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Opposing Trends in Antiracism in North Atlantic Rim Universities: Converging Interests or Public Non-Performativity?

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Abstract: University senior management teams are reacting to an evolving trend of identifying and eliminating institutional racism in universities along the North Atlantic Rim. They are tasked with designing and constructing processes for the implementation of remedial antiracist policies, in conjunction with minority employee interest groups, in a putatively inclusive but also hegemonically White environment. Evidence is presented from an international academic survey of non-managerial university minorities, comprising mainly academics and conducted in 2021. This reveals a trend whereby Sara Ahmed's model of performativity and non-performativity in antiracism is shown to be contingent upon the reputational interests of university senior management, as predicted in Derrick Bell's convergence theory. This article presents a new synthesized model to explain and predict the trend of non-performativity in university antiracist practices, and then identifies further strands of research that might focus on closing the convergence gap to make antiracism leadership more substantive.

Keywords: antiracism; convergence theory; institutional racism; performativity and non-performativity; university senior management teams; higher education institutions

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1. Introduction

Universities in the US and UK (the North Atlantic Rim) have been responding to the trends created through legal reform, public consciousness, and social activism to eliminate widely-acknowledged institutional racism [1–3]. The term 'institutional racism' has become delegitimated in the eyes of denialists by association with notions of 'wokeness', the successor to 'political correctness', and it has also been refuted in its entirety, normally by Far-Right- and Right-Wing elements, and by some elements within academia [4–6]. Its denial is presently increasing in line with the rise of Far-Right Populism in the US, UK, and Western Europe, in line with reactionary Conservative appeal amidst worldwide anxieties and inequalities. This work rejects all such denial; however, from that denial and obfuscation, meaning must be unpacked [7].

Ontologically and epistemologically, institutional racism speaks to structurally deterministic, and therefore purposive, discrimination against People of Colour (PoCs) [8]. However, the term did not enter common vernacular in the UK until the Macpherson Report (1999) into the police response to the murder, by a gang of young White males in 1993, of a young Black male, Stephen Lawrence. In the US, the murder of George Floyd revisited attention upon institutional racism in the US [9], from whence the term formalized from the earlier work of Ture and Hamilton [10] amidst the racial violence of the Civil Rights era. In both the UK and US, discussion of institutional racism has provoked a populist backlash from reactionary quarters [11–13] contesting the validity and necessity of the term. Backlash against racial equality and antiracism is not a new phenomenon; it is indicative of resistance to deprivileging White male elites and the social allies of all levels and classes that sustain them.

Institutional racism is a projection of socially originating values and beliefs, and the associated organizational practices they create, which are then sustained and defended

by more institutional practices, priorities, and personnel. It involves 'dysfunctionalism in the interactions of culturally and ethnically differentiated beings' [14], (p. 21). This dysfunctionalism, and the destructive and repressive biases it projects and enforces, stems from an institutionally 'unified system of racial differentiation and discrimination that creates, governs, and adjudicates opportunities and outcomes across generations' [15,16]. It is an institutional process that perpetuates systemic inequality [17]. It is not 'individual prejudice and bigotry; rather, racism is a systemic feature of social structures' [18], (p. 665). Institutional racism, then, is an alignment of beliefs about race and racial superiority, endorsed by governments, extended by and across Empires, reproduced in the metropolitan homelands, sanctioned in their laws, and manifested in social prejudice. It is the continuous projection, through contemporary formal and informal institutions, of the same beliefs and attitudes that historically sanctioned and sustained imperialism and slavery. If it is an echo of the past, it is a very loud one. For the purposes of this article, institutional racism refers to the witting and unwitting organized reproduction of racial injustice and inequality formed around internalized institutional codes that continue, until actively halted, to reproduce regimes of racial injustice and inequality.

Such institutional racism needs to be understood in the wider contexts of power, governance, and history. That is, universities (and other organizations) did not simply become racist bodies of their own accord [19]. Ideas of racial superiority and racism derive, most recently, from imperial domination and the social construction of the inferiority of one race, necessary to sanction its oppression by another [20–22]. Similar beliefs and values to those that projected colonial control are disseminated through metropolitan populations and institutions via nodes of civil governance, like national police forces, regional state bureaucracies, local welfare offices, youth organizations, schools, and universities. Racial ideology is thus funnelled from centralized to regional to local authorities through networked nodes of governance, as it was from metropolis to subaltern during the imperial era [23,24]. Until such historical embedded norms are challenged, they persist. The current trend towards antiracism represents such a challenge, but this challenge must address the infrastructural nature of racism that Foucault identified, including its deep roots and institutional and normalized embeddedness, legitimacy, and authority in wider society and governance. That Foucauldian infrastructure must be realigned with antiracism; if governments are not for it, legislation will not be, and universities will not have new antiracist laws, guidelines, or even expectations to conform to. In fact, the reverse would be true: a message would have been sent that there is no call to do anything about institutional racism, which has been the default setting since imperialism until much more recently.

Recently, Foucauldian legal and social trends have been steering the governance of North Atlantic Rim (NAR) universities into overt antiracist operations that are overseen by specifically anointed external bodies, to which universities are held accountable by student consumers, their friends and families, and the taxpayer, unless the institution is private, in which case it still faces social pressures [25–27]. The terms of that process are also increasingly presented as racially inclusive and participatory [28,29]. This means that institutional antiracism could be planned and potentially operationalized by at least some of those in whose name it is ostensibly conducted. This brings into proximity the two core interest groups that are the subjects of this article, whose relationship is characterized by an asymmetric power dynamic, and whose interests can be seen to both converge and diverge, depending on the priority attached to any given interest. University senior management teams (USMTs) are the primary agents of change and continuity in HEIs [30]. The primary actors traditionally include Vice-chancellors, Pro-vice-chancellors, Provosts, Registrars, Deans, and Directors of Human Resource Departments, but they also include Chief Operating Officers, Chief Financial Officers, and other titles associated commonly with Neoliberal corporatist nomenclature [31].

That composition has a Colour. It is White. Today, according to Robbie Shilliam [32], (p. 33), Western 'universities remain overwhelmingly administratively, normatively, habitually and intellectually "White". Their doors have been opened, but the architecture

remains the same'. In the UK, the Higher Education statistics body, HESA, found that, of all the 'managers, directors or senior officials' in UK universities, 475 identified as White, 25 as Asian or other, and none as Black. This is less the case in North America, but the asymmetry of power is still plainly evident [33]. This serves to illustrate the present reality of institutional racism in NAR universities. USMTs are lacking in diversity and intrinsic consciousness and comprehension of racism [34–36], despite the liberatory bravado of the 1960s and putative Liberal reform agendas that have followed [37]. Pilkington [38], (p. 93) refers to a 'sheer weight of Whiteness' involved. This powerful White body engages with multiple minority groups of employees of Colour who also have interests in institutional antiracism. It is this asymmetrical dynamic, and the convergence of related, comparable, and competing antiracist interests, that is the subject of this research programme. This article now turns to Derrick Bell's theory of what happens when the respective interests of two racial groups contest one another.

2. Convergence Theory

The idea of a theory of converging interests was developed through Derrick Bell's analysis of the legal claim regarding school desegregation in the US, commonly known as Brown v. Board of Education [39]. Bell maintained that desegregation had been successful not because of an intrinsic moral determinism, but because it suited those who controlled the situation to surrender certain privileges in return for advantages that would accrue from so doing. Specifically, Bell maintained that desegregation was allowed in law because the US government gained international validation from doing so; it was seen to be progressive and Liberal when it sought allies in the Cold War context. Later, Bell noted, when interests diverged, further civil rights in the US were rescinded; the process inverted as White power in the US saw less benefit to cooperation. From this process, Bell theorized that 'the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites' [39], (p. 523). Bell theorized that movements aimed at ending institutional racism 'may instead be the outward manifestations of unspoken and perhaps subconscious... conclusions that such remedies... will secure, advance, or at least not harm... interests deemed important by whites' [40], (p. 22). It is a challenge to the Liberal deception of race and racism that is rooted in the belief that racism's temporary character can be halted, and which fails to consider the structural determinism and permanence of the problem. In Kimberley Crenshaw's words, Liberal ideology and determinism ignore 'the embeddedness of white supremacy in the social structure and institutions' of the West [41], (p. 113).

For Kenzo Sung, that persistent ideological hegemony is central to convergence theory, because it recognizes the participation of PoCs in the process of maintaining White hegemony. These elites perpetuate their position 'largely by getting non-elites to consent to rules they have been made to believe serve their interests, through a process of genuine and dynamic compromises within structural constraints' [42], (p. 306). Thus, Bell's convergence model embraces the realization that PoCs, in pursuit of their own interests, are active participants in a process whose outcome is confined to and by Liberal structures and epistemologies that constrain the possibility of convergence. This White supremacy hosts dominant interests, permitting or denying challenges to that dominion, depending on the extent to which White interests are sustained or undermined. The essence of convergence theory, applied to Higher Education, is that PoCs in universities are more likely to achieve equality when their interests converge with the material concerns of USMTs. Conversely, where interests diverge, hegemonic USMT power will compromise or deny the interests of PoCs, whilst being able to claim authenticity through superficial inclusion, engagement, and participation practices crafted around their own institutional policy permissions. Correspondingly, from Sung's perspective, this participatory process creates the impression, for PoCs, that they will benefit from participating in this process.

This theory is not without critique. Importantly, Justin Driver [43], (p. 145) points to the idea of Bell's 'interests' as being subject to an 'overly broad conceptualization' that

clouds definition. Furthermore, Bell attributes White convergence to matters far beyond social justice, like international perception of the US by its enemies and allies, in the case of Brown v. Board of Education. This is impossible to falsify, argues Driver, and so leads to a weakness in this framing. In this article, both weaknesses are addressed. Specific interests of USMTs are identified, and external arbiters of USMT policy are evidenced.

Most significantly, this article reframes convergence within Sarah Ahmed's conceptualization of the institutional performativity and non-performativity of diversity. This is key because her model and approach allow us to understand USMT-led change not as convergence, despite appearance, but as divergence, due to elite managerial and institutional priorities in market-based Higher Education systems in the West. This article now turns to the research method employed.

3. Materials and Methods

An anonymized online survey was deployed throughout July 2021. The data collection platform is the reputable, secure, and professional Online Survey organization, designed by academics. The usual standards of care, broadly agreed upon across UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and codified in relation to wider prescriptive institutions, from the Data Protection Act to the Mental Health Act, were provided throughout the creation, dissemination, and collection of research material, and internal review was sought in the initial design and dissemination stages. The questions were synthesized from existing racism research survey practices [44] and past research surveys, and further developed according to ongoing debates in the wider literature on capturing data on institutional racism [45–47]. The survey was content- and face-validated, though voluntary local and network peer review, and was distributed through the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the Association of American Universities (AAU), the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD), the worldwide Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA), in blogs, on Twitter (X) and Facebook, and through academic networks on LinkedIn.

Respondents could qualitatively describe their professional experiences of institutional racism. In total, 138 respondents represented 88 institutions, 38 in the UK and 50 in the US, with all 8 Ivy League institutions and 11 out of the 24 Russell Group (UK) elite universities accounted for. There were no responses received from Canadian institutions. The data are biased; no USMT representatives took part, leaving only the evidence of employees—a demographic under-considered in the literature [48]. The survey attracted responses from 6 members of lower level SMTs: 1 Dean and 5 associate Deans. The remaining 93% of respondents were Lecturers and Senior Lecturers (UK) or Professors and Associate Professors (US), with 3% coming from Professional Services in the UK. The survey ran for a month and was open to all identities. As can be seen in Figure 1, 98.6% of respondents were People of Colour; 1.4% were White; percentages were rounded out.

As can be observed in Figure 2, responses are organized around themes developed in the coding process, first using NVivo (an industry standard), and then by hand. The material was organized into categories of meaning recognizable in the published work on institutional racism in Higher Education. It was grouped, from right to left, according to respondents' comments, overlaps in which formed conceptual categories, and from which aggregate conceptual dimensions were identified. This led to the identification by respondents of 3 categories of convergence and 4 of divergence.

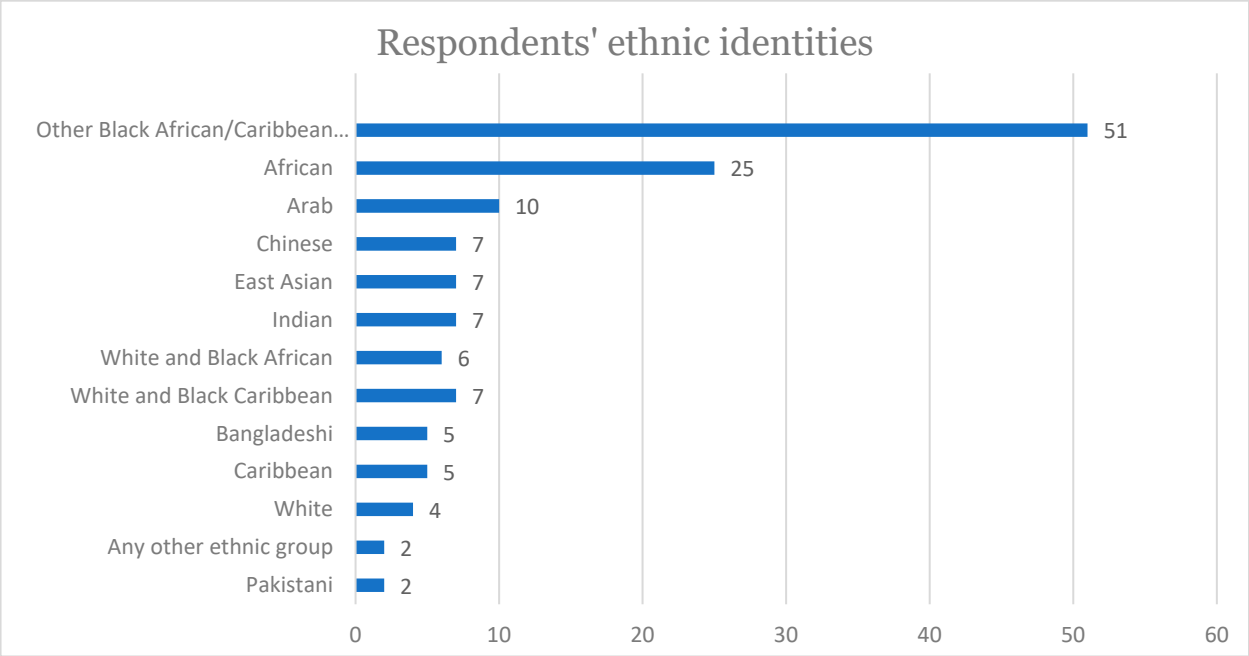

Figure 1. Respondents' ethnic identities.

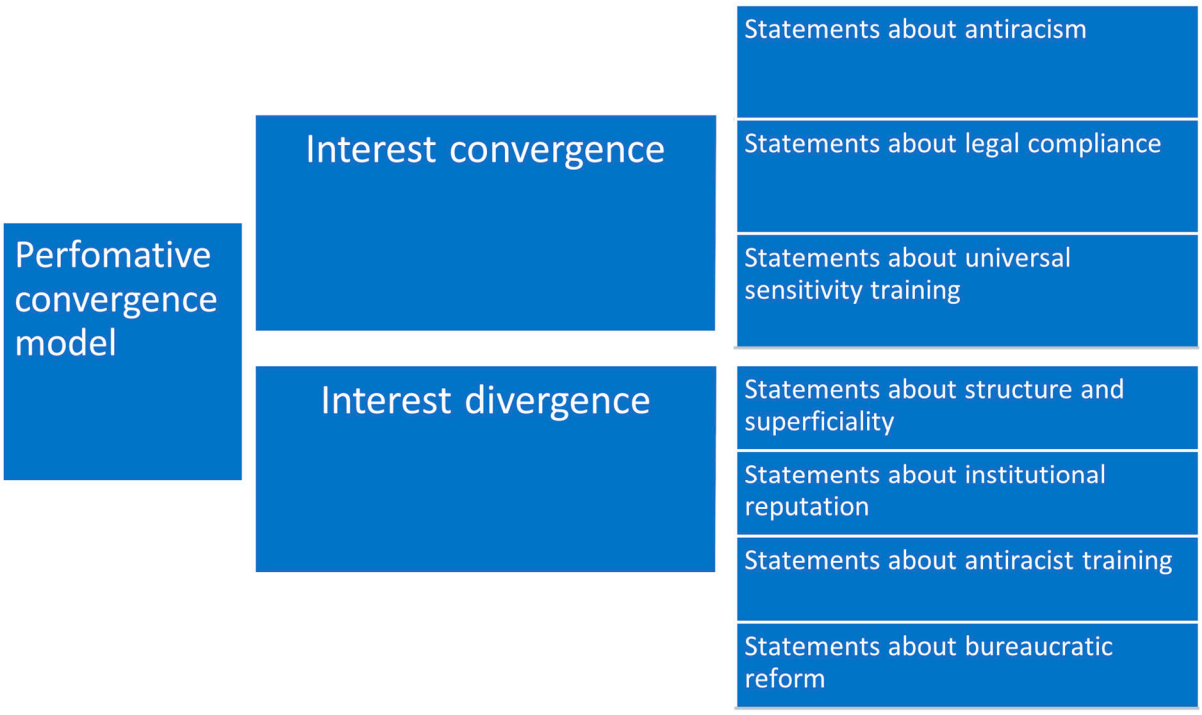

Figure 2. Qualitative data coding.

4. Results

4.1. Categories of Meaning in Qualitative Analysis: Convergence

In the context of this research, convergence means that reform of an institution's practices that traditionally discriminated against PoCs, directly or indirectly, would only be adjusted by power holders if the changes involved were of benefit to those making the decisions. This research identified three categories in which respondents noted a convergence of interests. I address these in turn below, before moving to areas of divergence, similarly determined. The first area of convergence is antiracism.

Antiracism is the central issue in this research. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign, illuminating, again, the cyclical necessity to foreground those who face racial abuse in a White-dominated society, was a locus of agreement around which 90% of respondents in both the UK and US recognized both USMT and staff convergence. Respondents (77%) claimed that BLM reinvigorated White participation in conversations in HEIs concerning the persistent state wherein PoCs in universities are 'frequently' and 'systemically' exposed to racial abuse from staff and students, are paid less than White people, are excluded from elite levels, and are passed over for promotion in favour of White people. The problem becomes worse 'the further into intersectional territory you go', since Black women are marginalized more than Black men [37].

Respondents (85%) declared that social media interventions regarding George Floyd (and all the other PoCs killed or betrayed by the police) amplified existing attention to the normalization and embeddedness of racism in North Atlantic public institutions, which directed a spotlight towards universities. HEIs have 'a higher calling' in this respect, as bastions of enlightenment and progressive thought that should not be involved in perpetuating traditions of oppression rooted in US and UK involvement in the slave trades, segregation, and colonial domination. Some held out against antiracist progressiveness; five respondents pointed at Oxford University's attachment to its statue of Cecil Rhodes, the colonialist. But, for the most part, respondents (85%) considered that university leadership was keen 'to be, and be seen to be, on the right side of history'.

There was substantial disagreement, however, between respondents on the rationale for such involvement by USMT bodies. Three broad camps emerged. The first and smallest group saw no agenda beyond a commitment to social justice on the part of USMTs; these respondents were mostly (77%) in junior posts. Exemplifying this group's sentiments, one declared that there were increasingly PoCs 'at the very top, so policy is shaped accordingly'. This reflects a common perception that having PoCs in power means power is shaped by their presence. This notion is supported in the Liberal literature on race but has been falsified in more critical and conscious bodies of literature on the 'politics of presence' [49].

The second group decried the idea that USMTs had PoCs at heart and were more sceptical about motive. Their position is represented well by one respondent, who declared that USMTs 'had to get on board with this or risk being publicly disgraced when social media got their hands on the news'. A third group (the largest) took the view that there was a more agentic dynamic at work, wherein publicly committing to ending institutional racism served the larger purpose of keeping the institution viable in the marketplace. Not to follow this path would be to 'condemn an institution to dinosaur status and risk losses in student recruitment that would make their position untenable'. Since universities must compete in a Neoliberal system, they must behave as any other public-facing business does and minimize exposure to negative publicity or risk losing status [50]. USMTs would thus gain institutional 'merit badges' by 'getting on board' the 'gravy train' that George Floyd's murder by police officer Derek Chauvin set in motion. As Alexis Hoag said, 'it is now popular and financially advantageous to be anti-racist'. Interests converged, then, around the anticipated improvement in working conditions for PoCs seeking an end to institutional racism in universities, and the expectation among its senior management that engaging this way would ensure social capital, reputation, and institutional viability [51].

Legal compliance was also an issue of convergence between USMTs and employees of Colour. Respondents agreed (82%) that legal compliance aligned with their interests because it forced institutions into conducting themselves equitably. They declared that there was normally institutionally directed conformity with legislation, evidenced by a cascade of guidelines, instructions, and notices appearing from loci of USMT power, such as corporate compliance offices and Human Resources departments when new legislation appeared. These included institutions' selection of definitions of terms, like institutional racism, that they would accord with; the creation of formal and informal networks of cooperation and support; the formalization of wellbeing processes concerned with racism; and institutional White Allyship commitments and conventions.

A smaller body did not see as much convergence; 19% of respondents took a dim view of legal reform on the grounds that it was Liberal law that had structured slavery and segregation for centuries and was owned by White interests at the very top. 'Law cannot mean what we need it to mean', claimed one respondent, 'because the most senior lawmaking apparatus in the US is controlled by the racist Far Right'. This reference to the restructuring of the US Supreme Court during the Presidency of Donald Trump was mirrored, to a lesser extent, by British respondents, who claimed that their own Conservative (Right-Wing) government was also reactionary, populist, and racist in its construction and application of legislation.

Broadly, however, respondents could see their institutions' interests converging with their own in this domain. First, they could not be found to be at the helm of a university breaking the law. That would have dire consequences for their own positions, and if 'heads didn't roll, then the ensuing internal disciplinary process would be humiliating and probably public though leaks'. Second, the institution itself could be held to legal account for its failure. Breaking the law could result in serious public sanctions, none of which would be in the interest of those in charge. Regardless of what happened to USMTs individually, however, the greatest damage would likely be, it was suggested, to the institution's public reputation, its ranking, and its recruitment, with associated income diminution. The issues of reputation and public accountability begin to appear as repeating themes.

Universal sensitivity training was identified by respondents as a third area of convergence, until the meaning of 'training' became contested. The term is comparable with unconscious bias training [52,53]. Sensitivity training has been directed across universities from USMT directives to be implemented and surveilled by HR, as is normal for most training regimes in Neoliberal institutions. Sensitivity training reproduces most other training regimes, since training is about conformity with an organizational disciplinary mandate: listen, learn, repeat, record [54,55]. This is a familiar process, likened to military indoctrination, that is uncritical and unreflective.

Respondents supported the universality of the programmes; they thought it was right that everyone from the top down participate in something that can be measured, verified, and monitored because that was 'demonstrably and transparently accountable and equitable'. The idea of uniform, universal training appealed to 82% of respondents; it fits into the hegemonic epistemological assumptions about quantifiable learning that are embedded in Neoliberal bureaucracies [56]. On the other hand, 19% thought that simple training was a start, but it was not sufficient. This minority recognized the institution's need to record and enforce training systems as part of managerial performance and surveillance regimes. But they were concerned that processes like unconscious bias training avoid real conversations about racism and systemic behaviour [57], and fail to address senior managerial strata reproducing racism in institutions 'despite participating in training programmes they themselves authorized'. This minority later occupies a greater place when it comes to divergence, as discussed below.

4.2. Categories of Meaning in Qualitative Analysis: Divergence

It may seem counter-intuitive to consider that USMTs may not want antiracist progress. But if we consider that the price to be paid for such a goal may be too high in some instances, we are better placed to interrogate such a notion. An example reported by multiple respondents at one institution serves the purpose of making clear how this process functions. They reported the creation by a UK Business School Dean of a crony-based all-White Equality, Diversity, and Inclusivity committee. When this was formally challenged by a PoC, it was declared that there was 'nothing wrong, necessarily, with an all-White EDI committee'. When that statement was challenged formally in a grievance procedure, the USMT declared 'nothing wrong' had been done. More senior White males at the very top of the institution became involved as the claimant commenced external legal and social action. The Human Resources department supported its USMT; the complainant

was offered voluntary redundancy with a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA). They were also threatened with dismissal if they acted outside the university. Moreover, 16 other structurally similar cases were recorded, of which 11 were in the UK and 5 were in the US. Thus, antiracism is a point of convergence, until actually being antiracist threatens the reputational cohesion of the institution and its most senior officers. Antiracist interests then diverge.

Structure and superficiality emerged as a key category of divergence. This refers to processes that require structural adjustment, and those that require minimal input [41,58]. One respondent referred to this as 'the difference between changes that are hard and long term, or easy and quick fix'. For respondents, the former has greater consequences and requires more investment, thought, and change, with less immediate visible effect. The latter is easily accommodated, cheaper, and requires less critical thought, but may have an immediate and evident impact. This linearity has been described as 'performative wokeness' in which 'generating the right appearance easily becomes more important than making systemic changes' [59], (p. 137). An example of the former is the restructuring of the USMT and the university itself to engage race-equitable, USMT-level senior leadership representation with a mandate for structural reform, the office from which to conduct it, and the funds to make it happen. An example of the latter might be the addition of a virtue-signalling message in a Vice Chancellor's email tail indicating support for antiracism (or anything else). An example of something in between is the appointment of a race-equitable USMT-level senior leadership representative who does not redesign the structures that cause institutional racism, but simply presents as a powerful entity seemingly engaged in leading the institution in antiracist work, creating the appearance of radical transformation whilst facilitating the perpetuation and reproduction of institutional racism. When referenced, these appointments were described by respondents as 'Uncle Tom' characters, after the character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's eponymous novel centring a Black person who was overeager to win the approval of Whites [60]. They were also referred to as '5th Columnists', a term referring to saboteurs.

Furthermore, 79% of respondents noted frequent USMT resistance to structural reforms, like appointing appropriately qualified PoCs to USMT levels of management, appointing PoCs to key institutional decision-making committees, democratizing decision-making processes, making Human Resources departments more representative of existing institutional diversity, and reforming bureaucratic structures like agenda construction and perennial diaries to accelerate institutional reform (see below). The same respondents claimed that USMT divergence from such proposals had been on grounds such as expense, impracticality, complexity, disagreement regarding efficacy, and 'structural ossification'. They also referred to the issue of deeply entrenched and historically originating institutional conventions regarding academic structure and process that should not be changed because of their longstanding legitimacy, that is, 'it should stay because it is there'.

Those structures contain the apparatus of institutional decision-making. Whilst levels of participation had expanded, reflecting a convergence of interests, since USMTs knew that widened participation was now mandatory, this was seen by 80% of respondents to be a quantitative exercise, except where a PoC has entered the USMT itself, which was rare, and even rarer if they had entered the USMT with a specific mandate for reforming institutional racism. The numbers had gone up, but access to key decision making at the USMT level was still 'all but non-existent'. One respondent later cited a Provost at a UK university who declared in a closed meeting that the process of determining the fate of minorities in his institution 'wasn't a democracy'. In fact, that Provost declared Saudi Arabia to be 'safe' for LGBTQ+ people, on the grounds that, as a straight, White, old man with institutional cash the Saudi government was interested in, he 'had felt safe' himself. The interests of the USMT did not converge with the interests of a minority group, and so the latter was sacrificed for USMT priorities. That Provost made it clear that, despite PoC participation, the final outcomes of a deliberative process were ultimately left to an all-White USMT that did not have to consider any PoC position if it did not want to. The

USMT 'made no provision for integrating PoCs into the most senior positions of managerial direction', and in only a handful of cases had made 'space for a PoC at the top table' with a mandate for the reform of institutional racism. It was not in the interest of the USMT to accommodate participation at their level because the system was not democratic; power, and ultimate authority, resides in the hands of the USMT. Furthermore, to integrate a reform-mandated PoC into an elite system whose successful reform would expose the details of institutional racism threatens that which the USMT was believed to consider most hallowed: 'institutional reputation'.

'Institutional reputation' and 'reputation' were the two most cited terms in the survey. Neoliberal principles have been increasingly applied to Western Higher Education over several decades since the 1960s [61,62]. They are now delivered according to New Public Management principles. This involves 'the adoption by public sector organizations of organizational forms, technologies, management practices and values more commonly found in the private business sector' [63], (p. 70). According to Henry Giroux [55], (p. 425) reformed higher educational bodies now 'either ignore or cancel out social injustices. . . by overriding the democratic impulses and practices of civil society through an emphasis on the unbridled workings of market relations'. However, USMTs encourage the construction of impressions about university compliance with law and social norms, so they are socially respected in terms of their rankings in the league tables used by stakeholders like employees and student 'consumers' [64,65].

Universities' reputations are frequently determined through metrics comparing national and international performance across a dizzying array of activities [51,66]. Here, it refers externally to the ability of a university to maintain a respectable position in university ranking schemes used by prospective students for selection purposes. It also refers internally to a university's putative efforts to shape how its employees view its conduct across a similarly broad range of activities [50,66].

Both groups, staff and USMTs, converged in their desire for the institution's reputation to be protected. However, they diverged on the extent to which antiracist practices could be undertaken without revealing policies and practices that may harm an institution's reputation. Reform 'could go so far, but not against bigger concerns of the leadership' because they had 'their public domain reputations to think about'. Practices like implementing new policies in racial sensitivity training, new equality practices, and new managerial leadership positions would likely be seen as constructive and supportive of reputation. But admitting wrongdoing, revealing racist activities, or refusing to change racist endeavours could, if revealed internally and/or exposed externally, damage reputation.

Another example of divergence that surfaced in the survey concerned employee proposals to decolonize a science curriculum in the US. The principle itself provoked convergence because it was 'in the interests of the institution to be seen to be doing the right thing' and 'decolonization is all the rage'. However, the USMT rejected the proposal because science is 'inherently objective and thus not subject to the same colonial biases as humanities or social sciences' and 'any such changes would meet with fierce backlash from external stakeholders and the public'. This is not an uncommon scenario [67,68]. The increasing surge of racial backlash against antiracist reform, in both the UK and US, mirrors the trend in political leadership towards intolerant and racist Far-Right attitudes that punish public and private institutions for perceived 'wokeness' that challenges traditional White privilege [7,69]. The external reputation of the university in question was the concern of its USMT; as a result, the decolonization of the science curriculum favoured by employees of Colour diverged from the interests of their USMT in preventing costly external backlash. It was prevented.

It was not in the interests of the USMT to accept their own roles in the reproduction of institutional racism, because of the risk of public and professional condemnation. They 'did not want to wash their dirty linen in public', claimed one respondent. The need to protect the institution's market reputation 'compromised the process of holding it accountable'. USMT interests and priorities led 79% of respondents to describe conversations with USMT

representatives as 'rarely', 'seldom', or 'never' safe events. That fear was present when it came to conversations regarding institution-wide antiracist training.

Antiracist training is central to many universities' efforts to address institutional racism. On the surface, it appears uncontroversial, with an expectation that interests would converge around the idea. They did, to an extent. New ideas were integrated into institutions' existing training regimes, normally managed through Human Resources, with the support of communities of Colour, external consultancies, and academic analysis. However, training as a concept is heavily criticized—first, because it represents, in an institution, a form of corporate disciplinarity for conformity with hegemonic ideals. The HR-complicit process is 'clearly linked to the strategic objectives of the organization to enhance competitive advantage' [70], (p. 30). But training is also primarily about 'telling people what to do, bending them to shape, or filling them as if they were empty vessels' [71], (p. 1). The Army trains its soldiers to fight wars, and less so to reflect on the reasons they must kill. Mechanics are trained to repair cars, not to ponder fossil fuel dependency.

The obvious problem with this is that the hegemonic ideals have traditionally come from USMT principles, dominated by the agendas of predominantly White people who have only recently realized they are part of the problem (and are trying to take constructive action to change that, in some cases). The eradication of institutional racism has rarely, if ever, been part of any USMT-led training regime before. An unprepared, untrained, and too often racially unconscious elite White minority defines, shapes, and structures a largely homogeneous managerial space reflecting its own experiences, values, and identities.

A second problem is that unconscious bias training, much favoured in modern organizations, does not change inherent racism. Jackson [72], (p. 45) describes how unconscious bias training is popular for teaching people to understand and respond to 'present histories of racism'. But making people aware of their biases does not inevitably shift that bias. In addition, according to the former head of the UK Institute of Race Relations, unconscious bias training 'avoids real conversations about racism and systemic behaviour' and fails to address the role of elite power in reproducing racism in the institution invoking the training. Furthermore, the literature clearly shows that antiracism training risks 'promoting more adaptive racism. . . through the coaching of participants' on how to behave [72], (p. 46). In short, according to a respondent, 'the leadership was keen on a form of training that it could convert into metrics that would prove it was invested in change, but it was not willing to sanction and invest in the kind of training that might open people's eyes to how racist the institution is'.

There was divergence over higher-level epistemic strategies. The well-publicized shortcomings of unconscious bias and other similar training regimes led to proposals for alternatives that did not ignore embedded prejudice, and which offered the promise of deeper change. Respondents identified Paulo Freire's [73] widely acknowledged emphasis on conscientization. Conscientization is a type of learning and understanding that is focused on perceiving and exposing contradictions and acting against oppressive elements of reality. It is increasingly applied in other senior management spaces [74] and has been shown to enhance 'executive self-awareness, understanding of others, dealings with diversity, and engagement with the larger world'.

Respondents who had developed and advanced this idea, of more meaningful transformation above rote training through a purpose-built working group, reported that it was rejected by their USMT. Despite the putatively common goal of antiracism, interests diverged because the USMT 'would not make the time needed' to engage. Respondents declared that such an initiative did not fit with conventional epistemologies favoured by the USMT, 'revealing the very bigotry that conscientization was meant to expose in the first place'. Nor would the USMT submit to *long durée* interventions, whereas respondents showed a willingness to do so. A commonly expressed zone of divergence, then, appeared over whether training would be 'shallow or shallow'.

Bureaucratic reform was a fifth area of divergence identified in the survey. There is evidence of convergence aplenty in institutional statements of diversity that announce the

creation of bureaucratic and administrative structures and processes like working parties, administrative bodies and processes, restructuring of websites and user interfaces, and, to a much lesser extent, elite decision-making bodies like USMTs [75,76]. In a few instances, there were examples of the reshaping of the USMT itself to include a specifically antiracist elite post. In this respect, the interests of employees of Colour converge with those of the USMT, where the latter putatively performs transformative action that presents a positive self-image, and PoCs are presented with evidence of change and greater inclusion and participation in organizational bodies, primarily at lower institutional levels.

However, 80% of respondents identified a 'glacial' rate of bureaucratic movement that impeded policy reform. They noted that this was related, in part, to the annual calendar of 'meetings pre-scheduled at and for higher levels', and the limits this placed on making things move faster. They said that the movement towards antiracism was being 'levered into a historically White institutional bureaucratic structure designed decades before and no longer fit for purpose'. They also claimed that this speed would not change because it was controlled by the most senior management, who prioritized existing structures and excused their diffidence with the thought-terminating cliché of 'these things take time'. Respondents highlighted limited decision-making windows, comprising a perennial academic calendar with 'specific periods for teaching, breaks, and administrative tasks' that constrict the reform processes. This is closely related to seasonal workload cycles and faculty members' presence in alignment with the academic calendar. Significant reforms 'usually require multiple committee meetings, fed from multiple other committee meetings, which. . . can lead to delays, as committees may only meet once a month or a quarter or even less frequently'. Respondents also pointed out that faculty are generally less available due to research leave, and students, who increasingly inform institutional decision-making, are off campus in the summer and throughout other holidays during which key reform meetings may be scheduled.

In short, according to Milner [77], (p. 335), 'the speed at which society can move toward racial equity is dictated by the dominant group', meaning 'change is often *purposefully* and *skillfully* slow and at the will and design of those in power' (emphasis in original). Furthermore, there are limits to inclusion in this architecture. Without representation, higher level committees are off-limits to PoCs, and those committees are often where key policy decisions about antiracism are made. As was alluded to earlier, presence and participation do not necessarily or automatically mean democracy, or fairness, or equity [49,78].

4.3. Discussion: A Performative Convergence Model

USMTs create an impression of institutional racism being treated, but the data show that this is only part of the story. The objectives of PoCs are being managed according to the interests of White power in HEIs. A grandiose impression is created of good work being led by senior management that serves to mask an institutional process that ignores or relegates, through the asymmetrical power dynamic at work, the interests of PoCs. There is a public performance at work that is also non-performative, and because of this, we may look beyond Bell's work on convergence towards Sarah Ahmed's models of performance and non-performativity to develop a more nuanced framing of this lacuna.

Ahmed [79], (p. 117) writes that the non-performative is not a failure to perform. Instead, it is actually what the speech act is doing. Such speech acts are taken up as if they are performatives (as if they have brought about the effects they name), such that the names come to stand in for the effects. As a result, naming can be a way of not bringing something into effect.

Saying is not the same as doing, but saying something can create the impression that the act is underway and, in so doing, create a particular impression for a university. To say that the institution is actively engaged in antiracist practice can mean it is engaged in activities around which PoC interests converge, but it can also imply that the job is done because of this. According to Yao [80], (p. 451), this can mean that engaging in antiracism speech acts and public declarations of activity and performance illustrated through areas of

convergence 'can co-opt [the] term. . . without engaging in real change'. The performance becomes an outward-facing act aimed at ensuring the institution's public reputation in the Neoliberal marketplace. Juliet Hess [59], (p. 129) clarifies: such actors 'do not take action, but rather position themselves in ways that they believe will help them look good'. This then reproduces the very structures it claims to challenge. Claiming to do something whilst not doing it properly leaves the status quo only superficially adjusted. In this way, the use of performative actions that do little (the non-performative) manage divergence. The actual gap, constituted of a rejection of interests of minorities, is managed by the rhetoric in non-performativity. Appointing a PoC to a senior USMT position is performative if that person leaves the institution's racist structures in play. It is then non-performative, according to Ahmed. It can 'convey taking action without requiring the institution to meaningfully do so' [81], (p. 110).

A Non-performative Interest Convergence Theory (NPIC) combines Derrick Bell's convergence model with Sara Ahmed's concept of non-performativity to explain the trend whereby institutional antiracism efforts often fail when the interests of PoCs diverge from those of the White dominant group. In this model, the gap between interest groups is rendered invisible by USMT performative speech acts that create the impression of change whilst this act simultaneously masks the non-performativity of institutional antiracist rhetoric. The model explains how the status quo is preserved despite the performance of speech acts to the contrary, because of the non-performativity of diversity and antiracism that prevent meaningful structural change. Antiracist policies and initiatives may meet basic compliance requirements, but do not address the deeper systemic inequalities that contradict USMT interests.

This model presents opportunities for further research. First, case studies at institutions could investigate the extent to which antiracist initiatives at a university align with the interests of the dominant group, and whether they result in performative or substantive change. Second, theorizing and demonstrating the gap between non-performative rhetoric and the preservation of structural institutional racism would encourage conversations about the gap between stakeholders and how to close it. Third, the model affirms the value of applying interdisciplinary approaches that combine areas such as Critical Race Theory with Organizational Behaviour scholarship. Fourth, it shows the need to extend such research into USMT actors, to develop an accurate sense of elite perspective.

5. Conclusions

Trends in institutional antiracism in the West tend to manifest at Liberal convenience and consent. In 2024, they are in flux, carried still by the momentum of George Floyd's execution, symbolizing a far wider experience of institutional racism, but at the same time, drowned by another cyclical tide of racist White populism in Western Europe and the US. Connecting Derrick Bell's era of research on segregation with the present era of antiracism reveals a continuous trend in non-performativity in the treatment of institutional racism: it is undertaken primarily according to the interests of institutions, the interests of their elites, and the protection of reputations, not secondarily according to employee interests or racial equity. The non-performative and managed illusion of antiracism being performed in paperwork and in the politics and perception of participation and presence masks the lacuna of substantive institutional reform. It shows the continuity of older convergence trends in 'antiracism' respawning in the putatively 'post-racial' era of modern Higher Education on the North Atlantic Rim, as well as the new trend of elite manipulation of converging and diverging interests. 'The past in the present', as Achille Mbembe says, but the present has the twist of the non-performative cloaked in public performance and rhetoric for Neoliberal rationales.

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