

What is the elephant under the rug? The Swedish experience of a black academic

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to unpack my experience of my academic career in Sweden as a black man and a first generation immigrant. The obstacles faced by under – represented groups in the labour market and Swedish society has been examined from a number perspectives and focus. For instance, in Sweden, there is a large number of study, which examined the barrier immigrants and other underrepresented groups encounter in the Swedish labour market. These studies identified a number of factor that impact negatively the inclusion of under-represented groups in the labour market and theses are discrimination/racism, poor educational and language skills, wrong job search strategies etc., and these factors are not unique to Sweden (Andersson & Osman, 2008; Arai 200 etc.). There are to my knowledge no studies that examined the position or the encounter of afro-Swede with the Swedish society from afro-swede perspective or the perspective of different institutional actors. This deficit, I would to stressed spurred my interest to describe my experience of my encounter with different social spaces I am embedded in Sweden. In addition, I am also embedded in research community, who are interested to examine migration and the field of education. My research interest and of many of my colleagues is transition of immigrant from different educational system to work. This story my story of transition from field of education to work.

Hence, the objective of this paper is to show how the materiality of my body, my blackness affects my knowing and agency in the white worlds I am embedded in, particularly the white academic life. In this paper , I would like to emphasis that Afro-Swedes experiences is qualitatively different compared to other non-European social categories such as, for instance, Bosnian, Spanish, and Greeks or of “White Latin American” etc. These groups *can* sometimes pass as “white”. Nevertheless, a black person cannot escape the materiality of his body in a white context. Theoretically, this paper departs from the idea that our everyday lives are entangled in matters, living and nonliving. In other, words a post-humanist perspective. Matter in this context refers to the materiality of the afro-swedes body his/her the phenotype. It is because of materiality-the body, the color of afro-swedes body that makes it possible for afro-swedes to be subjected to real and symbolic violence in the different “white worlds” they embedded and by other non-European bodies of different nuances of “whiteness” (Asian, Turkish, Iranians etc.). However, who is white and who is black is and continues to be contested. However, the benchmark of who is “white” is constructed in relation to the “Negro”. Hence, the point of departure of this paper is that Afro-Swedes experience of racism is qualitatively different from other groups with different shades of whiteness, such as, for instance, Bosnian, Spanish, and Greeks or of Latin American background etc. These groups *can* sometimes pass as “white”.

Discursive practice according to Barad (see Jackson and Mazzei 2012; Barad 2003, p.819) is: “what counts as meaningful statements”. It not only permits but also limits what can be said in a particular instance or in relation to a particular phenomenon or processes etc. Furthermore, she points out that discursive practice constitute the subject and “the object of the knowledge practice (Barad 2003, p.819). For instance, my encounter with the white world is an encounter of meanings and meaning in a post- humanism perspective is “that which we know as

produced by the discursive, and the notion of matter. “Matter denotes what we know and encounter as the material” (Jackson and Mazzei 2012, p 116). For instance, how the black body as a matter (phenotype) is produced discursively and materially. This, in turn, shapes the experiences of black person in the white world(s). Any persons being encompasses a passive and active dimension of experience (Barad 2007, Jackson and Mazzei 2012). The passive dimension of my experience, for instance, is the gaze of the other vis a vis the objective observable fact of my body (“blackness or color- phenotype”) and the meaning the gazer ascribes to it.

In other words, subjectivity is not durable and more importantly, it is fashioned in relation to others in everyday interaction. This understanding of subjectivity cannot therefore be reduced to or essentialised by identity categories (race, class, gender), because the way of being in the world is contingent on “social relation, historical experience and material condition” (Jackson and Mazzei 2012, p.117; Karen Barad, 2007, 2008). The perspective has sharpened my gaze and has made me aware that there is the need to reinstall the material as “equal in the material-discursive binary without reducing, for example, the materiality of my body as a signifier of a specific “biological race”. I would like to assert or argue that the biological discourses of race in modern political, academic discourse (to some extent) use race-neutral categories such as welfare cheaters, morality, religion, security, terrorism, and crime. Race neutral discourse sometimes are used interchangeably to inform the discursive practice of immigration and legitimisation of exclusion of non-European bodies in the “white spaces. It is also used to legitimise symbolic and real violence against afro-Swedes. In the discursive sphere, my humanness is under attack in subtle ways, but at times in overt ways. From this point of departure, my experience, hence, constitutes my way of knowing and being as a black subject in the white world. More importantly, it shapes the agency. Agency in the post-humanist perspective is “attributed to a complex network of human and non-human agents, including historical specific sets of material conditions that exceed the traditional notion of individuals” (Barad 2007, p 23). In other words, agency in this perspective is an enactment and not something that we possess (Jackson and Mazzei 2012).

However, it is important to stress that my experience, being, knowing and my agency is formed or shaped a by my sense of marginality in the multiple spaces I am embedded in as pointed earlier. In other words, I am part of a small community of Afro-Swede (first generation) that have made an academic career in Sweden. However, being one of the “lucky ones” you also become an enigma. I have wonderful colleagues in the academy that are “white” and “black “and more importantly, I have never experienced overt racism in my academic life, but have experienced and sometimes still experience outsider the academy. I have also experienced and confronted the suspicion of my community vis a vis the white community and institutions. However, as a “black person in sea of whiteness or white bodies, you quickly mark that the issue of race, racism etc., is the elephant under the rug. It is constantly there- but one you are not to supposed to talk about or raise, particularly as a person of color.

Methodologically this paper is inspired by auto ethnographic method. The method fuses certain characteristics of autobiography and ethnography. In autobiography one retroactively choses and describes past experiences (Freeman, 2004). The reconstructed experiences in this method are referred to "epiphanies. That is, moments or events that has had a considerably bearing on the trajectory of a person's life (Bochner & Ellis, 1992). For instance,

significant epiphanies in my academic career is my admission to doctoral program in Sweden. An event that has shaped my career, my perception of the Swedish academy. Epiphanies are experiences that are subjective and are what an individual views as transformative episodes. They reveal moments that are critical and is etched in one's memory (Bochner, 2000).

To make sense of my epiphanies I plug the post humanist perspective to make sense of the selected epiphanies. Plugging simply means thinking with theory (Jackson and Mazzei 2012). That is in analyzing my experience my focus is to describe how my body (blackness as a materiality) is produced and reproduced in my intra-action with the white academic world. A setting (academic world) that forms a major part of my everyday life and relation with the white world. The use of the concept intra-act instead of interaction is a deliberate choice. It is used to indicate as Taguchi (2008, p 115, Jackson and Mazzei (2012, Barad, 2007, p152) point out that interaction connotes interpersonal relation, while intra-action focuses on how discourse and matter are mutually constituting each other and produce a specific way of knowing, knowledge and agency. Taguchi (2008) stress that body writes discourse as much as discourse writes the body. Similarly" (Jackson and Mazzei 2012, p. 111) stress that bodies are: "already discursively produced and the discursive is always already materially produced". This entanglement shapes agency.

The impossible position: the struggle over naming, being named and positionality in a structure

My contradictory experience of the academy is the product of meaning making that manifests itself in my embedding in a multiple structures/communities. I am embedded in a marginalized community (the Somali community in Sweden), and I currently occupy a relatively high position in my University (or the academic field as an Associate Professor). In these social communities, I am positioned simultaneously at the center and the margin of the communities. For instance, my Somali immigrant community positions me at the margin. To them, I represent the few that have succeeded in the Swedish society. Consequently, in the Somali community, I am torn between different demands and ways of being. For instance, I am asked for advice or the members of my community seek my advice and opinion on a variety issues and if I say I have no time or I am busy, I am accused of being "Swedish" or have forgotten my roots. Furthermore, if I give my opinion, which contradicts some of my community members' perceptions, I am accused of being "white". On the hand, the Swedish society (the common person) I represent one of the few "black persons" that have managed to achieve a relatively successful career in the academic field in Sweden. I am met with the perception, often implicit, that people like me (black) do not or are not supposed to achieve such position. To be precise; I am met with "admiration", and questions such as "how did you do it? With mild irritation, I often reply "through hard work and perseverance". This mindset is also apparent (and one which I must admit I often relish) the surprise in the faces of some of my white students when they discover that I am their teacher. One students once told me. "When I got you as my supervisor, I thought shit I am going to fail the course"- this a typical illustration of how body and competency intersect. In other words, this student questioned my competency and more importantly, she saw my materiality or blackness and concluded that I am incompetent. She would have not a prior questioned my competency if I was white. Similarly, I am elated to see the faces of first or

second-generation immigrant irrespective of their origin light up when they see that I am their teacher. To them, I represent what is possible, that despite the obstacles, they can make it. The dark side of this perception is that these students see me as a potential ally, some who understand their plight as the other.

The dominant group controls institutions such as the academy, school, and media in advance nation states etc. It is an arena of domination or arena, in which “outsideness” is produced and reproduced (Spivak 1993). Hence, as the black other, I am confronted with choices: to develop strategies to survive in the academy or to resist, but to resist is not a plausible strategy. Adapting, and accepting, the dominants groups’ norm, disposition and interest allows me to access opportunities and to infiltrate and achieve social mobility. This very sociogenesis of institution, however, make me an oddity in the system and as consequence forces me to adopt an in between position and role in relation to the different communities I am embedded in. For instance, even if I am convinced that the missed opportunity in my academic career was a consequence of discrimination rightly and wrongly, I chose not make a fuss about it. My relation and experience with my academic colleagues is complex and my agency is informed by it. On the one hand, my colleagues see me as one of the margins that has infiltrated the field and made it. To them, I am not a representative of the marginalized other. Nonetheless, I feel I have to watch my tongue and I have to be impeccable in my relations with both my students and my colleagues, and vice versa no doubt. However, as the black other, and who has infiltrate the system, the center take or assumes that I represent the voice of the marginalized and to champion their “cause. Furthermore, as the other, one becomes diversity workers or an alibi for diversity work in the institution. All these relationships, intra-action etc., in different spaces I am embedded in among others shape my knowing and being. I know because I am part of these multiple context, knowing and being thus constitute each other, it widens but also limits my agency.

The margin –center paradox: decentering the center or validating the margins Admission in the Ph.D. program made it possible for me to become part of the research and teaching community in higher education in Sweden. Accessing this field in Sweden meant that I embraced and accepted the Swedish academy and its practices. I am in otherwise, complicit in producing and reproducing the practice or the rule of the game of the academy. The rule of the game in the academy no doubt is stacked in favor of the academics who wield power in different institutions and subject fields. These are often white men from middle and upper class background. In practice, the rule of the game maintains both the privilege of the powerful and to question or attempts to disrupt the monopoly of the center risks one to be consigned to an academic Gulag. In other words, it is the professors, associate professors, management, policy maker (at the national and at the local organizational level) who set the rules of the game, recommend promotion, tenure, distribution of resources etc. These actors no doubt have their own interest and the interest of their discipline, compete for research resources with each other and are in constant struggle to maintain their privileged position or promote their protégés.

Access by post-colonial academics, minorities or white working class in the field of higher education is possible but it does not, mean having the same rights, conditions, and recognition, nor does it mean that a post-colonial academic has the same chances or possibilities

in the academy. This was evident in my experience being doctoral student. I was admitted into the doctoral program based on my past academic merits prior coming to Sweden. The first year of my doctoral studies, I financed my studies through the student loan program (CSN). The first year of doctoral studies, I found myself at the margins of the institutional life. I was not accorded the same condition as my other doctoral colleagues. For instance, all my doctoral colleagues were salaried through different research grants/project or had grants from the university, could attend conferences, and more importantly felt that they had a future in the institution.

These doctoral students were handpicked by different professors at the department from graduate programs. They deemed to have the ability or capacity to successfully complete their doctoral studies. I came from the “outsider”. I was not a product of the Swedish university at the graduate or Masters level. However, my educational credential was recognized and I was admitted in the doctoral program. Every year or every other year a faculty financed doctoral position becomes available, and all doctoral students could apply for the position. It was a tough competition. The application, followed traditional academic criteria. Nevertheless, in the competition the professors were active actors in this process and not neutral in the process. In this process I was an “outsiders” and could not compete with the insiders, particularly with colleague that were salaried, and were being mentored, worked for the professors in a research project or were supervised by powerful professors in the institution. However, in my second year I was allocated a new supervisor and within few months I was awarded a faculty financed position as doctoral students

However, my experience of the academy is not informed by a sense of marginality, or discrimination as implied above. During my academic career I have developed a very close relationship with my doctoral colleagues. My doctoral colleagues and some of the tenured staff at the department opened their arms and we became friends in an outside the academy. They gave me tips how to survive the academy. For instance, a number of my doctoral colleagues encouraged me to change the supervisor. They explicitly pointed out that my current supervisor was not or had little power at the institution. Fortunately; the supervisor I was allocate at the beginning of my doctoral study got a position in another university and consequently I was assigned a new supervisor, and suddenly I was awarded a doctoral position at the institution. These events during my doctoral studies made me aware of culture of grants and academic tokenism. At the end of my doctoral studies, I was not offered a position at the institution. All my “native” doctoral colleagues were offered a teaching position in the academy at the end of their doctoral studies. Through contact that I had and through my initiative I was offered a research position at a research institution. In the last decade or so, I have realized that tenure in the academy is sponsored. It is about whom the professors in an institution want, prefer, it is about establishing alliances or mentoring of individuals that share similar theoretical and ideological conviction about the state of affairs.

The academic discourse of marginality: the struggle over domination of the field In the last decade or so as noted earlier, my research has focused on how different institutional practices constructed a competent or incompetent immigrant subject, and the consequence of this construction of their transition in the Swedish work life. In the last couple of years, my experience of research in the area has stagnated and has in revolves around three explanatory

models: the cultural deficit discourse, discriminatory/ racism or deconstructing the different type's cultural deficit explanatory model. The essence of the cultural deficit discourse has revolved around what I would like to call "cultural fetishism" whereby the other is constructed as the other, and allows the dominant groups to subject the other to symbolic and real violence. The essence of this cultural fetishism departs from the notion that cultural difference as primordial and identity as singular, skills are cultural and contextual and that individuals are victims of structures or cultural practice and agency.

In recent years, however, there are a number of researchers that call for the need go beyond the White and Black binary of racism and discrimination. They argue that it is time to see the importance of globalization, technological development etc., and how these changes shape multiple and decentered forms of discrimination and racism in a society. A good example, of this, is how maids from Africa and Asia (Ethiopians, Philippines, Indians etc., are treated in the Gulf countries, and in other Middle Eastern countries, while Middle Eastern immigrants in Sweden/Europe and United States are similarly are subjected to racism and discrimination. It is also important to point out how racism is also common between different immigrants groups, the exception one might argue, is that racism between immigrant group is inconsequential in the sense that all are in the same boat in relation to the dominant white power structures. However, race, racism, and racialization I will like to stress is heterogeneous, often shifting etc., and reflects the multi-layered intersection of class, ethnicity, gender, and space, it is local and not ahistorical etc. However, in all these spaces shades of "blackness" is the common denominator and a stigma. As researcher, on the field education, migration and integration, I similarly struggle to voice my experience, perspective, in other words, as marginalized other, to problematize the "official, political and academic discourse of my body. The struggle I encounter in the Swedish academy I would like stress is how to understand the marginalization, racism and discrimination of non-European immigrants, in this the voices of Afro-Swedes are made invisible. In Sweden, hence, the voice of non-European immigrants are conflated and this makes the experiences afro-swedes invisible in the academic discourse but also outside the academy.

Concluding remarks

Theoretically and methodologically, my focus in this paper is an attempt to show how phenotype and discourse constitute each other using my experience. In other words, how my "blackness" projects meaning(s) to the "white bodies in different milieus- in these intra-actions which is not ahistorical forces me to constantly be sensitive in the different milieus of whiteness that I willingly or unwillingly navigate in my everyday life. The point I am trying to make or emphasis is that in Sweden and in many other "white society" the academic and political debates, the perception of blackness is explicitly construed as fluid. This "public discourse" ignores and makes invisible the experience of black bodies (afro-Swedes) in white context. The white/black relation and intra-action, knowing, being and agency to rephrase and interpret Du Bois (1903) is shaped by "double consciousness looking oneself through the eyes of the other" (p.3). One is ascribed a collective stigma and dispositions by virtue of their different shade of whiteness and blackness.

Furthermore, race as biological/cultural type is upheld through various and inter-tangled spaces whereby by the discourse of diversity or integration is one these spaces. The discourse

functions to maintain the notion that humanity is made up distinct types of cultures/races. These discourses makes it possible to describe, compare and contrast different culture/races and hierarchize them in relation to each other. In these comparisons, it is the “white culture” that is norm. This understanding is reflected is particularly in the discourse and debate on immigration. For instance, in the discourse immigration/integration, the ability of specific type of immigrant is discoursed in relation to their ability “integrate” by politician, academics etc. Adaption implies often “becoming white”. It implicitly but also sometimes explicitly tells you as the black other that you do not belong and if you are included your positioned or subordinately included or at worst excluded and stigmatized. Stigmatisation gives the white body the right to subject the black other to symbolic or real violence.

Hence, in the academic field the production of knowing, naming the authentic inhabitants of the margins and their suffering is at center of academic practice. In this process, the process is characterized by whiteness as norm often this is not explicit. To question, whiteness, which characterize the majority of institutions particularly by a person of color is to question white power structure, which is not often a good position to be in. Criticizing the established power structure in the academy, by a black academic is to commit suicide career wise. Hence, to survive in the academy as “black person” you have to know your place and build alliances in the field. Alliances gives academic cred or you are vouched by the dominant white power structure that you are competent despite the fact the you are black. It is an assurance to other white colleagues in the institution that you are not a troublemaker.

In Sweden, academics in the field immigration studies analysis of marginalization etc. tend either to focus on how the other is racialised. The focus of racialization involve an analysis or examination of the way in which persons are assigned to specific positions in a society and position which is reproduced or inherited by the children of racialised group in work life. In other words, the analytical focus of racialisation is the material condition of a specific group in a society. The proponents of the use of race (blackness) argue that black people are subjected to symbolic and real violence simply because of their phenotype irrespective of their position or status in the society. Hence, the denial of the blackness as a social marker that disadvantages person African background compare to “fair skinned Latino”, or Bosnian, or an Arab or Turk is partly based on good intention or the reluctance to split and fragment the resistance. In some researcher, the notion of racialization fits well with their ideological leanings or belief. I do not deny that all these immigrant groups are to some extent-racialised groups, but it is a matter of degree, and not all immigrant group face similar experiences. Racialization” is reduced to the material condition of different immigrants and by homogenizing all non-European immigrants; it makes invisible the unique experience of black persons in Sweden. Thus, this paradigm in Sweden undermines the unique experiences of Afro- Swedes within the “non-White community” and leads to conflation of the experience all Non White experiences as similar in relation to white dimension of the binary.

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