

# “They Bring Standards of Academic Excellence Down”

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## A Critical Analysis of Responses by Social Media Users to Targeted Hiring of Black and Women Faculty Members in South African and Canadian Universities

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### Abstract

Calls to hire more diverse faculty members in South African and Canadian universities have long standing histories. The pace of implementation of proposals to appoint more Black and women faculty members was slow. It was partly pressures from the #RhodesMustFall student movement in South Africa (2015) and renewed calls to address anti-Black racism in Canada post the murder of George Floyd in the United States (2020) that prompted post-secondary institutions in these countries to take concrete action towards instituting campus wide transformations to address questions of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Informed by the Othering theory and using thematic analysis, this paper critically examines social media users’ rebuttals to the hiring of more Black and women faculty members at universities in South Africa and Canada. This paper argues that the racist and sexist framing of Black and women faculty as the inferior ‘other’ potentially has negative consequences on the mental health of the aforementioned groups. This

article also challenges ahistorical analyses that neglect critical examinations of racist and sexist systemic barriers that women and Black faculty contend with when applying for academic positions. Further, this paper exposes the limitations of the logic that assumes that merit-based hiring is necessarily inimical to sustaining standards of academic excellence.

**Keywords:** Black faculty members, Black cohort hiring, anti-Black racism, mental health and wellbeing, South Africa, Canada

## Introduction

The call for diversity, equality and inclusion of Black and women faculty members has been a longstanding burning issue in South Africa and Canada (Albertus, 2019; Daly, 2016; D’Amato 2021; Joseph et al., 2021). Several studies that have examined the exclusions of Black and women faculty and the pressing need to transform and decolonise higher education in South Africa date back to the dawn of democracy (Batisai, 2019). These studies include *Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience* (Khunou, Phaswana, Khoza-Shangase and Canham, 2019) – a volume that documents the biographies of belonging and exclusion in the South African academy. An article by Rabe and Rugunanan (2012) also explores questions of gender and race amongst female sociologists who exit the academia in South Africa. Naicker (no date) maps the journey of South African women academics with a particular focus on women academics in theological education. *Hear Our Voices: Race, Gender and the Status of Black South African Women in the Academy* by Mabokela and Magubane (2004) exposes “institutional racism and sexism as experienced by black academics in South Africa” (Magubane, 2015) 10 years into flag democracy. In Magubane’s words, the volume “contextualize[s] and historicize[s] these experiences – to show that they were not about isolated individuals but about deep systemic problems and to root those problems in history” (Magubane, 2015).

The realities of gender and racial exclusion in South Africa resonate with those observed in the Canadian context. For example, several universities in Canada, commit to equity, diversity and inclusion (Universities Canada, 2017). Institutions have “employment equity and affirmative action programmes were established to remove structural barriers, change institutional cultures, and uncover hidden biases that hinder the recruitment, hiring, tenure, and promotion of Indigenous, racialized, and other equity-seeking groups” (Henry

et al., 2017:11). It is against this backdrop that leading scholars debunk the equity myth based on empirical evidence that exposes racialised experiences of Black faculty and the shortcomings of equity programmes in Canadian universities (Henry and Tator 2012; Henry et al. 2017; Mensah 2010; Mohamed and Beagan 2019). Therefore, the fact that there are few Black and women faculty at Canadian universities (Grant, 2019; Joseph et al., 2021) and the reality that Black people make up just 2 percent of university faculty drives the need for racial transformation of faculty (Kozelj, 2020).

Partly in response to pressures from the #RhodesMustFall student movement in South Africa (2015) and renewed calls to address anti-Black racism in Canada post the murder of George Floyd in the United States (2020), universities in South Africa and Canada instituted campus wide transformations to address questions of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Among the reforms aimed at redressing systemic anti-Blackness in universities was the hiring of more Black faculty members (Jansen and Walters 2019; Joseph et al., 2021). Nonetheless, research on the inclusion of historically excluded groups reveals the slow racial transformation of the South African university system (Barnard, Cowan, Kirman and Müller, 2016). These scholars pose thought-provoking questions: “are qualified black people hired as faculty?” and “are there enough qualified black people who can be hired as faculty?” (Barnard, Cowan, Kirman and Müller, 2016:1). Various scholars who examined faculty diversification programmes at South African universities unearthed narratives such as ‘we cannot find qualified blacks’ (Mabokela, 2000). Attributing the shortage of black faculty to “a shortage of suitable candidates” was challenged by Black faculty arguing that the above position promotes white supremacy in the academy (Adjiwanou et al., 2014).

Although literature suggests that the South African case is an extreme one (Barnard, Cowan, Kirman and Müller, 2016), this article argues that the need for racial transformation of faculty is a reality that cuts across contexts. For instance, framing Canada as a progressive context that does not struggle with racism downplays the depth and pervasiveness of anti-Black racism in the country (DasGupta, Shandal, Shadd and Segal, 2020). This progressive depiction perpetuates the longstanding national myths that there is less racism in Canada compared to the United States (Satzewich, 1998; Mensah, 2010). The denial of anti-Black racism in any context perpetuates institutionalised or structural injustices and guarantees that institutionalised and systematic racism continues to thrive (Olson, 2003:211). Such institutionalisation creates

a conducive environment where anti-Black discourses that are contrary to equity, diversity and inclusion prosper and often, discourses such as ‘they bring standards of academic excellence down’ go unchallenged and become normalised or acceptable aspects of everyday reality in academic spaces.

The above discussions and studies about Black hires have largely been in the elite spaces of the academy with very little room for ordinary people to weigh in the debates. Moving beyond the ivory tower, this article focuses on comments by the general public on social media platforms. Building on the preceding empirical findings on the lived experiences of Black and women faculty who, in the Canadian context for example, have been framed as “strange faces in the academy” (Mohamed, Tameera and Beagan, 2019:338), this article critically analyses the responses by social media users to targeted hiring of Black and women faculty members in the two countries. Drawing on the Othering theory and using thematic analysis, this article critically explores counter-arguments by social media users to targeted hiring of more Black faculty members at universities in South Africa and Canada.

## South Africa And Canada In The Same Paper?

Despite South Africa and Canada being geographically located in different continents, the sizes in square kilometres and the make-up and size of their populations being vastly dissimilar, the countries share interesting similarities. For example, Black people in the two countries share relatively similar experiences with prejudice. Statistics Canada (2022) reports that “in 2020, approximately 63% of Canada’s Black population reported experiencing discrimination five years prior to the beginning of the pandemic or during the pandemic, nearly double the proportion of the White population (32%).” Noyoo (2021) argues that over two and a half decades after the transition to a democratic South Africa, Black people continue to contend with racism. The above is notwithstanding that Black people in South Africa constitute 81% of the population (Statistics South Africa, 2022) and in Canada, Black people are ethnocultural minorities; they make up 3.5% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2022). In terms of gender, despite having progressive legislations, women in both countries continue to face discrimination in the workplace (Nangia and Arora, 2021; Musetsho, Isac and Dobrin, 2021).

In addition to the above, South Africa and Canada share histories. In a 2017 speech delivered at the University of Cape Town’s Law School, Honourable

Jody Wilson-Raybould, former Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada averred that “Canada and South Africa share a long-standing and broad relationship, anchored in shared values, shared histories, and strong people-to-people ties” (Government of Canada, 2017). Both countries are former British colonies, and they are members of the Commonwealth of Nations. Further, Canada and South Africa share values around democracy, more equitable and inclusive societies (Van Niekerk, L’Heureux and Holtzhausen, 2022). In the 1980s, Canada campaigned against apartheid in the Commonwealth and supported the institution of a democratic South Africa. Former Canadian Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney played a steadfast role in backing the release of Nelson Mandela from prison (Government of Canada, 2017; Blanchfield and Bronskill, 2013). Mandela was later elected South Africa’s first Black president post-1994. For his contribution, Mulroney was awarded the “highest honour South Africa bestows upon foreign nationals: the Supreme Companion of Oliver Reginald Tambo award” (Prime Minister of Canada 2015). Experts in the two countries collaborated in preparing the preliminary version of South Africa’s initial democratic constitution (Government of Canada, 2022). In addition, “Canada bestowed Nelson Mandela with honorary citizenship in 2001 in recognition of his leadership in the fight against apartheid and his efforts to build a new united South Africa” (Government of Canada, 2022).

In 2022, Canada marked 155 years since its founding as a country. While for most Canadians, this is an occasion to celebrate, for many Indigenous people, remembering the past is challenging because of the histories of colonialism (Government of Canada, 2017). Similarly, for the majority of Black South Africans, reflecting on the past is traumatic due to their experiences of subjugation during Apartheid. Honourable Jody Wilson-Raybould observed that both South Africa and Canada “have pursued reconciliation to right the wrongs of the past. Both established Truth and Reconciliation Commissions to discover the truth about our respective pasts and to record that truth so we do not forget. [...]” (Government of Canada, 2017). Wilson-Raybould highlights that in Canada, the objective of reconciliation is to “empower Indigenous peoples, who make up approximately five per cent of the total population” (Government of Canada, 2017). In South Africa, the aim of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was “to promote re-conciliation and forgiveness among perpetrators and victims of apartheid” (The Apartheid Museum, 2022). The TRC was mandated to “discover the causes and nature of human rights violations in South Africa between 1960 and 1994; to identify victims

with a view to paying reparations; and to allow amnesty to those who fully disclosed their involvement in politically motivated human rights violations” (The Apartheid Museum 2022). Notwithstanding the TRCs, the everyday lives of many Indigenous people in Canada and majority of the Black population in South Africa, are pernicious reminders that the wrongs of the past still linger.

## The Othering Theory

This paper uses the othering theory as a conceptual scaffold. Othering is the implicit concurrent binary constitution of an in-group (the self) and an out-group (the Other) in which the in-group is framed as superior to the Other while the out-group is constructed as inferior. The in-group possesses some attractive and unique traits that are absent in the out-group. Further, the out-group has unwanted characteristics that the in-group does not have (Brons, 2015). Ritzer and Stepnisky (2018:575) further explain that othering is “an internalized rejection of difference that can operate to make people devalue themselves, reject people from different groups, and create criteria within their own group for excluding, punishing, or marginalizing group members.” Mudavanhu (2017, 15) argues that “othering those in the “out-group” manifests itself through, among other ways, stereotyping and stigmatising” with “those in the “in-group” almost insisting on presenting a group of people in parochial and simplistic ways in a manner that negates the multiplex nature of their identities.” These polarised constructions expose the disrespect of scholarly expertise (Pittman, 2010), which insinuates that a Black and woman faculty member constantly carries the burden of proof as she has to provide evidence to white male students and colleagues that she is able to offer relevant knowledge (Farmer, 2021).

## Resign Design

This article analyses responses to posts by Canadian and South Africa universities on social media. This is informed by the realisation that in research, social media platforms present new frontiers for both data collection and analysis that have been successfully used by several scholars (Felt, 2016; Mudavanhu, 2021; Batisai and Chipato, 2022). Although there are several social media platforms, this study specifically looks at Facebook. Franz et al. (2019:1) contends that “Facebook, in particular, is the most dominant player in the social media landscape [...] As a significant portion of individuals’ social

lives is conducted (and hence displayed and recorded) on Facebook, it is a potentially rich source of qualitative data for researchers.”

This paper uses thematic analysis to critically examine pushbacks by some social media users to the idea of employing more Black and women faculty members in some South African and Canadian universities. Clarke and Braun (2017:297) define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data.” The practicalities of doing thematic analysis in this paper were informed by the six-step-by-step iterative guide that was proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and later used by other researchers (Nowell, Norris, White and Mouleset, 2017; Kiger and Varpio, 2020). The process began with the familiarisation with data (step one). In this article, this involved identifying posts on targeted hiring of Black and women faculty on Facebook pages of universities in South Africa and Canada. Posts that were considered were published between 2015 and 2021 when the #RhodesMustFall protests started in South Africa and after the George Floyd protests in the United States. Central to this process was reading, copying and pasting all comments linked to the posts, taking note of potential codes. The above step flowed into step two (initial generation of codes) in which notes were made on patterns that were emerging from the comments. Step three (looking for themes) entailed examining codes and determining which ones could be combined to form themes. Step 4 (appraising themes) was guided by the following questions: “Does each theme have adequate supporting data? Are the data included coherent in supporting that theme? Are some themes too large or diverse?” (Kiger and Varpio, 2020:6). Step five (delineating and naming themes) involved ascribing names to themes. Step 6 (the write-up) entailed authoring and presenting the analysis, occasionally re-visiting some of the previous steps.

## Findings and Discussion

Despite South Africa and Canada having differences in histories and geographical locations, the targeted hiring of or propositions to hire more Black scholars and women scholars at universities in the two countries attracted similar kinds of spirited racist and sexist backlash from social media users. This is, despite the fact that diversifying of faculty at some universities in South Africa and Canada was long overdue (Daly, 2016; Albertus, 2019; D’Amato, 2021). This also, notwithstanding, that in Canada, “publicly funded

universities have a legal obligation through the Employment Equity Act to include statements that demonstrate their commitment to equitable hiring practices” (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017:558). The section that follows discusses common interrelated responses by social media users to the idea of employing more Black and women faculty members in some South African and Canadian academies. All counter-arguments that will be discussed implicitly constituted Black and women faculty members as the inferior Other.

### *Us Versus Them: On Academic Excellence*

Facebook users opposed to the targeted hiring of Black faculty and women faculty in South Africa and Canada critiqued the intervention insinuating that Black people and women were “not qualified,” “undeserving,” “not worthy,” “not the best” and “incapable” of being appointed as instructors and lecturers. Social media users drew on racist and sexist discourses that othered Black people and women as inferior to White people and men respectively. Black faculty and women faculty were often juxtaposed with White male colleagues who were constructed as embodying what it means to be excellent academics. According to Aničić (2015), the above dualist logic is critical to the formation and sustaining relationships of domination. The fact that racist ideas emerged in this discussion demonstrates that racism is not rare, rather it is commonplace and intricately embedded in the fabric of society (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017).

Commenting on a post on a Facebook page of a South African university, one Facebook user said: “I’m just so sick and tired of hearing about quotas. How about [giving] the work to capable people.” Another averred that: “things cannot just be handed to people who are not worthy of them: it makes them lazy and mediocre.” “All I am saying is that individuals that possess the best qualifications should be employed. You want to build a better society then that’s what you do. You want your company to do well then you hire the best you can,” stated another social media user. Commenting on the Black cohort hiring process at universities in Canada, a Facebook user stated: “They [universities] should be only focusing on hiring the most qualified people,” in a way that assumed that Black people would not be the most qualified. “[name of university removed] can have whatever colour professors they want as long as they are highly qualified [...] U cannot just place anyone in this position,” declared a Facebook user.



Pushing back at presuppositions that hiring more women is a liability because they are intellectually inferior to male colleagues, a Facebook user asked: “Why do people automatically assume hiring more women means lowering the standard? It could mean [university name removed] is putting lots of effort [into] attracting qualified female candidates.” Also speaking back to assumptions that whiteness is necessarily synonymous to academic excellence, a Facebook user writing on a Facebook page of a Canadian university contended: “It is much more patronizing to assume that the predominantly white status quo is somehow an example of excellence. It is not. It is an outdated system that does not adequately serve the students, who are much more racially and culturally diverse than the faculty and administration.” Also commenting in the Canadian context, one social media user wrote: “For all the “HIRING SHOULD BE BASED ON EXCELLENCE AND SKILL!!” [capital letters in the original] ... Black people can be hired based on excellence and skill too ... Black people can be skilled [too]...[name of university removed] needs to do sooooo much more but I admit this is a good start. And as for other racial [minorities], I believe this should be done for them as well, especially Indigenous people.” Responding to anti-Black racism in South Africa, Kambule (2018) argues:

Black South Africans are tired of the smoke screen and silent reproving of racism. We are done condemning, we are now confronting. It is about time we remind each other of the importance of dignity for all human beings. For our country to rid itself of the chronicle of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ South Africa needs whites to join blacks in confronting racism and any prejudice on the black skin. The best place to start is calling out their peers who continue to belittle black workers in the workplace, the retail space, restaurants and helpers. After all, racism and Apartheid were created by white people. It is up to them to help bring its still-lasting effects down.

For new Black and women faculty hires, successfully landing tenure track and tenured positions is likely to be both exciting and anxiety provoking. Exhilarating because they finally have the jobs, they previously struggled to get due to several systemic barriers to entry in open hiring processes because of their race and gender and other intersecting identities. Fox Tree and Vaid (2022:1) explain:

The university as an institution was founded by and largely for men and, in particular, for White men [...] Particularly in elite universities in Europe and the United States,

women (White or other), and racialized groups (of any gender) were not allowed to pursue higher education or be employed as faculty until fairly recently [...].

Considering the above observations, it is hardly surprising that new Black and women hires would feel perturbed. The anxiety is compounded by racist and sexist scripts such as the ones discussed above that are likely playing in their minds reminding them that they are not good enough. Andrews (2022) explains: “For racialized groups, such as Black people, the pressure becomes more pronounced where there is an unwritten but glaring expectation to excel even in areas where other fellow scholars may have failed.” New Black faculty and women faculty carry what Farmer (2021) terms the burden of proof as they join traditionally white and male dominated domains. They carry the pressure to prove that they are qualified, deserving of the positions and capable of getting the job done. The burden to prove that they are excellent is not peculiar to Black faculty and women faculty. Writing about Black women in South Africa, Farmer (2021) argues that the burden of proof is a generational burden. A Black woman, similar to her mother and grandmother before her, carries either as “the servant who proves her honesty, the student who proves her academic worth or lecturer proving her knowledge” (Farmer, 2021:218). In academia, the burden follows her as she changes institutions. The onus is on her to show her skills in addition to her qualifications and previous experience each time her context shifts. The implications for Black faculty and women faculty of constantly trying to prove in different ways that they are good enough is tiresome. Andrews (2022) elaborates that “the pressure to “keep up with the good work” is real and exhausting.” Gone unchecked, in the long term, the weariness from overworking can potentially cause burnout and mental health challenges.

Moving beyond the problems highlighted above, Andrews (2022) advises Black academics to shift their perspectives and realise that they “do not owe the university anything more than their White colleagues do.” Further, Andrews (2022) recommends the following to Black scholars:

Collaborate with other colleagues you really like. Having true friends as research collaborators is probably the best support group we can have as Black academics, especially in a world where expectations around incessant productivity can lead us into crashing overdrive sometimes. Academia can be isolating and more so for Black people who face all kinds of systemic barriers that are ingrained into the very

architecture of the ivory tower. [...] We need to establish boundaries of work and happiness. Here, my slogan is work hard and be sure to party even harder! Besides academic work and required service, indulge in things that you truly enjoy.

Freeman (2020) also offers useful tips to Black faculty on thriving in predominantly white universities in the article, ‘Professoring’ While Black: Strategies for Thriving in the White Professoriate.’ Some strategies include the centrality of establishing support structures and taking care of one’s health.

### *Lowering Standards of Academic Excellence at Universities Dominated by White Men*

Following the racist and sexist labelling of Black faculty and women faculty as inferior, social media users went further to argue that appointing these scholars will result in the standards of excellence at universities in South Africa and Canada being lowered. In the context of South Africa, one Facebook user wrote that the appointment of Black faculty and women applicants resulted in the “degeneration of all value systems in South Africa.” Also in South Africa, one university was advised by a social media user to hire: “whatever colour professors they want as long as they are highly qualified and capable of maintaining high standards!” Another Facebook user wrote: “A university is a place of learning and a meritocratic standard need to be employed when determining whether or not to hire a professor.” Refuting sentiments such as the ones expressed above, Adjiwanou et al. (2014) argues:

Raising the issue of standards when referring to black academics is a discourse that serves to undermine the competencies of black scholars and one that works to maintain the false notion that white scholarship and white scholars are superior. In many ways, such constructions [...] are part of a broader discourse of white superiority - a historical legacy we all share and have a responsibility to confront.

Interestingly, social media users talked about the idea of standards as if it was not a concept that needed problematising and deconstructing. In most white and male dominated universities, the standards and the rules are set by a very niche group of tenured, older, white males. This group presides over what sociologists term “boundary work” (Gieryn, 1983). Matias, Lewis and Hope (2021) explain that boundary work is “the practice of a group setting rules to determine who is good enough to join.” Social media users did not also

problematise the uneven ways in which the standards and rules were applied depending on one's identity. Gasman (2016) observes:

I have learned that faculty will bend rules, knock down walls, and build bridges to hire those they really want (often white colleagues) but when it comes to hiring faculty of color, they have to "play by the rules" and get angry when any exceptions are made. Let me tell you a secret – exceptions are made for white people constantly in the academy; exceptions are the rule in academia.

Partly in response to the assumptions that Blackness is not synonymous to academic excellence, the African Caribbean Faculty Association of McMaster University in Canada, for example, labelled the cohort hiring for Black faculty in 2021, "the McMaster University Black Excellence Cohort hiring initiative" (Joseph et al., 2021). Also in Canada, Wilfrid Laurier University termed their targeted hiring, the "Inclusive excellence cohort hiring initiative" (Vannelli and Morrison, 2021). Commenting on the use of the term 'Black excellence,' Andrews (2022) explains: "One may argue that Black excellence seems uncalled for, since there has never been the need to promote White excellence as a hashtag, but the fact is that the existence of #BlackExcellence underpins the need to celebrate the contributions of Black folks who are working in institutions that have historically underappreciated their efforts and contributions."

Social media users who assumed that hiring more women and Black faculty jeopardised standards of excellence did not go unchallenged. One Facebook user rebutted: "Why do people automatically assume hiring more women means lowering the standard? It could mean [name of university removed] is putting lots of effort [into] attracting qualified female candidates." Another countered: "The problem with this argument is that it assumes that the women who have been hired are not qualified ... To assume that the woman [is] being hired are not qualified and are only chosen based on gender is sexist."

Some social media users failed to appreciate that appointing of Black and women faculty is actually not inimical to the attainment and upholding of standards of academic excellence at universities in South Africa and Canada. Paradoxically, diversifying the faculty increases academic excellence. According to the Scarborough Charter (2021:9) "inclusive excellence embodies the recognition that not only is post-secondary education enriched by equity, diversity and inclusion; equitable inclusion is critical to excellence." Further,

“a diverse faculty is more successful in recruiting and retaining students from varied backgrounds. In the United States, for example, research indicates that the success of undergraduate female students is directly related to the number of female faculty members. This effect is particularly pronounced among African Americans. [...] Students identify more with Professors who look like they do [...]” (Henry, Choi & Kobayashi, 2012:3). Leggon (2010:1015) adds that all students benefit when faculty members are diverse.

### *Merit Hires versus Diversity Hires*

To prevent the alleged lowering of institutional standards of academic excellence, Facebook users commenting on targeted hiring of Black and women faculty in South Africa and Canada urged universities to hire on the basis of merit regardless of the identities of the hires. Most Facebook users who advocated for merit-based hiring dismissed histories of racist and sexist segregation that Black and women intellectuals have had to contend with in the broader society and in hiring processes (Fox Tree and Vaid, 2022).

Writing in the context of South Africa, one Facebook user could not believe that “Apartheid will still be blamed” for disparities that targeted hiring processes were attempting to address. Also trivialising the implications of race and gender-based marginalisation on Black people and women, another Facebook user commented: “we’re not living in that time period [Apartheid period] anymore.” Another added: “As we as a nation move forward the lives of those affected by Apartheid will eventually improve - after all we’re no longer living under a government that supports such a system.” Also in the South African context, a social media user averred: “Do not blame “apartheid” ... 20 years has gone by in the “new SA” ... more than enough time to get a few “other” PhD’s, if they wanted to become professors!” Echoing similar sentiments, another Facebook user wrote: “Move on in life and stop blaming the “whites.” Do you think Jan van Riebeeck landed in SA with a fridge, TV and internet on his back...No!!!...they worked the land and became educated....so please, do not re-invent the wheel...get on with your life!”

Although some Facebook users showed eagerness to move away from the enduring consequences of a racially segregated past in South Africa, Motswatswa (2021) argues that: “although Apartheid is over, its influence continues to intrude in virtually every waking moment of a Black person’s life in South Africa.” Motswatswa (2021) adds: “South Africa has come far but

the road ahead is still long, and until privilege and access to a quality of life are deracialised, I simply cannot get over Apartheid. The past is still present; we simply cannot move on – the system will not allow us.” Mtose (2011:325) concurs: “racism is alive, active, pervasive and no less damaging.” Arguing along similar lines, one Facebook user argued:

20 [years] can't make up for a lifetime of wrongdoing, and yes, we can still blame Apartheid because u white people still reap the fruit of it. Because of what your forefathers did to all people of colour for almost 400 [years] you want only 20 [years] to wipe it out, never, the pain is still there, you can't talk because u never lived your life like an inferior, u were never told piss of, you [are] on the pavement of a white beach, not on the beach itself. [You] were never told u can't get on the train because u made it to the white side of it and can't get on and have to wait women alone for another hour for the next train.

Asking Black people in South Africa to get over Apartheid or move on, given that “the past is still present” (Motswatswa, 2021) is callous and violent. Mtose (2011:325) elaborates: “Sadly, experiences of everyday racism remain a historical and current reality for black South Africans. This suggests that the legacy of apartheid racism continues to have a significant impact on black people in South Africa.”

Similar to social media users in South Africa, it was interesting to note that Facebook users responding to Black cohort hiring in Canada also denied that racism was a factor that hindered the hiring of Black faculty. One social media user argued: “[Name of university removed] has been an equal opportunity venue in all respects for decades. Your implication that a white person would get hired over an equally qualified black person has no foundation whatsoever. None.” Another Canadian Facebook user argued that allegations that a particular university discriminated against Black people and women had no basis in reality. The Facebook user averred that such claims: “didn't reflect the reality of my time at [name of university removed]” in the eighties and nineties. “Where is the proof?” asked another sceptical Facebook user. While the Facebook held these ideas, in Canada, Henry et al. (2017:3) argue that:

Notwithstanding the promise of equity, the university is a racialized site that still excludes and marginalizes non-White people, in subtle, complex, sophisticated, and ironic ways, from everyday interactions with colleagues to institutional practices that at best are ineffective and at worst perpetuate structural racism. To deconstruct

the intricacy of race and racism in Canadian universities we assembled a group of some of the leading scholars in the field, who tell those stories using many types of evidence and comparative analysis. We have called our book *The Equity Myth* to signal that the goal of achieving social justice by creating equitable institutions has been consistently promised but persistently denied for racialized and Indigenous scholars. The subtitle, *Racialization and Indigeneity at Canadian Universities*, indicates the subjects of our research – racialized and Indigenous scholars whose lives are affected by their experiences of “race.”

Though comments by South Africans at least acknowledged Apartheid (despite dismissing its consequences on Black people’s lives today), social media users in Canada were conspicuously silent about histories of anti-Black racism in Canada. This is not surprising considering the denialism of anti-Black racism in Canada. Estrada (2020) explains:

For Canadians who have likely never experienced systemic racism, it is easy to deny its existence. That makes it easy for them to make smug remarks about our neighbours to the south, like “that would never happen here” or “we’re so much better than that,” because they are personally so far removed from oppressive situations.

Facebook users who dismissed histories and present manifestations of racial injustice in South Africa and Canada advocated for the hiring of faculty members based on merit without taking into account their identities. In South Africa, one Facebook user commented: “I thought that positions were given to an individual based on their credentials and that the colour of someone’s skin wasn’t supposed to be an issue.” Another said: “As long as we refer to the colour of one’s skin as being a determining factor in anything, we will never progress to a situation where we are “a people”, and in so doing, we are blowing on the burning coals of discrimination in perpetuity.” Sounding irritated, two Facebook users affirmed: “I’m just so sick and tired of hearing about quotas. How about [giving] the work to capable people” and “I had no idea that we had a quota to fill. I thought that positions were given to an individual based on their credentials and that the colour of someone’s skin wasn’t supposed to be an issue.” “But I see no reason to allow for the preferential treatment of one human over another,” said another Facebook user.

Similar to comments made by Facebook users in South Africa, one social media user in Canada commented: “Is [name of university removed] suggesting

these new hires couldn't get in on their own steam?" Arguing along similar lines, another commented: "Nothing quite like the "subtle racism of low expectations." Is the president [of a particular Canadian university] implying people of colour can't succeed under their own steam? Why else have a targeted hiring policy? A bit patronising. Give them the dignity of treating and judging them as individuals." Another questioned the place of merit in light of Black excellence cohort hires: "so basically it is no longer a meritocracy?" "Does it really matter what colour/race a lecturer/teacher is, as long as they are teaching the students correctly?" asked another social media user.

Instead of implementing initiatives that seek to address the low numbers of women and Black faculty in South Africa, one Facebook user suggested: "Why is this a concern that needs to be addressed? I'm sure that over time the numbers and colour profiles will balance themselves out." Another contended: "I see no reason to allow for the preferential treatment of one human over another." In the Canadian context, a Facebook user contended: "Here's a simple rule: No privilege for anyone. If you want it, earn it." Also writing in the context of Canada and commenting on affirmative action to hire more women, another social media user commented: "To me, it does not matter whether or not a company (or institution) makes it's faculty/staff 100% women-dominated. But you hire based on merit and NOT because of gender. You don't put in place these affirmative actions to hire women just for the sake of getting women in the field, that in itself, is actual sexism."

Also advocating against considering race and gender in hiring processes, another Canadian Facebook user argued: "I am saying that hiring should be based on [competency] and merit." They add that race and gender should not be taken into account when hiring. Also in Canada, and in agreement with the previous comment, another said: "My point is that among people who are all qualified, how well a person "fits" into the company/role should be based on soft skills or experiences or personality, not on race. Race should never be a factor in almost all cases. Isn't it ironic that the people who claim to hate racism so much are also the ones who think of race as such an important/defining characteristic?" Another said: "[Name of university removed] didn't get to the top by indulging in racial preferences. It got there by hiring the best candidate regardless of race, sex, creed, etc. We [made] Martin Luther King proud by judging people on their individual merits. So now we're going to grant preference (and also penalize) people based on their skin colour?"



Some Facebook users contended that targeted hiring of Black and women faculty was synonymous with racist and sexist discrimination against people who were not raced as Black and gendered as women. A Canadian Facebook user argued: “How patronising is this? Not to mention reductionist...This is also the “subtle racism of low expectations”. Another said: “Anything short of simply focusing on the person who’s the best for the job is some sort of unfair discrimination. In this case, they are trying to do “accelerated hiring” of black faculty members ...This is by definition, racist. The fact that it’s an attempt to right previous wrongs doesn’t make it less racist.” Pushing back at the idea that targeted hiring was racist, a Facebook user writing from a Canadian perspective argued: “And for the people who think this is racist, this is a (long overdue) method of trying to EQUALIZE opportunities for all people because of systemic racism before you argue [please] read the Peel Region Education report findings and the Black Student Athletes Report that explain WHY this must be done.”

It is interesting that many social media users regarded hiring based on merit and hiring for purposes of addressing historical injustices as mutually exclusive. The assumption was that appointing more Black people and women necessarily meant that they were not being hired on merit. As discussed earlier in the findings section, this assumption is both racist and sexist. Those who dismissed targeted hiring initiatives by universities in South Africa and Canada likely enjoy privileges based on their race and gender that shield them from experiencing prejudice. Pushing back the idea of solely hiring on merit, a Facebook user argued: “The harsh reality is recruitment without consideration of our internal biases is NOT merit based in itself. Hence, we use affirmative action as a means to correct some of our biases.” Another social media user commented:

On meritocracy ... The problem with your argument is it doesn't consider the potential of inherent biases [...] towards women. There are a number of sociological studies suggesting a heavily [ingrained] unconscious attitude towards women. As a result, affirmative action actually has the potential to LIMIT bias and can actually help achieve a MORE merit based recruitment process [...] we NEED to use affirmative action so we can correct centuries of inequities and help bring these marginalized groups [an] equal shot.

In a lengthy comment worth quoting, a social media user writing from the Canadian perspective contended:

For all those complaining that people should be hired on merit, you need to realize that people of colour do not have the privilege to be hired based on merit. All we want is to be given a fair shot. It would seem like the fair thing to do just to hire people based on merit but in reality that is not how it actually is. The lack of diversity you see in all these institutions is not because there are no people of colour qualified for the job, [it's] evidence of the different blocks placed on their path. Starting with the biases recruiters have towards ethnic sounding names...you won't believe how many resumes are excluded by just that criteria alone. Then there are racist policies that are hidden in requirements ... "Canadian experience", "Canadian education". People of colour are more affected by these requirements disproportionately because chances are most visible minorities are immigrants so are automatically excluded by that criteria. Then if you manage to pass all those blocks and you make it to the interview, you have to pray and hope that the people interviewing have no biases of their own and give you a fair interview...sounds simple but [it's] not. So yes, in a perfect world you would hope people are hired by merit but don't for one second think that the lack of diversity is a reflection of the candidates who have applied for the job. The problem goes so deep that when people of colour are considering career options, they have to think about how well they will do in the said industry and some just don't even bother going into education or law because they know that there will be no opportunities. So if [name of university removed] is willing to look at where their policies discriminate against people of colour, [that's] a good thing. Not sure why it took so long but [it's] a welcome step in the right direction.

Facebook users in South Africa offered Black people and women the following unsolicited advice: "It is all about hard work and commitment. Why making it a racist or feminist issue?" "If you work hard enough, get the grades, use the multiple opportunities and apply for bursaries...the sky's the limit." In another comment, a different Facebook user argued: "It is about hard work, intelligence, passion and commitment to study: I did not get my post school education for free...stop your "apartheid" crap ... learn, work hard, focus, and become a professor!!"

On the surface, it appears as though there is nothing inherently wrong with advising Black people and women to work hard to achieve their goals.

This argument is deeply problematic because it is devoid of histories and systems of oppression that have ensured that Black people and women remain disadvantaged. In the South African context, working hard alone has not necessarily served Black people well. These people work hard but that has not translated to better opportunities for them. Although South African comedian Trevor Noah was tweeting in response to a comment by Kim Kardashian in which she advised those desiring success in business to work hard, his comments sum up the realities of the majority of Black South Africans who have worked hard most of their lives, but their material realities remained unchanged. Noah tweeted, "A lot of people work hard and they are still broke. In fact, the broker you are, the harder you probably work" (@TimesLive 2022). Beyond telling people to work hard, a textured analysis of systemic barriers that Black people and women contend with is needed.

## Conclusion

Three interlinked themes emerged in this paper. The first is the Othering of Black and women faculty as inferior and unworthy of appointment. This discussion exposed the racism and sexism that characterised comments by Facebook users and the potential negative consequences for Black and women faculty. New hires potentially self-impose undue pressure on themselves to prove to detractors that they are qualified, deserving, worthy and capable academics. This often results in overworking, burnout, exhaustion, and mental health challenges in the long term. Depending on individuals, having scripts like this running in the backgrounds of their minds affects levels of confidence in negative ways. This paper highlighted ways Black and women faculty could survive and thrive in their jobs.

The second theme examined assumptions by social media users that hiring Black and women faculty members led to a drop in the standards of academic excellence. This discussion challenged the notion of standards pointing to their constructed nature and the ways these standards were impartially applied. Assuming that appointing Black and women faculty is a liability is racist, sexist and parochial. Proponents of this view failed to see that hiring diverse faculty enhances academic excellence at institutions dominated by white men.

The third theme discussed calls by social media users for post-secondary institutions in South Africa and Canada to hire based on merit without

considering the race or gender of applicants. These comments that were devoid of histories of systemic barriers Black and women faculty contend with to get academic appointments erroneously imagined that hiring the above academics necessarily meant the suspension of rigorous merit-based standards. This is further from the reality. Similar meticulous processes applied in the appointment of faculty members in open advertisements were also applied in targeted hiring processes. The only difference is that universities now recognise biases that have prevented Black and women faculty from getting employed and they consciously attempt to right some wrongs through cohort hiring.

Circling back to the Othering theory, in all three themes, Facebook users constituted Black and women faculty members as the inferior Other. As discussed by Brons (2015), the othering was implicit. Although the out-group is largely constituted as silent in the Othering theory, looking at comments by social media users, there were several strong pushbacks from the Other or Facebook users whose views were sympathetic to the position of the inferior Other. Those advocating for the Other took it upon themselves to educate those criticising targeted hiring of historical injustices that prevented Black people and women from being appointed as faculty. They also challenged assumptions that positioned targeted hiring as compromising academic standards of excellence.

Notwithstanding the fact that parts of the hiring process require that candidates sometimes give talks that are open to the university community, the majority of the time potential hires present their ideas to hiring committees in meetings that are understandably closed to the public. The committees make the final determinations of candidates to appoint. This means committee members end up being the only ones who have a detailed and granular appreciation of the value and the worth new hires are bringing to the institution. Beyond the spaces departments curate on their websites for new faculty to offer public information about their experiences and research agendas, it may be useful for new faculty to make public presentations broadcast on social media platforms of their work once they settle into their jobs. This might contribute to deflating and speaking back to some of the problematic stereotypes and problematic discourses that were discussed in the paper. This can be done in tandem with other strategies of addressing structural racism and sexism in universities.

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