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## Critical Spaces: Processes of Othering in British Institutions of Higher Education

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### Cover Page Footnote

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# Critical Spaces: Processes of Othering in British Institutions of Higher Education

Aretha Phiri, Rhodes University

**Abstract:** Global recession and the economic crisis have affected contemporary British society in predictable ways. But this age of austerity has also unveiled the continued sinister machinations of whiteness. While not necessarily homogeneous, austerity rhetoric, as it is currently conventionally deployed, works to perpetuate white masculinist privilege and further entrenches the normative value of whiteness, while simultaneously masking and marginalizing those ethnic minority populations traditionally othered from mainstream sociopolitical discourse. More specifically, recent austerity measures adversely affect the situation of women and the future of feminist theory and practice in British higher education. This paper investigates and problematizes the deployment of austerity discourse within higher learning for its perpetuation of the normativity and hegemony of a masculinist whiteness, which further disadvantages (white) women and disrupts the practice of feminism(s) in academia.

**Keywords:** austerity, Britain, whiteness, academia, women, feminisms

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## Introduction

The effect of the global economic crisis on British higher education in particular has prompted urgent discussions on the impact of austerity on institutions of higher learning (Gumport 2000). Still, while recognizing the need for rigorous debate, it needs to be acknowledged that current austerity rhetoric in the United Kingdom is framed and discussed within the parameters not just of white race but of a particular kind of whiteness presumed to be universal and normative. In this regard, and arguing for the need to be alert to the sinister machinations and exclusory mechanisms of dominant global agendas, this paper offers a case study of a leading higher education institution in the UK with the view to problematizing the discursive strategies and practices that are being deployed institutionally in the current economic climate. With specific consideration given to the impact of austerity and “austerity talk” on women and on feminist theory and practice in British higher education herein, the paper proposes the (inadvertent) structural complicity of white women in disseminating programs that rely on white masculinist strategies and practices. In advocating thus a critical awareness of the frameworks within which white women in particular are situated and operate, the paper suggests the employment of alternative paradigms that recognize, in an academic climate of austerity, their material experiential diversities.

The first section of this paper offers a brief and general contextual background to, and discussion of, the inexplicitly raced, white character of contemporary British austerity rhetoric. In the second section, the institutional embeddedness and austere, exclusory influence of whiteness are examined in the anecdotes and personal experiences of black female scholars at a leading British university. In order to better comprehend the mechanisms of whiteness, however, the third section moves to consider its influence on women in

academia within the context of austerity. By way of informal group discussions, surveys, questionnaires and interviews conducted with white women within the humanities at the institution discussed, the fourth section suggests that whiteness itself should be viewed as a kind of austerity that, while further perpetuating inequalities in higher education, serves to hinder the advancements and achievements of (white) women and the practice of feminism(s). In an attempt to widen and render more inclusive the discursive field of austerity, the paper concludes by asserting the need to differently imagine and image austerity and puts forward suggestions for reconsidering women's positionalities and practices of feminism(s) within institutions of higher learning in the UK.

### **Background: “Raceing” Austerity (Talk) in Contemporary Britain**

The global recession instigated in 2008 and the continuing economic crisis, as well as the austerity measures instituted under the current Conservative-led coalition government in the United Kingdom, have affected general society in predictable ways (Inman 2013).<sup>1</sup> Tax increases and public spending cuts have widened the socioeconomic disparity between the haves and the have-nots and curtailed the effectiveness of essential social services such as those provided by the National Health Service (NHS), public transport and the police force. Precipitated by Britain's reluctant membership in the European Union (EU), the predictable knock-on effect of this has been to foment urgent and heated debates on “welfare reform”—expedient terminology for the aggressive realignment of “national concerns” with more profitable conservative sociopolitical ideologies and practices.

Yet, within this generic discourse, it is pertinent to question or at least be mindful of *who* speaks austerity. In Britain, austerity rhetoric is overwhelmingly disseminated by a white, predominantly male voice. Major political parties in the UK are headed and dominated by white representative spokespersons, while media imaging of, and talk about, austerity is largely monopolized by the majority ethnic white population. With prevailing media reportage of the demise of a white working- and middle-class increasingly forced to visit food banks or take up payday loans (Osborne 2013), the effect has been to universalize white Britons as the normative representatives of austerity. Herein, the “self-empowering ... consequences” of whiteness (Wiegman 1999, 121) are elided because, while rendered visible in austerity coverage, whiteness is still “invisible as an ethnicity in its own right” (Mercer 1994, 215). That is, in that whiteness is universalized and its racialized character paradoxically erased in mainstream media reporting, austerity rhetoric here “relies on a perspective of deviance which obscures white particularity” (Aziz 1997, 17), while reinforcing and enhancing the privileged, exclusory mechanisms of British whiteness (Dyer 1997).<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, evidenced in the national concern with the perceived “mass” economic migration of primarily Eastern Europeans to the United Kingdom, current austerity talk suggests a continued “possessive investment” (Lipsitz 1998) in a British whiteness, which, historically aligned with imperialism (Dummett and Dummett 1982) and functioning as “an active property”—a beneficial source of “privilege and protection” (Harris 2003, 81, 78)—is perceived as beleaguered and under threat (Syal 2014; Dustmann and Frattini 2014).<sup>3</sup> This is not only demonstrated in the resurgence of the far-right, working-class English Defence League (EDL), and in the increasing popularity of the aptly named United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which has made political strides largely on the basis of its anti-immigration and anti-European Union stance; current governmental reforms on general immigration, calls for the amendment of the EU Freedom of Movement Treaty, and restricted access to benefits for European nationals (The Mole 2013; BBC 2014) highlight the ways in which “race” and capitalist economy in Britain have traditionally intersected (Moore 1975; Paul 1997; Bonnett 1998) and continue to intersect in ways that nurture racism.

Speaking of and to a particular milieu of heightened antiblack agitation in 1980s Britain, Paul Gilroy has observed that racism does not “move tidily and unchanged through time and history. It assumes new forms and articulates new antagonisms in different situations” (1995, 11). While austerity talk in contemporary Britain highlights the incongruities of white identity, whiteness also risks being “reproduced both by the fantasy of paranoia (it doesn’t ‘really’ exist), and by the effect of the fantasy of paranoia, which is to make us paranoid” (Ahmed 2004, 47). That is, in recentralizing the focus on white people, “race” continues to be projected onto, and associated with, “other” racial bodies, whose obvious—visible and perceived—difference allows for the redeployment of racial prejudice and racism (Ali 2004, 76). Recent data from the NatCen Social Research’s British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, as reported in *The Guardian*, reveals that since the beginning of the millennium and as a likely result of the global economic crisis, the proportion of Britons who admit to being racially prejudiced has risen, with three in every ten respondents describing themselves as “very or a little prejudiced” against people of other racial categories. Despite evidence of improved ethnic minority integration (Heath and Demireva 2013), this national attitudinal move from “racial hostility” to “acute discomfort about racial difference” (Taylor and Muir 2014) reveals that racial prejudice is “undoubtedly still part of the national psyche” (Park 2014), of which educational institutions are not exempt.

### **The Institutionalized Whiteness of British Higher Education: Some Anecdotes**

According to the Race Equality Survey undertaken by the group Black British Academics in 2013, 56 percent of black and ethnic minority staff reported discrimination in higher education, while almost three quarters (73 percent) said they would rate their institutions’ performance on race equality as “poor” or “very poor.” Endorsing claims of numerous encounters with racism and contemptuous treatment in academia, one respondent noted that “you are not taken as seriously, and it is as if you have to do more/owe more in order to receive the same as a white British individual” (Parr 2014). Not unlike African-American women’s experiences in American institutions of higher education, in which they are “presumed incompetent” (Gonzalez and Harris 2014), this goes some way to illustrating why only 85 of the UK’s 18,500 professors are black and just 17 are black women (Parr 2014). Arguing that the “silent crisis of minority women’s persistent inequalities predates the 2008 economic crisis,” and that current austerity talk does not then actually “represent anything new in terms of minority women,” Akwugo Emejulu and Leah Bassel (2013b) confirm Heidi Mirza’s sentiment that young black female scholars in educational institutions in the UK “see from the sidelines, from [their] space of unlocation, the unfolding project of domination” (1992, 5).

The institutional embeddedness of whiteness, and its perpetuation of the inequality of (female) black and ethnic minorities, is evinced in a seemingly mundane incident that occurred at a prestigious British university in November 2013. Four white members—one of whom was female—of the university’s Law Society sparked anger for “blacking up” as Somali pirates at the Society’s internationally themed fancy-dress party. While making claims to internationalism, this “blacking up” was offensive for its tacit racism and its distinct echo of American minstrelsy—a racist nineteenth-century phenomenon in which white Americans painted their faces black and performed “blackness” for white audiences (Saxton 2003). In this instance, not unlike how it functioned historically, “race” masquerades as white entertainment while masking the lived experiences of black people; “blacking up” uncannily veils the inherent racism of the act while simultaneously reinforcing the power and normativity of whiteness (Lott 1991) and ultimately restoring “the racial terms of social order” (Hartman 1997, 29).

When challenged by other society members and students present at the function, door staff informed the aggrieved that “if” they were offended, they could leave. At the time of the publication of the incident, the Society itself was in the process of drafting an apology “if” any offense was caused. Notwithstanding clear evidence by the aggrieved that the incident had in fact caused offense, in qualifying its response the Society universalized, normalized and effectively obfuscated the racist character of the act. Whiteness was not just rendered pervasive and privileged; the liability for racism was simultaneously lessened, even dismissed, while the onus for dealing with racism, “if” it existed, was laid on the victimized “other.” While the incident made headlines (Lavery 2013), it is telling that it was only reported in a local, rather than national, newspaper, for this restricted coverage serves to localize, condense and disguise the problem of racism while continuing to reinforce the notion that black and ethnic minority concerns and experiences, “unnamed in official discourse” (Mirza 1997, 3), are peripheral to, rather than inclusive of, national institutional concerns, programs and agendas.

In another distressing episode that occurred previously at the same university in February 2013, a white male undergraduate student reportedly uploaded a photograph of three black African female undergraduate students onto his Facebook page under a discriminatory tag (Smalley 2013). This remained posted for a month before finally being removed. One of the students, rightfully incensed, stated that they had been humiliated “beyond repair.” She explained that while she had faced racial abuse before, this was different: “This was done publicly and to the amusement of a bored bunch of juvenile delinquents.” Recounting her general experience of the city in which the university is based, she continued: “I’ve had monkey chants hollered at me by a group of young men.... I’ve had a person use the n-word in conversation with me without feeling any guilt or remorse. I’ve had a person tell me I speak ‘good English for a black person.’” In March, when the original image was reposted on Facebook, she commented, “I’m so over this uni.”

The alleged culprit denied having uploaded the tagged image and claimed that he had been “fraped”; that is, it was he who had in fact been violated, technologically “raped” by a Facebook friend. Meanwhile, a prominent member of the university’s student union, while deploring the problem of racism in the UK, highlighted the university’s “zero tolerance to racism and all forms of discrimination.” Expressing how “horrified and saddened” he was by the incident, he nevertheless stated that he did not think the university was “particularly worse than elsewhere.” Another student union member described the incident as an example of “low level” racism breeding “an atmosphere in which particularly bigoted incidents are allowed to happen.” Yet again local reportage in the university’s student newspaper and the lack of public commentary by senior university officials on this incident underwrite not just the notion of “low level” racism; they reaffirm the idea that racism is generally considered relatively insignificant in/by white Britain, a fact confirmed by the victims’ experiences and sense of frustration. At the same time, in transposing and employing the language of victimhood, the commentators are able to deftly dismiss, while also highlighting, the issue of racism. In the case of the alleged perpetrator, the deliberate deployment of a sexualized discourse—“fraping”—that recalls the sexual context in which the photograph was posted in the first place and conflates blackness with sexual deviancy (Gilman 1985), frames him, the white male, as the actual victim, “raped” by the uncontrollable machinations of cyberspace technology, in this case Facebook. While appropriate, the emotive terminology—“horrified and saddened”—employed by the student union member, and which redirects and realigns the focus onto the university’s “zero tolerance” to racism, suggests the institution itself—not “particularly worse than elsewhere”—as the “victim” of a wider, pervasive culture of racism.

Both student union members' responses display what Sara Ahmed describes as the expedient practice of "non-performativity" (2004); herein the declaration of the recognition of racism transforms a bad (individual) practice—racism—into a good (institutional) practice—antiracism—and allows for the simultaneous obfuscation and negation of racism altogether. That is, because to name is here "not to bring into effect" (Ahmed 2012, 117), it is precisely the declarative mode that creates the conditions for the fantasy of the transcendence of racism and allows for racial accountability and institutional transformation to be avoided, while effectively reproducing and entrenching whiteness.

### **Whiteness, Austerity and (White) Women in Academia**

This institutional reproduction of whiteness is evidenced in my own personal experience as a postgraduate scholar at the same university discussed above. A cursory look at most departmental websites of higher education institutions across the country presents a familiar narrative of the continued universal and normative positionality of whiteness in academia, and the institution discussed here is not exempt. Academic staff and postgraduate profiles in the humanities, and particularly within my department, consisted primarily of white male colleagues, underwriting, for me, a traditionally androcentric, Anglo-Saxon heritage and purview. While harboring no illusions about my peripheral positionality as a black African female (Mählck 2013), I was unprepared for the psychical feeling of liminality or "doubleness" induced by having to negotiate and navigate my ethnicity, race and gender in an overwhelmingly white and male space. Although cognizant of my "otherness," inhabiting academia here rendered me feeling complicit not just in the masculinist normativity of whiteness, but, in a pervasive climate of austerity, in the colonization of academe "by market principles ... facilitated by and as a consequence of the economic crisis" (Emejulu and Bassel 2013a, 4).

With the rise in tuition fees and subsequent budget cuts to, and dissolution of, schools and departments particularly within the humanities and social sciences (Scott 2013), the move toward the corporatization of knowledge in institutions of tertiary learning reveals higher education's increasing capitulation to a meritocratic, business-based ideology and practice aligned with the conservative imperatives of economic austerity. In addition to the deleterious effect on pedagogy, in a neoliberal knowledge economy where discussions about "value" are not simply about academic worth and merit" (Ali 2009, 83), the implication for, and impact of, the deployment of mainstream economic ideologies and programs on women in academia cannot be overestimated. Not only are feminist research, theory and practice negatively affected, women academics risk reiterating the precepts and imperatives of a white "masculinist signifying economy" (Butler 1999, 18), thus maintaining their own (and others') structural oppression and undermining the solidarity and effectiveness of women and feminism(s) in academe.

Audre Lorde has warned that it "is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns" (1984, 113), and by working within a white "masculinist signifying economy" that is British academia, white women in particular are in danger of mimicking "the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms" (Butler 1999, 18–19). As such, arguing that we need to "interrogate the ways in which the feminist ontologies hitherto constructed are implicated in a vexed genealogy of racialized discourse," Jean Walton proposes that we "expose and address the way in which whiteness has come to pose as deeply constitutive of female subjectivity" (1997, 246). In the following section, in order not to recentralize but to interrogate and problematize whiteness, I consider how austerity discourse within academia has affected white women. Far from implying white female homogeneity and

not simply accusatory, in an attempt to better understand how whiteness operates and is put into practice, the study below assesses how white women academics negotiate their race and gender. That is, revealing “women’s varied and complex social reality” (hooks 1997, 485), I explore white women’s academic lives as potential “sites both for the reproduction of racism and for challenges to it” (Frankenberg 1993, 1).

### **Whiteness as Austerity: An Analysis of White Women in Academia**

#### *Sample and Methodology*

In 2013, at the university discussed throughout this paper, I conducted a series of interviews and surveys via e-mail, as well as group discussions with white female academics of Anglo-European descent and primarily from within my department in the humanities. I specifically chose to focus on my department because, as previously mentioned, this department, with its traditionally androcentric, Anglo-Saxon heritage and purview, presents an interesting case study for the institutional mechanisms and machinations of whiteness. Further, while personal interviews admittedly provide the optimal “interactional context” of subjective negotiation between researcher and respondent (Best 2003, 895), the choice to conduct e-mail interviews and surveys was to allow for potentially unpressurized, considered and thoughtful responses and reflections. Although targeting and focusing predominantly on PhD students and early-career postdoctoral researchers, I was also able to engage fully employed lecturers in the department on their gendered and racialized—that is, ontological—experiences of academia within the current context of economic austerity. In total, the responses of 13 postgraduates—PhD students and early-career researchers—ranging between the ages of 25 and 30 (including the group discussants) and of five academic staff members were garnered. While the group discussion followed no particular methodological format and was conducted in an informal manner and setting, the women were required to respond to the central question of the impact of austerity on women and feminism(s) in academia; e-mail interviews and surveys, however, required more specific consideration of the following concerns:

- the meaning of austerity and its impact personally, professionally and on feminist teaching and practice;
- the divisions and inequalities that put pressure on the networks of support, cooperation and community generated by an increasingly competitive environment of employment in higher education;
- institutional “sisterhood” (including race, sexuality and class) and the challenges posed herein in the current academic climate;
- the dearth of employment opportunities for postgraduate and early career researchers and the potential herein to elide the next generation of feminist scholars;
- in view of the above, strategies of resistance to the marginalization of women and feminism(s) in academia and recommendations for alternative futures.

Similarly, my own reading and assessment of the responses did not follow a linear approach. Instead, I was interested in and concerned with how these women’s views and experiences spoke to each other, painting a picture or providing a narrative of whiteness in academia within the current economic climate in a potentially dialogic, rather than merely discursive, manner.



*Navigating Austerity, Negotiating Whiteness*

Noting how, with limited funding and increased tuition fees, undergraduate students have seemingly adopted a “buy a degree” attitude, one teaching assistant in the department maintained that austerity had “pushed marketization to the surface.” She explained: “The curriculum is determined by the economy. We supply the demands of students as if they were consumers.” This, in her view, affected not just the quality of but equitable access to education. One senior lecturer interviewed maintained that she was pessimistic, suggesting that the inequalities prevalent at the institution “will only become harder to redress” in the current socioeconomic climate. Observing that in her discipline “there has historically been underrepresentation in the academy in terms of race, sexuality and class,” she lamented that it was “difficult to see how the broader issues affecting funding and support in higher education might be arrested or ameliorated.” She was certain that the economic cuts would “have a major deleterious impact on prospective undergraduate students from more socially [and] economically deprived backgrounds” and bemoaned the “further narrowing of a potentially diverse student community.”

Notwithstanding the obvious racial, sexual and class disparities across the university, exacerbated by the current economic climate, the presence of white female scholars and junior and senior academics in the above lecturer’s department, while appearing to be the embodiment of institutional diversity, may have the opposite and contrary effect of further disguising and marginalizing “other” populations and concerns. Speaking to the employment of black and ethnic minorities within British higher education, Ahmed warns that embodying diversity can be “about changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organisations. Changing perceptions of whiteness can be how an institution can reproduce whiteness, as that which exists but is no longer perceived” (2012, 34). Similarly, while the white women here encouragingly create the picture and impression of gender equity and inclusiveness within the parameters of white identity, this does not necessarily redress the existing ubiquitous racial, sexual and class imbalances and maintains the institutional white status quo. In this regard, a situation in which “some bodies more than others are recruited, those that can inherit and reproduce the character of the organisation, by reflecting its image back to itself” reveals how whiteness “is an effect of what coheres rather than the origin of coherence” (Ahmed 2012, 41).

This “coherent” image of whiteness is thus not just detrimental to other ethnic, racial and class minorities; it belies the lived, diverse, even antagonistic, realities of white “sisters” in academia. One lecturer, who self-identified as a gender activist, admitted that for her “sisterhood” was not something “obvious on a day-to-day basis” within the department, but maintained that sisterly support was “forthcoming in times of crisis for individuals.” She added that “a notion of ‘sisterhood’ is the only thing that keeps such identity issues in view” because, in her experience, issues of gender and sexuality particularly were “often dealt with on a perfunctory basis by male colleagues” and, socially, she had come across a “deeply concerning lack of consciousness in male colleagues.” Overall, then, she saw sisterhood as “accessible on a personal level and less so on an academic and professional level.” But while women’s gender-based visibility provided opportunities for female solidarity and support and helped to keep women’s issues in focus, the fact that “sisterhood” was viewed by the lecturer as available on a personal level “in times of crisis” and not generally at an institutional level speaks to the absence of an obviously embedded culture of cohesion among women, which itself underpins the lack of consciousness in male colleagues on issues of gender and sexuality. While female/feminist solidarity is significant and its decline lamentable in the current global capitalist, neoliberal and individualist milieu (Fraser 2013), we need also to acknowledge that “sisterhood” puts forward an imaginary community rather than sociopolitical reality; as African American and other black female ethnic

minorities have continuously stated, there is a “pretense to homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist” (Lorde 1984, 116).

This view is reflected in the words and experience of another postgraduate student within the department. Her frustration at the “lack (or small numbers) of high-quality, well-respected female academics/role models” in the humanities not only makes implicit reference to the increasingly corporatized paradigms and imperatives of quality-based, financially quantifiable research within higher education internationally (Slaughter and Leslie 1997); her additional reference to the current meritocratic, neoliberal knowledge economy, in which a competitive attitude among prospective candidates or early-career researchers is fostered, simultaneously shows a gendered awareness and is indicative of the “power of the economics of knowledge production and dissemination” (Ali 2009, 83). Describing her collegiate environment as decidedly unfavorable, she explained that with her immediate PhD peers there was “an intense competitiveness over everything—from publication and conference attendance to friendships with and social access to members” of her department. As such, she complained that there was no sense of sisterly community or collegiality: “There is absolutely no sense of ‘sisterhood’ (at least, not that I have encountered)—the predominant ‘community’ [here] are white, middle-class, early twenty-something women, and they are the least ‘feminist’ group you could ever hope to meet (seeming to happily fulfill the traditional stereotype of ‘fluffy’ females reading books!)” The derisive term—“fluffy females”—applied to her white female colleagues points to this postgraduate’s perception and experience of white female/feminist community within academia as fundamentally illusory despite, or because of, their (and her own) privileged racial positionality. Ironically, then, she views and experiences her gendered sociopolitical situatedness within whiteness as a kind of *disposition*; that is, her lived experience of whiteness becomes paradoxically disruptive to her own (desired) sense of subjectivity.

This perception was reiterated in my engagement with a feminist reading group consisting of eight white female PhD students and early-career researchers in their mid- to late twenties of varied nationalities—English, European and in one case American—and from various departments at the university. I viewed my role in this informal setting as primarily to facilitate discussion among the women, and my participation was “interactional” only to the extent that I would occasionally interject to ask for the expansion on or elaboration of a particular point raised. While my own racial and ethnic positioning may have provided depth and diversity to the conversation, I was also conscious of how it may prove disruptive to my effort at creating a space for a potentially honest and frank discussion about *white* women’s experiences and perceptions of (white) academia within the current economic climate.

All the women in the group expressed an awareness of and concern for their situatedness in an environment where accomplished, professorial positions are dominated by what they collectively described as “pale males.” Cognizant of the implications in the current climate of austerity of masculinized academic imperatives, their angst was further compounded by what they saw as an institutional leaning toward archaic, androcentric curricula they were “forced” to teach and which did not include, or made very limited reference to, issues of race and gender. Again linking their institution’s ideologies and practices to the current socioeconomic and sociopolitical climate of austerity, one of the women saw this academic leaning as fostering prejudice in which “inequalities can grow like mould.” Pointing out that subjects of race and gender were not viewed as “profitable courses, you see. They don’t bring in the money,” another student maintained that in academic circles there remains this sense of an “old boys club” to which white women are privy, but in which they dare not and generally don’t “rock the boat.”

Such unwitting structural complicity, in which they are “forced” to maintain the masculinized status quo, undermines the real gains of white women within academia. What Ruth Henig argues in her study of British women in national and local politics in the 1990s is applicable also to the contemporary state of British higher education. Arguing that “the presence of a significant minority of women will not in itself be enough to bring about change ... and to influence political agendas,” Henig observes that white women’s structural complicity within a male-dominated order “raises significant questions about the slow pace of political change in Britain, and about the nature of the political structure. It suggests that there are still considerable hurdles to be overcome before women are able to exercise substantial political power” (1996, 234–36). The institutional makeup of British higher education generally, and of this university in particular, functions as a kind of white mask whose image conceals while extending other (gender, racial, sexual and class) inequities. Indeed, the early-career researchers within the feminist reading group expressed grave concerns with job (in)security in the current economic climate. One woman in her late twenties, who joked that everyone she knows in academia has “anxiety or depression,” was particularly worried about how her own decision to start a family at what she perceived as a relatively late stage would hinder her career prospects. For another woman, who had completed a postdoctoral fellowship and was now on a temporary teaching contract, academic “casualization of jobs” frustrated her career ambitions, as she was offered temporary post after temporary post while failing to secure a permanent contract. Albeit differently articulated, both women’s anxieties reflect and reinforce the competitive, corporatized imperatives of their university in particular and of British higher education in general.

These women’s candid talk of the effects of austerity and their consequent vulnerability illustrates how whiteness as property can be transformed, instead, into a “wage” in which white women navigate their whiteness “in order to survive”; as a survival mechanism, being white becomes “not a privilege but a penalty” (Thandeka 2006, 77, 8). Herein is evidence of how whiteness does not just constitute female subjectivity in academia; it functions sophisticatedly as a kind of psychosomatic/psychosocial (Sullivan 2006) and material leverage and stricture. In this regard, and while not directly referencing black and ethnic minorities, these women’s implied “raced consciousness”—their conscious awareness of their sociopolitical positionality as white women—could create the conditions for a potentially antiracist feminism (Dixon 2002, 101) that recognizes the need and aspires for universal equality.

Yet it is precisely their austerity-induced “raced consciousness” that, because it risks a (paranoid) refocus on whiteness, could make these white women oblivious to the experiences of other minority populations and potentially compromise their “impulses to moral action” (Thandeka 2006, 9) against ubiquitous institutional inequalities. Razia Aziz points out that in endeavoring to shift the ground of feminist discourse the adversary is not white feminists themselves but “any feminism which comes from a white perspective, *and* universalizes it”; such a feminism subsists “through a failure to consider both the wider social and political context of power in which feminist utterances and actions take place, and the ability of feminism to influence that context” (1997, 70). Although global recession has brought to light their own precarious positionalities within a current neoliberal, corporatized academic environment, these white women’s feminist concerns are channelled through a contemporary discourse of austerity which reinforces a white “masculinist signifying economy” that oppresses them while continuously obfuscating racial and gendered others. “[P]roduced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought” (Butler 1999, 5), their own feeling of being “other(ed),” while here illuminating, extends their (unwitting) privileged positionality. In this respect, for these women, as well as for the “other” women elided in their discourse, it is whiteness that becomes an austere condition that works to fundamentally disadvantage

them, and economic austerity serves to further undercut the advancements in academia of women in particular and the potential of feminism(s) generally.

The position of white women in academia considered here resonates with Emejulu and Bassel's study of minority women across France and the UK. They found that "the logic of free market relations had penetrated and embedded itself into the rationale and practices of the third sector" (2013a, 1). That is, already disadvantaged minority women were having their demands reshaped or were themselves actively reshaping their demands to fit into the global economic system. Herein, minority women, encouraged to "survive" austerity by being "enterprising actors" (2013a, 1), were being channelled into definitively conservative and decidedly masculinist neoliberal models of behavior. Evidence of this masculinist conservatism is demonstrated in one senior lecturer's response to her recent award for a collaborative research project on a specifically feminist, woman-focused project. Despite her academic achievement and obvious capability, she saw herself as "extremely fortunate" to have received a grant at all in the current economic climate. But in perceiving the "'austerity' drive and its impact on humanities funding, as not, for the moment at least" having "had a direct effect" on her, her qualified attitude—she places the term austerity in inverted commas and recognizes that austerity may well directly affect her in the future—suggests an unawareness as to how she herself might reproduce and be restrained by the very power structures that enable her achievements. That is, her recognition of her "hard-won place in the establishment" creates the "risk of blindness" (Catherine Wells quoted in Gonzalez and Harris 2013, 292) to the impact of austerity on other minorities and (unwittingly) aligns her with the competitive, masculinized imperatives of neoliberal higher education. At the same time, the lecturer's sense of gratitude and vaguely self-effacing tone are indicative of and confirm the traditional marginalization of women and the effacement of their achievements within academia. In this regard, it is disheartening, but not unexpected, that this lecturer would express pessimism "about the likelihood of such [feminist] projects receiving similar support in future years" and, recalling the concerns voiced by the postgraduate and early-career researchers in the group discussion, that she would convey "grave concerns about the financial and institutional support available to younger [female] researchers embarking on an academic career at doctoral and postdoctoral level."

### **Conclusion: Reimagining Austerity**

The general picture painted here of the state of British higher education in an age of austerity appears bleak and, from the empirical evidence presented above, more so for women. In the current economic climate, the institutional whiteness of universities across the UK has troubled not just black and ethnic minority female academics; it has proved disadvantageous and disruptive to the aspirations of white women academics. This has further bearing on the strength and future of feminism(s) within academia. Emejulu and Bassel argue that resource scarcity in the current economic climate "shrinks the available range of frames of contestation" by "closing down important spaces for debating and enacting real alternatives to austerity and the logic of the free market" (2013a, 6). But while theirs is not an incorrect observation and is supported by my own research, I argue that the current economic climate can also provide opportunities for extending and opening up significant spaces for debating and enacting alternatives to narrow contemporary mainstream discourse, ideology and practice.

Indeed, in line with bell hooks's argument that "[i]f women always seek to avoid confrontation, to always be 'safe,' we may never experience any revolutionary change, any transformation, individually or collectively" (1997, 499), I have tried to show in this paper that, while deleterious, the impact of the current

climate of austerity can generate a potentially productive space for women. That is, in highlighting the continued marginal positionality of women in general and of white women in particular, austerity as it operates within academia can create a conducive, albeit conflicted and uncomfortable, space for revisiting, reconsidering and reimagining women's positionalities. In bringing the varied and diverse experiences and voices of (white) women into dialogue, the paper has attempted not just to unveil the implications of, and (white) women's implicatedness in, disseminating the neoliberal, corporatized imperatives of a white masculinist system within British higher education; it has tried in this way to disrupt these pervasively inequitable programs.

Recalling Lorde's position that "*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*" ("They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change") (1984, 113; original emphasis), this paper suggests that women/feminists in academia should be actively involved in creating alternative, unconventional structures of empowerment. One frustrated PhD student, who questioned the notion of academic feminism and feminist discourse and bemoaned her inability to attend "expensive" and prestigious feminist conferences, suggests that revolutionary change may occur when we bring "theory and practice together to shatter the ivory tower!" She adds that in order for feminism(s) to matter, we need to "organize, [and] join the community instead of closing [ourselves] off in expensive conferences, lunches, closed-access journals. We need new voices in the bloody debate and more listening!" Her nonconventional, activist approach is underwritten by a lecturer in the department who suggests that we keep feminist research and teaching prominent through more "interdisciplinary opportunities for cooperation," which "would certainly help to reverse a notion of decline, as would developing relations between academics and other interested organizations, and other NGOs and community activities."

Where diverse, collaborative exchange among women academics and feminists would help to cushion the impact of the current economic climate within academia, one senior lecturer suggests that engagement come "at a local level in terms of intellectual support, mentoring schemes within each institution and at an interinstitutional level at regional and/or national levels." She also suggests that "the funding bodies themselves—those organizations and agencies who are for the moment empowered to award grants—need actively to resist homogenization and be composed of academics/researchers who come from diverse academic communities."

The desires expressed here appear to be for more varied, inter- and multidisciplinary, yet inclusive feminism(s); that is, for an opening up and expansion of, in order to reimagine and reimage, racialized masculinist paradigms that currently exist and operate within British institutions of higher learning. Noting that academia "can be a cutthroat world, especially for PGRs [Postgraduate Researchers] and ECRs [Early-Career Researchers]," Alison Phipps advises that you "don't have to carry those neoliberal structures and values into your working relationships. Refuse to play the game if it means pitting yourselves against each other" (2013). Through analyzing and problematizing generically deployed discursive strategies and practices, this paper has argued for the need to be alert to the sinister mechanisms and machinations of dominant white masculinist global agendas. Advocating that we recognize our own implicatedness in disseminating these programs, I have called for reconfiguring the frameworks within which women are positioned and I have suggested the deployment of alternative, nonconventional paradigms that acknowledge our contesting material diversities.

## Notes

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1. Britain's coalition government consists of the Conservative Party, led by David Cameron, and the Liberal Democrats, led by Nick Clegg. Opposition comes, traditionally, from the Labour Party, led by Ed Milliband, and now also from the more right-wing United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) led by Nigel Farage.

2. This realization has also been the motivation for the school of critical whiteness studies initiated by American scholars in studies such as Frankenberg 1993, Roediger 1994, and Ware and Black 2002.

3. British Defence Secretary Michael Fallon caused a furor recently when he claimed that some British towns, "swamped" by migrants, felt "under siege." His sentiment recalls Margaret Thatcher's fear in 1978 and before being elected in 1979 that Britain might suffer cultural domination by immigrants from the new Commonwealth and Pakistan. Her remark followed the introduction in 1965 of the anti-immigrant White Paper and the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1968. Amended from the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, this legislation revealed a determination to preserve British whiteness from the "onslaught" of migration particularly from the West Indies and later Asian countries, which had been precipitated by the Second World War.

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