Being Black in American Academia

By Lauren DeSousa

ZZ Packer's *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* consider what it is like to be a young Black woman in academia in the United States. Academia is rarely racially diverse, and this lack of representation is incredibly detrimental for young Black students and their potential for success. According to statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics, Black full-time professors at degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States made up only 6% of the professorial population in Fall 2018 (NCES, 2018). With numbers like these, Black professors, students, and other university staff are significantly more likely to be victims of all forms of racism and discrimination. Even among predominantly white institutions who are trying to be aware of their biases, these Black individuals are likely to be subject to tokenism. Black tokenism is where one individual with a marginalized identity is harmfully presented as the representative of that identity, and/or asked to take on the brunt of diversity and inclusion work. This essay examines these two pieces of fiction that manage to poignantly capture a reality that is not discussed as much as it should be.

Packer's protagonist, Dina, is immediately placed into therapy upon her starting at Yale. In an orientation game, Dina states that if she was an object, she would be a revolver and the "comment won [her] a year's worth of psychiatric counseling, weekly meetings with Dean Guest and … [her] very own room" (Packer, pg. 2). Through her encounters with Dr. Raeburn, her psychiatrist, Dina contemplates her identity as a student at Yale, and in the wider world. She struggles with her sexual identity and her race, but the overarching issue she faces is that she feels as though she doesn't fit in at Yale.

Adichie's protagonist, Ifemelu, has a similarly negative introduction to university in the United States. Her welcome is blatantly racist when Cristina Tomas, the person at freshmen registration, "speak[s] so slowly, lips scrunching and puckering" (Adichie, pg. 163). Ifemelu first feels sympathy because she assumes Cristina has "some sort of illness" (Adichie, pg. 163) that made her speak in that manner, however, she quickly realizes "that Cristina Tomas was speaking like that because of *her*, her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling" (Adichie, pg. 163). She is immediately judged on the basis of her race; it is automatically assumed that she doesn't speak English since she is a Black international student. Even when Ifemelu asserts the fact that she speaks English, Cristina invalidates this fact by saying she doesn't know *how well* she speaks English - something that should honestly be irrelevant in this interaction all together. A welcome like that immediately sets Black students up for failure.

A significant difference between the experiences of Dina and Ifemelu is their connection with other Black students on campus. Dina finds that she doesn't "understand the black people at Yale" (Packer, pg. 3). When "[o]ccasionally one would reach out to [her] with missionary zeal, … [she]'d rebuff that person with haughty silence" (Packer, pg. 3). Dina sees the other Black students at Yale as entirely complicit with the white, patriarchal system in which they find themselves. Perhaps a part of this could be related to socio-economic status; Dina reveals that she has always felt insecure about the neighborhood she lived in, which despite a shared race, is starkly different from the Exeter T-shirt on the first Black person she encounters at Yale. On the other hand, Ifemelu finds solace with the African Students Association (ASA) at her college; "[h]ere, Ifemelu felt a gentle, swaying sense of renewal. Here, she did not have to explain herself" (Adichie, pg. 171). The connections she makes through the ASA help her find a job, but moreover, she finds people around whom she can be her authentic self, she finds people who have faced similar discrimination to her, and who do not discount her experiences simply because of her race.

Later in the novel, Ifemelu enters academic spheres as an equal, yet she is often nervous and her opinions are repeatedly discounted. Even after her blog becomes successful and she earns an academic fellowship at Princeton, she does not necessarily consider herself an academic (though, notably, white people she encounters consider themselves academics for less). Ifemelu struggles to see herself in academia as both a Black woman and as a non-American. This narrative is not hers alone, rather, it is a common one.

Another key component which acts to further separate Dina from the Black community at Yale was her queerness. Throughout the course of the short story, Dina grapples with her sexual identity, something that is further complicated by her identity as a Black woman. Ultimately, Dina cannot find a community at Yale because she sits at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities: too Black to fit into LGBTQ+ spaces, too queer to fit into Black spaces. Just as Ifemelu finds eventually some community among the ASA, Heidi - Dina's closest friend at Yale - is able to find community among other LGBTQ+ individuals and decides to publicly come out: "[a]nd then there was Heidi. She was proud that she liked girls, she said when she reached the microphone. She loved them, wanted to sleep with them" (Packer, pg. 14). Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that Heidi is able to find a safe space within this community largely because she is white, whereas Dina feels further ostracized from this group and from Heidi. Thus, Dina's queerness is essential to her experience of her Blackness, and vice versa.

Drinking Coffee Elsewhere shows the direct effect of a lack of Black people in academia, especially in "elite" academia such as at Yale and other Ivy League schools. *Americanah*, aided by its length, also shows a struggle for Black people to find their place in academia, even long after it has been earned. Overall, the lack of racial diversity in academia is incredibly detrimental to young Black students. It perpetuates a cycle which breeds less diversity. Without Black professors and advisors in universities (and honestly, in all workplaces), young Black students have less places to turn to when they are struggling. As a result, they are more likely to dropout and/or perform poorly compared to their white peers. Therefore, white professors are less likely to mentor Black students because the statistics make it *seem* like they are less likely to succeed and are not worth the investment - this is racism. The statistics fail to recognize the dangerous cycle in place and thus, it continues. Increasing representation in academia does not decrease racism and discrimination alone, but it is a necessary step in helping Black students succeed. Significantly more work needs to be done in order to make higher education accessible and equitable for Black individuals. As the Senegalese Yale professor named Boubacar tells Ifemelu in *Americanah,* "get[ting] into these places [of academia as a Black person] … is the only way to change the conversation" (Adichie, pg. 421).

Works Cited

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