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White Male Privilege, Diversity-as-Deficit, and Tokenism in the North American University: Reflections on Netflix's The Chair

Introduction: Synopsis of The Chair

Ji-Yoon, a professor of Korean origin, is the newly appointed chair of the English department at Pembroke University, stand-in for a lower-tier Ivy League school on the East Coast of the United States. Most of the department's faculty are older and white, and almost all male, except for an older woman Joan Hambling, a white professor who has been sidelined. There is also a young black woman faculty member named Yasmin McKay, whom Ji-Yoon wants to make the university's first black tenured professor with an endowed chair in the English department. Yaz, as they call her, has published in top journals, and is loved by her students, who flock to take her courses. Ji-Yoon herself chose to stay at Pembroke despite possibilities of receiving better offers at other competitive universities, because she likes her colleagues and she liked the offer Pembroke gave her. Additionally, there are two white men, who play important roles — Elliot Rentz (old), trying to be relevant to young students, and Bill Hobson (middle-aged), trying to make sense of his life after losing his wife to cancer and when his only daughter leaves home to go to university. The 6-episode series evolves through various aspects of departmental and university-wide politics, ending in Ji-Yoon losing her leadership position but managing to maneuver to appoint the hitherto-neglected Joan Hambling as the successor chair of the department.

Race and Gender: Central or Peripheral Themes?

On the surface, the show's storyline does not seem overtly racist and the setting of *The Chair*, at a lower-tier Ivy League University, does not seem like a bastion of white male privilege like other top-tier ivy schools. An Asian woman, Professor Ji-Yoon (played by Sandra Oh), newly appointed as chair of her department champions another woman of color; Ji-Yoon is keen on ensuring that her black colleague, Yasmin McKay (Yaz) (played by Nana Mensah), receives both tenure and an endowed chair. Diversity issues are at the fore of the show, but not evenly treated by the creators of *The Chair*, Amanda Peet and Annie Julie Wyman. According to film critic Han (August 12, 2021, *The Hollywood Reporter*), "The students are presented as an undifferentiated mass and figures like Yaz, a popular young professor on

track to become the department's first tenured black woman, and Lila, a teaching fellow whose future is jeopardized by Bill's screw-ups, are shunted to the sidelines."

While I agree with most of Han's arguments, I feel that racialized women are still the heart of the story. The professional and private life of Ji-Yoon, a Korean American professor, is the narrative core of *The Chair*. Her racial background is meaningful, as her family and other members of the Korean American community are highlighted in several scenes, such as when Ji-Yoon's father takes his granddaughter to a Korean baby ceremony. Some Asian Americans like Ji-Yoon's family and friends appear to have established themselves fairly well in the larger community. This is in keeping with South and Southeast Asian families, in general, in the U.S, especially California (Crockett 2022). But as Crockett (2022:7-9) implies, many of these ethnic communities might still experience the pull of incorporation (demand for labor) and the push of marginalization (when it comes to issues of nationality and citizenship) so much so that they experience it as a personal dilemma and combat these feelings through entrepreneurial actions that pushes them to convert their ethnicities into commodities such as music, food, festivals on display or shared with the public at large (Verasiu and Geisler 2018). While ethnic communities in general may or may not experience racial oppression or racial equality (it depends on what they do in specific situations), the lower classes in most ethnic communities feel racially oppressed. This is particularly the case within the Black population in the U.S. (Crockett 2022).

Ji-Yoon is a tenured female professor in an almost white department at a university that provides token jobs to people of color. She has privileges associated with high levels of education that other ethnic women may not possess but when she is on trial because of student protests, she is voted out of her job as chair by the white, mostly male, faculty. Her ability to change the culture of the department through her leadership is severely questioned.

Through Ji-Yoon's leadership position, she is connected to Yasmin, her black colleague, and to a lesser extent, Lila, who looks to be of Asian-American origin, although her ethnicity is not explicitly stated. These women of color are all tokenized by their institution and constrained by the white male privilege deeply ingrained within the North American university. This is particularly apparent when Elliot Rentz, who has to champion Yaz's case for tenure and promotion, wants to follow existing norms rather than make changes in procedures that will make Yaz incontrovertibly the preferred choice.

Ben Travers (Aug 20, 2021), a reporter for The Indie Wire, focuses on Ji-Yoon's racial background in his evaluation of the show: "Ji-Yoon recognizes she's the critical initial step in a longer movement to bring Pembroke University out of the dark (white) ages. Accordingly, she feels pressured to embolden diverse, minority voices in a world long controlled primarily by men." The Dean at Pembroke tells Ji-Yoon that she is positioned to bring Pembroke to the modern era, which she takes as an encouraging sign. But it seems there are deep structural constraints within which she must work, and as a result, she fails.

Yaz, who is confident in her abilities as researcher and teacher, accepts an endowed chair at Yale with a much higher salary. Her acceptance at Yale is an endorsement of her ability as both researcher and teacher, despite prevailing policies of tokenism. Among the Pembroke faculty, disappointment seems limited to Ji-Yoon, who worked very hard on Yaz's behalf. She had managed to convince David Duchovny (who was being considered for the endowed Chair instead of Yaz) that Yaz deserves it more. She even confronted Elliot about his lackadaisical treatment of Yaz, urging him to sing Yaz's praise to the committee about her research and teaching. Elliot, on the other hand, feels lost and marginalized within the classroom when all the students endorse Yaz's approachable and cool teaching style. You can see the resentment, bewilderment, and sense of loss of status in his eyes. He no longer has the credibility in research and teaching that he enjoyed even had a decade earlier. The students belong to a different time and a different world — one where social media reigns and has left him far behind.

Secondary Human-Interest Storylines

The secondary storylines involving Bill Dobson and Joan Hambling are human interest stories that happen alongside the main narrative. Several themes are developed around the character of Dobson, a renowned but troubled professor who has just lost his wife, and who goes through a personal and professional breakdown. Dobson extends his friendship to Ji-Yoon and offers to babysit for her while he is suspended from teaching for inciting controversy. Dobson's narrative arc has romantic overtones as well as a darker side: he makes Ji-Yoon more vulnerable in her role as chair when his actions (performing a Nazi salute in class as an example of absurdism in the face of fascism) are misinterpreted by the students, leading the dean and the university to seek action against him and fire him from his job. Ji-Yoon is also conflicted in her feelings for him even though to all intents and purposes they are just good friends.

Professor Hambling's arc, on the other hand, has both a tragic and comedic tone. When she receives a negative student evaluation, she enlists an admirer with IT skills to find the student who wrote the evaluation by introducing a funny note. Since Professor Hambling is an older white female, her professional position is in jeopardy as the dean wants all professors with low student enrollments to be removed from the faculty, regardless of age, gender, or race. The fact that she is banished to a basement office in the sports complex is indicative of the kind of respect she garners from her colleagues and from the administration. She recalls that earlier she had been bypassed for research recognition and more importantly discriminated against in terms of her salary. She provides an example of how one of her white male colleagues – hired at the same time as her by Pembroke – was offered a salary that was \$16,000 more than what she received. But like other women, she did not take any action; instead, she played nice and wanted to fit in. In general, while older men and women are both seen as liabilities by universities, older women suffer more (See also Prothero 2023). Hambling's story is a classic example of how a post-menopausal woman is seen as incapable of growth and creativity (see Quental, Rojas-Gaviria and del Bucchia 2023 for discussion on how menopause is viewed in organizations) and is physically isolated and ignored by all. She is important to the story, however, in both generally supporting Ji-Yoon as well as creating complications for her as chair. I was not surprised when Ji-Yoon – who was voted out of the role of chair because of campus student agitation – took the opportunity to make Joan the new chair instead of Elliot. It was a last-ditch effort at preventing the older culture of male domination to continue. This helped Hambling not only to get a good office (the Chair's large office) but also some respect from her male colleagues. Aging men, it seems, have more power than aging women.

Tokenism in a context of Color-Blindness

I must confess that during my first viewing of the show, I thought the story was clever, funny, and depicted academic life fairly accurately; with so few shows or movies about professors and university politics on TV, this storyline was refreshing. It also rang true, however, given my own experiences as an academic. The Chair's titular character is a woman of color who has broken through the ranks, marking a change from Pembroke's imagined history: all prior chairs were white men. That Ji-Yoon is a woman of color is important in this show, given the relative absence of powerful women of color in many universities until recently.

Ji-Yoon has a Ph.D. from a prestigious university and has published several papers in top-ranked journals. Her accomplishments, however,

seem less valuable to the institution than what she represents. It seems that she was chosen as chair by white men who were keen to demonstrate their forward-thinking, liberal sensibilities; she is used as a token of diversity and inclusivity, a passport to the progressive political ideologies that so many universities publicly endorse.

Tokenism is an important theme in the serial, although it is downplayed. While Ji-Yoon has been chosen as chair, she does not have the power that goes with the job. In trying to wrangle tenure and a chair professorship for the highly deserving Yaz (which she believes she has the authority to do), Ji-Yoon finds her colleagues resistant to the idea and she is ultimately forced to wield heavy-handed authority to initiate the process. Furthermore, when she is directed by one of the board members to give the distinguished lecturing role to a celebrity (David Duchovny), she realizes her power exists only on paper. The dean tells her that while in principle she has the authority to name this person, based on the funding the faculty receives, her choice can be trumped by the highest bidder. As in many privately-funded institutions, money matters most and often overturns both tokenism and real diversity.

Watkins's et al.'s (2018) review of Kanter's (1977) theory of tokenism reinforces the notion that the effects of being a token are hard to escape, even in a workplace with a token proportion of up to 20%. Being employed with others of the same demographic group does not necessarily secure individual benefits, as the dynamics of tokenism are complex and contingent. Crockett (2022) highlights the importance of hiring practices such as "culture matching" that leaves many ethno-racial groups out because they might not be a good fit in the organization.

The experiences of tokens vary based on their gender and concomitant social status. Watkins et al. (2018) found that men with token status in a female-driven context suffer minimal adverse effects since they tend to enjoy a higher status (than token women) because of their place in the masculine hegemony. There are exceptions, as it is clear that a man's minority status does not unduly affect him unless he buys into the belief that doing what is expected of him as a token will improve his lot. The protagonist of *The Chair*, as both a woman and a visible minority in a male-dominated context, is bound to be adversely affected by her token status.

According to Kanter (1977), heightened visibility is the first experience of a person in a token position and certainly Ji-Yoon attracts a lot of attention. She has the eyes of Pembroke University — her colleagues, administrators, and the student body — upon her, and because of this hypervisibility, she feels that she must perform to the highest standards. Interestingly, although Ji-Yoon is tokenized (Korean woman faculty) in this

fictional university setting, none of her colleagues probe her background or scrutinize her cultural values. She does not feel the pressure to explain Korean history and culture to her non-Korean colleagues, her experiences are different from those of non-white workers outside the university. Pembroke University would prefer to take an ostensibly color-blind approach and give the impression that ethnicity does not matter. Race does matter to the racialized characters, as well to as the students at Pembroke, who become politicized when a black female professor is denied tenure in the Political Science department. They protest this decision and lament that this professor's work is evaluated using antiquated standards. Ji-Yoon agrees with these progressive views, although outwardly she does not seem particularly perturbed by these injustices; this is the first time we get a sense of how she feels about herself and other racialized groups in academia. A further consequence of visibility is the need to downplay the negative actions of the majority group, and by extension, the victimization of the token. For instance, she tells Yaz that they would wait to rock the boat until Yaz was safely tenured, suggesting that she is ambivalent about her role in drastically changing the organizational culture. Understandably, she takes the safer route of conforming to the institution's rules, both unspoken and codified. Boundary heightening — another obstacle put in place to subjugate the token — creates additional negative sentiments within the dominant group (i.e., the Us vs. Them feeling); although Ji Yoon acknowledges that she and other minorities are never invited to the homes of the powerful, this aspect of tokenism is not really explored in the show. Role entrapment, a third factor identified by Kanter (1977), is a process of assimilation that receives more attention in *The Chair*. Role entrapment happens when tokens find themselves relegated to specific roles that perpetuate stereotypes and limit their career progression. In this show, role entrapment is subtle, and we see characters attempting to resist the pressures to adhere to gender and racial typecasting. Ji Yoon's choice of a modest, slightly masculine style of clothing — she favours blazers with longer skirts — helps to distance herself from overt femininity as well as assimilation to the masculine norm. Her university pays lip service to an ideological commitment to gender equality. For instance, one of the board of directors (a woman who wants David Duchovny to give the endowed chair's talk instead of Yaz) expresses her delight that Ji-Yoon, a minority, is the current chair of English. This sentiment is echoed by the Dean and other senior white men at Pembroke, reinforcing the "fact" that their faculty is moving with the times. Nonetheless, their support proves hollow, and the institution's efforts towards diversity are only symbolic at best — the essence of tokenism.

Diversity-as-Deficit Thinking

The concept of “diversity-as-deficit” thinking, the negative conceptualization of people tokenized for their identity (Patton and Museus 2019), is evident throughout the show. In a university environment, “diversity” and “merit” are sometimes discussed as separate and indeed opposing categories. Within and beyond the academy, a person’s ability to obtain a post-secondary job is perceived to be entirely merit based, and the failure to succeed seen as the result of individual failings. Such unnuanced thinking assumes that merit is based on an individual’s ability and that a person will achieve their plaudits without any help or privilege deriving from their background, upbringing, or identity (Reed 2021). Many people in academia ascribe to the idea that university hiring must be based on merit before all else. This, however, creates a systematic rejection of certain social groups who have historically been disadvantaged in terms of education, and who have not the same privileges as other candidates. And if actions are taken to rectify this disenfranchisement, the thinking is that concessions must be made and standards lowered, in order to recognize less meritorious individuals. Often, this approach to hiring is associated with people of color or ethnic backgrounds who are then viewed as having been selected because of their racialized backgrounds. Consequently, a professor of color carries an emotional burden; they feel isolated and marginalized, and/or they experience imposter syndrome: a persistent feeling of self-doubt, according to Reed (2021) in her discussion of deficit thinking. Gender and women in professorial positions also feel this imposter syndrome (Prothero 2023). Professors of color also experience a sense of powerlessness and uncertainty about whether they were hired based on talent or because they check a diversity box. While the confident Yaz, the character going up for tenure in *The Chair*, does not seem to have any self-doubts, Ji-Yoon does. The protagonist constantly second-guesses herself and leans on others (e.g., Bill Dobson) for their opinions and advice, even when their judgment is obviously inferior to hers.

The other side of the emphasis on merit is the concept of privilege. Simone de Beauvoir (1992) explains that it was because of her class privilege and other accidents of birth that she was able to develop her talents and benefit financially from them. In becoming oneself, she notes, one takes up the ascriptions given one at birth and the possibilities assigned to one in childhood. For instance, her extensive education enabled Beauvoir to become a successful writer later in her life. Since the self is always situated vis-à-vis social class, ethnicity, or power, we must acknowledge this truth and act upon it, recommending that we “deploy our privilege as effectively as possible, to endeavor to use it well” (Kruks 2005, p.197).

Privilege, acquired through conformity with the dominant group's practices, is a source of tension among the racialized characters in *The Chair*. Ji-Yoon's relationship with Yasmin becomes strained when Yaz accuses her of acquiescing to the dominant culture, acting to please the powers that be. In a previous conversation, Ji-Yoon had suggested that they lie low until Yaz achieved tenure and after that, with the tenure issue settled, they could work together to change the system. As a chair, Ji-Yoon adopts a position that necessitates an acceptance of the power structures already in place; to her more radical junior colleague's dismay, she uses her position of privilege to promote the status quo not just passively but also actively. Yet, Yaz has the ability to go elsewhere; she does not have to wait around, hoping that her white colleagues at Pembroke will tenure her. She exercises what Foucault (1988) calls "technologies of power and techniques of the self," in the face of institutional apathy. The former is often used by people in power and the latter by those who are less powerful, like Yaz. Power can be exerted from the top based on rules of tenure and appointment of chair professorships by faculty (primarily white males), but Yaz decides to circumvent the top-down decisions at Pembroke by opting instead to go to Yale for a higher salary and with an opportunity to hold a chair professorship. Since she feels she will never be treated with equity in any university, she decides it is better to accept a job at a top Ivy League university like Yale and at a much higher salary. This is a slap in the face for Pembroke, which was, to that point, waffling about whether Yaz should receive the accolades she deserves. But, as the institution never invested in her, she had no qualms about not investing in it, unlike Ji-Yoon whose institutional loyalty — wrapped up in her position of privilege as chair — stands in the way of her own self-actualization.

Male Privilege and White Privilege

The Chair alludes to the problems of sexism and racism within academia but is arguably less hard-hitting as a critique of the white heteropatriarchy. Peggy McIntosh (1988, 1989) discussed male privilege and white privilege decades ago, although not much has happened to significantly mitigate its effects, even in 2021. White women are all very aware of male privilege and the feminist movement has this very concept at its root. When Simone de Beauvoir first raised the issue of privilege in her work, she was talking about class but subsequently, it was applied to male privilege (Kruks 2005). McIntosh (1988) argues that while men acknowledge that women have been disadvantaged in the university curriculum and in life, they are reluctant to acknowledge that they have been privileged. Even those who

want to work towards equity do not wish to upset the apple cart in ways that would disadvantage them. This is glaringly apparent in the ways in which older white men act in the faculty. They want to ensure that their jobs are secure before they would consider making any dramatic changes in how things are done in the faculty. This is also the reason why they were wanted to get rid of Ji-Yoon as chair.

In a similar vein, McIntosh argues that while she recognizes the existence of white privilege, we have been taught not to recognize that it exists. Women of color feel the same way about privileges that white women enjoy. White women who want to change the system find it difficult to see themselves as oppressors and participants in perpetuating a damaged culture. Ji-Yoon is not a white woman, but as a chair in an institution that upholds white supremacy through practices like tokenism, she is complicit in its oppressions. McIntosh (1989) notes that “whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average and also ideal so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow ‘them’ to be more like ‘us’” (p.2). She then identifies 46 examples of white privilege rarely accessible to women of color, including:

If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area that I can afford and in which I would want to live. I can be reasonably sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me. I do not have to educate our children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection. If I declare there is a racial issue at hand, or there isn't a racial issue at hand, my race will lend me more credibility for either position than a person of color will have. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race (p.2).

In her reflections on white privilege, McIntosh laments that such privilege confers dominance and power to some and not others. She notes that the expectation that your neighbors will be good to you or that your color will not be held against you in court should be applicable to everyone and not just a select few. Kruks (2005) takes this further and argues that privilege based on structural differentiation also produces morally unacceptable differences that affect the well-being of marginalized individuals. “Who speaks” and “who is silenced,” she argues, confers privilege on some people and groups to the exclusion of others. Most white men and women think racism does not affect them because they are not people of color (for a part-humorous, part-serious take on this, see the idea

of widespread hyphenated ethnicities, including for whites, in Dholakia and Atik 2021). White is the norm and they do not see “whiteness” as racial identity. Most of us are taught that racism is carried out through specific pre-meditated acts of violence rather than in invisible systems conferring dominance on some groups and not others. Individual acts of respect to people of color — like Ji-Yoon’s crusade for Yaz’s recognition — can help, but ultimately cannot end these problems. White advantage, as McIntosh (1988) notes, is kept alive by myths of meritocracy and democratic choice. As these myths dominate the neoliberal university, operating within a larger capitalistic system, those holding positions of power (however minor) in this system are complicit in safeguarding white privilege (Crockett 2022).

Ji-Yoon’s personal life is problematic as well, evidencing the show’s partial investment in exposing social issues. The man (also Korean) she was going to marry got a job in another university; not considered for a spousal hire, Ji-Yoon stayed behind at Pembroke University and the relationship ended. In short order, her fiancé found someone else he wanted to marry, although Ji-Yoon does not seem to resent this as she had concluded that they were not a good match. Her hopes of having a biological family were dashed, however; so she goes through the process of adopting a child from the Latin community. She is keen on raising the child, called Ju-Ju, with openness and freedom, encouraging questions related to any topic, including sexuality and the body. Ju-Ju is a precocious and high-maintenance child whose favourite book is a catalogue of photographs about the human condition. Ji-Yoon’s challenges as a chair are compounded by her difficulties in mothering Ju-Ju. She receives help on the parenting front from her colleague Bill Dobson, who also then serves to subtly decentre Ji-Yoon from her own narrative as a working single mother.

To complicate matters, Ji-Yoon seems to be (at least partially) in love with Dobson, who has just lost his wife. It is not clear whether their relationship will have a future, but the two spend a considerable amount of time together; there is physical intimacy between them, though that is a peripheral feature of their relationship, which is largely emotional and professional. Dobson often babysits Ju-Ju and he wants to support Ji-Yoon in her role as chair. Unfortunately, he does not usually follow through on the latter intention, often creating more trouble for her. The show drops the ball by choosing to foreground Dobson’s plight and sidelining Yaz’s more timely narrative. Problematically, his private life is depicted, while Yaz’s home life is not. Unfortunately, we are not treated to this black academic’s backstory, the writers instead privileging Dobson’s redemption arc and the pseudo-romance between him and the protagonist. Yaz is not really humanized the

way he is, which is the show's weakness, considering the taken-for-granted dominance of white men in campus narratives (see Prothero 2023). Moreover, Ji-Yoon's ill-advised decision to date Dobson compromises her position as an authority figure and takes away from her characterization as a strong, successful single mother and professional.

Concluding Remarks

In watching the show a second time, it seems very clear that universities as neoliberal institutions (Dholakia and Zilliberberg 2023) have race and gender built into the structure and the operations of the university. While there is some recognition of such inequities at first view, there is no concerted effort to rework the structure. Universities operate like other institutions with money becoming the arbiter driving policies and strategies instead of higher education being considered a public good. Prothero (2023) provides a detailed and poignant account of gender differences and the poor treatment of women in academia most of which is applicable to Ji-Yoon as well. In Prothero's plea to end gender discrimination in the university and the Business School, she makes a point similar to Crockett (2022) about injustices "being endemic" to the system. Dismantling patriarchy and racism – since they go together as in *The Chair* – is a difficult task.

While the topics of white privilege, male privilege, and tokenism are only lightly touched upon in *The Chair*'s six episodes, they are nonetheless present. Sandra Oh adeptly conveys Ji-Yoon's uncertainty and naivete in her role as chair, and Nana Mensah plays Yasmin as rational, articulate, and decisive. The depiction of administrative sluggishness in academia is also spot-on, with rules and procedures interfering with what could be timely decision-making. In this case, inaction in the upper administration results in Yasmin being neither recognized nor retained, because she then chooses to take a more prestigious and lucrative job elsewhere.

Foucault (1988) provides insight: apparatus and rules play a crucial role in decision-making in institutions. The fictional Pembroke University with its neoliberal characteristics is no exception. Accountability to donors and the board of governors is a check on faculty and students' freedom of speech at a university, though most newly hired faculty are unaware of these pressures. In sum, *The Chair* is a fairly accurate but disappointingly toned-down portrayal of white privilege, male privilege, tokenism, and decision-making pervasive within universities in the U.S. and Canada today.

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