Complaint

4th October 2022

Dear X

I am writing to make a formal complaint against [X] who organised and hosted a conference at [X] on in September 2022. Due to the delicateness of the complaint, I have also added references and links to some of my points for emphasis and credibility. This goes beyond more than just my own opinion and reads as more of an autoethnographic account of my experience of the event.

My complaints are as follows:

Institutional Whiteness

- The X Conference centred white emotions and feelings over Black and Brown trauma.

The event began with the thanking of all white people: [Names of X number of people were here]. It gave the impression that those in charge were white, and the Black and Brown people were subservient. This appeared much in the air of colonial paternalism: "the benevolent planter, the paternal planter – the planter that is invested in Christianising and so-called civilising the enslaved" (Katie Donnington *qtd* in *Britain's Forgotten Slaveowners*, 2015). In short, largely Black people existed to perform for their white masters – in this case, senior managers.

Personally, for me, it was a deeply triggering dynamic between coloniser and colonised; powerful and powerless; the rulers and the ruled. In an event that was supposed to be anti-racist, white supremacy pervaded through Black and Brown "usefulness" positioned in proximity to white others where the institutionalisation of white supremacy (Ahmed, 2006; 2007; 2012; 2014; Hunter, 2015; 2019; 2021) further reaffirmed, as Charles Mills' writes "… white supremacy implies the existence of a system that not only privileges whites but is run by whites, for white benefit" (Mills, 2004: 31).

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Upholds the Status Quo

- No Engagement with Wider Debates

The conference failed to consider other conversations happening across the anti-racism agenda, including the backlash to the *Sewell Report* (2021) which claimed there was no evidence of institutional racism in the UK. The backlash to the government's inquiry had wall-to-wall criticisms from both within and outside universities alike, including Kehinde Andrews and Halima Begum. It also made claims that people were consulted who were not consulted, including historians SI Martin and Stephen Bourne. This is further worsened as it was led by Black and Brown people, tying into the government's use of Black and Brown faces as "diversity optics" to front a racist inquiry.

Further, how the Conservative Party had again weaponised Diversity & Inclusion against the public by using its Black and Brown MPs as the faces of racist policymaking.

In a 2021 address to the House, the Labour MP for Slough Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi, stated:

> "What's even more galling … is that the prime minister is getting someone with a brown skin colour to do his dirty work, with a bill that could have disastrous consequences for Black and Brown people. No wonder there are accusations of tokenism from within the Asian, African, and Caribbean British communities. What's the point of having Black and Brown people as cabinet ministers, sitting on those Conservative frontbenchers, if they are going to directly act against the interests of Black and Brown people, just so they may hold ministerial office?" (@TanDhesi, *Twitter*).

Moreover, in 2022 more than half of the MPs running in Conservative Party leadership race were from a Black, Asian, or other ethnic minority background. The way the X conference presented race equality showed no evidence that lessons had been learned in how diversity had already been weaponised, nor did it show that we academics and practitioners need to present a more robust plan to safeguard against further co-options of the equality agenda.

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- Practitioners with No History of Anti-Oppression Work

The X Conference revealed an epistemology of ignorance (Sullivan and Tuana, 2007) to anti-oppression work that will have a long-term negative impact. When those leading are giving out "good practice" exclusively based on their lived experience, it is damaging to audiences.

Education academic Muna Abdi tweeted:

> "There are some anti-racism consultants who have no history of race equity work beyond lived experience... enabling organisations to profit from performed trauma and surface level engagement ..." (@Muna_Abdi_PhD, *Twitter*).

Starting at X as an X (X-X), then as an X (X-X) and then as a X (X-X) and then within the X department (2021-), in my few years within the institution it was obvious that the university (and student union) do not hire people with backgrounds in anti-oppression work. Last winter, I challenged the university's climate conference (X) due to its whitewashed line-up much alike the summit in Glasgow, both inconsiderate of the wider debates in activism. i.e Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion.

When I challenged the university again, senior members of management responded with flippant replies (via emails), consistent with "white fragility" (DiAngelo, 2017), made worse when we consider the lack of academics at X with backgrounds in work that looks at racialisation, whiteness, and decoloniality. Having also X, the relationship between the X and local activists is also strained going back decades. So, the illiterate culture to social justice issues at X is precedented.

- Cultural Integration Workshops [CIWs]

The focus on Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion [EDI] revisits my earlier points about the institutionalisation of whiteness. Talking about diversity recentres an assumed neutral position, with anything positioned outside of that default as to be 'invited in' (Puwar, 2004; Bhanot, 2015).

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The CIWs are a series of eight sessions at ninety minutes each, constructed to explore the social behaviours of culture and how environments can be more inclusive.

1. Introduction to identity through the lens of race
2. Privilege
3. Unconscious bias – gender lens
4. Belonging – safe space immigration lens
5. Words and labels LGBTQ+ lens
6. Neurodiversity
7. Intersectionality
8. Review and reflections

In the context of the X Conference, it was co-delivered by a white person who centred themselves, including emotions (Aronson, 2017; Hamad, 2021). Two Black women students reported racial microaggressions (Pierce, 1970), which lead to the development of Cultural Integration Workshops lead by an X lecturer whose background isn't in race equality. The original 'inspiration' for these workshops is through the white gaze. It was done from a position of white interest, where simply "interested" is not a good enough reason to do these workshops. At its bones, the nucleus of this interest could be described as ethnographic. Regularly, white scholars have conducted studies on racially minoritised communities without any analysis of their own privilege (Milner IV, 2007). In this context they enter that space with a "psychological wage" (DuBois, 1935: 738). So here, I struggle to see what expertise X practitioners brought.

This is compounded by how EDI was conflated with the original "inspiration", which centred the two Black women's experience of racialised gendered violence (Crenshaw, 1989). Yet, if the workshop that was delivered – talking about privilege – is structured in the same ways as the others, it excludes any conversation or analysis of wider overarching systems. Otherwise known as what bell hooks

termed as imperialist capitalist white supremacist patriarchy (hooks, 1994). How can we talk about inequality and privilege without talking about pervading systems of violence?

Moreover, the CIW conducted, was exclusively dependent on audience participation. For Black and Brown participants, this drew on our emotional labour, and it positions social discourses of violence as a source of fascination, without considering how they could 'retraumatise' the public, including through vicarious trauma. If this was pitched as research (i.e an MA or a PhD thesis), it would likely not gain ethical approval. Yet, an activity like this being co-led by a white person with no background in racial advocacy work is both dangerous and irresponsible. Sonya Dwyer and Jennifer Buckle (2009) talk about this further as far as insider-outsider positionalities, while psychologists like Joy De Gruy (2005) and Guilaine Kinouani (2021) have further showed the importance of considering (intergenerational) trauma, but no such considerations were made by X with this event.

The trigger warnings in place appeared designed to protect the emotions and feelings of white people. However, Black and Brown people experience these triggers on a regular basis, with no such consideration. This goes back to my previous two references to institutional whiteness and whose emotions are valued in workplace settings. Throughout the day, the emotions and feelings of white people were validated over those racialised outside of whiteness. In the CIWs, there appeared to be no understanding of privilege where lived experience is not enough – and in doing so, whiteness was further recentred as the absence of race (hooks, 1992; Dyer, 1997; Tom Nicholas, 2020).

At best, the CIWs showed epistemologies of ignorance inhabit white supremacy (Mills, 1997) while at worst it was white savourism (Cammarota, 2011; Cole, 2012; Aronson, 2017; Yu, 2021). Further, with the problematic posturing of allyship as something done in "place of" people rather than in partnership – or better yet, white people should remove barriers for their Black and Brown colleagues. But no, there was a culture of 'togetherness' with no thought to how individuals through action or inaction uphold violent social discourses, including white supremacy and patriarchy. White saviourism continued in the posturing of English for Speakers of Other Languages [ESOL] ignoring

how white supremacy functions in language, no less in the number of countries in the world that share in their experience of trauma under the British colonialist project (Brenzinger, 1992).

Here, X evidenced a lack of awareness in 'race literature' but more concerning, a lack of racial literacy amid their practitioners. Other than a reference to the anti-racist book club which started in the X in 2019 (but now is not endorsed by X), there was no evidence of further reading. It is now run by someone who does not work at the university, and only white people were acknowledged for their contributions. Simultaneously, there was an enforced conversation about if racism exists, in the process gaslighting audience members – where on a few tables white people appeared "more oppressed" than Black and Brown people, including Black women under misogynoir (Bailey, 2010; Bailey and Trudy, 2018; Bailey; 2021).

Lack of Sensitivity

- Empathy as Practice

When practitioners treat violence that impacts someone else more than it affects them as a purely academic concept, it recentres privilege – in this context of the X Conference, this recentred white privilege. An event which I expected to be a safe space took a much greater emotional toll on my own persons due to the recentring of white emotions and white ignorance.

As a Black disabled academic-practitioner in this area, it was obvious that for some, racism was an academic exercise – while for Black participants, it can feel like a 'retraumatising' experience and thus upping risk of vicarious trauma and post-traumatic stress disorders. Here, there are strong links between racism and trauma (Fanon, 1961; Kinouani, 2021), but these conversations were absent at an event that kept discussions about violence as individual – not overarching systems, where the individualising of violence was privileged ahead of conversations about institutions and structures.

In my view, at a bare minimum the university needs to start hiring people with specific backgrounds in anti-oppression work and social justice (both academically and wider afield) to stop embarrassing

appearances at conferences and like-events in the future. This is about protecting Black and Brown staff and students, while further also protecting future reputational damage. And in short, for members of the X to act in the same grace as they tell others to – since to remain passive in these situations is a consequence of privilege, not increased objectivity. The X has work to do and lots of it.

Thank you very much

Tré Griffiths