The Workings and Effects of Precarious Employment on Black Women Educators in Development Studies: An Autoethnographic Account of an International Fieldtrip

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Abstract: This observation is an autoethnographic contribution to understand the epistemological complexities of being employed on a precarious contract and challenging racialized abuse in a higher education institution. I ask the following question: What does it mean for precariously employed Black staff to face and challenge racialized acts and have their expertise questioned by students? This observation draws on my experience of teaching and accompanying students on their compulsory overseas field study. A key finding is the implication that precarious employment practices perpetuate inequality in the discipline of development studies by limiting the ability of Black educators to confront or challenge abuse.

Key words: Development studies, racialization, transformative learning, teaching, postgraduate studies

I. Introduction

Contemporary employment practices, steeped in the neoliberalization of higher education institutions (HEIs), continue to perpetuate inequality through the increased reliance on part-time and temporary staff for teaching and research (Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015). The rise of neoliberalism over the last few decades has shaped the policies and practices of HEIs in the United Kingdom (Burke, 2013). Precarity, a consequence of neoliberalism, is a state of uncertainty, instability and insecurity of employment, where the worker is left vulnerable (Kalleberg and Hewison, 2013). In 2017–2018, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2020), over 6,500 academic staff were employed on zero-hour contracts, nearly 33,000 researchers were on fixed-term contracts and nearly 30,000 teaching ‘only’ staff were employed on fixed-term contracts (Megoran and Mason, 2020). According to the University and College Union (UCU), staff at lower levels are far more likely to be on fixed term than on open-ended contracts (UCU, 2016). According to the UCU (2021) report, Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) staff are significantly more likely to be on a fixed-term contract than White staff, and Black staff are 50% more likely than White staff, and three times more likely than Asian staff, to be on a zero-hours contract. Therefore, Black teaching staff are
over-represented in precarious employment in UK higher education. 

Megoran and Mason (2020) posit that precarity and casualization have become the business model of higher education, and as such it dehumanizes the staff, who are treated as second-class academic citizens, leaving them vulnerable. Courtois and O’Keefe (2015) concur, highlighting how the absence of employment standards is a consequence of precarious contracts and strips away workers’ agency. Casualization and precarity highlight some of the structural inequalities inherent in the neoliberal system (Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015), which marginalizes and isolates staff (Husbands and Davies, 2010; Lopes and Dewan, 2014). This is acutely felt by Black educators on a precarious contract, as they are positioned as outsiders, and face challenges as they confront systems and structures that position students as clients.

At its core, this observation is an attempt to contribute to pedagogical understandings of the epistemological challenges of confronting racialized abuse that draws on my experience as a Black woman educator on a precarious contract. I ask, what does it mean for precariously employed Black staff to face and challenge racialized abuse and have their expertise and knowledge questioned by student-clients? In answering this question, I explore what it means to be a Black educator in a neoliberal institution and to be evaluated through a racialized lens and by stereotype. I draw on Critical Race Theory (CRT) to analyse a specific incident in a student fieldtrip and counter explanations or rationalization of the incident as anything but racialized abuse. I refer to racialized abuse as acts of aggression and the use of derogatory and denigratory language and gestures towards an individual based on how they are perceived and categorized in the racial hierarchy.

I have adopted autoethnography, a valid methodological approach in Black feminist writing, as a method because it allows the researcher to draw from their own personal experience to extend sociological understanding (Holt, 2003; Wall, 2008). Although autoethnographic accounts have been criticized for lack of analysis, lack of objectivity, data quality, ethics, and the blurry boundary between personal experience and scholarship (Duncan, 2004; Wall, 2008), autoethnography is appropriate for this study because it allows me to situate myself as a source of knowledge and produce deeper insights into my lived experience in ways that allow me to speak to other Black precariously employed educators in UK academia and to highlight the real effect of the neoliberal university on Black educators.

This observation is structured in three parts. The first section discusses CRT and autoethnography as the methodology employed in this study. I explain in the section how the methodology allows me to situate myself as a source of knowledge and produce more profound insights into the workings and effects of neoliberal university and development studies education. In the second section, I narrate my experience in the field and give an autoethnographic account of the abuse I experienced and my lack of response at the time, linked to the precarious nature of my employment. Finally, the last section concludes and argues that the employment practices in development studies faculties are no different from the employment practices in neoliberal HEIs.

II. CRT and Autoethnography as Methodology

My experience as an educator leading a student fieldtrip informs this observation. CRT is adopted because it allows for a nuanced understanding of racial experiences to be shared through storytelling, narratives and chronicles, giving precedent to the voices of those racialized because of their knowledge and experience of racism (Patton and Catching, 2009). It provides an opportunity for counter-narratives, and through my autoethnographic
narrative, I explain how the incident in the field was racialized and the impact it had on me as a precariously employed Black educator.

Further, CRT is also relevant and appropriate for analysing the issues raised in my autoethnography. With its origins in the post-structuralist paradigm, autoethnography offers a way of telling personal experience through narration, which lends itself to understanding larger social or cultural phenomena (Butz and Besio, 2009; Ellis et al., 2011; Wall, 2008). Autoethnography accommodates emotional writing and subjectivity into storytelling and analyses (Ellis et al., 2011). However, it has also been criticized. For example, Duncan (2004) and Wall (2008) warn that autoethnographers must be cautious about allowing emotions to rule the writing and cloud honesty. Further, I outline the process of reflexivity and ethics that I adopted to maintain an honest account.

Reflexivity is important in ascertaining the writer’s credibility in narrating the truth, and this is especially the case in autoethnography, given its inherent subjectivity (Duncan, 2004; Pillow, 2003; Thwaites, 2017). Reflexivity means critically examining the underlying assumptions of our actions and the impact of those actions, and committing to change (Cunliffe, 2016). Reflexivity was useful for questioning and confronting my assumptions. The process of continuous self-analysis and questioning of my own assumptions and interpretations was done through reading Black feminist writers and writers such as Bhopal (2017, 2018), Daniel (2019), and Smith and Lander (2012)—as well as by talking to colleagues.

The process of data collection in this observation involved assembling extracts from my diary in the field and a draft email to a senior colleague that, after much thought and reflection, I decided not to send. The email drafted on the night of the incident is a source of data that serves as a point of reflection on action (Schön, 1987). Another point of reflection was the call I made to my senior colleague from Kampala recounting what had happened and trying to make sense of it with another person outside the field: this process allowed me to validate and question my thoughts.

Dealing with dilemmas around ethics is crucial in autoethnographic writing (Ellis et al., 2011; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). In telling my personal experience, I acknowledge that I situate not only myself in the story but also others. Therefore, autoethnographers may have to protect the privacy and safety of others by altering their identifying characteristics, which I have done in this observation. Further, when speaking of others, autoethnographers may feel compelled to show their work to those implicated in their stories, allowing them to see what has been written about them and giving them a chance to respond (Ellis et al., 2011). Notwithstanding, researchers can still gatekeep the impact of any responses on their account. In this case, I have chosen not to share my account prior to publication with the others that feature in it. By choosing to centre my account and interrogating the honesty of its effect on me, I am unapologetically claiming a space for my truth.

Finally, I am aware that my identity as a Black woman born and raised in an African country plays a role in my worldview. This position also plays a role in how I am perceived and the assumptions that are made when an African woman occupies a position of power that challenges the notion of where a Black body belongs, disrupting the imaginary of the academic space. Further, as a Black woman of African origin, I acknowledge that my experience of race is different from that of, for example, a Black British woman. My experience does not aim to universalize or generalize the ‘Black experience’; the account I give merely serves as an illustration and process of interrogation of the effects of precarity when Black.

III. Being Precariously Employed and Black on a Fieldtrip
Development studies faculty employment practices are not immune from practices
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steeped in neoliberalization of HEIs. I was a Black educator on a precarious contract who was asked to lead a development studies fieldtrip to Uganda. I not only had the role of module organizer but also worked part-time as a graduate teaching assistant. Using autoethnographic narration, I illustrate how development studies employment practices are implicated in practices that impact the legitimacy of precariously employed educators to challenge racialized abuse.

On day one of our fieldtrip to Kampala, Uganda, I was walking towards the hotel reception, having just dropped off my bags to my room, when two students approached me to express their discontent with some information given to them by a senior member of staff (the most senior member of staff on the trip). These two students approached me during what was my free time, on my way to have some dinner after flying over 10 hours to Kampala. What should have been a civil conversation where they communicated their concerns, turned into an aggressive encounter. The two students stood in front of me, at close proximity to my face, and started raising their voices, threatening physical contact with their gesticulations and body movements. In my confusion about why their voices were raised and shouting, I tried to understand and deescalate the situation by being calm and answering some of their questions as gently as possible. But the two students were shouting at me, I did not know why, and I was very confused. One of the students was about 6 foot tall, and although I am 5 foot 7 inches, I felt vulnerable because there were two of them. I tried to listen through the raised voices to understand what was going on and I could hear one of the students say to me ‘I asked three times, I asked three times, are you…’ and she gesticulated towards her head almost blurring out what she intended to say but could not say as she stopped short of completing the sentence.

The students’ dissatisfaction, as I came to understand, had to do with their misunderstanding of what was communicated to them by a senior member of staff and had nothing to do with me. It was a piece of information that would have been explained to them had they met with the senior member of staff. Rather, the two students decided to confront me in the most denigrating manner.

There was a racialized element to the confrontation for the following reasons. There were five members of the staff on the trip, three men and two women. I was the only Black woman on that trip. The students could have met with other members of staff on the trip, who were also around the hotel premises and within reach. They could have spoken to the senior member of staff concerned; instead, they singled me out. The unexpected confrontation, the unprovoked aggression and the use of denigrating gesticulations, with one of the students pointing to her head insinuating that something was wrong with my head or intelligence, have racialized connotations and tropes used to denigrate the ‘other’. The confrontation was so charged with the two students shouting that other students and staff in the hotel foyer turned to see what the commotion was about. Things escalated so fast that one of the male members of staff passing by, and seeing what was happening, quickly intervened, holding the students to stop them from touching me. Throughout our stay in the field, the students did not confront the senior member of staff with their dissatisfaction, at least not in the violent way they confronted me. The confrontation and the aggression of it shocked students, hotel staff and those that witnessed it or that were told about it. It was also disheartening to the staff members on the trip.

The incident left me shocked and distressed, and as I walked away, I wondered why I did not confront their behaviour and whether walking away was the best response. After the incident, I did not make an official complaint. However, I shared what happened with the senior member of staff, who then spoke to the students, and they agreed that their behaviour was unacceptable. The senior
member of staff told me that he explained to the students how their behaviour was unacceptable. The students later apologized for their behaviour, and I accepted the apology and did not pursue the matter. I reflect on why I did not confront the students during the incident or pursue the matter. My point of reflection pays particular attention to the precarious nature of my employment and the implication of epistemological complexities in development studies.

I tried to understand this incident from the students’ perspective. There were understandable reasons why the students may have been upset and why they chose to direct their concerns to me rather than to other members of staff. First, we had just travelled over 10 hours into a country unfamiliar to them. Students often have mixed feelings about the fieldtrip: some are excited at the prospect of learning and seeing something first-hand about development, and at the same time, are apprehensive about visiting an African country for the first time. Some students confess that their fear stems from how the media in their respective countries portray the continent. A fieldtrip to a foreign country, away from loved ones, affects students in different ways. First, the trip from the United Kingdom to Kampala is long: we had taken two flights followed by a long bus journey to the hotel in Kampala. Second, the fieldtrip is an academic exercise and the two weeks spent in the field are remarkably busy with students visiting their partner organizations, conducting interviews, attending guest lectures, and preparing their reports and group presentations. Whilst there were sessions to manage students’ expectations, these real-life experiences can act as stressors, leading some students to feel disappointed and blame the teaching staff for problems in the field. Lastly, I was the module leader and they felt comfortable expressing their frustrations to me and may have been afraid to approach the senior member. I was their tutor; the students had the right to approach me, and I encouraged it. However, these reasons do not explain the abuse and aggression directed towards me. In that moment, the students thought it was acceptable to dismiss my feelings and my authority. In this act, they follow a long history of disregard for Black women educators (Daniel, 2019; Dlamini, 2002; Joseph-Salisbury, 2019; Kannen, 2012).

**IV. Discussion and Conclusion**

This observation is a response to the relationships between neoliberalism, precarity, being black and being an educator. My experience as a precariously employed educator who accompanied students on a compulsory international fieldtrip and occupied a teaching space exposed me to microaggression. As I reflect on why I did not challenge the students’ behaviour towards me, I realized that being ‘professional’ and not making a ‘fuss’ were linked to the fear of how the process of complaints, the outcomes and procedures would threaten and affect my job security or the ability to reapply and renew my contract. I did not want to appear angry or seem to look like I was complaining to the same people who would carry out my appraisals. A successful fieldtrip meant success in my role, which translates to evidence that could be used to progress or renew my contract. Although it is difficult not to have a fieldtrip without incidents and tensions, managing students’ dissatisfaction was part of my role both in the field and outside of it.

What role does development studies as faculty play in this? The implication of precarious employment practices that perpetuate inequality in HEIs is also present in development studies employment practices. These practices put Black educators such as me in a vulnerable position, limiting our ability to confront or challenge abuse, or turn such moments into educative lessons for students on respect, dignity and racism.

Clearly, development studies faculties are not exempt from employment practices that are harmful to Black educators, irrespective of its teaching content and its rhetoric of justice.
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and equality. The hiring practices of employing non-permanent educators on lower pay has a detrimental effect on the Black educator, especially leaving them vulnerable when they experience abuse as I did in the field. As Courtois and O’Keefe (2015) argue, precarious contracts strip away the agency of workers. For Black educators, the agency is not only limited in confronting abuse but can also have a direct impact on their careers as educators. Teaching whilst Black (Daniel, 2019), teaching as a Black woman (Thomas, 2020) and teaching whilst on a precarious contract means continuously navigating the tripartite oppressions of racism, sexism and precarity.

When the agency and legitimacy to confront abuse is stripped away through employment practices, we allow for the continuation and normalization of abuse of Black educators like me. Challenging and confronting abuse is important not only to correct the behaviours of students but also to put out a strong statement that it is everyone’s human right to be treated with respect and dignity. Years after the incident, I have chosen to confront the abusive behaviour I experienced through my narration rather than revisit the confrontation with the individuals concerned. Yet, this cannot be the path for everyone. It is also worth reflecting on ‘confrontation’ and who should be doing it. We all suffer in some sense when there is any form of abuse, and it is certainly not only the work of the ‘victim’ to confront abuse.

So, what solutions can development studies faculty adopt in its employment practices? My solution would be to end precarious employment and allow all educators to be the teachers they want to be, including Black educators who want to confront racism. As one of the tenets of CRT posits, racism is the norm and ordinary experience (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). My experience shows how this played out and how employment practices limit confronting racialized abuse. I argue that without permanent contracts, Black educators will always be compromised and will never be able to teach with their full self.

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