

[Mis]recognitions: Black students' experiences in higher education

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The general inclination in 'mainstream' political or academic discourses today is to try as much as possible to avoid the term 'black people' and replace it with soporific formulations such as 'historically disadvantaged', 'the poorest of the poor', 'students from working-class backgrounds' or 'needy students'.

In trying to make sense of this intellectual nervousness, in a paper titled 'Racism and Power, Non-racialism and Colour-blindness' (Mbele 2016), I make the point that "*when Black people have to think about thinking about their position in the world, racism has a way in which it coerces Blacks to discipline their thoughts so that, when they verbalise them, they come out as well-manicured, polite and don't offend the inventors and primary beneficiaries of racism, and produce as a response, a type of liberal discourse, which some refer to as the politics of respectability*".

Who exactly are black students?

Who exactly are black students? If we are to answer this question honestly, it may be useful to situate it within the history of black people in South Africa and, in particular, the invasion by the Dutch and the British, how our ancestors responded and how the polity today, known as 'South Africa', came into being.

'South Africa' as a polity is not a creation of the indigenous people but rather a creation of the European invaders. It came into being because of an Act titled 'The Act to Constitute the Union of South Africa of 1909', which was passed by the British parliament on 20 September 1909. Later, this Act was endorsed through the formation of the Union of South Africa on 31 May 1910.

The formation of the Union of South Africa is not just a consequence of European invasion, but it also means the Dutch and British invaders had now agreed to coordinate their oppression and robbery of the indigenous people. The name 'South Africa' is, therefore, a symbol of the humiliation of black people and the name 'Union Buildings', carries the same connotation.

Therefore, when we talk of black students today, we refer to the grandchildren of warriors, such as Inkosi uHintsa kaKhawuta, igorha uMavumengwana kaNdlela Ntuli, Inkosi uSekhukhune, Ikumkanikazi uManthatisi, and many others, who engaged in over 300 years of bloody resistance against all kinds of invaders. These warrior ancestors are the pioneers of the decolonisation project who fought against the first recorded legislated forms of dispossession, from the 1884 Native Location Act to the Native Land Act of 1913. Hence, through the name 'black students', we refer to the students who identify with and embrace this tradition of gallant resistance.

What are the experiences of the black students in today's South African universities?

Black students in South Africa continue to live like rats. Not so long ago black students at the University of Cape Town had to erect shacks on the university campus as a way of drawing the country's attention to the accommodation crisis. Not so long ago, on this campus, black students were protesting for food.

South Africa is one of the wealthiest countries in the world; therefore, why do black students have to periodically suffer the indignity of having to fight for basics such as food? The answer is simple but not obvious. Black students in South Africa are part of the landless indigenous majority. Unlike the white minority, they or their families do not possess the capital that comes from owning property, such as land, which capital they can use to effortlessly provide for the basics, such as food, accommodation or education.

White students, on the other hand, do not have to experience this indignity. Their ancestors (who dispossessed the ancestors of black students), made sure they bequeath to them a massive institutional mechanism that dispenses privilege and power, on the basis of skin colour: racism. Put differently, unlike his or her black counterpart, a young, white person is set up for success even before she or he is born. In contrast with this scenario, the opposite applies to a young, black person. White people have created structures whereby even the most mediocre white child has a second chance, a third chance and a fourth chance to make a success of their lives.

In spite of passing various pieces of legislation calling for the transformation of higher education and the appointment of black and female vice chancellors, South African universities continue to be cold-violent, anti-black, patriarchal and Eurocentric spaces.

As part of the revolutionary intelligentsia, what role should black student activists play in universities today?

The colonial violence that the Europeans exported to Africa deliberately focused on pulverising the souls of Africans and violently infusing them with the European's concept of the self and the world. In explaining the impact of this psycho-spiritual violence, the Kenyan writer and philosopher, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, in his masterpiece, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, (1986), observes, "*The African children who encountered literature in colonial schools and universities were thus experiencing the world as defined and reflected in the European experience of history. Their entire way of looking at the world, even the world of immediate environment, was Eurocentric. Europe was the centre of universe. The earth moved around the European intellectually scholarly axis. The images children encountered in literature were reinforced by their study of geography and history, and science and technology where Europe was, once again, the centre.*"

The 'European intellectual scholarly axis' Wa Thiong'o refers to continues to contort the character of the basic and higher education systems in South Africa. As a response, the black student activists of today revived the call for the dismantlement of the Eurocentric approaches to learning, teaching and research in South Africa's universities.

As part of this project, the black students of today must challenge the problematic view that presents the Greek thinkers, like Thales, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Pythagoras, Zeno, Empedocles, Anaximander, Anaxagoras or Parmenides, as the inventors of philosophy but says nothing about the fact that they were actually beneficiaries of the scholarship of black philosophers, such as Imhotep, Ptahhotep, Khety, Khunanup, Duauf, Amenemhat, Amenomope and Akhenaten.

Black students must challenge the approaches to teach mathematics and science that do not mention Africa's earliest mathematical instruments, such as the Ishango bone calculator of the

Congo, the Lebombo bone calculator of the Swazi people or the multidisciplinary genius from Timbuktu, called Ahmed Baba.

They must even dare to expose the anti-blackness of the celebrated philosophers of the white world, such as George Hegel and Karl Marx. In this *Philosophy of History*, Hegel says of Afrika, “*at this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit ...what we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World’s History*”.

In a letter to his lifelong companion Friedrich Engels, written in 1862, Karl Marx complains about someone called Lassalle. He explains as follows: “*It is now quite clear to me that, as his cranial structure and hair type prove, Lassalle is descended from the Negroes who joined Moses’ flight from Egypt. That is, assuming his mother, or his paternal grandmother, did not cross with a nigger. Now this union of Jewry and Germanism with the negro-like basic substance must necessarily result in a remarkable product. The officiousness of the fellow is also nigger-like*”.

Essentially, they must continue the fight for Afrocentric approaches to understanding the self and the world. Afrocentric in this sense is defined by one of its foremost theoreticians, Molefi Kete Asante, as “*a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person. The Afrocentric approach seeks in every situation the appropriate centrality of the African person*”.

Concluding remarks

The misrecognition of black students is a conscious outcome of the historically evolved-globalised project of white supremacy, which has anti-blackness as its basis. According to Michael Jeffries, “*Anti-Blackness more accurately captures the dehumanization and constant physical danger that black people face*. He further says, “*the “anti” in “anti-blackness” is denial of black people’s right to life*”.

To help us understand why the black body automatically attracts violence and other forms of negativity, Lewis Gordon makes the point that “*In anti-black societies, to be black is to be*

without a face. This is because only human beings (and presumed equals of human beings) have faces, and blacks, in such societies, are not fully human beings...”

As ‘faceless’ objects there is no value in black students being apologetic or even untruthful about their position in the world. If there is an ounce of self-respect left in them, they will pay careful attention to the words of Assata Olugbala Shakur when she says, “*For centuries, we have endured beatings only to never raise our fists. We remain in subjugation, talking, listening, debating, but nothing changes. The only thing left to do is to fight centuries of fire with fire*”.

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