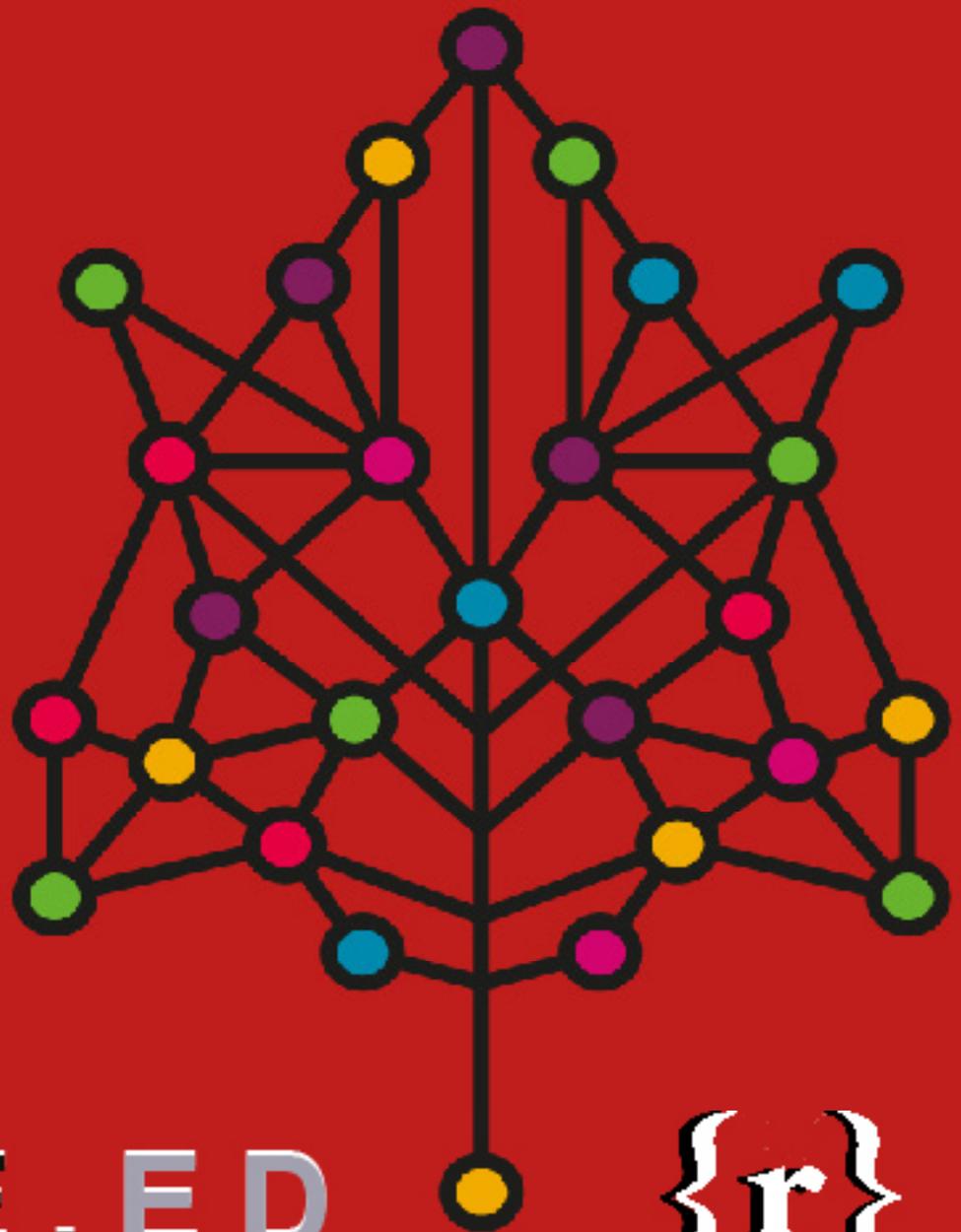


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{retrospect} JOURNAL WITH RACE.ED PRESENTS

RACE IN RETROSPECTIVE



RACE.ED



Contents

Contributors List | 3

Editor's Introduction | 4

The Story of RACE.ED | 6

Articles | 9-46

Making Sense of Silenced Archives: Hume, Scotland, and the “debate” about the Humanity of Black People | **Dr. Chisomo Kalinga**

Listening to the Dead: How Historians Study Race | **Dr. Richard Oosterhoff**

Spoken Gems: When Academia Meets Self-Care – A Conversational Piece | **Dr. Katucha Bento & Dr. Azeezat Johnson**

Race, Science, and the University of Edinburgh | **Lea Gagliardi Ventre**

Craniology and Scientific Racism in Late-Nineteenth-Century Edinburgh | **Professor Ian Harper & Professor Roger Jeffery**

The Imperial Chancellor's Project: Arthur James Balfour and the Global History of the University of Edinburgh | **Dr. Shaira Vadasaria & Dr. Nicola Perugini**

“Race Relations” and the Limits of Social Anthropology | **Professor Jonathan Spencer**

A “Little” Race Relations | **Professor Robbie Shilliam**

Scotland and Racial Inequalities | **Professor Nasar Meer**

Systemic Racism in Scotland increases Racial and Ethnic Minorities' Vulnerability to COVID-19 Infection | **Dr. Gwenetta Curry**

The School of History, Classics, and Archaeology and Institutional Racism – An Interview | **Lucy Parfitt & Jack Liddall**

Wikipedia and the Problem with Neutrality | **Dr. Suzanne R. Black**

Race, Space, and the Radical Paradox of Academia | **Lucien Staddon Foster**

Confronting the Legacies of African Enslavement and Anti-Black Racism at the University of Edinburgh | **Professor Tommy Curry & Dr. Nicola Frith**

Race Equality and the Academy: this far and no more? | **Professor Emerita Rowena Arshad**

Bibliographies | 47

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RACE.ED: Our Story So Far

By The RACE.ED Team

The story of RACE.ED very much represents its symbol: the tree of life – a source of rootedness and vitality. Conceived as a cross-university network to support work on race, racialization, and decolonial studies, RACE.ED is made up of more than one hundred colleagues across the three colleges of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, Medicine and Veterinary Medicine, and Science and Engineering at the University of Edinburgh. As such, RACE.ED reflects an ecosystem constellated across different traditions of thought, research, and teaching commitments, allowing for different genealogies of race and colonialism to be known.

Contributors of RACE.ED have worked to stimulate and deepen conversations around the lasting, structural, and quotidian violence of race and its intersecting sites of power, covering a range of social issues that span the globe. Narrators within this collective also tell a counter-story of coloniality, often recasting the tropes and racial sensibilities that discipline and delimit our political imaginaries. Holding space to address modernity's racial orders and our various modes of refusal, the story of RACE.ED is also one of alternatives. From the outset therefore, it has worked from multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary aspects of our exchange, to bring visibility to the means of racialisation and the conditions upon which race matters.

Translated into three objectives, RACE.ED has worked to deepen and expand a broad and enduring intellectual culture. Firstly, to undergird teaching and learning. Secondly, to support research – within and in connection beyond the university. Thirdly, to insist these topics are not peripheral – or just used instrumentally – in the identity of the University of Edinburgh as an institution.

Nothing is, of course, without a history and ours is inevitably connected to a longer institutional story so effectively detailed by others in this wonderful collection. Yet the specificities of RACE.ED merit a record, for this network emerges from a discussion amongst ourselves. Partly inspired by Gender. ED and the work of Professor Fiona MacKay and Dr Meryl Kenny, a number of us moved forward in 2017 with support from our incoming Head of the School of Social and Political Sciences (SPS) Professor Linda McKie and the then Head of Sociology Professor Jon Hearn. Together, Dr Lilliana Riga, Professor Rowena Arshad, Dr Ashlee Christofferson, and Professor Nasar Meer initiated a series of mapping exercises followed by three open meetings throughout 2018-2019, in which Dr Omolabake Fakunle joined us. The over-whelming view from our consultations with colleagues was that existing work in the areas of race broadly conceived, needed to be better connected across various disciplines and interdisciplinary fields and more proactively supported across the three colleges.

We were joined by Dr Katucha Bento and Dr Shaira Vadasaria in the Spring/Summer of 2020, who, a year later, commenced two RACE.ED Associate Director roles for Content and Engagement respectively. Together, with Professor Nasar Meer, they have taken a lead on race curricula, including “Race and Ethnicity”, as well as a level ten honors practice course designed in collaboration with a set of multidisciplinary students in preparation for the launch of a university wide pre-honors course entitled “Understanding Race and Colonialism”.

Dr Bento is a Black feminist teacher and educator inspired by samba, quilombo, Queer, and Brazilian Black movement communities to deploy her anti-racist and decolonial practices. She is the co-founder of the Free Afro-Brazilian University (UNAFRO), emerging in relation to her transnational work in Education involving adult's literacy, children and youngsters Education, Higher Education

Institutions and grassroots educational projects. Dr Vadasaria completed her PhD at York University (Toronto) and based on her SSHRC (Social Science and Humanities Research Council) funded doctoral research, was awarded the 2018 Sociology Distinguished Dissertation Award. As an interdisciplinary social theorist concerned with the study of race, law, and decolonial studies, her research is informed by lived experiences researching and teaching in Palestine where she taught at Al-Quds University, Bard College, and lived for many years. Working with the Director (Nasar Meer) and the Steering Group, these roles formalised existing labour undertaken in these areas, and connected across new priorities to help to renew RACE.ED objectives and approaches.

All of this is in many ways reiterate that in provenance, we are not a top-down invention, but a coming together of colleagues across the University, something reflected in our governance structure and the Cross-College Steering Group.

So how have we gone about our work so far?

We cannot summarize (at least in a way that does it justice) the work of RACE.ED colleagues so far, but important milestones include:

Firstly, we've been developing and convening a new cross university course on *Race and Coloniality* to commence in 2022. This will be an interdisciplinary course that provides an overview of the major issues at stake in the study of race, racialization, and decoloniality from a broadly conceived social science and humanities tradition. It moves directly off an SPS in-Practice course that Dr Shaira Vadasaria, Dr Katucha Bento, and Professor Meer ran last semester. This team also adopted such a dialogical pedagogy in the honours option *Race and Ethnicity* and received the award as the "Outstanding Course" of 2021 by the Edinburgh University Students Association.

Connected with this more broadly, RACE.ED has worked with colleagues in the Centre for Research Collections and the main library to develop a collection of resources on race and decolonial studies to support teaching and learning more widely.

In partnership with research centres, networks and organisations across the university, RACE.ED co-organised a number of events to address the topic of race and racism from various standpoints. Gender.ED, CAS, CRITIQUE, IASH, ESALA and E-flux co-badged a few of our activities.

We've had just as busy a start externally, with RACE.ED:

- Partnering up with Edinburgh International Book Festival in hosting the author Brit Bennett;
- Working with the Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences (SGSSS) during Black History Month;
- Connecting with Wezi Mhura and Curious Edinburgh and all the incredible artists involved in the Scotland wide Black Lives Matter Mural Trail;
- Publishing with the Coalition for Race Equality and Rights (CRER) and race-equality stakeholders and the Scottish Parliament on our report and panel discussion on Taking Stock – Race Equality in Scotland;
- Bringing together race scholars within and outside of UoE to workshop book manuscripts including Professor Sherene Razack's forthcoming book "Nothing Has to Make Sense: Anti-Muslim Racism, Law and White Supremacy".

Each of these activities and more are detailed our site which was designed by Clare De Mowbray and Adam Cavill who developed our Tree of Life logo that has become so resonant in both our audio and visual presence.

We this in our Podcast Undersong: Race and Conversations Otherwise, launched with the inaugural episode hosted by Dr Shaira Vadasaria in conversation with Dr Katucha Bento, Dr Radhika Govinda, and Prof Tommy Curry on Intersectionality and its usage between the Global North and South. The episode emerged as a welcome collaboration with Gender.ED, and was followed by episodes on public art and memorialization, the relationship between antisemitism and Islamophobia, anti-Chinese racism and a retrospective conversation with UncoverED colleagues.

Most recently we have exhibited an especially curated collection of living images drawn by the artist Paola Roza focusing the theme of collective and creative pedagogies that came out of our inaugural event, co-organised with Dr rashné limki in the business school, featuring contributions from Dr Katucha Bento, Dr Rama Dieng, Dr Carol Dixon, Dr Agomoni Ganguli-Mitra, Dr Radhika Govinda, Dr Kaveri Qureshi, Prof Meer, and Dr Shaira Vadasaria.

Last but not least we are about to award the first of our Fellowships that have come through working with IASH colleagues on their Project on Decoloniality 2021-2024, to be offered in collaboration with The Centre for Research Collections (CRC) and the Stuart Hall Foundation in London.

If then, you look at our network you can see the list of people involved in RACE.ED – some of whom have been part of this conversation for the last two years, and others are just joining. We look forward to being joined by others to come – and please do accept this as an open invitation to colleagues interested in these topics.

A final note of thanks to reiterate that were it not for the support of School of Social and Political Science (SPS), there would be no RACE.ED, and its support that has continued through some really tough periods. In addition to brilliant academic colleagues across each of the subject areas in SPS, this especially includes colleagues in professional services: Michaelagh Broadbent, Joe Burrell, Adam Cavill, Jen Chambers, Gordon Coutts, Clare de Mowbray, Marie Storrar – and so just a continued thank you really to everybody for the time and support you've invested in this journey.

It has been our privilege to collaborate with the Jamie Gemmell, Alice Goodwin, and Tristan Craig, and the entire Retrospect team on this special issue to mark the first anniversary of RACE.ED's launch. This Retrospective issue has given us an opportunity to reflect on where we've been through the past year and where we're headed in the future. We aspire for the RACE.ED Network to continue to reflect anti-racist commitment and dialogue with Global South cosmo-visions, across situated knowledges, at the level of disciplines and experiences – grassroots activists, policy-makers, academics, artists, practitioners, and many other expressions in dialogue with race and the decolonial.

Together, we look forward to building more.

RACE.ED

Spoken Gems: When Academia Meets Self-Care

A conversational piece between Dr Katucha Bento & Dr Azeezat Johnson

Since the pandemic began, things have been intense. Azeezat was increasingly unwell, and Katucha had two bereavements in her family in the space of two weeks in 2020. We were invited to talk about our experiences as Black women discussing race, racialisation, and decoloniality in the “Academy”. The following conversation sits with the tension between Black women thinking and creating alongside academic institutions that are, in many respects, grounded in the epistemic violence of white supremacy.

This piece will frustrate the reader if a traditional academic format is expected. Our positionality is consistently situated in Black feminism as we exchanged voice notes between teachings, hospital visits, research projects, the birth of a family member, and the concomitant possibilities of tearful and delightful moments of our lives.

As a methodological note, the voice notes exchanged were transcribed. The transcription is not presented in order of our conversation. To ease the reading process, we have divided the topics and weaved the conversation to offer a thematic flow. It is not about following a timeline, but rather a conversation that is spoken from the heart. Lacking conventional record-keeping embraces the ethics of caring, as Patricia Hill Collins taught us, freeing us from the formality of notetaking and data records. In Azeezat’s words: “you don’t need a record in order to know that it’s real, right?!”.

As we foreground a Black feminist ethics of caring, we decided to publish the transcription with the ways we speak to each other. The format is inspired by the language and presentation of the e-mails exchanged between Gloria Anzaldúa, AnaLouise Keating, and her students. The language in that communication intertwined Spanish and English, setting the tone of attentive and caring possibilities of addressing people to formulate fruitful experiences, rather than hierarchical academic positions of power. As Anzaldúa provokes:

“I’d like to create a different sense of self (la nepantlera) that does not rest on external forms of identification (of family, race, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality), or attachments to power, privilege, and control, or romanticised self-images. But can we

talk about ourselves in ways that do not rest on some notion of identity when identity is the means by which we (both individuals and groups) attempt to create a sense of security and belonging in the midst of a fast-paced, ever-changing world?”

Dwelling with complicated negotiations of how we are identified and how we rest in a temporary safety net where we build our identifications, we started our talk. Claiming our identification also requires unveiling the violence and microaggressions of the everyday. We do this to situate the urgency to demand and build new world-makings.

Azeezat: “Thank you for inviting me. I can’t lie, things have been intense. While I’ve been unwell, I’ve had to drop so much ... with a rapidly accelerating disease, I was too busy navigating a healthcare system that was facing extreme pressure from all fronts (because of the skilled robbery of successive Conservative governments). And now that the illness has moved to a state beyond preemptive care and I’m trying to ease back into ways of working that bring me joy and nourishment ... I jumped at the opportunity to participate in this dialogue. It feels like I’m trying to imagine ways of dwelling in and caring for my body while knowing that care for my Black crippled body is rarely guaranteed (or even offered). I’m trying to focus on living while also knowing that I’ll soon be passing through my own personal door of no return which is ... uff. It’s heavy. And I want to work through this with a Black feminist who I trust to hold on to the light (also see Lombé in Grégoire & Ntambwe, 2019): I want to spend my time with those ready to fight for the something I believe in, you know?”

Ok. So that’s it from me – I hope you are taking care. I’m looking forward to having this conversation. I think it will be really fun. Sending loads of hugs and light from here m’dear.”

Katucha: “I’m so happy to hear your voice and hear from you. Thank you for accepting and being in this conversation. Of course, whatever you prefer to make this entire conversation through voice notes. I am now in the park, able to share with you and send you the light and the good vibrations that I’m receiving from the Sun, and I hope you are receiving the warm

embrace from the Sun in your heart. I understand the need to step away from academia because it can be very toxic and unhealthy. I do that myself, of course, from a different perspective than you and different circumstances; I don't mean to compare.

Well, let's talk about our journeys that took us to academia. My suggestion for this conversation is to create a dialogue with another Black woman – and my first idea was to talk to you – and explore, to borrow from Audre Lorde, a bit of our “biomythography” in academia. The paths that took us here that are not only academic but related to other aspects. As long as you feel comfortable, talk about the perils to travel into academia from our hearts. Please, share with us your experience in a way that doesn't need to be linear or follow any Cartesian timeline, but highlighting the things you find important in your academic biography. From there, we can talk about how we arrive at a conclusion to attend to our needs to take breaks, breathe, and be outside the ivory tower.”

Azeezat: “I'm so excited to do this with you. So much in what you said. I've been thinking a lot about using voice notes to connect at each individual's own pace. This has been inspired by the time I've been fortunate to spend with my friend and long-time Black feminist mentor, Pat Noxolo. We've been talking about what it means to be in the middle of a really busy, really heavy moment, but also be able to send notes to one another, spend time with one another ... And I feel like it is this power and possibility of spending time together in a different way; for showing care, slowing down enough to send a verbal letter ... that's what I love about voice notes and I love you reaching out and suggesting this dialogue. It just reminds me of the best bits of academia ... All of the parts that I actually care for and am excited by. So, thank you.

So let's talk about what comes from our hearts in these voice notes, and after transcribing, we can see if it is even necessary for us to organise another recorded session. I like what you were saying about speaking from your heart and how that connects to the decolonial possibilities that you are holding on to, you

know?! And, yes! More than anything, what we are trying to teach, is to speak from the heart; to feel our embodiment, to feel how we actually connect with our multiple realities on a deep level. On a level that is based on care, care for ourselves, for our own wellbeing, but also for our collective wellbeing.

It makes me really excited and happy to think about such an exchange that begins with our hearts. I can't let go of it, but also ... Uff! When talking about my personal journey, I need to explore how I am feeling a deep sense of both anger and sadness at the world and the academic world in particular right now. I feel so ... I don't know ... I think the word must be betrayed. Just really ... I keep on remembering all of the moments where something really messed up happened or someone said something that was *clearly* out of order, and everyone else takes a step back and leaves me to do the labour of trying to hold the space. People who would otherwise claim to care and love me could still turn away when it came to addressing structures that privileged their bodies in our university and activist spaces. They could ask things of me, sit on panels with me, organise with me, send me messages of “well wishes” in and around various



Source: Sandra Brewster, *From Life 3*, 2015, mixed media on wood, 60 x 48 in.

hospital treatments ... and also look away when my pain or anger became a bit too inconvenient. Again and again I was left dealing with the after-effects of being seen as the angry and erratic Black woman: a Black woman who could never spend her life passing as a Sicilian princess (Mehri, 2021).

I've been trying to breathe an imagination of self-care into worlds that keep seeing me as too Black to ever be incorporated into their way of doing things. I have to talk about my experiences in *Feminist Review (FR)* here, because, uff! Was it traumatising ... Being so seriously unwell and realising that the free labour I was trying to do around my job was actually breaking me.

And honestly, one of the most painful parts of this whole thing was how the belittling was designed to be a silencing technique: there were implicit and explicit attempts to force me to see myself as a problem, as an alien to my own body. Instead of dealing with the entwined violences of ableism, Islamophobia, and misogynoir that my presence had exposed, they chose to minimize my being and ignore my instincts. I remember having a meeting with some of the striking members and an active FR member. And I was overwhelmed and crying: I couldn't focus on the work I had committed to finishing (for the collective) because I was too busy recovering from the latest round of gaslighting. And I had finally gotten a surgery date sorted for two days' time. And the active collective member – who up until then had repeatedly looked away whenever her presence could have offered even the slightest of comforts – all of a sudden, she was “advising” me on how “you need to be careful you know, Surgeries are such a shock to your body, you really need to let yourself take care before da-da-da-da ...”. At this stage, I'd already been in surgery every six to ten months. I remember looking at her and thinking, “Wow. You have no idea ... you have no comprehension of what it means for me to even be in this (Zoom) room with you right now. You have no concept of what it means to actually live my life. And I finally understand that you don't care.” All of these feminists who built internationally renowned academic careers writing about feminist whatever, they still didn't have to like ... care about my reality, to care about the hurts directed towards my body, within the same academic institutions that they had found space to manoeuvre within.

So instead of allowing them to continue hurting me in the hopes that they will one day recognise the harm they had caused, I left. And a year later, I can't say that I'm over it, or that talking about it isn't incredibly

painful. But I also know I won't hold any untruths or silences in my body for any of them. I refuse to prioritise their care over my own: I will not use my body to cover for anyone that has helped to maintain FR's multiple modes of institutional brutalisation.

And now that I'm trying to return to aspects of academia – with an even more perilous health condition – I've been thinking about how to deal with the heartache and heaviness that academia can cause without letting that heaviness overshadow our being ... And I think that is about spirituality for both of us in different ways ... about how faith inspires us to work towards the possibility of worlds that exist beyond our current scope for imagination. But also it's about trusting our lived experiences and holding on to the decolonial possibilities of like ... Ruining it all (laughter). Abolition. You know what I mean?”

Katucha: “Yes, sister! I feel your words. It's hard to face these situations and be in spaces where the ordinariness of racism (Tate, 2014) is so present and yet feels so invisible to everyone's eyes. My heart feels heavy to hear the details of what happened to you. I know we hold in our Black-feminist-spiritual-loving the possibilities to find liberation from the poison there is in such situations, so have all my solidarity. Always.

Facing such situations means doing an incredible level of emotional, mental/intellectual, physical and spiritual work that is exhausting. Sometimes it feels lonely, at least for me, but it is part of how we (re) connect with each other, you know what I mean? I believe this lonely work to understand how not to let “that heaviness overshadow our being” is how we find the uses of our erotic, like Audre Lorde taught us. This erotic helps us build communities, new connections, and imagine new decolonial forms of relationships with one another.

In my case, I had to translate the makings of racism according to the “label” I received here in the UK. Here I'm not only Black, but Latina, Brazilian, Not-a-proper-English-speaker, and so many other labels that sometimes I just can't ... This translation was not easy as, in Brazil, racialisation and racism are very different. To complicate, I did my Masters programme in Barcelona (Catalonia), where racism has a different colonial shape and expression. During that time, I didn't have a scholarship or any source of income, my family could not send any financial support, and my friends helped me pay for my fees, so finishing my MA programme was a collective victory. I worked

in all different kinds of services, but especially the domestic work was where I felt safer and, at the same time, the typical stereotype.

What helped me to understand my translation process was my supervisor, Shirley Anne Tate as she writes in the first person about the racist experiences she had in academic spaces. The racism I could identify in the everyday encounters were also in academia. Between the many examples we discussed, shared, and drafted, the word limit will not expand our narratives. So, I selected an iconic situation for my Herstory as I watch the debates in the UK about anti-Critical Race Studies, the denial of institutional racism, and what it means the freedom of speech in this imperialistic and colonial setting that is Great Britain. Co-workers, like you mentioned, the white and white-adjacent colleagues, believe that the good intention of not being racist is actually what makes them anti-racist. When this happens, it becomes harder to have a conversation about their reproduction of racism, often because they get caught up in white fragility. After a few attempts to discuss how racism will be included as an issue to address in the pedagogical approach in the department, I had to mark essays and dissertations using the “n” word. In the same assessment batch, I received three essays using the “n” word.

By this time, I was already the “angry” or at least the “annoying” Black woman in the department. The one and only Black woman, by the way. I flagged this to senior colleagues. One response. The person who had to deal with the administrative process of assessment came to my office – after all, these things are never written in an e-mail – and asked: “as my BAME colleague, what do you suggest that we do in this case?”. For me, those words resonated like “as a non-white person, I expect you to tell me how I deal with this racist situation to make it look like we care, but we are not willing to make any structural change in the ways students and staff discuss and reproduce orderings of race and racism. As the only Black woman in the department, in other words, the token, the ‘BAME’, what can I do so I don’t need to really engage with the meaning or practices of anti-racist pedagogies?”. I refused to answer that question to that person. Refused to do the emotional and psychological labour on top of the administrative labour he asked me to do. Refusal to engage with the comfort zone of whiteness, bringing answers or solutions to the problem that whiteness created. To get to that point, racism permeated academic relationships for a while, authorising ugly things to escalate in situations that I haven’t still found the means to verbalise.



Source: Luna Bastos, *Travessia* ('Crossing'), 2020.

At that stage, I had lost weight, developed chronic pain that numbed my left leg and foot. It was mentally draining ... I had students suggesting that my English was not good enough; was introduced by co-workers as a researcher instead of a lecturer; the co-workers who identify as “allies” whispered in my ear many times after hallway jokes or gossips related to my response to racism, sexism, and xenophobia “don’t worry about that ...” or “I will talk to them for you” or “don’t give much attention to it!”. All these things were happening during the BLM demonstrations when I was asked to co-write two of them. It was when many universities were writing their solidarity statements. It is crazy how our experiences correlated! It is indeed heart-breaking to deal with the politics of not-caring in these toxic environments on the ground of those institutions.

So, this exercise of sharing biomythographies is healing ... And healing is political. Finding wellness is a slap in the face of racism. That is why building a loving space is sacred, political, and strategical to me. That is where the decolonial breathes (for me). As you mentioned in the beginning, taking breaks is part of our protection. Protecting ourselves can be spiritual (our meditation, prayers, rituals), can be related to our health, it can be everything or anything

we want or need. I take my crystals, Orishas, and herbs as part of the process.

I also believe in the importance of creating a supportive collective in academia. This leads me to think about how or whether we have decolonial possibilities in the academic space. How are we doing that? I believe that we are doing something. I believe that you are doing something. The publications, the teachings, and even the tweets you post are somehow creating a bridge that enables a different experience in academia – and I love when students engage in that. It might be limited, but I will always have hope in our roles as educators. The new moon has just passed, so I wish you light and love for the new cycle. I also want to share with you that my sister is having a baby in the next few days. I'm happy with the news, and I hope I made you smile.

Azeezat: “You made me smile multiple times. I trust us to navigate that. What does it look like to work in an academic institution, work within the heartache of it, sit in some very brutal systems of non-care and yet still choose one another and find a way to create systems of care?”

And congratulations about becoming an auntie. A couple of years ago, my brother had our first next-generation kid, and it's just been a game-changer. She is amazing in every single way. So, I'm excited for you. Sending lots of love and speak soon”.

As we wind towards an ending in this piece, we stay grounded in one certainty: we will continue honouring ourselves, taking care of ourselves, and speaking from our hearts. We end with this thought, instead of creating idealised homemade recipes that do not work (even for ourselves). There is no romanticism in the ways we are envisioning the decolonial and hoping for the transformation of academic spaces. Our conversation was deep, therapeutic, reflexive. It picked up on discomfort, pain, and harm; but it also returned to a Black feminist politics of care and consideration for our different embodied realities. In reading between these feelings, we finish this piece, actively working for transformations that lead people to speak from their hearts and think otherwise.

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