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THE LIBERAL POLITICS OF DIVERSITY: BEHIND THE BLACK SQUARE

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Inspired by scholars such as Stefanie Boulila, Sara Ahmed, and Alana Lentin, the image I created draws on Boulila's *Race in Post-racial Europe*. The piece, *Behind the Black Square*, attempts to illustrate that liberal diversity paradigms are disconnected from anti-racist, feminist, and queer political traditions; act as a shield to avoid accountability for complicity in the oppression of marginalized identities; denigrate claims for social justice; and thus perpetuate the status quo rather than being counter-hegemonic.

Behind the Black Square

Originally this was intended to be an opinion piece, reflecting on my experiences of institutional performativity and the liberal politics of diversity in the charity sector and the university. However, realizing I could not anonymize the piece, I decided to put together a diagram that illustrated the tension between the liberal politics of diversity and the principles and goals of anti-racist activism. I found that Stefanie Boulila's (2019) chapter, 'But We Are All Different! Diversity and the Depoliticization of Anti-Racism,' resonated with my experiences and provided a way to make sense of this tension.

A commitment to diversity becomes shorthand for being against racism, sexism, and homophobia—even when that is not the case. However, this commitment has a performative character as it creates the institution as a realm that has overcome structural inequalities. By embracing diversity's vagueness and its refusal to account for specific histories of oppression, institutions become spaces of cheerful pride (Boulila, 2019, p. 130).

The suggestion that equality does not require social movements, but merely top-down liberal institutional practices, denies the material histories of the transformations that the feminist, queer and antiracist movements have brought about (Boulila, 2019, p. 128).

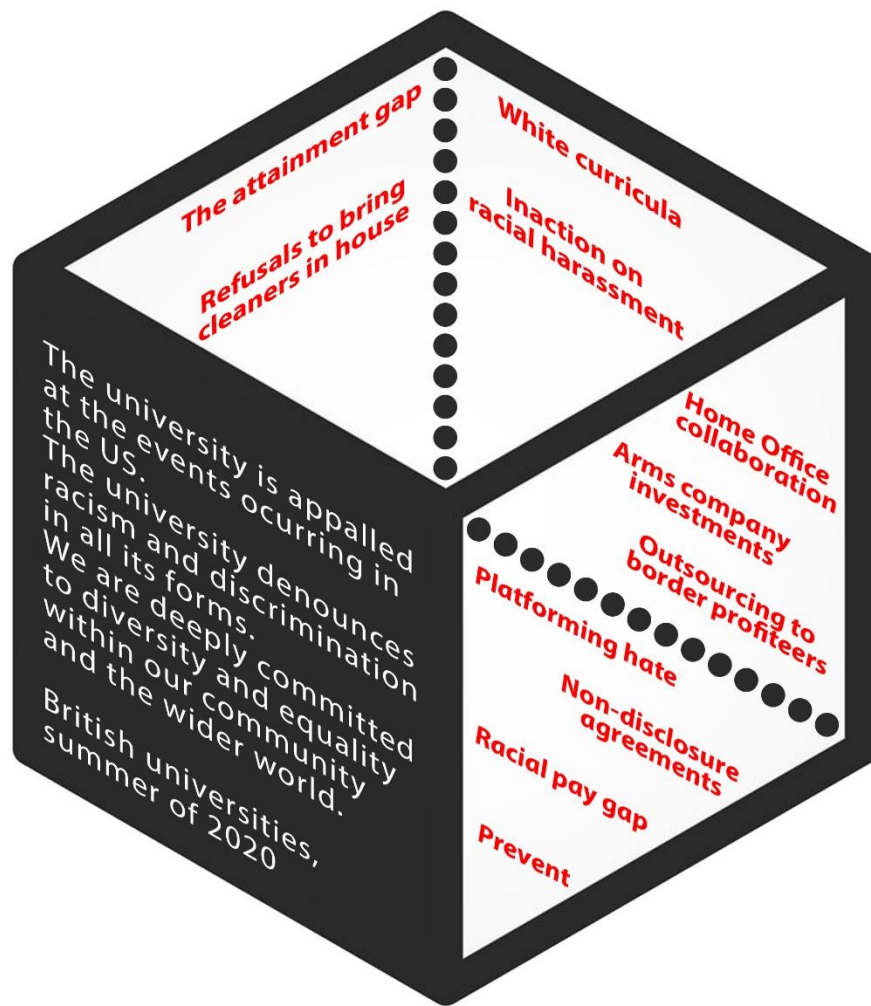


Fig.1 Behind the Black Square

In an institution that has mastered its language, antiracist, queer or feminist claims can be framed as excessive and destructive and thus illegitimate (Lentin, 2011). Within a context where a politically empty promise of equality is embraced, antiracist critique quickly becomes ‘too extreme’ (Boulila, 2019, p, 129).

Diversity is lacking a radical history indebted to an intellectual and political movement; instead it has historically operated as a top-down discourse... whilst feminist, antiracist and queer movements are historically marked by social and political struggles oriented against dominant structures and norms, diversity has been restricted to a cheerful, affirmative language that is ambiguous and decontextualised... An ahistorical account of difference allows for the concerns of marginalised groups to be swept aside in favour of a liberal political project that allows for hegemonic positions to dominate the space of diversity and difference (Boulila, 2019, pp. 128–130).

Academic Commentary

In the summer of 2020, the violent murder of George Floyd by police officers in the US sparked global anti-racist political mobilizations. Whilst protests took place in the streets, institutions and corporations across Britain and the world made declarations on social media against racism and pledging solidarity with the Black Lives Matter protests (some sincere and some performative). The image I created (Fig. 1) was inspired by Stefanie Boulila's book *Race in Post-racial Europe*, specifically the chapter on diversity and the depoliticization of anti-racism. The chapter, largely influenced by key scholars such as Sara Ahmed (2012) and Alana Lentin (2011), demonstrates how liberal diversity paradigms are disconnected from anti-racist, feminist, and queer political traditions; act as a shield to avoid accountability for complicity in the oppression of marginalized identities; denigrate claims for social justice; and thus perpetuate the status quo rather than being counter-hegemonic.

The image attempts to impose three elements related to the spectacle of social media statements on top of each other. The black surface of the cube represents the black squares that were shared across social media during this time, where institutions, corporations, and organizations quickly reproduced this performative gesture. The inner part of the cube represents deeper manifestations of racism that anti-racist movements have highlighted in the past and which liberal diversity paradigms often fail to address or consider irrelevant. Finally, the quotes by Boulila that frame the image flesh out how and why liberal diversity paradigms are disconnected from anti-racist and other political traditions, even though these realms are often presented as one and the same.

References

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