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The Heart of Whiteness: Racial gesture politics, equity and higher education

Abstract

This chapter considers how, despite legislation, policies and expressed commitment to 'equality and diversity', racial inequalities (such as the Black-white degree attainment gap and the low number of Professors of colour) are able to persist in UK higher education institutions. Drawing on composite examples from empirical research, personal communications from colleagues in the UK and overseas and, my experience advising on race equality, I posit that institutional directives to address race inequalities often fail to engage seriously with the fundamental aspects of race and racism. Instead, it is argued that universities tend to embrace a range of limited short-term strategies and initiatives, which give the *appearance* of serious engagement but, in effect, make little substantial, long-term difference to the experiences, outcomes and success of students and faculty of colour. The chapter closes by considering how these groups might work toward a humanizing, successful existence within spaces characterized by this contradiction.

Gesture Politics

...any action by a person or organization done for political reasons and intended to attract public attention but having little real effect

Cambridge English Dictionary (undated)

Early in 2016, I gave a talk to an audience of academics, professional staff and students as part of an event to celebrate the launch of a university equality network. At the end, as is customary in most presentations, the Chair (a senior member of the university) stood to give closing remarks and invite questions from the floor. Thanking me for my contribution, she observed, "our universities would certainly look very different if you were in charge". The comment stayed with me. If, for a moment, we were to take the statement seriously rather than assume it to be a mere polite throwaway comment, what then was it about the content of my presentation that made her come to this conclusion? Further if my perspective, along with others who work in the field and share a similar analytical lens, had the potential to make such impact why was change not more forthcoming? Indeed why do we continue to encounter resistance to our proposals to advance racial justice? I share these ruminations not as an exercise in academic self-aggrandizement but rather as means to reflect upon why, despite a well-established record of equalities legislation in the UK, despite the policies, guidance documents and professed commitments of higher education institutions, and the supposedly liberal, inclusive ideals of many academics, meaningful change on race equality might be labelled at best slow and at worse, abysmally static. With such questions in mind, this chapter focuses on the wider institutional context and hegemonic practices in which race inequalities persist. It draws attention to the ways in which universities engage with and attempt to

address racial disparities. Drawing on examples from empirical research, personal communications from colleagues in the UK and overseas and, my experience advising on race equality, I posit that institutional initiatives to address race inequalities often fail to engage seriously with the fundamental aspects of race and racism. Instead, it is argued that they tend to embrace a range of limited short-term strategies that while giving the *appearance* of serious engagement, in effect, make little substantial, long-term difference to the experiences, outcomes and success of students and faculty of colour.

What is race inequality and what does it look like in our universities?

Being African American in a predominantly white institution is like being an actor on stage. There are roles one has to perform, storylines one is expected to follow, and dramas and subplots one should avoid at all cost. [It is like] playing a small but visible part in a racially specific script. Survival is always in question. Carbado & Gulati (2013:1)

It is precisely this script that interests me given that as faculty of colour we are seldom the authors or playwrights determining the roles, content or direction of what happens on the academic stage. Gender is important here. To be a woman of colour within mainly white institutions is to occupy an identity which is diametrically distinct from the white male leaders who make the decisions within those spaces. And for women of colour specializing in race within higher education, this is a space which is often surreal, frustrating and exhausting (Ahmed, 2009; Maylor, 2009). This particular state of double consciousness (Fanon, 1967) is characterized by the careful, oscillating dance between a white academy that largely avoids, limits or shuts down any meaningful debate on race and, the endless pained accounts of people of colour who work or study within this arena. I am struck by how many - a large number of whom are strangers - come to me, fuelled by some awareness of my work, to share their experiences. They contact me by email or pull me aside at conferences, seminars and talks within and outside of the academy to speak in hushed, pained tones about what has happened to them within the ivory towers. Students speak of lecturers whose course content dismisses or subjugates their identity or history, of white supervisors who seek to minimize or altogether alter the content of postgraduate research where race is the focus. Administrative staff describe being forever stuck at the same grade or of their contributions being overlooked by dismissive line managers and, academic staff share endless examples of incidents in which colleagues repeatedly question their competence and expertise. I have lost count of the number of these conversations I have been part of but note that at the heart of each is the desire to be treated with respect and with courtesy and, an expectation of a fair opportunity to progress and succeed.

It is not uncommon for the observations that I set out above to be dismissed by the 'scriptwriters' as anecdotal, as individual perception or as the attention-seeking cries of a disgruntled few. But a small and growing body of literature and empirical research has shown these experiences to be part of the norm for faculty of colour within universities in the UK (e.g. Ahmed, 2009; Bhopal, Brown

& Jackson, 2015; NUS, 2015; Leathwood, Maylor & Moreau, 2009; Mirza, 2006; Rollock, 2011, 2012) mirroring the experiences of their US counterparts (e.g. Carbado & Gulati, 2013; Harris, & Gonzalez, 2012; Smith, Yosso & Solorzano, 2006; Yoshinaga-Itano, 2006). Given such evidence, it should come as no surprise that UK faculty of colour are more likely, when compared with their white colleagues, to consider leaving the country to work at overseas institutions (Bhopal et al, 2015) believing the opportunities for progression to be better, though still not ideal, elsewhere. For this too has been something about which faculty of colour have long whispered – before the empirical research gave it formal legitimacy - and dreamt about during those conversations at the margins of UK institutional spaces. For people of colour in such places, there is recognition that racism can go beyond the overt, crude reckonings of random individuals or disenfranchised Far Right groups. Instead, we are subject to what Pierce (1970:472) describes as the “offensive mechanisms” of racial microaggressions:

...racial microaggressions are a form of systemic, everyday racism used to keep those at the racial margins in their place. They are: (1) verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward People of Color, often carried out in subtle, automatic or unconscious forms; (2) layered assaults, based on race and its intersections with gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent or surname; and (3) cumulative assaults that take a psychological, physiological, and academic toll on People of Color. Perez Huber & Solorzano (2015: 302)

Such acts, subtle though they may be in their manifestation, nonetheless speak to an implicit belief by many white people that their experience and knowledge is inherently and unquestionably better than that held by people of colour. Racial microaggressions serve to remind people of colour that they are different and less than whites. Much of their power is in their persistence and subtlety. Race or racism does not need to be explicitly named for this form of racial inequality to occur. Consider, for example, the following scenario:

Scenario 1

A white female academic joins a university as a new member of staff. She is assigned to a teaching team where the team leader is a female faculty of colour who has been at the university for ten years. On receiving students' coursework, the team leader sends an email to the teaching team which summarises university's practice with regard to marking and states the deadline for submitting grades. The new member of staff fails to complete the marking in line with the request and when prompted by the team leader responds with a curt, two-line email emphasizing her extensive experience of working in higher education and her track record of marking. She refuses to address the team leader's concerns and insists that, in her view, she has already completed the marking according to university guidelines.

There are two critical issues that must be incorporated in the reading of the above incident. First, the absence of any *explicit* mention of race does not mean that race is absent from the equation. In recognising and challenging the whiteness of universities, we seek to explore how they become and remain that way. Therefore, the task is to identify (and deconstruct) those hegemonic practices which form the natural, unquestioned fabric of the academy and enable its cultural preservation:

Domination is a relation of power that subjects enter into and is forged in historical process. It does not form out of random acts of hatred, although these are condemnable, but rather out of a patterned and enduring treatment of social groups. *Ultimately, it is secured through a series of actions, the ontological meaning of which is not always transparent to its subjects and objects.* Leonardo (2009: 77) [emphasis added]

Just as we take a view about the relationship between length of employment in the institution and knowledge of university procedures in determining the actions of each actor (we presume the person who has been there the longest better knows and understands the procedures), we also give due regard to the power relations – including the racial identities – that shape the incident. A racially just perspective demands that we ask whether this new employee would respond in the same way if the team leader were a white woman or indeed a man of colour.

Recognising and naming race, even if as a possibility, *must* co-exist with a second fundamental consideration, namely, the wider evidence on race. Here questions about what is known about the workplace experiences of people of colour and, in particular, women of colour are essential. By coupling a consideration of race *with* the research evidence, we can begin to move away from a colourblind approach and better acknowledge the way in which power relations operate along axes of race (and other identities) within UK universities.

Yet it is precisely because such acts are carried out with no apparent “ontological meaning” (Leonard, 2009: 77) that such incidents tend to go uninvestigated or are trivialized by white power-holders in these institutions. This is despite empirical evidence about the experiences of faculty of colour and recent large-scale studies documenting the persistence of racism in UK workplaces (Business in the Community, 2015; Ashe & Nazroo, 2016).

There are several points to note with regard to the scenario above. The marking remains incomplete and the team leader’s knowledge and authority has been undermined. In addition, by acting in the way that she has, the new employee also provides insight into the characteristics of whiteness:

...tools of Whiteness facilitate in the job of maintaining and supporting hegemonic stories and dominant ideologies of race, which in turn, uphold structures of White Supremacy. Picower (2009: 205)

Entitlement and privilege operate to position as superior and more legitimate experience obtained prior to arriving at the university despite the fact that it does not complement practices at the new place of work. The team leader is also left with a predicament. Irrespective of the reasons for the new employee's behaviour, the coursework must be marked to time and according to university protocol. If this does not occur, it is the team leader and not the new member of staff who will be held responsible.

Let us take the scenario one step further and assume that the team leader reported the matter to senior colleagues believing that they would intervene and demand co-operation. Instead it is dismissed as being a "teaching related" issue that she should manage herself. This serves to legitimise the poor behaviour of her white colleague (thus reinforcing and sanctioning whiteness) and, because she has to now mark them herself, causes a delay in returning grades to the students. Complaints ensue and are reflected in the student evaluations, which are submitted later in the year. The external examiner and the same senior colleagues to whom the team leader had reported the incident, express serious concerns about the students' comments and seek explanation. It is the faculty of colour who is in their sights and *not* the intransigence of the white colleague. The team leader is left feeling frustrated, alienated and unsupported and the white colleague is not reprimanded (Muhs, Flores Niemann, Gonzalez & Harris, 2012).

It is experiences like this that others share with me time and time again. In my 2011 article on racial microaggressions in the academy, I employ counternarrative (Delgado, 2000) to articulate the semi-fictional experiences of Jonathan, one of few faculty of colour at a high profile university. The article describes how a colleague took issue with Jonathan's preference for opening windows in their shared office as opposed to using the air conditioning system and so approached Human Resources to issue a formal complaint against him. While it may seem trivial and possibly incredulous, the incident in fact draws on a real-life event. None of the key actors with the power to shape how the event unfurled (Jonathan's line manager, the HR manager) took account of the possible role of race. Jonathan ended up being informally reprimanded just two weeks into a new role. Several years later, in real life, the name of the same colleague with whom Jonathan had shared an office would surface in a race discrimination case.

I share these accounts as a means by which to demonstrate the insidious ways in which power through racial discrimination operates within the academy. Seemingly slight or even trivial acts serve to position faculty of colour at the margins of institutional spaces which continue to ignore, downplay or deny their experiences and the salience of race. Yet if we are to understand why the sector remains plagued by such low numbers of senior faculty of colour¹(Equality Challenge Unit, 2015) and why their experiences are largely negative, then it is

¹ An analysis of the most recent data from HEIDI (higher education information database) published by the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) reveals that there were 75 UK Black professors in 2014/15.

imperative that we move beyond colourblindness and take seriously the experiences of this group.

The first step in this process is honest conversation.

The Fallacy of Honest Race Talk

I keep trying new ways to make them see what they clearly do not want to see, what perhaps they're incapable of seeing... Bell (1992: 142)

Derrick Bell is one of the founders of Critical Race Theory, an approach that offers a radical lens through which to make sense of and ultimately challenge racial injustice in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Rollock & Gillborn, 2011). While I ended the previous section with a call for white colleagues to move beyond colourblindness this, in fact, is to overlook some of the fundamental constraining aspects of racial politics and white dominance. Attempts to speak honestly with white colleagues about race are fraught with risk and challenge irrespective of the weight of additional evidence or new analyses that is brought to bear in the discussion:

...by sharing their real perspectives on race, minorities become overt targets of personal and academic threats. It becomes a catch-22 for them. Either they must observe the safety of whites and be denied a space that promotes people of color's growth and development or insist on a space of integrity and put themselves further at risk not only of violence, but also risk being conceived of as illogical or irrational. Thus, white privilege is at the center of most race dialogues, even those that aim to critique and undo racial advantage.

Leonardo & Porter (2010: 140)

Prioritising the growth and progression of people of colour means disclosing to white colleagues when they are complicit in racist acts, which is seldom welcomed. It also means revealing that they, as whites, are racial beings (a fact which they know but seldom publicly acknowledge) implicated within and benefiting from the nature of a racially ordered society (Leonardo, 2009). Most whites react against such revelations through actions such as denial, tears, guilt, defensiveness or anger (Picower, 2009; Yoshinaga-Itano, 2006). There are moments during my career where, drawing on research evidence, I have spoken truth about the experiences of people of colour and have been publicly shouted down, positioned as "challenging" or, patronizingly, as being "refreshingly frank". For as Ahmed (2009) reminds us:

To speak of racism [within universities] is to introduce bad feeling. It is to hurt not just the organisation, re-imagined as a subject with feelings, but also the subjects who identify with the organisation, the 'good white diversity' subjects, to whom we are supposed to be grateful. P46

This is precisely because such words are viewed as a disruption to the dominant narrative in which whiteness is supposed to remain invisible and where people

of colour are pathologised and positioned as inherently deficient and responsible for their own lack of progression. The unnamed requirement is that those working in the field of race equality collude with this norm or at least do not disrupt it and make white colleagues uncomfortable. As Leonardo & Porter (2009: 139) state "...pedagogies that tackle racial power will be most uncomfortable for those who benefit from that power".

As such, honest race conversation between whites and people of colour is a fallacy. The two groups begin from fundamentally different starting points, investments and aspirations. They have different ambitions. However, Leonardo (2009) warns against coming to the conclusion that because whites evade, deny and fight against genuine racial analysis of education, they simply lack knowledge about race. For to think thus, would mean being seduced by the idea that *acquiring* knowledge via a few hours of 'unconscious bias' training (currently a la mode in UK higher education institutions) or a one-off invited session with a race expert will be sufficient to enable white colleagues to begin to move beyond whiteness and commit, genuinely, to the racial justice project. It would mean that once educated - once made race conscious - whites will set about proffering analyses and implementing initiatives that truly equate to equity for people of colour. Such radical acts are rare and institutions demonstrate what becomes positioned as commitment, in other ways.

The Tale of the Emperor's New Clothes or, Racial Gesture Politics and the myth of race equity in Higher Education

Many years ago, I was assigned a mentor – an older white female academic – as part of a university programme to support the development of junior Black and minority ethnic staff². During our first meeting, in a local coffee shop, my new mentor asked about my professional aspirations. I liked academia I said, however, I was struck by the fact that there were only (at that point) 17 Black female professors across the entire sector. 'Oh' she said, 'you mustn't let that dissuade you or get you down'. In thinking that the figures could have only served to disincentivise me, she missed my point. My actual thinking was, if there are just 17 Black female Professors across the entire UK, what had their specific barriers to progression been and how might I too learn to navigate them? Later, sat before my computer in my office, I reflected that despite her well meaning, I did not want to do the work of educating my mentor about my views on success and survival as a woman of colour. I sent her an email to thank her for her time, making the excuse that mentoring was something about which I needed to give further thought and to which I might return in the future.

² I have long had reservations about the blanket, unquestioned use of mentoring programmes in higher education because they are often predicated on the notion that the mentee is lacking in some way and are seldom accompanied by wider imperatives for institutional or structural change. The notion of sponsorship, where the sponsor facilitates introductions to key individuals, share potential networking and job opportunities, is infinitely more attractive (Schwabel, 2013) and aligns with research which demonstrates the powerful role that social and cultural capital plays in facilitating social mobility (e.g see Ball, 2003; Bourdieu, 1986).

Since then, I have become increasingly interested in and concerned by the ways in which institutions respond to and engage with race and the issues raised by staff, students and faculty of colour. Of course, the first point to note is that within the current sociopolitical context, it is unusual to name race, racism or racial injustice so explicitly. Such language is politely subsumed within palatable umbrella terms such as *equality, diversity, inclusion* or, BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic). Race or racism is seldom named or foregrounded thus serving to maintain a racially sanitized norm which benefits whites and others faculty, staff and students of colour. In this context, attempts to explicitly name or foreground race and racism are silenced or reworked and rebranded in an effort to preserve the institutional image as neutral, colourblind and progressive. These acts of brand management do not challenge whiteness and are preoccupied only with protecting it whether through action or, as with the senior colleagues in the scenario above, inaction.

Ahmed's (2012) research examining engagement with racism and diversity in higher education institutions is relevant here. In one example, she describes how an anonymous college responded to newspaper coverage revealing that international students had experienced racist attacks on campus and, their complaint that the college lacked any means for dealing with such incidents:

The college spokeswoman said, "This could not be further from the truth. The college prides itself on its levels of pastoral care". p144

In analyzing this response, Ahmed makes the following observation:

The response [of the college] not only contradicts the students' claims (...) but also promotes or asserts the good will of the college. (...) Pastoral care is tied to an organizational ideal as being good: we do not have a problem (with racism, with responding to those who experience racism?) *because we care for these students*. The response to a complaint about racism and how the college handles the complaint thus takes the form of an assertion of organizational pride (...) *The response to the complaint enacts the very problem that the complaint is about*. p144 [emphasis added]

I noted similar processes at work during my role as Chair of one of the Equality Challenge Unit's panels assessing university submissions for the race equality charter. The charter exists to support the success and progression of Black and minority ethnic staff and students. Universities who were not successful in receiving an award tended to be those who were unable to offer, for example, a coherent account of staff and student experience in their institution. They also tended to view the process as a public relations' exercise, downplaying or attempting to gloss over inconsistencies rather honestly proposing how they might address them (Herbert, 2016; Rollock, 2016). By contrast, those institutions that did well were able to provide a clear narrative - irrespective of how revealing this was of their own failings - about the experiences of their staff, faculty and students of colour and could describe their plans to facilitate change.

So what are universities actually doing when confronted by data on race inequality? The following scenarios, again drawn from different sources, give some insight:

Scenario 2

A faculty within a large university carries out research to determine how many staff are from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds and their level of seniority. There are just five such staff and none is at Reader or Professorial level. The faculty compares its figures to other faculties in the same university and finds fewer Black and minority ethnic staff in each. It congratulates itself on standing heads and shoulders above other departments and concludes that it does not need to take any action to address the representation of these staff.

Scenario 3

A university finds that over a five-year period, Black and minority ethnic staff are more likely to leave or take up voluntary redundancy compared with their white counterparts. The institution explains this by saying that it has a global workforce and no workforce is static. When questioned specifically about the racial disparity, it argues that it has equality policies in place and all staff are treated equally.

What should be apparent in each case is the shallowness of strategies allegedly implemented to address racial disparities. These “performative contradictions” (Ahmed 2012: 144) may give the appearance of engaging seriously with race but in fact are no more than what I term *racial gesture politics*, i.e.:

Racial gesture politics refers to (individual or collective) words, policies or behaviours, which ostensibly address racial disparities but in reality maintain a racially inequitable status quo.

If we accept that racial gesture politics persist as the norm in higher education institutions (and indeed elsewhere) despite evidence from experts that their conceptual and analytical framework is problematic and in some cases regressive, then we must obviously question whether the intention to change is genuine and whether, and indeed how, the racial justice project might be realized.

Beyond white dominance

In 2008, I was commissioned by Runnymede (a UK-based race equality thinktank) to carry out the first independent review to assess whether the Government had met the criminal justice recommendations of the Lawrence Inquiry³ (Rollock, 2009). I carried out detailed secondary research, attended

³ The Lawrence Inquiry was published in 1999. It was announced in 1997 by the Labour Government with a remit to investigate the circumstances (including failed police investigation) surrounding the racist murder of Black teenager Stephen Lawrence (see Macpherson, 1999;

meetings at the Home Office, spoke with senior members within the police service, interviewed Stephen Lawrence's mother Doreen, read and analysed a weighty body of academic, government, and think-tank literature which had been published during the preceding 10 years. I found that the majority of the Inquiry recommendations had been met or were well on their way to being achieved. However, there were two recommendations - one relating to racial disproportionality in stop and search and, the other to the representation and retention of Black and minority ethnic officers - where there had been relatively little progress. I was surprised. After all, this was a period in recent British history where the term *institutional racism* had gained traction within print and broadcast media and wider public and political consciousness. This was a period characterized by the fast-tracked implementation of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. This was a period where, under the Act, public bodies had to demonstrate how they were promoting equal opportunities and good relations between different ethnic groups. Funding was made available for conferences, training schemes, for new posts and projects that centred on advancing race equality. It seemed that race was finally on the political agenda. Yet despite this, 10 years on disparities remained on the two key recommendations that focused on race and policing. It led to my posing different questions about my own understanding of racial justice: if unprecedented attention, commitment, resources and legislation had not made a difference to those recommendations, then what would and what were the actual barriers to change? I concluded that while considerable effort had been made to address racial disparities and improve the experiences and outcomes of Black and minority ethnic groups, there had been relatively little attention paid to exploring and challenging the attitudes, beliefs and practices of those in positions of power or to understanding how those positioned at the top of the racial hierarchy benefit from being there. In other words, while some important changes had been made to the script (to continue Carbadó & Gulati's analogy), the scriptwriters essentially remained the same and remained unchallenged in their practice and the culture they perpetuated.

In returning attention to higher education, there remains a sense in which students, staff and faculty of colour must depend on the white majority for their eventual (possible) understanding and commitment to improving race outcomes. Yet if whites benefit from the current racial order then we must ask whether the changes we demand from our places at the margins, are likely to be forthcoming. Indeed, in knowing and accepting this, we must also ask how we as students and faculty of colour might move to a more humanizing existence beyond merely hoping that whites might relinquish their privilege and power. It is in this context that campaigns such as #RhodesMustFall⁴ must be understood. To

Rollock, 2009). For a summary timeline of events stemming from his murder in 1993 see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-26465916>

⁴ The #RhodesMustFall campaign began, in 2015, at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. Stimulated by the actions of Chumani Maxwele (who threw faeces on the statue of British colonialist Cecil Rhodes located on the campus), Black students demanded greater representation of a history and individuals that spoke to their Black African experiences. Their actions were later followed by campaigners at the University of Oxford, England <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/nov/18/why-south-african-students-have-turned-on-their-parents-generation>

position the campaign, as some have⁵, as merely focused on the removal of a single statute at the University of Oxford (albeit of an individual profoundly associated with the oppression of people of colour) is to miss the point of the students' and activists' demands (Espinoza, 2016). Collective action, agency and self-determination serve as the bedrock of a movement which stipulates that the curriculum in its very broadest sense (i.e. taught provision, campus landscape, institutional culture, representation of staff and faculty of colour) is not simply diversified by the addition, for example, of a few more faculty or students of colour (an act of racial gesture politics) but instead is *decolonized*. In other words, that white structures, policies and decision-making processes are deconstructed and fundamentally reworked with principles of racial equity at the core (Olusoga, 2016; Rhodes Must Fall Community Facebook page, undated). In the decolonized institution, whites are cognizant of the ways in which they have facilitated racial injustice; low expectations of faculty and students of colour are challenged and penalized; whistle-blowing policies exist to root out and eradicate racial microaggressions. Racial justice is a named, embedded and enacted normality of institutional life.

In closing, I return to the scholarship of Derrick Bell (1992). He invites us to embrace a 'both, and' positioning with regard to the racial justice project. On one hand we must accept the permanence and futility of racism. My experiences carrying out the research for the *Stephen Lawrence Inquiry 10 Years On* report were formative in this regard. And at the same time, we become empowered from the very knowledge of its permanence⁶. It is with this knowledge that we can begin to pay greater attention to how we might forge a healthy existence within the 'racial fantasyland' (Mills, 1997: 18) of higher education as well as continue to challenge and deconstruct the racially unjust status quo.

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⁵ Lord Patten, the Chancellor of the University of Oxford (where the statue is located) dismissed the actions of the campaigners, announcing on a primetime BBC news programme that students who did not like the presence of the statue should study elsewhere (Espinoza, 2016).

⁶ In acknowledging this permanence, Bell does not suggest relinquishing the fight for racial justice or, indeed, becoming demoralized by it. It is the very awareness of this permanence and embeddedness that lends perspicuity to the strategies and work required to deconstruct it.

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