



CHAPTER 12

Lessons on Humility: White Women's Racial Allyship in Academia

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BECOMING WHITE IN SOUTH AFRICA

There are a vast number of articles currently being written around decolonisation. A quick search on The Conversation (<https://theconversation.com/africa>), an online platform that offers academics the opportunity to disseminate their research to the wider public, brings up hundreds of articles written since 2015 with the word decolonisation in the title—many by white authors. However, what is missing so far from the conversation is a discussion about the role of white academics in challenging the systemic inequalities so prevalent in South African higher education. What does it mean to be an “ally” in the context of decolonisation? Is there a role for us? Should there be a role? And if yes, what would such a role look like? In this chapter, I am reflecting on my own ongoing struggles as a white, middle-class female academic, deeply concerned with social justice issues, trying to find my space in the decolonial project in higher education in South Africa. I recognize that by writing about and challenging Whiteness, I am centering Whiteness while white allyship should be concerned with decentering what is usually centered.

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As such, this piece is addressed primarily to a white audience although it might be of interest for people of colour as well—even if only to affirm that Whiteness should and can be challenged from within.

My family and I arrived in Cape Town in 2010. Born in Austria, I had for many years travelled around Africa, including four years spent at the University of Botswana. This is where I met my husband, who was born in Kenya. We have two mixed-race children. Before getting married, our long conversations were not about our own racial positions and the different levels of privilege these entailed. Somehow that didn't seem important, as in general we encountered openness, support and curiosity when we engaged with others. What we spoke more about was having and raising mixed-race children: about challenges they might encounter when growing up, their complex identities and their lack of a place called home. It was our firm belief that it would be up to us to create a home for them and that their rich cultural heritage would ultimately be an advantage to them, making them global citizens.

In 2010, we arrived in South Africa, where I took up a position as an academic staff developer at a large university of technology serving predominantly underprivileged students. My rose-coloured view of difference quickly changed. I realised that race—in my case, being white—mattered in a way that I had never experienced before. I signed the lease for a flat within a month of arrival; I got my bank card within a week; I suddenly had a voice in departmental meetings; I was listened to although I was often the youngest and a woman, a combination that in other contexts had presented a struggle for me to be acknowledged or recognised. I never got stopped by the police; I was never asked for my staff card when entering the library; I never experienced problems booking a table in restaurants... and the list goes on. I only noticed these things because others, who had a different skin colour, did not share these experiences. My husband started complaining that people overlooked him when they greeted me. He pointed out how people locked their car doors when he passed by. He showed me how women suddenly held their bags closer in a queue at the supermarket when he stood behind them. I was shocked and initially unconvinced. I told him not to be paranoid, implying that he had a chip on his shoulder. That is how blind I was to my own Whiteness.

I eventually realised that as a partner to a black man and as a mother to two mixed-race children, growing up in South Africa, I needed help to learn to understand this context better—to learn how to respond to my partner's experiences of racism or how to prepare my sons for this

world. What I quickly learnt, however, is that it was not easy to talk about race—both in my professional and in my personal spaces I encountered mostly silence when I tried. Apartheid worked by separating people by race, culture and gender. When Apartheid was finally abolished in 1994, South Africa introduced a new ideology in the name of collective nation building: “rainbowism”. Rainbowism emphasised common ground and sameness rather than a focus on difference and was meant to fight racism and discrimination, much as the phenomenon of “color blindness” in the USA (Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2006). One of the side effects of rainbowism is that South Africa—and in particular white South Africa—is highly uncomfortable with talking about race, which in turn contributes to rendering black experience or black pain invisible while keeping white privilege in place.

Eventually, about a year and half after arriving South Africa, I decided to start an interracial dialogue group with some women I knew and who were equally frustrated by the lack of spaces to engage around race. The group, which we called “This Dialogue Thing”, embraced bell hooks’ (2000) principles for dialogue: meeting at somebody’s house, honouring everybody’s voice, creating an alternative space focusing on the lived experience of participants. We distinguished these encounters from what we experienced as theoretical, guarded, disembodied and—unfortunately—often predominantly white debates on race and reconciliation in South Africa found in academia.

Being part of this dialogue was transformative for me. I had to let go of the idea that being married to a black man, having mixed-race children and living in diverse spaces meant I was not racist. By sharing our stories of our own deep-seated racism, owning up, for example, to our own racial profiling (and if we didn’t by being immediately called out on these by our black group members), we learnt to become more sensitive to it and understand racism as systemic, implicating each and every one of us. I remember one of those stories I shared: it was parent teacher evening at my children’s school and my husband and I were late. The black security guard at the school gate did not want my husband to park inside the school, claiming that there were no parking slots left, while he allowed the next car in, driven by a white parent. My husband was livid and started arguing with the guard. Instead of supporting him, I felt embarrassed, got out of the car and left him there, fighting by himself, in order to try and get to the parent meeting in time. I didn’t want to see that racism at that moment, didn’t want to step in, torn between my responsibilities towards my children (making it

in time to the parent teacher meeting) and my responsibility towards my husband (calling out racism). It helped unpack this moment with my group members, trying to understand the difficult choices we have to make at all times and trying to struggle with competing responsibilities, loyalties and needs.

What I learnt in this group impacted on my work with my students, my relationships with my colleagues and my personal life, as I became more and more aware of how white privilege plays itself out in everyday interactions. I actively sought out people of colour to work with—called in strategically by course lecturers when a white voice was needed to explain concepts such as white privilege, white fragility or whitesplaining to students. I tried to show how white defensiveness or white fragility, i.e. the inability to engage with in race conversations, is a symptom of the affective investments in social norms, which we accumulate over a lifetime, and which make it so difficult to shift our worldviews and behaviours (Ahmed 2004). DiAngelo (2011), who coined the term “white fragility”, argues that white people have grown up in an “insulated environment of racial protection [which] builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress”, leading to what she refers to as “White Fragility” (54). I shared my own personal story of “becoming white” in South Africa over and over again—both in my academic work and in my personal life (Gachago 2016). I was convinced that interracial dialogue was the way forward for South Africa.

Although the dialogue allowed us to become better at talking about race, we struggled to address the intersectionality of, for example, race and gender or race and class in our group. In retrospect, I understand that gender can allow women—in particular white women—to hide behind their own oppression in relation to patriarchy, rather than addressing their own personal racism. As such as a focus on intersectionality can be a form of white fragility (DiAngelo 2011), if not checked properly. Similarly, what we also learnt is the importance of a women-only group, to establish trust and solidarity, but also to be able to focus on race, rather than be compromised by other power dynamics such as female/male hierarchies. This is why this chapter emphasises racial rather than, for example, gender or class oppression. It focuses on my role as white ally, rather than as a white female ally, as this is where I feel I learnt the most, although I see gender oppression in academia as real and important to unpack.

THE ROLE OF WHITE ALLIES

About five years after I arrived in South Africa came #RhodesMustFall, in 2015, led by black students at the University of Cape Town (UCT), calling for the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue dominating the central space of the campus and more generally raising an awareness around the lack of decolonisation of higher education locally and globally (Chaudhuri 2016). Higher education institutions all over South Africa were swept away in a storm of protests, closing down campuses for months and reigniting debates around our colonial past, the legacy of Apartheid and the deeply unsettling process of decolonising the curriculum.

I was first excited by this movement, hoping that maybe finally the moment had come, where we could widen the dialogue, using our experiences of interracial dialogue to start a conversation across difference, power and privilege at our institutions. But I soon realised that the #RhodesMustFall movement was defined as a black movement, emphasising the centrality of black voices and black pain—not necessarily calling for the kind of interracial work that I had been doing. For the first time, the concept of “White Allyship” made the rounds. The literature around allyship, whether in the context of race, gender, disability or sexuality activism, is vast—globally and locally. Opinions around the value of allyship are divided. It is widely acknowledged that allies can be useful in calling out racism or sexism, and working amongst those like them. By recognising and acknowledging their own privileges, they can help to dismantle stereotypes and provide valuable support to individuals in oppressed groups who may not have the power, status or opportunity to influence institutional and systemic change (Alandzes 2017; Alexander 2016; Dlavalku 2015; Murphy 2015).

In the context of #RhodesMustFall, white allies were asked to step back from the conversation and show silent support, using their white privilege strategically by, for example, acting as human shields and protecting their black peers from police brutality during protests and demonstrations, setting up support stations, dropping food and drinks during building occupations or raising bail money for students who had been arrested during protests (Sherriff 2015). White voices should be limited, if heard at all, to white-only spaces in which they should engage white academics in conversation and help to build support for the

movement there (“Disrupting Whiteness: UCT” n.d.). For a long time, I felt paralysed, not knowing how to engage in the protests, although I in my heart supported them. I watched the movement from a safe distance, struggling to understand what my role should be. Our dialogue group also took a break during those times, as in particular our black group members felt strongly that their energies were needed elsewhere.

STEPPING BACK AND CALLING OUT

My white allyship was first tested in a discussion about decolonising the curriculum on our departmental WhatsApp group. During the height of the 2016 #FeesMustFall protests, which called for free decolonial education in South Africa, my colleagues engaged in a long conversation about the implications of another campus closure. Opinions varied widely but the conversation was polite, not allowing emotions to flare up, until a black person wrote an angry response arguing that “white liberal academics” were the worst enemies of the movement. A white colleague responded reprimanding her for her “aggressive tone”—putting forth the argument of “I understand your anger” but—for the sake of interracial conversations—asking her to use a more conciliatory approach. I saw this as “tone policing” in its worst possible form. I had stayed quiet so far but felt the need to step in at that point and said as much, including an article about the danger of such silencing (Hugs 2015). My comment was met with defensiveness but also a question by an Indian colleague whether white people should have a say in this debate at all. It felt deeply uncomfortable: stepping out and challenging Whiteness openly like that, the awkwardness of meeting my white colleagues face-to-face later, doubts about my approach (should I have had a back channel talk with the colleague about “tone policing” rather than calling her out openly?). But it was also reaffirming, as my black colleague sent me a private message later thanking me for standing up for her.

Taking the decolonising project seriously means challenging established power structures and systems in higher education. It means challenging everything academia holds dear: who teaches, the knowledges that are being taught, the teaching and learning approaches used, the spaces we teach within. It means a deep reflection on the purpose of higher education—in particular in contested spaces as South Africa. How can education transform society? Or society education? How can we create an academic space that is meaningful to our staff and our students?

How can education help address inequality? And what does that mean then for the white ally?

Rigby and Ziyad (2016) suggest: “Perhaps the only action white folks can take—barring physical disappearance—in the struggle for black liberation, for them to successfully put an end to their own Whiteness, is the absolute absolving of their places and power” (para. 19). Is that our only role? To give up power and make space for the other? What does this mean for our academic practices? What does it mean to step back and allowing others to take the lead? *Can* Whiteness ever step aside and let others lead? Recently, I worked on a presentation with a black colleague on our attempts to decolonise her course curriculum. We decided she should be the one to present. It made sense—it was her course, her students and conversations around decolonisation must be led by people of colour. Still it was not easy. As white academics, we are so used to being at the front and talking, to be leading the conversation, to be at the centre of the debate; stepping back takes strain. Keeping quiet creates strain.

But I believe there is more to it. Macedo (1993) writes about the “social construction of not seeing” (189) in the context of American education, which has been equally prevalent among white South Africans for decades. As Heleta (2017) points out, “leaders, managers, staff members, academics and well-off students often turn a blind eye to the painful lived experiences that many black students and workers go through on a daily basis” (6). Stepping back cannot mean turning away, giving up responsibility. Although this might very well be a defence or survival mechanism, a response to not feeling “wanted” as ally, being told to keep silent, or a strategy to continue navigating and negotiating deeply unjust systems, as white allies we have to start seeing, listening and calling out oppressive systems and practices.

LISTENING TO OTHERS

Another step then towards white allyship is to learn humility, to recognise that we *don't know*, that we might not hold the knowledge, experience and skills necessary to take South African higher education further at this moment. We may need to acknowledge that others may hold more important knowledge—first and foremost our colleagues and our students, whose lived experiences and needs should shape curricula. Pett (2015) calls for teachers to be retaught—not only new knowledge, but also new ways of engaging with students, facilitating difficult

conversations, handling emotions, allowing the personal into the classroom. Within this decolonial project, there is a huge opportunity to create democratic spaces for authentic co-production of knowledge, in the Freirean sense (1970) in which lecturers and students jointly work on “unveiling the reality”, understanding it critically and creating new knowledge in the process, if we allow ourselves to step back and really, actively listen (69). As Sevenhuijsen (2002) asks us to do: to retreat to make space for the other. Over the last few years, we introduced the Privilege Walk (Unsaid 2017) to our students in an attempt to start a conversation around the systemic, intersectional and complex nature of privilege. While the activity worked well to give students an embodied experience of privilege and led to fruitful conversations, it also left us unsettled. One of the main points of discomfort for us was the question “who learns and at whose cost does the learning take place?” The Privilege Walk powerfully visualises the inequality of today’s society, but can be traumatising for those at the back of the grid—as our students mentioned many times. Listening to our students, we developed the activity further and asked them to come up with new statements to create a new grid, based on different societal values—statements that allowed other students to be in the front. Through this activity students set up a new social grid, a new system, a new society, one that they could feel proud of and one that affirmed them, even if just for those few minutes in class (Ngoasheng and Gachago 2017).

WHITE PEOPLE SETTING UP WHITE SPACES

There are strong voices in the decolonial debate who challenge the notion of white allyship, emphasising the danger of involving white allies in the fight against white supremacy. These arguments are framed by the belief that whites can never be separated from Whiteness and that Whiteness cannot operate in any way that does not first perpetuate white supremacy (Rigby and Ziyad 2016). The inability to step back and listen can derail the process, take centre space and thus re-centre Whiteness “[b]ecause for white people ‘to do’ anything means that Whiteness must be centered in a way that would perpetuate its oppressive essentiality” (Rigby and Ziyad 2016, para. 6).

This can be seen in calls for “black only” spaces, such as the recent lecture on “decolonizing the mind, securing the base” by Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o at UCT, which was disrupted by students questioning the

presence of white bodies—the enemy—in the room (Chutel 2017; Fongoqa and Maasdorp 2017). When I heard what had gone down at UCT, I was at first taken aback. How can students ask white people to leave the room? Were we not an important part of the dialogue? Of the conversation? I still struggled with the idea of not being wanted, not playing a role in a cause that I felt so deeply passionate about. It took me a while and a number of conflicts with my black colleagues, in which I caused harm and pain and abused the trust that was placed in me as white ally and friend, to understand the violence that white people can cause in mixed-race spaces (Leonardo and Porter 2010).

My dialogue members had warned me repeatedly: white people set up white spaces. What does that mean? It took me a while to fully understand the scope of this statement. Only a few weeks ago I was tasked to organise a workshop for early career researchers on supporting diverse students in higher education. Decolonising the curriculum was a core theme of the debates in the online phase before the face-to-face workshop. When it came to workshop facilitation, I reached out for recommendations on social media, and since Cape Town's facilitation scene is dominated by white women, the first names I was given by my network of friends and colleagues were all members of this group. I contacted the first person suggested, who immediately showed interest and even offered to do the facilitation pro bono because she liked the project so much. And I just accepted. I—who has presented at various occasions around the power of cross racial collaboration, about the danger of Whiteness—organised a workshop on decolonisation facilitated by a white woman and didn't see the problem. Very quickly, my black colleagues and friends stepped in and in no uncertain words demanded that I look for a person of colour to co-facilitate the process. I was floored. How could that have happened to me? I saw the deep disappointment—even anger—in my friends. Could—should—that happen to a white ally? Should I not be more careful, self-reflective, aware of these issues? Would they still see me as white ally?

CONTINUOUS SELF-REFLEXIVITY

How can whites make themselves vulnerable enough to acknowledge and be open about their biases, thought and structures framed by Eurocentrism (Chaudry 2009)? Reflecting on and dismantling our biases, our own—very likely colonising—frames of thought, might be the

most important thing we can do in this context. “Vulnerability, authenticity and respect—as well as imagination—are so vital in the decolonisation debate to ensure we really sink our teeth into the detail rather than bellowing at each other only about definitions” (Behari-Leak et al. 2017, para. 25). How can we achieve this? Reflecting back on my misstep when I organised a white facilitation team, I understand my friend’s disappointment, her hurt. I managed to keep my white fragility at bay. I managed to listen to her and not react too defensively—although I tried to argue my case at first, citing the pro bono offer, which was quickly rejected—why hadn’t I at least given people of colour a chance to do the work? She later told me that she found the pro bono argument particularly triggering as it reminded her of the recent historic silicosis court case, in which reason that was given as to why the advocates for the mine workers were all white was that they agreed to work at a reduced rate (Nontshiza and Clarke 2015). I also tried to correct my mistake by organising a diverse facilitation team. However, what I could not do was to communicate to her my deep shame and my fear of losing not just my “allyship” status, but more importantly her trust and her friendship.

Why was it so difficult to not just listen to her and argue my case, but to show her how I *felt*? To make myself really vulnerable? Buhle Zuma (2015), a lecturer in the Psychology Department at UCT, made a strong statement in a talk about violence in South Africa: *Whiteness is not able to commit suicide*. Whiteness is constructed as an absolute being or as a closed system. There is no room for doubt or change, and suffering and injustice are externalised and happen outside this system. How can we be something else other than what we constructed ourselves to be?

Heleta (2017) argues that an “involvement of white academics in the decolonisation project requires self-reflexivity, recognition of privilege, personal change and growth as well as unlearning of the old knowledge designed to subjugate and exploit the other” (6). Being a white academic ally means never allowing ourselves to be comfortable, being hyper-aware and upfront about who we are, our own intersectional subjectivities, and how this impacts on who we teach, write and do research with, who we supervise and who we invite into projects or who invites us into projects. South African academic Lis Lange (2016) describes this process of watching herself all the time beautifully:

These are the kinds of things you learn, to watch yourself, and then you become very sensitive to your own behaviour. Sometimes I can see myself

doing what I am doing. Which is not bad all the time because then you can see yourself this close to the abyss, to just putting your feet in the wrong place, and then you correct your course. (116)

If we are lucky enough, we catch ourselves before we make mistakes, or if we can't, we might have black colleagues who trust us enough to continually challenge us and point out our own blind spots, as Alexander (2016) mentions: "Developing as an Ally is a skill that doesn't happen overnight; it comes from engaging in open conversations, asking questions, recognizing your own biases and blind spots, and stepping out of your comfort zone" (para. 5).

WHERE IS MY COOKIE?

Being a white ally in the decolonial project is a lifelong and difficult process and practice of unlearning, necessarily failing over and over again, accepting the uncertainty and complexity we have to negotiate every day, which will put us many times in highly defensive positions. Allyship is a verb, is action, is something we do, not just read and write about. It's taking risks, putting yourself on the line, asking uncomfortable questions, becoming, as Sara Ahmed (2004) termed it, a "killjoy", the one that constantly pokes and stirs, not allowing white business as usual. However, maybe most importantly, being a white ally means to be somebody who recognises, accepts, keeps working on and speaks out about their own racism. Guilt and shame should not prevent us from opening up about our own mistakes—on the contrary, as Boutte and Jackson (2014) advise, accepting one's shame and guilt can be productive: "There is no shame or guilt in what we do not know as long as we are open to learning and pursuing other possibilities. Therefore, white allies need to find ways to make peace with damage done and being done by white racism" (363). For me, this means finding a way to allow myself to feel the pain Whiteness inflicts on people of colour and at the same time feel compassion for our continued failings, our white guilt and shame. While I agree with Adichie (2013) that, "racism should never have happened and so you don't get a cookie for reducing it", I find being an ally is also highly rewarding. There is so much to learn, so much joy in doing this work, in recognising the complexity in ourselves and others, of finding ourselves in the other, in establishing deep and lasting relationships across difference.

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