

Problem and solution

Occupation and collective complaint

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In the spring and summer of 2019, a group of Black and PoC students from Goldsmiths, University of London formed Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action (GARA) and occupied Deptford Town Hall – a key administrative building on campus – to push back against the institutional racism they experienced in the university. We, two junior academics situated in different departments in the university (Anthropology and Media, Communications & Cultural Studies, respectively), were struck by how British and ‘international’ Black and PoC students, as well as British white students, collectively created a multiplatform set of demands that placed discriminatory labour practices towards cleaners, reception staff and security guards in the university (a majority of whom are Black and PoC), and the institution’s complicity in gentrification of a Black and PoC working-class neighbourhood, in the same frame as a complete curricular review, overhaul of complaints procedures and anti-racist training for all staff.¹ These demands, taken together, were the result of years of unresolved and bureaucratically managed complaints that lived, siloed from one another, as discrete conversations in the university that often could be sidelined or forgotten because of the inevitability that students who raised these issues would move on after they graduated. GARA’s work was, in part, to link these complaints to one another and to other struggles within and outside the university and to show how they formed a larger set of enduring problems in an institution that purports to be radical and progressive.

As each of us began to work with GARA’s key members, we learned that their broad range of demands – some that could be rolled out as sanitised diversity initiatives by the institution itself (mandatory anti-racist training, for instance), others that appeared to challenge the literal foundations of the university (taking down the frescoes of slave owners on the edifice of Deptford Town

Hall, for instance) – were the result of a careful consensus-based decision-making process that GARA had initiated within its loose leadership structure. As students came together to challenge the university that they experienced and conceptualised differently, they had to configure an organising platform that was non-hierarchical and gave each core member an equal voice.² Because GARA didn’t narrow its engagement to the ‘BAME’ student experience, but, rather, connected issues of racialised and unequal labour conditions in the university, the endurance of colonial landmarks and the experience of Black and Brown students in classrooms, its demands seemed to confuse management. The institution initially responded to these demands by framing GARA students as unreasonable, irrational and politically naive.

As the occupation continued, stretching from weeks into months, we saw the university’s senior management struggle to come to terms with the fact that GARA simply wasn’t going to go away and that it could not successfully spin the public narrative about what was happening.³ The institution’s leadership concluded that it would have to ‘publicly’ listen to GARA and rely on it for potential ‘solutions’ to end the occupation. These solutions, of course, were encoded in the multiple demands themselves. GARA wanted management to listen to and address these demands on its own terms. However, even as the university leadership conceded that GARA offered a diagnosis and a concrete set of solutions to various issues in the university that fell under the broad banner of racism, it continued to assert that the students remained a problem as long as they occupied the town hall building. Senior management emphatically refused to comply with GARA’s requests to provide written responses to its demands until it vacated the building.

Eventually, three months into the occupation, management relented and agreed to negotiate with GARA

– first providing written (if terse) responses to each demand, then setting up two days of negotiation facilitated by an external mediator, a community activist from Lewisham agreeable to both parties. However, as was revealed in the last few days of the occupation, and soon after the face-to-face negotiations concluded, management was simultaneously building and filing a legal case against GARA. Just as GARA was coming to a final agreement with management, it found pinned on the door of Deptford Town Hall a large envelope with over 500 pages of documents charging trespass and filled with social media ‘evidence’ of GARA members’ involvement in the occupation. Rather than a simple injunction, senior management threatened to prosecute core individuals involved in the occupation if they didn’t vacate the building immediately. In the end, after 137 days of occupation, GARA vacated Deptford Town Hall. Before ending the occupation, it succeeded in getting management to sign a document agreeing to fulfil all of its demands.⁴ These demands, at the time of this writing one year after the occupation, remain unfulfilled.

GARA’s occupation, as an endeavour to create a shared space of learning and care for students, staff and community members in Lewisham in the heart of the Goldsmiths campus, whilst putting pressure on the institution to address structural issues, taught us several important lessons. As each of us became increasingly involved in GARA’s activities, we found its approach to organising, collaborative decision making and communality a powerful and novel example of creative and generative resistance to institutional racism that produced a vibrant, if temporary, undercommons. We also saw how GARA’s engagements with the university administration, the campus trade unions and our colleagues revealed important lessons about how Black and PoC students and faculty (ourselves, in this case) are received and channelled by the university administration and staff when they collectively identify potential ways to address racism within the institution. In this essay we discuss one lesson that we’ve learned – the ways in which participants in GARA’s actions have been individualised and positioned between being/offering potential solutions to issues of racism in the university and being intractable problems precisely because they/we participated in generating a collective complaint that publicly shamed the institution and its staff.

Sara Ahmed pushes us to think carefully about complaints as a way to strategically reach an institution’s ears.⁵ Complaints, in Ahmed’s reading, disrupt the workings of the institution by revealing its inability to see and serve those who are systematically marginalised within it. Complaints, however, are easily individualised and domesticated in the university’s workings. They traverse institutional circuits that limit their capacity to become anything other than singular problems to be managed. We are interested in how complaints become public demands when they emerge out of collective action, and the ways in which these demands work to make those that enunciate them both problems *and* solutions for those charged with managing the university. In other words, we are interested in how collective complaints (and the demands they generate) position those who participate in making them public. On the one hand, those who participated in GARA have had to experience the affective weight of counterclaims, denial and angry scrutiny from staff and leadership in the university, both publicly and privately. They have had their Otherness amplified. On the other hand, they have been asked, often by the very people that problematise them and the claims they embody, to offer additional ways to fix problems or to sit at the table in working groups, task forces, steering committees and more to deliberate on how to ‘action’ the original GARA demands. Here, we discuss how senior management and university colleagues, in their approach to students and staff involved with GARA, demonstrate how issues of racism and racial inequality (and the possibility for institutional remediation) become firmly located in the bodies of Others.⁶ We argue that in the white public space of the university, this move to make racial difference the problem of those who purportedly embody it and to place the institutional labour of solving it on them is inevitable. This doubling creates a political and ethical dilemma for those who are involved in struggles for racial justice in the university around whether to take on the enormous labour of attempting to change the institution and whether it will, ultimately, change anything.

What does it mean to call the British university a white public space? Whiteness, as Helán Page and R. Brooke Thomas remind us, becomes a taken for granted condition of possibility because there is an assumption that the implicit and explicit practices, beliefs and values within a space are shared.⁷ The space of the British uni-



iversity remains white, in large part, because whilst the student body has diversified over the last twenty years, its staff, curriculum and teaching practices have not necessarily reflected these demographic changes. Indeed, the whiteness of British Higher Education comes into relief as the sector has diversified its enrollment since the late 1990s. The 1998 Teaching and Higher Education Act and, later, the Widening Participation Programme had a part to play in this process of diversification, particularly as the latter offered a monetary incentive to universities in the UK to enroll 'BAME' students and provided a nominal state sanctioned route towards mobility for the 'most deserving' individuals who hail from the UK's ethnic minorities.⁸

The shift towards fees, loans and the internationalisation of recruitment has also diversified the student body in UK higher education institutions, whether in the Russell Group universities, the post-1992 institutions that were formerly polytechnics, or in smaller, niche art and humanities colleges like Goldsmiths.⁹ The story of

neoliberal strategies to diversify and monetise the sector over the last thirty years is too extensive to do justice to here. Suffice to say that in the present moment, British higher education institutions can now publish images of the university that show smiling Black and Brown faces against the backdrop of an idyllic campus green while also counting on tuition fees from these students. These Black and PoC students (and the few faculty of colour who have been hired on permanent contracts in this thirty year period), whilst positioned quite differently from each other on various axes, all share the experience of stepping into the white university and having to strategise about how to navigate it.¹⁰

As Ahmed argues, seeing whiteness is 'about living its effects.'¹¹ Seeing whiteness is, of course, easier to do when one sits outside of it. Conversely, it is curiously difficult to see whiteness and the ways in which it shapes space, location and relations if one embraces its framing vision or doesn't question one's inclusion in it. As a result, as Audre Lorde suggests, race and race

talk has a tendency to locate itself in the bodies of those who are not white, particularly those who are marked as Black.¹² Which is to say, race becomes the ‘baggage’ of those outside of the liberal enclosure of whiteness.¹³ Whiteness, as such, can disappear as a foundational, anchoring social, cultural and racial category for those who find or actively locate themselves within it. Or, perhaps, it doesn’t so much disappear as become hidden in plain sight.

Discussions of racism in the university and the university as white space, thus, are more likely than not engendered by those who sit outside whiteness. When Black or PoC students or faculty arrive at the university and confront whiteness, locate it in institutional practice or embodied habitus, a common tactic, resorted to by those who can’t and don’t wish to see its effects, is to evoke the spectre of ‘identity politics’. This move serves to reify racism as a problem of the ‘Other’ who has a deep investment in their racialised identity rather than open up an engagement with whiteness and its intersectional effects as constitutive of institutional life. Seeing and describing whiteness, locating its scripts, its locutionary force and its edifices has consequences. It generates a reaction from those who feel seen in its naming. Naming whiteness is taken personally. As DuBois observes, ‘this knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious’.¹⁴ An oscillation between the structure and individual opens up – discussions regarding structural whiteness are responded to with angry demands to name the ‘bad apples’ and absolve the rest of racism. Conversely, identifications of individuals implicated in power structures of whiteness are met with defiant cries to focus on the structural.¹⁵ That these consequences emerge in and as affects doesn’t take away their material force. We would argue that it is not just reactive ‘white fragility’ that plays out in these moments of interaction.¹⁶ These affects, rather, are the animating spirit that begets various forms of violence directed at Black and PoC students and staff in the institution and, as such, reproduce structures of power. Many of the students who were involved in GARA narrated experiences, prior to the occupation, of being positioned relentlessly as problems when they, in one way or other, named whiteness and its effects on them as students.

The university typically responds to the complaints made by those who sit outside of whiteness – if they

don’t go away on their own or can’t be managed through institutional reporting systems but accumulate and intensify – by hiring professional diversity workers.¹⁷ Since GARA’s occupation, the institution has hired a team of diversity workers to look into issues of racial inequality in the university.¹⁸ These workers, some of whom have worked across public and private sector institutions, are charged with doing research, writing reports and organising working groups or committees with the goal of eventually making recommendations for change in the institution. What is ironic in this case, of course, is that GARA, with its well-researched demands, had already done much of the work to provide substantive solutions to some of the long standing problems of inequality for the institution.

At present, GARA members – some who have graduated, some who are still students in the institution and both of us as staff members – are asked to sit on committees led by diversity workers who have been put in charge of seeing some of the demands through to implementation. GARA’s time and labour in these spaces is unpaid and its interjections in the meetings are seen as a problem for the functioning of these groups and committees by those that convene them. Many GARA students have wryly observed that they are invited to these meetings simply because the institution fears that failing to do so could reignite GARA’s public protest in ways that would further tarnish it. In this case, the threat of student protest is generative of student activist participation in management strategies to maintain the white university.

The diversity workers that institutions like Goldsmiths hire, more often than not, inhabit positions marginal to normative conditions of classed, gendered, ableist whiteness. They are charged with narrating problems in their specificity and reducing them to issues that can be addressed without upsetting the foundational premise of the university as white space. Take for instance the ‘Insider/Outsider’ report, written and published by Goldsmiths in October 2019, a few months after the GARA occupation ended.¹⁹ The document touches upon but ultimately skirts the issue of white institutional space. Rather, it focuses on Black and PoC student testimonies of trauma within the university to make a case for harm reduction. We might consider, based on this report, that GARA’s demands – which located the white

university as the problem – required diversity workers to return the problem of difference onto its Black and PoC students. If diversity workers had diagnosed and narrated the problem as one of a failure of the institution to see its own foundational (white) logics then perhaps this report wouldn't have been published. Indeed, an earlier version of the report which included a foreword written by a GARA core member (who was also the Welfare and Liberation Officer of the Student Union) that markedly pointed to the broader problems of university stewardship under the current management regime and pushed, once again, for the university to meet its demands, was rejected by the senior diversity officer. Major edits were introduced to make the foreword (and the report) a palatable set of recommendations. Several GARA members were furious and tried to force the issue but the report was nevertheless published without their contribution.²⁰

As Ahmed describes, diversity workers' recommendations translate well into non-performative solutions that bring to a close the diversity workers' tenure in the institution.²¹ Ahmed defines non-performativity as speech acts that don't do much of anything. If we consider performative speech acts as, per Austin, consummate action, non-performatives foreclose the possibility for action by becoming the action in and of themselves.²² What follows is rote. The institution makes public promises of various kinds and continues on, just slightly different from what it was before the solution raised itself as a problem. During the occupation, management offered many such non-performative speech acts, expressing deep sympathy for the cause of the occupation and publicly articulating their desire to sit at the table and talk with GARA. However, it didn't want to do the one thing GARA asked of it: offer a written response to each of its demands. Putting words on paper, it seemed, veered dangerously close to making language do work. Especially, it seems, if those written words are in direct conversation with students' complaints, demands and solutions, rather than routed through the filter of diversity worker reports.

GARA's occupation comes on the back of several student movements that have, in their own ways, attempted to push institutions to address their endemic structural inequalities. Since the 2010 tuition fee protests, there has been a growing disquiet amongst Black and PoC students and staff in the UK. Rumblings about the need

for change became rallying cries that borrow from student movements elsewhere, for instance Rhodes Must Fall in South Africa or the 'I am' movement that started in the United States.²³ These collective and publicly visible protests, actions and occupations, for the university, require different (or additional) solutions. The same institutional actors who previously outsourced the management of problems that diversity brings by hiring diversity workers, develop other techniques to manage the problem. Invitations are issued to students and staff who have raised issues of racialised disparity, hostility and exclusion, to provide solutions to the very issues they raised in diversity and, more recently, anti-racism committees. Black and PoC academics are asked to lead these committees or, at the very least, participate meaningfully in them. Black and PoC students are asked to provide input. Complaint and grievance, in the eyes of management, become the grounds to cultivate participation while dampening collective rage.

If you are one of the students or staff members who finds themselves invited or even expected and obligated to provide solutions to the intractable problem of racism by sitting on (or even chairing) a department anti-racism or diversity committee, you find yourself enmeshed in affects of whiteness. Remorse, regret, rage, surprise and a strange sense of righteousness oscillate and produce insistent counter-demands to those who have raised problems to subsequently solve them, all the while maintaining decorum. If you show irritation or any sign of emotion, you again become a problem.²⁴ To be clear, these oscillations don't just come from management. Even amongst colleagues who claim a radical politics there is no agreement on what constitutes meaningful critique. Faculty (and in some cases, students) who are raising issues regarding racial disparity and who are amplifying GARA's message have been accused of unconsciously doing liberal diversity work rather than offering substantive critique of the neoliberal university.

GARA students and the two of us, as we've been invited into these forums, are then left to work through the range of feelings they (we) are exposed to. We (are forced to) try to chart a course that takes the opportunity to offer solutions to the problems that have been raised in the hope of making the university (even slightly more) survivable for ourselves and the students and faculty of colour who come after us. But even as we do so, we

struggle to reject the compulsion to provide this labour freely, especially given the lack of recognition of the emotional toll it takes to do the work of explaining how tenets of liberal whiteness are embedded in every process, the imperative of doing so without causing upset or anger, and the possible detriment to our careers and future prospects as a consequence of doing this work. All the while, there remains a scepticism that offering one's labour in this way will result in substantive institutional change. We do it nonetheless in the knowledge that if we don't, Black and PoC students (present and future) in the institution will, ultimately, suffer. But the process drags on. Semantic railroading disrupts or delays the promise of any substantial change. Ahmed's non-performative solutions take on new meaning. They are now framed as dialogues without end and without result.

The fight that GARA began in 2019, one that spread to other institutions,²⁵ has once again reignited. George Floyd's murder in the US and the uprisings and calls for abolition in its aftermath coupled with the devastating effects of COVID-19 on Black and PoC populations in the UK, has pushed students and staff to ask why the demands that GARA made over a year ago haven't been met. These public queries have again created a public image problem for an institution touted for its progressive politics in a moment when it is already teetering as a result of financial deficits. In turn, the university has once again begun to reach out to those who raised the problems in the first place, for solutions. Both of us, certainly, have been invited onto various committees and even bids for grants dealing with structural racism in British higher education, in large part, we would argue, because of our involvement with GARA. Participation in GARA has ironically created a kind of fraught institutional capital for each of us. Others in the university seem to have grasped this 'opportunity'. Some who were strong critics of GARA for various reasons – that it wasn't radical enough, that it played identity politics, that it didn't know how to negotiate with the university, that racism wasn't a big enough problem in a progressive institution – have now begun taking up GARA demands (particularly the sexy, decolonial ones such as the removal of colonial statues on Deptford Town Hall) or positioned themselves close to Black and PoC students in the institution to curate events with them. Somehow, aligning oneself close to the problem without necessarily having done the work of

engaging with, listening to, and supporting students in GARA, seems to be becoming a viable strategy to accrue academic capital.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. This document, part of a larger archive that details GARA's actions and activities, elaborates on GARA's initial demands: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1l6Jn-q8TLqnZtEGiEjEt0d_egF70q2ENcOmwJyk5ulM/edit.
2. The adoption of this consensus-based model of decision-making within the collective was in part inspired by local grassroots organisations such as Sisters Uncut UK.
3. The 'public' narrative of GARA's occupation was, on the one hand, fashioned by the university's PR team and, on the other, articulated by students in GARA on social media and through pieces in a variety of publications including the *Guardian*, *gal-dem*, *EastLondonLines*, *The Independent*, etc. GARA also made all correspondence with senior management public on social media (see <https://www.facebook.com/goldsmithsanti/notes/>). Throughout the occupation, GARA invited journalists to report on its struggle, which it linked to larger issues of systemic racism in UK higher education.
4. External mediators were brought in to facilitate the signing of the contract so that the institution could save face and GARA members could leave the building feeling that they had won an important victory.
5. Sara Ahmed, 'Complaint and Survival', 23 March 2020, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2020/03/23/complaint-and-survival/>.

6. On diversity and its limits, see Ellen Berry, *The Enigma of Diversity: The Language of Race and the Limits of Racial Justice Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). On diversity talk in the university, see Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012). See also Tariq Modood and Stephen May, 'Multiculturalism and education in Britain: An internally contested debate', *International Journal of Education Research*, 35:3 (2001), 305–317.
7. Helán Page and R. Brooke Thomas, 'White Public Space and the Construction of White Privilege in U.S. Health Care: Fresh Concepts and a New Model of Analysis', *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 8:1 (1994), 109–116. See also Karen Brodtkin, Sandra Morgen and Janis Hutchinson, 'Anthropology as White Public Space?', *American Anthropologist* 113:4 (2011), 545–556.
8. These policy initiatives were preceded by efforts by the Labour government of the late 1960s. For example the 1965 and 1968 Race Relations Acts were implemented to improve 'race relations' through localised initiatives to educate white populations about new immigrant labour and to help integrate Caribbean and Asian immigrants into white British life. BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) or BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) is a British bureaucratic racial category that surfaced in public discourse in the 1970s and 1980s. For more information on widening participation, see Debbie Weeks-Bernard ed., 'Widening Participation and Race Equality', Runnymede Perspectives, [https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/WideningParticipation-2011\(Online\).pdf](https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/WideningParticipation-2011(Online).pdf).
9. See <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students> for information on the diversification of British higher education since the early 2000s.
10. Whilst the university has diversified student recruitment over the last twenty years, it has not done the same for staff. See for example Richard Adams, 'Fewer than 1% of UK university professors are black, figures show', *Guardian*, 27 February 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/feb/27/fewer-than-1-of-uk-university-professors-are-black-figures-show>.
11. Sara Ahmed, 'Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism', *Borderlands* 3:2 (2004), http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations.htm.
12. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984).
13. For a discussion of how liberalism shapes race consciousness, see Barnor Hesse, 'Im/plausible deniability: racism's conceptual double bind', *Social Identities* 10:1 (2004), 9–29.
14. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 29.
15. Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); see also 'Selfcare as Warfare', 25 August 2014, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare/>.
16. Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (New York: Beacon Press, 2018).
17. Ahmed, *On Being Included*.
18. See Goldsmiths letter of response, in which it promises to fight for racial justice, in part by assembling a consulting team to do so: <https://www.gold.ac.uk/racial-justice/commitments/dth-protest-college-response/>.
19. Sofia Akel, 'Insider/Outsider: The Role of Race in Shaping the Experiences of Black and Ethnic Minority Students', October 2019, <https://www.gold.ac.uk/media/docs/reports/Insider-Outsider-Report-191008.pdf>.
20. In October 2020, *The Guardian* published a piece on the report; see David Batty, 'Goldsmiths racism report finds BME students feel unsafe on campus', *Guardian*, 10 October 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/10/goldsmiths-university-to-tackle-racism-after-damning-report>. After speaking to GARA students and the writer of the forward, it published another piece the very next day that reported the watering down of the report: Rachel Hall and David Batty, 'Students accuse Goldsmiths University of watering down racism report', *Guardian*, 11 October 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/oct/11/students-accuse-goldsmiths-university-of-watering-down-racism-report>.
21. Ahmed, 'Declarations of Whiteness'.
22. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).
23. For a discussion of the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movements, see Kelly Gillespie and Leigh-Ann Naidoo, '#Must-Fall: The South African Student Movement and the Politics of Time', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 118:1 (2019). For a discussion of the impact of the Fallist movements in the UK, see Amit Chaudhuri, 'The real meaning of Rhodes Must Fall', *Guardian*, 16 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/mar/16/the-real-meaning-of-rhodes-must-fall>.
24. This process is also inherently gendered. The naming of Black women and women of colour as 'problems' and the negative reactions to them are often quicker and more intense. This was visible in the ways in which senior management spoke to and tone policed Black women from GARA and also in the difference in treatment we, a WoC and a man of colour, receive from our colleagues.
25. See the Warwick Student Union statement on their occupation, which began in November 2019: <https://www.warwick-su.com/news/article/warwick-su-statement-on-student-occupation-2019/>.