

Whiteness in Academia

Whiteness in Academia:
Counter-Stories of Betrayal and Resistance

By

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**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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PREFACE

This book takes a very different approach to considering issues of ‘whiteness’ in education to my previous writing on the subject. I use speculative fiction, fan-fiction and (to some extent) counter-narrative to consider the positioning of whiteness within academia in its widest sense. I would like to thank Professor Fred Dervin for agreeing to publish this work as part of his series on “Post-intercultural communication and education”.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Guilty, self loathing, white? Welcome!

This book is about white people who work critically on race in Higher Education in its broadest sense. Whether it is critical race theory, critical whiteness studies, post-colonial theory or “new ethnicities” work more generally, conferences, academic departments and professional associations are disproportionately populated with white people. The statistics on white academics in Higher Education show that few Black and Minority Ethnic academics occupy senior positions. 98% of professors in UK (United Kingdom) Higher Education are White with only 29 Black and 179 Asian professors in the *whole country* according to statistics obtained by the Association of University Teachers in 2012¹. These figures are even more extreme in the most prestigious universities in the UK. In 2011 in the “top ten” universities there was not a single Black, Pakistani or Bangladeshi professor² and in the (top) “Russell” group of universities as a whole only one institution lists a Black professor and a (different) institution lists a Pakistani professor³. Such universities have established departments and reputations for investigating “race”, ethnicity and social justice issues. This would be ironic were it not so disturbing. What does it mean for white people to occupy such “monstrous positions” in university departments of education, sociology and social justice whilst

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2002/jan/21/raceineducation.race>

² http://www.google.co.uk/#hl=en&output=search&sclient=psy-ab&q=gillborn+hgher+education+presentation&oq=gillborn+hgher+education+presentation&gs_l=hp.3...757.7099.0.7355.41.34.2.2.2.0.244.4960.2j27j5.34.0...0.0.-YRLTnvEg_0&pbx=1&bav=on.2,or_r_gc.r_pw.r_qf,cf.osb&fp=1deb3a27a4d9b1ab&biw=1280&bih=707

³ http://www.google.co.uk/#hl=en&output=search&sclient=psy-ab&q=gillborn+hgher+education+presentation&oq=gillborn+hgher+education+presentation&gs_l=hp.3...757.7099.0.7355.41.34.2.2.2.0.244.4960.2j27j5.34.0...0.0.-YRLTnvEg_0&pbx=1&bav=on.2,or_r_gc.r_pw.r_qf,cf.osb&fp=1deb3a27a4d9b1ab&biw=1280&bih=707

simultaneously aiming to achieve socially just, transformative or even revolutionary results?

The starting point for this book is disquiet around white academics (such as myself) who work on “race” in our universities and colleges of education. There has hardly been silence around these issues and white academics in this field have been rightly “troubled” and “outed”. This begs the question of whether there is a need for any further discussion of this subject, particularly by a white academic. Surely people of colour know all this already? What is the purpose of a book written by a “white” academic on the horrific nature of their privileged position?

My aim is not to restate what is already known but rather to reconsider, from a different angle, what are some of the betrayals and resistances of white academics and writers in this area. I don’t faithfully use counter-narratives (I can’t from my positionality although as a second generation Irish and working class white I have plenty of experience of classism and ethnic slurs). I have no experience of racism but plenty of racists. Rather, I use techniques from science fiction and speculative fiction (which are not alien, as it were, to Critical Race Theory, CRT) to scope the limits and possibilities of whiteness in academia. These “pedagogical fictions” are parables, perhaps even learning tools, that can be used to explore the betrayals (and resistances) of whites working in this field.

Critical perspectives on whiteness consider the nature of white privilege and its structural partner white supremacy. In my earlier work I have argued for the validity of these concepts from a materialist perspective stressing a political economy of white supremacy (Preston, 2007) and the ways in which capitalism creates a material form of racial oppression unique to that mode of production (Preston, 2010). I have deliberately steered away from a discussion of my own whiteness and my positionality within academia for three reasons.

The first of these is the political validity of doing so. White academics writing about whiteness centre the analysis on themselves and make the object of whiteness studies (the oppressive nature of white supremacy) more about the subjectivity of white people:-

“I said this looks like a job for me
 So everybody, just follow me
 Cause we need a little, controversy
 Cause it feels so empty, without me”
 —Eminem “Without me” (2002)

Narratives that emerge from the voices of white academic authors can not fail to be as unauthentic as Elvis' carbon copy rhythm and blues or Eminem's whiny squeals. The white performer grabs the spotlight and wails "It (critical race studies) feels so empty without ME" meaning the white academic-hero / racial reformer / race traitor. The counter-narratives in this book must be partly seen in this vein. I can't duck out of the fact of my whiteness and, certainly whilst not embracing it, I can appreciate the limits, the heresy and the lack of criticality that writing counter-narratives even from my liminality, that is from my dual heritage white, working class, perspective or what I have previously called a trash-crit (Preston, 2007), can do within critical studies of race (in particular, the paradox of working with CRT from a white perspective). It would also be disingenuous to claim that this book is a morally "good" white discourse (Thompson, 2003). Similarly, all of the caveats in the world regarding my own white privilege, positionality and angst still make me an "unreliable narrator". Using the trope of "unreliable narrator" to define my own stories as "...partial, non-definitive" (Ford, 2008) is truthful, but not helpful.

Secondly, whites have a perceptual disadvantage in "seeing whiteness" and unconscious and dysconscious (King, 2004) desires to push it away from themselves are powerful. Ontologically, whiteness is a material formation that can only be observed tangentially by whites. Whites doing work on whiteness therefore need an alternative epistemology, and indeed methodology, for engaging with whiteness. For some whites in academia (and elsewhere) a philosophy of social (racial) justice provides this lens. However, a cloak of political philosophy does not mask the reality of white privilege.

This brings me to the third reason why whites should generally steer clear of analysis of their own whiteness. That is the impossibility of escaping embodiment. No matter how whites working in social justice might politically kick and struggle against whiteness we embody whiteness. Its quasi-material nature makes it the monster or maybe we (whites) are the monsters embodying it. Despite my reflexive cynical reaction (Preston, 2007) against "self loathing whites" and "guilty whites" one has to ask how any sane white academic who studies whiteness could not be "self loathing" and "guilty". If they (we) aren't then surely they (we) have missed the point?

This book is motivated by that third point. Whiteness, if it is to be "made strange" must be, for the white writer, alien and monstrous. This has particular implications for white academics doing whiteness studies or critical work in universities. How do they confront their "monstrous positionality"? There are many fictional portrayals of the "monstrous", of

course. The horror / science fiction writer H.P. Lovecraft created a mythology in his stories in which humans are completely insignificant and in which deity like alien beings from before time itself run the universe. This is sometimes known as the Cthulu mythos. Lovecraft's own work has been accused of being racist even by the standards of his time. His stories drip with vitriol against immigrants and the "other". It has even been argued that the mythos themselves represent racial themes and motifs. I am not trying to rehabilitate Lovecraft here or to claim that in his discussion of the monstrous he was really writing about his own whiteness or whiteness in general. Rather, Lovecraft's work presents a metaphorically useful way for whites writing in whiteness studies to think about their own identity. Firstly, whiteness exists outside of white perceptions. In Lovecraft's books (see Lovecraft, 2007) the universe of the Cthulu mythos exists outside of the human universe although it occasionally intersects with it. In the world of the mythos angles are odd, planes out of context and colours are found that do not exist in science or nature. Things are seen out of the corner of the eye or can not be heard in the same scale as normal sounds. Smells are discovered that have never been sensed before. Similarly, the perceptual world of white people is sometimes tangential to white supremacy but it does not allow them to perceive its horrors. The horrors of white supremacy, like the mythos, are of a different (cosmic) scale. Secondly, the "truth" about whiteness might be expected to lead whites to madness. In the Lovecraftian universe, encountering aspects of the mythos leads to insanity.

However, even if whites *could* consider the monstrous nature of their own whiteness white storytelling on this does not "fit" neatly into the repertoire of counter-storytelling within critical race theory. According to Delgado (1989) counter-stories should arise from a non-majoritarian (that is from a person of colour) perspective. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) take a slightly different position and consider that a story becomes a counter-story only when it incorporates elements of critical race theory. I would argue, though, that the incorporation of critical race theory alone does not make a counter-story if the writer identifies, or even is identified with, the white majority. The "counter-stories" of white writers, whilst not necessarily inflected with majoritarianism, still support elements of majoritarian position (the authority of the white author and their supposed ability to "transcend" whiteness) whatever their role in struggles against white supremacy. Exposed to critical enquiry they are jarring and uncomfortable even as they are majoritarian and predominant (as white supremacy means that the people who write the books, publish the articles and have most time to write are...). White narratives, even those which

are critical of the author's positionality, fall both within and without the cannon of voice in critical race theory / studies. The following narrative shows the difficulty of placing "white accounts of whiteness" within this literature.

The Racial/realist Dewey-Decimal System

Steven went into the library and appraised the books that lined the single shelf as they ranged off into infinity away from him. He was a librarian by trade himself, a cataloguer skilled in the Dewey Decimal system of library classification where every subject, fiction or non-fiction, had its own discrete category. He had travelled miles along crossroads and open country to arrive at the library at Crenshaw, the last surviving library to keep its own version of the Dewey Decimal system. Steven had become aware of the Crenshaw library when an unusual book had come his way. The book did not have a standard catalogue number but along its spine was written the code "124 + 34i". The book appeared to be written in a South Asian language but bore no relation to any language of which he knew of. Determined to find out who the book belonged to, or who would keep such a strange text, he took the drive out to Crenshaw to find out himself. Parking his old Volvo estate car in the run down car park Steven walked into the modern but largely empty library. The building was a testament to 1980s architecture with post-modern turrets. Murals lined the walls. There was no one inside the library except a young Pakistani woman under a sign which said "Enquiries".

Steven walked to the desk

"Hi," he said. "I work at Monkstown and we had a book come to us from your library at Crenshaw. I just thought that I'd return it. Steven Summers pleased to meet you."

The woman took the book. "Hasna. Pleased to meet you Steven. I see that you have one of our books, I am so sorry for this. I must apologise. Thank you for returning it."

"That's OK. I just didn't recognise the code, that's all. I wanted to ask you about it."

"Oh, there's no mystery about it," said Hasna. "I know that for you this all must look like a strange set up, but really there are no secrets here. On the contrary, the texts in this library deal with things which are more real than anything. The Decimal code on the book is part of our racial realist system of classification. We use imaginary numbers to classify books in the racial realist catalogue as opposed to the integers that you use in the Dewey Decimal system. Imaginary numbers are no mystery."

They're used all the time in mathematics to denote areas outside of the set of real numbers, like 0, 1, -2. For example, what do you think is the square root of 4?"

"2," said Steven. "2 x 2 is 4."

"and -4?" said Hasna.

"-2?" said Steven.

"No, -2 x -2 is 4. Ask a mathematician if you don't believe me. Mathematicians have invented the system of imaginary numbers to account for such inconsistencies. The square root of -4 is 2i and 2i x 2i is -4 by definition."

"So what does the Dewey Decimal classification on the side of this book stand for?"

"Well as you know the classification stands for Pakistan. The sub-classification is for Pakistani women and the "i" classification is a sub-classification for unmediated racialised experiences. They fall outside of the usual "library" of majoritarian experiences but they are real as opposed to the biases evident in majoritarian accounts."

"Unmediated racialised experiences?"

"Correct." said Hasna. "However, as a white man, indeed as a white person these experiences would be impossible for you to understand directly. You are free to borrow any book in our collection, indeed white people do this all the time – borrow, appropriate, discard – but you will not be able to fully understand the text so for every text we offer some kind of translation but I warn you that you may not get that much out of reading them."

Steven narrowed his eyes as if to say "I'll be the judge of that."

Hasna directed him towards a set of shelves labeled "Translations". Steven took the appropriate book from the shelf and checked it out.

"When can I bring it back?"

"We don't have borrowing dates," she said. "Take as long as you want with it. But we do expect you to bring your own book, your own life story when you return it."

Steven clutched the thin tome to his side and carried it out of the library with him, tossing it on the front seat of the car.

Fifty years passed and Steven had his text bound and brought it back to Hasna at the library. She smiled a little awkwardly when she saw it. "Sorry, we don't stock white biographies in this library. You can put it in your own library though."

"But my own experience is just as relevant!" said Steven.

As the short story above considers white “voices” and “biographies” using critical race theory fall within the mainstream cannon (within the usual library classifications of the above library) rather than as part of the “racial realist” cannon. They are hence (doubly) unclassifiable being neither “realist” accounts nor counter-stories. Rather than attempting to “place” white voices within or adjacent to “racial realism” this book takes a parallel approach, using storytelling to create social science fictions that reveal social facts, but these must be considered as distinct from “racial realist” accounts. Even within these stories, however, are elements of uncomfortable “truth”. Despite attempts to flee the scene of one’s whiteness all writing by whites on ‘race’ is, to some extent, autobiographical. Many things in these stories I have seen, thought and done or seen other white people doing. The Neo-Nazi bar in the story “The Fall Guy” is real (it is in Amsterdam and me and my friends made a quick exit not even getting beyond the doors), “Julia Quinn” in “Page 43” is a composite of some white academics that I have met in this field and the cats in “Cute Traitor” are both as cute and as revolutionary as portrayed.

As I will consider in chapter 5, white attempts at counter-stories are, additionally, “fan-fictional” as they pay homage to a reality of racial experience that whites will never experience. Although I do not necessarily make claims to a counter-story approach to CRT throughout the book two CRT counter-stories make frequent appearances and reappearances.

The first of these is Derek Bell’s “The Space Traders” from his book “Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism” (1990). In this “chronicle” Bell uses the trope of speculative fiction to imagine a “deal” offered by aliens to the United States government to trade gold, unlimited energy and to clean up the environment in return for “....all the African Americans who lived in the United States” (Bell, 1990: 160). Bell imagines the political, cultural and social machinations that follow including a supposedly “democratic” election in which 70% of the US population vote to agree with the Space Traders demands. The Space Traders win and at the conclusion to the chronicle they are taken into vast ships “...black people left the New World as their forebears had arrived” (Bell, 1992: 194). Bell’s chronicle considers the betrayals that white people are prepared to make to advance their own situation.

The second is Bernal and Villalpando’s (2002) “An Apartheid of Knowledge in Academia: The struggle over the “legitimate knowledge of faculty of color”. This counter-narrative does not use speculative fiction, albeit a fiction sourced in the reality of law in the US, but rather the actuality of the lived experience of academics of colour. It considers the

assessment for promotion of Patricia Avila, a Chicana academic, by a white tenure committee. The judgements that they make about her scholarship are filtered through a normative lens of whiteness so that her academic credibility is disparaged. This narrative is no less horrific than “Space Traders” as it shows the everyday horrors practiced on people of colour by white supremacy.

Structure of the book

Despite my reticence to address whiteness in academia for fear of centering my own or collective whiteness, too many times I have seen, been amongst and indeed indulged in, a white academic audience who see ourselves above our complicity with racial oppression. We often act with no consideration of what we have heard. This is the cruelest form of white privilege, to indulge in what Delgado (1996, 4) calls the “false empathy” of whites whilst still behaving as if they were racial allies. This book seeks out such contradictions and questions white positionality in academia (particularly for those researching race) and to seek out oblique methods of counter-storytelling and ultimately resistance against racial oppression. In doing so it is attempting to do something which is actually impossible (as explained immediately above) and which is almost willingly determined to fail but which *might* create new possibilities or areas of explanation. It is not to open up new areas for whites to further colonise critical studies of race in fact (as I will discuss in the conclusion) I consider that white withdrawal, a giving away of position within academia, is as necessary as insurrectionary resistance to white supremacy outside of it.

The book follows a narrative arc from initially questioning the positioning of white academics in researching race to examining racial counter-stories themselves as forms of “fan fiction” and finally to examine whiteness and the possibilities of resistance through traitorous acts and the liminality, indeed the fragility, of whiteness itself. The narratives can be read independently, though, even as some of the same characters, references and themes appear across them. They all occur within the same social-scientific universe (of racial oppression and resistance) even though the rules of that universe may alter. The narratives draw on what I would call, after Derek Bell’s conception of racial realism, magical *racial* realism. In the stories are talking and sentient cats, time travel, occult objects, racist bars from hell and alternative (counter) histories of race. All of these conceits and artifacts serve a purpose in highlighting aspects of racial inequality, white privilege, white supremacy and resistance. In

this way the social science fictions which make up the book are more substantive and “real” than the physical universe where racism is often covert and hidden. The magical and science fiction tropes in the stories are intended to make “real” what has gone previously unnoticed. “Race is science fiction” and the science fiction genre is central to critical race theory in various forms. Magical items, counter-histories, alternative timelines, composite characters and utopias / dystopias are common in CRT counter-stories. The chronicle is used to construct a fantasy, a utopia or dystopia which often turns out to be a real racial construction. Science fiction is used as to directly channel the world of racial oppression as white supremacy is too painful to write. Perhaps, ironically, it is a trope that works particularly well for white audiences as they prefer not to consider their own parts in this oppression directly (see chapter 4).

The first two narratives “Page 43” (chapter 2) and “CRTI” (chapter 3) problematise the positions and actions of white academics researching and theorizing race. In “Page 43” a white academic, Julia, takes physical possession of black voice. She faces the ethical dilemma of how voice is used to support her own work and ultimately her career when those voices become acutely (and literally) tangible to her. The narrative examines how she deals with critiques from her black colleague from a different university, Sylvia, and explores the all too easy compromises and Faustian bargains that white academics make when appropriating the voice of others in their work. The next narrative “CRTI” takes its initials from both Critical Race Theory (CRT) and crime dramas and novels (Critical Race Theory Investigated). The story considers a contemporary detective, Maria Kathina, who investigates a potential serial killer wiping out academics, a mystery which can only be solved with reference to CRT itself.

In chapter 4, “The Fall Guy” the issues of how white people receive counter-narratives is discussed. In the narrative a stranger in the “worst bar in the world” addresses the white reader personally and directly to consider how they receive “racist” white characters within counter-narratives. The narrative questions how white readers can distance themselves from their own personal racism in their engagement with counter-narratives.

Chapter 5 examines the nature of counter-storytelling, particularly within CRT, but also in other critical theories of race as a form of fan-fiction. By fan-fiction I mean those types of narrative writing that take existing fictional settings as the basis for further speculative fiction. My aim in this section is firstly to consider that counter-storytelling (particularly by white academics) can only hope to be a form of “fan-

fiction” as the real universe (the real setting) of racial oppression (in the form of white supremacy) is not perceptually available to white people. So although white counter-stories may have radical purposes (and even effects) in essence they are “fan fictions” of existing CRT chronicles. In chapter 5 “The critical race theory fan-fiction blog” I consider a future web-site where fan-fiction on the basis of existing CRT chronicles (in this case Bell’s “The Space Traders”) actually exists. The re-working of Bell, where class rather than race is the traders’ aim shows both how fan-fiction can open new “worlds” of CRT and the limitations of such an approach when applied outside of an analysis of racial inequality. The ambiguities concerning conceptions of “class” when compared to (embodied) race make Bell’s powerful narrative somewhat forced when applied to class and highlights the validity of racial realism.

Chapters 6 and 7 consider the role of white people, and white writing, in opposing racial oppression, inequality and white supremacy. Both draw on the work of Noel Ignatiev on “whiteness studies”. Chapter 6, “Sideways”, considers a counter-history of Irish whiteness in order to consider how white marginality and liminality can, at critical points in history, be a source of agency against racism. It is counter-historical in considering how the (supposed) rewards of white citizenship can (and should have been) resisted. In chapter 7 “Cute Traitor” a children’s story about house and alley cats is used to convey the anarchist and situationist political arguments found in Ignatiev and Garvey’s (1996) “Race Traitor”. In this format, although frivolous (stripped of the ideology of human racial discourse and transposed into the world of cats) the logic of “Race Traitor” is discussed.

In the conclusion to the book (chapter 9) I consider the problems of white academics accepting the status quo in terms of the future development of critical studies of “race” in education and consider political possibilities.

CHAPTER TWO

PAGE 43

Prologue

What does it mean for white academic authors to quote racial oppression? Whether in terms of quotations from interviews or ethnography, statistics and figures or counter-narrative characters there is a problematic trade at work here. These artifacts used to create a case for social justice are simultaneously (when used by white writers) used to enhance their own publications and ultimately careers. They are doubly oppressive, not only by being put into service by a white writer, but also as the essences that comprise the academic commodity. Although it is perhaps worse for white writers to trade on their own experiences as racists and “guilty whites” there are paradoxes in these moves by white authors towards social justice that hinge so heavily on the evidence of other’s oppression. Accepting this wholeheartedly can lead to an utterly cynical position, though, where every remark by a white author needs to be unpicked for underlying prejudices and exploitations. There is always courage involved in naming oppression particularly in a neo-liberal and increasingly white academic culture. This chapter asks, though, who benefits and who loses from such declarations? Furthermore, how easily can white academics working in emancipatory fields accommodate the horrific nature of their fields of study?

It takes as its starting point the ways in which different power relations in the academy attach differential values to knowledge of racial oppression. It uses a fictional setting to consider what would happen if a white academic were to come into contact with unmediated experiences of racial oppression. The narrative refers to perhaps the most central and controversial transgression of racial oppression, Griffin’s (1998) “Black like me” where the (white) author adopts a variety of prosthetic devices to “appear” black. In the book Griffin’s portrayal of racism as jarring and horrific (which it is) contrasts with the thoughts on racism of the black subjects in the book. They too regard racism as horrific (which it is) but

additionally as banal and everyday, a common experience. It also draws upon the article "An apartheid of knowledge in academia" (Bernal and Villalpando, 2002) which considers the ways in which differential types of knowledge in academia between white and BME academics are accorded differences in importance when it comes to promotion prospects. In literary terms it draws on Lovecraftian conventions regarding books of forbidden knowledge and artifacts that can only be "seen" from certain angles.

Julia Quinn looked around the room and took a deep intake of breath. This was the first UK conference on Critical Race Theory in London, at least the first she had heard of, and the majority of academics in the room were thoroughly and insufferably white. As she thought this, she checked herself again and again. Of course, whiteness is a social construction and she could not be certain of her perceptions. Like an academic obsessive compulsive tic she could not help but turn to scholarship to think through what every taxi driver and window cleaner knew to be common sense:- that they knew a white person when they saw one.

"What am I thinking? Why do I want so many BME people to be at this conference? To tell me what CRT is really about -isn't that really patronising? Or is it just another micro-aggression that I want to be the only white academic in the room, the border crosser, transgressor," she thought.

Julia made her way to the tea, passing the visibly black women ("Was that a social construction?") who were clearing up the empty plates of biscuits that had been devoured at the break. She made her way over to Sylvia one of her colleagues at Bury University.

"Hi, how are you? How are things?" Julia gushed.

"Yeah, OK. We're in the thick of it at the moment with all of the cuts. I've got to reapply for my job."

Julia paused. Things were bad in Universities at the moment. She had just got a big grant to look at race equalities in adult education that she had been dying to tell Sylvia about. Suddenly the moment had passed, though.

"I'm really sorry," Julia said. "Genuinely, I really am. I didn't know that. Things are bad at Southern, too, but not quite that bad yet."

"Thanks," said Sylvia. "I'm not too worried, CRT seems to be quite the trendy thing at the moment."

"Hence all the bandwagon jumpers here," she nodded across the room at a group of Deleuzian scholars who were putting together a book of critique of CRT. "At least it makes a change from the Marxists. I think that they've moved onto bigger things now, like the imminent fall of capitalism?"

“Yes, that’s always a big one. Anyway, have you presented yet?” Julia suddenly felt guilty that she hadn’t seen Sylvia’s paper, but she wasn’t really interested in Sylvia’s stuff anyway. In fact, she suddenly felt that she had latched onto Sylvia for some other purpose. *Perhaps because she was one of the few black women in the room?* She let that thought drop quickly.

“*I must stop being so introspective.*” Julia thought. “Anyway, what’s your paper on?”

“It’s called “Your Puppet Pal” and it’s about the use of voice in CRT counter-stories. It argues that what can happens in counter-stories is a form of ventriloquism that often makes for simple morality tales for whites.”

“Sounds interesting,” said Julia.

“Yes, characters in counter-stories are supposed to be speaking with their own voice but this ignores authorial voice. The author is obviously putting words into their mouths. It is obviously a problem when white authors write BME characters as they can’t challenge the white authorial viewpoint without making the author look bad or lose academic credibility. There is also the issue of experiential knowledge. The classic is a male author trying to write female characters.”

“Yes, I can see that it is a form of ventriloquism, totally forgetting about power,” said Julia.

“But it’s also a problem when BME characters are used in counter-narratives by BME scholars. They give the characters voices that are really theirs but the characters sometimes don’t do us any favours. They are comfortable for white audiences because they are fictional when *really* these are our experiences. To write authentically, with rage, like bell hooks frequently does, is too painful for white readers. So counter-stories provide ‘puppet pals’ for whites...I think that on the internet they are called ‘sock puppets’.”

“Where people create fictitious internet identities to support their own opinions?”

“That’s right! So I’m sick of hiding behind sock puppets and I’m going to write about my own experiences, my own politics, back to basics black feminism. It’s not new, and lots of people are doing it, but it seems very vital at the moment.”

Julia nodded. “That’s really exciting,” but part of her was worried. If people started writing from their own experience then what was left in it for her? The only place to go would be a white miserable account of her own privilege and the academic market was flooded with those already. The problem for Julia was that there were too many whites writing about

race. What were we changing this thing into – were we de-radicalising it and making it into a nice earner for some liberal whites like Sylvia was saying? If it was only her then she would be able to carve out quite a niche for herself.

“Have you heard of the magic Negro?¹” said Sylvia.

“Magic...” said Julia, tripping up on the overt racism of what Sylvia had said. *How could she say that?*

“Yes, it’s a lousy term,” said Sylvia. “Makes people uncomfortable. It comes from the idea that black characters often feature as stock characters in films as a magical force to cure white people’s problems or to bring about racial harmony. You know, Morgan Freeman always plays an angel, that type of thing. You can also apply it to Nelson Mandela or Obama, that they are there to make everything alright, to solve white people’s problems for them without them taking any action.”

“I’ve not come across that,” said Julia, but her brain was already embracing and applying the concept in that academic sense so familiar to her. “It sounds intuitively like something that could be used in Critical Race Theory – if white people interpret it as a way for BME people to solve all our problems for us.” Julia was uncomfortable in taking collective responsibility for “whiteness”.

“Sure,” said Sylvia picking up that Julia was in introspective mood, coasting on her academic capital, and decided to move on.

“OK, well it was great to speak to you again.” She leafed through her conference programme. “I thought that I might go to this next?”

Julia gave Sylvia her full attention again.

“Yes, I thought that it sounded good.” (*What was it again?*) “I’ll come with you if you don’t mind.”

The two women headed out of the lecture theatre deep in friendly, if awkward, conversation. As they walked out their plates of leftover food were cleared for them. Without them noticing, the plates were wiped clean and made invisible.

Julia sat next to Sylvia in the utilitarian lecture room waiting for the next session to begin. These little routines that had once seemed so alien to Julia, the chair’s introduction, the Power-point presentation, the polite questions at the end, now seemed routine.

“*The expected had become a source of comfort to us all*”, she thought, “*no alarms and no surprises.*” She wondered what Sylvia thought of it all and in a sudden moment of empathy remembering the phrases in “Black Like Me” about Griffin’s surprise at feeling the same emotions and

¹ Bailey (2008): 245

feelings, of sweating the same as a black person, viscerally the same². Sylvia probably thought the same as she did – repetition, repetition, repetition. She surprised herself at the thought. Maybe her work had made her hyper-aware of these ideas but perhaps it had also made her reify black experience.

“It really annoys me when these sessions don’t start on time, it’s not fair on the last speaker.” Sylvia said.

Julia wasn’t listening to her. She was rooting in her bag hoping that her fingers would connect with the familiar cool metal of her mobile phone. She felt a sinking feeling that it wasn’t there, a feeling of victimhood, of why did these things keep happening to her?

“Sylvia, I’m sorry I think that I’ve left my mobile in the other room, I’ve got to go.” Her chair groaned as she pushed it back, with infinite loudness now the first speaker had started.

“Race Theory has reached an impasse. It has reached the point of no return,” said the speaker as Julia weaved her way between the chairs towards the door. The lack of apology on Julia’s part was one of the habits of academic life. A “sorry” would only have broken the flow.

The speaker continued. “It either becomes academic wallpaper, journal articles and books, or it regains its promise.” The words were suddenly silenced as the fire door shut and Julia was again in what non-academics called the “real world” with its corridors and toilets, away from the lofty silence of the seminar room.

When Julia got to the lecture theatre no one was there. She searched on the jumble of table tops and was pulling out the chairs to see if it had fallen down to the floor.

“*Maybe one of those women took it?*” she thought referring to the women who had been cleaning up the plates. The next thing that she knew, almost coincident with the thought, one of the cleaning ladies was at her side.

“Err., have you seen my phone?” Julia said. The woman nodded and took it from her pocket as a wave of micro-aggressions rippled over Julia, barely registering on her face. She handed Julia the phone.

“Thanks.” Julia said, with some feeling but little empathy other than a dull hatred at her own prejudices.

“No problem,” said the woman who turned, desperate to get to the next job to finish the rooms and the toilets before 8pm. She was eager to leave this scowling and potentially threatening white woman. What if she reported her for having had her phone? She had thought about handing it

² Griffin (1998)

in, when it would have inevitably have been forgotten in lost property for ever, but kindness was its own kind of revenge.

Julia was already looking at her phone checking her messages and calls to see what her missed calls were. There was a text message from Sylvia.

“Sorry that you had to go – you missed a gd session. S.”

“The sessions could not be over yet,” thought Julia. She had surely only have been gone five minutes. She suddenly thought that she was out of place and time. As she checked her messages Julia noticed something on the edge of her peripheral vision. It looked like an old exercise book from the 1970s, from when she had been at school. Inevitably lined and ruled with thin blue veins of ink on thin paper. It was so far from contemporary school exercise books branded by a multinational on the front and a message about getting your five pieces of fruit a day on the back. She looked up at the incongruous object and observed that she could not see it, that all that was visible was the corner of the room. Squinting she could see it again but it suddenly disappeared from view. She felt madness briefly before it tipped into rationality and cunning

“*If I creep up on it, perhaps I can get to it,*” she thought. Looking around to see if anyone was watching, Julia crept up to the book, almost shyly not looking directly at it (as then it would dissolve from sight) but moving sideways, crab like, to finally get to it with her foot. She was surprised to put her foot on it and feel the swish of dragging paper across the floor. She picked the book up and could look directly at it. On the front written in beautiful cursive script were the words:-

“*My struggle, or the third eye, an Afrikana joint.*”

Julia considered it coarsely, surely the work of a mad person, albeit one with a mystical, perhaps even ironic touch. Hearing footsteps Julia felt the cleaner return to the room. She quickly folded the book in two and shoved it in her handbag sweeping out past the cleaner who searched on the jumble of table tops and pulled out the chairs looking for something that had gone missing.

Later, on the tube, Julia opened the book and began to read. All of the text was written in the same beautiful cursive script. Her eyes were transfixed on it and she realised this was forbidden knowledge to her. The book was not really a story but an account of someone’s life, their gender and name were indeterminate, but their feelings through time were written as if on a ticker tape, constant and unrelenting feelings of anger, sadness, despair, beauty, love, rage and resistance.

“*This is, this is...unmediated,*” she thought, bestowing and damming with an act of academic praise. Sometimes the voices were individual and

at other times they were collective. “*This is better than counter-storytelling,*” she thought to herself. “*This is the real thing.*” She could not help but be moved by the book and in her flat later that night she choked and even retched with what she had read. Julia poured herself a large glass of red wine which would usually have made her maudlin but rather put distance between the book and her own feelings.

“*This stuff is priceless,*” she thought, appraising it with the steely eye of a career academic. “*I should use some of this, but not plagiarise it. No, I will be completely honest about the source.*”

As the bottle of wine emptied Julia moved from the book to a notepad to her laptop. She wrote more quickly than she had before in desperate fear that by some kind of Cinderella mythos that perhaps the book would disappear at midnight. Slumped over her laptop at 2am she realised that she should stop and in the next late morning (the joys of academia’s lack of routine) its dusty jacket was still there. She sat in her armchair and read on when she came to a page, number 43, that she had not noticed before. It was not written in the same cursive script but in plain text and said simply:-

“*Stop. Do not turn the page until you have understood all that came previously.*”

Julia paused for a second. Normally she would not have taken any notice of such an admonishment being thoroughly rational and not willing to countenance any superstition. However, something about both the nature of the book and the difference in print made her think that there was something not right about all of this. It was as if the book had tried to protect itself from her by playing on her childhood fears. She had, when younger, been a voracious reader of the occult and fantasy. The way in which the book was not quite visible and could appear only from the corner of the room reminded her of H.P. Lovecraft. Of things that only be seen from a side angle, or in the corners of rooms where they would appear to devour the beholder. The only way to survive would be to live in a completely circular room, devoid of corners and edges³. This story had frightened her to death as a teenager. Then there had been the time that her and Steve, who despite his love of Dungeons and Dragons was actually a pretty great boyfriend, had got into Alistair Crowley⁴ one Summer. They had done all of the occult stuff and had got to a page just like that one, with the same words “Do not turn this page until you have understood what has come before”. She had been scared to continue but Steve insisted on carrying on. What came next in the book was one of

³ Long (1998)

⁴ Crowley (1986)

Crowley's acts of showmanship as he stated that if the reader turned the page without understanding he or she would have summoned a great demon who would one day rip out their soul and drag them to hell. Steve laughed it off but later freaked and ended up on Lithium, which was like an early Nazi form of Prozac. The last she had heard he had given up Dungeons and Dragons and become a Christian. The demon was still pending. Still, the message resonated with Julia and almost as an internal check on herself, rather than as a superstition, she decided to go no further than this. Without checking her e-mails, normally part of her morning routine, Julia devoted the rest of the day to her writing ignoring the world of students, administrators and ostensibly her job. In the late afternoon she mailed Sylvia:-

"Hi, spent the whole day writing (unusually). Sorry that I missed you at the end of the conference. I have found a book that I really want to show you if you are still around."

Sylvia replied quickly:-

"Lucky you! Have been marking all day, never seem to get the time to write. I am in London today if you want to meet up – what about 8pm in the usual place."

That was how well they knew each other, thought Julia, they had a "usual" place to meet. She felt easily cosmopolitan and confident although sometimes she wished that the usual place was somewhere different.

Sylvia hated the usual place. It was a cafe on the edge of Hoxton Square stripped down and industrial blaring out loud Reggae music for white folk. Julia seemed to think that Sylvia liked it though. She ordered herself a latte from a white nodding ex-public schoolboy in a cut off Public Enemy t-shirt and sat down waiting for Julia. Sylvia had timed to be half an hour late, on the expectation that Julia would be an hour late and she was nearly right.

"Sorry I'm so late," said Julia crashing her bags down on the table. "You must have been here ages."

"Well, you know," said Sylvia. "Only about half an hour but I guessed that you would be later and I was right."

"You're always right," said Julia. "That's one of the things that I hate about you." Julia sat down at the table and sipped at her overpriced fair trade coffee.

"I've been thinking about what you said about writing from experience," said Julia. "I wanted to know what you thought about white academics using black experiences in their narratives. Sorry to cut to the

chase so quickly but I know that you hate small talk.”

Sylvia nodded. “You either know what I think or you are trying to put words in my mouth. I guess that what might trouble you is that although academically I think it is an issue I don’t really have any strong feelings about it. It’s what the academy has always done and always will do and there is very little that I can do about it. I suppose that I would weigh it up in terms of the extent to which white academics are useful in the struggle. So it can go either way. Actually what really matters is not necessarily what is said but the power dynamics behind it, who said it, in which context, who was listening and whether they did anything about it.”

Sylvia noted that this was not really the answer that Julia expected. She seemed puzzled, rather than annoyed, at the ambiguity.

“However, I think that you’ve got some major gossip to tell me. You didn’t bother with the social niceties.” said Sylvia.

Julia enjoyed the power of revealing a great secret and slowly took the exercise book from her bag. To her it looked magical and mystical and she was shocked when Sylvia picked it up at the corner like it was a piece of rubbish.

“Is this a blast from the past, revisiting your childhood?” Sylvia said.

“No, it’s not mine,” said Julia thinking rapidly, “I bought it at a...car boot sale.” Julia internally cringed at how unconvincing that sounded but she seemed to have got away with it. “Tell me what you think.”

Sylvia put the book flat on the table and turned each page carefully. She frowned as she looked at the words looking up only occasionally at Julia who nodded encouragement as if this was the most important thing in the world. They sat in silence for ten minutes as Sylvia looked through. Julia didn’t warn her about the Alistair Crowley page (“look no further”) and Sylvia did not even pay any mind to it, continuing through the book to the very end. Julia’s eyes widened at the thought of being able to ask Sylvia about what was at the end of the book.

“Well, what do you think?” Julia said.

“Yes, well,” said Sylvia. “It is what it is.”

“What do you mean?” Julia was eager to find out what literal interpretation Sylvia had put on the words. She knew that it was powerful, compelling, exciting but did not know what meaning to attach to it, or even whether the story had a meaning at all.

“It’s common sense,” Sylvia said. “Nothing special. Pretty mundane, what you would expect to find in an old school exercise book.”

“I find it really odd that you would say that,” said Julia. “I didn’t read it like that at all. What about the intensity of it, it was very emotional for me.”

"I'm sure that it was," said Sylvia, "But it didn't make me feel like that. You know, I could recognise myself in some of it, of course. Are you alright? I mean, you normally get excited about books but not one like this."

Julia was embarrassed about the sheer level of incomprehension from Sylvia regarding the book. Maybe she wasn't committed to the idea of voice. Perhaps it was just a posture.

"Well then, what about the ending? You know, you read it to the end."

Sylvia lifted her hands in mock horror. "Scary stuff! Again, we both know that, we know what the consequences are of doing what we do."

"What consequences?" Julia was worried but validated that her concerns were well founded. *There was something in the text which was dangerous after all.*

"You mean that you haven't read it to the end?" Sylvia said. "I didn't think that you were superstitious. You know that warning is just the same as a chain letter. You shouldn't take it seriously."

Suddenly Sylvia's tone softened.

"Look, are you alright? All of this about the book is not like you at all."

"Look," said Julia. "Stop playing with me, just tell me what you thought, particularly about the ending."

"I don't want to make you feel any worse than you are," said Sylvia. "Because if you took the ending seriously it would be the end of you, of your career and everything. But it's not something that you don't know already and I'm not going to spell it out to you, it would be going back to first principles. I'm not going to patronise you by doing it and I would feel patronised if I had to explain it...and I'm not doing it now because I don't feel that mentally you are up to it. I think that you should go home, relax and take a couple of days off. You've been working too hard."

"Do you think that I've made this up?" Julia said. "Do you think that I wrote all of this myself?"

"You know that you wouldn't be capable of doing this," said Sylvia. Julia looked offended.

Sylvia continued. "You know that I think that you are a brilliant academic but you just can't do this sort of folksy, narrative stuff. You just can't."

Julia almost snatched the book off the table. "Fine, don't worry about it."

"Julia!"

"No, really, it's fine. Let's forget about this. I really have been working too hard, got hung up on some weird obsessions. Anyway, let's

talk about the symposium we're doing at AERA⁵ this year."

Julia and Sylvia talked confidently eager to move away from the topic of the book which for Sylvia was a sign of her colleague's growing (if it could) egomania and for Julia was a great prize that she could not wait to read again-but not past page 43.

Six months later in San Diego, California, things seemed genuinely bohemian, in contrast to the faux-bohemia of Hoxton. The streets around the city centre were thronged with students, the homeless and for one week only a multitude of academics. There was a constant ant swarm of intellectual labour in and out of a grand concrete conference centre fed by a number of chain hotels. Despite the brick size of the conference programme and the early hour of the morning Julia and Sylvia's symposium on "Counter-narratives in educational research: a reassessment" was well attended. All of the speakers were from Southern university where Sylvia now worked, albeit in a part-time capacity, her contract having come to an end at Bury. Sylvia's paper had gone well and Julia felt uneasy, over-shadowed, as she got to her feet to speak.

"This paper is not really my paper," she said, "which you would expect, as any attempt by a white academic to use the term "counter-narrative" would only reinforce white privilege." Julia knew that by dropping the w (white) bomb in that self knowing way it would defuse some of the imminent critique of her own positionality.

"I must confess that most of this paper was copied from an exercise book that I found discarded but what I want to do is show the power of experiential knowledge of racism from a critical race theory perspective and how even white accounts of that knowledge even whilst arbitrary, deceptive and self-serving can further the creation of critical pedagogies against racial oppression."

Julia continued with the main body of the paper. As she spoke she realised that the audience were paying attention and had even stopped flicking through the programme or, in a couple of cases, checking their messages. A few were even taking notes. This was going better than she expected. When Julia finished there was a pause, as if the audience were drawing their breath, and then a round of applause. Julia nodded and sat proudly as the other presenters in the symposium went through the motions.

At the end of the presentation, a small group of academics approached Julia.

"Hi, I'm James Hamilton," said the first, although he did not need to introduce himself being one of the leading professors of race theory in

⁵ American Educational Research Association

education in the United States. "I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed your paper. I think that you tackled the issues of white interventions in counter-storytelling in a sensitive way. I'm really interested in the metaphorical repertoires used in counter-storytelling and the metaphor of the discarded book was a really interesting one. The voices in the paper were...I must say that I was pleasantly surprised at how insightful it was."

"Oh, the book isn't a metaphor," said Julia. "Here it is." She handed the book to Professor Hamilton who looked bemused as he reluctantly took it.

Leafing through the book he said "Yes, really clever metaphor," frowning at the disjuncture between the powerful voices in the paper and the turgid ramblings in the book. "*Is this some kind of performance piece?*" he thought. "*AERA has become a bit too innovative for me.*"

James continued, "Look, why don't you and the other people in the symposium come and have coffee with me, I'm meeting some colleagues from the University of Illinois in the bar for lunch and they would love to know more about your work on this."

"Sure," said Julia. "I...we'd love to."

As Julia talked to the small group, almost a queue, of people who approached her after her seminar, her speech changed. The book became "the metaphor," or, "as James said, the metaphor of the book," and she slid it away from her on the table so that it could not be seen under her bag. When the room had emptied, whilst a Chinese cleaner picked up the discarded coffee cups and the flyers from the floor, the women talked.

Julia turned to Sylvia.

"Well, I think that it went very well. Are you coming to meet with James?"

"Yes, of course, I know him from when he came to Bury. That's before I lost my job, of course," said Sylvia. "It went even better for you, I think. You got really good comments and it was powerful stuff. I think that the metaphor of the discarded book was a good one. Was that what you were saying when we met in Hoxton that time. I really didn't get it then?"

Julia nodded. "Yes, that's right. I am using the book, and the other things in my paper, as a metaphor for the ways in which the voices of the oppressed are marginalized."

Julia looked away slightly at this. Sylvia obviously didn't know that she had copied much of the paper verbatim from the book. In fact, James didn't really seem to see anything special in the book at all. Perhaps she had some sort of special insight into things and it wasn't about the book anyway. Maybe she was either going a bit crazy or she had heightened