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Should we clear the cobwebs in our minds or dismantle racial structures? Reflections on the lack of critical thinking of higher education staff in the UK

Chrissie Da Costa, Ph.D.

Abstract

Higher education in the UK constantly emphasises critical thinking for students. However, analysis of comments made about Black students and staff indicate that some academic staff fail to critically analyse their thoughts, words, and deeds. This paper sets out to analyse these utterances of HE staff and to investigate whether they actively reproduce and are intended to reproduce racist practices in HE, which could affect the experience, performance, and confidence of some of these students and staff who identify as Black and Global Majorities. Applying critical race theory and socio-ideological analysis of language (Bakhtin 1981 and Voloshinov 1973) to analyse these utterances, which seem to be thoughts trapped in cobwebs, I seek to understand whether some HE staff fail to practise critical thinking and what this absence reveals about their ideological position and beliefs. I further explore whether critical reflection is required for those of us working within the university sector to become aware of our uncritical habits of mind (King 1991), i.e., the cobwebs in our minds. This paper discusses why one-off workshops such as unconscious bias training may be ineffective in tackling these deeply ingrained false assumptions and in dismantling racial structures.

Should we clear the cobwebs in our minds or dismantle racial structures? Reflections on the lack of critical thinking of higher education staff in the UK

Higher education (HE) in the UK, and probably in other countries too, prides itself on its determination to develop students' critical faculties. The emphasis on developing students' critical faculties is evident through messages, which resonate through HE, such as - "To write academically, you have to be critical". However, statements made by some HE staff toward or about people from some groups (Black and Global Majorities¹) highlight a need to critically analyse our thoughts, words, and deeds, especially since higher education institutions (HEI) and their staff are issuing the directive to students to be critical.

This paper analyses these utterances that seem to emerge from thoughts trapped in cobwebs and the underpinning thought processes of these utterances, and raises awareness of the structures and practices that allow such statements to be uttered and to go unchallenged. The aim is to understand whether the focus should be confined to clearing cobwebs or to dismantle the racial structures that enable cobwebs to develop. Crucially, the analysis extends to the ideological positions and beliefs held by those making the utterances. Such utterances could be a form of racial microaggression or macroaggression, which could affect the academic performance of students identifying as Black and Global Majorities, as found by (Mills 2020) and (Solorzano et al. 2000) who researched the negative experiences resulting from racist interactions. Other research focusing on racial stereotypes and students' experiences in these environments has reached similar conclusions, that the fear of being seen through the lens of negative racial stereotypes could affect students' sense of belonging and academic performance (Chavous et al., 2004; Gonzalez et al., 2002; Steele, 2018; Steele and Aronson, 1998). As the threats racial stereotypes pose and the damage and stress they cause to staff and students who identify as Black and Global Majorities can be ignored (Solorzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009), it is necessary to analyse institutional and interpersonal racial oppression (Chavous et al., 2004; Pittman, 2012), which is what this paper sets out to do through analysing utterances about and towards Black staff and students.

Some scholars rightly contend that the focus should be on macroaggression, as well as microaggressions, which are not at all minor or insignificant (Pierce, 1970 & 1974; Sue et al., 2019). Macroaggression describes the systemic and institutional forms of racism (Huber and Solorzano, 2014; Williams et al., 2020). Following this view, in analysing the utterances of some HE staff, I draw on three conceptual elements: the construct of critical, through which I explore what it means and how the lack of critical reflection is a form of ignorance or cobwebs in the mind that serve/s to maintain racial domination and discrimination; critical race theory's elucidation that racism continues to affect the daily lives of people racialised as Black and is maintained through institutional structures; and the socio-ideological nature of language, through which I examine how these utterances have a specific intent, in other words, there is an unwillingness to clear the cobwebs.

¹ Although I would prefer to use the term Black, I use the terms "Black" or "Black and Global Majorities" interchangeably, as I am aware that some people might feel I am appropriating the term that people of African heritage have claimed to define themselves. I am also mindful that people of African heritage bear the greater burden of racism, including racism from other people of colour.

The focus of this paper is on utterances by people in positions of power in HE that I overheard as a Black staff researching, teaching and training in higher education in the UK. The aim of this analysis is to understand whether these utterances are intended to represent themselves and the groups they belong to as superior. These specific utterances were chosen for analysis to explore whether seemingly unconscious biases convey dominant narratives at both institutional and interpersonal levels, which need to be analysed, interpreted and countered. Considering that the utterances reveal a reluctance of HE staff to examine and clear the cobwebs in their minds, this paper intends to uncover the reasons for this reluctance.

In identifying as Black, I should point out that it is not my intention to offend or appropriate from people racialised as Black by bureaucratic hierarchical categorisation or from those asserting their Black identity and affinity with their African heritage. However, acknowledging regional or epidermal proximity to oppressed groups is not an indicator of progressive thought, especially if imposed labels that reinforce racial hierarchies are not challenged. Being Black means to stand in solidarity with all oppressed groups in struggles against racial classification and dehumanisation (Sivanandan, 1985; Prashad, 2000; Erasmus, 2001; and Ahluwalia and Zegeye, 2003). Uncritically accepting official codifications betrays a lack of critical understanding of the self in relation to others, an irony given that being critical is touted as a necessary virtue in HE.

Critical thinking or critical understanding

The first conceptual element is the construct of critical or critical thinking, as universities in the UK and elsewhere in the world expect students to develop their critical thinking (CT) skills. Universities in the UK and elsewhere in the world expect students to develop their critical thinking (CT) skills. A look through the online resources of any university would certainly confirm that course handbooks, university webpages, assignment guidance, assessment criteria as well as lectures, seminars and tutorials emphasise the importance of students' CT. To achieve this goal the HE sector looks for ways to develop students' CT (see Bezanilla et al., 2019; Chatfield, 2017), with studies focusing on problem-based thinking (Thorndahl and Stentoft, 2020) or creativity (Badger, 2019). However, other scholars such as (Hamamah and Junining (2022); Heng (2018); Liyanage, Walker and Shokouhi (2021); Zhong and Cheng (2021) correctly interrogate the belief that CT abounds in Western societies and not in the Orient. Still others raise concerns about how to assess CT (Hart et al., 2021). If HEIs and organisations emphasise the importance of CT for university students in their academic, professional and personal lives (Hart et al., 2021), then an understanding of CT and its dimensions is necessary, which is explored next.

A universally understood or accepted definition of CT does not seem to exist, but many emphasise not just the techniques, but the values required to think critically (see Brookfield, 1987; Elder and Paul, 2009; Elder and Paul, 2020; Facione, 1998; Mulnix, 2012). The consensus seems to be that a critical thinker is someone who has intellectual integrity, intellectual civility and who examines their own thinking. This explication of CT is shared by other writers who offer an understanding of CT that is broader than a narrow understanding of CT as an individual skill. The interpretation of CT offered by Benesch (1999); Gieve (1998); and Brookfield (1987) clearly informs us that to think critically one has to deepen one's understanding about oneself

and should avoid thinking simplistically about issues. These scholars conceptualise CT as reflective social practice, as developing social awareness, and as becoming aware of the assumptions we hold.

From these interpretations of CT, it would be fair to say that merely sprinkling the phrase “critical thinking” in instructions to students does not indicate its presence in the instructor, especially if these instructions are not backed by critical understanding of the self in relation to others. The importance of relational understanding for learning and teaching has been emphasised by Cowden and Singh (2013), who point out the need for a democratic culture and pedagogy that counters dominant logics and nurtures critical consciousness. They further argue that the relationship between a teacher and those taught should be one that values everyone’s contribution. This is similar to bell hooks’ (2014) point that learning and teaching is a process of engagement and interest that recognises everyone’s worth. Emphasising the importance of respectful learning environments, Singh (2020) explains that these could reduce anxiety that marginalised students’ experience. The broader understanding of CT considers its relational nature, and from this perspective, I would argue that what is needed is not CT but critical understanding. The latter concept would encapsulate the idea of CT as reflecting and examining one’s own beliefs, and of understanding the self in relation to others. However, the goal of this paper is not to campaign for a change of concepts, but to discuss whether a critical approach informs the thinking of some within the HE sector, and to discuss what the presence or absence of CT indicates.

Whatever definition of CT one accepts, civility and sense of justice seem to be crucial ingredients, but sadly this understanding of CT seems to elude many. For instance, some writers, such as Atkinson (1997), erroneously believe that people from some cultures are gifted with CT and some cultures lack CT. This claim clearly reveals a complete lack of critical understanding because it shows a reluctance to understand others and an arrogance to believe that one’s culture is superior to that of others. Fortunately, this inaccurate claim has been rightly contested by others, who point out that CT is not the monopoly of some cultures (Gieve, 1998; Heng, 2018). They go on to show that students from cultures deemed to lack CT in fact have a strong sense of criticality but could struggle with applying it to academic writing (Zhong and Cheng, 2021). This struggle does not mean that these students lack CT, but it could mean that universities and their staff lack clarity on CT, fail to demonstrate this in teaching and are consequently incapable of guiding students to apply it to academic work. Exploring the different framings of CT / understanding is helpful to understanding the thoughts of those claiming that CT is a trait of Western cultures and to determine whether they lack CT. In failing to question their derogatory and racist beliefs and perspectives, these Western-centric exponents fall short of the standards and values expected of a critical thinker. However, the spotlight has to move away from individuals to institutions and structures, which is why the second conceptual lens is needed.

The role of Critical Race Theory in developing our understanding

To better understand how derogatory claims and assumptions about some people are maintained within the HE sector, the second element of the conceptual lens can offer useful insights. Critical race theory (CRT) highlights the role of racism in structuring relations and interactions between people, in this case, between White staff and Black staff and students. CRT

also helps people to understand the impact of racism on the lives of all people, those who practise racism and those who experience it. A key point of CRT is its analysis of everyday racism, that racism is the norm in society although the form of racism may have changed from predominantly violent to mainly subtle.

The CRT principle of everyday racism has expanded our understanding of racism and its continued presence in education and in society (Bell, 1991 & 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Lynn, 2004; Vaught and Castagno, 2008; Lynn, Jennings and Hughes, 2013). These scholars establish how racism is entrenched in institutional structures and practices, which Bonilla-Silva (1997 & 2003) calls a racialised structure. (Essed, 1991 & 2008) too explains racism as both structure and process - it is built into the system of domination and is kept alive through enactments. Recognising the permanence and permeability of racism, (Turney et al., 2002, p.16) observe that racism occurs in a variety of social and institutional contexts. As the education sphere could be one such setting that both practises and contributes to everyday racism and to the racialised structure, it is important to analyse this sector.

In fact, everyday racism continues because of the racialised hierarchical structure of white supremacy, which enables false beliefs of white superiority to circulate and persist, and education may have a role in these processes. White supremacy is racial domination based on the false belief in white superiority. Drawing on the insights of Purakayastha (2019), Slate (2012), Dhanda (2020), Prashad (2000), it can be said that there are similarities between white supremacy and brahmanic supremacy; both forms of supremacy classify people as superior and inferior based on false and misleading notions of the superiority of some groups. These false beliefs have been analysed in different ways as dysconsciousness (King, 1991), epistemologies of ignorance or white ignorance (Mills, 2007), and as unconscious bias.

The latter concept lets the person uttering derogatory comments about or towards Blacks off the hook, as it claims that these utterances emerge unconsciously or unintentionally as part of the socialisation process, whereby the utterer develops their thoughts from their social environment. In response to racist or derogatory remarks uttered in workplaces and to appear committed to EDI, many organisations have been conducting unconscious bias training for their staff (Tate and Page 2018) to make them aware of their biases and attitudes that could lead to discriminatory comments based on race, gender and ability. However, if the proponents of unconscious bias claim that the social environment is responsible for shaping thoughts, then it should logically follow that this social structure, which is a racialised one, needs to change. Instead, the proponents of unconscious bias halt their initiatives at one-off anti-bias training sessions instead of analysing and trying to break the mould of the racialised social structures that shape derogatory attitudes.

Challenging the myths or false assumptions of the superiority of some groups that circulate unconsciously would require systematic epistemological dismantling of the racialised structure through uncovering how this structure is fortified by those who ignore its existence. As Payne and Hannay (2021) argue, implicit bias is a cognitive reflection of systemic racism in the environment. Therefore, our understanding would have to evolve to acknowledge racial structures that need to be dismantled, as superficial tweaking of the manifestations of these

structures would be inadequate. An epistemological challenge would also raise awareness that white superiority is a myth, and that this false belief serves to prop up racialised structures. As Gillborn (2005), Leonardo (2004 & 2009), Kitching (2011), Tate and Page (2018) and others have argued, bias training workshops merely raise consciousness of racism and biases, but do not lead the awakened souls to tackle racism and become aware of their complicity in upholding it. In agreement with this point, Evans-Winters and Hines (2020) argue that diversity training is limited, without a focus on white supremacy, as a system that enables domination and discrimination. They convincingly argue that racism is entrenched in education, and in particular in teacher education - which represses Black staff - so research is needed on how to resist hostile staff and students. A possible way is through counter stories to expose the hostility of racism (James-Gallaway and Baber, 2021) and to explore ways of resisting it, which have methodological and pedagogical relevance, and which will be discussed later.

The concept of dysconsciousness that King (1991) introduced years ago exposes the limitation of the concept of unconscious bias. She argues that it is not unconsciousness that leads to inaccurate assumptions about people who identify as Black and Global Majorities but dysconsciousness, that is an impaired consciousness that disables thinking about racism and leads to false assumptions. An unconscious mind would not be aware or would lack knowledge, whilst a dysconscious mind is limited in their thinking and understanding, and so unable to become aware despite being surrounded by knowledge and information.

Whilst dysconsciousness is certainly a useful way to understand the distorted thinking of some minds who see themselves in a position of superiority in relation to others, it may not fully address the wilful ignorance (Mills, 2007) of those who choose to be ignorant of their own shortcomings and who falsely perpetuate the myth of white superiority. In other words, they are aware but choose to ignore the reality of racism. Charles Mills's (2007) concepts of white ignorance and epistemologies of ignorance go beyond the concepts of unconscious minds and dysconsciousness. This ignorance, as Mills explains, is part of the racial contract, which is a fundamentally flawed unspoken contract that accepts white domination as the norm and whereby groups racialised as white falsely believe in their superiority over other groups. The concept of wilful ignorance is similar to Dhanda's point (2020) in reference to caste domination, where she correctly notes that the refusal to see or listen to the pain of casteist (and racial) domination is an ethical failure. She explains that it is not an inability to see or understand, but a refusal to understand.

For Mills (2007), an epistemology of ignorance, is ignorance of the reality of racism, ignorance of the moral imperative to understand racism and to understand the self in relation to others, which leads to inaccurate understanding of what is right and wrong in racial relations. This wilful ignorance aligns with another principle of CRT – interest convergence (Bell, 1980 & 1995) – which attests that some people have a vested interest in maintaining their ignorance and the myths of their superiority that they hold on to. Mills (2007) too points out that it serves the interests of the dominant group to maintain their ignorance or to hold on to false beliefs about the inferiority of people identifying as Black and Global Majorities. However, because it is in their interest to be seen as tackling racism, people and institutions might make half-hearted attempts to address racism through implementing certain policies such as closing the attainment gap or bias training workshops. These steps mask their white supremacist nature or create an illusion of

concern, but, as King and Chandler (2016) confirm, despite the claims to diversity, educational institutions do not serve the interests of racially diverse groups. Such reforms masquerade as good intentions but are designed to maintain the racialised system, for instance, they refuse to acknowledge that there is no difference in the academic abilities of different groups, and they perpetuate the myth of white superiority.

Half-hearted measures such as anti-bias training, whether these are one hour or day long sessions, that institutions organise are, as Tate and Page (2018) analyse, ineffective in dismantling racial structures. Besides, the CRT principle of interest convergence accurately urges us to see such anti-racist institutional reforms not as altruistic measures but as interventions that could benefit White supremacist institutions. The illusion of anti-racism is superficially projected on to the image of the institution, while the reality of racism stays unchanged. CRT's understanding of interest convergence could help to analyse whether the HE sector's focus on race equality and diversity is a strategic move to showcase diversity for financial gains, as the appearance of diversity could be used to attract students from diverse backgrounds to an institution. The analysis of utterances in HE would help to understand how and why these utterances emerge in the context of supposedly inclusive practices. As Bell (1993; 1995 & 2003) Ladson-Billings (1998; 2004; 2009; 2020 & 2021) and others explain, inclusive or anti-racist practices are rarely implemented for altruistic reasons, hence interest convergence would help to explain whether policies and practices in HE are introduced for the benefit of students or the institution.

Given Mills's (2007) analysis of white ignorance, which is a wilful ignorance, a focus on examples of lived encounters within a racialised structure, as others have analysed – Arday (2018a & 2018b); Johnson (2019); Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury (2018); Joseph-Salisbury (2019) and Ladson-Billings (1998 & 2021) - would be a necessary epistemological endeavour. This process would raise understanding of both the denigrating experiences within white supremacist institutions and the need to research these interactions to uncover how the racialised system operates. The principles of CRT are useful to understand how and why derogatory assumptions and utterances thrive in educational spaces and in society. This paper seeks to deploy this understanding of the institutional and systemic nature of racism to analyse the utterances of those occupying the centre stage of institutional structures, and to understand whether they reinforce racist culture and practices within educational institutions.

Counter stories as pedagogy and methodology

Given that racism is every day, enduring and epistemically sustained, pedagogical and methodological processes are necessary for epistemological transformation and dismantling of racism. Methodologically, CRT's use of voice or narrative enables us to train the focal lens on voices and experiences. Through counter-stories (Rollock, 2012a & 2012b;), CRT scholars seek to bring the voices of the marginalised to the forefront and to disrupt the dominance of those who hold the centre-stage of institutional systems. In this paper I do not focus on the voices of marginalised groups, but instead focus on the attitudes and assumptions of the dominating group. Researching the marginalised without focusing on those doing the marginalising, may seem as if the domination or oppression happens autonomously, without the active participation of the dominating or oppressing group.

This spotlight on the views of dominating groups seeks to raise awareness of the experiences of those rendered silent and subordinate by the dominating voices (Kraehe, 2015) to understand whether the intent of these utterances is to diminish the abilities and identities of people towards whom they are directed. I adopt a critical counter-view approach to hold a mirror to the assumptions of the dominating groups, to examine their impact on marginalised groups. This form of critical counter-narratives (Miller et al., 2020) is necessary to research and transform educational spaces and experiences. Counter stories as a research tool would enable the analysis of racilised structures and attitudes that pathologise and misrepresent Blacks and GM (Rezai-Rashti, 1995) and elevate whiteness (Agnew, 2007, p.18). Ladson-Billings (2009) clearly articulates how Black women in particular are often debased and perceived as incompetent, and she believes that storytelling can explore race and racism in society and education. She skilfully analyses how the media reinforces negative stereotypes of Blacks, which are drawn from a wider culture of white superiority. Given the derogatory portrayal of Blacks in the media, Ladson-Billings (2009) and Alderman et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of counter stories to dispel these negative stereotypes and the racist depictions in mainstream media.

The epistemological role of stories has also been recognised by Truong, Museus and McGuire (2016), who point out that because stereotypes abound about the inferiority of Blacks, counter-stories are needed to humanise Blacks. Counter-narratives would certainly help to correct the skewed depiction of dominated groups by dominating groups (Hicks, 2012) or to resist majoritarian narratives (Ender, 2019). Moreover, counter narratives seek to gain recognition for subjugated knowledges by analysing the experience and resilience of dominated groups (Ladson-Billings, 1998 & 2004; Kitching, 2011; Solorzano and Yosso, 2002). Hence, theorists of CRT correctly believe that it is an epistemological obligation to present and analyse narratives about experiences with racism to unravel the horrors, the resistance and the messiness of life under racism (see Miller and Tanner 2019, and others who have conducted a narrative inquiry such as Barone, 2000; Connelly and Clandinin, 1990; Jacobs, 2005; Moen, 2006, Lensmire et al., 2013 and Turvey, 2012). Miller and Tanner (2019) further point out that to work towards anti-racism, we need to disrupt ways of thinking and reconstruct knowledge through engaging with other knowledges. In agreement with Mason (2016), they explain that genuine anti-racism is a lifelong commitment, and it takes time to develop, not through an hour's workshop. An additional point they make along with Palmer (1998) and Lensmire (2017) is that patience and understanding is required rather than blaming and shaming to dismantle systemic racism. In fact, they claim that dismissively labelling actions as ignorant or dysconscious does little to develop the cause of anti-racism. Miller and Tanner (2019) further explain how efforts should be directed towards enabling white people to understand themselves in relation to others in different areas of society, and to go on to challenge racism. They insist that the focus should be on the learning and unlearning - the pedagogical processes required to achieve this consciousness and action.

However, King (2003) seems to believe that a tougher approach is needed. He clarifies that stories are meant to disturb, provoke and not portray a false and comfortable process. He firmly believes that by not disturbing the thinking of Whites, we pander to their distorted beliefs and re-enact violence on people of colour. Hanna (2019) also favours a tougher approach, and

she argues that a gentle approach that she tried out does not work when people claim to be offended when their racism and false superiority are called out. She contends that claiming victimhood shows wilful ignorance and arrogance. Making a similar point, Phipps (2021) argues that claiming victimhood is an attempt to minimise the violence women of colour endure. More pertinently, Finkelstein's (2003) critical analysis of the tendency of some groups who claim victimhood reveals this to be a ploy to gain immunity from criticism for unjust actions. For these reasons, Hanna (2019, p.229) believes in the pedagogical approach to challenge and educate those who misuse the term oppressed and disregard institutionalised and systemic racism and its violence, and she argues that it is necessary to dismantle these structures of "privilege and entitlement". She (2019) adds that this challenge can be done through stories, which theorise racism to better understand the racist structure and how it affects people's lives. Although King (2003) and Hanna (2019) reject a softer approach, they too believe in the pedagogical power of stories.

Counter stories can serve as a pedagogical resource for anti-racism education (ARE), which is needed to explain how racial processes maintain power and privilege (Escayg, Berman and Royer, 2017). As the traditional curriculum reinforces monolithic understandings of knowledge and marginalises other forms of knowledge (Escayg, Berman and Royer, 2017), ARE would focus on analysing racial attitudes stemming from a belief in White superiority that maintains white supremacy (Leonardo, 2009). The analysis of racial attitudes necessarily entails analysis of social relations and racialised power dynamics, as theorised by Bonilla-Silva (2003, p. 271), and would require a reflection on the processes that maintain power differentials. Thus, the key difference between ARE and unconscious bias training is that anti-bias training avoids naming racism (Vandenbroeck, 2007), whilst ARE addresses racism to transform social structures.

To implement ARE, Alderman et al. (2021) recommend that educators critically self-reflect to advance pedagogical transformation and learn from successes and tensions. They add that anti-bias training is microscopic, whilst ARE is periscopic, focusing on institutionalised racism and the ways it oppresses. A similar point is made by Aldana et al. (2019), who argue that purpose of anti-racism is to explore ways to dismantle racism and racial oppression. They argue that to tackle the different manifestations of racism / racial oppression, a web of resistance is required, which they explain as comprising understanding, advocacy and action that connects with others in solidarity. Overall, these scholars acknowledge the hierarchy of knowledge systems and relational practices, and they argue that ARE has to raise awareness of these systems and destabilise White dominating forms of knowledge and ways of thinking about racial differences.

Stories also have a pedagogical value of creating narratives of self-reflection (McGuinness, 2009) and of transforming the way misrepresentation unfolds (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Without this self-reflection, we could be complicit in white supremacy, cautions Hanna (2019). To avoid unintentionally reinforcing white supremacist beliefs, we need to examine and reflect on the misrepresentations and our perceptions of these, which is what Giroux (2003) believes is the pedagogical role of ARE, as it could help us to understand and redefine the relationship between the self and the other. Counter-stories are useful to understand how power operates to spread misrepresentation of some people in society. This consciousness

raising and call to action are necessary to challenge racial injustices, contends Giroux (2003). As racism is the default practice, so anti-racist practices and culture must be consciously enacted through an ongoing process of self-examination, collaborative working and understanding of racial structures and systems and the ways these frame relations (Kendi, 2019; Roberts and Rizzo, 2021). Given this understanding, the point is not to be merely conscious of the racism but to be anti-racist (Hazelbaker et al., 2022), and to do so, we have to acknowledge our identity and position in a racialised structure.

In reflecting on the utterances and their impact, I follow what CRT scholars urge, the need to constantly work towards improving conditions and experiences. They caution that we should not delude ourselves into thinking that racism will vanish, but at the same time we should not lose hope that things will ever change and so do nothing. Heeding Ladson-Billings's (2013) advice that storytelling should not be used to exhibit one's own personal experiences with racism but to raise awareness of the need for racial justice in society and in education, I aim to focus on utterances directed towards or about people (Decuir-Gunby and Walker-Devose, 2013), who identify as Black or Global Majorities. By contextualising these utterances, I aim to show that these individual assumptions are socially formed and maintained and that we need to work not just on eradicating these cobwebs from individual minds but to strive for racial justice.

Language as socio-ideological

The third element of the conceptual lens is language as socio-ideological, that is, as social with dialogic, intentional and evaluative elements. Although the tenets of CRT and affiliated concepts are useful to analyse and understand how a white supremacist system enables a false belief in white superiority, the analytical lens of the socio-ideological nature of language adds another layer to the analysis of assumptions and utterances in education and in society. This conceptualisation of language enables an understanding of utterances not as abstract, detached words and phrases but as conveying socially located positions and identities, as communicating a particular point of view with an ideological or evaluative tone, and as responding with intent to previous utterances and for a specific purpose. To illustrate, an utterance such as "Black girls have such attitude" could reveal much about the identity of the person holding such assumptions. We could understand why they think so, how this utterance affixes generalising labels on all Black girls based on stereotypes, and how such utterances are intended to demean confident and articulate young Black girls. Put differently, the utterance is deployed ideologically to silence these girls.

I rely on the third element of the conceptual framework to explain power relations in utterances, that is, how these reflect a hierarchy of voices and people. The focus here is not on the surface linguistic features but is an attempt to explain how certain voices are expressed and the social conditions that create the ground for such thoughts to emerge. The socio-ideological nature of language urges us to focus on what is said, why, to whom or about whom, and the immediate situation and wider context. This understanding of language is informed by the work of Voloshinov (1973) and Bakhtin (1981), as well as others who have adopted this approach to analysing language, such as Collins (1999 & 2000), Collins and Jones (2006), Holborow (1999, 2006, 2007 & 2015), Harris (1996), Jones (2004 & 2007), Jones and Collins (2006), Palmer (1990 & 1993). These analysts argue that language or utterances cannot be analysed in a

decontextualised way without exploring the social, dialogic and ideological elements of utterances. As discourse cannot be disconnected from historical, social and economic relations (Leistyna, 2001), the social, economic and political environments within which speakers and their utterances are situated need to be understood.

The key to understanding language as socio-ideological would be to see utterances as internally and externally dialogic and ideological, in other words, they are imbued with traces of past utterances (this explains how stereotypes get repeated and circulated); they are directed towards an intended audience; and they have a specific purpose. Bakhtin reminds us that “language is ideologically saturated”, that it promotes a particular worldview (1981, p.271). However, not all thought and language can be considered as ideological, only that which indicates conflicting interests and worldviews. Voloshinov (1973) too observes that not all utterances are ideological, only those which represent as well as encode reality with ideological content or views. In plain terms, ideological utterances are those that express a particular point of view with a particular purpose in mind. What we can glean from the work of these scholars is that language is not a driverless car, it is deployed, reproduced and changed by people for specific purposes and within specific social relations of power.

In focusing on the utterances of the dominating group in education and in society, the point made by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* to explain the dissemination of the ideas of the ruling class comes to mind.

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, that is, the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production (1965, pp.64-65).

This view of language and ideas being used to reinforce domination and discrimination connects with Mills’s (2007) point about competing views / truths, whereby some views dominate in a racialised structure. As discussed earlier, in a hierarchical system, false notions of superiority and inferiority are circulated and may be internalised. Challenging these false notions may be necessary but insufficient to dismantle the racialised structure of domination and discrimination. As Marx and Engels (1857 in McLellan, 1977) explained, while technological reforms may have improved working and living conditions, a change in the organisation of society would be needed to end domination and exploitation. Similarly, the system and structures that socialise our minds need to change to ensure equity in education and society. For this to happen, we need to deepen our learning through systematic ARE that raises awareness and initiates action to tackle racism. Towards these ends, analysing some of the utterances made by higher education staff through counter-narrative recollections of salient episodes could contribute to understanding the pervasive nature of racialised thinking.

“These ‘BAME’ students do not read classic literature, they are not academically oriented, and they struggle with academic coursework”

This utterance was made at a conference, and when I emailed the organisers of the conference later to point out that the assumption was derogatory, I did not receive a reply. There are two issues to untangle here: the utterance and the lack of response. With reference to the first issue, in addition to labelling some students as academically deficient, the utterance reveals the author's view of classic literature – the writings of White English-speaking writers as the gold standard. When asked to explain what she meant by “classic literature”, she replied, “George Orwell, Jane Austen, etc”. Her initial utterance and her reply raise an important point as to why texts in languages other than English, such as Arabic or Mandarin are not considered classic literature. Indeed, the two utterances reveal an epistemic narrowness or what Charles Mills (1998, p.2) calls, a “conceptual or theoretical whiteness” that excludes the knowledges and experiences of groups that are not White. Utterances emerging from a blinkered view of what constitutes valid knowledge, such as the one being discussed, reinforce the nullification of knowledge systems that are not White and uphold White supremacist beliefs (Yancy, 2021). The utterance under analysis subscribes to the hegemonic view that Ayling (2019) discusses as constructing whites and whiteness as superior to blacks and blackness, and she (2020) urges the need to disrupt these racial myths.

Given that white-dominant educational spaces denigrate the knowledge systems of racially and culturally subordinated students, Lynn (2022) calls for epistemologies of transformation such as critical race pedagogy that is committed to understanding students and resisting hegemonic practices. Discussing specifically how writers such as Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and others have tried to counter the hegemonic sidelining of African American literature, Yancy (2021) points out the need to engage with different voices and styles of knowledge production to contest this nullification of the knowledges of some “races”. This is a point that Heringer (2019) reinforces in insisting that teachers should understand their roles in epistemological domination and ensure that students' knowledge and culture is validated and drawn on rather than silenced. Odeniyi (2022) concurs that teachers should recognise the linguistic, cultural and epistemological diversity in the classroom, which teachers who make utterances like the one under discussion would fail to do.

Another noteworthy point is that reading classic literature, whatever one's understanding of what constitutes classic literature, should not be the only indicator of academic abilities. An elitist tone can be detected in this utterance, which makes an assumption that everyone should read, or that everyone has access to reading resources. Some people with academic ability may not have time, resources or opportunities to read, and it is necessary to first understand why some students do not read what is considered “classic literature”, instead of labelling them as lacking academic orientation. Inoue (2021) accurately notes that it is a privilege to think that everyone has the same access to opportunities and resources. He calls this orientation to the world as HOWL (Habits of White Language and Judgement).

The utterance under analysis clearly reveals a lack of CT / understanding, as a judgement is made about students identifying as Black and Global Majorities, apparently without any attempt to understand these students. Critical understanding as discussed by Benesch (1993 & 1999), Gieve (1998) and others is a dialogic process whereby the person engaging in this process reflects on their own thoughts and ideas and the origins of these ideas. To do so would require the thinker to understand how they arrived at certain thoughts. This approach to critical

understanding would make thinkers / speakers aware of their thoughts and could possibly reduce the risk of making glib utterances based on fast thinking or mind bugs (Inoue 2021) that lead to faulty judgements. The expectation is that students should think critically at university, but this academic staff certainly seems to belie this expectation.

The third aspect to the utterance is the use of a derogatory label “BAME” that boxes some students into a sub-category because they are not considered the natural inhabitants of higher education, whilst a similar labelling is not used for students who are considered the norm. The focus however should not be merely on the label but on those who use the label. An unquestioning use and acceptance of this label serves to maintain relations of dominance (Da Costa et al., 2021). This labelling whereby some groups are deemed to be space invaders (Puwar, 2004) or categorised as the subordinate other in higher education is a form of everyday racism (Kilomba, 2004). My understanding of this practice is drawn from Essed (1991) who observes that everyday racism seeps into our social practices and is reflected in our attitudes and behaviour (Essed, 1991, p.3). In glibly reproducing the label, the speaker’s racial attitude is clear - she positions herself as superior and so not requiring an ethnic marker. The seemingly innocuous labelling fits the explanation of everyday racism as subtle and not apparently aggressive but used to diminish people’s worth and identity. This form of racism manifests itself in everyday situations, processes and behaviours (AdvanceHE, n.d.). Although the focus here is on the speaker of the utterance, it is worth reminding ourselves that everyday racism draws sustenance from the racial system and “the ideologies of white supremacy that justify the superiority of a dominant group (whites) over non-dominant groups (People of Color)” (Huber and Solorzano (2015, pp.297-298). The supremacist beliefs and the actions they give rise to in the form of everyday racism assert dominance (2015, p.298) “to keep those at the racial margins in their place”, which is what this utterance sets out to do.

The utterance could either be a product of dysconsciousness (King, 1991) that uncritically accepts false stereotypes or it could be a form of wilful ignorance (Mills, 2007) or ethical failure (Dhanda, 2020) that deliberately ignores evidence negating the myth of white superiority. The socio-ideological nature of language enables us to analyse as deliberate this false belief or acceptance of stereotypes that portray black students as academically deficient. There could be ideological reasons for depicting students as intellectually inferior, that is, the intention could be to cover up the institution’s failure to ensure all students succeed academically and have a good experience at university. Instead of focusing on institutional racism that prevents some students from achieving as per their potential, the utterance seems to have vested interests in deflecting attention on to imagined deficits of students identifying as Black and Global Majorities.

The second issue, that is, the lack of response merits exploring for its unwillingness to engage in a discussion, its indifference to derogatory labelling and its arrogance to dismiss an email that dared to challenge language and practices in White dominant academia. In the email I explained that the utterance was derogatory and pointed out that - “The presenter seems to be echoing the condescending views of Paul Ramsden and of some of the higher education policies in England.” I also cited sources (Ramsden 2003 & 2008; Department of Business, Innovation & Skills 2010 & 2011):

“Students who are less well-prepared academically pose challenges for universities and their staff”

“It costs more to educate students of disadvantaged backgrounds”

The sources I cited in the email are evidence of racist and elitist views in the HE sector, which I thought academic staff should not be subscribing to, at least without critical interrogation or supporting evidence, but the organisers did not think that my utterance warranted a response. As the definitions of CT discussed earlier highlight, a critical thinker is a person who has civility and an intellectually open mind, but there seems to be little evidence of these traits in the lack of response to my email utterance. Here again the relations of dominance are apparent. The organisers chose to ignore my complaint, as they probably thought that a Black person who dared to challenge White academics should be ignored and put in her place (Huber and Solorzano 2015), especially as I was challenging their belief in white superiority and black incompetence. Sadly, cobwebs in the form of outdated beliefs that Blacks are academically deficient are widespread in HE, as the next utterance indicates.

“Black students do not have a culture of learning”

This utterance was made at a meeting of a committee tasked with improving the student experience, by a university staff heading the committee. As such views regularly circulate in HE and in society, the focus should go beyond the individual utterance to the system that enables such views to be uttered. That the speaker was able to climb the ladder in academia whilst holding on to such derogatory and ill-informed opinions or cobwebs, reflects the institutional nature of racism. Institutions might claim to tackle racism or discrimination, but the reality and the rhetoric often do not match up. Senior leadership’s thoughts as well as institutional culture and practices rarely merit rigorous scrutiny. In fact, such views are steadfastly maintained and disseminated.

This committee and the research presentation discussed earlier both focused on the experiences of “BAME” students. HEIs are known to set up committees and undertake research, which give the impression that they are committed to improving the experience of all students, but these initiatives are exemplars of interest convergence (Bell 1995 & 2003). Following Bell, Ladson-Billings (1995), Taylor (2023) and others explain how people in positions of power often claim to seek racial or social justice because of the rewards they can reap; for HEIs and their staff, the rewards could be publications, reputation and funding. As DaCosta (2017) argues, HEIs seem to be concerned about the loss of fee income if students withdraw from their studies because they do not have a good experience at university. They are concerned with protecting the interests of the institution under the guise of concern for students.

To fully analyse such utterances, we have to understand how and why such utterances emerge. As discussed earlier, an utterance is social, dialogic and ideological. This utterance reveals the social position of the speaker who looks down on those she considers to be lower down the social hierarchy. The arrogance in assuming that only students who share her white ethnic background are endowed with academic abilities is accompanied by ignorance. Like the first utterance, it betrays a lack of CT, the speaker makes a judgement about students and labels

an entire community as academically deficient. She makes assumptions about students; she does not examine her thoughts or think about the impact of her assumptions on students towards whom these are directed. A position high up institutional hierarchy apparently grants people immunity from CT; they brazenly make statements that are devoid of any critical understanding. It is my firm belief that academic ability is universal (Ambedkar, 1924 in Naik 2003; Gramsci, 1972 & 2000); there are certainly differences in the types of academic abilities people have, but there is no hierarchy of abilities or that some groups have a monopoly over academic abilities, which others lack. As a philosopher of society and education explained a century ago, all human intellect is like an uncultivated land, which can flourish if it is cultivated judiciously (Ambedkar 1924 in Naik 2003, pp.262, 263). Gramsci (2000) too believed that intellectual ability is distributed among all social groups. These philosophers challenged the view that only some groups have a monopoly over intelligence. Moreover, whilst academic ability is universal, opportunities to develop this ability are hardly so. For students who are working class, mature and first generation in higher education, the pressures on time and resources could impact their academic development. Marx and Engels, in their analyses of capitalist society and in their vision of communism, noted that to educate children it is necessary to feed them, and to free them from the necessity of earning a livelihood (1844 in McLellan 1977). Research by Thomas (2002, p.423) confirms Marx's views and provides evidence that financial pressures and the burden of having to work while studying could have an impact on student retention and learning at university. Marcus Rashford's successful campaign to get the UK government to provide free school meals (*The Guardian*, 2021) is based on his awareness of the link between nutrition and academic performance of children. In failing to consider the contextual factors in learning in HE, the speaker displays her class and racial ignorance, and certainly the cobwebs in her mind.

There is no attempt to conceal her arrogance or ignorance, but the utterance should be seen as not merely a product of the speaker's arrogance, ignorance or lack of CT. In confidently expressing derogatory misconceptions of these students, the utterance plays both a dialogic and an ideological role (Bakhtin 1981; Voloshinov 1973). It is worth remembering that racial prejudices are a product of systemic racism that believes in the superiority of one group. Merely focusing on individual biases or ignorance would leave the racial structure in place. Utterances and the thoughts that form these emerge in a particular context and have an intended aim. This is the dialogic aspect of utterances; they are shaped by and in response to other utterances. This utterance reveals the speaker regurgitating negative stereotypes of students identifying as Black and Global Majorities that are formed in a racialised system, and it is intended to influence other people's views of these students as deficient.

The comment is probably responding to discussions within the HE sector about universities failing to offer all students a valuable experience, and is making excuses for this failure. Universities across the UK set up student experience committees to improve the experience of all students as they found that students identifying as Black and Global Majorities and those from less privileged backgrounds were withdrawing from universities because of their poor experience (Lowe and Wright, 2024, p.93; Pötschulat, Moran, and Jones, 2021). However, instead of trying to identify the reasons some students have a poor experience at university and addressing these issues, this utterance tries to absolve the staff and the institution of any responsibility. It is therefore necessary to see the utterance as due to systemic racism and as socio-ideological. However, not all language is ideological, only that which takes a position on

an issue, and which wants to achieve something. In this case, the utterance has ideological reasons for shifting the blame onto these students, it helps to move the focus away from the institution's failure to dismantle the racial barriers that hamper the progress of some students and instead labels students as deficient. If this is what university staff think about students who identify as Black and Global Majorities, let us examine how they treat staff who identify as Black and Global Majorities.

“Only teaching staff are allowed to park here”

This utterance was made by white staff to a staff who identifies as Black and Global Majorities. The utterance has a policing tone and assumes that a Black person cannot be an academic in a university. It was made when a Black staff had just parked her car in the staff car park one morning and was sitting in the car collecting her thoughts before tackling the academic workload or difficult interactions in a white dominated space. An angry rapping on her car window rudely interrupted her. She decided not to ruin her day and chose not to engage in a verbal duel with the white staff telling her that she could not park there. As the Black staff did not respond to her, the white staff marched off to call the campus security. A security guard arrived, recognised and addressed the Black staff by her name, and asked what the problem was. The Black staff returned the security guard's greeting and replied that she did not have a problem. The white staff muttered, “oh you should have told me that you were staff” and walked away without an apology.

The utterance illustrates the derogatory perceptions dominating groups have about people from dominated / marginalised groups. These arrogant assumptions in HE are probably formed by the frequent depictions of Black people in the media as doing menial jobs (Rockquemore and Laszloffy, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2021) and incapable of anything more. The stereotypical portrayal of people from marginalised groups in subservient roles, and the unquestioning acceptance and reiteration of these stereotypes highlight both the racialised system and the dialogic aspect of the utterances. Utterances are born from other textual and visual utterances that portray marginalised groups in subservient roles.

However, it is necessary to understand that although language is dialogic, it is not a driverless car. The person using language or uttering words has agency and does not have to passively accept the derogatory depictions of Black people. The dialogic nature of utterances does not absolve a speaking agent of the responsibility to analyse and reject the dominant assumptions about marginalised groups. The failure to do so can be understood as ideological – the utterance is a product of the position the speaker assumes towards the person who is othered and the speaker's intention to show Black people their place in society. The passive acceptance of derogatory depictions also demonstrates a lack of CT, which is probably what these academic staff constantly berate their students for lacking. These derogatory and ideological utterances or cobwebs are a form of dysconsciousness, that is, an uncritical acceptance of dominant norms and ways of thinking, or more likely, a case of epistemologies of ignorance stemming from a white supremacist system, which codifies people as superior and inferior, and is part of the institutional nature of racism.

The echoing of stereotypes confirms that institutional structures and systems which are racist shape people's racist attitudes. This brings the discussion to the systemic nature of racism. The principles of the socio-ideological nature of language and of CRT are helpful to understand how and why such utterances emerge and circulate. These principles remind us to focus on the utterance as well as the racist structures from which such utterances emerge. As CRT scholars (Bell, 1992; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Ladson-Billings; 2021; Warmington, 2020) accurately point out, racism is endemic in society and because racism is inherent in structures and systems it shapes racist attitudes and encounters. Bonilla-Silva (1997 & 2003) too argues that it is not racist ideas that lead to racism, but enduring racialised systems that enable racism and racist ideas to persist. The forms of racism may change, that is, from overt to more subtle forms, but as long as the racialised system is in place, racist ideas and practices will continue. This racialised system categorises some as superior and others as inferior, and permits those deemed superior to belittle and demean those deemed inferior. The systemic nature of racism that enables the misrepresentation of groups in the media is also responsible for racial inequalities and the under representation of marginalised groups as academic staff in HE. The under-representation as a feature of systemic racism further reinforces racist prejudices and perceptions, and this structural racism seems to empower dominating groups to take on a policing role and tone to keep marginalised groups in their place.

The claim that racism is part of the sinews of institutional structures is borne out by the fact that such cobwebs in the form of utterances / assumptions about Black staff being incapable of working as academics are common across the White-dominated HE sector in the UK, USA and probably other countries. It is a fairly common occurrence in the lives of Black academics to be asked when they are serving the food or drink, to have their presence as academics doubted, to be suspected of intruding into academic spaces (see Jason Arday 2018a & 2018b; Boles, 2017; Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2008, and others). Several studies critically point out these that microaggressions are uttered to degrade blackness and celebrate whiteness (Bhopal, 2014; Johnson, 2019; Ahmet, 2020a, 2020b & 2021; Wynter, 2003). Indeed, these aggressions are used to suppress dominated groups, and institutional racism enables these aggressions that sustain and are sustained by white supremacy.

Media representation of marginalised groups reinforces and reproduces White racial supremacy through utterances such as the ones under scrutiny. Such utterances are a product of a racialised hierarchical system, or as part of the Racial Contract (Mills 1997 & 1998) that enables Whites to feel entitled to eject black bodies from white spaces (Puwar, 2004). Mills explains the racial contract as having an epistemological dimension - epistemology of ignorance about the world and people, or an ignorance that elevates whites and constructs others as sub-knowers, who need to have knowledge imposed on them. Drawing on Mills, Leonardo (2004, 2009 & 2013) explains that the racial contract demotes Blacks to the status of non-personhood. In light of this, Bonilla-Silva (1997) accurately observes that a change in racist ideas will not be possible until the systemic roots of the racialised structure or the Racial Contract are addressed. As long as the racist structure remains in place, ignorance and arrogance as products of the codification of differences through superior and inferior categorisations will manifest themselves.

The utterance, which for purposes of clarity, I call a primary utterance, resulted in secondary utterances, which were a denial of racism or the unwillingness to admit that this form

of “stop and search”, a British policing practice to stop and search people considered to be suspicious, is racist. At a workshop for the senior leadership team of a university, I presented this example of the primary utterance. This was dismissed as “simple and not examples of aggressive racism”, and there were questions whether there was proof to claim this was a racist incident, as it could be that the white staff did not know the Black staff and would have questioned anyone the same way because of security concerns. In response to the second argument, I asked the white senior leadership team whether they had encountered such policing either in academia or in society, or were questioned about their presence in any place. Everyone murmured “no”, this low-voiced response was an emphatic and resounding answer to their own vehement refusal to accept that these incidents could be classed as racist.

The contrast in the tone of voice was distinct – the team did not hesitate to vociferously challenge my description of these incidents as racist, but when asked to think about whether they had experienced such policing, their tone was muted. The ignorance and arrogance of the White SLT was apparent in challenging my depiction of the situation as racist. They probably see themselves as champions in judging what is racist and what is not racist, and have an overwhelming sense of the importance or truth of their ideas, a product of epistemologies of ignorance. Getting the SLT to reflect on their own experiences, that is, whether they had similar experiences, to help them understand the racist nature of the utterance, which they were reluctant to acknowledge, probably muted their tone.

The secondary utterance denies that the policing tone of the primary utterance stems from racism, it assumes the authority to decide what does or does not constitute racism. This authoritative identity is formed as part of the racial contract (Mills 1997, p.18), which is an agreement to misinterpret the world, whereby one learns to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority. In line with Mills, we can understand the refusal to call out the utterances as racist as an epistemology of ignorance which is a product of white supremacy. This is a system of domination that assumes the superiority of Whites and undermines “others” as inferior (Mills, 1997 & 2007; Bain 2018). This system produces an epistemology of ignorance, that is, ignorance, falsehoods, and distorted framings of facts to maintain white supremacy. As Sullivan and Tuana (2007) explain, an epistemology of ignorance examines how ignorance is produced and sustained. Drawing on these insights to make sense of the secondary utterance that denies that the primary utterance was racist, it is fair to say that the racial contract has granted the signatories the authority to epistemically determine fields of knowledge or social situations according to their misinterpretation, that is, whether a remark is racist or not. Mills’s (1997 & 2007) exposition of the racial contract helps to explain that they can confidently spout their views because racially structured discrimination is a norm, rather than a deviation from the ideal. Mills offers another explanation for such secondary utterances that are used to refuse or accept that these primary utterances are racist. He points out that it serves the interests of the dominant group to maintain and hold on to their beliefs / assumptions that portray blacks as inferior, and this helps to sustain white supremacy.

Another aspect of the secondary utterance is the argument that this primary utterance is barely racism as it mild or innocuous, and not aggressive. Indeed, some people might call the primary utterance microaggression, that is minor slights, but as Chester Pierce (1970), the person

responsible for analysing and naming seemingly innocuous racist interactions, pointed out, microaggressions are not minor or insignificant, as they build up to create a toxic environment that is damaging for those towards whom these are directed. Dismissing such utterances as minor seeks to minimise the harm caused. Moreover, if such utterances are not deemed racist, then no action would be required to weed out racism and to heal the wounds inflicted by such racism. Consequently, white supremacist structures allow racism to operate uninterrupted, to thrive and to dominate marginalised groups. Such secondary utterances are spewed to render both racism and the pain it causes invisible. It seems that the senior leadership team would accept that their Black staff faced racism only if there was violence and aggression.

Concluding thoughts

This paper set out to investigate whether the exhortation to students to think critically is borne out of higher educational institutions and their staff's own criticality. It found that institutions and their staff fail to practise what they preach. The strident messages exhorting students to be more critical or to show evidence of critical thinking and writing seem hypocritical as HE staff show little evidence of critical thinking and understanding. Crucially, it found that inaccurate assumptions or cobwebs are lurking in the minds of some academic staff. This finding emerged through analysing comments uttered by some within the HE sector towards or about people who identify as Black and Global Majorities and about their academic abilities. These assumptions are like cobwebs composed of dusty thoughts and ideas, which this paper examined. These cobwebs not only indicate that the person harbouring and expressing their cobweb-trapped thoughts lack criticality but that they are practising racism. This paper has tried to put the spotlight on intentional or possibly unintentional utterances and has tried to understand the attitudes and assumptions implied. Significantly, in analysing the utterances I have established that these are connected to the racial structures and systems that enable these racist thoughts to emerge and to spread.

Several studies have investigated the experiences of staff and students who identify as Black and Global Majorities, and these studies have found that the derogatory attitudes and assumptions within academia can thwart the progress and performance of staff and students who identify as Black and Global Majorities, can undermine their confidence, and/or affect their mental health. Given these findings and given that derogatory perceptions continue, as the utterances under investigation reveal, HEIs should be committed to acknowledging and addressing the racial roots of these utterances, but they fail to do so. Instead, they roll out unconscious bias trainings, set up EDI committees and take other superficial steps so that the image of the institution acquires a halo of anti-racism, but the racist structure stays in place and racist culture and practices continue. The token gestures are window dressing and indicate an unwillingness to disrupt racial myths about the superiority of the dominant white ethnic group. Both the false assumptions and the unwillingness to examine and address these are produced by and in turn reinforce racist structures. This paper has argued that these superficial measures that leave the racist system intact would be ineffective in tackling racism, as racial structures need to be dismantled.

More significantly, the reluctance of HEIs to address racism whilst pretending to do so strongly indicates both interest convergence as well as white supremacy. Half-hearted gestures

allow HEIs to reap the benefits of pretending to dismantle racism without relinquishing their false beliefs in white superiority. It logically follows that the absence of CT of some HE staff is deliberate, part of the racial architecture of HE, and serves to maintain this racialised structure. The uncritical utterances or cobwebs of white HE staff are ideologically intended to maintain their fundamentally flawed White supremacist positions and to devalue and diminish people who identify as Black and Global Majorities.

If HEIs were committed to addressing racism, they would engage in anti-racism education that could contribute to revealing the racial structures of HE and the hierarchy therein. Occasional workshops to raise the critical awareness of HE staff have little value; instead, this awareness has to be sustained through ongoing reflection, attention to racialised power structures, and action to transform racialised power hierarchies in HE. The key steps would be: acknowledging that there is a problem to be addressed; recognising the pain and burden of racial trauma that Black staff and students bear; analysing institutional cultures and practices; reflecting on thoughts, words, deeds and false assumptions; understanding that there are no instant solutions; and engaging in constant learning and unlearning.

The above steps are necessary to identify the ideological bases of utterances, as the aim is not to merely discard false assumptions or clear cobwebs, but to dismantle the racial structure. Unwavering commitment and action could transform HE by developing staff and students' confidence to courageously challenge racism thus creating an anti-racist culture, allowing anti-racist practices to prevail, and preventing racial assumptions or cobwebs from taking hold in higher educational spaces.

Notes on contributor

Dr. Chrissie Da Costa is an experienced educator and researcher. She is committed to transforming structures, cultures and practices that marginalise some people and silence some voices. She hopes to continue learning and working collaboratively with like-minded colleagues towards dismantling barriers of “race”, class, caste, gender, religion and language that exist in higher education.

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