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MADRIAGA, Manuel <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2725-1718> and MCCAIG, Colin <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4364-5119>

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Published version

MADRIAGA, Manuel and MCCAIG, Colin (2019). How international students of colour become Black: a story of whiteness in English higher education. Teaching in Higher Education.

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How international students of colour become Black: a story of whiteness in English higher education

Manuel Madriaga and Colin McCaig

Sheffield Institute of Education, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, United Kingdom

Sheffield Institute of Education, Sheffield Hallam University, Howard St., Sheffield, UK, S1 1WB

Contact email address: m.madriaga@shu.ac.uk

How international students of colour become Black: a story of whiteness in English higher education

This article highlights how international students of colour are racialised in English higher education. Key performance indicators of racial inequality in the sector like achievement outcomes currently discount experiences of international students of colour. This is problematic as international students, as found in this study, identify themselves under the sector racial category of Black and minority ethnic (BME). They experience racism and discrimination in and outside the Academy just like 'home' BME students. The work presented here foregrounds the racialised experiences of international students of colour in English higher education. It is a counter-story in the tradition of critical race theory which reveal how whiteness unifies and divides. It unifies in creating a shared experience amongst those who experience the heat of the 'white gaze' in academia. It divides, categorising and classifying 'us' to the extent that 'we', both students and academic staff, may unwittingly perpetuate whiteness.

Keywords: Black and minority ethnic (BME), international students, England, higher education, whiteness

International students, in general, are viewed as lucrative to the higher education market, especially in the West (McDonald 2014). Although they financially contribute to the host economies, international students, particularly those who are racialised as people of colour, may experience racism and racist incidents (Brown and Jones 2013). While these racist incidents have been documented (Brown and Jones 2013), there is limited discussion on international students experiencing racism within the corridors of the Academy. Amidst the literature on international students studying abroad in Western contexts, such as in England and the USA, there is a dominant perception of international students of having cultural deficits, such as unsatisfactory language competence, which limits their academic achievement (Jabbar *et al.* 2019; Tran 2008).

This paper argues that such a perception of international students, particularly those who are racialised as people of colour, is linked to how whiteness is performed and reproduced in English higher education.

In the English higher education context, whiteness is taken-for-granted to the extent that it is invisible, and normal (Madriaga 2018). It's pervasiveness surfaces in the crude social categorisation of 'Black and minority ethnic' (BME)[1]. The category is perpetually reproduced in official higher education statistic reports, reinforcing the white racial category as the norm (Equality Challenge Unit 2017). The diversity existing within the BME category is exhaustive with constructed subcategories of Black (Caribbean, African, Other), Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Other), Malaysian, Mixed and Other. The issue is that this BME category is very broad. It discounts and misrecognises the variety of differences of groups of people categorised within it (Young 1990).

Reflecting upon the dominant discourse on race and racism in English higher education, we raise the question about international students, particularly those of colour. Their experiences are discounted in key performance indicators of racial inequalities such as access into universities and achievement outcomes. Domiciled BME students are the primary focus in collecting and reporting of higher education race equality data (Broeke and Nicholls 2007; Equality Challenge Unit 2016; Singh 2011; Stevenson 2012). There is no rationale for *just* focusing upon the UK-domiciled, particularly when international students of colour, living and studying in the UK may

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[1] Although crude, the category of Black and minority ethnic (BME) will be used in this paper throughout as respondents to this study identified themselves as BME.

endure similar barriers and racial discrimination (Brown and Jones 2013). With whiteness being axiomatic of Englishness (Gilroy 2002), international students of colour and UK-domiciled Black and minority ethnic students are Othered and racialised.

Why whiteness?

Whiteness offers a broad scope to reflect and examine institutional racism throughout English higher education, within and outside the lecture halls, impacting both staff and students. It is a social construct, in particular a social process (Frankenberg, 1993; 1998; Ware and Back 2001; Wellman 1977), that excludes to include, dividing 'us' from 'them' (Barth 1969; Jenkins 1997). Whiteness is a marker of ethnic differentiation based on white supremacy, derived from a specific historical circumstance – English colonialism of North America in the 1600s (Allen 1994; Ignatiev 1998; Roediger 1991). Its symbolic meanings may have shifted and contested since its inception through space, in various national contexts, and time, but a constant has been its axiomatic relationship with notions of Englishness (Gilroy 2002). Whiteness is part of the 'cultural stuff' (within the boundaries of Englishness), that binds the nation together, that something-more-than-the-sum-of-the-parts.

Whiteness impacts on our daily lives particularly in education (Chitty 2009; Gillborn 2015). The pervasiveness of whiteness is reproduced when education is maintained to not serve the needs of BME learners. Whiteness is performative (Gillborn 2005). It does not matter where one is placed on the racial divide, whether one is racialised as white or Black, if one is working in an education system that perpetuates a racial divide and unequal outcomes, then whiteness is being reproduced.

The pervasiveness of whiteness has been confirmed in the study presented here. Whiteness unifies and divides *us* in higher education.

Methods: critical race theory as method and using composite characters

English higher education institutions are not value-neutral or colour-blind (see Arday and Mirza 2018). These settings privilege whiteness under the guise of meritocracy. Whiteness is taken-for-granted in these spaces to the extent that it is normal. The authors of this article are uncomfortable with racial inequities that are reproduced in the English higher education sector. Also, we are also aware that we may unwittingly perpetuate whiteness in our own academic practice. Being racially aware, or racially literate (Blaisdell 2016), are a given for the authors of this work. Manuel was born and raised in the USA in which he has been hesitant to call 'home' as a child of Filipino immigrants. This hesitance stems from being racialised and Othered, never really feeling confident to identify as American as it is often equated to being racialised as white. In addition, Manuel was an international student, and now a 'foreign' academic in England who has experienced racism within and outside the walls of its universities. The other author, Colin, a former mature student who hails from an English white, working-class background who specialises in educational policy on social exclusion as it relates to access into higher education. He has documented how higher education policy, particularly in England, discriminate against marginalised, racialised students as part of a wider process by which higher education in England is increasingly differentiated through marketisation. This makes it more likely than ever before that marginalised groups (including BME students) will accumulate at lower prestige HE providers and have less opportunity for a transformative HE experience (McCaig 2018a; 2018b).

Being discomforted by the racial inequalities in English HE has led the authors to the safety and security of critical race theory (CRT) in education (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). The centrality of experiential knowledge is one of the key tenets of CRT. According to Solórzano (1997), this knowledge is a strength drawing explicitly on lived experiences of people of colour by including such methods as storytelling, family history, biographies, scenarios, parables, chronicles, and narratives. These methods are consistent with narrative inquiry in teacher education (Conle 2003), placing emphasis on a teacher or a researcher to share their stories, experiences, and histories with students and research participants to develop and reflect on teaching practice in matters relating to race (Milner 2007; Lachuk and Mosley 2012). The sharing of stories is under the banner of CRT methodology in education which 'challenges white privilege, rejects notions of "neutral" research or "objective" researchers, and exposes deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of colour' (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 26). It allows for a counter-narrative to the majoritarian story of higher education that exemplifies meritocracy and colour-blindness with the voice and the experience of the oppressed:

> By listening to the counter-stories of people of colour, white people can gain access to a view of the world denied to them by white privilege and white domination. Telling their own story provides people of colour of psychic and emotional barriers against the damage caused by majoritarian stories that, for instance, blame people who are targeted by racism for their own subordination (Love 2004, 233).

The counter-story approach is significant and unique particularly in illustrating the English higher education experience. The work presented here follows on from the tradition of counter-stories through the use of composite characters in critical race theory in education (Gillborn 2010; Harper 2009; Hughes and Giles 2010; Love 2004;

Milner and Howard 2013; Patton and Catching 2009; Solórzano and Yosso 2001; 2002). There are a couple of reasons for employing composite characters in presenting this work: (1) it placed experiential knowledge and experiences of racism at the center (Milner 2007); and (2) it allowed us to share findings from a research project on racism that is not only ethical, but ensures the anonymity of experiences of all participants in the study, even the researchers themselves (Patton and Catching 2009). With this in mind, we employed a narrative approach and constructing composite characters from: (1) the data gathered from the research process itself; and (2) our own professional and personal experiences.

Empirical work took place at one predominantly white university in England. It incorporated a first phase of an open-ended survey of teaching staff (n=10) from two different subject groups where there were sizeable proportions of 'home' BME students. A second phase of the study was a focus group discussion with students associated with the student union's BME student committee (n=6). The BME student committee was approached to purposely acquire BME student engagement in the study. Two of the six were 'home' students, which one of them was self-identified as white, with the rest being categorised as 'international', hailing from the continents of the Americas, Asia, and Africa. The overall study was *informed* by a narrative inquiry approach (Connelly and Clandinin 1990; Milner 2007). We shared our racialised stories with research participants as previous studies (see Milner 2007; Lachuk and Moseley 2012). We also shared our racialised experiences in the research process, in the analysis, reflecting upon the stories and responses offered by the research participants in the study with our own stories.

The study began with optimism to inform a route towards inclusive teaching practice in higher education. The two subject groups of teaching staff were chosen

because their performance key indicators on race equity were better than the rest of the institution. For instance, on average, both subject areas contained courses in which had an achievement gap between white and BME 'home' students at 11% while the rest of the institution hovered over 18%. Given this, we were interested in gathering evidence, which would spark reflection and self-study for educators as evidenced in the narrative inquiry work of Milner (2007). Having conducted work on inclusion in English higher education (Madriaga 2018), we initially sought how staff accounted for equality and diversity within their classrooms and student perceptions of teaching and assessment practice. Only three open-ended questions were asked of staff on an online Google Form distributed by email: (1) How extensive are discussions on race inequality on the course? (2) How are the subject areas accounting for diversity in the classrooms? (3) Any suggestions that can be offered to the University to address race inequalities? As evidence started to trickle through, we were reminded of the extent English higher education invests in the notion of meritocracy and colour-blindness, restricting its lack of honesty about racism. For instance, some early staff responses mirrored deficit perceptions of BME students found in Stevenson's (2012) work. Although low engagement to the Google Form, 10 out of a possible 54 staff responses remain meaningful. Themes emerged from their responses were: (1) lack of teaching staff awareness of inequality in academic achievement among student groups; (2) lack of discussion among academic staff on race inequality in delivering teaching; (3) deficit perceptions of students of colour who do not achieve; (4) acknowledgement that there is a lack of teaching staff diversity; and (5) issues of diversity not systematically accounted for in course design.

We collated the anonymous staff survey data and subsequently shared these initial findings with the half-dozen students associated with the local BME student

committee. This sharing was to ignite questions and comments in a two-hour group discussion. The sharing of preliminary survey findings with students adhered to the original design of the research which was approved by the university's ethics committee. In responding to the teaching staff survey findings, the discussion centred on: (1) student frustration that teaching staff do not recognise and embrace the diversity of students who they are teaching; and (2) key performance indicators of race inequalities within the institution not accounting for the experiences of international students.

It was the latter point that caught our attention as only two of the six student participants were considered 'home', British students. The other four students were international students. This is significant as all students invited to participate in study understood it was a study on the BME student experience in relation to academic achievement. It was not initially designed to gather international student experiences. As indicated earlier, official English higher education institutional data on race inequalities do not account for the international student experience (see Equality Challenge Unit 2017; Stevenson 2012). However, these students, whether 'home' or international, identified themselves as BME. Unlike previous research on race inequalities in higher education (e.g. Stevenson 2012), the work presented here foregrounds the racialised experiences of international students in English higher education.

Through reflection (Milner 2007), as well as encouraged by the small study of Ahmed (2007), we were able to tease out patterns in staff and student responses, along with our own experiences, which reflected the pervasiveness of whiteness in responding to questions of race inequalities in English higher education.

In the set-up of this counter-story, there are two composite characters, Serg and Jonah. These composite characters are not fictional (Patton and Catching 2009), as they were formed from empirical data and real-life experiences, as done in previous work within the area of critical race theory in education (see Harper 2009; Hughes and Giles 2010; Love 2004; Milner and Howard 2013; Patton and Catching 2009; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). As Harper (2009, 702) explained, the creation of composite characters relies on empirical data collected from individuals 'who have experienced a particular context or similar phenomena… composite stories are useful for representing the often disregarded experiences of a larger group through a smaller subset of 'characters' who represent the group.' The primary data sources which inform Serg's perspective are themes that emerged from staff responses, our own journal entries during the study as well as our own reflections. In contrast, the perspective of Jonah was informed by the themes picked up from the group discussion on race inequalities with BME students (both 'home' and international).

Serg and Jonah

Serg is in his 3rd year of his PhD study examining international university student experiences in the UK. His pursuit of a PhD stems from his own experience of having been a child migrant of Surinam parents, having arrived in the Netherlands as a young child. It was in the Netherlands in which he became self-aware of his own racialised identity and Blackness. He draws on his personal experiences in his teaching delivery on undergraduate modules as part of his PhD studentship.

Serg finds himself in a cafe sitting in front of a laptop. He has a coffee and thinking about how many words he will write-up on his thesis today. He thinks three hundreds words would be more than an achievement. The café is busy. It is situated in

a new university building, in which big screen televisions rotate screensaver shots of the national student experience survey and other surveys notifying students to complete. It is student union election time, and Jonah is running for BME student officer. He is passing out flyers in the café. He lays a flyer right next to Serg's laptop: VOTE JONAH - BME STUDENT OFFICER.

What!? You running for BME student officer

Serg having observed the flyer, asked the young man, 'Who's Jonah?

The young man, replied, 'I am.'

Sitting down with a cup of coffee in-hand, Serg looked-up to this young man and his facial expression was one of disbelief. He did not know whether to respond or attempt to enter into a conversation for further information. For him, this young man did not typify a student who should be running for this office post.

> Jonah (recognising the puzzled look of Serg): I am from Malaysia. However, my Malaysian-ness is subsumed under this problematic category, BME, the Black and minority ethnic. It is a British invention, nothing in the world like it...
> Serg: You are throwing me off. Not only are you Malaysian, you just don't sound… I mean your use of English… are you an international student?
> Jonah: I have been told that I speak with an American accent. (He sits on one of the available nearby chairs.) I studied in the US prior to arriving on these shores for an MBA.

Serg did not expect Jonah to sit down but he realised he set this up by querying Jonah's suitability for the role, particularly in university leadership on matters of race. Serg was taken back by Jonah's campaign for this role, and even his audacity to lay a leaflet under the nose of someone who identifies himself as Black. The questions running through his head was Jonah's recognition of the Black student experience.

Serg: I have been studying and teaching in England for a few years now, I have become immersed in the social media conversations around the questions as to 'why is my curriculum white?'(Peters 2015) and 'why isn't my professor Black?' (See Tate and Bagguley 2017; Joseph-Salisbury 2019). I have become aware, first-hand, of this major issue of this so-called 'Black and minority ethnic achievement gap' in higher education degree outcomes (Equality Challenge Unit 2017). Given your experience as a *Malaysian, international student*, what do have to say about this persistent inequality?

Jonah: Good question! Let me begin by saying that I am victimised by racism as well. I am aware that you are busy here, and I do not want to bring a dark cloud here. I also have followed similar social media conversations, particularly on this notion of white curriculum, which was kick-started by students at the University of College London (UCL) campaign (see Tate and Bagguley 2017; Joseph-Salisbury 2019). In fact, it is what has fuelled my campaign to run for BME Student Officer Post now as the UCL campaign shed light on the eugenicist work of Sir Francis Galton. This Galton guy proposed the idea to send Chinese, or what he referred to us as 'Chinaman', to Africa to displace 'negroes' (Galton 1873). The issue is that his name, and that of his disciple Pearson, continues to be celebrated today. His contribution to the world continues to make a negative impact on *us* particularly in education. This eugenicist thinking continues to mark us out as deviant for being people of colour (Eze 1997).

Serg: I have followed the #whitecurriculum debate at UCL and student objections to Galton's legacy being celebrated (see Peters 2015).

Jonah: Even with the uproar at UCL and Oxford, with student objections to the Rhodes statue #rhodesmustfall (Joseph-Salisbury 2019), English universities continue to attract business from Black students and international students. I am studying for an MBA, and I feel the sector takes *us* for granted. I am paying international student *upfront* fees to a university system that continually discriminates against people of colour. This achievement gap is an issue and I am aware that English universities are aware of it. Some are upfront about the issue. Other institutions, like Oxford, are not and have to be coerced to release information by freedom of information requests by one adamant politician (Lammy, 2010). Speaking as a business student, it is not good business for universities to be labelled as discriminatory especially when they are seeking to sell their products here and overseas. I do not believe it is a coincidence that we are talking about these kinds of issue now. I hear a lot of talk about teaching excellence in English universities now. But, considering my own experience and

what I have observed so far, I do wonder who are the *real* beneficiaries of an *excellent* student experience?

Both of them identified themselves as BME. In official statistics (Equality Challenge Unit 2017), the category of Malaysian, as Jonah rightly remarked, is subsumed under the banner of BME. As indicated earlier, BME is a crude category which marks the category of whiteness as the norm. This crudeness is reflected in the English higher education official sector data of the race achievement gap issue. However, if particular groups were drawn out and isolated from the banner of BME, such as Black African graduates, the achievement gap between this racialised group and white graduates is wider at 27.4% (Equality Challenge Unit 2017, 116). This is in contrast to the smaller gap of 6.5% between Chinese and white graduates, which still favours the latter (Equality Challenge Unit 2017, 116). The crudeness of the BME category hides the variability of 'gaps' according to specific categorised, racialised groups. Some worse than others in comparison to a *white* norm. Whiteness, in the form of official data, divides and binds these two students. Both Serg and Jonah recognise that the achievement gap issue is currently placed at the forefront of discussions of race and English higher education policy. However, it should be highlighted that both Serg and Jonah will not be factored in any official, national data of the gap attainment issue given their international student status.

International students are discounted in official achievement gap data, as it only emphasises UK-domiciled, 'home' students (Equality Challenge Unit 2017). In this current discourse of race inequality, the racism faced by international students are not acknowledged.

Serg: The thing is that it seems no one knows or cares about this achievement gap in this university. There is a general lack of awareness. It seems a surprise to my

colleagues when I bring it up at meetings, and a surprise to my students in class discussions. In fact, I look forward to the Equality Challenge Unit's annual publishing of equality and diversity statistical report to get an opportunity to discuss it with colleagues and students (see Equality Challenge Unit 2016; 2017). The issue, for me, is that there is a lot of talk in pockets in the university, but nothing concrete in sorting it out. Also, if there is an event, or even a national conference on the BME gap attainment issue, the attendees are mostly people of colour. This is discouraging as it is an issue that impacts us all regardless of ethnic and racial difference.

Jonah: Yes, this lack of awareness is troubling, and my aim, as BME student officer, is to raise awareness massively. I am tired of folks, staff and students, sleepwalking on this issue. This reminds me what I was doing prior to sitting down. What's your name?

Serg: Well, my name is Sergio. But you can call me Serg.

Jonah: I have this packet of leaflets asking students to vote for me, so if you don't mind (gets up from his chair)...

Serg: Go ahead bro, get students to vote for you.

Jonah: See you later and nice meeting you.

Who am I and what am I a part of? [Am I being overly-sensitive?]

As Jonah moved on with his electoral campaign within the cafe, Serg was left with mixed emotions. He was happy to have met someone who was frustrated as he was at the current state of higher education. However, he also found himself reflecting on his own professional development and future career prospects working in English academia. His face turns into worry. With his laptop in front of him, he immediately heads for his department's webpage seeking the faces of staff profiles. His concern is confirmed. He is the *only one* of fifty members of teaching staff in the department who is BME, and he is not even a permanent member of staff. He is on a temporary, fixed-term contract of only 12-months. He questions how this achievement gap issue can be addressed when there is so little diversity around him. He understands the systemic racism in higher education may cause Black aspirant academics to move to the US

(Equality Challenge Unit 2015; Bhopal, Brown and Jackson 2016).

As the sole person of colour in his department, he begins to reflect on the everyday conversations with colleagues in corridors and exchanges in departmental and board meetings. While there is an acknowledgement from the University and the sector to address race inequalities in achievement, it has not been addressed as an item in any departmental meetings. There is a general lack of awareness of this issue amongst his colleagues. He is frustrated by this lack of recognition given the huge presence of students of colour in his lectures and seminars. He has never wanted to raise the issue himself out of fear and anxiety. He wants to secure permanent, full-time employment as an academic member of staff. He does not want to jeopardise future opportunities by raising awareness of issue publicly.

When the issue has been raised, usually in response to issues of student retention and student academic misconduct within the department, he is encouraged by the one or two members of staff who are keen in addressing race inequality. These staff members are keen on curriculum change and injecting more equality and diversity components into module content. The question for him is how it will look like.

Inclusion has been mentioned. But, he holds this notion loosely given its traditional link to disabled student support in English higher education (see Madriaga 2018). While the notion of inclusive practice is perceived as encompassing differences of all learners, its link to disabled student support suggests it is targeted and earmarked for a specific cohort of students (Slee and Allan 2001). He is not against the idea of making the necessary reasonable adjustments to ensure disabled students succeed and achieve in education (Madriaga *et al.* 2010). He has observed that many of his colleagues positively engage and alter their teaching and assessments accordingly for reasons of student accessibility. However, in discussions with colleagues in addressing

the race inequality and unequal achievement outcomes, ideas of a targeted approach for students of colour is either viewed negatively or dismissed. There is a reluctance to change for this specific cohort of students.

Sentiments expressed by his colleagues suggest that change has to begin with the students themselves, which Serg finds frustrating. He is reminded of how race inequalities in achievement gets explained away with staff anecdotes and observations of BME students isolating themselves: ‘They form little silo communities’; ‘They do not integrate’; ‘They are culturally disconnected with what goes on in the classroom.’

He ponders this response of a cultural disconnect. There is perhaps a cultural disconnect, and questions whether this cultural disconnectedness has more to do with the culture of the English Academy at-large than the differences and experiences that students of colour bring into university classrooms. As he is pondering, he sees Jonah approaching another table full of students with his leaflets in-hand. Serg signals him over.

White masks, Black skins; negotiating twoness

Serg: Jonah, you got me thinking.
Jonah: Well, let me sit down. I need a break from having to explain to folks why I am running for BME Student Officer. Like you and many others, there’s this perception that I shouldn’t be running for this post…
Serg: There is always that possibility. In any event, you rest up here. I got some stuff to clear from my chest, particularly in regards to race and higher education. Let me begin by saying that the writer bell hooks (1995) mentions that Black academics have always worked in US higher education, even before the advent of the civil rights era. It is not a new phenomenon. It made me reflect that there has always been Blackness in the Academy, even W.E.B. Du Bois at the turn of the 20th century was the first African-American PhD student in Harvard when the country was still in throes of Jim Crow. I can only imagine the gaze and stares he had to endure walking into a university classroom at that time. I understand it

because I feel the heat of this gaze on an everyday basis, particularly in this workplace. My Otherness objectified by my own students and other staff members. It is a lonely, distressing feeling.
Jonah: One of my friends from the BME Student Committee elaborated upon this gaze, especially when he walks into an all-white classroom. I asked him how he felt about it. His response was that they stare at him because he is good-looking and a handsome fella!

The comment about receiving the white gaze and being good-looking triggered a short laugh between the two. It was a funny moment, but at the same time discomforting, as the two were hinged on a shared experience of being objectified and Othered within and beyond the walls of English university classrooms. The 'heat of the gaze' Serg describes while working and studying in an English university is dehumanising. Jonah understood this, and responded by quoting W.E.B. Du Bois.

Jonah: I think of this twoness quite often, not as an African-American as Du Bois, but as a Malaysian international student seeking equality in an English university classroom. I can see myself as a student like other students, supposedly we are taught and assessed the same. However, in emphasising this sense of sameness amongst students, there are differences, such as me being an international student who hails from Malaysia. The latter stuck out to me towards the beginning of my studies here. After a week-long international student induction with other international students, I had to take a module called 'English for Academic Purposes'. I felt it was racist to have taken this module. All students in there were international, and I question the grasp of the English language of some of my peers. In contrast, I was schooled in English since primary education. As you recognised earlier, I speak fluently with an American accent. The experience of taking this module has skewed my experience here in this University. It was not inclusive. It was all the foreigners in one room segregated from the general student population.
Serg: Hold up! I'm aware of this module being an international student myself. I did not have to take it, but isn't the point of taking it to help prepare one for the trials of UK higher education?

Jonah: It is, yes. There's a purpose of the module, and it may be beneficial for many students. But, personally, like I said earlier, I have spoken English for the majority of my life since I was in primary school. I feel I was placed in the module because I am a foreigner from Malaysia. No consideration was made in my proficiency of English. I was segregated with all the other students of colour.
Serg: I'm sorry that you felt distressed by that situation. I didn't mean to cause you grief by challenging you on the purpose of the module.
Jonah: No worries. I know that there are individuals, particularly teaching staff who try their best in making their curriculum inclusive. For instance, I'm aware that group work is an issue. Much effort is made by academic staff to prevent students from self-selecting into groups, particularly on my course where 'home' and international students can be broken down 50:50. Many of my tutors actively encourage integration and make attempts to prevent silos and cliques. However, when 'mixed' groups are chosen and students meet-up to decide group leader, there is always a tendency to select a 'home', white student. It is unfortunate, but it is evidence of the extent of racism embedded within our classrooms. There is a deference to the authority of one who can claim white-skin privilege.
Serg: That little narrative you just described is what is left unsaid in many discussions about the Black student experience in higher education. You highlighted the positive work of teaching staff in attempting to make their learning environments inclusive.
Jonah: Yea, I do see efforts being made by staff. However, I do get frustrated with them as well. Like, for instance, my tutor can possibly be more careful when he writes-up a reference for employment. I'm studying on a competitive course in which securing employment is key. My family has invested a lot of money for me to study abroad at this university. So, my tutor should, at least, spend a bit of time proofreading the spelling of my name on references. This neglect has not only happened to me. It has occurred to some of my friends on the course. The lack of care in writing-up our references is not good. It is actually hurtful and disrespectful.
Serg (nodding in agreement): It is hurtful. They do not even recognise your name. Your name!!

Both of them sat in silence for a moment. It was obvious they were both frustrated at their experiences of English university life so far. The moment drew to a close when Serg looked up at Jonah and asked him if he can buy him a cup of tea.

While valued for making classroom activities more accessible, the call for inclusive academic practice is not perceived as a positive solution to the BME gap attainment issue. It is viewed sceptically by both Jonah and Serg due to its colour-blindness. There is only so much on offer by university lecturers to make their teaching and assessment accessible. However, as Serg pondered above, the grasp of colour-blindness and meritocracy holds university teaching staff tightly enough to hinder ideas for targeted approaches to ensure equality of opportunity, as well as equality of outcome, for students of colour. This is discomforting for Serg who is actively trying to maintain an academic role, on a permanent basis, within the department. Out of fear, he does not want to flag the issue of race inequity and student experience. This is, of course, understandable given his precarious employment status. But, he, perhaps unwittingly, is complicit in whiteness being maintained, unmarked and reproduced in his department to the detriment of students of colour.

Discussion and concluding thoughts

Although their exchange was quick, they identified a shared understanding and experience of racial discrimination, and even shared a laugh about the 'white gaze' (Solórzano 1998). However, there is a recognition of how whiteness divides them, categorises them, as signalled by Serg and his adverse reaction to Jonah representing Black student interests.

The pervasiveness of whiteness impacts our daily lives regardless whether one is categorised as 'home' or 'international' as illustrated above. The tension between Serg wanting to act in the name of social justice but remaining silent is reminiscent and representative of Du Bois' [1903 (1989)] double-consciousness or the twoness Fanon (1967) describes in having to wear a 'white mask' (in higher education) with Black

skin. It is an inner struggle which is the result of having one's racial and ethnic differences misrecognised by the falsities of meritocracy and colour-blindness within English higher education. The university perpetuates the notion of whiteness being normal. This is oppressive and unjust, exemplified in the above story of misspelling 'foreign' student names on reference letters. It confirms for students of colour, as well as academic staff of colour, that they do not belong, and that they deviate from the norm. Addressing whiteness in higher education requires marking it, making the invisible *visible*. As mentioned by Jonah above, higher education practitioners are not making it *visible* when trying to forcefully put students from different racial backgrounds to work as a group under the banner of inclusion.

The desire to be 'normal,' accepted and included induces a psychological crisis (Fanon 1967). On the one hand, it forces one to remain silent, like Serg, in order to gain acceptance within an academic department, (re)producing whiteness. On the other hand, by remaining silent, it is an acceptance that being a person of colour is deviant and inferior. This is not easy for either a staff member, or even a student, to negotiate.

Critical race theory employing a narrative approach was liberating, breaking the silence. Not only has it allowed us to share themes gathered from fieldwork in an English higher education institution, but it has also allowed us to share our own personal and professional experiences. The counter-story between the two composite characters of Jonah and Serg are grounded in actual life experiences (Patton and Catching 2009). For people of colour, students and university staff, the work in having to mark out the persistent race inequality and dealing with microaggressions are emotionally arduous and frustrating (Doharty 2017; Joseph-Salisbury 2019). The investment in notions of meritocracy and colour-blindness by English universities coerces one to remain silent on the issue, or wear a 'white mask'. However, the wearing

of the white mask comes at a cost. The hope we draw upon is recognising that there are definitely going to be costs in pursuing social justice and anti-racist work. History has told us this. So, challenging whiteness within English universities is the task at-hand. To achieve this, notions of meritocracy and colour-blindness require critical interrogation.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the encouraging support of Dr Joan O'Mahony and her leadership at the Higher Education Academy (now AdvanceHE) when we began this work examining racial inequalities in the UK higher education sector. Also, we would like to offer our thanks to the two anonymous reviewers who offered encouragement and critical suggestions in earlier drafts of this work.

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