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“Merit”, “Success” and the Epistemic Logics of Whiteness in Racialised Education Systems

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Introduction

The idea of “merit” and “success” within arenas defined by “meritocracy” within educational systems is intriguing. Academic and public discourses alike have found multiple convergent routes along which the debate regarding equalities—of intellect, commitment, intention, as well as equalities of opportunity—find alliance. This chapter speaks to the ongoing issue of Whiteness, merit and privilege, vis-à-vis the so-called universal nature of epistemic and existential knowledge-based academies, what Grosfoguel termed “Westernised University systems” (Grosfoguel 2013). I aim to signpost some features of the material and epistemic landscape of “merit”, since its nature and reality depends not on its own objective placement within a universe of knowable entities, but actually on where

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the viewer is positioned, the architecture of Whiteness and the phenomenology of structural and embodied racialised experiences.

Here I am using the term *parallax* to explore and perhaps unravel the potential alternative, counter-punctual meanings of “merit” and how it is maintained through performance and institutionalised social structures of race, Whiteness and privilege. At its most simple level, I could mean merely that how “merit” looks depends on where you position yourself. This, however, is an over-simplification of a much more complex set of racial logics and embedded structures of oppression throughout Western racial capitalist systems. Indeed, there is much in academic social science discourse to demonstrate the various ways in which merit is defined, produced, performed and maintained. This has traditionally been underpinned by a class analysis (with corresponding reductionist analyses de-throned and re-rendered readable through intersectionality). Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings 1998) frameworks have brought into stark relief the landscape of racist inequalities in the educational and employment/labour market arenas, especially in relation to Whiteness (Rollock and Gillborn 2011; Arday and Mirza 2018; Bhopal 2015). There is no shortage of evidence showing racial and ethnic inequality within higher education in the UK (Bhopal 2018; Bhopal et al. 2016; Alexander and Arday 2015; Gillborn et al. 2012). Such patterns of inequality affect Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students as well as BME staff, resulting in the UK Equality Challenge Unit setting up the Higher Education Race Action Group, underpinned by the “Race Equality Charter”, an aspirational equality goal for Universities in the UK to aim for. This long-standing “problem” has both problematised people (Gordon 2007) and called our attention to the various theoretical deficiencies of the social sciences as they continue to operate within the paradigms of modernity they were borne of—which were fundamental in shaping what becomes legitimate conceptually, theoretically and empirically as a discipline (Bhambra 2007) and as understandable truth. It is interesting then that higher educational institutions which pride themselves on demonstrations of sophisticated learning and teaching technologies, all underpinned by a variety of ethical, theoretical and empirical pedagogic techniques, are also able to somehow “unsee” those very practices and discourses that contradict these missions of learning for a wide population of “others”.

These contradictions run parallel to the informed, intellectual, philosophical girders that are often used to communicate the power of liberation pedagogy—for example, Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968 [2000]) often used in discourse and practice to achieve emancipatory effect. Similarly, there is no dearth of Foucauldian analysis of power, knowledge and the nature of subjugated experiences of knowing, in the critique of educational governmentality (Foucault and Ewald 2003 [1975–1976]). However, the multitude of theory that is central to the engineering of Western knowledge seems to relegate to the margins the “discovery” of Spivak’s (1988) powerful critiques of the imperial, literary, western gaze, Thiongo’s (1986) call to decolonise the mind and language or Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (2013) work on decolonial methods. These frameworks amongst many others, part of the decentralised movements from postcolonial discourse towards “decolonial turns” are rendered peripheral and tangential, exotically important only by and through their difference as “other” knowledges, generated by “otherness”, and to be consumed in relatively moderate amounts.

Given that “success” in Higher Education is constituted by a very specific, categorically delimited series of “attainments” validated and verifiable only through a particular field of hierarchically organised legitimacies, it seems pertinent to unpack the very foundation of this notion of “success”. I ask what is left when the notion of merit is stripped of any contextual, racialised variance or experience? What happens when within a neo-liberalised, marketised economy of White intellectual hegemony, in the “post-racial” moment, racialised bodies and minds are configured as estrangements to modernity’s project of “enlightenment”? What is left in the *racial-parallax* field of meritocracy when “success”, defined in a field of hegemonic Whiteness is not only the object to be viewed as constantly centred and aspired to, but reveals the “prize” or “goal” of education to be Whiteness itself? In other words, “merit”, defined, produced and maintained within matrices of performativity that are already enmeshed in and constitute racialised power relations, is “locked” outside of the evident fluidity of the race-making (Knowles 2010) arena, but equally also constitutes the racial power relations of Whiteness itself. Such illusion-making (while at the same time productive of material realities) is integral to the ontological and epistemic machinery of Western modernity’s

multiple routes to its own self-defined civilisational purity. Such “post-racial” illusions are collusions that contribute to the powerful mythologised universalisms embedded inside the very idea of meritocracies. As Joseph-Salisbury summarises, “it is through the hegemony of the ‘post-racial’ myth, the collective denial of the continued significance of race, that White supremacy endures and thrives” (2019: p. 4). Hence, merit and success are constructed as absolute, universal fixities, whose immovability also symbolises the epistemic and ontological fabric of Westernised, Eurocentric models of knowledge (Mignolo 2011). The stability of this constant avowal is a strategic and existential move whose origins are long steeped in racial capitalism, coloniality, brutality and *Epistemicide* (de Sousa Santos 2015). Such epistemically and institutionally codified connections between what happens at the intellectual level, and the *type* of body and mind in which this thinking can even be generated are steeped in the histories of Western modernity’s educational institutions (Mills 1997).

What I term the *racial-parallax* can be regarded simply as a temporary heuristic, a conceptual signifier to allow us to roll back the field of vision, perception and experience of racialised-life in ways that people of colour already experienced in these fields are very familiar. It is located within a wider logic of structural racism and Whiteness that modifies the *conditions of possibilities* open to subalternised populations, since the basis of European Enlightenment philosophy, with its foundational role in the scientific revolutions, seeks to maintain its primary position in the established flow of power from the particular in the Global South to the universal in the Global North (Grosfoguel 2013). Such processes, re-performed on a daily basis create Eurocentred epistemic alterities and bring about the generation of counter-alterity narratives through disciplinary and technical bureaucracies. Indeed, such daily activations work to reinforce both the power and legitimacy of racism and Whiteness because they occur inside an *already existing and distorted racialised arena*. The resultant problems in BME “student attainment”, the multiple barriers to success for BME staff, and the longer-term problems for both in the wider societal context need therefore to be framed with this context.

Rethinking the Context: Whiteness and Decoloniality

In this chapter, I am drawing on authors and writings that span the decolonial turn as a wide, diverse processual network of ideas, theories and activism that, as Maldonado-Torres et al. (2018) argue, arose in response to modern colonisation, and has been active since the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The position of “merit” in the power structures of Whiteness, and the resultant subjugation of “others”, allows us to invoke explanatory frameworks and spaces of resistance that mobilise agency. The ideas here also dismantle the driving assumptions behind the enduring coloniality of modern capitalism (Boatcă 2016) and the consequent structuring of social, cultural, economic, gendered emotional and psychological life (Lugones 2008). This applies for both coloniser and colonised through the geo-politics of racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya 2018) and the proliferation of modern world systems. In Anibal Quijano’s colonial matrix of power, conflict rages at both the material and the epistemological levels through control of the economy, authority, gender and sexuality, and knowledge and subjectivity. These sets of struggles move in two directions, the imperial conflicts between European states, the conflict between these states and the enslaved/exploited African and Indian colonial subject (Mignolo 2003). This matrix, however, has at its heart two dimensions that characterise how it works: the racial and patriarchal foundations of knowledge. As Mignolo shows us, it is Christian theology that “located the difference between Christians, Jews and Moors *in the blood*” (Mignolo 2007: p. 8) and it is in the context of the exploitation and “discovery” of the new world that racial configurations are established as differential and hierarchical between Spanish, Indian and African. As secular philosophy and science came to replace theology, newly creative forms of racial classification were employed. Within the discussion of the racial-parallax field the positioning of merit-as-Whiteness occupies the same epistemic location as the ego-politics of knowledge (Mignolo 2007). The only knowledge worthy of knowing, and the only subject that contains the possibility of knowing, must be the European, White male, since all other possibilities were extinguished (women, Blacks,

Indians, Moors, Jews). Such thinking is the core of Westernised University systems—as well as entire social and cultural processes of discipline making. These knowledge systems produced in the Global North are therefore seen and performed as *universal*, rather than *particular*; viewed as objective, rather than subjective; exist *beyond* embodiment, despite being fully embodied (in the White male) and represented as the ultimate reward for... merit. That such thinking originates in the colonial generation of capitalist accumulation, and the subjugation of people for centuries is cast aside as merely historical fragment, or collateral consequences of the overall positivity of modernity. That such modernity is regarded as bounded and generated solely within the confines of the Global North, rather than constituted by and through colonial exploitation at the material and epistemic level (Bhambra 2007) is substantively ignored except within critical intellectual and activist circles.

Veronelli (2015) neatly summarises the view from the other side of modernity's historiography with a focus on "the perspectives and life experiences of peoples from the Global South as points of departure to a critique of the failures of Eurocentred modernity" (2015: p. 109). Therefore, this *unfitting* into neatly pre-organised, linear segments of history becomes a driving force for revealing the underside of "success" in educational meritocracies, vis-à-vis the heteronormative, racialised and gendered axes of racial capitalism (Robinson 2000; Lugones 2008).

Counter-framing the notion of "merit" as both an attainable state and process, and a means by which universally recognised achievable endpoints are rendered visible, we can locate this universality as a geopolitically constructed and fuelled, epistemic and material legacy of centuries of racial capitalism. It works within matrices of colonial power and frames how the currency of equity in liberal democratic knowledge systems that operate on "merit" utilise Whiteness structures of ignorance within the racial-parallax field. In the UK context, there is a multiple layered and intersectional racialised system of deprivation, inequality and injustice in every field of society, with multilevel problems (UUK 2019). The notion of "merit" then appears in our racial-parallax field as a universal mechanism of attaining the objective neutrality that affords full citizen-hood, person-hood and civic participation afforded to *all* subjects, through its own objective stance. The distortions produced by the

racial-parallax modify the field inside which this struggle sits, but also frame the notion of merit through fallacies and inaccurate representations.

Knowing by Not Seeing

The epidermal beginnings of colour racism in the sixteenth century, once theological racism had been superseded, mobilises the logics of racism through systematic, embodied structures of Whiteness. That such structures are performed, maintained and fuelled systematically at the epistemic and material cultural level (Dyer 1997) is not news. However, that these structures *present themselves* as unremarkable, invisible and ignorant of the dynamics being played out in the field of knowledge making and assessment is highly problematic. These structures and agentive socialities appear ignorant of the general, enduring landscape of racism and ignorant of their role and culpability in the resultant causal chain of inequalities in this field. I draw parallels here with what Mills (2007) terms “whiteness as an epistemology of ignorance”.

Epistemic Whiteness fundamentally plays an ontologically superior role in the colonial/modern world, and hence the mechanics of its operation are both sublime in their performance as “objective, and universal”, and sophisticated in their insidious insistence on ignorance of the *consequential* racisms resulting from this power relation. Alcoff (2007) does not accept the innocence of ignorance when it is in a relational field of racial power, since Whiteness use the notion of “meritocracy” to justify its own position. This wilful ignorance is neither passive nor innocent. In Charles Mills’ formulation, the core denial of racial oppression is itself an enduring legacy of the psycho-social requirements for colonial enslavement, labour extraction and brutality. They are constantly renewed and replenished through liberal regimes and the emergent post-racial silencing of racism (Lentin 2014). Viewed inside the *racial-parallax* field, “merit” is located as a neutral, universal and desirable process and state, whilst simultaneously occupying fundamentally distorted positionality, in a field of relations that *relies on distortion*. Success, ambition, merit, attainment, status, all provide the ambient furniture of a structure whose

architecture is racism, Whiteness, coloniality and racialised capital power relations. Their structural position and connection with other arenas that equally employ these distorted fields ensure that cries and complaints of intersectional racism become deflected by the “innocent ignorance” of Whiteness. However, being situated inside a *racial-parallax* field, is also experientially a potentially empowering fracture of this distorted lens, as it enables the subject to discern the nature, extent and cause of the distortion, by rendering that which is invisible, visible. I am arguing that the transformative experience of being “other”, such as the migrant, the outsider, the raced-body, the intersectional body-out-of-time-and-space, the othered *being* as a fundamentally displaced modality, an identity borne of struggle, potentially affords one a corresponding *clarity of vision*. As the luxuries of merit, privilege and epistemic superiority vie to maintain prime position as ontologically achievable, they do so only through appropriate ontological subjects. Being both *within* the parallax but constituted by a vision *outside* of the field, allows subalternised “others” to dispense with the falsities of merit as produced and maintained by Whiteness. Such sub-ontological identities (Maldonado-Torres 2016) whilst imbricated in the mechanics of oppression also provide techniques of resistance, for these ontologies of resistance are counter-moves against the epistemologies of Whiteness in meritocracies. In so doing the *racial parallax* remains powerful only in as much as the viewer(s) experiential gaze is limited to the constitutive elements of Whiteness. By moving outside of the primary racial field through collective organisation, disrupting White hegemony and utilising resistance as an everyday unsettling of power, “merit”, Whiteness and Eurocentric privilege dressed up as forms of ignorance, can be debunked and displaced.

If the dismantling of the machineries that both create distorted fields and the ways in which those fields are understood—the geo-politics of knowledge—then perhaps thinking about one component of the epistemic other’s experience is to identify this *racial-parallax* as intimately violent and real, but subject to resistance and counter-moves. Whiteness structures of power and institutional frames of coloniality as they reproduce privilege through “meritocratic success” need to be understood through the need not simply to “...give the subaltern a voice” but to “...work against subalternity itself” (Spivak 2014). Students, staff and

alliances from across a multitude of arenas working towards related goals of social justice and anti-racism can move outside the narrow epistemic and material confines of the *racial parallax*, and re-align our gazes and embodied stances towards different affective, epistemic and embodied potentials.

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