**Title:** “Applying critical race theory in social work education in Britain: pedagogical reflections”

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**Applying critical race theory in social work education in Britain: pedagogical reflections**

**Abstract**

This paper draws on personal experiences of teaching white British and Black African students on a social work Master’s course in England. In this paper, I critically discuss the fire at Grenfell Tower in London (June 14, 2017) and how it served as a pedagogical tool to open up critical discussions among students about racial in/justice, intersectionality and neoliberal racism. I also explore how Black students were enabled to share their experiences of immigration, racism, and racial inequality in Britain as part of these discussions. Inviting personal experiences of race in the classroom can be highly emotive; but, as this paper shows, these voices can also highlight institutionalised racism and provide a way for Black and ethnic minorities’ histories to be told and learned. These histories matter and can develop student consciousness about racial inequality for pursuing a social agenda. They also challenge claims that Britain is now a ‘post-racial’ society. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) provided a way to counter such claims and critique my ‘whiteness’ and socio-economic class in my teaching, as well as challenge the neoliberal ideologies and structures that reproduce and mask ‘white privilege’ and racial injustice in Britain today.

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**Introduction**

In Britain, anti-racism and anti-racist social work have become encompassed within the generic concepts of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. The concepts developed in the 1970s to critique the dominance of binary models of thinking since the 17th century Enlightenment in Western Europe (individual-society and mind-body). However, these concepts have ‘long since lost their political edge’ and become ‘part of “status quo” thinking’ (Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, 2014, p.1). As a result, critically discussing anti-racism appears to be less relevant in contemporary social work education and practice, and especially since the rise of post-racialism (Crenshaw, 2011).

The rise of post-racialism has also undermined the recognition of institutionalised racism in the police (Macpherson, 1999) and in mental health services (North, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire Strategic Health Authority, 2003). And, the anti-racist gains under the *Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000*, which required public organisations to act on racial discrimination, have been undermined by later anti-discriminatory legislation and the shift towards diversity. The *Equality Act 2010*, for example, (which repealed previous legislation including the *Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000*) focuses on ‘harmonising protection’ under one piece of legislation, and identifies individual forms of direct and indirect discrimination based on nine individual ‘protected characteristics’ (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018). In doing so, the Act conceals the structural inequalities and institutionalised forms of oppression that particular groups experience. Individuals are also made responsible for pressing legal charges under this Act. This can make it more expensive and difficult than for social groups, which could have supported these individuals, previously (Gifford, 2017).

Racial discrimination remains unlawful and is widely criticised in Britain today as is racism generally too. Yet, there has been a shift in how race and racism are framed; for example, inequality and difference are most often articulated in terms of ‘culture’ or ‘ethnicity’ rather than ‘race’. This shift has been supported by multiculturalism in Britain since the 1970s, which espouses liberal values and diversity while simultaneously also promoting essentialized notions of ‘otherness’ and difference from which racist ideas and behaviours can develop (Singh, 2014). ‘Cultural fundamentalism’ (akin to religious fundamentalism), Stolcke (1995) warned, is the ‘new rhetoric of exclusion’ in Britain and (Western) Europe. ‘Culture’ has replaced ‘race’ as the language nation-states use to assert their cultural homogeneity. However, nation-states remain based on the conceptual contradiction between free will (political) and common heritage (cultural) (Stolcke, 1995). It is this contradiction that drives the ‘new rhetoric of exclusion’ and can explain current anxieties about ‘social cohesion’ and ‘immigration’ in Britain as well as the ‘othering’ and exclusion of refugees, reclassified as ‘bogus’ or ‘genuine’ asylum-seekers.

Shifts in language render new racism as less visible and open to challenge. Color-blindness masks ‘white privilege’ and limits the significance of race (Orelus, 2013; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; 2010) as a signifier of power and inequality. Color-blindness also ‘deletes the relationship between racial differences and power’ through ‘a denial of how racial histories accrue political, economic and cultural weight to the social power of whiteness’ (Giroux, 2006, p.77). ‘Neoliberal racism’, alternatively, obscures racism through ‘the privatization of racial discourse’ based on ‘denial regarding how power and politics promote racial discrimination and exclusion’ within neoliberalism (Giroux, 2006, p.78). Rap music, for example, is no longer ‘a black thing’ but ‘just music’ that is a matter of musical taste and a lifestyle choice (Girous, 2006, p.77) within contemporary neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism is the dominant economic and political philosophy of our times (Giroux, 2006, p.75) and the form in which global capitalism now exists. With its focus on the free market, neoliberalism promotes individualism and is inextricably linked to new racism. The Conservative-led Coalition government (2010-2015), a proponent of neoliberal policies, was criticized for ‘weak leadership on racial equality’ (European Network Against Racism, 2010-11 cited in Redclift, 2014) and some conservative neoliberal policymakers have claimed that Britain is now a ‘post-racial’ society that has reached the ‘end of racism’. Similar claims followed Barack Obama’s election as President of the United States (2009-2017). Such claims are not only false but illustrative of the post-racial paradigm (Crenshaw, 2011) and ways in which ‘neoliberal racism’ and ‘colour-blindness’ currently co-exist in Britain.

As social work has ‘morphed from a distinctly political project to a managerial task’ under neoliberalism (Singh, 2014, p.25), so too have neoliberal racism, color-blindness and post-racialism become the greatest obstacles to tackling racism and promoting anti-racist social work in Britain. This shift is reflected by the way in which neoliberalism tends to be taught and discussed separately from anti-oppressive, anti-discriminatory and anti-racist practice in social work in my experience. But to promote anti-racism in social work education and practice, it is imperative to discuss anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice in relation to neoliberalism. Doing so, opens up the possibility for critical discussion about how neoliberal ideologies reproduce and mask ‘white supremacy’ and also promote the privatisation of racial discourse within neoliberal racism.

Anti-racism, however, has a beleaguered history in social work in Britain. In the 1980s, Black researchers promoted ‘Black perspectives’ in social work and Black social workers were actively recruited to the profession, which the Commission for Racial Equality (1978) recognised was Eurocentric and overwhelmingly white. In 1980, riots erupted in St Paul’s in Bristol, followed by riots across Britain in 1981 in Toxteth, Liverpool and in Brixton, London. The riots occurred amid a national economic recession that led to rising unemployment (especially among Black youths) and increased deprivation in inner city areas. The Scarman report (1983) concluded that ‘institutional racism’ – a term it introduced – did not exist in the police and therefore had not caused the Brixton riots. There was ‘cautious criticism’ (Neal, 2003, p. 65) of the police in the report and individual officers’ attitudes and behaviours were explained as personal misjudgements, not racism.

Meanwhile, anti-racist groups such as the Association of Black Social Workers and Allied Professionals and the Mickleton Group were established and comprised Black and white anti-racist academics and practitioners (Dominelli, 1997, p.163), who successfully pressured the Central College for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) – a government quango - to adopt an anti-racist policy. This policy, developed by the Black Perspectives Committee, was incorporated in CCETSW’s Paper 30 (Annex 5) in 1990, and made anti-racism a requirement of the DipSW qualification. However, this led to a backlash among practitioners and academics, who complained of having little knowledge and training of their own about anti-racist social work, or about how to teach it within their agencies and educational institutions (Dominelli, 1997). The media picked up on these divisions in social work and relied on white male social work academics (Phillips, 1993; Pinker, 1993) to mock anti-racism for its so-called ‘political correctness’ as well as undermine anti-racism’s achievements by highlighting structural forms of oppression that some groups experienced under anti-racist policies (Dominelli, 1997). Other factors such as CCETSW’s failure to develop a support base among leading social work academics, also contributed to these debates and to anti-racism’s demise. CCETSW also failed to address growing anxieties in the profession over the government agenda to privatise social services and social work education by promoting bureaucratic reforms and competency-based social work through CCETSW (Dominelli, 1997; Penketh, 2000).

Recent calls to reinvigorate anti-oppressive practice and anti-racism are thus part of a political project in contemporary social work (See Dominelli, 2018; Harrison and Burke, 2014; Singh, 2014), but which also appear ill-fated in the face of ever-advancing neoliberalism and the development of post-racialism. Previous attempts to re-energise anti-oppressive practice as a political, anti-racist and emancipatory project in opposition to multiculturalism also had little success (Williams, 1999). Critical Race Theory (CRT), however, may provide a more convincing critical theoretical approach to challenge current ‘neoliberal racism’, ‘color-blindness’ and the neoliberal ideologies and structures of power that reproduce ‘white privilege’ (see Abrams and Moio, 2009; Bhopal, 2018; Delgado, 1995; Gillborn, 2005). This is because CRT explicitly critiques ‘race’ as a construct, including the concept of ‘whiteness’, and how the meaning and value accorded to whiteness(re)produce ‘white supremacy’. CRT may also provide ‘an important intellectual and social tool for …deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power’ (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p.9), making CRT an apt theory for promoting anti-racist social work. Notwithstanding, critical approaches to anti-oppressive practice in social work (Dominelli, 2018; Mattsson, 2013), like CRT, also promote intersectionality as a way of analysing intersecting and interacting axes of oppression, which include the axis of ‘race’. Dominelli (2018) recognises that addressing racism is essential before anti-oppressive practice can be promoted, as well. CRT offers a possible and compelling way to achieve this by exposing and challenging ‘neoliberal racism’ and post-racialism in Britain today.

CRT activism first developed to challenge elite institutions to rethink their notions of ‘race neutrality’ and the exclusionary practices by which the status quo was maintained (Crenshaw, 2011, p.1260). CRT gained currency as critical debates about the law, social power and structure expanded to include professionals from other disciplines (philosophy, sociology, psychology). However, for CRT to survive and grow, Crenshaw argues it must develop a credible counter-narrative to post-racialism, which is currently CRT’s greatest challenge. To achieve this, Crenshaw states that CRT must be ‘interdisciplinary, intersectional, and cross institutional’ (Crenshaw 2011, p.1262). This calls on the social work profession to engage with CRT to challenge post-racialism and promote anti-racist social work practice.

Despite the opportunities CRT offers for exposing new racism, critical race theorists have been criticised for privileging ‘race’ over class, and thereby concealing how capitalism (re)produces class struggle and inequality (Darder and Torres, 2004; Darder, 2011; Cole, 2009). Cole (2009) and Maisuria (2012), for example, have argued that the ‘racialisation’ of class is a more appropriate anti-racist analytical approach, because it necessarily links the articulation of racism to capitalism and modes of production, which CRT - with its critical focus on ‘whiteness’ and ‘white supremacy’ - does not.

CRT, however, is not a purely subjective or cultural-based theory but is rather based on intersectionality, which provides a tool for analysing ‘the points at which power relations meet’ (Ahmed, 2012, p.14) and the complex and dynamic ways different axes of oppression, including class, race, gender, sexuality and disability intersect and interact. Intersectional analysis also invites the articulation of experiences, shared histories of ‘otherness’ and counter-narratives. These counter-narratives may expose the normativity of whiteness in the histories and narratives that dominate the institutional structures, policies and ‘spaces’ in which people from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds are constructed as ‘space invaders’ (Puwar, 2004). Counter-narratives therefore provide a way to challenge tacit whiteness and the unspoken presumption of white privilege and entitlement (including to property) on which ‘white supremacy’ is predicated.

Far from homogenising white people (cf. Cole, 2009), the CRT concepts of ‘white supremacy’ and ‘white privilege’ critically foreground ‘whiteness’. Critical race theorists recognise that classifications of whiteness include ‘divisions and hierarchies… which create further divisions – [and that] these may be based on class, education levels, accent and dress’ (Bhopal, 2018, p.21). Gillborn (2012) – a leading critical race theorist in Britain – has also highlighted how Thatcher’s neoliberal government in the 1980s produced rising unemployment, widening class divisions and the poorest people in Britain today, who have not benefited from the general rise in living standards over this time (see also: Backwith, 2014; Jones, 2009).

In the early twenty-first century, public and media discourses about the ‘white working classes’ have been prolific. These discourses have either demonised the ‘white working classes’, mocking them as ‘degenerate’ and ‘chavs’ (a pejorative label) or they have heralded the ‘white working classes’ as ‘victims’ losing out to their Black and ethnic minority counterparts in terms of employment and educational opportunities and attainment (Gillborn 2012, 2009; Jones; 2009; Gest, 2018). However, as a recent study on UK Poverty (2018) by the Joseph Roundtree Foundation clarifies, ‘Bangladeshi and Pakistani families have experienced much greater rates of poverty than all other ethnic groups and this has been the case for 20 years.’ Furthermore, the study highlights, ‘Poverty rates are higher among all ethnic minority groups compared with those among the majority White British population….[and] the two groups that have become more at risk of being in poverty now than five years ago are Black/African/Caribbean/Black British working-age adults and those who marked ‘other’ as their ethnicity’ (Joseph Roundtree Foundation, 2018, p.18).

The divisions created more recently among the ‘working classes’ serve to protect the interests of white people, including the white working classes, who benefit from their ‘white privilege’. These divisions also prevent collaborations developing between working class people from white, Black and ethnic minority backgrounds, including recent white Eastern European migrants (especially from Poland) and Traveller, Gypsy and Roma groups. In effect, this protects the interests and privilege of the (new) middle classes in Britain (Gest, 2018; Bhopal, 2018; Gillborn, 2012).

CRT is not new in Britain, and has been used as a critical anti-racist theory to highlight ‘white privilege’ in neoliberal higher education policies and institutions (HEIs) (Gillborn, 2005) and to show how ‘neoliberalism fails to acknowledge racism’ (Bhopal, 2018, p.5). Gillborn (2005) has also used CRT to advocate for the incorporation of racial justice in higher education policies as a specific form of social justice. This has particular relevance for social work education because ‘social justice’ is a core ethical principle of the profession (BASW, 2018; HCPC, 2017, IFSW, 2014). Nevertheless, Ferguson, Ioakimidis and Lavalette (2018, p.154-167) have recently highlighted how the centrality of social justice has been eclipsed in the International Federation of Social Workers’ updated global definition of social work (2014) in a political compromise that the IFSW approved in an attempt to be ‘neutral’ and satisfy competing social work traditions and histories. In effect, the authors claim that this deprives social workers of an ‘ethical and political stance through which…[they] can challenge neoliberalism’s assault on civil rights.’

Stevenson (2014) has also raised concerns about neoliberal higher education policy, challenging the extent to which ‘diversity issues’, including ‘religious diversity’, are genuinely promoted in HEIs in Britain, and in the policy agendas on ‘widening participation’, ‘intercultural education’ and ‘internationalism’. Such absences in the curricula prompted me to reflect on my teaching practice. How to talk about diversity, challenge new racism, and promote anti-racist social work were all issues that I contemplated as I prepared my teaching over the summer, when suddenly my attention was diverted to the horrifying images and reports of the fire at Grenfell Tower in London in the early hours of 14 June 2017.

**The Grenfell Tower fire: a critical case and pedagogical tool in social work education**

Within minutes, a fridge fire in a fourth-floor flat had transformed the 24-storey tower block into an inferno that claimed the lives of 72 people. The fire at Grenfell Tower was hailed the ‘deadliest tragedy’, causing ‘the biggest loss of life in a residential fire since the Second World War’ (Onyanga-Omara, 2018). The ‘victims’ who died were almost all residents: men and women, older people, people with disabilities, mothers, fathers, grandparents, and children as young as six-months old. A large number of residents in Grenfell Tower, it became apparent, were migrants (BBC, 2018a), who lived in poor housing conditions and relative poverty – despite Grenfell Tower being located in one of Britain’s wealthiest areas: the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Media reports portrayed the ‘victims’ in inconsistent ways that shifted and were challenged by the residents and bereaved relatives, who also gave personal testimonies at the commemorative hearings which opened the Grenfell Inquiry. This Inquiry was established to find out what happened on the night of the fire, and the circumstances and decisions that led to it. The residents, it emerged, included ‘retired textile workers, schoolchildren, poets, engineering students, and refugees’ (Knight, 2017). Many of the survivors also ‘objected to being characterised as “poor people” living in undesirable circumstances….[and] social housing’, and denied feeling ‘marginalised or pushed out or gentrified by the rich people of Kensington; they felt pleased to have lived in a nice part of London, with nice parks and a good mix of people’(O’Hagan, 2018). This is an important reminder about the dangers of stereotypes that can stigmatise and fail to reflect the reality of people’s lives and experiences.

**Inequality, injustice and human tragedy: The effects global neoliberal capitalism**

The fire at Grenfell Tower was a human tragedy. It was also unjust and exposed the negative and unequal effects of neoliberalism - deregulation, privatisation and marketization - and how these disproportionately affect people who are poorer, ‘working classes’, especially from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds. Since the sale of council housing under Thatcher in the 1980s, some residents at Grenfell Tower had bought and privately owned their flats, while others had been sublet and were unregulated by the local authority, which therefore could not name or state how many residents lived in Grenfell Tower after the fire. This also hampered the authorities’ ability to identify the missing and confirm the final death toll. Some residents were also undocumented migrants whom charities and volunteers reported were too scared to come forward to report themselves and those missing after the fire in case they were referred to the police or the Home Office, and deported (Bulman, 2017). Evidence of the poor housing conditions in Grenfell Tower before and after the recent refurbishments became apparent soon after the fire. Letters and blog posts sent by the Grenfell Tower Residents’ Association and individual residents raising health and safety concerns with Kensington and Chelsea Tenants Management Committee (KCTMO) circulated widely in the media, but which appeared to have been repeatedly ignored.

Social workers were instrumental in the response to Grenfell and subsequent support for its residents. This is despite social workers’ relative absence in media accounts of the tragedy. Lack of media visibility contributed to the idea that the local authority had ‘done nothing’ for the residents of Grenfell (O’Hagan, 2018). According to O’Hagan, this was about the local authority’s mismanagement of its public relations because its ‘keyworkers’ did not wear Hi-Viz jackets like the emergency services and voluntary organisations who took over the emergency response. This was largely because the voluntary organisations were also more organised, having previously benefited from local authority support (O’Hagan, 2018).

The marketization of safety pursued under New Labour led to a commercial partnership between the insulation and plastics industries. These were identified as key factors that contributed to the fire at Grenfell Tower (O’Hagan, 2018) and also reflect the progression of privatisation and deregulation of fire and safety first introduced by Thatcher under the Home Office’s *Review of Fire Policy* in 1980 (Wrack, 2018). In an independent review of building safety and fire standards in the UK after the Grenfell Tower fire, Dame Judith Hackitt concluded that the regulations were substandard, and called for a further inquiry to revise them. She spoke of a culture of ‘indifference’ and ‘ignorance’, and a lack of clarity about roles as well as a ‘robust ownership of accountability’, which contributed to a flawed decision-making process in a ‘race to the bottom’ (Hackitt, 2018, p.5).

The Hackitt Report, however, was met with significant condemnation as no individual or corporation was held accountable, and it did not call for a ban on the use of the affected [ACM] cladding. This was despite the report recognising that the cladding’s inner core exceeded the acceptable combustible limits under the Fire and Safety Regulations and had also not been tested with the outer cladding, which *did* meet these Regulations. The Hackitt Report’s recommendations also came as a disappointment after the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing had indicated that international human rights standards on housing safety had been breached because of safety issues about the cladding and because residents’ views had been excluded from the discussions about housing safety, as well (Butler, 2018).

**Reflections on Grenfell Tower: a critical race case study and anti-racist pedagogical tool**

In this final section, I reflect on how I used Grenfell Tower as a ‘critical incident’ (Fook and Gardner, 2014) to teach about social and health equalities to social work Master’s students. In doing so, I discuss how this tool promoted a critical and dialogic approach to learning and a ‘safe enough’ environment in which some Black African students felt it was possible and necessary to contest the whiteness of the institutional space and classroom discussions. I also show how analysing this ‘critical incident’ exposed neoliberal racism and the ways in which neoliberal policies that promote privatisation, outsourcing and deregulation have produced inequality and had greater effects for the poor, and especially people living in poverty from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. I consider how these insights can be harnessed in social work education and practice.

I visually presented Grenfell Tower as a critical case study to students by displaying an image of the burnt-out Tower alongside an image of ‘The Shard’ – one of the tallest, most iconic and elite buildings in London, today. These contrasting images instantly engaged students and provoked class debates about in/equality, in/justice and neoliberalism. The students critically reflected on who lived in, used and owned these buildings and the quality of services provided to their respective ‘customers’. I also showed students several televised news reports to highlight the political-economic consequences of neoliberalism in the Grenfell Tower case. The first report was on Channel 4 News, shortly after the fire at Grenfell Tower. It highlighted that life expectancy in England had stalled since 2010 and contrasted with other wealthy nations where life expectancy had continued to rise. The report also referred to evidence of a 16-year gap in life expectancy within the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and it questioned the relevance of health and social care funding cuts under government austerity since 2010. It provided a clear and direct example of health inequalities and their effects on life expectancy, which the students were thereby prompted to apply to the residents of Grenfell Tower. Students also critically reflected on the quality of residents’ lives and the conditions in which they had been living in conjunction with the emerging controversies about the safety of the cladding, and they tried to evaluate how far the fire was a tragedy that could have been prevented by researching the evidence.

The second news report I showed students in class featured a father and his young daughter, who talked about her ongoing nightmares and distress since the fire as a result of living in a hotel room and being isolated from the people and community in which she had lived at Grenfell Tower. This, and the first news report, encouraged students to approach individual cases of child and adult trauma, socially, within family and community relations. It also prompted students to openly debate why there was a lack of affordable housing for poorer families and to recognise the injustice of this and the added harm experienced by this young girl. Students also debated the father’s and daughter’s identities and statuses, as migrants to the UK from an ethnic minority background.

To develop an understanding about forms of social inequalities and how they relate to health inequalities, I set the students a written formative assessment in which they were asked to: ‘Critically discuss, in no more than 750 words, how and why the “victims” of Grenfell Tower fire were also “victims” of social inequalities in health’. I designed this as a leading question to support students to identify forms of social inequalities and health inequalities and consider how they may be connected. My overall aim was for the students to develop more critical and complex analyses about social inequalities in health and social work methods of intervention in their final summative assessments. In this formative assessment, the students were advised to focus on particular residents as members of specific service user groups and submitted their assessments to me for formative written feedback. They also received verbal feedback in class from their peers and me.

When students completed the formative assessment in October 2017, stories and information about the survivors of Grenfell Tower were still unfolding. Every student in the classroom was aware of the Grenfell Tower fire and expressed feeling reasonably confident and motivated about going away to research more about the residents, the issues, and inequalities in this case. Most were also broadly familiar with the housing safety issues and survivors’ condemnation of the authorities, including the UK Prime Minister Theresa May’s reported failure to engage with the residents after the fire (The Guardian, 2018). The students were also all aware of government austerity since 2010 and its impact on health and social care budgets and service delivery. Using Grenfell Tower as a critical case study enabled students to apply and develop a broader, critical understanding of neoliberalism and its effects on particular service user groups. Students also questioned how social workers could challenge the forms of injustice they identified and how social workers could ethically intervene to support ‘survivors’ after major incidents.

The students actively engaged in their own research, and shared stories that were less well-known at the time, such as the case of a 65-year-old woman, Sakineh Afrasiabi, who was housed on 18th floor of Grenfell Tower, and died in the fire. Despite being physically disabled and partially sighted, this woman’s daughter later told the Public Inquiry on Grenfell Tower that her mother could not walk down the stairs and had previously been told by the housing service that she should not be housed above the fourth floor of a building with a lift on account of her disabilities. Ms Afrasiabi was from Iran and moved to live in the UK in 1997 (BBC, 2018b). This particular case was presented in class by a white British student to highlight the health and social care safeguarding concerns raised by the privatisation and shortage of suitable and ‘affordable’ housing. A discussion ensued about the impacts of austerity on housing provision and as a consequence of selling council houses to tenants under Thatcher’s government in the 1980s. It also developed into a debate about the intersecting forms of disadvantage experienced by this older woman, and about how it might have felt for her as a migrant living in Britain.

The treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers in Britain was another issue that students debated in class discussions about Grenfell Tower. This emerged out of a discussion about the large number of migrants and refugees who lived in Grenfell Tower, including undocumented migrants. One student commented how, before the fire, Grenfell Tower would have provided the refugees living there with a safe haven where they would have been well-treated. The comment provoked a spontaneous gasp from one of the Black African students, which momentarily silenced the class, and was queried by some of the white students. In the discussion that followed, a couple of the Black African students spoke out, challenging the idea that asylum-seekers are treated fairly in Britain. They recounted their own discriminatory encounters with immigration services and alluded to the experiences of friends and members of their communities, who had been detained in immigration centres and left endlessly waiting for asylum decisions, and without welfare support.

These were voices and stories that, in my experience, are not often heard in the classroom and which I suggest also might depend on whether Black African students experience the classroom as a ‘safe enough’ anti-racist learning environment; that is, one in which Black perspectives and histories are valued, and will not be denied or discredited by color-blindness, ‘white privilege’ and neoliberal racism. One of the ways I sought to achieve a ‘safe(r)’ anti-racist environment through my teaching was by openly critiquing my ‘whiteness’ and describing how I have benefited from ‘white privilege’ to become a social work academic. On reflection, however, by taking the floor in this way I failed to de-centre whiteness, and thereby most likely reinforced ‘white supremacy’, which I had intended to challenge. Most of the white students on the module, however, fell silent when I did this, and some became quite angry and defiant.

Returning to the case of Grenfell Tower, these students emphasised how the fire could quite easily have happened in a high-rise block in a poor white working class area or in upmarket apartments, as some media reports also highlighted (Brodbeck, 2018). Both cases may indeed have happened, and had they been true, the loss of life and the consequences for the survivors and the bereaved would have been as horrifying and tragic. But the fire *did* happen at Grenfell Tower, killing residents from poorer, predominantly Black and ethnic minority backgrounds in one of Britain’s wealthiest boroughs that white corporate elites mostly inhabit and control. The students’ examples also implicitly emphasised the shared whiteness of the white working classes and elite residents in contrast to the residents of Grenfell Tower. This hindered discussions arising about the similarities in experiences of inequality and exclusion among poorer white, Black and ethnic minority communities as well as about who benefits from division among the working classes in neoliberal Britain. These counter examples also fail to recognise how ‘white privilege’ would protect white working class and elites in contrast to the residents of Grenfell Tower, who have also been subjected to racial hatred on social media since the fire, while poorer white residents may be demonised in other ways (cf. Owen, 2009; Gest, 2018). What also troubled me then (and now) about these students’ counter-examples, was the emotion (cf. Ahmed, 2014) with which they were articulated, which suggested a certain defensiveness and anxiety about discussing ‘race’ as well as a *desire* to articulate these narratives about ‘whiteness’ to restore white normativity in the classroom space. I also felt uncomfortable because these examples resonated with wider discourses about the ‘white working classes’ as perceived ‘victims’ ‘losing out’ to their Black and ethnic minority counterparts whose lives also seemed to matter less.

Teaching and learning about racism and anti-racism can generally provoke strong emotions, including anger and defiance among students (Abrams and Moio, 2009; Jakubowski, 2001), and be understood as an expression of ‘white guilt’ (Bhopal, 2018). I am aware that my ‘white privilege’ also endows me with the authority to speak and challenge ‘white privilege’ in my teaching and writing, and that this argument would not be accorded the same meaning or value if I were not a white British, middle class academic. I am not “watched” to ensure that I remain ‘unraced’ and ‘assimilated’ (Collins 1998 cited in Mirza, 2018, p.4). ‘White privilege’ protects me (and white students), who do not “stand out” and do not ‘invite[s] a certain type of surveillance that appears benign but can be deeply distressing for black and ethnicized women’ (Mirza, 2018, p.4-5), amid the whiteness of HEIs.

**Conclusions**

In this paper I have shown how Grenfell Tower can be used as a critical race case study and powerful anti-racist tool for teaching and learning about neoliberal racism, racial injustice, and intersecting forms of oppression and inequality in Britain. I have also highlighted a range of diverse and widely accessible teaching and learning resources on Grenfell Tower which can used to promote active, independent learning, critical reflection, and politically-engaged anti-racist social work practice. Incorporating Grenfell Tower case in my teaching worked because it was a well-known media issue and it was not a direct or personal experience for any of the students or for me. It worked as a critical case study because it was not specifically about 'race' and 'anti-racism'; rather, students’ learning about 'neoliberal racism' and 'white privilege' developed out of critical class discussions about the learning resources, students’ independent research, and the voices of Black African students, who contributed their experiences and stories of racial in/justice to debates in the classroom. In this way, the paper seeks to contribute to debates on critical pedagogies to promote racial justice and to challenge and transform the ‘hideously white’ space of the Academy (Bhopal, 2018). This is so that students from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds perceive and feel like it is a ‘safe enough’ space for them to share their views, knowledge and histories. ‘Safe enough’ to know that they will be respected, and that they will not be expected to educate ‘white people’ about ‘race’, racism and ‘white privilege’ or be made to feel obliged to do so (cf. Bhopal, 2018).

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