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Sociology

Racism Seems to be the Hardest Word: How Racialised Workers Make Sense of Racial Inequalities in Creative and Cultural Industries

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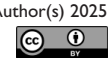
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Abstract

The creative and cultural industries face an urgent challenge in addressing structural exclusion and forms of racism. This article, based on in-depth interviews with 42 Black, Asian and ethnically diverse creatives, reveals that nearly all respondents faced racial disadvantages hindering their career progression. However, it was striking how there are different degrees of willingness to attribute their struggles to structural racism. Our research uncovers the intricate interplay of race, class and the concept of post-racial meritocracy in the experiences of these creatives. By examining how the attachment to post-racial meritocracy shapes racialised individuals' attitudes towards their structural disadvantages, we demonstrate the harm caused by their reluctance to acknowledge racism. This reluctance often leads to self-critique, perpetuating a cycle where structural racism remains unchallenged. We argue that denying and debating the existence of racism allows it to persist and stifles necessary frameworks to address these inequalities.

Keywords

classism, creative and cultural industries, diversity, meritocracy, post-race, racism

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Introduction

There is a common accusation in the idea of 'playing the race card' that suggests that racialised minorities may be too quick to put the experiences and challenges they face down to the presence of racism or racialised structures. However, in a research project that used interviews to explore the experiences of racially minoritised people attempting to build careers in the UK creative and cultural industries (CCIs), we found an opposite tendency to this derogatory stereotype. We interviewed Black, brown and Asian creatives coming through Creative Access,[1] a British organisation that facilitates significant diversity schemes in CCIs. While nearly all respondents described forms of racial disadvantage that hindered their attempts to build flourishing careers in CCIs, there were different degrees to which they were willing to attribute their own struggles to these factors. We argue that a hesitation to label personal experience as the product of structural racism is shaped by the conjunction of twin discourses of meritocracy and post-race. The conjunction of these discourses also highlights the intersection of class and race as exclusionary forces in CCIs (Littler, 2017). The prevalence of a discourse of post-race (even in the context of the resurgence of Black Lives Matter, which framed the interviews), tells respondents that we are – or at least should be – beyond talking about race. Attachment to ideas of meritocracy leads to a belief in self-improvement as the route to a sustainable career in CCIs and, within this logic, a failure to progress is taken as a sign of personal limitations.

CCIs matter for racial justice. Media perpetuate racial tropes that together with forms of economic disadvantage constitute the oppression of racialised people. Conversely, CCIs produce symbolic goods that coalesce into discursive formations that can challenge historical constructions of racial Others and conjure images of how we can better live together (Saha, 2018). There exists an assumption in creative industries policy and research that greater representation of racialised symbol creators inside CCIs will lead to 'better' representations of those communities in the cultural commodities produced – a relation that we argue is not as straightforward as suggested. Nonetheless, the number and experience of racialised people who work in or are trying to get into CCIs has become an important social justice issue, for academics and activists alike (Banks, 2017; Saha, 2018).

This research is a contribution to sociological research on inequalities in CCIs (O'Brien et al., 2017) and argues that the barriers in calling out racism help racial inequalities stay in place. It is also a contribution to the sociology of race, and debates on post-racialism that characterise neoliberal society in the West (Goldberg, 2007; Kapoor, 2013; Titley, 2019), providing a rare empirical insight into how the attitudes and experiences of young racialised people are shaped by post-race discourse. In what follows, we situate our research within CCIs research, and outline the concepts of post-race and meritocracy that frame our analysis. We explore how the literature on post-race and post-racialism shows that denying and debating racism allows it to thrive and silences the necessary frameworks to address structural inequalities, explaining our findings. However, this literature is mostly focused on the macro-level and on how post-racialism is operationalised by and for the status quo. As Bethan Harries (2014) notes, hardly any research on post-race has focused on its effects (a) on racialised people, and (b) in

everyday contexts. We then describe how we approached our interviews and the coding of interview data. The remainder of the article presents our findings and demonstrates the specific ways in which our respondents skirted around the language of racism, while describing in detail forms of racial disadvantage.

Structural Racism and Post-Racial Meritocracy in Creative and Cultural Industries

The original impetus for this research was a desire to interrogate a cornerstone of modern creative industries policy: that CCIs – with their unique set of raw materials (*creativity*, *originality* and *innovation*) – are more meritocratic and therefore more inclusive than older, more staid, industrial sectors (O'Brien and Oakley, 2015; Taylor and O'Brien, 2017). Schemes in the UK such as the *Creative Careers Programme* and *Get into Creative Careers*, led by the government and various industry partners, promote the idea that anyone with talent and ambition can succeed in the creative industries, regardless of their background.

This belief has been contested by critical scholars who demonstrate that, despite the meritocratic rhetoric, CCIs remain structured by deep and persistent inequalities that disproportionately affect marginalised groups (McRobbie, 2016; Friedman and Laurison, 2020; Brook et al., 2020). The general argument is that CCIs are presented as offering 'good work' (and still have this potential) but in fact produce alienation, (self) exploitation, insecurity and precarity (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011).

Sociologists of race studying CCIs have focused on structural racism, drawing on Bonilla-Silva's (2001: 37) concept of a racialised social system, where racial relations and practices shape society. Structural discrimination is reinforced across housing, education, employment, criminal justice and media. In media, research highlights how diversity initiatives often sustain rather than challenge systemic racism. This includes covert discrimination within diversity discourse (Gray, 2013; Ali and Byrne, 2022; Saha and van Lente, 2022) and industry logics that push cultural creators towards reductive racial tropes despite anti-racist intentions (Saha, 2018; Nwonka and Malik, 2018). A smaller but growing body of work, influenced by Ahmed (2007) and Puwar (2004), examines the embodied dimensions of exclusion through Puwar's somatic norm (O'Brien et al., 2017). This refers to the unspoken racial, class and gendered norms that determine who belongs in the industry. Racialised creatives often struggle to fit these expectations, leading to alienation and exclusion from key networks (Ali and Byrne, 2022: 508–509). This article builds on this latter strand of research.

As Taylor and O'Brien (2017: 30) put it, '[c]ritical research made it clear that there is a mismatch between narratives of an open, meritocratic, set of occupations and the structural barriers to those who are not the "default" affluent, white, middle-class male'. But as they go on to argue, while empirically rich data have been produced on the precise character of inequalities in CCIs, there has been less focus on how, as they state, 'these structures are perpetuated through *attitudes and assumptions* of those occupied in cultural labour' (Taylor and O'Brien, 2017: 30, emphasis added). Taylor and O'Brien (2017) argue that many in CCIs hold the belief that these industries are open, fair and reward hard work, despite structural evidence to the contrary, reflecting how post-racial

meritocratic ideals are internalised and contribute to the normalisation and invisibility of structural racism. Among the aspiring creative workers we interviewed, struggles to gain entry or progress in CCIs were often interpreted through a lens of individual deficiency or self-improvement, rather than linked explicitly to structural barriers, revealing how meritocratic and post-racial narratives shape subjective understandings of inequality. As we shall show, that is not to say, however, that our respondents denied that such structural obstacles/inequalities exist. It was their inability or reluctance to describe it directly as racism that is of interest here. Fleshing out the context of neoliberalism further, we turn to recent literature on 'post-race' to explain this specific pattern.

Sociologists have used the term 'post-race' to describe the current common-sense thinking that society has overcome structural racism; that racism is a thing of a past. This was challenged somewhat by the global Black Lives Matter protests from 2020, which produced a racial reckoning in western societies like the UK (and was still having reverberations at the time of our research in early 2021). Nonetheless, despite the English far-right riots in 2024, Nisha Kapoor's (2013: 1031) observation from the last decade still rings true and has perhaps become more pronounced at the time of the research, with Britain's first ever non-white Prime Minister:[2]

> increasing stratification among non-white groups and the positioning of racialized minorities within the upper echelons of state administration, in particular, have come to symbolize all the burden of proof required for those advocating we have now entered a 'post-race' era.

Post-race discourse can be understood as an extension of colour-blind ideology that characterises liberal democracies; the good, liberal subject *does not see race* (Bloch et al., 2020). Critical race theorists nonetheless have treated post-racialism (i.e. the perpetuation of post-race discourse) as a specific expression of neoliberalism. In this vein, Goldberg (2007) and Kapoor (2013) describe racism under post-race as becoming individualised or as they put it, *privatised*. That is, racism is no longer recognised as a structural force (if it was ever regarded as such) but a problem that individuals possess (whether the perpetrator or the victim).

The deniability, or 'debatability' (Titley, 2019) of racism in this regard, is precisely how racism persists. According to Titley (2019: 8), in contemporary media, racism has been reduced to a topic to be debated, characterised by 'the incessant, recursive attention as to what counts as racism and who gets to define it'. Post-racialism and the denial of the existence of racism deliberately creates noise, confusion and scepticism – and for relevance to this article, a suggestion of delusion on the part of the person who brings it up (Lentin, 2020). Yet, the concept of post-race does not merely describe the process of racism being denied. Rather it is understood as a discursive trick, or a 'unique hegemonic manoeuvre' (Valluvan, 2016: 2242), that allows racism to fester. As Jared Sexton (2008: 27) puts it, 'racism does its most essential work in the shadow of the very attempt to explain it'. Again, with direct relevance for our article, Kapoor (2013: 1029) describes how post-racialism mutes race at the precise moment when it is urgently needed to explain social and structural inequalities, making 'it near impossible to name, to identify and thus to redress racisms'.

To summarise, the literature on post-race and post-racialism demonstrates how in the current conjuncture: (1) racism, rather than an established social fact, is instead to be denied and debated; (2) racism thrives in the moment of its denial; and (3) the terms and frameworks of race and racism needed to address structural inequalities are buried and silenced. These three dynamics, as we will demonstrate, help explain our findings. Returning to sociological research on inequalities in CCIs it is noteworthy that the concept of post-race has featured rarely in this literature. One exception comes from Jo Littler (2017) in her powerful critique of meritocracy. Littler argues that the idea of meritocracy, that society is a level playing field where people are rewarded through their own 'talent' and hard work, is a myth that allows class privilege and other structural inequalities to persist. Moreover, meritocracy is inherently neoliberal, emphasising individualism, entrepreneurialism and competition. With particular pertinence for this article, Littler combines the concept of post-race with her critique of neoliberal meritocracy. Meritocracy operates as a post-racial ideology by implying that any lingering effects of racism can be overcome through personal effort alone, thereby obscuring the structural mechanisms through which racial inequalities are reproduced and justified. It is also post-racial in how it resists any form of positive action designed to address inequality, for this would undermine meritocracy. As Valluvan (2016: 2243) highlights, 'the prevailing common sense is indeed to picture the contemporary as one where social mobility is primarily an epiphenomenon of individual effort'. Similarly, Ben Pitcher (2012: 4) describes how the independent, entrepreneurial, Black subject (who does not need state support) becomes 'the exemplar of neoliberal meritocracy'. The flawed assumption of meritocracy as post-racial overlooks how race and class function as exclusionary forces. As Keister and Southgate (2012: 17) argue, 'the role of race and ethnicity are almost always related to access to resources in social groups'. Recognising this intersection is crucial to debunking the myth of post-racial meritocracy. Returning to Littler, she shows how the idea of meritocracy prevents the enacting of concrete social action, whereby our respondents blame their lack of entry/mobility into and within CCIs on their own shortcomings, while holding faith that individualised self-improvement will result in better rewards for their labour. The next section briefly outlines our research methods.

Methodology

This article draws on interviews with 42 Black, Asian and ethnically diverse[3] aspiring and current workers in CCIs, conducted as part of a broader project that also included a survey of 720 ethnically diverse participants conducted from 5 February to 16 April 2021. Participants for both strands were recruited through Creative Access, a leading UK organisation dedicated to advancing diversity, equity and inclusion in the creative industries. Given the article's focus on discourse and processes of silencing, we centre our analysis on the rich interview data, which offers deeper insight into these phenomena. Recruitment explicitly targeted ethnically diverse creatives and cultural workers, excluding white-identifying respondents to ensure clarity of analysis around racial inequalities. Invitations to complete the survey were sent through Creative Access mailing lists and in their newsletters to subscribers. Interviewees were recruited through two approaches. First, participants who completed the anonymous survey could indicate their willingness

to be interviewed, from whom a subset was selected to ensure a range of sectors and roles were covered. Second, Creative Access staff directly invited potential interviewees via their mailing list. All interviewees had some connection to Creative Access, whether through receiving communications, completing an internship or engaging in training and employment opportunities offered by the organisation. Interviews took place between February and May 2021, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a significant yet uneven impact on cultural and creative sectors. While existing research acknowledged racial inequalities exacerbated by COVID-19 in CCIs (Ali et al., 2022; Walmsley et al., 2022), it did not address the specific sociological and cultural manifestations of racism explored here.

Given the prevailing restrictions on meeting in person, the interviews were all conducted on Zoom. This proved to be logistically convenient and to our surprise, enabled a feeling of intimacy and connection as interviewees were in their own spaces (Oliffe et al., 2021). This relaxed feel was maintained even though the interviews were conducted by a team of three interviewers.[4] Importantly, this also meant that there was always racial diversity within the interviewing team. While the literature affirms the significance of interviewer identity in qualitative research on racism (Mizock et al., 2011), there is less consensus on its effects (Archer, 2002). One advantage of the use of Zoom was potentially that the use of multiple interviewers did not appear to be overwhelming to the interviewees. While the primary focus was on open questions that elicited interviewee views, we decided not to take a neutral stance and were prepared to follow up on questions where interviewees seemed to avoid discussions of racism, or provide resources for support after the interviews.[5] Here, we followed critical race theorists' integration of 'activist-scholarship' as a methodology with 'critical framework for social justice' (Lawrence and Hylton, 2022), which mandates research practices have 'concrete physical actions in service to community and beyond solely researcher theorizing' (Dillard, 2008: 279).

The interviews covered respondents' experiences of entry to and work in CCIs, spanning the period before, during and after the COVID-19 lockdowns. They were also asked about their general views of the experience of ethnic and racialised minorities in CCIs and their awareness and experiences of diversity initiatives within organisations they had worked in or aspired to. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. As a team we then produced narrative summaries of individual interviews to enable a portrait of the interviewee constructed, the stories they told and the interpretations they gave of their experiences as well as properly track the contradictions and silencing within the interviews, which are often lost if thematic analysis is conducted without this intervening holistic layer (see Byrne, 2006). We then further analysed the interviews through NVivo 14 to draw out themes and commonalities across the interviews. Finally, discussions of work and career progression must of course account for racialised differences rather than assuming a universal trajectory. Research in the UK highlights how Black and South Asian employees face distinct forms of racism across sectors like law, finance and tech. Black professionals experience overt racism, exclusion from networks and barriers to leadership (Ashe and Nazroo, 2017; Social Mobility Commission, 2021), alongside higher job insecurity (Owen et al., 2015) despite comparable education levels. South Asian employees, particularly Pakistani and Bangladeshi workers, are often confined to

lower-paid roles due to racialised assumptions (McGregor-Smith, 2017). While the research design recognised these differentiated dynamics, the size and makeup of the sample of the qualitative interview is not suitable for drawing conclusions about variations across racialised groups. Instead, the analysis focuses on how racism in the UK CCIs remains obscured, regardless of who experiences it, as even those affected rarely acknowledge it openly.

Findings

As we have discussed in the introduction, the focus of this article is on the pattern that emerged through the interviews where it often appeared to be difficult for interviewees to name the operation of structural racism within their careers and work experience. The hesitation was seen in many of the faltering accounts (often from otherwise extremely articulate individuals) of difficulties that they faced and indeed in the way that sentences about their experiences often trailed off or where they tried to find other explanations ('it's a mystery', 'I can't say it was racism', 'I wondered why'). Yet simultaneously, they were aware of structural racism in terms of inequalities within the industry and the potential influence of its racial structure on their experiences, which often seemed to linger in their thoughts. In what follows, we demonstrate how the struggle of respondents to name structural racism directly does not just provide further evidence of the slipperiness of racism, but actually illuminates the nature of structural racism itself.

Difficulties Talking about Racism

Our research suggests that a key challenge in recognising racism stems from a prevailing understanding of it as primarily interpersonal, rather than structural or systemic, which shapes how individuals make sense of their experiences. Anushka, a South Asian woman who works in theatre, gave a typical response when she defined racism as 'a hard thing to define', describing 'something that pokes fun at you because of your culture or your tradition', which she describes as the 'malicious types of racism, which for me are the main parts of racism'. However, when we as interviewers introduced the idea of structural racism, this prompted her to consider other situations that might be defined as racism. Here she went on to explain how one of the theatres she worked at had a show with an all-Black cast:

> it was only after the show had properly started that I realised that I was the only person of colour not in the cast [. . .] I am talking specifically about the office, it was just me as that person of colour, and nothing was handled insensitively, there were no questions that I ever faced or heard that were racist, but what I'm saying is that I think that's slightly racist because you present one way, like the industry, theatre, [the company], presents this way, but behind the scenes is very much not what you're saying in front of the scenes, so it's like I would consider that racism, for example.

Anushka's account highlights the challenge of articulating how institutional displays of diversity can mask the persistent racial homogeneity within organisational structures; an

issue that is difficult to frame within dominant understandings of racism that prioritise individual intent over systemic inequality. Anushka felt that the industry's growing awareness of the need for diversity had somewhat benefited her, as her second job involved enhancing the theatre's visibility in the ethnically diverse press and ultimately increasing audience diversity. However, at times what she called the role of being a 'token' was pressurised:

> Yes, it's hard. People would be texting me or sending me an email being like, oh, it's Ramadan, can we use this picture? It's just . . . I don't fucking know. I'm not everyone. I can't answer that question for you. But it's good to know that they're trying, do you know what I mean?

Here Anushka is not required to conform to, or 'inhabit' as Sara Ahmed (2007: 158) puts it, the whiteness of the organisation, but rather to occupy a space of 'diversity' or otherness where she is expected to represent all racialised or religious minorities. The burden of representation and education of white colleagues, alongside experiencing microaggressions of misrepresentation contributes to what Mary-Frances Winters (2020) has described as 'black fatigue'.

This was not a unique experience, and ironically perhaps was heightened for some in 2020 when many organisations within the cultural sector felt that they should respond to the Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. As we will explore elsewhere, organisations that were overwhelmingly white often turned to their few racially minoritised employees to provide solutions. Interestingly, it was perhaps at these moments, and where the organisations made public statements about equality that felt hypocritical, that individuals were able to identify processes of racism. Chantel was working in the publishing sector and describes a moment where she felt uncomfortable about how she was being positioned:

> we had this, like, one meeting, and it was actually after the Black Lives Matter movement, the protests, were happening. And out of nowhere I was asked what I thought about everything, and then it, sort of, went to the only other black girl who was in the meeting as well [. . .] I didn't see why I had to comment on it, or why she had to, sort of, represent everyone and, sort of, comment on it. And it was quite abrupt, so I was taken aback a bit.

This account illustrates a moment of discomfort and emerging critical awareness of racial under-representation, yet the language of discrimination remains difficult to invoke, partly due to the emphasis placed on individual experiences of inclusion over structural dynamics. The interviewee then returned to a narrative of how her team in the organisation was accommodating and perhaps an exception to the rest. Inter-personal goodwill is emphasised over structural exclusion.

In many cases where there was hesitation to identify structural racism as a barrier to progression in CCIs it was because there is no way that an individual can prove that their lack of opportunity or progression was down to a racialised ceiling or closed door. Candice is a mixed white-Caribbean woman who had been steered away from music as a career by her (white) university teacher:

> I think either he meant it as in don't go into music like you won't earn that much money in that industry or it could've been don't go into music like you won't fit in there. I think there are possibly two sides to that.

While she had found this advice quite 'disheartening' and something that 'stuck with me', she avoids directly or definitively attributing it to any assumptions he might have about her. She eventually worked in the music sector, but as an administrator rather than a musician, moving through different high-profile organisations without securing a permanent post. When decisions and processes involved in retaining some staff and not others were not transparent, she is left uncertain as to the cause, but also unwilling to label it as racism:

> there haven't been development opportunities for me within the companies that I work for and I can't say why that is, but other people that I've worked with have had those opportunities to progress within those organisations. But those opportunities just haven't been offered to me or I haven't been there at the right time.

When pressed directly, by the interviewers on the issue of racism, her uncertainty becomes clear:

> Interviewer: You seem to be skirting around issues of racism. I mean, do you feel like. . .? Sorry to be blunt about it. Is there. . .?
>
> Candice: I think I was the only person from a Black heritage at the orchestra at that time. [. . .] And certainly, the only person in my team who wasn't white. And it just seemed strange to me the. . . The process didn't seem very transparent, and it was clear that I was looking for a job. So, if you have someone that's good at their job, has achieved all their targets, then why would you not want to keep them on?
>
> Interviewer: Yes. Again, you're kind of careful about blaming that on. . .
>
> Candice: [. . .] It's hard. I can't identify a direct link. I couldn't say it was because they're a racist organisation. I don't think I could say that, but there wasn't an effort made [. . .], I don't know. Maybe. . . there's a lot of talk about fit these days and I don't know. . . One, I don't know if they could see that I was the right fit or whether that's something they were conscious of. And two, I don't know whether there was an awareness that, oh, actually, you know, maybe it would be good to keep Candice in the industry because there aren't that many people from ethnically diverse backgrounds, so, really, we should do what we can to make sure she can thrive. I don't think there was a sense of that either.

Candice's hesitation to name racism explicitly reflects the difficulty of making claims without clear or demonstrable proof, highlighting the evidentiary burden often placed on those experiencing subtle or systemic forms of exclusion. Other respondents distinguished between overt and covert discrimination and between racism and ignorance, but distinguishing between conscious and unconscious racism was more common and also picks up on popular discourses of unconscious bias and racism. Tate and Page (2020), for

example, argue that claiming that racism results from 'unconscious bias' minimises white supremacy and maintains white innocence by ignoring institutional racism.

As an example of the use of unconscious bias, two separate interviewees of Muslim heritage described employing 'blind CV' tests (one by accident) whereby they changed their Muslim-sounding names to English-sounding names, resulting in an increase in responses. What is of note here is both respondents' resistance to naming it as Islamophobia or racism. For instance, Nour is more comfortable using the language of unconscious bias to explain their experience with a blind CV: 'I don't think it's conscious. I don't think people are aware of it. [. . .] They're like, oh here we have a list of names; let's just pick the regular ones.' Nour is a good demonstration of the hesitation to name racism even where she has some concrete evidence of the different experience she has applying for jobs with a white-English-sounding name. Part of the difficulty she felt, which was shared by other respondents, was the sense that individuals working within cultural organisations were 'lovely' or 'nice'. Yet ultimately, when trying to make sense of the whiteness of the industry, she can only explain it in terms of racism:

> You always think you don't have the right thing, you don't have enough of what is required. But then you're like I'm sorry, but how is it that everyone else seems to know exactly the right way to behave. And I think honestly it took me years to realise how people were racist, [. . .] were consciously racist, even by saying like, oh you're different, but it's different for you, oh but you're just not going to be part of this.

The pressure to behave in the 'right way', which will be discussed below is notable here for the tension it creates in identifying racism and the resulting oscillation between assigning experiences to 'conscious' and 'unconscious' racism.

One issue that emerged from the interviews was that while respondents were reluctant to label organisations or individuals as racist, this was something they actively considered. The interviews highlighted the significant mental and emotional effort involved in grappling with these issues, including actions like submitting two different CVs or contemplating doing so. As Imani, a Black woman working in website content creation, explained:

> I've never experienced racial discrimination that I was 100% sure was someone being racist towards me. But I've had situations, which I think many people of colour have had, where I'm looking around and I'm like, you're definitely picking on me or definitely bullying me [. . .] and through a process of discernment, I think it is to do with my race, or my gender in some cases. [. . .] But I don't know and there's no evidence, you've never used a racial slur, there's no evidence that it's racial, [. . .] The ways I've experienced it is kind of overbearing micromanagement, dismissiveness, a lack of trust often in terms of in my working relationship with a manager versus how they treat another member of staff.

This emotional labour involves second-guessing many work-based situations, coupled with significant introspection and self-judgement, which we see in considering the experience of networking. Emotional labour may also be involved in *not* looking directly at the racism because of the psychic costs that such examination takes. For those trying to break into a competitive industry, recognising that their lack of progress might be due to racist structures raises the question of what can be done and where to go from there. For

several respondents, the response was to keep looking forward rather than examining their negative experiences in too much detail, as explained by Elijah:

> I think there were moments where I was considering whether it could be my race, whether other people were overlooking because of who I was or what I looked like, but you just have to keep battling and just keeping going and hopefully you do get that opportunity.

More than Class: The Whiteness of Networking in CCIs

The previous section highlights respondents' struggles to attribute their difficulties entering or working within CCIs to structural racism. Yet, their ambivalence in naming racism paradoxically reveals its underlying mechanisms. This is especially evident in their reflections on networking – a practice widely regarded as essential for success in CCIs.

The cultural industries are notorious for their casualised work structure and informal recruiting practices where networking is key (Brook et al., 2020; Lee, 2011). As it is highly dependent on personal relationships and cultural capital, networking can be a 'mechanism of exclusion' (Lee, 2011: 550). Points of entry and access to the cultural industries are thus significantly guarded and, even when entry is granted, social and cultural capital are key currencies in networking and remain crucial in maintaining work and aiming to progress. While the classed nature of this process is more generally recognised, the racialised nature of networking exposes the whiteness of cultural industries. Our interviewees were acutely aware of the significance of social and cultural capital, recognising their lack of these and understanding that their entry point into the industry is that of deficiency. Amara, a mixed-race interviewee working in non-fiction publishing acknowledges:

> I'm the first person in my family to go to university, [. . .] to pursue a creative career, you know, and I don't know anyone in this industry, like literally no one. And that's hard as well because it's an industry where networking is everything, like I don't even . . . I didn't even know who the players were, how to do it, how important social media is, all those things, so just not having the information is a barrier.

For Amara and other interviewees, and in common with much of the literature, class rather than race is the primary factor referred to as barriers to entry, with whiteness as an invisible norm, producing more muted comment (Byrne, 2006). In Amara's case, that is particularly true as she regularly emphasised her lower socio-economic status and declared that she used previously to identify as 'white British'. Networking is frequently shaped by exclusionary practices, where white, middle-class norms dictate professional legitimacy, making participation in out-of-office activities and elite social circles a key determinant of success (Rivera, 2012). This dynamic reinforces racialised inequalities, as access to resources and organisational networks remains constrained (Ray, 2019). Nonetheless, throughout our interviews, racism as a barrier for networking was often displaced and negotiated through class discrimination. It was evident that race and class intersected, but relaying examples of what might be seen as racial exclusion were often presented as a retelling of class discrimination. This further highlights the challenge of

talking about racism, which can be overshadowed by dominant classed narratives. The racialised nature of networking becomes clearer in the experience of Emilie, a 35-year-old Mauritian working in TV production. When asked if she experienced discrimination based on her ethnicity, she explained:

> Not overtly, but definitely covertly for sure. I don't ever feel like I fitted in the workplace. I think I feel like a lot of people who work in TV and film and the creative industries expect people to live the same lifestyles as them and to act in the same way, to have similar values. They see independence through a very white lens, which is not living at home, and success, meetings and going to drinks and having all these relationships. It's just a very British way of doing things, and I've not grown up with those cultures. And I'm very proud to be me, but I often felt like I couldn't connect with them and they couldn't connect with me because of that.

The emphasis on cultural differences and that networking necessitates applying a 'white' lens and a 'very British way of doing things' can here be understood explicitly in racial terms. Emilie admits to feeling excluded and not fitting in, and this is precisely because networking is circumscribed around whiteness. In explaining whiteness as a social and embodied phenomenon that sets the context and background of bodies and experiences in institutions, Ahmed (2007: 150) argues that 'whiteness describes the very "what" that coheres as a world'. Whiteness, according to Ahmed (2007: 150) 'orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they "take up" space', or in the experience of Emilie, how she gets pushed out of space. Elijah, a 27-year-old man who identifies as Black Caribbean and works in television production, has a similar experience where he explained that he felt 'unwelcome' and 'left out'. Elijah does not attribute this exclusion to 'direct racism', rather, 'it's just the idea of you know you're Black and it's just the idea of people are just pushing you out. [I was] pushed out.'

What is troubling, and where this article is actively attempting to make an intervention, is when the hesitation to name racism as the source of exclusion becomes a mode of self-critique. The act of displacing racism is transformed into a process of identifying personal shortcomings, or deficiencies in an imagined meritocratic sector. In the interview, Elijah expresses the challenges he faced in advancing his career in the television industry despite working hard and managing to secure a job on a high-profile BBC current affairs programme. He felt that his colleagues progressed up the ranks while he 'stayed here, stagnant'. Elijah explains: 'That might be down to me, I wouldn't say it's all down to race', and later on he elaborates: 'I see as if people are just better at networking than me or maybe they're. . . because I think, this is just my personality.'

In Elijah's case, his emphasis on his personality as being potentially at fault for his inability to foster networks can be understood as a reluctance to blame racism and an internalisation of 'post-racial neoliberal meritocracy'. Through the interview, it was noticeable that Elijah was personable, and clearly had the ability to build positive relationships. Therefore, the disconnect is clear between how he articulates his inability to network effectively and how he seems to be liked by his colleagues.

It is here where the idea of clique-ness, as a code for whiteness of the industry, creeps back again as the most logical explanation for what he sees as potential 'deficiencies' in networking:

> it's so easy for them to be friends and that's something that I'm learning, where I need to be more social, in my personality to go out and go to pubs and get to know these people that have the power to bring me up. So yes, it's still a learning game and I'm *still cracking on*.

In the interview Elijah conveys a sense of alienation tied to his inability to be part of a network 'clique' and progress in the industry. He explained that he is planning to move to the USA in a bid to progress his career. These feelings of exclusion, alienation, stagnation and not fitting in have ultimately culminated in materially pushing him out of the UK cultural industries while internalising a mode of self-critique pertaining to networking as a potential personality 'deficiency'. The reference to 'I'm still cracking on' speaks to the individualised nature of struggle in neoliberal CCIs.

As shown earlier, racism particularly in its covert and institutional form is key in manufacturing and perpetuating this presumed deficiency and others. Some of our interviewees admitted to assuming a 'white voice' that embodies both whiteness and class privilege in order to fit in (see Ahmed, 2007). Amirah is a 24-year-old British Asian woman who works as an intern in a PR company and aims to work in documentary filmmaking. She describes her manoeuvring to fit in with culture that is hegemonically white:

> when I was in that environment . . . and I can talk, you know, my normal voice is my white voice [. . .]. So, it's not hard for me to be in that environment and, you know, talk white all the time, I kind of pride myself on being able to do it better than most white people.

From the interview, it is clear that Amirah is not attempting to assimilate. Rather, what this confirms is that adopting elements of whiteness is a strategic decision emerging from an awareness of that whiteness and a mobilising technique. This individual compensation for a lack of privilege, in this case racial privilege, manifests in an 'entrepreneurial' adoption of a white voice.

This becomes clearer in Adebayo's interview. Adebayo is a Black African Nigerian, who works on a daily news programme as a journalist and producer. He explains:

> I think, I'm also fortunate because of, you know, I recognise my own privileges in this. So, I'm fortunate that I can maybe camouflage a little bit, and speak in a way that's expected, or recognised, or whatever, that fits into the general mould. So I guess that would make me – maybe unfortunately, and wrongly – put me at an advantage, sometimes. So I think little things like that maybe saved me.

His choice of the word 'camouflage' is significant here, particularly as it carries raced and classed overtones. The 'mould' is recognised through the acquisition and embodiment of a cultural capital that is encoded in whiteness (Meghji, 2019). What is also notable in his reflection is his recognition of privilege – his ability to 'camouflage' implies access to certain forms of class-based capital (Bourdieu, 1994), which allow him to navigate these spaces with relative ease compared with others from similar racialised backgrounds who may lack these forms of capital. The labour involved in embodying this white capital is decoded by the interviewees as a necessity, a part of what it takes to make it into the cultural industries. Littler (2017: 70) explains how even when racialised people are encouraged to put in the labour and be 'particularly amenable to a meritocratic discourse of empowerment' by aiming to be entrepreneurial, they still face significant

challenges in terms of gaining recognition for their efforts and sharing in the benefits of that labour. This creates a double penalty for them: they are marginalised due to their racialised identities while also bearing the burden of a meritocratic system that assumes equal access to success through effort alone. Adebayo's experience highlights the intersection of race and class in career mobility. While class privilege, such as cultural capital, can facilitate workplace navigation, colonial and contemporary racial barriers persist (Bhambra, 2021; Ashe and Nazroo, 2017). The cultural industries are embedded in whiteness, requiring racialised professionals to assimilate for access (Saha, 2018). Ahmed (2012) theorises this as the burden of 'institutional whiteness', where inclusion remains conditional. That is, even with class advantages, racialised individuals face career progression and leadership barriers (Khan, 2012). Networking while racialised is, then, a labour steeped in a meritocracy discourse about the cultural industries that masks its racialised rules of exclusion. It is a set-up for failure. The feeling of being 'pushed out' pushes racialised people out of the networking circles and silos them. Imani discusses her relief when the pandemic led to working from home culture:

> [lockdown] got me away from the people that had been driving me crazy, so I was like, oh this is great, I don't have to deal with them anymore [. . .] and actually, everything calmed down when we weren't all in the office. So there's definitely a very British political culture in the office, 'cause as soon as we weren't in the office, people seemed to calm down.

Her physical presence in her workplace seemed to create discomfort or as Ahmed (2007) puts it, a sense of 'disorientating' the whiteness of the place. Once the racialised body was out of site, that sense of disorientation seemed to fade away.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our research highlights the complex interplay of race, class and a discourse of post-racial meritocracy in shaping the experiences of Black, brown and Asian creatives in CCIs. Through interviews with ethnically diverse participants, we found that nearly all respondents encountered racial disadvantage in their careers, yet often hesitated to explicitly name these experiences as structural racism. This hesitation reflects the internalisation of dominant discourses of meritocracy and post-racialism, which obscure the recognition of racial inequalities and complicate the ability to frame them as systemic. By examining how post-race discourse influences how racialised individuals interpret their disadvantage, the article demonstrates the harms this causes – both to the individual and to broader efforts to challenge structural injustice. Our interviews show how this reluctance often manifests as self-blame, reinforcing a cycle in which structural racism remains unchallenged. We argue that denying and debating the existence of racism enables its endurance and erodes the conceptual tools needed to confront it. Furthermore, our research shows how networking – as essential to entering and progressing in CCIs – particularly for Black and ethnically diverse individuals, is heavily racialised and shaped by the expectations and norms of whiteness. While class barriers were frequently cited by our respondents, our findings reveal that race and class intersect in ways that complicate the acknowledgement of racial exclusion. The emphasis on cultural

'fit', the adoption of a 'white' voice and the need to perform a 'very British way of doing things' underscore the racialised logic of access in CCIs. Ultimately, our research calls for a more nuanced understanding of structural racism and how a post-racial meritocratic logic is operationalised in CCIs to mask racism even from those who experience it. How can cultural organisations and indeed ethnically diverse creatives challenge and address racism in CCIs if they struggle, hesitate and sometimes refuse to name it? By examining this discursive reluctance, we aim to contribute to dismantling structural barriers, challenging racism and rejecting the false meritocratic narratives that pathologise racialised creatives while leaving unequal systems intact.

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Notes

1. https://creativeaccess.org.uk.
2. Rishi Sunak was the UK's first British Asian Prime Minister from 2022 to 2024.
3. Given recent critiques of the term BAME in describing racial and ethnic minorities, we use Black, Asian and ethnically diverse as a collective term, shortened to ethnically diverse (Inc Arts UK, 2019; Malik et al., 2022). In our interviews, respondents self-identified their race and ethnicity, and we use their definitions in presenting our findings.
4. The research team consisted of a white senior researcher, a racialised senior researcher and two racialised early career researchers.
5. At times we also stepped out of neutrality by offering, after the interview, to discuss career or particularly study options with interviewees, and sent them materials, such as relevant articles, and in one case, introduced an aspiring author to a literary agent.

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