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### Unspoken rules of engagement: navigating racial microaggressions in the academic terrain

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## **Unspoken rules of engagement: navigating racial microaggressions in the academic terrain**

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Racial microaggressions are brief, everyday interactions that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racially minoritised group. Compared to more overt forms of racism, racial microaggressions are subtle and insidious, often leaving the victim confused, distressed and frustrated and the perpetrator oblivious of the offense they have caused. Drawing on the counter-narrative aspect of critical race theory that stresses the importance of understanding the role of race in the world through the experiences of people of color, I demonstrate the subtle but powerful ways in which racial microaggressions can manifest within a fictional academic setting and the consequences for those involved. It is argued that while engagement with overt forms of racism, notably through the recording of racist incidents, remains crucial towards the fight for race equality, this has tended within both education and wider British society to obfuscate understanding of these more nuanced, everyday forms of racism with which those of color must contend.

**Keywords:** racial microaggressions; critical race theory; denial; Whiteness; counter-narrative

A wolf came upon a lamb who had wondered too far away from the security of the fold. Instead of simply attacking, the wolf resolved to justify to the lamb why it was that it should be eaten. ‘Last year, you grossly insulted me’, said the wolf. ‘Impossible’ cried the lamb, ‘I was only born six months ago.’ Then the wolf said, ‘You feed in my pasture.’ ‘No’, replied the lamb, ‘I have not yet tasted grass.’ The wolf then said, ‘You drink of my well.’ ‘No’, blurted the lamb, ‘I have not yet tasted water for as yet my mother’s milk is both food and drink to me.’ The wolf responded to this final declaration by seizing and eating the lamb, saying, ‘Well I refuse to go hungry simply because you refute my allegations.’<sup>1</sup>

### **Whiteness, racism and racial microaggressions<sup>2</sup>**

In the UK, there remains an expressed political commitment and legal imperative to improve race equality in schools and other educational establishments that is based on a narrow and unsophisticated version of racism which is seen to exist only in overt forms. Addressing racism in schools has been reframed to simply pertain to the recording of racist incidents (Rollock 2009a). This is despite the fact that trainee teachers continue to feel ill-prepared for and apprehensive about teaching pupils from

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minority ethnic backgrounds (TDA<sup>3</sup> 2009; Rollock 2009b) and despite the findings of an independent government review stating that institutional racism plays a key role in the over-representation of particular minority ethnic pupils in the figures on exclusion from school<sup>4</sup> (Wanless 2006; DCSF 2009; Gillborn and Rollock 2010). In higher education there is also cause for concern. The low number of Black and minority ethnic staff in senior academic grades compared to their White counterparts continues to be evident (ECU 2009), as do annual statistics reporting the lower level of degree attainment amongst Black and minority ethnic students compared to their White counterparts (ECU 2008). While, in vain attempts to address these ethnic group differences, consideration may be given to increasing Black and minority ethnic staff and student support in the form of mentoring schemes, race equality groups or updating race equality schemes – what Hylton (2010, 345) describes as *symbolic commitments to anti-racism* – there remains a persistent silence about the role of Whiteness and pervasiveness of racism in maintaining the ‘historical and cultural fabric’ (Giles, Hughes, and Bonner 2009, 635<sup>5</sup>) of British education.

Whiteness has been described as a power and privilege that is invisible and goes unseen (McIntosh 1992; Dei, Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik 2004) and while it is impossible to do complete justice to the growing literature on Whiteness here, it is important to at least acknowledge and summarise its role in maintaining the normality of racism and how this benefits White members of society. Whiteness allows White people to proceed in everyday practice without recognising or being conscious of their own racial positioning, meaning that they often ‘benefit from a variety of institutional and social arrangements that appear (to them) to have nothing to do with race’ (Bush 2004, 15, cited in Picower 2009, 198; Wildman with Davis 1997). However, Gillborn (2008, 162) has argued that the notion of White *privilege* does not sufficiently encompass the multifaceted extent of power and domination that constitutes Whiteness. Like Picower (2009, 198), he supports instead the view that Whiteness can be regarded as a ‘way of being in the world that is used to maintain White Supremacy’. In a useful paper, Picower (2009) comments on the wide range of ideological, emotional and performative ‘tools of Whiteness’ that her White students use to maintain their hegemonic understanding of their racialised status quo during a course on multicultural education:

... [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*. (2009, 205, emphasis added)

It is important to note that such is the power of Whiteness that these forms of resistance and protection can exist quite unconsciously and *even when* there is an explicit commitment to race equality.

Much of the power of Whiteness lies in the fact that it is often disguised and *misrecognised*, to borrow from Bourdieu<sup>6</sup> (see Grenfell and James 1998), as the morally acceptable, as normal, as natural. One of the ways in which Whiteness manifests is through acts of ‘racial microaggression’. Racial microaggressions are articulated and performed through seemingly slight but persistent daily reoccurrences that serve to remind persons of color<sup>7</sup> that they are judged to be different, not trustworthy, less intelligent and inferior as compared to their White counterparts (Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder 2008). As exemplified in Table 1, they are frequently delivered in the form of subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures, tones and comments.

Table 1. Examples of racial microaggressions (adapted from Sue et al. 2007, 276).

Theme	Microaggression	Message
Ascription of intelligence: Assigning intelligence to a person of color on the basis of their race	'You are a credit to your race.' 'You are so articulate/well-spoken.'	People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites. It is unusual for someone of your race to be so intelligent/educated/well-read.
Colour blindness: Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to acknowledge race	'When I look at you, I don't see color.' 'America is a melting pot.' <sup>a</sup> 'There is only one race, the human race.' 'I entirely understand; I experience exactly the same thing, coming from a working class background.'	Denying a person of color's racial/ethnic experiences. Assimilate/acclurate to the dominant culture. Denying the individual as a racial/cultural human being. Ignoring that irrespective of social class similarities, experiences are shaped differently because of race. ( <i>depending on the context of the discussion, this also could amount to a denial of individual racism</i> )
Denial of individual racism: A statement made when Whites deny their racial biases or privilege	'I'm not racist. I have several Black friends.' 'As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority.'	I am immune to racism because I have friends of color. Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression. I can't be racist. I'm like you.

<sup>a</sup>A British version of this might be, 'When you come here you have to follow our rules'.

In professional settings, microaggressions can manifest in the ways described in Table 1 but also include more subtle acts such as interrupting, ignoring or questioning the validity of the contributions of Black and minority ethnic individuals while accepting the same suggestions or ideas from their White counterparts. For Black women, it can manifest in the constant intrigue about their hair, about the potential complexity of a style and exactly how long it took to complete. The prevalence and incidence of these racial microaggressions remains a key marker of the continuing power and privilege of Whiteness in educational practice and wider society as they continue to wound, constrain and denigrate the validity of the presence of persons of color. Yet these very acts are 'missed' as being racist not just because of their subtlety but because of an inherent misconception that 'nice' people cannot be racist. However, following Ladson-Billings, I insist that:

... our conceptions of race, even in a postmodern and/or postcolonial world, are more embedded and fixed than in a previous age. However, this embeddedness or 'fixed-ness' has required new language and construction of race *so that denotations are submerged and hidden in ways that are offensive though without identification.* (1998, 9, emphasis added)

Managing the persistent casual deployment of racial microaggressions is an additional, unspoken aspect of daily life with which people of color must contend.

While there is little substantial research on microaggressions in the UK, this is a growing area of study in the US, with researchers drawing attention to the consequences, notably to African and Latin Americans, of having to constantly manage and circumnavigate such acts. For example, in a compelling study examining the experiences of African American students in three university environments, Solórzano and Yosso (2000)<sup>8</sup> report that racial battle fatigue caused students to doubt their capabilities, led to feelings of frustration and, in some instances, resulted in their leaving the university altogether and enrolling elsewhere. Giles and Hughes (2009) describe the pressures for faculty of color working in mainly White academic institutions as giving rise to fatigue in the form of high blood pressure, stuttering, sweaty palms and moments of second-guessing their intellectual capabilities.

In the UK, there is an absence of understanding with regard to these more subtle forms of racism. While certainly there have been moves to explore the limitations of racial understanding in mainly White schools (e.g. Gaine 2005; Asare 2009), I contend that such examination is also required in the mainly White spaces of other professional, including educational, organisations.<sup>9</sup>

### **The rules of racial engagement**

Critical race theory (CRT) is an important theoretical framework that recognises and seeks to expose and challenge the normality of racism in everyday life.<sup>10</sup> One of its central tools is the use of story-telling or counter-narrative to give precedence to the experiences of minoritised groups and to highlight the vagaries of racism in everyday life (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Bergerson 2003). Accounts, usually comprising composite characters, can be semi-autobiographical or fictional in nature and act as a powerful means of enabling minoritised groups to ‘speak back’ about their racialised experiences and in so doing challenge the status quo:

The stories or narratives told by the ingroup [*dominant group*] remind it of its identity in relation to outgroups, and provide it with a form of shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural. The stories of outgroups aim to subvert that reality. (Delgado 2000, 60)

In this paper, I employ counter-narrative to make visible some of the subtle aspects of racism in everyday educational practice. In particular, I seek to make a direct association between the tools of Whiteness, as discussed earlier, as they are played out through the denial of racial difference, the simplification/naivety of the complexities of race, and the deployment and consequences of racial microaggressions. This is done through two primary fictional,<sup>11</sup> composite characters, a Black professional couple, Jonathan and Soray, and in line with CRT, I make use of notes to complement and extend arguments made in the main body of the text.

### ***Monday morning***

‘Oh God, I really can’t be bothered to go to work today’, moaned Jonathan, stretching languidly across the rumpled duvet.

‘Why, what’s happened now?’ asked Soray, surveying her partner of three years in the reflection of the mirror as she finished plaiting her hair. They didn’t have the chance to talk the night before because she’d had to work late at the studio.

‘Just more of the same; you know the stuff that niggles away at you, that if you were to say it to someone you didn’t know it would sound as though you’re mad. On the surface they appear to be tiny, almost insignificant episodes but they wear you down.’

‘Hmmm, I know’, Soray said, her voice soft with empathy and concern. ‘Micro-aggressions. That’s what it’s called in the American literature but honey, we’re gonna have to talk about this later. I’m gonna miss my train. I will see you at dinner and we’ll talk about this some more.’

. . . . .

Jonathan stood, straight backed, legs splayed confidently, staring emotionlessly at the Head of HR; the only minute sign of stress the sporadic flinch of his tensed jaw. ‘Look, if you’re not happy with the situation, you *can* appeal’, she offered. Jonathan studied her carefully. She uttered the word ‘appeal’ as though she was handing him the formula to manufacture gold yet the dispassionate coldness of her grey eyes belied the apparent generosity of the suggestion. Appeal? Part of him wanted to laugh; to collapse on the floor with hysterical laughter; to shake her hand even and congratulate her with ‘Appeal? That’s a good one.’ How many Black staff were there in the department, excluding that is the administrative support? Two? Three? Out of a total of 80 academic staff? And the university still hadn’t addressed the ongoing challenge of recruiting increased numbers of Black and minority academics, yet alone of ensuring their progression through to the ranks of professorship.<sup>12</sup> To appeal, no matter how unjust the current situation or how much in the right he was, would be seen as causing trouble and as a Black man he particularly didn’t need to be tainted with *that* stereotype. He didn’t need to do anything that would highlight his presence in an institution, where he was already in a minority, in a negative way. He also had to consider the fact that he was about to submit his application for professorship. He couldn’t risk anything jeopardising his chances of securing the promotion. He had worked hard since he arrived at the university, one of the most respected and prestigious research institutions in the country, and had kept his head down in a focused drive to move onwards and up. Yet somehow, despite this strategy, he now found himself standing in Jayne Simmon’s (the Head of HR) office in the pretence of discussing a situation that had arisen with the colleague with whom he presently shared a room.

‘Look, Simon isn’t here to defend himself so it would be unfair for us to have this conversation.’

‘Yes’, conceded Jonathan, ‘but I have made it evident from the beginning that I would be more than happy to have a conversation with him, I ...’

‘He doesn’t want to speak with you’, Jayne interrupted impatiently.

‘But, I don’t understand. He has never actually spoken to me about *any* of this. Why is he so angry?’

‘Look’, came the response, ‘from his point of view, he has been here for, what, five, six years and never had a problem with anyone before. Since there is nothing we can do about the air-conditioning the fairest thing to do is to move you to separate rooms.’

Jonathan clenched his fists into tight balls in an attempt to suppress his anger at the vacuousness of the statement, ‘never had a problem with anyone before’. The desire to shoot back a water-tight argument about why everything the Head of HR had just said was completely illogical and *unfair* was almost insurmountable. The two-year building programme implemented as a result of the university’s continued expansion

had resulted in a number of academic staff having to share rooms on a temporary basis. He reflected how, when he had been moved into Simon's office a mere eight months earlier, he had asked his colleague quite casually and oblivious of the turmoil that would later ensue whether he would mind opening the window if he needed fresh air rather than using the air conditioning. Simon had agreed. Then one day, six months later, when Jonathan staggered in, weighed down by files and exhausted after a particularly long project meeting, Simon had snarled that the open window wasn't providing him with enough air and demanded that he visit a neighbouring office to assess whether the air-conditioning system in that room would be suitable for them. Baffled by the sudden and inexplicable roughness of Simon's tone, Jonathan had nonetheless acquiesced; even taking time when he realised that Simon wouldn't be in the office the next day to set out his views on the new system in an email for him to pick up when he next logged in. Thinking no more of the matter, he had been stunned to read a week later, an email from Simon (into which he'd been copied) to the Head of HR in which Jonathan had been selectively quoted as being obstructive to Simon's needs. Thankfully, the original email had been included so that the impropriety of Simon's communication ought to have been apparent. Still, Jonathan had gone home that evening and recounted the incident to Soray with a mixture of bemusement and mild concern, explaining how on reflection Simon had inexplicably become quite moody and abrupt to him in recent months – not that he had ever been that friendly to him – refusing to even say hello or goodbye each day unless he spoke first.

Several days passed tensely. Jonathan and Simon sat in an unyielding silence at their respective desks, tapping away diligently at their keyboards. A knock at the door broke their concentration and Jonathan glanced up to see Jake Simpson, the university Health and Safety officer, enter the room. They exchanged a few words of friendly banter before Jake headed over to meet with Simon. Before he even pulled up a chair, Simon began complaining in overly loud, frustrated tones how *Jonathan* had 'insisted' on switching off the air conditioning the moment he'd arrived months earlier; how *Jonathan* was being insensitive to his needs; how the air coming from the open windows that *Jonathan* had demanded remain open had been causing his contacts to dry out and, as a result, had led to him having severe and persistent migraines; and how noticeable it was that he had *never* had problems before *Jonathan* arrived.

Jonathan had sat there insulted and paralysed with shock, hurt and anger. This was the first he was hearing of Simon's difficulties. Why on earth hadn't he said anything to him before? And why on earth was he so angry? Should he say anything? Yet how could he when the conversation wasn't being directed at him even though it was *about* him? Wouldn't that simply play into Simon's hand for a heated argument? Yet it was evident that he was *meant* to hear; the office was small, it was impossible to have a telephone conversation even at a whisper without the other person overhearing.

He had left the office temporarily to collect himself and on returning was even more dumb-founded to hear Jake explaining that, having assessed the draft levels coming from the open window and compared them with the air being emitted from the air-conditioning system, there was no difference in intensity. The problem with Simon's contacts, Jake explained, was likely to be the result of taking insufficient breaks from the computer and from having the contrast on the monitor set at an inappropriate level. Even in view of this independent, expert assessment, Simon remained angry, viciously dismissing Jake's words as nonsense; shouting at him in his insistence that Jonathan's demands for the open window were the source of his health problems.

‘Well?’ demanded Jayne, impatiently. Jonathan blinked, refocusing on the present. He was struggling to understand the basis of Simon’s behaviour, especially since Jake had ruled out the air-conditioning as causal. He had believed that the Head of HR would empathise with this but here she was instead suggesting that he appeal? Driven by an inconsolable need to set out the facts he tried again to make his point but every argument was met with a simplistic blunt retort:

‘Look, is there something I am missing? Perhaps I don’t have all the facts about this situation.’ He considered that a different approach might work.

Jayne didn’t bother to suppress a disinterested sigh, ‘You are missing nothing. Simon is experiencing headaches as a result of the lack of air-conditioning in your room.’

‘Yes, but if we consider the facts’, Jonathan attempted to reason, ‘the health and safety officer ... Jake explained that there was no difference in draft intensity when he compared air entering from the open window and ...’

‘Yes’, Jayne interjected, disregarding Jonathan’s analysis, ‘but Simon should be able to exercise his choice over how he wishes to remain cool. He has the right to exercise his choice.’

Jonathan frowned, confused by the sudden change of focus: ‘But I thought this was about his headache?’

Undeterred and clearly unbothered by Jonathan’s confusion, Jayne steadfastly restated her earlier words, ‘Simon has been experiencing severe headaches recently due to the lack of air-conditioning in your room. He has been here a long time and shared with several people; he has never had a problem with anyone before’, she added. ‘In the interests of fairness, I’ve decided to move both of you out of that office to separate rooms.’

Jonathan’s mouth fell open. He had been about to further set out his case but on hearing this last statement, realised that any attempt at reasoned discussion was futile. Despite her pretensions of impartiality, by repeating Simon’s allegation that he’d never had a problem with anyone before, the Head of HR was telling him that *he* was the problem. She was either oblivious to the pettiness of the situation or she just didn’t care. To Jonathan it was simple. The air-cooling system was not the real problem; Simon’s disproportionate reaction indicated that some other explanation lay behind his behaviour. Simon clearly had a problem with *him* and yet, he recalled, they had barely spoken during the eight months that he had been in the office. How could he have stimulated such anger in Simon from simply being sat in the same room as him?

Then it struck him. How many of Simon’s previous office-colleagues had been Black?

He looked at the Head of HR; her face had acquired the blank disengagement that earlier had been poorly concealed by an insipid smile. He knew he couldn’t even mention race as a point of consideration. It would be career suicide.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Dinner***

‘I used one of the vials today.’

‘What?’ Soray lifted her head abruptly from the menu she’d been studying with the serious intensity of someone who hadn’t eaten all day. ‘What do you mean you used one? When? What happened?’

‘Well’, Jonathan began slowly, ‘today. Do you remember that ridiculous incident I was telling you about at work?’

‘Yes, yes of course. Go on.’

‘Well, I was so mad, so vexed about the whole thing, but you know how we can’t show that we are mad no matter how insulting the situation.<sup>14</sup> Well, I broke one and the liquid spilled onto the floor. This really strong smell filled the room; it wasn’t horrible, just quite distinctive and then it was as if ... I mean ... this is going to sound crazy but we went back in time ...’

. . . . .

The vials had been given to him by his father on his thirteenth birthday. Jonathan had stood with trembling anticipation as his father handed him the sleek black lacquered box that although it opened with ease, it was apparent that it had remained untouched for years. Inside, set against the smooth blood-red velvet of the in-lay, were seven small vials laid in a neat row, each glowing with a translucent golden liquid. Each vial, his father explained, represented one of the seven ages of man.

‘Wow, what are they?’ Jonathan asked, his eyes wide with intrigue as he marvelled at the contents.

His father paused.

Jonathan looked up at him.

‘They are racial truth serums.’

Jonathan regarded him quizzically.

‘You are too young to understand the details now but it is imperative that you keep these in a safe place for there will come a time when you will need to use them. But use them with care. These seven are all you have to accompany you throughout your life.’

‘What’s a racial truth? And how will I know when to use them?’

‘You will know, my son. You will know’, came the grave reply. ‘There will be times in your life when commitment to justice and reasonable deliberation will be of no use to you; when logic and quest for understanding will be futile. At such times you will feel frustrated, helpless and even question your own mind. And there will be many such situations that you will face as a Black man but you must remember these doubts are not yours but are those of society; of White society. You must decide when you choose to use these with ca ...’

‘But where are they from? Who gave them to you?’ Jonathan blurted out, unable to contain himself.

His father surveyed him serenely with an unspoken pride, reflecting how the same opportunities to ask questions of his own father had been unavailable to him – such were the dynamics between adult and child when he was growing up.

‘No-one knows. Some say they are a legacy of slavery passed with great courage and care through the underground tunnels our ancestors used for escape. The precise contents of the serums are not known. That too remains steeped in mystery. But you must, on using your last serum, close the box and only open it again when your first son or daughter turns 13. Seven more will be ready for him or her but only if the box remains closed, otherwise their power will be lost.’

. . . . .

Everything in Jayne Simmon’s room looked the same. He was still standing in the same place as before with the broken vial crushed in his hand.

‘Please, have a seat’, she said, gesturing to the chair just in front of her. Jonathan sat warily looking around the room in a vain attempt to ascertain how the serum might have taken effect.

‘Jonathan, I am sorry to have called you in here but I thought it was important that we keep you abreast of proceedings. As you know, Simon is experiencing headaches that he attributes to the lack of air-conditioning in your room.’

He eyed her suspiciously but said nothing. It was *he* that had originally called the meeting, having spied an email on Simon’s desk addressed to his trade union representative and copied to HR, but perhaps this was something to do with the effect of the serum. He decided to keep quiet, to find out what else she had to say.

‘Jake has filed a report to us and I see that he has found no significant difference in air intensity when he compared the window draft and the air-conditioning. He also explained how unprofessional Simon was in the way he referred to you during the assessment. I have to apologise that you experienced that.’

Jonathan’s heart skipped a beat. Apologise? Jayne looked at him, acquiring an even more sombre expression.

‘Simon has also stated on several occasions that ...’ she consulted her notes, ‘*he has never had a problem with anyone before you came*. I want you to know, Jonathan that I take every situation, no matter how minor, involving our Black and minority ethnic staff very seriously. I am alert to the challenges we face in recruiting and retaining staff from these backgrounds and it is important if we are to have any success in changing this that we understand, as best we can of course, your experiences in the workplace.’ She paused, studying him.

Jonathan returned the gaze, still he said nothing.

‘Bearing in mind the results of the Health and Safety assessment, Simon’s disproportionate behaviour and his comments about you, I have gone back through his records in an attempt to ascertain some meaning to recent events and to establish the profiles of his previous office colleagues.’ There was another pause. ‘I note that none of them were Black. It is likely, therefore, that even if he wasn’t aware of it consciously Simon bears some animosity towards you because of the colour of your skin. I will be sharing this information with him and asking him to move to another office. If you feel this is an insufficient course of action, I would be happy to discuss additional possibilities, within reason of course, with you. In confidence.’

Jonathan smiled inwardly. It was a knowing but sad smile. He now understood the power of the serum.

. . . . .

The menu sat in the middle of the table, abandoned. Soray stared at him, dumbfounded by what she’d just heard. ‘You mean the serum really does make White folks race-aware? I’ve only heard stories, you know, from my grandmother and a few friends but I’ve always had my doubts. That’s amazing and I have to say shocking.’

‘Well of course. You heard me. I don’t think I said a word during the “truth” part of our exchange. She literally did all the analysis and gave me her conclusions and they were astoundingly different from what she said “pre-truth”, said Jonathan, gesturing to the waiter that they were finally ready to order.

‘You mean you didn’t have to teach her what it means to be of color? Her mind was already open to the prevalence and challenges of racial inequities? Have you told anyone else about this? Most people I know have stored their vials for safe-keeping.’

‘Well I almost mentioned it to Derick’, answered Jonathan as the waiter scribbled down their orders. ‘We met for lunch today – well a snatched bite to eat – he was too preoccupied with work. They’re giving him a hard time. Can you imagine he is the second in command to the CEO at a top FTSE 100<sup>15</sup> company – we both know how

hard he worked to get there – and he asks his PA to do some photocopying for him and do you know what she said? “*Can’t you do it?*”<sup>16</sup>

‘Huhmm’, Soray retorted with an emphatic acknowledgement that indicated her disgust. ‘You know if he’d been ...’ she paused, waiting for the waiter to leave, ‘... if he’d been White and male’, she continued in hushed tones, ‘she would never have dreamt of saying that.’

‘Yes but not only that. This same PA was supposed to be organising the seating plan for their annual inter-agency meeting. All the top-brass from their international offices attend. She told Derick that there was no space for him at the front so he would have to sit at the back! You know what Derick is like, friendly with everyone, so he called up the Conference Office and had a word. Turns out that there is, in fact, plenty of space at the front; they were only too willing to put him next to the CEO but he said the second row would be fine. Obviously he said nothing of this to his PA but on the day itself he noted how *she* had positioned herself next to the CEO. Can you imagine that? She almost collapsed with shock when he tapped her on the shoulder and asked her to find out where lunch had got to.’

Soray gave a dry humourless laugh, ‘You’ve always got to be one step ahead. But why didn’t he use his serum?’

‘We didn’t have time to go into that but it’s as you said, there are only seven vials and many of us are keeping them somewhere safe for those moments that we perceive to be extreme or of great magnitude. You have to be shrewd about when you use them. Once they’re gone that’s it.’

‘I guess you’re right but what about what you went through? You work for an educational institution for goodness’ sake. What about race equality training? They have that for schools don’t they?’

‘Training? Come on Soray, you should know better than that. Think about what you were saying this morning, about racial microaggressions.’

‘Yes, I remember’, Soray reflected on their earlier brief conversation as she sipped her wine and looked thoughtfully at the plate of food that had been set down in front of her. ‘I guess most race equality training isn’t really going to get to the root of how microaggressions are caused and perpetuated. Besides I’m guessing White folks are just going to steadfastly deny being racist anyway.’

‘Precisely! After the serum incident I did some more reading on the topic. One of the difficulties is that racial microaggressions are sometimes hard to identify when you’re in the actual ebb and flow of everyday interactions. You know when you have that sense because you’re so used to being Othered that something is wrong but you can’t always put your finger on it.’

‘You mean like what happened with Derick and with you pre-truth?’

‘Exactly’, Jonathan swallowed a mouthful of food. ‘You’re recruited to do a job and you get on with it. You’re not really thinking about race every minute are you, but yet you’re required to cope with the barrage of racial micro-insults, micro-assaults and micro-invalidations<sup>17</sup> without ever naming race *and* also succeed professionally. It can’t be a coincidence that many Black and minority ethnic staff in higher education feel isolated, marginalised and experience racial discrimination.<sup>18</sup> As someone of color you are constantly reminded about the assumptions embedded in the colour of your skin even if it’s not necessarily in an explicit way. When I ask my White colleagues, for example, about how they think their race, their Whiteness has shaped their research on race, they often tell me dismissively that they have already completed such self-reflection in some early book or in their PhD written many years previously.’

‘Wow, lucky them! They get to switch on and switch off their Whiteness as they choose?’

‘Well, it is precisely because they don’t recognise themselves as racialised that they can say that.<sup>19</sup> Their lack of understanding about the power and privilege tied up in Whiteness means that not only do they see such a statement as acceptable but they genuinely believe it plays no role in their daily interactions with people of color. It serves to both ignore and trivialise the centrality of Whiteness in maintaining racism and simultaneously denies our racialised experiences.’<sup>20</sup>

‘It’s as if there’s the person specification you get sent when you apply for a job and then there’s the person specification for a racialised WhiteWorld;<sup>21</sup> a World where the racial rules of engagement are hidden yet inform the normalised thoughts and actions of White folk.’<sup>22</sup>

‘Exactly but the thing is Soray ...’ Jonathan paused and put down his fork. Pushing his plate away, he leant forward, resting his forehead on his hand, ‘... operating to the WhiteWorld person specification is exhausting. I can easily identify the characteristics of it but ...’, he trailed off, searching for words that refused to be found.

‘But?’ Soray prompted gently, also pushing her plate aside as she reached out to hold his hand.

Jonathan sighed and tried again, ‘That WhiteWorld person specification requires an extra strength, an extra resilience to cope with it all. You have to be able to pick yourself up each time, dust yourself off and keep going.’<sup>23</sup> *That* is the unnamed specification for a person of color: boundless resilience in the face of adversity. Sometimes I don’t feel I have the strength. Does that sound mad? Does it seem like I’m being overly analytical or sensitive?’ He swallowed the last of his wine.

‘No and don’t you ever say or think that. Not for a minute. This is what happens: self-doubt. You start questioning your sanity; your competence. And besides’, Soray added, ‘if you had misread or overanalysed the situation then nothing different would have happened when you used the racial truth serum.’

‘Yes, I guess you’re right’, he responded, only slightly consoled by Soray’s fierce determination. ‘But what can I do? I can’t fight this and I certainly can’t fight it alone. What happens when the serums run out?’

Soray squeezed his hand until he looked up, his eyes meeting hers. ‘Don’t forget’, she said, ‘no matter how bitter the road or how stony the road, we have persevered. We have not faltered, nor have we grown weary.’<sup>24</sup>

Jonathan smiled, recalling Obama’s famous words spoken at the NAACP<sup>25</sup> Centennial which they had debated at length over breakfast one Sunday morning just a few months earlier.

‘There’s only one thing you can do’, Soray continued. ‘You must write about it. You have to make visible the invisible otherwise these institutions, those who work within them, who make the policies and the rules, will always remain the same and our children’, she paused to smile at him mischievously, ‘will continue to live in a world that is tainted by the very same inequalities that we face.’<sup>26</sup>

Jonathan smiled a weak resigned smile. ‘You’re right’, he conceded, ‘you’re right.’

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to demonstrate how traditional, commonplace understandings and portrayals of racism are limited and flawed, incorrectly serving to position White members of society as innocent bystanders to the racist acts of the deviant few.

Using the concept of ‘racial microaggressions’, borrowed from the American psychological literature, and the counter-narrative element of CRT I have shown how instead racism is in fact complex and nuanced, remaining more deeply embedded in the subconscious presence of the everyday than is usually imagined in public and political discourse.

I have purposefully exploited literary and ‘standard’ academic license to introduce the concept of racial truth serums as a metaphor for enabling White consciousness. In so doing I invite the reader to imagine an alternative reality that is less shaped by powerful Whites but instead is subject to meaningful, long-lasting intervention by people of color. In doing this, I am seeking to contribute to the social justice project (Stovall 2006) by introducing a concept that is at once empowering yet simultaneously speaks to an explicit need for genuine action that goes beyond the symbolic and beyond the status quo (Hylton 2010). Racial truth serums allow a theoretical space to examine issues of power and racial subjugation. I invite the reader to ‘play with’ this alternative reality. How would our lives be different were they really to exist? Would their content, origin and replication (or obliteration) become a source of fixation for White society? Would there be attempts to ban entry to the UK of prominent, political Blacks who advocate the best and most effective ways of using the serums? Might certain Blacks be offered positions of power or financial rewards if they decried the value of the serums and supported instead the police and intelligence services in their operations to locate and wipe out the serums’ existence? How might the concept of agency on the part of the Black population be different?

In embracing this CRT counter-narrative I am explicitly, defiantly and with courage ‘fighting back’ or, to paraphrase Maya Angelou, rising again to give name to processes that too frequently remain silenced within society and within the academy.

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### Notes

1. Aesop fable cited in Dei, Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik (2004, 8).
2. I am indebted to Derrick Bell (1992), in particular his chapter on ‘The rules of racial standing’, for lending to the inspiration for this paper. ‘Unspoken rules of engagement’ can be regarded as a continuum of the hidden racial paradigms and ‘rules of racial standing’ that inform interactions and relationships across the divide between White members of society and people of color.
3. The Training and Development Agency is the government agency responsible for teacher recruitment and training in England.
4. Namely, those from Black Caribbean and Mixed White and Black Caribbean backgrounds. See Gillborn and Rollock (2010) for full discussion of school exclusions and ethnicity.
5. I cite Giles, Hughes, and Bonner II (2009, 635) who are making this point in relation to the American context.
6. Bourdieu describes *méconnaissance* (misrecognition) as relating to the ways in which ‘underlying [my emphasis] processes and generating structures’ of social spaces (fields) are ‘not consciously acknowledged in terms of the social differentiation they perpetuate even though they often operate in the name of democracy and equality’ (Grenfell and James 1998, 23).
7. ‘People of color’ is an American term used to refer to those from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. I use the term here as an expression of solidarity in terms of the shared struggle for race equality.

8. One student with a strong track record in Mathematics achieved 95 in one of the first class quizzes. Suspecting the student of cheating, the professor called him/her into his office and insisted that s/he took the exam again. While the student achieved 98 in the second test, thus easily refuting the professor's allegations, it is the suspicion of mal-intent simply on account of naive beliefs based on the colour of the student's skin and the fact that the student had to re-sit the exam, that are central here.
9. Obviously such rigorous examination ought not to be limited to racism. Giles, Hughes, and Bonner II (2009, 637) argue that: 'issues related to race and systemic racism, gender, social class, religion–spirituality, language and literacy, and power dynamics live deeply embedded within all educational preparation settings, classrooms (and) administrative offices ...'
10. For a fuller discussion of CRT see Bell (1992); Delgado and Stefancic (2001); Gillborn (2008); Hylton (2010).
11. While inspired by actual events the characters and the serum are fictional. All characters except Soray, Jonathan, his father and Derick are White.
12. A recent HEFCE report revealed that when examined by academic grade, 'non-White' staff are least represented at professorial level (HEFCE 2008). In 2007–2008, there were only 50 Black or Black British Professors or heads of department, accounting for 4.8% of Black academic staff in higher education institutions. This compares with 13,530 Professors or heads of department who were White, accounting for 12.1% of White academic staff (ECU 2009). In 2002, a BBC documentary reported on the 'Black brain drain' of Black academics from British to American universities as they sought political spaces and support for their intellectual growth (BBC 2002).
13. Bell (1992, 111) argues that statements by people of color about their racialised experiences are often deemed to lack objectivity or legitimacy. Deemed 'special pleading' they are not regarded as entitled to serious consideration.
14. A similar point is made by one of the African American students in Solórzano and Yosso's (2000) study of African Americans' experiences of university. The student reports an incident that occurred when a group of Black students were playing football on a campus car park:

... it's 11 o'clock [at night] and all of a sudden, [campus police] sweeps up ... There's a total of four or five cars, and then we have two cops on the bikes, all there for us who are not displaying any type of violence or anything like that ... but we're upset. And we're saying at the same time, *we're feeling restricted because if we act in a way that we want to react – number one, we're going to jail; number two – it's just going to feed into the stereotype that we're supposed to be violent ...* We actually just stood there out there and just really pleaded our case for at least a good 45 minutes. And they were not trying to hear us at all. We had to leave the parking lot ... Once again, it reminded me I'm a Black man [on a predominantly White campus]. (Solórzano and Yosso 2000, 69, emphasis added)

Conventional modes of response are not permitted to people of color. Aware that they can be easily misread in line with stereotypical norms, they face the double indignity of not only being singled out on account of the colour of their skin but also, irrespective of the magnitude or transparency of the injustice, of nonetheless being obliged to proceed and manage the incident in a way that minimises the probability that they will experience even further racial mistreatment.

15. Financial Times Stock Exchange. A FTSE 100 company is one which is listed as having amongst the highest share indices of listed companies in the UK.
16. Such challenges to authority can be regarded as a further example of a racial microaggression.
17. Sue et al. (2007).
18. Leathwood, Maylor, and Moreau (2009); Maylor (2009); Mirza (2006).
19. Aveling (2006); Dyer (1993).
20. Kay (2009, 682) contends that any 'diversity initiative' in schools should include a component that examines White privilege. A similar argument could be extended to other educational establishments.
21. Gillborn (2008, 162) uses 'WhiteWorld' to encapsulate the various normalised layers of White supremacy as it oscillates, without warning, between named, explicit and aggressive acts and those which are more subtle and hidden.
22. Writing about the experiences of professionals from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, Ballard and Parveen (2008, 81) state: 'To those who seek to enforce rules which

- have quietly been constructed to sustain their own position of advantage, such issues have long since been assimilated into common sense and hence rendered almost completely invisible.' Although it should be added that such issues are far from invisible to those of color.
23. Kay (2009, 680) describes this 'literal and figurative tiredness', one of the many cumulative consequences of racial microaggressions, as 'coping fatigue'.
  24. Obama, B. 2009. Obama remarks to NAACP, 16 July. NAACP Centennial, New York. Ladson-Billings and Donnor (2008, 373) describe these moments of racial Othering as 'a regular reminder of the liminal space of alterity'. Rather than regarding this as a place of disadvantage and degradation, Ladson-Billings and Donnor insist on the 'perspective advantage' those excluded from the centre can experience, as their analysis becomes informed by a panoramic dialectic that is positioned 'beyond the normative boundary of the conception of Self/Other'.
  25. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.
  26. Leonardo (2002, 31) writes of 'disrupting white discourses and unsettling their codes' in order to 'name, reflect on and dismantle discourses of whiteness'. This is particularly challenging for those of color who have to simultaneously 'engage whiteness while working to dismantle it'.

### Notes on contributor

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