



## Book Review

of

### *Inside the Ivory Tower: Narratives of Women of Colour Surviving and Thriving in British Academia (2017)*

Edited by Deborah Gabriel and Shirley Anne Tate  
Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books

#### [Nadena Doharty](#)

Lecturer in Education, Culture and Childhood  
School of Education  
The University of Sheffield, UK

**Abstract:** Gabriel and Tate's edited book provides a collection of articles from Black women across a range of disciplines writing with striking linearity about the subtle, but persistent, direct and indirect ways that racism operates. Shattering the meritocratic and equal opportunities' discourse that we come to know of the education system, each author describes the obstacles of navigating British academia. But the book goes further: it offers Black and other racial minorities the inspiration to keep going in spite of one's circumstances, knowing that there are networks such as Black British Academics that support you along the way in tackling racial inequalities in higher education. In spite of a hostile racial environment, Black women in this book are thriving! However, this book simultaneously represents a call to action to institutions and those within, to explore critically, how "diversity" is used, who the beneficiaries are and the impact of racism on the health and safety of its employees.

**Keywords:** Black women; higher education; whiteness; racial microaggressions

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The overriding message of this book is that historically white institutions such as universities may have a few Black faces sitting in the offices you walk past or on the brochures and promotional materials you thumb through as you read about the courses you have chosen, but there is an insidiousness that haunts the corridors, meeting rooms and classrooms that you unquestioningly pass through: white supremacy. Leonardo defines this as the “direct processes that secure domination and the privileges” for persons racialised as white (2009, 75). The power of whiteness means that those ‘actors’ within the institution perpetuate, through practices, policies and behaviours, the uncritical assumption that Black bodies do not belong (Bhopal 2018; Puwar 2004) and their scholarship is inherently biased, straying too easily into identity politics. Consequently, Black women are marginalised across multiple axes including race, class and gender. These assumptions about equal opportunities ignore how knowledge is produced, thus claims to the neutrality of a university space is a positioned perspective that becomes taken-for-granted (Delgado 2009). Eurocentric knowledge has deep, obstinate roots in British universities reflecting and being reflected by wider acceptance of such knowledge by persons racialised as white. Indeed, white people are “primed” from a very early age about the world and those who do and do not belong. This pre-disposal to racial stereotypes means white people “embrace an ideology of race neutrality or colour blindness...many Whites tend to underestimate or deny racism exists but will still engage in behaviours that perpetuate racial discrimination” (Smith et al. 2007, 561). As a result, Black women within the book recount with consistency, the racial microaggressions they experience working in British universities and the suspicious looks and questions they receive about their roles within the university. Not surprisingly, this has led to countless instances of mistaken identity, where these academics were mistaken for administrators, students or even a coffee lady.

Not only does this insightful and illuminating book shed light upon persistent patterns of marginality, but also on the importance of informal networks. Black women have to draw on fellow Black academic and community ‘sisters’ for support and advice in the face of various iterations of white privilege. The

margins for Black women have been a source of frustration but have also revealed the potential for resistance (hooks 1990) and, as Gabriel points out, the book provides “narratives of women of colour surviving and thriving in British academia . . . ‘thriving’ with regards to our emotional and spiritual growth and development, our endurance, determination and perseverance in our ambition to be agents of change in our various roles within and beyond our institutions”(Gabriel and Tate 2017, 148). Informal networks have been useful for these women to retreat - if only temporarily - from the most abrasive forms of racism because for universities, racism is a “diversity and equality” consideration and not a health and safety issue (Tate 2017; Ashe and Nazroo 2018). Structural misogyny refers to hostile white institutions having a direct impact on the mental well-being of Black women; therefore, the book makes a strong case for framing and encouraging institutional accountability for racism *and its affects* as part of universities’ Health and Safety policies because it directly impacts upon the mental well-being of Black women (Bernard 2017; Douglas 2017; Gabriel 2017; Jackson 2017; Kwhali 2017; Opara 2017; Mirza 2017; Richards 2017; Tate 2017; Wilson 2017). And yet, Black women’s mental well-being seem to be of no consequence to the changing of institutional cultures. Consequently, the book reveals that Black women’s emotions and mental well-being are also routinely dismissed (2017; see also Duong-Pedica 2018 for an excellent analysis of white hurt and white women’s tears).

As informal rather than institutional support is garnered, the chapters focus a critical lens upon taken-for-granted notions of academic freedom, meritocracy and institutional markers of accountability that ignore the racialised and gendered challenges Black women face. Indeed, the book represents a clear need to centre race as well as gender, particularly with charters such as Athena SWAN which holds institutions to account for their promotion of gender equality, but ignores race. Thus, white middle-class women can continue being the beneficiaries of such charters and universities’ policies on tackling racist discrimination (Bhopal, 2015), while pay and progression of Black women remains non-performative (Ahmed 2004). This book is for you, Black woman, Black man, white woman, white man. You do not need any more fact-finding

books, reports or surveys to “understand” the pattern of racism on your campus. It is there. Although this book is a source of inspiration for racially minoritised women who face these daily indignities and structural barriers to their scholarship but still manage to keep thriving, it does not absolve us from personal responsibility. Therefore, the book should also be read as a call to action: what will you do? For we are all impoverished so long as the scholarship of talented Black/brown academics is marginalised or dismissed. Moreover, readers are left with the obligation of critically looking at the positions of power we all occupy and apply a critical reading of our departments, policies and personal behaviours. Black, brown, white silence is complicity and silence costs careers and lives, so I ask you again: what will you do now that you have finished reading this book?

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**Nadena Doharty: Book Review of *Inside the Ivory Tower: Narratives of Women of Colour Surviving and Thriving in British Academia* (2017)**

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