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Who is not on the list?

Navigating white academia

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Abstract

In onderstaande auto-etnografische tekst reflecteert Sibbo Kanobana over een alledaags voorval aan een Europese universiteit tijdens de coronapandemie van 2020. Daarbij toont hij aan hoe alledaags racisme in werking treedt in een witte academische omgeving en hoe een klein voorval het zelfbeeld van de betrokkene aantast. De tekst beschrijft vervolgens hoe op die manier zelftwijfel aangewakkerd wordt en bijdraagt tot de moeilijkheid om in een witte wereld zonder schroom over racisme te praten.

Keywords: structural racism, whiteness, academia

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“Your name is not on the list”, she said, “I can’t let you in”. She wasn’t unfriendly but made clear that I wasn’t supposed to be there, that I should leave.

A few weeks ago, I got an e-mail from the head of my department at university asking for volunteers to invigilate the exams. Due to Covid-19, exams had to be organized differently. Instead of one auditorium with one hundred students supervised by two or three academics, the group had to be split in four and spread over four different auditoriums. Consequently, there was a need for more invigilators and I volunteered to help.

I was assigned to a location, but when I arrived the people in front of the building responsible for registering the students and distributing facemasks said they couldn’t let me in. I said I was here with Mark Van der Steen¹, that he was also an invigilator, and that he should already be inside. She took a look at her list again and said: “There is no Mark Van der Steen either, sorry, I think you are at the wrong location.”

I started to doubt myself, so I took my phone and checked my e-mails. Did I miss something? Did I forget to read a last urgent e-mail? Or did I come on the wrong day? Was it yesterday or rather next week? I started to get stressed, scrolling through my e-mails and using the search function to find any mails I could have missed, went through my spam. Nothing. I couldn’t find any other e-mails than the communication in which I responded and confirmed that I would be there. I showed the lady my e-mail, but she wasn’t interested. She repeated: “Sorry, you’re not on the list, you can’t get in.”

She had other things to do, as students started to arrive. I didn’t have Mark’s phone number, so I sent him an e-mail with my phone, telling him I was in front of the building but that they wouldn’t let me in. I withdrew myself from the entrance and started to think while standing on the sidewalk. What now? I returned to my e-mails, searching for my mistake but couldn’t find it, when suddenly after a few minutes Mark stood behind me and said, “Hi Sibó, come on in”.

I was surprised. Where did he come from so suddenly? “I was already in the auditorium”, he said, “I arrived fifteen minutes ago. I just opened my computer and saw your e-mail”. “But your name is not on the list”, I said, “How did you get in?” He didn’t know, he didn’t even know there was a list, they just let him in, he said. I was puzzled, so I went to the lady with him and said, “Well this is Mark Van der Steen, my colleague with whom I will supervise the exam in auditorium A1.” She looked at her list and seemed a little confused or embarrassed, and then said to Mark, “So, he is with you?”,

¹ This is a pseudonym.

while pointing at me with her pen. Mark said yes and that was it. It was confirmed. It was all good now. I could get in.

I was perplexed. What happened? I couldn't stop thinking: "But Mark is not on the list either. Why did they let him in? Why is he a trustworthy source of information for letting me in? Why does he have to confirm that I'm okay while she doesn't know him either? Why did she let him in in the first place? Why didn't she ask his name? He isn't on the list and didn't suddenly appear on the list."

I didn't say anything, but I was kind of pissed off. I didn't show it though. I am a nice guy. I knew that being angry wouldn't help much. But I kept on thinking about what happened. Why was I treated that way, and Mark wasn't? Mark and I are the same age, we're both fathers, we're both middle class, we both have facial hair, we both speak fluent Dutch, we both have the same educational background. So, what has happened here? Is it our bodies? I'm taller and slimmer than Mark and he's balding while I have long hair, dreadlocks actually. And yes, maybe it's that. The dreadlocks. Maybe my father was right all along. I should cut my hair and wear a suit and tie. Just not to scare people. Because, you see, I am black. The brown skin, mixed race type. The fashionable type. But still black. Still a threat. Mark, however, is white.

But thinking that is really problematic. I mean how could *race* matter here, in this progressive university? We're in Western Europe, in a rich, clean, well-organized, liberal university town. The local mantra is that racism is relative, that if you speak the local language, all doors will open for you. Well, in this case, the door stayed closed. Even if I did speak Dutch perfectly, if that is even possible. I speak Dutch with the local accent, the local well-educated version of Dutch.

So, I keep on thinking, wouldn't it be shortsighted from me to label this woman and her colleagues racists? Race can't be the thing here. I just wasn't on the list. It's a bureaucratic matter. An administrative mistake. Moreover, we are in a predominately white town. Very few people with my appearance live here, even less work at university. And this university brands itself as a progressive institution. Can I blame this mistake onto racism? I think so, but I don't want to. To protect myself. Because if I would have dared to say there was something racist going on, that I demanded an apology for the mix up, that wouldn't be constructive. That would have made me *an angry black man*. You don't want anyone to think you're angry and black. That's dangerous. Moreover, I would be made responsible for the situation to escalate. I would

be framed as oversensitive. Another black stereotype. So why bother, just keep silent.

I didn't say a thing. I didn't make a scene. I focused on my privileges. I didn't have a cop's knee on my neck, after all. I wasn't going to die. I could breath. So I didn't ask why she didn't refuse Mark the entrance if he's not on her list. I didn't confront her. Who cares. It's not my problem, it's hers. She was just doing her job, right?

I asked Mark, though, what he thought had gone on. I was disappointed as there was no outrage on his part. He didn't seem puzzled. We were both not on the list, because we were both replacing a professor, so he guessed that the professor's name would be on the list and therefore not ours. I agreed, but it didn't make sense. "Why did she let you in, and not me? Why did you have to confirm that I was an invigilator? What kind of power do you have that I haven't? White power?"

I didn't say these things, I didn't want to make him feel bad. White power? Seriously? I kept that for myself. My past experiences told me that making white people feel uncomfortable about race, is not solving problems. At least, not in the moment. I focus on the good intentions, ignore the bad effects it has on me. The insecurity, the self-doubt. I relativize. I tell myself that's what happens when you're one of the few black people in a white world. Of course, she thinks I might be up to no good. That's what people of color are mediatized for. That's our specialty. Being up to no good.

Still, what Mark said didn't explain a thing. We were both not on the list. We were eight invigilators spread over four locations to supervise one exam for one professor. His analysis didn't address my question. However, I'm a well-behaved law-abiding citizen, I didn't say anything, I didn't want to go over this again, I didn't want to cause unease. They were all acting and talking with the best intentions, I assumed. I was being complicated. I felt insecure. I said, "Thank you", to the lady and I thanked Mark, my *white savior*. And I promised myself I would try to forget this episode as quickly as possible.

But I didn't forget. The rollercoaster of news about *Black Lives Matter* and the effects it had worldwide made me aware that I had to tell this story. Until now, I always chose to dismiss the importance of such personal experiences. After all, most people weren't intentionally racist. I kept my anger for the fascists, not for the nice people who had learned to assume that I could be a threat. It wasn't their fault. It was the system. I told myself this wasn't racism, it was ignorance. However, the pain and distress it caused, made me realize that ignorance is racism.

I've been talking about race for decades, but always in theoretical, historical, and sociological terms. Never about myself, never about my experience. It seemed impossible, it wasn't objective, it was anecdotal, and it was traumatizing. However, through my ethnographic work I came to learn that society, history and theory are there, in these little everyday interactions, and that if we want to talk about racism, we need to look at these everyday interactions to understand how racism works. Even if my current research project is not centered around my personal experiences, it taught me clearly that racism is not a matter of bad individuals, it's indeed a systemic problem. Racism is not this specific lady's problem, not Mark's problem, not my problem. It's our problem. And if I keep silent about it, I am part of the problem. I could have made that point at the time it happened, but my point wouldn't have landed well. I would be an *angry black man* and thus a public danger. I would be overreacting. Writing seemed to be one of the limited ways I had, to break the silence without harming myself. Still, it's me who has to revisit something I'd rather forget. In the moment, Mark with his power might have been able to achieve more than I could. I had to control my outrage, to protect myself. But where was his outrage? Why didn't he call out what happened? Of course, it is not his personal responsibility, it's not just *his* problem. Again, it is *our* problem. And as long as we don't address it as such I'm afraid that we will never be able to change racism's systemicity.