

## 'People Like You': Hidden Stories

Ana Maria Peredo

Telfer School of Management, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada

### Mr Bow Tie

I was trembling in my office, in a former university. I was there waiting to hear he was coming into the building to give him the letter in person. Perhaps then I could have concrete evidence of his behavior. I know he will be mad. I was sweating, my heart bouncing and the fear starting to invade me. Finally, I decided not to wait for him, put the letter in the mailbox and left the building as quickly as I could.

A few months earlier, I had been assigned to co-teach with Mr. Bow Tie. He sent me a spreadsheet for the course plan. I filled in some parts. I was excited to be in that course. I had been waiting to teach that course for a year. When we met, he looked at the spreadsheet, threw it in my face and said: 'people like you'. He was annoyed because one line of the spreadsheet was out of alignment. I was paralyzed. I didn't know what to say. A few days later I consulted with the Dean, and his advice was, 'you just have to become another shark, and by the way, I won't support you going for tenure without teaching a [that] core course.' This was just the beginning. The course was taught in three sections, three times a week. As I lectured, I could see Mr. Bow Tie's eyes following me. By the second of the three sections on a given day, I knew exactly when he would get up and repeat a version of 'people like you'. It was usually when I brought up issues of poverty and what he called 'third world issues'. The narrative needed to be changed; economically poor countries needed to be portrayed as riddled with corruption; the negative effects of economic globalization were nothing, but a few independent incidents created by bad a few bad apples. His whiteness and seniority gave weight to his delivering what he thought was the truth. I calmly breathed and waited to continue with the lecture.

Toward the end of the term, he posted a damaging teaching review on the internet, pretending to be a student, containing personal information that students wouldn't know. When the official evaluations arrived, I was pleased. They were really decent, and I asked to meet so we could look at the evaluations and reflect on what worked or not and implement relevant changes for the following year. When we met in his office, he announced to me with some pleasure in his eyes that I was not going to teach

that course anymore and that he was very well aware that I needed that course for tenure. My tears came down, and he laughed. After a pause, he added, 'I am also the associate Dean', just in case, presumably, I wanted to appeal the decision.

If you are a woman, non-white and have a different point of view, the chances are that you will hear openly or thinly veiled some version of 'people like you...' during your academic life. This hangs over your head, providing a rationale for exclusion. In the weeks to follow, Mr. Bow Tie spread a narrative that people like me were not team players. He never answered my letter.

Months later, another associate dean loudly declared in a faculty council 'we want to hire people like us'. About a week later, an Asian female junior faculty came to my office. The same person who announced the preference for hiring people like him had been annoyed with her because she added one point to one of the slides he provided to her for class teaching. I learned that he gave her a set of slides for each class with the implicit expectation that she would regurgitate them exactly. I was surprised when she said to me that she was grateful to him and 'admitted' that she should not have changed the slide. I tried to encourage her to do so by saying, 'I believe that the students would benefit if you bring your own experiences into the classroom. It makes theories real.' She didn't seem convinced. I said to myself, 'yeah, minority women already face all kind of challenges and pressures to conform, and they conform, and I understand it.'

Unfortunately, the attempt to mold and shape process in this way isn't confined to the political right in the academic community. As Di Angelo points out in *White Fragility*, it happens among white progressives as well. There is an expectation as well of how one ought to behave or think. There is a standard of 'normality' or a mold framed by white progressives, sometimes, ironically, in their attempts to be anti-racist. For a non-white woman, the impacts are similar: When one does not fulfill the model constructed for them, one is discarded and excluded as a non-team player. In this case, no one tells you, but you know it. It is all beneath the surface. No efforts are there to really hear different opinions; the label is already there. In the middle of it all, we praise diversity.

\*Corresponding author: [aperedo@uOttawa.ca](mailto:aperedo@uOttawa.ca)

## **The politics of silencing diverse voices: The emotional burden**

The emotional consequences are a heavy tax for minority faculty members. The feeling of loneliness, marginalization, unfitness, and outsider status is real. Over time, one's voice starts getting weaker. One's confidence decreases as you have an accent and a colleague shouts, 'I don't understand what you are saying', or four or five white males start monopolizing the meeting and saying to each other 'you know me, we have talked about this, you know what I think about X', which often signals that the conversation has already happened and one has to play catch-up. So even if you are (were?) cheerful and vivacious, you might end up joining the many minority women and men who decide early on to participate minimally to get along in those meetings as a way of protecting themselves. It seems that either one becomes invisible or one is made invisible. It is a kind of implicit social punishment. The more one cares, the more one can get hurt. These are some of the realities that are at the roots of our challenges in decolonizing curriculum. The failure to recognize and value diversity in universities is not only hurting Indigenous and minority women but the entire mission of the university

## **Spaces of collective resistance**

Over 20 years, I have benefitted from the solidarity of progressive and activist women on campus. It has been a joy and work of love to be part of the foundations and evolution of solidarity women's organizations. As the 'usual suspects', these women and their organizations participate actively in equity and diversity committees and meetings. These meetings and committees seem to go nowhere as the rules of the game are shaped by the administration, and the sense of just being 'managed' and being played out increases at the end of each meeting. Nevertheless, these activist women keep providing feedback and putting forward proposals to remind the administration of their obligation to provide a welcoming environment for diversity every day.

An Open Forum Against Racism (OFAR) coalition emerged as a response to explicit and coded acts of white supremacy in a university setting in 2017. For some of us, this coalition constitutes a space of agency and resistance toward institutional attempts to shape our individual and collective identities. As an umbrella, OFAR allows us the possibility of mobilizing diverse relevant organizations (unions, students, instructors and staff, organizations and associations) and resources.

OFAR has also been a space of learning to work with each other, recognizing that we are not a homogenous group, and we are ready to discover and encourage different patterns of cooperation and participation.