



## Reflections on Researching Within a Structurally Racist Institution

Mary C. Parker (Independent Scholar), Anna Claire Walker (Independent Scholar) and Michaela Gasteratou (Independent Scholar)

### Abstract

During a required group research assessment at our higher education institution, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (RCSSD), we uncovered multiple underlying and intersecting axes of oppression that affected our research. These axes include silence, gatekeeping, discrimination, white fragility, and emotional labour. This article explores how our research process was affected by these axes of oppression in an academic setting. First, we unpack the scope of our initial research which included a heuristic methodology and Critical Race Theory. Next, we uncover how this internal study around structural racism was interrupted by the oppressive practices and to what extent they affected the research process and our final assessed presentation. Finally, using autoethnography we investigate how, as three researchers with different backgrounds and ethnicities (two Black women and one white woman), we seemingly disrupted an internal research conference at a higher education institution. Writing this article is a necessary act of liberation for us as researchers to contextualise and define our experiences through Critical Race Theory. Through this paper, we aim to expand the dialogue among researchers and institutions on how structural racism and oppressive practices become evident in the fabric of academia. Furthermore, any lack of dialogue will inevitably continue to cause acts of oppression within institutions until they are faced with resilience, honesty, and a balance of power free from oppression.

### Bios

**Mary C. Parker** is an African-American international applied theatre practitioner, dialogue facilitator, and comedic actor. She holds an MA in Applied Theatre from Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (RCSSD), a BA in Sociology from Emory University, and is a Certified Professional Coach through Duquesne University's Palumbo Donahue School of Business. At RCSSD Mary researched how stand-up comedy can increase the visibility of Black women's voices and identities. Currently, Mary collaborates with individuals, educational institutions, and corporations who are ready to deepen their self-awareness, interrupt bias, and actively engage in dismantling oppression through services of playshops and coaching sessions.

**Anna Claire Walker** is a white American children's theatre practitioner. She holds a BFA in Musical Theatre from Auburn University and an MA in Applied Theatre from RCSSD, where she researched the effects of neoliberalism and capitalism on children's entertainment. Originally from Birmingham, Alabama, she worked as a professional puppeteer and performer in Atlanta, Georgia



before moving to London to attend RCSSD. She is currently based in Washington, D.C., working as a youth development facilitator for a community arts centre.

**Michaela Gasteratou** is a Greek-Ethiopian actor and producer with an MA in Creative Producing from RCSSD where she researched the significance of autobiographical performance in disability-led theatre. She produces new writing and disability-led work. Her work explores hidden disabilities/medical conditions whilst advocating cultural diversity. Currently, she is working on producing community-based theatre projects and supporting accessibility.



In the spring of 2019, we (Mary C. Parker, Michaela Gasteratou, and Anna Claire Walker) sought to perform academic research on the representation of Black racial identities on stage at our higher education institution (HEI) during a required module of our Masters' courses. Our initial aim was to investigate how structural racism was being addressed in the curriculum and student body at our institution: Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (RCSSD).<sup>1</sup> Throughout our research process, we recognised multiple underlying and intersecting axes of oppression that continually affected our research. We define oppression as harm caused by systemic biased forces (Cudd, 2005). Using autoethnography to analyse our experiences, we have discovered that it was not the subject matter alone that induced these oppressive axes, but our identities as a research team as well: three non-British researchers with differing backgrounds and ethnicities (two Black women and one white woman).<sup>2</sup> This article aims to identify how the axes of oppression we experienced are acts of structural racism. First, we unpack the scope of our initial research titled *Dear 'Write' Central*, including the methodology and theories we used to develop our research. Next, using autoethnography, we uncover how this internal study around structural racism was interrupted by

---

<sup>1</sup> We would like to acknowledge the resources and students at RCSSD that enabled us to perform this research, as well as our project supervisor for their labour, guidance, and support, known and unknown. Although we recognise their positionality within a structurally racist institution, we appreciate every act of care and attention they gave us and how they prepared us to examine and critique not only the data we collected but the data we could not collect due to oppressive practices.

<sup>2</sup> We have chosen to capitalise 'Black' in this paper and leave 'white' lowercase. The reason behind this choice is to acknowledge the imbalance of power that exists due to white supremacist culture and exercise a form of 'orthographic justice' by empowering Black voices and experiences (Perlman, 2015).



five oppressive practices and to what extent they affected the research process and our final presentation at the HEI. Finally, we investigate how our identities as a research group affected the response to our findings, and how we seemingly caused disruption at an internal research conference and at RCSSD.

We believe in the power of sharing stories of racial discrimination. Similar to Delgado, Stefancic and Harris, we know that ‘stories can name a type of discrimination; once named, it can be combated’ (2001, p. 43). It is our aim through sharing our story, that we will give evidence to issues in our society and that we can all connect and learn through these experiences.

### **Dear ‘Write’ Central- The project and methodology**

The research module at RCSSD required us to propose our research topic as a team. Our initial research question focused on the representation of Black people on stage in the UK, and more specifically at HEIs. However, the first event we attended as part of our data collection, a student-led showcase, had what seemed to be no Black actors and only one Black audience member, excluding two of our research team members who identify as Black. This was observational data since we did not ask anyone in the room to disclose their racial identity to us. This experience led us to shift our research to a different question: ‘Who is responsible for ensuring ethnic diversity and representation on stage within our institution?’ To better understand how this happened we



decided to use the MA course that put together this production as a case study. We will refer to this MA course as Alpha.<sup>3</sup>

As we conducted our research, we learned how the lack of diverse representation on stage within our academic institution was a by-product of structural racism. Structural racism is rooted in systemic policies that inform institutional practices to promote racial inequity for groups that are not white (The Aspen Institute, 2020). We then sought to analyse the course curriculum information, and administer surveys and workshops, to determine the extent to which student writing, dramaturgy, and performance can be seen as embedded in the mechanism of structural racism that exists within the institution (Delgado, Stefancic and Harris, 2001).

We gathered our data by administering a student questionnaire and a workshop. For the workshop, we invited students from all 15 MA/MFA courses offered at RCSSD to attend a rehearsed reading followed by a focus group session and a short questionnaire. The rehearsed reading was of a script from the student-led showcase where we made changes to the casting, replacing the white cast one-by-one with Black actors. After gathering data from the students, we constructed a questionnaire for the Alpha course tutors to examine the structure of the course curriculum. Additionally, we utilised the existing data report *Royal Central School of Speech and Drama Race Equality Review*, which was published by Halpin Partnership in reviewing RCSSD's race and equality practices (2019).

---

<sup>3</sup> To protect anonymity, we are choosing to not name the course.



In their book, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic state that Critical Race Theory (CRT) can be used to assess issues surrounding controversies in education more specifically in curricula (2001, p. 3). CRT argues that race, instead of being solely ‘biologically grounded,’ is constructed by society. ‘Racial inequality emerges from the social, economic, and legal differences whites create between ‘races’ to maintain elite white interests’ (Curry, 2009). In other words, racism is not merely a matter of prejudice, it operates as a structural and social system that has been crafted to uphold the status quo. Using CRT as our primary theoretical framework, we catalogued theorists that specialised in structural racism within higher education to analyse the data we collected and ground our argument (McNamara and Coomber, 2012). We were transparent in our efforts to understand the connection between the student-led showcase and course curricula, which consequently catalysed a drawback from students and staff. As a result, our research process was impeded through oppressive acts that are discussed later in this paper. Although at the time some of the obstacles we encountered were excused as personal or circumstantial, this paper aims to analyse these experiences through autoethnography. Autoethnography is defined as ‘an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience’ (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2020, p. 273). Throughout this article, we will use autoethnographic methods to critique the systematic and unchecked biases that exist in academia today.

After further analysis and research, we have identified five systematic axes of oppression that hindered the impact and clarity of our research. These intersecting axes are silence,



gatekeeping, discrimination, white fragility, and emotional labour. Although we attempt to gain clarity on our experiences by defining them as individual oppressive acts, we understand the complexity of their intersecting relationship and their impact on us as researchers. In a recent interview, Kimberlé Crenshaw defines intersectionality as ‘a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other.’ (Steinmetz, 2020). By contextualising and defining these intersecting instances, we aim to alter the perception of structurally racist oppressive tactics in higher education from circumstantial to systematic.

### **Silence**

Despite our many efforts of outreach during our research process, we failed to gather interest in our subject matter. We were met with silence from our peers on the Alpha course when they were asked to speak on their casting and writing processes regarding race and representation of characters. We distributed an online survey asking the students whose work was presented at the showcase to share their casting process and if they were willing to share their script as well. From the 10 Alpha students whose work was presented, we only got one response. We used this student’s script in our rehearsed reading followed by a focus group. As we mentioned earlier, we focused on the casting of characters and what would change if they were played by Black actors. We collected data before and after the rehearsed reading through electronic questionnaires, as well as by video and audio recording the entire focus group discussions, with consent. Here’s what was



said by our participants during our ‘Performing Research: Dear ‘Write’ Central’ focus group when asked how race and equality are discussed in class settings:

Participant 1: ‘We have those discussions amongst the class, but we don’t have a focus on it, per se.’

Participant 2: ‘The things we learn in applied theatre (ethics and representation) are not the things actors have to learn for example. Which is weird for me because they should know it, shouldn’t they?’

Participant 3: ‘I’m directing and observing a lot and it’s always just The Seagull and Mamet, Stanislavski, Chekhov, white middle-class texts. Everyone goes to the go-to texts. It’s like, why?’

Participant 4: ‘There’s an exoticism that happens especially with how my course mates interact with me or some of my lecturers interact with me in class. I perceive it as a slight exoticism but as I reflect on it, it’s more of just they’re not aware’(2019).

Five different MA programs were represented in our focus group and the unanimous opinion was that discussions on this topic were not taking place often enough, in the classroom or out of it. This qualitative data is consistent with the findings presented in the Halpin Partnership report (2019), which resulted in a recommendation for more racial awareness training to be done for students, faculty and staff. From our focus group, 75% of participants said they felt that their awareness of race on stage changed because of the discussion in the workshop. This further





demonstrates how awareness can lead to a shift in mindset which could lead to a possible change in writing and casting.

Both our focus group dialogues and the Halpin Review (2019) uncovered that the Alpha course, like many of the courses at RCSSD, lacks a core curriculum that embeds equality and diversity. This confirmed our postulation that for many of the students, the value of our subject matter could be reduced to a personal interest, not a required part of learning within the institution, which leads to the discomfort when discussing race. Research shows across the United Kingdom, HEIs fail to offer supportive structures to engage in dialogues about race as one step towards addressing racism within their institution (Batty, 2019; Bhopal and Pitkin, 2018; Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019). Within HEIs discomfort must be recognised and supported through learning in and outside of the classroom about race, privilege, and whiteness (Cabrera, et al, 2016). This discomfort about discussing race is connected to white fragility, which we will expand on later in our analysis.

### **Gatekeeping**

Due to the lack of participation that we referenced earlier as ‘silence,’ the data we gathered thus far was not substantial enough to enable us to thoroughly examine how the lack of representation in the Alpha course’s showcase was a direct mechanism of structural racism at RCSSD. Therefore, using our CRT framework, we constructed a questionnaire for tutors of the Alpha course to examine the structure of the course curriculum. Our survey questioned if and how the course



embeds equality and diversity in its teachings. It also questioned what kind of support has been made available to the tutors to educate the students on racial equality. However, our ability to perform academic research on our subject was yet again obstructed.

Our initial survey sent to tutors of the Alpha course was filled with open-ended questions because similar to the Halpin Partnership, we found there was not any public information available that linked equality and diversity with the course curriculum. Upon distributing the survey to the principal tutors of the Alpha course we received a same-day response stating at first that our research was compelling and important work. However, the response went on to criticise our data collection methods, including the design, survey platform used, and length of time required to complete. The Alpha tutor observed that the survey would take a long time to complete as it consisted of open-ended questions. The Alpha tutor then suggested we research other questionnaire designs and upon designing something that required quick responses with less open-ended questions, they indicated that they would share it with their colleagues. We took on board their desire for changes in our survey because as students we wanted to display our willingness to adjust when the research required it. We reconstructed our survey by including multiple-choice questions and Likert Scale questions, a point scale asking the Alpha tutors to depict how strongly they agreed or disagreed with several statements we provided. Despite the changes made, we only received a response from one Alpha tutor. It is important to highlight that by changing our questionnaire there were limitations on the answers we could receive which would impact analysis.



This resistance to sharing basic information about the curriculum had a gatekeeping effect that is deeply rooted in structural racism. The gatekeeper decides what information should move past them (through the information ‘gate’) to the group or individuals beyond, and what information should not. Gatekeepers are at a high level, data decision-makers who control information flow to an entire social system. Based on personal preference, professional experience, social influences, or bias they allow certain information to pass through their audience (Mass Communication Theory, 2019). By withholding information about the curriculum, the tutors of the Alpha course acted as gatekeepers of information that directly affected our ability to gather data for our research presentation.

Given the topic of our research, it could be argued that the Alpha tutor’s refusal to enter a discussion about race on our terms underscores white supremacy culture. According to Tema Okun, white supremacy culture is an ideology rooted in superiority over people of colour (Okun, n.d., p. 1). White supremacy culture can be exercised, knowingly or not, by members of society in many ways, including ‘perfectionism,’ ‘only one right way,’ and ‘either/or thinking’(Okun, n.d, p. 1-5). Although we understand that there could be many factors that contributed to the tutor’s lack of engagement, by criticising our survey questions and refusing to give us access to information about the curriculum after we adhered to their requested changes, the Alpha tutor obstructed the development of our research. Regardless of intent, these actions could be seen as upholding white supremacy culture by diminishing our efforts in researching race and reinforcing whiteness as a gatekeeper.



After unsuccessfully attempting to gather data from students and tutors, our supervisor urged us to keep our ethics practices water-tight because we were ‘opening ourselves up for scrutiny’ due to the nature of our topic. The continued questioning, silence and gatekeeping combined with the posture of our supervisor’s warning, informed us that our research was being viewed as a threat or a liability to be contained. This kind of discrimination highlights the fact that despite external examinations of structural racism, such as the Halpin Review, students wishing to perform academic research on race face unique scrutiny due to structural racism.

### **Discrimination**

Our research was being assessed through an oral presentation at an internal research conference. The internal research conference was held in several rooms throughout the institution, and presentations were simultaneously occurring in blocks of three. Each presentation block had a shared overall theme so similar presentations were grouped together. As the end of the module and subsequent research conference drew near, our supervisor informed us that students from the Alpha course had complained about our research topic. The details of the complaint and how it affected the Alpha students was not disclosed to us. As a result, we were told that our presentation would therefore not be taking place where it was initially scheduled: in the large auditorium with the other presentations about writing and casting. Instead, we were redirected to present in a small porter-cabin with what seemed to be presentations that focused on the relationship between theatre and psychology. When asked about the reasons behind the move, our course supervisor relayed



that the decision was made by the tutors of the Alpha course, who were concerned for the adverse emotional impact our research may have on students in the audience. Tutors were concerned that if our research was presented alongside students from the Alpha course, those students would not be emotionally capable of presenting their research to the best of their ability. This ‘differential treatment’ discriminated against our group in favour of our peers (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2014, p. 14). This incident is an example of racial inequality constructed by society that emerged to uphold white interests as per CRT’s argument (Curry, 2009).

One of the most notable disadvantages of this discrimination was our removal from a wider platform to share how race and representation are experienced within our institution. The auditorium we were intended to present in could seat just over 230 people while the small porter-cabin we were moved to could hold 40 people comfortably. This communicated to us that research involving race is not highly valued if it causes discomfort in an institution where a majority of people are white (Halpin Partnership Ltd, 2019, p. 60). Our subject matter disrupted the comfort of our peers and therefore we were removed to protect their comfort (Ahmed, 2007). This reinforces to us as researchers that if a majority of white people are made to feel uncomfortable, actions and policies will be enacted to protect their safety. These experiences will be further examined later through the axes of white fragility and emotional labour.

We can conclude that the decision to move the location of our presentation was rooted in what could arguably be understood as resentment towards our critical research on race and representation. Raymond Williams discusses in Paul Gilroy’s *There Ain’t no Black in the Union*



*Jack* how ‘Resentment of ‘unfamiliar neighbours’ is seen as the beginning of a process which ends in ideological specifications of ‘race’ and ‘superiority’.’ (1991, p. 49). The focus of our research on race and representation within writing and casting manifested in resentment from tutors and students. This resentment towards our research made us feel like ‘strange foreigners’ within our institution (Diène, 2005, p. 14).

Now that our research is complete, reflecting autoethnographically, we can see how our diverse identities as a research team may have compounded this resentment. The identities held by our research team include, but are not limited to, being women, being non-British, and for two of the three researchers, being Black. These diverse aspects of our identity, which were known to at least one student in the Alpha course who attended our focus group and is in our student records, creates an aspect of unfamiliarity that inherently makes us ‘foreign.’ Our foreignness contributed another layer of inequality, as per Crenshaw’s definition of intersectionality, affecting how we were discriminated against.

### **White Fragility**

Throughout our research assignment, we noted the continued reservation and awkwardness surrounding the discussions we tried to foster as part of our research. We have labelled many of these interactions as examples of ‘white fragility’ (Saad, 2020; Brown, 2018). Robin DiAngelo describes white fragility as ‘a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves’ (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 57). She states that white



people in North America live within an ‘insulated environment of racial privilege,’ which leads to an inability to tolerate discussions around race (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 57). Although DiAngelo’s research was primarily based in North America, the issues surrounding racial discussions and white fragility ring true for white-majority institutions in the UK as well, including RCSSD. DiAngelo unpacks the process by which white people confuse feeling uncomfortable in a discussion with being attacked or in danger, creating a dynamic where white people feel that they are the victims of a hostile environment at the expense of furthering honest discussions about race (2018, p. 64). There are a number of sources of racial stress that can trigger white fragility, including receiving feedback about the racist impacts of one’s behaviour and suggesting a person’s views come from a racialised reference point. These sources result in ‘interruptions’ to the white racial equilibrium, causing inflated responses that seek to reinstate the racial status quo (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 57).

When our course supervisor shared the news that the location of our presentation had been changed, we were confused as to why our presentation alone caused this kind of disruption to the research conference. This decision had adverse effects on the three of us as student researchers that no one, except our supervisor, in the institution appeared to take into account. These effects included being made to feel that our research had the potential to be offensive, and the implication that we were the brunt of student and faculty gossip. At the time, this decision seemed out of our hands and just another isolated experience that we needed to accept to accommodate the feelings of others and successfully navigate this assignment. Through autoethnography, however, we



understand how DiAngelo's assessment of white fragility provides another framework as to why the leaders of our institution felt the need to remove our presentation from the larger auditorium where it was originally scheduled. If our presentation on race triggered feelings of 'confusion, defensiveness, and righteous indignation,' in our peers, the institution as a whole could suffer disruptions as the white institutionalised status quo became challenged (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 64). This explains why, to the best of our knowledge, our presentation was singled out as a cause of such a disruption in our institution, in contrast to research presentations in other fields, where it was not discussed whether or not the students involved in the case studies of those presentations were emotionally capable of also being the audience.

Throughout this process the seemingly white students consistently positioned themselves as the victim. It is vital to state how often we had to clarify that this research is not pointing fingers at the students but investigating the institution as a whole. Throughout our research process and presentation, we clearly stated that we were primarily investigating if '...all students, specifically in MA courses, receive education about systematic racism and the complexities of representation in the arts' (*Dear 'Write' Central*, 2019). However, because the majority of the students and tutors present throughout our research were seemingly white, our attempt to distance the individuals involved in our research from the institution under scrutiny was not successful and resulted in withdrawal and criticism.

Analysing the events of our project further through autoethnography has allowed us to see the policing of discourse and unnecessary vetting process as an oppressive form of conflict





resolution where the stability of the white status quo is vigorously maintained. These events serve as a reminder of how in our careers we will, unfortunately, be subjected to this type of fragility at the potential expense of our achievements. Furthermore, this series of events required considerable emotional labour the three of us had to undertake to complete the assignment to its full potential. The lasting effects of this emotional labour have been felt long after the assignment was completed, though we understand it has affected us differently due to our differing identities.

### **Emotional Labour**

In their research on the emotional labour of people of colour in white professional settings, Louwanda Evans and Wendy Leo Moore collected data from many higher education institutions as well as professional corporate environments on how racism affects the emotions of professionals of colour. Their research indicates that in the majority of white professional settings, people of colour have to overcome a greater emotional journey to keep their professional reputation and ability to succeed in white spaces (Evans and Moore, 2015, p. 439-454). According to Evans and Moore:

People of color[*sic*] experience an unequal distribution of emotional labor[*sic*] as a result of negotiating both everyday racial micro-aggressions and dismissive dominant ideologies that deny the relevance of race and racism. As a result they must actively seek ways to engage in forms of resistance that promote counter narratives and protect themselves from denigration while minimizing the risk of severe consequence (2015, p. 439).



By choosing our HEI as the subject of our research on race in the curricula , we experienced the emotionally laborious consequences of white fragility. It is relevant to note here that one of our research team is not a person of colour, and throughout our research, we analysed how the project could potentially affect each person differently due to the unequal ways we navigate white institutionalised spaces. Although the diversity of ethnic makeup of our group played a part in the distribution of the emotional labour, the tension we felt as a team during the research process was a palpable outcome of white fragility when asked to enter a discussion about race. Despite these emotional challenges, we endeavoured to complete our presentation and report our research on how issues of race on stage were being taught in the curriculum.

During the research conference students were encouraged to witness other presentations when they were not presenting. Since the conference occurred in blocks of three in several rooms, students were advised to pick one block and not enter or exit in between presentations. In the few moments of setting up between the second presentation and ours, a group of students from the Alpha course entered the room. The huge disruption made it impossible not to notice that these were the exact students the tutors had sought to ‘protect’ by moving our presentation to another room. We gave our presentation, reporting that although an external company had found our institution to be doing adequate work to diversify its student body and curriculum, the students we surveyed and workshopped, who represented a wide range of degrees and programmes, overwhelmingly agreed that the issues of representation and race in theatre was not being taught enough as a part of the curriculum. We referenced the first event we attended as researchers, in



which there were 10 one-act plays written, directed, cast, and performed by students, and it seemed that there were no Black actors and only one Black audience member, excluding two of our research team members. In the question and answer section after the presentation one seemingly white student expressed that they had trouble finding people of colour to be involved in the event, but that our critique overlooked the other ways in which the event was diverse. The response developed into an accusatory statement, attempting to reduce our presentation to a personal vendetta. This defensive response is an example of white fragility where white people confuse feeling uncomfortable in a discussion about race with being attacked, identifying themselves as the victims (Diangelo, 2018, p. 64). We experienced an emotional tension in the audience, specifically from the group of students who interrupted the block of presentations. We attempted to return the focus to our thorough research process and complete the question and answer portion of the presentation.

Using Evans and Moore's emotional labour research as a lens through which to analyse this experience further in our autoethnography, we have found their description of resilience to be helpful. They expand the definition to include the 'time consuming and emotionally laborious[sic] process of decision making about how and when people of color[sic] will respond' to racist accusations and experiences (Evans and Moore, 2015, p. 449). In this way, our research team in the moments following the presentation were required to tap into an emotional resilience in order to maintain academic integrity and restore control, instead of allowing a white majority



institutionalised audience to execute their ‘power over’ our subject as a form of intimidation (Palmer et al., 2020).

Immediately following the presentation we felt a sense of relief that we had overcome the challenges of the last three months and completed the assignment. As we left the presentation room, a glaring truth began to take shape: that this presentation would affect us differently as individuals based on our racial identity. Before we had a chance to reunite with our peers and congratulate each other on the success of our presentation, the two Black members of our research group were approached by seemingly white students from the Alpha course. This engagement with the two Black researchers forced them to continue exerting emotional resilience while the white students expressed their allyship and reiterated that they were personally not to blame. The white team member was not met with any questions or requests for validation from her peers, highlighting that it was the Black team members’ emotional pacification the audience was seeking. This exchange would have been much more beneficial if it had taken place months before through the many surveys we administered and the workshop we invited them to, and if the interactions had been evenly distributed between all three team members. However, the act of a public approach following the presentation was a continued oppressive act that forced the Black researchers to engage in emotional labour where they had to appear publicly pleasing with students we knew were initially critical and accusatory towards us (Evans and Moore, 2015). This experience blatantly solidified that although we thought we experienced discrimination because of our research subject, there was a second layer of discrimination present that excluded the white



team member. That team member was allowed to re-enter the institution without the same emotional labour required as her Black colleagues. The layering of discrimination and emotional labour experienced by our research team is an example of what Kimberlé Crenshaw defines as intersectionality. The presence of these axes of oppression magnifies the exertion of power described by Palmer and underscore the institutionalised white status quo as described by DiAngelo.

These interactions and responses to our presentation highlight how white people neglect to see whiteness as a racialised group, and that to discuss race and representation, white people feel they must seek out the acceptance and approval of people of colour. But as cohesive as we felt as a team of researchers, our project ended in a way that made the subject matter of our work feel even more vital. Our peers saw us not as a research team, but as Black students and white students, and this truth is certainly to affect how we navigate academic institutions.

## **Conclusion**

Over a year ago, we three students came together on a group assessment and found a shared interest, exploring questions about the structural racism at our HEI. Now, a year later, the assessment has been completed, we have graduated from our institution, but the work of unpacking our experiences is not over. We have been in the process of writing and editing this essay when the Black Lives Matter Movement has come to the attention of the media worldwide following the death of George Floyd in May 2020. It is a time where the media, and our drama school, in



particular, are now focused on discussing the complex issues of race and moving towards being actively anti-racist. In giving our individual, personal reflections on this experience, we would like to acknowledge our historical moment, and how each of our lives has been altered by not only this research but the larger global conversations:

Mary C. Parker: ‘In the week of 2-9 June 2020, I watched the live feed of George Floyd’s first funeral, sat in a virtual room with performers from a prominent US comedy theatre and heard from Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) folx that have experienced discrimination and racism within the theatre, and witnessed performative activism from several companies who are issuing statements of solidarity for #blacklivesmatter including the very institution this article is written about.<sup>4</sup> And! there is a global pandemic as well that is disproportionately affecting communities of colour. To say I am tired is an understatement. The racial battle fatigue in writing a reflective autoethnographic article is, not surprisingly, exhausting. As a creative of colour, my experience at RCSSD reminds me that I cannot assume that I will be safe and free from experiencing racism. Reflecting now at a time when this institution is publicly called out for racism as we are writing about it gives me hope that our voices matter. I am motivated to create work that addresses injustice through my artistic practice and to continue to push the line of creative expression, integrity, and learning through honest discomfort.’

---

<sup>4</sup> By using the term ‘folx’ this actively includes non-binary people in this conversation and moves away from gender specific words (Peters, 2017).



Michaela Gasteratou: ‘This paper has shifted how I recognise micro-aggression in my day-to-day life. Reflecting on the events mentioned in this paper and witnessing people come forward with their experience of racial discrimination at the institution makes this paper more relevant. As a person who grew up in Ethiopia where I was part of the racial majority, this experience along with my time in the UK and Europe since 2009 has exposed me to the racial injustice that people of colour face daily world-wide. Additionally, this experience has made it more unlikely for me to pursue a PhD programme at this institution because the same issues could unfold. Although, I am now more equipped to call-out racism in every shape and form, it is still a worry that issues like this could take place at any institution.’

Anna Claire Walker: ‘This experience has greatly affected my practice as a theatre artist. Too often in this industry, race is seen as something that does not affect white people. But as long as white theatre is seen as ‘the norm,’ we are continually ‘othering’ and discriminating against practices centred around other racial experiences. As a white woman from the American South, my identity can place me in the position of oppressor if I am not consciously doing the work to disrupt the white supremacist norms I have been conditioned to accept. This work has again proved to me the importance of disrupting the status quo and making marginalised voices heard. As a white theatre practitioner, I must educate myself on how my practice either promotes or disrupts white supremacy. Racism is not always about obvious acts of hate and violence; white supremacy affects every action of institutionalised spaces and constantly oppresses and creates inequality through small, normalised gestures that, more often than not, go unchecked.’



It is important to note that although the process of writing and researching for this paper has allowed us to process and define an important experience of racism in academic research, it has also been emotionally laborious for the two Black members of our research team. This has translated into hesitation about filing a complaint. This stems from the fact that a lot of the research we undertook during our module and our experience at students shows that complaints at this HEI in the past have not resulted in many positive outcomes or actions taken, and we were continually met with the attitude that it is just the way things are (Central Students' Union, 2019). The shared lack of trust towards the integrity of HEI's complaint procedures in the UK resonates with us as well (National Union of Students, 2011, p. 35).

Our aim is that those reading would go forward into academia with more knowledge and awareness of how seemingly small instances of institutionalised structural racism can be named, defined, and compounded, and armed with that knowledge, promote change.





## References

- Ahmed, S., 2007. A phenomenology of whiteness. *Feminist Theory*, 8(2), pp.149-168.
- The Aspen Institute. (2020). *11 Terms You Should Know to Better Understand Structural Racism*. [online] Available at: <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/structural-racism-definition/> [Accessed 26 Jan. 2020]
- Cudd, A. (2005). How to Explain Oppression. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 35(1), p.20-49.
- Batty, D., 2019. UK universities condemned for failure to tackle racism. *The Guardian*, [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jul/05/uk-universities-condemned-for-failure-to-tackle-racism> [Accessed 6 May 2020].
- Bhopal, K. and Pitkin, C., 2018. *Investigating Higher Education Institutions and Their Views on The Race Equality Charter*. [online] London: University and College Union. Available at: [https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/9535/Investigating-higher-education-institutions-and-their-views-on-the-Race-Equality-Charter-Sept-18/pdf/REC\\_report\\_Sep18\\_fp.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/9535/Investigating-higher-education-institutions-and-their-views-on-the-Race-Equality-Charter-Sept-18/pdf/REC_report_Sep18_fp.pdf) [Accessed 4 May 2020].
- Brown, A., 2018. *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity In A World Made For Whiteness*. Convergent Books.
- Cabrera, N., Franklin, J. and Watson, J., 2016. Whiteness in Higher Education: The Invisible Missing Link in Diversity and Racial Analyses. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 42(6), pp.7-125.
- Central Students' Union, 2019. *Dear White Central*. London: Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.
- Crenshaw, K., 1995. *Critical Race Theory*. New York City: The New Press.
- Curry, T., 2009. Critical Race Theory. In: *The Encyclopedia of Race and Crime*. California: Sage Publications, pp.166-169.
- Delgado, R., Stefancic, J. and Harris, A. (2001). *Critical Race Theory*. 1st ed. New York and London: New York University Press



- Diangelo, R., 2020. *White Fragility*. [online] Libjournal.uncg.edu. Available at: <<https://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/viewFile/249/116>> [Accessed 29 May 2020].
- Diène, D., 2005. Eliminating racism in a changing world: arguments for a new strategy. In: *Dimensions of Racism*. [online] New York: The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), pp.13-19. Available at: <<http://www.corteidh.or.cr/tablas/23351.pdf>> [Accessed 5 May 2020].
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. and Bochner, A. (2020). *Autoethnography: An Overview*. [online] Qualitative-research.net. Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095> [Accessed 22 Jan. 2020].
- Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019. *Tackling Racial Harassment: Universities Challenged*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/tackling-racial-harassment-universities-challenged.pdf>> [Accessed 6 May 2020].
- Evans, L. and Moore, W., 2015. Impossible Burdens: White Institutions, Emotional Labor, and Micro-Resistance. *Social Problems*, 62(3), pp.439-454.
- Gilroy, P., 1991. *There Ain't No Black In The Union Jack*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Halpin Partnership Ltd. (2019) Royal Central School of Speech and Drama Race Equality Review. Available at: <https://www.cssd.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Central-School-of-Speech-and-Drama-Race-Equality-Review-FINAL-VERSION.pdf> (Accessed 21 March 2019).
- Kalwant Bhopal and Clare Pitkin, K. and Kalwant Bhopal and Clare Pitkin, K., 2020. [online] Available at: <[https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/9535/Investigating-higher-education-institutions-and-their-views-on-the-Race-Equality-Charter-Sept-18/pdf/REC\\_report\\_Sep18\\_fp.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/9535/Investigating-higher-education-institutions-and-their-views-on-the-Race-Equality-Charter-Sept-18/pdf/REC_report_Sep18_fp.pdf)> [Accessed 6 May 2020].
- Lippert-Rasmussen, K. (2014). *Born Free and Equal?: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Nature of Discrimination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mass Communication Theory. (2019). *Gatekeeping Theory*. [online] Available at: <https://masscommtheory.com/theory-overviews/gatekeeping-theory/> [Accessed 5 Dec. 2019].



McNamara, C. and Coomber, N. (2012) BME Student Experiences at Central School of Speech & Drama York, United Kingdom: The Higher Education Academy.

M G, M. C. P., A. C. W., 2019. *Performing Research: Dear 'Write' Central*. London: s.n.

National Union of Students, 2011. *Race for Equality*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.nus.org.uk/en/news/research-publications/> [Accessed 1 May 2020].

Okun, T., n.d. *White Supremacy Culture*. [ebook] Dismantling Racism. Available at: <[https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/White\\_Supremacy\\_Culture\\_Okun.pdf](https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/White_Supremacy_Culture_Okun.pdf)> [Accessed 6 May 2020].

Palmer, G., Fernández, J., Lee, G., Masud, H., Hilson, S., Tang, C., Thomas, D., Clark, L., Guzman, B. and Bernai, I. (2020). *Oppression and Power*. [online] Press.rebus.community. Available at: <https://press.rebus.community/introductiontocommunitypsychology/chapter/oppression-and-power/> [Accessed 26 Jan. 2020].

Peters, M., 2017. Womyn, wimmin, and other folx. [Online] Available at: <https://www3.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2017/05/09/womyn-wimmin-and-other-folx/vjhPn82ITGgCCbE12iNn1N/story.html?arc404=true> [Accessed 17 8 2020].

Perlman, M., 2015. Columbia Journalism Review. [Online] Available at: [https://www.cjr.org/analysis/language\\_corner\\_1.php](https://www.cjr.org/analysis/language_corner_1.php) [Accessed 10 7 2020].

RCSSD MA Students 2019. Rehearsed Reading and Focus Group [Interview] (7 March 2019).

Saad, L., 2020. *Me And White Supremacy : Combat Racism, Change The World, And Become A Good Ancestor*. Naperville: Sourcebooks.

Stefancic, R. D. a. J., 2001. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. New York and London: New York University Press. Steinmetz, K., 2020. *She Coined the Term 'Intersectionality' Over 30 Years Ago. Here's What It Means to Her Today*. [Online] Available at: <https://time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/> [Accessed 28 April 2020].