Counter-narratives in the First Person: Whiteness and the Limits of Diversity

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Abstract

This short article focuses on Sara's experience as the first-ever student BAME department representative at a large post-secondary institution in the UK. Written as a first-person testimonial but grounded in a dialogic method of ethnographic recovery and remembrance, we argue that diversity initiatives that seek to create inclusion and representation, without a careful engagement with power, end up reproducing the university as a white public space that centres white fragility. The article highlights two key experiences during Sara's tenure as BAME student representative in a department of anthropology that show how the limits of diversity in higher education are found in the refusal to engage with whiteness.

Keywords: Counter-narrative, white public space, whiteness, diversity

Introduction

In November 2018, I was recruited as the first-ever student Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)[i] department representative at my university. My role was to represent other BAME students within the anthropology department, where I was enrolled as an undergraduate student. The department had created this role with the Students' Union's (SU) support in the context of releasing data which showed a large gap between the attainment of Black, POC[ii], and white students across the University. These 'gaps' prompted the university and its departments to find some sort of solution, one of which, seemingly, was to create a representative voice for BAME identified students at the department level.

In this short essay I, writing with Gabriel, describe and analyse two of my experiences as a BAME department representative. Through these experiences we show how institutions of higher education in the UK, in their attempts to 'represent' diversity, can sideline difficult conversations around institutional racism and racial microaggressions that have multiple, adverse effects on racially minoritised students. If we take diversity to mean a commitment to equalise different positions in the university, sidelining conversations around institutional racism only serves to reproduce the university as a white public space that centres white fragility.

What does the university as a white public space mean? For us, to think about the British university as a white public space is for us to grapple with the fact that only in the last two decades have British higher education institutions set out to explicitly include racially minoritised British students into its folds. This relatively recent move towards inclusion is evidenced in the widening participation policy, a materially incentivized programme established in the early 2000s that was designed to push universities to engage and enroll 'BAME' students.[iii] As a result of the widening participation policy, there has been a significant increase in racially minoritised student enrollment in British higher education.[iv] A large proportion of these students, in this time period that has also seen an steep increase in tuition fees, enroll in higher education institutions – like the one where I was a student - which are not as highly regarded in the public sphere as the 'prestigious' Russell Group universities (Boliver, 2016).[v]

Whilst my university has, over the years, enrolled greater numbers of racially minoritised students, their staff, curriculum, and teaching practices have not reflected these demographic changes. This striking discrepancy - where the student body has significantly shifted whilst the university in academic practice and composition has not - requires us to engage with what Brodkin el al (2011) describe as the spatial dynamics of racialized reproduction. Brodkin et al (2011), writing with regards to the discipline of anthropology in the US, argue that an attention to the reproduction of university space as white reveals the "social construction of institutional spaces and…the implicit and explicit practices, beliefs, and values that govern behavior in them" (545). This spatial

dynamic requires that racially minoritised students entering into a university conform to the practice, beliefs, and norms of white, middle class Britishness (See Daswani, 2019 for a discussion of whiteness as a kind of classed aspiration) as they are particularized in disciplinary formations.

Writing about white public space in relation to my time as BAME Department Representative necessitated that we engage with what Robin D'Angelo (2018) describes as white fragility -- the hostile or defensive reaction that people who have otherwise imagined themselves as unmarked feel when they and the spaces they create are named as white (and classed). My experience shows how any efforts to sincerely represent racially minoritised students and their experiences in ways that draw attention to the social construction of institutional spaces as white and classed, results in white fragility. These moments of fragility, we argue, serve to protect white space and the status quo. They remind us that any diversity initiatives that tokenistically include 'BAME' students will fail unless they seek to radically reconstitute the shared space of the university that requires a reckoning of whiteness and white public space.

This article and its engagement with white public space and white fragility relies on a critical race theory (CRT) framework which posits that racism is profoundly embedded in structures in ways which render it invisible (Hylton, 2012). Whiteness, in this reading, is what becomes visible when racism - embedded in structures and voiced as everyday microaggressions – is called out. Whiteness, when made visible, gives us a clear sense of who the subjects of inclusion are and what the limits of diversity might be. In the CRT literature, one method of making whiteness visible is to foreground the counter-narratives of Black people and people of colour who experience Euro-Western social institutions differently. As Joseph-Salisbury (2019) argues, counter-narratives "emphasise the importance and legitimacy of the experiential knowledge of racially minoritised people" (3). In this article my experience as the BAME representative of an anthropology department stands as a counter-narrative that reveals in specific ways how white public space and white fragility operate in higher education institutions. Moreover, it makes evident the ways in which British social anthropology reproduces itself as a discipline that is resistant to diversity even as it purports itself a purveyor of it.

A brief note regarding our dialogic method of ethnographic recovery and writing for this article: Gabriel and I, in conversation, recalled our memories of the two events documented in this article that transpired whilst I was the BAME Department Representative. Our process of shared remembering began with a short text I wrote reflecting on my experiences, more broadly, in the department and university. Over the course of multiple conversations we, using my original text and social media documentation of the two events, developed the narrative for this article. Whilst we wrote this piece together, we have decided to narrate this account in the first person. The move to centre my voice as the subject who experiences and knows in writing is a political and ethical decision insofar as it doesn't separate my experience from myself as the narrator *of* the experience. Writing in the first person makes central how my counter-narrative –as vital critique – is rooted in embodied experience. However, voicing my experience in the first person does not discount the collaborative and dialogical process that produced this text. In this sense, this article – in its content and its style of narration – offers an example of how one might collaboratively write ethnography that centres the voices of those who experience institutional and everyday racism and amplify their accounts as necessary critique. This critique, to be clear, is not meant to offer solutions but to provide a diagnostic from my position as a Black Muslim woman of how whiteness limits diversity from realizing itself as a vehicle to radically remake the university.

Decentering Anthropology Forum

One of the specific duties that I was suggested to take on in order to fulfill my role as BAME representative in the department of anthropology was to attend and contribute to the Decentering Anthropology Forum. Initially, the forum was imagined as an alternative space to the classroom where we could collectively explore non-Western anthropological traditions and excavate the works of scholars (and non-scholars) whose anthropological contributions have been ignored/obscured/relegated to the margins of our discipline. The space was also, after conversations with staff, thought of as a way to empower racially minoritised students to voice their particular concerns about racism in relation to the curricula and teaching while simultaneously granting the opportunity for staff members to address their concerns. In short, the forum, like my role as BAME representative, was seen as a diversity initiative designed to create inclusion and the possibility of collective decision making around teaching and learning in the department.

Very quickly, however, the forum became a space for white academics in the department to reproduce the university and the discipline as white public space. In the first session of the forum, the staff member who was

charged with taking this initiative forward with me gave a long enthusiastic speech about what decentering anthropology could be. After ending their speech by suggesting that the work that was done in decentering anthropology would become the basis for a new module in the department, several racially minoritised students in attendance voiced frustration. One third year student said, "That's great for the next group of students that come to the department but what about us? What about those of us who are unhappy with the way things are now?" Following this line of questioning, students proposed that the second session of the forum be used to annotate a current course outline of an existing module as a starting point for the discussion about what decentering anthropology, as it is taught, might entail. A senior member of staff in the department graciously volunteered for their course outline to be inspected by students and academics. However, once this process commenced, the very same lecturer refused to engage with their concerns about the Eurocentric reading list. They declared that there is a value to teaching traditional anthropology -what is often called the canon - as a means to develop students' understanding of the discipline.

Questions were raised about the absence of Black and POC anthropologists in the reading lists were immediately cut off. Literally, students who were in the middle of a sentence were interrupted with an apology and an explanation for why things had to be the way they were. What was meant to be a space of discussion, deliberation, and care – where students and staff were on a level playing field – reproduced what I and other Black and POC students experienced in anthropology classroom spaces and what, ultimately, produced the complaints that led to the Decentering Forum in the first place. White anthropologists in the room were unable to receive constructive criticism from Black and POC academics and students and yet, somewhat strangely, were enthusiastic about participating in future forum sessions. This resistance to criticism but enthusiasm to continue the forum exemplifies how white space is reproduced so that racially minoritised students are seen as diversifying simply by being present whilst they are actively discouraged from challenging the status quo. Their enthusiasm, when seen against their unwillingness to take up less space, reveals the ways in which the performance of decentering is often more compelling than a commitment to embodying its premise.

In the third (and final) session of Decentering Anthropology - final because after this session student interest and participation dramatically declined - the same lecturer who shared their reading list offered to put their first year introduction to anthropology lecture slides up for collective scrutiny after it was decided in the first session that decolonising the reading list was only part of the challenge. Students identified that the other key shift that needed to happen for anthropology to change – whether in my university or elsewhere – was to critically engage with how it is taught in the classroom with the view to fundamentally rethink pedagogical strategies. For this session, the staff person I was originally working with to co-host the decentering forum was supposed to bring printed copies of the slides of one of their lectures to distribute to the attendees -so that we could scrutinize it collectively. As the crowd gathered and the minutes passed the lecturer was nowhere to be seen. Finally, after 15 minutes, the lecturer who had, in the previous session shared their reading list, volunteered to pull up their teaching slides on the main screen for us to collectively scrutinize.

When the first lecture slide went up on screen the few students and staff of colour who were present commented that the language of the slide felt violent, especially if we considered that the lecture was geared towards first year, first term students. Terms like "The Other" in the title slide of the presentation, without any context for where and how that term emerged historically, immediately made the racially minoritised students and staff attending the decentering forum uncomfortable. This was despite the fact they had experience with the language of the discipline (most of the students in attendance were 2nd and 3rd year BA students, some were MA students) and were in a supposedly safe space to think through these questions collectively. "What would this sort of language do to first year Black and POC students?" a participant remarked. How would they react? These comments were immediately received by the lecturer who had put themselves under scrutiny with surprise and defensiveness.

My collaborator on this essay, Gabriel, immediately suggested that we break into small groups to think through the issue of language and teaching more carefully. Several white staff who participated in the exercise were openly hostile. When a student discussed how lecturers had to be careful about what they put on slides, one lecturer commented with frustration, "does this mean I have to look over every slide I've made and change each and every word and photo?" Challenging practices by pointing out their normative assumptions of whiteness pushed lecturers into performances of fragility and defensiveness. Whilst a few white staff agreed that we needed to think more carefully about how and what we teach, generally Black and POC students and staff were met with dismissal and an unwillingness to take responsibility.

In retrospect it seems clear that the Decentering Anthropology initiative was bound to fail. It was overburdened from the start. How could one voluntary forum adequately supplement the teaching and learning of core undergraduate modules that neglect to engage with Black and POC anthropologists in the reading list or that fail to address race/racism/racialisation as critical and foundational concepts in anthropology? How could a student-staff forum, alone, offer the possibility for a critical reflection around pedagogy and act as a space to address racialized micro-aggressions and exclusions in the department? Why was a voluntary forum with students thought of as a space to reimagine the core curriculum in the first place? Why weren't staff taking responsibility for doing this work themselves and, in doing so, hiring more Black and POC anthropologists to support them in remaking the department? More importantly, how did they expect me, a 3rd year student at the time, to work through all of these questions and design a space for engagement, even with staff support? The forum, despite its stated goal of decentering the discipline, ultimately, reproduced the university and the discipline as white space. By centering the voices of the predominantly white staff, it reestablished the norms and expectations of whiteness within the forum as well as outside of it. In this sense, as Jafari Allen (2011) has argued, 'decentering' as a progressive project that seeks to recognize colonial histories, in this case embedded within the discipline of anthropology, is bound to fail if it doesn't acknowledge the ways in which the signs, status, and habitus of whiteness have the tendency to be continuously re-centered in the process (48).

BAME Anthropology Report

After the Decentering Anthropology experiment failed, I went ahead and organised a separate event for racially minoritised students in the department. Together, for an afternoon, we discussed our experiences within the anthropology department without the mediation or the interruption of staff. This became a healing space for all of us and, also, became part of what I presented to the department as a draft of the BAME Anthropology Report in January 2019. The report was the culmination of the second component of the work I took up as BAME Representative for the department. I was tasked to research the experiences of 'BAME' Anthropology students. I say agreed upon because there were several meetings with anthropology staff in the autumn of 2018 to discuss the creation of this report and agreement with everyone who was present that this sort of research would be useful. This sort of enthusiasm, however, evaporated as I proceeded to systematically gather accounts from my fellow students about conditions in the department.

With the support of the Students' Union, I recorded structured interviews with over 45 current and fomer racially minoritised students in anthropology. Some of them were one-on-one interviews. Other interviews were held in groups. These groups became spaces to collectively reflect and heal. During the interviews I conducted, several troubling incidents were referenced. Students in these groups notified me of several seminar tutors using the N-word in class. Moreover, they told me that, even when they complained, there were no repercussions. Some students reported that lecturers in the department would spend a duration of a lecture justifying colonialism in the Global South. Some students told me that they were struggling with mental health issues that they felt were linked to the kinds of everyday violence they faced in the department. This violence could be described as small. Little things that were said or done (or not done), that gain force each time you hear them and feel them. Over time they become overwhelming, they made students feel like they were intruders in a space that never imagined they might be a part of in the first place. These small acts of violence have been described, first by African American psychiatrist Chester Pierce (1988), as microaggressions. Microaggressions have been theorized more recently as the everyday interactions that reproduce institutional whiteness while upholding the pernicious idea that the institutions are post-racial, or beyond racism (Holland, 2012:3).

Early on in my research when I met with staff to discuss what I was finding I was encouraged to agree to a different narrative to make sense of what I was hearing. In one instance, I brought up that racially minoritised students told me that they dropped out because they couldn't take the racism in the department anymore because it was impacting their mental health. When I shared this with members of staff, I was told that BAME students were underachieving or leaving the programme due to 'family difficulties' and that the conclusions I had come to were wrong.

Hearing the stories from my peers had a significant impact on *my* health and wellbeing. I didn't feel equipped to handle the responsibility of being the one person that students felt they could speak to in the department. This feeling grew when I shared these stories with staff. Two staff explicitly dismissed out of hand the idea that mental health issues were at all related to the racialized climate of the department. What is more, staff told me that this 'finding' would put students who shared this information with me at risk and that because I wasn't a professional researcher and hadn't gotten ethical approval, gathering this kind of information was a problem.

Research protocol and institutional ethics were used as a reason not to engage with Black and POC student feedback that I had gathered at a personal cost.

In another meeting, I sat with two white women lecturers and shared some of the testimonials I had recorded. When I shared these testimonials, one of the lecturers began to cry and I ended up comforting her. It was only afterwards that I thought about her tears and how they were used as weapons to silence me. It was ironic that I was selected to be the spokesperson for all Black and POC students in the department and yet in these instances, when I brought up their (and my) struggles with race in the department, I was put in a position where I had to comfort and protect a white scholar's feelings. This interaction between myself and the white lecturer links to the positioning of white femininity in the reproduction of white public space. Historically, white woman's' tears have been used strategically as a method to silence the conversation around institutional racism, while simultaneously maintaining the whiteness of institutional spaces (Ameeriar, 2017).

In other meetings, when I brought up the issues I was hearing from my fellow students, I felt like I immediately became the aggressor and was no longer seen as a student in the eyes of the white lecturers who I was speaking to but just an angry Black Muslim Woman. In one situation, two lecturers/members of staff in the department sat on either side of me and told me to explain to them what a microaggression was or what intersectionality was because they claimed to have never heard of it and, for that matter, didn't feel these concepts were useful to engage with. One white lecturer explained to me that intersectionality was not useful because if they couldn't explain what it meant to-their grandmother then it wasn't a relevant concept. Intersectionality, to them, was academic jargon. I felt I was aggressively forced to perform theory in order to justify the contents of the report I wished to share with them in order to create meaningful change in the department. All I got in return was hostility and dismissal. All of these moments, to reiterate, reinforced my experience of the department and the university as hostile white spaces where any challenge to norms were met with fragility and small acts of aggression.

My Resignation Letter

It had become clear to me, after all this, that the creation of the role of BAME representative was a method to shield the department and the institution from the consequences of their racism rather than a sincere effort to create inclusion. In taking the role I intended to speak up for students of colour unapologetically. I was immediately met with hostility and restricted from doing so. Audre Lorde (1978) declared, in the context of Black struggle "when we speak, we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So, it is better to speak" (Lorde:1995). Yet, my speech as a representative of Black and POC students in the department was being ignored. I decided to resign immediately because I did not want to continue to participate in a situation that was only perpetuating the problem. I emailed the department notifying them of my resignation, and after weeks of no response, I received an email stating "thank you for your letter of resignation." It was just that one line.

The anthropology departments' one-line response to my resignation via email prompted me to go public and offer my account of the story as the first-ever BAME representative. Around this time, I, along with a group of Black, POC, and white students from across the campus, had begun an anti-racist occupation of one of the key administrative buildings on campus. My voice, whilst silenced in the anthropology department, had been amplified in collective action with my comrades. Together, we demanded the institution address the multiple layers of racism that have sedimented on campus over the years. Using the occupations channels of communication, I broadcast an account of my experiences as the first BAME representative in the history of my university. The Student Union (SU) at my institution followed up, publishing a statement on their website, adding their own critiques.

After the SU statement, the anthropology department sent me, the other anthropology representatives, and SU sabbatical officers an apology note. In the note, I wasn't even addressed in the greeting and spoken about in the third person in the email text. Upon receiving this email of apology, one of the SU sabbatical officers who was directly addressed in the email, responded by saying that the private apology wasn't sufficient and what was needed was a public apology and an action plan on how the department planned to change their practices. The anthropology department then responded to those who were included on the email as a gesture of publicness (they hadn't done this in their prior response). They also stated that they would visit the occupation to begin a conversation on next steps. I mention these correspondences in some detail because I think they show, quite clearly, the ways in which whiteness prevents its own scrutiny and, only through a public insistence to be taken

seriously, did anything shift. Even then the apology wasn't directed to me and didn't acknowledge harm in any sort of meaningful way. As Sara Ahmed (2021) notes, reflecting on institutionally rendered apologies, "apologies that do not recognise harm can be experienced as empty or meaningless by those who receive them."

The anthropology department visit to the occupation took place in late March of 2019. Several white staff members, along with my co-writer, Gabriel, walked into the space of the occupation. One senior staff member who had been at the centre of many of the difficult moments I had as BAME representative brought me a bunch of flowers and hugged me. We proceeded to sit in a circle and began a conversation that, inevitably, created the opportunity for two white staff to perform, once again, white fragility and defensiveness. One staff member started their engagement by saying racism was subjective -- and was quickly corrected by occupation members who taught them that to think of race as subjective is to miss the historical legacy that produces institutional racism and creates the conditions for very different experiences of the institution in the first place. Another staff member talked nervously for a long stretch, defending problematic positions around the politics of racial inequality in the UK. The room was silent and their words lost the power that they might have otherwise had in another setting. Other staff from the department contributed meaningfully to the conversation and, in the end, one staff member wrote action points down for next steps. That meeting, because it took place in the space of an anti-racist occupation, disrupted the white space of the institution with its norms, practices, and power dynamics. Lecturers who otherwise wouldn't have recognised or been made accountable for their defensiveness, were forced to listen.

Conclusion

As we close in on publishing this piece, the action steps that the department suggested they push forward on that day during the occupation – Black and POC led conversations on race in the department, decolonising seminars, and so on – have been initiated under the banner of a department Anti-Racism Committee, but have yet to take root. Most of the occupations' demands that were won have yet to be fulfilled by the university. What does all of this tell us about what Sara Ahmed (2012) calls diversity work in the university? I was hired as the BAME department representative to be a student diversity worker. Yet, it is clear my role was a tokenized one. Any meaningful engagement or feedback I provided was met with resistance and worry because it marked the space of anthropology and of the university as a white public space. Yet, the role on paper allowed the department and the university to narrate themselves as progressive and in step with the needs of their student body. It allowed staff to feel, at least until I started raising 'trouble,' that they were on the right side of things.

Once I started raising trouble, it was easier to make me a problem to be managed and then let me go rather than address the issues that I raised. Here Sara Ahmed's words regarding (institutional) racism and its relationship to diversity talk are instructive. She writes, "diversity is a mask… when it slips, racism is given freer expression. Note then: a complaint can bring out what a complaint is about" (Ahmed, 2020). In other words, by raising complaints and calling attention to whiteness, I created the conditions for racism to be given free expression. It was only when collective action, under the banner of an anti-racist occupation, ensued that the issues I had raised in the department warranted a response of any sort. Given that my university's student population is, at present, composed of almost 50% BAME identifying students, it seems evident that the work to create an inclusive space cannot simply be tokenistic. It requires a commitment to confront the whiteness head on if there is a possibility of real change. Of course, this applies equally to institutions that have a smaller representation of Black and POC students. It's not the number, ultimately, that should matter but rather a commitment to radical inclusivity through a critical engagement with whiteness.

In British social anthropology, diversity, as the editors of this special issue point out in their call for papers, has been one of the disciplines "core ethnographic concerns and key sources of conceptual excitement." From a critical historical perspective, the core interest in diversity within the discipline might be imagined as an enduring impetus to see, understand, and manage from afar through the white gaze. Whilst there have been ongoing critiques of this orientation and efforts to disrupt the white gaze in ethnographic research, the discipline continues to create teaching and learning spaces where whiteness is taken as the norm. Students are imagined as white listeners and practicing and teaching anthropologists are imagined as white speakers. How can the discipline reimagine itself so that this is not the case? Our answer is that it must reflexively confront its own whiteness in pedagogical spaces and find ways to mitigate it.

I take a pessimistic view on whether the university and the discipline are capable of doing this work. Even writing this piece feels like an exercise that is bound for white consumption and, potentially, white denial. What

does she mean by racism? How is what she is describing, racist? It's my hope that the counter-narrative we have written pushes the white, middle class reader (who we imagine is normally the audience for anthropology journals) to confront themselves honestly and ask themselves about their own complicity in maintaining this space in the university and in the discipline of anthropology. It's also my hope that this piece circulates in ways that provide comfort, relief, and hope to Black and POC students studying anthropology in the UK and beyond who might read this special issue and this essay and feel inspired and seen when they encounter someone that is speaking truth to power.

Notes

[i] BAME is a uniquely British racial category that lumps together various experiences of racialised difference into a singular experience, in effect obscuring whiteness as the category that gives it shape. Recently there has been push back on the public and socio-scientific use of the category. See, for instance, https://blackbritishacademics.co.uk/about/racial-categorisation-and-terminology/ We use this term as a shorthand to at once point to the category as it is used in institutional parlance and to complicate it as it appears in dialogue and friction with other racial categories of (self) identification – Black, people of colour (POC), and the term racially minoritised.

[ii] POC stands for People of Colour. The term originates in the US and has, in recent years, been picked up in the UK. It has problematized as a limited and problematic racial category that obscures particular experiences of anti-Blackness and also limits the capacity to apprehend whiteness.

[iii] https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/WideningParticipation-2011(Online).pdf

[iv] https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/a-levels-apprenticeships-further-education/further-education-participation/latest

[v] The Russell Group are a consortium of 24 British Universities. When founded in 1994, the group consisted of 18 universities with the mission to protect their interests as the 'most prestigious' research intensive universities in the UK. https://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/our-universities/

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