

Student Activism by Women of Colour: Collectives in/of Solidarity for Systemic Change



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May 2024

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How to cite:

Lin, Georgia. (2024). *Student Activism by Women of Colour: Collectives in/of Solidarity for Systemic Change*. The Diversity of Student Experience Research Project. The Centre for Teaching and Learning. University of Oxford.

About

I am a DPhil candidate in Education at the University of Oxford. My doctoral research explores the experiences of women of colour students engaging in student activism at the University of Oxford, addressing broad themes of coalition(s), spatial politics, colonial legacies, racialisation and transnationality; as well as women of colour feminisms, and critical university studies. I am in the process of completing the fieldwork phase of my research, completing participatory ethnographies with student groups at Oxford focusing on the dynamics of gender and race in activism and social groups. I hold an MSt in Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies from the University of Oxford. My other research interests include affect theory, disability justice, reproductive justice, the history of protest, and feminist/decolonising research methodologies. My most recent article, "[Writing in/against the Academy: Contemporary Biomythographies by women of colour](#)" (2024) can be found in Issue 39 of *Wasafiri* Magazine.

I am involved with numerous access and outreach initiatives at the University of Oxford, including supporting the UNIQ+ internship programme, teaching at Christ Church and Brasenose Colleges, and administrating the Neurodiversity at Oxford project. My doctoral degree is supported by the Clarendon Fund and Brasenose College, where I am a Senior Hulme Scholar. Outside of my studies, I am a choral singer in Oxford and an advocate for ethical feminist citational praxes.

Research ethics approval for this DPhil project was granted by the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee. Reference: EDUC-C1A-23-232

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Highlights

This report provides an overview of my DPhil Education research, titled “Collectives in/of Solidarity: Student Activism by Women of Colour at the University of Oxford.” The report charts the research progress up to and including the narrative interview stage, the bulk of which concluded in Hilary term 2024.

The report contains four main sections:

- **Section 1** explores the research background of the project, including the rationale and aims for the thesis, and I situate my positionality in relation to the work.
- **Section 2** is a short literature review encompassing fields of activism, higher education, and movement studies. It justifies the focus on women of colour *students* to address existing research gaps and is broken down into three subsections:
 - Definitions of student activism and its links to relationality
 - Women of colour and student activism, outlining a history of ‘women of colour’ as a political identity and organising category
 - Spatial politics and affordances for women of colour in Oxford, reviewing literature on space and embodiment in institutions
- **Section 3** focuses on the data I have collected thus far, highlighting key axes of initial analysis including discussions on the terminologies of activism; the power of community and solidarity between women of colour; and participants’ experiences with the spaces of Oxford as racialised and gendered persons.
- **Section 4** considers future directions for the research and my reflections on the feminist ethics of care I strive to embed in my work.

An in-depth discussion on methodological choice regarding the interview and ethnographic process was outside the scope of this report as the ethnography is ongoing throughout Trinity term 2024.

The aim of this report is to provide insight into the lived experiences of women of colour students at Oxford and learn about their engagement with student activism in service of social justice and community building. The goal of my doctoral research is to inform future holistic provisions around welfare, supporting student initiatives, and institutional change for the University of Oxford and its women of colour students, as well as those who occupy other related axes of oppression in addition to race and gender, such as class, disability, migration status, and so forth.

The University of Oxford’s 2018-2024 Strategic Plan outlines its vision, one that is “committed to equality of opportunity, to engendering inclusivity, and to supporting staff and student wellbeing, ensuring that the very best students and staff can flourish in our community” (Strategic Plan, 2024). My questions explore how these broad institutional goals map onto the lives of women of colour students at Oxford through in-depth interviews with current students and alumni. It is my privilege to listen and share the stories of fellow women of colour students and I carry their hopes for the university and beyond with me.

Research Background

Histories of white women at the University have been well documented, such as the first admission of female students to Oxford women's colleges in the late nineteenth century, but little attention has been paid to the multiple and concurrent marginalisations faced by women of colour. My doctoral research explores the lived experiences of women of colour students through their participation in, and engagement with, student activism movements. Through a mixed qualitative methods study using narrative interviews with 40 women of colour and ethnographic case studies with two student organisations, this project foregrounds the voices of women of colour students and how they view their interactions and leadership within student activism, including the impacts of race, gender, and other related facets of identity on their experiences. I posit that women of colour are central actors in critical junctures of social change that have wide-ranging impacts on the broader UK higher education sector.

The centrality of women of colour in this research project is a concerted personal and political choice. I identify as a first-generation immigrant and a working-class Taiwanese woman of colour, while also holding immense privilege as a doctoral student at Oxford. I strive to illustrate the multiplicities of the experiences of women of colour through my research. Black feminist writer and 'warrior-poet' Audre Lorde (1984: 126) wrote: "The literatures of all women of colour recreate the textures of our lives, and many white women are heavily invested in ignoring the real differences". I project her criticism of white women, and the institutions of whiteness that uphold white feminism, onto a broader critique of the academy and the whiteness articulated and felt at Oxford. By focussing on and analysing Oxford as a socially and politically significant locale, it reflects the notion that "a geographical imperative lies at the heart of every struggle for social justice; if justice is embodied, it is then therefore always spatial, which is to say, part of a process of making a place" (Gilmore, 2023: 137). Moreover, I consider knowledge as spatially situated and value how place contributes to intellectual formations, salient points when considering the colonial and imperial histories of Oxford and its related legacies, particularly for marginalised students.¹ Indigenous conceptions of land as life best represent these principles: "Embodied or emplaced spaces, while always intimate, are never neutral" (Styres, 2019: 27).

On institutions, Ahmed (2012: 2) writes that if they "provide homes in which some bodies gather, then some more than others will be at home in institutions. To account for institutional whiteness is to account for how whiteness gets reproduced in the very matter of the institution". This statement is especially interesting to consider in the context of conducting research at Oxford. As an elite institution, Oxford represents dichotomies within its student population: First, the ongoing dominance of whiteness in its student body which then "replicates the ideology of an unchanging world of privileged white youth" (Coetzee, 2022: 288; see also Henriques & Aboushek, 2018). Conversely, communities are working on the ground

¹ The now-inactive Oxford and Colonialism project, housed at the Pitt Rivers Museum, charted the colonial links between the University's colleges, departments, and faculties; it also named student movements and campaigns addressing colonial legacies at the time of publication (2020).

in resistance to these claims of elitism, which are inextricably entangled with whiteness. Former Rhodes Must Fall Oxford organiser Dalia Gebrial (2018: 34) states: “To do [student activism] work in the university is to dig where you are – where you have access – rather than to view the university as the primary space where transformation happens”. As such, the locale of Oxford offers a potent political site for both justice and hope through activism, which can guide new directions for collective organising that have far-reaching repercussions for women of colour students in academia and beyond. I am interested in how the body politic of Oxford women of colour students takes shape through student activist movements in the context of Oxford’s spatial politics, particularly how and why communities of racialised women have deemed them important enough to partake in alongside their degrees.

A feminist ethics of care

I want to state my commitment to feminist ethics of care in research. Collins (2014: 263) theorises the ethic of caring as an interrelated set of epistemologies that “concerns the appropriateness of emotions in dialogues” and “developing the capacity for empathy”. I am dedicated to ensuring that the questions asked, and the conversations had as part of this research project are not solely concentrated on the pain and difficulties of being a woman of colour student at Oxford. However, such themes inevitably arose during the interviews. The anger felt by women of colour students when reflecting on their experiences is key. In her essay on uses of anger, Lorde (1981: 281) emphasises that “any discussion among women about racism must include the recognition and the use of anger”, especially for women of colour when responding to white women’s ignorance of race when addressing gender inequality. In concert with anger, I embrace a reframing of the concept of struggle, viewing it as a “tool of both social activism and theory [that] has the potential to enable oppressed groups to embrace and mobilize agency, and to turn the consciousness of injustice into strategies for change” (Smith, 2021: 254). Adopting the instrument of struggle, coupled with the joy and connection nurtured through student activist movements, is at the heart of my research.

I reject the premise of neutrality in investigating higher education and its related research methodologies, instead adopting an intentional feminist and decolonising framework. A commitment to socially just research actively resists oppression rather than “seeing research as necessarily ‘objective’ [or] deciding to take a ‘neutral’ position when studying manifestations of racism” (Sung & Coleman, 2019: 49) or other oppressions. In tandem with rejecting neutrality, I follow the tradition of intersectional feminist scholars in ‘choosing the margins’ as a space for research: “To resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve ‘what we were and remake ourselves.’ The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities ... all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope” (Smith, 2021: 4). To preface this research report, I return to a quote from Lorde (1984: 120): “In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action”. I extend this to a collective vision, one held by generations of women of colour, where bold visions of justice through education, solidarity, and community are possible through meaningful theories of change. The

fundamental undercurrent of this research is my desire to not only enact social change but also use my capacity to support communities of women of colour to do the same.

Literature Review

This condensed literature review examines the state of research on student activism by and for women of colour students in England through an intersectional feminist lens. Numerous empirical studies have examined the actions taken by women and by students of colour to address issues of oppression in higher education institutions. There is, however, minimal literature on the experiences of women of colour. Racialised women contend with multiple forms of discrimination stemming from varied axes of power, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and so on. I align my understanding of intersectionality with Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins' (2015: 3) definition, who names intersectionality as a "broad-based knowledge project" that "houses a dynamic assemblage of interpretative communities" focused on social inequities and power relations. I argue that the lack of empirical studies on the specific axes of oppression that affect women of colour students can be addressed through feminist research that explicitly values and honours their journeys through activism at university, specifically at Oxford.

Definitions of student activism

There exists significant literature on the experiences of women of colour faculty and staff in UK universities, especially on how they employ strategies of solidarity and survival in a hostile environment, but little on the experiences of women of colour students.² I am particularly interested in how women of colour student activists construct meaning-making narratives through communities of resistance within and against the University of Oxford. Emejulu & Littler (2019: 82) define activism as a "collective public politics ... a 'going-together' of different kinds of people in solidarity who are seeking to make some sort of change in public space". As for what defines an 'activist', Hensby (2018: 39) argues from the UK higher education context that "being an activist requires a 'radical habitus' which is acquired through sustained engagement with activism fields". The process of becoming an activist is a discursive one, whereby one amasses political knowledge of their cause and becomes embedded in a network of social agents working towards change. The emphasis on 'embeddedness' in Hensby's conceptual understanding of student activism links to ideas of relationality that form the basis of 'field and network' theories of participation.

Relationality and subsequently, its ties to collective action and education, have been theorised by feminist scholars like Alexander (2006: 109) asserting that "we need to develop a[n] urgency around relational curricular projects that put us in conversation, not domination, with a range of relational knowledges". Moreover, relationality is a key concept within intersectionality. Collins (2019) theorises that relational thinking has three modes: addition, articulation, and co-formation which then inform intersecting power relations. Additive approaches seek to insert axes of race and gender into theoretical frameworks; articulation offers an open-ended "framework for the changing relationships among multiple systems of power" and emphasises that social phenomena "can be perpetually recast" depending on one's relations; while

² For research on the experiences of women of colour faculty and staff in the UK academy, see Ahmed, 2012; Blell, Liu & Verma; Arday & Mirza, 2018.

co-formation posits a philosophical “holistic analysis of a seamless process of mutual construction of race, class, and gender as phenomena” (ibidem: 233, 241). Intersectionality’s focus on the complexities of relationality points toward a broader argument for social justice activism: Collective action works to dismantle oppressive power structures in service of a better world.

Women of colour and student activism

It is critical to understand intersectionality when discussing women of colour, a tenet central to radical feminism but which has also become “the preeminent location of a dense set of feminist desires, longings that reveal the continued centrality of racial anxieties to feminist practice” (Nash, 2021: 133). My research adopts an explicit intersectional framework that is integral to understanding the lives of women of colour students. In a chapter reflecting on the seminal 1981 anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour*, Alexander (2006: 269) writes: “We are not born women of colour. We *become* women of colour. In order to *become* women of colour, we would need to become fluent in each other’s histories, to resist and unlearn an impulse to claim first oppression ... We cannot afford to cease yearning for each other’s company”. This statement rings especially true in the context of empirical research, of which there is little published material on the experiences of women of colour students. Women of colour feminisms have a long history of collective action, most notably the work of the Combahee River Collective, whose 1977 Statement defined a radical set of Black feminist politics, declaring that “the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives” (Combahee River Collective, 1977: 264). Women of colour are important political actors, including within the realm of higher education (see Olufemi et al.: 2019); thus, I am interested in how the participation of women of colour in activist collectives at Oxford influences their positionalities and politics, much as the combined manifesto of the Combahee River Collective allowed them to organise as Black lesbian feminists.

Spatial politics and affordances for women of colour in Oxford

On notions of space, I follow the theories of embodiment and spatial politics articulated by women of colour scholars such as Daigle and Ramírez (2021: 216), who theorise space as “laden with histories of conquest and resistance that demand our attention”. They emphasise that “space is the material substance through which power is transmitted and through which relations are made. Space is never neutral and reflects the structures of power that human societies are founded upon, saturating geographic locations and relations with meaning” (ibidem: 216). In a higher education context, Samatar et al. (2021: 718) researched how female students of colour “negotiate and repurpose university spaces” by “[carving] out counter spaces for survival” in hostile UK university environments. The authors found that due to recurring marginalisation and systemic racism, their participants’ “aspirational and physical mobility in terms of university spaces have been confined”

(2021: 728). Their conclusions underscore the need to investigate how the spatial politics of the University of Oxford, where colonial legacies permeate the institution, impacts student activism by women of colour (Oxford and Colonialism, 2020). Furthermore, Daley (2018: 82) writes that “Racialised Others in the Western academy learn like outsiders looking in ... this lived experience of marginality permeates those spaces that fail to acknowledge that the racialised Others’ experience of white supremacy generates negative emotions, producing instability and anxiety — in effect a sense of not belonging or *non-existence in place*”. Contextualising student activism at Oxford alongside the university’s history of colonialism and imperialism is imperative to surfacing the affective nuances and affordances of women of colour students in Oxford’s historic and modern environment as a political and academic actor.

A prime example of literature on the embodiment of women of colour in UK university spaces is *A FLY Girl’s Guide to University: Being a Woman of Colour at Cambridge and Other Institutions of Elitism and Power* (Olufemi et al., 2019). In an essay on decolonising the English Literature curriculum, Olufemi (2019: 191) reflects on how her positionality as a woman of colour “enabled [her activist group] to open up a wider conversation about what decolonising the institution might look like, even if it was impossible”. This mirrors Henriques and Abushouk’s (2018: 309) exhortation that student activists “must continue to reflect on the benefits of seeing their work in a global context and understand what can be gained from recognising that a particular struggle should be in constant conversation with global struggles and solidarity movements”. *A FLY Girl’s Guide* is also a concrete example of how feminist student activism often occurs and is recorded outside the constraints of the academy; the work counters what we think of as ‘traditional’ academic texts by highlighting poetry, personal reflections, and calls to action (2019). A collective vision for Oxford can look like what Bell et al. (2020: 857) envision for what they call a ‘New University’, where “activism would be the norm because the creation of a more socially just world would be the priority of the university”.

A note on inhabiting the margins

Studies on marginalised communities often define themselves *against* a normative ideal; however, I wish to employ a similar epistemic praxis as that of Bassel and Emejulu's (2017, xiii) research on minority women in Europe where they "redefine minority women's knowledge as expert knowledge". This then does not replicate harmful patterns of positioning those on the margins against one another and avoids hierarchical relations, preferring the intersectional model of relationality that instead concentrates on collectivity and solidarity. Naming women of colour students as experts on their own lived experiences can mitigate the "competing marginalities" that caused previous feminist political solidarities to fail (Fellows & Razack, 1998: 335). Fellows and Razack (1998: 335). posit that "any theory, strategy, or practice based on competition marginalities and the race to innocence will inevitably fail because it ignores the relationships among hierarchal systems". It is the *interlocking* of differing relations through a praxis of solidarity between and across women of colour that has yet to be thoroughly researched in UK higher education environments.

I use the term marginalised communities as theorised by Bell Hooks (1990:150), viewing it not as a "site of deprivation" but imbued with possibilities of resistance.³ There is power in claiming work situated in the margins; it is not a "marginality one wishes to lose, to give up, or surrender as part of moving into the centre, but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternative, new worlds" (ibidem: 150). Participatory action research and social change research also seek to "suspend damage" and move away from a damage-centred framework, instead urging "our communities to refuse to be complicit in our further categorization as *only* damaged, as *only* broken" (Tuck, 2009: 422, *emphasis in original*). The use of 'our' is an intentional grammatical choice for myself and numerous authors cited in this document because the focus on community and collectives are at the heart of women of colour and radical feminisms: García Peña (2022: 31) asserts that "we [women of colour] must rebel by creating communities of freedom within and outside the institution, by reaching out to others and forming concrete plans to sustain our work and our lives". Theories and frameworks for a new, just world lie at the heart of activism, not least of which includes the influential work done by student activists working on and from the margins.

³ See also Smith's chapter on "Choosing the Margins" in *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2021).

Preliminary Findings

This section outlines some preliminary findings and themes from my ongoing research (see section on Research Background, with further in-depth analysis to come in my DPhil thesis. In this section I draw on a series of interviews I conducted using a narrative method, meaning that the participants were given the freedom to tell their story as they saw fit.⁴ Feminist narrative qualitative research in particular takes care to “link the personal with the political and understanding the effects of social problems in ways that do not hyper-individualize, denigrate, and/or pathologize the people who experience them (Fraser & MacDougall, 2017: 244). I offered an initial discussion prompt: “Can you tell me about your journey with student activism at Oxford?” Many led the conversation from this sole question while others had to be further prompted with questions relating to their Oxford experience, their perceptions of the university, and their thoughts on activism.

Tensions around pride in activism

The themes generated from my initial data analysis underscore the multitude of challenges women of colour face as students at Oxford, with many experiencing racial or gendered microaggressions from their peers or only seeing ‘surface-level’ changes to increasing diversity in their respective colleges or realms of participation. Numerous participants noted their apprehension towards the term ‘activist’ or ‘student activism’, with many noting that although they did not directly identify with the label for fear of not having ‘earned’ the moniker, they embraced their participation in activist activities. Albertina, a second-year student, did not see herself as an activist:

“In my head, when I picture activism, I’m thinking like Angela Y. Davis, people like that – I don’t necessarily feel like what I’m doing threatens me in any way.”

Disaffiliation from the word ‘activism’ does not mean that students are not proud of their work, and in more than one instance, participants came to embrace their work as a form of valuable activism. Roma, a third-year student who was part of her JCR committee and reflected on her role:

“The way I like to think of it, the way I sort of carried out my role, I wanted to make a change, which I guess is what student activism is, right? So, the way I did it and the way I led my committee to do it, I would like to think was activism for better student life.”

⁴ All participant names have been pseudonymised using a pseudonym of their choice. In keeping with the participatory methodologies of the research, all participants were given the option to review their interview transcript and add, edit, or omit their responses as needed.

Imposter syndrome in Oxford spaces

Another key axis of analysis is the consideration of space. Participants observed that the physical and affective spaces of Oxford were not built for them, echoing Ahmed's (2007: 157) theory of a "phenomenology of whiteness" wherein spaces "take shape by being orientated around some bodies, more than others". The relationships women of colour have with space directly affect their sense of belonging. Yasmine, a second-year student, spoke about the emotional experiences endured as a result of Oxford's inherent whiteness:

"Oxford specifically is a place – and this is something that I think haunts you as a person of colour in Oxford, in an institution like this – is that this place was never built for us. We are absolutely not the intended audience or target demographic for this place, none of those buildings were built for us in mind. So, there is already this sense that we are encroaching on a place or trespassing in this place that we don't belong. We always make jokes about the dining hall, all of the portraits, like if these people jumped out of these portraits right now, they'd have a heart attack because this is absolutely not who they expect to be sat here. We joke about it, but it plays into the imposter syndrome of like, I don't quite belong here."

Feelings of imposter syndrome and the 'haunting' nature of the Oxford aesthetic were recurring themes; however, I posit that women of colour students have (un)willingly enacted a politics of refusal towards the university that has facilitated the creation of communities of solidarity. Refusal has been theorised by Indigenous researchers as a powerful praxis to reject the norms of the neoliberal university (see Grande & McCarty, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2014; Simpson, 2017). The necessity of hope when conducting research and engaging in activist work operates in tandem with refusal politics, considered as "generative rather than prohibitive [and] a critical intervention to resist those reified representations that invisibilize or hypervisibilize, and to turn the gaze back to power" (Bell et al., 2020: 851).

Community and hopes for collective futures

The reliance on community to sustain ideations of liberatory futures at Oxford and beyond is articulated by Arya, a third-year student:

"There's been a big sense of solidarity which has helped, because sometimes it's easy to get disillusioned, but having that sort of companionship has really been good for building my confidence and the confidence of others. I think solidarity comes from a very local, small-scale level, which honestly has given me hope when I've felt like I'm not doing enough. It's really difficult to change this university from its roots, but finding other people like yourself, even if it's like two people at an event you're holding, and they tell you they think you're doing a great job, or we have common experiences, that really helps. It makes you feel like you are making material change."

Participants also identified the importance of supporting other women of colour, as Emily, a graduate student, noted:

“Being in a big bureaucracy has meant that I really feel like my being in a place like [Oxford] is much less about changing an institution, much more about a rescue mission, sweeping up other great women of colour and seeing how we can collaborate in the future.”

The support women of colour provide for each other is critical for refusing and surviving the university. The initial themes generated from my data collection process demonstrate that women of colour students conduct activism, in its many forms, with conviction and passion for change. Their goals are oriented towards building community spaces for and alongside one another that serve them throughout their time at Oxford and beyond.

Future Routes

This study explores the holistic experiences of women of colour student activists at the University of Oxford through understanding their community formations, relationships with the university, and personal motivations related to social justice causes. There exists a dearth of empirical contributions to the experiences of women of colour students in UK higher education, especially research on the intersections of race, gender, and activism. I hope that it will also prove useful in our shifting perceptions of Oxford as an institution of knowledge worthy of both criticism and praise, holding both its ancient past and possibilities for transgressive, equitable futures in the same breath.

The focus on collectives as part of my project is intentional. It follows a tradition paved by women of colour feminists who emphasise the power of cross-movement solidarity, the likes of which deserve to be understood and disseminated in Oxford's student environment. To bookend this report, I end with parallel quotes from two women of colour scholars across generations. I return to Audre Lorde (1984: 119), who writes: “Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression”. I view Lorgia García Peña's (2022: 50, *emphasis in original*) statement in harmony with Lorde: “To have community, we must commune. That is, we must insist on *community* as an action, as a verb”. I look forward to learning and growing with women of colour student activists at the University of Oxford as I continue my doctoral research.

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