



## BEING BLACK IN A WHITE WORLD: UNDERSTANDING RACISM IN BRITISH UNIVERSITIES

*Ser negro en un mundo blanco: comprendiendo el racismo en las  
universidades británicas*

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### Abstract

This paper critically examines the experiences of racism encountered by academics working within British universities. The conceptual position is underpinned by a critical race theory and postcolonial feminist framework. These theoretical approaches intertwine to present a rich and complex set of snapshots that document the various challenges and barriers faced by British academics of colour/difference in higher education. The empirical data that informs this piece has been generated by a series of qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with academics of colour and of difference, and who are based broadly within the social sciences and humanities. Those interviewed come from a range of different racial, religious and ethno-national backgrounds, and occupy different academic positions within the university structure. Through a close engagement with the empirical material, this paper analyses the effects of the structural and systemic nature of racism as experienced by my respondents. The account is focused around three key themes including microaggressions and institutional racism, teaching, and promotion and support.

### Resumen

Este artículo examina críticamente las experiencias de racismo de académicos que trabajan en universidades británicas. El marco conceptual en el que se apoya son la teoría crítica de la raza y el feminismo postcolonial. Estas perspectivas teóricas se entrelazan con el fin de presentar una serie de imágenes que documentan los diversos retos y barreras que se encuentran académicos británicos de color y de diversidad en la educación superior. La base empírica de este trabajo es cualitativa, habiéndose realizado una serie de entrevistas en profundidad y semi-estructuradas con académicos de color y de diversidad, y que en su mayoría trabajan en el ámbito de las ciencias sociales y las humanidades. Las personas entrevistadas provienen de una amplia gama de orígenes raciales, religiosos y etno-nacionales, y ocupan diferentes posiciones académicas dentro de la estructura universitaria. A través de un trabajo minucioso sobre el material empírico, este texto analiza los efectos de la naturaleza estructural y sistémica del racismo tal y como es experimentada por las personas entrevistadas. El artículo se focaliza en tres temas clave, incluyendo microagresiones y racismo institucional, docencia, y ascenso y apoyo.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Statistics around Black Minority and Ethnic (BME) representation in universities continue to demonstrate that academics of colour are marginalized from British higher education (HE). Data generated from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in 2012/2013 revealed that out of 17,880 professors, only 85 were Black, 950 were Asian, 365 were 'other' (including mixed), while the majority 15,200 were White (Bhopal, 2015; Runnymede Trust, 2015). In terms of black female professors there are just 17 in the entire British university system (ibidem), and in January 2017 the Guardian newspaper reported that for the third year in a row HESA figures recorded no black academics in the elite staff category of managers, directors and senior officials in 2015/16 (Adams, 2017). Alongside the data there is also extensive literature documenting ongoing practices of institutional racism in universities, including the gutting of race equality policy, limited access to career advancement, fewer opportunities for promotion, and daily experiences of discrimination. The persistence of racism in HE shows that at the top very little has been done to encourage progress and racial equality. Mobilizations and shifts however have occurred on the ground with the implementation of the first UK undergraduate degree in Black Studies at Birmingham City University (BCU), and the *Why is my Curriculum White?* movement, which was founded by students at University College London in 2015 to tackle the embeddedness of whiteness operating in university curriculums. The objectives of this campaign aim to both challenge and highlight the lack of diversity within HE teaching and learning practice. These much needed interventions have been unsurprisingly led by students and academics of colour. Support from the white majority has been limited, which means there is still a long way to go in dismantling structures of white privilege in British universities.

Racism across British universities inevitably takes its toll on academics of colour who carry the heavy burden of precarity as they are more than often positioned as outsiders. This weight is made increasingly heavier against a backdrop of an unforgiving neoliberalization in which universities precipitously compete over performance, student satisfaction scores, Research Excellence Framework (REF) rankings, and student recruitment figures. These rapid changes place academics of colour at greater risk, who alongside keeping up with new needs and demands, must also continue to put up with embedded practices of



racism. Situated within a critical race theory/postcolonial feminist approach, this paper seeks to explore the challenges faced by academics of colour, and of difference, working in British universities. Based on empirical data, the paper documents experiences of racism operating at personal and structural levels. After presenting the methodology, the paper focuses upon three key themes to understand racism in British HE, these include: microaggressions and institutional racism, teaching, and promotion and support. By presenting a series of snapshots, the paper builds a textured narrative around the various barriers facing academics of colour/difference, and aims to broaden understandings of experiences of institutional racism in HE.

## 2. METHODS

The data informing this paper has been generated by a small sample of in-depth, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with a total of 8 academics of colour and of difference<sup>1</sup>. Academics of difference refer to those who may be considered in their own nations as white, however, are unable to make this white privilege travel to post-Brexit Britain. As a result, they begin to experience degrees of racialization that ethnically mark them as subaltern (Hesse and Sayyid, 2006: 21-24). I interviewed a mix of male and female respondents, ranging from early career, mid career, and advanced career academics working either as teachers or researchers, on permanent, part-time or fixed-term contracts. My respondents were initially accessed through convenience sampling, that is academics of colour/difference who were easy to reach geographically and available to participate (Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2006: 133). This was followed with snowball sampling whereby I was able to reach other respondents by building a network from my initial group of informants, who introduced me to others (*ibidem*). The interviews took the style of an informal conversation and the questions asked were open-ended in nature allowing respondents to provide depth and detail (Bryman, 2001: 143). Topics discussed were broadly focused on experiences of teaching and the curriculum; support and departmental politics; institutional racism; and career progression.

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews took place in January 2017. This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of York Ethics Committee.



The respondents come from a range of racial, ethno-national, and religious groups, including: South Asian, Afro-Caribbean, mixed, Eastern European, Muslim, Taiwanese, and South Pacific. They are based at Russell Group and Post-1992 universities across the North of England<sup>2</sup>, and are located within the social sciences and humanities<sup>3</sup>. The sample size was deliberately kept small in order to generate rich qualitative data; this research is less concerned with representativeness and more concerned with representation. That is, the nature of this study is focused around a critical discourse analysis as a way to examine how meanings are represented within particular narratives. The research thus explores how the discourse shapes the structures of the context (Hall, 1992: 290-292; Sayyid and Zac, 1998: 249-268). The paper is set within a critical race theory and postcolonial feminist framework to understand both the lived experiences and structural dimensions of power operating within HE. These tools allow for critical insight into the ways in which performance and practice in HE are both enacted and conditioned by structures of race (and gender) (Chan, Dhamoon and Moy, 2014: 4-7). As a female academic of colour, my reflections will also inform this piece.

### 3. MICROAGGRESSIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

The university space is a difficult terrain for many academics of colour to navigate. It is the site where subtle forms of racism are more likely to occur, rather than the direct insults people of colour may encounter on the street, or public transportation. In the white academy, insults are replaced with a politics of exclusion, which works to situate the body of colour firmly on the outside; this is one of the defining characteristics of institutional racism. In the UK, institutional racism was 'officially' incorporated into mainstream policy discourse with the Macpherson Report (1999), which highlighted police failings following the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence (Hesse, 2004: 131). One of the key recommendations of the report was that police should recognize an incident to be racist if one of the parties or third party described the incident as racist. At the core of this subjective definition was a

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<sup>2</sup> The Russell Group represents 24 UK universities. These are often considered to be "elite" institutions that have a reputation for academic excellence and producing highly rated research. Post-1992 universities refer to previous tertiary education teaching institutions (polytechnics) that were granted university status under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.

<sup>3</sup> To ensure confidentiality I will use pseudonyms to refer to my interviewees.



conceptualization that saw racism, not as a specific system of oppression, but rather, as the general outcome of a clash of members from different ethnicities. This paradoxically undermined the structural dimension of institutional racism (Sian, Law and Sayyid, 2013: 33). Rather than reading institutional racism through Macpherson's definition, this paper understands the category as one that is linked to practices of racial governance (Hesse, 2004: 143). That is, institutional racism refers to structural practices that systematically affect the prospects of people of colour (Patel, 2017: 126). It encompasses a set of hidden racist values, practices and customs that form the institutional norms of structures and organizations, and is closely associated with white privilege (ibídem). This subtle form of racism is defined by Barnor Hesse as, "that which is concealed, hidden, disguised, unacknowledged, denied but which is consistent in its impact of strategic effect" (2004: 144). Manifestations of institutional racism can as such be found in the way in which experiences of racism are patterned both through structural conditioning and everyday interactions.

Microaggressions can be seen as being deeply intertwined with covert, institutional practices of racism and are central to the production of the invisibility syndrome, which develops from the long-term accumulation of stress, emotional abuse, and psychological trauma linked to racism (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin and Kelly, 2008: 13)<sup>4</sup>. These effects arise when a person of colour understands that their capacities and identity are disregarded as a result of exclusionary, racist attitudes. Microaggressions provoke distress because they intentionally or unintentionally dismiss a person of colour, leading to isolation, perplexity and a lack of belief in oneself (ibídem). Subtle forms of racism are more challenging because they operate against the common sense understanding of racism as easily identifiable. As such, the vague nature of subtle racism makes it less recognizable as it tends not to fall within the conventional remit of 'clear intentionality' which we see commonly associated with blatant acts of racism (Reid and Birchard, 2010: 479; Essed, 1991: 72-80). My interview data reveals the complex performance of microaggressions in HE and the ways in which they are intensely bound up with practices of institutional racism:

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<sup>4</sup> For racially marked bodies, the politics of invisibility often interplays with the politics of hyper-visibility. For further discussion, see Patricia Williams' *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* published in 1992.



People in academia are a bit smarter, they're more subtle, and they understand what they can't say. Everything is just a bit more institutionalized. But you get the sense that it's also the place where things are unchecked, it's a lot less frank... I think in general people try to be nice and they want to be nice but they have all these ingrained biases. I always feel like an outsider in this space...  
(Walid, 36 years old, Researcher)

The next interviewee similarly notes a sense of invisible forms of bias operating within universities:

There is a problem with how your colleagues perceive you. Many of them reproduce prejudicial attitudes refracted through their class position and privilege. So they can all read the Guardian, and say that they're against racism, but they can't see it in their own protocol and practices. My experience is that colleagues are uncomfortable rather than downright hostile, unless they're semi-drunk and the mask begins to slip. And most of it is done by assumptions, double takes, and that English middle class discomfort around diversity (Tariq, 54 years old, Professor)

Institutional racism often operates implicitly, without intent to harm and without recognition of privilege and power (Okazaki, 2009: 104). As such, racism within the academy is rarely felt to be overt:

Rather than racism articulate itself in a way where I'm being called bad things, it's almost like a subtle kind of attitude that seems to place me as an outsider. One colleague of mine has to be the dominating figure, almost like she knows best, even though she's only been in post one year longer than me. I constantly feel like she's challenging everything that I try to do, and I don't know whether that's because she thinks I'm incompetent because I'm a person of colour, or because I'm a person of colour and therefore need extra guidance and mentoring... it's almost a bit insulting. I don't think they're overtly trying to be racist, but I think their whiteness comes out in a particular way which makes me feel uncomfortable. There is this sense of paranoia, like am I being sensitive? Am I just using the so-called race card to legitimize the way I'm feeling? This constantly plays on my mind. And partially it makes me feel like is it my fault? There's a part of me that blames myself (Khaled, 32 years old, Lecturer)

The respondent interestingly expresses feelings of paranoia and questions whether he is using the 'race card' or being 'overly sensitive.' Because the kind of racism operating in universities is subtle in nature it is less easy to detect, as a result the racially marked body is made to



question their own actions and practices, rather than the other way round (Essed, 1991: 72-283). This is a key characteristic of institutional racism, whereby in his everyday interactions this individual is 'presumed incompetent' as his identity appears to clash with the racial prejudices and expectations of his white colleagues (Harris and Gonzalez, 2012: 3). Anderson Franklin, Nancy Boyd-Franklin and Shalonda Kelly (2008) warn that a key problem linked to microaggressions is internalized racism, whereby people of color start to believe in their own subordination and accept negative attitudes (ibídem: 18). In this example, the respondent is conflicted because on the one hand he expresses a feeling of discomfort, yet on the other he questions if he is to blame. This is constitutive of the way in which institutional racism operates and the inner struggle it produces, as Nirmal Puwar argues, because black bodies are not "natural" in academia, they have to "endure a burden of doubt" from those around them who subject them to inspection often resulting in high levels of anxiety (2004: 53-54).

The respondent also raises the point about feeling like an 'outsider' against a backdrop of whiteness. Whiteness refers not simply to phenotypical characteristics and origin, but rather represents complex structures of power, entitlement and status (Patel, 2017: 16). It describes a social positioning that is both structurally and racially privileged, benefitting those belonging to its category economically, socially, culturally and politically. It defines itself as the norm and renders others 'abnormal,' invisible or marginal (Garner, 2010: 118-128). In my interviews the sense of marginality was clear:

My experience of the academy is that I'm a black man in a white world. In theory, the university may turn around and say, 'oh we're all for race equality and fairness and so on', but all it takes is for you to go to a departmental meeting, or a faculty meeting, or to meet members of the management team and you immediately realise that the one thing that is missing here is colour- there is no colour. All the main managers, all the lecturers, all the students are 99 per cent white, so regardless what the theory says on race equality, their practices are totally different, it's a colourless environment" (Khaled, 32 years old, Lecturer)

In his reflections on being a black professor, George Yancy (2016) describes the way in which his racially marked body is trapped within a landscape of whiteness. He recalls a sense of displacement, and reciting



Fanon he explains how he is “overdetermined from without” (ibídem). He goes onto write:

“Honestly, being a black man, I had thought that I had been marked enough — as bestial, as criminal, as inferior... It follows me around at predominantly white philosophy conferences; I am marked as “different” within that space not because I *am* different, but because the conference space is filled with whiteness” (ibídem).

The sense of whiteness was a common theme expressed across my interviewees, who like Yancy, were cognisant of their difference which led to a feeling of isolation:

I always feel like an outsider in the academy, you know whenever we go to a departmental meeting, if the other colleague who is a person of colour is not there I am the only colour that you will see in that department, so that immediately makes me feel like I am the only one (Khaled, 32 years old, Lecturer)

This ‘outsider status’ was also a prominent theme in research conducted by Kalwant Bhopal (2016) examining the experiences of BME academics. She found that power relations in the white academy operated to exclude academics of colour (ibídem: 86-113). Such exclusion was often expressed in my interviews as also being the result of having a ‘difficult’ name:

You feel like you are foreign. Most people in the department can’t pronounce or spell my name right. Often white males would be particularly bad at asking how to pronounce my name, or trying. And the funny thing is they feel so comfortable mispronouncing my name; they just don’t seem to feel any hesitance, or embarrassment about pronouncing my name wrong, because it’s not important enough. This makes you feel even more distant from members of staff. It’s like they can’t even say your name, so it puts another layer of distance between you and them (Agnieszka, 34 years old, Researcher)

Another respondent speaks of a similar experience:

I am mixed, a lot of people think that I’m white, but when people do read me as other I’m exotic, or when people hear my accent and see my name, they know instantly that I’m not from here, but they can’t place me —so I’m always in between... I always get mistaken for another staff member of colour, because they’re so few of us, even though these people look nothing like me. It’s just so odd; it just works as a reminder (Mayia, 25 years old, Lecturer)





The reminder here suggests that she does not belong; she is not considered 'one of them'. My participants also expressed a sense of Englishness pervading the academy that manifests itself as superior. Englishness refers to a set of exclusionary practices and values intertwined with articulations of whiteness and constructions of 'others' as inferior in aptitude and temperament. It assumes the exceptionality of England in world history and culture, exemplifying a unique set of manners, traditions and customs associated with England as a liberal economy and polity (Hall, 2014: 57-58). As a result, white English members of staff presume that lessons on pronunciation, history and culture are required for those whose first language is not English:

Often when we eat lunch together, there is one senior member of staff who —towards me and a Chinese member of staff particularly— likes explaining a lot, so we'll be in a group, he'll be talking, and then he'll often pause and look at me, and say 'Do you understand?' or 'Do you know what I mean?' And it becomes really embarrassing. In a group of people it is super patronizing. It's not only about words, it's also about events, or famous or historical English people. He just assumes that I won't know (Agnieszka, 34 years old, Researcher)

The same respondent feels her difference serves as a transitory topic for discussion and critique from her colleagues. The shallow engagement with her difference tends to reinforce orientalist narratives whereby her home country is seen as either a tourist attraction or a space of backwardness:

If you are different, your difference goes only in a way to satisfy people's interests, so that might be a current political debate, or a place they once visited. But when your difference means that they have to do some work, like learn your name, or ask the uncomfortable question of, 'how do I pronounce your name because I don't know how to say it?' that means they have to do labour and they are not prepared to do that, which tells me that they're not prepared to embrace that difference. So it's about taking your difference and making it the interesting topic to be discussed at lunch, where you talk about how 'backwards' Polish people are, and 'oh these laws are terrible' and so on (Agnieszka, 34 years old, Researcher)

Sara Ahmed (2007) suggests that the institutionalization of whiteness produces a form of "likeness" that leads to the discomfort, exposure and vulnerability of racially marked bodies whose difference is both marked and visible when they enter spaces of whiteness. The sense of discomfort is clear,



and some respondents expressed that certain social activities reinforced the marking of their difference:

Pretty much all of our social events will be alcohol centric, and so you may or may not chose to participate in them, but as you go on, if you don't drink it gets tedious, you know those are the kinds of spaces where often opportunities come up, you know people having conversations, where it's like 'oh this is going on, would you be interested in being involved?' So if you don't participate you're less likely to be included in things. (Walid, 36 years old, Researcher)

Such social events work to alienate particularly Muslim members of staff. The next participant suggests these events often operate on a one way basis that fails to consider non-drinkers, who in order to be included are expected to 'play their part,' despite their non-drinking:

I've always tried my best to socialize with my colleagues, and a lot of that takes place around spaces in which alcohol is the central defining feature. I've never had a problem with socializing in such spaces, but I constantly feel like the pressure is on me to be a particular way. I don't even drink alcohol but I'm always having to be the one who has to integrate, whereas the spaces I may go to eat, or the spaces that I hang out in, would be places where my colleagues would never even dream about coming in order to make me feel at home. I feel like I have to juggle between being a certain way in order to acquire social upward mobility, and being myself. Why do I always have to do certain things? Why can't you arrange certain events that cater for everyone? I can't eat the meat, I can't drink the alcohol; I constantly feel out of place as a result of it (Khaled, 32 years old, Lecturer)

The feeling of having to enter white spaces and engage in particular forms of cultural activity in order to be included is central to the operation of whiteness. The institution is orientated around whiteness, as such non-white bodies are required to "inhabit whiteness" if they are to be accepted (Ahmed, 2007: 158). Acceptance and legitimacy in HE was seen as particularly challenging for my respondents due to the workings of white privilege reflected through practice and policy:

The university hierarchy is very uncomfortable dealing with issues of racism especially when it's around issues of not just staffing but the organization of the university itself. They make a much greater effort regarding incidents of racism directed at students and experienced by their students. They seem very conscious that such incidents may affect the reputation of the university and impact their recruitment especially



internationally. When it comes to staffing very few Russell Groups move beyond the platitudes and policies of large corporations. It would be fair to say that racism is not a priority except in their brochures (Tariq, 54 years old, Professor)

We see in the above example the way in which challenging racism at the institutional level is felt not to be a priority, and when it is engaged with this is done so either superficially or instrumentally. In a similar vein another respondent expresses that there is unwillingness by university hierarchy to develop research in the area of race:

My department does not engage with race at all really. There are a couple of members of staff who are particularly strong on race, so you think the department would capitalise on that, and use it to their advantage, but over and over again it's a side issue. It's an area that they're simply not interested in, the debate is always being shut down; it's always an afterthought... They don't want to use this knowledge, so it's completely white like that (Agnieszka, 34 years old, Researcher)

The above examples represent how whiteness operates to locate people of colour on the margins; as such they often go unseen and unheard (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin and Kelly, 2008: 12). In my own experience in the academy I have encountered similar incidents to many of my respondents; from letters mistakenly being placed in my pigeon hole addressed to the only other person of colour, to members of staff using my last name as my first, or being unable to pronounce my surname correctly. Additionally I have received emails from senior colleagues who have opened their email by addressing me with the name of the only other staff member of colour. There appears to be a strong resemblance across the responses that points to the widespread nature of institutional racism. These acts unravel the ways in which subtle structural processes of racism work to reinforce whiteness at the expense of racialized bodies; who are positioned as outsiders.

#### 4. TEACHING

The classroom is often thought to represent a 'safe space' that promotes critical learning, the exchange of ideas, and pedagogical tools to generate future knowledge. However, the university classroom is not race-neutral and is deeply entrenched "in the political" (Chan, Dhamoon and Moy, 2014: 3). As such, for many academics of colour the classroom is also the site in which students express feelings of white guilt, confront their



privilege, or challenge the authority of the educator. These dynamics represent “part of the politicized landscape of the academy” (ibídem). I have found teaching in British universities difficult, challenging and at times rewarding. When I first started out as a teaching assistant, I remember leading a seminar class, and a white middle class male put up his hand and smugly remarked, “*but everybody knows black people have smaller brains than white people*”. I was shocked and dazed, my body froze as anger and rage filled my body. I continued on with the class as the comment was immediately challenged by a female student of colour who appeared to feel the same way that I did. I wanted to give her the space to critique him and it went on to provoke an important discussion whereby his white peers also went onto challenge his assertion. The boy was left with a red face and he went on to apologise. I remember leaving the classroom and immediately running up the stairs to see my mentor, who was a person of colour. As I started to tell him what had happened I broke down and cried. From that day on, I was fortunate to have his guidance which went onto prepare me with the tools to deal with situations of this nature. I know I was one of the lucky ones, as I had a mentor who was able to guide me through and give me the confidence to productively challenge racism... others, as we will go onto see, have not been as fortunate.

Whiteness and white privilege are staple features of the student body across British universities. These discourses are reinforced by the under-representation of BME students. In terms of student participation, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) Triennial Review (2010) reported that the number of BME students has increased from 13% of students in 1994/95 to 23% in 2008/09 (Runnymede Trust, 2010: 2). Although this figure appears proportionate to their size in the young population, it is important to note that they are grossly under-represented in Russell Group universities. For example, the Runnymede Trust found that there are more students of Black Caribbean origin at London Metropolitan University than at all the Russell Group universities put together (ibídem). Furthermore, in 2009 only one Black Caribbean applicant was accepted to study at Oxford University (ibídem). Against this backdrop, racism is rarely challenged by white members of faculty, that task is almost always left to us. When we do critically engage with “difficult content” we are accused of being bias, sensitive, angry, or turning everything back to the question of race, and this is usually



documented in our end of term evaluations (Chan, Dhamoon and Moy, 2014: 2). My interviewees revealed such concerns:

Once I had really bad feedback because I called a student out on something that he said about Japanese Geishas being prostitutes, I just didn't like where the conversation was going and it was getting more and more racialized and I said that's enough. So I got really bad feedback because I shut down the debate. I think sometimes you do have to shut down the debate because it's not productive because it's so problematic. I do feel like there's an additional burden because a lot of other teachers don't care, or don't have the tools, or they don't go out of their way to get those tools to unpack racism (Mayia, 25 years old, Lecturer)

For Roxana Ng, the institutionalized nature of racism (and sexism) in universities means they are "taken for granted" and not open to critique (1993: 191). Ng reflects upon her experiences as a female educator of colour and draws our attention to the challenges she encountered in the classroom setting. She details an incident in which a student accused her of using the course as a way to develop her political agenda, he complained that he had been marginalized as a white male student, and in subsequent meetings with administrative staff he expressed that she was "a woman out of control" (ibidem: 192). My respondents recall similar experiences raising concerns around engaging with critical discussions on racism:

My experience of teaching is centred around being in a constant state of fear, especially when teaching in subject areas such as racism, Islamophobia, and so on. I feel under threat that one of my students is going to report me to a member of staff, and the university will take some kind of disciplinary action against me, for articulating a particular argument. Why should I have to feel this afraid about talking about racism or Islamophobia, or critiquing policy? Why should I be afraid to talk about this in class? I'm constantly under threat, and under psychological strain and pressure when doing my job because of institutional racism (Khaled, 32 years old, Lecturer)

He goes onto recall an encounter whereby a white male student challenged him. In this incident not only was he expected to listen to the Islamophobic views expressed by the student, but he was also expected to defend his position as well as the broader position of Islam, because as a Muslim man it was assumed that he somehow represented the entire religion:



I've had one encounter with a white male undergraduate student, who challenged me on a series of issues when I explained the topic of political violence. He started to ask questions and make points that were Islamophobic. He was talking about child molestation by the Prophet Muhammad, how Islam had been a religion spread by the sword, how Muslims believed in female genital mutilation, and so on. I was constantly having to explain and defend a religion of over a billion people, because somehow in the eyes of the student, I was Islam; so I found that to be a really uncomfortable experience (Khaled, 32 years old, Lecturer)

This represents an explicit exercise in Islamophobia, whereby the student seeks to undermine the authority of the lecturer through a string of provocative and pejorative statements. In this way we can see the way in which hegemonic practices of racism, sexism and Islamophobia operate to keep particular groups in dominant and subordinate positions, thus reinforcing institutional racism (ibídem). Interactions like the above encounters around Islam or Japanese Geishas, alongside my experience in the seminar space, and the incident documented by Ng, demonstrate that the normalization of racism has very real, negative effects upon educators of colour.

The psychological strain around teaching sessions related to race was picked up again in another interview:

Sometimes, I'm walking in class and I hope no ones going to say something, and in the end I don't even want to talk about race anymore because I'm so scared that someone will say something. I'm always scared, so I have to prepare myself psychologically that they might say something (Mayia, 25 years old, Lecturer)

She goes onto state:

I don't know what part of me makes them behave to me or speak to me in a certain way, it's the whole package; it is my height, my voice, I look very young, I have really long hair so I'm hyper-feminine and very exotic. So I on purpose don't wear too many colour when I teach, because I don't want them to see me as the Pacific Islander or see me as less (Mayia, 25 years old, Lecturer)

Academic females of colour continue to experience 'harsh realities' in HE (Niemann, 2012: 446). The double exclusion they encounter, through embedded structures of racism and sexism, serves to make them more vulnerable and exposed to systemic antagonism. In the absence of institutional support, a sense of belonging for female academics of colour is more challenging to obtain as they are forced to constantly reflect



upon, and question, if they are 'fit' for this kind of labour (ibídem: 450). The emotional effects of teaching race-related subjects highlights that such a task should not be left only to people of colour (ibídem: 470). As we have seen, teaching on such areas is not only likely to generate poor student evaluations, due to students' opposition to having their normative views challenged, but it also leads to a sense of dread and isolation which intensifies particularly for women. In her research on female academics of colour, Linda Trinh Vo (2012) documents similar feelings to those reported above, whereby she had to mentally prepare herself for hostile teaching environments. She acknowledges that for many of her students she was probably the first racially marked person they had encountered, as such they resented not only being taught by a 'foreigner' but also being taught by a female in a position of authority (ibídem: 102-103). Another respondent who recalled an incident in which a white student questioned her legitimacy also raised this sense of resentment:

I remember one time I was teaching a grammar class and I came in early to set up the classroom. There were two Indian students in the front of the room and one British white girl. So the two Indian students saw me and were like, 'oh where are you from, it's really cool that you're teaching this class', so I told them my parents were from India, but that I was from the US... and this British girl from the side of the room said 'so how are you teaching this class?' I was just so shocked and lost for words, I felt so deeply uncomfortable about it (Reema, 26 years old, Teaching Assistant)

Female academics of colour are often perceived as lacking credibility, as Puwar argues: "authority is seen to be especially misplaced when it is clearly vested in a woman of colour" (2004: 52). This positioning can leave female academics of colour feeling powerless in HE. In my own experience I have found myself being mistaken for a student, subjected to hostility which appears to be based on the notion of perceived lack of authority (as racially marked and female), and being abruptly interrupted or spoken over. Gendered and racist power relations significantly influence the way in which formal authority is observed by students, and work to "disempower" minority and feminist teachers (Ng, 1993: 190). Race and gender thus combine to both undermine the credibility of educators of colour as well as maintain their subordination in HE.

For academics of colour, the psychological strain of teaching in HE cannot be underestimated. The university is not somewhere that one would typically expect to encounter black bodies, as a consequence, being a



body of colour in these predominantly white spaces carries with them, “emotional and psychological costs to the bearer of that difference” (Mirza, 2006: 106). For Adrienne Chan, Rita Dhamoon and Lisa Moy (2014) when academics of colour do engage with difficult topics, such as race and ethnicity, they are often required to take on certain forms of “labour-intensive roles” including curator/choreographer, tour guide, puzzler, book, and catalyst and s\*\*t disturber (ibídem: 19). Their research found that when teaching topics that disrupt hegemonic norms, the educator is often read as, “not easy to get along with, as hostile and unhappy, as someone who is responsible for tensions and divisions in society, as someone who is not a real scholar but motivated by ideology” (ibídem: 15). Furthermore, the act of critiquing white privilege was often unwelcomed by students leading to hostility, as well as apprehension within the educators themselves (ibídem: 18). Such experiences resonate with my respondents whose bodies represent sites of suspicion, danger or mockery, as a result they are left fearful, unable to navigate the challenges they encounter. Chan, Dhamoon and Moy propose that this form of emotional-intensive labour should be regarded as “institutional contractual or collective agreement issues” rather than individual problems (ibídem: 20), this is perhaps more pressing a task in light of extensive research which shows that perceived racism is central to the “race-related life stress” experienced by people of color (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin and Kelly, 2008: 14).

Interrupting hegemonic forms of knowledge in HE requires a deep sense of structural transformation. The social science curriculum in particular, is central in reproducing Eurocentric knowledge arising from the European colonial enterprise. This knowledge is problematic as it is based on a narrow set of ideas, racial classifications, and ‘universal truths’ to maintain an ontological distinction between the ‘modern’ and ‘civilized’ West, and the ‘primitive’ ‘uncivilized’ Non-West (Hall, 1992: 275- 331; Patel, 2014: 606). Calls to critically challenge the reproduction of these knowledges are not to suggest that universities should eradicate European categories, but rather to recognize the limitations of these concepts within pedagogical practice (Patel, 2014: 609). The introduction of the first Black Studies programme at Birmingham City University, and *Why is my Curriculum White?* demonstrate successful mobilizations around the possibility of unsettling conventional social science curricula. Such campaigns illustrate the significance of carving out epistemological





spaces for educators and students to engage with 'other' knowledges and situate global issues in nuanced frameworks. Decolonizing the curriculum is thus vital to both the transformation of HE, and the development of inclusive spaces. However, as my interview data shows, this often remains a difficult task to achieve:

I think to make the curriculum more reflective of the world where we are right now, in my experience is met by two different objections. On the one hand, I've had colleagues say that we can have more classes on saris, steel bands and samosas, but mainly at undergraduate level. Other times they say we shouldn't bring identity politics into the curriculum it's not about black or white, it's about teaching what's right. In my experience the university makes up its mind and rationalises its decision; so positive feedback and robust recruitment all go by the wayside once their mind has been made to stick to a particular policy which downplays race (Tariq, 54 years old, Professor)

Furthermore another participant states:

To teach in sociology is to give a critical tool to see the social world and the power imbalance, and I think that's very important. So not having non-western theorists or readings or materials feels like we're almost suggesting the whole western world is the leader in knowledge (Vi-chun, 30 years old, Associate Lecturer)

The responses demonstrate concerns around intellectual agendas in HE that reinforce Orientalism and whiteness. As a consequence, the current curriculum can only work to relay particular forms of knowledge that reproduce notions of western superiority (Sian, 2014: 193-199). As bell hooks warns, in the absence of profound and continued educational reform, education will continue to reflect the plantation culture, whereby the slave was only able to learn forms of knowledge that legitimized enslavement and racial hierarchies (2003: 93).

In relation to institutional support around teaching, many of my interviewees felt alone and unable to speak to others about their experiences:

I dwell on these things. I haven't had that much experience of lecturing so I'm not comfortable in this position. They think I don't deserve to be there. I don't have anyone who is around me who isn't white so it's difficult to talk to people at the institution. So when dealing with all the stuff against me from the students, I don't really have many mechanisms (Mayia, 25 years old, Lecturer)



Another respondent recalls an incident whereby a white professor was in disbelief that racism or conflict could arise in the classroom:

We did a workshop on training around teaching and difficult situations that could arise between staff and students. For me I'm constantly thinking that something like this could happen, as I'm a woman and 'Asian looking'. Now the white male professor chairing this session seemed very surprised to hear that. He was like, 'oh has anyone had an experience of a conflict in the seminar setting?' I think I've always expected that to happen at any moment in my teaching career, and it surprised me that the white male professor was sitting there shocked saying it had never happened to him in his life. I don't think many white male professors realize how privileged they are. The fact that they don't realize how much privilege they have suggests to me that they don't understand how challenging it may be for other people, including myself (Yi-chun, 30 years old, Associate Lecturer)

This example demonstrates a lack of awareness from the white male professor around the complex ways in which racial systemic violence may operate in the classroom. Institutional racism is thus so entrenched that practices of racism become increasingly "obscured" by white privilege (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin and Kelly, 2008:14). The reluctance of whites to reflect upon practices of institutional racism suggests that they are perhaps apprehensive about challenging structures that they directly (and indirectly) benefit from. That is, institutional racism reinforces racialized structures that locate whites in an advantageous position compared to their racially marked counterparts. In this sense, institutional racism serves to benefit whites by maintaining their power and privilege (Garner, 2010: 119-120). In some cases this has been challenged through the forming of white allies. White allies represent those who have both recognized and critically unravelled the privilege attached to their whiteness (Niemann, 2012: 451). However, as long as universities continue to construct and reproduce whiteness as the norm, these instances of solidarity will be of marginal significance.

## 5. PROMOTION AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

In order to meet the requirements of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, British universities have ensured that a range of diversity and equality policies have been generated around positive action and racial equality. Groups of consultants have been recruited by the sector to



establish sleek action plans, however, despite these strategies, widespread racialised class and gender inequalities show little indication of decreasing in HE (Mirza, 2006: 101). Research demonstrates that BME staff encounter a series of challenges around promotion, and they are less likely to be shortlisted or appointed compared to their white counterparts (Pilkington, 2013: 229). As such they are particularly under-represented in senior roles. My respondents expressed that lack of support in HE served as a key barrier to promotion:

For promotion the issue of mentoring is crucial, and a lot of that is informal and relies on who you know. For people of colour that is one major obstacle. Another issue is how the work that academics of colour do is valued. There is a racist lens which finds it easy to conclude that if an academic of colour is researching a topic it must be about race, ethnicity, etc. or what they consider to be marginal issues. Finally there is a racialized expectation that high flyers are always packaged as white. All of these things, I have experienced directly in my prospects for promotion. I was never told what was necessary to get promoted; I was never encouraged to apply. I was discouraged, and my work was seen as being of only marginal interest despite international recognition. I was always left with the suspicion that if I had been white all my accomplishments would have been seen as exemplary and the department would have promoted me (Tariq, 54 years old, Professor)

The next respondent similarly notes that she feels that future promotion could be harmed if one's expertise is located in the field of race:

If you are true to yourself and talk about your work as focused on racism or anti-racism in your CV or cover letter you run the risk of not being short-listed (Kiara, 60 years old, Professor)

In my experience there has often been a sense from senior members of staff that my research on race and ethnicity is trivial or irrelevant and as the above responses demonstrate, those who engage with such topics feel marginalized and unsupported. Lack of mentoring, combined with feelings of discouragement were common concerns expressed in my interviews:

In academia it seems to be a lot more about judgement, so are you good enough to be promoted? Have you done enough? I've been here for more than six years now and I came in at the most junior grade, after having ten years of work experience in other places. I've had over twenty published journal articles, I've got two million pounds worth of funding, and it was only this year that the



head of department said, 'oh maybe you should put in for promotion'... I feel like in my department they champion certain people, and I haven't really had any of that (Walid, 36 years old, Researcher)

Academics of colour clearly feel unsupported in HE. Research has shown that female academics of colour were particularly "sorely lacking" in access to career guidance from a mentor, often being forced to look in other places for the kinds of support conventionally provided by senior faculty members in their departments (Thomas and Hollenshead, 2001: 173). The sense of feeling unappreciated was common to all my respondents:

I feel as if there is a significant disconnect between the university hierarchy and academic members of staff, and I have reached out to members of staff to introduce myself and the response has been pretty hands off, you know nice to meet you, now go away. There's no real engagement or desire to utilise the skillset that you bring to the table. When I took up my post one of the first departments that I contacted —because of my public engagement— was communications, and they were very dismissive, and I thought that was weird. I thought that they would have been keen to draw upon and to use my publicity. I found the disconnect to be quite severe when it came down to supporting me as a member of staff. I've done some quite high profile things but there is a reluctance to support me (Khaled, 32 years old, Lecturer)

He goes onto reflect:

When I was working at my former institution on a fixed term, one year contract, somebody who I used to really look up to and respect was a white professor there. I constantly searched for support in this person but I never got it, and it never quite registered with me as to why this person wasn't supporting me, or even engaging in conversation... I sensed something quite peculiar and quite strange (Khaled, 32 years old, Lecturer)

Robbie Shilliam (2015) argues, alongside over-scrutiny by senior colleagues, black academics frequently express a lack of mentorship starting from as early as PhD study. Added to this is the problem of ingrained racial/gender prejudices which work to reproduce, "white male networks and career advancement" (ibidem: 32). As a result, academics of colour are disregarded for promotions or discouraged from the application process (ibidem). For Chan, Dhamoon and Moy systematic mentoring programmes for academics of colour, that are both fully



resourced, and driven by nonwhite members of staff, must be implemented to facilitate strong support networks (2014: 20).

Job stability is arguably more challenging for international academics of colour due to work visas and sponsorship. This adds an extra layer of exclusion and precarity around securing positions, as one respondent recalls:

As a foreigner I have a lot of issues around my visa, and this process has been really unsettling. Being on a temporary contract and also being part time means that I can't apply for a work visa, because a work visa applies to full time jobs that need to be sponsored by the university. The contract I'm on now is only 50 per cent, and the support has been limited. Having to hold a working visa drastically reduces the chances of me getting employed, because a lot of times, institutions don't have the money to sponsor a visa. The centre I'm based in is very small, there are only a few permanent positions, but all of them on those posts are white. I'm the only non-white staff member there, and the only one on a temporary contract. It's interesting. What's even more devastating is the fact that some of my colleagues will never understand the difficulties or stress I feel which is very problematic. The director didn't even realize in my case that I am a foreigner and if I'm working here I need a visa. That gave me a shock (Yi-chun, 30 years old, Associate Lecturer)

She goes onto state:

I feel like I have less chances of employment compared to white British people. There are challenges around working as an immigrant in the UK, so we may be qualified and may even almost get the position, until the moment we have to tell them that we need a work visa and sponsorship from the university; that's when it falls apart. It feels like we're almost inferior to other people even if we have the qualifications, knowledge, and experience. So I often feel less confident about my position (Yi-chun, 30 years old, Associate Lecturer)

Bridget Anderson argues that immigration controls are as much about the conditions of stay, as they are about conditions of entry (2010: 309). That is, non-citizens who have entered the UK legally encounter certain restrictions dependent upon their visa status (*ibidem*), and as demonstrated in the above example, the respondents' job security is reliant upon a sponsor. This sense of precariousness is further reinforced by the fact that the employer has the power to withdraw sponsorship at any time. Consequently, workers subject to immigration control are



placed on fixed term contracts that can be ended at the employer's discretion, and as identified by my respondent, this has consequences beyond the workplace creating an ongoing sense of temporariness, uncertainty and dependency.

All the respondents throughout this section have expressed feelings of instability and insecurity within their careers, with very little encouragement and reassurance from senior members of staff. If academics of colour are to feel truly valued and supported a series of structural, intellectual and ethical obligations must be implemented in HE to ensure inclusivity for all.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In 2002, Laura Turney, Ian Law and Deborah Phillips developed an anti-racist toolkit to address institutional racism in HE. It came as a critical response following the Macpherson Report (1999) and built a set of tools to both embed racial equality in HE, and ensure a long-term commitment to anti-racist politics in the university (2002: 8-10). Fifteen years on however, very little has changed. Research continues to demonstrate a stark under-representation of academics of colour/difference, who experience a lack of institutional support, difficulties around teaching and curriculum design, and day-to-day racism. Alongside this, the changing political landscape has brought with it new anxieties that many marginalized groups must attempt to navigate. However for many academics of colour, challenging environments are commonplace and as difficult as their experiences have been, my respondents have shown that they have survived the white academy.

This paper has brought to light the collective nature of the struggles academics of colour encounter in HE. Its contribution lies in its findings, which raise a number of important practical and conceptual issues around racism in HE. It has demonstrated that a consequence of embedded practices of institutional racism (and sexism), female and male academics of colour/difference, at all career levels, experience emotional and psychological strain across every aspect of their profession, including in their daily interactions with colleagues, in their teaching practice, and in their future prospects. The findings have illustrated that there is limited support and mentoring available for academics of colour/difference which works to exclude them from the



system. They are made to feel like they are invisible, that they do not belong, and that they are of no value to their institutions. They are ridiculed, harassed, belittled and ignored, and live in a constant state of fear. If these issues are to be addressed effectively, British universities need to accept that racism is endemic in HE and can no longer be ignored. Practically, this means prioritizing race equality in educational policy and a renewed commitment to fostering anti-racist practices that promote diversity and inclusivity (Sian, Law and Sayyid, 2013: 58-59).

The findings of this paper also point to the need for universities to provide clear access to paths for progression to ensure that academics of colour/difference can fully participate within the sector and realise their potential (ibídem: 56). To understand the root causes of the persistent position of disadvantage experienced by academics of colour/difference, a conceptual dialogue is required around institutional racism, Eurocentric knowledge production, and the impact of structures of whiteness (ibídem). Although much of this work is already starting to take place on the ground with important debates opened up by *Why is my Curriculum White?* these initiatives need to be implemented at all levels of the university structure. For meaningful anti-racist practice, universities must develop strategies that encourage and facilitate the active participation of academics of colour/difference into HE (ibídem: 128). In the absence of these institutional mechanisms the possibility of social transformation in HE is unlikely.

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