Addressing Whiteness with/in (Critical) Migration Studies

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Abstract: This intervention aims at stimulating a collective discussion on everyday racism in and beyond (Critical) Migration Studies. From a reflexive perspective, we scrutinise the intricate ways racism – and the norm of whiteness as one of its most immediate manifestations – affect our everyday lives whilst navigating the myriad spaces of Migration Studies and anti-racist activism. Against the background of a theoretical framework that allows thinking through everyday racism in activist/academic spaces, we explore the lifecycle of academic migration in the white neoliberal academy, as well as problematic divisions of labour between different spaces and subjects of knowledge production, activism, and care. Based on this, we discuss some ways to move beyond the white status quo.

Keywords: Whiteness, Everyday Racism, Migration Studies, Academic Migration, Division of Labour

> "This campus owes us everything. We owe white people nothing. All of this is mine. My people built this place."
> – Member of Princeton University's Black Justice League (VICE 2015)

The world over has been and is experiencing Students (of Colour) rebelling against *white* academia, or as we like to call it, academia. They are unhappy with the canon they are being forced to read, with the demographic make-up of their staff and fellow students, and with their surroundings (statues, buildings, etc.) named after and mythologizing racist and colonial projects. The Black Justice League protests calling for a name change of the university's (in)famous Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs due to the former president's racist legacy is just one example of this.

We are two activist researchers working on borders and migration who first met at a conference on critical migration studies hosted by MobLab, a loose network of

people interested in the intersections of academia, activism and art. More often than not, we both found ourselves uncomfortable, outraged and powerless in face of some of the dynamics we were witnessing, and our role within that. How do we perpetuate inequality and oppression through our research? Why are those in the highest echelons of academia usually white, middle-class, able-bodied, cis-gendered and heterosexual? How do so-called critical or activist researchers distance themselves from perpetuating oppression by calling themselves self-reflected? Academia, a sphere that is heralded for discussion, analysis and contestation, is deeply rooted in white supremacy. We are part and parcel of that, and we don't like it.

While preparing a workshop on whiteness in academia and activism, our own personal stories came to the forefront.[1] Instead of only analysing these 'tales of whiteness' we wanted to talk about how we can counter these dynamics practically.

This essay aims to think through forms of everyday racism that we encounter as activists and academics. While we are confronted with the *same* structures, they affect us *differently* – this will become apparent below. Our goal is to explore and challenge the workings of racism in our lives: from the crooked floors of neoliberal academia that harbours isolation and competition, over the comforting and empowering sensations of friendship and solidarity, to the brutal realities of contemporary border regimes and the impressive strength and persistence of those who struggle against them. Hesitantly and fragmentarily, this intervention aims to pin down structures and dynamics that surround us. If it produces more questions than answers, this is an expression of our firm conviction that challenging the status quo requires collective political action rather than one-size-fits-all solutions, and a broad discussion instead of ready-made recipes.

THINKING THROUGH EVERYDAY RACISM IN ACTIVIST/ACADEMIC SPACES

A focus on everyday racism in activist/academic spaces does not imply that our concern with conceptual and theoretical elaboration is merely peripheral: we believe that "transformation", in the words of Sara Ahmed (2012: 173), is "a form of practical

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1 | We are indebted to all participants. Without you, our reflections wouldn't have been possible. It is not a mere coincidence but a manifestation of the dynamics we're grappling with that this essay is being written by two persons who are formally affiliated with academic institutions.

labor [that] leads to knowledge". Yet, it is necessary to briefly introduce the tools that helped us with our reflections.

Racism is not an unfortunate misunderstanding, but a regime of difference that creates borders and hierarchies between people by installing whiteness as *the* dominant (yet largely unacknowledged) frame of reference for social, political, and economic relations. Racism works beyond mere 'prejudice', for it is a structural condition creating "a violently conflictual split at the level of social relations themselves [...] reproduced within the world-wide framework created by capitalism" (Balibar 1991a: 9). Structural does not mean abstract or anonymous: rooted in colonial history, the violent hierarchies of racism are reproduced in our everyday lives (see Kilomba 2008). Bound up with other forms of oppression (sexism, classism, ageism, ableism[2]), racism decides over access (to rights, entitlements, spaces...), belonging, and survival (see Lorde 2009).

Researchers and activists dealing with academic institutions are confronted with two dimensions of racism: "institutional whiteness" (see Ahmed 2012), infusing committees, conference panels, departments, the student body, practices of hiring and firing, marking, assessing and evaluating, or teaching. It is entangled with whiteness as an epistemic condition and relation. Sprawling theories, methods, publications or debates, it is (re)produced through citing, reviewing, (not) engaging specific contributions, concepts, arguments, (not) listening to certain voices or dominating spaces. Well reported for some contexts (for example the UK: see Alexander/Arday 2015; Preston 2013), the effects of both dimensions are rarely addressed in others (for example Germany; but see Eggers et al. 2005; Kuria 2015).

We are particularly interested in how these issues concern people moving at the intersections of the institutionalised and the non-institutionalised strands of (Critical) Migration Studies and anti-racist activism.[3] We acknowledge that everyday racism is continuously challenged by acts of resistance and that "the destruction of the racist

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2 | This list is necessarily incomplete: our reflections are limited by the fact that we chose racism and whiteness as entry points. We did our best to do justice to the complexity of the phenomena described, but are aware that this probably didn't always work out the way we wished.

3 | A note on method: With Preston (2013) and Kuria (2015), we believe in narrative writing as a powerful tool to challenge the conditions we live in. Providing us with a situated analysis of racism in academia, 'tales of whiteness' can help to break the silence that often girdles the issue, without conceding the false comforts of an abstract analysis. Stories are personal – but they always interface with patterns that have been and continue to be effective elsewhere, which constitutes their political quality.

complex presupposes not only the revolt of its victims, but the transformation of the racists themselves and, consequently, the internal decomposition of the community created by racism" (Balibar 1991b: 18). Thus, we propose to nurture a conversation on how the complex of racism and whiteness affect our lives as activist researchers *differently*, struggles we can learn from, and the countless instances in which we fail miserably.

LIFECYCLE OF ACADEMIC MIGRATION IN THE WHITE NEOLIBERAL ACADEMY

A professor's response to my anti-racist student group's call for diversity training for teaching staff:

> *"Not being able to choose what I call selected groups of people would inhibit my intellectual being. As a professor, one must be objective and deciding oneself what to call people is a necessary part of that."* (Miriam)

With the increasing privatisation of higher education, universities rely more and more on academic migration from the Global South. In our first example, we want to examine how the lifecycle of international student migration necessarily reproduces racist colonial structures.

This lifecycle begins with the targeted recruitment of students from abroad, especially from the Global South, for studying in Germany, the UK, you name it. This kind of academic migration is usually encouraged through calls like this one (from the German Academic Exchange Service):

> "This programme is designed to further qualify future leaders in politics, law, economics and administration according to the principles of *Good Governance* [...]. The programme offers [...] the chance to obtain a Master's degree in disciplines that are of special relevance for the social, political and economic development of *their home country.*" (DAAD 2015, emphasis added)

One can already see an uneven power relation here. The assumption is that 'we' – the University, the host country – offer 'them' – the students – an education and teach 'them' about the merits of democracy and good governance. The payoff is that 'they' then return to where they came from, teach their peers and their subjects what they've

learned in Germany (or wherever) and this process somehow discourages further migration from the South. The advantages and gains of the host university are obvious. The necessary funding through international student fees is one of them. Additionally, through tokenising students and staff of Colour, the university gets to decorate itself with the aura of diversity or even anti-racism (see Ahmed 2012; Kuria 2015). Often, one sees diversity heralded as one of the advantages of certain colleges or institutes. Webpages and flyers boast with language and nationality statistics. Students of Colour are instrumentalised for public relations purposes. One can often not tell a brochure apart from a United Colors of Benetton ad.

> *Did you read this email about the event tomorrow, the one the administration wrote asking us to wear 'ethnic clothing'?*
>
> *Yeah... I think they probably expect people to show up in colourful pyjamas - 'traditional'.*
>
> *I'm going to spend the last of my money this month to buy a new suit to show them that for us, going to formal events also means wearing a suit. That's not a thing particular to the Germans.* (Miriam)

Further, the discourse around diversity is usually centred around the learning experience of white students and sold to them as something that goes to their benefit. The assumption is that the academic centre is white and that non-whites, those outside of this centre, are given the opportunity to be part of this – but, only as long as they enrich the others. There is a logical fallacy in this racist line of thinking, as Jedidah C. Isler commented in response to the Fisher v. University of Texas case:

> "Black students' responsibility in the classroom is not to serve as 'seasoning' to the academic soup [...]. Black students come to the [...] classroom for the same reason white students do; they love [a certain field of study] and want to know more. Do we require that white students justify their presence in the classroom? Do we need them to bring something other than their interest?" (Isler 2015)

To add insult to injury, what is being taught and by whom is usually entrenched in white supremacist thinking. This is largely due to the lack of understanding and will to understand whiteness and its ramifications. In response to student protest about the invisibility of Blackness, the self-proclaimed global university – University College London – hosted an event, which later turned into a further reaching national student movement. According to *Why is my curriculum white*?

> "[. . .] whiteness and monoculturalism is [sic] normalised in the curricu-
> lum in that people don't even notice it. And it's only when you go on
> a journey of your own self-discovery do you [sic] realise that there are
> women, there are Black academics, there are disabled academics who
> have all contributed, but they're not in the general discourse because the
> majority of academia, with a few exceptions, is based on status – how
> often somebody is referenced. So, of course, historically, institutions
> [. . .] perpetuate the ideas of certain people that have been there for the
> longest [sic] must have the strongest right to claim academic privilege."
> (UCLTV 2014).

For centuries, the epitomised subject of knowledge production was white and male.
This hinges on a violent hierarchy of thought that systematically delegitimises and
erases non-white epistemologies and ontologies, and resonates in problematic divi-
sions of labour.

PROBLEMATIC DIVISIONS OF LABOUR

New Orleans, February 2015.

> *It's my first big conference. 'It's part of the game', they say. Hilton Ho-
> tel. Border checks: Are you wearing your badge? Endless floors, deep
> carpets. Divisions of labour: Opening the doors, cleaning the rooms,
> providing fresh water: People of Colour serving the conference crowd
> that is mostly white-cis-male. Serving me. Divisions of labour: The
> theme of this annual meeting of the International Studies Association
> is 'Global IR and Regional Worlds – A New Agenda for International
> Studies'. In the premium slots of the 'Sapphire Series' the panels are
> white-only. That's what 'global IR' looks like in 2015. They don't say
> that this is part of the game. Critical debate, calling out and challeng-
> ing the status quo: Confined to small rooms, attended by a limited au-
> dience. I enjoyed this part of the conference. Listening. Learning. But
> you always see the same faces. I'm in this. Uneasy feelings of com-
> plicity. Ego-defense: 'Maybe I'm not really a part because. . . I'm not
> staying in the fancy hotel? Because. . . I'll speak on a 'critical' panel?
> Because, in the end, I'm doing my reflexivity homework? Because. . . .'
> Ego-defense. I'm a part of it.* (Veit)

In our second example, we propose to scrutinise how racism and whiteness are sta-
bilised through problematic divisions of labour between different spaces and subjects
of knowledge production, activism and care. As feminist anti-racist interventions
have made clear, divisions of labour are not a mere technicality but intimately con-
nected to questions of power and oppression.

Nadiye Ünsal's article on intersectional power structures in the Berlin refugee
movement offers a wealth of examples: "Mostly white WLGBTIQ* (Women, Les-
bian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Inter, Queer) do the invisible jobs, such as cooking, in-
frastructure, cleaning, translation, taking minutes of meetings, emotional and legal
support, conflict resolution, grant writing, organization and coordination of actions,
events or fundraising events, etc." (Ünsal 2015). By systematically staying away from
care work and building patriarchal alliances with activists affected by racist migration
regimes, white-cis-male activists reproduce a double privilege and perpetuate racist
and sexist relations while cultivating an aura of infallibility. According to Ünsal, this
results in a situation in which "[m]ost of them fear being called a racist much more
than to be called a sexist" – a sad reminder of how a unidirectional, self-assumed
criticality in relation to one dimension of oppression can effectively help mask the
complicity with others. We propose to pick up Ünsal's point by discussing how di-
visions of labour affect those who move at the intersections of institutionalised and
non-institutionalised spaces of knowledge production and activism.

From the beginning, Critical Migration Studies have problematized rigid distinc-
tions between academia and activism by conceiving of research as a political inter-
vention from the perspective of, and in solidarity with movements and struggles of
migration. This has proven strategically appropriate in debunking the statist gaze and
the objectification of migrant subjects – features that had been underpinning Migra-
tion Studies for decades. However, this might become more problematic in the light
of recent developments.

Ongoing transformations of academic institutions result in growing individual re-
sponsibility for ensuring external funding, increasing precarisation through casual
contracts or the increasing salience of impact ideologies and evaluation culture.
Among other things, this creates constant pressure to instantly valorise knowledge
and at the same time, cut oneself from parts of the production process.

For example, Critical Migration Studies is prone to a division of labour paradoxi-
cally evolving in the midst of its core principle (a conception of research that centres
on the forms of situated knowledge and practices of those who struggle against racist
migration regimes). We should be wary of a situation in which migrant activists and
those involved in everyday solidarity work primarily produce 'raw material' and en-
sure the reproduction of activist communities through relations of care, solidarity and

struggle, and those affiliated with academic institutions work on this raw material in a secondary process, 'refine' and package it to a product which is subsequently valorised in terms of individual careers or narrow conceptions of impact. While all this is already intrinsically problematic, the situation is exacerbated by the fact that academic institutions are infused with relations of oppression, which are linked to their neoliberal transformation.

Critical Migration Studies enjoy increasing recognition in the mainstream, yet there are no grounds to assume the field is not implicated in these dynamics. While there are encouraging examples for doing things differently, a configuration quite similar to the one introduced in the above narrative could be witnessed at the 'critical' events we have been involved in as co-organisers and participants. Additionally, the emphasis on an instant valorisation of knowledge is often replicated within activist-academic circles: while 'mainstream' scholars are criticised for their exploitative behaviour towards activist communities (arriving with prefabricated projects as soon as 'interesting stuff' happens), quite a similar attitude is present here. For example, it is almost seen as a strange thing not to *directly* connect political practice and academic research in every instance. This is inherently problematic, for it reduces 'migration' once again to the status of an object to be valorised. By discouraging careful reflections on the prerogatives of analysis, and dangers of recuperation, we risk to miss the point where it is vital *not* to transfer knowledge and experiences in academic circuits or to uncouple 'activist' and 'academic' practices. Especially when those present in academic spaces are not primarily affected by the resulting consequences.

BEYOND THE WHITE STATUS QUO

Against this background, we propose to base interventionist strategies on a careful reflection on our contradictory position as activist researchers: We need to establish dedicated spaces to talk about who has got the time to analyse, reflect, write, and who doesn't, whose voices are heard, what different positions in a cycle of valorisation exist, and how they are distributed (i.e.: who gets to build a career? Who pays and who is compensated?). This goes hand in hand with actions aimed at changing the status quo, be it by collectivising resources we dispose of as researchers with formal academic affiliation (funding, copy machines, space, institutional credibility), working against the exclusionary politics of the education system (for example by refusing

to act as border guards when we have to register students' attendance as teachers[4]), or by creating sustainable relations with communities, collectives and struggles, which start before and go beyond the lifespan of research projects. Sometimes, it might be just infinitely more helpful to pitch a tent rather than produce yet another clever analysis (especially if you're rarely ever doing any care work). Finally, asking who gets to define the horizon of emancipatory politics and who decides over the progressive or regressive quality of a struggle or a concept is not only a question of representation, but of solidarity. At this point, it is crucial to look for appropriate forms and venues to voice critique. Critical reflexivity can create self-awareness and underpin political interventions – but it is certainly *no panacea*:

> *'This article is written from the necessarily limited perspective of a white-cis-male, class-privileged academic with full funding.' Ritualised self-reflection. Self-indulgence? How does it affect the deep structure of my work, my interactions in the university, in the struggles I'm involved in? Here comes fatalism: 'Every step you make is connected to your position. There is no way out.' Relativism lurks around the corner: 'If it's like that, does it even matter whether you engage in acts of reflexivity or not?' Cynicism adds: 'Just do whatever. Who cares about positions? Who cares about your position?' I care about positions.* (Veit)

It is somewhat frustrating to realise that both tokenistic rituals of positioning,[5] as well as relativism, fatalism and cynicism make it infinitely more complex to challenge racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression.

However, it would be a mistake to think that the status quo goes unchallenged. In academia, it is increasingly defied by students and staff: in their own way, Occupy Academia in Princeton, Dismantling the Master's House at UCL London, The University of Colour in Amsterdam or the Why is My Curriculum White? campaign in the UK expose how Eurocentrism, colonial thinking, racism and whiteness are ingrained in institutional and symbolic politics of representation. They also speak to structures that should be addressed in society as a whole. Struggles over whiteness in academia are a small part of the anti-white supremacist struggles we are seeing everywhere.

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4 | This is the case in the UK, where universities are forced to monitor international students for the UK Border Agency in order to be able to recruit students overseas.

5 | Which are prone to an obsessive re-centering of white subjectivities – see for example Arslanoğlu (2012).

Instead of positing abstract recipes, we propose to acknowledge and collectively scrutinise these political interventions, particularly with regard to the challenge they pose for Critical Migration Studies, the activist-academic space we inhabit and shape. At the same time, it is important to express our solidarity with those who are affected by, and struggle against racism. Everyday acts of solidarity decide over the success or failure of critical paradigms – without them, the most sophisticated, well-reflected framework is worthless.

While opposing racism is not more or less important in Migration Studies than it is in Neuroscience, for argument's sake, critical scholars of migration could be seen as holding a privileged position to do so because they have immediate access to situated theories, methods and research that help scrutinise the racist status quo. In the worst case, however, we fall into the trap of empiricism (that we usually reject passionately!) by conceiving of racism and whiteness as 'something out there' or 'interesting' research objects that can't really affect our own practices by definition.[6]

According to Audre Lorde (2009: 201), "we have few patterns for relating across differences as equals." With the firm conviction that "within our difference [...] we are both most powerful and vulnerable", she proposes to "claim [...] and learn [...] to use those differences for bridges rather than as barriers between us." Major bridge works are required to counter racism and other forms of oppression. Obliging us to face uncomfortable, long misrecognised truths about our positionality, an open and honest debate that accounts for its often contradictory quality is literally vital – "[...] there is no separate survival."

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6 | Such a disidentification can lead to what Ahmed terms "'critical sexism' and 'critical racism' [...] reproduced by critical subjects who do not see the reproduction because of their self-assumed criticality" (2012: 217f).

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Inhalt

Aufsätze

Interview

Interventionen

Forschungswerkstatt