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# TOWARDS AN ANTI-RACIST FINE ART PhD: ACTIONS FOR THE SUPERVISOR, STUDENT AND EXAMINER NOW

## INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines 3 actions for the supervisor, student and examiner to introduce a level of anti-racist consciousness in the journey of the Fine Art PhD. I will draw on related literature, and reflections on a departmental Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) forum that I have initiated, and my own PhD and supervisory experiences. I will also call upon my practice, research and lived experience as a socially-engaged HE academic and arts practitioner, with a spotlight on the creative method of 'productive antagonisms' (Latham and Author 2017).

The steps outlined here are intended as 'warm-ups' within and towards more comprehensive, longer term strategies for individuals, departments, faculties and universities, to nurture communities of anti-racist researchers, and make UK HE anti-racist. Undemanding of additional resources, they can be implemented immediately. Change takes time, negotiations are unfolding, and my brushstrokes are broad. But if the heart of any PhD endeavour is about the development of critical insight, not just by the student into a knowledge area or problem, but about their own position as autonomous researchers, not just within their fields but the wider HE sector and beyond, an *actively* anti-racist agenda must be integral. I wish to critique my own position as a non-white researcher who has signed up to the 'neoliberal, "post-race" university which [...] still caters for national/international elites, where some knowledge is commodified on a global scale and others continue to be erased', as articulated in *Building the Anti-Racist University* by UK's first Professor of Race and Education, Shirley Anne Tate (Tate and Bagguley 2017), and which the title of this piece alludes to. I welcome feedback, and seek to lay the ground for further work by myself and others. This is my call for researchers in Fine Art and UK HE at large to step up.

## CONTEXTS

As expected of an award of advanced learning, critical thinking, and having an inquiring mind and intellectual insight, are fundamental in a PhD (Vitae Researcher Development Framework descriptors A2.3, A3.1, A3.2 2011). Alongside the understanding of research as a deterministic or instrumental process of 'problem solution' or 'finding the truth', key is its role as an 'insightful process' that provides a 'deeper insight and understanding into a particular topic, extending concepts, stimulating further interest or work in a particular area, creating new insights by summarising new and previously existing knowledge, searching for more knowledge, or adding more knowledge to existing knowledge, and [...] even new ideas' (Meyer, Shanahan, and Laugksch 2005). This reflexivity isn't just vis-à-vis a subject area or research problem, but the student's standing as an autonomous researcher. Supervision is 'not only to teach them skills', but to teach them 'to be someone—a researcher, a scholar, an academic' (Grant 2003). If the PhD is a 'journey' or 'rite of passage' – whereby the student moves through a series of transformations: some emotional, some intellectual and scholarly' (Amran and Ibrahim 2011), the destination is when they are 'emancipated' and become independent and self-aware (Lee 2008). This

positioning goes beyond intellectual or professional standing, but citizenship within the wider Higher Education (HE) sector. The ideal PhD student ‘demonstrates awareness of issues relating to the rights of other researchers, of research subjects, and of others who may be affected by the research’, ‘challenges potential or actual unethical behaviour of others’, and even shape the sector’s policy and procedures (C1.2 in Vitae 2011).

But what can be said about ‘the sector’? HE as an entity was effectively born in 1096 in the UK, when its first university was created, expectedly, in Oxford. Yet, unexpectedly for an institution that demands intellectual reflexivity, and one of this maturity, UK HE has hitherto refused to address its systemic racism. White fragility – the discomfort, defensiveness by the white liberals when confronting issues on racism (DiAngelo 2018) – combined with the British stiff upper lip of ‘restraint’ demanded by ‘polite’ society, have conspired to create a deafening collective silence. This is despite how HE’s racism is well-established in academic scholarship (since at least S. Neal 1998; and explored in eg Ahmed 2007; Bhopal 2015; Sian 2019). 24% of non-white students have experienced racial harassment, and 20% physically attacked (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2019). 924 years on, the sector hasn’t answered the question ‘Why is my Professor still not black?’ (Morgan 2016).

If HE prides itself as a ‘liberal’, ‘post-racial’ and perpetuated ‘patterns of privilege’ ‘structured by whiteness’ (Sian 2019), and fights hard to maintain this status quo, issues are exacerbated in art and design. To begin with, art and design disciplines, and the PhD degree, already present additional barriers for those from minority backgrounds. Postgraduate Research (PGR) is an ‘expensive enterprise’ (Meyer, Shanahan, and Laugksch 2005). Fine Art and drama qualifications are historically ‘elitist’ and ‘useless’, bringing ‘worst job prospects’ (Annetts 2018; Cascone 2018; Starkey 2013). PGR culture is exclusionary, not just because it attracts privileged, white students, but is governed by privileged, white managers and teachers. Universities lazily focus its EDI campaign on gender, resulting in UK’s white middle-class female academics being prioritised above women, and men, of colour, with 23.9% of professors of white women, and only 2.1% non-white women (Bhopal 2020). This has resulted in a ‘hierarchy of oppression’ in which white women’s experiences are privileged above that of non-white women and men (Bhopal 2020). ‘White supremacy in heels’, characterised by ‘grand displays of defensiveness’ and ‘racial slurs and doxing’ (Cargle 2018), is rife.

When the 2020 Black Live Matters movement (BLM) exploded in the US, then hit UK, its force and scale meant that UK HE can’t be silent any more. Following grand proclamations for ‘solidarity’ on social media, they were called out for their bad practices. Yet, much of universities’ ‘knee-jerk outpourings’ on racial equality are ‘merely rhetoric’ (Bhopal 2020). While a few had had to admit that they ‘haven’t always got it right’ and promised reform (such as revising naming conventions at Salford University, Marshall 2020), others invent imaginative PR moves (such as Whittaker 2020). UK universities with the highest attainment gaps – regularly above 20% – between their black, Asian and minority ethnic and white students, ‘were still comfortable proudly to signal their support for #BLM’ (Bhopal 2020). The fallout for arts and drama schools is still unfolding (eg Goldsmiths College Fine Art Alumni 2020; Goh 2020; Hemley 2020; BBC News 2020; Marcelline 2020; GSATruth 2020; UALTruth 2020), revealing the ubiquity of racism in art and design at UK HE, which is echoed in the sector (cogently-summed up in Montserrat, Wee, and Gamaker 2020).

## THE SUPERVISOR

The supervisor should assume the role of the ‘anti-racist productive antagonist’ (ARPA). From the beginning when the thesis and methods are being formulated, and at strategic points throughout the 3-6 year life-span of a PhD journey, the ARPA will interject by raising questions around race, even, and *especially*, if the inquiry does not concern or consider race and its intersectionalities (why *not*?). The ARPA will function well in Fine Art PhD, where 3-person supervisory teams (with one of the supervisors specialising in creative practice) are common. Supervisors could take turns to play ARPA, or let one or two persons lead. The PhD, already an introspective process, necessarily pushes the artist-researcher to a greater level of critical self-reflection. As part of this deep dive, surely the student must be tasked to consider and evaluate how race relates to what and how they are investigating, what and whom they are using and working with, which geographical and/or social-economic class they are traversing, and more.

ARPAs are urgent, because racism in creative arts PhD is pervasive. An encounter in 2015 comes to mind, but it is by no means unique. This concerns a workshop I gave on running as a mode of feminist urban intervention at a conference. Based on findings of my Fine Art PhD thesis, my approach framed the body as a personal and political ‘site/sight of protest’, vis-à-vis the oppressive regime of Singapore. It drew on my 1000-day durational performance, where I used my body as a primary medium and material, and picked up running. By then, this work had been extensively published and well-received. But this was too exotic for my audience. They tut-tutted, and ‘whitesplained’ feminism as well as the Caucasian female anatomy (‘women here have breasts’). I love being challenged – that is the mission of my creative and pedagogical provocation since 1998. Yet, this was personal. My aggressors were white women, who believed that their feminism (and mammary glands) carry more weight than mine. The occasion? The 10th Biennial Conference of the Gender and Education Association, entitled *Feminisms, Power and Pedagogy*. The governing adjective was ‘white’. It was not spelt out as it is taken to be universal.

An ARPA can confront such biases by student and/or other supervisors in the team. The ‘agreement’ could be that the ARPA has the permission to play devil’s advocate within the safe(r) space of the supervision. If a supervisor ‘can make or break a PhD student’ (Lee 2008), guiding them through spaces of discomfort must be part of this ‘making’. This design calls upon, and enriches the supervisory process as a ‘complex and unstable process’ filled with ‘pleasures and risks’ (Grant 2003), and how the student-supervisor working relationship, as an emotionally challenging relational experience (McCallin and Nayar 2012), is key to the success of a PhD (Gill and Burnard 2008). It highlights the importance of communication and good interpersonal working relationship between them (eg Ives and Rowley 2005), but, like a ‘good cop bad cop’ setup, let other supervisors play the more traditional roles of being nurturing, and having great listening skills to improve student confidence (eg Seagram, Gould, and Pyke 1998).

The ARPA is also a child of the creative method of ‘productive antagonisms’, on instigating dialogue and insight across diverse and divergent knowledges and approaches (Latham and Author 2017; Author 2016; 2018). Itself a collision of distinct principles and practices such as the collage, and the notion of critical friendship, productive antagonisms was founded by an artist and a geographer through a collaborative curatorial project, and was

later developed into a teaching framework. It resembles the notion of constructive controversy as a 'clash of different perspectives and positions' to produce creativity and innovation (Johnson and Johnson 2015). The ARPA's 'antagonisms' are deliberate, performative and profitable. This is a celebration of the relationships between the teacher (supervisor), student, and knowledge (thesis) as 'productive', involving the active engagement of the teacher and student as co-producers of knowledge (Lusted 1986). Embracing critical thinking and emancipation, ARPA encourages the students to self-interrogate form of their own argument, analysis and synthesis, and illustrates the supervisor's multiple roles as teacher, project manager, gatekeeper, mentor, coach and more.

ARPA also draws on my research and practice, where EDI and social change are key. Since 1994, I have argued against the siloed approaches, including in HE, called for arts, artistic research and neurodivergent leadership (or 'artful agitation') as agents for change (eg Author 2019; Backdoor Broadcasting Company 2019; Author 2020a), and playful, interdisciplinarity and the subversion of 'illness' in what a collaborator (a psychiatrist) and I have termed being 'ill-disciplined' (Author and Asherson 2018). My current roles as a trustee of a detained migrants' charity (Music in Detention 2020) and co-founder/co-leader a 150-person neurodiversity and creative research network ( Author and Dhital 2020) draws on my curation of or participation in some 500 exhibitions and conferences celebrating trans-and inter-culturalism, including a 3-year investigation into cultural supremacy and geopolitics in Japan and Asia ( Author 2002), and as someone who had first chosen to call the UK 'home' in 1994 to protest against claustrophobia, control and censorship. For better or for worse, my ADHD and autism also provide an (over-)drive, hyper-focus, and incapacity to grasp social boundaries. When the UK lockdown began, the rhetoric of 'we're all in this together' set against the live horror spectacle of Covid-19 disproportionately impacting disadvantaged groups fortified my campaign for equality (or rather, equity), (neuro)diversity and inclusion. I made use of my privilege, and local, national and international platforms to raise questions aloud. I argued for the artful exploitation of disruption for change, through proactive participation in and leadership of inter- and multidisciplinary efforts (eg Author 2020d; 2020g; Author and Northey 2020; Author 2020b; 2020c; Tan and Author 2020).

## THE STUDENT

Just as ethics is essential in many doctoral training programmes, which can function at Faculty level or University-wide, anti-racism training must be obligatory. I propose an Anti-Racism Productive Antagonisms (ARPA) strand within this. The 'antagonisms' in this case will not just refer to the cross-disciplinary collisions, but the discomfort that the training may stir, or even efforts by students or staff to block such a training programme. My invitation is for PGR to make room – in their consciousness, heart and mind, and within the training curriculum – for this confrontation. Anti-racism as an essential component of doctoral training will make PGR culture in HE actively anti-racist in the long run. After all, students who have undergone this training who then become supervisors themselves will bring along anti-racist skills and mindsets, so that anti-racism becomes the norm, not exception.

In the ARPA, students will learn historical, theoretical, practical, cross-disciplinary and creative tactics to interrogate selves, other students, supervisors, as well as the university

environment and the wider HE contexts. Highlights could include debates around the questions ‘Why is my curriculum white?’ and ‘If “race” does not matter only class, then why is there still a blinding whiteness in terms of what counts as knowledge, in terms of what has become the canon, what gets taken up, and what remains erased?’, which are questions raised in Tate’s paper (Tate and Bagguley 2017).

ARPA must be co-led by white staff. This is something that I have learnt in the EDI through Art and Performance (EDI through AP forum) that I set up in June 2020 at my Department to work with PG programme leaders to decolonise the curriculum. As the only non-white PG programme leader, and one of a small handful of non-white academic staff in the Department, I recognised early on the need for a critical mass and to ‘mainstream’ the campaign. I called out for work with two white co-chairs, and the fora now holds micro-workshops, discussions and more for 10-25 colleagues regularly, including the chairs’ peers. Involving white allies makes anti-racism a jointly-owned problem, and not just the burden, responsibility or ‘niche interest’ of a small group of people.

As part of the effort to question and invert power, students should lead reading groups to discuss papers, such as on the power of whiteness in silencing difficult conversations in race, racism and ethnic difference (Watt 2017). ARPA will also not just focus on the trauma of racism but celebrate what EDI brings. Non-white students could lead in the co-creation of an EDI manifesto. Fine Art students could lead in the dramatisation and/or co-create artistic outputs to re-frame texts through anti-racist lenses, while History students can lead field trips to (virtual) museums and galleries, to trigger discussions on the decolonisation of collections. International students could draw on their non-UK perspectives to lead sessions to imagine better alternatives for the problematic construct of ‘BAME’.

Practice-led, diverse, and co-created, ARPA can temper resentment, and instead make participants engaged and activated. ARPA can enhance students’ capability in research governance and organisation. It will raise their awareness of racism relating to other researchers, of research subjects, and of others who affected by the research, and enable them to challenge racist behaviour of others, and even shape anti-racist HE policy and procedures (Descriptor C1.2 in Vitae 2011). Students also learn about collegiality, equality and diversity, global citizenship, and how their research impacts society and culture (Descriptor D1 and D3 in Vitae 2011).

## THE EXAMINER

If the PhD is a ‘rite of passage’, the ‘closing ceremony’ of this passage will be the *viva voce* examination. I have discussed how the supervisor can be an anti-racist agitator, as part of this transformation and upheaval. I have also focused training the student to become anti-racist in what, how and why they do and think as a researcher, not just within their PhD and research environment, but towards building anti-racist cultures and institutions within and beyond academia, as autonomous researchers after their PhD. So, what could an anti-racist examination look like, and what is the role of the examiner as an ‘anti-racist productive antagonist’ (ARPA) in this? If the PhD examination is ‘an opportunity to give formative feedback to students’, and the ‘examination process itself constitutes a mechanism for upholding standards’ (Hodgson 2020), could we cast the examiner as an

‘anti-racist productive antagonist’ (ARPA), and model the viva as exemplar of anti-racism in HE.

An anti-racist examination would be one where the external examiner, internal examiner and/or independent chair is a person of colour. One of these examiners will cast an ARPA perspective on the 7 aspects identified of a PhD examination, which are: mastery/command, argument, criticality, coherence, independence, depth/breadth, clarity/accuracy (Hodgson 2020). How comprehensive is the work? Does it privilege or perpetuate white narratives? Does it include knowledges by black and minority contributors to the field? In terms of criticality, depth/breadth and accuracy, how far has the thesis probed into how existing knowledge relates to the ‘machinations of European empire whether as colonized or colonizer’ which we are ‘all touched by’ (Tate and Bagguley 2017)? This grilling is needed even at the closing ceremony of the PhD journey, in case the student ‘insulate[s] themselves via claims that they are beyond the need for engaging with the content because they “already had a class on this” or “already know this”’ (Cargle 2018).

The ARPA will also have the authority to police against racist behaviours of other examiners. At my viva, one examiner was keen to discredit my non-Western sources, although my endeavour was explicitly framed as a dialogue with ‘dominant’ paradigms. Instead of inquiring into how I have used the Chinese Daoist approach of ‘gentle anarchism’ to probe into power, they gave a spiel on Michel Foucault’s take on power. Alas, the examiner had tasked themselves with ‘expert and gatekeeping roles’, where they were ‘examining according to standards that they see themselves as having a duty to uphold’. The examiner assuming the role of the ARPA will be able challenge unnecessary displays of defence of continental philosophy and civilisation, and instead drive the discussion back to that of apples rather than oranges.

Certain universities may also allow the presence of external observers (Manchester Metropolitan University 2019). If so, these observers could also act as witnesses to hold participants to account, and ensure that they are on their best behaviour.

If the viva as a closing ceremony is where the student can rehearse how they could hold their own as autonomous researchers, this should also be where players rehearse a PGR culture that is more respectful, and where *better* practice take place.

## CONCLUSION

Yet today, HE seems to be doing everything to make its bad practice *worse*. Metrics like the Research Excellence Framework have made HE a ‘dog eat dog’ and ‘all for myself’ environments, disproportionately affecting non-white academics (Bhopal 2015). Non-white PhD researchers who call out on racist practices face ridicule, abuse and death threats (Choudhry 2019; Seresin 2019; W. Neal 2019; Khomami and Watt 2017). While innovative in many ways, which has ensured its survival and transformation over the centuries, UK HE has also always been slow and resistant to change (Woodgates 2018), and swift to defend its identity or status when it feels threatened, as it did with respect to issues of sustainability (Lotz-Sisitka et al. 2015). This fragility means a failure to realise that change, the call for change, and those who do the calling, are geared towards the same goal of making HE *better*. With the already challenging conditions in HE as a result of austerity

and its neo-liberalisation (eg Grove 2014; Berg, Huijbens, and Larsen 2016) where timely PhD completion is a measure of student success (McCormack 2004; Yam 2005), UK's official end to the freedom of movement and the hostile migration policy and rhetoric, not to mention the small matter of a global recession as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, HE *will* want to continue to protect its status quo. Sadly, a 'brave new (equal) world is not on the horizon just yet', and 'in six months' time it will be business as usual' (Bhopal 2020). But if universities 'are serious about issues of social justice, they must set an example to the rest of society', and must 'acknowledge the shameful, sad, sorry state of affairs they have been complicit in perpetuating' (Bhopal 2020).

Nonetheless, I do not wish to be complicit in perpetuating bad practice. I want to do what I can, in a small, local way. Many of us in the business of teaching, making art and making artistic research will agree that we continue to do what we do because we believe in the transformative power of art, HE and art in HE, that art, HE, art in HE and the Fine Art PhD, are powerful mechanisms ask to ask the difficult questions, and that we won't get immediate feedback or results. Which is also why we work with students who will help to change things over the next generations, and who will ask better questions, find better tactics and create better solutions.

In this paper, I have outlined 3 simple steps for the PhD supervisor, student and examiner. They are intended as preliminary, modest steps within or towards more comprehensive, longer term strategies for individuals, departments, faculties and universities, to nurture communities of anti-racist researchers, and make UK HE anti-racist. Undemanding of additional resources, they can be implemented immediately. I have been testing out some of these, and will ask colleagues for feedback, implementation and evaluation. This strand of work complements some of my other efforts at PhD level, including the recruitment of a PhD student through the Northwest Doctoral Training Consortium Programme Collaborative Doctoral Award to work with a local organisation to look into an innovative creative research project to decolonise art practice and research. The steps I have outlined here can also be adapted for other features of EDI such as neurodiversity, and adapted for disciplines beyond fine art PhD.

This is my call for my fellow researchers in Fine Art and UK HE at large to step up. I very much welcome feedback.

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