

Article

The Seeds Are Sown: Towards Interracial Inclusivity at a UK Predominantly White Institution

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Abstract

The mental distress experienced by ethnic minority students studying at predominantly White institutions is well documented. These institutions and their spaces can be hostile environments for ethnic minority students and staff, leading to low retention, engagement and poor mental health. Often posited through a deficit lens, we challenge models that situate the experiences of what we call the resilient minority (ReM)—racialised ethnic groups—into categories to be fixed. By deploying qualitative research into Black and White university student experiences of racial inclusion, we explore alternative views to building stronger, more resilient communities. By further theorising interracial anxiety (the increased levels of anxiety felt by White people when interacting with ReM or experienced by ReM in predominantly White contexts), we highlight how decolonisation, built on representation and recognition, not only generates important discussions about interracial anxiety but also creates opportunities for change. We evidence how the representation of ReM groups through a Black feminist and decolonial critique in predominantly White contexts can reduce anxiety, promote wellbeing and potentially foster interracial inclusivity in higher education.

Keywords: interracial anxiety; decolonisation; racism; black feminism; PWI; racism; interracial inclusion

1. Introduction

In recent years the realities of interracial tension have again taken centre stage in Northern democracies. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests after the murder of George Floyd and subsequent reports of disproportionate treatment in a variety of institutions, reveal that the projects of value-pluralism and multiculturalism have been unsuccessful in challenging deep-seated racial prejudice, stigma and discrimination (Mullard 2023). Moreover, it is evident that this prejudice continues to have a devastating impact on ethnic minority health and wellbeing (Kapadia 2023; Nazroo et al. 2020; Todorova et al. 2010; Williams and Collins 1995). Whilst the literature about ethnic minority mental health outcomes has largely focused on stigma within these communities, such as religious or cultural explanations, the growing literature is turning against this deficit model. For example, Kapadia (2023) shows how attention must be paid to the role of wider racialised institutional stigma that shapes the narratives given to ethnic minority mental health. In keeping with this turn, we explore the way interracial anxiety (IA), as defined by Plant and Devine (2003), is a useful theoretical tool for unpacking the mental distress many ethnic



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minorities, or what we call the Resilient Minority (ReM)¹, face in predominantly White institutions (PWI).

By drawing on the prejudice and social anxiety literature, [Plant and Devine \(2003\)](#) highlight how higher levels of anxiety are experienced by White students when interacting with Black students. For example, more overt forms of racial tension are replaced with implicit behaviours such as nervousness, dialogue errors and less eye contact (a form of avoidance) (*ibid.*). This tension or anxiety relates to preconceived negative expectations or embedded racial prejudices that exist before interracial interactions with outgroup (Black) members occur. Moreover, these tensions extend well beyond the walls of the academy. In the context of the North East of England, where White working-class identities rub up against the multicultural and international communities that attend the local universities and more established ReM populations, interracial tensions can, at times, run high. This was evident in the counter-BLM protests organised by far-right groups in the summer of 2020 ([Mullard 2023](#)). There have also been attacks on Black-owned businesses and cases of racialised abuse. Thus, IA offers a way to delve deeper into our understanding of interracial interactions and of the impact of IA on the mental health and distress of both White and ReM people.

To unpack the IA faced by White people and the mental distress experienced by the ReM, we use research carried out in a higher education setting to reveal how this operates as an affective or emotionally driven practice that limits the educational and social experience of both White and Black students. In turn, we explore the ways in which representation of ReM groups through a Black feminist and decolonial critique in predominantly White contexts can reduce anxiety, promote wellbeing and potentially foster interracial inclusivity in higher education.

2. Our Research

The empirical element of this paper attempts to answer the following questions:

How do two Black undergraduates' counter-stories of race and racism refracture interracial inclusivity within a PWI in the North East of England?

How does interracial anxiety shape interracial encounters within a PWI in the North East of England?

To explore both questions, we draw on Jones' doctoral research into student perceptions of race, racism and racial inclusiveness, which was carried out at an elite PWI in the North East of England. We specifically examine these questions by extracting two Black undergraduates' perceptions from Jones' work (see next paragraph). Jones' research (December 2019 to February 2020) was composed of qualitative data (1-1 semi-structured interviews) from a Russell Group (RG) University. A total of 21 undergraduates were interviewed. The participants were recruited from the RG via global email, social media and student societies, with a gender sampling of women ($n = 13$) and men ($n = 8$), and a race/ethnic sampling of Black and Mixed ancestry (Black and White, Brown and White).

This paper adopts an in-depth qualitative case study approach, centring on Ciara, a Black undergraduate student whose counter-narratives expose the operation of IA and its implications for identity formation and the wider student experience of Black women within a PWIs (see [Table 1](#)). To enhance analytic depth and comparative insight, Ciara's account is examined alongside evidence from a second participant, Prisca, whose reflections on decolonisation extend the analysis by illustrating how intentional forms of interracial inclusion may mitigate IA and support Black students' mental health. Together, these cases enable a nuanced exploration of IA as both a structural and interpersonal phenomenon.

Table 1. Ciara and Prisca’s details.

Name (Pseudonym) and Identity	Counternarrative Sums from the Original Thesis (Race, Racism and Racial Inclusion)
<i>Ciara</i> —A student who is Black Caribbean and British, a woman from a working-class background in London	Ciara participated in her institution’s Black Summer School programme, an initiative designed to lower grade requirements for prospective Black applicants. Students who completed the programme automatically received an offer of admission, contingent upon meeting the adjusted academic criteria. Ciara conceptualised race as a social construction that systematically advantaged White people in general, and White students in particular, within the PWI. Having grown up in an ethnically diverse environment, she initially found encounters with racism or racially exclusionary behaviours to be ‘weird,’ which in turn shaped her understanding of racial inclusion for Black students (her room is considered her safe space). Notably, her reflections were primarily grounded in interpersonal experiences that illuminated gendered intersections between Black women and Black men.
<i>Prisca</i> —A student who is Black Caribbean and British, a woman from a working-class background in the North East.	Prisca, one of the few Black students from the North East of England at the PWI—despite the institution’s geographical location in the same region—described Durham as ‘weird.’ Having come from a predominantly White educational background, where she experienced what she characterised as ‘hell’ in sixth form due to racism, Prisca felt somewhat prepared for navigating the PWI. As a result, she framed her university experience as relatively positive, contrasting her Black peers, highlighting how race had shaped her educational trajectory at an earlier stage. Moreover, Prisca identified ‘lad culture’ as a key mechanism underpinning anti-Blackness within the institution, echoing Ciara’s observations regarding the intersection of race and gender. She also reflected on being positioned as a ‘lone wolf’ and perceived as ‘outspoken’ in comparison to her peers. Notably, her account foregrounded institutional dimensions of racism and emphasised the role of decolonising practices in fostering self-belief and supporting racial inclusion.

We adopt a critical race theory (CRT) methodological position that centres the role of counter-storytelling to move discussions away from deficit models. Counter-storytelling is important to analyse when conveying racialised experiences (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, p. 26). For example, as Doharty et al. (2021) suggest, ‘sharing stories challenges White privilege, rejects notions of “neutral” research or “objective” researchers and exposes deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of colour’ (p. 235).

Alongside CRT, a Flippin’ the Script (FTS) methodology developed by Jones’ doctoral work has been deployed as it concentrates on what causes the behaviours of the ingroup (White). By interpreting these behaviours using the Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF) (Johnstone and Boyle 2018), we provide a rich methodology through which to explore IA in the context of Higher Education. The main purpose of the PTMF is to unpack different ‘operations of power’ (e.g., social capital and ideological) and how they convert into a *threat response* when someone’s power is perceived to be challenged. *Threat responses* stem from an insecurity felt by the perpetrator and ‘serve for emotional, physical, relational and social survival’ (Boyle 2022, p. 36) (e.g., IA). They are also used by people who have experienced racism, and their power is used ideologically and/or interpersonally

(Boyle 2022). For instance, in this study, students who are Black seek race/ethnic-based student societies when responding to a threat (e.g., repeated racist abuse) to meet with ReM peers, develop a sense of belonging and feel validated in a PWI. Thus, an FTS methodology extends CRT and critical Whiteness studies² through the application of an inclusive interracial approach and a strengths-based lens for targets and perpetrators of racism, by considering language along with a deeper more critical consideration for the source of racism, racialised experiences and the behaviours they generate.

We then combine this with the interracial anxiety theory and processes of decolonising an institutionally racist environment as counteractions that may reduce IA and student mental distress. We then provide Black feminist recommendations from Ciara and Prisca—the two Black students around whom this paper centres. In the final section, we discuss the ways in which IA manifests at their PWI and how challenging this through decolonial approaches offers room for improvement. The amalgamation of these plants seeds for interracial inclusion.

3. The Context: Higher Education in the North East of England and the Persistence of Racial Inequality

In UK higher education (HE), facilitating a racially inclusive wider student experience is important for all students and staff, and many universities are embarking on inclusion projects of this kind. The current landscape of HE spaces has seen an increase in the number of students and staff from underrepresented and ReM backgrounds. However, whilst the numbers of ethnic minorities have increased, these groups tend to be overrepresented in newer university spaces such as those often referred to as the “post 1992’s”. These are institutions, formerly polytechnic or Central colleges, that gained full university status after the implementation of the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, which sought to dismantle the distinction between colleges and universities in the HE sector. The HE sector in the UK is highly competitive and hierarchical (Russell Group 2016), and the newer universities are often regarded as ‘less desirable’ than their ‘older and *red brick* university’ counterparts and are underrepresented in the RG. Established in 2007 as a self-selecting association of the highest-ranking research universities, the RG contains the universities perceived as the 24 most ‘prestigious’ higher education institution’s (HEI) in the UK, receiving collectively over three quarters of all HE funding and with their graduates holding 61% of all jobs in the UK that require a degree despite representing only 17% of all HEIs (Russell Group 2016).

Whilst there are many reasons for this disparity, a recently well-documented cause is linked to the university admissions process (Boliver and Jones 2023; Jones 2025).³ Boliver (2018), for example, suggests that unconscious bias operates in the admissions process. These biases prejudice their admissions process and therefore lead to issuing fewer offers to ReM students (ibid.). The empirical push for equitable opportunities to fill this void requires proper legislation, and some efforts have been made in this regard. For example, the Equality Challenge Unit attempted to decrease ‘unconscious bias’ in admissions with staff training (ECU 2013) and to share offer rates. Such organisations have had a positive impact and the Black–White enrolment gap has now decreased to 1.2 percentage points (UCAS 2022).

The safety for Black bodies coming into these predominately White spaces is compromised by the lack of intergroup contact experienced by the cohort who typically populate RG institutions. The low enrolment rates and lack of support for ReM students can create a hostile environment. This is because not only do ReM students make up a very small percentage of the student population, but they are also confronted with the most economically advantaged of the overrepresented White ethnic group (largely privately educated and

well-connected), who operate as exclusive cultures that require adaptation. Furthermore, the overrepresented White population, as a result, misses the opportunity to experience diversity in all its forms. As such, and because we wish to champion a strength-based language, we will henceforth call White middle/upper-class students 'Absent Diverse Opportunity' as is further explicated in Jones' doctoral work.

Moreover, because White students have historically dominated and continue to dominate RG institutions, the spaces up for grabs are not equal because their foundation has been based on the education of an already "elite" community. For those coming into this space who have not been part of that experience, they are immediately disadvantaged. For example, many White students attended the same elite schools, have families that are connected and share common references as well as social and cultural capital. These spaces, therefore, operate as exclusive cultures requiring adaptation. Whilst there are growing opportunities for underrepresented academic staff and students, the location and prestige of the institution have a far greater impact on the trajectory of their lives than for students who have occupied that trajectory from birth.

As such, ReM students require special attention in spaces where they are less represented. This is because the interactions between the minority ReM outgroup and White ingroup are juxtaposed and brought to the forefront in such spaces. The racial hostility and subsequent anxiety are exacerbated when the wider environment of the institution also lacks ethnic diversity. Both environments are considered hostile by ReM students because of their overexposure to racialised experiences. For example, Jones' research highlights that within the university, White students are reported to display covert forms of racism, such as racial microaggressions, and in the wider community context, experience more overt forms of racism. This renders racism and the racialisation both of White and ReM inescapable for many in this study. The inescapable racialised spaces both within and outside the academy is why we wish to challenge the deficit models that lock in both the experiences of ReM groups and White communities. Thus, this paper draws on the impact of interracial spaces in a PWI and area in the North East of England, presenting practical recommendations for building a more interracially inclusive community.

The North East of England has very low levels of racial/ethnic diversity, with current figures reporting a population that is 93.6% White and 96.8% White for the HEI's County (ONS 2021), a predominantly rural post-industrial region characterised by nucleated villages and towns. This county has high levels of social deprivation and is currently ranked 48th out of the 151 most deprived upper-tier local authorities nationwide (Crown Copyright, Ministry of Housing 2019). As pointed out by Mullard (2023), given its rural location, history of deprivation and the breakdown of its traditional industries, the geographical context represents, on the one hand, an exceptional setting for such discussions, yet on the other hand, a generative site that exposes particular sets of social relations and juxtaposing experiences that can support our understanding of IA and strategies that may help reduce mental distress and encourage interracial inclusion.

4. Interracial Anxiety

Over the years, British HE has become increasingly multicultural and issues around racism and its impact on student wellbeing and mental health has highlighted the need to illuminate how students from different racial backgrounds interact in student and wider community spaces. Lessons can be learned from the expansive USA research in this area (Jackson 1998; Littleford et al. 2005; Johnson-Ahorlu 2013).

When considering the interaction between ReM students and their White counterparts, it is useful to explore the concept of interracial anxiety (IA). First conceptualised by Plant and Devine (2003), IA refers to heightened anxiety experienced during interracial

interactions, particularly among White individuals, when engaging with racialised others rather than members of their own racial group. Empirical research demonstrates that IA is associated with observable behavioural outcomes; for instance, laboratory-based studies have shown that White students' implicit racial bias significantly predicts reduced nonverbal friendliness (e.g., decreased eye contact and heightened anxiety) during interactions with Black students (Dovidio et al. 2002; $p < 0.01$). While IA is often conflated with *White fragility*, the two are analytically distinct. IA reflects affective and behavioural responses to the anticipated or actual presence of racialised minorities, whereas White fragility refers to defensive reactions that arise when White individuals are challenged about racism or racial inequality. Although these phenomena may share similar emotional expressions (e.g., fear or discomfort), they emerge under different conditions and operate through distinct mechanisms.

Furthermore, IA is an amalgamation of two theoretical components of anxiety—i.e., intergroup and social—to measure a deeper understanding of interracial interactions. *Intergroup anxiety* 'results from the anticipation of negative consequences resulting from intergroup interactions. According to the model, people's expectations regarding negative consequences derive from their previous experience with outgroup members and their thoughts and beliefs about outgroup members.' (Plant and Devine 2003, pp. 790–91).

Intergroup anxiety has also shown to correlate with 'aversive racism'. Dovidio and Gaertner (2000) demonstrate that aversive racism, 'characterises racial attitudes of Whites who endorse egalitarian values, who regard themselves as non-prejudiced, but who discriminate in subtle, rationalisable ways' (p. 315). The egalitarianism underpinning this process implies everyone starts off life and their educational careers in the same way and at the same point, which does not account for the challenges that many underrepresented students face throughout their educational experience (Gillborn and Mirza 2000; *ibid.* 2018).

Schlenker and Leary (1982) define *social anxiety* as a series of responses that highlight fears and apprehensions about the way a person thinks they are evaluated in social situations. Social anxiety occurs when people feel they must make a particular impression in an interaction but worry they will not succeed (*ibid.*, 1982; c.f. Plant and Devine 2003). Therefore, *social anxiety* is concerned with outcome expectancies and the outgroup's desire to have positive interactions between ingroup members. However, the ingroups' (White) willingness to interact is often shaped by their perceptions and even worries about being viewed as prejudiced. Conversely, the use of racial stereotypes by White people impacts intergroup interaction with the outgroup (Black). This is an important factor to consider as many people who are White at PWIs are absent diversity and as such, miss out on interpersonal experiences with ReM groups. We argue it is this 'missing out', coupled with social anxiety, that creates IA.

Meta-Stereotypes and Contact Avoidance

IA results in two types of actions by the ingroup (White) that create barriers for racial inclusivity, i.e., (i) contact avoidance and/or (ii) hostility toward the outgroup (ReM). Two major factors underpinning contact avoidance and hostility are 'prejudice' and 'meta-stereotypes' (Finchilescu 2010). According to Allport et al. (1954), 'prejudice is a hostile attitude or feeling toward a person solely because he/she [they] belongs to a group to which one has assigned objectionable qualities (p. 1).' In this context, racial prejudice is an unfair preconceived attitude towards a racial outgroup (Black) based on opinions of the racial ingroup (White) members, because of the ingroups inability to judge based on reality or integrity (Allport et al. 1954).

A meta-stereotype refers to a stereotype one group may have about the ways in which they are stereotypically viewed by another group. Social Psychologist Gordijn (2002) shows

the ways in which status-ranked groups have difficulty interacting because of a belief that the other group holds stereotypes about them. For Gordijn, this becomes most apparent when a particular high-status group feels they are being evaluated negatively by the lower-status group or vice versa. For example, when writing about whether meta-stereotypes are automatically activated, [Vorauer and Kumhyr \(2001\)](#) revealed that White Canadians shared the mainly negative meta-stereotype that Aboriginal Canadians think White Canadians are egocentric, insensitive, prejudiced and ambitious and that these stereotypic associations can be automatically triggered when feeling evaluated.

Meta-stereotypes align with *social anxiety* as they are the fear of ingroup members who are White being negatively stereotyped by outgroup members who are Black, and thus the White group ‘carries a range of emotional and behavioural consequences’ that may hinder interracial contact, such as avoidance ([Finchilescu 2005](#), p. 465). Furthermore, the relationship between anxiety, intergroup contact and meta-stereotypes is complex ([Finchilescu 2005, 2010](#)). For example, [Finchilescu et al.’s \(2002\)](#) study in South Africa demonstrates that participants with less racial prejudice display IA because of the belief that ‘blacks hold negative stereotypes of Whites’ (cited in [Finchilescu 2005](#), p. 467). Thus, regardless of group membership, people who are White are more likely to have higher levels of IA in interracial spaces, as shown in various studies ([Littleford et al. 2005](#); [Plant and Devine 2003](#)). Ways to counteract such feelings and behaviours are through reframing the ways in which colonisation can be dismantled and flipped.

5. Woke Decolonisation

[Ocheni and Nwankwo \(2012\)](#) define colonialism as ‘the direct and overall domination of one country by another,’ wherein state power is exercised by a foreign authority (p. 46). Colonial education functions as a form of epistemic violence, favouring Eurocentric knowledge as universal while marginalising the cultures and scholarship of the global racial majority ([Heleta 2016](#); [Mullard 2021](#); [Ocheni and Nwankwo 2012](#); [Valdez 2020](#)). These epistemic hierarchies shape racialised perceptions, experiences of racism and understandings of racial inclusion within educational institutions.

Higher education campaigns such as ‘Why is my Curriculum White’ and the Decolonising the Curriculum movement have taken an approach to challenge and dismantle colonial education ([Peters 2015](#)). According to [Begum and Saini \(2019\)](#), ‘Decolonisation is crucial because, unlike diversification, it specifically acknowledges the inherent power relations in the production and dissemination of knowledge, and seeks to destabilise these, allowing new forms of knowledge which represent marginalised groups—women, working classes, ethnic minorities, and LGBT to propagate’ (p. 198).

The importance of acknowledging race is increasing representation of ReM scholars in academic curricula, who are increasingly recognised as important by the institutions themselves. Since the calls to decolonise, many universities across the globe have embarked on journeys to redevelop their courses to include a wider diversity of scholars. As [Charles \(2019\)](#), Director of Library Services at Birbeck College, London, highlights:

‘Being aware of our unconscious bias and acting on this also impacts not just teaching and the resources used but more importantly research output, innovation, new theories or insights. If we only allow ourselves to be aware of and be influenced by a very narrow view, rather than a broader perspective, could result in synergies not imagined being missed as a result’. (ibid., p. 5)

The ways to challenge a colonial education are not only through sheer representation but, most importantly, what is in policy and how it is practiced. Diversity alone does not provide inclusion and belonging. [Altheria Caldera \(2018\)](#) developed a ‘woke’ pedagogical framework substantiated in Black feminist ideology that challenges the cultural “blindness”

of educators. The term woke, formulated by the Afro-American writer William Melvin Kelley, implies an awareness of the abuse and inequity targeting the Black community in the USA (Babulski 2020). It is worth acknowledging that over time, the term woke has been used globally and criticised as an ‘umbrella’ term, largely by the White fragility of the conservative right; the right claims it punishes people with contrary beliefs (O’Hagan 2020). For example, Brooks (2018) highlights that wokeness ‘leads to a onesided depiction of the present and an unsophisticated strategy for a future offensive’. The term woke is also misused as a façade or watered-down term (Kunda 2019), such as by the neoliberal left who claim to be anti-racist but are seen to have false integrity. Moreover, ‘woke pedagogy’ describes implementing teaching practices in the curriculum that take an intersectional approach and critique oppressive structures that historically and currently impact the lived experiences of ReM groups (Altheria Caldera 2018; Ladson-Billings 2014). Altheria Caldera (2018) highlights three approaches to woke pedagogy:

1. ‘Both teachers and students view their lived experiences as sources of knowledge and tools for knowledge creation.’
2. Teachers and students must ‘analyse multiple forms of oppression and the intersection among them.’
3. ‘Woke classrooms are led by teachers who exhibit activist care.’ (p. 7)

Therefore, woke decolonisation challenges colonial cultures and curricula to then foster collaborative methods between staff and students, which leads to civic engagement and social activism. The analysis advances this as a key recommendation for fostering interracial inclusivity, which, over time, may reduce IA and associated mental distress.

Racism operates through institutional and systemic power rather than solely at the interpersonal level. It is therefore necessary to interrogate the limitations of, and racist counter-responses to, decolonisation initiatives within higher education. Central to this critique is CRT’s concept of *interest convergence*, which explains how universities often endorse antiracist agendas primarily to protect institutional reputation, rather than to dismantle racial inequality, by aligning Black interests with dominant White interests (Bell 1980). Such dynamics frequently result in tokenistic and inauthentic practices that ultimately reproduce institutional racism (Jones 2025). For example, Shain et al. (2021) identify three phases through which English universities engage decolonisation under conditions of interest convergence: strategic rejection, reluctant acceptance and strategic advancement. Their analysis demonstrates how reputational risk functions as one of many motivations for institutional engagement with decolonial work. Recognising the insecure yet persistent power of Whiteness and hegemony within PWIs, we argue that systemic racism and oppression continue to shape interpersonal encounters—particularly through interracial interactions underpinned by IA and what participants characterise as ‘weird’ or subtle forms of racism.

6. Understanding Interracial Anxiety: Ciara’s Weird World

This section draws on the experiences of Ciara, a Black undergraduate woman. We call it *Ciara’s Weird World* because that is how she has defined her university environment when arriving from a diverse educational context to a racially non-diverse one, which she was not used to in an educational setting. We can characterise her experiences through the following subthemes: (i) *Ciara’s intergroup anxiety*, (II) *Black interracial anxiety* and (iii) *White hyper-racism*. In the original study, thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework: familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; examining for themes; evaluating themes; defining and naming themes; and generating the report. As this article constitutes an analytical offshoot of the original study, attention was given to emergent findings concerning interracial anxiety and decolonisation. To further

interrogate these constructs, we returned to the previously coded counter-stories of both participants, Ciara and Prisca, and developed two overarching themes and associated subthemes to address the research questions. This analysis integrates a Black feminist lens with Jones' *Flippin' the Script framework* to foreground the nuanced interplay between intersectional interracial anxiety and decolonisation within a PWI context—an area that remains underexplored within UK higher education.

Black feminist scholarship has been central in providing an alternative lens through which to explore racial inequality. Collins (1986), when considering Black feminist consciousness, draws a useful distinction between knowledge and wisdom. She argues that Black women are 'insiders' privy to the workings of White society and that this affords them certain knowledges through which to navigate White spaces. Yet, they also occupy the position of 'outsiders', fully knowing they will never really be accepted by White society. In turn, it is the wisdom that is acquired through occupying the 'outsider within' space that creates the resilience that Black women need in order to survive and even thrive in spaces that exclude them.

Kimberlé Crenshaw created the term *intersectionality* as an extension of Black feminist research to unpack the ways in which race intersects with multiple forms of identity and how these intersections are practiced simultaneously (Crenshaw 2013). As such, IA is further affected by different forms of inequality such as gender, class, sexuality and disability. Moreover, there are differences between the experiences of British-born Black women and first-generation Black women who have grown up in a majority Black context. As such, understanding the nuanced Black experiences in universities necessitates an understanding of the multiple histories and experiences of racism and their intersections.

6.1. Ciara's Intergroup Anxiety

Ciara is a second-year undergraduate who is a Black Afro-Caribbean, British woman from a working-class background in London. At the start of the interview, Ciara is asked how her experiences compared to her expectations coming to the PWI.

'To be honest they kind of met my expectations as I didn't think I would have that great of a time in my first year. I didn't think there would be many Black people and there aren't that many Black people, so it kind of met the expectations I had really.'

Ciara fully expected there to be few Black people at her university, and she believed that she would struggle to have a good experience as a result. Moreover, she further expected to feel lonely and isolated as the sixth form she had attended was more diverse.

'I'm used to being around Black people like my sixth form was literally probably like the opposite to here exactly opposite so like the amount of White people here would be the amount of Black people in my sixth form basically.'

Having come from a predominantly Black educational setting to one where she was very much in the minority created intergroup anxiety. Thus, her new 'weird world' generates a range of affective responses that in turn lead her to occupy the 'outsider within' positionality. In doing so, we 'flip the script' to highlight the ways in which Ciara navigates her own IA and, in turn, generates new strategies of resilience.

6.2. Ciara's (Black) Interracial Anxiety

Ciara expressed concern about the lack of diversity at her university and felt that she would not be able to make friends and open up to her White classmates. 'I wouldn't open up to them because it would be like weird and uncomfortable.'

Ciara's sense of not belonging restrains her interactions. She does not feel she will have anything in common with the other students and that they themselves might find it 'weird' to talk to her. Having to navigate these complex feelings creates a form of mental distress and fatigue, as her positionality as an 'outsider' entails constant concern with how one is perceived or through which lens one is being observed. Being less open to avoid 'weird' and 'uncomfortable' interracial interactions draws on both her perception of how the White students may feel interacting with her but also how she will then feel when faced with their discomfort. Thus, Ciara's experience of IA also produces racial contact avoidance, a common theme amongst interracial interactions. However, whilst these forms of racial contact avoidance are predominantly observed in the literature as typical of White students, such as by Finchilescu (2010), it is clear from Ciara that avoidance can also be practised by Black students. As such, IA cuts both ways, and whilst one is informed by a racialised discomfort around Blackness, for Ciara it is connected to the impact of having to witness the discomfort being displayed by white students.

Ciara's racial contact avoidance is further explained by virtue of her Blackness being perceived as a threat by White students absent diverse opportunities.

'I feel like people when they talk to me, they'd be scared to say certain things or they'd randomly just start talking about something Black related, they just make it weird in general.'

Ciara's IA is not just something she feels herself but is also a result of White students' 'weird' behaviour toward her.

'It's like most the time it's with people I just met I'd say, so like one time I was in the club and someone came up to me and was like "oh yea I went to a Kendrick Lamar concert" and I was like hmm so that's the first thing you're going to ask me and first thing you're going to tell me (laughs) just stuff like that it's just weird.'

For Ciara, the White student's immediate reference to the Black Afro-American rap artist Kendrick Lamar is taken as 'weird' because it is the first thing the student says to her, and unless the artist was playing at the time of the encounter, it is read as a direct statement about her Blackness. Whilst it could have been a misjudged attempt at making small talk, the direct reference to a Black artist instantly leads Ciara to feel on edge and vigilant. However, rather than a deficit approach that places Ciara in the role of victim, we stress this encounter is based on the perpetrator's desire to avoid being meta-stereotyped (Finchilescu 2010). As such, the student uses his knowledge of Black hip-hop to appear to have what they may consider to be shared references. However, the student's attempt at commonality is equally a form of racial stereotyping and implicit racist abuse.

Despite the weird interactions and feeling uncomfortable Ciara is, in her words, 'content' and tries to make friends. This North East University constructs Ciara's (*Black*) *interracial anxiety*, where racial contact avoidance (the bedroom is where she spends most of her time) is underpinned by White students' IA (e.g., implicit racist behaviour), impacts Ciara's mental health and the opportunity for interracial inclusion.

6.3. White Hyper-Racialism

The weirdness Ciara expresses is intensified by virtue of Ciara's specific race-gender identity.

'I just always hear other people's experiences. . . I wouldn't call it racism, I just think it's weird, it's I don't know not offensive someone said they were into Black girls they were just like: "yeah I'm like really into Black girls". That's basically a way of trying to move to you, but I don't know, I think that's weird, and I wouldn't call it racist, but I just think it's weird seems like fetishy (laughs).'

Through a vicarious experience Ciara illustrates a Black female fetish percolating in society historically and contemporarily. The 'Jezebel' stereotype reinforces the fetish because it historically illustrates the intersectionalities of hyper-sexualising the physique of Black women (Watson et al. 2019). During slavery, Black women were portrayed as having an 'appetite for sex' (Pilgrim 2002, p. 1), this being a racist justification for insecure White abusers (slave owners) to rape and/or have sexual relations with resilient survivors (enslaved Africans). The Jezebel stereotype contradicts Ciara's perceptions of the perpetrator 'not being racist' because of the historical elements to her race-gender identity being hypersexualised.

Additionally, Ciara shares an experience with a White peer that is in juxtaposition to the previous one.

'Ok one of my friends who is Black made a comment was made about him [by a White woman] and I think they said 'oh he's really good looking for a Black guy'...but, you know what? She didn't actually know what she said was wrong, we were like "why would you say for Black guys?" and she was like "what do you mean like he is nice for a Black guy". She didn't know she was being racist.'

Ciara's interracial interaction is now extended to the hypersexualisation of Black men. However, unlike beforehand, where the sexualisation is directed toward women, when directed at men, she recognises it as racist. Moreover, it was the addition of 'for a Black guy' and the lack of recognition displayed by the perpetrator that emphasized the racist undertone. The fact that the White woman was blissfully unaware of the racism inherent in her comment reveals the largely unconscious adoption of a racial hierarchy/stratification based on attractiveness or a desirable racial prejudice. Desirable racial prejudices associate Black people with a hierarchical beauty standard whereby the proximity to Whiteness is often the normative measure (Lindsey 2011; Deliovsky 2008). Most research into the racialised beauty standard is largely from the perspective of female beauty, a likely product of the white-heteronormative patriarchal obsession with measuring women's attractiveness and the minimal focus on men and racialised male attractiveness. One notable exception highlights the exoticisation of Black Mixed-race men. Newman (2019) highlights the ways in which Black multiracial men disrupt the expectations of a monoracialised body and, as such is exoticised, fetishised and desired.

Returning to Ciara, the White student is being racist and is largely unaware of her behaviour in interracial spaces. However, we can flip this script to a more positive frame. In the context of the exchange, the student who is White is educated by the Black students' anti-racism and leaves with the tools to reflect and hopefully learn that such comments are highly problematic. Moreover, White IA is underpinned by more 'weird racism', oblivious to White students, and racial prejudice is still experienced vicariously (Truong et al. 2016) and directly by Ciara.

Lastly, Ciara's level of discomfort is further exacerbated when out and about in the wider community spaces. Here, she feels hypervisible which produces more anxiety.

'You do get stared at a lot when you're like walking down the street or something. I don't know, I always tell myself it's because I look good (laughs), but it could be because I'm Black, but I don't know.'

Ciara continues to express her hypervisibility and how it makes her feel,

'It's just in general like you just look up and someone is already looking at you, it's weird...It just makes me feel like I shouldn't be here, but at the same time I just kind of ignore it because it doesn't really affect me as much as it could affect someone else.'

Ciara's weird world exposes a racial psychological inversion, blaming her Black identity for her racialised experience. However, if we flip the script and remove the victimisation, it is because the wider community, similar to White students, is absent diverse opportunity and is largely living in a predominantly White context.

Despite the absence of diverse opportunities for these White groups and their misrecognition, Ciara is still resilient in two ways: first, she downplays her Black hypervisibility with jokes ('I look good'); and second, her resiliency is identified by stating it does not bother her in the same way as it might someone else. Ultimately, Black–White interactions uncover *White hyper-racialism* because of the symptom of White IA producing racial stereotypes and weird racism. Thus, interracial inclusion comes with White hyper-racialism, constructing 'Ciara's weird world' where a North East community ostracises students who are Black. The next section highlights the importance of decolonisation of the mind, curriculum and the way it is taught to improve interracial inclusion and potentially decrease anxiety over time.

7. Reducing Interracial Anxiety and Promoting Student Wellbeing Through Decolonising the Curriculum

Decolonising the curriculum was the watchword in higher education during and after the BLM response to the murder of George Floyd. Whilst we will not go into a lengthy discussion of its origins and permutations, suffice it to say that it has largely been a student-led activity.

Black Women's Critique

Jones' research, conducted prior to the George Floyd movement, revealed that despite race not being central to mainstream politics at the time, the student sample demonstrated an awareness of strategies for promoting racial inclusion. These strategies foster self-efficacy and a sense of belonging, particularly in predominantly White spaces. One key theme emerging from the study's recommendations was 'Decolonisation,' which was supported by three descriptive codes:

1. White-Washed Portrait refers to the dominance of Whiteness and Eurocentrism in the existing curriculum, which necessitates critical examination. Diversifying representation and incorporating varied pedagogical perspectives can positively impact all students by reducing racial exclusivity (e.g., a curriculum that is only catered to the White majority).
2. Inspiring Blackness highlights the transformative potential of Black African pedagogy to raise societal consciousness. It also emphasises the importance of inspiring Black students to engage with academia and foster a sense of belonging.
3. Acknowledging Race, also termed 'racial silence,' addresses the absence of race-related discussions in the curriculum. It calls for deliberate attention to racial identities to expand racial inclusivity beyond White students.

In the remainder of this section, the authors will elaborate on the concept of decolonisation and explore its connections to Ciara and Prisca's perspectives on racial inclusivity.

Ciara was asked about her awareness around decolonising the curriculum by me in the interview, and she insinuated 'is it just about Whites? That we learn about White stuff.' After confirmation, she responded with,

'I think it's a good idea to be honest, it's about time if they actually are doing it. Um I don't think it's fair that we don't get to learn about other cultures or other like say if it's science I'm pretty sure they only learn about White people's creations I don't know what they do. Um but at least with criminology I don't know about others, but I know in criminology and sociology we do learn about

um other perspectives and like Black and ethnic minority theories to certain topics but if it's of history I know history is a big one because I know they don't really learn about African or Caribbean history I think that should be brought in. I think it should be compulsory the same way it's compulsory to learn about White people's history.'

Ciara illustrates that the current curriculum is not 'fair', since it is not fair for ReM students to predominantly learn about White creations. Ciara specifically targets science and history as two primary perpetrators of this, and research has shown these subjects display Eurocentrism in their content, i.e., European knowledge as universal (Asante 1991; Heleta 2016). Eurocentrism also silences or misinterprets Black history by not sharing African contributions. However, when Black history is acknowledged, it is taught through a deficit narrative and this impacts Black youth's motivations (Andrews 2013, 2014; Doharty 2019). As the African/Caribbean experience is part of Ciara's identity and an important part of British history (Olusoga 2016), it seems plausible for Ciara to want a 'compulsory' curriculum that is properly decolonised. Thus, from Ciara's perception, fairness is synonymous with recognition of Black knowledge in the curriculum through equitable procedures (compulsory) for restored outcomes, because the absence and misinterpretations of African history influence White hyper-racialism. Prisca, a Black female undergraduate student, shares Ciara's sentiment on equitable procedures in education.

'Racial inclusion, I think they should accept more Black students, I think they should intentionally employ Black staff and I think they should intentionally like decolonise the content of all the academic reading list. I think that those three things could really kind of permanently change how [RG] sees and addresses race.'

Prisca's three recommendations for racial inclusion are underpinned by an increase in Black representation in the university population and curriculum. Prisca's emphasis on 'intentionally' is perceived synonymously with Ciara's comment 'compulsory.' These two meanings suggest that avoiding interest convergence and championing equity should be the primary focus, because equity prioritises the needs of those who are disadvantaged, whilst benefiting the 'advantaged.' However, affirmative action is illegal in the UK⁴ and positive action is useless if the university admissions process and other recruiters continue to display ethnic bias (Jones 2025).

Moreover, their comments flip the script on meritocratic narratives, which insist that everyone in education is on a level playing field and on the adage that working hard results in equal outcomes. Ciara received an offer from her North East institution through participating in the Black summer school programme hosted by the University and meeting contextual grade requirements. This is a progressive programme that aims to increase the intake of Black students, a form of positive action, if you will, that recognises the failures of meritocratic multicultural society. Therefore, while the university terrain is unjust and only just engaging with the unequal racialised playing field, Ciara and Prisca's Black feminist wisdom, the 'outsider within', provides transformative answers to decolonise parts of the university.

Such encounters with Black feminist perspectives clearly show that critiquing the current racialised terrain offers decolonisation and interracial inclusivity methods. Whether Ciara is experiencing IA first-hand, vicariously or through Prisca's valuable critique, it has profound impacts on how all people can relate to the topic of interpersonal and institutional racism and, in turn, how they support ReM communities. Whilst these perspectives will not necessarily erase IA for all, they can decrease mental distress and build belonging over time. It is clear that these decolonising perspectives lead to a new awareness for everyone.

8. Discussion

Black women's voices—that are often silenced—potentially offer a broader perspective towards an interracially inclusive curriculum. Ciara's and Prisca's insights are underpinned by a Black feminist consciousness, which represents CRT's counter-stories and the outsider within the frame. This frame attempts to build a holistic understanding of their context, which not only allows them to offer coherent suggestions for improvement but also helps them build resiliency to navigate white spaces. As Ciara points out in the interview, it is because she has sought out and created a network of women with shared experiences that she was able to situate herself. She effortlessly pulls back the curtain on many issues that we can theorise as IA.

First, Ciara illuminated her IA by sharing that she felt uncomfortable occupying the PWI due to an anticipation that White students would behave in 'weird' ways—an expectation that was ultimately confirmed through multiple encounters. Her experiences suggest that race directly shapes White students' behaviours, particularly in relation to fears of being meta-stereotyped, i.e., being perceived negatively by the minority group. These behaviours can be understood as a manifestation of White students' own IA and threat responses to Ciara's presence. However, unlike what is typically theorised as White fragility—where defensiveness emerges in response to conversations about race and racism—the White students Ciara encounters appear to be attempting inclusion, albeit through racially unconscious practices. In one instance, the student's reference to a Black artist reproduced racialised assumptions, revealing how efforts toward inclusion—or to be perceived a certain way by Ciara—can nonetheless be underpinned by unexamined racist ideas.

Additionally, Ciara's account underscores how the experiences of Black women in higher education are both similar to and distinct from those of Black men,⁵ reinforcing Black women's positionality as 'outsiders within.' This positioning further illuminates the multiple and intersecting levels at which IA operates. In particular, Ciara's experiences highlight how 'desirable racial prejudices' are perceived as racial harm, shaped by colonised ways of thinking. Such encounters place a disproportionate burden on Black students, who are required to (i) anticipate interactions laden with racist undertones, (ii) endure these interactions as they unfold and (iii) often assume responsibility for educating those who perpetuate them. IA thus intersects with colonisation and negative meta-stereotyping, producing racialised encounters that have tangible implications for Black students' mental health and wellbeing.

Consequently, interracial inclusion within predominantly White spaces frequently functions as an impediment for Black students, while simultaneously serving as an educational opportunity for White students. When this dynamic is 'flipped,' these racialised encounters can be understood as an equitable learning process for White students—who have been absent diverse opportunities—but a potentially inequitable and extractive experience for Black students. As interest convergence is more on an institutional level (Bell 1980), we could call this interpersonal consequence an 'asymmetric convergence,' underscoring the urgent need for embedded, systemic interventions that actively work to rebalance the inequities produced through interracial interactions within PWI contexts.

Ciara and Prisca conceptualise racial inclusion as the intentional embedding of equitable measures that actively disrupt colonial forms of education—what Ciara described as 'just learning about White stuff' or 'White people's creations.' Within this framework, White students' social worlds are understood to reproduce conscious and unconscious forms of White superiority, alongside entrenched anti-Black prejudices, as illustrated in the preceding analysis. Both participants position decolonisation as a necessary site of systemic transformation, which we extend to include its interpersonal implications. Prisca's

articulation of the value of decolonising her PWI, particularly through being ‘intentional’ in challenging the hegemony of Whiteness in educational spaces, offers a clear strategy for moving beyond interest convergence and the mere management of racism and toward an approach that exposes its structural foundations and facilitates the development of a more transformative decolonial and antiracist framework (cf. [Mullard 1983](#)). In this sense, antiracist education is not a White-defined project but a Black one; it is not a tool of the oppressor but an expression of the resistance of the oppressed (*ibid.*).

Prisca’s reflections further emphasise the need for what we term *woke decolonisation*, i.e., decolonial pedagogies grounded in critical consciousness and sustained Black representation across all sectors of the PWI. Regarding visible representation, initiatives such as [100 Black Women Professors Now \(2025\)](#) exemplify racially and gender-specific decolonial interventions, operating as steering mechanisms that strengthen the academic pipeline for Black women. While the number of Black women academics has reportedly doubled since the programme’s inception in 2021, as shown, representation alone remains insufficient. Similarly, institutional access initiatives, such as the Black Summer School programme at Ciara’s and Prisca’s PWI, attempt to increase Black student enrolment; however, without parallel investments in racial reconciliation ([Douglass Horsford 2014](#)) and authentic interracially inclusive practices, such efforts risk reproducing existing inequities. For instance, despite this programme, Black representation is significantly low because the absence of these integrative approaches within Ciara’s and Prisca’s institutional contexts highlights the limits of representation without structural and relational transformation, which perpetuates coloniality ([Ocheni and Nwankwo 2012](#)). UK decolonising educational research supports this by insisting that challenging epistemological hierarchies, creating funding opportunities for ReM researchers, being taught by same-race teachers and power shifting for student needs are healthy ways of decolonising ([Egalite et al. 2015](#); [Lindsay and Hart 2017](#); [Tamimi et al. 2024](#)).

9. Conclusions

These recommendations are primarily from a Black perspective; further work is needed on the intersectional voices from a range of ReM groups. However, what Ciara, Prisca and Black students in particular ([Jones and Boliver 2025](#)) show is hope for interracial inclusivity. As such, the prioritising of equity over equality can (i) increase ReM representation and (ii) reduce IA through employing decolonisation efforts around the navigation of difficult subjects like race, racism and interracial tensions. This then has the potential to protect and support the mental health of all students and staff in education, avoiding interest and asymmetric convergence. It is also our hope that works of this kind can permeate through the education system, particularly in predominantly white locations, so that all children are equally exposed to the sowing of interracially inclusive seeds that showcase the achievements, presences and histories of the ReM community in the UK.

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Acronyms

IA	Interracial anxiety
PWI	Predominately White institutions
CRT	Critical Race Theory
ReM	Resilient Minority

Notes

- ¹ Resiliency is the ability to overcome adverse circumstances by utilising strategies such as directly challenging discrimination or knowing when to manage self-care. We use resilient minority intentionally to balance out a strength-based approach to political terminology. Often terms such as ethnic minority, racialised minority, or minoritised reinvent victimisation.
- ² CWS extends CRT by being White specific, i.e., through interrogating different modes of Whiteness and hearing the voices and perceptions of White people.
- ³ See Six Racism in Education Processes.
- ⁴ As with affirmative action being removed at universities in the US.
- ⁵ In the original study, Black men emphasised Black women has a harder time fitting in at their PWI.

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