'Whiteness is an *immoral* choice': The idea of the University at the intersection of crises

Abstract

Universities in the global North are shaped against intersecting crises, including those of political economy, environment and, more recently, epidemiology. The lived experiences of these crises have renewed struggles against exploitation, expropriation and extraction, including Black Lives Matter, and for decolonising the University. In and through the University, such struggles are brought into relation with the structures, cultures and practices of power and privilege. These modes of privilege are imminent to the reproduction of whiteness, white fragility and privilege, double and false consciousness, and behavioural code switching. In particular, whiteness has historical and material legitimacy, reinforced through policy and regulation, and in English HE this has tended to reframe struggle in relation to culture wars. This article argues that the dominant articulation of the University, conditioned by economic value rather than humane values has been reinforced and amplified during the Covid-19 pandemic. The argument pivots around UK Government policy and guidelines, in order to highlight the processes by which intellectual work and the reproduction of higher education institutions connects value-production and modes of settler-colonial and racial-patriarchal control.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter; Covid-19; crisis; whiteness; University; values

Introduction: crisis and the idea of higher education

The Covid-19 pandemic has reinforced the idea that the University in the global North is defined in relation to crises, which materially affect the governance, regulation and funding of higher education (HE). This analysis of crises, either singular or interwoven, has accelerated since the financial crash of 2007 ushered-in a period of deep, global austerity (Bevins et al., 2020). Against this backdrop of financial shock, the structures, cultures and practices of universities have increasingly been shaped against industrial and science strategies, markets and ideas of value, regional and national economic needs, and protections of student-consumer rights and those of the taxpayer (Department for Education (DfE), 2017; Office for Students (OfS), 2020). One outcome of this has been an inability for institutions like universities to address crises without recourse to finance capital, markets and business-as-usual.

In English HE, this has been accelerated since 2010, under the Coalition and successive Conservative governments. Here, the funding, regulation and governance of universities has become increasingly shaped against value or value-for-money (Hewitt, 2021; OfS, 2019, 2020). During the Covid-19 pandemic this led to the Government basing any potential institutional bailout upon a regime of restructuring (DfE, 2020a), with HE framed as a site for the development of human capital, and of 'the provision of high quality courses aligned with economic and societal needs' (DfE, 2020a: 3; see also, OfS, 2022a).

This ideological framing of restructuring for-value had been shaped for a number of years prior to the pandemic. The desire for capital-intensity across the economy reshaped regulation and funding, and underpinned rises in student fees, the implementation of metrics like the United Kingdom's National Student Survey and Longitudinal Education Outcomes, and enforced engagement with institutional audits related to teaching and research excellence. In England, this has been framed by a policy framework rooted in productivity and human capital, to be demonstrated by institutions through specific outcomes data, in order to catalyse effective competition as the primary enabler of student success (for instance, DfE, 2017; Her Majesty's (HM) Treasury, 2015).

The idea of productivity and productive work is central here.

> Productivity is the challenge of our time. It is what makes nations stronger, and families richer. The drivers of productivity are well understood: a dynamic, open enterprising economy supported by long-term public and private investment in infrastructure, skills and science. A nation flourishes when it uses the full skills of all its people in all parts of that nation. (HM Treasury, 2015: 1)

The impulse for a more productive, re-engineered HE terrain accelerated the creation of efficiencies through cost reduction, the need for more efficient allocation of resources between providers, and knowledge-based innovation. Here performance data are crucial in enabling hard choices about funding to be made, driven by judgements about investment, by Governments, students and taxpayers (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS), 2015). This is predicated upon the idea that HE exists inside a closed, capitalist system, framed by equality of opportunity, and inside which it is the responsibility of individuals to maximise their human capital.

The economistic narrowing of HE policy discourse has been matched by a widening of discourse around national identity, Brexit and British values, focussing on the idea of Britain as a post-colonial power. As will be highlighted, during the coronavirus pandemic, this idea of what it means to be British infected and inflected HE policy and guidance, opening-up a renewed front of cultural contestation (e.g. Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (CRED), 2021; DfE, 2022). This reinforces the hegemony of capitalist social relations inside which individual agency is based upon meritocratic institutions, cultures and practices. As a result, there has been a denial of material, communal demands for decolonising, Black Lives Matter (BLM), and identity-based politics, and an emphasising of free speech as opposed to cancel culture (Hubble and Lewis, 2021; OfS, 2022b; Williamson, 2021). Such denials refuse to understand marginalisation as structurally-reproduced, for instance, through racial and gendered violence against particular bodies, and instead the focus is upon individual deficits (Mellgren & Ivert, 2019; Minister of State for Equalities, 2022; Rollock, 2019).

During the pandemic, universities became pivotal spaces inside which these narratives of value and identity are entwined. The concrete separations reproduced during previous moments of extreme stress, like the financial shock, have been witnessed in the differences *both* between those expected to be on-campus, and those with the resources and privilege

to work from-home, *and* between disciplines and institutions that are forced to compete in a zero-sum game for positional outcomes, like teaching contracts and research funding. Thus, during the epidemiological crisis of Covid-19, precarity, gendered and racial disparities in workload and outcomes, the criticism of allegedly unproductive or low-quality courses, and the focus upon an accelerated return to face-to-face teaching, each articulate a view of an institution that is increasingly anti-human (Kornbluh, 2020). As finance, efficiencies, value-for money and economistic outcomes are amplified, there is an increasing tendency for the University to reflect the one-sidedness of a life inside a system that views human beings solely in relation to the value of their labour-power.

Prior to the pandemic, this anti-humanity appeared in the symptoms of distress recorded by students and staff, in terms of: chronic overwork; narratives of individuals quitting the University; stories of ill-being, anxiety and depression; and, tragically, reports of suicide or suicidal ideation (Hall & Bowles, 2016). Responses often focused upon curing or solving symptomatic distress. Yet the conjuncture of Covid-19 and BLM exposed the limitations of the dominant imaginary of HE. This is precisely because it has surfaced how that imaginary is narrowly-defined around a particular conception of value, which denies differential and intersectional injustices, and the reality that they have systemic causes. Thus, the heat generated by the idea that free speech is under attack in a renewed culture war, has revealed contestations around the idea that hegemony is underscored by whiteness (Prescod-Weinstein, 2021).

Working though these tensions between value and humane values, and the ways in which they have been exacerbated by Covid-19, is at the heart of our argument. The pandemic is a crucial moment for this work, precisely because it has realised differential threats to the corporeal and psychological existence of people. Other threats, rationalised as not-yet-present (like climate forcing), have failed to create the same, shared questioning of social institutions, cultures and practices (Bendell, 2018). This is not the case with Covid-19, which has threatened the lives of humans and the economic integrity of individual institutions, and as a result has reanimated the relationships between the political and the economic inside universities. Crucially, the argument here situates how this reanimation plays out in relation to whiteness, in particular for institutions that are unable to reflect upon their own conditioning inside matrices of coloniality (Kubota, 2020), and instead reflect the realities of settler-colonial and racial-patriarchal power (Andreotti, 2021).

Working through *both* its methodological practices that reinforce racialised, patriarchal, one-sided approaches to knowing the world, *and* a reflection upon English HE policy and guidance during Covid-19, this paper articulates the ways in which the University is unable to imagine a generous role for itself beyond supplying fixes that maintain an exploitative, anti-human system. It analyses how crises have shaped the idea of the University through Cartesian conditioning represented as whiteness. It articulates how this conditioning has been reinforced by Government policy and guidance enacted to reinforce particular value-propositions, which have then been used to set-up strategic culture wars. It goes on to discuss how this reinforces cultures of whiteness inside institutions, further distorting the subjectivities of those who labour inside them. Consequentially, we question whether the

University is able to move beyond the reproduction of structural inequality, in order to contribute to the abolition of the present state of things.

Covid-19 and the methodological conditioning of the University in crisis
University funding, regulation and governance, are shaped by relationships to finance capital and cultures of competition predicated upon value-for-money for students and the taxpayer (Hall, 2021; McGettigan, 2015). This has tended to create toxic managerial cultures (Kinman & Johnson, 2019; Megoran & Mason, 2020; Wray & Kinman, 2020; Zábrodská et al., 2018), because the corporate form of the University is shaped in relation to the reproduction of surpluses, rather than in relation to human needs (hooks, 1994; Tokumitsu, 2014). Such disconnection is reproduced methodologically, as institutions vie for resources, in terms of student numbers, income from research and knowledge transfer, and spill-over activities like consultancy, and as they compete based on discourses of student outcomes, impact and entrepreneurialism.

Accelerated through the pandemic, this trajectory is increasingly framed by the requirement that University activities might be unbundled, sorted and compared across *both* national *and* international terrains, and thereby enable, for instance, new services to be commodified or further financial derivatives, like educational exchange traded funds, to be created (Beecher & Streitwieser, 2019; Williamson, 2020). This requires definite and definitive forms of measurement, imposed rationally inside competitive institutions (Brankovic, 2018; Pinel, 2020). These forms of measurement tend to be defined against idealised modes of performance, and tend to privilege: those with access to resources like time and networks that are valued; hegemonic disciplinary and interdisciplinary discourses of value; and, individuals who can devote more of their lives to work, for instance those without caring responsibilities (Aquinis et al., 2018; Morrisey, 2015).

Within this methodological University and categorised inside disciplines, objective work shapes a space designed around the operationalisation and determination of performance. Thus, the activities of the University are endogenous, deterministic and transhistorical, because it is impossible to imagine anything, including the resolution of crises, other than against dominant modes of capitalist reproduction (Bracio & Szarucki, 2019; Cerra and Saxena, 2018). Not only does this develop practices based upon the allegedly neutral symbolism of economic value and the search for perfect markets, but it tends to push the blame for imperfections and uncertainties onto those deemed unproductive. In the University, this means those whose practices are not impactful, entrepreneurial or excellent.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted this inability of the University to work beyond the systemic parameters set by capitalist social relations. In spite of the global and immediate, epidemiological threat, the governance and regulation of these institutions was predicated upon ensuring that they were able 'to emerge in a stronger position to contribute to our economy and society, as the nation recovers from the pandemic' (DfE, 2020a: 3). Such prioritisation was also witnessed in emergent narratives of the social need for universities to reopen, perhaps with nuanced local mitigations, alongside fears of institutional and sector-wide illiquidity and bankruptcy (Brooks-Pollock et al., 2020; London Economics, 2020).

This matters because the pandemic shock emerged against the historical backdrop of over-leveraged institutions, where additional debt burdens were shouldered to maintain or generate competitive edge, or where there were insufficient cash reserves to drawdown upon (or punitive covenants placed on the use of those reserves). Between 2015-19 UK HE institutions expanded total external borrowing by 48 per cent, to £14bn (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) 2019). In exchange for Government underwriting, certain sectoral bodies in the UK offered to 'reduce costs, increase efficiency and moderate certain behaviours to increase stability and sustainability' (Universities UK (UUK) 2020a).

Thus, the focus for survival was upon preserving institutional forms, with University workers expected to bear the costs, through increased pressures described as academia's new 'shock doctrine' (Kornbluh 2020). Against projected risks to income from international and domestic student fees, limited research funding, and low net cash inflow as a result of Covid-19, institutions: planned redundancies; capitalised upon distance or online provision; refused to furlough staff on fixed-term or part-time, hourly paid contracts; asked staff to take pay cuts; intensified algorithmic management and communication systems; and, reopened, accelerating community infections (London Economics 2020; Workers' Inquiry Network (WIN) 2020).

Covid-19 reinforced the methodological tempo of institutions around the reproduction of value and value-for-money. In spite of calls for a Zero Covid University and a Covid-Safe Student Experience (The Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Independent SAGE) 2020), institutional responses amplified competition, mediated by the balance of risk between individual, physical and institutional, economic death. Institutional and sectoral responses to the epidemiological threat to their economic viability skewed behaviour towards the incentivised and economic (Bossie and Mason 2020), in relation to: first, student recruitment and markets, operating activities and research; second, the development of new forms of organisational development and entrepreneurial activity; and third, delivering the same quality of education and value-for-money online, face-to-face and in hybrid contexts, in order to protect student outcomes. For instance, in England, Durham University proposed, and later rescinded, a move to fully-online degrees, whilst the University of Sheffield proposed salary cuts and promotion freezes for staff, which were withdrawn due to increased student numbers.

The 'pandemic swerve' (Mitropoulos 2020) in universities reinforced extant trends that act methodologically to reproduce privilege. These include: the widening and deliberate separation of academics from those in leadership positions (Erickson et al. 2020); the reproduction of a narcissistic, competitive 'macho agenda' in academia's prestige economy (Perry and Miller 2017); an obsession with performance metrics and league tables as a kind of fantasy sports league (Spooner 2017), reinforcing the distorted relationships between institutions, consultancies, policy analysts and funding bodies; and, the tolerance given to patriarchal, white and *value*-driven positions. The pandemic swerve accelerated narratives of business-as-usual, through which both policymakers and University leaders refused to rationalise Covid-19 as a systemic dislocation. Instead the activities of the University

remained subject to a methodological rhythm that is endogenous, deterministic and transhistorical, based upon the symbolism of value-for-money, grounded in markets and competition.

Yet, crucially, during the pandemic there has been a renewed critique of this methodological rhythm, pivoting around its whiteness. There has been analysis of how the allegedly neutral practices of universities are grounded in the methods of closed professions, inside which being a woman, black, queer, disabled is a cultural and structural problem (American Economics' Association (AEA), 2019; Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC), 2022; UUK, 2020b). These articulated a need for work that critiques how academic disciplines construct the world. As Prescod-Weinstein (2021) notes for Physics, and Yusoff (2018) highlights for Geology, the social and intellectual practices of disciplines tend to deny non-white/cis/male perspectives. They thereby further the othering of those positions and identities and their ways of knowing the world, unless they generate value and surplus.

As deterministic and rational methodologies are imposed, they subsume all singular, lived experiences, and judge them against particular identities that are elevated and reified because of their generative relation to surplus. In this way, a systemic essence is revealed that structures being around a particular colonial and patriarchal universality, deemed to be of value. Thus, what Moten (2017: 36) calls 'minoritarian citizenship' is determined by and against an absolute idea that structures and appropriates surplus through exploitation, expropriation and extraction. In this, the methodological University, defined against the universe of value, objectifies all of life, including the materiality of social identities. Queer, feminist, Black, disabled, social identities exist as beings-in-themselves, but are judged against the methodological power of whiteness, such that they cannot be for-themselves.

Methodological whiteness in the University
As an organising concept, whiteness reinforces racial inequalities at all levels of society. Mills (1997: 3) articulates how 'global white supremacy' highlights a system that preserves privileges for specific groups. He writes that 'what is needed, in other words, is a recognition that racism (or, as I will argue, global white supremacy) is itself a political system, a particular power structure of formal or informal rule… and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties' (ibid.). Leonardo (2009: ix) describes the 'fundamental building blocks of the very structures of society' in which specific groups are given privileges whilst those who are Black and Ethnically Minoritised (BEM) are disadvantaged and alienated.

Universities wanting to diversify their structures, cultures and practices, or simply wishing to catalyse conversations about race, in an attempt to counter whiteness, too often end up reinforcing it, precisely because they cannot escape this structuring reality. For example, Ahmed (2012) focuses upon the issue of recruitment, through which BEM academics find themselves being interviewed by majoritarian white panels and speaking to primarily white audiences, and then being judged against dominant positions on issues of race and diversity. Processes like recruitment are defined to constrict the ability of others to affect the whiteness of the organisation dynamically. In fact, dynamic or agile questioning of whiteness is faced down by the inertia of the institution, which uses up the energy of

specific groups/individuals by requiring them to take on officially-sanctioned equality and diversity work. For these BEM individuals, this inevitably means '…your existence can allow the other not to turn up' (ibid: 5). A crucial result is that the white *status quo* is reinforced through the co-option of bodies made marginal to undertake work considered to be less valuable.

The reality for those who define themselves as Black or of colour, for those who identify as a woman, transgender, LGBTQIA, or who are disabled, is that they have to contend with cultures and structures that reproduce what Ignatiev (1972) calls 'wages of [patriarchal] whiteness'. Moreover, this is shaped in relation to the symbolism of equality of opportunity, or the idea that HE is a meritocracy predicated upon equality, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) strategies. Yet the reality of this is materialised as:

- fewer black, female professors or leaders in HE (Rollock, 2019);
- fewer black students attending selective colleges (McMillan Cottom, 2018);
- discrimination against women in the sciences (Aguinis et al., 2018);
- the historical and structural inequalities reported by learned and sectoral societies (Equality and Human Rights' Commission (EHRC), 2019; RSC, 2022); and
- discrimination against forms of knowledge produced from intersectional groups or the South as 'invisible colleges' (Walker & Frimpong Boamah, 2019).

These outcomes are symptoms of enforced engagement in discourses of excellence, through which externally-defined forms of measurement rooted in quantity act as proxies for quality. Measurements are predicated upon reflecting back to those doing the measuring what they are looking for, which also tend to reflect racialised and patriarchal norms of behaviour, language, impact, excellence, entrepreneurship and performance. Those who do not outwardly mirror those norms must constantly validate and assert themselves in ways that demonstrate belonging (Ahmed, 2021), and do not disturb the status quo. At the same time, trying to exist inside the 'unreconstructed spaces of whiteness' (Arday & Mirza, 2018: 11), which are historically and materially designed to exclude specific groups, amplifies the experience of alienation and racial battle fatigue in the face of whiteness (Sian, 2019; Puwar, 2004).

Universities operating methodologically around value and value-for-money tend to be unable to tackle these cultures of whiteness, and the methodological practices that reinforce them, beyond engagement in EDI awards like the Race Equality Charter. For Henderson and Bhopal (2021: 14), such 'marketised diversity work' ends up 'reinforcing the very inequalities on which [the University] seeks to act' (Henderson & Bhopal, 2021: 14), because they seek to use the lived experiences of those bodies to maintain the integrity of dominant structures, cultures and practices.

This structural, cultural and practical integrity has been reinforced during the pandemic, which has made visible issues that are more likely to disadvantage women and BEM staff, including: precarity; differential workloads; reduction in temporary/zero-hour contracts; and, impacts on mental-health. Women are over-represented in precarious positions (O'Keefe &

Courtois, 2019; UCU, 2020), and this is compounded for BEM staff who are: less likely to have open-ended/permanent contracts; less likely to be in senior positions; more likely to leave academia than their white peers; more likely to suffer micro-aggressions and mental ill-health (Advance HE, 2019; Wright et al., 2020). Addressing such issues, which 'intensified at the height of crisis', remained an 'after-thought' for universities (Arday, 2021), and 'the response to COVID-19 by well-meaning white people and universities has failed to account for the "racial realities" of our current crisis including the trauma of the disproportionate number of [BAME] deaths' (Wright et al. (2020), discussing Guliford (2020)). Here, the business-as-usual focus of universities has generated an environment that is at once hopeless for many (Hall, 2021), and also shaped through culture wars that protect whiteness.

Protecting whiteness and Empire: the State and HE
The Covid-19 crisis coincided with an accentuation of tension around race in universities and wider society. The BLM movement and protests following the death of George Floyd in June 2020 increased pressure on universities to act over race (Otobo, 2020: 8). This continued a recent historical trajectory, which saw Black students and staff raise demands for change over: racism (Tate & Bagguley, 2017); the predominant whiteness of academic staff (Rollock, 2019); the need to decolonise curricula (Arday & Mirza, 2018); and the colonial history and architecture of universities (Carrell, 2019; Chigudu, 2020).

However, immediately preceding the pandemic, and reinforced in the policy response to it, there was an increasing connection between: first, the social need to reinstate a dominant model of economic growth based upon the common sense of work; second, individual responsibility for generating human capital predicated upon a meritocratic system; and third, vocal and direct opposition to minoritarian citizenship, for instance in efforts to decolonize curricula. At the core of these connections lies a denial and a refusal to accept the idea that some individuals and communities are blocked structurally from self-actualising their lives, and instead places the onus on individuals to overcome individual deficiencies.

Analysis of pandemic-driven, English HE policy and guidelines demonstrates how calls for national, economic renewal, almost as a wartime-effort, were situated as an opportunity to renew a dominant British identity. This is a starting point for understanding the centrality of value production and the denial of structural inequalities in that renewing, as twin, interrelated concepts. In his foreward to the Establishment of a Higher Education Restructuring Regime in Response to COVID-19, the then Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson MP, argued for particular 'conditions imposed… designed to ensure those providers make changes that will enable them to make a strong contribution to the nation's future. (DfE: 3). This future is predicated upon high-quality courses with strong employment outcomes, with a clear regional connection. However, this was immediately followed by the imperative that 'all universities must, of course, demonstrate their commitment to academic freedom and free speech', including student unions that should be 'focused on serving the needs of the wider student population rather than subsidising niche activism and campaigns' (ibid.: 4).

Established conceptions of core needs, rather than niche desires, led Williamson to be clear that future funding would be conditional upon: first, guarantees of outcomes for students, economy and the taxpayer; and second, 'assurance that providers are fully complying with their legal duties to secure freedom of speech under section 43 Education (No.2) Act 1986' (ibid.: 6). This policy approach capitalised upon the pandemic, in order to reinforce dominant cultural conceptions, and which were later reinforced through amendments to the governing principles of the chief regulator, the OfS. Through its 'value for money strategy 2019–21', the OfS (2019) remained focused upon teaching quality, the consumer rights of students, transparency, and employment outcomes. Here, issues of individual choice, taxpayer protection, competition, fee limits, employment outcomes, funding transparency, and improving teaching quality was situated within an endogenous system, which could be finessed with a key focus upon value-for-money, '[f]or all students, from all backgrounds' (ibid.: 3).

This approach to the regulation of a closed system governed by competition and markets, was crucial in ensuring the authenticity and validity of 'our world-class HE system delivers for all students and the wider economy' (DfE, 2020b: 4). It also catalysed a range of analyses from policy institutes on the idea of value, and how value could be constituted at a time of extreme stress like the pandemic (Hewitt, 2021), alongside short-term consultations on how best to regulate quality and standards inside this system determined by competition, performance data, efficiency, and specific, student outcomes (OfS, 2021). The defence of the material history and perceived, universal strengths of the system, against criticisms like identity-politics or critical race theory, is central.

Maintaining the strengths of the system has underscored a regulatory focus on teaching quality and student outcomes, and generalised claims about HE 'dumbing down and spoon-feeding students rather than pursuing high standards and embedding the subject knowledge and intellectual skills needed to succeed in the modern workplace' (DfE, 2020c). Dominant, subject-based intellectual skills shape human capital development, and are the priority for institutions in delivering value. For instance, in a policy paper on *Reducing bureaucratic burden in research, innovation and higher education* (DfE, 2020c), the UK Government pressed institutions to ignore 'voluntary membership awards or other forms of recognition to support or validate an organisation's performance in particular areas' like Athena Swan or the Race Equality Charter. There is a clear identification of such activities with *causes* that mirrors much of the discussion around the *contested political ideologies* generated by identity politics and cancel culture. As a result, the Government asks its HE regulators and funding bodies 'to ensure that they place no weight upon the presence or absence of such markers or scheme memberships in any of their regulatory or funding activities', because they are inefficient, bureaucratic, and detract from 'core teaching activities' (ibid.).

This articulation of institutional engagement with identity-politics detracting from economic renewal was increasingly elided with statements around cancel culture and national history. For instance, in spite of statements made against racism in HE (Hazell, 2020) and acknowledgements of the attainment gap (Donelan, 2020a), the Minister of State for Universities, Michelle Donelan MP, consistently connected issues of race and decolonisation

to discussions over 'free speech' in universities. In June 2020, in response to the BLM protests following the murder of George Floyd, she argued that 'racism is abhorrent' but also made it clear 'that we should not seek to censor or edit our past… we cannot re-write our history. Instead, what we should do is remember and learn from it' (Donelan, 2020b).

Critics argue that the one-sided memory of history works un-critically, to enable universities to benefit from substantial endowments without remembering contemporary and extant criticisms of colonial legacies of dispossession (Drayton, 2019). Remembering is a critical act, threatens *both* dominant, white identities, *and* the idea of fixed, objective subject knowledge and intellectual skills needed to succeed in the modern workplace. In this way, contested and subjective interpretations of subject knowledge and intellectual skills threaten the common sense idealisation of our history and our national development as an economic power, Imperial legacies notwithstanding. Thus, decolonisation demands responses for 'safeguarding our history because I do think it otherwise becomes fiction if you start editing it, taking bits out that we view as stains…' (Donelan, 2021b).

Thus, whilst celebrating the notional autonomy of institutions like universities, public policy and policy papers, Government guidance and ministerial statements have used the pandemic to recalibrate whose voices and histories should be heard. In this, the idea of the University maps across to a particular, ideological and Conservative idea of social relations that has been re-energised, enlarged and re-crafted in post-Brexit Britain (Drayton, 2019b; Virdee and McGeever, 2018). Whiteness is central to this project. Thus, the *Higher education: free speech and academic freedom* bill states:

> The [Higher Education Provider [HEP]] should not interfere with academic freedom by imposing, or seeking to impose, a political or ideological viewpoint upon the teaching, research or other activities of individual academics… This applies equally to contested political ideologies that are not associated with a particular political party or view, such as 'decolonising the curriculum'. (DfE, 2021: 38-9)

Through the bill, academic freedom is developed from the Restructuring Regime, and becomes a matter of regulation by the OfS (Hubble and Lewis, 2021; OfS, 2021a). This is *both* revealed in relation to that regulator's focus upon student outcomes and teaching excellence (OfS, 2021 b), *and* reinforced in a ministerial letter to all vice-chancellors (Williamson, 2021).

Such policy, guidelines and ministerial letters tend towards regulating away the lived experience of structural injustices. Thus, the OfS (2020) annual review acknowledges inequalities, but stresses that accountability lies with institutions for tailoring individual support. In its consultation on constructing student outcome and experience indicators, regulation is predicated upon promoting quality and equality of opportunity, inside a system that offers a normalised experience. Inside the system, students pay a significant price, invest time and effort, and deserve the same regulation of quality, 'whatever their background and characteristics' (OfS, 2022c: 7). With a focus upon individual outcomes, unaffected by differential, intersectional, structural conditions, data about identity is used for

reliable interpretation from particular perspectives. This enables claims to be made about rates of access to HE by, for instance, white working-class boys, as a rebuttal of societal, structural inequalities for other ethnicities, in spite of evidence about the value of other life trajectories for those groups.

Such perspectives and claims are central to policy and guidance designed to protect its common sense, hegemonic history. This can only be underpinned by disciplinary and institutional methodologies that rationalise and normalise certain behaviours, and through which universities are being positioned within a much broader 'cultural' struggle against so-called 'woke' left-wing culture and critique. Writing in an anthology by the *Common Sense Group*, Gareth Bacon MP laments this cancel culture that seeks to negate the successes of post-Imperial Britain, and denigrate any dissent to it.

> Our heritage is under a direct assault – the very sense of what it is to be British has been called into question, institutions have been undermined, the reputation of key figures in our country's history have been traduced. […] Shamefully, […] our universities – have become corrosively complicit in crushing the diversity of thought and intellectual dissent. (Bacon, 2021: 20)

Here, whiteness works as a concept that cannot be named, and conditions common sense engagement with issues of social justice. In fact, the idea of white privilege is actively denied in the *CRED* (2021) report, alongside that of The Education Committee (2021b) on low attainment amongst 'forgotten' white working-class pupils. By contesting critical accounts of the violence of Empire as 'woke', the State seeks to protect a version of British culture and society where whiteness is never implicated, and where injustices are individual rather than structural.

Thus, in her response to the CRED report, the Minister of State for Equalities, Kemi Badenoch MP, argued (2022) that lack of opportunity cannot simply be linked to ethnic minority disadvantage. Crucial here is the idea of levelling-up, rather than any need to dismantle systemic, institutional structures that are marginalising. She argued that society's focus should be on 'the agency, resilience and mutual support of and among individuals, families and communities that ultimately drives success and achievement.' In this way, 'inclusion and belonging' would lead to acceptance of 'our country's rich and complex history' (ibid.). One route to acceptance is to analyse both positives and negatives, in relation to 'a more sophisticated and robust analysis of the data' (ibid.). Such analysis, of course, is also defined by dominant positions in thinking through the parameters and boundaries of algorithmic governance, predicated upon whiteness (Noble, 2018).

The plan that supports the idea of *Inclusive Britain* announced by Badenoch (2022), highlighted five actions (43-46, 53) on universities that reinforce the centrality of teaching quality and standards, the choice-based consumer rights of students, transparency in relation to access and participation targets, and employment outcomes. By focusing upon social mobility as a solution to inequality, the focus for universities becomes high-quality courses, and the demand to 'clamp down on low quality courses, which hurt people from

disadvantaged backgrounds the most'. Here, regulation 'will set minimum acceptable standards for student outcomes', thus reframing injustice in relation to equality of opportunity, robust data, and individual resilience.

Policy, guidelines and ministerial statements during the pandemic, reinforce the connections between individual responsibility, a denial of structural injustices, social mobility, and economic growth. Moreover, these sit alongside more vocal, Conservative opposition to any activity that links race or racism to the settler-colonial and racial-patriarchal violence and exploitation that was central to Empire (Biggar, 2021; Gill, 2020). As a result, through policy, the State is seen to defend whiteness, which is integrally linked to the preservation and defence of a particular idea of national institutions like universities. These institutions are then positioned as potential threats to the dominant construction of British history. Moreover, they are threats to the objective, economic process of renewing the nation, in response to the pandemic and Brexit. State intervention in HE seeks to protect whiteness, and its relationship with the history and legacy of hegemonic structures, cultures and practices. This is a moral choice to construct reality around institutions and positions that accept a closed, deterministic system of reproduction, to which there is no alternative.

Conclusion: whiteness as an immoral choice
The intersection of epidemiological and financial crises emboldened narratives about HE that reinforce a dominant common sense. This ignores the intersectional, intercommunal and intergenerational injustices of the pandemic, and the lives made precarious. Both institutions and policymakers/regulators continue to push an agenda of value-for-money, business-as-usual, efficiency and productivity, focused upon particular ideations of performance. Moreover, where universities seek to engage with symptomatic failings in relation to racism, common sense tends to reduce these to technocratic analyses of awarding gaps, harassment on-campus, and reading lists.

The socio-cultural geography of the institution is then shaped through ministerial speeches, and Departmental policy and guidance, which serve to mobilise the idea of culture wars and the desires of one fraction of the nation state. Conditioned by the imperative to create value, and framed by equality of opportunity, the University then shapes an idea of academic freedom and free speech that reinforces dominant modes of privilege. Crucially, the cultures and practices that enable such modes of privilege are constructed in relation to white, male, cis, and ableist performance. Thus, whiteness is imminent to processes of measuring and sorting individuals and groups, which catalyses separation, divorce, alienation and estrangement between people, framed inside disciplines and institutions. This further marginalises questions of racial injustice and decolonising, and instead enable them to be reframed as the outcome of 'contested political ideologies'.

The material and historic reproduction of whiteness also depends upon the cognitive dissonance, double or false consciousness, fugitivity and code switching of those who benefit or suffer under it. Here, the choice to ignore evidence and testimony around the toxic nature of whiteness, makes its institutional reproduction an immoral choice. In response, survival demands that individuals attune themselves to the ideological rhythms of

institutions that are positioned around the reproduction of surpluses. During the pandemic, this one-sided nature of our universities amplified its methodological practices, and policy responses reinforced privilege and exclusion, through a focus upon relationships generated by value-for-money. Thus, policy and practice in the pandemic increased the separations between the lived experiences of individuals, in denial of what Mbembe (2017: 30) calls the 'Black consciousness of Blackness'.

Dissolving these denials is a step in negating the validity of historical, material privilege accrued inside universities, and realised in the static identities of high-performing individuals and disciplinary departments. It demands that those identities are made as fragile as all others, and are brought together in an entangled communion that pushes beyond what Shotwell (2016: 195) calls a 'purity politics of despair'. The idea is not to generate blueprints for managing crises, to cling to the unreal imaginaries of solutions-focused cultures, or to defend established standards of living that are grounded in apparently transhistorical, settler-colonial and racial-patriarchal norms. Instead, it reveals the immorality at the heart of the cultural perspectives of the institutions of the global North, which simply offer a 'vast bureaucratic apparatus for the creation and maintenance of hopelessness' (Dinerstein, 2015: 82).

The reproduction of whiteness has been amplified at the intersection of financial and epidemiological crises, generating questions around the idea and ideals of University work. For what is the University a symbol? Is it possible to refuse its transhistorical, anti-human imaginary from within? How might we disentangle economic value from humane values in our intellectual work? If the struggle is against the University's demand that we are one-sided, human capital, realised in its forms, pathologies and methodologies, what forms, cultures and practices do we need to be many-sided and otherwise?

Harney and Moten (2013) ask us to question how we might move from antagonism, and to struggle for paths we might make ourselves. This is the decomposing of those ways of being, acting and knowing the world that are governed by the commodity form, including in academic work. Instead of surplus, the focus may become our recognition of intellectual abundance, predicated upon the many-sided and communal reproduction of wealth, rather than its commodification as knowledge production. This *both* gestures towards decoloniality (as anti-capitalist practice) *and* enables hospicing whiteness as a way of existing that is dying because it is unable to offer any existence beyond crisis management (Elwood et al., 2019). Here, new generative, qualitative and relational metaphors for activity in the world, predicated upon composting, hospicing and braiding, might 'assist with the birth of something new, undefined, and potentially (but not necessarily) wiser' (Andreotti et al., 2018).

Covid-19 has demonstrated that in this movement away from the immorality of whiteness in the University, a different imaginary is required. Yet, against HE's pandemic policies and guidelines that double-down on opposition in the form of culture wars and the name of freedom of speech, this feels impossible. Yet, one of the tools at our disposal is the plurality and mutuality of our humanity and its values. Here, indignant storytelling that reveals the

lived experiences of objectification, productivity, impact and excellence as violent acts of denial is a starting point. Such storytelling does not collapse the singular experience against particular demands and universal norms. Rather, it opens those experiences out, as new, pluralistic universalities able to connect to stories of injustice and hopelessness from inside-against-and-beyond the boundaries of the University. Against whiteness as a suffocating mode of quantitative rationalisation, this is a starting point from which we must consent not to be one-sided. It is the starting point from which we must consent to 'infinite humanity' (Moten, 2018: 183). This is not the reproduction of the capitalist University after the pandemic, which takes that event as an exogenous shock to be mitigated for-value. Instead, it is the real movement of intellectual work in society, built from the pandemic-shaped experiences of people, their relations and shared values.

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