Symposium on Early Career International Law Academia: Black in the Ivory: Reflections of Early Career 'Blackademics' in International Law

By:

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Following the uprisings for Black life in the spring of 2020, the movement quickly marched its way into the academy with the viral hashtag #BlackInTheIvory harvesting confessions of black scholars – or 'blackademics'. This post presents the perspectives of six anonymous early-career blackademics from universities in Europe, Australia and North America, each pursuing careers in international law. Sharing their positive and negative experiences navigating this industry, this post aims to foster exchange and understanding about the relevance of identity when establishing an academic career in international law.

An initial challenge for any early career researcher, no matter their race, is breaking into the academic market. Certain international law blackademics may feel that their race plays a role at this stage. For starters, the scarce number of blackademics in the industry may intimidate newcomers. Suma* from Canada delayed pursuing her doctorate, despite opportunities to do so, for five years after finishing her LLM out of fear that she would not be hired. “Having seen the dire statistics around the hiring of qualified Black women in the legal academy, I was terrified that after years of financial sacrifice, I would not be valued on the ‘market’. Even without statistics, I know that the exclusion of Black women from the academy has been systemic and predictable.” Salma, born, raised and working in Canada, commented that the field there is “so small and dominated by a few white voices.”

Many of these scholars have a sense that as minorities, they must work harder than typical candidates, who tend to be white and more economically privileged. Maya, completing a PhD in Switzerland, claims, “Without strongly believing it, I admit that [this advice] does not leave me indifferent, especially since it was uttered by a black [professor of international law] who knows the rules of the game.” Nigerian-born academic Obasi specifies that this is particularly the case for academics based in Africa. “The average black scholar [living in Africa] has not had access to even one international conference to attend,” he reflects. “I got a stipend to do so when I moved to Australia.”

The challenge of systemic bias was raised by half of this group of scholars but approached with nuance. Obasi submitted 20 applications following his PhD, but only got invited to one interview. “I kept wondering at the back of my mind, if I were a white person would this happen?” But of course, it is uncertain whether bias may be involved. One scholar answered: “You can always self-doubt; that’s part of the gaslighting that comes in this field. Although recruitment is about merit, even merit can be race-based and people aren’t willing to acknowledge that.” But most have sought confirmation from colleagues or loved ones that they “weren’t crazy” – “when I shared this experience with [non-black] colleagues, they were aghast and did acknowledge some sort of bias”, one said about being rejected from all job applications for a pre-tenure track position. Another “had to lean into other people who confirmed [her] suspicions.” Salma from Canada has sat in recruitment panels at her university and seen first-hand that, “If the candidate doesn’t look like you (…),

their chances of being hired are pretty slim. Faculties are keen to hire people who look like them and mirror them in as many ways as possible. If you don't have the diverse group of people doing the hiring, then you won't have a diverse candidate pool."

But while overall the number of blackademics remains low, there appears to be a newfound emphasis in adding more diverse voices to international legal academia. I personally feel that my race has played positively into my obtaining academic positions, and Salma recalls "times where I feel race is positive in my pursuit of academic positions because they were receptive to a diverse candidate pool." So how do these blackademics feel about diversity hires? Some aren't keen. Emmanuel from Australia fears that diversity hiring "may lead to people of 'diverse background' compet[ing] for a single position against each other", potentially enabling "pernicious and bad faith comparisons between good and bad immigrant/racial background." But other interviewees view it more positively: Suma argues that "material representation through individual hires is critical [to] advance racial justice in the university". Salma adds that "2022 is upon us and we know we can't trust some hiring committees to intentionally incorporate equity, diversity and inclusion considerations in the process." She sits on hiring committees at her university for this reason. I am personally of the view that I am qualified for the positions I apply for, and I know my worth. So, if it takes some institutionalisation of diversity practices for me to be given an equal shot to the typical candidates, then that's great.

What about the experiences of such scholars once they've secured an academic position? Some can feel isolated – Obasi recalled that in his previous university, he was "the only black academic at the time", while Salma is thankful to have fostered "a group of really supportive and likeminded colleagues who go through the same things." Can they be open about their identity at university – for example, through the way they dress? UK-based lecturer Tanesha says that she can wear Nigerian traditional outfits in her "supportive environment". Maya from Switzerland says that "the rare occasions where I wore traditional clothes, the feedback was rather positive. However, I prefer to stay neutral, that is, to dress like everyone else so as not to mark my racial identity more." Suma eased into it with time, "curls unfurl[ing] from my ponytail", and she now shows "tattoos that for me are a part of my Black queer community, some with messages that have spiritual meanings for my family

and wider Black communities." She reflects on the wider implications of being true to oneself in this respect:

"Relaxing into the way that I speak, carrying myself as I do, without conforming to what I began to recognize as pervasive, white performances of legal education, this was liberating for my students. I also strive to be genuine in my appearance, voice and other forms of expression in solidarity with other faculty members and staff who face similar circumstances to me, whether they are racialized folks, are queer, speak the dominant languages of our field as second languages, or otherwise."

This group of scholars also shared their experiences discussing their background, culture, or anything to do with race, with non-black colleagues. Sara feels she must present herself "in a way that doesn't frighten or intimidate" and "[doesn't] have room to express [her]self fully". "I'm very careful in what I say and how to say it, because I don't want to be misunderstood – otherwise, you're typecast and put in a box. I can't be my true self in this job. It's frightening, but it's something I have to do to survive in academia." Emmanuel candidly says that he has never engaged in such discussions – at least not comfortably, "And not for lack of trying nor for shame about my background either. Even when invited to do so it leads to awkward social moments and so it is perhaps best to be avoided or only to be expressed in safe Disney style kitsch."

Finally, half of the interviewees report inappropriate comments or misinformed remarks related to race at their universities. This can take the form of "being belittled through subtle gestures" according to Salma, or a "patronising smile or view around issues animating Africa" in Obasi's experience. I personally have not had such an experience, nor has Tanesha. But Suma has also experienced "nuanced communications that are nearly impossible to locate", adding that, "It is not unusual for me to feel put down when senior, non-racialized scholars engage with me, even if they do not engage in outright 'discrimination'". She has also witnessed "racially infused language in international legal scholarship, the use of pejorative language, omissions that reflect implicit biases, 'othering' and systemic 'erasure'". Much of this can be well-meaning, or a reflection of ignorance or miseducation on racial matters – Obasi explains this by saying, "When you're in a position of privilege, you are blinded to suffering and to

nuances”. But when it occurs, does this group of scholars feel they can speak up? “Of course,” says Maya, but she would craft her reaction “in proportion to the gravity”. Tanesha has also comfortably spoken up as the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Lead at her university about ‘inappropriate activities’ that she was unable to disclose. Emmanuel would not do so directly, but rather “find ways to do it in the ‘academically respectable’ passive aggressive expression including the use of allegories, metaphors and the good old Roman à clef.” Indeed, Salma feels that “if you do speak up about certain things you have to be very mindful about how you go about it”. Similarly, Obasi says “it’s more about educating rather than criticizing.” Salma believes that not using her position in such a way would be a “disservice to my people and community”. As Toni Morrison said, “It is our responsibility in positions of power to help those coming after us”.

Following the Black Lives Matter uprising in spring 2020, greater consideration has been given to diverse representation in the legal academy, and the international legal academy is not immune to this. Despite this newfound reckoning of growing diversity in our field, I was curious to address some issues still being faced by certain early career researchers. As Suma has observed, “However much I strive for a different world, immediately, I believe transformation is a multigenerational process of faith sustained through daily action. I feel blessed to be where I am. I would not say it is a benefit of my racial identity, as there can be no silver lining to the injustices that have led to my field or my position.”

If you are a current or prospective early career blackademic, what can you do as you enter or escalate this industry? Know that you are just as worthy as any other candidate, work hard and keep trying. More of us are finding our place here. Once you secure an academic position (because you will!), I would make two humble suggestions to optimise your mental sanity. First, try to connect with colleagues (whatever race) who could provide support if you were ever to need it. Second, it is best to believe that most people you come across act out of miseducation or misunderstanding rather than malevolence. This mindset could make it easier for you to speak up, should you ever need to. As for all academics, no matter what race, we could benefit from having respectful and open dialogue about such issues, in view of further enhancing diversity and inclusion in international legal academia. My hope is that my exchange with

these interviewed black international law scholars can generate wider discussions within universities about diversity and inclusion in hiring practices, university environments and international legal scholarship.

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*This post is not representative of every black academic's experience in international legal academia – but only reflects those interviewed. *All names have been changed for anonymity at the request of the interviewees. They also requested that specific details of what they may have lived through not be shared. While this may create difficulty for certain readers to fully grasp certain issues raised, I have tried to write this in a way that is both fair in describing the issues but also protecting the interviewees. Many thanks to them for their honesty and courage. Thanks also to Alex, Juju and the reviewers for their helpful feedback and editing. I wish to also thank Sonya, Charles, Mamadou, Ntina and Obiora for their kind assistance as I prepared to write this piece.*

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