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Diversity in crisis: Race, media and *popular superdiversity* in authoritarian times

Abstract

This article examines the unfolding crisis of diversity in Western media and society. Once a benign, even banal, concept, ‘diversity’ is now attacked from both Left and Right: for the former, as a performative gesture masking structural racism; for the latter, as a threat to meritocracy and national identity. Today, it is the far right that is most forcefully shaping public discourse, reframing diversity as a symbol of cosmopolitan elitism and white marginalisation.

Yet media culture remains ‘super-diverse’. In the UK, people of colour are more visible on screen than ever before, represented through seemingly complex and varied characterisations. Even as diversity discourse becomes increasingly embattled, this multiracial media form appears largely intact.

Focusing on British media, the article traces the unravelling of diversity as a governing logic. It asks how we can make sense of the coexistence of popular superdiversity and the mainstreaming of far-right populism. Its central contention is that understanding the politics of diversity – in all its contradictory forms – is essential to grasping the current conjuncture, and may even point toward how to resist the reactionary forces that define it.

Introduction

In 2001, then Director-General of the BBC Greg Dyke infamously described the corporation as ‘hideously white’, referring to the composition of its senior management team. At the time, he might just as well have been describing British television more broadly, where the presence of people of colour – both on-screen and behind the scenes – remained marginal. Two decades on, however, the media landscape appears transformed. Today, racial diversity appears ubiquitous. A glance at any major streaming platform reveals that Black, Asian and other racially minoritised characters are no longer confined to peripheral or stereotypical roles. They are now often positioned as protagonists – driving the narrative rather than supporting whiteness from the margins. They seem liberated from the historical constructions of

Otherness that once ensnared them. In fact, these characters do not appear defined by their racial or ethnic identity at all. On the surface, then, the historic demands of progressive anti-racism have been met: the non-stigmatisation of racially minoritised groups, now represented in media as visible, legitimate, and enduring elements of Western society.

Yet the acceleration of what I call ‘popular superdiversity’ – a concept I unpack below – has occurred against a backdrop of intensifying political crisis. While some commentators have identified this as a crisis of neoliberalism – a breakdown in the neoliberal consensus – others argue that neoliberalism remains resilient, if increasingly adaptive and diffuse (Davies and Gane, 2021). Yet, even if neoliberalism endures in mutated form, we are nevertheless witnessing a crisis: a breakdown in the authority of social democracy and the renewed prominence of ethnonationalism that contest, reshape, or even deepen neoliberal logics. In the UK, I am referring to the alarming resurgence of far-right activity, including anti-migrant riots and coordinated attacks on asylum centres that began in 2024 and continue to this day. It now feels increasingly inevitable that the far right will make the same political gains in Britain as they have across Western Europe and the United States. It is this crisis – of social democracy and the mainstreaming of far-right politics – that I take as my starting point.

Within this resurgent reactionary movement, diversity – or ‘DEI’ (‘diversity, equity and inclusion’ as it is commonly known in the US), and ‘EDI’ (‘equality, diversity and inclusion’ – the predominant term used in the UK) – has become a primary target, providing a discursive cover for racism made palatable to the mainstream. In the US, where Donald Trump has secured a second term, DEI initiatives have been dismantled at a devastating pace. While we have yet to see the same institutional rolling-back of EDI in the UK, diversity has become similarly controversial within an intensifying ‘culture war’. An ascendant Reform Party led by Nigel Farage – alongside elements within the Labour government itself – has borrowed from the same populist playbook as Trump, casting ‘DEI as a symbol of elite cosmopolitanism and the very source of working-class marginalisation (distracting from the harms of austerity in the process). While racialised difference continues to proliferate across media content, *diversity* – once a relatively benign term – has hardened into a polarising term of contention, provoking fierce backlash across media, politics, and public discourse.

This article explores the unravelling of diversity as both policy and discourse within British media. Rather than simply mapping the rise and fall of diversity, I adopt a conjunctural approach, framing the analysis around a central question: how can we make sense of the hyper-

visibility of racial and cultural difference on our screens amid the global resurgence of reactionary politics? A popular explanation frames this paradox as a symptom of the intensifying ‘culture war’ between progressive and conservative forces. Relatedly, there is a view, shared by both Leftist and right-wing commentators that holds that an ‘excess’ of diversity in popular culture has itself provoked a right-wing backlash. Those from the radical anti-racist tradition will argue that this apparent contradiction merely underscores the limits of representation when it is detached from material struggle, where the obsession with representational diversity in popular culture has distracted from the structural labour required to dismantle racism, which is now reasserting itself with renewed force across political and institutional life. In all these readings, the implication is clear: diversity in media does not really matter.

While each of these interpretations carries some truth, I want to offer a different reading. I argue that the current crisis of diversity must be understood as a rupture within the political formation from which it emerged; a formation characterised by a tense alignment between racial neoliberalism and a racist nationalism. These forces have long operated in delicate balance – but that balance is now collapsing. What appears as a *disconnect* between media visibility and political reality is, in fact, a deeply *connected* and symptomatic relationship – one that reveals the contradictions within the social formation itself. The paradox between popular superdiversity in media and the rise of the far right, then, is not accidental but conjunctural – a product of a shifting political terrain that demands critical interrogation.

This framing matters for two reasons. First, it reminds us that defending ‘EDI’ on its own terms will only reinforce the neoliberal multicultural logics that got us to this point of crisis. I make this argument with full recognition of the understandable impulse to defend diversity policies in the face of their rollback. Second, it positions media as a crucial terrain for this unfolding crisis – what Stuart Hall (1993: 36) called the ‘theatre’ in which cultural diversity is produced and displayed, and the ‘forum’ where the terms of collective life are negotiated. In this way, how cultural diversity is mediated *should* matter – but not in its current form of popular superdiversity.

What follows is a conjunctural analysis that situates the crisis of diversity within the breakdown of the neoliberal-nationalist formation in the UK. The main focus of the article is the emergence of popular superdiversity, and how it has collided with an emboldened far right. I conclude by imagining what kinds of media environments might enable radical new forms of race-making – forms that foreground commonality across difference. The overall aim of this article is to show that understanding the politics of diversity – from the dominance

of popular superdiversity, to its limitations as anti-racist praxis, the far-right backlash it has provoked, and the ideological function it performs as a proxy for deeper racial anxieties – is essential to grasping the current conjuncture.

1. Reframing the Field: From Diversity Critique to Conjunctural Method

A brief overview of critical diversity studies

Until very recently, the value of diversity appeared beyond dispute. When understood simply as ‘variety’, ‘variation’ or ‘range’, diversity is hardly controversial. Even in political discourse, concepts such as ‘diversity’, ‘equality’, and ‘equity’ have historically drawn legitimacy from universal liberal principles that structure the normative foundations of social democracy. When diversity came to replace the more politically vexed language of multiculturalism in Britain from the late 1990s onwards, there appeared to be a strong consensus around the term as the best way to manage an increasingly heterogeneous nation. This was especially the case in media, where diversity became the dominant paradigm for addressing racial inequalities within the cultural industries as the stark absence of Black and Asian people became hard to ignore. Occasional rambling pronouncements against diversity from white ‘celebrity’ figures such as Laurence Fox – echoing the critiques of ‘political correctness’ from a decade earlier – could be swiftly discounted within the prevailing consensus. Media institutions remained committed to diversity, almost to the point that it felt like an ‘obsession’ (Saha et al., 2024).

But before the recent right-wing attacks on diversity, there was a substantial field of critical research that was drawing attention to the limits of diversity practice. These include from management and organisation studies (Zanoni and Janssens, 2004; Ray, 2019), sociological studies of creative and cultural industries (O’Brien et al, 2017; Newsinger and Eikhof, 2019; Ali and Byrne, 2023) and a relatively new field of race and media studies focused on cultural production in its industrial/institutional forms (Havens, 2013; Saha, 2018; Martin, 2021).

The literature I refer together do not just expose the stark ways that diversity is not working (Brook, 2020; McAndrew, 2024) but how diversity itself is the problem. Diversity

regimes commodify race, reproducing whiteness by steering minoritised cultural practitioners into performing their racial or ethnic identities in ways that allow media companies and arts organisations to satisfy diversity metrics, meet key performance indicators, and secure public funding (Saha, 2013; Nwonka and Malik, 2018; Kolbe, 2024). With significance for this paper there is an emphasis on how diversity aligns with neoliberal ideals of individualisation and entrepreneurship, prioritising personal success over community transformation (Gray, 2013; Warner, 2015). In a slightly different vein, a critique of diversity appears in recent scholarship that has examined the trend of corporate brands appropriating anti-racist and feminist social justice issues to promote their products – a phenomenon labelled ‘femvertising’ or ‘woke-washing’ (Sobande, 2019; Kanai & Gill, 2020). For Sobande et al (2022: 1581), the danger of such ‘woke capitalism’ is that it reduces the task of addressing deep structural inequalities to consumer-friendly gestures of diversity, representation and visibility, where ‘taking a witnessable stance on racism and other social justice issues becomes the dominant, legible form of doing politics’. In sum, critical diversity literature in cultural and media studies reveals how diversity, shaped by the neoliberal phase of racial capitalism, enables the dominant culture to extract value from racial difference – and even from racial justice movements – while reinforcing their elite status. Some commentators have even provocatively called for the *end of diversity* itself (Saha, 2024).

As much as this article draws from and is situated within this literature, I highlight two limitations in relation to the specific focus of this article. Firstly, much of the literature focuses on workforce diversity rather than onscreen representation. That is, the central concern tends to be the severe under-representation of racial and ethnic minorities in the creative workforce and the conditions that make it particularly ‘bad work’ (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011) for these groups. Research with a more sociological orientation helps explain this emphasis on labour and production. While such empirical studies offer rich and valuable insights into how diversity operates on the ground, they can sometimes overlook how these experiences are shaped by broader historical forces such as capitalism and the legacies of empire. More race-grounded studies and feminist media studies - perhaps due to their greater affinity with cultural studies – are more concerned with unravelling the complex relations between political economy, culture and representation, the material and the symbolic – as illustrated in the research on ‘woke capitalism’, and ‘femvertising’ cited above (see also Jo Littler (2015) on ‘model minority authoritarianism’). There remains a curious lack of interest, however, in

the subject of this paper – that is, the glaring contrast between the marginalisation of racialised groups within the workforce (in the wider context of attacks on ‘DEI’, particularly in the US but coming more to the fore in the UK) and the hypervisibility of difference in media content.

Relatedly, another issue with this field – and this is due to no fault of its own – is its political resonance in the current moment. What is the status of this critical literature on diversity in the face of an intensifying right-wing backlash? The anti-racist critiques of diversity I have discussed feel both literally and metaphorically academic at a time when a surging far right has trained its sights on diversity and on anything even vaguely associated with it. Critiquing diversity in this context now feels counter-intuitive, even risky. In the US, we are witnessing defences of DEI in higher education through protest and legal countermeasures. While the UK presents a very different context – and is, it is important to note, the crisis around diversity is not (yet) at breaking point as it is in the US – it is not hard to imagine similar tendencies emerging here as attacks on diversity intensify. While sympathetic to such efforts, I urge caution. I suspect that the authors of the literature I have discussed would also express ambivalence about defending diversity solely on these institutional terms.

I argue that meaningful countermeasures must begin with a deeper understanding of how we arrived at this point – by situating the crisis of diversity within broader political crisis, what some are calling a crisis of neoliberalism (Bhattacharyya, 2020) itself. This, I contend, requires a conjunctural analysis that locates the backlash against diversity within shifting political and social formations in the UK.

A conjunctural approach to race, media and crisis

My conjunctural approach is rooted in the British Cultural Studies tradition, and especially the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Defining exactly what a conjuncture is - what makes it distinct, when it begins and ends - can be difficult, often leading to its loose or inconsistent application (Gilbert, 2019). For precision, this article draws specifically on Stuart Hall’s framework for conjunctural analysis. For Hall (1988), a conjuncture is not simply any slice of history. Rather, it is - as he puts it - a “moment” (not a ‘period’), defined by the accumulation/condensation of contradictions, the fusion or merger - to use Lenin’s terms - of “different currents and circumstances” (Hall, 1988: 130). In other words, a conjunctural moment is revealed in times of crisis, when distinct and sometimes opposing

forces converge to produce political rupture. Hall's own influential analysis of the conditions that gave rise to Thatcherism (see Hall et al, 1978; and Hall, 1988) exemplifies this approach: a close examination of the 'condensation of forces during a period of crisis, and the new social configurations which result' (Hall, 2011: 9).

A conjunctural analysis, then, is not simply a matter of providing historical context. It is a method for identifying contradictions that converge at a given moment, producing new ideological and political formations – or as Gilbert (2019: 6) states, for mapping 'convergent and divergent tendencies' that give rise to a new hegemonic order. As such, conjunctural analysis demands historical specificity: an attention to the precise conditions of a given social formation and the ways in which it begins to morph into something new.

It may be too early to say whether we are entering a new social configuration, but we are undoubtedly in a moment of crisis. Since the 2008 financial crash, the neoliberal consensus appears to be unravelling (Gilbert, 2013; Davies and Gane, 2021). The aftermath has been marked by prolonged austerity, deepening inequality, migrant crisis and the accelerating climate crisis. In the wake of this disruption, the rise of far-right populism and authoritarianism - even in ostensibly stable social democracies - signals the consolidation of a new commonsense. And this new commonsense is finding expression in the contestation around 'diversity'. As I argue in this article, the transformation of 'diversity' - from a soft anti-racist ideal to something increasingly construed as exclusionary and even racist - is not merely symptomatic of this ideological shift, but is actively shaping and accelerating it.

This article's grounding in the British Cultural Studies tradition is also due to its longstanding engagement with race and crisis. Two of the most influential texts that emerge from the CCCS, *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al., 1978) and *The Empire Strikes Back* (CCCS, 1982), demonstrate how race becomes a pivotal terrain of struggle in conjunctural moments. In their analysis of the moral panic over 'mugging' in 1970s Britain, Hall et al (1978) describe how race, through the image of the young Black mugger, becomes 'the lens through which people come to perceive that a crisis is developing. It is the framework through which the crisis is experienced. It is the means by which the crisis is to be resolved – "send it away"' (Hall et al., 1978: 31–32). Importantly, the authors are not suggesting that race is a mere epiphenomenon - a symbolic proxy for broader political or economic crisis. Rather, in their account, race is *articulated* to crisis: not simply a symptom, but the medium through

which the crisis is lived, narrated, and addressed, often with devastating material consequences for racialised populations. In other words, the politics of race is part of the ideological terrain on which the crisis is fought out.

Another reason *Policing the Crisis* is so important to this article is its sustained focus on the role of media within the crisis. Media was central to their analysis, as the authors traced how news journalism in particular worked in tandem with the state, judiciary, and police to generate an amplification spiral - heightening public anxiety over ‘muggers’ and producing relative ideological closure around the need for tougher law and order measures. While they understood the media as part of the ideological state apparatus, they also emphasised its relative autonomy and stressed that the reproduction of dominant ideologies through media is a ‘problematic and contradictory process’ (Hall et al, 1978: 217).

This contradiction is key: the media is best understood not simply as a conveyor of dominant ideology, but as itself a terrain of ideological struggle—though one that is ‘heavily structured and constrained’ (ibid.). Of particular relevance to this article is the book’s assertion that popular culture is a crucial arena where hegemonic values are contested. The authors cite *The Uses of Literacy*, *Look Back in Anger*, and Elvis Presley (Hall et al, 1978: 230) as cultural forms that mounted some of the most significant challenges to the postwar consensus. Thus, adopting a conjunctural mode, I argue that diversity is a site of ideological contestation, and that media and popular culture serve as crucial sites where this contestation is enacted. While mainstream analyses of the current crisis may gesture toward the rise of ‘culture wars’ or the backlash against ‘DEI’ as features of contemporary populist authoritarianism, they rarely take seriously the role of popular culture itself as the terrain on which these struggles are materially and ideologically fought — a terrain this article places at the centre of its analysis.

In what follows, I explore the crisis around diversity as a conjunctural formation shaped by different tendencies. It begins by exploring the emergence of popular superdiversity, driven by the business case for diversity and shaped by the broader dynamics of racial neoliberalism.

2. The Diversity Regime and Its Discontents

Introduction to the conjuncture

In 2011, the co-creator of the popular quaint British crime drama *Midsomer Murders*, set in the fictional pastoral county of Midsomer, was suspended after a comment he made in *The Radio Times* regarding the lack of diversity in the show: ‘We just don’t have ethnic minorities involved. Because it wouldn’t be the English village with them. It just wouldn’t work. Suddenly we might be in Slough... We’re the last bastion of Englishness, and I want to keep it that way’ (Plunkett, 2011). A year later, Conservative MP Aidan Burley sparked widespread condemnation – including from senior Tories including Prime Minister David Cameron and London Mayor Boris Johnson - when he described Danny Boyle’s opening ceremony for the 2012 London Olympics as ‘leftie multicultural crap’ on Twitter. His ire was triggered by the casting of Black and Asian actors to play historical British figures, including from the Victorian era.

While it’s difficult to pinpoint the precise moment when ‘diversity’ became culturally dominant, these two incidents from the early 2010s signal a shift in the national mood. Suddenly, a commitment to representing the inherent racial and ethnic mix of Britain was no longer a fringe or contested value but an expectation – at least in public discourse. To not address diversity, or worse, defend its exclusion, now risked reputational damage. It seemed, for a moment, as though Britain had grown comfortable in its multicultural skin. Diversity was the new commonsense.

Such moments, while seemingly anecdotal, reflect a broader transformation. What was once dismissed or derided as ‘multiculturalism’ (Lentin and Tiley, 2011) was now being rearticulated through the more palatable language of diversity. Since the turn of the century diversity has replaced multiculturalism as the dominant policy frame for managing racial difference in society. Until very recently, diversity set the terms of institutional responses to racial inequality (mostly understood in terms of workforce composition, and occasionally, pay gaps) across all sectors - from corporate boardrooms to government policy, from urban regeneration schemes to the creative and cultural industries. In the context of British media one of founding principles behind diversity is the belief that better representation of racially and ethnically minoritised groups – both in content and the creative workforce – will foster greater understanding and, ultimately, promote racial harmony. Diversity, in this original sense, draws on what Charles Taylor (1994) terms the politics of recognition, wherein racially marginalised groups are valued for their differences rather than expected to assimilate into dominant cultural norms. Over the past decade, this public value of diversity has increasingly been displaced by the business case for diversity, which justifies the inclusion of racial difference

in terms of economic growth and market expansion. This shift has turbocharged the already growing presence of Black, Asian, and other racialised subjects on our screens. I describe this as the moment of *popular superdiversity*. This is not simply hyperbole that captures the ubiquity of diversity on our screens. Instead, the term popular superdiversity carries critical value that points to the limitations of this proliferation of racial digitalia. Before I describe how we got to this point of popular superdiversity – a key part in understanding the current crisis – it is necessary to outline its key characteristics.

Defining ‘popular superdiversity’

My concept of ‘popular superdiversity’ draws from Steven Vertovec’s (2007) notion of ‘superdiversity’. Vertovec, a social anthropologist, coined the term to describe the increasingly complex and heterogeneous nature of global cities like London. For Vertovec, urban diversity in the UK is no longer defined solely by postcolonial migration from former British colonies, but now also includes communities from Brazil, Albania, Colombia, Turkey, and China, among many others. Superdiversity, then, refers to the proliferation of ethnicities, though Vertovec is also concerned with the layered, intersecting variables – such as legal status, language, gender, and economic position – that shape migrants’ lives. Importantly, superdiversity is not just a theoretical construct but an observable reality: a defining feature of contemporary metropolitan life around the world.

Despite its take-up in studies of urban migrant socialities, the concept of superdiversity has come under critique. Les Back, for example, argues that the notion inevitably evokes a sense of excess – as if a ‘quantum of diversity has been breached’ (Back, 2015, np). This, for Back, risks inadvertently echoing reactionary fears that too much diversity undermines cultural cohesion, or at least is a forced disruption. His concern stems from the observation that much of the superdiversity literature fails to meaningfully engage with how racism and imperialism function as structuring forces that constrain the lives and life chances of migrant populations. Back’s critique speaks to a broader sociological concern with how to conceptualise the politics of multiculturalism in contemporary Britain (see also Sealy, 2018), a debate that I do not have the space to enter. Regardless, my interest in superdiversity lies in its application to a different domain – one that still concerns the politics of living with difference, but as mediated through popular culture. It is inspired specifically by Back’s (2015; np) observation that the superdiversity literature produces a ‘thin-culturalism’, offering ‘accounts of migrant

experience that skim the surface of their complex and mutable cultures'. In this phrase, Back indirectly captures something crucial about contemporary media culture – and in doing so, produces an uncanny echo of how difference is rendered in popular representation: visible yet superficial, complex yet flattened. Thus, the concept of 'popular superdiversity' does not affirm the notion of superdiversity, but rather extends Back's critique of it.

The characteristics of popular superdiversity are threefold. Firstly, it refers to the intensified circulation and mediation of cultural, racial and ethnic difference within contemporary popular media. Distinct from the sociological use of 'superdiversity' to describe demographic complexity, popular superdiversity highlights how diversity is constructed, aestheticised and commodified through the logics of popular culture – from corporate media to curated user generated content on digital platforms.

Secondly, popular superdiversity refers to the ubiquitousness of racial, ethnic and gender diversity (the three most *visible* and identifiable forms of difference in contrast to say, class and sexuality) that we now see in media. Diversity is everywhere. It is almost impossible to watch a new British or American television production, whether it is on public service media like the BBC, or on major streaming service like Netflix, and not see a person of colour. The hypervisibility of difference is arguably most pronounced in promotional media, as has been noted in critical advertising studies (Chambers et al, 2020), where judging by supermarket ads and billboards selling sofas mixed race couples and children make-up the normative British family. Francesca Sobande's (2024) work in particular has shown how in the post-Black Lives Matter and *Me Too* period, the social justice orientation of diversity has been absorbed into corporate branding strategies, cloaked in a language of morality, but rationalised in terms of how it adds reputational value. I shall explain this proliferation of ethnic and racial diversity in media shortly, but for now it is worth stressing how the very logics of diversity work primarily in terms of visibility and 'optics'. Put another way, diversity is measured and contested in terms of visibility, whether in the context of corporate media, public service broadcasting, or even in strands of anti-racist activism. As Herman Gray (2013: 772) puts it, 'the cultural politics of diversity seeks recognition and visibility as the end itself'.

The third characteristic of popular superdiversity is its postracial character. More precisely, it evokes a dynamic of *postracialism*, where – as Sivamohan Valluvan (2016: 2244), trying to make sense of this new racism, puts it – 'the social is not characterized by a question of race no longer being named, but rather, how is it in fact named' – where 'race continues to circulate but it is racism that is denied'. In the context of media, race is no longer positioned

as the subject – a category with agency and voice – but is instead rendered as the object: something to be framed, consumed, and managed. I develop Valluvan’s argument by insisting that under popular superdiversity, race in popular culture is 1) either present but invisible, or 2) hypervisible and overdetermined.

A compelling example of race as hypervisible and overdetermined can be found in Clive Nwonka’s (2022: 845) analysis of the ‘Black neoliberal aesthetic’, where he explores the cinematic reproduction of ‘Black convention’ within Black British film and television dramas – often characterised by themes of criminality and social dysfunction. Nwonka focuses on both ‘urban’ productions such as *Bullet Boy*, *Top Boy*, and *Kidulthood* (Nwonka, 2023), as well as works produced under the auspices of public service multicultural programming, such as *NW* (Nwonka, 2022). He argues that, even as these texts adopt the aesthetics and form of social realism, they ultimately ‘perform the very excision of race that neoliberalism requires’ (845). In this way, Black criminality – and ultimately Black death – becomes ‘an inextricable part of the Black British identity’s experiential space’ (858). The Black neoliberal aesthetic, then, produces an excess of racial representation, but in forms that neutralise political critique and remake Blackness according to neoliberal norms. I will discuss the racial character of neoliberalism shortly.

In terms of the ‘present but invisible’ dynamic of race under popular superdiversity, I draw from David Theo Goldberg’s (2009: 1) notion of antiracism – as distinct from antiracism – which denies the very concepts, names, and categories that undergird racism. I see this as the dominant form of popular superdiversity, particularly in mainstream programming. This form of postracialism is mediated through what Banet et al (2019) refer to as racial ambiguity, or what they call privileging the *racially flexible* subject (10): ‘a malleable representation that fits with ease within a neoliberal multicultural framework’. In other words, it describes the proliferation of racially ambiguous – or race-less but still raced – characters in popular culture. This tendency is most evident in the US network television products that saturate UK streaming platforms, as well as in British-made mainstream productions. Of relevance is Kirsten Warner’s (2015) critique of the practice of ‘blindcasting’ as employed by hugely successful Black American showrunner Shonda Rhimes (behind hugely popular series such as *Grey’s Anatomy* and *Bridgerton*) which she argues ‘alienates characters of colour from the material realities of racism’ (ibid.: 642), presenting society as a level playing field where racism has been overcome. Another more contentious version of this dynamic is what has been termed ‘racebending’ (Saha, 2025: 18-19), where existing content – films, television

shows, comic books – is remade or rebooted with formerly white characters now cast as people of colour (an inverse of *white-washing*, the more historically common Western practice of casting white actors to play people of colour, sometimes *blacking* or *browning-up* as part of the process). High-profile examples of racebending include Black British actors Idris Elba and Lenny Henry playing a Norse god in Marvel's *Thor* franchise and a Harfoot in Amazon's rendering of Tolkien's ostensibly white Middle-earth in *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* respectively. In recent years Disney appear to have adopted a strategy of racebending to revitalise its exhausted and racially problematic intellectual property, casting Black and brown actresses to play iconic Disney princesses in live-action reboots such as *The Little Mermaid* and *Snow White*. Echoing Sobande's work, these moves are framed in the moral terms – it's the *right, inclusive thing to do* – but ultimately rely on the commercial logic of blindcasting (which, demonstrating the post-racialist dynamics at play, is anything but blind) to extract profits.

It is precisely because superdiversity as a concept flattens and depoliticises difference – treating it as a descriptive fact rather than a relation structured by power – that it proves analytically useful for interrogating contemporary popular culture. Its limitations, particularly the thin-culturalism of Vertovec's formulation, reflect the surface-level ways in which racial and cultural difference are now represented in media. In this moment of popular superdiversity, race is everywhere, but rarely engaged with in ways that challenge power or deepen understanding. Instead, racial difference is made through neoliberal narratives of self-realisation, resilience, and marketable identity – forms that align with prevailing cultural and economic logics. The concept, then, draws attention to the tensions between increased visibility and persistent inequality – between symbolic inclusion and structural exclusion.

From Corporate Multiculturalism to Popular Superdiversity

The backlash against diversity can be understood as the latest expression of what Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley (2011) described over a decade ago as the enduring crisis of multiculturalism. They argued that the multiculturalism being attacked and defended was less a concrete set of policies or practices than a symbolic site for 'coded debates about belonging, race, legitimacy, and social futures in a globalised, neoliberal era' (Lentin and Titley, 2011: 12). I suggest a similar dynamic is at play today. Just as multiculturalism became a proxy for broader anxieties around race and nation in the 2000s, diversity has emerged as a similarly

overdetermined discourse. As public expressions of multiculturalism came increasingly under attack in the early 2000s, a new formation was emerging that was friendly to capitalism: corporate multiculturalism. According to Stuart Hall (2000: 210), this was a strain of multiculturalism that ‘seeks to “manage” minority cultural differences in the interests of the centre’. Paul Gilroy (2000: 21) similarly describes the ‘signature’ of corporate multiculturalism as presenting difference ‘from an implicit white norm’, as ‘highly prized’ signs of ‘timeliness, vitality, inclusivity, and global reach’. Hall and Gilroy were referring to those growing instances in which multiculturalism was being reframed as a palatable, market-friendly strategy – one that was distinct from the state’s more politicised or ‘excessively accommodating’ approach to migrant communities. It is from this logic that contemporary discourses of diversity emerge, recoding multiculturalism’s marketable elements while disavowing its political demands.

While these critiques continue to resonate, *popular superdiversity* needs to be understood as a distinct formation that is shaped by the latest phase of neoliberalism. As the critical diversity literature has shown, the commodification of difference today takes place within a broader political economy shaped by privatisation, marketisation, and deregulation – including the unregulated ascendancy of platform capitalism. Popular superdiversity must therefore be situated within this neoliberal restructuring of the media industries – a context that not only enables but actively incentivises the circulation of aestheticised, decontextualised forms of racial and cultural difference. Understanding this conjuncture is key to grasping the current crisis of diversity in media.

In the post-Windrush period, public service broadcasters - then still influential - developed multicultural programming based on social democratic principles, aimed at helping migrants from the former colonies to settle into the motherland (see Malik, 2002, for a fuller account of this history, and for a more recent retelling Giese et al, 2024). But by the 2000s, specialist multicultural units such as the BBC’s Afro-Caribbean Unit, the Asian Programming Unit, and Channel 4’s Multicultural Programming Department were closed. The Head of Channel 4 in 2001 insisted that this was because minorities had become part of the mainstream and no longer required specialist provision. But this claim obscured the deeper impact of neoliberalism. The marketisation of British media - accelerated by the 1996 Telecommunications Act – had rendered ‘niche’ programming financially untenable. Facing funding cuts and intense competition from satellite and cable, public service broadcasters could no longer justify these forms of provision, and started acting more like commercial broadcasters.

Yet this did not mean the end of multicultural visibility. With New Labour came the politics of the ‘Third Way’, defined succinctly by Jeremy Gilbert (2019: 14) as ‘an ideology of socially-liberal, cosmopolitan neoliberalism’. This marked a deviation from Thatcherism, with Labour’s orientation towards social justice, though within an overarching neoliberal framework (see Hesmondhalgh et al (2014), for a nuanced discussion of the neoliberal and publicly-oriented dimensions of New Labour’s cultural policy). Under New Labour, the creative industries became central to regeneration and economic growth. ‘Diversity’ became the language through which this investment was justified: it promised to revitalise inner-city areas (often home to racialised communities), foster social cohesion, and boost innovation and creativity in the national economy, within which creative industries were seen as a key, though historically undervalued, sector. It is in this moment that the pre-existing corporate multiculturalism that was defining promotional culture mutates into a broader discourse of ‘diversity’, as commercial logics increasingly shape how diversity is articulated and implemented across public policy and cultural institutions.

But how exactly diversity would deliver economic and social benefits was never clearly articulated. In my own research on publishing, we often found companies proclaiming the economic necessity of diversity without offering convincing evidence that they genuinely believed it would generate significant financial returns (AUTHOR XXXX). The commercial version of diversity was more likely to be driven by fear and guilt. The Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 had a significant impact, building clout on a global level that forced dominant institutions in Western society to reckon with uncomfortable issues of race and racism. There emerged from this a form of what Jo Littler (2015: 148) calls ‘the rise of popular feminist and anti-racist activisms’ that identified diversity – understood in terms of media representation and visibility – as a key social justice goal. Harnessing the affordances of social media, they directly challenged the authority of the dominant culture that own media, using shaming tactics made more powerful in a moment where brand/reputation management became a key part of corporate communication. Indeed, the critique of the lack of diversity in media discourse became media content itself (Littler, 2017: 148) fuelling an amplification spiral in which calls for better representation produced a new commonsense: that media had to diversify or risk reputational damage. In a neoliberal context that privileges economic expansion, individualism, and entrepreneurialism, moral and ethical arguments for inclusion hold little sway. Thus, emphasising the economic benefits of diversity (including in terms of brand management) be-

came the means by which media institutions justified their approach internally, in order to deflect external accusations of racism. This marks the consolidation of a new commonsense in which diversity is instrumentalised as a reputational asset – one shaped not by a deep commitment to justice, but by the pressures and possibilities of a particular historical moment.

Thus, popular superdiversity is an outcome from a broader shift, from multiculturalism to neoliberal diversity. This shift involves demographic change, the emergence of social media that allows the marginalised to talk directly back to the powerful, as well as structural transformations in the context of streaming platforms that has led to the commodification of race within popular culture in strikingly new ways – all of which has unsettled the dominant culture's authority in ways unprecedented in modern history. The ascendancy of superdiversity in media is the conjunctural outcome of articulations between changing politics of multiculturalism, the development of new media technologies and political-economic transformation – specifically the ascendancy of neoliberalism – that produced a new commonsense around diversity that is still with us now, though its legitimacy is waning.

The Populist Turn Against Diversity

Despite the critique of popular superdiversity given above, one might still argue that it at least represents an advance on what came before, where the racially marginalised were either ignored or stereotyped. Yet even a cursory glance behind the camera reveals a very different story. While racial difference is hypervisible on screen, the media workforce remains steadfastly homogenous. According to Census 2021 data for England and Wales, ‘the percentage of White people in arts, culture and heritage occupations was higher than in all other occupations: 87% compared with 84%’ (McAndrew et al., 2024: 56). This alone exposes the limits of ‘EDI’ as practised in the media industries.

But the data reveals something even more telling about the nature of superdiversity. Of all occupational categories, only two exceeded the national average for ethnic diversity, including ‘Actors, entertainers and presenters’ - those in front of the camera. By contrast, ‘Managers and directors in the creative industries’ were second least diverse groups this category of occupations. Put bluntly: while we see an *over-representation* of diversity on screen, those who shape these representations – and hold real economic and cultural power – remain overwhelmingly white. The data provides clear empirical example of how it is the white dominant

culture profiting from popular superdiversity. It stresses how popular superdiversity is shaped by capitalist ideology.

Yet, as suggested, while this anti-racist critique of diversity is now well established in academic research, it has now been superseded by a backlash instigated by the right. Reframed as ‘DEI’, a linguistic manoeuvre that abstracts away the explicit references to ‘diversity’, ‘equity’, and ‘inclusion’ (values that, in principle, few would openly denounce), diversity initiatives have become the target for conservative and far-right backlash, particularly in the United States. Even prior to Donald Trump’s return to the presidency, there was the rollback of affirmative action, bans on DEI initiatives in several states, and corporate retreats from diversity commitments, with brands like Harley Davidson and Jack Daniels abandoning DEI targets. Upon securing a second term, Trump swiftly issued an unprecedented wave of executive orders, dismantling civil society protections and slashing federal funding for any social initiatives associated with DEI.

In the UK, while the populist right has not yet stoked culture war flames to the same extent as in the US, there are nonetheless signs of the commonsense around diversity shifting. Nigel Farage, as leader of Reform, has stated that they will put an end to the ‘DEI industry’ once in power, while Blue Labour, a conservative nationalist campaign group within the Labour party, fearful of Reform taking Labour votes have similarly called for the government to ‘root out DEI’ (note the use of American terminology in both cases) (Osuh, 2025). Economic pressures, combined with cultural winds from across the Atlantic, have provided opportunities for some UK corporations to roll back EDI initiatives to which they were arguably never fully committed (BT Group and the financial regulators: PRA and FCA are recent examples of high-profile companies/organisations who have dropped diversity targets).

In the context of the British cultural industries, we have yet to witness an outright dismantling of diversity commitments – though there is already evidence of a backlash within the creative workforce (Lee, 2024) and indications that UK-based divisions of American-owned parent companies are becoming increasingly circumspect about using the language of diversity. What we are seeing in the context of British media is a quieter retreat: less vocal public commitments to diversity, shifting commissioning priorities, and diversity roles being quietly redefined or absorbed into broader HR functions. The language is also changing, with terms like ‘belonging’, ‘inclusive leadership’, and ‘social impact’ replacing the more politicised ‘diversity’. For example, under mounting political pressure, Disney replaced its ‘Diversity & Inclusion Other Performance Factor (OPF)’ with a ‘Talent Strategy’ OPF that assesses how leaders

uphold ‘company values, incorporate different perspectives to drive business success, cultivate an environment where all employees can thrive, and sustain a robust pipeline to ensure long-term organizational strength’ (Danziger, 2025: np). This offers a likely model for the UK: a further assertion of the business case for diversity, but a greater emphasis on merit to deflect accusations of positive discrimination where Black people have been favoured over white. It might not feel like a full-blown *crisis* in the UK as it is in the US, but diversity discourse is being contested and its status as a dominant paradigm in public and corporate policy is shifting.

As the culture wars intensify and anti-diversity rhetoric grows louder, the summer of 2024 was marked by deeply unsettling far-right victories in France, Germany, and the United States. Although Marine Le Pen and her National Rally were ultimately defeated in France, the far right made significant gains elsewhere. In the UK, far-right riots erupted across the country on a scale not seen for decades, and continue a year later. Triggered by a false online rumour accusing an immigrant of murdering three children at a dance class in Southport, these riots were rapidly mobilised through new media technologies, including AI-generated content, and coordinated by a well-connected network of far-right activists. Crucially, they also drew in non-activists, inflamed by the wider anti-immigrant and Islamophobic narratives circulating in mainstream media, the source of which were several high-profile Black and Asian Conservative politicians in the lead-up to the 2024 general election. Sociologists have long warned that, under the guise of populism, far-right ideas are steadily infiltrating the mainstream (Titley, 2019; Mondon and Winter, 2020). The key point here is that these riots were not an isolated flashpoint, but the violent expression of a racist current that had been gathering force for some time. This surge has since provided political momentum for Nigel Farage’s Reform Party, which is now arguably displacing the Conservatives as the main opposition in the UK.

This returns us to the central question of this article: how do we make sense of the far right’s ascendancy alongside the rise of popular superdiversity in media? How do we explain the apparent paradox in which, on the one hand, the mediascape is filled with joyous, life-affirming images of diversity, projecting a vision of a society untouched by racism, while, on the other, there is a sharp rise in attacks on racialised Others, and explicitly racist, anti-migrant, and Islamophobic rhetoric propels far-right populists to the brink of power? Does this mean that diversity in media does not matter? Rather than dismissing diversity discourse as irrelevant, I propose that superdiversity and the rise of the far right are not opposing phenomena, but symptoms of the same political-economic formation.

3. Conjunctural Analysis: Race, Crisis and Cultural Politics

The Racial Conjuncture: racial neoliberalism and racist populism

In this article I have wanted to emphasise that popular superdiversity is a distinctly neoliberal formation. Thus, one way of interpreting the backlash against diversity amid superdiverse media content is as part of a broader backlash against neoliberalism – or more precisely, neoliberal cosmopolitanism. This is a theme in critical accounts of neoliberalism developed by thinkers such as David Harvey, Wendy Brown and Wolfgang Streeck, as identified by Arun Kundnani (2021). Focusing on the (fleeting) moments where race and racism surface in their analyses, Kundnani notes a shared implication – whether explicit or tacit – that neoliberalism has no structural need for racism. Because neoliberalism is premised on the sovereign individual and market rationality, racism appears in these accounts as a kind of irrational residue – a remnant from an earlier era – and thus as evidence of neoliberalism’s incomplete realisation. From this perspective, the backlash against diversity might be seen not as a contradiction within neoliberalism, but as a reaction to it.

These arguments partially explain the current crisis, but Kundnani, contrary to these analyses, wants to emphasise that neoliberalism is itself a racial project. Far from being indifferent to race, let alone intricately anti-racist, neoliberalism ‘reorganises and reconstitutes racism to produce a new, integrated structure specific to the historical moment of neoliberalism’ (Kundnani, 2021: 52). For Kundnani, neoliberalism’s imperative for global expansion generates surplus populations who, when deemed of little economic value, are subjected to racial exclusions, harm and violence – administered through neoliberal biopolitical regimes. Racism, then, is not incidental to neoliberalism but essential: it functions to sort populations into racial categories, which are then subjected to differential regimes of surveillance, evaluation and control. Of particular relevance to this article, Kundnani (2023) extends this critique to the contemporary moment of diversity – especially corporate diversity training – which he sees as the latest iteration of liberal anti-racism. Diversity, in this account, serves capitalism by deflecting attention from structural and institutional racisms, re-framing inequality as a problem of individual prejudice and interpersonal bias. While such liberal forms of anti-racism may improve social relations at the micro-level, they are ultimately unable to challenge the racial logics embedded in neoliberal governance or to dismantle deeper historical structures of racial domination.

If we apply Kundnani's argument to the subject of this article, it follows that the backlash against diversity is therefore an outcome of the failures of liberal anti-racism within the context of neoliberal breakdown. Liberal anti-racism lacks the concrete means to address – let alone resist – the wave of white nationalist resentment that defines the current crisis. While I do not dispute this reading, I argue that something *conjunctural* is also at play: a historically specific configuration that helps explain the paradox at the heart of this article. This entails a consideration of the role of nationalism alongside the dynamics of racial neoliberalism, understood here as two distinct but entangled historical forces.

I am drawing from Gargi Bhattacharyya's (2020: 171) framing of the current moment as shaped by 'the interplay between racial neoliberalism and *racist populism*' (my emphasis). In the UK context, this takes the form of a resurgent English nationalism, or what Stuart Hall (1999, 192) termed 'English fundamentalism': a nostalgic imaginary rooted in Empire, and a residue of Powellism, 'haunted by the fantasy of a late return to the flag, family values, national character, imperial glory and the spirit of Palmerstonian gunboat diplomacy'. Valluvan's (2017: 239) powerfully incisive account of the 'multiple discursive heritages' from which nationalism draws (including liberal, conservative, neoliberal and communitarian left iterations) helps further illuminate this turn. The racist populism that is of concern here, is grounded in Valluvan's notion of the 'conservative' imaginary that happens to be the one most closely tied to ideas of race – one that appeals nostalgically to the 'moral and aesthetic clarity of provincial, imperial and/or rustic whiteness'. Crucially for my argument, this racialised nationalism has gained ascendancy over the neoliberal nationalist subject that Valluvan identifies: the 'deserving, self-reliant and entrepreneurial capitalist self' – the figure of 'homo economicus'. This ties in with Bhattacharyya's version of racist populism, that she sees linked to what she calls a 'crisis of whiteness' (2020: 162), understood as the racialised reframing of austerity. Here, the erosion of welfare provision under neoliberalism is experienced not simply as economic dispossession, but as a loss of racial privilege. Within this context, diversity is no longer merely dismissed as 'woke' cosmopolitanism – it is recast as a racist practice itself, one that privileges migrants and their children over white Britons, not quite 'the whip hand over the white man' as Enoch Powell forebode but inching closer. The point, as Clarke (2023: 30) argues, is that this crisis of whiteness – 'the grievances felt by folk such as a loss of the way things were, the idea that they were being swamped by migrants' – is not grounded in material reality but is 'articulated through potent national and nationalist imaginaries'. What this crisis of whiteness reveals then, is a

shifting relationship between two dominant racial formations of the present: racial neoliberalism, which I have argued underpins the rise of popular superdiversity, and racist populism, which now mobilises resentment against it. The crucial question, then, concerns the nature of the relationship between these two formations.

It is here that we approach the crux of my argument. Rather than functioning as discrete or opposing historical forces, racial neoliberalism and racist populism exist in a precarious and dynamic relation. Far from signalling a transcendence of the state in favour of borderless free markets, neoliberalism has consistently required strong national formations to implement and legitimise the policies necessary for capital accumulation and market expansion. As David Theo Goldberg puts it, ‘far from dismantling the state, or drowning it, then, neoliberalism would remake it’, fundamentally reshaping ‘the relation of state to the private sphere’. Clarke (2023: 65) elaborates on this, noting how neoliberalism’s apparent anti-statism belies a deeper reliance on state capacity to stabilise its contradictions:

Despite neoliberalism’s rhetorical anti-statism, neoliberal projects have constantly reformed, restructured and exploited state capacities in order to install, sustain and manage the instabilities of neoliberal development. State resources have proved essential for reviving capital accumulation (such as subsidies, privatisations, outsourcing and tax reform). States have been crucial to the management of populations, seeking to reform or ‘improve’ them: teaching them to be entrepreneurial and responsible subjects, and disciplining those who fail, often through increasingly authoritarian measures.

It follows that nationalism – what James and Valluvan (2018: np) describe as ‘the most reliable broker of electoral power’ – has been instrumental for neoliberalism, enabling the election of governments committed to global market-based economies.

But this relationship is unstable. As James and Valluvan go on to argue, neoliberalism’s version of the national project ultimately lacks deep affinity with Little England-style nativism. In its instrumental embrace of nationalism, neoliberalism has opened the door to a more virulent ethnonationalism – a shift exemplified by the decline of Conservative neoliberalism and the rise of Reform-style racist populism. This rupture is central to the crisis of diversity we face today. To repeat: neoliberalism has helped cultivate a resurgent nationalism, tied to whiteness, that identifies cosmopolitan, middle-class ‘elites’ as its primary enemy.

The irony is that this cosmopolitanism – so vilified by racist populism – is, as James and Valluvan (2018: np) put it, merely a ‘thin marketplace consumption of ethnic diversity’. Similarly, Bhattacharyya (2020: 169) identifies a neoliberal ‘market multiculturalism’ that offers a ‘kind of secular morality for a corporate age: one that repackages racial difference as a pleasurable consumer experience and a marker of personal identity’. These accounts, while not focused on media specifically, capture the very logic of what I have called *popular superdiversity*.

My argument is that the backlash against diversity cannot entirely be explained as a white working-class revolt against elite cosmopolitanism. Nor should it be read as a contradiction internal to racial neoliberalism, which commodifies racial difference while simultaneously disavowing less ‘marketable’ forms of it. Rather, what we are witnessing is the breakdown of a delicate – and ultimately unsustainable – relationship between capitalism and nationalism. As Clarke reminds us, ‘contemporary forms of nationalism may be best understood as conjuncturally specific formations’ (2023: 31). In the present moment, Clarke argues that nationalism is being overdetermined – saturated with multiple demands and contradictions – producing the volatile political terrain in which the crisis of diversity unfolds. In short: neoliberalism harnessed nationalism to expand, only to give rise to a racist populism that now feeds on neoliberalism’s own crisis.

Diversity as Symptom and Site of Crisis

At a basic level, this analysis reveals that the crisis of diversity cannot be reduced to a binary struggle between progressive anti-racism and reactionary backlash. Rather, it stems from a deeper structural tension between neoliberalism and a resurgent ‘Little Englander’ nationalism. Neoliberalism and nationalism have long existed in a mutually beneficial, if uneasy, relationship. But in the current conjuncture – marked by overlapping crises of economy, governance, and culture – that fragile balance has ruptured. Crucially, this rupture is not merely symptomatic of crisis, but has become the crisis itself. In which case, how should we respond?

Firstly, as has been implicit throughout this article, we must avoid countering the backlash against diversity by defending diversity. In the face of brutal attacks on DEI, defending the practices and frameworks that have undoubtedly benefited some marginalised peoples feels not only understandable but necessary – and, at the very least, like a practical, concrete response at

a time where the prevailing mood is hopelessness. But the danger is that fighting back on the terms set by diversity risks further extending the crisis rather than resolving it. As Bhattacharyya (2019: 164) warns, anti-racist activism conducted within liberal frameworks – for instance through legal redress – reproduces liberal ideals (especially of the individual) and the very structures that produce racism in the first place. She adds that racial neoliberalism, while more palatable than overtly racist populism/authoritarianism, can still operate in deeply pernicious ways. We must be wary, then, of choosing between two modes of state-led racism – a contest that ultimately reflects a battle between rival elite projects. More directly troubling is the emergence of a leftist nationalism that reads the crisis as one of cosmopolitan elites acting against the interests of the white working class – typified by Blue Labour’s call for the government to ‘root out DEI’, absurdly painting it as some kind of enemy from within. As Valluvan argues, this dangerously conflates authentic working-class identity with whiteness, once again fuelling racist populism rather than addressing its underlying causes. To paraphrase Bhattacharyya (2019), since ‘neoliberalism inhabits the language of global multiculturalism’, we need to be careful that any counter-response to neoliberalism does not slip into ‘ugly everyday nationalisms’.

There is also a danger on the Left of treating the crisis of diversity as a mere epiphenomenon of structural crisis – something that will automatically resolve itself once neoliberalism is dismantled and a new political-economic order is established. More reductively still, some dismiss it as a distraction from ‘real’ material struggle. But we must resist this instinct. The crisis of diversity is not a sideshow or unfortunate consequence – it is constitutive of the crisis itself. As others have noted there are parallels between the present and the pivotal moment that paved the way for Thatcherism as captured in *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al, 1978). As James and Valluvan (2018: np) note in their reading of *Policing the Crisis*, the identification of racial threats – most notably the figure of the ‘black mugger’ – was not simply a technique of deflection, but marked ‘a more fundamental shift in the locus of democratic governance and desire itself’. Like the figure of the ‘black mugger’, diversity has become a symbolic condensation of wider social anxieties – a formation through which the state, media, legal, economic and other social institutions negotiate the contradictions of the present conjuncture. In other words, the unravelling of diversity is not merely a response to crisis – it has become a key site through which crisis is produced, managed, and contested.

As I have argued throughout, popular media is not peripheral to this crisis – it is one of its primary battlegrounds. This article centres popular culture as the key site where the politics of

race are both played out and reconfigured. I am deliberately evoking Stuart Hall's (1981) famous notion of popular culture as a key terrain of hegemonic struggle. While mainstream accounts link culture wars and the DEI backlash to populist authoritarianism, they rarely take seriously how the politics of race are fought through the popular. Yet it is precisely through popular culture that the racial dynamics underpinning populist authoritarianism are mediated, negotiated, and made commonsensical. To understand the current backlash against diversity, we must attend to how race is being rearticulated through the forms, narratives, and affective economies of popular culture. This is why I have focused on what I call 'popular superdiversity': the aesthetic and affective regimes through which race is rendered visible, commodified, and seemingly celebrated in contemporary media culture (even though this remains for some radical anti-racists as a trivial concern).

One way out of the crisis, I argue, is to articulate an alternative to the neoliberal multiculturalism that has produced the thin culturalism of popular superdiversity. What is needed is a more radical politics of race-making: one that merges questions of representation with those of production. This means moving beyond narrow debates about visibility and inclusion, toward a reparative model of diversity – one that both exposes injustices shaped by colonial and racial legacies, and fosters organic, convivial cultures. In short, a media culture that produces images, sounds, emptions and affects of how we might better live together. Such a vision demands radical media reform: breaking up corporate oligopolies, revitalising public service media, creating non-extractive and non-colonial digital infrastructures, and supporting grassroots, community-led initiatives (Saha et al., 2024).

No single act of race-making – whether a documentary, book, or YouTube short – can resolve the crisis of diversity. But collectively, such interventions can organically coalesce discursive formations that begin to shift hegemony in less racist directions. One example of a race-making practice that disrupts the antiracist logics of popular superdiversity is the work of the YouTube collective *Beta Squad*, who, at the time of writing, have over 11 million subscribers. Comprising Black and brown British men of African descent (Caribbean, Nigerian, and Eritrean heritage), *Beta Squad* produce hugely popular prank-based videos, game shows, and comic skits. Their style exemplifies contemporary 'roadman' culture and its signature use of Multicultural London English – a hybrid vernacular blending Cockney, patois, Arabic, and South Asian linguistic forms.

Their humour is often juvenile – reflecting a youth-oriented sensibility – but it is anchored in the warmth, banter, and camaraderie of long-time friends who have each become celebrities

in their own right (including Niko, who came to fame for his videos that troll and mock members of the *English Defence League*). One of their most successful formats is the *False Identity* series – part of a broader social media genre in which a group of actors conceal their true identity, while the *Beta Squad* attempts to identify the ‘real’ one. Their spin on this format includes *Guess the Rapper* (featuring Burna Boy), *Guess the Musician* (featuring Ed Sheeran), and *Guess the Police Officer*. Most notable are the episodes in the *Guess the ___ Person* series, where *the Beta Squad* must deduce a person’s racial or ethnic background – such as Black, Asian, or Latino – using culturally specific questions and clues based on accent, mannerisms, or shared knowledge. The most popular instalment of *Guess the Black Person*, has garnered over 15 million views, making it the most-watched video in the series.

The results are ridiculous, silly, often hilarious – and crucially, very rarely offensive. These episodes are not politically correct, but they are typically respectful, affectionate, and grounded in cultural intimacy. They are irreverent without being cruel. If popular superdiversity is defined by its postracial, antiracist character – denying the language of race and racism altogether – then *Beta Squad*’s *False Identity* content is unapologetically racist, though never racist. I draw on David Theo Goldberg’s (2009) interpretation of Kwame Anthony Appiah, in which he distinguishes racialism – the belief in meaningful racial difference – from racism, which ties those differences to hierarchies of value. Goldberg underscores how while Appiah considers racialism conceptually flawed, it is not inherently immoral or dangerous. Extending this argument, I suggest that what we might call ‘racialism without racism’ becomes, in this context, a radical gesture. There is no sense of superiority or exclusion in *Beta Squad*’s engagement with race; rather, it is animated by shared recognition, humour, and cultural play.

More importantly, *Beta Squad* exemplifies race-making from below: a vernacular cultural production enabled by the affordances of social media. Despite the ways in which digital media are built upon the extractive logics of data colonialism, *algorithmic oppression*, and racialised surveillance, platforms such as YouTube and SoundCloud remain among the most fertile terrains for Black and brown cultural expression – particularly when contrasted with the exclusions and gatekeeping of legacy media. There is of course the ever-present danger that creators like *Beta Squad* are absorbed into the neoliberal machinery of the attention economy – and in many ways, they already have been. Yet if popular superdiversity is the cultural mode of ne-

oliberal cosmopolitanism, then *Beta Squad* represents a form of *vernacular cosmopolitanism* (Werbner, 2006): a mediated, demotic conviviality that doesn't erase difference, but revels in it – even when it's being laughed at.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the backlash against diversity is not simply an unfortunate by-product of a broader political crisis, nor should it be dismissed as the right's latest culture war obsession. Rather, it is articulated to a deeper, structural crisis rooted in a fundamental contradiction within the capitalist nation state: on one side, a neoliberal free-market logic that seeks to exploit difference; on the other, an ethnonationalist imperative to defend the purity of the nation from foreign 'Others'. The task, then, is to develop strategies that harness these contradictions in the struggle for racial justice. Crucially this means not dismissing media and race as marginal concerns but placing them at the centre of political struggle, alongside direct anti-racist activism.

To reiterate, the politics of race in media - how media make race - is crucial to understanding the current crisis. The proliferation of superdiverse images has not stemmed the rise of ethnonationalist authoritarianism; as I have argued, these phenomena have ascended together, albeit in tension. That tension has now ruptured, manifesting in the crisis of diversity we see today. Rather than succumbing to despair, dismissing popular culture as unimportant, or defending a version of diversity as 'EDI' or 'DEI' we always knew was compromised, we must focus on the political opportunities that crisis affords. This requires renewed attention to the politics of race, media, and popular culture as key battlegrounds in the ongoing struggle for hegemony.

If nothing else, this article has sought to demonstrate that any account of the current crisis must take seriously the politics of diversity – not only in its institutionalised forms, but also in the ways it is contested, repurposed, and resisted. For all its contradictions, diversity remains a key site through which struggles over race, power, and the future of collective life are being played out. Attending to these struggles may be vital to imagining a way out of the crisis.

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