

Who is worthy of a place on these walls? Postgraduate students, UK universities, and institutional racism

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This commentary provides insights from a study with black and minority ethnic postgraduate students at London-based universities. The study entailed focus groups, photovoice, and in-depth interviews. Drawing on this data, and influenced by the work of Yuval-Davis, it is argued that black and minority ethnic postgraduate students often feel “out of place” in British universities because they find themselves in spaces calibrated to maintain white supremacy. I conclude that, as geographers, we are potentially ideally placed to interrogate these spaces and counteract their perpetuation of racism. We should do so as part of a sustained and critical reflection of our own disciplinary structures and praxis. Geographers might therefore help to foster a higher education landscape where black and minority ethnic postgraduate students are not only more visibly present in British universities but also feel that they belong and can flourish in them.

KEYWORDS

belonging, critical race theory, photovoice, postgraduate students, racism, space

1 | RACIST ARCHITECTURE

Central to critical race theory, as argued by Bonilla-Silva (2017), is that racism is much more than individual prejudice and bigotry; rather, racism is a systemic feature of social structures. For example, colonial histories are inscribed on the campuses and architecture of many of Britain's oldest and most celebrated universities. The majority of Russell group universities were founded, built, and established to satisfy the needs of the British Empire (see Bhabra et al., 2018). In March 2019, Oxford University announced that it would be investigating its own role in colonialism (Fazackerley, 2019; Gopal, 2019). This announcement has to be understood in the context of the recent controversy surrounding the statue of Cecil Rhodes at Oriel College, Oxford – a controversy that highlighted the extent to which individuals commemorated in this way, or by having campus buildings named after them (such as Galton at University College London), become embedded within the university fabric and are then celebrated. Gebrial has highlighted the Rhodes Must Fall Oxford movement, which began in 2016, and campaigned for the removal of the Rhodes statue at Oxford and illustrated how whiteness is present even in “the nooks and crannies” (2018, p. 20) of British higher education. Robbie Shilliam, meanwhile, argues that universities continue to be built on a clear cultural hierarchy, delineated along racial lines:

Universities remain overwhelmingly administratively, normatively, habitually and intellectually ‘White.’ *Their doors have been opened, but the architecture remains the same.* (2015, p. 33; emphasis added)

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Shilliam and Gebrial are speaking metaphorically, but I am seeking to use these metaphors to think about the physicality of the university space and the impact that this has on black and minority ethnic postgraduate students. To engage with the physical space of the university is to be reminded of the power space has to make one feel “inside” or “outside.” Puwar, in her research on women in parliament, argued that space is not only “abstract” and subject to calculus and homogenous control, but it is also “lived” as an interwoven series of local encounters involving sensuous connections and imaginations (2010, p. 67). Similarly, within university spaces there is an intersection between race and space. For Kwame Harrison “racial spatialisation” is “founded on the perception that certain racialised bodies are expected to occupy certain social spaces, complementarily, that the presence of other bodies creates social disruption, moral unbalance, and/or demands explanation (2013: 316)”. The spatial dimensions of race have been well documented (cf. Delaney, 2002; Dwyer & Jones, 2000; Kobayashi, 2014; Puwar, 2010; Thomas, 2005). There has also been a wealth of research on institutional racism in universities in the UK and beyond (see, for example, Mirza & Arday, 2019). However, there has been little work examining the intersections between the spatial dimension of the university and race.

In this paper, I seek to contribute to this work on race and space by engaging with an often overlooked group in debates over the student experience in UK higher education, namely, black and minority ethnic postgraduate students. I critically reflect on the following question: what role does space play in shaping the experiences of black and minority ethnic students at predominately white universities? The discussion is informed by findings from a study with black and minority ethnic postgraduate students at London-based Russell group universities. I conducted focus groups, followed by photovoice, and in-depth interviews. Photovoice is a qualitative method that enables participants to use photography to document and visually narrate their experiences (see Wang & Barris, 1997). In the next section, I provide some context on the postgraduate student experience in the UK, and introduce Yuval-Davis's (2006) conceptualisation of belonging. I then present some key findings and concluding remarks.

2 | POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS, RACE, AND BELONGING

Black and minority ethnic postgraduate students are underrepresented in UK higher education (Williams et al., 2019) and their experiences are often overlooked. In 2017, the journal *Race, Ethnicity and Education* published a special issue entitled “Building the anti-racist university.” In this special issue, Tate and Bagguley (2017) noted that for the UK higher education sector, a wealth of research has highlighted the challenges facing black and minority ethnic students at undergraduate level, but little mention was made of post-graduate study. According to data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in 2017/2018, of all postgraduate taught students in the UK, 77% identified as White, 8% Black, 10% Asian, 3% Mixed, and 2% Other. When we look at the level of postgraduate research students, 83% of research postgraduates identify as White, 4% Black, 8% Asian, 3% Mixed, and 2% Other. More specifically in Geography only 4.4% of research students identify as black and minority ethnic (see Desai, 2017). Williams et al. (2019) found that a key factor for these numbers is that black and minority ethnic students are less likely to be recipients of research council funding, which has implications for opportunities to carry out a PhD.

In my own study, I wanted to find out what life is like for the black and minority ethnic postgraduate students who are in the academy. The use of visual articulations of institutional racism was at the centre of the study, hence the use of the methods outlined above. The narratives and images demonstrated the mediation between the materiality and physicality of space and the experience of that space, and therefore keeps them in dialogue with each other. There is indeed a neat parallel between the space/place (or material/lived) binary and the two data sources for photovoice narratives – where photography has a documentary quality that speaks to the immediacy and physicality of a space and narrative speaks to the subjective reality of navigating or living that space. Through the use of photovoice, the participants were able to talk through their experiences of the space of the university. Photovoice was a powerful tool in this research process as it enabled students to visualise their experiences, moving beyond words and numbers.

Key to my analysis of the findings, and my response to the question “what role does space play in shaping the experiences of black and minority ethnic students at predominately white universities?,” is engagement with the work of Yuval-Davis (2006), who provides a comprehensive discussion of belonging. Yuval-Davis notes that belonging is both “about emotional attachment, about feeling ‘at home’ and ... about feeling ‘safe’” and that it “tends to be naturalized, and becomes articulated and politicized only when it is threatened in some way” (2006, p. 197). Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 199) identified three analytical levels of belonging: one associated with social location; a second that is concerned with the ethical and political value systems through which individuals judge the extent to which they and others “belong”; and third an individual's identification and emotional attachment to various collectives and groupings. Below I show how the “layers” of belonging identified by Yuval-Davis can be applied to how black and minority ethnic postgraduate students experience

spaces of higher education because it is through people, spaces, attachment, and politics that students considered themselves to feel that they do not belong in spaces of higher education.

3 | WHITENESS AND (UN)BELONGING IN LONDON UNIVERSITIES

Yuval-Davis talks about how a sense of belonging is reflexive. To experience belonging or unbelonging is first framed around our social locations, i.e., how categories of social difference, such as race, gender, and class, relate to space, place, and time. Black and minority ethnic postgraduate students who took part in this research occupied racialised, sexualised, gendered, classed social locations which impacted on how they experienced belonging in the specific space of the predominantly white university (Figure 1).

The perpetuation of whiteness as ‘neutral ground’ and being on the receiving end of Othering can at times be very isolating. It often goes beyond questioning my position as a researcher and surfaces in ‘harmless jokes’ and subtle comments and inferences that draw on cultural and religious stereotypes. In other instances, my choice to adhere to particular religious and cultural practices is completely disregarded, ignored or seen as an inconvenience. I sometimes find myself questioning the extent to which I belong and whether I am truly accepted.

Social location within the walls of whiteness has the power to create a sense of unbelonging. Ayesha speaks about her social location, of her religious identity, and how she is othered and made to question whether she belongs in the predominantly white space of her university. Ayesha goes further to discuss how the interiors and exteriors of universities have the power to create a sense of inclusion or exclusion because of one's social location. Ayesha photographed a prominent space in her university and entitled it “Who is worthy of these walls?” (Figure 2).

These images show the walls filled with paintings of directors and prominent people who are a part of the university history and legacy. All but one are white, reflecting the privilege of whiteness that continues in academic institutions and beyond to this day.

Ayesha talks through her photograph and discusses the interior of institutions and how whiteness resides in the walls. Her social location is “othered” and set “against” the whiteness of the university. It is therefore important to draw together the relationship between social location and space.

Ayesha's image and narrative highlight how the walls that keep the building upright have placed on them images which reflect the upholding of whiteness within that institution. During the interview, Ayesha explained she is continuously confronted with what Johnson (2020) refers to as “sharp white backgrounds” against which her social location was set. Johnson (2020), in her paper entitled “Throwing our bodies against the white background of academia,” raises concerns about conducting research with racialised minorities within academic institutions that perpetuate normative whiteness. The “sharp backgrounds” are materialised in the images that Ayesha, and other students, used to narrate experiences of navigating their

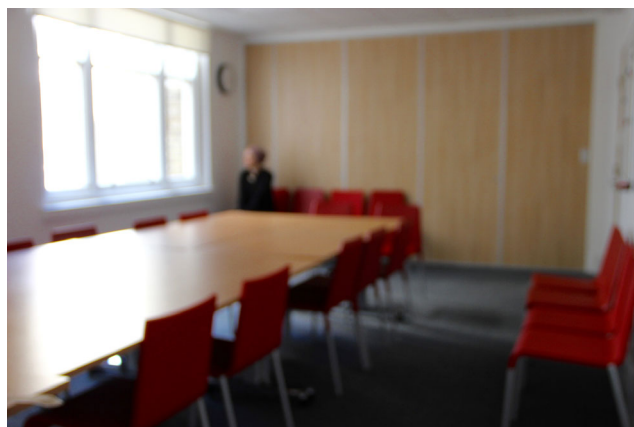


FIGURE 1 Do I belong here?



FIGURE 2 Who is worthy of these walls?

institution based on their social locations. For example, David a final-year postgraduate student, photographed an outside space of his institution and entitled it “Them” (Figure 3). David’s narrative explores further the historical inscriptions of the university and reiterates Kwame Harrison’s (2013) racial spatiality argument that certain bodies simultaneously are allowed into but are also made to feel out of place.

David notes how:

This is the (name of university) that everybody knows. That everybody imagines before they step foot on the campus. This is the University of the rich. The University of the well-to-do. The University of future heads of state, future Nobel laureates and world changers. This is the University of faux radicalism, where the Marxists ask what you have read rather than what you think. People in high places ask what makes us a part of the university? That which makes you part of the university is that which makes you apart from most of the world. Most people on earth aren’t white and neither am I, most people on earth can’t afford the fees and neither can I.



FIGURE 3 Them.

David illustrated how whiteness is persistently reproduced in the university. It is expressed through the spaces of socialising, spaces of learning, and even in the “ostensibly” neutral spaces of the lecture theatre, black and minority ethnic students are made to feel “out of place.” In the following image (Figure 4), Jessica, a female, black and minority ethnic postgraduate student, expands on this point and discusses an experience in a seemingly everyday learning space, the lecture theatre:

On my first day of classes, I asked a question to a lecturer about how a theory on identity that she spoke about during the lecture relates to race and gender. She quickly got defensive and after another student of colour spoke up on my behalf, she stated that she was not going to ‘get into an argument.’ Before coming to university, I made the decision that I would not become the ‘angry black woman’ in my classes. I thought the lecturer and I were having a discussion about theory, but she must not have seen it that way and on my first day of classes at university, in front of the entire department, I was seen as ‘getting into an argument.’ I became the argumentative, angry black woman on the first day of classes. I doubt the lecturer even remembers this interaction, but I haven’t forgotten it.

Jessica's experience in the lecture theatre is an example of what Tate refers to as the “ordinariness” of racism in higher education, arising from a process where racism is “swallowed whole and unable to disappear into the thin air, but rather it is held in place as the very fabric of the air itself” (2016, p. 70). Jessica's social location shapes her experience within the lecture. This example also highlights the value system of higher education and “white fragility,” which according to DiAngelo is defined as a “state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviours, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium” (2018, p. 60). University spaces have the power to systematically prevent black and minority ethnic postgraduate students from feeling that the university belongs to them (Modiri, 2019).

The ways in which we are judged and valued impact on belonging. The ethical and political values of higher education need to be considered, particularly in relation to the social locations of the students. The image in Figure 5 is by David, which he entitled “I, the Darker Brother.” The image is accompanied by a Langston Hughes poem which is purposefully edited to reflect his experiences and explicitly discuss the racism of higher education:

Does someone like me, fit into a place like xxx? If the only criteria for fitting in was aptitude, I guess you could say yes. But it doesn't feel that way. One day I'll fit in. One day, from a distance, you'll see me walking and you'll think to yourself ‘he looks like a scholar.’ But not today, today, like most days, you'll see me and be afraid.

‘I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen when company comes,



FIGURE 4 Argumentative.

But I laugh, And eat well, And grow strong. Tomorrow, I'll be at the table when company comes.
 Nobody'll dare say to me, 'Eat in the kitchen,' Then. Besides, they'll see how beautiful I am and be ashamed

—
 I, too, am ~~American~~ [name of university]. (Hughes, 1926)

The ethical, political value system of universities is indeed framed in the upholding of whiteness. All of the participants in the study photographed both the security and cleaning staff because this is often where they saw themselves disproportionately represented. One particular image and narrative that encapsulates this is Figure 6, entitled “Maintain,” by Jamal:

In the first week at university I noticed that the only time I'd see other black folks was in the early mornings. The schools care staff were often finishing their shifts. We'd greet each other often; a recognition that we were the few. I am often struck by how invisible many of the aunties, uncles, brother, and sisters that keep the school running. I sometimes feel that we are here for similar purposes. We are both here to be invisible and keep the school running. We are both, in different ways, here at the university to maintain the cleanliness of the school. While some of us work hard to keep the table tops polished and the kitchens clean, the rest of us are here to serve as voiceless diverse faces that can help wash the image of university clean with a Race and Equality Charter Mark. I have learned that the school may want my colour but not my voice. The school may open itself to diverse students but there is an expectation that we will be grateful, quiet, and maintain the university image.

Jamal's image and narrative powerfully articulates through both words and the visual the political and moral value system of many universities. It also leads into the next theme of collectives and groupings because it highlights that the concentration of black and minority ethnic staff is in predominately non-senior roles.

There is a clustering within certain spaces and certain roles and not others for black and minority ethnic staff. If, as Yuval-Davis (2006) argues, belonging is associated with collectives and belonging, then the presence of black and minority

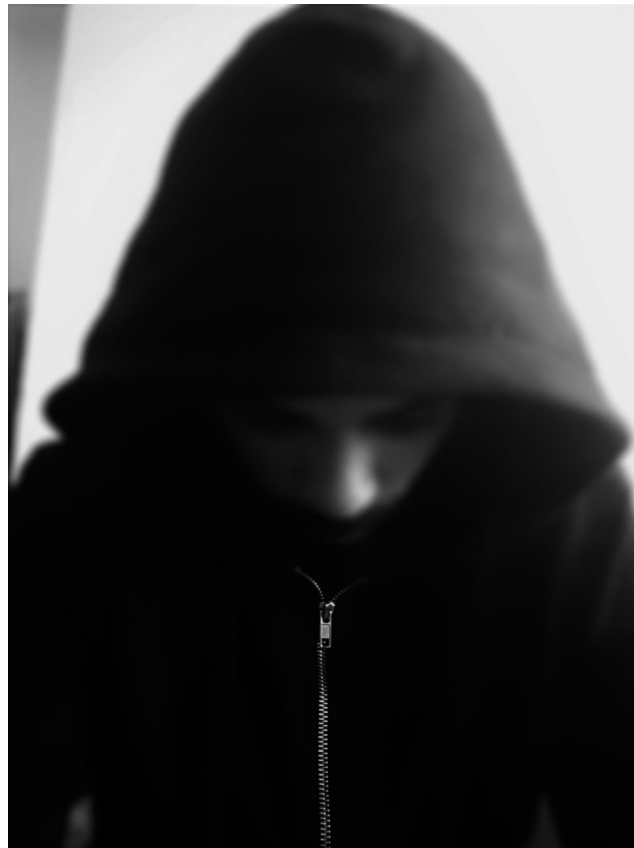


FIGURE 5 I, the Darker Brother.



FIGURE 6 Maintain.

ethnic academics in senior positions has the power to ensure that black minority ethnic students feel that the university also belongs to them. To belong is to see yourself represented and experience life as part of a collective:

Your question about what benefit can come about from having black or brown academics ... while it is really good to have other citations and things like that, I think what is even more powerful just for the students to see someone that they could potentially relate to, and that's even more powerful than anything else. Especially where they are a minority as a student body to see someone that they can relate to. Because in terms of something like that, your role as a black, brown minority researcher I think it's very complex.

In closing, and as another participant, stated:

I don't see anyone who looks like me EVER. Teaching, I mean I have got x in the department but you are like who is it that looks like me, who can relate to me, who is an example, if I do want to pursue academia what would that look like. So that was a moment.

This reflects Divia Tolia-Kelly's (2017) discussion in her recent piece on her experiences as a woman of colour in the academy, in which she traces her experiences of being an "outsider." Similarly, Heidi Mirza writes of the expectations placed on black and minority ethnic students to be "one in a million, an exotic token, an institutional symbol, a mentor and confidante, and a 'natural expert' on all things to do with 'race'" (2017, p. 39). For as long as British Academia remains administratively, normatively, habitually, and intellectually white (Shilliam, 2015), such experiences will persist. The institutional racism encompasses the walls of learning as well as those delivering knowledge (Rollock, 2019). These narratives highlight the totalising nature of whiteness on the university campus – the students, academic staff, on the walls, and in the names and forms of buildings. If, as Yuval-Davis (2006) argues, belonging is tied to one's association with that social location, to ethical and political value systems, and to an attachment to various collectives, these images and narratives have shown that universities are not providing institutional arrangements that black and minority ethnic postgraduate students can belong to and in.

4 | CONCLUSION

The findings in this paper indicate that we still need to understand better how and why it is that key spaces within British universities have white supremacy embedded in their walls. We need to do so because, as geographers, we are potentially ideally placed to interrogate these spaces and counteract their perpetuation of racism as part of a sustained and critical reflection on our own disciplinary structures and praxis. Through doing so, we would also be contributing to wider efforts aimed at building the anti-racist university (Tate & Bagguley, 2017). More specifically, given the focus of this paper, I want to call on geographers to establish our own interventions to address the "leaky pipeline" that results in only 4.4% of our research students identifying as black and minority ethnic (see Desai, 2017). I realise that many readers were perhaps unaware that there was even an issue concerning black and minority ethnic students' access to and progression through postgraduate study within the discipline. I therefore make this call in the hope that it will both raise awareness and eventually lead to the creation of a more just and humane UK higher education landscape. A landscape where black and minority

ethnic postgraduate students are not only more visibly present in British universities but also where they feel that they belong and can flourish.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the research.

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