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# **The University went to ‘decolonise’ and all they brought back was lousy diversity double-speak! Critical race counter-stories from faculty of colour in ‘decolonial’ times.**

## **Abstract**

UK Higher Education is characterised by structural and institutional forms of whiteness. As scholars and activists are increasingly speaking out to testify, whiteness has wide-ranging implications that affect curricula, pedagogy, knowledge production, university policies, campus climate, and the experiences of students and faculty of colour. Unsurprisingly then, calls to decolonize the university abound.

In this article, we draw upon the Critical Race Theory method of counter-storytelling. By introducing composite characters, we speak back to assumptions that universities are race-neutral, meritocratic institutions. We illustrate some of the key themes that shape the experiences of faculty of colour in UK Higher Education: institutional racism, racial microaggressions, racial battle fatigue, and steadfast fugitive resistance (Moten and Harney, 2004). We argue that, despite the paradox of working under (what purports to be) a ‘decolonial’ agenda, widespread calls to decolonize our universities have further embedded rather than dismantled whiteness, thus continuing to characterise the careers, wellbeing, and daily lives of faculty of colour.

**Keywords: racial microaggressions; racial battle fatigue; CRT; higher education; institutional racism**

## Introduction

Recent years have seen a palpable upsurge in anti-racist activism in UK universities. Calls to ‘decolonize’ have reverberated across campuses, garnered (limited and often distorted) media attention, demanded change from UK universities, and in some cases seem to have been taken up in institutional discourse. Most recently, these issues manifest in a 137-day occupation of Deptford Town Hall. Student campaigners tabled a list of anti-racist demands, and called on Goldsmiths College to implement change. The occupation ended when the university finally conceded to the students and committed to implementing the changes without initiating legal action against the protesters (Rawlinson, 2019).

This protest emerges out of a trajectory that has been picking up pace in recent years. In 2013, Nathan Richard’s catalytic ‘Absent from the Academy’ film (Richards, 2013) was quickly followed by an event at University College London (UCL) in which panelists responded to the question, ‘*Why isn’t my Professor Black?*’ (UCLTV, 2014). This title became a campaign slogan for staff and students wanting to draw attention to the under-representation of Black staff at professorial level. ‘Why isn’t my professor Black?’ coalesced with another student-led campaign: ‘*Why is my curriculum white?*’. Through ‘Why Is My Curriculum White?’ events up and down the country, students drew attention to the Eurocentricity of the curriculum, and pressed for change. Both of these campaigns were quickly followed by other national and international campaigns (‘I too am’,<sup>1</sup> for example), and perhaps reached a zenith around the Rhodes Must Fall Oxford campaign (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019a). Following their South African counterparts, students at Oxford University demanded that the statue of Cecil Rhodes be removed from the campus. As the campaigners argued, ‘as long as the statue stays, it remains a celebration not only of the crimes of Rhodes himself, but of the racist imperial legacy on which Oxford University has thrived, and continues to thrive’ (RMF Oxford, 2015: np). The impetus of Rhodes Must Fall was not limited to Oxford but emerged at other institutions through, for example, Leopold Must Fall at Queens, Galton Must Fall at UCL, and Gladstone Must Fall at the University of Liverpool.

**In each of these campaigns, students have been clear to point to the institutional and structural issues facing UK Higher Education, and much of this has come to coalesce in a movement to ‘decolonize’ Higher Education (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancioğlu 2018). This movement draws upon the languages and frameworks (sometimes) of the revolutionary struggles against colonial rule that characterised the 1960s, and led to the formal independence of many nations in the Global South. When applied to contemporary educational contexts, (at its essence, at least) decoloniality urges us to consider the ways in which colonialism has shaped, and how coloniality continues to shape, knowledge production and education systems. In this sense, therefore, the decolonize movement has the *potential* to engender a radical framework for examining and transforming the colonial relations that shape education. However, as Dar, Dy and Rodriguez (2018) have shown, the misuse and overuse of the decolonize discourse places the term at (if not beyond) risk of becoming little more than a superficial buzzword,**

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<sup>1</sup> Beginning at Harvard, before spreading to campuses across the US and the UK, ‘I too am...’ was a campaign in which students ‘held up boards that quoted or described their daily experiences of racial microaggressions... As the [Harvard] campaign’s Tumblr Page suggests, ‘I too am’ emerges from a collective sense that Black student voices ‘often go unheard’ on campus, their ‘experiences are devalued’, and their ‘presence is questioned’. The campaign represents a ‘way of speaking back’ (I too am Harvard, 2014: no page).’ (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019a: 10).

**severed from its radical essence. Arguing that ‘decolonization is not a metaphor’, Tuck and Yang (2012) have even questioned whether the term should ever be applied to contemporary educational contexts.**

Amongst other issues, a decolonial lens draws our attention to the whiteness of the university staff body. The depth and saturation of whiteness in British universities means that ‘BME’ staff, and particularly ‘UK BME’ staff, are underrepresented in the highest contract levels (Advance HE, 2018). The proportion of BME academics that are professors is lower than the proportion of white academics who are professors, and BME staff are more likely to leave their institutions than white staff (Advance HE, 2018). The situation is particularly bleak when we look specifically at the Black ethnic group. In 2016, of 18,425 professors, only 110 were Black (0.6%) (Equality Challenge Unit, 2017). The numbers are bleaker still when we consider the ways in which race and gender intersect (Rollock, 2019). There were only 25 Black female professors in 2016 (Equality Challenge Unit 2017, 260; Rollock 2019).

A plethora of research has shown that those academics of colour who do work in the academy face a range of racialised and racist difficulties, are often made to feel like outsiders who do not belong. Academics of colour too often experience high levels of stress, anxiety, fatigue and discomfort (Arday, 2018; Gabriel and Tate, 2017; Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Mirza, 2018; Rollock, 2019; Sian, 2019).

Recognizing Sian’s (2019: 3) assertion that ‘racism in British universities is endemic’, we suggest that the negative experiences of faculty of colour are unsurprising. They are in fact a predictable consequence of deep-seated structural racism, and superficial efforts to address that racism. The low take-up and general ineffectiveness of sectoral initiatives like the Race Equality Charter Mark (Bhopal and Pitkin 2018; 2020; Champion and Clark, forthcoming), attests to the distance that we still have to travel.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the reduction of decolonial agendas to hollow diversity initiatives - in which concerns are limited to the tokenistic inclusion of one or two Black and Brown authors on reading lists - shows that, for anti-racist institutional change, there is yet much work to be done. As Ahmed (2006) argues, such ‘non-performativity of anti-racism’ acts to leave structural determinants intact. In the context of calls to decolonize, therefore, and with institutions claiming to be decolonizing, it is worth us pausing to reflect on the continued struggles of faculty of colour. This is our task in this article. In the next section, we set out our CRT inspired methodological approach. Thereafter, we share three vignettes from our composite characters: Antonia, Tayo, and Serg. These vignettes enable us to bring to life some of the issues that face faculty of colour. We provide some analysis after each vignette, before ending with a conclusion.

### **CRT as method**

Our lived experiences of racialization have led us to adopt Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a method (Solorzano and Yosso 2001). One of the key tenets of CRT emphasises the centrality of experiential knowledge. This knowledge is considered a strength which draws explicitly on lived experiences of people of colour by including such methods as (counter-)storytelling,

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<sup>2</sup> Not all universities are members of the Charter and of the 56 members of the scheme, only 12 institutions have managed to demonstrate a ‘bronze’ level of commitment to race equality. None have achieved silver or gold (Advance HE, 2019)

family history, biographies, scenarios, parables, chronicles and narratives (Solórzano 1997, 7). The sharing of stories as argued by Solórzano and Yosso's (2002, 26), 'challenges white privilege, rejects notions of "neutral" research or "objective" researchers, and exposes deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of colour.'

Under the banner of CRT, the work presented here follows on from the tradition of narrative inquiry (Milner 2007), and the use of composite characters in critical race work in education (Martinez, 2014) conducted - primarily but not exclusively - in the USA (Harper 2009; Hughes and Giles 2010; Love 2004; Solórzano and Yosso 2001; 2002). With so few academics of colour in British universities, the use of composite characters are useful in protecting the identities of those whose personal narratives have informed the stories we share (Patton & Catching, 2009; Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Harper 2009). The guise of composite characters, allows authors to speak more freely and present a cogent picture that, centring racism, draws upon the experiential at the personal and collective level (Milner 2007; Lachuk and Mosley 2012). Like the authors, our composite characters are situated in the sociopolitical context of UK Higher Education. As such, their experiences are illustrative of the auto-ethnographic experiences of authors, and the wider research on experiences of racially minoritized staff. However, creating composite characters does not resolve all issues of representation: we do not claim to homogenise BME staff experiences. In the following section, we introduce the accounts of Antonia, Tayo and Serg.

### **Antonia**

*Most colleagues don't smile*

*They just show you their teeth*

*Lean into me and dissect me*

*"Could you take the race module?"*

*I feel like a ballerina in a musical jewellery box*

*Always ready to spin and play for you on demand*

*But then I realise the delicate features of a ballerina*

*Aren't made for people who look like me*

*A body on a coroner's table cut open, then. Go ahead and dissect the useful parts of me.*

Antonia is sitting at her desk, earphones in; world out. She feels someone standing behind her left shoulder and turns from her emails to look at the towering figure. It is a white male Professor on a different programme. He leans into her space, and asks about the new race strategy being developed across the campus after statistics revealed a devastating Black and Minority Ethnic attainment gap and poor representation of BME faculty and staff in management positions. He asks, "could you help me transform this programme into a decolonial one?" Antonia flinches. Immediately, she felt the environment transform into a dark interrogation room with

her sitting at a table, hands glued to it, and the white man standing over her with a torch in her face, blinding her vision. He is pointing the torch - weapon-like - into her face, peering into her, interrogating what she knows and what insights she might offer up. Antonia would normally be the type to feel this out of body experience inwardly whilst outwardly, her mouth would contort unnaturally, into a teeth-showing, collegial smile when in reality she just wants to scream. She wouldn't dare. She was already a 'space invader' (Puwar, 2004) as well as a junior colleague, not to mention the first in her family to stay in University so damn long. But this time she felt the pain and did it anyway; she said that it is simply not her responsibility to assume this role, it would be more meaningful and impactful to draw on the support of other colleagues on the programme and everyone would need to meet to discuss why this change was taking place. The Professor looked perplexed. He pointed to the one other Black and Minority Ethnic colleague in the department also working on a different programme and suggested they could work as a tight knit team to see the changes through. I really do want to scream now, Antonia thought. "But, Professor, their scholarship is not even on race!" Want to know a joke? His reply was "I need allies too!" and walked off. Antonia exhales deeply and turns back to the computer screen, the room resuming its normal office setting. Therein lies the problem: the assumption that ALL race scholarship is the same; the assumption that we can be called upon, at will, to sort out the Eurocentric mess FOR white people; that we have the resources, support, time within our workloads and energy to do so; that we all work on race simply because we are non-white; that we even want to participate in a fundamental misunderstanding of decoloniality. Does Antonia's resistance become read as her not being collegiate? "Look how she upset him and isn't demonstrating allyship" she can imagine the chatter around the photocopying machine. She catches her reflection in the small mirror next to her office phone and berates herself: "silly, black girl, you're supposed to be all things to all people. Stop messing this opportunity up for yourself!" As Beauboeuf-Lafontant explains

Recognised for what they do, not how they feel, strong Black women are confined by a discourse that speaks in extremes – always giving, never complaining; ever strong, never weak (2009, 82)

Antonia has internalised the stresses of contorting her mouth into that teeth-showing smile: a consequence of 'racial battle fatigue': a "physiological and psychological strain exacted on racially marginalized groups and the amount of energy lost dedicated to coping with racial microaggressions and racism" (Smith et al. 2007:555). Assuming the position of the race scholar who can give majority white faculty and students the (singular) black perspective on race and racism is exhausting and, the pressure to do so, constitutes a racial microaggression (Pierce, 1995). It fractures Antonia's identities into constituent parts. It privileges her racialized position as the defining feature of who she might possibly ever be, and marks the boundaries of her scholarship. How do you 'surface act' in the academy when you are bound by your skin (Hochschild, 1983)? Antonia collects her belongings and heads to a lecture that she is filling in for a colleague: it's on decolonising the curriculum. En route she reminds herself that her scholarship is decidedly more than rehashing racial inequalities in education, every year, to a different set of majority white students who

will probably never encounter someone who looks like her again. Or care if they do not. The responsibility for ending racism, still constructed and understood to be interpersonal and from a fringe few, falls to Black and Minority ethnic faculty's shoulders. She can count on two hands the number of students who have the political will to change what they are learning about beyond lamenting about the 'injustice of it all' in the module's assignment. She walks into class and turns to the lectern. Then it dawns on her: I am not allowed to be tired. These shoulders can take more and more. Just like Buckaroo<sup>3</sup> can. I have to show up and show out every time! Shoulders thrust backwards, she starts: "Students, I am excited, beyond privileged to stand before you, in this moment, to discuss decolonising the curriculum". She ends the lecture by agreeing to disagree that racism exists. A few students have black friends and they have never said anything! We exist in a colour-blind world: of racism without racists (Bonilla-Silva, 2010) and Antonia becomes the problem for naming the problem (Ahmed, 2017). So, Antonia continues with her scholarship, meeting the institutional targets for publishing and applying for funding. Despite knowing that funding for projects based on 'race' is not a priority. Despite knowing that the Knowledge Exchange Framework could potentially lead to the closing down of programmes and modules such as the ones she is given on race and social justice that do not meet the demands of the knowledge economy. Despite it all.

It is difficult being the 'only one' as Antonia's vignette demonstrates. This hypervisibility is useful for institutions to demonstrate their inclusiveness in prospective student university brochures and websites to attract international students; however, what they are doing by not actively supporting the scholarship of Black and Minority Ethnic scholars and not actively embedding race equity beyond mere statements of intent, is as Ahmed describes, illustrative of the non-performativity of anti-racism; whereby, "declarations of commitment" such as announcing a BAME Race Equality Strategy "can block recognition of racism" (2006:110). As Ahmed elaborates "the failure, or the non-performativity of anti-racist speech acts is a mechanism for the reproduction of institutional authority, which conceals the ongoing reality of racism...Being committed to anti-racism can function as a perverse performance of racism: "you" are wrong to describe us as racist because "we" are committed to being antiracist. Antiracism functions here as a discourse of organizational pride (p.110-111). Therein lies the particularity of whiteness in the UK context: we do not have positive discrimination initiatives and Universities are not legally obliged to apply or embed the Race Equality Charter<sup>4</sup>. We have to accept what we are given in an environment where one non-White face is taken to be symbolic of the end of racism! This vignette draws on Frankenberg's work where Whiteness is understood as "a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a 'standpoint,' a place from which White people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, 'Whiteness' refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed." (Frankenberg, 1993: 1). A 'BAME' equality strategy can still be modelled on the principles of whiteness, centring and privileging those racialised as white, which is why it

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<sup>3</sup> Buckaroo is a children's game in which the aim is to pile as many items onto the mule without causing it to buck all of the items off. The winner is the one who has achieved this.

<sup>4</sup> Further information can be found here: <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter/about-race-equality-charter/>

is important that scholars of colour are able to identify and expose the shifting and slippery nature of it in a context where ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ prevails - often at the expense of minority faculty members’ health (Ashe, Barkowska and Nazroo, 2019).

## **Tayo Mensah**

*“Dear Tayo, I know we haven’t met before but, given your expertise, I wondered whether you might be interested in delivering a lecture on decolonising education. I know that the students would really appreciate your input on the module, Kind Regards, Dr Whiteman”*

There was nothing spectacular about the email. It was one of a steadily increasing number of requests that filled his inbox. Although the email conveyed a lack of familiarity between sender and recipient, the pattern was incredibly familiar. No relationship. A favour. A vague acknowledgement of ‘expertise’. No mention of remuneration. A plea to do it for the students.

It was an ‘invitation’ that he had accepted many times before. He had been flattered. He had thought about the students: the importance of representation. He had felt the importance of the work, and - being concerned about those colleagues of colour who perpetuated rather than challenged white supremacy - he had worried about who would deliver the session if he declined.

Increasingly though, Tayo was becoming weary. He was tired. He had felt for some time now that he was working two jobs. As an academic from 9 to 5 (when work didn’t spill into the evenings), and as an activist in the evenings and weekends.

In his academic work, he was working intensely to develop a course on ‘decoloniality’. This had not been his own idea, or even his desire, but that of a head of department who had seen an opportunity to commodify and profit from, whilst hollowing out the impetus of, a social movement.

Alongside growing evermore weary, he was becoming increasingly conscious of the wider context of these emails. What was de-colonial, he asked himself, about people of colour doing the labour of white academics for free? Were these not contemporary manifestations of the white supremacist power relations that have characterised modernity?

Hearing his line manager’s ‘publish or perish’ mantra echo in his mind, he thought more about the implications of taking on additional labour for his white colleagues. Perhaps it was this process that enabled his white colleagues to publish regularly, whilst he struggled not to perish.

His mind began to rush with questions: in accepting requests like those of Dr Whiteman, was he helping to paper over the cracks? That is, by doing these ‘guest lectures’ was he enabling Higher Education to continue avoiding the appalling underrepresentation of staff of colour? As he grappled with these realisations, he became increasingly agitated by the audacity of the request, and increasingly despondent about his role in the academy.

He recalled some of the many previous requests that he had received. His mind paused on one memory in particular. It was early on in his career. He had received a very late invitation to speak at a conference on diversity, inclusion and widening participation. Whilst he was initially flattered, upon arriving at the conference it dawned on him why he was there, and why his invitation was so late. Despite the conference focusing on issues that disproportionately disadvantage communities of colour, he was the only speaker of colour in the entire day of sessions. He was the diversity in the conference title. The ‘widening participation’ was the tokenistic ‘inclusion’ of his body. He knew he was nothing more than a symbolic buffer against accusations of Euro-centricity. His presence was creating the illusion that the work was being done.

As he traced these memories, he registered his anguish. **This is the ‘cumulative burden’ (Pierce, 1995: 281) he had read and taught about, he thought. These invitations were racial microaggressions, and, as microaggressions eventually do, they were weighing him down. This was why senior colleagues of colour seemed so tired and miserable, he thought. This was why they left to work elsewhere (Bhopal, Brown and Jackson, 2015), he realised.** Infuriated by the machinations of white supremacy, he began to type a response...

“Dear Dr Whiteman”,

“Like many staff of colour, I am already overworked. I am tired of requests like these. As Audre Lorde puts it, it is not our job to educate you. I will not do unpaid labour that means ‘oppressors maintain their position and evade their responsibility’, whilst people of colour are exploited. I suggest that 1) you use your privileged position to agitate for the employment of more academics of colour, and 2) you educate yourself and see anti-racist work as your responsibility too.

Regards,

Dr Tayo Mensah.”

He sat and stared at the screen. Despite becoming conscious of the amount of time he had given to this request, he felt a sense of relief at the prospect of articulating his frustration. Riddled with fear over jeopardising his own reputation, however, he would not press send. He would be seen as *the angry black man*. Recalling his recent lecture on the nature of racial microaggressions, he knew all too well that if he were to respond angrily, he would be seen to be ‘blowing things out of proportion’. The wider institutional context, the years and years of microaggressions, would not be seen. He would be the proverbial Black with a chip on his shoulder (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019b). As he sat back and contemplated, he wondered how much worse the burden must be for his darker skinned colleagues, for women and non-binary folk of colour. He must speak up, he thought. He did not enter the academy to play the role of ‘the good Negro’. ‘Your silence will not protect you’, he told himself. He looked back at the email and pressed send. Bracing himself for the backlash of *white fragility* (Di’Angelo, 2018), he felt a sense of catharsis.

At the individual level, Tayo's account shows the impact that microaggressions can have on academics of colour in the UK. These microaggressions are simultaneously a consequence of,

and contributing factor towards, wider structure of racism in Higher Education. In developing a nuanced understanding of the disproportionate lack of Black staff (and particularly Black women), microaggressions - as experienced by students and academics - need to be a part of our analytical framework. They have to be understood, however, through an *institutional* analysis. In this sense, underrepresentation can be situated alongside the reported dissatisfaction levels of Black staff in academia, the higher rates of mental health issues experienced by Black staff, and the likelihood for staff of colour to leave UK academia. As Tayo's account shows, however, among many staff of colour, there is a commitment to speaking up and speaking back against the white supremacist processes that characterise UK higher education.

## **Serg**

*Having to always perform*

*Having to put on that mask*

*Well, Check Yo Self before I Wreck Myself*

*I am hating on drama*

*I never did this for the C.R.E.A.M.*

*I did this for the love*

*The love from community*

*Poured on to me as a youngn'*

There was madness on a Tuesday morning to get kids ready for school. After working with his wife to get their kids out the door, Serg had an hour to get himself ready for work and catch the bus to make it into the office. He had a long day ahead, and the first thing on his mind was preparing and printing out handouts for his first lecture of the semester. He is committed to making a good impression not only to the students, but to his head of department who is also teaching on the module. There is only a short window to positively sway students and the head of department as Serg only has seven months left on his temporary teaching contract.

He catches the bus. Like the rest of the commuters, he is seated with a fixed gaze towards the screen of his mobile phone. Desperate to keep on top of an increasingly unmanageable workload, he is scrolling through his work emails. There was one email he did not expect to see. It was an email from a colleague sharing some insider news of a recent university union representative meeting. Serg's colleague suggested that some of the union representatives indicated despair of a proposed academic staff survey on race perceptions that Serg designed on behalf of the University. Serg is an expert on race inequalities and the UK education system, as he recently completed his PhD in the area a few years ago. The email indicated that some union staff members

queried the emphasis on race inequalities rather than social class. Feeling dejected, he departed the bus, thanking the bus driver, as usual, for getting him to the office safely.

He arrived to his empty open-plan office. He logs on to his PC in a determined fashion as his lecture is earmarked to begin in thirty-minutes. He needs to make some slight amendments to his lecture slides and print them off as handouts for his students. As he was working in haste, a few of his colleagues arrive several minutes later after attending a breakfast research seminar organised by the department. Given school-run duties at home, Serg knew he could not attend the event. Also, the paper presented at the research seminar was not congruent with his immediate research interests. The paper revolved around the issue of white working class boys and restricted access into university education. Serg greeted his colleagues as they shuffled in by saying, 'Good morning', and returned his eyes to his monitor to adjust his lecture presentation.

Serg was concentrating on the task at-hand with open-plan office chatter all around him. The chatter was nearly, becoming background noise until his colleague, Alana, voiced her reflections about the seminar, 'I was not keen on the comments raised by Leonard.' Leonard is one of five Black minority ethnic (BME) staff members in an academic department that has 70 employees. According to Alana, Leonard was critical of the rationale for the working-class boys study particularly given the recent student movements to decolonise higher education within the English sector and beyond (see Joseph-Salisbury, 2019a). Leonard shared his reflections about the university and its entanglement with the legacy of colonialism. He claimed it was institutionally racist, and not representative of the rich, ethnic and racially diverse, local community it's supposed to serve.

Alana, who is white, found fellowship with others in the office who expressed disagreement and resentment at Leonard's claims of the university being institutionally racist. She exclaimed, 'I was raised working-class. You do not hear me bringing up my social class, and it being an issue!'

For Serg, the sentiments expressed by Alana were not appropriate. Serg is a son of island immigrants from the southern Pacific Ocean, lacking British citizenship, and the only person of colour present in the open-plan office. It took him a couple of minutes to process Alana's remarks as he was simultaneously sorting out the printer for his prepared lecture slides. With only a few minutes until the start of the lecture, he rationalised not challenging Alana's remarks.

Following the two-hour lecture on gender inequalities in education, Serg was exhausted. It was not the best lecture he had delivered. On his way back to the office, he grabbed a sandwich and a coffee at the nearby university cafeteria and sat down. He was frustrated with himself. He was not upset at his recent lecture performance. He was disappointed that he did not rebuke Alana. It was not only about Alana, but it was the others who stood in agreement with her in his own office. He questioned how others perceived him in the office. Was he invisible? Was he considered an 'honorary white' for being in a space where a white colleague can express such resentment? By not offering a rebuke, he felt complicit in the colonialist, institutionalised racist university culture that his fellow colleague, Leonard, had pointed out earlier in the day. This distressed him. He did not want to return to his

office. He felt ashamed. He thought about telling his head of department about the incident and his own uneasiness of working alongside colleagues who share the same office. Then, an anxious question arose about the risks of sharing his own discomfort, particularly with the head of department, given that he needs to secure further employment. He, again, rationalised his own inaction.

Walking to his front door at the end of the day, Serg compared his inactions of the day to the boldness demonstrated by Leonard. He shared Leonard's views on decolonising English higher education and calling out institutional racism, but he lacked the audacity to declare it publically. He did not even attempt to defend Leonard's views to his office colleagues. This made him feel uneasy with regret. He opened the front door to be greeted by his bouncing children who adorn him with hugs.

Serg tucked his kids into bed.

Serg later wakes up in the middle of the night. Unable to go back to sleep, he is worried about going to work the next morning. He does not want to go back into the office. He questions whether an academic career was a wise choice.

**Whiteness in English higher education as represented in Serg's story is taken-for-granted, axiomatic of an exclusive sense of belonging that despises people of colour. Whiteness rationalises the stripping of humanity of a person of colour that the latter becomes invisible, not even recognised as human (Dumas 2016). This longing to be recognised as *human* in an effort to attain some sense of equal footing with white faculty is a call-to-arms to advance institutional equity work (Rollock 2019), such as addressing lack of representation of BME staff and pay disparities (Advance HE 2018). English higher education has been keen on addressing racial inequalities in the sector (Bhopal and Pitktin 2018), however whiteness remains steadfast, manifesting itself in different forms. Its pervasiveness coerces faculty of colour, like Serg, to wear a mask in a Du Boisian and Fanonian sense and rationalise racist incidents and microaggressions. Wearing this mask is toil, damaging, which requires an antidote of healing and wholeness. When the invisibility of whiteness, or terror in the black imagination (hooks 1995), is called out within the realm of higher education and made visible by Serg's colleague, Leonard, it causes discomfort to those who benefit from it (Blaisdell 2019; Matias 2016). As presented in Serg's story, this discomfort subsumes issues of racism in the English academy with a constant foregrounding of class struggle (see Cole 2009). It results in such discourses on the plight of white working-class boys (see Sutton Trust 2016; Gillborn, 2010). **This white discomfort was also represented in Alana's reaction to Leonard's claim that the university is institutionally racist. With this in mind, tackling the question of how to progressively engage in race equity work in English higher education is usually left at the feet of faculty of colour trying to convince both the institution and its white inhabitants of their humanity.****

## Conclusion

The vignettes of three staff of colour each give an insight into the experiences of and challenges facing academics of colour in the UK. These experiences are shaped by and reflective of a Higher Education context in which Black staff are staggeringly under-represented amongst lecturers (Shilliam, 2016), and particularly amongst professors. Underscoring the particular issues faced by Antonia, the picture is even bleaker for Black women. Consequently, the conditions that make Higher Education hostile for staff of colour, in turn, come to be supported by those conditions it creates.

By drawing upon composite characters, in this article we have presented stories that are all too familiar to staff of colour in Britain. In doing so, we have offered a humanising narrative that shows the lived realities behind the grim statistics of under-representation. There are themes that run throughout the narratives that are indicative of the institutional challenges facing staff of colour; namely, racial microaggressions placing a significant burden on Antonia, Tayo and Serg. Although often overlooked for their apparent innocuousness, we suggest in this article that racial microaggressions need to be taken seriously if we are to improve the experiences of academic staff of colour. Indeed, racial microaggressions are not abstract aberrations but are direct consequences of the lamentable structures of inequality manifest in the curriculum, teaching force and institutional policies and procedures. We also saw, in the account of Serg, the oft-discussed plight of white working-class boys who are purported to be the real victims and thus deployed to thwart any conversation about racism (Gillborn 2015).

Whiteness in British HE is marred by a unique affliction: cut off from colonial and postcolonial roots, decolonisation is the 'new' way in which institutions can demonstrate commitment to *racism* - both interpersonally and structurally. Institutions advance rather than dismantle racism by adopting the work of a few racially minoritised groups, but exploitatively draining the useful parts of their scholarship to meet institutional metrics and marketise fashionable buzz-words that appeal to social media hashtags. Therefore, whiteness, so invisible and 'everyday' (Essed, 1991) can result in BME scholars becoming complicit in supporting the limited progress institutions herald as significant achievements - working themselves into the ground by sitting on and contributing to, a disproportionate number of Equality and Diversity committees, BME student support initiatives, Race Equality Staff networks, and Race Equality launches.

All of these taxes on time and energy are not without consequence and racial microaggressions whether subtle or overtly explicit, serve as a stinging reminder to the BME scholar of the fleeting nature of their existence 'against a sharp white background' (Hurstun, 2015; Johnson, 2019) and how their roles are perceived within it. Composite characters have not 'given a voice' to these narratives: those voices were already there; however the vignettes are valuable for understanding the changing nature of whiteness in the UK context, even through initiatives ostensibly designed to level the playing field. A CRT framework has ensured the counter-stories foreground race along with its intersections, which illuminate how racially minoritised status is 'read' on account of gender and citizenship identities, too. CRT recognises the value in shedding light on lived experience and rather than being blindly swept along by the hysteria of 'decolonising the curriculum', it recognises that if racism saturates all aspects of British society so too does it underpin moves towards divesting in the colonial power of the university space.

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