



## 6th St. Gallen Diversity & Inclusion Week

Understanding racial burden and tokenism - A Black feminist critique of Black (in)visibility in higher education

12 – 16 September 2022

From insight to impact.

# Our Speaker



Dr. Noémi Michel is an anti-racist and feminist scholar, teacher, activist and cultural worker. She is a lecturer in political theory in the Department of Political Science at the University of Geneva and teaches regularly at the Geneva School of Art and Design (HEAD). Dr. Noémi Michel has been a Visiting Professor of Diversity Politics at HU University and has completed research stays at Northwestern University, UC Berkeley, and EHESS Paris. She is currently researching different understandings of anti-racism in public debates and institutions in Europe, as well as diasporic black feminist theories of political voice.

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# **Understanding racial burden and tokenism**

## **A Black feminist critique of Black (in)visibility in higher education**

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Diversity & Inclusion week – University of St-Gallen

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# Including-Excluding: the impact of (in)visibility

**Visibility as a "politics of presence"**



**inclusion?**



**unsustainable inclusion**

## **Tokenism**

“the practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to do a particular thing, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of sexual or racial equality within a workforce.”  
(Oxford Online Dictionary)

## **Towards a Black feminist critique of tokenism**

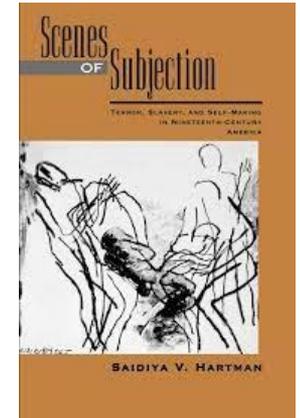
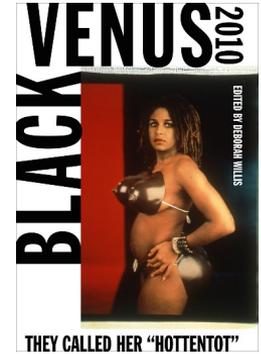
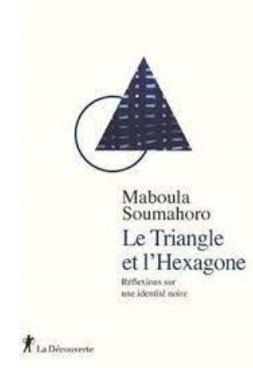
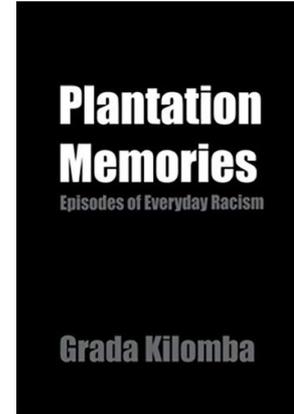
# Black feminist critique

Diasporic Black feminist thought

A mode of theorizing: close reading, lived experience, historicizing

Intersectional and temporal understanding of power

→ tokenizing as a set of operations



# Tokenizing as a politics of "embodied voice"

A mediation between subjects and their voice within academia

Giving flesh to academia

An unsustainable and burdening politics of embodied voice

→ Argument in three steps

# Tokenizing as a story: the Black woman on the poster

**E01:** “I remind my colleague that I am not a professor, that there are other professors for my subdiscipline that could take part to the film. He specifies that **the director really insisted upon me.** I end up figuring in the film. I am actually very present in that film. It begins with me and ends with me, ... **smiling... explaining how wonderful my institution is.**”

**E02:** “My image in the poster means that the University is also serving “this kind” of students. Indeed, I am **the only woman of color** retained for the campaign. (...) During many years that follow, at the beginning of each semester, I enter the main building of the university and cross a **giant picture of me smiling** besides a text promoting the wonderful services of the University. On another poster I walk with confidence besides three other students, all whites, (...), we look at the sky, and **smile. For years, people recognize me** in the streets or in parties and interpellate me as the woman on the University poster.”

# Tokenizing as a story: the Black woman on the poster

**E03:** “He says that my profile is really excellent, that I gave convincing responses during the Q and A, but that *my research is “too far away”* from the thematic they have privileged for the position. The committee has said that *I am not mainstream enough*.

At that very moment, as I am crying from disappointment, at that very moment, *I truly realise that I have been a token* in that process of recruitment. I feel like being a token in general. I feel that *the institution needed to show my “profile” without seriously considering to invite my person* for a durable stay.”

**E4:** "Nobody really acknowledges the violence that happened to me. All my claims seem to hit a wall. They want me to be present, to figure, even to represent them, but *not to really be there. Be present but do not do you, do not speak for yourself*."

# Tokenizing as bodily dispossession and spectacularization

"Innocent pleasures" (Hartman 1997)

the "(S)exotic spectacle of the Other"  
(dos Santos Pinto 2013)

V., the Black woman on the poster:

"I am actually **very present** in that film. It begins with me and ends with me... **smiling...**"

"a giant picture of me smiling"

"For years, people recognize me as the woman on the university poster."

"the institution needed to show my 'profile' without seriously considering to invite my person"

"I realize how badly this institution wants my image, but not me. They want me to be present, to figure, even to represent them, but not to really be there."



**the look of inclusion  
unsustainable visibility**

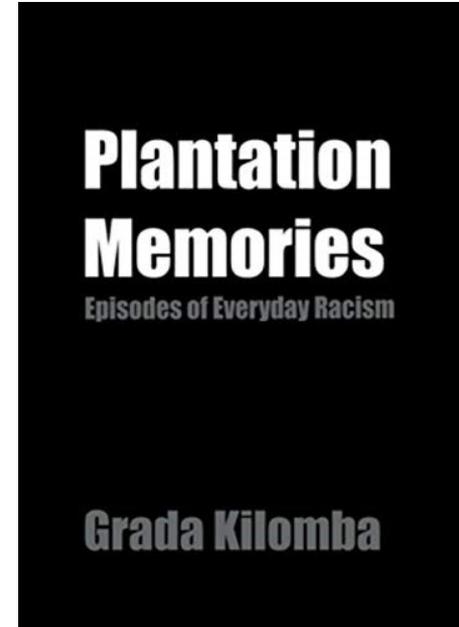
# Tokenizing as voice containment and distortion

Archival power (Hartman 1997)

Suppression of Black women's intellectual work (Hill Collins 2000)

The facemask of *Escrava Anastacia* (Kilomba 2008, p.17)

"With no official history, some claim she was born a Yoruba princess (today Nigeria) before being captured by European slavers and brought to Brazil, while others point to Brazil as her place of birth. Her African name is unknown; Anastàcia was the name given to her during enslavement. By all accounts she was cruelly treated by her 'owners' and forced to wear a heavy iron collar and a **facemask that prevented her from speaking**. The reasons given for this punishment vary: some report her political activism aiding in the escape of other slaves; others claim she resisted the amorous advances of her white master; and yet another version places the blame on a mistress jealous of her beauty. She is often purported to have possessed tremendous healing powers and to have performed miracles, and was seen as a saint among the enslaved Africans."



# Tokenizing as voice containment and distortion

The facemask of *Escrava Anastacia*  
(Kilomba 2008)

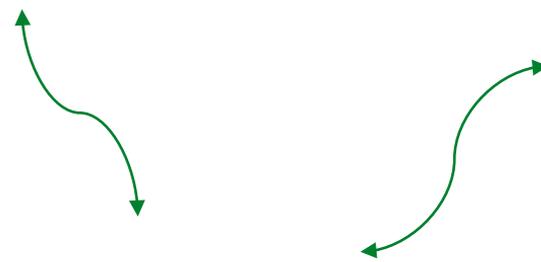
The Black woman's happy voice:

"I am actually very present in that film. It begins with me and ends with me... smiling... explaining how wonderful this institution is."

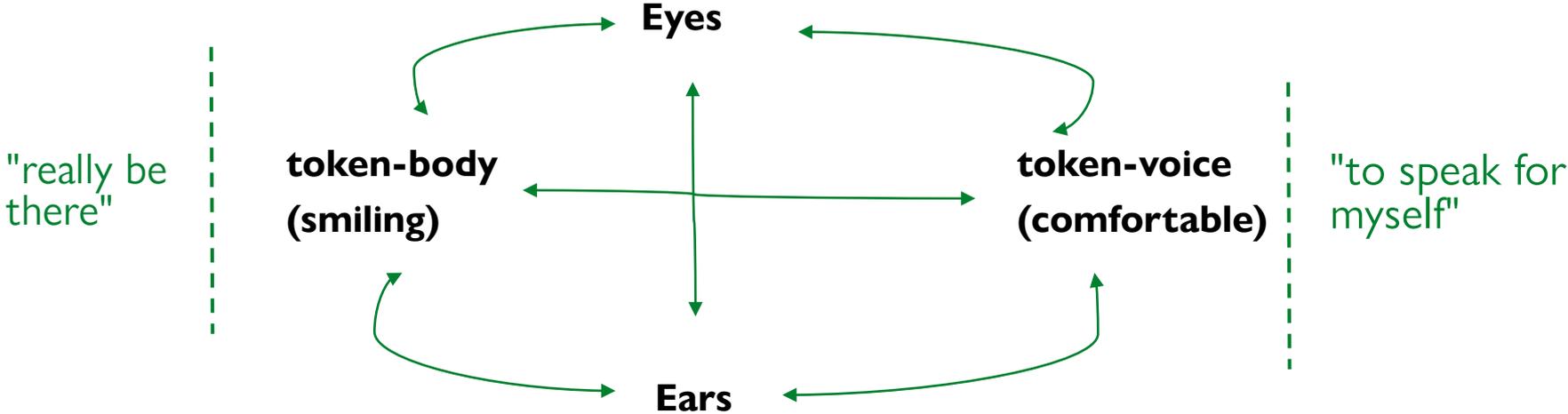
"My research is too far away"

"My claim seems to hit a wall. (...) Be present but do not do you, do not speak for yourself."

**the sound of inclusion  
inaudible visibility**



# Tokenizing as a racial burden / unsustainable inclusion



# Upcoming events

- **"Towards a Black feminist archiving: exploring digital amplifications of Black European voices."** Panel co-chaired with Jovita dos Santos Pinto, September 23, AfroEuropeans conference, Bruxelles, <https://www.afroEuropeans2022.com/fr/>
- **Vielleicht** a theater creation about the coloniality of urban spaces and the Black experience in Europe, November 1-11, théâtre du Grütli, <https://grutli.ch/spectacle/vielleicht/>
- **La politique de la voix** , a podcast series created with my former students to listened to here: <https://www.mixcloud.com/radio40/playlists/la-politique-de-la-voix/>

# Upcoming events CCDI

● **Logib Workshops**, Language: FR, [register here](#)  
20 September, 27 September



● **Infoevents «Aiming Higher – Karriereentwicklung für Assistenzärztinnen»**  
Dates and soon also registration [here](#)

● **Swiss Leadership, Inclusion, & Diversity Summit**  
Save the date: 1 – 3 June 2023

All our offers can also be found at [www.ccdi-unisg.ch](http://www.ccdi-unisg.ch) and updates on upcoming events on our [LinkedIn page](#).

# SAVE THE DATE: D&I Week 2023



The 7. St. Gallen Diversity & Inclusion Week will take place from **11 - 15 September 2023!**

You will find the slides and further information on our website [www.inclusion-tagung.ch](http://www.inclusion-tagung.ch) in a few weeks.

Note: The sponsors of the D&I Week are in no way responsible for the content presented by the University of St. Gallen.

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