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RACIAL POLITICS AND THE POSTRACIAL UNIVERSITY

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In the summer of 2020, it seemed like racial politics had a clear impact on universities, as the murder of George Floyd set off protests by Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements in the US and other countries. The protests also reinvigorated existing student movements to "decolonize the university" in North America and the UK, calling for institutional recognition and accountability for historic links with the transatlantic slave trade and colonial empire. But politics had also been relevant to university life over the years preceding the protests, as conservative politicians and governments, as well as white supremacist "alt-right" groups, supported moral panics about free speech and academic freedom at universities. This combination forms the context for contemporary racial politics in and across western countries such as the US, UK, France, and Canada, among others.

In this paper, I examine how racial politics affects whiteness in universities through the relationship between racialized bodies, ideas and spaces. The university is situated within white colonial and settler colonial projects that underpin the nation in the UK, US and Canada, respectively. While the institutional whiteness of universities reflects these structural conditions of whiteness in society, it is also more flexible and dynamic in the present. In this context, I consider postracial whiteness in the university, drawing on two incidents in the UK and Canada, respectively. I argue that the discourse of academic freedom is mobilized amid contemporary racial politics to do postracial work in universities, drawing on Sara Ahmed's (2007; 2019) work on whiteness and the university and David Theo Goldberg's (2015) theorization of the postracial. I make a distinction between what academic freedom is and what the discourse of academic freedom does, focusing on the latter as a tool that is used to make a claim to the postracial while asserting the logic of whiteness.[1] It is a form of resistance both to the presence of racialized faculty and students

[1] It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss what academic freedom is or ought to be, though it opens up another question, as the editor noted: how does academic freedom itself do postracial work in the university, separate from the discourse about academic freedom? This question implies that academic freedom has its own content that would allow it to do postracial work (or not), which is different from what

in the university and their naming and making coloniality and racism explicit as part of current racial politics.

In the first part of this paper, I lay out the theoretical framework by discussing how whiteness in society (Mills 1997) is related to whiteness in universities (Ahmed 2007; 2019) and the role of the postracial (Goldberg 2015) through the relationship between bodies, spaces and ideas. In the second part of this paper, I analyze the two examples, one at a British university in 2018 and the second at a Canadian university in 2020, to illustrate this idea. Lastly, in the third part, I discuss the significance of contemporary racial politics to these two cases.

WHITENESS

The racial contract describes the relationship between white and non-white groups that underpins whiteness as a political system, as well as an epistemological one. Whiteness is a system of racial privilege of white groups over non-white groups with material outcomes that benefit white groups. The racial contract was used to justify genocide of Indigenous communities in the Americas, transatlantic slavery, and European colonialism in other parts of the world from 1492 until post World War II (Mills 1997, 21). The structure of European colonialism was built on the racialized hierarchy between white European colonizers over the non-white, non-European colonized, justifying not only political rule but also the extraction of material resources from the colonies and sent back to benefit the colonizers. Although colonial and white settler societies have moved from an explicitly colonial racial order in the past to an implicit racialized hierarchy in the present, the racial contract and its logic persists.

The foundation of the university reflects the colonial conditions of white societies, particularly their direct and indirect ties to slavery and colonialism. British and North American universities were built for the privileged—primarily men—in society. These universities provided an education for men who owned land and property (including enslaved people) who would go on to take up leadership positions in the government, the British colonial empire, or the Church (Collini 2018, 17; Wilder 2013). Colleges and universities benefited from the profits generated by slavery and colonialism. For example, at Jesus College, University of Cambridge, wealthy donors were merchants whose wealth came from the slave trade, as well as sugar and cotton. The College also had students from plantation families in the Caribbean and/or who had connections to the slave trade.

the discourse does. However, I would suggest that academic freedom as a principle isn't weighted, by itself, in one direction or another, but operates within the contexts and structures of the university. Thus, while academic freedom is important in and to the university, the emphasis remains on the analysis of how the postracial and whiteness work together to maintain a hegemonic status quo; academic freedom can further it, or not. For more on this topic, see the contributions in Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt and Kakali Bhattacharya (2021).

Their tuition fees and living expenses, derived from these sources, indirectly benefited the institution (Jesus College 2019, 7).

Colonial histories are part of the location of universities. Many Canadian universities are located on unceded Indigenous territory, referring to territory that was appropriated by the Canadian government from the Indigenous peoples who have lived there since before English or French colonial settlers arrived. Reflection on the implications of this past and present relationship between the Canadian government, universities, and Indigenous peoples is part of the Calls to Action highlighted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015). Land acknowledgements, offered at the introduction of university events, name the specific Indigenous communities who have lived and currently live in the unceded territory of the province and city where the university is located. They recognize the past as part of the present, indicating that the establishment of the university was not the beginning of the history of the area (CAUT n.d.). While some have criticized land acknowledgements as formulaic and performative actions (Deer 2021), the very act of naming indicates the settler colonial roots of the university and society in Canada.

These links between universities, colonialism and slavery are a way of emphasizing that whiteness is not only part of how universities come to be, but also how they continue to be. The 2020 protests by anti-racism and BLM supporters focused public attention and anger towards the uncritical veneration of slaveowners and colonial merchants as founding patrons and donors to educational and civic institutions. The tearing down of their statues in places as far apart as Toronto, Canada and Bristol, UK was both a physical and symbolic response, standing in for an interrogation of the enduring ties between slavery, white supremacy and colonial histories and reinforcing calls to decolonize the university (Rhodes Must Fall Movement 2018).[2]

WHITE BODIES, WHITE SPACES

Whiteness in society is constituted through the privilege attributed to white bodies to take up and own space. In contrast, the presence of non-whites within these spaces generates tension (Mills 1997, 53). Sara Ahmed (2007) builds on Mills's ideas to address how the orientation of bodies and spaces constitutes whiteness in the university. She argues that institutional whiteness is shaped through the habitual comfort that comes out of the proximity of white bodies in relation to each other. White bodies both produce and extend

[2] In Toronto, a petition to remove the statue of Egerton Ryerson, Ryerson University's founder, was circulated, calling attention to his role in establishing Canada's residential schools. In Bristol, the statue of Edward Colston was toppled by BLM protestors and dumped into the harbor. In Oxford, in June 2020, Oriel College voted to remove the status of Cecil Rhodes and to appoint an independent commission to look into the issues surrounding him and the statue. The original call to remove the statue had come in 2015 by the student-led Rhodes Must Fall movement, but at the time, the university did not support its removal.

white spaces in the university. In contrast, non-white bodies become disruptions in them (Ahmed 2007, 157; Jamil 2022, 24).

Focusing on the constitutive relationship between bodies and spaces through "use" and "fit," Ahmed argues that universities are meant to be used by those who are perceived to best fit into it. This is not an accidental outcome, but something that is created intentionally and then reinforced over time (Jamil 2022, 25). "Institutions are built from small acts of use, from uses of use, from how building blocks put together, over time, become walls, walls that enable some bodies to enter, stay put, progress, others not" (Ahmed 2019, 191).

Institutional whiteness in universities is produced and maintained because white groups are readily perceived as belonging in it, while non-white groups are considered to not be a "good fit." But a "good fit" is contingent upon the space that already exists for one to fit into and to advance through the institution. Over the long term, institutional whiteness is collectively reproduced and maintained through the faculty body, made up of the people who are hired to teach there (Jamil 2022, 25). "An institution acquires the shape of those who have shaped it" (Ahmed 2019, 165).

While whiteness in universities is constituted and maintained through this relationship between bodies and spaces, I want to consider the specific role of universities as intellectual spaces and, in particular, the epistemic authority of whiteness. Mills reminds us that the racial contract is maintained in part through a worldview that privileges and normalizes whiteness. It sets the terms for "what counts as correct, objective interpretation of the world" (Mills 1997, 18). This includes what counts as knowledge about the world, who has the capacity to know it, and who is deemed to lack that capacity (Jamil 2022, 25).

These elements can be historically and politically contingent, as what is considered to be legitimate, important, and authoritative knowledge changes over time. For example, the study of eugenics was once considered to be an acceptable area of academic study, important for its justification of transatlantic slavery and, later, European colonialism. Francis Galton, considered to be the "father of eugenics," was an important figure in University College London's (UCL) history in the late 19th century. He left money to the university, which funded the first Chair and first department of eugenics in the world at the time. In 2019, an inquiry was launched into the university's role in propagating and supporting the eugenics movement, with a final report released in 2020 to address this institutional history (University College London 2020).

In academia, the epistemic authority of whiteness is reflected in the Eurocentrism of what constitutes the canon, which is often built on the work of white, male scholars. However, students are questioning the Eurocentrism and predominantly white, western, epistemic orientation of their disciplines across British universities. For example, in 2014, there was a student campaign called "Why is my curriculum white?" (UCL 2014). More recently, there are campaigns and debate focused on what it means to "decolonize the curriculum" at different universities (Sabaratnam 2017; Etienne 2019). These campaigns are situated within broader politics of neoliberalism in higher education, turning students into customers and higher education into a product for consumption. However, they also reflect how whiteness in universities is an ongoing intellectual and epistemic project.

POSTRACIAL

Whiteness is part of the social and political conditions within which British and North American universities were created and within which they continue to operate today. It is also connected to the postracial, imagined as a product of the white liberal imagination (Hesse 2021; Jamil 2022, 26).

The idea of the postracial is based on two main points. First, that "race" and racial discrimination are "over," as a result of a long, linear history of social and political progress. If racial discrimination is an issue at all today, it "is anomalous and individually expressed" (Goldberg 2015, 2). In other words, racist individuals can be characterized as "bad" people who can, in theory, be corrected and taught to not be racist. They confirm the normative position of "good white people," reinforcing a liberal view of "race" and racism in a postracial society (Sullivan 2014).

Nevertheless, despite the end of racism, the racial logic of society continues to exist. As Goldberg (2015) argues:

> What the claim about postraciality as the end of race suggests, rather, is simply that a certain way of thinking about race, and implicitly of racist expression, has given way to novel understandings, orders, and arrangements of racial designation and racist expression. (6)

Thus, while the postracial may claim that "race" and racism are over, this denial is what allows it to continue to do racial work (4). The concept of the postracial echoes Mills in gesturing to both the invisibility and hegemonic power of whiteness as constitutive of the racial contract in society. In universities, the postracial makes it possible to uphold whiteness as a racial logic by not naming it and furthermore, protects whiteness from attack by calling it something else (Jamil 2022, 26). This creates the space for a discourse on academic freedom to be mobilized to uphold institutional whiteness, as illustrated in the following two examples in the UK and Canada.

BRITISH COLONIAL NOSTALGIA AND THE JUSTIFICATION FOR EMPIRE

Since 2016, the public debate on Brexit opened up discussion on what the role of Britain has been and should be on the world stage in relation to its domestic (national) relationships to the formerly colonized peoples who are now citizens. It has catalyzed academic controversy on the study of British empire and colonial nostalgia. While there are many scholars involved in this intellectual project, in 2018, it took the form of a public disagreement between Nigel Biggar, a senior white male professor in theology at Oxford University, and Priyamvada Gopal, a postcolonial studies professor in the English department at Cambridge University, over Biggar's Ethics and Empire project.

In September 2017, Bruce Gilley (Portland State University) published an article titled "The Case for Colonialism" in the journal *Third World Quarterly*. As the title indicates, he argued that Western colonialism brought benefits to the colonized, rather than being harmful. He faced criticism from those who believed that it disregarded the existing scholarship on how destructive colonialism was to the colonized (Robinson 2017). Fifteen members of the Editorial Board resigned in protest against the journal editor's decision to override the blind peer review process and to publish the article anyway (Flaherty 2017; Dawes 2017). Although the journal first defended its decision by laying out the steps in its peer review process, it later withdrew the article (Taylor and Francis Online 2017a; 2017b).

Writing in support of Gilley's views a few months later in November 2017, Biggar (2017) published an op-ed article titled "Don't Feel Guilty about Our Colonial History" in *The Times* newspaper in the UK. It built on Gilley's argument, proposing that the "good" parts of British colonialism should not be overlooked out of a misplaced sense of shame and national guilt.

Biggar was talking about his own research as much as Gilley's. Earlier that year, Biggar's five-year project on Ethics and Empire, hosted by the McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics, & Public Life at Oxford University, had had its first workshop (Murphy 2018). The project proposed to consider the "good and bad sides" in order to articulate, according to the Centre, a "nuanced and historically intelligent Christian ethic of empire" (McDonald Centre, n.d.). When this project became known as part of the publicity generated by Biggar's November *Times* article, a number of scholars at Oxford and other universities criticized it for its weak scholarly and methodological arguments (McDougall et al. 2017).

Among these academics was a Cambridge professor with expertise in postcolonial studies, Priya Gopal. On Twitter, she described it as "outright racist imperial apologetics" (Lodhia 2018). She was part of a group that drafted and signed an open letter opposing Biggar's position, that was published on December 21, 2017. It stated:

> The "balance sheet" approach to empire is rooted in the self-serving justifications of imperial administrators, attempting to balance out the violence committed in the name of empire with its supposed benefits. It has long since lost its scholarly legitimacy, as research has instead moved to trace the actions which occurred in the name of empire in their complexity through time. (Wilson 2017)

A few months later, on April 10, 2018, Biggar (2018) published another newspaper article in which he criticized Gopal's Twitter comments about his proposed project as "vile abuse." It became the opening for a personal attack published a few days later, on April 12, 2018, by Guy Adams in the *Daily Mail* newspaper. He singled out Gopal with the headline "How CAN Cambridge let this hate-filled don pour out her racist bile?" and presented Biggar as a victim of her "left wing nastiness" (Chye 2018). It led to a deluge of hate mail and attacks on social media from Biggar's supporters and other right wing free speech proponents who joined in the fray (Chye 2018). Gopal recognized the racist dimensions of the attack on her,

calling it a "racist and sexist hatchet job" (Lodhia 2018), given that she was the only non-white female professor targeted among the many scholars, both white and non-white, who had criticized Biggar's project publicly.

In addition to complaining about Gopal in the media, Biggar also registered complaints against her to her College in January 2018, and again in April, that she was impinging on his academic freedom and should be sanctioned for it. They did not take any action against her, and issued a generic statement supporting the importance of free speech (Churchill College Cambridge 2018; Gillespie 2018). Gopal criticized the statement put out by Churchill College for not going far enough to defend her. She stated that if she had been a "white, centrist/conservative and ideally, a full professor," both Cambridge University and Churchill College would have taken a stronger position in support of her, especially addressing the charges of racism (Gillespie 2018). While the official university response may have been lukewarm, students at Cambridge and other universities in Britain organized in her support (Gopal 2018).

This case highlights multiple points about the institutional whiteness of universities, the postracial, and the mobilization of the discourse of academic freedom. First, there is the racism of a deliberate public and personal attack against Gopal by a white male senior academic, facilitated by British newspapers, and followed through by social media supporters. It is a classic way of trying to silence her, trying to "put her in her place" as a racialized minority and a female professor, for speaking openly and critically. It mobilizes the trope of an "angry woman of color" to take away from the intellectual basis for her disagreement with him and reduces her to someone who does not "fit" (to use Ahmed's terminology), someone who does not "behave properly" (Gopal 2018).

There is also the implicit racism that Gopal points out in the institutional responses by Churchill College and Cambridge University. While they signal support for academic freedom, they also maintain a distance from her. Gopal's comment that if she had been a white male conservative professor, they would have taken a different stance, illustrates Ahmed's point about institutional whiteness that can function as a form of privilege for those whom the university is for.

Second, Biggar's attack is a response to intellectual criticism about his project, which he turned into a claim about academic freedom. This is where the postracial becomes visible. It deflects a problem of harassment and racism by a white male professor into a problem of academic freedom in which he is her victim. His claim that she impinged on his academic freedom is in fact a claim to a position of dominance rather than victimhood. It is a claim of whiteness as the unfettered privilege of a senior white male academic to say and do what he wants; in this case, to ignore scholarly disagreements pointing to the weakness of his argument.

Since the postracial favors individuals over systems, it makes Gopal "the problem" as a woman of color and as an individual faculty member because she named the racism and sexism against her (Ahmed 2015, 8). Gopal becomes "the problem" for naming the problem, rather than the institutional white privilege that continues to maintain the

positions of white male academics. Neither his project at Oxford University, nor his academic position, was affected by Gopal's comments.

Lastly, postracial whiteness extends also to the topic of the project itself. It maintains the power and invisibility of the epistemic authority of whiteness, which allows Biggar and his colleagues to make a pseudo-academic argument about "the good of colonialism." Colonialism is an expression of the racial contract (Mills 1997, 20). The British Empire was a global project of extraction and exploitation of resources, skewed in favor of the colonizers. By re-presenting colonialism as a "moral balancing" exercise, as Biggar and Gilley have done, the postracial recenters whiteness as invisible and reinforces the immensely negative and far-reaching impact of coloniality today.

I want to consider the implications of British colonial nostalgia argument in the context of contestation over the perceived disciplinary value of postcolonialism as a field of study. As historian Kim Wagner (2020) argues, this argument aligns with the colonial view of British Empire at the time as a force for good, spreading civilization to the "natives" and bringing them into modern times. It was based on a linear understanding of civilizational progress, from the dark ages into white/Western light: "The idea of progress and historical providence sustained the imperial project, providing a powerful moral alibi that has never really lost its grip on the British imagination" (Wagner 2020). Viewed from this perspective, decolonization and anti-colonial movements are seen as an aberration, not a moral challenge to the "good" of the British empire. This "means that critical scholarship exploring, for example, racialized violence, or revealing links to slavery, is all too often dismissed simply as 'biased' or 'woke'—not because it is factually incorrect, but because it challenges the very worldview that so many take for granted" (Wagner 2020). Or, in other words, because it challenges the epistemic authority of whiteness through which the racial contract endures in society today.

This example illustrates the contestation of the university as an intellectual space within contemporary politics and adds weight to the following questions: How was the university created? Who is the university for? Who can belong there? Who cannot? Going back to Sara Ahmed's work, extending the relationship between space, bodies, and ideas as constitutive of whiteness in the university, I am suggesting that this is also a political project in addition to an intellectual one. It does not exist in a vacuum, but is a response not only to whiteness within academia but also to racial politics within society. In the UK, Brexit forms the backdrop against which this example is meaningful.

The second case took place a few years later in Canada, at the University of Ottawa in September 2020, in the context of post-George Floyd's murder and summer of global BLM protests.

ANTI-BLACKNESS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

In the fall of 2020, in her class on Art and Gender at the University of Ottawa, Prof. Verushka Lieutenant-Duval used the N-word as part of a discussion about how words

that are used as insults have been reappropriated by the targeted community. She also used "queer" and "cripple" as examples of words that have been resignified through queer theory and crip theory, respectively. After class, a student wrote to her to say that they had been offended by her use of the N-word. She apologized and invited the student to open up a class discussion on whether it was okay to use the term as part of academic discussions on specific topics. The student posted this exchange on Twitter, expressing their unhappiness with the situation. As the tweet went viral, it quickly turned the issue into a matter of public and media interest (Holland and Dutil 2020).

The University of Ottawa suspended Dr. Lieutenant-Duval for a short time as a disciplinary measure. A group of thirty-four francophone academics from University of Ottawa published a public letter in her support on October 16, 2020, arguing that her academic freedom as a professor was being violated. They argued that students should not be able to censor the texts that are studied in the classroom. Students must develop academic inquiry and critical thinking skills by engaging with all materials, whether offensive or not, in line with the purpose of academic freedom in the university (Le Droit Numerique 2020). This was followed a few days later by a second public letter in the newspaper *Le Devoir*, signed by almost 600 predominantly white francophone professors in Ontario and Quebec, calling on the University of Ottawa to protect academic freedom.

These letters inspired a petition and statement written by twenty-four members of the BIPOC Caucus of Professors and Librarians at University of Ottawa. They "unequivocally condemned the use of the N-word and the conversation on academic freedom that is being used to justify the use of this racist slur." They expressed support for Black students and called out anti-Black racism: "Black students deserve to go to university without having to hear derogatory terms about their communities or having the use of terms that dehumanize them being put up for a class debate." They pointed out that racial slurs are not acceptable to use in the name of academic freedom in the classroom, and that in fact, making this argument was "a silencing tactic that aggressively deters and discourages students from coming forward when they experience systemic racism on campus" (Recommendations by the BIPOC Caucus 2020).

Lastly, they concluded by calling on the University of Ottawa administration to take concrete measures to address anti-Black racism. A month later, in an update, they issued a series of detailed recommendations to address systemic racism and anti-Black racism across all areas of the University, including faculty hiring and tenure guidelines, curriculum, student support, data collection and reporting, among other areas.

Writing along the same lines, the University of Ottawa's Student Union President, Babacar Faye, expressed disappointment and sadness that Black students were the ones being blamed for speaking up about their discomfort in the classroom, when it is already well-known that the term in question is a racial slur (Faye 2020).

Analyzing the racialized dimension of this debate, Black activist and Montreal resident Will Prosper noted the predominantly white composition of the group of 579 academics who signed the public letter in *Le Devoir* supporting academic freedom (Prosper 2020). He suggested that this may indicate that the problem is more the majority's fear of the

loss of their position of white privilege, rather than the use of the N-word. He criticized their argument for claiming it was acceptable to disrespect Black students who are already marginalized in the university and in society in the name of academic freedom.

There are different elements of this situation which took on a life of their own when they hit the media, but I want to focus on how the discourse of academic freedom comes into play and what postracial work it does. The situation began with a class session where a student felt the professor's use of the N-word and subsequent handling of the situation was inappropriate and harmful to Black students. The mobilization of the public response centering academic freedom came later and was driven by other professors, not by Lieutenant-Duval, the professor of the particular class. Yet, it echoed and amplified her reasoning, which deflected the racial critique by favoring a different explanation for her teaching strategies.

The N-word is well-known, historically and in the present, for being used as a racial slur towards Black people. Lieutenant-Duval was aware of that, but stated that she was making an argument for how terms used pejoratively had been resignified by the targeted communities. While the comparison between the N-word and other terms might be debatable, her explanation centered the pedagogical importance of academic inquiry, and by extension her role and authority as professor over the students. In other words, while she did not explicitly claim academic freedom, she sought to diffuse the critique that as a white professor she should not be using the word by claiming that the academic purpose behind it was more important. In effect, it was another way of saying she was not a racist, or even a white professor. She was *only* a professor doing her job.

To be clear, the value of academic inquiry, or a professor's academic freedom in the classroom as part of her job, is not the issue. Rather, the issue is how and why this claim is mobilized at this moment to do postracial work. It deflects the naming of race and whiteness generally and racial critique of whiteness specifically, by Black students. They are making visible how the classroom, and by extension, the university, operates as a white space by saying why they are uncomfortable in it. The response to this naming was denial and deflection, which had the effect of recentering the authority of the professor as a white body in the university as a white space at the expense of Black students.

The two public letters published in French language newspapers in support of Lieutenant-Duval did not have to do with the subject of her course, but rather opened up a separate conversation by mobilizing Quebec history and literature as the litmus test for academic freedom. The question then is why was this topic significant? There are two reasons for this. The first is that the debate created by this incident took place primarily in the French news media and it involved primarily francophone professors, many of whom teach at Quebec colleges (known as cegeps in the province) and universities. Thus, French Quebecers' claim to the importance of Quebec history and literature is logical in this situation. The second reason has to do with the specific work that they referred to. They gave the example of the book by Pierre Vallières, published in 1965, whose French title uses the N-word, *Les N* blancs d'Amerique*. They suggested that censoring this book today because of its title would lead to a partial and corrupted view of Quebec's history and

political consciousness, in addition to the literary merits of the text itself (Le Droit Numerique 2020).

Vallières wrote the book in the political context of Quebec's Quiet Revolution of the 1960s. Major social and political changes were taking place in Quebec, questioning the status quo that maintained the structures of power within society, sometimes through violence. He was inspired by the Black Power movement in the US, as well as anti-colonial and nationalist struggles for independence in other parts of the world (Cornellier 2017). In his book, Vallières compared the subjugated historical position of the French Quebecois with that of Black people in the US, ignoring the history of transatlantic slavery that defines the place of Black people in the racial hierarchy in North America. His work has been criticized by scholars since then (Austin 2013). But the fact that a group of predominantly white, francophone professors brought it up is noteworthy.

The BIPOC Caucus at University of Ottawa referred to this specifically when they argued that Quebec's history of white francophones was not comparable to Black history. Not only did the comparison demonstrate a certain degree of ignorance of how white supremacy works, it also did not offer a free pass on the use of the N-word on the pretext of discussing the former. Black students at University of Ottawa and other Quebec universities echoed this argument, that the comparison obscures the racial logics of domination as well as hurting Black students (Faye 2020; Scott 2020).

I noted earlier that the academic freedom discourse did postracial work by opening up a terrain that is seen to be universal, that could be used to deflect racial critique and to center whiteness in the form of professors' moral and epistemic authority over Black students. But there is a tension between the claim to universality on one hand and to the specificity of Quebec history and literature on the other. On the one hand, the signatories of the two public letters framed academic freedom as a universally desirable commitment and goal of all professors and all university classrooms. On the other hand, they claimed that this had to be done by considering the specificity of Quebec history and literature, such that their intellectual value could not be appreciated except through uncritical repetition of the pejorative terminology they employed.

These two examples illustrate how postracial whiteness operates in the university as a particular kind of institutional space. They demonstrate how a female, racialized minority professor and Black students interrupt the uncritical epistemic authority of white professors through their presence as non-white people in the university. In both examples, they interrupted the reproduction and circulation of ideas and knowledge that underpinned whiteness. In one case, this referred to the British colonial empire, built on the racial hierarchy between the colonized and the colonizer. In the second case, it referred to the use of a racial slur that is emblematic of a systemic anti-Blackness. Black students drew on their lived experiences of alienation in the classroom rather than allowing it to remain invisible and unremarkable as part of "how things work" at universities. They offered a critique that made whiteness visible and showed the historical and political contingency of these ideas shaped through British imperialism and slavery.

RACIAL POLITICS

These incidents, though several years apart, did not occur in a vacuum. It is worth considering why these incidents occurred at the time they did, or in other words, how racial politics create the context for postracial whiteness in universities. I noted at the beginning of this article that Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 interrogated the racial foundations of universities, reinvigorating student-led decolonizing movements. But in the years before that, between 2016 and 2020, there were other relevant political events: the openly racist and Islamophobic Trump presidency in America, the virulent nationalism and xenophobia of the Brexit referendum, and the visible rise of far-right, white nationalist, and white supremist political groups in Canada, US, and Europe. This resurgence of white nationalism and far-right and conservative or right-leaning politics on both sides of the Atlantic demonstrate that the political conditions that shape the current situation extend longer, and deeper, than one summer.

I draw out two points here about how whiteness in racial politics is related to postracial whiteness within universities. The first regards whiteness as both a national and transnational political phenomenon. This includes the implicit and explicit ways that a platform of white supremacy was the basis for conservative politicians to win elections in the US, UK, and some provinces in Canada as well as in France, among other European countries. They played on the fear that white majorities are losing, or have lost, their power to the racialized minorities, immigrants, and Muslims who have "taken over" or are "taking over" the country. They mobilized a worldview of "white anxiety," combined with xenophobic and Islamophobic views and attitudes, that resulted in Brexit and Trump's policies against immigrants and Muslims, to give two examples.

The second point regards the consequences of these racial politics for how whiteness operates in universities through the relationship between bodies, ideas and spaces. Alt-right and white nationalist groups have made efforts to raise their visibility on university and college campuses in the US, UK, Canada, and other countries. Some popular figures from these groups operate on the speaker circuit at university and college events. They use the controversy provoked by their views to legitimize them by making a claim to free speech and academic freedom (Southern Poverty Law Center 2017). They claim that universities are havens for left-leaning activist-academics who limit their free speech as alt-right, white supremacist or conservative speakers. They politicize and polarize the discourse by claiming to be "victims" of "wokeness" and "cancel culture" created by the political correctness of the left.

In doing so, they politicize certain fields of study and disciplines by creating a dichotomy between normative disciplines, which teach "correct" history, politics, etc., and those associated with the left, which are automatically "biased" because they interrogate the epistemic, racial, gendered, capitalistic, etc., foundations of society and social structures in the past and present. This latter group includes critical race theory, gender studies, postcolonialism, and studies of decoloniality and Islamophobia, to name a few. While one might argue that these topics always had political ramifications, the key difference now

is the ideological polarization driven by a combination of government actions and white nationalist political groups that shapes a transnational discourse of whiteness.

For example, the Conservative government in the UK announced plans in February 2021 to appoint a government representative to protect free speech in British universities because it claimed the climate is "chilling" for those holding right wing or conservative views. Reflecting pushback to the summer 2020 protests which highlighted universities' links to slavery and colonialism, the Minister for the Department of Education claimed that this was necessary to "defend our culture and history from the noisy minority of activists constantly trying to do Britain down" (Walker 2021).

Along the same lines, in February 2021, a few months after the University of Ottawa incident, Quebec's Premier, Francois Legault, got involved in the media debate, saying that he would protect academic freedom from the minority of "radical activists" (Montpetit 2021; Oullette-Vézina 2021). He echoed a similar claim by France's President Macron the week before, that the import of "woke" American ideas was undermining France (Onishi 2021). Both of these leaders have suggested that anti-racism protests and social justice interests that originate in the US are circulating in their universities and undermining national cohesion and identity. In France, the government minister for higher education has called out "islamo-gauchisme," an invented term that links the critiques of Islamophobia by Muslim civil society organizations and academics with those who are ideologically on the left.

In conclusion, the postracial whiteness of universities is linked to the transnational characteristics of how whiteness operates in racial politics. This analysis allows us to understand why and how these two events, one at Cambridge University in 2018 and the other at University of Ottawa in 2020, are not isolated incidents. Rather, the way that academic freedom was mobilized as a discourse to push against the racial critiques of Black and racialized academics and students is tied to the way that it is being mobilized by right-wing and alt-right groups to support whiteness and to undermine the political claims and racial critiques of racialized minorities in and across different countries. This is a response to the undermining of the epistemic authority associated with whiteness, in which the worldview of white majorities was the only knowledge possible, and it was accepted as is. Thinking about the relationship between bodies, ideas and spaces shows us that the epistemic authority of whiteness and the political authority associated with it are closely intertwined.

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