

It's not my Place: On White Silence and Feeling Uncomfortable

Ben Purvis

Introduction

Alongside many of my notionally progressive white peers, in response to the 2020 upswell of anti-racist action following the murder of George Floyd I began a personal journey of interrogating my practice and expanding my knowledge. As a member of staff at Sheffield School of Architecture, the 'Anti-Racism at SSoA Call to Action' formed one of several examples which brought home how structural racism impacts those within my immediate personal and professional circles.

This essay is a reflective piece which focuses on my reaction to the 'Call to Action' as someone racialised as white. In particular, I interrogate and deconstruct my initial reluctance and discomfort to write about racism as someone with no direct lived experience of it. Key to this is the distinction between making space for marginalised voices and letting the burden of labour fall upon minority groups through inaction.

Not my Place?

This special issue of *field*: calls for work that responds to 'Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action' published by a group of students from Sheffield School of Architecture (SSoA) as a response to the global waves of Black Lives Matters protest following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020.¹ The 'Call to Action' begins as a provocation, outlining the lack of diversity

within the school and wider architectural sector. It then presents a detailed series of targeted and time-oriented actions for beginning to address outlined issues. It concludes with a series of personal accounts of the experiences of racialised minority students at SSoA.

When I first saw the call for contributions, my first thought was that maybe I had valuable insights to contribute. I have been involved with the school's Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) committee for the last year, as well as equalities organisation through the University and College Union (UCU). A portion of my research has analysed hierarchies within the academy, and I have experience of organising against precarity and injustice within the sector as both a union officer and through my research networks.² All this has led to a growing feeling that the structure of Higher Education (HE) within the UK is systemically resistant to meaningful attempts to diversify and decolonise. As I thought through several ideas that I could contribute to this special issue, I became increasingly uncomfortable and unsure as to whether it was my place, as someone racialised as white, to write about this. This was manifested in terms of the shibboleth of *making space*, and the ideation that it is *not my place* to write about racism as someone who will never personally be a victim of it.

This uncomfortable feeling has persisted, despite my increasing realisation and belief, that the *not my place* framing is problematic and counterproductive. Whilst elevating marginalised voices is important, it is all too easy for *making space* to mean inaction and silence; avoiding difficult topics and reflecting upon our own roles in maintaining unjust structures and leaving the labour of addressing systemic injustices to those most oppressed by them. Thus, it is my belief that there is space for me to contribute something considered and informed, and I hope that in reflecting upon my own journey and experience of white silence I can stimulate further some of the conversations that the 'Call to Action' provoked.³ Rather than writing a more academic piece about power structures and hierarchies within the university and their relation to systemic racial injustices, I felt first the need for a more reflective piece, leaning in, interrogating and disassembling my discomfort and white silence. This piece is not about me (despite leaving my passive authorial voice comfort zone), it is not a *mea culpa*, and I have endeavoured to contribute something meaningful without centring myself and relying too heavily on self-flagellation, virtue signalling or saviour narratives. Nevertheless, I feel it is important to outline my personal journey and experiences of race to illustrate something that other white people can reflect upon in relation to their own journeys.

- 1 Connie Pidsley and others, 'Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action', 2020.
- 2 Ben Purvis, Hannah Keding and Phil Northall, 'The Academic as an Output? Critical reflections on postgraduate researchers on a collaborative interdisciplinary research project'(forthcoming).
- 3 Yolanda M. Wattsjohnson, 'End White Silence', *Multicultural Perspectives*, 5.3 (2003), 12–18.
- 4 James Baldwin and Richard Goldstein, 'Go the Way Your Blood Beats', in *James Baldwin: The Last Interview: And Other Conversations*, by James Baldwin and

Reflecting on Privilege

I am white, I grew up in a very white area, went to a 'good' school, worrying about finances was not a serious concern growing up, my grades were good, and my post-16 education was within an environment where there was little doubt that I would go to university. I attended a Russell Group University for both my undergraduate and PhD. I made my first friend who is not white when I was twenty-one.

Growing up I had encountered privilege across a range of dimensions, both where I held and lacked it, but had not at that point been taught to recognise it. As a child I had wondered why my friend's single working mother fed us oven meals whilst my mother on family leave made fresh meals from scratch. I never had to correct anyone who had difficulty pronouncing my name. I had witnessed a Spanish speaking child struggle to fit into a school system that had little experience of or provision for non-English speakers. I remember the stigma surrounding having to wear my elder brother's faded hand-me-down school jumpers whilst most of my friends wore bright new ones. It wasn't until much later that I would directly experience friends being racially profiled by club bouncers and border police.

Interviewed in the 1980s, novelist and activist James Baldwin, reflected upon the intersection of sexuality and race:

'I think white gay people feel cheated because they were born, in principle, into a society in which they were supposed to be safe. The anomaly of their sexuality puts them in danger, unexpectedly'.⁴

In my early-mid-twenties, as I began to explore the intersection of my sexuality with my gender expression and identity, I received my first bouts of verbal abuse in public (are you really gay if you haven't had someone scream f*ggot at you out of a passing car?). I wear earphones whenever I leave the house now. Whilst I have recently leant in to feeling more comfortable wearing whatever I want, I am still mindful of how I look and act within an unfamiliar environment and am still unlearning the internalised code-switching that occurs when meeting new people that I perceive as unqueer.⁵

Despite this lack of privilege relating to my sexuality and gender expression, I work in a profession which is largely progressive on a superficial level, and where white gay people are reportedly overrepresented.⁶ And whilst conscious of how I present at times, I continue to benefit from privileges across other dimensions. I've never been particularly concerned about having to walk home alone at night, I've never had to worry about whether I can afford to pay my bills next month, I've never had to plan my travel based on whether a route has step

Quincy Troupe (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2014), pp. 57–74 (p. 67).

5 Kissy Duerré, *Life Is Short so Live It to the Fullest* <<https://www.instagram.com/reel/CMS37UfAWi9/>>.

6 András Tilesik, Michel Anteby, and Carly R. Knight, 'Concealable Stigma and Occupational Segregation: Toward a Theory of Gay and Lesbian Occupations', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 60.3 (2015), 446–81.

free access and I have never feared for my life when confronted by a police officer.

The SSoA Call to Action

The ‘Call to Action’ came at a time that felt like a phase shift in the consciousness of my left-aligned, progressive bubble, characterised by a proliferation of Instagram infographics, as well as action against police violence (and more recently Palestinian solidarity).⁷ Tacit support for anti-racist movements without action and deeper reflection of personal practices and complicity was beginning to feel insufficient. It has taken the best part of my 27 years for me to begin to comprehend that racism is not a problem of bad or ignorant people, from the far-right to grandmas excused for being “from a different time,” but a deep structural issue in which I am inherently complicit. This is a testament to the extent to which cultural hegemony conceals such structures. That I have felt and continue to feel uncomfortable as to whether it is appropriate for me to write about racism and my own complicity demonstrates how ingrained the *not my space* white silence logic is.⁸

I first became aware of the ‘Call to Action’ when the school’s EDI lead, Cith Skelcher, sent it to the all-staff mailing list shortly after its publication. At this point I had had little interaction with the fantastic students of SSoA, and was thus taken somewhat aback at how powerful, detailed and thoughtful this document is. Whilst not shy to be critical of the school and the wider architectural profession, it strikes a constructive and collaborative tone, illustrating its content with lived experiences of students from racialised minority backgrounds within SSoA, provoking further conversation and a collective desire to hold the school to account. Shortly after the document dropped, Cith circulated an email calling for members of the school to get involved with the EDI program. I responded to this with enthusiasm, though in the spirit of my white silence reflex, I felt the need to append my email apologising for being ‘another white gay man in EDI.’

The initial EDI meeting in September 2020, buoyed by the enthusiasm created by the ‘Call to Action’, was attended by around 25 staff and students. After a lengthy and inconclusive discussion about how the group should organise, we split into groups each focusing on individual aspects of the ‘Call to Action’. Over time, the numbers dropped off as other workload demands picked up and some of the initial enthusiasm or optimism waned. Nevertheless, a core group of attendees were regularly present. A ‘student action group’ coalesced and formed, allowing for more grassroots organising outside the formalised school EDI structures, and Cith acquired funding to pay members of this group for some of their time. In a podcast hosted by the Sheffield University Architecture Society (SUAS) some of the

7 Gene Demby, ‘Why Now, White People?’, NPR, 16 June 2020, section Code Switch <<https://www.npr.org/2020/06/16/878963732/why-now-white-people>>.

8 The phrasing of complicity provokes a defensive response. Less pernicious examples of complicity in unjust power structures, include my perpetuation of unhealthy email culture by replying to emails at 11pm on a Sunday, despite the “I do not expect you to reply to emails in my working hours” line in my email signature; being reluctant to give up certain practices such as buying imported food or having the occasional holiday abroad, despite my work on climate change. Often structures are so embedded that it is near impossible to not be complicit in them, locally grown organic food has a high cost, international flights can be more affordable than staycations. This has been illustrated in the popular Matt Bors comic strip ‘we should improve society somewhat’ (Matt Bors, ‘Mister Gotcha’, The Nib, 2016 <<https://thenib.com/mister-gotcha/>> [accessed 19 June 2021]).

members of this group, as well as authors of the 'Call to Action', articulated some frustration at the institutionalised slowness in navigating the formal EDI structures to begin to implement actions clearly articulated within the original document.⁹

I shared many of the frustrations articulated by the students, though of course was sheltered from the direct impacts of this institutional inertia. Through my involvement however, I had begun to understand the scale of the challenge, and the numerous institutional and structural barriers that had so far constrained action. Much of this had already been articulated in the 'Call to Action', including the lack of time allocated for partaking in EDI work to staff already overburdened by standard workloads and the additional pressures precipitated by the pandemic. The securing of nominal funds to pay the students involved has addressed some of this, but it is only a first step. Other structural issues became evident when looking into broadening the school's outreach and "widening participation" (WP) work. Here the impact of marketisation on the sector became evident with, despite the sympathy of individuals within the central university WP team, the university's primary focus being on measuring success through the number of students brought to the University of Sheffield. This meant that the existing outreach programmes targeted more privileged institutions who already had a good record for sending students to the university. There is little space within this structure for expanding the horizons of disadvantaged students, providing support, or empowering or inspiring them to pursue similar courses elsewhere.

'Read, Read, Read – and Dance'¹⁰

Reflecting on my reticence to voice a meaningful contribution, aside from the doubt that it is my place to speak, the fear of saying something wrong weighs highly. This is an important concern, and a continued source of discomfort, and I have struggled to construct this piece and articulate my contribution without being anxious that I might use the wrong language or write something misjudged or problematic, as well as resisting the urge to lean on labour from black friends and colleagues for validation. Yet, as Ijeoma Oluo writes, it is okay to misstep: 'it's going to happen, and you should have these conversations anyway', 'it's important to learn how to fail, to learn how to be wrong in a way that minimizes pain to you and others and maximizes what you can learn from the experience'.¹¹

Despite the best intentions, it can be all too easy to say something that offends or causes hurt. If we cause harm, it is important that our reaction is to listen, to apologise, to grow. In worrying about hypotheticals of how saying the wrong thing might harm, we ignore the hurt and complicity that comes with saying nothing. As the activist Clay Rivers writes, the key to overcoming personal white silence lies in interrogating the intent of a

9 SUAS, A Call to Action: Anti Racism at SSoA, Off The Drawing Board Podcast, 2021 <<https://open.spotify.com/episode/2QzSPA4zD3QuwpFtxM3FVb>> [accessed 19 June 2021].

10 Emma Dabiri, *What White People Can Do Next: From Allyship to Coalition* (Dublin: Penguin, 2021), p. 109.

11 Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race* (New York: Seal Press, 2020), p. 44; p. 48.

contribution to the conversation: if one's contribution to conversations of race, as a white person, is one of defence, denial or jumping on the latest activist bandwagon, then there is a need for greater reflection, but if there is something 'constructive, insightful, instructive, productive' to add then the floor is there.¹² Tilly FitzMaurice writes of vulnerability as the product of reaching 'the edge of our known – or knowable – worlds'.¹³ Recognising and acknowledging the limits of one's knowledge can be a radical act: 'we aren't here to learn what we already know'.¹⁴

The academic and writer Emma Dabiri reminds us in her latest book that 'Google is your friend'.¹⁵ It is not the duty of our racialised colleagues or friends to educate white people on how and why we should talk about race. Dabiri also outlines the power of reading, reading not just the plethora of recent "anti-racist" books, but reading Black fiction: reading James Baldwin; reading Toni Morrison; reading the postcolonial literature of Frantz Fanon, or Wole Soyinka; reading authors from the Black Radical Tradition like Angela Davis and Cedric Robinson; reading the poetry of Audre Lorde and Maya Angelou.

Recently I read the *Broken Earth Trilogy* by N. K. Jemisin.¹⁶ I stumbled upon this incidentally, but later I realised that despite having spent most of my life as a prolific reader, this was the first novel I had read which was written by a Black woman. This had not been a conscious decision on my part (as it had not been to rectify this), but it prompted me to reflect on the structures that had led to me hitherto interacting very little with the works of Black authors. There is something of an identitarian trap in suggesting that diversifying existing structures and habits is enough to address systemic issues of racial injustice, but interrogating one's own consumption of culture and the extent to which it presents racial homogeneity is a step towards beginning to identify racist structures. Why had I never read a novel authored by a Black woman? Was it by chance? Was the massive underrepresentation of Black women in science fiction simply because Black women just aren't that into science fiction? Jemisin has frequently spoken about her place as a Black woman in science fiction, of her early experiences with publishers who were not sure where to 'fit her in the market', and of the confused response to Black authors creating a piece of work that says little about race other than, as Octavia Butler puts, 'Hey, we're here'.¹⁷

Aside from reading or consuming other forms of media, learning happens through doing. This can be through volunteering or activism, but also in the form of reflecting on one's own practices and unconscious biases, however uncomfortable this may be. As the 'Call to Action' asks: 'can you name 3 Black architects?'. Unlearning is not easy. This process necessitates kindness not only to others but to oneself – complicity in structural racism is not an indication of being a bad person and beating yourself up over

- 12 Clay Rivers, 'As a White Person, Should You Write About Racism?', Medium, 2020 <<https://medium.com/our-human-family/as-a-white-person-should-you-write-about-race-ad4cc429726e>> [accessed 20 June 2021].
- 13 Tilly Fitzmaurice, 'Precarity, Mastery, and Vulnerability: Some Thoughts on UCU's Recent Elections', UCU Commons, 2021 <<https://ucuccommons.org/2021/03/22/precariety-mastery-and-vulnerability-some-thoughts-on-ucus-recent-elections/>> [accessed 20 June 2021].
- 14 Kyla Wazana Tompkins, 'We Aren't Here to Learn What We Already Know', Avidly, LA Review of Books, 13 September 2016 <<https://avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2016/09/13/we-arent-here-to-learn-what-we-know-we-already-know/>> [accessed 21 June 2021].
- 15 Dabiri, What White People Can Do Next, p. 111.
- 16 N. K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (London: Orbit, 2015).
- 17 'NK Jemisin: "It's Easier to Get a Book Set in Black Africa Published If You're White"', The Guardian, 2 May 2020, section Books <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/02/nk-jemisin-its-easier-to-get-a-book-set-in-black-africa-published-if-youre-white>> [accessed 20 June 2021]; Raffi Khatchadourian, 'N. K. Jemisin's Dream Worlds', The New Yorker, 2020 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/01/27/nk-jemisins-dream-worlds>> [accessed 20 June 2021].

something you said or did in the past that may have caused hurt is energy lost. Audre Lorde powerfully outlines the problems with “white guilt”:

[Guilt] is a response to one’s own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destruction of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness.¹⁸

Recent years have witnessed the spectre of “cancel culture”, mostly fuelled into parody by right-wing rhetoric, but there is a certain tendency of some progressive voices to take glee in the unearthing of problematic past incidents. Whilst it is important to hold public figures to account for any hurt they may have caused in the past, this should not deny space for genuine atonement and growth. If we forgo that possibility then how can we begin to dismantle the systemic structures that have precipitated such events in the first place? Of course, whether someone who has caused significant hurt should continue to enjoy privileged platforms, suffer little consequence of their actions, or be afforded ‘forgiveness’ from the communities they have harmed is a different matter, but to suggest that they cannot personally develop and begin to actively challenge such harmful structures and practices themselves permits these structures to persist.

Whose Place?

Not my place becomes a proxy for “I do not want to intervene because it makes me uncomfortable”, a bystander effect, an absolution of accountability, a denial of complicity. It not being my place, as a white person, to write about racism, implies that it is for racialised minorities alone to advocate for compassion, their right to representation, their right to equal pay, their right to exist. As Audre Lorde emphasises, relying on people of colour to teach about racism is ‘a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought’.¹⁹ It falls upon all white people then to overcome our defensiveness, recognise the multidimensionality of our privileges, interrogate our practices and be uncomfortable. Listen, don’t speak over, elevate voices, but don’t be silent, don’t fall into inaction.

18 Audre Lorde, ‘The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism’, in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017) pp. 107-118 (p.114).

19 Audre Lorde, ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House’ in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017) pp. 89-93 (p. 93).

I now recognise the problems of my initial response to the invitation to get involved within the school’s EDI program in feeling the need to predicate my email with an apology for “not being marginalised enough”, to justify taking up space I felt perhaps I should not as a white queer person. Besides the erroneous assumption that there is a limited amount of space within these open forums, by centring my discomfort I diverted energy away

from empowering myself and advocating for my own queer community, let alone advocating for other marginalised groups. Dabiri calls on us to ‘listen to [our] own voice, that little one inside that perhaps [we] silence because, according to the new gospel of “privilege”, only the most oppressed... feel any pain.’²⁰ She continues with the provocation: ‘why is it that despite all of your “privilege”, you still feel overworked, underpaid, exhausted, and quite possibly spiritually bereft? You can console yourself with the fact that you are not oppressed by racism, but I would argue that you are hoodwinked by the “whiteness” that tells you that you are superior to black people, as a distraction from all the pernicious effects that “whiteness” wreaks.’²¹

This guilt manifests as a form of imposter syndrome and the construction of a normative hierarchy of oppression which impacts us all. This is not just limited to those of us who benefit from whiteness, but experienced by the Brown woman who feels the legacy of the systemic racism she suffers from is a few hundred years shorter than that of her Black sister, the Black man who was born into familial wealth on the West Coast of Africa and cannot presume to speak to the experiences of his African-American brothers, or the Black trans woman who is seen to “pass” and thus is spared much of the abuse levelled at her sisters. Oluo writes about the privileges of her class and education, and how the denial of these would mean her activism leaves many behind.²² However, she does not dwell on this guilt, emphasising instead that these privileges afford us the opportunity to reflect on how they have shaped our experiences of the world. Chances are that if you are reading this you will have an intersection with some form of underprivileged identity, and even if you do not it shouldn’t mean you can’t leverage your own privilege, redistribute it and raise up those with less.

Structural racism is embedded in our society and so permeates through the architectural sector, UK Higher Education, and the Sheffield School of Architecture. The ‘Call to Action’ kickstarted a conversation of how the SSaA community can begin to challenge this within our shared institutional environment, but it is only the beginning. The road is long and it is for all of us to take. Whilst elevating and platforming marginalised voices continues to be important, this can’t mean remaining comfortable in white silence. The work to dismantle racist structures should not and cannot be left to our racialised friends, colleagues and peers. We must build coalitions and lift ourselves and each other up.

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20 Dabiri, *What White People Can Do Next*, p. 148.

21 *Ibid*, p. 148.

22 Oluo, ‘Why am I always being told to “check my privilege?” in *So You Want to Talk About Race*, pp. 52-67.

Biography

Ben Purvis is an early career academic working in and around fields of sustainability science, urban studies, and science and technology studies, currently taking a critical approach to the use of simulation in climate mitigation studies. Ben has written about interdisciplinarity in the contemporary university and the intersections of their identity as a queer person with their academic identity. Outside of his research, Ben is a trade union representative and officer, and believes strongly in building an equitable higher education system centred on principles of justice.

