

The business school is racist: Act up!

Organization
2021, Vol. 28(4) 695–706
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DOI: 10.1177/1350508420928521
journals.sagepub.com/home/org



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Abstract

In this essay, we call upon our fellow scholars of colour to recognise the ways Business Schools are structured by white supremacy and actively de-value our knowledge and experiences. Alongside this recognition, collective action led by scholars of colour is needed to build intergenerational support systems which will be key to dismantling racialised power structures as they appear locally and transnationally. White scholars are invited to listen and learn from this call.

Keywords

Anti-racism, critical race theory, collective action, scholar-activism, white supremacy

I wake up to the news that yet another Black person has been killed. Philando Castile, a 32-year-old man, was fatally shot by a police officer in Falcon Heights, Minnesota after being pulled over. I feel sick. I arrive at the conference in the morning and present my paper on white supremacy to a small crowd. At the end of my talk, a white male professor whose work I have admired raises his hand and asks, ‘Aren’t you making too much of race? Does it even really matter in this day and age?’

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Introduction

Capitalism is racist (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Davis, 1971; Lorde, 2017) and the educational institutions that reproduce its ideology require rigorous critique, material challenge and co-ordinated collective action to build a movement for anti-racist scholar-activism. From its inception until today, capitalism in all its forms (colonial, slave, mercantile, financial, market, information) has used racist logic to demarcate superior white humanity from deficient Black non-humans, distributing wealth along a racialised scale of human value (Mills, 1997). In Business Schools, the racist foundations of capitalism have been largely ignored, while their expansion, in terms of student numbers, student fees, faculty, and international campuses, has led scholars to question the ethics of chiefly serving white groups (Grimes, 2001; Nkomo, 1992; Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014; Swan, 2017). In the present mire of climate emergency, hardening national borders and intensifying racial violence, this essay is an urgent call for scholars of colour to collectively act up to radically challenge the white supremacist nature of Business Schools, even as it plays out differently in local contexts.¹

The notion of white supremacy helps us understand racialised relations and structures within Business Schools. White supremacy is a system of power that maintains a strong positive orientation to white superiority based on arbitrary classifications, reinforcing white power and privilege through everyday and institutional racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Deitch et al., 2003; Essed, 1991; Feagin, 2013; Hill, 2009; Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014). Whiteness is thus not understood as a biological essence within white people, nor does it reside in 'unconscious bias' (see Tate and Page, 2018), but is a regime of power that normalises white dominance and subordinates people of colour (Mills, 1997).

Management and Organisation Studies (MOS) scholars cannot afford to ignore the terrifying resurgence of white supremacist ideology, given our involvement in (re)producing and promoting racist capitalist scholarship. In the Global North/West,² this ideology has manifested with the election of Donald Trump in the United States and Brexit in the United Kingdom, precipitating a rise in race-based violence (Burnett, 2017; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2017), the entrenchment of governance structures reproducing racialised climate injustice (Sealey-Huggins, 2018), and a hostile environment for immigration (Bowling and Westenra, 2018) supported by mainstream and social media (Ibrahim, 2018). We see these developments as intensified extensions of the historical impoverishment of Black and Brown communities for the benefit of white hegemony and wealth. Yet, critical engagement with the racism of capitalism conflicts with a 'post-race' discourse pervading both business practice and education, wherein the continued salience of race is ignored even by those on the critical left.

Critical race and decolonising scholars have long offered insights into the ways that macroeconomic structures of the past 500 years precipitate racialised contemporary realities. These scholars have theorised the historical formation of race (HoSang et al., 2012; Omi and Winant, 1994) and expounded the systemic, intractable, ubiquitous and relentless mechanisms of white supremacy (Anzaldúa, 1987; Bhabha, 1998; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; DuBois, 2005; Hall, 1997; hooks, 1989; Ifekwunigwe, 1998; Mohanty, 2003; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1983; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Despite this rich intellectual history, management and organisation studies remain broadly disengaged from these debates (Nkomo, 1992). In this tradition, we draw attention to the Business School's complicity in perpetuating ignorance. We call for collective anti-racist scholar-activism in the form of knowledge production, theorising and community-building. We call for the amplification and heeding of voices of people of colour who have theorised their oppression to build a foundation from which to take action.

As we write and refine this piece, we recall the problematic history of scholars in the Global North/West universalising their experiences, and our reproduction of this. This history, and its formation in the present, continually erases Global South experiences and knowledge. Yet, the Global North/West is not the arbiter of knowledge. As scholars with lived experiences largely of these geographically dominant contexts, we must be careful not to speak for, or over, people in other locations – we must constantly challenge the tendency to universalise a ‘we’ beyond our own knowledge and lived experiences. Our engagement with scholars in the Global South must be securely rooted in our work beyond research, where writing about the struggles of those in contexts outside our experience can so often fall to appropriation of the ‘native informant’. Instead, we use our privileges as doctoral supervisors, conference convenors, workshop facilitators, and book and journal editors to de-centre white privilege and amplify the voices of our colleagues in the Global South. A transnational practice of solidarity in this era of neocolonialism is to work with Global South scholars as agents and thinkers in their own right. Although we, the authors, write from our own perspectives, we endeavour to hold ourselves accountable to Global South scholars and non-Western knowledge that disrupts hegemonic practices:³

I attended a workshop on inclusion in higher education. Each presentation was delivered by a white person. I felt increasingly disturbed and violated by the casual racism underscoring many of these presentations and the blatant exclusion of people of colour from the programme. The last presentation was given by a white woman who stated that ‘inner city diverse students’ need extra support because ‘they don’t know how to use intellectual language and have trouble with independent learning’. At that point, I got up and walked out. I could not bear to be part of this complicity where the speaker’s violence and deeply racist assumptions were accepted, lauded and normalised by the mostly white audience.

Forgetting in the white academy

Addressing racialised forms of exclusion requires that the white academy stops forgetting and instead engages with its past, and most importantly, its present continuities with violence. Engaging with its past requires white academia to recognise how the university continues to serve as an arm of the state, perpetuating and hardening borders that facilitate access, circulation and value of white knowledge at the expense of non-white people and our knowledge. Business Schools uphold white supremacy by perpetuating a racist logic that protects the idea of White nations at the cost of Black and Brown lives (Goldberg, 2006). The themes of recent management conferences, for example, have constructed Europe as distinctly *open* and *enlightened*, by implication reproducing a colonialist glorification of white knowledge (Wa Thiong’o, 1992).

Such amnesia manifests in our material working conditions through marginalisation, targeted monitoring, harassment and racialised-gendered inequalities in hiring, pay and promotion of global majority staff and students. Taking the United Kingdom as an example, while 86.9% of all UK academic staff are ‘White’, and 13.1% are people of colour (Quereshi, 2019), Black women comprise only 26 of the 19,000 professoriate (at the time of writing); across their roles in UK universities, they earn on average 39% less than white men (Croxford, 2018; Solanke, 2017). Beyond the institutional level, UK-based scholars of colour more broadly have seen their work excluded from government funded audits on a national scale (Stern, 2016). Our value to the institution (and therefore our right to remain in academia) is diminished by accounting techniques designed and administered by white groups in ways that favour them. Any pathways to seek material remediation for these conditions are grossly mitigated by university governance structures that fail to recognise such exclusions as racist (Dar and Rodriguez, 2019). With a cruel irony, many universities

in the white-dominated nations of the Global North/West tout equity policies and equality charters, which serve as alibis for the material realities of racism (Ahmed, 2012) and construct whiteness as moral authority entrusted to correct the unequal representation of ‘minorities’.

In the Business School specifically, knowledge production has erased race from business scholarship, resulting in the continued omission of the roles of Indigenous genocide, extractive settler-colonialism and Black chattel slavery in contemporary capital accumulation and wealth disparity (Cooke, 2003; see also Yusoff, 2018). In 1992, Stella Nkomo published her incisive critique of the business management field (see also Nkomo, 1988). Her analysis reveals the dominance of white male knowledge in organisation studies that inflects the canon with a Eurocentric ‘non-inclusive universalization’ (Nkomo, 1992: 489). She extrapolates how white knowledge is presented as the norm, benchmark and condition for ‘value-free’ research. By this ideological premise, race and difference is attributed to otherness, abnormality, or insignificance. White knowledge, thus, escapes critique because it is universalized, and the relevance of race to organisation studies is restricted to niche areas or sub-fields, such as postcolonial studies. Despite Nkomo’s brilliant argument, cited over 750 times, her central demand aimed at the field – to dismantle white male power over knowledge production – has been largely ignored.

Others, too, have attempted to dislodge the racist assumptions within MOS scholarship and the hegemony of Western canonical knowledge (Alcadipani et al., 2012; Banerjee, 2003; Banerjee and Linstead, 2004; Cooke, 2003; Dar, 2018a; Faria et al., 2010; Gantman et al., 2015; Grier et al., 2019; Ibarra-Colado, 2006; Liu, 2017; Liu and Baker, 2016; Mandiola, 2010; Mir and Mir, 2013; Nkomo, 2011; Prasad, 2003, 2015). These contributions provide alternative narratives and, in some cases, clear liberatory demands, but due to the persistent reproduction of white patriarchal capitalist knowledge regimes (Jones et al., 2018), they remain marginal or forgotten. Without these interventions, the amnesic proselytising of management scholarship perpetuates a racist political economy couched in the myth of meritocratic societies, comprised of abstract economic and entrepreneurial actors, for whom the pursuit of Western-style ‘development’ is a singular, unproblematic aim. This forms the basis of a militarised neo-colonial free-market business pedagogy, resulting in teaching curricula and research agendas that perpetuate the destabilisation of communities of colour and relationships of aid, debt and dependency on the Global North/West (Harvey, 2007; Klein, 2007; Lander, 1996).

We exist in societies that obscure the facts of white violence. People of colour are trying to survive in educational environments that treat our knowledge as not worth knowing (cf. Collins, 2000). Our curricula almost exclusively teach the opinions of white American and European men (Bhambra et al., 2018; Nkomo, 1992) and we learn to mimic their voices – the historical price of recognition as fully human, a perverse echo of the charming natives who adopt the masters’ ways. When we migrate, we learn to become fluent in the language of the powerful to ‘demonstrate’ our ability to speak. Likewise, we learn to become fluent in the language of white philosophers, citing Bourdieu, Giddens, Foucault, Derrida, Irigaray, Butler, to prove our ability to think. When we take seriously the philosophy of scholars of colour, our writings seemingly become illegible for many editors and reviewers. Articles citing hooks, Davis, Collins, Hartman, Hall and Moreton-Robinson are frequently read as ‘atheoretical’. The systematic exclusion of voices of colour produces solipsistic knowledge where white lives, interests and identities have come to define what is considered normal, legitimate and valuable social science (Nkomo, 1992).

The near wholesale omission of our knowledge from business management curricula reinforces to our students of colour that they, and their critique of the field, have no real place in the Business School. It also reproduces racist dichotomies between the supposedly knowing, well-governed North and the ignorant, corrupt South. Lionised in our research and curricula are white philosophers whose silences on race are palpable, and whose kernels of radicality have been whitewashed.

This perpetuates a devaluation of the intellectualism, critique and epistemes of intergenerational communities of colour (Alimahomed, 2010; Baca Zinn, 2012; Collins, 1986; Faifua, 2010). We cannot afford to wait and wish that this will somehow dramatically change; yet we cannot dismantle white supremacy as long as capitalism structures higher education. Given these stark parameters, we now explore the possibilities for collective action to resist assimilation into white structures:

A student comes seeking dissertation advice; she's thinking of studying for a PhD. We start a search on the department website for potential supervisors to approach and meanwhile she spots 'anti-racism' on a poster in my office. 'Racism', she says. 'That's so interesting. I didn't know that we could study this in business and management'. She tells me how she and other students from China on her course had quickly become alienated among their peers in the first weeks of term – having been tasked with working in teams, they found little patience among classmates to listen to their preferences on how to organise work, and when and where to meet, much less given space to articulate their ideas. 'They say that we are lazy and rude'.

Navigating the borderlands of scholar-activism

The slivers of our experiences shared throughout this piece illustrate the subtle and slippery ways racism saturates our lives and workplaces. We attempt to remember and resist them, despite the challenges of doing so from within (Suzuki and Mayorga, 2014). The ubiquitous racist structures cannot be fully seen nor addressed alone, so we navigate the borderlands in search of each other. Following Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) theorising of the borderlands, we recognise our own positionalities between multiple, sometimes conflicting, worlds: as migrants, children of migrants, non-Black women of colour, scholars and activists. In our institutions, where it is always risky to speak out against white supremacy, we hold roles of varying precarity; we, therefore, continuously negotiate our locations within whiteness and the ways that our knowledge production and working conditions are shaped by it. Existing and struggling in these 'in-between' and shifting spaces are how we develop knowledge about the fault lines of power.

We found our starting point in the cracks and fissures of white supremacy by working in activist spaces in the margins of universities. If these spaces did not exist, we built them through a deep involvement with anti-racist philosophy and by working with student communities of colour. We asked ourselves: *What do we want to see? How do we want to feel?*⁴ These questions are premised on a desire to relate differently to each other as we work with a politics of refusal, in which we reject the preordained academic narrative of competition, individualistic careerism and the automation-like compulsion to produce outputs at any cost. We continually challenge this careerist narrative through the process of collectivising and becoming accountable to each other in ways that are inconceivable to white academia.

Anti-racist practice operates in ways that embrace extra-capitalist, non-white, anti-casteist pursuits. We reclaim forms of knowledge marginalised in and by the academy, sparking change from the de-centred non-white. Anti-racist scholar-activists use materials capable of overturning racial logics centring whiteness – critical theory, political dialogue, visual, musical, poetic and performed art, Indigenous feminist medicine, ancestral non-European knowledge. This endeavour is locally contextualised, and as we write and organise from the Global North/West, we do so in dialogue with colleagues in the Global South/East who confront different conditions of racism, racialisation and the hegemony of white supremacy (da Conceição and Spink, 2013; Mandiola, 2013).

Because navigating the marginal spaces of the borderlands offers opportunities for both engagements and refusals of traditional scholarly practices, here we would like to acknowledge the inherent contradiction of producing this Acting Up piece. Academic publications can so easily become the sole purpose and outcome of individual careerism masquerading as scholar-activism. Admittedly, we benefit professionally and materially from publishing this article when we remain employed in white institutions that will more likely recognise our interventions as legitimate when they are couched within high-ranking journal articles. The benefits we might enjoy from engaging in traditional scholarly practices, such as writing this essay together, are often fleeting when we must return to white academia that subordinates, excludes and marginalises women of colour. The return prompts a harsh affective shift that reminds us that our bodies are out of place (Hurston, 2000; Puwar, 2004) and our interventions, rather than being welcomed into white spaces, are often marked as potentially dangerous:

To combat a so-called epidemic of plagiarism, our university purchased software to compare writing samples and produce an estimation of the likelihood that the samples were written by the same author. An incoming policy will require academics to collect writing samples from students under the guise of formative assessment, and use them to monitor for academic misconduct. Hundreds of students, predominantly from China, will undergo this surveillance so misconduct cases 'do not devalue the degree'. The 'yellow peril' theme underlying this response, and the exorbitant fees that will continue to be accepted from students who are not ready to study in English but are admitted to the university, are left unaddressed.

Our bodies are on the line

Within the white academy, our bodies are rendered vulnerable and contested. As space invaders (Puwar, 2004), our bodies come into conflict with its structures in ways that take a toll on our mental and physical health. The harm on our bodies is felt in the nauseating anxiety as we gather up the courage to tell our manager that they are exploiting colleagues of colour in precarious contracts, the hours of overtime put in to develop repeated applications for promotion, with little hope of them being accepted, and the reading and rereading of our email to the Dean asking why yet another candidate of colour was passed over for recruitment. The pain is in the crossed arms and frowns of a conference audience and the influential professor who whispers 'troublemaker' to those around him, and in the venomous review, we receive from an anonymous peer whose mind snapped shut at our first use of the phrase 'racism'. It is in the shuns we receive from colleagues, who stop inviting us for lunch when we have spoken up for students of colour too often at department meetings, in the silence when it is always only our voices speaking out, and in the emotional labour of absorbing the anger and deflections of defensiveness, or soothing tears of awakening. Yet, we return to put our bodies on the line with the intention of resisting white structures, while knowing that the potential for co-optation or retaliation against us is possible. Experiences of safety and wholeness at work are found in spaces of our own making, and tentatively introduced into environments where their welcome is uncertain.

The racialised non-white body is potently valuable and desirable to whiteness, while our knowledge is not (Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury, 2018). Our bodies, our scholarship and our activism are not separable, but they are (en)forced apart in white patriarchal capitalist academia. Our visibility presents opportunities for white institutions to make claims about their progressive, inclusive values. We see our bodies extracted for value in university prospectuses, promotional posters, and advertising campaigns. Our strategic appointments to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) committees lend legitimacy to charter marks, accreditations and targets. Such EDI efforts produce

value for white supremacy. They were never intended to deconstruct white power, and thus cannot ensure safety for people of colour nor sustain our activism.

Anti-racist scholar-activists seek to reformulate existing templates for what is possible in theory and practice, through a continuous, everyday reflexivity (Johnson et al., 2019) that compels us both to bring our racialised bodies into our scholarship, and use our scholarship to ground our activism. When our bodies, scholarship and activism coalesce, we can act against the grain of Eurocentric non-inclusive universalisation. Fundamental to reflexive anti-racist practice is vigilance about the ways whiteness may ambush anti-racist intentions and interventions. Self- and collective-accountability in our communities make resistance to white supremacy possible. Commitments are made to one another to be radically vulnerable, to learn, to take risks with trusted allies, to explicitly recognise and deal with our anti-Blackness, to stop working when costs are too great, to be *with* and *in* alterity, constructing spaces where scholarship and activism can become one and the same:

‘But we’re trying, we can’t be scared to say anything at all’, says my white colleague during a discussion about ‘intercultural communication’ in which I have shared my own experience of microaggressions. I respond, more gently and generously than the rebuff deserves, that yes, we need to do and try because that is all we have to enact change; but we also need to be prepared to be told we got it wrong and to learn to do better next time. She is solemn and mournful and isn’t listening.

Becoming good elders

We find ourselves looking ahead to a bleak future in which climate catastrophe decimates communities of colour (Sealey-Huggins, 2018) and global far-right alliances leverage the digital to consolidate political influence and white wealth. This is the future in which the next generation of scholars will emerge and in which we will become elders. Connecting the past, present and future, we therefore aim to build intergenerational support systems that can ensure our survival. This can only be accomplished by cultivating anti-racist communities of colour in the Business School and the broader white academe, and practicing the radical act of simply living our truths and centring our knowledge (Pow, 2018).

There is no more time for polite debate, niceties and engagement with white governance structures – we need agile activism that agitates for transformation. In this call to our community, we wish to open a dialogue with fellow scholars of colour on what it means for us to take action and the principles on which our actions need to be based. This dialogue should lead to differentiated action on the basis of positionality, and local and regional histories, with people in positions of privilege relative to whiteness working to listen, centre and amplify the experiences and critiques of more marginalised people. Layla Saad (2018) offers the concept of a ‘good ancestor . . . to help create change, facilitate healing, and seed new possibilities for those who will come after I am gone’ (p. 14). We extend this with the idea of becoming *good elders*, those with a commitment to build and model transformative spaces that, at least temporarily, level power dynamics among students, administrative staff and academics to create and cherish collective methodologies for survival. We do this for ourselves as well as for those who come with us, and those who come after us.

With the guidance of our own anti-racist elders who offer advice both directly and through their writing, we work towards becoming good elders ourselves. We see the students of colour in our discipline, who in the United Kingdom make up the highest proportion only after medicine and law (Dar, 2018b; UUK, 2015b), struggle as their experiences are erased or denied (BreakThrough!, 2018; see also Ahmed et al., 2019). We try to bring them up with us into the academic pipeline and to lend our armour to them when they inevitably face the racist forces of the Business School. The


good elder helps to make racism thinkable and speakable on campus, empowers our students with intellectual frameworks to understand it, to advocate for students of colour, to hear them and to validate their experiences as real. Our students seek and generate this knowledge outside of the academy in other communities, including social media. Good elders need to engage with these spaces and to value them as part of a wider activist network that can work against capitalist economies (see Sobande et al., 2020).

Being good elders also requires that we become custodians of our communities in ways that exercise ongoing reflexive accountability with one another. Within our own communities of colour, anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity mean non-Black and non-Indigenous people of colour gain from white structures. This privilege needs to be considered, rejected, and/or leveraged as necessary in solidarity with Black and Indigenous people. We must all engage in continuous collective self-reflection on our differentiated racial, class, gender, cis-heteronormative and able-bodied privileges, and deferment of our own defensiveness and self-promotion. Centring accountability and reflexivity will strengthen the anti-racist community against efforts that attempt to erase or assimilate us. We need to work to challenge and change discourses that serve to 'fix' people of colour so that we may shape the depth and direction of our own narratives. Being a good elder is to fight together for the very possibility of transformation, for creative spaces, new imaginaries and hope. It is to ensure the next generation of business scholars of colour will not merely survive, but live, learn and work in environments that sustain their knowledge and desire their truth.


Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. We are aware that some readers of this piece would expect this essay to contain specific strategies of anti-racism that they can adopt to challenge white supremacy in the Business School. While we recognise there is an urgency for answers in these hostile times, we would contend that leaps to institutional action are premature and that solutions will not emerge from this approach. For an excellent critique that specifically addresses what white people should do, see Swan (2017).
2. Simple analytical distinctions between Global North/South, West/East are, of course, precluded by each nation's specific socio-economic history of stratification and relationship to whiteness, but also by globalised governmental and corporate alliances that constitute a geopolitical system of racial capitalism that is anti-Black, casteist, anti-Indigenous and Islamophobic (Ackerman, 2018; Beckett, 2018; Caldwell et al., 2018; Carmody, 2016; Conde, 2018; Osuri, 2019). While the global manifestations of white supremacy and racialised ideologies of superiority deserve analysis, the purpose of this article is to focus on Business Schools and the white polity governing communities of colour located in white-dominated regions.
3. We thank Reviewer 1, in particular, for raising this point and consistently holding us to account throughout the review process.
4. These questions were formed based on our discussions of Tate's (2017) and Tate and Bagguley's (2017) work that identifies how affective relationalities structure racist institutional spaces. Working with affective relationalities foregrounds a fundamental dimension of anti-racist work, potent for transforming university spaces into conduits for developing racial justice.

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The authors are members of Building the Anti-Racist Classroom collective. BARC is an international collective of women of colour scholar activists who came together in 2017. We aim to build anti-racist pedagogic communities of students and university workers through sustained collective organizing, collaboration and radical thinking. Our practice is led by our commitments to critical feminist theory, critical race studies and decolonizing frameworks. We are part of the Decolonizing Alliance initiative that seeks to invigorate activism across universities around the world. Please visit us at <https://barcworkshop.org/>.