

## Transcendence over Diversity: Black Women<sup>1</sup> in the Academy

### ***Abstract***

Universities, like many major public institutions have embraced the notion of ‘*diversity*’ virtually uncritically- it is seen as a moral ‘good in itself’. But what happens to those who come to represent ‘*diversity*’- the black and minority ethnic groups targeted to increase the institutions thirst for global markets and aversion to accusations of institutional racism? Drawing on existing literature which analyses the process of marginalization in higher education, this paper explores the individual costs to black and female academic staff regardless of the discourse on diversity. However despite the exclusion of staff, black and minority ethnic women are also entering higher education in relatively large numbers as students. Such ‘grassroots’ educational urgency transcends the dominant discourse on diversity and challenges presumptions inherent in top down initiatives such as ‘widening participation’. Such a collective movement from the bottom up shows the importance of understanding black female agency when unpacking the complex dynamics of gendered and racialised exclusion. Black women’s desire for education and learning makes possible a reclaiming of higher education from creeping instrumentalism and reinstates it as a radical site of resistance and refutation.

### ***Introduction***

In higher education many diversity action plans and equality statements have been produced by universities to meet the requirements of positively promoting racial equality required by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000). Armies of consultants and professionals have been recruited to produce complex, bureaucratic, target led, glossy action plans and strategies which are underpinned by the notion of ‘*respecting diversity in order to achieve equality*’ ( Bhavnani, Mirza and Meeto 2005) . However despite these action plans endemic racialised class and gender divisions show little sign of abating (Blandon 2005; Reay et al 2005; Connor et al 2004). Analyzing writings and research evidence which explore the processes of marginalization in higher education for black and working class groups, the question I address in this paper is ‘what has ‘*diversity*’ done to open up (or close down) possibilities for black women as both students and teachers in higher education?’. The paper argues there appears to be a contradiction between the persistent marginalization of black women in higher education and the continuing desire among black women to be educated and to be educated.

In the context of policies on 'widening participation' in higher education and the media exposition of the continued lack of equity in access, particularly for working classes, black and white young people, *'diversity'* has become an all consuming discourse that no right minded university, old or new <sup>2</sup> would dare be without as an intrinsic part of its identity and image. However as the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) declares in its policy statement, *'diversity'* is less about equity and more about diversity of HE provision so as to secure the 'best fit' to meet the diverse needs of students, the economy, and society:

“Diversity is widely agreed to be a desirable feature in higher education.....the goal must be to secure the pattern of diversity that most cost-effectively meets the needs and aspirations of the greatest number of stakeholders ( HEFCE 2000:3-4).

Diversity as a discourse of social inclusion is based on the philosophy of *'getting the right people for the job on merit'* and the *'business benefits of a more diverse workforce to reach a wider market'* (Cabinet Office 2001:18 ). Government strategy overtly claims diversity is about good public relations, and 'inclusivity' as good for business. The Ministerial forward to the official guidance for the higher education sector embraces the business principle stating:

“It is vital for the continuing health of the higher education sector that it should recruit from a wide and diverse human resource pool. This is not only on the grounds of equity, but equally sound for business reasons” ( ECU and JNCHES 2003:2).

The driver for change comes from a pragmatic recognition of demographic changes with a projected ageing population and reduced fertility in Britain. This has led to a concern about under utilized labour and need for black and 'ethnic minority' groups to be included in an expanding service sector in a global economy (Metcalf and Forth 2000). The employment of these groups it is argued will bring added benefits since they will increase access to certain customer groups. But what happens to those who come to represent *'diversity'* in higher education? Diversity targets include increasing numbers for traditionally under-represented groups such as the disabled, the working class( both male and female) and black and minority ethnic groups. However with higher education institutions increasing thirst for global markets there has been a particular emphasis on black and minority ethnic visibility ( Giroux and Giroux 2004; Law et al 2004).

Higher education research shows black and female staff are likely to be concentrated in lower status universities, be on lower pay and more likely to be in short term contracts (Carter et al 1999; NAO 2002; THES 2004). Similarly students are to be found in lower status new universities and concentrated in particular subject areas. Particularly those of African and Caribbean origin are more likely to be performing on the 'lower tail end' of attainment (Connor et al 2004; Modood and Acland 1997). However despite these endemic inequalities and patterns of marginalization black women persist in their desire for education as social transformation (Mirza 2005). Levels of participation in further and higher education are as high for women of black African, Caribbean and Indian origin as among white women- both at 23% (WEU 2002)<sup>3</sup>. However there is no mirroring of this

educational desire in the seniority, experience and employment of black women in higher education. Indeed neither is this educational urgency reflected more widely in the world of work where black women despite their educational qualifications are found to be under-represented and under-employed in a racially and gendered segmented labour market ( Mirza 2003; Fawcett society 2004). In order to explain this apparent contradiction in numbers and experience, two further questions I address here are ‘why does this persistence and desire for education prevail in such hostile places’ and ‘what is the cost to black women as both staff and students of just being there?’

### ***The paradox of black women in higher education***

There is a paradox concerning black women in higher education. On the one hand they are almost invisible in the higher and senior levels of the academy- a state that has persisted in the 25 years since 1980s when I began teaching and researching in higher education . Recent figures suggest there are only 9 black women professors in the UK, and 5 of them are in nursing ( THES 2004). Black and minority ethnic staff, 92% of whom are on low grade less senior posts, make up 2.5 % of those working in higher education and of these only 1.6% are female ( Carter et al 1999).

On the other hand black women are present in new universities as students in significant numbers, a phenomena that I have seen grow over the same time (Connor et al 2004; Modood and Acland 1999). Though ethnic minorities make up 6% of the working population in the UK, they make up 15% of all students. Young black people of African and Asian origin are nearly three times more likely to be in university than their white counter parts. If we look at the percentages of young people under 21 on full-time undergraduate courses, black and minority ethnic women are the highest participants of all. As a proportion of the average 18-19 year old population we find 59 percent of young black women going to university to do a degree, as are 48 percent of young black men<sup>4</sup> (NAO 2002 ). I am intrigued by this invisibility / visibility split between staff and students, and the significance it has in terms of understanding the experience of black women in higher education.

The visibility/invisibility distinction that characterizes black women’s presence in higher education must be contextualized within the pervasive, all consuming discourse of ‘*diversity in higher education*’ ( Law 2004). For the staff it raises the question, ‘why is there such little real diversity on the ground when we talk so much but achieving the goal of diversity as a moral and social good at the top? For the students the question is, ‘how does diversity affect access and their experience of ‘just being there’.

Diversity documents in our higher education institutions highlight black (or working class) numbers to show how successful (or not) they are achieving equality. It would appear black women are highly *visible* when their bodies help higher education institutions achieve their wider moral and ethical goals, and help them appeal to wider global market. But this is not a true representation or equality. It is a notion of diversity that is ‘skin deep’. We find people of different ethnicities are celebrated in colourful

brochures with smiling ‘brown’ faces- like a box of chocolates, there is often one from every continent and one of every colour - Chinese, African, Indian. Black women often find themselves appropriated, their bodies objectified and commodified, ‘for the desiring machine of capital’, as Simmonds a black female academic explains:

“Adorned and unadorned I cannot escape the fantasies of the western imagination. Robert Young (1995) illustrates this desire for colonized bodies as spectacle, as labour and so on, as essentially an extension of the ‘desiring machine’ of capital” (Simmonds 1997: 232).

On the other hand black women slip into invisibility in the site that matters the most-how they are valued and embraced in everyday practice and the transforming difference that they bring to higher education institutions. With the new found ‘fetish for difference’ that diversity brings black women have become ‘hot’ property in the academy in terms of research projects and teaching, once they stay in their place as ‘natives in the academy’ (Puwar 2004; Spivak 1993). In universities black women struggle daily against the,

“presumption that scholars of colour are narrowly focused or lacking in intellectual depth ...whatever our history what ever our record, whatever our validations, whatever our accomplishments, by and large we are perceived as one-dimensional and treated accordingly...fit for addressing the marginal subjects of race, but not subjects in the core curriculum.” (Madrid in Lopez 1993:127).

To understand this duality of experience it is important to understand the limitations of the discourse on diversity to which I now turn.

### ***Moving From equality to diversity***

The discourse on diversity and difference which emerged in 1980s evolved in response to the recognition that equality is not simply about sameness, but about achieving inclusive difference. The shift away from equality toward diversity in the 1990s signaled a bigger sea change in how we conceptualize the attainment of racial and social justice in society.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century struggle for equality characterized by the Civil rights and feminist movement was very much based on the fundamental liberal democratic principle of equality as enshrined in the 18th Century Enlightenment Project (Malik 1998) – that of universal humanity where all ‘men’ are equal. This notion of universal humanity to which all belonged (not just those with state recognized rights) was an important standpoint in the victory for recognition for hitherto excluded groups who were considered not to have rights, such as women or people of colour.

However the universal notion of equality that enabled these struggles to mount their cause was based on the modernist construction of ‘sameness’. ‘Sameness’ was a flattening out process whereby complex differences in individual identity (such as the intersection of class, race ethnicity, gender sexuality etc) were subsumed to the greater

goal of equality for the group. The axis of sameness was an important 'essentialist fiction' (Fuss 1989) to bind groups together in homogenous commonalities and collectivities for the purposes of political action. Thus while the feminist movement proclaimed 'we are 'woman'!' and the black activists proclaimed 'we are as one!', there was little room for recognition of plurality and difference which was subsumed to the greater good.

Equality and antidiscrimination legislation is based on the notion of equal and fair treatment – that like should be treated as like and that sex, race, or disability should not justify inferior treatment (Fredman 2002). Equal opportunities policies were brought into our institutions to redress shortcomings in our fundamental equality principles when it was recognized disadvantaged groups still suffer indirect discrimination and hence do not begin the race from equal starting points.

“Equal opportunities approach aims to equalize the starting point by removing barriers at the point of selection for employment, education or other benefit ”  
(Fredman 2002: 5-6).

Equal opportunities was essential to combat inequality because as Fredman explains a fundamental problem with our underlying enlightenment principle of equality is that it assumes a gender- neutral and colour blind society. Thus while race, sex, etc are not grounds for inferior treatment for an individual, action based on colour or gender is prohibited even if its aim is to redress disadvantage. As Fredman explains:

“ This symmetrical view ignores actual imbalances of power in society, whereby women and ethnic minorities continue to be subjected to disadvantage and detriment”  
(Fredman 2002: 4).

However equality policies which evolved in 1980s have suffered a demise due to a backlash against the inefficiency of municipal antiracism, poorly executed equal opportunities strategies, and an overall disappointment with the impact of equal opportunity policies to progress under- represented groups up the hierarchy ( Bhavnani and Mirza 2005).

### ***The problem with diversity and difference***

In the late 1980s calls for the recognition of the difference age, gender, sexuality, disability, ethnicity, culture and religion make signaled an important and liberating time for many silenced minorities. For example the black feminist critique was a destabilizing force for the modernist epistemological standpoint of white feminism which had failed to embrace the diversity of women's experiences across class and race lines (Collins 1990; Mirza 1997). The assumption, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty explains was that,

“feminist studies discursively present Third world women as a homogenous, undifferentiated group leading truncated lives, victimized by the combined weight of 'their' traditions, cultures and beliefs, and 'our' (Eurocentric) history.”  
(Mohanty 1993: 42).

However while postmodern notions of 'difference and diversity' were important for marginalized voices it also led to fragmentation. This fragmentation into different identity

interests not only dissolved the notion of a universal subject, but in so doing undermined the basis for collective political projects along the old modernist lines such as the civil rights and feminist movement. Kenan Malik has delivered a sharp critique of the shift from equality to diversity. Diversity he suggests evolved from the identity politics of the 80s where the politics of recognition gave voice to hitherto silenced minorities such as these who were black, gay or female, he writes:

“Twenty years ago it all looked very different. I became an anti-racist because I thought it unjust that people should be treated differently simply because they happened to have a different colour skin. Today that is just what anti-racists want. Where once I fought for equal treatment, anti-racists now demand respect for diversity. Where once I wanted to be treated the same as everybody else despite my skin colour, activists now want to be treated differently because of it ( Malik 2003: *The Guardian* ).

Malik has a point. This new found focus on ‘difference’ is not innocent – it obscures the nature of racism, as Stuart Hall explains:

“The Black subject and Black experience are constructed historically, culturally; politically ....the grounding of ethnicity in difference is deployed, in the discourse on racism, as a means of disavowing the realities of racism and repression.” (Hall1992: 257)

Sara Ahmed investigates the ways in which *diversity work* acts as a mechanism for the reproduction of institutional authority in universities and operate as ‘technologies of concealment in the unfinished work of racism’ ( Ahmed 2005: 8). She argues that *diversity work* remains ‘undone’ in higher education because though the term *diversity* may ‘circulate’ in the institution, diversity documents and statements get ‘stuck’ that is, ”cut off from histories of struggle which expose inequalities” (Ahmed 2005: 19).

She argues *diversity in and of itself* does not simply bring about institutional change. The question we must ask is ‘what work does ‘diversity’ do in education?’ Ahmed suggests institutional ‘speech acts’, such as a university making a commitment to diversity, or admission that they are non-racist and ‘for equality’, are ‘non performatives’. Non-performatives are ‘speech acts’ or pronouncements which work precisely by *not* bringing about the effects they name or the change they purport. Thus she explains having a good race equality policy gets translated into *being good at race equality*- ‘as if saying is doing’.

“Declaring a commitment to opposing racism might function as a form of organization pride....the university now says: if we are committed to antiracism (and we have said we are), then how can we be racists? ...the work of such speech acts seems precisely how they function to block rather than enable action.” (Ahmed 2005: 8).

Thus, as Ahmed argues newer universities which are seen as ‘diversity led’ (as they have many students from ethnic minorities and lower socioeconomic backgrounds) present themselves as ‘being diverse’ without having to do anything. Simply ‘being diverse’

means such new universities need not commit to ‘doing diversity’. On the other hand the ‘ideal’ research led ‘sandstone’ universities are elite precisely because they have an image that is not diversity led. They use the language of globalization and internationalism where diversity for them means appealing to a wide variety of diverse people across cultures. Ahmed explains, “Diversity here is not associated with challenging disadvantage, but becomes another way of ‘doing advantage’.

Malik suggests there is now a ‘fashion’ for diversity training which emphasizes cultural difference in our organizations and institutions. A whole industry has developed to ‘deliver diversity’, which as he explains is superficial in its intentions and effects:

“Diversity training...has become the contemporary version of ghostbusting - an army of people always on call to clean up any polluted air and put the genie of racism firmly back in the bottle. Back in the 80s, diversity training was the province of loony-left councils. Today, there is barely a blue-chip company that has not called on the services of diversity trainers to help its employees understand their differences.” (Malik 2003: *The Guardian*)

If *diversity* is ‘failing’ to deliver, then what are the costs to black women students and staff? I now turn to look at the ‘other side of the story’, the experiences of black women in higher education: the hidden world ‘diversity’ *work* obscures.

### ***Excluding practices: Counting the costs of ‘being there’***

There are costs to ‘just being there’ in higher education. Many black and minority students are more likely to leave university before completing the course. As Connor et al (2004) argue the most influential reasons are unmet expectations about the HE. While financial and family difficulties, institutional factors, such as poor teaching, and wrong subject choice also feature, ethnic minority people also reported, ‘the feeling of isolation or hostility in academic culture’ (Connor et al 2004:60).

These are worrying findings as it signals the fact that many black students do not feel they ‘belong’. The findings of Diane Reay, Miriam David, and Stephan Ball (2005) have shed some light on the process of exclusion ‘felt’ by young working class and ethnic minorities seeking to enter higher education. Reay et al suggest young people can engage in a process of self exclusion when making university choices. Drawing on Bourdieu they write that processes of exclusion work through having, “a sense of ones place which leads one to exclude oneself from places from which one is excluded” (Reay et al 2005: 91). As one working class student in their study says about going to an elite university, “what’s a person like me doing in a place like that?”

“Choosing to go to university .... for the working classes is about being different people in different places, about who they might be but also what they must give up.” (Reay et al 2005: 161)

Processes of exclusion in higher education are difficult to unpack as they are underscored by the complex dynamics of class, gender and race. Experiences are complex and relational

and are located at the intersection of structure, culture and agency (Brah 1996). For some students university can be a positive experience. As Shirin Housee demonstrates Asian young women can find a space at university to express assertive, independent, personas which enable them to freely express their religious identity. In opposition to the stereotype of Asian women as victims and recipients of patriarchal culture they found in their universities a space for, “fighting back... and were not going to accept racism, sexism or any other – ism” (Housee 2004:69).

However while spaces of opposition can and do open up, Back (2004) suggests there are two antagonistic forces at play in higher education. One that moves unconsciously and haphazardly towards what Hall has called multicultural drift (Hall 2001) and the other remains the ‘sheer weight of whiteness’ (Back 2004: 1). With regard to the latter, in some institutions the ‘sheer weight of whiteness’ is overt and almost impenetrable. Research looking at the University of Cambridge shows how elite culture is self-reinforcing. It was seen as a white, male, ‘tough and macho’ culture that was ‘secretive, intimidating and insular’. It was assumed those in privileged positions were there because of their ability and merit. However over 70% of readers and professors had a degree from Cambridge and a third of academics had no experience of any other university, the majority being there for over 20 years (Schneider-Ross 2001).

Puwar (2004) draws on the social theorists Bourdieu and Foucault to explain how cultures of exclusion operate within contested social spaces such as universities:

“Social spaces are not blank and open for any body to occupy. Over time, through processes of historical sedimentation, certain types of bodies are designated as being the ‘natural’ occupants of specific spaces....Some bodies have the right to belong in certain locations, while others are marked out as trespassers who are in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined, politically, historically and conceptually circumscribed as being ‘out of place’ “(Puwar 2004: 51)

Puwar suggests black bodies out of place are ‘space invaders’. She argues there are several ways in which black bodies are constructed when they do not represent the racial somatic norm within white institutions (Puwar 2001; 2004). First there is ‘disorientation’, a double-take as you enter a room, as you are not supposed to be there. You are noticed and it is uncomfortable. Like walking into a pub in a town where you don’t live. There is confusion as you are the not the ‘natural expected occupant of that position’. I know this well, in many meetings even though I am a professor I have been mistaken as the coffee lady! Even students do a double-take when they see you are the social theory lecturer.

Second there is ‘infantalisation’ here you are not only pigeon-holed into being ‘just a race expert’, but black lecturers are seen as less capable of being in authority. This can mean black staff are assumed to be more junior than they are (I have been told to get off the photocopier as it is not for administrators). There is a constant doubt about your skills, which can affect career progression. Third there is the ‘burden of invisibility’, or hyper surveillance. Here you are viewed suspiciously and any mistakes are picked up and seen as a sign of misplaced authority. You have to work harder for recognition outside of the



confines of stereotypical expectations, and can suffer disciplinary measures and disappointment if you do not meet expectations in your work performance.

### *The 'trouble' with whiteness in higher education*

Higher education in Britain remains a 'hideously white'<sup>5</sup> place, rarely open to critical gaze (Back 2004). It is not a place you expect to find many 'black bodies'. Being a body 'out of place' (Puwar 2001) in white institutions has emotional and psychological costs to the bearer of that difference. Simmonds, a black woman academic writes, "The world I inhabit as an academic is a white world ...in this white world I am a fresh water fish that swims in sea water. I feel the weight of the water on my body" (1997 ; 227).

Black women's journeys into higher education are journeys into the 'heart of whiteness'. As Kathleen Casey describes black women's innocent expectations and eager quest for knowledge can take them on an unexpected journey 'to another place' where they are transformed, but are also transforming,

. "young black women set off into the white world carrying expectations of mythic proportions...their odysseys, they believe will transform their lives ...but separated from their cultural communities these young women's passages turn out to be isolated individual journeys ...' into the heart of whiteness' " (Casey 1993:132)

Casey argues the reductionist homogenous identity of 'the black woman' is created by 'a white gaze which perceives her as a mute visible object' (Casey 1993: 111). Being a 'mute visible object' is something that consumes your very being and as bell hooks argues black women need healing strategies and healing words to enable them to deal with the anguish that sexism and sexist oppression creates in daily life . She suggests black women need to theorize from a 'place of pain ...which enables us to remember and recover ourselves'( hooks 1994:74).

Recently I attended an equal opportunities workshop where we were asked to identify experiences of institutional racism. A young Iranian woman, a graduate student, recounted how her husband, a qualified medical doctor was experiencing racial discrimination when trying to get a placement in the NHS ( National Health Service) . A white male member of the group, an established academic piped up and said 'don't worry love ...it wouldn't happen to you as you are so attractive".

In that one moment all the black women in the group were silenced, reduced to their embodied 'otherness'. Simmonds suggests a 'certain kind' of racial knowledge has been constructed of the colonised female as exotic and desirable especially through anthropology's particular fascination with the female body and their sexual lives, which still effects racial encounters now in everyday life. She suggests that in higher education black women have to 'negotiate daily with such embodied social situations' (227)

"For some of us it is impossible to escape the body and its constructions, even inside the teaching machine. I am expected not only to carry my body but also

acknowledge it...In this white world, the black body, my body is always on display” ( Simmonds 1997: 228-229).

Patricia Williams talks of the collective trauma such everyday incursions into your embodied self-hood engenders:

‘There are moments in my life when I feel as though part of me is missing. There are days when I feel so invisible that I can’t remember the day of the week it is, when I feel so manipulated that I can’t remember my own name, when I feel so lost and angry that I can’t speak a civil word to the people who love me best. These are times I catch sight of my reflection in store windows and I am surprised to see the whole person looking back ...I have to close my eyes at such times and remember myself, draw an internal pattern that is smooth and whole. (Williams 1991: quoted in hooks 1994: 74)

### ***Black women and the Politics of containment***

Black women are increasingly visible in public spaces as professionals in previously race/gendered homogenous places such as universities, the judiciary and the media. The black feminist writer Patricia Hill Collins suggests this shift in the positioning of race and gender and class through changing power relations and privatization has led to reconfigured patterns of institutionalized racism. In what Collins calls the ‘new politics of containment’ surveillance strategies become increasingly important when middleclass black women enter institutional spaces of whiteness in the increasingly devalued public sphere from which they were hitherto barred. She explains:

“Whereas racial segregation was designed to keep blacks as a group or class outside centers of power, surveillance now aims to control black individuals inside centers of power when they enter the white spaces of the public and private spheres “.( Collins 1998:20)”.

Collins argues black women are watched in desegregated work environments to ensure they remain ‘unraced’ and assimilated (Collins 1998: 39). Being seen to be assimilated is important as standing out can invoke deep feelings of need, rejection and anxiety within the ‘white other’ (Ahmed 2004). To be unassimilated or ‘stand out’ invites a certain type of surveillance that appears benign but can be deeply distressing for black women.

For example surveillance means being accountable and having more attention than others heaped up upon you. A black female professor related when she was first appointed with fanfare and excitement. She was a ‘special case’; one in ‘million’; a black female trophy. She was in the University news ( front page and the web) and she was invited to many high profile functions and events. Though it was not her job, in the first week she has to publicly present a detailed plan for delivering equal opportunities and race equality for the next five years to the senior managers and executives of the University. by 3 months she had been required to write 5 reports on her targets, attainments, and strategies and also found herself accountable to 3 different line managers (as it could not be decided to whom she should report, the executive, academic area, or the faculty). Their ‘kind and

supportive' attention was all consuming but she received no real support for her academic research and teaching. Finally she became ill. No other professor had received this exhausting and intense level of scrutiny or expectation over such a short space of time.

There is an irony to heightened visibility for the 'invisible' in our polite and gentle corridors of higher education. A national survey of ethnic minorities in higher education found black women were more likely than any other group to report being the victim of sexual harassment and discrimination at work (Carter et al 1999). This raises many questions about the safety of black women in public spaces. As Anita Hill, the African-American woman whose high profile case on work place harassment against the African -American Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas shows, is how the 'black woman ' is seen and given meaning in the public discourse on ' race'. Anita Hill did not fit any of the stereotypes of 'the black woman' (ie she was not an 'overachiever', 'welfare mother' etc) thus she was not seen as credible and was labelled as a 'traitor-to-the-race' (Morrison 1995; Collins 1998). Collins points out that:

“surveillance seems designed to produce particular effects- black women remain visible yet silenced; their bodies become written by other texts, yet they remain powerless to speak for themselves” (Collins 1998: 38).

We need to begin to open up and understand the complex multidimensional world black women inhabit on the margins of white institutions. Moreover we need to understand black women's agency and subjectivity in relation to their space on the margin. With this in mind I now turn to look at how and why they find themselves in higher education and their strategies for survival.

### ***Educational desire and 'other ways of knowing'***

Whatever the 'costs of being there', black women are deeply committed to education and 'buy into the meritocratic educational system' (Mirza 1992; 2005). It could be argued that there is a mass movement from the bottom up that promises to change the face of further and higher education in years to come (Mirza and Reay 2000a). Significant numbers of black women are already in universities, colleges and other educational institutions. As we have seen already, young black people of African and Asian origin are nearly three times more likely to be in university than their white counter parts. Though they make up 6% of the working population in the UK, they make up 15% of all students. Most of all it is the women who seek social transformation through education. 60 % of black and minority ethnic women are in higher education, as are 48 % ethnic minority men and (NAO 2002).

But what drives black women on their quests of personal transformation through educational inclusion? In research for *Young, Female and Black* ( Mirza 1992) I found young African Caribbean women collectively identified with the meritocratic notion of credentialism, which within the parameters of their circumstances meant 'getting on'. The young women did this by strategically rationalising their educational opportunities. They would opt for accessible careers (gendered and racialised jobs) which would give them the opportunity to

get onto a college course. They were in effect subversively and collectively employing a back door entry to further and higher education.

However research shows black female educational urgency is a pervasive cultural orientation among black women at all levels. As mothers black women invest in the education of the next generation. In our research on African Caribbean women educators working in black community schools, (sometimes called supplementary or Saturday schools) Diane Reay and I found black women working alongside the dominant educational discourse ( Mirza and Reay 2000a). In their space on the margin, with their quiet and subversive acts of care and ‘other ways of knowing’ these women:

“operate within, between, under and alongside the mainstream educational and labour market structures, subverting, renaming and reclaiming opportunities for their children through the transformative pedagogy of ‘raising the race’ – a radical pedagogy, that ironically appears conservative on the surface with its focus on inclusion and dialogue with the mainstream.” (Mirza 1997: 274)

Black women appear to occupy parallel discursive spheres in what Diane Reay and I have called a ‘third space’ (Mirza and Reay 2000b). Nancy Fraser calls this third space, ‘hidden counter public’ spheres which are arenas where:

“members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (Fraser 1994:84).

Black women appear to seek social transformation through educational change. The African-Caribbean women teachers in black supplementary schools as indeed those working and studying in universities and schools struggle for educational inclusion in order to transform opportunities for themselves and their children. In covert and quiet ways (unlike street riots and which signal masculine social change) these women work to keep alive the black communities collective desire for self-knowledge and a belief in the power of schooling to militate against racial barriers (Fordham 1996:63). As Casey writes education acquires a different meaning in the context of racist oppression:

“In a racist society ...to become educated is to contradict the whole system of racist signification ...to succeed in studying white knowledge is to undo the system itself ...to refute its reproduction of black inferiority materially and symbolically” (Casey :1993: 123)

For African-Caribbean women educational institutions are not just mechanisms through which individuals are unconsciously subjected to the dominant ideological system but rather as Friere argues education are the terrain on which they acquire consciousness of their position and struggle (Freire 2004). Just as the black women educators had developed through their experience a strategic rationalization of their situation and opportunities so too have black women in higher education developed a sense of their space on the margin through self-actualization and self definition.

## Conclusion

We began by asking, 'how can so much 'diversity talk' engender so much 'diversity paralysis?' It has been argued here that 'diversity' as a policy movement in higher education has had little to do with transforming the experiences black female staff and students. As Ahmed (2005) demonstrates in her unpacking of diversity work in higher education, diversity is more about the 'saying rather than the doing'. Black women's embodied experience as black bodies 'out of place' in higher education reveals how racism continues to exclude through silent everyday practices in our seemingly egalitarian democratic and liberal institutions of higher learning.

Excluding practices have a consequence, and for black women this means they are virtually invisible from higher education as professional lecturers, researchers and teachers. In tiny numbers they are often the only member of staff in a department, and often in part-time work and in lower less stable contracts (Carter et al 1999). Constrained by institutional surveillance in 'desegregated public spaces' such as universities (Collins 1998) and consumed by normative cultures whiteness (Puwar 2004), they are the most likely to leave or articulate their distress through cases of discrimination and harassment (Carter et al 1999; THES 2004). Our cultures of 'diversity' have not done much to stem the tide of young black academics leaving to go to the USA where they hope to find more open and valuing spaces of academic freedom (THES 2005)

However we do find the phenomena of 'educational desire and urgency' among black women for themselves and their children. Significant numbers of black women students are to be found in new universities and on particular courses. For example in the university I teach black women can make up as much as 65% of the students on health and social science courses. Such educational urgency transcend discourses on widening participation and diversity which assumes latent non participation by black and working class students waiting to be 'allowed into' or coaxed into places of higher learning by new opportunities being created for them. In this paper I have been concerned with explaining why this persistence prevails to enter higher education when the evidence shows them to be quite hostile places for young working class black and minority ethnic students, many of whom struggle or leave (Connor et al 2004). To explain this drive for higher learning we need to understand the dynamics of grassroots educational desire and its intersection with the dynamics (or not) of 'diversity' as practiced and articulated by our universities.

Paulo Friere the visionary Brazilian educationalist gives some indication as to the nature of this dynamic. He argued that education is the struggle over meaning as well as power relations (Friere 2004). As I suggest here for black women universities are not simply a place to get qualifications and pass exams in an increasingly instrumentalist market driven educational culture. As Mohanty argues for black women,

“Educational sites represent accommodations and contestations over knowledge by differently empowered social constituencies. ...thus education is a central terrain where power and politics operate out of the lived culture of individuals and

groups situated in asymmetrical social and political positions” (Mohanty 1993:43-44).

With encroaching neo-liberal market forces Manuel Castells has argued that universities are global elite information networks that are important to sustain because the university is the last remaining space of freedom (Castells 2004). However as we have seen here within these precious places of freedom, academic institutions still create paradigms and knowledges that transcribe race and gender power relations. Racial and social justice remains illusive in our changing mass systems of higher education (Giroux and Giroux 2004). Despite all the *diversity talk* in our universities we still have a long way to go before we fulfill the mantra that is core to the ‘diversity movement’, that of ‘*respecting diversity in order to achieve equality*’.

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<sup>1</sup> Black is used here to mean women of visible difference, this includes women of colour such as those of African and Asian origin unless otherwise specified ( Mirza 1997; Brah 1992; Sudbury 2001 ). Terms such as minority ethnic and are used when studies cited have used these categories.

<sup>2</sup> In the UK we have a distinction of 'old' and 'new' universities – old are the established traditional elite 'sandstone' and 'redbrick' research based universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. The new universities are sometimes referred to as the 'post 1992' universities when polytechnics and HE colleges merged and gained university status in a new rationalizing and expansion of HE.

<sup>3</sup> However only 7% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin women have Further and Higher educational qualifications ( Dale et al 2002)

<sup>4</sup> This is compared to 31percent of young white women and 28 percent of young white men aged 18-19 in fulltime undergraduate degree courses (NAO 2002:6).

<sup>5</sup> The BBC was called 'hideously white' by Greg Dyke the director general of the BBC in 2001 for being 98% white; With less than 1.3% of black and minority ethnic staff in higher education in UK ( THES 2004; Carter et al 1999) it too can be called hideously white