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# On (not) being the master's tools: five years of 'Changing University Cultures'

Alison Phipps  and Liz McDonnell

Sociology, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

## ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the first five years of the Changing University Cultures (CHUCL) collective, which conducted equality and diversity projects in four English universities between 2015 and 2020. We explore how CHUCL has been used in the service of institutional polishing (Ahmed, S. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Duke University Press, 143) and airbrushing (Phipps, A. 2020b. "Reckoning Up: Sexual Harassment and Violence in the Neoliberal University." *Gender & Education* 32 (2), 230–233), how our reports have become non-performatives (Ahmed, S. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Duke University Press, 90), and how our findings have been weaponised in the service of institutional interests. We are two of three white middle-class women who constitute the CHUCL collective; we situate this retrospective within critical reflections on our positionality and an abolitionist theorisation of the institution. We conclude that we have often been the master's tools, and while we join the work of imagining alternatives, we must build capacity for survival within the master's house.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

At the 'Second Sex' conference in New York in 1979, Audre Lorde famously said: 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.' This quote is often repeated by white feminists and we usually take it out of context. Lorde's speech criticised the conference for including lesbians and Black women on only one of its panels (and highlighted that the two Black women present were asked at the last minute). Her analysis of the 'master's tools' explicitly included white women as part of that problematic. Historically lacking access to the means of production, white women have invested in white supremacy instead (Lugones 2008, 15). These investments can be overt or can masquerade as rescue: the long lineage of 'white saviours' (Cole 2012) includes the female missionaries and anthropologists sent to 'civilise the colonies' (Phipps 2020a, 48), and the women who ran the reformatories for 'wayward' Black girls in post-Emancipation America and abused them 'for their own good' (Hartman 2019, 370–403).

**CONTACT** Alison Phipps  [a.e.phipps@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:a.e.phipps@sussex.ac.uk)  Sociology, University of Sussex, Freeman Building, Falmer Campus, Brighton BN1 9QE, UK  [@alisonhipps](https://twitter.com/alisonhipps)

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We are two of three white women who constitute the Changing University Cultures (CHUCL) collective. Between 2015 and 2020 we were commissioned by university leaders (a term we use to mean Vice- and Pro-Vice Chancellors or equivalent) to conduct projects at four English universities, focused on how their institutional cultures framed equality and diversity issues and problems such as bullying, harassment and violence.<sup>1</sup> These were one urban, elite institution, one 1960s campus institution, one Victorian civic university and one coastal, post-1992 university.<sup>2</sup> Our projects took various forms involving: (1) the collection and/or analysis of qualitative data on inequalities and institutional culture; and/or (2) the delivery of action inquiry interventions (Torbert and Taylor 2008), in which groups of staff and students discussed our initial findings over several months, and thought together about how issues might be resolved. At the end of all four projects, we produced reports with recommendations for the institutions. During these five years of work we had some success; we were also neutralised, co-opted and weaponised, and questioned and tried to reimagine what the university is and/or could be. Our experiences gave us frequent cause to wonder whether we might, in fact, be tools.

A little while ago, a joke circulated on Twitter:

Q: what do you call a room full of white women?

A: an equality and diversity committee.

It is funny because it is true. White women dominate equality and diversity in UK higher education as well as the corporate equality and diversity machine.<sup>3</sup> Most interpretations of Lorde's words understand the master's tools as those of racial capitalism and its imperial extensions (Gordon and Gordon 2006, ix): power, competition, domination, individualism and punishment. As Lorde (2007 [1980], 119) herself said, too often white feminism asks for a seat at this table rather than dismantling the table itself. It tends to understand 'equality' as career progression for privileged white women: what Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser (2019, 4) call 'equal opportunity domination'. There is also often an emphasis on celebrating difference which conceptualises it as 'benign variation' (Mohanty 2003, 193) and does not pose any fundamental challenge to institutional discrimination. White women can be attracted to this because it preserves, and does not name our complicity with, white supremacist power. We benefit from focusing on inclusion within the status quo.<sup>4</sup>

What Ahmed (2012, 8, 98) calls 'equality regimes' are also the master's tools: the institution is preserved through modes of measurement, monitoring and audit that encourage surface-level tinkering rather than deep thinking and meaningful change. CHUCL has been commissioned to provide consultancy to universities, so we have been located both within and outside these regimes. As consultants we have been 'private advisory allies' of the institution (Jupe and Funnell 2015, 65, 82). We also aspire to what Patricia Hill Collins (1986, S29) calls 'outsider within ways of seeing' through grounding our thinking in Black feminist and other radical perspectives.<sup>5</sup> However, this double positionality creates a danger that our work could be passed off as transformative and radical because of our politics, when its parameters are not. You cannot be a revolutionary in the pay of the master: at most you can hope to mutiny and start an insurrection.

During the first five years of CHUCL, we fought our instincts to placate or appeal to power and authority, which are central to whiteness as an institutional and state project (Lugones 2008, 15).<sup>6</sup> We lost our attachment to romantic histories of higher education. We tried to avoid defaulting to 'diversity' as benign variation, to prioritise structural relations, and to operate within an intersectional critical framework (though with a growing conviction that it may be impossible to do transformative projects on university terrain). However, overall, we probably played it safe. While more marginalised people, and Black women especially, are often automatically understood as oppositional and confrontational (Lorde 2007 [1981]), our positionality meant we were able to content ourselves with minor disruption and 'critique' that was often taken up as reform or not taken up at all. As a result, we were complicit in the institution's drive to preserve itself.

### Theoretical context: the university is the master's house

In wondering whether we are the master's tools, we start from the position that the university is the master's house, that education is key to the capitalist, colonial, modern world-making project (Meyerhoff 2019, 4). Boggs et al. (2019, 15–16) theorise education as a mode of primitive accumulation, which creates the preconditions for racial capitalism through hoarding the means of study and deploying them to credentialise us for our hierarchically assigned economic and social roles (see also Meyerhoff 2019). It inculcates us into ways of knowing and learning that reflect capitalist norms and practices: separate public and private spheres, the rational and consuming individual, and colonial dichotomies between culture and nature, modernity and tradition, value and waste (Meyerhoff 2019, 21, 67; see also Lacy and Rome 2017). We become 'competent' in the knowledges of the state and status quo (Harney and Moten 2013), and other forms of world-making are cast as deprived and less evolved (Meyerhoff 2019, 21, 67).

As economic actors themselves, universities are central to flows of dispossession and accumulation. From the building of institutions upon indigenous and/or enclosed common lands, to the wealth flowing from transatlantic slavery, to the development of financial institutions (Draper 2018; Boggs et al. 2019). There is a continuity between the university and the prison: Meyerhoff (2019, 205–6) theorises an education-carcerality nexus whereby if you drop out of one, you will end up in the other (see also Moten and Harney 2004). Like prisons, universities 'disappear' surplus populations to keep unemployment figures down and remove surplus land from agricultural production to repurpose it as a 'social investment' (Boggs et al. 2019, 9–10; see also Gilmore 2007). Universities are deeply embedded in state capitalist exploitation and violence, including post-9/11 border and counter-terrorism regimes through which academics become police via technologies such as attendance registers and risk assessments (Dear 2018). They are also places where student protest is physically, violently repressed (Chatterjee and Maira 2014, 2–3).

With all this in mind, Boggs et al. (2019) challenge the nostalgia of 'critical university studies', which understands the post-war public university as a site of liberal redistribution, social mobility and knowledge generation, reserving its critique for more recent neo-liberal reforms in a 'crisis narrative' that presumes there is an unproblematic past to return to. The role of universities in the contemporary 'knowledge economy' and in producing docile, self-regulating neoliberal subjects is explored in an extensive field of literature.<sup>7</sup>

Universities are also deeply complicit and entrenched in the rationalities and practices of neoliberal privatisation, outsourcing, downsizing and precarisation, and are subject to, and have, complex financial interests (including in the military-industrial complex – see Lacy and Rome 2017). However, this is an extension of, not a departure from, what came before.<sup>8</sup>

The university is the master's house. The master's tools include the tools of academia, which create and reflect the universalising claims of modernity, and the stable definitions that allow elites to gain hegemony over meaning (Meyerhoff 2019, 85; see also Ferguson 2012). Academia's inaccessible scholarship (Williams 1993) is itself a mode of dispossession, part of the professionalisation of knowledge (Moten and Harney 2004) which makes study something you pay or are paid for (Moten and Harney 2020). Higher education has shaped the discourses of nationalism, patriotism, citizenship, democracy and 'civilisation' (Chatterjee and Maira 2014, 12). Disciplines such as anthropology, economics, demography, philosophy, sociology, psychology and criminology rationalise, and have rationalised, exclusion and exploitation (Draper 2018; Boggs et al. 2019, 15). Universities are sites where – through conferences, white papers, consultations and outreach – modern techniques of governance are fermented (Harney and Moten 2013, 55–6). They are also sites where state and capital co-opt the emergent knowledges of radical movements (Ferguson 2012, 9).

Reflecting all this, Moten and Harney (2020) write: 'an abolitionist university would be kinda like an abolitionist prison or an abolitionist plantation'. However, the university can also be a site of struggle between different modes of study and world-making (Meyerhoff 2019), a house underneath which the rebellion is being fermented and a site at which education can be used for social change. Ferguson (2012, 8–18, 231) argues that as a laboratory for the production of truth the university is both an agent of imperial power, and an agent of disruption and opposition, especially in the inter-disciplines. This is an appeal to what Moten and Harney (2004, 104) call the undercommons:

maroon communities of composition teachers, mentorless graduate students, adjunct Marxist historians, out or queer management professors, state college ethnic studies departments, closed-down film programs, visa-expired Yemeni student newspaper editors, historically black college sociologists, and feminist engineers.

For Moten and Harney (2004, 101, 105), this community is 'always at war, always in hiding', and must 'sneak into the university and steal what [it] can.' The undercommons may be shrinking in the context of increased workloads, surveillance and monitoring regimes for academics (Gill 2010), and growing instrumentality amongst students (Danvers 2019). However, its continued power is attested by the fact that inter-disciplines such as gender and critical race studies – and individuals within them – are the focus of the right-wing culture wars proliferating across the world (Chatterjee and Maira 2014).

## Methodological note

The data from all four of our CHUCL projects underpin the analysis in this paper (see Table 1). This combined dataset comprises approximately 55 documents, 36 h of 'drop in' sessions where staff and students could share issues, 110 in-depth interviews and 106 focus groups, surveys which generated almost 850 responses, over 180 h of observation in

**Table 1.** Methods and focus.

Method	Focus	Total	Institutions			
			1	2	3	4
Documentary analysis	Language & ideas in external promotional/internal policy materials Demographic statistics on staff and students Staff survey documents and other internal equality & diversity data	55 documents	20 documents	10 documents	10 documents	15 documents
Drop-in sessions	Open session for informal discussions with students and staff around institutional culture and intersecting equality issues	36 h	36 h	N/A	N/A	N/A
In-depth interviews	Work and study practices External and internal facing values Perceptions and/or experiences of intersecting equality issues	110 participants	45 participants	58 participants	7 participants	N/A
Focus groups	Sessions exploring similar issues to the interviews in a group setting	106 participants	N/A	80 participants	26 participants	N/A
Open-text survey	5 words to describe the institution's culture Strengths and weaknesses of the culture How the institution promotes equality & diversity	847+ responses	147 responses	700+ responses	N/A	N/A
Observation	Behaviour, clothes, conversations, body language, interactions in varied social and spatial contexts (e.g. student and staff events, public lectures, cafes, meetings)	180+ h	40 h	100+ h	20 h	20 h
WordPress	Website form where staff and students could submit anonymous personal experiences of equality issues	81 responses	22 responses	25 responses	34 responses	N/A
Action Inquiry	Group work using personal, group and wider system observations to explore themes from our data	127 participants	28 participants	65 participants	N/A	34 participants

In the first two institutions we conducted what we term 'grounded action inquiry' (Phipps 2020b, 237–8), involving collection of in-depth sociological data about equality issues and institutional culture, which underpinned action inquiry interventions. In the third institution we conducted interviews and focus groups only, and in the fourth we conducted action inquiry only, based on analysis of existing institutional data. All samples were self-selecting but we made efforts to gain diversity through specifically inviting members of under-represented/marginalised groups to participate.

All four projects were approved by the University of Sussex Social Sciences and Arts Research Ethics Committee (approval numbers: ER/AEP25/3, ER/AEP25/6, ER/GN33/3, ER/EJM33/12). All participants gave informed consent, either through signing a project consent form or through completing our online surveys and website forms.

institutional settings, 81 anonymous stories submitted via a form on our website, and action inquiry with 127 participants (roughly 8 h per group). We term this a 'composite ethnography' (Phipps 2020b), and it offers rich and detailed information. We have not attempted to reshape the four research projects into a larger construction however (for instance, for comparative purposes), and in a short narrative we are able only to present snapshots from this combined dataset.

The data collection was initially undertaken in order to understand the culture of each institution and how this framed inequalities and issues such as bullying, harassment and violence, as well as to uncover potential routes to cultural change. However, for this paper we have explored the data anew, drawing out different themes in order to reflect on the process of the work itself. We have also (re)examined our own experiences, through re-reading our fieldnotes and recalling conversations with one another over the course of five years. Some of the devices we use - such as personal narrative, anecdote and story-telling - echo autoethnographic accounts, as does our desire to articulate insider knowledge which fills gaps in existing research (Adams, Ellis, and Jones 2017, 3). While not 'rigorous' by conventional measures, this article shares experiences that could not have been captured using traditional research methods (Adams, Ellis, and Jones 2017, 4), which give important insights into how institutions work.

### **Adding institutional value(s)**

*We write as the Changing University Cultures collective - we have been working closely with Universities UK over the past couple of years on promoting equality and diversity in higher education, and tackling sexual harassment and violence, through cultural change. We were recently commissioned to produce a set of sector-wide guidelines on creating cultural change in universities, to be launched at a national conference this November. Unfortunately, in light of the ongoing USS pensions dispute, we are writing to withdraw from this commission and our current association with Universities UK.*

*Pensions are a key equalities issue. Universities UK cannot claim to be working towards equality and diversity in the sector while pursuing pension reforms which are antithetical to that agenda. On the bigger issue of institutional culture, it is clear that the sector is in disarray and that this has happened under the influence of Universities UK. The proposed reforms to the USS pension scheme could not be a clearer statement of current sectoral values, based on an imaginary deficit and designed to facilitate capital investment projects at the expense of staff security and working conditions (defined as 'inessential costs').*

*Institutional culture work cannot be window dressing for the systematic devaluation and precarisation of staff and students. It must be grounded in a critique of the marketisation of universities and what that does to the values that staff and students hold dear. It is with regret, therefore, that we withdraw from our current association with Universities UK.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*The Changing University Cultures Collective.*

This is an abridged version of a letter written to Alistair Jarvis (Chief Executive of Universities UK or UUK) and Professor Dame Janet Beer (UUK President) during the 2018 strikes over proposed reforms to the Universities Superannuation Scheme, one of the main pension schemes for UK higher education staff. The proposed reforms, still in dispute at the time of writing, threaten to leave members significantly worse off in



retirement. UUK describes itself as ‘the collective voice of 136 universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland’. ‘Universities’, in this formulation, means the leaders of these institutions rather than students and staff. One of the organisation’s key areas is equality and diversity, and we had a productive and collegial relationship with UUK employees working in this area. Our letter was sent to the heads of UUK, after we realised we could not continue.

Specifically, we realised we could not claim to be conducting critical work on equality in higher education while collaborating with an organisation so central to the marketised systems that are its antithesis. The pensions strikes confronted us with the hypocrisy of our position, and its threat to our integrity and credibility as a collective. In response, we chose to remove ourselves from complicity with the violent paradox of UUK positioning itself as a positive force for equality and diversity. This paradox is made possible by the understanding of equality and diversity in marketised higher education: as ‘benign variation’ with no relationship to systems of oppression, power and governance; and as an indicator, a form of capital that can increase organisational value and, in the process, divert attention away from these systems.

Universities UK is an architect and steward of the neoliberal regimes in which, as a participant put it:

a contemporary university has to market itself, and monetise every ... God, I hate that word ... monetise everything and business model, you know, the shiny-suited people come to faculty meetings and they talk about, you know, seeking out values of entrepreneurship and ... all that kind of post-Thatcherite garbage.

Such sector-wide regimes create a strong pressure to maintain the appearance of a functional institution rather than worrying about the reality (Phipps 2020b, 230), within what another participant described as ‘a focus on finances and university reputation to the detriment of staff wellbeing.’ There is a circuit here: equality and diversity initiatives conceal crude economic agendas by clothing them in the garb of a kinder, gentler institution, while simultaneously being deployed within these agendas to add economic value. As a third participant commented, ‘the university wants to portray itself, they’re putting all this policy in place and thinking that’s how they want to portray themselves, as this diverse, rich place of research excellence’.

Ahmed (2012, 34, 143) has coined the phrase ‘institutional polishing’, for the public relations technology in which equality and diversity initiatives generate a marketable image of the university rather than tackling the inequitable truth. One of our participants explained it like this: ‘if you’re trying to get money from investors and people, you’re going to be portraying the very best aspect of yourself, which is never going to be the reality.’ Within a marketised system, equality and diversity work becomes about changing *perceptions* of the institution as unequal, rather than dealing with the fact that it *is*. This produces an impetus to a certain type of initiative: another participant commented:

I just find it’s not very embedded. We’ve got Black history month, that’s when all the Black people meet for history events. Then you’ve got pride month, when all the rainbow people meet. There’s like a high-level policy and we tick the boxes, yes we do the history month, yes we do this, but it doesn’t mean anything on an everyday basis.

This cannibalisation of equality and diversity work by the institution through largely superficial initiatives can be set in context of the broader role of the university in incorporating and neutralising radical thought (Ferguson 2012; Kelley 2016). Institutional polishing creates a shiny image, and finds ways to buff in various forms of critique.

Furthermore, when a problem cannot be buffed in, it is often airbrushed out. This usually happens after disclosure of specific incidents of bullying, harassment or violence, and often in response to exposure in the 'outrage economy' of the media (Phipps 2020a, 82–96). Institutional airbrushing takes two main forms: concealment and erasure. Either issues are minimised, denied or concealed and complainants encouraged to settle matters quietly, or when this is not possible, the alleged perpetrator is 'airbrushed' from the institution, and it is made to appear as though they were never there (Phipps 2020b, 230–233). Airbrushing is often followed by further polishing: after a 'blemish' has been concealed or erased, the institution is buffed up. In three of our four projects, we were part of this process: commissioned after a problem was exposed, to 'polish up' the institution and help it recoup and add value.

Publicly sharing our report has been one way to do this. Statements of 'institutional values' were also used: staff are usually required to declare and evidence their adherence to these, often using performance management technologies (Enslin and Hedge 2019, 388–9). In two of our projects, we were asked to contribute to the production of such value statements. In the process, we saw that although values may have transformative potential when held sincerely and deeply, they can easily be weaponised for institutional preservation rather than institutional change. This involves divesting them of any understanding of power and reducing them to interpersonal qualities: as one participant said, 'we [have been] told it's just our own personal responsibility to make things better.'

In one project, this involved the value of 'kindness.' Its adoption, individualised and decontextualised, was used to tell students to 'be kind' to staff members who held discriminatory views towards them, and to berate staff on strike to defend their pensions for being 'unkind' to university leaders. This latter narrative echoed one circulating on the national stage, with UUK President Professor Dame Janet Beer (who refused to talk to student supporters of the strike), allegedly saying at an event: 'I felt the crazies had come for my children' (USS Briefs 2018). It is relevant here that white supremacy has a long history of constructing challenges to its authority as 'unkind' and 'not nice' (Lorde 2007 [1981], 125–134; see also Castagno 2014). It is a means of concealing structural cruelty by focusing on the anger this cruelty produces instead.

We have reflected on our role here in context of the long history of bourgeois white women being used to grant respectability to (in other words, to polish) violent institutions and projects, colonialism in particular (Ware 1992). This continues to happen even in the most everyday settings, despite our best intentions (Castagno 2014): and as equality and diversity workers, we are often invited to wave our dusters around. We may also be likely to accept this invitation due to our relative comfort in institutional settings (Ahmed 2012, 40): from the white feminist position of seeking equality within the status quo, it appears that the furniture merely needs a polish rather than the whole house being a perilous place.

The impulse to airbrush and polish has made institutions need us, although there have been fears we might uncover more blemishes instead. We have tried hard to do more than shine up the furniture: our reports have not been 'friendly' documents (Ahmed

2012, 95–6), and they have not always been made public. In one institution our report was published in full; in another, university leaders wrote their own abridged version. In the other two, our reports were internal and confidential, and there was anxiety about information getting out. Leaders at one of these universities were so nervous about a potential future Freedom of Information (FOI) request they asked us to add a disclaimer to our report stating that participant narratives ‘had not been verified’ (in other words, might be untrue). We refused, and cautioned them that should such a request be made, the fact that the institution had tried to cast doubt upon our participants would compound any reputational damage from the report. We also advised them that in asking for a disclaimer, they were fulfilling our participants’ worst fears: that the institution would not believe them.

These incidents all happened in earshot of the ‘outrage economy’ of the media, in which institutions and perpetrators are ‘named and shamed’ by corporate outlets that care about clickbait, not social justice (Phipps 2020a, 92–3). We have written reports in a context in which institutions are perhaps legitimately scared of any form of reporting. Sexual violence reporting systems implemented by universities, for instance, often lead to negative media reporting due to reports of sexual violence increasing as a result of the opportunity to report (Phipps 2020a, 93–4). This shapes an impulse to create the position in which, as one of our participants said, ‘if anyone puts an FOI in, which happens a lot now, then there aren’t any cases’. While anxious to escape the respectability politics of institutional polishing, we are interested in finding alternative modes of accountability that do not rely on outrage and shame. Indeed, although anger has a productive history in feminisms of colour (Lorde 2007, 125–134; Ahmed 2014), white feminism has often used outrage to demand institutional and state discipline or even to justify discrimination (Phipps 2020a, 109–133).

### **Non-performativity (of non-performatives) as institutional preservation**

Our work constitutes much more than reports and institutional value statements, and we have consistently emphasised to institutions that the research *process* is designed to leave its own impact (especially the action inquiry discussions of our data). However, our reports have been the focal point for university leaders. For Ahmed (2012, 90), diversity is often a matter of documents, and ‘the point of the document can be to have a document you can point to.’ This is what she calls ‘non-performativity’: discourse (language and practice) that does not produce the effects it names but *stands in for them instead*. A non-performative is understood as doing something, when in fact it allows institutions not to do anything else. Non-performativity is often a response to requests for reform, which can easily be placated by producing a report or policy, commissioning training, or other measures. The idea of non-performativity complicates the argument that such reforms can pave the way for more insurgent demands (see Taylor 2016).

A classic example of non-performativity is when a report highlighting problems becomes their resolution, and this has certainly happened to us. As one of our participants said, institutions ‘put these documents out to cover themselves ... it doesn’t mean they actually want to step in and do anything.’ When presented as evidence problems are solved, such documents can prevent further engagement with said problems, and be weaponised against those who persist in saying the problems still exist. This constructs

those who raise problems, *as problems* (Ahmed 2012, 62–63). Another participant commented: ‘if you’re struggling or not good enough there’s something wrong with you, not with [the institution].’ In the words of a third participant, ‘you’re just being awkward. You want to fit in, and you don’t want to be seen as a nuisance.’

Within the charter and audit schemes of neoliberal higher education, documenting inequalities (without necessarily tackling them) is a key performance indicator. When documents are units of measurement, their production becomes the *work itself*, often to the frustration of equality and diversity workers (Ahmed 2012, 84–7, 100). The reports we have produced for university leaders have been referenced as ‘actions’ in charter and audit schemes, even when our recommendations have not been implemented. Perhaps the collective noun for this might be a *non-performativity of non-performatives*: such schemes do not assess the qualities of the institution, but allocate value based on its ability to tick the right boxes. As one of our participants commented, ‘it sometimes looks to me like it’s about ticking boxes and looking like this to the outside, more than making sure it’s really lived and practiced for the right reasons.’

Understood in this way, our reports have done little more than enable institutions to accrue value. In fact, in one institution (and after a defensive reaction to our interim report), a senior manager told us she did not want to continue with the rest of our project as her unit had already submitted its charter mark scheme application. As Tzanakou and Pearce (2019, 1195, 1199) suggest in their work on Athena SWAN,<sup>9</sup> charter schemes are often based on helping marginalised groups assimilate to the institution, although under certain conditions they may provide leverage and a pathway to more radical action. Furthermore, the positioning of such schemes as a means to competitive advantage risks universities not just polishing things up, but *airbrushing things out* in order to get recognition. One of our participants told us that the Athena SWAN lead in her institution had bullied people into withdrawing negative responses to a survey conducted for the submission. The institution’s ‘success’ at producing documents was also its ability to preserve itself by airbrushing out problems and neutralising dissent.

Even if our hearts are in protest, when our work is commissioned by institutions our minds will end up in policy. We have attempted to avoid this by ensuring that our reports are not ‘friendly documents’ (Ahmed 2012, 95). We have sought out the undercommons, issuing calls for participation which have explicitly targeted members of marginalised groups. We have not shied away from direct analysis of neoliberalism and have called racism, sexism and other oppressions by name. We have challenged university leaders’ understandings of equality and diversity problems as being ‘out there’, rather than ‘in here’, making it clear that we are uncovering manifestations of oppressive structures and cultures emanating from the very top. We have asked that a process continue after the submission of our reports, in which institutions take responsibility for implementing our recommendations. However, these efforts have largely been in vain.

In only one university was our project substantively engaged with for a significant period of time (meaning months or years) after our report. In another, our report was used as a catalyst to ‘rewrite all the policies’ (in the words of a participant), but the institution did not commit to resourcing a structure in which these policies might be functional (instead, the equality and diversity budget was cut). Ultimately, this report ended up in a drawer, like the other two. Sometimes, our analyses were acknowledged before being filed away; sometimes, there was a defensive reaction

consisting of critiques of our methodology and/or motivations. Ahmed (2012, 6) argues that after a document is put in a drawer, its official life is over. Our experience suggests even worse: these documents *can* re-emerge (and then disappear again) as part of defensive manoeuvres. At one institution, the Students' Union told us that when they raised a problem highlighted in our report, they were told that the university had already commissioned our report. This is perhaps the ultimate in non-performativity: our report became a reply to itself.

When we are commissioned within a non-performativity of non-performatives, how can we be anything but? Ahmed (2012, 83) suggests that even if documents themselves are non-performative, the conversations had in the process of producing them are useful. This resonates with us and in the words of participants who have told us how the spaces we created have mattered. As one participant said of our action inquiry sessions: 'it was a safe space ... you could let go completely ... we had 100 per cent trust.' However, we are also concerned that these spaces, in which staff and students aired their troubles, were shock absorbers in the absence of capacity for action from institutions. In the words of another participant: 'there's a sense that just talking about something is enough ... and then it's like, "oh, we've done that now".' We also take note of Kelley's (2016) analysis of Black activism on US campuses, which cautions that an exclusive focus on disclosing individual troubles can crowd out 'fugitive planning' for justice.

In many of our interviews, focus groups and action inquiry sessions, critiques of university leaders and systems were vigorous and astute, in some cases creating 'insubordinate spaces' (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 2019) in which staff gained courage to challenge dominant structures. Two of our participants also worked up the courage to resign. However, we were not able to parlay these conversations into transformative institutional action, even with our efforts, the efforts of our participants and those of the equality and diversity workers who collaborated so enthusiastically with us. This is partly our own fault: despite the fact that all our projects were commissioned by university leaders, we did not (as we should have) insist on them treating CHUCL, in the words of one participant, 'like a serious piece of work.' As paid consultants of institutions we conducted our projects on *their* terms and in the language of 'improvement' rather than transformation.

'Improvement' is one of the master's tools, implying that the university is broken rather than functioning exactly as designed. There is a paradox here: how can the institution be made more equal, considering what it is *for*? Non-performativity shows this paradox in action and is a form of institutional preservation which dovetails with the preference of white feminism for equality within the status quo. Policies and reports construct the institution as fundamentally benign and able to be worked on, concealing the violence built into its very existence. Even if policies are properly implemented (which is rare) they target individual behaviours and not discriminatory institutional structures and power relations. We should be suspicious of 'paperwork relations' (Gudova 2015, 141): while equality and diversity policies cannot be compared to, say, the structural violence of filling out immigration forms, it is worth remembering that bureaucracy at the very least limits our imaginations (Graeber 2015).

## Becoming a weapon

*A while after one of our projects has ended, we receive an email from officers of the institution's union branch saying they are sending a notification to the Office for Students (OfS) about our report.<sup>10</sup> They are asking OfS to 'use its regulatory powers' to tackle the institution's failure to act on our recommendations, specifically around bullying. They ask for some minor clarification around the process of our report's submission. When the union's intervention goes public, the Vice-Chancellor of the university sends a furious email to all his staff, defending the institution's response to our report. He does not consult us – he has not consulted us at all since our report was submitted. We watch, as these men fight.*

In the incident described above, our report (which was critical of an institution) was weaponised in the service of a complaint against the institution, made to a higher institution. The higher institution was the Office for Students, an 'independent regulator' which nevertheless has close ties to the most right-wing UK government in decades. The complaint demanded governance and punishment of the university concerned. The action was confrontational, directing energy towards power (which is ultimately what it seeks – see Moten and Harney 2020, 11). Furthermore, the action was taken by officers of a union branch that claimed to be anti-neoliberal in its politics.

Our discomfort with this was compounded by the institutional dynamics that framed and underpinned the incident. Our report had highlighted serious problems with bullying at the university concerned, many of which came from the top. We situated these within structural relations and practices that had tangible and painful outcomes, and a culture of behaviour amongst university leaders in particular. Nevertheless, when university leaders engaged with our analysis of bullying at the institution, this was to claim that they were victims of 'upward bullying' from staff.

With this in mind, the union's notification to OfS could be seen as a necessary attempt to hold leadership to account, coming from the grassroots. However, the plot thickens: during our project, the head of the union branch had also been credibly described by some participants as a bully. Given this, the OfS notification (at least in part) came across as replicating management behaviour, deflecting attention from problems within the union branch. We watched, as these men fought each other over our report and its meaning, to fuel their claims and counter-claims of bullying. The document was certainly functioning here as a tool of the master: a weapon in a battle between different parts of the institution, which seemed similar in their desires to avoid accountability by locating the problem elsewhere.

As Lorde (2007 [1979], 113) says of the master's tools: 'they may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change'. By weaponising our report, it seemed that the union branch was attempting to beat the master at his own game, and in the process (intentionally or not) concealing itself as a site of oppression, a wing of the master's house. This was underlined by the confrontational nature of the action: loud shouting which drowned out any potential discussion of bad behaviour from union representatives themselves. As (Moten and Harney 2020) argue, confrontation can be a re-instatement of power and a repetition of oppressive dynamics. This incident certainly suggested that it is not enough to pit ourselves against the master if we want to avoid using the master's tools.

The incident also reiterated that when we appeal to authority in our politics, we are acting as *clients of the system* we may ultimately want to dismantle (thus preserving it instead). As Harney and Moten (2013, 135) argue, requests made to authority accede to, and ultimately legitimate, that authority as a granter or denier of the request. The complaint to the OfS, requesting punishment of a particular institution, legitimated the authority of both OfS and the institution concerned, as the issue of bullying was positioned as something to be dealt with by manifesting, rather than disassembling, the proper chain of command. Both seeking authority *and appealing to it* can be understood as enactments of white supremacy (Lugones 2008, 15), the latter being the purview of white women in particular (Phipps 2020a) although it was done by white men in this case. The incident heightened our suspicion of modes of institutional action that amount to little more than ‘asking for the manager’, which are common in neoliberal higher education (Phipps 2021).

## Conclusion

After five years of CHUCL, we are surer than ever that the master’s tools cannot dismantle the master’s house. Furthermore, we take to heart Lorde’s (2007 [1979], 113) advice that this fact is only threatening to those who ‘still define the master’s house as their only source of support’. As we take stock of our project after five years, we feel compelled to acknowledge that changing university cultures may not be possible. However, we can refuse to be the master’s tools by joining the work of building a different house. Here we do not mean building a collectivist rather than a capitalist institution: abolitionist theory tells us this is probably an oxymoron. Yet while we imagine something different beyond the university (and there is plenty of this collective imagining happening already in contemporary radical movements), we can move in a better direction and build capacity for subsistence *within* the university’s terrain.

Moving in a better direction within the university requires paying attention to the abolitionist distinction between reformist and non-reformist reforms (Berger, Kaba, and Stein 2017), the latter being reforms which shrink, rather than grow, the institution’s capacity for violence. Non-reformist reforms, of course, can only be generated from the undercommons: and there are plenty of models to draw on in traditions such as transformative justice (Kaba 2021) and mutual aid (Spade 2020). Such traditions suggest the formation of small, self-organised groups of staff and students who imagine new ways of relating and solving problems together. These prototypes could be used to develop initiatives which create structures of accountability rather than shoring up the institution’s power.

This work would be *in*, but not *of*, the institution: we should turn away from the institutional equality and diversity machine, away from white-dominated institutional feminism and towards more radical grassroots frameworks. To facilitate this work, however, especially in the over-stretched environment of the neoliberal university, we would need institutional resources such as money, space and time. We should make big demands for these: although we know what the institution is, we must get what we can from it and claim what we are entitled to. We should also be (strategically) politically ambitious, not asking for effective implementation of policies and rules or seeking regulation from morally bankrupt higher authorities, but calling



for transformative change. Even if we know that such transformation is not ultimately possible, if we keep our eyes on the horizon we may be able to take some forward steps. If there is a future for Changing University Cultures, it exists in such gradual, but onward, motion: while working to dismantle the master's house and create the blueprints for a new one, we must ensure that its current inhabitants can survive.

## Notes

1. Our working definition of 'institutional culture', drawing on Schein's (2004) definition of 'organisational culture', encompassed the values, ideas, customs and social practices of the institution.
2. Post-1992 universities are former polytechnics in the UK which were given university status by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. These institutions tend to disproportionately contain students marginalised by race, class and other categories (Arday 2021).
3. For instance, Munir et al. (2014, 11) found that in UK universities, institutional Athena SWAN leads were 92% white British and 72% female, and departmental leads were 94% white and 80% female.
4. For instance, there is research evidence showing that white women tend to benefit from diversity and affirmative action schemes which focus on achieving equality within existing systems rather than dismantling them (see for example Crenshaw 2006).
5. Our focus on achieving 'outsider within' *ways of seeing* (rather than claiming this as a positionality) is informed by Collins' (1999) critique of the appropriation of 'outsider within' status as a personal identity category that can be marketed, and how this has both erased the specificity of Black women's experiences and uncoupled this status from social justice work.
6. We do not wish to ontologise whiteness and essentialise it in particular bodies: we understand whiteness as a system of domination that works through racialising the other (see for example Lentin 2020) and a mode of operation that seeks power within the status quo (Phipps 2020a).
7. There is no room to rehearse this literature here – see Brown 2015 (especially Chapter VI) for an indicative text.
8. It may be necessary here to distinguish between the US and UK models, as the latter was publicly funded until very recently.
9. Athena SWAN, established in 2005, is a gender equality charter scheme through which UK universities or departments, schools or faculties can receive a bronze, silver or gold award based on self-assessment of gender (in)equality and related initiatives.
10. The Office for Students is the independent regulator of higher education in England. It receives funding from the Department for Education (DfE), which also sets its annual priorities. OfS has a legal duty to encourage competition between higher education providers - alongside Universities UK, it is a key architect and steward of the neoliberal agenda in UK higher education.

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## Notes on contributors

**Alison Phipps** is Professor of Sociology at Newcastle University. Her latest book is a critique of mainstream feminist interventions around sexual violence from an abolitionist perspective, entitled *Me, Not You: the trouble with mainstream feminism* (Manchester University Press).

**Liz McDonnell** is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Sussex University. Her research interests are framed by a curiosity about connectedness, the relational, and how the social (including structural inequalities and disciplinary logics) are experienced and narrated by individuals.

## ORCID

Alison Phipps  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9476-6848>

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