

# Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

---

Volume 1  
Issue 40 *Fostering Inclusive Learning  
Communities Together*

---

Article 9

July 2023

## The Only

Nkumbu Mutambo  
*Northumbria University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe>



Part of the [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mutambo, Nkumbu "The Only," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 40 (2023), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss40/9>

## **THE ONLY**

*Nkumbu Mutambo, Postgraduate (PhD) Researcher, Design and Communication Design,  
Northumbria University, Class of 2022*

Throughout my life there have been many moments and spaces where the words ‘the only’ aptly described my positionality relative to others. Being ‘the only’ comes with a weight felt not only in stares and looks but also in tactless questions and the assumptions which these thinly veil. It is a weight felt not only in the violence of abuse but also in the unquestioned quiet of sameness. Being the only, the other, the exception, leaves one empty, voiceless, breathless.

Figure 1. *The Only*

## Academic Commentary

Contrary to marketing materials carefully curated to feature people who appear to represent a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, most higher educational institutions in the UK are selling a dream of diversity and inclusion which they fail to live up to in reality. For instance, while recent reports suggest that minority ethnic students “are healthily represented within the sector at the undergraduate level” (Arday, 2020, p. 2), there is also evidence which suggests that there is a drop-off in participation of such students at the postgraduate level (UKCGE, 2020). Furthermore, this lack of representation extends to the area of staffing, with BAME individuals constituting only 9.8% of staff in the sector in the UK (Advance HE, 2019). Furthermore, though

this figure reflects an increase of BAME-identifying staff, the evidence also suggests that “inequalities persist, with lower proportions of both UK and non-UK BAME staff than White staff on open-ended/permanent contracts, in senior management positions, and on higher salary bands” (Advance HE, 2019). Therefore, some have argued that such disparity, along with the general lack of ethnically diverse staff and postgraduate research students, contributes to a lack of positive role models, the perpetuation of Eurocentric curriculum and knowledge systems, and the general perception that the HE sector in the UK is a white space (Alexander & Arday, 2015; Akinbosede, 2019; Arday, 2019; Arday, 2020).

In addition to these abstract and more generalized impacts, the weight of these disparities is felt by individuals as part of their unique, lived experiences. For students in particular, the experience of these disparities can culminate in a sense that one does not belong. While statistics can quantify the ‘cold, hard facts’ and aid in forming a general understanding of conditions, they fail to communicate what it means for any individual to exist in a space where they are the only, the other, the exception. The piece aims to capture and convey some of the entangled and complicated feelings which come with finding oneself in the position of ‘the only.’ Specifically, as a Black, African woman, it is a situation which has become a defining aspect of my experience the further I have progressed in academia. As such, my creative piece aims to highlight the fact that in spite of the smiling images and snappy copy in marketing materials, the message that is reinforced for many students through everyday experiences is that they don’t really belong. That, just like in a museum where one is instructed emphatically to look but not touch, the academy is ultimately a place where one is welcome to visit for a short time, but not a place one is welcome to shape, become a part of, or to remain in.

## References

- Advance HE. (2019). *Equality in higher education: staff statistical report 2019*. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/equality-higher-education-statistical-report-2019>
- Akinbosede, D. (2019). The BAME attainment gap is not the fault of BAME students. University of Sussex. <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/broadcast/read/50544>
- Alexander, C., & Arday, J. (eds.) (2015). *Aiming Higher: Race, Inequality and Diversity in the Academy*. Runnymede Trust. <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/Aiming%20Higher.pdf>
- Arday, J. (2019). Dismantling power and privilege through reflexivity: negotiating normative Whiteness, the Eurocentric curriculum and racial micro-aggressions within the Academy. *Whiteness and Education* 3(2): 141–161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23793406.2019.1574211>
- Arday, J. (2020). Fighting the tide: Understanding the difficulties facing Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Doctoral Students’ pursuing a career in Academia. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53(10): 972–979. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1777640>

UKCGE (UK Council for Graduate Education). (2020). *Access & Participation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnicities in UK Postgraduate Research – Policy Briefing*.  
<http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/article/bame-pgr-access-participation-459.aspx>