Race Ethnicity and Education

The invisibility of race: intersectional reflections on the liminal space of alterity

Nicola Rollock [a]

[a] Institute of Education, University of London, London, UK
Published online: 04 Jan 2012.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

The invisibility of race: intersectional reflections on the liminal space of alterity

Nicola Rollock*

Institute of Education, University of London, London, UK

It has been argued that racialised Others occupy a liminal space of alterity; a position at the edges of society from which their identities and experiences are constructed. Rather than being regarded as a place of disadvantage and degradation, it has been posited that those excluded from the centre can experience a 'perspective advantage' as their experiences and analyses become informed by a panoramic dialectic offering a wider lens than the white majority located in the privileged spaces of the centre are able to deploy. In this article, I invite the reader to glimpse the world from this liminal positioning as I reflect critically on how the intersections between social class, race and gender variously advantage or disadvantage, depending on the context, the ways in which Black middle classes are able to engage with the education system. While I make reference to findings from a recent school-focused ESRC project 'The Educational Strategies of the Black Middle Classes'[1] the article takes a wider perspective of the education system, also incorporating an autobiographical analysis of the academy as a site of tension, negotiation and challenge for the few Black middle classes therein. I make use of the Critical Race Theory tool of chronicling (counter-narrative) to help demonstrate the complex, multifaceted and often contradictory ways in which ambitions for race equality often represent lofty organisational ideals within which genuine understanding of racism is lacking.

Keywords: Whiteness; marginality; intersectionality; Critical Race Theory; Black middle classes

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. (...) When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me. (...) Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of bio-chemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. (...) It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then too, you're con-

---

*Email: n.rollock@ioe.ac.uk

stantly being bumped against by those of poor vision (...) You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful.

Ralph Ellison (1965, 7)

Introduction

Drawing on Wynter's (1992) theorisation of the concept of marginality, Ladson-Billings and Donnor 2008, 373) posit that racialised others occupy a 'liminal space of alterity' that is, a position at the edges of society from which their identities and experiences are constructed. They remain at the margins through acts and frequent reminders from dominant groups that regardless of achievement, qualification or status they are locked in 'the power dynamic and hierarchical racial structures' that serve to maintain unequal order in society (Ladson-Billings and Donnor 2008, 372).

Yet Wynter (1992) insists that rather than regarding this space as a site of dismal subjugation, those excluded from the centre can experience a certain profound analytical insight that is 'beyond the normative boundary of the conception of Self/Other' (Ladson-Billings and Donnor 2008, 373). In other words, it is precisely from this position in the margins that racialised others are able to acquire not simply an 'oppositional world-view' (hooks 1990, 149) but what might be understood as a unique *surround vision* that is able to recognise and deconstruct the multifaceted contours of Whiteness and therefore advance the broader objectives of the racial justice project. Such an all-encompassing analytic perspective is particularly important to challenge and move beyond the *not seeing* nature of Whiteness that works to perpetuate a racially inequitable status quo:

> One of the most powerful and dangerous aspects of whiteness is that many (possibly the majority) of white people have no awareness of whiteness as a construction, let alone their own role in sustaining and playing out the inequities at the heart of whiteness. (Gillborn 2005, 9)

While recognising and fully supporting the centrality of liminality to advancing a 'counter-hegemonic discourse' (hooks 1990, 149), I seek in this article to provide an extension to these debates by arguing that the very notion of what might be framed as *liminality as resistance* is wholly context dependent. That is to say, the field in which racialised others are operating, the tools or resources at their disposal, the support mechanisms available to them and the relative power of other actors present within the social space or field fundamentally impacts and brings into awkward tension the extent to which occupying a site in the margins becomes advantageous. I variously

employ Bourdieu and Critical Race Theory (CRT) as theoretical frames of reference. As such, the arguments presented are located in an understanding, informed by CRT, that racism operates as normal[2] in everyday life (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Tate IV 1997) and can, in part, be understood through the various forms of capital – to borrow from Bourdieu – that are positioned as having status and legitimacy within formally sanctioned spaces of, for the purposes of this article, the education system which I am taking in its broadest sense to include the academy:

> The members of groups based on co-option (. . .) always have something else in common beyond the characteristics explicitly demanded. The common image of the professions, which is no doubt one of the real determinants of 'vocations,' is less abstract and unreal than that presented by statisticians; it takes into account not only the nature of the job and the income, but *those secondary characteristics which are often the basis of their social value (. . .) and which, though absent from the official job description, function as tacit requirements, such as age, sex, social or ethnic origin...* (Bourdieu 1984, 102; emphasis added)

As a theory, CRT affords me, as a scholar of colour, the license and power to 'speak back' about racial inequalities in a way that hitherto I have not found entirely possible through many other theoretical tools. Critical Race Theory offers a framework that explicitly recognises and encourages people of colour to name, speak and theorise about their experiences as shaped by racism. The approach I adopt, therefore, is creative what Tate IV (1997, 210) describes as an 'enactment of hybridity.' I use part autobiography, part data analysis and part counter-narrative to critically interrogate the norms and practices of educational spaces of which I have been part, am part and, predominantly due to my racially minoritised status, am not part. As a Black female academic, I am at once located within this article even as I write hence the use, where appropriate, of pronouns such 'we,' 'our,' 'my.' With reference to data analysis, I draw on findings from a two-year ESRC project 'The Educational Strategies of the Black Middle Classes' which examines the educational perspectives, strategies and experiences of Black Caribbean heritage middle class families as they attempt to navigate their children successfully through the school system. Many of the parents' accounts speak directly to the notion of marginality and how they have developed a complex set of resources with which to manage instances of racism and othering. By drawing these strands of analysis together I am seeking to highlight the pervasiveness of the racial power dynamics at play across the education system as a whole.

There is an additional point to be made. In seeking to capture some of the multifaceted, nuanced and quite complex ways which facilitate the continued existence of race inequality and demonstrate how racialised others manage such experiences, this article attempts an ambitious project. It is

near impossible to present such complexity in precise conventional terms with a neat beginning, revolutionary middle and an all-encompassing conclusion; the racial justice project is challenging and it is ongoing hence the naming of this article as a set of 'reflections.' There is no tidy conclusion.

Finally, I invite the reader to consider this article an enterprise in seeking to critically 'name, reflect on and dismantle discourses of Whiteness' (Leonardo 2002, 31) and to not only consider what is written here in a mere academic way but to take account of how their own racial positioning (and awareness thereof) informs how they make sense of and react to the arguments presented.

Understanding liminality

In an attempt to deconstruct and give life to some of the theoretical analyses with which I began this article, I begin with a true story and reflect on the notion of marginality as it came to pertain to my own raced and classed positioning and also how aspects of my gender came to have salience to my identity.

Part I – the true story

When I was precisely eight and a half years old my parents moved me from my local state primary school – a place where, in my nostalgic memory, we played kiss chase at break time, lay on our backs in the field daydreaming at the sky in the summer and where all the kids lived in roughly the same size houses and our dads drove the same kinds of cars – and sent me instead to a private girls' school that seemed, to my young mind, to be an eternity away. The only Black teacher at the state school had warned my parents about the pervasiveness of racism, of how it was affecting her and many Black pupils she knew. I had no idea what racism was but I do remember that my (white) teacher refused to allow me to move up to the next set of *Peter and Jane* books because I was racing ahead of the rest of the class. 'Read them again,' I was instructed. When I told my parents my mum looked at my dad but said nothing.

So to my new school. I arrived on a Monday morning. Monday was spelling day; a test of 20 words that had been given to the girls as weekend homework on the Friday. To the utter amazement of the girl with whom I had swapped to mark our work, I got all 20 correct and won myself a shiny gold star next to my name on the chart on the wall behind Mrs Jackson's desk. I also won the instant friendship of Lucy Gladstone-Brown,[3] Ms Popularity herself. I would recall later how on our way home on the bus one day Lucy pointed out her home. It was massive three-storey sand-coloured affair, standing far enough back from the road to allow two or three generous sized cars to lounge comfortably on the drive. 'Wow,' I said peering through the bus window, 'It's huge!' 'Well, we can't live in a bungalow,' Lucy retorted, her voice frosted with a disgust, that I hadn't known possible in an eight-year-old, at

the mere thought. I recalled feeling a bit odd about what she had said. Why hadn't she just agreed that it was a big house? Why had she uttered the words with such condescension? It occurred to me that maybe Lucy shouldn't see where I lived.

In that first week I settled down with my new best friend and enjoyed school with the rest of the girls. On the Thursday, after break or lunch, I forget which, we sat in our classroom at the top of the rambling old Victorian building in which the school was situated, messing around, giggling and chatting until our teacher Mrs Jackson arrived to take the afternoon register. Whoever I was messing around with tickled me and being horrendously ticklish I let out a shriek accompanied by tumbling notes of carefree laughter. It was at that precise moment that Mrs Jackson walked through the door. Even now I remember the sound of her high heels on the tiled lino. 'Who...?' she boomed in a tones swelled with harshness, '... screamed?' Hush fell upon the class, all earlier tomfoolery and laugher dying without trace, without fulfilment into the now stilled air. We froze, alert to the possibility of something awful that had yet to occur. I swallowed. I would say that someone had tickled me. She would understand. After all, she'd seemed nice enough on Monday when she was awarding me my star. No, I couldn't do that. She would want to know who had tickled me and I wasn't a grass. 'Well?' she boomed. We sat meekly peering up at her wanting to appear attentive yet striving to avoid her inquisitional gaze. Silence. 'It was me,' I finally offered in a small fragile voice, thinking that perhaps I might receive some reprieve being the new girl. She glared at me, 'Well, I don't know where *you* come from but *we* certainly don't do that sort of thing here!' she barked and clonked in her high heels to her desk.

In making this powerful statement, which I will continue shortly to discuss through the eyes of my eight-year-old self, the teacher is in a very Bourdieuian sense letting me know that my act has no place within the 'legitimate culture' of the school:

...the educational institution succeeds in imposing cultural practices that it does not teach and does not even explicitly demand, but which belong to the attributes attached by status to the position it assigns, the qualifications it awards and the social positions to which the latter give access. (Bourdieu 1984, 26)

There is a further complex playing out of power here as I unwittingly become positioned as having contributed to my own exclusion by not adhering to the rules, albeit unwritten and unnamed, of the school. Mrs Jackson lets me know that I can – *potentially* – gain 'inclusion,' however, I definitely am not yet on the inside.

The shiny gloss of my newness was ripped from my being as I struggled to make sense of the reprimand. 'Where I come from?' I puzzled and puzzled over this phrase. 'I came from...well I live in Tooting, just near the common, very pretty,' I considered. Why would people in Tooting be more likely to

scream than...? No, that didn't make sense. 'We?' Which we? Who were 'we'? Wasn't I 'we' since I was sat in the same classroom, wearing the same khaki green uniform as everyone else? I felt myself shrink behind a veil of confusion, of hurt. I vowed not to speak for the rest of the afternoon and proceeded to study Mrs Jackson carefully, watching her every move, listening to her language, making note of with whom she smiled, taking note of with whom she did not. I studied the rest of the girls in my class, watched how they interacted with Mrs Jackson, with each other. I was determined to make sense of this 'we' of which I apparently was not part. And it was through my observations that I learnt to see this 'we.' I saw how the class was made up mainly of white girls (living in big houses like Lucy's) who had 'Pops Club' pencil cases that you could only buy from a single shop in Wandsworth Common,[4] somewhere I had never ventured; they had scented erasers and Caron d'Ache[5] pencils, which were terribly expensive. My stationery came from Woolworths. I heard how they 'popped over' to their holiday homes in the south of France during half term. I went (with much excitement because I loved books) to Tooting library loosing myself in fictional tales while gorging on penny sweets from the local newsagent. I watched as their 'mummies' came to collect them in green wellies, Burberry jackets or body-warmers making promises of afternoon tea to other mummies. And they were accompanied by small rosy-cheeked boys wearing blond bowl-shaped tussled hair and the blazers of prep[6] schools of which I had (then) never heard. And golden Labradors wagged excited tails in the back of Land Rovers and cars whose identities I could not place.

I begin to hate my dad's car.

This was the 'we' of which I was not part.

I tell this story, occurring as it does over 30 years ago, as a reflection of how I came to class awareness and the beginnings of my understanding of the power and taken-for-granted privileges embedded in Whiteness. As has been argued at length elsewhere (McIntosh 1997; Wildman and Davis 1997; Leonardo 2002), Whiteness tends to benefit and advantage whites in ways that they seldom see or care to acknowledge. However, my schooling enabled me to not only see Whiteness but understand and develop a level of perception and analyses of how middle class whites engage with one another, the language they use, the pastimes and activities they pursue, their tastes and preferences (Bourdieu 1984) and, significantly, how they treated people who were not like them. It was only much later, despite incessant warnings from the handful of Black girls advising me of which teachers I should remain vigilant and hearing various accounts of racist incidents, that I began to explicitly recognise myself as racialised and, consequently, comprehend how race and class came together in quite complex ways with varying and uneven outcomes depending on your racialised status.

Transferring from a co-educational state school to an independent girls' school enabled me to forge a comprehension of intersectionality[7] and acts of class distinction, shaped as they are by race, long before I learnt and

deployed, with some discomfort and resistance, the formally 'sanctioned' theoretical language of the academy without which my racialised experiences apparently had little legitimacy. The African American scholar bell hooks speaks to similar discomforts when she observes 'this language that enabled me to attend graduate school, to write a dissertation, to speak at job interviews, carries the scent of oppression' (hooks 1990, 146).

However, there was a further aspect of my identity to which, at the time, I paid scant attention; that of femininity. Attending an independent girls' school meant I became embedded in discourses of femininity that were predominantly white and middle class. I was teased to the point of anxious self-consciousness about the shape and size of my bottom; my skirt not so much as A-line as awkward pencil-cut thanks to my derriere. Hair was also a subject of white curiosity. How often did I wash it? How long did it take to style and in moments that struck an as yet unanalysed peril in my heart, could they touch it? While white girls flicked their hair or dried it in seconds under the dryer when we went swimming, I and the other Black girls attempted to restore ours to some natural order before, the job yet incomplete, being barked back into hurried lines by impatient gym teachers. These experiences, regardless of school type, location or gender intake, mirror those recounted during interviews with many of the Black middle class parents in the project 'The Educational Strategies of the Black Middle Classes':

> I remember children coming up to me to find out if my bottom was white or Black because they just had no idea at all (...) I always remember that (...) I couldn't believe that anyone could be so ignorant as to not know (...) they were shocked about my hair not being the same as theirs. (...) they were just intrigued about me as a person and in turn I was intrigued that they didn't know... (Vanessa, Community Development Officer)

Like the parents in the project, these daily moments of othering were not limited to the relatively unmonitored spaces of the playground but were also evident within the classroom. I remember how the musical tastes (classical) of the parents' of a handful of über-trendy, pretty, blond-haired, clique-y girls served to imbue them with a set of unspoken 'secondary characteristics' (Bourdieu 1984, 102) that amounted to boundless status and privilege in our music lessons; they were seldom told off and given countless opportunities to talk ad infinitem about music and skiing holidays while the rest of us sat restlessly in the dull greyness of the shadows. My parents clearly did not have the 'right' taste in music for the fact that neither Bobby Darin (my mother) nor John Holt (my father) were ever mentioned, served to betray the illegitimacy of their musical preferences as much as my hair, bottom and skin represented markers of an undesirable embodied capital within that school (Bourdieu 1986). Like the parents in the Black Middle Classes project, school became a 'site of constant battle for survival in terms of gaining recognition of one's racial identity as legitimate, let alone...a place

to learn' (Rollock et al. 2011). In becoming racialised within this very specific classed and gendered context, I was beginning to see the world through a different space that I would later understand as 'the margins.'

Yet interestingly during my adult years, I would come to be perversely appreciative of my femininity recognising it as a considerable advantage relative, for example, to the emasculating experiences of my Black male counterparts. Yet there seems to be no place within the academy for my *Black femininity*. I have come to recognise that when white colleagues speak about feminism they do so placing an unspoken Whiteness at the normative centre of their analyses. No mention is made of race or racism. I am continually made invisible. And I would come to recognise that while my transition to middle classness facilitated access to the many spaces dominated by the white middle classes, when white colleagues speak about their class identification there remains scant acknowledgement of how their raced identity shapes a reading of a class identity that, depending on context, is informed differently from the middle classed experiences of other ethnic groups and remains supported by uninterrogated and presumptuous discourses of privilege and power.

I offer these reflections as a way of attending to the various ways in which I came to be and remain at the margins of educational spaces that are marked by intersecting forms of class and race discrimination (as well as inequalities of gender). I came to understand during my (private) schooling that I was an *inside outsider*, 'part of the whole but outside the main body' (hooks 1990, 149). This positioning has remained throughout my career in the academy. For all my class advantage, it is the colour of my skin to which others continue to react with fear, hesitation and intrigue requiring me, therefore, to constantly develop complex forms of *strategising for survival*; acts to which much of WhiteWorld (Gillborn 2008, 162) is completely oblivious.

Survival within the liminal space of alterity

In the section that follows I make use of one of the central tools of Critical Race Theory, story-telling (or counter-narrative) to highlight instances of marginality, resistance and agency within the racial justice project as played out within the academy. Counter-narrative can be semi-autobiographical or fictional in nature and acts as a powerful way for minoritised groups to creatively introduce concepts and arguments aimed at subverting and challenging the normative narratives of the dominant group (Delgado 2000; Delgado and Stefancic 2001). As with *The True Story* described above, I both tell the narrative and, simultaneously, speak back to the reader by interweaving an ongoing analysis and critical reflection of the events as they unfold.

In *The Counter-narrative*, I continue the story of Jonathan, a fictional Black academic working at a prestigious UK university, and chart his expe-

riences as he attempts to successfully navigate his way through a higher education system in which he witnesses few Black academic staff in senior positions (ECU 2009; HEFCE 2008) and an ever increasing number taking their employer to tribunal. I first introduced Jonathan, and his partner Soray, in a paper discussing the concept of racial microaggressions (Rollock forthcoming). Both are composite characters in that they reflect actions and experiences from multiple sources. Both are Black and possess a critical awareness of the various ways in which their racialised identities are (mis) used by dominant others.

Part II – the counter-narrative

The wind howls miserably, shaking the fragile windows of the office. The building is deserted, bar a few security personnel and doctoral students committed to working late into the cold, dark night. Jonathan looks at his watch and sighs, promising himself that he will answer just one more email before heading home. He glances back at his inbox and notices that a new email has arrived. It's from the journal to which, at Soray's insistence, he had eventually submitted his most recent article. His eyes scan the email, voraciously searching for the key sentence that will let him know whether or not he had worked in vain:

'I am pleased to accept your paper for publication subject to your addressing the revisions detailed by the three reviewers. Their comments are attached.'

He relaxes momentarily, not realising how intensely he has been peering at the screen and then double clicks on the attachment. He muses how hesitant he had been about naming so explicitly microaggressions as an issue with which the academy had to contend. 'Outstanding contribution to the field...'[8] states the first reviewer. Jonathan smiles and nods to himself, satisfied. His eyes flit over the rest of the glowing review before he turns to the remarks of the second reviewer: 'The author offers an insightful and important theoretical analysis....' Jonathan exhales with relief, his smile broadening. He just didn't think the paper for all its theoretical sensitivities would be readily embraced. Soray had, in retrospect been correct about writing about his experiences, he reflects. He scans the comments of the final reviewer:

'The first thing I should say is that even though I am a white male those who know me will testify to my commitment to the types of diversity issues described in this paper.... While the paper has the potential to make an important contribution to the journal, the use of story-telling is simplistic and anecdotal.... I recommend that the author resubmits the paper using a more conventional methodology...'

Jonathan reads the comments again, more slowly this time and then, for reasons he cannot immediately articulate, he starts to laugh.

And he is still laughing when he switches off the light to his office, locks the door and begins the cold, long journey home.

Jonathan studied the young Black woman perched eagerly before him on the edge of his spare office chair. He saw it as part of his duty to 'give back' to his community by taking the time to share his experiences and give advice especially to any serious-minded Black person who was interested in becoming an academic or doing a further degree. He sighed inwardly knowing that such time and contributions were precisely the type of activity that wouldn't be acknowledged through any of the internal workload assessment procedures nor through the forthcoming REF[9] even though he was supporting the professional development of the next generation of Black and minority ethnic academics. And heavens knew the academy's record on progressing and retaining Black academics was far from impressive.

This particular woman Sandra (28-years-old, married with a young child) was considering registering to read for a PhD. A white colleague who had supervised Sandra through her Master's programme, had directed her to him adding in the email that Sandra 'might benefit from your particular knowledge and experience.' Having read a copy of her dissertation, Jonathan had been sufficiently impressed by her level of critical engagement with the literature on race theory to agree to an initial meeting.

'I'm sorry,' Sandra repeated, 'I know you're extremely busy. It's just I could really do with your advice. I have no idea of what doing a PhD entails. I would have spoken with Diana but…well.… I didn't find her very supportive when I was doing my MA. I don't feel she really knows anything about the subject area or understood the issues I was trying to examine. And I'd really appreciate your help about how best to become an academic.'

Sighing inwardly for a second time, Jonathan removed his glasses and uncrossed his legs. He looked at her and sighed again before finally asking: 'Tell me why you want a career in the academy.'

'I want to challenge some of the rubbish that is being published about us, about Black people and I think I can make a real difference through doing research and teaching and…'

'You need to write,' he interrupted, now only half-listening to her. 'You need to make sure your work is out there in the best journals.… He trailed off dismayed by his own simplicity as he remembered the feedback about his paper that he'd read just the night before. The reviewer's need to clumsily name his acceptance and understanding of 'diversity' (although Jonathan had himself never used that word in the paper) had been made all the more facile by the recommendation that he abandon his theoretical approach, steeped as it was in Critical Race Theory, and adopt a more 'conventional' model. Thank goodness that the other two reviewers had been unequivocal in their praise otherwise the paper would have been rejected altogether leaving him with the option of submitting elsewhere or, quite possibly and horrifically, accepting the reviewer's advice. He shuddered at the thought.

A career in the academy? He recalled his first UK conferences. Soul-destroying spaces of isolation with barely a visible Black face. He noticed how papers that covered race and racism tended to elicit the same steady set of unsophisticated, poorly thought-out questions about the role of absent (read: 'deficient') fathers, about social class, about the influence of peers on Black children's educational attainment, about the perceived lack of parental involvement. Following his first presentation about the Black middle classes and the racism that affected their lives despite their class position, an internationally renowned white Professor had put up his hand and, smiling with apparent conviviality, remarked how similar Jonathan's findings were to his own work on the white working classes, 'Surely this is just about difference and issues of belonging' he'd said, presenting his words as more of a statement than a question. Others in the audience had murmured and nodded in relieved consent at these words that offered welcome and easy escape from their own complicity in the various acts of racism that Jonathan had presented to them.

Such reactions to ignore the role of Whiteness and trivialise or altogether obliterate the possibility of racism can be understood as one of the many tools of Whiteness. Picower's (2009, 205) analyses of the ways in which her white students use such tools to maintain their hegemonic understanding of their racialised normalities is particularly apt here:

> . . .[the] tools of Whiteness facilitate in the job of maintaining and supporting hegemonic stories and dominant ideologies of race, which in turn, uphold structures of White Supremacy. In an attempt to preserve their hegemonic understandings, participants [i.e. her students] used these tools to deny, evade, subvert, or avoid the issues raised. (emphasis added)

Within the context of higher education these acts of Whiteness, exemplified in the dismissive words of the renowned Professor, work to create and maintain what Delgado Bernal and Villalpando (2002, 169) call an 'apartheid of knowledge' that serves to 'marginalise, discredit and devalue the scholarship, epistemologies and other cultural resources of faculty of color.' We can understand, therefore, the challenge facing Jonathan. Even though he is presenting information gleaned from a serious qualitative study of the Black middle classes, the findings pertaining to racism and their racially minoritised status are alien and uncomfortable to his white colleagues. Committed to seeing the world through the lens of Whiteness they, like Picower's students find ways, albeit steeped in what appears to be civilised academic discourse, to deny the validity of his work and thus maintain this epistemological apartheid. Jonathan is presented with a challenge: how should he respond to such persistent acts of denial and still remain truthful to the data and his own experiences?

> Back then, he hadn't known how to react. Now he understood this as part of the complexity of Whiteness as white colleagues worked to protect their positions of privilege, worked to deny the presence of racism and trivialised his

research findings and, by implication, his experience and those of his research participants. 'Everyone is implicated in denial,' a white male colleague who he had thought understood the issues had stated during a discussion about the subject over lunch one afternoon, 'everyone is complicit. Even you,' he chuckled seemingly bemused by his own cleverness, 'are complicit by working in the academy as a Black male.' Jonathan had said nothing, pretending to give the statement serious consideration while chewing slowly on the remnants of his sandwich. In reality, he had been incensed at the way in which his colleague had sought to position as similar their experiences of the academy and, through wilful colour-blindness, disregard (his) white privilege and render Jonathan's racially minoritised experiences insignificant.

Sara Ahmed's (2009, 41) statement, about the complexities of embodying diversity when in a mainly white organisation, is apt here. She astutely reflects: 'if only we had the power we are imagined to possess, if only our proximity could be such a force. If only our arrival was their undoing (…). The argument is too much to sustain when your body is so exposed.' I want to situate these various forms of Whiteness, as demonstrated by the fictional white male Professor, the white others at the conference and Jonathan's lunch colleague, and the consequences they impose on our bodies as a *faux niceness* or *violence as niceness*. In the academy, such acts are often presented under the guise of 'polite' collegiality and theoretical debate while the 'violence' they impose on academics of colour, denying and subjugating their experience, remains unnoticed. It is precisely this white investment in niceness that contributes to what Leonardo and Porter (2010) describe as the myth of 'safe racial dialogue.' In other words, those conversations about race that feel comfortable and safe for whites are, in fact, fraught with tension and difficulty for racially minoritised groups who attempt genuine race dialogue but are consistently confronted by what might be described as a *Whiteness as default* positioning. Leonardo and Porter contend that while 'violence' in this context might be conceptualised as 'euphemized,' it is nonetheless damaging, serving to maintain 'links between material distributions of power and a politics of recognition, and lowers standards of humanity' (2010, 140). It is the complex *nano*-politics of these very issues that trouble Jonathan as he considers what advice he might be able to give to a student of colour interested in pursuing a career in the academy:

> Should he really tell this young woman sat before him to drop everything to become an academic? What should he tell her: that she could change it from within? Hadn't he learnt the hard way how embedded the systems of Whiteness were? Wouldn't she be better off working in the private sector where although they weren't bound by race equalities legislation she could ultimately earn enough money to enable her to make the choices she needed regarding the schooling of her young child?

'Er…yes, I need to write. Is there anything else?' the young woman asked, looking slightly concerned at Jonathan's apparent lapse in concentration. 'Is there anything else I need to do?'

Jonathan's sigh was audible this time. Rising to his feet, he clasped his hands behind his back and paced, deep in thought, to the window that overlooked the university car park below. 'Was she ready?' he wondered, 'Could he trust that she would understand?'

'Yes, there is something else you need to do but…' he turned, ready to study her reaction, 'it won't be easy.'

Sandra looked at him expectantly but without the bafflement he had anticipated. Moderately reassured he returned to his desk and identified the folder saved on his computer as 'In Progress.' His eyes scanned the various documents he had saved within it until he found what he was looking for. He paused momentarily, fingers hovering over the keyboard, before entering the password that he had set up to protect the file from any prying eyes and printed the document that finally presented itself to him.

Retrieving the article from the printer he looked down at it, feeling slightly protective of the words that he had written there.

'Here, take this,' he shoved the sheet awkwardly in her direction, keen to have her take it before he changed his mind, 'go away, have a read and if you still want to pursue an academic career get back in touch with me. We can talk then…but you must keep this to yourself. Keep what's written there confidential…'

Sandra nodded and stood, conscious that the meeting was being brought to a close. Slightly confused by the entire exchange, she accepted the paper from Jonathan's outstretched hand, only able to glance briefly at it as she gathered her coat and bag.

'Oh and it's not quite finished,' Jonathan added, as she made to leave the room.

'Um…that's okay. Thank you so much for your time.' As she closed the door behind her, Sandra paused and read the heading on the paper she had been handed. In bold, black text at the top of the page stood the words: *Rules of Racial Engagement for (Possible) Survival in WhiteWorld.*

The rules that follow can be understood as part of what I am defining as the racially minoritised habitus. Although I do not attempt to suggest that every person who is racially minoritised considers their experiences or strategizes in precisely this way it should be borne in mind that the kind of micro-analysis and strategizing that will be revealed shortly in the rules was also reflected in the experiences of many of the Black middle class parents in the ESRC project mentioned earlier. Clearly such thinking is not unusual to

those within this group. For example, in the following extract Ella (Senior Management, Health Sector) discusses the tactics she employs to manage incidents where she has been racially othered:

> I think it is very very difficult (. . .) you are going to drop the voice, (. . .); you are going to try to talk round it. You try and say look this is why and give an explanation. You have to try not to be angry, you know, it is very difficult but you have to. . .the worst thing you can show is anger right, because then it is all gone, because then you are so obviously the aggressor [in their eyes]. If you try to be calm in dealing with the situation, 'problem-solve' [says this slowly and deliberately, slightly scornful, using her fingers to denote that problem-solving is in quotes]. I am going to work it out with you. We are professionals. I am not going to be emotive about it even though it is a painfully emotive experience. I have got to lose that and I have got to deal with this situation as a problem-solving thing. It means I think that it affects your personality because it means in other situations you tend not to be overly assertive, so that you are not seen in other situations as an aggressor, therefore when you deal with things like this they can look at the rest of your personality, and although they want to label you as an aggressor now it doesn't quite fit the rest. So [it's] almost as if you mould yourself into a certain 'placid' individual (. . .)

What is difficult to reflect here is the tone with which Ella conveyed the above. Her pace was steady, careful, precise. She is clearly recounting experiences and strategies with which she is extremely familiar. She was calm but also sounded both bemused and weary as she detailed the amount of extra work and energy required to defend one's identity from insult while simultaneously remaining alert to white sensitivities about race. And I would go further to suggest that she is also disappointed by continued white denial. Fatigue, bemusement and disappointment are interwoven with undercurrents of condescension as she details the ways in which she is obliged to navigate and manage whites who remain oblivious to, yet complicit in, the complexities of the entire racialised situation. Ahmed (2009, 48) speaks to the personal consequences and challenges of this kind of nano-politicking when she acknowledges how being an outspoken Black feminist who highlights instances of racism or sexism can lead to her being positioned as a 'killjoy,' as a bringer of bad feeling to an otherwise (perceived) racially and sexually equitable and harmonious discussion. In presenting the 'Rules of Racial Engagement' I am seeking to summarise and name elements of this strategising and, in so doing, reveal the multilayered and nuanced analysis required for survival by those in the margins.

Rules of Racial Engagement for (Possible) Survival in WhiteWorld[10]

1 Avoid directly or even in passing accusing whites of racism, even if you believe their words or actions to be horrendously racist or racially Othering.

This sends whites in a frenzy of guilt; denial; anger so that they are no longer able to engage in conversation and rather than hearing or understanding the point you are making, you will become positioned as the aggressor or killjoy.

2 On matters concerning race be prepared to 'problem-solve,' engage, negotiate.

In other words act as though you are simply exploring some abstract idea or a suggestion in a professionally engaging manner. This presents you as non-challenging and reasonable and keeps whites 'safe' in feeling that the issues of race inequity being discussed have absolutely nothing to do with them – even though they do. This is a challenging rule for those committed to the racial justice project. The aim is to encourage change, disrupt the status quo, which requires some level of white discomfort. Yet when is it safe for us to make whites uncomfortable?

Be careful with this rule – you need to maintain the pseudo-safety of the dialogue but also challenge restrictive thinking while keeping your sanity intact. Support mechanisms are crucial. [see # 10]

3 Maintain a lowered tone of voice in debates on race, especially where there is a difference of opinion.

The aim is to always seem reasonable and friendly. Use a raised tone with care even if you have been deeply insulted.

4 Be prepared.

Whites will trivialise and position as anecdotal accounts of racism. Be prepared for this by knowing your subject area. Have countless sources of evidence and supporting examples. Statistics are always helpful. [Note: Qualitative evidence is likely to be refuted and closely questioned]. When writing for publication rigorously ground your analysis in theory. Good use of theory can provide a pathway to some form of academic legitimacy, albeit tenuous.

5 Don't show emotion or keep to a 'safe' minimum. Definitely don't show anger.

This is especially important for Black men but applies equally to Black women. Like the raised voice [see #3] use emotion strategically and with care.

Sometimes well-placed emotion, supported by a number of sources of evidence, can be highly effective. Do not overuse this strategy; emotion (irrespective of its appropriateness to the context) is not a license readily available to persons of colour.

6 Work at all times at presenting a friendly and reasonable persona.

This is a central tactic. If you work to present an image as friendly and approachable this will give you some degree of license, since it will seem out

of character, to deploy a raised voice and emotion to your advantage should the circumstance warrant it.

7 Employ the 'language of Whiteness' to make your case.

Understand the strength of language as a unifying tactic. Begin discussions and debates with words, phrases, examples and points of reference that whites will understand and relate to. Only then attempt to demonstrate differences that are to do with race and racism. Never be complacent or underestimate the power of Whiteness as default positioning. Always be prepared for the fact that they may never understand the full extent of issues pertaining to racism.

8 Dress and carry yourself in a 'non-threatening' manner.

In your professional capacity never risk wearing clothes or items that whites might use to misread or confuse your class position and subjugate you even more. Your class position can be used as some minimal yet fragile *protection against certain forms of racism.*[11]

9 Be on your guard.

Acts of Othering and microaggression surface in the most unexpected ways, at unexpected times and are not restricted simply to those conversations that centre explicitly on race.[12]

10 Develop and nurture sacred spaces and protected narratives.

Work to ensure a strong support network comprising of white allies, Black colleagues and friends. This network will act as your sacred space of sanctity where there is minimal or no need for the Rules of Racial Engagement. Such spaces provide an opportunity to engage in forms of narrative protected from the dehumanizing violence of WhiteWorld. These are narratives with which to theorise, decode, de-stress in relative safety and to reaffirm one's humanity.

These rules can be considered as a template for survival or possible survival within mainly white spaces. I do not suggest the list is complete. Indeed Jonathan notes that it is a work in progress yet there is much within them that speaks to the tensions and apparent contradictions of attempting to survive in that space at the margins. I explore these issues further in the following section.

Dismantling discourses of Whiteness

Black folks coming from poor, underclass [sic] communities, who enter universities or privileged community settings unwilling to surrender every vestige of who we were before we were there, all 'sign' of our class and cultural 'difference,' who are willing to play the role of 'exotic Other,' must create spaces within that culture of domination if we are to survive whole, our souls intact. (hooks 1990, 148)

In devising a set of strategies for survival, my fictional character Jonathan is both recognising and naming the contours of his own existence as racially marginalised and simultaneously revealing the ways in which Whiteness operates, in quite violent ways, to remain at the normative centre. Even while he comprehends this, his broader commitment to race equality and a personal need for a humanizing existence, necessitates that he finds ways to disrupt the white status quo while at the same time endeavouring to remain vigilant of the ever-ready sensitivities of whites who refuse to name and critically reflect on their place in the manifestation of White Supremacy. There are risks involved in 'outing' not seeing whites, in naming the contours of Whiteness, that could make the difference between a paper being accepted or not accepted by a journal, that could affect the ways in which others engage with his research and thus his capacity to advance his career. This reflects just one aspect of the awkward oscillating tension between liminality as advantageous and liminality as disadvantageous. To what extent does employing the 'language of Whiteness,' a phrase borrowed from a parent in the Black Middle Classes project, while a clever unifying strategy to gain the ear of whites in fact obfuscate the objectives of the racial justice project? What are the conditions under which one is able to make more explicit the goals of the project and reduce or ultimately discard such strategising?

Leonardo and Porter (2010) argue that in order to move towards racial justice there will invariably be some discomfort for those at the centre as they edge with resistance towards the recognition of their own investment in and endorsement of racism. I want further to argue that while such discomfort may be a necessary part of the move towards racial equity, it also represents a point of instability and danger for those of colour if whites fear that their positions of privilege and power are under threat or even merely being called into question. This, indisputably, is a serious consideration within the many spaces where whites are the gatekeepers or hold power in terms of decision-making (Collins 1991; Leonardo 2002). There are also countless additional matters to consider. Steer too far in the direction of disrupting Whiteness and Jonathan is likely to be construed as an aggressor or killjoy. Any future arguments or standpoints he presents will be deemed irrational, overly emotive and ultimately thwart his attempts to advance racial justice. Maintain too closely the 'nice safety' of the racial dialogue and he becomes one of the not seeing, complicit in the very practices he seeks to disrupt. He becomes further dehumanized seemingly unable to escape from what Fanon (1967, 88) evocatively describes as a kind of 'infernal circle.'

In drawing together different strands of analyses – counter-narrative, autobiography, data analysis – I have sought to reveal precisely the extent of the highly strategic and careful analyses required by those in the margins who are able to see. These tensions and negotiations demonstrate the extra work required for the person of colour within white society. Such work can,

without contradiction, be conceptualised both as an implicit requirement to survive Whiteness and as an agentic critical response to it. I have demonstrated that power, status, gender and context interact in multiple sometimes opposing ways to lend a complexity to the experiences and very being of those persons of colour who work to advance the racial justice project even while race is becoming more embedded, more nuanced, thus necessitating increasingly sophisticated strategies for survival (Ladson-Billings 1998).

Earlier I described, borrowing from Zeus Leonardo, the need within the racial justice project to name, reflect on and dismantle discourses of Whiteness. In presenting the arguments in this article I have sought to add my voice from the 'radical space of my marginality' (hooks 1990, 151) to the numerous others engaged in the same fight towards racial justice (e.g. Crenshaw 1989; hooks 1990; Bell 1992; Ladson-Billings1998; Delgado 2000).

I am talking back and working towards disrupting Whiteness.

Afterword

Extract from Jonathan's diary – Sacred Spaces and Protected Narratives

It is a barren terrain, the lands stretch for indeterminable distance, tumble weeds scatter in the wind. Sometimes in this dry land you encounter others like you, searching for a place, an island of comfort where we can rest, where we can take off the masks and be at one with the person crying with pain beneath the veil. This is a place where we can nurse the cuts, the grazes, the wounds that run deep.... And even when we encounter those others we have to still assess their trustworthiness. Can we really take the mask off with them? If we can, we sit on dry, unyielding land and share stories. We find others who recognise the pain. We create sacred spaces that are for us only us. We throw off the oppressive language and embodiment of WhiteWorld and intersperse our speech with colloquialisms, with the tongues of our mother countries and, for a brief precious moment, we relax. We shake our heads, hold each other's hands, we sigh, deep, deep sighs that only we and our ancestors can hear and engage in our protected narratives...narratives we keep protected from WhiteWorld. We laugh at the skill, at the strategising, at the recognition of some WhiteWorld act that we each have come to know only too well but of which WhiteWorld is oblivious...or unconcerned – caught up as it is in perpetuating the status quo. And we gain a temporary strength – for 'tis only temporary – as we stand, stretch our limbs, dust off our clothes and continue on our journey, leaving behind promises to meet again in this Sacred Space.

Acknowledgment

Notes

1. Economic & Social Research Council (RES-062-23-1880). I am carrying out this project with Professors Carol Vincent, Stephen Ball and David Gillborn.
2. Critical Race Theory recognises that racism is endemic and embedded as a normal part of the way in which society functions.
3. Lucy's name is a pseudonym as are those used in relation to the Black Middle Classes project.
4. A 'well-heeled,' relatively affluent area of south-west London.
5. Caran d'Ache is a Swiss based company specialising in writing instruments. According to their website: 'In that area of emotions where writing and images fuse together, graceful shapes, vigorous lines and deep colours create the passion that Caron d'Ache has for Fine Writing.' Only certain girls (white, middle class) owned these pencils. They were presented in flat, Caron D'Ache presentation box sets of 30 to 40 coloured pencils – 'the first water-soluble colour pencil since 1931' – that when dipped in water produced an effect not dissimilar to water paints. www.carandache.ch/m/les-instruments-d-ecriture-et-accessoires/index.lbl (last accessed 15 November 2010).
6. Preparatory schools are independent schools that prepare young children for continued (usually secondary) education in fee-paying schools.
7. Dill and Zambrana (2009, 4) define Intersectionality as a framework that examines the 'relationships and interactions between multiple axes of identity and multiple dimensions of social organization – at the same time.' Intersectionality is particularly useful as a means of reframing and creating new ways of studying power and inequality and challenging traditional modes of thinking about marginalised groups.
8. All of the reviews are entirely fictional.
9. The Research Excellence Framework is a process through which the quality of the research work of academics and UK higher education institutions is assessed. This is a highly competitive process which sees financial rewards attached to the highest university outcomes. http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/ (accessed 11 November 2010)
10. I am grateful to and have been inspired by the work of Derrick Bell, one of the key proponents of Critical Race Theory, who in a chapter entitled 'The Rules of Racial Standing' emphasizes some of the contradictions evident when in naming racism as a problem in a society where whites continue to deny its existence (Bell 1992).
11. See Rollock et al. (2011).
12. For example, see Rollock (2011).

References

Ahmed, S. 2009. Embodying diversity: Problems and paradoxes for black feminists. *Race Ethnicity and Education* 12, no. 1: 41–52.

Bell, D. 1992. *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. New York: Basic Books.

Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. New York and London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. 1986. The forms of capital. In *Handbook of theory of research for the sociology of education*, ed. J.E. Richardson, 241–58. New York: Greenwood Press.

Collins, P. 1991. *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. 2nd ed. New York and London: Routledge.

Crenshaw, K. 1989. Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics and violence against women of color. In *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement*, ed. K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, and K. Thomas, 357–84. New York: The New Press.

Delgado, R. 2000. Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative. In *Critical race theory: The cutting edge*, 2nd ed., ed. R. Delgado and J. Stefancic, 60–70. Philidelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Delgado, R., and J. Stefancic. 2001. *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York and London: New York University Press.

Delgado, B.D., and O. Villalpando. 2002. An apartheid of knowledge in academia: The struggle over the "legitimate" knowledge of faculty of color. *Equity & Excellence in Education* 35, no. 2: 169–80.

Dill, B.T., and R.E. Zambrana. 2009. *Emerging intersections: Race, class and gender in theory, policy and practice*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Ellison, R. 1965. *The invisible man*. London: Penguin Books.

Equality Challenge Unit. 2009. *Equality in higher education: Statistical report 2009*. London: ECU.

Fanon, F. 1967 [2008]. *Black skin white masks*. Exeter: Pluto Press.

Gillborn, D. 2005. Education policy as an act of white supremacy: Whiteness, critical race theory and education reform. *Journal of Educational Policy* 20: 485–505.

Gillborn, D. 2008. *Racism and education: Coincidence or conspiracy?* London: Routledge.

Higher Education Funding Council for England. 2008. *Staff employed at HEFCE-funded HEIs: Update*. Bristol: HEFCE.

hooks, b. 1990. *Yearning: Race, gender and cultural politics*. Toronto, Ontario: Between the Lines.

Ladson-Billings, G. 1998. Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 11, no. 1: 7–24.

Ladson-Billings, G., and J. Donnor. 2008. The moral activist role of critical race theory scholarship. In *The landscape of qualitative research*, ed. N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln, 279–301. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

Leonardo, Z. 2002. The souls of white folk: Critical pedagogy, whiteness studies, and globalization discourse. *Race Ethnicity and Education* 5, no. 1: 29–50.

Leonardo, Z., and R.K. Porter. 2010. Pedagogy of fear: Toward a Fanonian theory of 'safety' in race dialogue. *Race Ethnicity and Education* 13, no. 2: 139–58.

McIntosh, P. 1997. White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women's studies. In *Critical white studies: Looking behind the mirror*, ed. R. Delgado and J. Stefancic, 291–9. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Picower, B. 2009. The unexamined whiteness of teaching: How white teachers maintain and enact dominant racial ideologies. *Race Ethnicity and Education* 12, no. 2: 197–215.

Rollock, N. 2011. Unspoken rules of engagement: Navigating racial microaggressions in the academic terrain. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* February. DOI:10.1080/09518398.2010.543433.

Rollock, N., D. Gillborn, C. Vincent, and S. Ball. 2011. The public identities of the black middle classes: Managing race in public spaces. *Sociology* 45, no. 6: 1078–93.

Tate IV, W.F. 1997. Critical race theory and education: History, theory, and implications. *Review of Research in Education* 22: 195–247.

Wildman, S.M., with A.D. Davis. 1997. Making systems of privilege visible. In *Critical white studies: Looking behind the mirror*, ed. R. Delgado and J. Stefancic, 314–19. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Wynter, S. 1992. *Do not call us Negros: How 'multicultural' textbooks perpetuate racism*. San Francisco, CA: Aspire Books.