Commonplace

White Men

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It was one of the funnier moments in my diversity research. I was interviewing a practitioner. She shared with me a story. She had been looking at the new webpage of the senior management team at her university. They had just put up photographs of each member of the team. Her friend looked over her shoulder and asked: “are they related?” When she relayed the story, we both burst into laughter. When we catch with words a logic that is often reproduced by not being put into words it can be such a relief.

We recognised that each other recognized the logic. Laughter, peals of it; our bodies catching that logic, too.

Are they related? Well perhaps they are not related in the sense of how we might usually use the word “related.” They are not kin. Or are they? Is each member of the team one of the same kind? Does the homogeneity of an appearance registered by or in this question point to another sense of being related: being in a relation; being as relation? They were, as it happens, you might not be surprised by this, “white men.” To use this expression is not to summarise a relation; the relation is itself a summary (how the institution can be built around a short series of points). The photograph give us a summary of a summary: this is who the organisation is; this is who the organisation is for. Of course an image can change without changing a thing (this is why diversity is so often a poster, you can re-image the organisation as being colourful and happy as a way of holding onto whiteness: diversity as image management).

When we talk of “white men” we are describing an institution. “White men” is an institution. By saying this, what I am saying? An institution typically refers to a persistent structure or mechanism of social order governing the behaviour of a set of individuals within a given community. So when I am saying that “white men” is an institution I am referring not only to what has already been instituted or built but the mechanisms that ensure the persistence of that structure. A building is shaped by a series of regulative norms. “White men” refers also to conduct; it is not simply who is there, who is here, who is given a place at the table, but how bodies are occupied once they have arrived; behaviour as bond.

But when you talk about “white men” you are heard as making an accusation against him. Maybe the title of this post seems provocative: why make this all about him?

Well maybe I am talking about him: a pronoun is an institution. Him: for some to become him is to pass into them.

“White men,” then, refers to what as well as who has already been assembled: a collective body. This is not to say that white men are not constantly being reassembled; you can meet up in the present, you can have a future meeting, because of how the past splinters into resources. “White men” is between

tenses: it is how an inheritance is reproduced. When a body lines up, or is in line, you might only see one set of lines, or maybe you don't see any; when things appear as they should, the right way up, they recede. When a body does not line up, things appear queer or wonky.

Blink.

Nirmal Puwar's book [*Space Invaders: Race, Gender and "Bodies out of Place"*](#) (2004) describes these processes very well: some bodies are "somatic norms," they become rightful occupants of spaces.

Others not.

Blink.

One diversity practitioner I interviewed called it "social cloning," how organisations tend to recruit in their own image. In a diversity training session I attended someone talked about how members of her department would ask as a question about potential job candidates: would this person be "the kind of person you can take down the pub"? To become relatable is to restrict a relation; someone you can relate to because they are at home not only in meeting rooms or the seminar rooms, but in social spaces, spaces that have their own histories. Norms might become more regulative the more casual the spaces. This is why: when rules are relaxed, we encounter the rules.

Flinch.

How then is "white men" built or even a building? Think about it. One practitioner relayed to me how they named buildings in her institution. All dead white men she said. We don't need the names to know how spaces come to be organised so they can receive certain bodies. We don't need the naming to know how or who buildings can be for.

Behaviour as bond: you might walk into a room with a white male professor. You might notice how the collective gaze falls on him. You walk in together but you aren't seen as together. Maybe they assume you are an assistant. They see him as they expect a professor to appear this way. He might have a beard; grey hair. Of course there is more to him than that; no doubt there are things they do not see. Quite right; that's the point. When he is seen as professor there is a way he too is not seen. They are seeing what they expect to see; they are seeing one person and not another as professor because "white men" have already been assembled. Here come the professors, here is the professor; hello professor.

When you fulfill an expectation of how they appear you do not have to work to appear. Being seen is about being seen to; receiving attention. The quietness that might follow the words that are sent out; it is a solemn occasion. Sometimes I giggle. Because this has happened so often, you know what is happening when it is happening. Sometimes, of course, what we might be seeing what we are

expecting. But every now and then something happens that makes the flickering impression created by the turning of heads turn into something more tangible.

In one course I taught, each year I taught it, there would be some students assigned to my seminars who did not turn up. Instead, they turned up in the class of the white male professor; taking his class even though they were assigned mine. I was so intrigued by what would be the explanation that I asked one of these students when she came to my office hour why she went to his class. "He's such a rock star," she sighed wistfully. And then, as if to give substance to her admiration, as if to explain this admiration in more educational, or at least strategic terms, she added: "I want to go to America to do a PhD." She did not need to say more. Her ambition was offered as an explanation of a decision. I knew what she was telling me; in her estimation (rightly or wrongly) a reference from "white men" (when you hear this plural think: institution not person) would have more value; that she would be picked up; that she too would move up, through association, through proximity, to him. She estimated that if you had a reference signed by "white men," you would increase your own chances of moving up or moving forward in academic life. She has already digested an institutional diet, which is at once a social diet; higher = him. Note an estimation of a value that will be added is enough to add value.

White men: the origins of speculative philosophy, one might speculate.

Speculate, accumulate.

Another time, a telling time, two academics, a brown woman and a white man are presenting a shared research project. They are equal collaborators on the project; but he is a senior man, very distinguished, well-known, perhaps he too is an "academic rock star." He jokingly refers to her as "his wife" at the end of the presentation. He is describing how he sees their relation by joking about their relation: the husband, the author, the originator of ideas; the wife, the one who stands behind him. Maybe she provides helping hands; maybe she makes the tea. She doesn't of course; she provides ideas; she has ideas of her own. Her intellectual labour is hidden by a joke; how it is hidden is performed or enacted by a joke.

When it is not funny, we do not laugh.

If we catalogued incidents like this we would end up with a very long list. What a list. We need a catalogue. Becoming wife: unbecoming professor, academic, intellectual, human being. As I pointed out in my conclusion to *On Being Included* (2012), to catalogue these incidents is not a melancholic task. To account for experiences of not being given residence (to be dislodged from a category is to be dislodged from a world) is not yet another sad political lesson, a lesson of what we have had to give up in order to keep going. We learn from being dislodged about lodges. We come to know so much about

institutional life because of these failures of residence: the categories in which we are immersed as forms of life become explicit when you do not quite inhabit them.

A norm can be exercised as a way of seeing things: the quickness of how we register somebody as being somebody; how we notice an arrival. A quickening of a register; an unthinking of a thought. Ways of perceiving somebody as having certain kinds of qualities become objects in the world, tangible things. This process can be about a perception of an individual, that tricky matter of “reputation,” how some individuals are given certain attributes, sometimes independently of what they do, sometimes not, and how the institutional life of an individual person is partly about the value of that attribution. These little perceptions do stick to bigger categories, or might be how those categories stick. A feminist colleague who attends her university’s promotions committee tells me how you can hear how male and female staff are valued differently just by the kinds of adjectives used in the letters to describe their performances: how descriptive words for men are upward, energetic and thrusting, whilst for women they are quieter, more sedentary, closer to the ground. That gender becomes wordy should not surprise. We can do gender through words, although this is not, of course, the only way we do gender.

Citationality is another form of academic relationality. White men is reproduced as a citational relational. White men cite other white men: it is what they have always done; it is what they will do; what they teach each other to do when they teach each other. They cite; how bright he is; what a big theory he has. He’s the next such-and-such male philosopher: don’t you think; see him think. The relation is often paternal: the father brings up the son who will eventually take his place. Patriarchy: it’s quite a system. It works.

Whiteness too: it works; it is a system that works, what I called in another post a catering system, a way of staying or being well acquainted. I have read “critical” work on race that primarily cites white men. I see it when they do it, very quickly. I see whiteness spilled all over the pages. Whiteness is invisible to those who inhabit it. For those who don’t inhabit it, whiteness appears as a solid: a body with mass.

And then: colour appears as difference; as deviation; as intrusion. Maybe you are welcomed; I have talked of diversity as welcome, an invitation to those who are not yet part to become part. I read it again and again: a Call for Papers (cfp) lists feminist and postcolonial/critical race contributions as welcome. But they still cite only white men. Still cite, cite still. White men: we can be called to assemble around this body (registered precisely as individual citations, as proper names) even when other bodies are called for. I once read a cfp for feminist approaches in a specific area of thought, which included as a potential topic the masculinist nature of that area of thought, that began with references to all white men! Three quotes, singled out; white men as singling out. They can be doing it (white men is here an “it,” a habit of thought) in the very claim to be reflecting on (or being open to reflections on) what they are doing when they are doing it.

Blink.

Point.

Feminist fingers: pointed.

You come against a system when you point out a system. When there is a system those who benefit from the system do not want to recognise that system. You might be heard as dismissive as if you are explaining away their personal achievements. They might not recognise the walls, because to recognise the walls would also expose how an upward trajectory is not simply a matter of volition but is dependent on being supported and enabled; dependent on the uneven distribution of support.

White men = a support system.

No wonder: walls come up when we talk about walls.

A wall can be a defence mechanism.

Once on twitter I pointed out that an author had mainly cited other white men. He agreed with my description of the pattern but said that the pattern “was in the traditions that had influenced him.” To be influenced by a tradition is to be citing white men. Citing; reciting; an endless retrospective. White men as a well-trodden path; the more we tread that way the more we go that way. To move forward you follow the traces left behind of those who came before. But in following these traces, in participating in their becoming brighter, becoming lighter, other traces fade out, becoming shadows, places unlit; eventually they disappear. Women too, people of colour too, might cite white men: to be you have to be in relation to white men (to twist a Fanonian point). Not to cite white men is not to exist; or at least not to exist within this or that field. When you exercise these logics, you might come to exist, by writing out another history, another way of explaining your existence. If to cite is to wipe out your history, what then?

For some students this prospect would be terrifying; that citing yourself into an academic existence might require citing yourself out.

Of course I am overstating the case; we do feminist and anti-racist work by re-assembling spaces around different bodies. But it is not easy; and the assembling has to be collaborative to work; we have to meet up by creating different meeting points. And it does not always work. I have known feminist examiners of feminist dissertations ask for more white men to be added to reference lists; righted = more white men be cited. And we know the reasons for this: simply put, if academic fields remain organised around white men, then to be respectful of history, to cite right, to cite well, can in practice translate into a requirement to cite more white men.

We have been here before; so there will always be more. Because in this citational requirement is erasure; the willed forgetting of others that already passed through. Even feminist fields (formed, say, around the study of emotions, bodies, and intimacies) can end up being reorganised around white men. Decisions are made about concepts or values, definitions or distinctions, that do not appear to be gendering and racialized decisions (I talked about how this works in affect studies [here](#)). Individuals do not have not to cite not white men deliberately: they inherit decisions that make these exclusions for them, without them, decisions that marks edges, marking out where they do not have to go. Citations are academic bricks; and bricks become walls.

In the book I am writing *Living a Feminist Life* I thus have a strict and explicit citation policy. I will not and do not cite white men. And you know what: it has been really easy! You should try it! We can rebuild our houses with feminist tools; with de-colonial precision we can bring the house of whiteness down. Their body is not the world. A world can be opened up when it is not organised around their bodies.

I am not always going to have this policy: it is a writing experiment; a social experiment. I will cite white men again, just as I have cited them before. Sometimes, I cite white men, such as Hegel and Kant in *Willful Subjects* (2014), because I want to bring the house down, brick by brick. Other times, I cite white men because I too have been influenced by what I receive. For example I cite Husserl and Merleau-Ponty in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) and I have a fondness for their work, without question (especially Husserl, although I am not sure if my fondness is because through him, I found tables, which makes my fond a rather queer kind of fond). As feminists we have issues. A feminist issue is not only about who you cite but how you cite. I do not cite because I hope to become another point in the unfolding line of phenomenology. I hope I do not cite in this way! I have no wish to be a phenomenologist who inherits and reproduces this tradition. My aim is to queer the line that leads from one body to another. I want to be wonky; to get things wrong, even.

Error: to err is to stray. It is not to go the right way.

So I might ask what is behind Husserl's back. I might attend to his table; I might ask about the domestic work that keeps the table clear so he as philosopher can do his work; so he as a philosopher can keep the table in front of him, even when the table does not have his attention. I think of where he does not go, of how his models might assume a body ("I can") that I am not ("I cannot"). My aim in offering a queer phenomenology was thus to queer phenomenology; I end up, with tables as my love (err research) object, and with Frantz Fanon, and Iris Marion Young as my travelling companions; those who drew on phenomenology to explore how being in relation might depend on your relation to being (another way of accounting for: the unbearable whiteness and maleness of being).

Is there a way of not being in relation to white men? One time someone tweets to me about Badiou. She says Badiou could help feminism by giving feminism x. I didn't get to x; I stopped with the verb help. I had noticed this as a feminist student; how when some feminist philosophers spoke of male philosophers, they often addressed them as being helpful to feminism. I wrote about this use of "help" in my first book, based on my PhD, [*Differences that Matter*](#) (1998: 70). I think now what I thought then. I don't think feminism needs help sorting things out, as if thought comes from some place other than the places in which we are thrown. But philosophy might need feminist help; although I have no desire myself to be a feminist helper or to become the philosopher's helping hands (I much prefer to curl my hands into feminist fists). And philosophy needs feminist help because: as generations of feminist scholars taught us, exposing sexism in philosophy explodes the structure of philosophy.

We need more feminist explosions.

That would help.

Smashing.

To explode something, to blow it apart, we have to show that there is something. This is why it is crucial to give problems their names; this is why I give this post the name "white men." But when you talk about white men as a feminist you are dating yourself; you will be heard as a dated feminist as I described in an earlier blog. I have been called a 1980s feminist a number of times. When you ask questions like, "why are only white men speaking?" or even something more specific that relates to an ordering, "why are white men the opening speakers for a conference on race?" you tend to be heard as not being very helpful.

It has become old-fashioned to mention that only white men are speaking at an event but not old-fashioned to have only white men speaking at an event.

We are supposed not to notice a restriction in who gathers; and then this who gathers, and gathers again. And: when you make points like this you are told that you are doing "identity politics." You point out structure; they hear you as talking about identity. They think you are just concerned with being missing yourself; that you are making this about yourself.

You say: the event has a structure. They say: this is an event not a structure. And then: you are judged as imposing a structure on the event.

This is why it is important to say that "white men" is an institution. It is not that we are stabilising something; that stability is in the world. This is why any contemporary theory needs to explain institutions and other worldly stabilisations; to explain these mechanisms, to explain how things do not move, is to generate new ideas, new ideas of ideas.

There is still much work to do. And this is why: the language of flows will not only “not do” but is part of what is making this system work. I have said this before but I will say it some more: things are fluid if you are going the way things are flowing. That’s not how we experience the world when we are not “white men.” We need to write from our experience of the world. We: not white men. To make a “we” from a not requires being willing to be that “we.” So I call upon “not white men” to be rebels, not to keep citing white men, or not to cite just them or not to enlist their help to become them or not to aim to become as like them as you can be given the body you have. And I call upon white men not to keep reproducing white men; not to accept history as a good enough reason for your own reproduction.

It takes conscious willed and willful effort not to reproduce an inheritance.