"I'm not white": counter-stories from "mixed race" women navigating PhDs

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper critiques institutional whiteness and racial categorisation in UK higher education. This is done through the representation of the complex narratives of "mixed race" women navigating their PhD experiences in predominantly white institutions, when their identities have proximity to whiteness.

Design/methodology/approach – This study introduces five vignettes of "mixed race" women, gathered from a wider study of 27 PhDs and early career researchers in UK higher education. The paper employs Yuval-Davis' framework of belonging and bell hooks' approach to chosen versus forced marginality to create a conceptual framework based on fluid agency and empowerment, recognising belonging as an ongoing process.

Findings – The findings reveal how "mixed race" women can occupy a liminal space between belonging to and rejecting racial categorisation, as they attempted to situate their self-identifications within the boundaries of institutional whiteness.

Research limitations/implications – The study only utilises a small sample size of five counter-stories from a larger study on PhD career trajectories, limiting its empirical claims. It also only engages with "mixed race" women who have proximity to whiteness, encouraging research on different "mixed race" intersections.

Practical implications – This paper encourages more discussion around "mixed race" experiences of UK higher education and critical engagement with higher education's reliance on statistical data to understand racialised communities.

Originality/value – This paper contributes new empirical insights into how whiteness is experienced when "mixed race" women negotiate their relation to it in UK higher education. It also provides theoretical advancements into understanding of institutional whiteness and critically engages with racial categorisation.

Keywords Gender, Ethnic minorities, Qualitative, Belonging, Higher education, Racial discrimination, Mixed race

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

White supremacy in UK higher education is often discussed as a system of central institutional power, and providing invisible supporting structures that uphold the needs of the majority (Tate, 2014; Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). However, it is imperative to engage in a more nuanced exploration of whiteness that captures its inherently hostile structure through the stories of those who challenge it. This paper critiques institutional whiteness through the representation of "mixed race" women's counter-stories navigating higher education, when their identities have proximity to whiteness. The stories revealed a liminal space between belonging and rejecting racial categories, transforming depending on space and place, and present a critique of higher education's dependence on categorisation. This paper provides new empirical insights into how whiteness is experienced when "mixed race" women negotiate their relation to it in UK higher education.

Despite the presence of over two million "mixed race" Britons today contributing to one of the fastest growing populations in the United Kingdom (UK) (Song, 2010), there is a distinct lack of scholarship on how "mixed race" people experiences higher education. Literature on "mixed race" identities and experiences are dominated by the United States (US) and the UK (Fozdar, 2022). However, the US provides more developed language that not only describes "mixed race" experiences, but identifies prejudices that "mixed race" people experience

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because of their mixedness. An interrogation into the UK "mixed race" experience is important to further develop a geographically contexualised language to discuss mixedness (Campion, 2018; Caballero *et al.*, 2007).

In the England and Wales, the "mixed" category was introduced into national census data in 2001 (Aspinall, 2003), which has transformed into categories such as "White or White British and Asian or Asian British" or "Any other mixed or multiple ethnic backgrounds" (AdvanceHE, 2022). In policy documentation and higher education, the term BAME (Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic) is often utilised to describe those who do not identify as "white" to inform statistical data analysis. The inclusion of "mixed" categorising recognises the existence of "mixed race" bodies but does not represent the nuanced identification of many "mixed race" people.

Statistical data of racial categorisation should be critically engaged with in higher education, as "mixed race" experiences expose the risk of pursuing misleading information when analysing "race" and racialised institutional experiences. Song and Hashem (2010) problematised statistics when interviewing "mixed race" people who chose to identify themselves with one racial category for census data and revealed that they did not see themselves as just "racially white" or "racially Black" but exposed a more nuanced understanding of their racial identities. The reliance on data perpetuates the importance of documentation over action, repackaging diversity as a "tick box" exercise rather than a meaningful task that benefits those being documented (Ahmed, 2007), and places boundaries around identities that cannot be quantified. The liminal space occupied by many "mixed race" people in the UK holds the potential to better understand how the social construction of "race" is understood and experienced by those defying categorisation.

There are also tensions with the term "mixed race", as "race" can imply a biological element to racialised identities (Thomas, 2022). Other terms can be employed depending on the individual, the social, historical, and political contexts they are located in, such as mixed heritage, mixed parentage, mixed origins, multiracial, dual heritage, or bi-racial (Alibhai-Brown, 2001, p. 106). Mahtani (2002) argues that "mixed race" can be used to envision a more fluid "linguistic home" that spans across racial terrains (p. 476), because of the number of terms individuals can choose from. The term "mixed race" in quotation marks has been utilised throughout this paper to express a recognition of "race" as a social construction, and it was the term all of the participant's used to describe their own identities in the study.

This paper interrogates institutional whiteness in UK higher education through the counter-stories of "mixed race" women navigating PhDs. It shows how "mixed race" women can disrupt racial boundaries and challenge the colonial worldviews institutional whiteness depends on to survive. "Mixed race" literature asserts the transformative potential that "mixed race" identities provide, and UK higher education can look to this as alternative ways of being and imagining a future away from institutional whiteness and reliance on statistical racial categorisation. Firstly, the paper highlights scholarship that has asserted the resistance to racial binaries "mixed race" people have exemplified and discusses how instituional whiteness and belonging has been articulated in UK higher education from a "mixed race" perspective. It then presents the conceptual and theoretical framework, and the methods utilised to conduct the research. The findings are produced in the form of counter-stories to reference how "mixed race" women challenge institutional whiteness through their identities in their PhD studies and concludes with reference to limitations of the study and implications for future research.

"Mixed race" literature

Historically, whiteness has been represented as the "superior" race, and a reliance on whiteness as a normal body in higher education spaces allows for social imaginations to persist (Guy, 2018;

Puwar, 2004). Guy (2018) describes the term "passing" to refer to those who obtain whiteness through being racialised as white or performing a "normative" culture. Mahtani (2014) builds on this by describing "passing" as an active or passive process, depending on other's perception of someone's "mixed race" identity. However, she argues that when in proximity to it, "mixed race" relationships with their whiteness fluctuates with space and encourages people to subvert the notion that whiteness is not always seen as a site of privilege and power. Storrs (2011) also refers white privilege but focuses on "mixed race" women's rejection of it in their own identities. She presented how the women stigmatised their European white ancestry and embraced their non-white identities, often associating whiteness with being "normative and meaningless" (p. 193). Newman (2020) takes a different approach with a similar argument through the investigation of "mixed race" immigrant children, who blurred racial boundaries and claimed connection to multiple racial groups. The immigrant children were not described as marginalised but used their "mixed race" identity as a source of pride. "Mixed race" literature has focused on the lived experiences of "mixed race" people, highlighting their agentic self-identifications away from whiteness, and provides a new way of interrogating whiteness in higher education without centring whiteness as power.

While there is a lack of literature around "mixed race" women in UK higher education, there is literature in different contexts that UK institutions can learn from. Self-identification can be a powerful tool utilised by "mixed race" individuals to regain power over their own identities and encourages higher education institutions to rethink racial boundaries. Bettez (2010) focused on the self-descriptions of "mixed race" women, showing how they did it in a variety of ways in relation to race and ethnicity. She argues that these definitions allude to self-definitions and highlights the importance of self-identification and personal stories for the study of mixed-race women's perceptions of race. Ginsberg (2017) makes similar arguments through her personal experiences of being "multiracial" Native American, expressing how her educational spaces validated her whiteness, and encouraged her to identify more strongly with her white identity. Her story shows how white privilege is reaffirmed through the benefits she gained when racialising herself as white but was made to feel shame for the other parts of her identity. By amplifying self-identification and criticising racial categorisation, higher educational spaces could engage with the complexities of their students cultural and racial backgrounds and find ways to better support them in a culture of monoracial whiteness.

Higher education institutions can also be inspired methodologically, as "mixed race" representations have been represented creatively. Wilson (2020) reflects on an activity she performed with her students to inspire them to communicate their "mixed race" identities in new ways. A student used consumerism to exemplify the feeling of the fetishisation of their ambiguous looks in order to challenge people's perceptions of what the "other" was to them. The ability to self-identify, or express emotions in creative methods allow a new space for students to articulate what Tate (2016) describes as "racisms touch" (p. 72) and can inspire anti-racism education to articulate "racism's touch" where racism cannot be named. The inability to name racism can be particularly prevalent for "mixed race" individuals who have proximity to whiteness. Yet, this inability simultaneously offers challenges to racial categorisation by creating new meanings out of imposed dualistic racial orders (Mahtani, 2002). By looking to "mixed race" experiences and literature, UK higher education institutions can engage with the complexities of liminal racial identities and create transformative futures that facilitate all students.

Institutional whiteness in UK higher education

Institutional whiteness refers to the predominance of white bodies in the institutional space and the culture stemming from its colonial pasts. "Race" was a central element to modernity, arguably made central by colonial power as it was invented to be deployed as a tool and

constructed "race" in relation to whiteness as a hierarchical superior (Go, 2018). Even the use of statistical data has origins in the eugenics movement, used to protect those in power, especially those who deny racisms existence (Zuberi, 2001). However, statistics can still be used to further racial justice (Garcia *et al.*, 2018), but only if institutions consider the ways categorisation might be harming students in contemporary education.

Contemporary whiteness has been described as an invisible network of power (Tate, 2014; Ahmed, 2007), creating what Joseph-Salisbury (2019) describes as a "web of whiteness" that works strategically to strengthen itself in everyday practices. Puwar (2004) argues in these predominantly white spaces, racialised bodies are seen as "space invaders" due to their hypervisibility, yet simultaneously struggle to be seen as capable or competent. In institutions, it serves as the symbolic and material hierarchical positioning of the institution, and its micro-level functioning of organisational routines (Diamond and Lewis, 2022).

An example of whiteness in institutional culture was described by Bell (1980), who coined the term "interest convergence" (p. 523) to detail how racial justice actions will only be accommodated when it converges with the interests of whites. Racial categorisation benefits whiteness as racialised students are minoritised in Russell Group universities, underrepresented in leadership roles, and experience feelings of isolation and dissolutions in the academy (Arday and Mirza, 2018; Singh and Kwhali, 2015; Rollock, 2021). Racial statistics are commonly collected in higher education as a form of equity monitoring, yet do not critically engage with statistics historical associations with hierarchical logic (Garcia *et al.*, 2018). Statistical analysis and representations are another form of white culture implemented in "equity" work, as "diversity documents" are ways of promoting positive images of institutions and appear as performing "well" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 591).

Anti-racist scholarship in higher education provides many examples of challenges to whiteness, and "mixed race" scholarship can help further the anti-racist agenda of many scholars and practitioners. Institutionally white spaces have been described as environments that racialised academics have to "survive" yet maintain the ability to thrive in a space that inherently isolates non-white bodies, particularly the experiences of Black women (Rollock, 2021; Johnson, 2019; Bhopal, 2014; Zembylas, 2018). Under colonialism, whiteness and one"s proximity to it meant greater access to social and economic privileges, so the term "colourism" is utilised to describe the different experiences depending on skin tone (Dixon and Tells, 2017). "Colourism", along with the historical legacies of slavery and the social construction of "race" alters the experiences of "mixed race" women in predominantly white spaces, therefore it is also important to highlight the counter-stories of multiple "mixed" ethnic groups.

Whiteness is challenged in "mixed race" scholarship, further exposing "race" as a social construction and tool of the institution. Storrs (2011) highlights how "mixed race" women identified their whiteness as culturally absent, associating the meaning of whiteness with oppression, discriminatory and bland. She found they associated their difference with something to be celebrated, and whiteness was something "mixed race" women were rejecting while negotiating boundaries of non-whiteness. These challenges to whiteness are reflected in research focused on "mixed race" relationships and how they are navigated in different cultural contexts (Barn, 1999; Buggs, 2017; Harman, 2008), and even on schooling and how young people develop their mixed identities (Lopez, 2010; Wright *et al.*, 2014; Lewis and Demie, 2018; Tikly *et al.*, 2004). However, there is a distinct lack of challenges to institutional whiteness from a "mixed race" perspective, and how those with a proximity to whiteness interact with predominantly white spaces in the context of white supremacy in the UK.

This paper takes inspiration from previous "mixed race" literature that places emphasis on "mixed race" women's agency to self-identify, and anti-racist scholarship that attempts to displace the deficit model racial literature can be associated with, in order to critique whiteness, racial categorisation, and disrupt racial boundaries.

Belonging in higher education

The homogenisation of racial categories outside of "white" can disregard the complex experiences of "mixed race" students but provides an overview of underrepresentation in institutional spaces that can perpetuate feelings of unbelonging. In 2022, AdvanceHE found that out of 91,350 UK domiciled students, 73.8% of the population identified as white, with one of the lowest groups being those who identified as mixed at 4.4%, followed by "other" at 1.9%, and Chinese at 0.8% (AdvanceHE, 2022). Similar representative numbers are found in postgraduate research students, with 4% identifying as mixed, in comparison to 81% white, 9% Asian, 3% Black and 2% "other" (HESA, 2019). Contrarily, those who identify with "mixed race" backgrounds are one of the fastest growing groups, with an increase of 9% in comparison to other groups who increased 1%. This is not to suggest that "mixed race" is the *most* marginalised group but highlights how its low representation numbers might correlate to the lack of consideration for "mixed-race" identities.

A sense of belonging in UK higher education has been associated with positive outcomes in student success and staff satisfaction, revealing nuances as part of an analysis of whiteness, and difficulties racialised minorities have had connecting with whiteness (Ahmet, 2020; Doharty *et al.*, 2021; Wilson, 2020). But the connection of whiteness and power has been challenged by "mixed race" scholars who highlight how whiteness focuses on the advantages of privileges that accompany white skin (Mahtani, 2014). For "mixed race" students, they can experience a number of different relationships with belonging, such as monoracism creating barriers to belonging, resisting, and accommodating monoracial norms, and facilitating their own belonging (Chaudhari, 2022). Belonging in group membership can be both welcoming and exclusionary depending on who within the group holds the power. Campion (2018) describes the enactment of "horizontal hostility" when investigating the Black "mixed-race" experiences of Black rejection, providing an insight as to how Blackness is collectively identified and where those boundaries are. When centring whiteness, it presents a narrative of white versus "other", when this is not the case with "mixed race" bodies when reflecting on their sense of belonging and access to communities. Chaudhari (2022) argues that higher educational spaces must be intentional in transforming belonging in monoracial cultures as "mixed race" student populations grow, and multiracial agendas must be fundamental to achieving racial equity.

Conceptual framework

The paper employs Yuval-Davis's (2006) analytical framework for the study of belonging, and bell hooks (1989) theoretical approach to chosen versus forced marginality to create a conceptual framework of liminal agency and empowerment.

Yuval-Davis (2006) framework of belonging explores the complex and multifaceted nature of belonging, particularly in the context of identity and social inclusion. The framework is based on the idea that belonging is not a static concept, but a dynamic and fluid process that is shaped by various intersecting factors. The framework asserts the importance of interrogating specific spaces and identities, and highlights the importance of understanding the "mixed race" experience contextualised in UK institutions. She emphasises the role of boundaries in defining who belongs and who does not, which can shift depending on people's social locations and shape how people are valued and judged. However, the weight given to the importance of boundaries presents a challenge to the liminal space occupied by "mixed race" people.

To counter this, I also employ bell hooks (1989) approach to marginality. Although her article *Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness* originally aimed to scrutinise the discourse of feminist thinkers concerning marginality and difference, I adapted this approach into a conceptual framework. hooks describes marginality as more than a site of oppression

and deprivation, but also as a site of chosen radical possibility and a space of resistance. As a research framework for the study of those considered marginalised, it works to understand the oppressive forces of whiteness when contextualised in UK higher education, while also recognising the existence of resistance to these forces. The framework from a "mixed race" perspective focuses on people's ability to choose their own identity, resistance to categorisation, and reveals the liminal space in-between the margins that many "mixed race" people occupy.

The combination of Yuval-Davis's framework of belonging and hooks' approach to liminal marginality critically engages with the ways "mixed race" women "belong" to or "reject" whiteness in higher education, with recognition to its fluid and ongoing processes within contextualised space.

Theoretical framework

The research is theoretically approached through a union of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Critical Mixed Race Theory (CMRT), and intersectional feminism, to critically examine injustices associated with racial fluidity, and encompass a "mixed race" approach to research as an analysis method. CRT represents an interdisciplinary exploration of how society has been, and continues to be, shaped by racism (Ladson-Billings, 1998). It ontologically positions itself within a framework that recognises the existence of racial discrimination, and epistemologically and methodologically considers counter-stories and everyday experiences of racism as valid knowledge (Lander and Santoro, 2016; Doharty *et al.*, 2021). Rather than viewing racism as something associated with the past or extremist actions, CRT explores the mundane and micro experiences of racialised individuals (Lander and Santoro, 2016). This is important for a "mixed race" approach as it validates all racialised experiences as knowledge.

CMRT is a sub-field of CRT that examines the experiences of those holding multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds. As a theoretical approach, it has the ability to complicate binary racialisation that is often portrayed in UK higher education (Sims and Njaka, 2019). This work aims to push "mixed-race" narratives into mainstream debates about racial experiences and challenges to whiteness. CMRT was important to the analysis of the research as it emphasises the importance of self-narratives, self-identification, and destabilises the concept of race that still has a heavy reliance on racial difference and categorisation (Guy, 2018).

The counter-stories presented in this paper are from "mixed race" women, therefore also takes an intersectional feminist lens. Feminist reflexive approaches situate researchers within their research contexts. Rather than assuming researchers view the world from a distance, feminism encourages reflexive practices that discusses the researcher's identity within the research contexts (Rose, 1993). As a Chinese "mixed race" woman geographically located in the UK, my experiences influence the way I conduct and analyse research throughout the process. I employ the term intersectional feminism rather than feminism because unmarked categories can imply an apolitical position (Boatcă and Tlostanova, 2021). Intersectional feminism not only considers the socially constructed gender relationships with oppression, but also identities across other axes such as race (Gillborn, 2005). Historically, "mixed race" women have been categorised as sexually deviant, exotic, and racially ambiguous, and are more vulnerable to sexualisation (Mahtani, 2002), making it imperative to understand their experience through both "mixed race" and gender identities.

Methods

This paper presents five counter-stories of "mixed race" women navigating PhDs in UK institutions. The counter-stories were selected from a larger study of 27 interviews, investigating the career trajectories of racialised minority PhDs and early career researchers.

The five counter-stories were selected because the participants' identities had proximity to whiteness, discussed their "mixed race" identities in depth, identified as women, and were current PhD researchers in the UK to effectively reflect on their previous higher educational experiences and share how they navigated their way through to where they are now. The participants were contacted via email to choose their own pseudonyms for the counter-stories, with some participants opting to have one chosen for them based on their ethnic and cultural background to avoid using westernised names.

Counter-story identities were utilised to exhibit the personal stories of the "mixed race" women without revealing their identities (Kidd *et al.*, 2022). Counter-stories as a method are common within CRT, CMRT, and intersectional feminism, as they actively centre the lives of the participants and reframes institutional narratives that typically centre whiteness (Doharty *et al.*, 2021; Martinez, 2014; Rose, 1993). The counter-stories were created taking quotes from each participants transcripts and mapped them together to create a coherent narrative, as describing previous experiences can be difficult to construct in a linear manner in an interview but maintains their linguistic choices (Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2004).

The interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams, lasting roughly 60 minutes each, and thematically analysed on NVIVO. The data was coded through self-identification, previous experiences of higher education and current experiences of PhD research. As intersectional feminism encourages the use of reflexive approaches to research, I have utilised my own "mixed race" approach to research analysis. A "mixed race" approach to research analysis recognises that identities are fluid depending on individuals, space, and place. It also acknowledges the inability to homogenise a globalised identity and must be geographically contextualised. This resulted in an analysis that focused on individual lived experience contextualised in UK higher education. It also defined the racial identities of "mixed race" women through self-descriptions in the interviews, using quotes rather than categories to emphasise the importance of self-identification. The following section introduces the accounts of Sinead ("Mixed race, Black African and white British"), Radhica ("Brown woman... mixed race... half white Gibraltarian, and Guyanese"), Rosie ("Chinese mixed race"), Simone ("mixed race half Jamaican"), and Nanyamka ("half Ghanaian half white British").

Sinead - "I always put Black African first"

As a "Black African and white British" woman, Sinead exclaimed with pride "I always put Black African first". Yet still, there was an awareness of her "mixed race" identity, which caused some internal struggle "because of the biological connotations" and worried that if it was used as her identifier, she would be "reproducing 'race'". Within the contexts of institutional boundaries and oppression, she still reclaimed the term "mixed race" but emphasised the importance of racialising her primary identity as "Black African" first. Sinead had never been "racialised as white" but did not want to claim a Black identity as she reflected on her Black friends' experiences of higher education that she was "mixed race and they're Black, they would say I'm a Black woman too, but I haven't had the same experience". Sinead eloquently and agentically put her self-identification first, while being acutely aware of what it meant to be seen through institutional whiteness.

Sinead's relationship with whiteness revealed the liminal space between rejecting whiteness through her conscious choice to self-identify with "Black African" as a primary identity, yet a recognition of how her white identity provides a different experience from her Black friends. For her, she did not belong to whiteness, but agentically recognised her relation to it and revealed how institutional whiteness influenced her experiences. In the context of institutional whiteness, her story challenges the idea that "mixed race" women stigmatise their whiteness by not claiming it (Storrs, 2011), and did not claim connection to multiple racial groups (Newman, 2020). By focusing on the liminal space between her "Black African"

and "mixed" identity, Sinead's both belonging and unbelonging to Blackness, it challenges the idea that racial identity can be bounded in statistical grouping and engages individuals in a more fluid understanding of the social construction of "race". Would this be different outside of institutional whiteness? Without a "mixed race" perspective on institutional whiteness we can never know.

Radhica – "depends who I'm talking to"

With a small look of uncertainty, Radhica explained her identity was "mixed race" "Brown", specifically "Gibraltarian and Guyanese". What followed was an intense and deep conversation about how Radhica's identity ebbed and flowed depending on space, place, and people. Radhica had tried on many hats when it came to self-identification, both inside of and outside of institutional whiteness. Not only could she be described as "Gibraltarian and Guyanese", but also "Asian Caribbean" or "Indian", but it "depends on who I'm talking to" as to which response is used. Take "Asian Caribbean" for example. She exclaimed there are "a lot of complexities where a lot of people would say Guyana is not part of the Caribbean" or could be identified as "Chinese Caribbean" instead. She also didn't want to use the identifier "Indian" despite the fact "I am Indian, but I feel like I'm lying". Even her preferred term of "Brown" and "Gibraltarian and Guyanese" could change. "Brown" was the "easiest way for me to express [my identity] without having to go into too much detail on mixed race", but only used it when she felt who she was talking to would understand. "Gibraltarian and Guyanese" was the most commonly used identifier, yet her assertion of it changed with people and place. In Gibraltar, "I'm very strongly Gibraltarian, cause that's where I'm from, but at the same time, I'm Guyanese". When describing it in the UK, she faced geographical ignorance from those who "think I am from Ghana". Trying on these different forms of identifiers was "not always that simple". Coming from the predominantly white country, she had many experiences of confusion to her identity, being asked "where are you REALLY from" and "you're not REALLY from here". Ultimately, "I don't like people telling me where I am from" and if they did, she just didn't "want to talk about it". She exemplified the power to shape shift her identity to maintain her own mental safety, as she was secure in her own mixed identity, controlling her narrative.

Rather than viewing Radhica's identity as one dictated by others' perception, using a framework of liminal agency and empowerment, her choices reflect her decision to protect herself and control her narrative. Radhica's relation to whiteness stemmed from her connection to her home of Gibraltar but did not belong to the identifier as she was not racialised as white. Her "mixed race" identity presented challenges for others in their own understanding of "race" within the context of institutional whiteness, but also exemplified the fluidity of identification depending on space and place. While she was not performing whiteness by passing (Guy, 2018), she was aware of her ability to perform race to disrupt whiteness (Mahtani, 2002). The liminal space between belonging to and rejecting whiteness was reflected in the importance of listening to her self-descriptors (Bettez, 2010), as she did not reject whiteness nor did she belong to it, but revealed how her identity caused disruption through the lack of understanding of this liminal and fluid space that exists and that she controls.

Rosie - "I'm not white"

Chinese "mixed race" Rosie is an international PhD from Canada, who only recently began reflecting on her "mixed race" identity in relation to predominantly white institutional spaces. She expressed an air of sadness when explaining she "didn't realise that this might be something else that I'm dealing with that other people are not". In her PhD, she was surrounded by a large international cohort, predominantly Chinese international. Despite being racially diverse, she was the only person in her cohort who was a "mixed race"

international student. As she sat with her PhD supervisor, he looked her up and down, as he asserted "you are either an overseas Chinese student, or you're a white British academic". Her identity as a "Chinese mixed race" woman within the binary of academia was seen as "too close" to the research topic, which made her both too Chinese and not Chinese enough simultaneously, intersecting with her national heritage as a Canadian woman. As she transferred from the PhD environment to the staff space, her situation "didn't change" as "being mixed creates a different environment on a different level". Rosie described a common occurrence for lighter skinned mixed-race people: being racialised as white and non-white simultaneously. When organising an event as the only "person of colour" on her team, for "people of colour", she took issue with this, and explained to her colleagues why this was wrong. This was met with a white woman stating, "but we have you". She described this "odd liminal space", where in a similar situation she was racialised as white, where she strongly asserted to counter white women's attempts to relate to her, "I'm not white". No matter where she went in higher education "being mixed race, people turn to you and discredit both sides", yet she continued to assert her identity no matter what.

Rosie's agentic choice to identify away from whiteness openly did not allow the space for others to choose where she belonged and what she rejected. Whilst she could "pass" as white, it was a passive passing as it depended on others' perceptions (Mahtani, 2014). Institutional whiteness appeared when others identified her in that space, depending on whether it required a white woman to relate to them, or a woman of colour to appear diverse. Institutional spaces validate whiteness by shaming other elements of "mixed race" identities (Ginsberg, 2017), and racialised her when it benefits predominantly white spaces (Bell, 1980). Yet, she actively rejected whiteness and showed empowerment through her "Chinese" identity, both in her work and research, while simultaneously recognising her white privilege and experienced the liminal space when connecting to multiple ethnic groups.

Simone - "you look really exotic"

Simone is a "mixed race half Jamaican" woman, who firmly related to her mixed identity through her experiences of higher education. As institutions continue to diversify their student cohorts, Simone went her undergraduate experience without understanding the racialised elements of her identity. Her friends were mixed with "all types of ethnicities, not just Black and white", and very rarely experienced any form of discrimination that was "racially motivated" as she felt protected by the cloak of diversity that encased her. As her master's shifted her racial, spatial experience, suddenly, all of her friends were white, and she became "very racialised". Her experiences of this were not exclusive to the classroom but carried into her personal life. Her all-white female household pushed their arms against her post-fake tan, exclaiming "I'm darker than you!" or "I'm the same colour as you!" or had strangers in the pub announcing the infamously painful question for mixed women "you look really exotic, where are you from?". In reflection, she realised "you can never escape the race talks" and chose not to "kick off" anymore. These experiences led her to separate herself from this white identity, as "if you're in a predominantly white place regardless of the fact I'm half white, like I was obviously identifying more with the other side, but like there's a different dynamic", and realised she "missed my people, the people I could identify with". Simone was very aware of how institutional whiteness and gender shaped her identity, but her humorous approach to other's identifications of her showed empowerment and confidence with herself.

As space became whiter, Simone increasingly realised she was being racialised. The racial microaggressions that she described require a more intricate understanding of "mixed race" experiences, as they cannot always be immediately described, but felt (Tate, 2016). Simone realised that in the context of institutional whiteness, she was fetishised as the "other" (Wilson, 2020) while simultaneously experiencing whiteness attempting to relate to her.

Similarly, to Radhica, she actively chose not to engage with those who saw her in this way. Simone blurred people's perceptions of racial boundaries and did not claim connection to multiple ethnic groups, but described her identity situated in the liminal "mixed" space.

Nanyamka - "racial divide"

Now describing herself as a Black woman, Nanyamka described her "Black mixed race" identity as "half Ghanaian, half white". As a lecturer alongside her PhD, she had a breadth of experience of the higher educational space. Her whole life, she felt she was "in the middle" of being Ghanian and white, being the "only "mixed race" person in school". One thing she did have, however, was a strong connection to her Ghanian heritage. Being a member of her Afro Caribbean Saturday school, she was engaged with her histories and grew close to her culture. Even her choice to attend university was influenced by her Ghanian heritage. Despite her intimate relationship with her Ghanian identity, the world did not see her that way. As a college teacher, she described experiencing a "racial divide" in her department and highlights the difficulties these visible boundaries brought her "because I'm mixed race, if you sit with the white colleagues or the white staff, they think 'she's one of us' and treat me a certain way". Her association with Ghana and empowerment of her Black identity meant she was not seeking white access despite them offering it to her. She described the treatment she got after she made the choice to interact with both sides led to them bullying and "micromanage" her within the workplace, a common occurrence for Black women in predominantly white spaces (Rollock, 2021). Nanyamka described how one of her white parents came to pick her up from work, and someone commented to her "I saw this white lady walking around and she claimed to be your mum, but she can't be because she's not Brown". Nanyamka described having to self-identify to people because of their misunderstandings of how mixedness interacts with predominantly white spaces. After reflecting on how her mixed race identity was formed for her personally, she realised that she never really recognised her "in the middle" identity until "I progressed in my career". Now, she defines herself as Black woman with reference to her "mixed race" identity, empowering other Black women along the way, including her Black daughter, and no one can take that from her.

By making the agentic choice to primarily identify as a Black woman, she appeared to reject whiteness (Storrs, 2011). However, further discussion revealed the liminal space between belonging and rejection of whiteness through her recognition of how her white identity affected her life, like how people identified her mother, or how it changed the colour of her skin. In the context of institutional whiteness, she experienced academia as a Black woman (Rollock, 2021), yet still recognised how her whiteness presented certain privileges. Binary and bounded racial identifiers how her linguistic rejection of whiteness (Song and Hashem, 2010), but not her internal liminal reflections towards it.

Conclusion

This paper has critically examined institutional whiteness and racial categorisation in UK higher education, shedding light on the complex and liminal spaces that exist between belonging to and rejecting racial identities within a framework of liminal agency and empowerment. Through Yuval-Davis' (2006) framework of belonging, it was understood as a fluid and ongoing process, yet also challenged by revealing the spaces in-between the boundaries she describes. In relation to hooks (1989) approach to marginality, the binary and bounded identity structures of higher education require "mixed race" women to create new liminal spaces between belonging and rejection of whiteness, in order to recognise the privileges gained in predominantly white spaces, yet simultaneously challenging whiteness as the primary source of power. By analysing "mixed race" women's higher educational

experiences through liminal agency and empowerment, it criticises racial categorisation, de-centres whiteness, and reimagines what higher education could look like in the liminal space outside of the confines of white supremacy.

What this paper does not do is argue whiteness does not have power within higher education. The roots of colonial legacies and institutional memory from the British Empire sustains whiteness in its dominant position. Its historical legacies have overtime, built "new racisms" that are used to embed and justify racist behaviours and practices, and free people of accusations of racism that exist to maintain the racial hierarchy's whiteness depends on to thrive (Shain, 2020). It also does not claim statistics are not useful in higher education settings, but encourages institutions to be more critical of how they could be used in harmful ways. The findings highlight the importance of self-identification for "mixed race" women when it is constructed in the context of institutional whiteness, and critiques institutional approaches to racial identity. The counter-stories revealed how "mixed race" women did not belong to institutional whiteness, but also did not reject it. Despite being in a predominantly white space that promotes power for those identifying with it, within their counter-stories, the participants remained firm in their reclamation of their own identities, recognising their proximity to whiteness but also distancing themselves from it. Scholar's such as Mahtani (2014) and Storrs (2011) discuss the power of performing race and rejecting white identities, but in the context of higher education where racial relations and structures are inherently built into the systems, a rejection of whiteness and racial performance cannot always be applied. By understanding "mixed race" women's liminal journeys through whiteness in the context of higher education from a powerful and agentic perspective, institutions can facilitate a more in-dept analysis into how whiteness shapes linguistic choices, sense of self, and intersectional identities.

The study does include limitations to its claims, such as the small sample size, lack of focus on "mixed race" identities from the original study the interviews originate from, and the investigation of those in proximity to whiteness. While small sample sizes limit the empirical claims that can be made to wider research, it does facilitate the in-depth inquiry into how others construct their understandings of space (Crouch and McKenzie, 2002), and reframes narratives that typically centre whiteness by counter-storytelling the experiences of "mixed race" women navigating higher education (Martinez, 2014). Also, the original study the counter-narratives were selected from was investigating the career trajectories of racialised minority PhDs and early career researchers, meaning "mixed race" identities were not the focus on the research. While it did benefit this article as participants engaged in conversations about their "mixed race" identities without being prompted to, arguably showing how important it is to their experiences, it could have benefitted from a more in-depth analysis into how "mixed race" women experience higher education.

This study only investigated "mixed race" women with proximity to whiteness in order to address how whiteness is understood when individuals rest on the boundaries of what is considered "white". However, it is important to note that "mixed race" does not always mean "white", and future research must address this to disrupt the ideology that white is the default form. I encourage future research to further investigate the liminal spaces revealed between belonging and rejection of whiteness and identity, and how "mixed race" is experienced not just by those with proximity to whiteness, but all forms of "mixed race" identities in institutional spaces that attempt to bound them.

"Mixed race" literature, in particular literature that includes mixedness in proximality to whiteness, is a useful tool to understand UK institutional whiteness and racism, as it centres the experiences of those who rest on the boundary between what is wrongly deemed hierarchically superior and considered marginal. "Mixed race" women in scholarship have challenged conceptions of "race" as a social construction that actively and passively fluctuates between space and place and holds a lot of potential for how higher educational institutions approach

anti-racism work from a more empowering space. Not only does taking a more liminal approach amplify the voices of the counter-stories told, but also imparts new approaches to the study of whiteness and imagines new futures for higher education race equity.

Sharing the sentiment of one of the counter-stories, I am a Chinese "mixed race" woman, I am *not* white, and refuse to be categorised as such.

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