Anti-racist scholar-activism

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Backlash: opposition to anti-racist scholar-activism within the academy

As we have shown in previous chapters, the values and orientations of those engaged in anti-racist scholar-activism are starkly different to – if not fundamentally oppositional to – those of the neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist university. After all, scholar-activism involves recognising that ‘what is best for your department is not necessarily best for humankind’. The explicitly political, radical scholarship and praxes of anti-racist scholar-activism can situate us in mutually antagonistic relationships with much of the academy. As Harney and Moten contend in their discussion of the subversive intellectual, ‘the university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings.’ This tension results in attempts to curtail, dismiss, ridicule, or silence anti-racist scholar-activist work, casting it as not theoretical or objective enough, and too political and threatening. As scholar-activists clash with their institutions, they are habitually ‘pushed to the margins, forced to take risks, situated in politically and emotionally vulnerable positions, [and] rendered illegitimate by the structure.’ Those engaged in anti-racist scholar-activism are therefore confronted daily with backlash – and the ubiquitous threat of backlash – from within (as well as outside) of the academy.

In this chapter, we consider how anti-racist scholar-activism evokes backlash within the academy. We begin by foregrounding theoretical
understandings of backlash, before we draw upon participants’ accounts to explore how anti-racist scholar-activism is devalued by colleagues and managers within both our institutions and our wider academic disciplines. Next, we focus on how backlash is particularly acute for scholar-activists of colour and others who are marginalised by the interlocking systems of oppression that constitute the matrix of domination. Finally, in the context of (the threat of) backlash, we explore a range of mechanisms that our participants employ to navigate life within academia – their strategies of survival.

Theorising backlash

Backlash, Aoki conveys, might be understood as the “getting back to”, “returning back to”, or “restoring” [of] a real or imaginary status quo … before those that prompted one to “lash back” were on the scene. We might conceive of backlash, therefore, as negative reactions or responses to social change, whether that be actual change or the potential for, or threat of, change. The more counter-hegemonic that change threatens to be, the more backlash we can expect to see. In the context of the university, the real or imaginary status quo to which Aoki refers is one that is underpinned by whiteness. Indeed, Nirmal Puwar urges us to see how, in the context of intersecting structures and systems of power, spaces are constructed and imagined over time: ‘social spaces are not blank’, she asserts. With this in mind, we can understand the university as an exclusionary space, historically dominated by white men and Eurocentric (and racist) knowledge production.

Increasingly diverse student demographics are, however, threatening to change the landscape of higher education (HE), in the representational sense at least. Karis Campion notes that there was a 60% increase in the number of Black, Asian, and ‘minority ethnic’ students entering UK HE between 2003 and 2020. Such change can be disruptive and, as Puwar
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reminds us, disruption ‘is not without consequence’. Whilst some of these consequences may manifest in institutional transformation or the illusion of institutional transformation, they also manifest as backlash against change and those seen to be its harbingers. In this sense, backlash offers a lens through which we can think about the particular forms of institutional and interpersonal racisms that people of colour, constructed as *space invaders*, face within universities. Put another way, we can consider how racism manifests as a lashing back against the entry of significant numbers of people of colour into HE.

We can also conceive of backlash in other ways too, particularly as a response to the social gains made by anti-racists, feminists, the LGBTQ+ movement, and other liberation movements in recent decades. In this regard, we might talk not only about backlash against the presence of Black and Brown bodies, but backlash as a response to liberatory ideas and praxes that threaten the status quo. By way of an example, we might think here of the backlash against student decolonise movements, and specifically the *Rhodes Must Fall* campaign at the University of Oxford. Though no doubt shaped and accentuated by the racialisation of the students involved, the backlash primarily manifested as a response to the counter-hegemonic ideas of the students, which made visible the colonial underpinnings of the University of Oxford. Understood in this way, backlash is the desire to obstruct and prevent the forward movement of social progress. Thus, central to our theorisation of backlash in this chapter is what Nayak and Bonnett call *anti-anti-racism*: the backlash that comes in response to anti-racist ideas, scholarship, praxes, and movements.

Writing in the US context, the philosopher George Yancy examines the backlash to his viral *Dear White America* letter published in the New York Times in 2015, in which he implored white Americans to recognise the role that they play ‘in a system that continues to value Black lives on the cheap’. Reflecting on the responses he received to his letter, many of which were vitriolic in nature – replete with violent racist language – Yancy
lays bare the explicit racism that continues to pervade contemporary Western societies.\textsuperscript{17} As with the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, the backlash that Yancy faced was in response to the disruptive arguments he offered. It was, however, no doubt also inflected and exacerbated by his racialisation as a Black man. The point we want to make here, therefore, is that backlash is mediated by one’s location within the \textit{matrix of domination}.

Yancy’s focus is not only on explicit racism, however. He also draws attention to the systemic nature of, and culture of indifference and inaction that sustains, anti-Black racism. In so doing, he encourages us to think about the less explicit forms that racism takes.\textsuperscript{18} This intervention extends the utility of the concept of \textit{anti-anti-racist backlash} in a way that is helpful for our purposes in this chapter – that is, we can employ it not only to help us understand explicitly racist lashing back, but also the more subtle, subterranean, and seemingly non-racial racism that characterises the contemporary epoch, and particularly the contemporary neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist university.\textsuperscript{19} Conceived in this way, we can understand backlash as serving the simultaneous functions of penalising those that do speak out and deterring those that might.

There is one final way that we want to think about backlash, before we move on to look at participant’s accounts – that is, backlash against the praxes of scholar-activism. As we have shown in previous chapters, scholar-activism can signal a break with traditional and hegemonic approaches within academia. It often departs from the established conventions within our academic disciplines. In a range of ways, it constitutes a disruption and it is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that it evokes backlash. When we look at the experiences of anti-racist scholar-activists, the distinctions we are making here between types of backlash does prove to be somewhat superficial. Indeed, the backlash one faces in reality is often a consequence of a complex combination of one’s position within the matrix of domination, one’s anti-racism, and one’s scholar-activist praxes, and these factors are not easily disentangled. In what follows, we
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take these various forms of backlash as our concern, whilst holding on to their fundamentally entangled nature.

Devaluing anti-racist scholar-activism

Backlash against anti-racist scholar-activism comes in many guises. An observation common among participants was that their work is devalued by colleagues within their departments and institutions, and within their wider academic disciplines. Malaika, a Black early-career academic who migrated to Britain, for example, noted:

I think I’m seen sometimes as a troublemaker, sometimes as someone who is doing a subcategory of sociology, not real sociology.

Through the label of ‘troublemaker’, Malaika conveys a sense that she is seen by others to routinely cause problems and disrupt the status quo (which for her interlocutors is a negative thing). To borrow from Sara Ahmed, unequal power dynamics mean that it is often the person who shines light on racism that comes to be regarded as the problem, rather than racism itself. Although no doubt wrapped up with her being a Black woman in a white-imagined discipline with a history of marginalising Black feminist thought, Malaika being regarded as somebody who does not do ‘real sociology’ may in part derive from her scholar-activist approach to research. Indeed, many participants suggested that scholar-activists are constructed by others in the academy as less intellectually competent than those engaged in more traditional (often pseudo-objective) forms of theoretical or empirical research. This construction may, however, be felt particularly acutely by those pursuing an anti-racist agenda given that anti-racism is routinely marginalised within disciplines such as sociology, and positioned as a ‘subset’ – a niche element – of the discipline. It is apparent, therefore, that backlash can be mediated not only by the institution but by an academic discipline that is disciplining of its margins.
Malaika was not the only one who felt that they were viewed by colleagues as a ‘troublemaker’. Reflecting on their relationship with colleagues, Aaliyah, another Black woman and early-career academic, noted:

They’re like, quite conservative a lot of them. There’s quite a lot of feminist academics actually around me, but I feel they’re quite liberal. So, that’s why I introduce myself a lot as a troublemaker because I know that’s how they see me. I think I’m kind of a bit at peace with taking that role, because also they know that I’m needed … So, they welcome it, but they’re also critical of it as well. But I do feel precarious even though I’m on a permanent contract, precarious in being a scholar-activist.

As Aaliyah makes clear, she has reappropriated the troublemaker identity for herself, by taking a label with negative connotations consistently conferred upon her and using it to introduce herself to others. Given the many ills of the neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist university (some of which we outlined in the Introduction), why would we not want to cause trouble? As Judith Butler contends, ‘perhaps trouble need not carry such a negative valence.’ In this sense, we can understand trouble to be what Ahmed calls a feminist political ontology: ‘something we can claim to be, as feminists, which is to say, something we do, without assuming ourselves as behind that deed.’ The trouble attributed to the feminist troublemaker is, of course, exacerbated when one’s praxes and positionality within the matrix of domination cause trouble too. In Aaliyah and Malaika’s cases, their ‘troublemaker’ status may be a consequence of both their activist approach and the specific anti-racist orientation of that activism, as well as how race and gender are constructed in the academy (and in wider society). Given that ‘intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism’, the effects of the construction of race and gender as ‘troublesome’ are particularly pronounced for women of colour.

Although Aaliyah recognises the precarity involved in occupying the troublemaker role, she is proud of the disruptive work that she does within the academy and believes that her white feminist colleagues – whilst
unwilling to occupy the role themselves, even though their racialisation offers them greater protection – also recognise that someone needs to take up the position of troublemaker. There are some deeply concerning dynamics here that we do not want to gloss over. These dynamics reflect longstanding issues regarding the whiteness of feminist politics, and similar critiques regarding the gendered dynamics of anti-racist movements. Aaliyah’s account serves to remind us that it is too often women of colour and/or those with other marginalised positionalities that are laboured with the task of taking up adversarial positions within academia (and elsewhere) and, in so doing, expose themselves to backlash. Those with the privilege and power to better insulate themselves from the negative repercussion of backlash too often stand idly by: an act that is nothing short of ‘white complicity’.

Reminiscent of Malaika’s sense that her work is not perceived as ‘real sociology’, Okoye reflected on how her anti-racist scholar-activism is constructed by others in the academy as not intellectual enough. In duCille’s terms, not intellectual enough should be read as not ‘legible as white or male’. As a Black Muslim early-career academic, Okoye noted:

It almost delegitimises your space as an academic by saying, because you’re doing activist work, that the community aspect of it is where your specialisation lies and not with the academic. They don’t see the balance together … you’re presented as the expert of your own experience but not an intellectual in that area. So, I research around race and I research around intersectionality, but I’m not approached about my research around race and intersectionality. I’m approached about my experience of it … So, it’s almost as if there are certain aspects of my identity that are valued by the academy, and that’s the physical experience and physical body, but not the actual work and the theory that would actually help change practice.

Black feminist thought has resisted the binary between academic knowledge and lived experience, instead showing how lived experience shapes knowledge and how the standpoint of Black women can enrich scholarship.
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Nevertheless, Okoye’s account reveals that this (false) separation endures to shape her experiences, as well as those of other Black women in the academy. Her representation, as a Black hijabi woman, is valued more by her institution than the contributions she makes to the development of anti-racist theory and praxes. In this regard, anti-anti-racist backlash within the university context may be subtle, but it is, nevertheless, deeply pernicious. In Okoye’s case, it involves colleagues within her institution redefining her utility in their own terms – that is to say, her anti-racist scholar-activism has little value to her institution, whilst her bodily presence as a Black Muslim woman has superficial value within a sector seemingly more interested in appearing non-racist than being anti-racist. Okoye’s body might be seen, for example, to enable institutional performances of ‘diversity’ or act as a buffer against accusations of racism, even though the intellectual contributions generated through her scholar-activist praxis remain both uninvited and unvalued. In this sense, we see the tokenistic elevation of Black and Brown anti-racist scholar-activists, and the simultaneous delegitimising and silencing of their scholarship.

Reflecting on being labelled as ‘not intellectual enough’, one established Black academic, Dez, highlighted how he confronts this form of backlash – which he suggested is often experienced as ‘ridicule’ from his colleagues – by engaging more deeply with theory than his traditional academic (non-scholar-activist) counterparts:

I know my Marx and I’ve read all his fucking letters. I know my Hegel. I’ve read the books which other people haven’t read. I’ve read Logic. They’ve just read one or two chapters from Philosophy of Right. I’ve read all these fuckers, and they’re very good. It’s an education. Now, because of that, it means that some of the people I’m talking about can’t quite say that I’m not a proper intellectual.

Dez implies something commonly felt by participants – that is, that they must work harder than their ‘traditional’ academic colleagues to be viewed as ‘proper intellectuals’. An obligation to work twice as hard in order to
gain the respect of colleagues was felt particularly strongly by participants who were earlier in their academic careers, on precarious contracts, and/or working at particular (elite) universities (which reproduce traditional approaches to research). As Reynolds, Block and Bradley note, because community-based or activist research is often regarded as less theoretical – and of less ‘value’ – it can be perilous for academics ‘whose continuation in the academy hinges on publishing peer-reviewed, theoretical work’. Backlash against anti-racist scholar-activism, therefore, has real consequences in terms of job security and career progression, and all of this is exacerbated by race (and other stratifiers), a point we develop in the next section.

Another perception common amongst participants was that their work is viewed by colleagues within their departments and wider institutions as biased, lacking the objectivity of ‘proper’ scholarship. Aaliyah epitomised this viewpoint:

I think they definitely think that I’m biased towards feminist and Black liberation work. I think they think they’re neutral and I’m the one bringing in all of the politics.

The framing of scholar-activism as too political – and its juxtaposition against so-called ‘neutral’ research – is a key feature of the backlash against anti-racist scholar-activism within the academy. It is predicated on the construction of the university as white space and the normalisation of hegemonic approaches to scholarship, which render anti-racist scholar-activism disruptive and therefore problematic. As Patricia Hill Collins warns, ‘calling anything “activist politics” is the kiss of death in academia, because it is often assumed that one cannot be “academic”, in other words, appropriately objective, and “activist”, which many academics see as synonymous with irrationality’. Yet, the ‘objective academic’ versus ‘irrational activist’ binary is one that scholar-activists are fundamentally critical of; although, as we suggested in Chapter 3, it can sometimes be
useful to strategically exploit the fallacy of objectivity in order to carve out pockets of possibility for scholar-activism. Generally, as set out in the Introduction, we do not engage in the pretence that research or teaching (see Chapter 5) should be – or can ever be – value-neutral. Rather, anti-racist scholar-activism is intended to agitate for social change both within and outside of the university, whilst upholding high standards of rigour and criticality. This position stands in conflict with the neoliberal academy which, through its instrumentalisation and commodification of knowledge, strips pedagogy and research of moral and political practice. In this context, backlash is not only about devaluing the explicitly political work of anti-racist scholar-activism, it is also about establishing the superiority of ‘neutral’ traditional (non-scholar-activist) work and maintaining the neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist status quo of HE.

Amele – a mid-career academic of Indian heritage – expanded on the false construction of traditional academic work as objective. She argued:

Everybody is a subject. Everybody has a positionality. You can do your quants and your statistics as much as you like, you know, and try and claim some kind of distance from them as if they’re separate, but the way in which you organise that data, the way in which you classify that data, the way in which you manipulate and make sense of that data is all subject to your own views or ideas about the world. There is no distance. This is utter bollocks. So, yes, I think it becomes a way of critiquing intellectuals and academics who are political.

Although many (perhaps most) academics within the social sciences and humanities acknowledge that research cannot be completely value-free, Amele points to how the scientific validity of explicitly political work is still routinely questioned on the grounds that it is not detached enough, that the researcher is too emotionally involved. In this sense, the subjective nature of traditional research is deliberately downplayed and (explicit) subjectivity is instead framed as undesirable: ‘a way of critiquing’, or lashing back against, ‘academics who are political’. Yet, as Hale writes, whilst (the
fallacy of) neutrality is privileged within the academy, for scholar-activists ‘claims of objectivity are more apt to sound like self-serving manoeuvres to preserve hierarchy and privilege’. Indeed, recognising the urgency of what is at stake, scholar-activism involves the deliberate politicisation of academic work, often, though not always, through the rejection of the myth of objectivity, in the name of social justice.

Reflecting on a presentation that he gave to colleagues within his department, Dillon (British Asian, early-career) highlighted how anti-racist scholar-activism is framed as lacking in nuance. We might understand this, therefore, as another manifestation of backlash:

I gave it to academics in my department and not a lot of the people are involved in activism and I had one person, a white male scholar, who said that my discussion of the gangs matrix sounded like I was a conspiracy theorist … Where I’ve talked about institutional racism in policing or police militarisation, academics have said to me ‘well you need to be a bit more nuanced’. Well, I understand nuance and I think it’s important, but there’s nothing nuanced about the statistics. If you have statistics that are saying in London a Black person’s ten, twelve, fifteen times more likely to be stopped by police than a white person … there’s nothing nuanced about those statistics. You can clearly see that the police are a racialised institution.

Here, Dillon draws attention to how some academics, particularly those invested in the maintenance of the status quo, seek to undermine the radical work of anti-racist scholar-activists by questioning the ‘nuance’ of their analysis as a way of implying that their work is simplistic or ‘one-sided’. Once again, scholar-activists who highlight injustice – in this case in relation to widely evidenced institutionally racist policing – are recast as the real problem. Dillon’s experience also shows the way in which scholar-activists are not only constructed as fundamentally lacking (in their capacity for nuanced analysis) but also, as a threat. As Flood, Martin, and Dreher contend, scholar-activists ‘may be criticised as politically biased, dangerously subversive, or tarnishing the name of their institution’.

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framing of Dillon as a ‘conspiracy theorist’ – which in turn constitutes a denial of racism – might therefore be understood as a particularly explicit form of lashing back: a clear attempt to cast Dillon as something other than a ‘real’ academic. This delegitimisation of oppositional voices not only threatens to marginalise anti-racist scholar-activists, but also undermines our work and the challenges we raise. In response to this, and as explored in Chapter 3, we might find it useful to engage in strategic duplicity, adopting particular performances to achieve our anti-racist aims.

When the reputation of the university and/or its standing with partner organisations is threatened – particularly amongst those with which it wishes to ‘do business’ – HE institutions may lash back against anti-racist scholar-activists by seeking to silence us. Alison (white, mid-career) has some experience of this:

We operate within a department whereby at certain times, our research has been actively silenced because the institution is developing relationships with control agencies locally, and then other times the same research is celebrated and awarded an Impact award from the institution because of its contribution to such and such a change and challenging injustices in the community.

Rather than take heed of Alison’s work, which highlights how control agencies create and perpetuate inequalities through the criminal justice system, her institution instead chose to strategically silence her work in the interest of developing partnerships with these very same criminal justice agencies. As Alison explains, however, her research has at other times been celebrated by the university for its social impact outside of the academy. Jay (Asian British, mid-career) had a similar experience:

I remember when I was doing the pro bono stuff, at graduation and on the webpage they’d always shout out about it, saying what a wonderful thing it is. When it came to getting promoted, it was very much that it doesn’t count for anything.
As we suggested in Chapter 1, it is clear that the value of anti-racist scholar-activism may be recognised by our institutions if it enables them to (superficially) perform social justice – that is, if it bolsters their public image or falls within, what Jay refers to as, the ‘very, very narrow definition’ of Impact included in the Research Excellence Framework. Of course, the value that is recognised by our institutions is a much hollowed out version. It is ‘value’ only in the institution’s (metric-driven, capitalistic) terms. Nonetheless, we are reminded here that the university is not a monolith. Instead, it is an assemblage of contradictory forces within which we can operate. Backlash within our institutions or the wider academy may therefore not be constant, but rather repressed at times or superseded by competing logics, to suit the university’s agenda.

Scholar-activism within the matrix of domination

In the previous section, we explored backlash as it emerges in response to praxes of scholar-activism and anti-racism, and the mutually reinforcing relationship between the two. In doing so, we began to unpack the notion that anti-racist scholar-activists’ experiences of backlash are not undifferentiated. Rather, it was clear in a number of accounts that race and gender (though not exclusively) shape experiences of backlash within the academy. As Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey explain, ‘the distribution of the costs of doing this work [are] differentiated by race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and national origin.’ In this section, therefore, we consider more directly how experiences of anti-racist scholar-activism, including the backlash against it, are shaped by the location of scholar-activists within the matrix of domination.

The following account from Thomas (Black, early-career) is a useful place to start for thinking about how race structures experiences:

I guess also when you’re Black, you’ve got to do that intellectual work to prove that you are as intellectually competent as your white peers, and if
you’re not doing that intellectual work, if you’re not seen to be doing that intellectual work, it will reaffirm the existing assumptions that Black people are less intellectually competent than their white colleagues. So yes, I guess you have a double obligation as a Black activist-scholar.

Here, Thomas reinforces a point made earlier in this chapter by Dez, that scholar-activists – or activist-scholars in Thomas’ terms – are viewed to be lacking in intellectual competence. As he also explains, however, the competencies of Black scholar-activists are particularly subject to questioning. It is Black academics (and other academics of colour) who are forced to ‘prove that [they] are as intellectually competent’ as their white counterparts. It is not enough for Black scholar-activists to be doing intellectual work – they must be ‘seen to be doing the intellectual work’. Put another way, whilst white academics might always already be assumed to be ‘intellectual’, the racism underpinning academia means that Black academics have to prove their intellectuality because, in Puwar’s terms, space invaders ‘don’t have an undisputed right to occupy this space’.43 In this sense, constructed as bodies out of place within the academy, Black academics are subject to hyper-surveillance,44 all of which is exacerbated when those Black academics are also scholar-activists.

Similar to how Thomas talks of a ‘double obligation’, Zami – an established academic of colour – reflected on how the challenges of practising scholar-activism within the academy are compounded by intersecting structures of power:

If you’re trying to do that (scholar-activism) anyway, that’s one hurdle, but then slap on your colour and gender and your sexuality and everything else, it just, it’ll make the hurdles higher. Yeah. But I mean on the other hand you learn to be, well, we have to be don’t we, very rigorous in what we do? And learn to be articulate.

The influence of Black feminist theory on Zami’s praxis is evident. She is all too aware of how systems of oppression intersect, reminding us that racism, sexism, and heteronormativity (amongst other structures of
domination) make the work of some scholar-activists more difficult – the ‘hurdles higher’ as she puts it – whilst imbuing others with power and privilege. Yet as Zami continues, she also refers to the resistance that is so central to Black feminist praxis. Cognisant of the double standards to which she will be held, Zami, like many of our participants, has developed strategies to overcome the ‘hurdles’ she encounters within the academy. She has learned to be ‘very rigorous’ and ‘articulate’. In this regard, and notwithstanding the problematics herein, Zami recognises that within the academy, as well as outside of it, respect is more readily conferred upon those that adopt the ‘legitimate’ language and those who are seen as the legitimate speaker. Later in this chapter, we return to consider the strategies that anti-racist scholar-activists employ to navigate life in institutions that are, in many respects, hostile towards them.

Like Zami, Galiev reflected on the racism he has faced as a person of colour within the academy:

there were definitely impediments that I faced as a person of colour in my previous institution where I think I was seen as radical, not in the Angela Davis sense of grabbing at the root, but more as someone who was ideological, fanatic.

Galiev suggests that his interpellation through processes of racialisation as ‘ideological’ and ‘fanatic’ means that his work is not seen by colleagues as radical in the way he intends it, but rather is reframed through racist stereotype. We heard from participants that, all too often, their anti-racist scholar-activism was perceived as too excessive: too political, too radical, too ‘ideological’. It reminds us of Quaye, Shaw and Hill’s reflections about their own scholar-activism: how the Black – or ‘non-white’ – body, already hyper-visible within the white space of the university, is made all the ‘more visible, threatening and dangerous’ when it engages in activism.

The imagined threat posed by minoritised bodies was also highlighted by three of our Muslim women participants, all of whom were early-career academics. Ereene believed that she was the ‘wrong kind of Muslim. Too
vocal and too passionate about activism and too passionate about social justice, racism, and Islamophobia. Too outspoken.

Jasmin, on the other hand, felt that she was perceived by her colleagues as less threatening than other Muslim academics (which is not to say that she was perceived as entirely non-threatening): ‘I don’t wear a headscarf. I’m not like an overtly looking Muslim woman … I guess I kind of hit that diversity quota without being too Muslim.’ Both speak to the way in which more visible forms of Muslim-ness are rendered unwelcome in the academy and are thus subject to the threat of backlash. This point was made explicitly by Khadija: ‘It’s obviously worse when you’re a visible Muslim.’ All three accounts speak to the limitations of the university ‘diversity’ agenda. Diversity might create, what Sara Ahmed calls, a ‘happy impression’, enabling the university to create the illusion that it is ‘welcoming to those that appear different by drawing upon those that appear different’. But the lived experience of being a symbol of diversity is starkly different to the illusion, particularly for Muslims who are subject to surveillance under the UK government’s counter-terrorism duty, Prevent.

For Ereene, being ‘too passionate’ and ‘too outspoken’ means that whilst she serves a purpose to the university as a symbol of diversity, she is not considered to be doing diversity in the ‘right’ way.

Albeit cognisant of her racialised privilege as a white academic, Rosa reflected on the challenges she has faced within her institution as an academic who has migrated to the UK:

I had encountered some obstacles, as compared to other British, white, relatively privileged, if radical, academics in my career. I haven’t been helped when I applied for my promotion by some people; only by some others. Until the very end there was a moment when I was about to give up, but then because I’m a fighter I continued. I think I always tend to look more on my privilege than my disadvantage.

For Rosa, her non-British status presents ‘obstacles’ that other colleagues – even radical ones – have not been forced to encounter. Indeed, there
is little doubt that xenophobia within UK HE compounds the challenges that scholar-activists face in obtaining promotion. Despite comprising 20% of all UK university staff, international academics are also excluded from applying for some academic jobs and routinely experience challenges in obtaining work visas, hyper-surveillance under Prevent and/or the hostile environment agenda, and the threat of deportation. Rosa’s reflections about leaving academia were common amongst our participants and are reflective of how hostile the academy can be towards anti-racist scholar-activists, especially those who are marginalised within the matrix of domination. But, like Zami earlier, Rosa speaks of resistance, of being ‘a fighter’. What she also points to here is the importance of recognising that privilege and disadvantage can co-exist.

Others spoke about how privilege can be used strategically to enact change within the academy. Aaliyah, for example, noted that one of her supportive colleagues – a white woman – is sometimes better placed to do the ‘radical work’ than her, a Black woman:

Also, it’s easier for a white man or a white woman to say a lot of these things. One of my colleagues who I’m really close to, she does pretty radical work. I feel like she can carry some of the more difficult things for me. So, she’s the one who keeps pushing and I’m the one who pushes too – but also, I’m walking a line. I also have to be really nice to people. I have to ingratiate myself.

As Aaliyah intimates, ‘radical work’ is often made more palatable when it is undertaken by white academics and, as a result, is subject to less backlash. Their whiteness (partially) privileges them from the accusations explored earlier in this chapter of being too invested, not objective enough, or lacking nuance, as well as from accusations of having the proverbial ‘chip’ on their shoulder. In a context where academics of colour are often made to feel like outsiders in the academy, Aaliyah indicates that, owing to her positionality, she feels obliged to ingratiate herself. She is all too aware that she is subjected to a level of surveillance that her white colleagues
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are not. The very fact that Aaliyah names just one colleague who carries ‘some of the more difficult things’ for her, however, suggests that such colleagues – those prepared to use their whiteness to support colleagues of colour and as an act of resistance – are few and far between. It seems (racialised) privilege is still too rarely used in pursuit of an anti-racist agenda both within and outside of the academy; rather, it manifests most often to stifle an anti-racist agenda – that is, to bolster anti-anti-racist backlash.

Haytham – a Pakistani PhD researcher and long-standing activist – also reflected on the role of white people in anti-racist resistance, though he was critical of the strategic deployment of white people to ‘front’ anti-racist work:

I mean how many times have we seen [with] Black scholarship the need for white liberals to front the work that we know that Black scholars have been doing for a very, very, very long time, right? And how unfortunately sometimes our own communities are complicit in putting those voices forward because, for some reason, there is a sense that it will have more credibility if that happens.

Here, Haytham recognises that whiteness is perceived by some to add ‘credibility’ to anti-racist arguments. Whilst clearly conscious of the structural conditions that encourage a perception among communities of colour that ‘white liberals’ should ‘front the work’, he is nonetheless disappointed that this practice continues. We see that disappointment clearly in his use of the term ‘complicit’, which implies that the practice of encouraging white people to front Black scholarship feeds into the maintenance of white supremacy. Thus, the strategic deployment of white voices may be considered useful in the short-term – because the authority and legitimacy that is routinely conferred upon whiteness adds ‘credibility’ – but for Haytham, the anti-racist project is hindered in the longer term. Centring white voices reproduces the power and legitimacy of whiteness, further silencing and delegitimising the voices of people of colour in the
process. Of course, there is a tangible difference – albeit, a very fine line – between what Aaliyah and Haytham are talking about. Aaliyah appreciates the help of her white colleague to push for change within the academy, while Haytham is talking about white colleagues *fronting* Black scholarship. His use of the term ‘fronting’ perhaps implies that he is referring to white colleagues who take credit for Black scholarship, rather than those that use their privilege to support colleagues and communities of colour.

### Surviving backlash in academia: building networks and playing the system

As the previous sections have shown, the backlash against anti-racist scholar-activism comes in many guises and is particularly acute for those who are confronted by racism, sexism, and other structures of domination in the academy. Participants have, however, developed a range of strategies of resistance, and in this next section we explore just some of the tools that anti-racist scholar-activists employ to survive backlash within academia. Central to these reflections is the cultivation of networks of support. For many, including Zami, these networks exist outside of the academy:

> I've always had a network outside the university, always. And I always will … so, I'll always be part of about four other organisations very actively which take as much time as being inside the university. And I know there are times I feel I have been able to walk in those other spaces where everyone will say hello and I feel a belonging, where I might not feel a belonging in the place that pays my mortgage.

Zami juxtaposes the sense of belonging she feels within her activist networks outside of the university, against the lack of belonging she feels within the university setting. This is characterised by her framing of the university as ‘the place that pays my mortgage’, which implies emotional distance and suggests that a motivation for working in the university might simply be the need to earn a wage – that is, to survive under capitalism (we
discuss this further in Chapter 6). It comes as little surprise that some participants felt a lack of belonging within their workplaces, given that their values are not only different to, but in many respects antithetical to, the dominant values of the neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist academy. This unbelonging is demonstrated and exacerbated by routine experiences of backlash and by the racism that permeates HE. In this context, it is also not surprising that strong networks of support are built via our activism and that strong emotional connections develop via our shared experiences of anti-racist struggle.

In addition to the networks we build outside of the university (which we discussed more fully in Chapter 2), there is also the development of supportive networks within our institutions. These networks allow us to develop organic pockets of belonging, perhaps in what Harney and Moten refer to as the Undercommons.54 Alison, for example, spoke about the importance of being part of an institutional research collective that is committed to an anti-racist agenda:

I'm not in a common position. I work in partnership with two colleagues that I implicitly trust and I can have these conversations and work through some of this stuff with, and as a collective we are quite powerful within our department and institution, and that enables something that I don't think I could have on my own.

For Alison, the research collective that she is a part of not only provides her with a reciprocal support network of colleagues that she ‘implicitly trusts’, but also enables her to wield more influence within her department, institution, and the wider academy than would be possible as an individual. In this sense, the power cultivated through collectives of scholar-activists both protects us against backlash within the academy and enables scholar-activists to exert our own influence. Thus, collectives can facilitate scholar-activists to exploit the pockets of possibility within the university for our own ends – that is, in service to anti-racism. As explored in Chapter 3, by engaging in reparative theft, scholar-activists can, for example,
redirect the resources of the university to the communities that they work within. Although this practice may be a challenge for individual scholar-activists, particularly those new to or unfamiliar with university systems and processes, it may be easier for a collective to strategise together, and teach one another new and better ways to engage in reparative theft.

As Alison acknowledges, opportunities to work in research collectives within our institutions with colleagues that we trust are not all that common. Yet, as Barry (an early-career academic of colour) notes, it is possible to develop relationships with scholar-activists across institutions:

So, I think that it is kind of on us to create that community of people across unis who are doing critical work and see what can come of that. Maybe that’s writing books together or making sure you’re being mates and helping each other out and stuff because I don’t think it’s possible for all of us to get jobs where we do radical work.

Whilst those engaged in scholar-activism may draw much of their nourishment from the activist communities that they belong to beyond the academy, we should not underestimate the importance of protection and support from colleagues also employed by a university. These cross-university networks of support can help to sustain us as anti-racist scholar-activists. They can, as Aaliyah elucidates, redress the ‘toll on your body and your mind and your spirit … that’s why the networks that we develop are really important’.

Of course, our institutions and the wider academy may not welcome these networks. Lip service is often paid by universities to the importance of cross-university collaboration, but institutions rarely free up our time or bestow us with the resources to actively support network building. This experience is not unique to anti-racist scholar-activists, but may be felt more acutely by us. After all, it is oppositional to the interests of much of the academy – which, as we have shown in this chapter, is committed to an anti-anti-racist backlash – to support a highly coordinated anti-racist resistance. As such, this reinforces Frances Fox Piven’s observations that:
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We should work to fashion the environment that will nourish our activist commitments. At first glance that injunction may sound illogical, or at least impractical. After all, our environment, in this case our colleagues and reference groups, the scholarly associations and journals they sustain, are outside of us. But we also to varying degrees choose our colleagues and reference groups, and select our associations and journals. There is a lot to be said for thinking carefully about where we place ourselves in a complex and variegated academic world … If nothing else, we can cultivate the scholar comrades who share our activist commitments and can come to our defense if the occasion arises.56

Creating anti-racist scholar-activist networks and wider coalitions built upon solidarity should, therefore, form part of our praxis, particularly as we strive to insulate ourselves from institutional backlash.

In a similar way to Barry, Oliver (Black, established academic) also spoke of the importance of helping other anti-racist scholar-activists succeed within the academy, in a context where they may otherwise be marginalised:

I’ve been very conscious in being the mentor for my colleagues, to share the knowledge that I have, to make sure that we all progress up the ladder because what I don’t want is for me to reach becoming professor and I’m the only one. I’m marginalised. I’ve only got one voice. My position is precarious. Why do I want to do that? I’m already in that position, so why do I want to do it when the stakes are that bit higher?

Whilst early-career scholar-activists are particularly precarious within the academy, Oliver reminds us that precarity does not disappear entirely for all academics as they climb the academic hierarchy. Indeed, although there is an underrepresentation of staff of colour within HE generally, this underrepresentation becomes even more pronounced at the level of the professoriate.57 In a 2016 report on the experiences of Black and ‘ethnic minority’ staff in further and higher education in the UK, the University and College Union found that 90% of survey respondents faced barriers to promotion.58 Thus, for Oliver, supporting staff of colour and/or anti-racist
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scholar-activist colleagues is essential in order to ensure simultaneous progression within our respective institutions, so that there is a groundswell of anti-racist scholar-activists (particularly, of colour) occupying positions of power and influence in years to come.

Although we were conscious of the time burden we placed on participants in this research project, many remarked on the importance of the nurturing that comes from conversations with other anti-racist scholar-activists. Zami, for example, said:

These kinds of discussions are absolutely crucial because for those who do feel isolated or for those who don’t feel that there is a place … there’s always a strength in numbers, isn’t there? So, the more that are speaking, the louder the voice, isn’t it? You’re a big rock in the ocean rather than little droplets in an ocean, and that’s important. Absolutely important.

In some ways then, and not to overstate this point, there is a silver lining that arises from experiencing the emotional toll of backlash within the academy: our shared experiences and a shared threat can foster collectivism and solidarity. From these positions of collectivism, we are more effective in pushing back against the neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist university, and we wield more power as we move from marginal to more central positions within the academy. In this way, as bell hooks urges, we can think about how to use conflict constructively ‘as a guide directing and shaping the parameters of our political solidarity’59 Whilst some of us might be isolated in our respective institutions, contributing to conversations around anti-racist scholar-activism can empower us, amplify our voices, and create collective social change within and outside of the academy.

Another key mechanism that anti-racist scholar activists may employ for surviving in academia is to play the system. Oliver, for example, fundamentally disagrees with the neoliberal values of the academy, but he recognises the importance of understanding how ‘the business’ works in order to be able to navigate it as an anti-racist scholar-activist:
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Learn your business. Higher education is a business and I say to my students, particularly my postgrads but I think it’s applicable to early-career too, you need to know the system you’re working in, inside out. If you don’t, they’ll tell you all sorts of things and you’ll never get anywhere … that knowledge of the academy will help you navigate the obstacles because there will be people who will deliberately withhold information at best or give you misinformation at worst, just to hold you back.

The impacts of the neoliberal, hyper-competitive environment of HE to which Oliver refers, and of which we noted in the Introduction, are of course not felt exclusively by scholar-activists. Academics routinely speak of the ‘dog eat dog’ nature of their workplaces. But this environment can be particularly hostile for anti-racist scholar-activists, who already experience backlash because of their praxes, the subject matter of their work, and as a result of – or exacerbated by – their location within the matrix of domination. It is in this context that Oliver reflects on how we must protect ourselves against colleagues who may ‘withhold information’ or offer us ‘misinformation’.

Reflecting on the key things that protect him within his institution, Elroy (Black, established academic) spoke about how he plays the system:

I know what I have to do as a minimum here to keep folks off my back, and we know about that. For me, it’s writing. Now, I don’t mind writing, so if I’m four papers for the REF and I’m engaged in ABCD, and I can get £10k off [a funder] to do the work into [anti-racist topic], how are you giving me fucking heat? You can’t give me heat, can you?

Elroy’s experience of working in HE for some time has enabled him to understand the priorities of the university. Whilst his own priorities are not the same as those of his institution, he is willing and able to ‘tick the necessary boxes’ – research output metrics, external funding, positive teaching evaluations – if it means that he is left alone to engage in anti-racist activism. Although many of us are pushing for change within our institutions to fundamentally reshape HE, the reality of our employment – and
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particularly those of us on precarious contacts – is that we are compelled to engage with the demands of the university, at least to some extent. With this in mind, we might exert our own backlash against our institutions in a range of ways, including by struggling where we are (see Chapter 5) or by building radical alternatives outside of the university, but we might also be strategic about what we push back against. Of course, there is an inherent danger to us complying with the governance structures and research frameworks of HE in that we risk giving legitimacy to those harmful processes. We risk becoming complicit, an idea we return to in Chapter 6.

Claudia (white, mid-career) shared a similar sentiment to Elroy in relation to strategic compliance:

I would say my approach in academia is that I do completely play the game. So, I will get all my REF publications done, and I will publish in the most recognised journals, and I do that partly because actually I think that partly frees you up to do the other stuff. I know people who don’t do that and then they don’t actually have time to do a lot of other activism because they are chasing jobs or trying to get the next thing out. So, they’ve got like 20 publications, but they’re not really recognised, and so they’re still on that treadmill. Whereas, in a way, I feel if you can play the game within its limits then you’ve got over the bar and then you can do other stuff.

For Claudia, there is some sense in complying – albeit, in a critical fashion – with things like REF publication quotas (we could also think here of related pressures elsewhere: the tenure system in the United States, for example). Indeed, scholar-activists that achieve REF quotas may gain relative job security and financial stability, which may in turn enable them to engage in the anti-racist activism that matters to them. As Pulido puts it, a publication record can act as a ‘shield of sorts’, at least to a certain extent. There is, however, an extremely difficult tension at play here in that our compliance reproduces the ‘legitimacy’ of metrics such as the REF, meaning that those who do not produce ‘REF-able’ publications or
whose publications are undervalued within the structures of REF are potentially left with less job security. With this in mind, it is important that any compliance we give is not absolute – it is not an enthusiastic compliance, but rather a reluctant, cautious, and sceptical one. It is compliance to the extent that we keep the wolf from our door. It is the kind of critical compliance that we might engage in whilst simultaneously finding other ways to agitate against such metrics. These tensions point to the messy realities of anti-racist scholar-activism, and to the need for constant critical reflexivity around the gains and concessions of our actions.

Several of our participants also spoke about the importance of language in relation to playing the system, and here we return once again to Zami, who explained: ‘You learn to be strategic. You learn how to package stuff. You learn how to mix the language of emancipation with bureaucratic language.’ Framing the activist work we want to do through institutional language can offer some insulation against backlash, and help us to survive in the neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist university and under capitalism more broadly. Dez also reflected on his strategic use of language:

In a lot of work on all the race equality stuff in the university, and I would tell people, and I did, I’d say, ‘Man, I’m not talking about justice. I’m not doing the justice language. I’m dealing in institutional language. I’m talking about does diversity produce more rigorous knowledge, does it expand our knowledge base? Does diversity enable students to attain higher and not drop out, et cetera, et cetera?’ I’m not going to confuse that arena with a justice thing. As soon as you start ‘Ah, but it’s justice for this, justice for that’, it doesn’t work in those settings because those settings aren’t designed for that … I think part of it is, as well, is that we necessarily span and work in different environments. We’re not the only ones who do that. There are other activists who do that in different capacities, but nonetheless, if we want to call ourselves activist scholars, we necessarily span different fora. It’s our responsibility to understand what it is that we need to be doing in different fora.
Thus, whilst there is much scepticism amongst anti-racist scholars about the university equality and diversity agenda – not least because of its superficiality – Dez purports that one can strategically utilise the language of diversity to achieve one’s own ends. The radical nature of Dez’s work does not change; rather it is packaged in a way that is palatable or audible to the university: this is another example of strategic duplicity (also see Chapter 3). In this sense, we can avoid some of the backlash we might otherwise experience. Perhaps then, an ability to adapt to different environments should be a key skill of anti-racist scholar-activists. This might require us to adopt a different lexicon inside our institutions to that which we adopt outside; and, once again, we must remain reflexive about the costs of valorising the hollow language of diversity.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have drawn upon a conceptualisation of backlash to explore the opposition that anti-racist scholar-activists face from colleagues and managers within our institutions, our academic disciplines, and the wider academy. Although we recognise that backlash is not confined to the academy – and often occurs, for example, through social and mainstream media – this chapter has focused on the academy specifically because of how central universities are in the daily lives of (university-based) scholar-activists. Although we have focused in part on experiences of anti-anti-racist backlash, we have argued that anti-racist scholar-activists experience backlash in a range of guises – not only because anti-racism can be considered subversive, but also because its subversion is enhanced by our activist orientations. We are, therefore, often positioned within our departments and broader institutions as simultaneously lacking (not theoretical enough, not objective enough, not intellectually competent, not nuanced) and excessive (too troublesome, too conspiratorial, too political, too threatening).
What is also clear is that those with marginalised positionalities experience intensified forms of backlash: backlash against their anti-racism, activist orientations, and as a result of their location within the matrix of domination. This attests to the heterogeneous nature of anti-racist scholar-activist experiences. We have also shown that scholar-activists do not passively accept the backlash exerted against them. Instead, they push back against it, developing strategies to mitigate, navigate, and overcome it, including by developing networks of support and by playing the university at its own games. In this regard, we exert our own backlash against the neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist university, using our collective power to enact positive social change within, as well as beyond, our institutions. With this in mind, we consider the university as a site of struggle in the next chapter.