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## **Anti-racism in the age of white supremacy and backlash**

### *Editorial*

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Racism, “the pervasively malignant and malicious systemic illness” (Yancy, 2018, p. 1), has been an abiding feature of white organisations and societies. Its formation, through a combination of interlaced European racial sciences, philosophy and religious doctrines as the alibi for colonialism and slavery, ultimately left in its wake a normalised racial hierarchy that has produced and protected white power and privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; DuBois, 2007[1920]; Mills, 1997).

As we wrote these opening words in the original Call for Papers of our Special Issue in April 2019, we were tuning in to a swelling undercurrent of antagonistic sentiment that simultaneously over-inflated and delegitimised the gains in racial equality made over the past half-century. This so-called ‘post-racial’ political discourse asserted that we were all equal now, and that racial equality posed a threat to nations of the Global North. Yet a parallel discourse constructed immigrants and refugees as the scapegoats of wealth disparity. Narratives of nostalgia soothed anxieties by whitewashing history as racially uncomplicated, and stoked defensiveness to changes, including the felling of celebratory memorials to colonialists and the election of a Democratic presidential candidate.

We could not foresee then neither how violently nor how quickly we would arrive at the state of affairs today, with the intensity of the currently emerging shifts in race relations around the world. Over the past year, we have witnessed a dramatic discontent to the slow and limited progress made towards equality, alongside a creeping antipathy to grassroots calls for social justice, highlighting the distance between rhetoric and reality. Interconnected international uprisings were organised to create a Movement for Black Lives, the implications of which have challenged nearly every industry, including higher education, and each academic discipline. Moreover, social unrest, cynicism, and fear are fuelled by an economic crisis caused by a global pandemic and neoliberal disaster mismanagement that has disproportionately affected communities, especially women, people of colour, and the global poor.

This combination of events has forced a racial awakening, perhaps even a reckoning, in the public sphere. Those who had regarded the world as having entered a post-race era were impelled to adjust their view of reality, in which racism is something that happens ‘over there’. Many found themselves re-evaluating their understanding of racism itself, and the taken-for-granted social structures that perpetuate it. Long-standing abolitionist calls to defund the police have taken root; anti-racist and decolonial practice and intellectual leadership by Black, Indigenous and people of colour have entered the white agora, and people who were once bystanders to the ways in which white supremacy manifests increasingly felt compelled to

challenge the racial injustice they saw in their neighbourhoods, their governments, and their everyday lives.

In motion since 2019, our Special Issue speaks not only to the events of the past two years, but to the anti-racist social movements of the past decade that arguably laid the foundation for recent events. As such, it offers an analytical view of the trajectory which has brought us here, and critical insight into the backlash which seeded the movements of change that have broken through into public consciousness.

## ‘White’

The use of the term white supremacy throughout this Special Issue includes the more familiar and specific reference to extremist, alt-right movements emboldened in the contemporary climate of explicit racial violence (Johnson *et al.*, 2018). Yet it also extends far beyond them to signify the wider set of social systems characterised by the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000). In this sense, white supremacy signifies a historically emergent, socially constructed and institutionally embedded racial hierarchy that enshrines white physical, cultural, intellectual, and moral superiority (Dar *et al.*, 2020; Essed, 1991; Feagin, 2013; Hill, 2009; Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014). Taking this wider view, we recognise it as a pervasive feature both of the nation-states of the Global North/West, and most of the regions colonised by them, many of which are mired in neo-colonial relationships of dependency and control. White supremacy, as we understand it, is therefore not just a way of seeing race, but a fundamental way in which our world has been structured.

Accompanying white supremacy is the concept of ‘whiteness’, or the oppressive “social, psychological, and phenomenological racial reality for people racialised as white” (Tate, 2020, p. 1167; see also Tate and Page, 2018; Yancy, 2012). Tate and Bagguley (2017) emphasise *whiteness* as how one enacts one’s body and subjectivity around a white racist epistemic orientation, separating this from *whiteness* (*cf.* Frye, 1992; Yancy, 2008) to interrupt the essentialist misconception that this social phenomenon is something biological and inherent to white people.

Such detailed situating of concepts is necessary not only because their sociological usage may be unfamiliar to those outside the immediate field of research, but because they can, and have, elicited strong affective reactions with material effects. Research engaging with analytical concepts often needs to disclaim that critiques are oriented to structures of power, rather than to individuals who may identify or phenotypically present as white. Despite these concepts having a long history in critical race and whiteness studies in which they are demonstrably useful theoretical concepts that are explanatory of empirical realities, simply invoking the notions of ‘white(li)ness’ and ‘white supremacy’ amongst audiences that are not specifically anti-racist often reveals aspects of the emotionally charged backlash against anti-racist ideas and efforts that this Special Issue explores.

As scholars who have cited and applied these concepts collectively and individually in our work and writing, we have been met with reactions ranging from bristles of shame to bursts of rage, along with defensive rationalisations from across the white fragility spectrum (DiAngelo,

2018). The racial stress that anti-racist work seems to generate necessitates a good deal of labour, not only in scholarly exactitude, but also in emotional agility, to pre-empt or smooth over the ways in which it may be perceived as threatening. Furthermore, as light-skinned women of colour of Asian descent, and residents of the Global North/West (amongst us, Australia and the UK, with roots in the US) who engage in intersectional feminist reflexive practice about our positionalities in order to enact anti-racist solidarity, especially with Black and Indigenous people, ‘doing the work’ of anti-racism also means acknowledging and interrogating our privileges, the ways in which we ourselves are implicated and complicit in whitely structures, and processing what this means for our location in this field of academic enquiry. It also means leveraging any privilege we possess, first, to make space — and to make such spaces safe(r) — for global majority people, who are racialised minorities in the academy, and second, to advance anti-racist, intersectional and decolonial feminist theory, research, and social movements more broadly.

Despite its complexities, such critical work from within the academy, and within business schools in particular, is much needed. Notably, although critical race theory–informed examinations of business, management and organisations are growing in number, many in the field still treat management and organisations and knowledge about them as race-neutral (Dar *et al.*, 2020; Nkomo, 1992). Our field lags far behind its sister disciplines in its grasp of the influence of race as an enduring social structure shaping relationships of resource and power. Ignorance of the ways in which racism operates at a systemic level means that conversations about race can fall back on a latent, unremitting, and naive assumption that people can be divided into a binary of racist = bad / not racist = good (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 12). Recognition of the nature of racism means that we need to challenge the notion that one can passively step ‘outside’ of it, and take an active approach to disrupting it (Davis, 1971). The body of knowledge on anti-racism, to which we intend this Special Issue to contribute, therefore seeks to challenge the epistemologies of ignorance (Mills, 1997; Sullivan and Tuana, 2007) that serve to keep white supremacy and whiteness at the centre of social institutions (Tate, 2020).

### **Backlash Against Anti-Racism**

Theorisations of race and racism bear a rich century-long history through the intellectual contributions of Black thinkers and activists. Pioneering writers like W.E.B. DuBois (2005 [1903]) developed knowledge around ‘the problem of the colour-line’, just after Anna Julia Cooper (2016 [1892]) articulated the racialised, gendered and classed nature of identity and citizenship. By the turn of the 21st Century, critical race studies had been well-established in sociology (Collins, 1986, 2000), legal studies (Bell, 1989, 1995), and education (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

In organisation studies, our disciplinary theorising on race can be traced to Stella Nkomo’s ground-breaking piece, ‘The emperor has no clothes: Rewriting “race in organizations”’, published in 1992 in the *Academy of Management Review*. In her article, Nkomo (1992) calls out the naked emperor of organisation studies’ profound ignorance about race. She challenges the ways whiteness remains unnamed in our field and problematises the implication that race

is treated as something located in *other* groups, while whiteness stands as the universal norm, default and ideal (Nkomo, 1992).

Yet, in the nearly three decades since the publication of ‘The emperor has no clothes’, racial ignorance appears to remain a persistent feature of management and organisation studies. While we do not overlook the important and valued voices of anti-racist and decolonising scholars who have sought to challenge and subvert white supremacy and whiteness (Banerjee, 2003; Cooke, 2003; Dar and Ibrahim, 2019; Faria *et al.*, 2010; Gantman *et al.*, 2015; Grimes, 2002; Ibarra-Colado, 2006; Liu, 2020; Liu and Baker, 2016; Mandiola, 2010; Martinez Dy *et al.*, 2017; Masood and Nisar, 2020; Mir and Mir, 2013; Nkomo, 2011; Prasad, 2003; Swan, 2017), we seek to acknowledge that their interventions are still rare or readily forgotten.

These contributions are, in multiple ways, through specific journals, conference tracks, tokenistic panel additions, and more, relegated to the peripheries of organisational studies as ‘niche’ concerns. Beyond this marginality in the academy, about which we have written elsewhere (Dar *et al.*, 2020), we developed this Special Issue theme in order to further reveal what the publications and citations do not: the acts of censorship, silencing, bullying, gaslighting, co-optation, erasure, and recolonisation faced by those who offer anti-racist and decolonial critiques and interventions more broadly.

The barriers to anti-racist critiques are both institutional and interpersonal. Discussions of race and racism are frequently bound and gagged by shame and white fragility, while historically white institutions tend to invite critical comment but refuse to act on the resulting contributions. Both individuals and institutions often exhibit the immobilizing fear and shame of being labelled ‘a racist’. Ironically, the fear and shame of potentially being seen as racist leads many white or white-identified people to act erratically, enacting behaviours that undermine anti-racist interventions and perpetuate the status quo. Such behaviours include derailing the conversation by shifting the topic or focus, handing problems of racial inequality back to racialised minorities to ‘fix’, insisting on colour-blindness (“I don’t treat people differently based on their race”), an ‘All Lives Matter’ approach (“Black Lives Matter implies white lives don’t matter”), denial (“there’s no scientific evidence that racism exists”), whataboutery (“sure, race is important, but what about class?”), and the evasion of responsibility through oversimplification (“I don’t have white privilege because I grew up working-class”). These rationalisations manifest to differing degrees alongside the direct or indirect silencing of anti-racist writers and activists through threat, censorship, or victimisation. Such barriers shut down vital dialogue and critical debate, and hinder the progression of collective consciousness and the evolution it prompts towards more genuinely inclusive social norms.

We note as well that research and interventions that explicitly examine race are not necessarily anti-racist. Studies that are premised on, or conclude with, the celebration of diversity, predominantly assert homogenising stereotypes about ‘BAME’ (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic in the typical terminology of the UK context) and recommend the provision of support to better assimilate into whitely institutions. Such studies tend to treat belonging to a racialised minority group as a deficit or commodity (Liu, 2020), leaving white supremacist logics intact.

While work of this nature may provoke conversations that lead to discussions of racism, it fails to recognise racism as both a tool and an outcome of white supremacy. Studies in our field

adopting this approach typically cast Black, Indigenous and people of colour as a homogenous group of victims or survivors, cataloguing their suffering and needs, or indeed their agential resilience, while remaining silent on the source of racial injustice. Naming white supremacy, whiteness, and the ways in which people benefit from them, is often seen as going too far.

### **Persistent White Supremacy and Whiteness**

When the white academy silences, erases or co-opts the work of those who call out ‘the naked emperor’, racial oppressions are reinforced in management and organisation studies, and in turn, the social world within which it is situated. White supremacy and whiteness, then, simply become an unspoken and accepted foundation for knowledge production in the academy.

Nonetheless, it is important to make clear that the preservation of white supremacy and whiteness is not easily divided between scholars racialised as white and those racialised as non-white. Black and Indigenous scholars, and scholars of colour, may choose or feel compelled to assimilate to the norms, values, and practices of white academe to evade backlash or simply secure their survival (Dar, 2019). Their scholarship may even reproduce epistemic violence against people and communities of colour. Many may reproduce whiteness in their professional roles but find informal pathways to resist it, such as through mentorship, advocacy, and editing. Likewise, there are white scholars who practice allyship (Swan, 2017), some of whom suffer punishment and marginalisation as ‘race traitors’ (Ignatiev and Garvey, 1996).

As anti-racist voices rise, backlash can manifest in subtler ways to preserve white supremacy and whiteness, making some concessions whilst leaving the foundations of organising logics and governance unchanged. This can be seen in the ways white institutions are increasingly co-opting concepts like ‘decolonising’ (Dar *et al.*, 2018) and ‘intersectionality’ (Liu, 2018), adopting the concepts as a metaphor (*cf.* Tuck and Yang, 2012) and contributing to institutional performances of inclusion and wokeness that ironically serve to legitimise the status quo (Ahmed, 2007).

While the language of decolonising or intersectionality may be embraced, its theories often become divorced from the scholars who (co-)developed them and its practices depoliticised. At the same time, anti-racist work may be defanged, depoliticised, and assimilated, making it more palatable. This may appear, for example, in the celebration of accreditations that facilitate minor progress towards racial equality (e.g., the Race Equality Charter Mark in UK universities) or the promotion of a few hand-picked voices to sit on equalities committees at the expense of raising political consciousness and more fundamental change.

Finally, we ask if the effect of being silenced within the academy inhibits our critique from having the reach needed to shape and influence management practices. Attention to equality, diversity, and inclusion in management is arguably more prominent than ever before. Yet, while even the *Harvard Business Review* engages with this discussion (Ely and Thomas, 2020), what is noted is the way in which leaders are profoundly incapacitated by their ignorance when dealing with the subject of race and racism. Ghoshal’s (2005) argument resonates here: that business schools are destroying the potential for good management with bad management

theory. The most powerful and influential business schools are still teaching deracinated content that lacks sustained critical engagement with capitalism as just one of many possible economic and political models. However, recognition that such discussion is crucial may be increasing, as the climate catastrophe caused by unabated capitalism begins to sink in for those hitherto shielded from its present realities.

This Special Issue seeks to foreground twinned objectives: to feel hopeful about change and to commit to solidaristic politics that underpin a sustainable movement against white supremacy. Given the context, and the potentially violent repercussions of doing anti-racist work in a whitely academe, it is imperative to centre hope and healing so that fatigue does not consume the possibility for change (Emejulu and Bassel, 2020). In the closing section of this editorial, we offer our readers examples of resistance and endurance that give us cause to remain hopeful. We note that these do not always manifest as grand gestures, or as confrontation, or revolt, but are evidenced in daily acts of refusal, retreat, survival, and living one's truth.

## **Enduring Hope**

Just as the white supremacy and whiteness in academic knowledge production have been challenged by scholars before us, established and emerging anti-racist scholars are resisting the backlash, silencing and co-optation.

First, these resistive practices are not restricted to traditional publishing. Scholar-activists have built spaces for collective hope in the increasingly porous boundaries between the academy, local communities and digital media. Hashtags on Twitter such as #BlackInTheIvory create platforms where Black scholars can share their testimonies about racist abuses and microaggressions that pervade the academy when their experiences may be contested or concealed by university branding or public relations.

Second, anti-racist activism in business schools has a long history, although the longevity of this resistance is often erased or overlooked. There have been at least two decades of sustained organising led by global majority, Black, and Indigenous scholars, and scholars of colour. For example, in 2006, the Latin American and European Management and Organisation Studies (LAEMOS) conference signalled an epistemic and ontological break from subordination to white Eurocentric knowledge production. The LAEMOS conference was born from the desire to build a dialogue between Latin American critical scholarship and scholarship produced in Europe. In 2018, this experiment with bridging regions and their diverse histories was abruptly ended by the conference's sponsor, the European Group for Organisation Studies, following critique from supporters of the conference regarding how it had come to be configured as Eurocentric. Its legacy survives in the recent efforts co-ordinated by the Decolonizing Alliance to restore international collaboration around decolonizing and anti-racist organising.

Third, the inception in 2017 of the Decolonizing Alliance and Building the Anti-Racist Classroom Collective, groups which we co-founded and to which we belong, has signalled the possibilities of building collective practices that transform scholarly critique into a praxis of liberation. Working against the individualisation that structures competitive working practices, as well as the whitely and patriarchal cultures that toxify academia, these collectives engage

with the possibilities for a solidaristic politics across geographic locations while developing interventions that dialogue with racist logics underpinning Management education. From curating workshops on anti-racist pedagogy and writing for academic and public platforms, to organising actions calling out racism at academic conferences, these collectives have modelled a politics of resistance that is rippling across the field, renewing the desire to engage in a politics of refusal.

Here, the recent webinar series on decolonising the business school hosted by City Business School (formally Cass Business School) deserves to be noted. In the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter uprisings of 2020, City Business School campaigned to drop the surname of slave owner Sir John Cass from its name. At the height of the campaign, buoyed by the ratification of a name-change, the School organised an international webinar under the headline, 'Decolonise the Business School'. This invitation galvanised over 500 international business school delegates to register and participate and the campaign continues with follow-up workshops.

There is no doubt that organising for racial justice has always been, and will continue to be, a movement built up from the margins. At times, the most radical voices in this movement can inspire a desire for change, but it seems that invariably, these demands are recolonised by the same structures of power that find themselves under attack. Repeatedly, anti-racist movements fracture under the sheer weight of the interlocking powers keeping the status quo intact, only some of which we have introduced here. The COVID-19 global pandemic has further limited our capacity: not only is community organising restricted to online gatherings, but it is also stripped of the occasions for sharing space, food, and travel under fears of infection and restrictions to movement across borders. Our taken-for-granted ways to work, educate, and connect have been overturned, with the more privileged in society more likely to be able to endure this virus under the shelter of screen time, while many of the pandemic's 'frontline heroes' represent the most underpaid and precarious, facing exposure to health risks, and are disproportionately members of marginalised communities.

Students in the UK are organising the largest rent strike in 40 years, while a record number of publicly funded departments and faculties around the world are facing closure after years of austerity. More than half of the world's students cannot return to school (*UN News*, 2020). At the same time, we are witnessing the renewed intensity of backlash from legislative proposals that limit the use of ideas developed in critical race theory in education. The need for collective struggles for equality could not be greater. One would be right to ask what kind of solidarity can be developed in this context, and what hope can be mustered in these circumstances?

We can orient to this historical moment as a critical one, a threshold of sorts, in which we must learn new concepts and ways of being (Land *et al.*, 2016). Renowned Indian author and social critic Arundhati Roy (2020) has called the pandemic a *portal*. COVID-19's spread has inadvertently, and momentarily, reversed the direction of capital in the world's richest and most powerful nations. The upturning of our conventional ways of working has drawn attention to assumptions and alternatives. Roy argues that the halt in capitalist wealth accumulation will not desist, but that the pause in activity may be just enough to help us stop and examine the foundations of a system that persistently exploits and impoverishes the resources that sustain

life: land, healthcare, social security, biodiversity. At this crisis point, Black American queer social movement facilitator, doula, and pleasure activist adrienne maree brown (2017) reminds us of our inherent interdependency. With such knowledge amplified, the pandemic could be a transformative agitator, and enforce an imperative for a radical re-envisioning: a reset, a rupture – hope.

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