



Article type

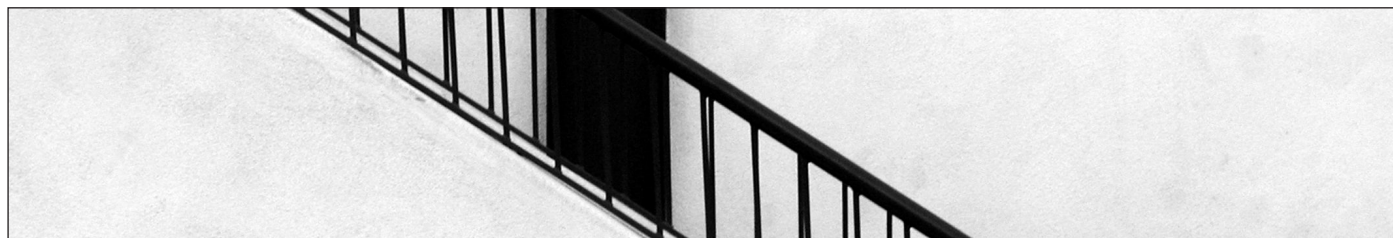
Full paper, double-blind peer review.

Publication history

Received: 03 June 2021. Revised: 11 December 2021.
Accepted: 15 December 2021. Online: 06 June 2022.

Cover image

Matt Artz
via Unsplash.



Special issue Autoethnography in online doctoral education | **More at** <https://doi.org/10.21428/8c225f6e.9415e58d>

Surviving institutional racism as a Chinese female in UK higher education

Puiyin Wong

Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster, United Kingdom

Keywords

career progression; Critical Race Theory; Global Majority; institutional racism; racism in higher education; white supremacy; white ignorance; whiteness

Citation

Wong, P. (2022). Surviving institutional racism as a Chinese female in UK higher education.

Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning, 2(3), 485-499.

<https://doi.org/10.21428/8c225f6e.da3e28ac>

Abstract

This autoethnography examines how my experience of microaggression, covert and overt racism is a result of a systemic failure to tackle racism in one particular UK university. In this paper, I reflect on my journey from being a student to a senior-junior staff struggling to break the glass ceiling to finally now a junior-senior staff in Higher Education. I have been through stages of being hopeful, defeated, fighting back and eventually being hopeful again. I hope my survival can help other non-white women to get a better understanding that some of our experiences are not because of who we are, but rather the system in which we are locked in.

1. This is personal

I came to the UK when I was 15, I was the only non-white kid in my class. I befriended a couple of British kids and I learned the British way of life very quickly. I share the same cultural values as my white counterparts and much to my shame, I also share some of the same prejudices. For many years now, I speak, think and even dream almost exclusively in English. I see things through the lens of a white British person and I am much more comfortable being around them than my own people. In my everyday life, I am seen as an equal to them; I am practically white. Despite

this, my career trajectory in UK higher education (HE) in the last 15 years has painted a very different picture; I have been met with obstacles after obstacles in one particular UK university - Uni A.

I want to understand why my experience from within the HE system is so different to my everyday life? I believe institutional racism is responsible, as it is something that is deeply embedded in the UK HE sector. Professor David Richardson, chair of Universities UK has acknowledged that "... a lot of evidence points towards universities perpetuating systemic racism" and "being institutionally racist." (The Guardian, 2021). Professor Richardson even apologises on behalf of the sector for being institutionally racist on national television earlier this year (BCC, 2021).

Throughout this autoethnography, I have critically analysed if I have been a victim of the deeply rooted cultural injustices (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015) that are part of the fabric of the UK HE culture. I want to know if institutional racism is to blame for my negative experience in HE?

Often researchers use autoethnography as the methodology for similar reasons; we want to reflect on our lived experiences and to critique social injustice that has been imposed upon us, in an attempt to affect positive changes. Autoethnographies are meant to be deeply personal about the researchers' stories, they expose our raw emotions but also sit in the "intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political." (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p.1). Therefore, whilst this paper is subjective with my views and memories of certain events, I have also provided objective facts and voices from others in an attempt to thoroughly understand if any particular person were to blame or if the culture needs to change? I want to know if the colour of my skin is the reason why my career progression has been affected.

Primary data includes various communications I have had with friends and colleagues over the years:

- *Email communication:* As a union member, every time I feel I have been treated unfairly, I email my union representatives for advice. Therefore, most of the events included in this paper can be verified by email exchanges. These emails also helped refresh my memories of exactly what happened and when.
- *Formal complaint documents and meeting minutes:* One particular chain of events eventually led to a formal complaint. I have revisited the complaint documents, communication and meeting minutes to corroborate my memory.

- *WhatsApp and text messages:* Private communication with friends whenever I felt something negative has happened; these exchanges are less objective, but they are records of my emotions and reactions to particular moments.
- *Twitter:* I reactivated my Twitter account in March 2020 to start building my external networks. On a few occasions, I have used it to publicly discuss unfair treatments either I or my colleagues have received. These were passive-aggressive and probably childish attempts to openly signal how we are affected by institutional racism in our workplace.
- *Private conversations:* Most of the communications have been verbal between myself and others, therefore, I used an autobiographical timeline (Chang, 2016), as shown in Figure 1, to help compartmentalise relevant memories and reflection of my life in HE between 2005 and 2021. I have written a short account of how I remember each of the events included in the timeline. I am aware that my memories might be unreliable and my intense emotions when revisiting these painful memories might dramatise the actual events (Chang, 2016).

Using multiple data sources, I hope they can corroborate the validity of my memories, which given the topic, has more than likely been reconstructed taking in cultural and political consideration (Creswell, 2014). I triangulated the data using the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2019). This particular approach allowed me to develop and reshape my codes and themes as the study developed, to support my reflection of my mental and actual experiences. I attempted to maintain a balance between a more objective interpretation of the data by developing semantic codes (Braun & Clarke, 2018), as well as using latent codes to reflect on my emotions (Braun & Clarke, 2018). Critical reflection is crucial in this paper because it is "focused on uncovering these hegemonic assumptions (beliefs/common sense/blinding prejudices that are deeply embedded in our accepted culture), which permeate the context invading and distorting one's life, both in the intimate and social spheres." (Mortari, 2015, p.4).

I have used pseudonyms for everyone included in this paper to minimise the risk of them being identified. I acknowledge that my interpretation of what happened will likely upset them. However, I hope they would understand my reason for disclosing these very upsetting memories is to try and draw some closure for me, also to give my readers a better understanding of the harm institutional racism can cause. Relational ethics is complex in autoethnographies, as they are often written out of love, guilt or a sense of trying

Figure 1. My autobiographical timeline



to right the wrong, therefore the personal intentions could outweigh the theories and reasons (Dauphinee, 2010). In my case, I have written this paper out of my love for the HE sector and my colleagues. I believe none of these people are racists at heart and their actions were influenced by the local culture.

The fairest way for these people would be to show them a draft of this paper and ask for their opinions via member check; a method researchers use to check the accuracy of what their participants have said and done in accordance with their recollection. However, this was not possible due to the sensitive nature of this topic; nobody likes being called a racist. Although this most certainly is not the intention of this paper, nevertheless, I worry that due to the already complicated relationships I have with some of these people, showing them my interpretation of the events they were involved in, in perhaps not a particularly positive light would make them subconsciously misinterpret my intention. Therefore, I have chosen to protect my own well-being first and foremost. I am not avoiding my responsibility as a researcher of telling my story and the impact it might have on my readers, quite the opposite; I hope by offering my version of my story, supported by data and resources, I can offer some companionship to those who share similar experiences, in an attempt to help them reflect and heal (Ellis, 2007).

Since member check is not possible, I have reached out to a colleague and a long term friend, Jennifer, as well as my union representative, Owen. I asked them for their recollection and interpretation of the events in this paper. Jennifer knows some of these people directly and Owen has supported me through many of these events. I believe by including their voices can help improve the credibility of this paper.

Furthermore, I have looked at an anonymous Instagram page with a total of 127 posts revealing a systemic failure at Uni A in dealing with racism. These posts describe the stories of other members at Uni A, some of which are similar to my own experience.

2. History will always repeat itself

I will avoid using the terms BAME or People of Colour in this paper because they were created by white people to support their superiority in Western societies (Lim, 2020). I will use the term Global Majority to describe non-white people to help us break free from being identified by the colour of our skin. Global Majority encourages us to consider ourselves as the majority in the world, currently about 80% of the total world population (Campbell-Stephens, 2020).

My arguments are supported by the Critical Race Theory (CRT), which has been an important concept in understanding racial disparities both in the US and the UK. CRT acknowledges the historical and “continued existence of racism” (Bhopal, 2020, p.503). In CRT, white supremacy does not only refer to the extreme far-right groups whose racist mentality and actions are crystal clear (Walton, 2020). Instead, CRT explicitly examines how white supremacy has a continuous influence on the way society is built, how decisions are made and policies are designed to discriminate against the Global Majority (Bhopal, 2020). Therefore, racism is deeply integrated into our social and economic structures and it must be understood as such (De La Garza & Ono, 2016). CRT seeks to challenge the historical “unequal distribution of wealth and privilege” (Walton, 2020, p.84) for most white people, meaning they have and will be more likely to have more opportunities in life, with or without them consciously knowing (Walton, 2020).

To understand this in the context of the British culture, we must revisit the origins of imperialism and colonialism, tracing back to the late 15th century when empires including the British violently invaded countries around the world, claiming resources, labour and lands that belonged to other people, including the Global Majority (Bain, 2018). This gave birth to white supremacy that has, over the last hundreds of years, been deeply and systematically ingrained in British culture. The *Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities*, published by the British government in March 2021 has acknowledged that racism still exists in today’s British society, however, it has categorically denied the existence of institutional racism. The report has been widely criticised by MPs and the media as failing to recognise how racism systematically affects the Global Majority in the UK.

It seems there is clear historical and recurrent evidence suggesting institutional racism is very real in the UK, but why is there an illusion that institutional racism does not exist? Is it because many do not speak up? Is it because those who speak up get shut down? Or are there more complicated reasons at play? Have we perhaps accepted this as a cultural norm? I do not expect this paper will be able to address the root of the issues, particularly as I am only telling my version of my story. Some might argue I have experienced a run of bad luck and that these are just a chain of coincidences. This is perhaps the biggest issue of autoethnography; the sample size is small and it is difficult to be a true representation of the masses. If after reading this paper, my readers do not believe institutional racism affects real people then they are entitled to their conclusion. As a researcher, I can only hope that this study can contribute to other studies that support

the impact institutional racism has on the Global Majority such as myself.

Now, let me tell you my story from the very beginning when I first set foot at Uni A...

3. My first taste of racism

In 2005, I started my BA(Hons) in Photography at a world-leading art university - Uni A. I was constantly encouraged by my tutors to explore my Chinese heritage; every February, I was asked the same question - "Are you going to do a project about Chinese New Year?" Meanwhile, I never heard my white classmates being asked to do a project about Christmas in December. Assuming I know anything about the Chinese culture and implying I should bring this into my practice is a textbook example of covert racism (Ramos & Yi, 2020).

I survived my degree without exploring my Chinese heritage, it worked for me, but did it work for my tutors? I feel as if my rebellion against my tutors' implicit instruction to be a model Chinese student had cost me my final grade - I got a 2:2 with 2% away from getting a 2:1. Uni A's regulations state that if a student is within 5% of the next grade, the tutors can exercise their discretion to award them the higher grade. I was disappointed that they did not do this for me, especially as they knew I suffered from a chronic illness in my final year that had affected my performance.

I decided to appeal for my grade on the grounds of unfair marking. When I was waiting to be seen by the appeal panel, I was accidentally left with everyone's records including notes from the exam board meeting. I looked and discovered everyone who was borderline between two grades was discussed and was awarded the higher grade, except me. Particularly, five white students who were within 5% of getting a 1st, were all awarded a 1st. My appeal meeting lasted less than 5 minutes because the panel unanimously agreed that my tutors did not treat me fairly, they awarded me the 2:1 that I duly deserved. Whilst my assumption of being subjected to covert racism is entirely subjective, the fact that the appeal panel ruled in my favour and my white classmates got awarded more favourable grades does support, at least in my mind, my version of the story.

Clearly, things have not improved much since my graduation in 2008, according to *Tackling racial harassment: University challenged* (2019), published by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, two-thirds of the 1,000 random sample of students did not report their experience of

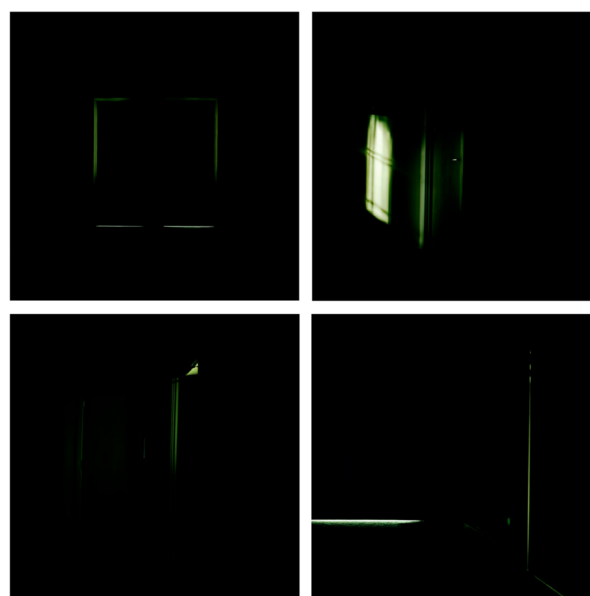
racism because they were worried that their degree results would be negatively impacted. According to Advance HE, in 2015/16, 78.8% of white students received a 1st or a 2:1 with only 63.2% of non-white students achieving the same results. The gap between white and Chinese narrows to only 6.6% with 72.2% of Chinese students achieving top grades (2017).

There are numerous posts on the anonymous Instagram page with Global Majority students and staff expressing their concerns about being treated differently from their white peers. The story below resonates with my own experience as a student:

Once in a tutorial a British Muslim student was showing her work. She was interested in landscape photography. The white tutor then said something to the effect of what don't you make work about being a Muslim woman in the UK. I thought that was so disgusting? Like are you asking white students to make work about whiteness." (Anonymous Instagram post 1, June 2020)

My fellow Asian classmates whose work was about their cultural heritage all achieved top grades, but I was the only one in my cohort who sold my entire degree show and The Photographers' Gallery in London wanted to show my work. So was it my talents that had a problem or were I a victim of institutional racism? Figure 2 shows some of the work included in my degrees show.

Figure 2. Part of my degree show series *Room C3C7*, 2008 that was highly praised by the curator at The Photographer's Gallery at the time.



My talents and the 2:1 that I had argued for eventually earned me a place on the Master of Fine Art programme at a prestigious art school in 2011. During my three years there, I was free to explore whatever direction I wanted, not once was I asked to include my Chinese heritage in my practice.

4. I am one of them only when I am a nobody

In 2006, when I was still studying, I started working in a digital media workshop at Uni A. It was refreshing because the colour of my skin did not bother anyone. However, I soon realised it was because I was a lowly nobody, so who cares if I was black, yellow or white?

I began experiencing incidents that I believe were racially motivated when I moved to a different team in 2011. My manager Hector would ask me to fill in timesheets detailing my every move, this rule only applied to me and Jo, a Jamaican lady in her 50s. Hector frequently compared my and Jo's productivities, criticising how slow Jo was, how sloppy my work was and my attitude was wrong. His criticism was baseless. As part of the Windrush generation, Jo was used to racism so whilst we often talked about Hector's treatment of us as being unacceptable, she took it "lying down", but I started speaking up for both of us. Instead of listening, Hector saw my speaking up as insubordination; he became more hostile and impossible to reason with. As a result of the constant stress Jo was put under, she was forced to medically retire in 2015.

Hector's behaviour was a typical example of white ignorance; a willfulness to ignore any new information that could undermine the status quo of white supremacy (Bain, 2018). White ignorance as a psychological state is for white people to maintain their innocence in situations relating to racial inequality, refusing to accept they cause the suffering of others, as well as to protect the wealth and status of being white bring (Martín, 2020). Those who have the white ignorance mindset tend to refuse to see the Global Majority as their equals. White ignorance does not mean passive behaviour, it requires conscious and continuous actions (Martín, 2020).

In 2012, Hector refused my request to join the Aspiring Manager Programme on the basis that I was not already a manager. Meanwhile, he supported a white female colleague's request and she subsequently became a manager. Hector's refusal was influenced by the fact that every manager in the department was white, granting my request would risk undermining their white supremacy because the programme could have given me a chance to join their rank.

White ignorance, therefore, is also a systemic and collective effort (Swan, 2010); the individual might not realise their contribution, as it was in Hector's case.

My colleague and friend Jennifer has confirmed that my interpretation of Hector's behaviour was similar to what she has witnessed. Jennifer joined the department after I had left and she too, saw how Hector treated Jo unfairly and harshly, as well as treating another female member of the team similarly. Whilst Jennifer never experienced unfavourable treatment from Hector, she agrees with my view that Hector seems to dislike female colleagues, particularly those who are not white.

In October 2020, my Trade Union conducted a survey on pay and progression at Uni A with 68 respondents. The report is available on request for our members. Some members expressed concerns about the lack of progression opportunities for Global Majority staff, with one respondent saying "There is a huge issue for BAME employees reaching mid/senior-level management. I used to manage a team and now am going back to a standard role where I feel I'm starting all over again at entry-level."

Hector's action made me more determined to progress. In December 2013, my hard work finally paid off, I returned to my previous job as a supervisor; I had earned a seat at the grown-up table, my future seemed brighter. All was well in the world, but this only lasted for about a year.

5. White ignorance always wins

In January 2015, my life was turned upside down due to family issues and a cancer scare. I was struggling mentally and my performance at work became erratic. Eventually, an anonymous complaint was made against me for being "aggressive and rude". When I asked my manager, Emily, for specific examples, I was told it was just a general feeling everyone felt, she refused to be specific at all. However, a white male of the same rank as me was known to be aggressive, constantly shouting at students; his behaviour was always excused as being just the way he is. Why could a white man be shouty constantly with no consequences, yet I got into trouble with a sudden drop in my otherwise exemplary performance? Emily went from being happy with me to judging me harshly without ever asking me if I was OK. Is it because I should be grateful that I was allowed to join the rank of my white colleagues, therefore, I should behave faultlessly and never compare myself with them? I felt like I was a victim of white ignorance again.

Although white supremacy and white ignorance do not mean the same thing, they are, however, interconnected. White ignorance, as explained before, is a systemic and collective effort that allows people to structurally decide not to see the world in a particular way (May, 2006). It is an excuse that enables white people to refuse to see the Global Majority as their equals. So when I am in a slight power of position behaving out of the norm, I threatened the superiority of my white colleagues. Although my behaviour was nowhere as bad as my shouty white male colleague, it was nonetheless deemed unacceptable, thus, I must be suppressed and controlled. Should I have told work what was going on in my private life? Would it have gotten me off the hook? Probably. However, why should I have to use my personal life to excuse systemic white ignorance?

Once my health was clear, I resumed my exemplary performance, but I decided to keep my head down by employing strategic ignorance (May, 2006); a deliberate survival tactic allowing me to choose only to see the positive things in the department. I chose to believe that the unfair treatment toward me was not racially motivated. Despite my relationship with Emily being broken beyond repair, I chose to be amicable with her, but she continued to treat me less favourably to my white colleagues.

I no longer felt comfortable in that department, so I started looking for jobs. The first offer I received was an assistant technician role elsewhere at Uni A, to accept it would be a demotion. However, it felt like the right decision at the time, because the only way I knew to escape racism is being a lowly nobody. When I announced my departure, my assistants and students felt sad. This gave me solace knowing I was valued in that environment, equally I felt uncomfortable that I was driven away probably due to the colour of my skin.

6. Institutional racism is real

In 2017, I was a lowly nobody again; I was looking forward to having some peaceful time. However, in the months that followed, I experienced a series of institutional betrayals (Smith & Freyd, 2014) where management omitted to recognise and act on a “host of microaggressive and harassing events” (Buchanan, 2020, p.97) that had caused me mental distress.

I shared an office with a young white male, Jacob, who was 24 then. Jacob graduated from Uni A a year before, he went from being a student with no industry experience to a senior film and video technician, which is unusual in other

universities but a common occurrence at Uni A. Always the “Big I am”, he waited no time to start undermining me, often interrupting and contradicting me in front of others. One time, I was having a tutorial with a student on how to use a camera. He must have heard something he did not agree with, he jumped in front of us, grabbed the camera off of my hands, nudged me aside and took over the tutorial. I had a quiet word with him afterwards, but he insisted it was totally acceptable to interrupt whenever he felt I was wrong. In the weeks that followed, I experienced many similar incidents so I reported Jacob to my manager, but I was told this is how Jacob behaves and I should just accept it.

Jacob is a product of his environment; he was educated from a “pale, male, stale” curriculum that focuses on white ideas and white knowledge; it celebrates colonialism and imperialism and encourages white superiority often without any explicit reference to whiteness (UCL, 2014). Students who are educated in such a curriculum might not be aware that they are being taught that racism is an acceptable social norm (Martín, 2020). Jacob had studied and subsequently works in a white-dominant environment without experiencing the outside world; is it any wonder that he felt he was more superior than me?

Even if I could excuse Jacob’s white ignorance because of his youth and to an extent, innocence. I will never forget other incidents involving senior academics that suggest a complete systemic failure to tackle institutional racism. One lunchtime, I was in my office talking to a friend, so when someone knocked on the door, I ignored it, knocking turned banging and the door was eventually forced open. A white female programme director barged in, demanded I was to take in some equipment belonging to Jacob. I said I could not do it because it had nothing to do with me and it was lunchtime, she told me “Well, I don’t give a shit, Jacob said you will do what he says.” She threw the equipment at my face and slammed the door on her way out. My complaint was dismissed with a comment from senior management, “It’s the beginning of the academic year, everyone is stressed, you have to be more tolerant of other people’s behaviour.”

Again, my experience is not unique as evidenced from the anonymous Instagram page showing posts of staff and students describing their experience of racism at Uni A, including a tutor using profanity when addressing their Global Majority students:

My tutor at Uni A referred to the young men of colour as dickheads repeatedly and called us the dickhead table. With the exception of one white boy who was a known

Nazi supporter. (Anonymous Instagram post 2, June 2020)

A Global Majority colleague's experience of racism:

I have been a Uni A staff for nearly 8 years, in a not-so-diverse team. I have had senior white male academic staff with toxic superiority complex, be verbally and physically aggressive around me, belittle me in front of other coworkers and students, then later pass it as humour! I am held more accountable than my peers for similar tasks/situations, and I am spoken to and explained things as if I am an idiot... But what irritates me even more, is when the same people who are enforcing discrimination and toxic hierarchy at work, have built up their image to show their activism/wokeness. I think it's very performative, disappointing and disgusting. (Anonymous Instagram post 3, July 2020)

7. They have the money. They just don't wanna spend it on me

In 2018, I managed to become a senior-junior staff again, but with a fixed-term contract with a promise that the role would eventually be made permanent; it was a risk worth taking. This all began with respect from all parties, however, as soon as I started requesting continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities, my relationship with my manager, Martin, quickly turned ugly.

In April 2018, my CPD application was delayed by Martin and I missed the deadline. Luckily, I still managed to get funding for the CPD because of my good relationship with the CPD coordinator. However, when I asked for time away to do the CPD, Martin told me I had to use my own time. I asked why others were allowed to attend CPD courses using work time? He said because I was on a fixed-term contract, he cannot give me the full benefits. After pointing out to him that treating me less favourably was illegal, Martin reluctantly signed off on my request. History repeated itself in January 2019, Martin refused to sign off my application again and constantly challenged why I needed CPD, but I argued and got what I duly deserved. However, a seed was planted for my eventual dismissal.

In an official one-to-one meeting, Martin told me "I think you are playing a game, why do you want to do X, Y and Z training? What are you trying to achieve?" According to him, my CPD was less important than others in the team. I later found out from the only other female, but white, in the team that they had secured £7,000 funding, but I was excluded

from it. Martin's action toward me was a form of epistemic exclusion (Buchanan, 2020) because he never considered I am equal to him or other white people in the team.

In June 2019, I was told that my contract would not be renewed because they had no money to keep me on. However, I quickly managed to find another job because of my transferable skills; I became a (junior) learning technologist at Uni A, which is slightly more senior than my role in Martin's team. One afternoon, I walked past my old office and saw Olly sitting at my old desk; Olly had been a student temping in the workshop since 2018. A few weeks later, I found two more new white male staff in the workshop. I was lied to, they had money not only to keep Olly but also to expand the team, they just did not want me. As angry as I was, I was ready to move on, but I had one more thing to ask Martin, so off I went to my old office again, "Hey, Martin, can you give me the access code to the Adobe site that you promised me about?" Instead of giving it to me as previously promised, he says, "Geez, you are a leech, all you do is take, take and take." There were two other people in the office, both were shocked by Martin's remark, but neither said anything to defuse the situation. I left the office feeling awkward and angry.

This triggered a formal complaint against Martin alongside all other incidents in the 18 months that I was in his team, my complaint was 23 pages long detailing every incident. 16 months later, without having as much as a hearing, the Head of Technical Services, Charles, unilaterally decided that my complaint was only partially justified. He found no evidence that Martin had treated me unfairly; there was no evidence of racism or sexism because materially speaking, I was given as many CPD opportunities as everyone else and I got time off in lieu for them. Charles did not take into account that I had to fight for everything when others did not. He found no evidence of unfair dismissal because I ended up with another job at Uni A, but I only applied because I was weeks away from being unemployed. In his official response, Charles emphasised the derogatory comments Martin had made as being part of the culture. I think Charles has tacitly admitted that the racist culture is acceptable at Uni A. Whilst he acknowledged my feelings were hurt, Martin did not have to face any consequences at all. My complaint was dismissed and not categorised under racism.

Whilst Owen was not present in any of these incidents, he was my union representative and a friend whom I turned to often whenever Martin caused me distress. Owen has confirmed that my emotions and my description of these incidents at the time and how I have expressed them in this paper are consistent. Whilst this cannot verify the accuracy

of any of these events, Owen's input helps support the accuracy of my memories.

My lack of trust in Uni A's complaint procedure is shared by other colleagues as evidenced in the anonymous Instagram page:

I've seen a POC colleague in my team go through the complaint procedure. After they were subject to covert and not so covert racism from others in the team... The complaint procedure itself appeared to be a sham, with a distinct lack of POC as part of the arbitration process, as well as there being white managers involved who were not fully impartial. (Anonymous Instagram post 4, July 2020)

According to *Tackling racial harassment: University Challenged* (2019), prolonged periods of the complaint process causing staff stress and undermining confidence in the fairness of the process is a direct result of staff not speaking up. The report highlights the discrepancy between racially motivated incidents and the number of complaints made. It finds around 38% of the 159 publicly funded universities in Britain received no complaints from staff and a total of only 360 complaints from the rest of the universities between 2015/16 and January 2019. If my experience is anything to go by, I think it answers the question of why institutional racism does not officially exist, because complaints get shut down and not categorised using the racism label.

8. Haters are always gonna hate

Being a learning technologist is pretty awesome, I have once again found my passion in academia. However, it is quite clear that institutional racism is a real issue at Uni A, so it is unsurprising that I experienced more or less the same treatment in this role.

I worked very closely with another learning technologist in the team, Luke, a white middle-class male in his early 30s. Although his role was identical to mine, he never considered me his equal, he treated me with microaggression regularly. Luke had called me his protégé and apprentice publically on many occasions to explicitly suggest that I am inferior to him. He told School Deans that the only reason why I got the same job as him was that I got kicked out from my previous team, attempting to invalidate my credibility. This was a lie because I applied for the job the same way he did and I too, was the best candidate in my round.

Luke's other actions also implied that I was less intelligent and less capable than him by insisting on double-checking and redoing my parts of joint projects. He was probably influenced by the unfounded and absurd scientific belief that white people are genetically more intelligent than some other racial groups (Walton, 2020), whether he was conscious of this, I will never know. I have never spoken up because I needed to survive as it is not uncommon for Global Majority women to be timid professionally, after all, we might be the only non-white people in the team, as I was. The "feeling of invisible and unheard due to others' perceptions of our gender and ethnicity" (Gause, 2020, p.78) can be overwhelming.

Luke's microaggression towards me was motivated by his fundamental belief that white men are privileged and superior to others. He once told me, "Oh, I am white, things always come easy for me, I will never have to try as hard as you do." When his white privilege was undermined by the fact that I was his equal, it manifested into different forms of microaggression (Gause, 2020).

I was not alone in this, other non-white female learning technologists in other teams also had their versions of Luke. We formed an alliance to support our continued survival (Buchanan, 2020), our conversations have revealed that Uni A most definitely is institutionally racist and sexist, not least because of our collective experiences being so similar, but also stories we have heard from our colleagues. By April 2021, three out of the four female learning technologists have left Uni A for similar reasons. One of them has vowed to never work for Uni A again.

Uni A's own Employee Experience survey 2020 reveals that 48.2% of the 1498 staff responded says they do not think Uni A cares about their welfare and wellbeing. Whilst the published data does not reveal if any of these 1498 people felt let down based on race or gender, having almost 50% of responders feel their employer does not care about them, does show there are some systemic failures in caring for one or more particular communities of people.

In order to keep my sanity, I started looking outwardly to my external network as a way of distracting myself. I am beginning to have a presence on social media, I now have a voice that cannot be easily silenced. I have earned the respect from some high profile, senior academics from other universities, a currency that I thought could mean something when Uni A was recruiting for four senior learning technologists in summer 2020. Among the 200+ people that applied, Luke and I both became the final six candidates; he was promoted alongside the only other white male internal

candidate, meanwhile, I was denied a promotion. The feedback I received from the panel was that I was both “very impressive” and “extremely likeable”, whereas Luke was told the panel found it hard to trust him because of the way he presented himself. Why promote someone they cannot trust?

Shortly after this recruitment, Uni A had a fifth senior learning technologist role they needed to fill; Uni A's recruitment policy states that the recruiting manager could either advertise the role externally afresh or if there has been similar recruitment within the last six months, the appointable candidates can be considered without further interviews. The recruiting manager decided to revise the remaining two candidates from the final six - me and a middle-aged white man. Unsurprisingly, I was overlooked once again.

Gender and racial biases have long been contributing factors for the lack of Global Majority women in senior positions in HE (Gause, 2020). Over time, this has created a vicious circle; because it has been hard for Global Majority women to progress, others are deterred from trying. I feel as if this stereotypical assumption that senior roles need to be filled by white men and white women (Gause, 2020) was the reason why I was denied the promotion. I asked my boss why I was overlooked twice, he insisted that I was not overlooked and that all six candidates were given fair consideration for the first four senior roles. I was again fairly considered against the white man when the fifth role became available. As a long term union member, I know Uni A's recruitments are based on a point scoring system; the candidate who scores the highest in the interviews will be offered the job. Likewise, if multiple roles are available, the candidate who scores the highest will get to choose, then the candidate who comes second will be appointed after the first candidate has made their decision, and so on. It is a mechanical system, thus, in this instance, the only reason why I was not promoted on both occasions would be because I scored the lowest out of the final six candidates. My boss refused to comment on this and insisted there were no scores and that the panel only judged whether each candidate is appointable or not based on their suitability to the teams. Owen, acting as my union representative, described this as something dodgy. At my behest, he made an anonymous information request to Uni A's HR and their response implied that the interview panel did not follow the recruitment policy and confirmed that my interpretation of the policy is correct. Owen and I both felt all evidence suggested I probably was cheated out of a promotion, possibly two. I could break my anonymity and make a complaint, but I have been down that road before, I have lost faith in Uni A's ability in handling complaints of racism with fairness and transparency. My

heart was set to leave because I have come to a conclusion that my 15 loyal years were spent being trapped in a system that is clearly rigged.

9. The glass ceiling is finally broken

“Congratulations! We would like to make you an offer for the position of (senior) Learning Technologist...”

This exciting promotion with one of the UK's most prestigious universities means I have finally broken the glass ceiling - I entered the senior ranks in March 2021, which was only five months after I was overlooked by Uni A. This suggests I was good enough to be promoted, I just was not white enough for Uni A. I waited no time to share this news with everyone.

“How thrilled are you by the way that you started a career in EdTech only a year and a half ago and you have made significant strides? You should be really proud of yourself!” asked Luke, who himself has merely had a few months more experience in EdTech than I do. This comment is another classic form of microaggression being disguised as something positive, but its actual context is no less demeaning (Gómez, 2015).

Before I accepted this exciting offer, I wanted to know how much I am really worth for Uni A, so I told my boss I would consider staying if he would support a role review to make me Luke's equal again, because practically, even after Luke's promotion, we were still doing the same job. Without hesitation, my boss refused and said he will ensure I only do entry-level work going forward to reflect the hierarchical difference between Luke and me. There it was, 15 loyal years with clear competence and experience, I was still treated inferior to my white counterparts. Being stuck in a bad but not intolerable situation is quite common, as Buchanan suggests, “Being marginalized and devalued can be internalized often without conscious awareness that it is occurring.” (2020, p.105).

Leaving Uni A was the best decision I have made in years, but what about those I have left behind? I have retained my seat at Uni A's Policy Committee as a union representative because I owe it to my friends to try and influence positive changes. However, I am disheartened by the white ignorance from committee members representing Uni A. The committee is merely a box-ticking exercise. For example, when I and other union representatives criticised the questions in the recent Race Equality Survey as being leading, we were told those questions cannot be changed.

How can questions like “I believe I am treated equally...”, “... Uni A undertakes recruitment fairly and transparently,” or “I have been encouraged to apply for higher-grade jobs...” not subconsciously affect the responders’ answers? This survey is a part of a larger anti-racism action plan Uni A has been promoting. Whilst these are being promoted heavily via social media, staff have not been adequately informed of them internally. This makes me wonder if Uni A is doing this purely as a publicity stunt? Do they really want to make changes? I feel like I have heard it all before, but nothing ever changes. According to the *UK Universities’ Response to Black Live Matter report* (2020), there is an overwhelming concern that the recent anti-racism initiatives are nothing more than PR exercises to keep the public happy, universities want to be seen as doing something to tackle racism, but all will eventually fade away and not much progress will have been made.

10. A word to the wise

I do hope all the current hype (again) to tackle racism in HE will influence proper systemic changes. Until then, I believe HE as a sector is institutionally racist. At least, my experience with Uni A suggests as much; it has failed to support my professional development by denying equal opportunities and it has refused to acknowledge and deal with my concerns regarding racism. I have had a total of eight jobs at Uni A, so my experience is comprehensive.

To address institutional racism, universities must first adopt systemic thinking and openly acknowledge that racism is a significant issue for them (Lingayah, 2021). This can be done by having a completely transparent and trustworthy system to encourage reporting. Encouragement and support are important because by acknowledging the existence of institutional racism, we are admitting that it is a fully ingrained feature in our everyday life (Lingayah, 2021) that many are potentially affected and not a particular person or group are to blame. It must be a collective and fundamental cultural change. It can be done, but it will take years of continuous and collective efforts.

Perhaps this is easier said than done, as taking real actions would probably mean universities as a sector will have to acknowledge that their belief in white supremacy, stemming from the British history of imperialism and colonialism, is wrong. According to a YouGov poll in 2016, 43% of respondents felt the British Empire was a good thing and 44% are proud of the British history of colonialism (Rickett, 2017). I was unable to determine the random sample size of this particular poll, however, according to YouGov’s research

Q&A’s page, their random sample size is either 1,500 or 2,000 people.

I believe the majority who are proud of the British colonialism past are not outwardly racists or racists at all. However, as the CRT explicitly indicates, racism has a continuous and subtle effect on the development of societies. Therefore, I argue that as long as a substantial portion of the British public is proud of its shameful past, institutional racism will be a difficult issue to address. This is because most people probably do not consciously realise their contribution to this issue.

Despite this, a lot of initiatives have begun to address the inherent whiteness that is the main contributing factor to institutional racism. For instance, students have had many successes in recent years to decolonise the white curriculum - Goldsmiths students are famous for their occupation acts dating back at least a decade. In July 2019, they had their landmark success in making senior management take actions to tackle racism (Pimblott, 2020). Decolonising the curriculum is another way to influence system change because white curricula will only produce more whiteness, which perpetuates the systemic issue of white people teaching white people how to be white.

Aside from influencing systemic change, there are small steps that can be taken to support Global Majority staff to reach their career goals, such as providing bespoke career progression support (Bhopal, 2020), something I could most definitely benefit from. We can also help ourselves by being active and being visible with external professional networks (Buchanan, 2020). I believe that my eventual success in breaking the glass ceiling was, in part, a result of my active participation with external networks. The recognition, support and encouragement my external peers have given me are something that I should have been given by Uni A.

If you find yourself in similar situations to me, be visible and be loud, you can be easily silenced when you are invisible, but the more visible you are, the harder it is to ignore you. If you cannot progress internally, look elsewhere, your current employer is not the only one, sometimes the grass is really greener elsewhere.

You might notice that I have not once claimed that I am an academic, because contractually speaking, I am not. I have always had professional services contracts, this does not make me any less important than my academic colleagues. However, because non-academics typically are not associated with research and are not always at the forefront

of academia, this means much of the existing literature focuses on the experience of academics, rarely any emphasis is on the experience of “the rest of us”. I hope this paper has given you an insight and a critical analysis of my struggles as a non-academic.

Finally, my experience described in this paper is limited to the same university I worked for in the last 15 years, whilst this does not represent the entire UK HE sector, it does, however, present a pretty damning picture of the damage that institutional racism could cause. Furthermore, I have only presented my interpretation of my experience, which can be emotionally distorted (Chang, 2016). It is possible that I might have victimised myself more than what actually happened because any mention of racism and attempt to tackle it can be very emotionally challenging and tiring (Lingayah, 2021), as it has been in my case. Whilst the limitation of my story needs to be taken into consideration, this should not be used as an excuse to dismiss my claim that institutional racism is real. It is worth noting that none of the events written in this paper is incidents of overt racism. Therefore, I stand by my belief that all of the individuals mentioned have been, perhaps subconsciously, influenced by the British colonial past that suggests white people are superior to the Global Majority. I do not believe these people are racists, whether or not they were conscious of their actions could be classed as racism. With that in mind, I conclude this type of racism is difficult to substantiate because it has been part of the fabric of our society for the last hundreds of years. Changes are possible, but there will always be an uphill struggle.

Whatever you take away from my story, I do sincerely hope that if you have been affected by racism, consider speaking up. If you have not been affected, congratulations, but please provide support to those we are affected, it will mean a lot to us.

References

- Adams, T. E., Holman Jones, S., & Ellis, C. (2015). *Autoethnography: Understanding qualitative research*. Oxford University Press.
- Advance HE. (2017, Mar 1). *Increasing the Diversity of Senior Leaders in Higher Education: The Role of Executive Search Firms*. Advance HE. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/increasing-diversity-senior-leaders-higher-education-role-executive-search-firms>
- Advance HE. (2017). *Degree Attainment Gaps*. Advance HE. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/student-recruitment-retention-and-attainment/degree-attainment-gaps>
- Bain, Z. (2018). Is there such a thing as ‘white ignorance’ in British education?. *Ethics and Education*, 13(1), 4-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2018.1428716>
- Bhopal, K. (2020). For whose benefit? Black and Minority Ethnic training programmes in higher education institutions in England, UK. *British Educational Research Journal*, 46(3), 500-515. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3589>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2018). *Thematic analysis - an introduction*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kv7C53yvLqk&t=2s>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). *Thematic analysis | a reflexive approach*. The University of Auckland. <https://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/thematic-analysis.html>
- Buchanan, N. T. (2020). Researching While Black (and Female). *Women and Therapy*, 43(1-2), 91-111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2019.1684681>
- Chakrabarty, N., Roberts, R., & John Preston (2012). Critical Race Theory in England. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 15, 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2012.638860>
- Chakraborty, A. (2021, April 16). *The UK government’s race report is so shoddy, it falls to pieces under scrutiny*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentis-free/2021/apr/16/government-race-report-evidence>
- Chang, H. (2016). *Autoethnography as method*. Routledge.
- Clarke, K. (2021). Addressing systemic racial injustice in the United States from the war on poverty to social enterprise to black lives matter. *Zhurnal Issledovani Sotsial’noi Politiki*, 19(1), 143-154. <https://doi.org/10.17323/727-0634-2021-19-1-143-154>
- Cole, M. & Maisuria, A. (2007). ‘Shut the f**k up’, ‘you have no rights here’: Critical race theory and racialisation in post-7/7 Britain. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 5(1). <http://www.jceps.com/archives/536>
- Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. (2021). *Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities: The Report*. GOV. UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities>

- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Educational research: Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Pearson.
- Dauphinee, E. (2010). The ethics of autoethnography. *Review of International Studies*, 36(3), 799–818. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40783297>
- De La Garza, A., & Ono, K. (2016). Critical Race Theory. *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118766804.wbiect260>
- Dodgson, J. E. (2019). Reflexivity in Qualitative Research. *Journal of Human Lactation*, 35(2), 220–222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0890334419830990>
- Ellis, C. (2007). Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research With Intimate Others. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(1), 3–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800406294947>
- Equality and Human Rights Commission. (2019, Oct 23). *Tackling racial harassment: Universities challenged*. EHRC. <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/tackling-racial-harassment-universities-challenged.pdf>
- Gause, S. A. F. (2020). White privilege, Black resilience: Women of color leading the academy. *Leadership*, 17(1), 74–80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715020977370>
- Gómez, J. M. (2015). Microaggressions and the Enduring Mental Health Disparity: Black Americans at Risk for Institutional Betrayal. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 41(2), 121–143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798413514608>
- Halpin. (2020). *UK Universities' Response to Black Lives Matter*. Halpin. <https://halpinpartnership.com/storage/app/media/halpin-report-uk-universities-response-to-black-lives-matter.pdf>
- Lim, D. (2020, May 11). *I'm Embracing the Term 'People of the Global Majority'*. Daniel Lim. <https://regenerative.medium.com/im-embracing-the-term-people-of-the-global-majority-abd1c1251241>
- Lingayah, S. (2021). *It takes a system: The systemic nature of racism and pathways to systems change*. Beyond Race/ Race on the Agenda. <https://www.rota.org.uk/publications/systemsreport2021>
- Campbell-Stephens, R. (2020, Dec, 9). *Global Majority: we need to talk about labels such as 'BAME'*. LinkedIn. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/global-majority-we-need-talk-labels-bame-campbell-stephens-mbe>
- Martín, A. (2020). What is White Ignorance?. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 71(4) <https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqaa073>
- May, V. (2006). Trauma in Paradise: Willful and Strategic Ignorance in Cereus Blooms at Night. *Hypatia*, 21(3), 107–135. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810954>
- Mohdin, A. (2021, April 28). *UK universities are institutionally racist, says leading vice-chancellor*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/apr/28/uk-universities-are-institutionally-racist-says-leading-vice-chancellor>
- Mortari, L. (2015). Reflectivity in Research Practice: An Overview of Different Perspectives. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 14(5), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406915618045>
- Peters, M. A. (2015). Why is My Curriculum White?. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 47(7), 641–646. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2015.1037227>
- Pimblott, K. (2020). Decolonising the University: The Origins and Meaning of a Movement. *Political Quarterly*, 91(1), 210–216. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12784>
- Ramos, D., & Yi, V. (2020). Doctoral women of color coping with racism and sexism in the academy. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 15, 135–158. <https://doi.org/10.28945/4508>
- Rickett, O. (2017, April 17). *Britain has never faced up to the shame of empire*. Vice. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/3d9jdw/britain-has-never-faced-up-to-the-shame-of-empire>
- Smith, C., & Freyd, J. (2014). Institutional Betrayal. *The American psychologist*, 69, 575–587. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037564>
- Swan, E. (2010). States of white ignorance, and audit masculinity in English higher education. *Social Politics*, 17(4), 477–506. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxq016>

- UCL. (2014, Nov 11). *What is my curriculum white?*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dscx4h2l-Pk>
- United Nations Human Rights. (2021, April 19). *UN Experts Condemn UK Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities Report*. United Nations Human Rights. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27004&LangID=E>
- Walton, S. (2020). Why the critical race theory concept of ‘White supremacy’ should not be dismissed by neo-Marxists: Lessons from contemporary Black radicalism. *Power and Education*, 12(1), 78–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757743819871316>
- Yi, V., Mac, J., Na, V. S., Venturanza, R. J., Museus, S. D., Buenavista, T. L., & Pendakur, S. L. (2020). Toward an Anti-Imperialistic Critical Race Analysis of the Model Minority Myth. *Review of Educational Research*, 90(4), 542-579. <https://doi.org/10.3102/003465432093353>
- YouGov. (n.d). *Research Q&A's*. YouGov. <https://yougov.co.uk/about/panel-methodology/research-qs/>

Acknowledgements

This research study was undertaken as part of my PhD in e-Research and Technology Enhanced Learning in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Kyungmee Lee, my supervisor for this study and Amanda Gorrell, my peer reviewer for their generous and continuous support throughout the development of this study.

I would also like to thank my Mum, who passed away in November 2014, for always believing in me. I hope she would be proud of me.



About the author

Puiyin Wong is a PhD student in e-Research and Technology Enhanced Learning at Lancaster University, UK.

Wong's research interests include digital access and inclusion/exclusion due to political, racial and social disparities; how open educational resources (OER) can bridge the gap for those less privileged. In addition, Wong is very passionate about how, by developing learners' digital capabilities, their practices can benefit. For example, how learners can competently and confidently develop their individual online identities, comfortably moving between different online spaces, using a range of digital tools and resources that can help them achieve their educational goals.

Wong is a learning technologist at a higher education institution in London, UK.

✉ Email: puiyin.wong@lancaster.ac.uk

ORCID: [0000-0001-5395-2732](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5395-2732)

🐦 Twitter: [@Puiyin](https://twitter.com/Puiyin)

Open Access (CC BY 4.0)

This article is distributed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence.



You are free to

- Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format
- Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.

Under the following terms:

- Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.
- No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

The full licence conditions are available at: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

