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## Impossible visibilities of Black and Global Majority staff at an ethnically diverse English university

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# Impossible visibilities of Black and Global Majority staff at an ethnically diverse English university

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores how Black and Global Majority faculty at an English university with an ethnically diverse student population perceive race and racism on campus. Informed by a theoretical framework drawing on Critical Race theory (CRT), CRT methodology and critical whiteness studies, we adopt counter-narrative story telling as a method of analysis. This research foregrounds BGM faculty's everyday experiences of racism in their professional lives and the "normalization" of racism in this setting. Through the construction of composite counter-stories (CCS) the experiences convey how BGM staff are simultaneously "othered" and "unseen". This complex duality of hypervisibility and invisibility reveals subtle and insidious undercurrents of racism that frame the participants' lived realities and ways everyday racism is enacted at institutional and individual levels. Although instances of "overt" racism are rare, these counter-narratives highlight ways institutional racism is perpetuated through white supremacist social and bureaucratic norms.

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Institutional racism;  
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Black and Global Majority (BGM)<sup>1</sup> academics experience multiple forms of racism in their everyday professional contexts in universities in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) nations (Heinrich, 2020). In countries such as the US and UK, BGM faculty are rarely the "majority" and are often working in pre-dominantly white institutions (PWIs). PWIs in academia have been found to often represent hostile spaces for BGM faculty and their experiences in PWIs have been associated with low retention and limited career progression (Chambers & Freeman, 2020; Ford, 2023; Haynes et al., 2020). Drawing on a small-scale qualitative dataset, this article explores the experiences of Black and Global Majority (BGM) faculty at an ethnically diverse English university of race and racism on their campus. We employ Critical Race Theory methodology to construct composite counter-stories (CCS) as the method of analysis to foreground the quotidian experiences of racism in their daily working lives. This research confirms previous findings that BGM faculty experience multiple forms of racism in their everyday professional contexts and adds to the literature on the implications in the UK higher education sector. Participants in this study recount experiences of racism in covert and overt ways through interactions with colleagues, students, leaders and institutional processes. We find that BGM faculty experience a complex duality of hypervisibility and invisibility within their daily work, which we refer to as

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“impossible visibilities” as a representation of their positioning in the institutionally racist university sector in England. We use the terms BGM and faculty of color interchangeably in this article.

## Background and context of BGM faculty in UK higher education

Higher education (HE) in the UK has engaged in formal attempts to advance race equality since the Equality Act in 2010. The Equality Act is the current anti-discrimination law in England and serves as the legal basis of protecting individuals from various forms of discrimination in the workplace and broader society (Gov.UK, 2010). HE targets include increased numbers of students from BGM backgrounds attending universities and better representation of and equal pay for BGM faculty (HEFCE, 2017). Despite this, institutional racism in higher education is “endemic” (Sian, 2019, p. 3) and underscores maintenance of the “somatic norm” (Puwar, 2004) where white, heterosexual male bodies are idealised as the norm.

Similar to other WEIRD nations, the UK governmental leaders and governmental discourses have been critiqued for resisting acknowledgement of institutional and structural racial oppression and white supremacy and the myriad ways racial inequities are pervasive in UK society (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019; Pilkington, 2021). Despite activism to tackle institutional, structural and systemic racism and other forms of oppression in HE, there remains low representation of BGM faculty in English universities (HESA 2019-20, 2020), with only 41 Black female full professors out of 22,000 in the UK (Women’s Higher Education Network, 2023) and disproportionately high numbers of BGM faculty on short term contracts (Mahony & Weiner, 2020; Rollock, 2021).

Since the Equality Act (2010), several organizations have developed tools and reports centred on addressing racism in UK higher education. In 2016, Advance (2016) HE’s Race Equality Charter (REC) was developed as a framework for universities to address institutionalized racism, yet this has been critiqued for enabling acts of performative inclusion while doing little to address systemic racial inequalities (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Doharty et al., 2020). In 2019, the UK Office for Students report found that across UK universities, there was a “lack of discussion of racism and discrimination as well as insufficient or ineffective mechanisms to capture disclosures of implicit racial bias and/or discrimination” (p. 7). The lack of clear policies, procedures, or structures for reporting and addressing racist or discriminatory incidents on campuses was further substantiated by findings by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) (2019) report. These studies concluded that there was little evidence that universities had adequate structures and procedures to address reported incidents. Furthermore, reported incidents of discrimination were often not acted upon effectively, if at all, and many were dismissed with no action. Also, student and staff respondents indicated under-reporting of incidents due to concerns that nothing would be done or the potential of negative consequences for the complainant, yet universities were generally “overconfident in their complaint handling processes” (p. 10). The EHRC (2019) report concluded that UK universities are “not only out of touch with the extent that racism is occurring on their campuses, some are completely oblivious to the issue” (p. 10).

In the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police in the US in 2020 that “re-energized Black Lives Matter movements in the UK” (Pilkington, 2021, p. 384), combined with public pressure to account for widespread racial disproportionality in COVID-19 fatalities, two key publications influenced discourse on race and racism in UK higher education. Firstly, Universities UK (the “collective voice” for UK Higher Education institutions influencing policy and practice) published a “toolkit” of recommendations for UK universities to put in place to “support universities in delivering long-term change in institutional culture and behaviours... to address racial harassment and make our universities safe places to work and study” (UUK, 2020, p. 2). Secondly, the highly controversial UK government commissioned Sewell Report (2021) was critiqued for downplaying the prevalence and systematic and institutional nature of racism in the UK (Olusoga, 2021; Pilkington, 2021); essentially rejecting the existence of institutional racism (IR) and viewing racism as rooted in individuals or the “failures” of specific communities. In light of this report’s claims, and the other reports and initiatives discussed, the “racial equality landscape”

within UK HE seems rife with contradictions, half-hearted attempts at anti-racism and narratives that deny the existence of IR and white supremacy, therefore resulting in the preservation and perpetuation of racism and the normalization of whiteness.

### Critical race theory, whiteness and institutional racism

To uncover the nuanced experiences of BGM faculty and their perspectives of race and racism on campus, we adopted Critical Race Theory (CRT) as our overarching framework (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT is an approach that “offers a lens through which to make sense of, deconstruct and challenge racial inequality in society” (Rollock & Gillborn, 2011), exposing how racial inequalities are perpetuated through the operation of structures and beliefs (Rollock & Gillborn, 2011). CRT affirms the centrality of race and racism such that racism is endemic and “normalized”, and more recent feminist iterations have recognized the intersections with other structural inequalities such as gender, class and sexuality (Collins, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), with the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) particularly powerful in documenting how structures of race are embedded with other forms of power.

The basic tenets or principles of CRT include: (1) race is socially constructed; (2) racism is normalized/permanence of racism; (3) interest convergence or material determinism (4) intersectionality and anti-essentialism; (5) voice or counter-narrative; (6) critique of liberalism and color-blindness; (7) social change (Bell, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Dixon, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2016).

Inherent in CRT framings is the notion of White supremacy (WS), which “describes a historically contingent system of power in which White people disproportionately have access to power and privilege at the expense of racially minoritised people” (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019, p. 4). WS and the normalization of whiteness is enacted and “daily re-enacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings” (Ansley, 1989, p. 993). CRT provides a lens for scholarship to reveal how structural WS continues to define our society (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). The normalization of whiteness in general and within the academy specifically is so embedded as to be difficult to “see” or recognize, and therefore, perpetuates itself and those with racialized power feel threatened and dismissive of attempts to disrupt or dismantle the systems that preserve their privileged position (see also Pilkington, 2011).

Central to this framing is the concept of institutional racism (IR). IR has often disputed and contested definitions; however we understand it as a systemic phenomenon in contrast to explanations of racial inequality as a product of individual-level racism, conscious or otherwise (see Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967; Gillborn, 2006). IR refers to “particular and general instances of racial discrimination, inequality, exploitation and domination in organisational or institutional contexts, such as the labour market or the nation-state” (Clair & Denis, 2015, p. 861). Here, macrostructural processes provide better explanations of contemporary racial inequality compared to individual acts (Clair & Denis, 2015). Bonilla-Silva (2006) work on racialized social systems illustrates how political, economic and social arrangements are structured by racial hierarchy and perpetuated by “color-blind” ideology. The very “normalization” and “everyday-ness” of racism “originates in the operation of established and respected forces in society and thus receives far less public condemnation” (p. 112).

The experiences of overt and covert forms of racism by BGM faculty can be understood as “racial microaggressions” (Pierce et al., 1977) and “mundane extreme environmental stress” (MEES) (Carroll, 1998). Racial microaggressions are defined as layered, subtle and cumulative insults directed at people of color while privileging White people (Smith et al., 2006). They can be categorized into three groups, *microassaults*, *microinsults* and *microinvalidations* (Sue et al., 2007). *Microassaults* include overtly racist interactions such as a racist slur being directed at a person of color. This is a *microassault* as it is not a physical assault but includes “often conscious...explicit racial derogations characterized primarily by a violent verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim

through name-calling, avoidant behaviour or purposeful discriminatory actions" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 278). *Microinsults* include interactions that subtly "demean a person's racial heritage or identity" (p. 274) and include statements that faculty of color are less qualified. Other examples of *microinsults* include nonverbal interactions when a White teacher ignores students of color in the classroom (Sue et al., 2007) and are described as "subtle snubs...that clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient of color" (p.274). *Microinvalidations* refer to experiences where White people dismiss people of color's realities as "racial hypersensitivity" denying experiences of racism and racial oppression (Pittman, 2012; Sue et al., 2007). Examples of *microinvalidations* include when a person of color is asked where they are from, implying they are not from "here" (Sue et al., 2007).

Racial microaggressions can have a profound impact on the mental, physical and emotional health of BGM people, often resulting in "racial battle fatigue" (RBF) (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2016). RBF is defined as the accumulation of stress associated with racial microaggressions (and macroaggressions) experienced by people of color (Smith, 2004). RBF is characterized as "the cumulative psychosocial-physiological impact of racial micro and macroaggressions on racially marginalized targets" (Smith et al., 2016, p.1192). RBF is experienced by people of color individually and collectively because they are part of a racially oppressed group. RBF often manifests as frustration, exhaustion, stress, strain, discomfort (physical and emotional), and feelings of loss (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2016). Research on RBF amongst BGM faculty and students in historically white universities in the US finds that BGM participants report these settings as hostile, detrimental contexts that not only perpetuate IR and white supremacy but have profoundly devastating consequences for people of color (Franklin, 2016; Smith et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2016). Related to RBF is the concept of "cultural taxation" (Padilla, 1994), a concept to understand the additional workload and tasks given to faculty of color because of their racial/ethnic backgrounds. These additional tasks, such as creating and championing diversity policies and initiatives and mentoring BGM students specifically, are a particular burden placed on faculty of color as part of their hidden and unacknowledged responsibilities to serve the university. This "taxation" and extra workload may contribute to RBF in that it puts additional racialized stress on BGM faculty.

We also draw on Puwar's (2004) concept of "space invaders" to consider the privilege of whiteness and White bodies within traditionally White, male-dominated spaces such as universities, and the "othering" of non-White bodies present in these spaces. People of color who are "othered" in these White spaces stand out, feeling they are out of place, and are made to feel "uncomfortable, exposed, visible and different" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 157). The experience of being a space invader resonates with the Duboisian concept of "double consciousness" (Du Bois, 1903). Du Bois (1903) describes the experiences of people of color as "two polarizing identities residing in one body... and thus fated to view themselves through two polarizing lenses: the black experience and the perceptions of the white world" (Welang, 2018, p. 297).

### **Research on the experiences of BGM faculty in the UK**

Experiences of racism, prejudice, and discrimination (in various forms) in academia are commonplace for BGM faculty in the UK and mirrors the research findings in other countries. BGM faculty experience differential treatment, isolation and being treated like "outsiders" in the white dominated space of the academy (Arday, 2018; Arday & Mirza, 2018; Bhopal, 2022). BGM faculty also report a lack of effort on the part of institutions and departments to recruit more BGM candidates, support retention of current BGM staff, or career promotion (Bhopal, 2018; Joseph-Salisbury, 2019; Rollock, 2021). This perceived lack of commitment and support demoralizes BGM faculty and leads to increased feelings of job dissatisfaction, alienation, and desire to leave the institution (Bhopal, 2018; Bhopal et al., 2016; Rollock, 2021).

BGM faculty in the UK Higher Education Sector report experiencing everyday racism in the form of micro- and macro-aggressions (Arday, 2018; Bhopal, 2022). The lived realities of BGM

faculty can be marred by a constant experience of racial microaggressions, which are “direct consequences of lamentable structures of inequality manifest in the curriculum, teaching force and institutional policies and procedures” (Doharty et al., 2020, p. 9). Decolonising efforts have also been critiqued for “adopting the work of a few racially minoritized groups but exploitatively draining the useful parts of their scholarship to meet institutional metrics” (p. 10) and, as a result, perpetuate the status quo (Doharty et al., 2020).

BGM education faculty in the UK also experience being both “hypervisible” and “invisible” depending on the social context (Lander & Santoro, 2017; see also Mahony & Weiner, 2020). Lander and Santoro (2017) highlight experiences of surveillance and scrutiny by White colleagues, leadership, and students because of their race, as a form of “hypervisibility” experienced by BGM faculty in the white-dominated and white “normalised” space of academe. Hypervisibility may also manifest as an “othering” of BGM members of staff in white-dominated spaces to assert white supremacy or “normalise whiteness” (Lander & Santoro, 2017, p. 1012). In addition to race being hypervisible in these ways, race is also downplayed and ignored at core moments as well—conceptualized as invisibility. Lander and Santoro (2017) use the example of taking a “color-blind” stance as a way of rendering BGM faculty invisible and negating their identity; emphasizing this invisibility as this stance “fails to acknowledge how color *does* shape lived experience.[and] can also mean the effects of racism go unacknowledged” (p. 1012). Invisibility may be experienced as indifference, dismissiveness, and being overlooked that often coexists or co-occurs with hypervisibility. People of color are “made” hypervisible and invisible, alternatingly, or concurrently, by being present in White-dominated spaces and institutions. They are made aware of how they are perceived and received within the White power structure and by individuals with that privilege, who wield that power. This duality requires complex and careful navigation of these spaces, creating an additional layer of stress and expending of emotional and psychological energy. These experiences reveal how White supremacy and institutional and structural racism operate to maintain a volatile environment for BGM faculty.

## Methodology

The research project utilized a qualitative approach to examine perspectives on race and racism at an ethnically diverse English university. CRT informed not only the theoretical grounding but also the methodology in terms of the importance of the voices of people of color, storytelling and experiential knowledge (Cook, 2013; Cook & Dixon, 2013; Hylton, 2012). CRT emphasizes the use of *counter*-narratives that challenge the erasure of people of color’s voices in dominant understandings of the social world (Solorzano & Yosso, 2016). Counter-narratives “provide an opportunity to challenge, contest and disrupt dominant ideologies” (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019, p. 3) and may shed light on ways institutional and structural racism operates within this specific context.

We obtained ethical approval from the relevant university Human Research Ethics Committee for this study. Participants were recruited through staff meetings, emails, and other university announcement platforms, and totalled 15 staff. There were 6 BGM faculty participants. The participants were from a range of backgrounds including Asian (4), Black-British (1), Mixed heritage Asian/White (1). Participants had been employed at this university from between 2 and 8 years. Student views were also garnered as part of the study but are not included here.

## Positionality

As researchers engaging in CRT and counter-storytelling methodology and collecting data from BGM staff in UK HE who represent marginalized populations, our positionalities have influenced our analyses and development of the CCS. CRT presents opportunities for researchers to “operate in a self-revelatory mode, to acknowledge the double (or multiple) consciousness in which she or he is operating” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 272). Therefore, we aim to be explicit about our positionalities

and critically reflect on the implications of our race, gender, class and other forms of privilege and marginalization that may shape our analyses and how racism “pervades even our own attitudes and behaviours as scholar-educators concerned with social justice” (Hauber-Özer et al., 2023, p. 2).

The first co-author is a mixed-ethnicity, lesbian woman from the US with a background in teaching in US urban public high schools, and an educational researcher in the US and UK focused on issues of equity and access to education for marginalized groups of students. As a “white presenting” Global North academic this may have influenced how candid participants were in the interviews. Her orientation and analysis are informed by institutional, structural and systemic racism in a US context and how this is enacted and embedded in educational and professional contexts.

The second author is an established, high ranking professor of race and education in the UK. She is a heterosexual, British woman of color and a recognized expert in the study of race and racism in UK education systems.

The third author is an established professor of social sciences. He is a British, white gay man. His past research has focused on sexuality and gender, including the experiences of LGBT communities in a variety of settings, including schools.

## Methods

The data was collected as part of a larger research project conducted at an urban English university. For the original project, both students and staff were recruited to take part in semi-structured interviews, focus groups and a questionnaire regarding their views on race and their perspectives and experiences of racism on campus. The interview questions and questionnaire items were co-designed by the authors and informed by CRT. Staff and students were recruited through campus-wide email announcements. Interested staff and students were given an email to contact if they wished to participate. Interview and focus group questions included “has your race or ethnicity impacted your experience at this university?”, “is racism a problem at this university?”, etc.

## Analysis

In order to construct the composite counter-stories that reflect CRT as method and stay true to the tenets of CRT, we followed established processes (Cook, 2013; Cook & Dixson, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2016). Composite counter-stories use narrative as a tool to emphasize the voices of those at the margins of society. We employ composite counter-storytelling as a “critical race methodological tool” to illuminate the ways race and racism “affect the lives of racial minorities in education” (Cook, 2013, p. 182).

In order to not “homogenize” the composite counter-stories or misrepresent the complexities of individual participants’ experiences, we engaged in close reading of the interview transcripts. This included identifying themes across the individual transcripts regarding participants’ experiences of race and racism in their professional roles and at the university. The major themes from the data were cross-checked by the research team. In accordance with CCS development processes, these themes were analysed based on their correspondence to the tenets of CRT and provided the foundation for the composite CCS. Additionally, we developed individual counter-stories for participants before developing “composite characters” (Cook, 2013). This supported staying “close” to the data, grounding our CCS in the data, and “creating a three-dimensional image of the participants” (p. 188).

Developing the composite counter-narratives from the individual counter-stories involved ensuring that “the link between the original data and the final story” (Willis, 2019, p. 474) is clear and involved a rigorous method. Based on the described methods for developing CCS, we followed these steps (see Cook, 2013; Cook & Dixson, 2013; Willis, 2019):



1. Each composite narrative is based on transcripts from interviews, 2-3 transcripts are condensed into each composite narrative.
2. Direct quotations come from these interview transcripts.
3. Each individual interview and transcription were coded first for themes and the “story” of each individual was created before developing composites.
4. Identifying personal details have been changed to further preserve anonymity.
5. Common themes and intersecting stories across the transcripts were used to create the foundation for each composite narrative.

The development of the CCS aims to be “three-dimensional” and convey “richer, more detailed stories that place our stories in more robust and powerful contexts” (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. 117). These CCS are grounded in empirical data, not fictional accounts (Solorzano & Yosso, 2016). They focus on privileging experiential knowledge, a central tenet of CRT, and attempt to “capture collective history and experience with racist structures...drawing attention to how individual experiences are representative of collective experiences” (Cook, 2013, p. 191). We also chose composite narratives to further preserve the anonymity of the participants and to reduce the likelihood of identification (Cook & Dixson, 2013) and to honour and illuminate the shared experiences of BGM faculty through narrative as tool of CRT to dismantle hegemonic discourse and knowledge (Cook, 2013). This approach also allows us to present important data while protecting the identity of participants, given the relatively small number of people of color working as academics at this university (see Cook & Dixson, 2013).

Applying this method, we created three composite narratives from 6 interview transcripts. Several different groupings of composites and alternate versions were developed and considered. The final composites were chosen to convey the range of experience, years in the field, time at the institution and range of views and perceptions revealed in the data. Moreover, we wanted to ensure the themes across the data were “shown rather than told” (Cook, 2013, p. 190) in the CCS.

## **Findings**

We identified five major themes in the data, including hypervisibility/invisibility, judicious resistance (strategic action and “picking one’s battles”), futility, organizational denial/inaction, and the pervasiveness of racial micro- and macroaggressions. Participants in this study recount experiences of covert and overt forms of racism. These experiences demonstrate ways racial micro-aggressions and macro-aggressions are enacted in various contexts and by various actors. Specifically, when BGM faculty raise concerns about racial discrimination, these micro- and macro-aggressions take the form of dismissiveness of the individual BGM faculty members and a denial of racism/IR and lack of action by the leadership of the university. These micro- and macro-aggressions are also experienced by BGM faculty through daily interactions with White colleagues and White students. We find that faculty of colour experience a complex duality of hypervisibility and invisibility within their daily work.

## **Critical race theory as methodology: composite counter stories (CCS)**

### ***Ayana: hypervisibility/invisibility and resistance***

As a Black-British woman, Ayana is one of very few Black faculty in her department and expects a certain amount of prejudice and discrimination from the leadership, her White colleagues and White students. She is used to having eyebrows raised when she walks into a meeting or experiencing some odd looks from White students on the first day of class. She is used to being mistaken for a secretary or a dining hall worker. Ayana knows she must work harder than her

White colleagues to maintain her position and much harder if she wants to advance in her career. She is used to being one of the only Black people in a faculty meeting and being ignored, except when discussions of race, diversity, “decolonising” the curriculum, or racial inequalities come up. It is then that she is stared at and expected to champion these issues as a “spokesperson”.

Ayanna does not expect things to be much different. Things change, but slowly. Even though her White colleagues seem oblivious or wilfully ignorant, she is aware that she stands out and is a jarring presence in the “White space” of the university. Ayanna knows she is not part of the culture of “white clique privileges” or the “power circle” in her department and she never will be. She is reminded daily of her “difference” and has become somewhat inured to it. She doesn’t “accept” it but knows she cannot be outraged every minute of the day. So, Ayanna focuses on the things that she can control and things that bring her joy.

One of the best things about her job is that she can see the positive impact she has on her Black students, precisely because of who she is and her ethnicity. These students seek her out for advice, and she is able to provide them support they don’t seem to get from elsewhere in the university.

Ayanna picks her battles, and one of these is student evaluations. Heading back to her office from meeting with her Head of Department, Ayanna felt that she had not been heard. The evaluations on her teaching were shared with her, and they were below the department average again. “They do have more experience than me”, she thought of some of the White men who had scored particularly highly, “but I’ve been doing this for 9 years and I know I’m good at my job”. This wasn’t the first time either, but consistent over several years. She worked hard to improve her teaching but none of her efforts have resulted in a change in her evaluations. It was only when she looked closely at specific items on the evaluations that she realised she scored the same or higher than her White peers in several aspects, but the final overall score was always lower.

She has repeatedly asked for consideration about racial bias in her teaching evaluations. She does not want her reputation marred by racial bias, conscious or unconscious, or by students who have never had a Black lecturer and cannot imagine they could be as good, or better, than a White lecturer. The responses to her concerns have been patronizing. “Oh yes, of course, we take that into consideration” is what she is told. She is given the polite brush-off by White leaders who do not know how to address the problem, and who still require teaching evaluations in staff review and promotion criteria. Ayanna thinks they hope she will forget about it, or if nothing changes, she will eventually give up questioning the evaluation process.

In Ayanna’s counternarrative, she is rendered both invisible and hypervisible in the same encounter. She is hypervisible through the differences in her evaluation performance both as she is evaluated by students and when the results are shared. Hypervisibility is also evident through the acknowledgment by her manager of accounting for racial bias as a possible factor in evaluations, an illustration of the “behind the scenes” acknowledgement of institutional and structural racism in some informal way and how Ayanna is “different” from the norm. She is also made invisible through the experience of raising her concerns and being politely rebuffed. Her concerns are not acted upon in meaningful ways communicating that these concerns are not a priority. This illustrates how institutional power is used to silence her concerns and maintain the status quo.

Ayanna is also rendered hypervisible in her experiences of being perceived as “less” than her White colleagues in terms of student evaluations. The differences in her evaluation performance in some ways “singles her out” and re-emphasizes her position as one of few Black lecturers. Her racial identity becomes a central feature of “difference” in her evaluations. These purportedly “race-neutral” evaluations of teaching and modules by students seem emblematic of racial discrimination and bias on the part of students, unconscious or not. Ayanna can do little to “prove” that the differences in her evaluations from her White peers is likely a result of “normalised” racism and not a reflection of her “actual” teaching. The only way she can demonstrate these

discrepancies is through her close scrutiny of the individual items on the evaluations. The burden is on Ayanna to prove the bias rather than on the institution to rectify such biases by adopting different forms of evaluation that may provide a fairer perception from students. This illustrates the very challenge with uncovering everyday racism. Ayanna “knows” this is deeply unfair and not an accurate reflection of her modules or teaching and that racial bias plays a role in her lower ratings, yet it is difficult to demonstrate how these forms of institutionalised racism are operating precisely because they are normalised. She demonstrates her resistance to the racial micro- and macro-aggressions by challenging her evaluations.

The lack of meaningful responses to her concerns are forms of “microinsults”. The inaction to investigate taken for granted, so-called “neutral” institutional processes and the polite brush offs constitute microinsults and may have potentially devastating impacts on her professional reputation or how she is perceived by her colleagues.

Ayanna’s experiences with raising concerns about the differential evaluations demonstrates processes of invisibility in the workplace. Her concerns are noted but nothing seems to change. This conveys a sense that her concerns are not considered important and little action is taken to address them. In some ways, through the vignette, she implies that she is politely ignored. This is not direct or overt, but her concerns are side-lined or overlooked, an example of a “microinvalidation” that manifests in invisibility.

This CCS also illustrates positive experiences that faculty of color have with students of color. This is reflected in much of the research on students of color’s experiences in higher education and the importance of having mentors of color to support them (Caplan & Ford, 2014; Brown & Dobbins, 2004). Ayanna reflects the enjoyment she derives from and critical support she provides to students of color as she has personal understandings of their experiences in the White space of the academy. These experiences with students are edifying to her and seem to help to sustain her in some ways as she navigates the obstacles of her work life. Yet, this “invisible” work Ayanna performs that perhaps improves BGM student progression and retention goes unrecognized. This “invisible” work adds to Ayanna’s invisibility in the department.

### ***James: an “incident”, racial micro- and macro-aggressions and RBF***

Wednesdays are long for James. As he packs up his things, he is thinking about the last student he met with today. She is a British-born Black student in her 20s. She told him about some negative interaction with one of his White colleagues, including confusing her with another Black student and calling her the wrong name. She expressed feeling grateful that he is her tutor because as a BGM staff member he “gets it”.

James is reflecting on the interaction as he walks towards the car park, across campus, in the dark. He is frustrated about what his student has told him. He is glad that his BGM students feel comfortable to come to him and talk about these things, but he is not sure what to do or how to change the culture of the department.

Lost in thought, he almost walks his old route. He goes the long way because he cannot bring himself to walk past the residence hall. About two months ago, when he was walking to his car after dark, a few White, female students, were standing on a balcony on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of the building. James wasn’t really paying attention. He heard the chatting and giggling, but didn’t look up, until he was struck by an object on his head.

After being hit by the object, James was a bit stunned. He reached up and touched his head where he was struck to see if he was bleeding. His heart was racing. He looked up and saw the four White girls laughing. He yelled up at them, “What are you doing? Don’t you realise that throwing things off your balcony is dangerous?” They giggled more, went inside, closed the sliding glass door, and pulled the curtains. James bent down to pick up his glasses. They were broken. He was shaking a little bit, but mostly he was angry. He looked around for the object

that hit him, but he couldn't find it. It felt like something solid, maybe plastic, but heavy enough to leave a bump. Luckily, he was very close to the security office. He headed over there and reported the incident. One of the security guards, a middle-aged White man, asked him to show him where this happened. They walked together and James pointed out the balcony. The security guard kept asking about what he was hit with. James explained, several times, that he couldn't find it. The security guard gave a cursory look around in the grass and by the road, but also didn't find anything. Back at the security office, James was adamant that he wanted to officially report the incident and wanted security to go and knock on the students' room. The security guard kept asking if James is "sure" about the incident? Couldn't it have been an accident? Frustrated, James was now very late to get home.

He left the security office with little confidence that they would get to the bottom of this incident. As he drove home he played the sequence of events over in his mind. He felt certain that it wasn't an accident. He felt very raw about the whole experience, angry, as he beat the steering wheel with his fist. He asked himself, "why am I so angry?" It was because this was racially motivated. There is no way those girls would have done this to a White staff member. They thought they could get away with it. He began composing an email in his head to his line manager, the Vice Chancellor's office, and other university leadership bodies about the incidence. Something has to be done about this!

In the subsequent days and weeks, very little is done. Security and the university leadership say they can't "find" the students who threw something at him. They cannot find the object. They haven't been able to identify the students, etc., etc. James feels humiliated. He doesn't tell any other colleagues because he doesn't want the negative attention. He realises nothing will be done. It dawns on him how low priority his wellbeing is to his employers.

James avoids that part of campus now. Sometimes, he wants to go into the student residence and march up to the door and talk to those students. Ask them why they did that. But he doesn't do it. He has to keep his head down and work on getting some articles published so he can leave this place with his reputation intact. He is afraid if there is a scandal or something about a racist incident directed at him, it will damage his prospects to move to another university.

In this CCS, James experiences an assault which he interprets as racially motivated which has impacted his professional life. He changes his routes around campus and is motivated to create an exit strategy to leave the institution. This incident is a racial macro-aggression and inculcates a number of racial micro-aggressions with the way it is "addressed" and not acted upon.

This counternarrative depicts experiences of overlapping hypervisibility and invisibility. James is hypervisible by being singled out for an assault. He exemplifies body out of place in the white-dominated space. He is targeted whether there is much pre-meditation or not to have an object thrown at him by students. The experience is compounded by the lack of proactive investigation on the part of campus security. The act of being questioned about his interpretation of the incident and not being able to produce the object thrown renders James invisible. His judgment and experience are not considered entirely reliable or potentially valid or relevant, which exemplify a series of racial micro-aggressions. Racial "micro-invalidations" are central here, his statements about the incident are not acknowledged as "accurate". These micro-aggressions are further exaggerated and enacted by little to no follow up by the university. His concerns and experiences are somewhat verbally acknowledged as "serious" yet not acted upon. The reluctance to even investigate the incident or speak with the students in the residence hall underscores James' experience of lesser import which can be skimmed over thus rendering it and James invisible. This exemplifies how institutional racism operates through the questioning or doubt that an incident may be racially motivated, doubt that there is evidence of racism, as well as the ways verbal or performative claims of racial equality and anti-racism lack any substantive action. This lack of action on the part of the university further renders BGM faculty and students invisible.

James is left to get on with his work with no resolution about the incident. The perceived lack of concern for his wellbeing and the lack of acknowledgement of how this incident could

possibly negatively impact him reinforces his position as a space invader. This experience exposes the racism he encounters. He is left to either accept being an outsider, as “less than” or unimportant, or move on professionally where he can be treated with more dignity and respect. This counternarrative illustrates RBF. This experience, including his exchange with a BGM student about their experiences of racism, compound to create an untenable workplace where he experiences multiple forms of stress and strain directly related to his racial identity and how he is perceived in the workplace. This is so pervasive and destructive to James, he is considering his exit from this institution.

### ***Indira: being a “Spokesperson”, hypervisibility and cultural taxation***

Indira has received another email requesting she give a talk about racial inequalities in a course module. Her very well-meaning White colleague expresses her misgivings and concern about her lack of knowledge and credibility to discuss racial issues with BGM students. Indira has been getting a lot of these requests lately, given wider “decolonising” movements in Higher Education. Indira is a bit put off by the requests. Why do her White colleagues feel so sensitive about being White? They think “we need a Black person to do it”. They get so awkward about it, and she thinks they need to relax. She tries to remind them it is okay to talk about race and it is okay to be White.

Indira does not like all this focus on her race and ethnicity. She feels that taking this post has brought up issues of race that she hadn’t really experienced before. When she interviewed, Indira understood that her perceived race and skin color was advantageous for the selection committee, but she also knew she was a competitive candidate. At recent team meetings, comments by some White colleagues have made her step back and think “was I hired for my particular skillset or was I hired to tick a particular box?”

Indira assumed that when she was asked to guest lecture it was because of the quality of her scholarship. But now she is not so sure. She doesn’t want to be viewed as just another “face of color”. She doesn’t think her colleagues are racist, but she has begun to second guess and question their motives when they ask for her input. Do they genuinely value her contributions? Or do they feel like they need a Black face on their agenda or something? Indira wonders if she is being paranoid.

Later, in the faculty meeting, Indira is acknowledged for winning a high-profile grant. Indira feels good about the recognition. A white colleague sitting near her in the large meeting room turns to her and says congratulations. She beams a little and says thank you. He goes on to say how lucky she is. It isn’t so much what he said but how he said it. The tone was really condescending and patronising, like she got favouritism or a special advantage because of her race or gender, or both.

Her smile fades. She doesn’t respond and sits through the meeting playing the comment over in her mind. The word “lucky” really bothers her. Luck had nothing to do with it. She worked hard and earned the grant. Is he insinuating that she earned the bid because she is considered BGM faculty, she was “favoured” because of her race, giving her some “edge” over her White colleagues? Indira wonders if other White colleagues are thinking the same thing, or is he the only one? Is she just reading too much into the comment?

As the meeting ends, she walks out with some colleagues. Indira does not mention the interaction and tries to put it out of her mind. She reminds herself that she cannot internalise these comments. She cannot think everything is racist and question all her interactions. This was a one-off, a throw-away comment from a White colleague, nothing more. She is being hypersensitive. This place is welcoming and she is doing well here. This faculty does not have issues with racism. She is not going to let these kinds of experiences stop her from achieving her career goals. She is just going to get on with it.

Indira's CCS represents the struggle faculty of color face in daily interactions in a context of IR. In some ways, Indira reflects the dominant narrative of the "innocuousness" of racial microaggressions and downplays the significant impact this has on her professional reputation and well-being. At the same time, she experiences stress, pain, and spends a great deal of energy trying to "manage" the racial microinsults and "cultural taxation" that is placed upon her, reflecting RBF.

Unlike her White colleagues, Indira is hypervisible and asked to take on activities related to diversity and inclusion by virtue of being a BGM member of the faculty. This underscores a general reluctance to engage in discussions of race and racism within the university, but also illustrates how she is perceived as "different". It exemplifies a form of cultural taxation (Padilla, 1994) whereby virtue of being a BGM faculty member, she is required to speak for others of her "group" and be the champion of racial equality and diversity.

Indira's experiences highlight a key tension in dealing with race and racism for BGM in this context. Indira does not know whether the word "lucky" was meant as an insult, to subtly demean her achievement, or whether it was a throwaway remark about the difficulty of gaining funding in contemporary Higher Education. What Indira's experiences emphasize, though, is that the intent is irrelevant in a context where Whiteness is esteemed and racism is institutionalised. Indira already experiences doubt about race and racism because not only is she asked to speak about issues of race and ethnic diversity solely because of the color of her skin, her White colleagues often claim inability to do this in a way they would not about other issues—where they might be expected to research the topic and teach it themselves. In this context, the word "luck" loses some of its ambiguity and takes on more sinister tones; not dissimilar from Delgado-Romero et al. (2007) findings that White colleagues often assume that faculty of color "earn" their positions and accolades because of their race not based on merit.

## Discussion

This article has used composite counter-narratives as a methodological tool of CRT to document how institutional racism is experienced by BGM staff at a university in England. These CCS illustrate how hypervisibility and invisibility operate within the context of the white-dominant HE environment. These CCS convey the "mundane environmental extreme stressors" (Carroll, 1998) that characterize collective oppression(s) in these multi-layered contexts. The hypervisibility and invisibility underscore the manifestation of how racism operates, how the "Black" body can be erased in the white-dominated/normalized "mindset" when convenient and yet experience heightened surveillance on other occasions. We argue that this combination of surveillance and erasure forms a set of impossible visibilities for BGM faculty. We use the term "impossible" to connote that BGM faculty's presence in this white-dominant space positions them as "space invaders" and outsiders, whether they are being "celebrated" or ignored. The contradictory positions of hypervisibility and invisibility render BGM faculty's presence as impossible often in terms of their professional functioning, day-to-day interactions and ability to be "seen". These impossible visibilities are reflected in these narratives and represent examples of how IR and white supremacy operate in these settings and how BGM faculty perceive these experiences and their perceptions of their influence on their physical, mental and emotional health.

The impossible visibilities of BGM faculty represented in these narratives illuminates connections to RBF. Hypervisibility and invisibility can be conceptualized as racial microaggressions which are directly connected to BGM faculty's descriptions of RBF (Smith et al., 2016). RBF may occur as a result of ongoing, omnipresent and relentless encounters of racial microaggressions, IR, white supremacy, underscoring CRT's primary tenet of the permanence and "normalisation" of racism. These CCS convey BGM people struggling as they cannot be their authentic selves in their workplace because they are constrained within the parameters of WS and controls/polices their presence and progression within the

institution. This resonates with Du Bois (1903) “double consciousness”, there is self-suppression and institutional oppression which may inevitably lead to RBF and other physical and psychological conditions. Relatedly, in these CCS, we can “see” how cultural taxation is exacted through institutionalized racism and negatively affects BGM faculty’s lived experience.

These qualitative findings add to a body of research that shows negative experiences for BGM academics (e.g. Arday & Mirza, 2018; Rollock, 2021; Bhopal, 2022). Moving beyond documenting this reality, we use CRT theory and methods to examine how this is lived and experienced at an ethnically diverse institution. Central to CRT, these CCS “talk back” and “centre” the marginalized voices of these faculty who exist and persist in these settings. Despite decades of concern about racial inequality and recent increased awareness of these issues, that we find remarkably similar experiences to older literature is evidence of the persistence of institutional racism and how it is deeply engrained in the structures of educational institutions. Moreover, we apply CRT as an ‘explanatory tool for the sustained inequity that people of color experience’ (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 18).

We argue that our composite counter-narrative approach also enlightens our understanding of racism in UK Higher Education by weaving together a range of concepts and using them to illuminate the operation of institutional racism. By nature, institutional racism often occurs through absences—through a lack of response or an absence of care—and documenting such gaps can be significantly more difficult than understanding and challenging overt forms of discrimination and oppression. What connects all these experiences is the knowledge that in an organisation that is institutionally racist, the absence of pro-active anti-racist campaigns means that these ambiguities will be experienced through a lens of racism.

Along with performative acts of anti-racist initiatives or diversity pronouncements on the part of universities, these CCS exemplify moments where interest convergence (Bell, 1990; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) may be the driving force for superficial “changes”. Indira’s status as a person of color, her professional successes and being positioned as a “spokesperson” supports the university’s “mission” as being “anti-racist” and “inclusive”. Ayanna’s presence as a Black faculty member is “useful” to the university’s desired image as a “diverse” institution. Similarly, James’ experience and virtually minimal response from security speaks to a “color-blind” approach (which is a racial microaggression), where the incident is not taken seriously and not perceived or acknowledged as even possibly racist.

This study highlights the experiences of and implications of institutional racism in UK Higher Education. Importantly, regardless of claims, policies, or initiatives to enhance racial equality, dismantle racism, and decolonise the curricula, often characterized as merely performative acts by universities, the experiences of BGM faculty remain largely unchanged. Moreover, these individual and cumulative experiences have very tangible, negative consequences for the well-being of BGM faculty and students, ranging from post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety and physical health problems, amongst others (see Smith et al., 2016). We argue that institutional racism extends to institutional neglect and our findings evidence institutional inertia (see McCormack et al., in press). The persistence of institutional racism can be conceptualised as institutional inertia (Greenman et al., 1992; Allison, 1999) and may elucidate how institutions resist structural and cultural change beyond “speech acts” around diversity, resulting in maintaining and perpetuating the status quo. Institutional neglect, the lack of action, care and support for the BGM members of the university community, intertwined with institutional racism and white supremacy, operates to perpetuate experiences that beg the questions: are universities safe space for BGM people? And/or are universities bad for the health of BGM people? And, if so, what can we do to change it? If universities are unable to mitigate the risks associated with racism, then are they liable for the damaging experiences on BGM staff?

Applying CRT as theory and method/methodology, our findings underscore the persistence of institutional racism and white supremacy, the impacts of IR and WS on racialised bodies in everyday ways, and the toll of IR and WS on BGM faculty experienced in multiple ways. Moreover, illuminating the interrelationship between IR, WS and institutional neglect underscores serious implications for universities, their cultures, and their (often limited) attempts to address racism

within the institution in meaningful and sustainable ways. In a UK (and perhaps global) context of denying IR (Pilkington, 2021; Olusoga, 2021) and attempts to de-legitimize CRT (Lander & Nicholson, 2020) as a theoretical framework, these CCS provide “evidence” of the persistence of racism, IR and WS and the consequences for BGM faculty. Critically, the conditions that BGM faculty and students are subject to collectively and individually in their everyday existence in universities and the implications of these experiences and conditions call into question the suitability and safety of these institutions as places for work or learning.

## Notes

1. Black and Global Majority (BGM) is used throughout most of this article as well as people of color (PoC), or faculty of color, interchangeably, as opposed to BAME or BME (terms used in the UK). We found this more appropriate terminology as Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) represent over 80% of the world's population and terms such as BAME/BME and “minority” may be perceived as disempowering and misrepresentative (Campbell-Stephens, 2020; People of the Global Majority, 2020).

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