evidence of the depth of the problem. If we can't connect the dots between the resistant theories we spout in our papers and the bodies in the room, then we are doing our own research a disservice.

This has not been an attempt to offer any easy solutions to the issues I highlight, but is rather about starting a conversation that needs to be had alongside all the others that stem from the question "Why isn't my professor black?". This unease I feel is something that I want to hold on to but not to keep to myself any more. I hope that these thoughts will be shared, debated and contested beyond my own limited experience.

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