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To cite this article: Manuel Madriaga & Benjamin Blaisdell (20 Jun 2024): Breathing space amidst the permanence of racism in the academy, International Studies in Sociology of Education, DOI: [10.1080/09620214.2024.2369887](https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2024.2369887)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2024.2369887>



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Published online: 20 Jun 2024.



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## Breathing space amidst the permanence of racism in the academy

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents evidence that sheds light on both the limitations and the possibilities of race-focused staff forums that have formed across UK higher education as part of a response to equality legislation. Based on interviews conducted with 13 staff of color across two universities, this paper foregrounds critical race theory presenting evidence that these staff forums are often performative and fail to address needed structural changes. Despite this, there is also evidence of agency among members to struggle for an anti-racist university. This paper reveals varying perceptions and meanings to these forums, highlighting a tension. On the one hand, staff recognize the performativity of these initiatives. On the other, they also often value them as spaces of respite. The paper concludes that further examination of the perspectives and situated knowledge of members of these forums can offer valuable insights that can impact the creation and implementation of such spaces.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 September 2023  
Accepted 14 June 2024

### KEYWORDS

Critical race theory; higher education; race; racial realism; university staff

Bell (1992a, p. 7), one of the early writers of critical race theory (CRT), wrote early on about a tension of hope and despair experienced by Black people working in higher education struggling to make anti-racist structural change. Disclosing to his muse, Geneva Crenshaw, in the essay, ‘The Law Professor’s Protest’, Bell (1992a, pp. 134–146) shared that he petitioned his own Harvard University leadership to recruit more Black professors. Bell shares a sense of hope with his colleague that the academy can be changed. However, in the same piece, he expressed despair that it will ever occur unless it benefits the university and upholds white supremacy.

Why the despair? Universities are racialized organizations (Ray, 2019; Schachle & Coley, 2022), where white supremacy is upheld (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Doharty et al., 2021; Rollock, 2021; Sian, 2019). A variety of scholarship has exposed the underrepresentation

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of staff of color in universities on both sides of the Atlantic (Bhopal, 2020; Jayakumar et al., 2009; J. Johnson et al., 2018; Luca et al., 2012; Sian, 2019). In the UK specifically, in 2020, Black professors comprised less than 1% of all professors in the sector (Advance, 2020, p. 164). Then, once in university positions, the academy in the UK is not the most hospitable arena for people of color due to the pervasiveness of white supremacy (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Doharty et al., 2021; Rollock, 2021; Sian, 2019). The above and other research has documented the extent, frequency, and effect of the negative experiences those staff encounter when they do hold university positions (Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal & Jackson, 2013; Bhopal & Pitkin, 2018; Harley, 2008; Rollock, 2021). Those experiences commonly position staff as outsiders in the institutions they work for (Bhopal, 2015; Sian, 2019). White supremacy is pervasive to the extent that staff of color must work to find spaces to not only survive, but to thrive (Dennis, 2018).

The UK higher education sector does recognize the extent of race inequity (Advance, 2020; Universities UK and National Union of Students, 2019). In response, universities have acted and engaged in anti-racist initiatives, attempting to be in alignment with Government equality legislation – the (Equality Act, 2010). This policy makes it unlawful to discriminate against those with certain, ‘protected characteristics’ which includes age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation (Equality Act, 2010 c.15 section 1[5]). To ensure legal compliance and that staff of color as having a ‘protected characteristic’ are not disadvantaged, universities have sanctioned specific spaces for people of color, race-focused staff forums, to lead and feedback on institutional policy and implementation of anti-racist initiatives. This raises the question of the extent of agency and meaning of these forums for university staff of color.

Very little has been said about these race-focused staff forums (Lander & Santoro, 2017; Mahony & Weiner, 2020), specifically from the perspective and voices of university staff of color who engage in these spaces. This paper is an attempt to enhance our sociological understanding of them through a CRT lens. We first look at the context for and creation of these forums in England and at the inherent tensions in their formation. We then use Bell (1980, 1992b) idea of interest convergence, which is undergirded by racial realism, to analyze those tensions and to critique the implementation of these forums. To expand on that critique, we then present our qualitative study of race-focused staff forums at two universities in England.

## Race equality charter

Our inquiry is spurred by the poor track record of university work on racial equity, especially as it relates to full inclusion of and responsiveness to staff of color as indicated above. In response to the stipulations of the (Equality Act, 2010), university human resources departments have promoted race-specific leadership programs<sup>1</sup> and mentorships (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2018).

Moreover, the work of Advance HE and its Race Equality Charter (REC) has also been a source of support for UK universities to respond to the (Equality Act, 2010). Advance HE is a charity based in the UK that works with universities across the world with ambitions to make them more inclusive. They provide a framework for universities with its REC to improve the representation, progression, and success for both staff and students of color (<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter>). According to Bhopal and Pitkin (2020, p. 532), the REC responds to the (Equality Act, 2010) in which universities must demonstrate their commitment to race equality. The commitment to the REC is adhering to a framework for universities to identify, evidence, and self-reflect on institutional and cultural barriers standing in the way of minority ethnic staff and students. Under the REC framework, an institution can apply for an REC award at varying levels: gold, silver, and bronze. The application is reviewed by Advance HE. If awarded, an institution will be able to hold an award for a fixed period, usually several years, as it will be expected to apply for renewal or apply to progress to next level of award. At the time of writing, there are 43 universities holding the REC bronze award and 2 holders of the silver award.<sup>2</sup> Having an award benefits an institution symbolically, with the ability to badge itself publicly as working towards race equality. In the development of the REC across the UK sector, equality, and diversity committees and Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME)<sup>3</sup> staff groups – what we refer to here collectively as race-focused staff forums – have sprouted within institutions (e.g. University of Oxford BAME Staff Race Network or University of Cambridge BAME Staff Network<sup>4</sup>). As universities seek to address persistent racial inequalities and perform diversity work, staff of color particularly those within these forums are often called upon.

## Tensions in the implementation of race-focused staff forums

Race-focused staff forums are often more performative than effective. Staff of color rarely report better experiences after these initiatives are instituted and, instead, are often left with feelings of frustration and resentment (Fook et al., 2019). One issue is that they are often mere rhetorical moves that do

not address the structural nature of racism in university life (Bhopal, 2020; Welton et al., 2018). A related issue is that staff of color are often asked to be involved in these initiatives, which puts them in the tenuous position of having to contradict normalized institutional discourse and logics (Ahmed, 2017). The result is a performative interest in racial equity, where institutions can look like they are working to address racial inequity while never actually having to make any material change.

Furthermore, participation in these initiatives can result in more labor – a diversity burden (Pak et al., 2018) – for staff of color. In addition to being an extra burden in terms of time, workload, and emotional labor, these efforts position staff of color as not only the solution to a problem (that they did not create) but also as the cause of that problem (Bhopal, 2020).

Despite the problematic role that university race-focused staff forums have in institutions, staff of color themselves have found, in addition to frustration and anger, value in participation. These bodies can serve as a space where staff meet and share with people with whom they could identify (Fook et al., 2019). They can be community building spaces from where staff can share and speak back to microaggressions and other forms of racial discrimination (Griffin et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2018; O’Meara, 2015).

### Racial realism of English higher education

The CRT concept of interest convergence helps analyze the above tensions. In his ‘Law Professor’s Protest’ essay (1992a, p. 142), Bell hints that his hiring at Harvard was related to student pressure to enhance racial diversity of staff, which coincided with riots in US cities in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. In sharing this, Bell gestured towards interest convergence, where work towards racial justice only gets taken up by institutions when it also *converges* with white interests (Bell, 1980). In Bell’s example, Harvard – a predominantly white-led institution – benefits by appearing to progress racial justice in hiring more staff of color (Bell, 1992a). While this happens to help Bell in securing a job, the outcomes of this kind of interest convergence will always be limited for staff of color (Bell, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), because institutions like Harvard use one-off appointments to avoid addressing more widespread institutional racism. This may seem despairing, but it needs to be put in the context of racial realism.

The notion of interest convergence is a ‘by-product’ of Bell’s racialist realist philosophy (Alemán & Alemán, 2010, p. 4). Racial realism is an acknowledgement of the permanence racism throughout society (particularly the US context), and as Bell explains, ‘That acknowledgement enables us to avoid despair, and frees us to imagine and implement racial strategies

that can bring fulfillment and even triumph' (Bell, 1992b, pp. 373–374). It is having the view of the permanence of racism within English higher education where hope can spring for anti-racist change.

Hope here highlights the agency of a group, comprised of people of color having to navigate the racialized academy. Their working lives may be structured by the permanence of racism within the academy. However, their lives do not necessarily have to be *determined* by it. On this point, we take encouragement from the ethnographic work of Tichavakunda (2021), who documented Black student agency and joy within the structural racism of a predominantly white university in the US. Too often, Bell's (1992b) message of hope and collective agency in the struggle for racial justice gets lost in the articulation of his CRT concepts of racial realism and interest convergence. Thus, we extend work like that of Tichavakunda to examine the role of hope in engaging in diversity work. While holding on to critiques of university equality and diversity initiatives – from both the literature and our own experiences – here we explore not only the problematic and unclear nature of these forums, but also what university staff of color make of them and what their experiences can tell us about how they function.

## Methods

Here, we ask the questions: what meaning do staff of color make of participating in university staff forums comprised exclusively of staff of color under the banner of equality and diversity policy? What do they find of value in their participation? We also ask, what can their experiences in these forums tell us about how they function?

As we sought to answer these questions, we did so with a reflexivity on our own roles. We have each been leaders of university diversity and inclusion groups in our respective institutions and lead other racial equity efforts. We come into that work with different racial identities, responsibilities, and higher education contexts but also with similar commitments. Manuel is a UK-based academic who hails from a Filipino immigrant home. He was co-chair of a race-focused staff forum at a previous institution, which was held accountable to an equality and diversity university committee. Ben is a white male faculty member at a large public university in the southeast USA and served as co-chair of his college's diversity committee for five years.

## Setting

With our own experiences in mind, we attempted to answer our guiding questions by conducting a qualitative research project at two

**Table 1.** Respondent details

	Name of respondent (pseudonym)	Self-described racial and ethnic ascription
1	Olivia	African descent
2	Maya	Black African. Sometimes refers to self as a Black Muslim woman
3	Alice	Black American
4	Carina	South Asian
5	Linda	Black
6	Fiona	Mixed-race
7	Grace	Black and Muslim
8	Hannah	Identifies as Asian Other
9	Iris	Black
10	Jacklin	BME
11	Kenneth	BAME and mixed-race
12	Lori	Asian and Muslim
13	Maria	Refers to self as hailing from the Indian subcontinent

UK universities. Respondents were recruited through emailing contacts on our own staff networks who voluntarily engaged with their university race-focused staff forums. Prior to Covid lockdown in the UK, five interviews took place face-to-face in university cafes. The other interviews were conducted over Zoom with recordings saved on our own PCs. The interviews lasted from an hour to three hours. Ethical clearance for this endeavor was approved by our respective universities.

### **About the respondents**

Our attention was drawn on the phenomenon of race-focused staff forums, with a focus on what binds these groups together. All respondents in our study were university staff of color. However, they were not a homogeneous group and identified themselves in different ways in their interviews (see [Table 1](#)). Their disclosed ethnic and racial specificities cannot be discounted, particularly in a higher education sector which is recognized as anti-black (Madriaga, 2018) and color-evasive (Madriaga, 2022). Their roles varied from academic teaching staff to those working in entirely ‘professional and support services’ departments (Advance, 2020), such as marketing or human resources. From the interviews, most respondents identified as women (10 of 13). Only one respondent identified as male. Two respondents did not disclose their gender identity in the study.

### **Methodology**

To undertake this work, we used narrative inquiry, which focuses on uncovering how people narrate their experiences and revealing the broader social dynamics in which those narratives exist (Clandinin & Michael Connelly, 2000). Denzin (2001) explains that examining detailed narratives in times of discord can shed light on the inequity

that is built into the structures and institutions in which people live and work. Narrative inquiry is especially useful to examine the experiences of people of color because it can offer rich accounts of the marginalization people face (Barone, 2009), and it can challenge the taken-for-granted, dominant narratives that tend to frame those experiences in reductive ways (Coulter & Lee Smith, 2009).

In addition, as we were conducting research specifically on race and racism with staff of color, our narrative inquiry was informed by CRT. CRT uses narratives of people of color as a counterweight to dominant discourses (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Institutional narratives rely on notions of racism rooted in liberalism, where racism is anomalous to institutional practice and can be eliminated simply by addressing individual, overt instances of racism (Matsuda et al., 1993). Such narratives ignore how racism is endemic in university practice and culture. In doing so, they frame bodies like race-focused staff forums as proof that the institution is addressing issues of racial disparity. As we explained earlier, institutions do not actually have to change policies and practices in ways that affect structural racism in anyway (also see Ray, 2019). Thus, their dominant discourses automatically sustain racial oppression.

### **Data collection**

As we set out to ask the respondents about their experiences, we were particularly attentive to narratives rooted in the experiences of people of color that offer new ways to understand racial power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) and that disrupt dominant narratives about race neutrality (Delgado, 1989). Therefore, in line with a CRT as a mode of inquiry, where CRT foundational principles inform the data collection and analysis process (Miller et al., 2020), we asked questions not only about the participants' experiences in these forums (e.g. 'What have been your experiences with your race-focused staff forum?'), but also prompted them to critically analyze these forums as institutional practice (e.g. 'What are the university's goals of the race-focused staff forum?' and 'Do those goals align with your own?'). Our intent with these questions and our follow-up questions (e.g. 'You mention the university using these forums as a tick-box exercise yet also have found value in them yourself. Can you tell me more about that?') was to expose the tension over these forums' intended, stated, and hidden purposes. These types of questions helped us elicit narratives that disrupted dominant institutional narratives that race-focused staff forums are unproblematically beneficial.

## Analysis

We used narrative inquiry to reveal the threads in the data (Clandinin & Michael Connelly, 2000), specifically to uncover commonalities in the participants' narratives regarding their experiences in race-focused staff forums. We also used a CRT lens to examine how their narratives shed light on the endemic nature of racism in higher education and how narratives by people of color can provide more contextual understandings that expose the often hidden, taken-for-grantedness of that racism (Cook & Dixson, 2013). It is important to note that this is not directly a piece of counternarrative. Rather, it is what Miller et al. (2020, 278–279) refer to as a 'narrative factors approach' or a 'thematic analysis rooted in CRT'.

A set of related themes were identified by the authors. First was the theme of being the 'only one,' of being one of the few staff of color and what that means for their relationship with other staff of color. Second was the theme of reprieve, of race-focused staff forums of being one of the few spaces where respondents encountered other staff of color. For most respondents their comments reveal a desire to connect with colleagues of color to compensate and at times even respond to the difficult position of feeling like the 'only one' most of the time. Third was a theme of ambivalence over what it means to belong to and participate in a race-focused staff forum. Comments revealed confusion and even frustration about the purpose and execution of these forums. This analysis helped us focus on how narratives reveal institutional racial power dynamics (Vaught, 2012). It also helped us show how the unique voice of people of color can serve to identify both racism and potential interventions into racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

## Findings

We present our findings in three sections. The first section illustrates the respondents' view that race-focused staff forums can be spaces of respite from being the 'only one.' The second section represents their concerns and frustrations over the forums' lack of efficacy in terms of institutional change. While many respondents greatly valued the chance to connect with colleagues of color, others were also left wanting in the forums' ability to promote racial equity in the institution. These first two sections illustrate the tension between the respondents' desire for community and their need for remit and coherence. Then, in the third section, we point out some of their insights on how this tension might be addressed. We follow-up those findings sections by coming back to interest convergence and racial realism, drawing again on the respondents' insights.

***“My only breathing space”: reprieve from being the only one***

The presence of university staff of color is minimal in English higher education (see Doharty et al., 2021; A. Johnson, 2020). The impact of this does not go unnoticed by respondents, particularly that feeling of being the only ‘one’ in the corridor or in a shared office:

To exist in this academy, you have to have thick skin. . . I’m certainly one of the only senior staff members in that space. If you came up to where I work, it is white. I work in a predominantly white space. You suffer microaggression on a day-to-day basis. (Linda)

You come back to the sight of an office full of white people talking about going to the bloody pub. (Grace)

The above comments are just a couple of the examples we heard that reveal how, because of their racial identities (and their religious affiliation in the case of Grace), staff of color are made to feel like outsiders within their own institutions (see Bhopal, 2015; Sian, 2019).

In contrast to feeling like outsiders most of the time, respondents expressed excitement to see another staff of color. The sight of another racialized visible minority offers respondents comfort and familiarity. Fiona recalled a memory of seeing another Black person in a university meeting, ‘There was a group of people in the room, and then I saw somebody who looked like me. . . She was the person who I felt more familiar with . . . We became friends.’ This connection to colleagues of color offered a shared sense of reprieve, belonging and affinity of working in a white-dominated space (see Tichavakunda, 2021).

The presence of staff of color is limited in English higher education with 11.6% classified as BAME in Advance HE Staff Statistical Report (2020, p. 130). This is, perhaps, the attraction of having race-focused staff forums for those interviewed. The desire to share space with other staff of color cannot be discounted. As Lori shared:

I felt that was my only breathing space. And I felt like this was the only place I was desperately looking forward to going to the [forum]. I’m telling you this because I felt nowhere understood. I felt like I was always out of place wherever I was in my office.

***‘That’s how whiteness maintains control’: meanings attached to race-focused staff forums***

Not all respondents shared a positive view of community-building aspects of their race-focused staff forum. Some desired them to have a clear ‘remit’ with ‘clear set of actions.’ It should not necessarily be a place about finding ‘community’ or ‘social kinship.’ As one respondent, Linda, recognized:

Too many things are going on in that space. . . Fundamentally, to be honest, if I never went to that meeting it would have no impact on my life whatsoever. I'd still come to work every day as a Black member of staff, and to be honest, the last one, I didn't go to the last one, because it's two hours out of my life, and I've got other things I can be getting on with . . . I don't have time to meet just to chat, because I'm very busy, and I'd like to know - do we have KPIs [key performance indicators]? . . . What's going to be the outcome at the end of the year? What will we have achieved as a [group]? What is it we're trying to influence and where are we making change? I don't really get a feel for that at the moment. It is all a bit wishy-washy for me.

Linda's sentiment about the race-focused staff forum reflects how a few others see these spaces. They exist for university business, particularly in having to respond to equality legislation as well as the pursuit of the sector's REC recognition. Universities have poured resources into these race-focused staff forums. As with any other committee or working group within any English university, the questions posed by Linda are applicable to race-focused staff forums. These forums are formed for an official purpose and are perceived as spaces of potential that can make meaningful change. Linda was not the only respondent who expressed worry about these forums not operating within a formal remit:

I mean, I think the way they should work is, you know, having a clear kind of remit and a clear set of actions I think is a kind of key thing for me in terms of a [race-focused staff group] . . . this is just generally over my time at [the university] is that it becomes a bit. . . just a discussion really between a group of people. People have a sort of common purpose that doesn't necessarily go anywhere. (Kenneth)

Other respondents, while not as worried about the race-focused staff forums' lack of focus or remit, did comment on its performative nature (Ahmed, 2012). For instance, Hannah highlighted that the forum at her university was formed and geared towards the REC:

So, the [forum] meetings that I went to, first off, I think it's very clear that it is REC-intended because as you fill out the form, there's a section where you have to write like what you bring to the to the group . . . I know what conditions are in the REC. So, it is like, wow, that's very explicit.

The above responses show the potential of narrative to provide understandings of racial power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), and in this case they specifically reveal how universities are racially organized (Ray, 2019; Schachle & Coley, 2022). Universities create spaces that are developed for the stated purposes of addressing the REC, but by failing to give group members any actual ability to affect institutional policy and practice, the institution also prevents them from addressing the material effects of racism. Thus, the respondents' narratives also reveal the interest convergence dilemma and the tension staff encounter. Furthermore, Hannah's

expression of ‘wow’ shows that staff of color are aware of the situation the university is putting them in.

In addition, Hannah’s comments point out how the university’s purpose for the forum – to show the university’s commitment to the REC – conflicts with the ‘breathing space’ purposes attached by respondents as noted above. To have a race-focused staff forum meet regularly to discuss either the application or university accountability to the REC, in all its performativity, was contrary as to why respondents sought to be a part of it and their desires for community as indicated earlier. Some respondents did explicitly acknowledge this dichotomy in the interviews. Like respondents in Ahmed’s (2006) study, they referred to race-focused staff forums as ‘tick boxes’ for their respective universities. For example, Lori reflected on how the university used its forum: ‘And it’s just always like showing and ticking boxes more than actually being interested in and doing this [race] work on a greater level, on a bigger level.’ These types of response show the respondents’ understanding of interest convergence, how institutions allow certain forms of procedural antiracism as long as the structural, material dimensions of racial power are not threatened (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In recognizing this dichotomy, Olivia acknowledged that the university is sustained by white supremacy and suggested that with all the evidence of institutional racism ‘things remain the same because that’s how whiteness maintains control’. Olivia argued that the race-focused staff forum was probably the only space in which staff of color can be ‘their racialized selves’, but at the same time knowing it was also a ‘tick box exercise’ for the university.

### ***‘We know it’s a tick box exercise’: exercising agency amidst structure***

The respondents’ narratives did also reveal some strategies, their agency, for responding to the tension of participating in race-focused staff forums. For example, recognizing the contradiction between her own forum’s performative and affirming functions, Olivia was deliberate in leading the forum to be a liberating space for staff of color and then reluctantly giving the university what it needs to fulfill their tick boxes. Making the forum a ‘breathing space’ for staff of color will come as a cost for the university according to Olivia, as ‘They’ve got to earn that tick box’:

We know it’s a tick box exercise, so I think myself and [another colleague], we’re going to make them pay for that tick box. They’ve got to earn that tick box. So, from the university perspective, we have a [race-focused staff forum]. Tick. Some people meet and talk about things. Tick. When we have a process that we’re thinking of changing, we will give it to them to have a look at, even though it’s changed already, and make them feel part of the change process. Tick.

Olivia's comments show the interest convergence behind the formation of these forums. At the same time, they show how staff of color can still use those spaces – and even the university's performative goals – to strategize for potential structural changes (e.g. 'a process that we're thinking of changing') that staff themselves would like to see.

The strategizing potential of staff of color narratives is important to consider because, despite the tension between the respondents' views of these forums as community-building spaces on the one hand and as tick-box exercises on the other. Though they may differ in their perspectives of what the race-focused staff forums means, they still identify themselves as members of the forum. There is a sense of bounded similarity and belonging to these forums amidst the individual differences in how they think these forums should operate. For instance, Kenneth highlighted that the race-focused staff forum should operate like an organization with a strategic vision:

What are the priorities that we think exists for BAME people, let's say, and then again, lobbying the appropriate groups in the university to say, you know: 'This is what we think the priorities are? I will get on this. This is what it needs to be really focused.'

While Kenneth advocates race-focused staff forums in 'lobbying the appropriate groups in the university' to address institutional racism, there are others who have expressed less optimism. In a similar tone of Olivia's earlier assessment of universities sustaining white supremacy, Carina remarked, 'So, it's like you're trying to address way too many things in a structure that is fundamentally an annihilating structure, and a structure that wants to strip you of dignity, justice, love.' Carina argued for a space that pushes the official-ness of the forum to the side for a couple of years to progress and build energy because university staff of color are 'beaten down':

You're permanently getting beaten down... So, I wonder if it makes sense to only engage the institution when you're ready. Partly sometimes I feel like we're not ready. We're not ready for that meeting with HR... So, I wonder if it's worth conserving our energy... Building energy... Right now, maybe all we can talk about is our exhaustion... Maybe we all want to watch shitty TV together, whatever, because there's value in that. I think maybe we do constrain ourselves... We do this mission statement, vision statement, meeting minutes. We fill these committees with so much administrative crap. (Carina)

The respondents' comments reveal that despite being frustrated by the ambiguity they experience and despite no easy answers to how those spaces could be made more effective, they saw value both in the community-building aspects of the forums and in their potential to push university policy, even if that potential was rarely realized. It is important to note that respondent narratives did not reveal a clear way out of the tension, or even unified views of how race-focused staff forums should function. Their responses did, however, expose the inherent interest convergence behind

the development and implementation of these forums. Furthermore, their narratives revealed how the knowledge and experiences of staff of color can open-up possibilities that help institutions begin to rethink how these forums can function.

## Discussion

For staff of color, the ‘benefit’ of race-focused staff forums is that they can address the issue and isolation of being the ‘only one’ in a department, corridor, or office. As Hooks (1995, p. 155) has described:

Every aware black person who has been the only ‘one’ in an all-white setting knows that in such a position we are often called upon to lend an ear to racist narratives, to laugh at corny race jokes, to undergo various forms of racist harassment.

White supremacy is not an aberration (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017); it structures our lives to the extent that a university worker of color is eager to introduce oneself to a stranger, specifically another person of color, seeking some sense of affinity, as evidenced above. It causes one to reach out, seeking comfort due to the discomfort of working in a predominantly white setting. Hence, race-focused staff forums can be meaningful for those who find themselves as the ‘only one’. Ahmed (2012, p. 36) shared thoughts on how freeing such spaces can be: ‘It can be surprising and energizing not to feel so singular’. As evidenced above by most respondents, the need for affinity, making oneself known to another person of color, and attending a race-focused staff forum emerged for reasons of ‘community’ and ‘breathing space.’ The beauty of these forums is that they can be spaces of community where one does not feel singular and can be their racialized selves in the whitest of institutions. This sense of community was touched upon by Tichavakunda’s (2021) work with Black students finding affinity with one another in a predominantly white institution. The staff interviewed for this study in a similar way to Tichavakunda’s students found a counter-space where agency and hope can be cultivated among a group of staff of color. As Olivia indicated, the forum is a space for folks to be their racialized selves. To recognize this, to just be with other university staff of color, is valuable work even if it is ‘watching shitty TV together’ in the words of Carina. These spaces open the possibilities for connection, encouraging one another to thrive amidst the micro-aggressions and the loneliness of being the ‘only one’. As they tie into staff wellbeing, these spaces may be beneficial for institutions in retaining staff of color if given room amidst the pressure of performing for the race equality agenda.

At the same time, while most respondents see the race-focused staff forum as an affirming space, respondents were also concerned about the remit of such forums and being tied to university key performance

indicators linked to the REC. This represents the diversity of how respondents perceived these institutional forums. In addition, many responses also indicated that staff of color are aware of – even critical of – the university’s rationale for the existence of these forums, that they may be performative and satisfying a university ‘tick box’. In fact, the performativity of these forums is what allows universities to maintain themselves as white supremacist institutions and the data shows that staff of color often recognize that interest convergence dilemma.

This acknowledgement of despair but still engage in the struggle, the race-focused staff forum is representative of Bell’s racial realist view (Bell, 1992b). It is not only about evidencing the despair of engaging in organizational race equality initiatives (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020), but also offering accounts of a sense of purpose, agency, maybe even hope, within this work (Tichavakunda, 2021). In sanctioning these forums, universities use them for their own performative purposes. Universities appear as if they are addressing racial inequity by sanctioning such spaces for staff of color. Thus, our data reveal a push-and-pull between the staff’s desire for community (which is not the official reason universities establish these forums) and a concern over being complicit in the institutions’ performative ‘tick box’ exercise. This provides new perspectives on how racism is normalized in institutions (Delgado, 1989), and our respondents’ narratives added nuance to existing explanations of how racial power is maintained in institutions even via supposedly antiracist initiatives.

## Implications

Race-focused staff forums have come to the fore for institutions to respond to the (Equality Act, 2010) and engage in the REC sector-wide scheme. Universities, particularly those taking part in the REC initiative, are actively encouraging, supporting, and resourcing these forums. Establishing these forums is in some sense a recognition of institutional racism embedded within English higher education.

The question remains, however, about how we can hold on to the anti-racist community building aspects of these forums while also overcoming the inherent issue of their performativity. The respondents’ own insights may be helpful here. Carina, for example, offers insight on the conflicting roles that these forums play – as affinity spaces versus organizing spaces. Her suggestion is, especially in their early stages, to push the official charge of these forums to the side and focus instead on their capacity to develop deeper connections and offer community that the institution cannot. Her suggestion connects to critiques by both Linda and Kenneth that the purpose of these forums is often unclear and/or not purposeful. These critiques also imply that, as there are different purposes for coming together,

there might not need to be one race-focused staff forum that serves all functions but rather various groups with narrower, clearer purposes.

With equally critical insight, Olivia offers suggestions for strategizing. In her comments – which we also include earlier in the piece – she says, ‘we’re going to make them pay for that tick box.’ In other words, she argues that participants in these forums can exploit the university’s performative purposes for establishing these forums to leverage power. Her comments also speak to how the critical insights of people of color can expose and disrupt those dominant discourses that sustain embedded racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This type of insight recognizes that while structural racism will always be embedded within institutions, there is power and value in speaking back to it and in being resistant, exercising collective agency (Bell, 1992a). In the context of higher education, universities promote themselves as racially inclusive spaces (Blaisdell, 2021) despite evidence to the contrary. By using race-focused staff forums to expose how universities are not inclusive, participants can negotiate for specific policy changes that they want to see. Such strategizing may help staff of color who work on racial equity initiatives not feel despair from the failure of institutions to achieve broader racial equality (Bell 2008). It leaves space, if only a glimmer, for hope for anti-racist change.

Having hope for anti-racist work is significant at this moment. As we conclude this paper with its focus on UK higher education and race equality, we see progressive work in this area being attacked elsewhere in the world, particularly the US where the gains made from the Civil Rights to make higher education more racially equitable are under threat (see Ray, 2023). The higher education sector in the UK is itself not free from racist discourses that have been mainstreamed by the far right. The question remains as to whether such discourses will land on the shores of the UK and hinder the development of other anti-racist initiatives and race-focused staff forums explored here. In any event, we will hold on to hope.

## Notes

1. Advance HE has an initiative to build-up BAME staff career progression. See <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/programmes-events/development-programmes/new-to-leading/diversifying-leadership>
2. To view current holders of awards please see <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter/members>.
3. We have tended to use the phrase ‘staff of color’ interchangeably with the UK official government category ‘BAME’. The limitation on the use of both ‘BAME’ and ‘staff of color’ is similar due to the diversity under the banner of such categories. However, with authors hailing from different national contexts, not

entirely based in the UK, we tended to use ‘staff of color’ to signify the racialization of staff against a white norm.

4. See linked examples of university race-specific staff groups – University of Oxford Staff Race Network <https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/bme-staff-network#collapse1177386> (accessed on 24/1/23) and University of Cambridge BAME Staff Network <https://www.race-equality.admin.cam.ac.uk/networks/bame-staff-network> (accessed on 24/1/23).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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