Collectives in/of Solidarity: Student Activism by Women of Colour at the University of Oxford

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Abstract

There are myriad historical and contemporary narratives about the University of Oxford as an ancient, elite university dedicated to intellectual advancement and education. Yet these narratives actively exclude the experiences of present-day women of colour students who navigate the politics and pressure of today's Oxford. I argue that by exploring the intersections of race and gender alongside other axes of oppression, a more comprehensive current history of Oxford can be told by and for women of colour students. 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 47 former and current women of colour students and critical ethnography 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 that then shape their emerging political and personal identities. The research examines key themes of feminist action, spatial politics, identity and meaning-making, and the inherent possibilities forged through solidarities committed to social justice. My research found that there is strength in collective action and solidarities in service of change within and beyond the HE academy in the United Kingdom. The thesis concludes with the research impacts of my findings and how Oxford and other British HEIs can apply its lessons in the future to better support future generations of women of colour students. Given the recent global wave of action across universities for Palestinian liberation, including at Oxford, it is clear that institutions of learning continue to be potent sites of revolution worth studying. My research seeks to situate women of colour students as central actors in critical junctures of social change that have wide-ranging impacts on the broader UK HE sector.

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List of Abbreviations

- ACS - African Caribbean Society
- BAME – Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic
- BDS – Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions
- BIPOC – Black, Indigenous, People of Colour
- BME – Black and Minority Ethnic
- CRAE – Campaign for Racial Equality
- CUS – Critical University Studies
- DPhil – Doctorate of Philosophy
- EDI – Equity, Diversity and Inclusion
- FemSoc – Oxford Feminist Society
- IHH – It Happens Here
- ISoc – Oxford University Islamic Society
- JCR – Junior Common Room
- HE – Higher Education
- HEI – Higher Education Institution(s)
- PoC – People of Colour
- OA4P – Oxford Action for Palestine
- OUAPS - Oxford Asia Pacific Society
- RAEM – Religious and Ethnic Minorities
- RMFO - Rhodes Must Fall Oxford
- MCR – Middle Common Room
- SCR – Senior Common Room
- SU – Oxford Student Union
- WoC – Woman/Women of Colour
- WocSoc – Oxford Women of Colour Society
- Wom*Cam – SU Women's Campaign
- VC – Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University

Chapter 1: Introduction

"While the present course of events is entirely capable of bringing the world to complete destruction, we are not there yet, and that other past itineraries remain unfinished - an apprehension which may help us seize the fullness of our present moment at a time in which change is still possible. The full present is a speculative space that encompasses both the timeline of modernity, which its aggressive drives of capitalism and war, and the simultaneous condition that there may be other alternatives, barely legible, rising, inchoate, through which we might transform the inevitability and brutality of that timeline."

Lisa Lowe, "Revolutionary Feminisms in a Time of Monsters" in Revolutionary Feminisms (2020, 226).

1.1 Research context

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 47 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 (HE) sector.

Contemporary student activism in the United Kingdom has been widely documented in HE studies and by the press, particularly addressing issues of oppression and social justice such as decolonisation, anti-racism, misogyny, and climate justice. However, there is scant empirical research on the experiences of women of colour students in the UK. This study investigates the embodied experiences of women of colour students through the medium of HE and critical university studies. My research strove to capture the processes and formations of collective action situated at the University of Oxford, an environment that embodies the following statement: "Power relations always underlie the social construction of space and

are embedded in race, class and gender equality … Space and its arrangement and allocation are assumed to be transparent, but they rarely are" (Low, 2016, 69). Researching UK HE in the context of Oxford allows for the interrogation of how power and privilege are exercised through gendered and racialised lenses against the backdrop of whiteness historically present in this ancient university.

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. Through my research, I strove to illustrate the multiplicities of the experiences of women of colour, following Audre Lorde's words: "The literatures of all women of color recreate the textures of our lives, and many white women are heavily invested in ignoring the real differences" (1984). I apply 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.[1] By focusing 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, 2022, 137). Moreover, I consider knowledge as spatially situated and value how theories of place contribute to intellectual formations, salient points when considering the colonial and imperial histories of Oxford and its related legacies, particularly for marginalised students.[2] To preface this research, I return to a quote from Lorde: "In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action" (1984). 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 my DPhil 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. 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 academe and beyond.

[1] A useful definition of whiteness is offered by Sriprakash et al.: Whiteness is an "ongoing educative project" that is "not innate, it is made and it is learned … [it refers] to the structural formation of racial domination tied to European colonialism which continues to be reinscribed across all aspects of social life" (2022, 4).
[2] The now-inactive Oxford and Colonialism project, housed at the Pitt Rivers Museum, charts the colonial links between the University's colleges, departments, and faculties; it also names student movements and campaigns addressing colonial legacies at the time of publication. The website is no longer available.

The University of Oxford was founded in the 11th century and boasts an illustrious history of accomplishments, including many milestones for women in HE. From the admission of white women to the formerly women's colleges beginning in 1878 to admitting women as full members of the University in 1920, the Oxford of today prides itself on gender equality (Education and Activism, 2020).[3] According to student statistics data collected in 2024, the University has 6,765 female students at the undergraduate level and 6,835 students at the postgraduate taught and research levels for a total of 51.1% of female students across the university's four academic divisions, including visiting students and those in continuing education (University of Oxford, 2024).[4] Oxford records 40.3% of students, or 10,725 individuals, who identify as BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) (University of Oxford, 2024).[5] Across all degree-granting levels, there are a total of 5,780 students who identified as both BME and female (University of Oxford, 2024).[6] However, much of Oxford's history excludes women of colour and racialised women's contributions to its development. It can be surmised that, given the colonial and imperial histories of the University and its colleges, the experiences of women of colour significantly vary from those of white women. This study investigates the experiences of women of colour students participating in student activism by focusing on the nuances and affordances, as well as how communities negotiate the limitations and hindrances of Oxford in correlation with the spatial politics of the institution.

The recent publications on women's histories at Oxford primarily focus on the centenary of the admission of women to the University, evidenced by the Education and Activism — Women at Oxford: 1879-1920 project (2020) and the Women Making History website and digital timeline that spotlights historical and present-day achievements of women at Oxford (2020). Though there are occasional mentions of the contributions of women of colour, they are either historicised as the "first" to complete a degree or other accomplishment (for example, Merze Tate as the first African American woman to attend

[3] The former women's colleges at Oxford are Lady Margaret Hall (LMH), Somerville, St. Hugh's, and St. Hilda's colleges. LMH was the first women's college founded in 1878, following the establishment of the Association for Promoting the Higher Education of Women in Oxford in the same year. Somerville was founded in 1879, St Hugh's in 1886, and St. Hilda's in 1893 (Education and Activism, 2020).
[4] Female students outnumber male students in every division except for Math, Physical, and Life Sciences (MPLS), which reflects the historical and ongoing gap for women in STEM disciplines (La Malfa & Jorgensen, 2024).
[5] In this thesis, women of colour and racialised women are used as equivalent terms. The term BME is used by the University to denote non-white students, but I will not be using the term unless quoting the University.
[6] The statistical data does not account for gender identity, only biological sex categories of male and female, therefore data on gender non-conforming students is not available; 'female' is used here in the context of how individuals are forced to identify on forms (University of Oxford, 2024).

Oxford) or highlighted as succeeding in male-dominated research fields (2020). Though these have been significant contributions to the development of gender equality at Oxford, little attention is paid to current women of colour students and their ongoing contributions. It is also important to be wary of tokenisation and 'institutional diversity' policies of universities that seek to mask systemic issues – what Ahmed, drawing on Austin (1975), calls 'nonperformative speech acts', making claims on behalf of an institution (2006).[7] Often demonstrated by institutions in positions of power that attempt to dissuade criticism about the perpetuations of sexism, racism and so on, tokenism functions to mask oppressions faced by multiply marginalised communities by assigning them as the face of progress.[8]

On institutions, Ahmed 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" (2012, 2). 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 & Abushouk, 2018). Conversely, communities are working on the ground in resistance to these claims of elitism, which are inextricably entangled with whiteness. Former Rhodes Must Fall Oxford organiser Dalia Gebrial 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" (2018, 34). On Oxford, Coetzee argues for a counter-narrative approach documenting the failures and disconnections of Black students at the University, as this then "pose[s] a challenge to ambitiously reparative celebrations of Black excellence, which risk upholding Oxford as center" (2022, 294). This argument mirrors the experiences of women of colour rejecting tokenistic positions that seek to elevate the University's reputation of 'diversity and inclusion'. Coetzee notes that key elements of an Oxford counter-tradition are the "foregrounding of connections to the times and spaces of elsewhere and the creation of forms of sociality that exceed the exclusive spaces of the formal high table dinners and the fellows'

[7] Ahmed's use of "non-performative" is important as "a performative refers to a particular class of speech – an utterance is performative when it does what it says" (2006, 104) wherein the conditions are suited for such an act to materialise; therefore, institutional claims can be *non*performative and empty without execution.
[8] Tokenism can be defined as "being viewed as a symbol of race rather than as an individual" (Wilson, 2012, 65) and "the pressure of a double-edged sword" wherein one is both hyper-visible as the mascot of diversity and invisible as the only marginalised individual within a group (Niemann, 2012, 343).

common rooms" (2022, 295). De-centring Oxford's formal academic and social spaces as the only form of knowledge production is a core component of how I analyse the spatial politics of the institution.

Given the University's intense eight-week terms and consequent six-week breaks, undergraduate and taught master's students in particular must contend with the limitations of short 'active' periods within the academic year to engage with activism alongside their studies. Coetzee names the temporalities of Oxford as integral to its enduring status as a mythical place in popular culture: "The tropes that recur in representations of Oxford University create a particular experience of space and time, what I term here 'unchronic': a time and space disconnected from the demands of history, and where the enclosed nature of the walled garden is naturalized and mobilized to defend against demands for social and political change" (2022, 296). 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.

I hope that my research will positively impact communities on the margins, especially women of colour students in UK universities. By foregrounding the lived experiences of women of colour students and understanding their resistance to institutional oppression through student activism, I endeavour to present the experiences of women of colour students in a holistic, nuanced manner using an intersectional feminist research approach. This methodological stance is especially generative in the context of Oxford as an HEI, as the research seeks to question and challenge the infrastructures of power at the University through the vehicle of student activism. I strive to locate my work in conversation with scholars of colour who primarily work and research in the United Kingdom, such as Sara Ahmed and Heidi Safia Mirza, in addition to following the historic tradition of women of colour feminist writing and research led by Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, and their contemporaries.

Having ranked first in the world in the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings for a record tenth consecutive year since 2017 (University of Oxford, 2025), Oxford's global prestige and privilege then warrant concerted scrutiny of its policies and practices. In sitting at the top of global rankings, Oxford adopts a mantle of leadership in HE

whose policies and practices influence other institutions, including any initiatives on race and gender, as the sector begins to contend with legacies of oppression in the UK. Throughout this research, I strove to embody Black feminist scholar bell hooks' pedagogy of hope as a means of reducing deficit perceptions of marginalised communities. hooks wrote that "progressive education, education as the practice of freedom, enables us to confront feelings of loss and restore our sense of connection" (2003, xv), a theory that can be applied to student activism movements. It is easy to fall into, or even rely on, cynicism to power movements of change. I argue that women of colour student activists are exercising their agency and channelling their lived experiences into mobilising their communities on the margins through generative collective action.

1.2 Research questions

The overarching theoretical query of my research is rooted in understanding how feminist and community solidarities form between women of colour in HE environments. The core of the following research questions is my conviction that the stories and experiences of women of colour deserve to be documented and disseminated. In tandem with questioning the effects of power and privilege in the backdrop of Oxford, I suggest that meaningful contributions can be drawn from forms of collective action taking place in this University, especially when understood through the perspectives of women of colour living in and working on the margins. I understand positionality as one's "social location, personal experiences, and theoretical viewpoint" alongside the participants' relational identities of race, gender, and other identities that can be fluid and exist in multiplicities (Suffla et al., 2015, 16). The focus on community and solidarity, as elucidated through the dynamic positionalities of women of colour students, facilitates an intersectional feminist research methodology that showcases the nuances of contemporary student activism in the United Kingdom.

1. How do women of colour student activists negotiate their collective and individual positionalities and politics at Oxford?
2. How does the institutional environment of Oxford affect their student experience as women of colour?
3. What are the ways in which they engage with student activism at Oxford and why?

4. How do women of colour build community and create meaning-making narratives at Oxford through student activism?

1.3 Thesis overview

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 HE, especially research on the intersections of race, gender, and activism. I reject the premise of neutrality in investigating HE 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. I hope that it will 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. In that vein, I offer two parallel quotes from two women of colour scholars across generations. Audre Lorde writes: "Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression" (1984). I view Lorgia García Peña's statement in harmony with Lorde: "To have community, we must commune. That is, we must insist on *community* as an action, as a verb" (2022, 50, emphasis in original).

A note on inhabiting the margins

I embrace the term 'marginalised' in the form theorised by bell hooks, viewing it not as a "site of deprivation" but imbued with possibilities of resistance (1990, 150).[9] She wrote that to "be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body," referring to her identity as a Black woman in academia (hooks, 1984, xvii). 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

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

part of moving into the center, 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" (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 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" (2022, 31). 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.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

"Possibility comes from intimacy with what has thickened in time, the walls, the doors, how rooms are occupied, making it hard to breathe. History is stale air. A poem, a breath of fresh air. To make something is to make it possible." | Sara Ahmed, The Feminist Killjoy Handbook (2023, 210)

This literature review examines the state of research on student activism by and for women of colour (WoC) students in the UK 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 (HEIs); however, there is 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, originally coined by Crenshaw (1991), with Collins' definition, who names intersectionality as a "broad-based knowledge project" that "houses a dynamic assemblage of interpretative communities" (2015, 3), focused on social inequities and power relations.

Transnational feminist theory is also integral to consider in relation to intersectional theory. From the formative texts by Spivak (1999) and Mohanty (1984) that laid the foundations for postcolonial, transnational feminist thought, including the authors' continual revisiting of their texts (see Spivak, 2010; Mohanty, 2003), transnational feminist theory continues to "emphasize intersectionality, interdisciplinary, social activism and justice, and collaboration" (Enns et al., 2021, 12). Enns et al. also offer the following themes of transnational feminist practice, using a verb at the start of each to "highlight the active and evolving nature of these defining features: a) practicing reflexivity; b) applying intersectional lenses; … e) valuing diverse forms of agency and resistance; f) decolonizing theory, knowledge, and practice; g) creative and sustaining egalitarian collaborations" (13). Following these ethics, my research is grounded in three interconnected theoretical frameworks: 1) intersectional feminist theory, 2) women of colour feminisms, and 3) critical university studies.

Using these schemas, this literature review contextualises the history of women of colour feminist organising globally and in the UK, and explores definitions of feminist

solidarity, relationality, and collectivity. I offer recent examples of British student activism movements, discuss the spatial politics of university environments, and identify relevant research gaps in exploring the experiences of women of colour (WoC) in HE. I argue that the relative scarcity of research on the specific axes of oppression affecting WoC students must be addressed through feminist research that explicitly values and honours their journeys through activism at university, using Oxford as an empirical example. I conclude by articulating the conceptual aims of my doctoral research.

2.1 Women of colour and feminist activism

It is critical to understand intersectionality, a tenet central to the origins of radical feminism, when discussing women of colour. Coined by Crenshaw in 1989 to address the intersections of racism and sexism against Black women in the context of American law, its legacy and contemporary realities have since come to house "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 integral to understanding the lives of WoC students. In a chapter reflecting on the seminal 1981 anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color,* Alexander writes: "We are not born women of color. We *become* women of color. In order to *become* women of color, 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" (2006, 269, emphasis in original). This statement rings especially true in empirical research, of which there is little published material on the experiences of WoC 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 in the US, 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). Matos et al. (2023) recount how the term 'women of colour' as a political organising identity sharpened in the 1980s in coalition with the Third World solidarity movement, linking shared struggles of women in what we now call the Global South (or Global Majority) with American Black Feminist politics.

Feminist activism more broadly in the UK has a robust history of being led by women of colour since the 1970s. The Brixton Black Women's Group was one of the first Black radical organisations of its time, acting as a hub of anti-racist, feminist, and community

organising (Miller, 2023). The Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD) was the first national Black women's organisation in the UK, established in response to the exclusion of Black women's voices from wider Black activist and anti-racist organisations (Swift, 2020). Though now both defunct, the two organisations were integral to the proliferation of feminist thought and consciousness-raising traditions in the UK. OWAAD also contributed to the emergence of feminist press in the UK with their newsletter, *FOWAAD*; *Spare Rib*, one of the best known and longest-running publications of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, in print from 1972-93, but was later criticised for its lack of intersectionality (Liberating Histories, 2025; Chambers & Worrall, 2017); and *Mukti*, a British Asian feminist magazine that amplified the voices of Asian women excluded in mainstream press (Liberating Histories, 2025). OWAAD's legacy of organising around a principle of gendered political Blackness has resonance in today's women's and anti-racism movements, working in and for solidarity as a "politics of dwelling differently" (Swaby, 2014, 23). Notable current UK feminist organisations dedicated to intersectional practice include Southhall Black Sisters, founded in 1979 (East, 2025); Imkaan, who focus on supporting Black and minoritised women of colour survivors of violence; and Sisters Uncut, the anti-austerity and domestic violence services direct action group, which Ishkanian and Peña Saavedra argue operates under a politics of 'intersectional prefiguration' (2019) that relies on collective identity and a shared definition of safer spaces.[10]

There is also sustained criticism of British feminism as being mired in whiteness. The contributions of Black British feminists, including Gail Lewis, Stella Dadzie, Avtar Brah, and Heidi Safia Mirza, among others, have historically been overlooked or discussed only in relation to the origins of US Black feminism. The landmark 1984 issue of *Feminist Review*, titled *'Many Voices, One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives'* by Amos et al., was instrumental in the proliferation of Black feminist thought; Gunaratnam's (2014) reflections on the issue contextualise its impact in contemporary British feminist politics. Mirza has offered several retrospectives on her role in shaping Black British feminism (2015; 2022); Lewis on intergenerationality in Black British feminist history (2023); moreover, Anim-Addo asserts the importance of Black British knowledge production (2014), and Gayle (2020) proposes an intervention in cultural production by Black British feminism as a response to austerity measures. Jonsson's critique of British feminist theory and politics as perpetrators of

[10] Safe and saf*er* spaces for women of colour at Oxford are discussed in 6.1.

‘white feminist racism’ implores white British feminists to “relinquish control of the narrative of feminism” and acknowledge the contributions of women of colour British feminists without further co-optation of their work (2016, 113). In a conversation with Gunaratnam (2014) reflecting on Black British feminism, Mirza also looks to the future: “For me, black feminism is a stalwart tree with rich, deep roots, lovingly nurtured by a community of careful, critical gardeners” (131). The influence of Black British feminism serves as a bedrock of modern UK feminist activism.

Relationality is also key in an intersectional framework. Collins theorises that relational thinking has three modes: addition, articulation, and co-formation, which then inform intersecting power relations (2019). 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 co-formation posits a philosophical “holistic analysis of a seamless process of mutual construction of race, class, and gender as phenomena” (233, 241). Collins and Bilge (2016) provide examples of an intersectional analysis applied to neoliberalism, economic injustice, and critical education, viewing the heterogeneity of the theory as a generative source of potential to move into “the politics of the not-yet” (120). Moreover, when intersectionality is considered in conjunction with Collins’ theory of a matrix of domination (1990), which incorporates not only forms of oppression but also the domains of power (structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal) through which they operate.

Ahmed’s discussion on feminism of colour in ‘diversity work’, which has allowed institutions to absorb and, in some instances, co-opt intersectionality, is also an important facet to women of colour feminisms: “If the focus on intersectionality within feminism of colour meant a concern with the points at which power relations meet, then it is worth noting that these points often recede from view … there is labour in attending to what recedes from view” (2012, 14). There is a considerable body of literature critiquing ‘diversity work’ in higher education, including scholarship by Ahmed (2012), Agbetu et al. (2021), and Doharty et al. (2021), among others. Intersectionality’s focus on the complexities of relationality and power points toward a broader argument for social justice activism: Collective action works to dismantle oppressive power structures in service of a better world.

Feminist solidarity is multi-dimensional and multi-definitional, based on the core idea that solidarity between feminists takes difference into account and strives to simultaneously incorporate "a particular affective orientation toward the other; a mode of communication … a form of political alliance; and the reality or promise of support for some form of political action" (Littler & Rottenberg, 2021, 866). It is grounded in intersectional feminist principles that declare we must "move beyond individual identities and single-issue politics … to have a collective vision to make struggle meaningful and successful" (Mohanty & Carty, 2018). In the Oxford context, Daley calls for a reparative justice for racialised communities because "institutional indifference has forced minority students in the Western academy to think collectively about self-healing and resilience, to create their own biographical narratives, in safe spaces full of support, trust, and love" (2018, 83). This solidarity is forged across gender, race, class, ethnicity, and nationality, all of which are dynamic factors that coincide and complicate the affordances of women of colour students in Oxford.

The affective politics of solidarity and the necessity of care were articulated by bell hooks (1986), who argued for sisterhood as a form of political solidarity, bound by the "basis of our political commitment to a feminist movement" (129), despite inter-movement conflicts. A contemporary reading of feminist sisterhood by Mitra (2023) frames it as a call for political mobilisation that fights for a "collective ethics of living" (449). The shifting dynamics of identity, especially for WoC in the typical university age demographic who constitute my participants, wherein identities are constantly being (re)shaped, discarded, and renewed, further contribute to the challenges of naming a stable politics of solidarity. However, the attempt here to emphasise the criticality of feminist solidarity, contextualised by transnational and British feminist histories, supports an awareness of the "importance of embodied politics of differences [and] the role of vulnerability and recognition in the formation and sustaining of solidarity" (Wickström et al., 2021, 861).

2.2 Collective identities and (student) activism

Significant literature exists on the experiences of women of colour faculty and staff in UK universities, particularly regarding how they employ strategies of solidarity and survival in a hostile environment; however, there is little research on the experiences of women of colour students.[11] I focus on how WoC student activists construct meaning-making narratives

[11] For research on the experiences of women of colour faculty and staff in the UK academy, see Ahmed, 2009, 2012; Blell et al., 2022; Arday & Mirza, 2018, Bhopal, 2016; Mirza, 2006, 2014; Osho & Alormele, 2025.

through communities of resistance within and against the University of Oxford. Emejulu defines 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" (Emejulu & Littler, 2019, 82). In a UK HE context, Hensby argues that "being an activist requires a 'radical habitus' which is acquired through sustained engagement with activism fields" (2017, 49). Becoming an activist is a discursive process, whereby one accumulates political knowledge of their cause and becomes embedded in a network of social agents working towards change (Hensby, 2017). Relationality and subsequently, its ties to collective action and education, have been theorised by feminist scholars like Alexander who assert the need to "develop a[n] urgency around relational curricular projects that put us in conversation, not domination, with a range of relational knowledges" (2006, 109).

An expansive vocabulary exists for conceptual forms of 'types' of activism. Johnston and Gulliver (2022) situate advocacy at the heart of all social movements, and activism emerges when action is taken to achieve a desired outcome. They further identify campaigns, tactics, and outcomes as key components of social movements employed by activists. Hands (2010) offers another categorisation that defines three primary modes of activism that can be considered sequential:

1. Protest and dissent as "expression[s] of dissatisfaction with the status quo."
2. Resistance in an active form, such as joining the membership of an organisation dedicated to change.
3. Rebellion as direct action on all scales.

Direct action can include public demonstrations and marches, public sit-ins or die-ins, picketing, and labour strikes. A prominent example is the economic activist group Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions (BDS), led by Palestinian activists, calling for actions against companies and investors who financially or materially support the Israeli settler-colonial occupation and apartheid state (2025). The BDS movement encourages consumer boycotts in conjunction with public pressure on "institutions, unions, and companies to boycott or divest and to isolate Israel academically, culturally, economically, and militarily" until it complies with international law (2025). Johnston & Gulliver (2022) also create a binary division between "conventional actions" that operate within the legal frameworks of a nation-state, such as political campaigning and distributing petitions, and "radical actions" that operate

outside of formal channels of change, such as occupations and blockades of public roadways[4], otherwise known as civil disobedience (Brooks, 2023). In recent years, climate action groups such as Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil have conducted numerous high-profile acts of civil disobedience in the UK, such as blocking the M25 and throwing paint on famous paintings to protest the climate inaction of government actors (Rufo, 2024); both actions have led protesters to receive jail terms ranging from twenty months to five years (Symonds, 2024). Media and digital activism have also proliferated in contemporary activist movements to spread awareness and mobilise communities worldwide through social media and other communication channels. Organisers can coordinate responses through secure digital platforms, such as the Signal messaging app, which governments or institutions cannot track. Notable successful global digital activist movements, sometimes referred to as "hashtag activism" (Jackson et al., 2020), include the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements.[12] Critics of online activism have called it 'slacktivism', a portmanteau that describes a slacking, low-effort type of passive activism where a sense of pride is won despite having done a minimal amount of work without risk or threat of consequence (Cabrera et al., 2017).

Hensby theorises that social movements and collectives share "social, strategic, and emotional experiences among participants," which produce a sense of collective identity that "helps to strengthen and sustain movements beyond their initial mobilisation" (2017, 38). The issue of longevity is particularly noteworthy in the context of student activism at Oxford, as exemplified by the Rhodes Must Fall movement. Polletta and Jasper identify another core component of collective identities: They are imagined alongside physical communities, "involving an act of perception and construction … it is fluid and relational, emerging out of interactions with a number of different audiences, rather than fixed"; in addition, collective identities in turn help shape an individual's sense of self (2001, 298). To further complicate the notion of an 'activist identity', Polletta and Jasper also note that "activists may define their identities in different ways depending on the strategic situation. If they are representing their group to a public audience, they may cast themselves as more unified and more homogeneous than they would in a setting of fellow activists" (294). I adopt Colbert's use of the term movement, that is to "participate in the formation of collective identity through embodied action but as perpetual change, not repetition" (2021, 159). The dynamism of a collective action movement is vital, as activism and its goals do not adhere to a singular

[12] See also Sobande's body of work on British Black women's digital lives (2020), social media activism and brand influences (2024; 2019), and digital diasporic feminist practices, co-authored with Basu (2023).

timeline; hence, the importance of activist imaginaries, as identified by Polletta and Jasper (2001).

Choudry's research on social movements and activist theory is also critical; his work repeatedly emphasises the significance of centring activist voices rather than being "overwritten with accounts by professionalized or academic experts" (Choudry & Kapoor, 2010; see also Choudry, 2007, 2020). The importance of knowledge generated by women of colour participants can be situated outside the academy, particularly if they are organising in student-led groups engaged with wider social justice issues that extend beyond the confines of Oxford. Choudry and Vally also note the importance of foregrounding feminist movements in discussions on contemporary university activism, that it is not only "far from a new phenomenon" but it is imperative to understand and expand on "the generations of feminist organising on campuses confronting patriarchal power relations, sexual violence and harassment" (2020, 17). My research explores these concepts in tandem with Collins' understanding of "intellectual activism" rooted in Black feminist epistemology — activist strategies intended to "speak truth to power [by using] the power of ideas to confront existing power relations" and "speak truth directly to the people" wherein activists are talking to the masses, not just elite classes (2013, 37-39).

In research on student activism, scholars present multiple dimensions that can define university students. Brooks and O'Shea (2021) postulate that students are constructed as learners, consumers, citizens, current and future workers, and socialites (see also Brooks, 2017; Brooks et al., 2022). The authors further argue that since the student-led protests of the 1960s and 70s, there is now an expectation that students be politically engaged and drive social change, despite involving only a minority of students (2021). There remains no clear consensus on the links between HE and the politicisation of students, though longitudinal research is currently being conducted on the subject (Brooks et al., 2025). Student identities are additionally contested because they are perceived as being in a transitional life phase, where they are neither fully adults nor still children; however, Brooks et al. (2022) argue that this framing creates a deficit narrative about students. In turn, their political activity or activism can be more easily dismissed as insignificant. For example, Gopal's discussion of the Rhodes Must Fall movement identifies a theme prevalent in public discourses about university students' calls for decolonisation: the image of the 'over-sensitive' and 'woke' student intent on halting debate rather than activists attempting to facilitate a meaningful

reckoning over Britain's imperial past (2021, 874). Rhodes Must Fall Oxford organisers were depicted as "yet another example of immature students unable to engage in debate" (Bhambra et al., 2018, 22); Ahmed's 2015 essay titled "Against Students" similarly identifies the consequential portrayal of the "'problem student' [as] a constellation of related figures: the consuming student, the censoring student, the over-sensitive student, and the complaining student" (2). These depictions of the coddled student, especially in places of privilege like Oxbridge, serve as a useful excuse to ignore marginalised students' real concerns of oppression and social injustice in their educational environment. In response to these claims, Ahmed asserts that "we need to be too sensitive if we are to challenge what is not being addressed … our feminist political hopes rest with over-sensitive students" (11). By presenting the student activists as a smattering of individuals intent on damaging tradition rather than communities collectively driving social change, the messaging of student activists can often be lost.[13]

Research investigating the links between student activism and identity formation for WoC students in HE is largely missing in recent literature. For example, a set of research conducted by Lewis et al. (2018) on student feminist activism informed the limited extent of the academic literature on anti-sexual violence activism led by students in UK HEIs. Using the same dataset to conduct their analysis, the authors examine the efficacy of feminist communities in HEIs in promoting student activism. Although they report their sample as "purposive," drawing from pre-existing networks of feminist student societies and employing snowball sampling for additional participants, the white feminist outcomes of their sample were evident. Out of a total of 18 UK participants, only one was a non-white woman. The authors acknowledge this skewed sample of race, concluding that "when participating in multi-racial feminist communities, participants were largely uncritical of the role of racial difference, power, and the manifestations of power in their own feminist communities, especially among participants who were white women" (Marine & Lewis, 2019, 898). In a related study, they note that "lack of representation may reinforce a troubling and persistent concern that feminist communities and organising are often over-focused on white women's interests and concerns" (Lewis & Marine, 2018, 143) hence my particular focus on WoC to shift this white-dominated narrative.

[13] See Hensby (2019) for more on the relationship between student activism and media, using the 2010/11 protests against fee increases as the subject.

The application of intersectionality in feminist activism has been investigated by Evans' (2016) work on feminist student societies in UK universities; Evans and Lépinard (2020)'s research on privilege in activist movements; and Charles and Wadia (2017)'s study of young women's activism through their participation in the organisation UK Feminista. Similar research critiquing the neoliberal academy and the marketisation of UK universities has been conducted using intersectional feminist approaches that discuss student perspectives (see Deschner et al., 2020; Atkinson & Standing, 2019; Sharma, 2020). However, not many have a primary focus on racialised women students. Anti-austerity research, and its links with the HE sector, have also been investigated using feminist methods, or with a focus on gender, by Craddock (2020) and Jupp (2021); Phiri (2014) looks at the effects of austerity on WoC academics, and Emejulu's body of research on WoC engaged in anti-austerity activism in Europe is extensive (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019; Emejulu & van der Scheer, 2022; Emejulu & Bassel, 2017, 2023, 2025). However, the data deficits on the participation of racialised women students involved in UK feminist activism remain, signalling the need for more empirical intersectional research on the topic.

2.3 Contemporary student activism at UK universities

Universities have long been a site of activist seedings, with student and academic organisers working for abolition by fighting against the university (Moten & Harney, 2004); challenging the colonial foundations of academia (Smith, 1999); and imagining new, liberatory intellectual and social worlds (la paperperson, 2017). The UK has a robust record of student activism, and contemporary movements have notable historical parallels; for example, the anti-apartheid protests in the 1960s, which saw students suspended for protesting white supremacy in South Africa and Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) and the first student occupation in British history at LSE (Shamshiri, 2024). This section provides a chronology of student activism movements in the UK from the mid-20th century onwards, concluding with the pro-Palestinian global student protests of the present day.

There exists a rich history of student protest at Oxford, with both anti-racism and anti-immigration demonstrations occurring before Black revolutionary Malcolm X spoke at the Oxford Union in 1964 (Tuck, 2014); numerous anti-Vietnam War protests that involved a teach-in at the Oxford Union, the first to take place at a British university (Thomas, 2008), and the creation of the Oxford Vietnam Committee by the leftist political activist Tariq Ali (Mansour, 2017). There remains a faint outline of the 'Hands Off Vietnam' graffiti on the

walls of Keble College across from the Natural History Museum, which was also the initial site of the pro-Palestine encampment at Oxford (see Image 1 in A6). The protests against the Union's invitation of the then-apartheid South Africa's ambassador to the UK in 1985 led to the cancellation of the debate (Tuck, 2014; see Image 2 in A6). The Oxford Union is renowned as a hub of free speech, and consequently, it is often the site of intense controversy. In recent years, it has invited global far-right figures (Smith, 2019) and 'gender-critical' academics to speak (Dunkley et al., 2023), the latter of which led to the creation of the Oxford Trans+ Pride coalition (Larsen, 2023) and a student counter-protester gluing themselves to the floor of the Union during a speaker's visit (Possnett, 2023).

The 2010-11 UK-wide student protests against the Conservative-Liberal coalition government's decision to triple university tuition fees in England to £9,000 per year (now capped at £9,535 for Home fee status undergraduates at Oxford for 2025/26) were extensive, with demonstrations organised by the National Union of Students and the formation of 50 campus occupations (Hensby, 2017).[14] Ibrahim (2014) argues that students were motivated by what they perceived as a violation of their entitlement to affordable higher education, part of a 'moral economy' that rejects the marketisation of further learning. Sampson (2023) and Gagnon (2018) analyse the visceral emotions on display at the protests, with the media portraying student activists as uncivil and aggressive in their tactics – similar rhetoric used to characterise the pro-Palestine student protests in 2024 (Brooks, 2026).

The legacies of anti-apartheid activism of the 20th century were further invoked in the pro-Palestinian global student encampments beginning in 2024, with similar suspensions occurring at the University of Essex, SOAS, and LSE, with the latter disciplining seven students that came to be known as the 'LSE 7' (Cage International, 2024). After widespread criticism, LSE concluded the disciplinary proceedings against the students (Boffey, 2024; Cage International, 2024), and the University of Essex also dropped its cases against students (BRICUP, 2025), though a student at SOAS was expelled for expressing pro-Palestinian views (Tester, 2025). Similar charges were issued and eventually dropped against students at Oxford who were arrested for occupying the University administration building in 2024 (Pollock, 2024). Chapter 7.7 offers a perspective on the Oxford encampments, highlighting the breadth and visibility of the global student pro-Palestinian movement. From physical

[14] Hensby's (2017) monograph is a comprehensive overview of the 2010-11 protests.

encampments, student-led investigations into university assets and investments in apartheid (LSEU Palestine Society, 2024), disrupting multiple graduation ceremonies (Oxford Student News Team, 2024; Elliards, 2025), students have successfully lobbied for divestment and substantial changes to institutional policies and actions complicit in war crimes, as declared by scores of international organisations including the UN Commission and Human Rights Watch (2025).[15]

Another recent significant student-led activist movement at Oxford began in early 2020 when the student group Fossil Free St. John's College began protesting St. John's £8.1 million investments in fossil fuels and corporations that contribute to the climate crisis (Healey, 2020). Protestors occupied the college quad for five days, actions that garnered solidarity from other Oxford colleges through support motions passed in their respective student common rooms and numerous alumni declaring they would withhold donations until the college divested from fossil fuels (Cordery, 2020; Busby, 2020). The momentum from the St. John's occupation led to Oxford agreeing to divest from fossil fuels and commit to a net-zero investment strategy in April 2020, a policy first proposed by the Oxford Climate Justice Campaign (Lovett, 2020). Student-led actions at Oxford have garnered national news coverage, underscoring the University's importance as a locus of collective action and highlighting the need for a critical understanding of Oxford's influence through activism.

The most prominent source of recent literature on student activism at Oxford is focused on the Rhodes Must Fall movement. Rhodes Must Fall Oxford (RMFO) originated in 2015, inspired by the Rhodes Must Fall movement initiated by Black South African students at the University of Cape Town in South Africa in March 2015 (Ahmed, 2020). The history of RMF in South Africa is well-documented in academic writing, most notably by Kwoba et al. in *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire* (2018).[16] Daley sums up the cultural impact of RMFO: "The fact that a student movement was received so viscerally outside the academy, both nationally and internationally, demonstrates not only the centrality of Oxford to British elite society, but also that the university is very much part of the wider society — not apart from it" (2018, 78). Gebrial, an RMFO organiser, noted that the group's efforts in Oxford attracted an intense amount of media fervour and

[15] The most notable UK example is King's College, Cambridge, agreeing to divest from arms industries after pressure from student groups and external organisations (ICJP, 2025; Paixao, 2025).
[16] See also the RMFO organisers' 2020 interview with *The New Statesman* (Rea, 2021) and the original #RhodesMustFallOxford WordPress blog (n.d.).

interest by the British public, in part due to "Oxford University's centrality to Britain's intellectual and cultural identity" that led to RMFO serving as a flashpoint for student activism (2018, 20). She further writes that RMFO brought "the call of decolonisation back to the heart of empire" wherein the institution of Oxford University required interventions that went beyond the original intention of toppling of Cecil Rhodes' statue at Oriel College (2018, 8). The RMFO's characterisation of Oxford as the core of the British Empire speaks to the University's academic and cultural capital and its legacy as a colonial institution, where Rhodes' statue remains standing today (see also Schwoerer, 2019 on neo-coloniality at Oxbridge).

In addition, Ahmed's study of RMFO recounts "frictions around gender and patriarchy among student activists, and more specifically, variations in understandings of intersectionality" that led to an inequitable distribution of labour amongst male and female RMFO activists, wherein the women organised large-scale events such as marches, but were so burnt out by the end of the process that the public faces of the event were seen to be the men because they had the energy to speak at the protest (2020, 298). In an interview with three Black women of colour in RMFO, they emphasised that the movement considers itself intersectional, but "it doesn't mean necessarily that it's non-hierarchical. Or at least suffers from symptoms of hierarchical patriarchal structures that it claims to be fighting" (Henriques, 2016). These internal examples of sexism within RMFO underscore the need for a gendered analysis of student activism; once again, there recurs a parallel to the pro-Palestinian encampments of 2024, where WoC participants reported an unequal gendered division of labour in their efforts.[17]

Activism against the proliferation of sexual violence in HEIs is also a pressing contemporary cause, specifically at Oxford. To foreground, the vast majority of literature on sexual violence (a term that encompasses sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape, and other instances of gender-based violence) is situated in the context of the United States.[18] Sexual violence in UK HEIs is primarily researched from a policy or practitioner standpoint (see Anitha & Lewis, 2018) or, through Phipps and others' bodies of work, on institutional 'lad' cultures and the abuses of student-staff relationships (Phipps, 2018; Page et al., 2019; Phipps

[17] See 4.5 for participants' experiences of emotional and physical labour in activism.
[18] Student activism against sexual violence in the US has been much more prominent due to applicable laws such as Title IX of the Educational Amendments in 1972 that protect students from sex-based discrimination.

& McDonnell, 2022). Though crucial to the development of the field, the existing literature does not adequately address the interlocking oppressions and pressures faced by WoC student activists tackling social inequalities in UK universities.[19] In the Oxford context, there has been a steady increase in sexual violence prevention-based activism in recent years, such as the work done by the student group It Happens Here aimed at raising awareness about sexual violence on campus and supporting survivors (2025). In 2021, Al Jazeera published an investigation titled "Degrees of Abuse" on the rampant sexual violence that occurs in UK universities (Howlett & Davies). Moreover, Bovill et al. emphasise not only the power of student activism to effect change but also the importance of fostering community amongst student activists combating sexual violence in ways "supportive of transitional change, given the transient nature of students on campus" (2020, 179). Several authors raised the issues of temporality in student activism; for example, Henriques and Abushouk (2018) write that at Oxford and other HEIs, "there exists no real sense of institutional memory, which means that many student organisations either end up repeating work that has already been done by their predecessors or are too invested in claiming for themselves the coveted title of 'first…'" (299). The literature reinforces a harsh reality: the pace at which university life functions, especially at Oxford, can hinder the long-term prospects of student activist movements in the UK.[20]

2.4. Spatial politics and affordances of activism

Theories of spatial politics are integral to my analysis and understanding of how WoC students navigate the spaces and places of the University of Oxford as a "continuum of global to intimate interrelations" (Low, 2016, citing Massey, 2005). In turn, I look to theories of embodiment and spatial politics articulated by WoC scholars such as Daigle and Ramírez, who conceptualise space as "laden with histories of conquest and resistance that demand our attention" (2021, 216). 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" (216). On spatial politics of universities, Daley writes that "Racialised Others in the Western academy learn like outsiders looking in … this lived

[19] A notable exception is *Complaint!* by Sara Ahmed (2021) which outlines complaints against the university as method and actively involves the voices of student collectives.
[20] The temporalities and sustainability of activism are discussed in 5.6.

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*" (2018, 82, emphasis in original). Puwar's feminist treatise *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* (2004) uses the elite spatialities of Oxbridge as a recurring example, arguing that Oxbridge is a "white space which is associated with refinement [and] can 'civilise' otherwise wild bodies," (most notably racialised and gendered bodies (113). The 'dissonant bodies' of women, people of colour, and the working class, viewed as incongruent with the foundations of Oxbridge as elite institutions, become bound up in language, dress, etiquette, and so forth that grant individuals social capital in rarefied spaces. 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 political and academic actors.

A germane area of inquiry to my research is the field of critical university studies (CUS). CUS posits that the contemporary university is grounded in neoliberal, marketized desires and thus critical scholars must abandon our "attachments to academic institutionality … that we can build ethical worlds we claim investments in" (Singh & Vora, 2023, 49). Boggs and Mitchell further define CUS as "predicated on the knowledge that the university has always been both insufficient as the presumptive site from which justice will come and far more complicit with the violences it claims to redress than is frequently acknowledged" (2018, 444). As a pedagogical practice, CUS encourages students to critically examine their experiences in HE and the inequities within the system, enabling them to demand better outcomes (Arthur & Renshaw, 2017). Ahmed's work is especially influential in framing the affective registers of the university that illuminate inequality, with a focus on how CUS works to "recognise how power and (in)equities orient people throughout the project of the University [and] interrogate the way these (in)equities are promoted through structures of feeling" (Khoo et al., 2021, 93). Ahmed's research on the cultural politics of emotions and its spatial and affectual affordances informs my conceptual thinking, especially when investigating what she terms 'queer' subjects (2014).[21] The spatial politics of Oxford dictate that certain bodies (namely, elite, white, male bodies) are made to feel comfortable, with comfort as the "effect of bodies being able to 'sink' into spaces that have already taken

[21] 'Queer' here is not limited to sexual identity, but all subjects viewed as foreign or strange by institutions, i.e. immigrants (Ahmed, 2014).

their shape" (Ahmed, 2014, 152). Ahmed further argues that when bodies cannot 'sink into' spaces, this can be read as a 'queering' of said space (2014); activism by WoC students at Oxford can fit into such a narrative. The spatialisations of Oxford underscore Low's assertion that "power relations always underlie the social construction of space and are embedded in race, class and gender inequality … space and its arrangement and allocation are assumed to be transparent, but they rarely are" (2017, 69). The affordances of gendered and racialised spaces for WoC in Oxford are central to my analysis in chapter seven.

In 2004, Moten and Harney declared that "the only possible relationship to the university today is a criminal one" (in the context of American institutions) and those within the university must leverage its resources for abolition (101). Over two decades later, calls to do so persist in the UK HE sector. Bailey and Freedman's 2011 work, *The Assault on Universities: A Manifesto for Resistance,* outlines revolutions against the neoliberalisation of UK universities; in a transnational context, Bozalek and Zembylas (2023) connect colonialism, the climate crisis, and the HE industry to offer a critique of academia and the future of university studies. Gopal, a Cambridge professor, names the university as an "inevitably compromised" space (2021, 889) and writes that "the university cannot be decolonised independently of society and economy, but it can be a site where these questions are frontally addressed towards wider change, not least in habits of mind" (883). Moreover, Massey's theorisations on the conjunctions of space and time are crucial to understanding the spatial affordances of Oxford, stressing the importance of relationalities: "Identities are relational in ways that are spatio-temporal" (2005, 380) and "space as well as place is understood as relational and therefore grounded, real" (382). In one of the few empirical studies on WoC students in the UK, Samatar et al. researched how female students of colour "negotiate and repurpose university spaces" by "[carving] out counter spaces for survival" in hostile UK university environments (2021, 718). 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" (728). Their conclusions underscore the need to investigate how the spatial politics of the University of Oxford, where colonial legacies permeate the institution, impact student activism by women of colour (Oxford and Empire, 2018). The nuances of localities are central to research at Oxford, where students are immersed in the temporalities of the university, not only regarding the eight-week terms but also the relative brevity of a three-year undergraduate degree.

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 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" (2019, 191). This mirrors Henriques and Abushouk's 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" (2018, 309). *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).

2.5 Conceptual aims

To share and present the stories of women of colour students as worthy of being recorded and disseminated, rigorous empirical research must be conducted on present-day university students who identify with and acknowledge the need for this type of transgressive academic work that criticises academia. Similarly, the research of Sriprakash et al. on education and the settler-colonial state calls for dialogues that "recognise and speak directly to the assumptive frameworks of whiteness in education – the entwined material, cognitive and affective economies of whiteness" (2022, 86) that operate in the academy. Here, the authors echo hooks' epistemology of education as the practice of freedom while naming the "ever-present hope and violence of education" wherein we must divest from whiteness and both "hold in tension, and work actively with, the capacity of education to be hopeful *and* violent" (88) in service of revolutionary change.

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 research on minority women in Europe, where they "redefine minority women's knowledge as expert knowledge" (2017, xiii). This approach avoids replicating harmful patterns that position those on the margins against one another and avoids hierarchical relations, instead favouring an intersectional model of relationality that focuses on collectivity and solidarity. Naming women of colour students as experts on their own lived experiences can mitigate the

"competing marginalities" that led to previous feminist political solidarities failing (Fellows & Razack, 1998, 335). The authors further 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 hierarchical systems" (335). 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 university environments.

The theoretical foundations of my research are grounded in intersectional feminist theory and its applications in political and empirical practice, which I examine in conjunction with theories of women of colour feminisms and critical university studies. Feminist research "continues to grapple with who is privileged epistemologically and how this affects the representation of voices and the interpretation of findings" (Reid & Frisby, 2011, 5). I draw from Ahmed's work on gendered and racialised environments of the academy; she considers "fragility as the wear and tear of living a feminist life" (2017, 163) when engaging in institutional "diversity work," a term I also take to encompass student activism in universities. Thus, the methodologies I employed aimed to honour the labour of the participants and the potential for re-traumatisation when recalling their experiences. Furthermore, I do not want to collapse the participants' identities into a sole signifier; the matter of self-identification is a fluid and ongoing process. By enacting a narrative approach, most consequentially in the interview phase, participants were able to repeatedly self-identity and contend with their choices of terminology, understanding that such terms may shift depending on the context of use. The conjunctions of each theoretical dimension are intended to underscore my commitments to the project as a woman of colour and a scholar, with the intention of producing research that has repercussions beyond the academy and into communities of women of colour by embracing the contradictions and complexities found in our intersectional narratives.

I placed a strong emphasis on reflexivity and relationality, especially when interacting with participants. I recognise that by recruiting 'women of colour' through participant self-identification with the term, I am already asking them to declare a politics in association with the study. Throughout the research process, I stressed that such terms are meant to be interrogated and deconstructed – identity 'sticking' relative to other concepts can be understood as a speculative act (including the prevalence of the term 'woman of colour' compared to other common identity markers such as BAME, POC, BIPOC, etc), not as a

fixed one. There also does not exist a singular definition of what 'successful' activism looks like; it could be the achievement of specific, targeted goals, but could also encompass "the development of collective values, or flexibility and adaptability that might be regarded as contextual, or dismissed as by-products of the main purpose of activism, but which nonetheless contribute to defining and determining goals in the first place" (Rye, 2024, 135). Furthermore, by emphasising that the goal of the project is not to reach a consensus on what 'good' student activism or feminism is, I strove for a research praxis that wholly engaged with and for participants' growth in tandem with my own.

Moreover, there are acute threats to activism in the UK due to attempts by successive governments, both Labour and Conservative, to suppress freedoms of protest. Anti-protest bills in Parliament have sought to criminalise peaceful protest, increase stop-and-search tactics, and label sweeping categories of actions as 'disruptive' and therefore punishable by law (Amnesty International UK, 2025). The Court of Appeal ruled in May 2025 that the changes to the Public Order Act, which restricted protest rights, were unlawful and thus void (Public Law Project, 2025; Liberty, 2025). The 'hostile environment' in the UK towards migrants and international students seeks to further quell activism. A report by the Migrants' Rights Network found that 56% of international students did not engage in activism at university because they were afraid of potential repercussions against their visas, despite 72% of surveyed students having been involved in activism before their studies began (2024).[22] Time, the precarity of one's immigration and financial status, legal threats, and antagonistic media rhetoric against protests in the UK all serve to deter students from participating in activism; yet, contemporary student activists persevere in their campaigns. Thus, the insights from this research are ever relevant to (inter)national conversations on politics, protest, and justice.

The contributions of this project lend themselves to interdisciplinary conversations that centre feminist research at the heart of critiques of the UK HE sector. The research builds upon research on racialisation and inequality in the UK academy (see Ahmed, 2012; Arday and Mirza, 2018; Bhambra et al., 2018) and the vital work feminist activists are conducting in the field from issues that span sexual violence on university campuses (see research by The 1752 Group; Phipps, 2020; Bull et al., 2022) to decolonisation initiatives in the curriculum

[22] In the US, undocumented college students face a similar anxiety around their immigration status and decisions to participate in activism (Manalo-Pedro et al., 2024).

led by women of colour (see Arshad et al., 2021; Begum & Saini, 2019; Jivraj, 2020; Rai & Campion, 2022). I build upon this existing body of literature by documenting the experiences of women of colour at Oxford, which can then be scaled to have sector-wide repercussions on the institutional and intellectual transformations needed to best support multiply marginalised women of colour in UK universities as they engage in activism and beyond. In the context of Oxford as an HEI, I explored a wide range of engagement routes undertaken by women of colour students. However, they were not necessarily involved in what is typically considered feminist or 'women's activism,' such as issues of reproductive justice or gender-based violence. Therefore, what I consider to be feminist activism, or activism enacted by feminists, encompasses a range of issues, politics, and movement aims to be as epistemically varied as possible. The choice to use the University of Oxford as the research locale is due to its prestige, influence, and cultural capital in the UK and internationally, whose policies and practices inform changes in the wider HE sector. The voices of women of colour students offer institutional critiques of UK universities situated in the broader context of student activism against power structures and inequalities in HE, and link the concerns and struggles of women of colour students and their activism to global social justice causes.

Chapter 3: Methodology

"Everything that happens to women of colour from time immemorial has been about race, class, and gender, and about religion, disability, sexuality, and all of the myriad layered ways that we are constructed and unseen … Intersectionality is about understanding that multiple layers of politics and economics affect your life and about who gets to decide whose lives matter."

Heidi Safia Mirza, interviewed by Line Nyhagen, in Intersectional Feminist Research Methodologies (Eds. Cooke & Nyhagen, 2025, 21)

3.1 Research design and methodology

This thesis is titled "Collectives in/of Solidarity" – two concepts key to my research design. I embrace Olufemi's statement that solidarity is difficult to define due to its dynamism and divisions; a feminist version of the definition can "understand solidarity as a strategic coalition of individuals who are invested in a collective vision for the future" (2020, 136). She also defines solidarity as imbued with affect: "Often it means bearing witness to the violence that takes place across the world and marking it where you are" (137); in the context of Oxford, women of colour students are bearing witness to and experiencing the harms perpetuated by the colonial institution. Intersectional feminist research is an embodied practice that examines the interrelated effects of societal oppression, including racism, classism, sexism, misogyny, and so on. Since I both research *as* a woman of colour and conduct research *on* our experiences, it is vital to embed women of colour feminist theories in my work. Salazar Perez et al. (2022) present the possibilities inherent in implementing women of colour feminisms in educational research, asserting that by acting in solidarity, women of colour feminists can create powerful coalitions as "a site of methodological revolution" (410). Women of colour feminisms have resulted in transformative pedagogical and material collaborations within and beyond academia that address the subjectivities of race and gender, most notably through the continued publication of the ground-breaking anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour,* whose fortieth-anniversary edition was published in 2021 (eds. Moraga & Anzaldúa).

My research employed mixed qualitative methods in a quasi-emergent, phased design that combined narrative interviews and ethnography with two student groups. Phase one was the interview stage, where I interviewed 47 women of colour students; phase two was the ethnographic fieldwork. I conducted nine site visits with the Oxford Feminist Society and

three with the Oxford Women of Colour Society throughout the 2023–2024 academic year. These phases were not strictly delineated, with interview opportunities arising throughout the ethnographic process. I applied an intersectional feminist research methodology along with critical inquiry to investigate my research questions, approaches that seek to question and challenge hegemonic power structures employed here to reimagine socially just futures for women of colour. Demar's (2024) call for feminist researchers to view their work "not simply as an academic exercise, but also as a means to support social movements and to integrate multiple parts of ourselves" (205) is a tenet of my research ethos, especially when the university is the site of inquiry. Demar asserts that feminist researchers must stay aware of institutional contexts to develop 'lateral power' that extends beyond academic discourse to tangible collaborations for liberation outside the academy (2024). The following sections dissect the rationale behind my chosen methods and map how an intersectional feminist research methodology was applied to each component throughout the year-long fieldwork process.

Intersectional feminist research methodology: Criticality and relationalities

An intersectional feminist research methodology accounts for the nuances of participants' shifting circumstances, especially concerning their lives outside of their time at university, which may have then influenced their decisions as students. Using feminist narrative methodology in the one-to-one interview phase gave participants the freedom to tell their story as they saw fit, as the approach 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). There is also an inherent reflexive process embedded within feminist relational principles whereby research can be considered as "a vehicle to engage in reflexive struggle and transformation" (Museus & Wang, 2022, 24) as opposed to extraction or reiterations of trauma. I considered participants autonomous storytellers of their lived experiences and sought to showcase their narratives in my analysis.

Feminist research is, for me, an inherently relational process that can be framed as an "act of devotion to the movements and relationships that inform our thinking" (Demar, 2024, 217). In turn, one can view intersectional feminist research methodologies as grounded in resistance against the patriarchal norms of positivist social sciences research, whose power structures and ideologies were moulded through cisgender, heterosexual, and patriarchal

thinking (Strunk & Betties, 2019). A relational politics of research considers not only the power relations between researcher and participant but is a "core construct for intersectionality that infuses intersectionality's guiding premises" (Collins, 2019, 276). An intersectional research design that "intentionally and intimately accounts for the role of relationships opens up possibilities to collectively refuse individualism and foster solidarity" (Museus & Wang, 2022, 26). I forged what I consider to be meaningful relationships with my participants, and they, too, with one another, as many of them knew each other before and outside of this research project. I touch on the impact of this research and participants' emotions towards their involvement in Chapter 9.1. As such, my research interviews were conducted using narrative methods. Rogers and Brown view narrative interviews as "'occasions' which produce a contextualised, subjective account and a 'narrative subject'; both of which are situated in time and space" (2023, 4). In the context of Oxford students, I understood the participant interviews as occurring in specific windows of their educational experiences, often at a critical time of identity formation and development at university.[23]

There is an argument for women of colour's participation acting as counter-narratives, wherein "stories which contest, resist, or misalign in some way with dominant narratives" are offered as counter-narratives (Rogers & Brown, 2023, 4; see also Miller et al., 2020). I question the need to frame research with marginalised populations as 'counter' to a narrative norm because it serves to reinforce the 'traditional' white, male, heterosexual stories told about Oxford as perpetually dominant. Instead, I view narrative research as practising a relational ethics, particularly when working with women of colour, because "it allows them time and space to express their feelings in the form of a dialogue" (Ghorashi, 2021, 49), which may not have previously been afforded to them. Fraser and Taylor's research placed "a premium on hearing and co-constructing stories through shared discussions with participants [that] saw how storytelling practices can be energising for participants, revealing of new or different experiences, or ways to articulate experience, and most importantly, poignantly illustrative of how the personal is political" (2022, 227). In my research, this element of narrative research emerged on numerous occasions, such as participants' reconsideration of their identities and relationship to the label 'activists' throughout our conversation.

[23] Extensive research has been published on students' identity development and self-empowerment throughout university, especially for those from marginalised communities; see Le et al., 2016; Buckingham et al., 2023; Covarrubias, 2023.

The emphasis on criticality and critical analysis was an integral methodological principle intertwined with reflexivity. Attending to how power structures and institutional dynamics operate at Oxford concerning the impacts on participants' lived experiences allows for a narrative that recognises and prioritises those on the margins. Denzin (2016) writes that critical qualitative research is a "moral, allegorical, and therapeutic project" (10) that at its core engages utopian pedagogies of hope. I consider Denzin's designation in tandem with the tenets of critical university studies (CUS), one of the theoretical underpinnings of my research, which is characterised as taking a critical, activist stance against the effects of neoliberalism and marketisation in HE (Khoo et al., 2021). Women of colour scholars in particular view CUS' interdisciplinary contributions as "calls to action that decenter the university's desires and invite us to center our own (feminist, abolitionist, decolonial) goals in our pedagogy and research" (Singh & Vora, 2023, 49). Rejecting institutional norms by "taking from the institution to serve other ends rather than enforcing its norms" (49) is how I sought to enact a critical reflexive methodology, assessing at all stages of the research whether my actions were benefiting the university *over* the interests of the participants. Disentangling the embedded forms of power and politics in an institution as powerful as the University of Oxford continues to be a challenging endeavour, and my decisions as a researcher funded and supported by the institution cannot be viewed as neutral. However, following the ethics of critical qualitative inquiry means that I am actively, purposefully evaluating my interpretations of power, politics, and relationships, not necessarily in search of a liberatory university, but a liberatory world for women of colour.

Quasi-emergent research design

The deployment of a mixed methods study rooted in intersectional feminism and decolonial approaches can execute a qualitative framework that is "both collaborative and in the service of liberation" (Nguyen, 2021, 260). In keeping with this structure, the research design was flexible and became quasi-emergent as numerous decisions were made and altered throughout the process. Archival research was discussed as a possibility in Trinity term 2023. I enquired about the available resources with the archivists at Oxford's original four women's colleges (Lady Margaret Hall, Somerville, St Hugh's, St Hilda's). Since my study focuses on contemporary and current students, I requested materials from the 1970s onwards, as women were first granted admission into the formerly all-male Oxford colleges in 1974. However, the archivists informed me that the student records from this period are currently closed and unavailable in the public domain. In addition, they hold little records on

the experiences of women of colour students in the colleges, primarily documenting their admission and deaths rather than student experiences.

I originally intended to follow a phased approach, wherein 'Phase 1' consisted of interviews with the participants discussing their broader engagement with activism, and 'Phase 2' was to be participant ethnography focused on issues related to gender and race, with further interviews as needed. The two phases amalgamated over the 2023-2024 academic year: I interviewed 24 students in Michaelmas 2023; in Hilary term 2024, I began conducting ethnography with the Oxford Feminist Society (FemSoc) and simultaneously interviewed 14 more participants. In Trinity term 2024, I continued ethnography with FemSoc, began ethnography with the Oxford Women of Colour Society (WocSoc), and interviewed nine additional students.[24] Eight students' involvement resulted from our meeting during ethnographic encounters, for example, at FemSoc events or a WocSoc committee meeting. As I interacted with participants engaged in both spheres of research, there was no longer a distinct separation between 'interview-only' versus 'ethnography-only' actors. The ethnography conducted with FemSoc is undoubtedly richer than my experience with WocSoc due to my extended time with the former, its more established history as a student society, and the greater level of access I was granted. I concluded my ethnography at the start of Michaelmas term 2024 by attending shifts at both societies' Freshers' Fair stalls at the Examination Schools.

The original plan for ethnography was to be conducted with both the Oxford Feminist Society and Class Act, the Oxford Student Union's campaign for working-class and state school-educated students. This would have provided a contrast between class-based activism and feminism-based activism; furthermore, my initial outreach to the Women of Colour Society in Michaelmas 2023 and Hilary 2024 terms was unsuccessful because the society was largely inactive. I interviewed the 2023-24 Class Act co-chairs, both of whom were white, and interviewed one of the 2024-25 co-chairs, whose committee is a majority of white people. Class Act also did not host events in Hilary and Trinity that would have been conducive to participant ethnography; for example, the only event I attended of note was their Annual General Meeting on 27/01/24, where they endorsed candidates for the Student Union election, and those decisions later became contested due to allegations of unethical behaviour

[24] See A3 and A4 for more information on each group.

(Dennison & Outram, 2024). Given the majority-white makeup of their committee and the fact that they did not host any events during Trinity term 2024, the decision was made not to continue with the ethnography on Class Act.

It is also important to recognise the material conditions under which the research took place, most notably the changing dynamics of the University's relationship with pro-Palestinian activism. The timeline of this research meant that discussing the ongoing Palestinian genocide was inevitable, and participants did not shy away from speaking about and critiquing the University's inaction, given its global power and influence, nor did I attempt to sidestep the issue. Instead, participants and I often spoke frankly about the topic, and I sought out their opinions directly by maintaining communication with them as the protests escalated (see 7.7 for more). Student activism naturally links itself to global issues and ongoing political events, and Oxford Action for Palestine's (OA4P) decision to set up an encampment in Trinity term 2024 to protest the University's links to settler-colonialism, scholasticide, and genocide through its investments resonated across the institution.[25] Discussion about OA4P and the, at times, violent reactions the movement spurred from the University formed a significant element of my interactions with participants. Many were directly involved with the encampments and organising alongside the dozens of other allied encampments in the UK and worldwide. I offered all participants, regardless of when our interview had occurred, the option to speak with me again or provide a written statement on the OA4P encampment in Trinity term, particularly after the University called the police on protestors outside of Wellington Square; I then conducted three follow-up interviews and received two statements in response.

On 8 July 2024, OA4P chose to end the Gaza Solidarity Encampment at the Radcliffe Camera after receiving threats of legal action from the university, which were issued after Trinity term ended and the majority of students had left Oxford for the summer (2024). The decision speaks to the University's use of time to its advantage to 'wait out' activist movements; this tactic is explored in chapter five. This research project was not designed to debate the Israel-Palestine conflict, nor am I equipped to analyse it – I offer these caveats as I continue to discuss pro-Palestinian activism in Oxford throughout this thesis and assert that my political and moral convictions are for a free Palestine and liberation for all. Student

[25] The term scholasticide was coined by Nabulsi (as cited in Ahmad & Vulliamy, 2009). In the context of scholasticide in Palestine today, see Desai et al. (2025), Alarabeed (2025), Hajir & Qato (2025), and Scholars Against the War on Palestine (2024).

activism, especially the movements Oxford saw in 2024, proves that change, however slowly, is possible.

Researcher reflexivity

I strove to be continually reflexive throughout the research; when working with multiply marginalised communities, I must be aware of my positionality as a researcher from a similar background while recognising that I hold power and privilege as a member of the research academy at Oxford. I am conscious of the 'insider-outsider' dilemma as articulated by Herr and Anderson (2015), who write that these dual positionalities are fluid, not fixed, depending on the research context. The limits of my power as a researcher rely on the setting; much as I understand the Oxford educational system and the student experience, I did not attend Oxford as an undergraduate student, nor am I from the United Kingdom. Given that 38 out of 47 participants were domestic British students and 40 total undergraduates, my differing experiences as an international graduate student and diasporic woman of colour factored into my relationships with the participants. However, the benefit of sharing a common Oxford-specific lexicon allowed for a more effortless flow of conversation, which would have been more challenging to maintain were I not an Oxford student.

Just as my experiences as a Taiwanese woman of colour cannot represent the experiences of all women of colour, I am cognizant that the participants' experiences of their identities do not reflect their entire community. I am also aware that I cannot claim to relate with every participant wholly; for example, as an East Asian immigrant, I perhaps had more in common with other East Asian women students compared to an Afro-Caribbean student, despite both identities falling under the category of 'women of colour.' Though there are limits to my understanding of student activists' experiences, I related on a foundational level since my participants and I shared at least some commonalities by identifying as women of colour. When interacting with participants, women of colour feminist methodology states that "as we elevate interpersonal relationships with those around us, we respect their intrapersonal relationship with themselves" (Salazar Perez et al., 2022, 415). A woman of colour feminist methodology is useful here because its histories are unapologetically identity-based; its approaches allow researchers to honour their women of colour selves and facilitate reflexivity as a critical element of the project.

During the interviews, I was especially attentive to the linguistic frameworks used to describe the study, taking care to avoid binary categories that construe or apply a measure of 'good' or 'bad' to the types of activism and activities of participants. In practice, this meant declaring my positionality more clearly, such as sharing my experiences of Oxford, both good and bad, and allowing fluidity for participants' responses and their potential amendments throughout the project without my judgment impeding their answers. I emphasised to my participants that my capacity as a researcher does not involve evaluating or critiquing their methods, intentions, or goals of activism. To foreground their agency and voice as part of the research process, I offered all participants the opportunity to review the transcript of our conversation and make changes as they saw fit. This fed into a broader enactment of participant validation, where I interpret and analyse alongside my participants rather than *on* them. For example, one participant chose to remove any mentions of her college in our conversation retroactively; another expressed worry that a comment she made about her tutor not proactively assigning texts by non-white authors would be traced back to her. Anonymising the first participant's college was done during her review of our transcript, where her tracked changes removing mentions of her college were immediately accepted; in the case of the latter participant, I reassured her during the interview that her contributions would be pseudonymised and the comment could be removed if she was uncomfortable. She ultimately chose to keep the comment in her review, but was aware that she had the option to amend her decision until the thesis was submitted.

I value the level of trust participants had in me to maintain confidentiality, given that for most, I was essentially a stranger, if a fellow Oxford student, at the time of our meeting. My decisions throughout the research process, as detailed in 3.2, were modelled after a "trusting, relational process in which researcher and participant create meaning together" (Rogers & Brown, 2024, 5) as a central pillar of the narrative interviewing method. I was able to demonstrate my commitment and engender the trust of participants during the ethnography as I kept returning to events and conversing with repeat attendees at FemSoc and WocSoc, where I was able to reiterate my feminist politics and research aims with the support of the societies' leaders.

3.2 Research process

Narrative method

A narrative interview approach is premised on the natural elicitation of participants' stories in an unstructured, in-depth manner with minimal influence from the interviewer. My approach to interviewing was adapted from Jovchelovitch & Bauer's (2000) phases of the narrative interview:

1. Initiation – I introduced the research and its motivations and explained the narrative interview format.
2. Main narration with no interruptions – The core question asked at the start of each interview to begin the conversation: "Can you tell me about your journey with student activism at Oxford?"
3. Questioning phase after participants indicate a coda – Posing questions specific to their experiences at Oxford, probing into their earlier responses.
4. Concluding talk – Stopping the audio recording and reiterating the welfare resources available, gifting the participants a thank-you card, and writing down my post-interview reflections.

Since I was not asking students to recount their life stories, only a particular vignette of their university life, their use of the narrative method varied. Some participants shared a significant 'main narration' that made up the bulk of their interview, yet others required more frequent prompting throughout, which I drew from their previous answers. The phases above also do not account for the fact that my research participants are women of colour, and therefore, their and my positionalities do not fit neatly within the 'no opinions and attitude questions' format prescribed in the above second phase of interviews (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). I took care to ask participants about their daily lives outside of the research framework, such as progress in their academic work and social life at Oxford, to build rapport before and after the interview.

Facilitating a frank discussion on race and gender where I shared my own experiences of navigating Oxford as a woman of colour allowed the creation of an "affective [interviewing] experience" where the "'use of self' mediates [the interaction] and offers

opportunities to connect with participants in meaningful ways" (Fraser & Taylor, 2022, 228). I frequently provided empathetic responses and encouragement during our conversations to ensure participants felt comfortable sharing intimate stories with me and to foster a research relationship founded on empowerment rather than neutrality. I also shared my lived experiences that echoed theirs, such as examples of racism or discrimination I faced at Oxford, to reassure them they were not alone; many of them also directly asked about my opinions on the topics we discussed. Such interactions reflected the need to cultivate moments in the university where "oppressed people come together to provide support and solidarity for one another, examine our conditions and develop our understanding of truly liberatory politics. These spaces might help mitigate the burden of existing in a space that might not feel completely our own" (Olufemi, 2019, 49). These dialogues strengthened the interview process because, with their prompting, I offered my vulnerability to match theirs and reflected alongside them. I discuss the benefits of having shared experiences as Oxford students further in 3.3.

Interview questions

To begin the interviews, 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.

Additional questions asked in multiple interviews:

- What has your experience been like at Oxford?
- How do you feel in the spaces of Oxford?
- Do you think the University is receptive to student activism?
- What do you think of the term 'women of colour'?
- What does solidarity mean to you?
- Do you consider yourself an activist?
- Can you tell me more about your role? (Ex. JCR/MCR committee, society committee)
- Final question: What is your hope for Oxford?

At the end of each interview, I asked participants to choose a pseudonym and to self-identify in whatever they chose. Most shared their ethnicity, though this was not required;

they also commonly shared their pronouns, gender identity, sexuality, class status, and religion.

Interview options and provisions

Participants had the option of engaging with the research through the following methods:

- Sit-down, in-person interview – 31 participants
- Online interview on Microsoft Teams – 9 participants
- Walking interviews – 5 participants
- Creative responses – No participants chose this option. One person expressed interest in submitting a creative writing response to the interview but could not as a result of her academic commitments.

The latter two methods operated under the broader premise of narrative feminist research wherein participants are encouraged to weave their personal and political lives that feed into a larger story about women of colour at Oxford. The walking interviews are aligned with participant-directed narrative frameworks that foreground the importance of spatiality. Participants chose the initial meeting spot, which included University Parks, Christ Church Meadow, Port Meadow, the grounds of Worcester College, and around the streets of the Examination Schools on the High Street. The interviews that took place in natural green areas of Oxford largely did not address any flashpoints of spatial politics, as it was not where participants had the majority of their academic or social interactions.

As I could not pay the participants any money, the least I could do was offer them my time and guidance, should they want it. I gave each participant a handwritten thank-you card after the interview and repeatedly emphasised my open availability if they wanted to speak further, including but not limited to the research project, postgraduate study advice, career ambitions, and so on. For example, Nina, a linguistics student, was interested in pursuing a language education master's degree, and I was able to share information about programmes offered at the Department of Education. I considered these to be necessary welfare provisions that comprised a core part of my reciprocal relationship with the participants, recognising the emotional labour I asked of them through sharing their stories. For example, I sent out an email to all participants on 28/05/2024 after the University called the police on pro-

Palestinian protestors outside of Wellington Square (Pollock, 2024), inviting them to share any opinions or reflections on Oxford's relationship to this political moment. I received two written statements and conducted three follow-up interviews after sending out this email, which demonstrates the participants' willingness to engage at various stages of the research process – Ella, who was my very first interviewee in November 2023, was one person who replied to this email – and their personal concern for the events that unfolded at the University. The visibility of the demonstrations in spring 2024 could not be ignored, especially in a project that explicitly focuses on student activism, and I felt it would be disingenuous to myself, and the overall research process, were I not to address the events and express my solidarity (see Table 1 for a full research timeline breakdown).

Table 1 – Research Timeline

Research Timeline		
DATE	**MILESTONE**	**NOTES**
MT 2023	Transfer of Status	
MT 2023	Participant Recruitment	Direct outreach via JCR and MCR contacts; Social media recruitment and snowball sampling
MT 2023	Participant Interviews	24 Interviews
HT 2024	Participant Interviews	14 Interviews
TT 2024	Participant Interviews	9 Interviews
HT 2024	Ethnography: Oxford Feminist Society	2 Events
TT 2024	Ethnography: Oxford Feminist Society	3 Events
HT & TT 2024	Ethnography: Oxford Feminist Society	2 Interviews with President & Vice-President
HT & TT 2024	Coding Rounds 1 & 2	
TT 2024	Ethnography: Oxford Women of Colour Society	2 Events
TT 2024	Ethnography: Oxford Women of Colour Society	6 Interviews with Committee Members
TT 2024	Oxford Action for Palestine (OA4P) Encampment	Encampment set up; volunteered and ran teach-in event (see 6.6)
TT 2024	Follow-Up Interviews re: OA4P and university response	3 Interviews; 2 written statements (all from previous participants)
MT 2024	Coding Round 3	
MT 2024	Ethnography: Oxford Feminist Society	Freshers' Fair Stall Representative
MT 2024	Ethnography: Oxford Feminist Society	Freshers' Fair Stall Representative
HT 2025	Coding Review	
TT 2025	Confirmation of Status	

Table 1 – Timeline charting DPhil research until the successful Confirmation of Status, after which all my time was dedicated to completing the thesis.

3.3 Data collection: Interviews

Participant recruitment and sampling strategies

By using a mix of snowball sampling, wherein existing participants identify other potential participants within their networks (Dutta, 2014), and my prior knowledge of Oxford's student activism communities, I was successful in reaching women of colour students from a variety of classes, racial, religious, and other demographic backgrounds.[26] I had been an Oxford student for two years (one year for a master's degree and one year of a

[26] A full list of the participants' pseudonyms, year and course of study can be found in A5.

DPhil programme) by the time I began my recruitment process; thus, I was aware of the machinations of Oxford student life (for example, the purpose of the Student Union versus college common rooms). I cast a wide net for potential participants and expected to recruit around 7-10 women of colour students. In the end, I conducted research interviews with 47 women of colour students (see Table 2 for participant demographic information). This is not a typical sample size for a qualitative study, and I was taken aback by the amount of interest this project received; however, the large number of participants further demonstrates the research gaps for studies focusing on women of colour.

Students who self-identified as women of colour students enrolled for any part of the last five years at Oxford at any degree-granting level (i.e., undergraduate, postgraduate, part-time, or full-time) and who also identify as having participated in student activism were invited to participate. I consider activism to be a broad category, not defined by institutional boundaries, nor does their activism have to be recognised by the university to be legitimate; the importance is that their starting points are rooted in their convictions. I explored what student activism meant to the participants throughout the interview process, learning and developing a framework through their terminology and experiences instead of relying solely on an institutional definition of social change. As I further analyse in chapter 4, many participants did not actively identify as 'student activists' per se. Still, since my definition of activism was intentionally broad in that there were no specific limitations to what could be considered 'activism', they could nonetheless contribute to the research. I stated in my recruitment materials that my feminism and, therefore, the project is wholly trans-inclusive, meaning that any reference to the term "woman" is a trans-inclusive term – individuals who identify as trans women, transfeminine, non-binary or genderfluid/genderqueer were included in this category.

I created a contacts database by compiling information from each college's JCR and MCR committee pages for the 2023-2024 academic year, specifically tracking the BAME representatives who identified as women in their profiles. When no women of colour were on the committee, I emailed the committee President and asked them to send the recruitment information to their respective student bodies. I did the same for each Student Union campaign, the Oxford student societies dedicated to women in specific subfields (e.g. Women in Business, Women in Computer Science, etc.), and other societies listed in the SU registry under the 'Campaigning' category. I also emailed the largest cultural societies at Oxford and

asked them to forward the recruitment to their members, including the Oxford African & Caribbean Society, Oxford Asia-Pacific Society, Oxford Mixed Heritage Society, Oxford South Asian Society, and so on. Another key outreach area was to organisations dedicated to supporting working-class students, such as The 93% Club, Target Schools, and the Crankstart Scholars' Council, the student-led leadership arm of the Crankstart Scholarship that supports low-income students at Oxford (University of Oxford, 2025).

Table 2 – Participant Information

Year of Study (Undergrad)	1st	1 (after foundation year)
	2nd	24
	3rd	12
	4th	2
	Alumni	1
	Total	40
Year of Study (Postgrad Masters)	1st	5
	2nd	1
	Alumni	1
	Total	7
Subject Area	Humanities	26
	Social Sciences	15
	MPLS	4
	MDS	2
Gender Identity	Woman (she/her)	42
	She/they	4
	Nonbinary	1
Religion	Christian	3
	Muslim	4
	Spiritual	1
	Jewish	1
	Did not discuss	38
Sexuality	Lesbian/gay	2
	Queer	11
	Bisexual	4
	Fluid	1
	Did not discuss	29

College	Former women's college	15
	Postgrad only college	0
	PPH	1
	20c. Foundation	1
	Pre-20c. Foundation	30
Student type	Domestic	38
	International	9
Primary Affiliation	JCR	17
	MCR	3
	SU Campaigns	6
	Ethnic/Religious Societies	11
	Other	10
Outreach Method	Direct email	27
	Participants inquired via society mailing list recruitment	2
	Participants inquired via academic mailing list recruitment	2
	Snowballing (via other particpiants)	4
	Ethnography	8
	Existing Oxford contact	4
Interview Method	In person	31
	Walking	5
	Teams	9
Term Interviewed	Michaelmas 2023	24
	Hilary 2024	14
	Trinity 2024	9

Table 2 – Participant information, including years and level of study, subject area, college type, primary affiliation, method by which they participated in the research, and if disclosed, their gender, religion, and sexual orientation.

Spaces between and feminist ears

My identity as both an Oxford student and a woman of colour allowed for an inherent premise of understanding and access to their experiences. The shared Oxford lexicon (see A1 for a glossary of Oxford terms) facilitated a smoothness in the interviews that I otherwise would not have had, as participants did not feel like they needed to explain the meaning of terms like 'tutes' or 'formal halls' during our conversation. Though many terms are undergraduate or college-specific, such as what each college JCR titles their committee representative for racialised students (e.g. BAME, RAEM, BME, E&M reps), I familiarised myself with any relevant terms before our conversations. This reflected the 'space between' status I occupied as a postgraduate researcher at Oxford, concerning the 'insider-outsider' status that qualitative researchers experience, one that allowed me to "embrace and explore

the complexity and richness of the space between entrenched perspectives" (Dwyer & Buckle, 62, 2009).[27]

Moreover, I became a better interviewer as the research evolved. Since the interviews occurred in all three terms of the Oxford academic year, I became a more confident, focused interviewer as the year progressed twofold. Firstly, I became more attuned to participants' willingness to share stories. In Michaelmas term, I would feel guilty or unaccomplished that it was a shorter interview (for example, ten minutes instead of forty-five) and wonder if there were further questions I could have asked to elicit more out of the conversation. In embracing a narrative method, I recognised that given the introspection required of the questions I asked, I understood that participants perhaps had a personal limit to how much they were willing to share on the record, regardless of the pseudonymisation of data. The longevity of the interview process also supported iteration, defined as the practice of "talking to current interviewees about findings from previous interviews" that cultivates a broader collective understanding of shared experiences (Fraser & Taylor, 2022, 234). Many participants were also curious about the research findings. As the research grew, I was able to provide more information and thus further assure them that their contributions were part of a larger project – both academic and political – that sought to enhance the lives of current and future women of colour students at Oxford. Participants' conscientiousness about their involvement in the research and its potential impact on future generations of women of colour students is discussed further in chapter eight. The second way I developed as a researcher was embodying the role of what Ahmed (2022) calls a "feminist ear" when she was researching university complaints: "To become a feminist ear is to hear complaints together … Becoming a feminist ear meant not only hearing the students' complaints; it meant sharing the work" (6). Ahmed coined the process of hearing complaints as "*complaint activism*, how we find different ways to express our complaints, to release them from their containers" (2022, emphasis in original).

Similarly, Frances' (2023) research using voice poems with young women's stories of domestic abuse in childhood enacted a method of "feminist listening" where their "re-storying accounts enabled affective, relational and dialogical listening" that resisted the epistemic injustice felt by domestic abuse survivors (69). I view the time spent with my

[27] See also Phoenix, 2000, for a discussion on gender and race in the interviewer-interviewee relationship in feminist research.

participants, sharing spaces as women of colour, sitting with their constellations of stories, and offering any support I could as part of the practice of being a feminist ear. By receiving and processing not only their complaints but also the successes and hopes that have characterised their Oxford experiences so far, I situated my role as a researcher and a woman of colour living and working in the same affective spaces in ways that grounded me throughout the project.

3.4 Data collection: Ethnographic sites

Aligned with an intersectional feminist research methodology, I conducted ethnographic studies with two student groups, the Oxford Feminist Society, founded in 2018 (FemSoc) and the Oxford Women of Colour Society, founded in 2022 (WocSoc). The organisations embody aligned but distinct aims: FemSoc operates primarily as a discussion-based and political campaigning group, whereas WocSoc styles itself as a welfare and community-oriented group. During fieldwork, I referred to my method as feminist ethnography, but upon retrospection, I now term it as a distinctly *activist* feminist ethnography, which is "a specific form of participant observation [using] feminist standpoint epistemologies to overcome a separation between the knower and the known" (Deschner & Dorion, 2020, 208). The semantic differences would not have been particularly relevant to the ethnography participants, as the authors note that it is not very distinguishable from participant observation, but it was important that I declared my feminist politics upon entrance to the fieldwork sites. However, the authors do insist that activist ethnography should commit to feminist epistemologies as this means "the purpose of knowledge production is political transformation and that the methodology used [mirrors] the anti-oppressive values of activist movements" (207), hence the label of 'feminist activist ethnography' used here.

Feminist ethnography emphasises the importance of dialogue, collaboration, and a focus on "redefinitions of power and a focus on agency" (Lamphere, 2016, 52). It can involve personal intervention, wherein the researcher offers resources to support activism and shares counter-stories to legitimise the demands and goals of social movements for change (2016).[28] Furthermore, feminist ethnography aims to support the empowerment of marginalised communities by "stressing their legitimacy to produce knowledge, and focus empirically on

[28] For more on what constitutes feminist ethnography, see Craven & Davis, 2013 and St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000.

feminist movements or organisations as political spaces producing social transformation" (Dorion, 2021, 457). Adopting the role of a participant observer in activist spaces is a challenging task; however, I embrace Shah's understanding of ethnographic research and participant observation in particular as "a profoundly political act, one that can enable us to challenge hegemonic conceptions of the world, challenge authority, and better act in the world" (2017, 45). It serves as a dialogic exchange between the researcher and the participants, foregrounding the importance of interconnections not only in research but also in how such relationships can be mobilised to create social change. Nuñez and García-Mateus' (2023) reflections on their work as Chicanx scholar-activists researching their own communities parallel the benefits and demands of conducting 'insider-outsider' ethnographic research, where they both drew from their lived experiences to better understand the experiences of their participants and recognised how outsider perspectives influenced their thinking when they struggled to understand participants' perceptions.

As with the interviews, I made it clear to participants that they did not have to identify as activists to contribute, but I identified myself as a researcher and activist to the groups. Throughout the ethnographic process, I concentrated on the contributions and activities of women of colour students in said groups. The ethnographic data collection involved other non-women of colour student members who attended the same event when I was present. At the events where I was a participant observer, discussion co-chair, or a freshers stall representative, I took typed field notes but did not gather any audio recordings.

I first contacted FemSoc when I began my initial interview recruitment process, which led them to share my call for participants on their social media channels in Michaelmas term 2023. In Hilary term 2024, I contacted the society President and Vice-President via email and their Instagram account to propose the ethnography research, which they accepted. At every event I attended, I introduced myself and the project to the group and emphasised that anyone could rescind their participation at any time and could opt for their contributions to be excluded from the research. I conducted ethnography with FemSoc over the course of two Oxford terms and concluded with the 2024 Fresher's Fair, interacting with two sets of committee members and participating in their committee elections via their online electoral process using Google Forms. In addition, I conducted 2:1 interviews with the President and Vice-Presidents of both committees at different points in the research process, as seen in Table 3.

Table 3 – Feminist Society Ethnography Timeline

Date	*Event Type*	*Location*	*Researcher Role*
29/01/2024	Liquor & Liberation Discussion	College room	Participant observer
19/02/2024	Liquor & Liberation Discussion	College room	Participant observer
22/02/2024	1st Interview with 23/24 President & Vice-President	Library common room	Interviewer
29/04/2024	Liquor & Liberation Discussion	College room	Discussion co-chair
13/05/2024	Annual General Meeting	College room	Participant observer
29/05/2024	Executive Committee Election Hustings	College JCR	Participant observer
03/06/2024	2nd Interview with 23/24 President & Vice-President	Cafe	Interviewer
08/10/2024	Interview with 24/25 President & Vice-President	Cafe	Interviewer
10/10/2024	Fresher's Fair	Exam Schools	Stall representative

Table 3 – Timeline of my ethnographic engagement with the Feminist Society in 2024, including information on event titles, locations, and my role at each encounter.

Similar to my outreach to FemSoc, I first contacted the WocSoc committee via Instagram at the start of Hilary term 2024, as they do not have an organisation-specific email. However, I did not receive a response until the start of Trinity term 2024. Therefore, only one term of ethnography was conducted with WocSoc (see Table 4 for a full ethnography timeline). I followed the same protocols with WocSoc as I did with FemSoc at any public events. Since their membership was exclusive to women of colour students, the target research demographic, I conducted 1:1 interviews with committee members about their experiences both with running the society and their overall experiences with student activism at Oxford, as I did with all other non-ethnography participants. With both ethnographic sites, I coordinated with their respective leaders to co-facilitate one discussion event for each society in Trinity term 2024. At FemSoc, I co-chaired a discussion on feminism and socialism with the society's Vice-President; at WocSoc, I co-chaired a discussion on parental expectations with the society's President. Both events allowed me to engage with their participants in a more direct, in-depth manner where I, alongside the co-chair, steered the conversation and shared personal anecdotes to guide discussion.

Table 4 – Women of Colour Society Ethnography Timeline

Date	*Event Type*	*Location*	*Researcher Role*
22/04/2024	Termly Committee Meeting	College JCR	Participant observer
07/05/2024	Interview with President	Cafe	Interviewer
07/05/2024	Interview with Sponsorship Officer	College grounds	Interviewer
08/05/2024	Interview with Welfare Officer	College room	Interviewer
09/05/2024	Interview with Publicity Officer	Cafe	Interviewer
13/05/2024	Interview with Publicity & Events Officers (2)	College cafe	Interviewer
29/05/2024	Parental Expectations Discussion Event	College grounds	Discussion co-chair
10/10/2024	Fresher's Fair	Exam Schools	Stall representative

Table 3 – Timeline of my ethnographic engagement with the Women of Colour Society in 2024, including information on event titles, locations, and my role at each encounter. Each WocSoc committee member's interview also added to the total tally of 1:1 interviews with WoC students.

I decided to leave the ethnographic field sites at the end of one full academic year (Michaelmas 2023—Trinity term 2024), with my final 'site visit' taking place at the October 2024 Annual Fresher's Fair. I volunteered as a stall representative for both societies in two separate shifts, sharing the responsibility with a committee member, both of whom I had met previously. Leaving the field is a complicated ethical endeavour that does not always involve a 'clean break', especially in this instance, as many participants continue to study at Oxford. Researchers "shape and are shaped by the emotionality of fieldwork, which the process of leaving helps illuminate" (McInch & Bowles, 2025, 70), and in many ways, I remain entangled in the field; for example, I still follow and engage with the social media accounts of both societies, though I have not attended any further events. In addition, my offer of welfare support did not include an end date; therefore, in theory, participants can still contact me about their personal and professional concerns, although none have. I have remained in touch with some participants in various degrees, such as mutually adding one another to our LinkedIn networks; I occasionally greet participants who belong to the Oxford colleges where I work; and most notably, I became a friend and informal mentor to the one participant who identified as Taiwanese because of our shared lived experiences and country of origin. Sustaining these relationships allowed me to maintain the trust I earned from the participants

during fieldwork, and I intend to share the research results and the relevant chapters with society members, as per their requests.

3.5 Data analysis: Interviews

I conducted 50 interviews with 47 participants (including three follow-up interviews), audio recording the in-person interviews, and using the built-in recording and transcription tool for online interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams. I transcribed each in-person interview from the audio recording and reviewed each Teams transcription to ensure the text matched the conversation, as auto-transcriptions are not always accurate. After receiving either edits or approval from the interviewees, I coded each interview using NVivo software. The initial coding phase was completed from Hilary term to Trinity term 2024, with additional coding rounds concluding in Michaelmas term 2024.[29] Blurring the lines between data collection and analysis and instead considering them as inductive processes allows researchers to "enrich our insights and stave off anxiety" (Rubin, 2021, 183). I did not delineate a strict divide between the data collection and data analysis periods; I coded individual interviews as I continued with the ethnographic research. The integration of these processes allowed me to approach the data with more nuance as the data amassed, connecting themes from the individual interviews to the stated goals of the societies (such as collectivity and education) in the codebook.

The coding resulted in four high-level core codes that align with my research questions:

1. Activism
2. Community
3. Oxford
4. Race and racialisation

I employ Braun and Clarke's method of reflexive thematic analysis (2022) to analyse the data. Initially proposed in 2006 for use in psychology research, their methodology has expanded to become an interdisciplinary toolkit for qualitative researchers interested in a thoughtful, introspective research process. The updated naming of the method to include *reflexive* "emphasises the importance of the researcher's subjectivity as analytic *resource*,

[29] See A4 for the full coding scheme.

and their reflexive engagement with theory, data, and interpretation" (2021, 330). I used reflexive thematic analysis because it considers "critical framings of language, data and meaning" and encourages the researcher to articulate their positionalities and philosophical underpinnings throughout the analysis (331). This is important in the Oxford context because women of colour students have varied understandings of the terminology and affective meanings attached to the activist movements with which they are involved, both with my existing definitions and those of their peers. Moreover, interviews with a reflexive TA approach "centers the interaction and co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant" (13) wherein the questions are not strictly structured. I provide an example of my coding structure in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Example of a scaffolded core code and accompanying sub-codes

High-Level Core Code	Sub-Code	Code Title	Description / definition	Example
Activism	Inequities within activism	Infantilisation of student activists	Students feel belittled by others, usually university administrators or leaders, when attempting to create change	I don't always feel comfortable using the label of student activist for myself. I think it's a double pronged issue. Mainly, it's because I feel that student activists don't get taken seriously anyway, so if I label myself as such, I feel like it's kind of infantilising or maybe even a bit pretentious, you know? (Arya)
		Funding issues	Lack of consistent, available funding for student activities and activism	It's weird because like the uni general gets so much funding, but like it's never really distributed to the students, or at least I don't really see it enough. (Sage)
		(Un)paid work	Students do not receive a wage for their activism, which affects activists' class status and ability to engage in said work	Here, I'm doing all this work unpaid, I'm not getting paid for any of this, which is not necessarily something I expected but not appreciated, still. (Phoebe)

There exist relevant critiques of coding as the accepted standard for qualitative data analysis in how it reinforces and takes on "the semblance of the Master's voice" (Viruru & Rios, 2021, 1151). The authors argue that coding and data practices in the neoliberal academy have fallen in line with capitalist aims and production, such as the monetisation of coding and other analysis software like NVivo (2021; see also Braun & Clarke, 2021). In a poem about critical qualitative inquiry, Ulmer writes: "We might write Slow methodologies / in place of McMethodologies / and pause in the midst of hate" (2017, 543). The main critique of these 'McMethodology' systems and software lies in their automated coding functions, which I did not use in my analysis, that may reinscribe conventional meaning to participants' voices without nuance. In moving away from the Master's voice, scholars advocating for 'data activism' (see Halkort, 2019) and a rejection of extractive methods can adopt a coding praxis

that moves "away from rigidity and toward the indefinite, the unfinished, and the untamed" (Viruru & Rios, 2021, 1156) as a means of decolonising qualitative research. In my research, applying continuous principles of relationality and reflexivity, I employed in vivo coding, assigning "low-inference codes that use exact words or phrases of participants as a way to stay close to the data" (Agyepong, 2018, 183). For example, under the high-level code 'Community', there is a code titled *"Ease of being around people that 'get it'"*. In a typical coding scheme, aimed at "the deconstruction of embedded voices with a silenced reconstruction toward one linguistic vision" (Viruru & Rios, 2021, 1155), there may be an impulse to dissect what participants mean by 'get *it*'. Questioning what 'it' is and scrutinising the code for a singular meaning deprives the possibility of pluriversal narratives from the participants' voices. The in vivo code title came from one participant's direct quote, Sage (who uses they/them pronouns), saying:

> "Sometimes you just have to get it, and a lot of people don't, which is fine, I'm not gonna ask you to, but it's easier if you can just click with people that just do get it."

Sage was referencing their experiences as a queer person of colour at Oxford, however, they did not explicitly explain what 'getting it' meant, nor did they need to. I can hope that it is because they were confident that I, as a fellow queer person of colour and woman of colour at Oxford, would inherently understand their meaning. Yet, in not designating a specific definition, Sage has left ample analytic room to interpret their contribution in dialogue with that of other participants who did not use identical wording. Other interlocutors phrased it in terms such as being "understood in such a way" (Ming); wanting to "find people that I feel could just get me entirely" (Gabriella); and having "people who will treat you and value you dearly and re-energise you" (Leila). The affective qualities of living shared experiences as women of colour allowed me to intrinsically 'get it', despite 'it' not being a fixed category that could be regurgitated as a categorisable data unit. Embracing these emotional nuances and allowing the code title to speak for itself, even if other non-women of colour researchers or readers would not necessarily process it the same way. My analytical journey has not been divorced from affect, emotions, and feelings, which is not surprising given the personal nature of my topic. Instead, I welcome the challenges and possibilities that come with being an 'affect researcher' who "preoccup[ies] oneself with the space between theory and method as well as how it relates to oneself" (Alegre Mouslim et al., 2025, 6) in qualitative feminist research.

3.6 Data analysis: Ethnographic sites

I examined related documents published by the student groups, such as meeting minutes, agendas, constitutions, and public social media posts, to gain a more holistic understanding of their operations and outreach to the larger Oxford student body in chapter four. Not all interview participants were involved in the ethnographic process, but some attended events where I was present. I used their chosen pseudonyms to refer to them in my field notes if they contributed to the discussion. Two WoC who attended a FemSoc event volunteered to be interviewed individually after I introduced myself, and I interviewed six WoC who were committee members of the Women of Colour Society. These eight interviews were integrated into the broader individual interview data set for coding and analysis. For the interviews with the society Presidents and Vice-Presidents, I created new high-level codes under 'FemSoc' and 'WocSoc' to categorise my discussions with their leadership. I also encompassed what other participants referenced about each society. I made typed field notes on each event (or 'site visit') I attended, noted total attendance numbers, and sketched the broad structure of each event. My notes highlighted the participation of self-identified women of colour, their responses and anecdotes, and instances where I participated in the conversation. I integrated real-time preliminary analyses in my notes, mainly writing them as 'asides' to the format descriptions of the event and the contributions of attendees (Kirner & Mills, 2020). After each event, I created a duplicate version of the fieldnote document wherein I summarised my observations into an 'analytical memo' and reflected on the event overall (Mills & Morton, 2013). I decided only to paraphrase ethnographic participants' accounts in the analysis since I did not record any audio at the events and therefore cannot ensure that my typed notes and recollections are the speaker's exact words. Furthermore, my role at each event differed, as I acted as a discussion chair, a stall representative, and a general participant-observer in varying circumstances. Therefore, my ability to record 'accurate' or heterogeneous field notes was not guaranteed. Analyses of the interview and ethnographic data, including takeaways from field notes, are woven throughout chapters four to eight.

Since I could not attend every event hosted by each society per term, I recognise that there are limits to my ethnographic exposure to the groups, and I can only capture a fraction of their organisational dynamics. The ethnographic portion of this project can be conceived as

"ethnographic portraits" rather than a complete ethnographic account, with the term 'portrait' emphasising "the deliberately crafted nature of the accounts. Portraits are not aspiring to be 'true' representations, holistic representations or complete 'life histories', but rather are deliberately partial accounts and encounters" (Mills & Morton, 2013, 88). The fieldwork I conducted resulted in what Günel and Watanabe theorise as a "patchwork ethnography", which calls for a "'seam-full' engagement with knowledge production, that is, an engagement that foregrounds the seams in our work … the indeterminacies between 'data' and daily life, the movement between field site(s) and home, and the various editorial decisions ethnographers make as they refine their stories" (2024, 131). A patchwork ethnography contextualises the labour required of ethnographic projects in a neoliberal university structure and broadens the definition of 'traditional' ethnography. Similar to Ulmer's call for adopting a 'Slow Ontology', which envisions a research environment that is "*not unproductive*, but *differently productive*" (2017, 201, emphasis in original). In my ethnography, I encountered similar problems to those of my participants in their activist work: the demands of the Oxford calendar. The short eight-week terms, the intensity at which academic and social activities operate, and the amount of socialisation required at each event were ultimately exhausting. Coupled with the challenges from the quasi-emergent design noted in 3.1, the overall ethnographic research experience was simultaneously rewarding and straining. Patchwork ethnography maintains the importance of cultivating long-term relationships with interlocutors, as I have done, and focuses on forms of "fragmentary yet rigorous data" (Günel et al., 2020) that values the physical and emotional labour of participant and researcher alike.

3.7 Ethical considerations

Embedding a methodology of care in a feminist research project is crucial. A practice of care can be understood as "a response to the failure of methodology to ensure inclusive participation is offered to the people affected by the issues that are researched"; what Brannelly and Barnes call "care-full" research strives to centre lived experiences and just outcomes of the research (2022, 8 & 19). In tandem with an ethics of care and decolonial feminism, I emphasise the importance of following a feminist citational politics, particularly that the embodied harms of an unjust citational politics are particularly felt by Black women academics. Nash writes that the failure to cite Black women's labour and contributions to the academy, an institution she argues relies "on the aesthetics of diversity which Black women's bodies are thought to emblemize" (2020, 78; see also Ahmed, 2012), is literally killing them

through violent and extractive methods of labour demanded by the academy (Nash, 2020). Similarly, McKittrick argues that "references and citations are concretised ... that references concretise inequity, and that referencing is a spatial project" (2021, 33). The epistemologies of how we know and why we know are illuminated through our citation practices – they reflect the scholars we respect, the ones with whom we disagree, and the ones we wish to emulate. The importance of feminist citational praxis is critical in the field of education as we contribute to a hierarchy of what is good to know about how to learn and teach, which in turn affects the pedagogies of other disciplines.

I adopt a feminist citational politics throughout my research, a socially just praxis embodied by feminist scholars of colour. Ahmed describes citation as a "rather successful reproductive technology, a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies" (2013) and notes the power of citational structures to shape disciplines and academic futures. Eurocentric intellectual tradition steers us toward certain lauded white male scholars and their modes of thought, a practice that Kim names as part of an intellectual economy "bound up with the treatment of ideas as property, with the dynamic of exchange turning that property into capital, into a vector for intellectual value" (2020, 5). Rejecting a typical reproduction of "standard" citations is in keeping with Ahmed's refusal to cite what she names as the institution of white men and acknowledging the contributions of scholars of colour who have been habitually erased from academic narratives (2014). Practically, this translates to my goal of citing a majority of Black, Indigenous, and feminist scholars of colour in an attempt to ensure I am not recreating or sustaining white patriarchal forms of intellectual production and instead "cit[ing] to transform" (Burgess et al., 2021, 63).[30] The solidarities cultivated between equity-deserving communities in these liminal intellectual spaces are part of the feminist ethos I strove to emulate in my research.

I assert 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 was conscious that the questions asked and the conversations I had as part of this research project were 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

[30] The results of my citational practice are discussed in 9.2.

anger, Lorde emphasises that "any discussion among women about racism must include the recognition and the use of anger" (1981, 281), 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.

This project received CUREC approval on 14/06/2023 and approval of a CUREC amendment on 27/10/2023 (Research ethics reference EDUC-CIA-23-232). Informed consent was obtained from all research participants before their participation, and ongoing consent was obtained at each stage of the project. During the ethnography, I announced myself and introduced the research project at the start of each event I attended, clarifying that the notes I was taking would not make anyone identifiable by name, and they could ask that none of their contributions be included if they wished. A relational ethics structured my relationships with the participants, where I articulated my attempt to try and "deepen perspectives and understandings around relationships between groups and individuals while keeping their trust" (Cunliffe et al., 2019, 153). This principle is particularly relevant as many of my participants had pre-existing relationships, both friendships and acquaintances, outside of the bounds of the research. For example, the many BAME representatives I interviewed were at least aware of the names of their counterparts at other colleges, and using a snowball sampling method meant that word of mouth about the project and its aims was directly communicated to students with related interests. To mitigate confidentiality concerns, I only discussed other participants' anecdotes anonymously during interviews (if relevant to the conversation), and would only acknowledge that I interviewed a peer or mutual friend if the interviewee raised the former's interview experience by name.[31] I obtained verbal consent from all attendees before the start of the discussion and liaised with the relevant event leaders to affirm that they could share my contact information if anyone had further concerns.

All participants are pseudonymised with a name of their choice, as this allows them to keep any meaningful ethnic, religious, or gendered connotations from their name to the pseudonym if they so choose. Participants were given the option to review their transcriptions

[31] For a worked example of the methodological and ethical challenges in social activism research, see Atkinson, 2017.

and omit any information they wished to exclude from the research data, with the knowledge that all the data would also be pseudonymised. The colleges of each participant are not identified at any point in the research.

3.8 Challenges and limitations

The limitations of this study primarily lie in its narrow participant and geographical scope. In only investigating Oxford, the sample population of women of colour students is localised and their experiences remain unique to their time at the University. I strove to capture their accounts in the context of their lives as students, a period often marked by fluidity and uncertainty as many experience full independence for the first time. This could explain why there are no first-year student participants in the study, as they may have not found their footing at the time of recruitment in their first Michaelmas term, and did not become involved in activism right away.[32]

It is possible that the research findings may be difficult to extend beyond the bounds of the collegiate universities in the United Kingdom given the unique challenges such structures pose, the functions and barriers which were raised in the interviews and ethnography. Insights from the scalar experiences of organising for a common cause can help illuminate the experience of student populations across the UK and beyond, regardless of an institution's collegiate or non-collegiate status. Moreover, the research findings on multiply marginalised communities within a privileged, elite institution can have a bearing on the policies and practices of other HE sites that may seek to emulate Oxford in rankings and performance.

The majority of my participants came from humanities and social sciences subjects, with only five individuals studying STEM subjects. This may have been because my existing networks and academic background in humanities and social sciences were my first points of contact, and my position as a DPhil researcher within the Social Sciences Division and the Department of Education naturally facilitated participants with similar academic interests. However, the lack of STEM participants also reflects the imbalance of women, and women of

[32] One foundation year student participated in the study, and is technically in their first year of a degree programme, but had been at Oxford as part of the foundation year programme for one full academic year.

colour in particular, pursuing traditionally male-dominated fields of study.[33] These inequities call for further research into the experiences of women of colour in STEM and the specific challenges they face in HEIs.

3.9 Researcher positionality

Before stating my positionality, I consider the tensions inherent in and critiques of 'positionality statements' themselves. Concerns raised by self-identified women of colour scholars about such statements include the implication that one's position is "both stable and named because it is the most relevant to the research project, implying an aspect of validity" (de los Ríos & Patel, 2023, 7). Placing positionalities at fixed points for an article or research project defies a decolonial feminist praxis that "one's positionality is the starting and continuous point of relation. To know one by demographic categories, in contrast, is to not know one at all, but to read a version of them that is restricted to a singular social category" (7). Gani and Khan (2024) share similar concerns about such "confessions of privilege" which then creates a "reification of material, assumed, and imagined hierarchies between people, which is then advertised and (re)produced by its utterance" (1). The authors emphasise the importance of distinguishing between "reflexivity in relation to practice or critique, versus reflexivity performed in positionality statements" (2). Both sets of scholars cited stress that their critique is intended to support women of colour academics who may feel pressured to explicitly name their marginalisations and simultaneously highlight the "narcissism and performance" that can characterise positionality statements (6). The validity given to white scholars who offer positionality statements is often not afforded to women of colour who do the same, whereby they are perceived as "reproducing the other" (9) and further codifies existing racialised and gendered hierarchies. The suggested solutions are not to abandon positionality statements in their entirety, but to instead centre humility, complicity, and a "resistance to the temptation of performance; followed by action in the form of material and intellectual reparations" (11) and answer calls to make "room for relationality, how social phenomena are from and through relation, always" (de los Ríos & Patel, 2023, 11).[34] With these goals in mind, I offer a statement on my research relationalities:

[33] An extensive body of research exists on the underrepresentation of women, particularly women of colour, in STEM fields; see Andersen, 2024; Casad et al., 2021; Hand et al., 2017; MacLean, 2017.
[34] See also Milner et al., 2025 on positionality in race research.

I identify as a first-generation, diasporic immigrant queer Taiwanese woman of colour with lived experiences of oppression. I also hold certain privileges as a doctoral student at the University of Oxford and responsibilities to my participants who are navigating the same spaces of this institution. As part of honouring my relations, particularly with interviewees younger than myself completing their undergraduate degrees, I have offered to keep open communication channels with them even if they have graduated, such as with non-university affiliated emails. I am conscious of the 'insider-outsider' divide, occupying both awareness and understanding of how systems of power operate within the University and benefiting from its effects while still experiencing oppression as a student on the margins. The personal dilemmas that can arise while researching deeply personal subjects are articulated by Beals et al. (2020): "When we as women, working class, and/or cultural *Others* enter into this space, we feel the call and the tug to strip aspects of our identity off and the pressure to speak from the center" (599, emphasis in original). Smith (2019) similarly states that "in practice, there is no inside. Even if you are a researcher in your own community, by being a researcher, you're positioned in relation to the community in a complicated way" (12). Resisting the temptation to morph into an academically acceptable self, inching further away from the margins and towards whiteness, requires thoughtfulness, reflexivity, and care – both of the self and of my communities – throughout the research process.

To conduct an uncritical research project would be disingenuous to myself and my community of women of colour peers who shared their experiences with me. It is my responsibility as a researcher on the margins to represent their opinions and contributions wholly and without judgement, embodying a researcher identity that is neither insider nor outsider but "edge and margin navigator who locate the gaps and trace the moving and movable margins so that their voices not only can be heard in the center but also have access to the center" (Beals et al., 2020, 600). I embrace Anzaldúa's conception of 'Borderlands' where women of colour draw strength from existing and creating in the margins, simultaneously recognising the pains of "keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity" while in an 'alien' space, yet the alien elements also offer a home (1987, preface). It is in these interstitial, dynamic spaces outside the bounds of disciplinary binaries where I offer my research findings, embracing the margins as a space of possibility and "radical openness" (hooks, 1990, 149).

Chapter 4: Identities and Positionalities

"Yes, we intimately know the origins of oppression; it brewed in our beds, tables, and streets; screaming out in anger is a necessary stage in our evolution into freedom, but do we have to dwell forever on that piece of terrain, forever stuck in the middle of that bridge? This land of thorns is not habitable. We carry this bridge inside us, the struggle, the movement towards liberation."

Gloria Anzaldúa, Acts of Healing, in This Bridge Called My Back (2022, xxiii).

Women of colour feminisms and the foundation of what came to be known as a WoC identity were shaped by the members of the Combahee River Collective (CRC) in their 1977 Statement, writing as Black feminists who saw their mission as "the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives" (CRC, 1977). In a 40th anniversary retrospective, scholars described the CRC Statement and ensuing conversations as the anchor for locating women of colour feminisms, grounding it in pluralities and "deriv[ing] a definition of women of colour coalition based on the awareness of shared precarity" (Bow, as quoted in Kolenz et al., 2017, 181). The CRC statement is considered the forerunner to contemporary understandings of intersectionality theory by highlighting the need to address the experiences of women of colour and "created new possibilities for relationships among different activist and feminist projects. It thus decentred whiteness as the social norm and inevitable point of comparison" (Huhndorf, as quoted in Kolenz et al., 2017, 170). This chapter situates the University of Oxford as a potent locale of power and privilege, examining WoC students' relationships with intersectionality, whiteness, terminologies, respectability politics, and labour. It investigates how participants (see Table 5) understood their identities assemblages as women of colour, students, activists, not activists, and the definitions that lie in between.

4.1 Intersectional identities of women of colour

For many WoC students, Oxford was the place where their racialised and gendered identities, and consequently their interactions with institutional and social structures, came into sharper focus. This is especially true for the majority of my interlocutors who were undergraduate students (totalling 40, in addition to 7 postgraduate students) navigating university life and independence for the first time. Presenting their experiences through an intersectional lens allows for an understanding of identities as "interactive rather than

additive" (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012, 385). It places the effects of multiple concurrent marginalisations, including but not limited to axes of race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, and migration status, at the forefront of this analysis. This section presents how the participants made sense of their identities as women of colour, shifts in meaning-making as they navigated distinct spaces in Oxford and their homes, and how they perceive a WoC identity in relation to their politics and broader lives.

WoC students experienced a degree of culture shock when they first arrived in Oxford. Roma felt "quite aware that [she] was of colour" at Oxford, which was a new experience; similarly, Charlie, a second-year student, spoke about her experience attending an Oxford open day with the law society at a large London firm:

> "We just went there, and there was a very specific class of people that were there, and I don't know, I have never been so…not just in that situation, but when I go to a formal, or when I go to a lecture, things like that, I realise, 'Oh, I'm a woman,' 'Oh, I'm also Black.' I'm very much aware of my Blackness, which is kind of weird."

Charlie and Roma demonstrate how their presentation and racial identity as women of colour were pushed to the forefront at Oxford in ways they had not previously experienced or had the opportunity to analyse politically before entering university. For example, Tundra was able to sharpen her conceptions of identity after completing a paper on sub-Saharan Africa as part of her degree:

> "I think I've learnt a lot more about the power of intersections and I think having, obviously like I've always been a woman, I've always been Black, I've always had intersections but having the vocabulary to identify it and talk about it and realise the ways it impacts your life is something I only really came across in Oxford."

WoC students had opportunities to learn about and embrace different facets of their identities, as many do in university, in ways they could not whilst at school or in their hometowns. Yamuna leaned into traditions from and discussions about her Indian heritage at Oxford:

> "There's also spaces where it's nice, it's not just a place where you need to conform but a place where you can find fun and enjoyment, like with the Diwali dinners, we're cooking together and actively coming together, and it comes from a place of want

> rather than something you need to conform to, need to do, or is obligatory. Actively seeking out that part of the culture has allowed me to enter spaces like India Soc, Hindu Soc, Tamil Soc and just talk about experiences of growing up South Indian or feeling like a coconut … it's just so nice to see people who look like you and speak to people about different things but still share in what they're saying, empathising and learning. That's a unique experience."

Likewise, Zayna, a committee member on the Student Union Women*'s Campaign, emphasised the importance of intersectionality in her life, especially as a working-class student:

> "The intersectionality between [class and race] is very important to me. And the fact that typically if you fall into, obviously this isn't true in all cases, but if you are a person of colour, you're more likely to come from, especially in this country, I feel, come from a less privileged background. A majority of the people that are going to private schools and having the funding and things will be people who have families with hundreds of years of history and can sort of afford that. So I think when you're thinking about the rights of one of those groups, you're really thinking about all of them as well. That's really important to me as well, actually."[35]

When asked how she identified at the end of the interview, Zayna specifically included that she was from a "socioeconomically disadvantaged background", while the majority of other participants did not explicitly name class status as one of their identity markers, denoting the importance of recognising the intersections of race and class for Zayna. Moreover, the desire to join a culturally or ethnically specific community at university underscores participants' intersectional identities. Intersectionality as a theoretical concept exposes how "intersecting systems of power catalyze social formations of complex social inequalities that are organized via unequal material realities and distinctive social experiences for people who live within them" (Collins, 2015, 14; see also Ali et al., 2010). Tundra describing that she now has the "vocabulary" to talk about race and gender, and Yamuna "actively seeking out" parts of her racialised identity demonstrate how undergraduate students utilised their university years to grow further into their women of colour selves.

[35] The asterisk after Women* is intentional, indicating the campaign is open to all women-identifying individuals, not just cisgender women.

There were also WoC who had already developed strong senses of self as women of colour. Iman, a committee member of the Women of Colour Society (WocSoc), views her identities and roles as one:

> "[They're] not really separate to me, as separate roles … It is alienating because I know there's no one like me, and my specific colour, as a woman of colour, is not common. Which means that solidarity is hard, but it also means that it's kind of easy because now it means I can connect to a lot of different people with both my South Asian and East Asian heritage. I'm basically pan-Asian, almost."

The ease of forging relationships with, in Iman's case, other Asian people, can lend itself to organising broader community coalitions that enable university-wide activist movements, as discussed further in Chapter 7.

Some postgraduate students made more direct references to theories of intersectionality. I surmise that their naming of feminist theories and tendency to have a more longitudinal view of the issues they perceive at Oxford is because they are older than their undergraduate counterparts and have specifically chosen their specialist subject at the master's or doctorate level. It is perhaps not surprising that all of my postgraduate participants had research interests relating to histories or lived experiences of marginalisation and were pursuing such subjects in their degrees. For example, Raj, the President of her college MCR, clearly noted the need for intersectionality when discussing histories of 'firsts' at her college:

> "It's crazy to me that every step of the way, college didn't even care to look who their first Black woman was. That's kind of problematic, in my opinion. I think there's often sometimes, 'who's the first woman,' but there's also an intersectionality that's important to understand, actually even maybe more important to understand, which is Black women in the UK, of African and Caribbean descent. But yeah, I found myself in very weird positions during [this conversation with the college]."

Chapter 5.2 further analyses Raj's experiences in a leadership position and those of other WoC who served on their college student governance committees. The ways in which different facets of women of colour's identities, with both positive and negative associations, were pushed to the forefront at Oxford are indicative of the university's status quo as an institution built upon exclusion, where only upper-class, white, straight, cisgender men were

permitted to thrive. The remainder of this chapter examines how WoC negotiated their identities and sense of belonging at Oxford that were at odds with the institution's norms.

4.2 The politics of terminology

The terms used to refer to racialised populations are often geographically specific and have fluctuated throughout history; in the UK, the most common abbreviation is BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) or BME (Black and Minority Ethnic). The majority of participants were comfortable with or actively embraced the term 'women of colour'; however, there were debates surrounding the use of acronyms to group all racialised minorities. This terminology is also politicised and can create additional exclusions, such as in institutional 'diversity work' wherein the word 'diversity' is "seen to be embodied by others, [which] then allows the whiteness of such organisations to be concealed" (Ahmed & Swan, 2006, 98). These tensions are also applicable to debates around BAME, the variations of which were most evident in each college's title for the JCR or MCR member representing marginalised students, including BME (Black and Minority Ethnic), EM (Ethnic Minority), RAEM (Religious and Ethnic Minorities); EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion); Equalities, Ethnic Diversity, and Inclusion; and Welfare and Equality representatives. Though everyone in these roles held the same responsibilities, the range of their titles underscores the inconsistencies and lack of collective agreement in cementing a catch-all term for referring to marginalised populations.

There are pitfalls in using any identity term to describe marginalised communities, as "any act of definition carries the potential to fold one's being into hegemonic structures and, by doing so, suspend animation" (Warrior, 2017, 379). Zhao notes the difficulties of using sweeping umbrella terms to describe identity:

> "I think the way I look at it is like, language is a very slippery slope, but as long as we're not using it blindly and we're acknowledging the terminology we're using, why we're using it and its implications, I think it could be OK, and it can be a side of coalition as long as we like, acknowledge the fact that there is intersectionality within that terminology. And that's to a certain extent … I think the best way to do it is to just like lay it out in the beginning of whatever you're talking about or whatever you're researching and say, look, I unfortunately am limited by the challenges and

> constructs and barriers of the colonial English language. I unfortunately don't speak another language. This is the way I can best synthesise this information that makes you know, logical sense, geographical sense. But at the same time, I acknowledge, you know, XY and Z intergroup cultural differences and the fact that intersectionality plays a huge role in changing people's experiences within a group."

Such terms differ in non-UK contexts. In North America, the broadly accepted terminology is BIPOC for 'Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour' and became more popularised in usage after the global uprisings against racial injustice in 2020 following the murder of George Floyd by police officers (Davidson, 2024; Press & Carothers, 2020); in Australia, one participant informed me that the "bureaucratic legal term would be CaLD – Culturally and Linguistically Diverse people".[36] Countries like Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand are settler-colonial in origin, with settlers displacing Indigenous populations and relations under various colonial conquests, hence the inclusion of Indigenous peoples in the terminology used to refer to marginalised peoples. Five of the seven postgraduate students I interviewed were international students, aligning with Oxford's recorded statistics on postgraduate domiciles of origin, with over two-thirds from outside the UK (2024). Our conversations on language use and the categories under which women of colour are placed – and often constrained within – reflect the importance of intersectionality that ties directly to one's sense of agency.

Emily stressed the importance of agency when determining terminologies:

> "When it comes to it linguistically, I don't necessarily have a problem as long as the terms are self-determined. I think if the terms come from a bureaucracy and are owned by a bureaucracy, as in they're made by people who are not constituents of that group, then it's problematic, but when it comes to people naming themselves, it's fine."

Emily identified a central problem of Oxford's usage of terminologies, in that it is mired in bureaucracy and terms like 'BAME' and 'EDI' and has been ascribed to marginalised peoples, often in legal language, rather than offering people a choice. Armstrong and Arendale's discussion of the politics of terminology in the field formerly

[36] See the National Ethnic Disability Alliance Australia for more information (2024).

known as developmental education stresses that it is about *who* wields the power of language and how it is ascribed to communities without said power (2024). Furthermore, the prolonged debates around the subject can in itself detract from tangible change, as Zhao notes:

> "I don't want to get too caught up in the politics of language because then I think it'll distract me from the true purpose of what my work is. It almost sometimes feels to me as like, you know how Audre Lorde talks about, like, how there's tools used to distract the oppressed and therefore keep them like in the subordinated position. I think that language can be one of those tools and I try my best to like navigate it and challenge it without letting it like kind of swallow me whole, if that makes sense."

Zhao and Emily's takeaways on the uses of language mirror Ahmed's research on 'diversity work' in UK HEIs, specifically how such initiatives often serve as a tool of distraction from the racism and sexism embedded in these structures: "Diversity work becomes about *changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organisations*" (2007, 605, emphasis in original). She asserts that we must "follow words like 'diversity'" in a literal sense, tracking its usages by the university and recording how it can be exploited by allowing "the organization to accumulate value, by re-branding itself as being diverse or even as being committed to diversity without, as it were, doing anything" (Ahmed, 2007, 254). Oxford University can and has fallen into similar traps, allowing the bureaucracy to distract and hinder the systemic change demanded by activists (further discussed in 6.4 and 6.5). We can instead strive for what Agbetu et al. (2021) call "an anthropology of disruption" in UK HE, where dislocation from institutional norms, including conscious disaffiliations with the standardisation of identity, can potentially usher in material change rather than only offering hollow 'commitments' to change for marginalised students, especially women of colour.

The 'othering' created by the language of diversity work is articulated by Sree, who spoke about the importance of specifying 'woman of colour' when discussing BAME and other terms:

> "I think women of colour do have differences to men of colour. So, I think having that as a separate thing is helpful. I was also thinking, at my college, there's a whole thing going on right now – there's a BAME rep at our JCR, but we don't have a religion rep. But it's kind of within their role to kind of plan and fund all the religious

ceremonies and things that happen, and there's also a big conflation of BAME as the 'other', almost, which isn't helpful generally."

Yet there is also personal and political power that can be derived from identifying as a woman of colour or using identity-first language in general. For example, Ana identified herself as "a woman of colour, [a] Black woman of colour." She also pointed out the inherent limitations of such categories and her preference for the term women of colour as opposed to BME:

> "I think the term BME is kind of not the best term that they could use, but that's just because, in general, I kind of dislike, you know, the insinuation that people of colour are like a minority ethnic, like an ethnic minority, or like a minority in general. It can be a bit – it kind of sets up a sort of, I don't know how to describe it, it makes you kind of feel like you are always going to be like a minority wherever you are. So, it's kind of like that's how it sets it up. That can feel quite isolating but in terms of the term women of colour, yeah, I do quite like that term. I think it's a good kind of balance between, you know, like the feminist cause and obviously like people of colour [and] activism. I like that term personally."

Ana's beliefs reflect Zavella's chronicling of the term 'women of colour', writing that it is "becoming a phrase that reflects racialized women's political subjectivity even as women articulate their pride for specific racial-ethic-national, gendered, sexual, and other identities" (2022, 405). The multiplicities inherent in the words 'woman' and 'colour' are essential to dissect, with four participants in this research using 'she/they' pronouns and one identifying as non-binary. The fluidity of gender and sexuality correlates with the fluctuations in one's preferred identity definitions. Arya, who uses she/they pronouns, is a prime example; when asked how she identifies, she said: "I don't feel repulsed by femininity. Most of the time, I do say I'm a woman, because those are ostensibly my experiences. I'm comfortable with femininity; I just don't want to be the only dimension to my gender identity." By considering the experiences of women of colour in tandem with evolving conversations on its usage in personal and political contexts, space can be made for the pluriversal worldviews long espoused by Indigenous and transnational feminists.

4.3 “This is a very white place”

“Oxford is white.” That is what the majority of my participants stated, and such is reflected in Oxford University’s 2023 undergraduate student intake of 71.2% white students and 28.8% BME students (2024). British women of colour academics have long spoken about the whiteness of the UK academy and the pervasive harms of institutional racism and sexism (see citations in 2.2).[37] The impacts of concurrent discriminations, which also include a culture of sexual harassment at Oxford (Steele et al., 2021; Howlett & Davies, 2021), are explored here in relation to participants’ experiences of and with whiteness as both personal and structural concepts. Twelve participants identified as mixed race, resulting in nuanced experiences of whiteness and the construction of their racialised identities.[38] Shafi and Nagdee write that “race and racism serve to consolidate power in the British state, as well as underwriting British imperialism abroad... Race is never innocent – it is differentiation for the purposes of domination” (2022, 10). Race as a social construct, as lived in Britain and Oxford, is necessary to foreground in this discussion, as how women of colour mediated race-related interactions, whether rac*ist* or not, shifted depending on their location as internal or external to the university.

It is notable that whenever I asked about their experiences of Oxford, all the participants were quick to clarify that none of them had experienced explicit racism in Oxford; however, the subtleties of race and racialisation affected their everyday lives. When asked about her experience at Oxford, Gitanjali discussed the pervasive whiteness of the university and its subtle effects without being prompted to talk about race in particular:

> “It doesn’t jar as much anymore, but I think it does still. I think the fact that I still get kind of like excited or kind of struck when I do see people of colour, or I'm like, you know, having a nice chat with someone, a person of colour, like at a party or something, I think the fact that it still strikes me probably means that it's not that diverse or like it's less diverse than what I'm used to.”

[37] Oxford’s 2023-2024 EDI report purports that 9% of associate professors are female and from BME backgrounds; 9% of statutory professors are from BME backgrounds; no data was provided on the percentage of statutory female BME professors (University of Oxford, 2025).
[38] 12 participants identified as mixed race, as in having one white parent and one non-white parent; 1 other participant identified as mixed-race of different East and Southeast Asian identities.

Gitanjali's contradiction of not having the whiteness of Oxford jars her "as much anymore" and, in the same breath, admitting that "it does still" exhibits Ahmed's theory on the affect of whiteness as an 'impression' as one that creates a border which "materialise as an effect of intensifications of feeling" (2004, 39). Much like the impression participants had of Oxford before they began university, their impressions of whiteness emerged from how "individual and collective bodies surface through the very orientations we take to objects and others" (Ahmed, 2004, 39), which is centred around whiteness in Oxford.

Domestic students from more racially diverse UK cities such as London or Manchester found the lack of racial diversity especially palpable. Ravinder, a second-year student, shares her feelings of discomfort:

> "I think my main thing has been more how I feel. I look around a lecture room and there's only like two other people of colour in this room, sometimes makes me feel a bit uncomfortable, even if I have no reason to feel unsafe. I think I'm always aware of that in a room, in a way that – cause I'm from Manchester, I think that's quite a diverse space, so I'm not used to that, and I think that was something that I struggled with most early on, I'd say."

Most participants did provide a caveat that by their second year, they were mainly accustomed to the whiteness of Oxford. However, the hyperawareness Ravinder mentions can lend itself to a culture of vigilance in which WoC can never fully feel comfortable in the university's white-majority spaces. Albertina, who does not come from a large UK city, considered Oxford diverse relative to her hometown but still sought out specific racialised spaces:

> "I come from a really white area, so for me, coming to Oxford is more diverse, which none of my friends can get their head around cause they're all from London, so coming to Oxford was like, oh my god, this is such a white space. I now live with five other Black students; I absolutely love it; it's almost like our little ethnic enclave in our college. So, this is kind of the diverse part of my life."

Albertina's decision to live in a house with other Black students can be read as a response to whiteness as "a situation we have or are in; when we can name that situation (and even make jokes about it), we recognize each other as strangers to the institution and find in

that estrangement a bond" (Ahmed, 2012, 5)." The desire for WoC and people of colour-only spaces is further analysed in 7.3.

Dylan, a clinical medical student, experienced a similar shock to Oxford's whiteness coming from London and correctly identified her non-London peers' inverse perceptions of the university:

> "It's definitely less diverse. I suppose I was expecting that to an extent, but what I wasn't expecting was for the vast majority of my peers and my friends to think that Oxford is really diverse because they come from even less diverse places. So, I think for me, navigating that and trying to communicate to people that I was feeling like – even though it is objectively a really diverse place – I still often feel like and am the minority."

Dylan's experience may also be coloured by their interactions as a medical trainee at an Oxford hospital, where their exposure to the local population while still occupying the status of an Oxford student underscores the "complex multidimensional embodied world that Black and ethnicised women inhabit on the margins of white institutions" (Mirza, 2014, 8). Mirza writes in the context of women of colour scholars, with WoC academics experiencing similar pressures at an institutional level; for example, sitting on equality and diversity committees, the stereotype of being named as the 'diversity hire' to help meet a quota rather than having earned their position on merit, and the burnout associated with having to not only represent their entire community but also support and care for marginalised students that feel abandoned by their institutions.

WoC participants experienced similar pressures at the student level, facing accusations of only receiving admission to Oxford because of what the university sees, as Holly put it, "the[ir] diversity element". There have long been contentious debates about the benefits and drawbacks of affirmative action or diversity in admissions, especially in the context of pitting racialised groups against one another, which ultimately maintains the structures of institutionalised white supremacy that activists are working to dismantle.[39]

[39] The most recent example can be found in the United States, where affirmative action in college admissions was overturned in the 2023 Supreme Court case *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, where a "racial wedge" was created between Asian American and Black students (Dirks, 2023).

International students also experienced distinct forms of racialisation and how they encountered the histories of race in the UK versus countries like the United States. Oxford is a distinctly British institution, despite 46% of its overall student body coming from outside of the UK and numbering 65% of all postgraduate students (University of Oxford, 2025). Phoebe, an American master's student, talked about her experience of whiteness in Britain:

> "I always bring up that this is a very white place. This is a very white country, this a very white city, but also, I heard of Oxford as a very international institution, which it is, but it doesn't also preclude it from being a very white space."

The preclusion Phoebe references is significant, as Oxford University does not define itself as a white institution but is perceived as such, especially by racialised students, in part also due to its elitist reputation (see chapter 6.4 for further analysis). Micah, an American postgraduate student who researches the histories of Black enslaved women, reflected on her interactions with others on race:

> "Some of the understanding of race in the UK that I've kind of interacted with comes from this really, really interesting positionality of like the saviour of the enslaved, that the English, I think, have taken very seriously … I think sometimes in some ways some of the reactions I'm getting, some of the things I've been told by my classmates about like what their professors say when they like, even bring up Black history and they don't study it has been, I think, very disheartening and very tough to find room to move forward in a way that I find is particularly productive, if that makes sense."

Micah's statement echoes two salient points: one, that WoC students and academics are the ones who bear the responsibility of studying marginalised communities and disseminating such scholarship; two, the return of the hyperawareness around whiteness experienced by WoC that seeps into various elements of their Oxford lives that makes it difficult for them to "find room to move forward", such as in Micah's case, to have honest conversations about Britain's colonial histories. The impressions of whiteness at Oxford extend beyond the academic realm and into WoC students' social experiences. Albertina referred to how students of colour may consciously suppress elements of their identity at Oxford:

> "I feel like a lot of students of colour get here, and it's like, yay, I'm at Oxford, but let me kind of shrink the aspects of myself that don't fit in with the Oxford archetype."

The ‘Oxford archetype’, as described by Jas, is an “Eton, middle-class private school boy”; Albertina also noted that her college doesn’t have typical “Oxford-y buildings, and not all the people are like your typical Oxford people.” Both went on to clarify that Oxford is slowly moving beyond the stereotype, but it is clear that WoC students have a clear image of who, or who the university believes, is ‘meant’ to be an Oxford student. Gabriella reflected on how she initially perceived Oxford as an exclusionary place and her assumptions that her peers had a markedly different experience:

> “I think especially in first year, I would make a joke that ‘Haha, 500 years ago, I probably wouldn’t even have been allowed in this place’ or would I be living in like the servant’s quarters or whatever. That was a joke to me, but yeah, I think I was a bit desensitised when people were like, oh my god, Oxford’s just so beautiful and so pretty; I think I was just like, I don’t get it.”

She concluded by noting that by her third year, she no longer thought of herself in such deficit terms and recognised her worth in Oxford, partly due to her time serving on the African-Caribbean Society’s executive committee, which is explored further in 5.3. The influences that cultural and identity-based societies have on WoC students are substantial despite the repeated intrusions of whiteness in particular movements. Arya, the co-chair of the SU Women*s Campaign, expressed her disappointment in its lack of intersectionality despite her best efforts:

> “I guess to return to the aspect of intersectionality, race intersecting with gender, because even in the work that I’m doing, me and Zayna are the only women of colour on our committee. It was really difficult because I was trying to get women of colour to apply for the role, but there weren’t many options, so it ended up just being me and Zayna. I think the biggest part of that is that women of colour don’t feel safe enough to even venture into these spaces because there’s a saturation of white women that dominate these spaces. Even though they’re all doing great work, we need to create spaces for other people from different backgrounds to come into it.”

Similarly, Carmen, an alumna who organised for racial justice whilst at Oxford, recalled her perceptions of anti-sexual violence activism as a majority-white space at Oxford that precluded her from participating:

> "I felt that activism around [sexual violence] in Oxford was very white, upper-middle class, straight-sized, cis, straight women thing, and I'm not many of those things. So, I felt very much that that wasn't a space where I didn't really feel like it was for me at the time … It's worth saying that there's a lot of internalised stuff as well; it's not that I ever had people say to me, 'you can't be involved in this', but it just didn't feel like a space that was relevant to me. I think there's a lot of complexity, especially around experiences of sexual violence."

Instead, WoC students construct social and affective spaces that decentre whiteness to commune with one another based on a shared marginality, such as the Women of Colour Society (WocSoc). Marie highlighted the society as a powerful space to fend off what Lewis describes as a "thick, suffering fog of whiteness" (Lewis & Hemmings, 2019, 411) in UK feminism:

> "I think also just creating a strong social community around women of colour can be very powerful. I think, especially in the UK, which is very white, creating a space where you can feel like you can really celebrate your culture, and you can be around people that get it and understand it and have that thread of connection can be really powerful."

WoC students, through their involvement in societies and other activist spheres, are cultivating what Liu and Shange term 'thick solidarity', which "layers interpersonal empathy *with* historical analysis, political acumen, and a willingness to be led by those most directly impacted" (2018, 196). This is evident in Maisie's statement, who recalled her initial encounters with the Oxford Feminist Society (FemSoc) before she became a committee member:

> "I think maybe it was just because it was such a non-male space that made it feel quite non-threatening, and I went so much in first year. I would go to all the discussions, we talked about really interesting things like the role of men in feminism, language and feminism, Oxford as an institution and to what extent is it problematic that we even go to Oxford, things like this were really interesting."

For Maisie, FemSoc was an environment where she could freely critique the institution in a "non-male space" – men were never barred from attending FemSoc, but as I witnessed throughout the ethnographic process, its attendance was always a majority of women and its

ethos was intentionally and explicitly serving the needs of feminist, women students. Student-led societies like WocSoc and FemSoc enable the rejection of patriarchy and whiteness as the central structures of governance at Oxford due to their perceived externality from the university. As evinced in this section, the affects of whiteness at Oxford can be overwhelming and even suffocating at times. Still, WoC students are carving out alternative spaces of encounter to not only confront its ramifications but conceive of new forms of resistance to the historically harmful power structures present at the institution.

4.4 Respectability politics

Activists are often portrayed as disrespectful and acting out of turn by the media when engaging in actions that question or threaten dominant power structures (Scheuch et al., 2024; Hailu & Sarubbi, 2019). Climate justice activists enacting large-scale disruptions of public life, such as blocking major traffic thoroughfares or vandalism of museum artworks, have generally received negative media coverage and waning support for their acts of 'extreme protest' (Feinberg et al., 2020).[40] Women of colour students at Oxford confronted similar rhetorical critiques of their activities when attempting to change what they perceived as the unjust issues facing their communities at Oxford. Their embodied knowledges and lived experiences are dismissed as unfit qualifications to lead initiatives for change because they do not align with Oxford's understanding of excellence as attained through scholarship and formal learning. There are two facets to this discussion on respect for WoC students: first, how women of colour are expected to perform a respectability politics that is seen as a necessary precondition to maintain Oxford's reputation; second, how WoC student activists experienced (dis)respect as visible faces of dissent at the university.

The term respectability politics emerged in the early 20th century to describe how Black women in the United States "presented themselves as polite, sexually pure, and thrifty to reject stereotypes" (Pitcan et al., 2018, 164) and to earn respect from others. It functions through a "constant reiteration of moral conduct and proper behaviour" as dictated by the white ruling class (Dazey, 2021, 582). Through the lenses of race, gender, and class, respectability politics can be a tactic for social mobility and societal acceptance. Oxford students are seen to be held to a higher standard in British society, which requires Oxford scholars to be articulate, respectful, and deferential to the enduring class and racial

[40] Just Stop Oil also protested at Oxford by throwing orange paint on the Radcliffe Camera to call out university leaders' inaction on climate change (BBC England, 2023).

hierarchies that initially built the ancient university. Of course, women and people of colour were not included in the original vision of Oxford; therefore, student activists from marginalised backgrounds today cannot wholly embody the archetype of the 'respectful' Oxford student. Yasmine and Habiba, two Muslim women who organised for Palestinian liberation in their college, recounted the challenges they faced once the veneer of respectability faded:

> "I think we're expected to be kind of respectable and courteous and nice about things. I think the minute we're not very nice to college or to the uni, they were kind of like – it was mentioned after we sent the kind of mean emails [criticising the college's response to Palestine] was, 'I feel everything you're saying, but you could've said it nicer.' And I was like, I think it's more than enough for me to be like, I don't like this, I don't like you, I'm not happy. And [the college staff member] was like, 'You're here for your analytical skills'".

The tone policing of activists is widespread, most commonly seen in the criticism of climate justice protests by groups like Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion, with some facing severe punishment, including jail sentences for protest actions and the current UK Prime Minister calling their demands 'contemptible' (Bilalova & Bedendo, 2024; Rowlatt, 2023; Blewett, 2023). The academy has analogous expectations of its members, with Mirza writing about the irony of the "heightened visibility for the 'invisible' [women of colour] in our polite and gentle corridors of higher education", where WoC experience higher rates of sexual harassment and discrimination (2014, 5). Carmen echoes this when speaking about what she viewed as Oxford's lack of respect towards its students:

> "Considering that Oxford is so big on how qualified all our students are, how we've got the best students in the world and whatever, you may say you have the best students in the world, but you don't actually respect them. I think the real shift that Oxford needs to institute is to view not only certainly teaching, engaging with activism, all these things as like a dialogue."

Carmen's assertion paints a picture of the university as an institution that proudly touts the quality of teaching and the academic achievements of its students, but put in the activist context, there is little will to engage in good-faith dialogues for change. The short academic terms, the limited timespan of students' tenure in leadership positions, and the decentralised

nature of the university and collegiate system contribute to the difficulties of enacting change (see chapters six and seven for additional analysis). Still, WoC participants assert that they were not afforded a baseline degree of respect. Moreover, Carmen makes a compelling contrast to how North American universities portray their students versus Oxford's attitudes:

> "I think Oxford's just got this really arrogant rejection of wanting to have anything to do with the values they instil in those people, whereas a lot more North American institutions are very much more interested in producing a global citizen … A lot of how Harvard and those large institutions in the US now recruit, they will explicitly say that our aim is to produce diverse cohorts that will go on to change the world. And Oxford doesn't really have any of that language, it's much more about the best and brightest, and that's just really not, I don't know, you need to define what you mean by that."

Oxford's lack of attention to cultivating 'global citizens' of its students results in maintaining the university's traditional status quo, which has historically excluded women of colour. For example, university leadership has repeatedly infantilised student activists' competencies, forcing them to play into the institution's respectability politics to garner meaningful results. Student activists frequently challenge the status quo by becoming visible faces of dissent and change to existing university structures. Here, I am referring to participants who openly defined themselves as activists. Their relationship to respect and respectability is markedly different as they anticipated challenges to their work. However, the difference lies in the disrespect they felt from their peers, as Arya described:

> "I just want student activists to be given more respect. I say this carefully, because I don't feel that we're inherently owed respect because we're activists, but the work that we're doing should be owed respect, otherwise, you're not going to make change. We're always between a rock and a hard place because the uni or the SU [Student Union] doesn't want to help us, but then other students that aren't part of the campaign will have unrealistically high expectations of us."

Arya references student activists' competing pressures from their peers and the shortcomings of institutional support systems such as the SU that, in her experience, has not championed her attempts to create change. For WoC, interactions with the university are further complicated given the majority-white makeup of Oxford's collegiate and university

governance bodies. Raj discussed her experience sitting on college committees as the MCR President, where she is the only non-white person:

> "I feel like a lot of getting things through in college, it boils down to a lot of bureaucratic hacking and a lot of personal relationships. There's a really fine balance to try and get respected as a woman of colour. That respect is not immediately afforded to me, and it's very obvious with certain members in particular. That's been frustrating."

WoC student leaders like Raj also felt the weight of individual responsibility when attempting to change the institution with an intersectional approach. For example, Raj was the only one pushing to commission a painting of the first Black woman graduate of her college and was met with resistance from white colleagues who did not understand the portrait's significance. There have long been sexist accusations levelled at women for being 'too emotional' to be in leadership roles or politics (Frasca et al., 2022; Vial & Cowgill, 2022). Raj's reflection on not receiving immediate respect, even as MCR President, is particularly poignant when paired with Habiba's perspective on these assumptions for WoC at Oxford:

> "[At] Oxford, there's already this respectability. Women are already punished when they act emotionally or hysterically or whatnot, and then women of colour are further seen as threats or as kind of overly emotional or overly, I don't necessarily want to say aggressive because I don't think we [Muslim women] have that stereotype but seen as not thinking clearly. And so, it all kind of melts together, and you just end up feeling like, oh, I'm not really being taken seriously here."

A central tension embedded in the respectability politics of student activism is the normative presumption of how 'the Oxford student' should behave under institutional expectations, in contrast to the ways of being associated with activism and its embodied emotionality that resists or outright rejects such norms. Habiba explained her perception of such constructions and emphasised the double standard in expressing one's views in an institutionally acceptable 'academic' voice versus an activist one:

> "I think specifically, this is a unique thing in Oxford, where you're expected to act like an Oxford student, and it's so steeped in respectability. The minute you kind of leave this freedom of speech, Plato debate thing and you take action, you feel strongly

about something, you kind of disqualify yourself from the respect of an 'Oxford student' who deals with things level-headedly and doesn't get emotional … You kind of have to suspend your disbelief a little bit and have these completely opposing opinions, which is Oxford is a space where you can talk about colonialism, where you can write about this, and you can write about that, and this space is open, and those views are taken seriously in the academic context when it's a nice essay when you're doing it well. But the same things that undercut that when they're transferred onto a non-academic context, like activism or self-identity, views, speech, language; the minute you transfer it out of this bubble of respectability, it's punished. If not punished, ignored, or not taken seriously. It's just this doubled kind of thing where it's so disorientating to have to acknowledge both and realise that they're just entirely at odds with each other."

Habiba's reference to this image of the expected 'Oxford student' conjures the stereotype of an erudite scholar in debating halls, where the realities of WoC lived experiences like racism and colonialism can be discussed in the abstract without consequence. Her reflection underscores the disconnect felt by WoC students at this institution, where their concerns are heard but not acted upon to create change, even if the changes – in Habiba's case, asking for the installation of a Muslim welfare support staff at her college for Muslim students to access as opposed to the only current option of seeing someone from the Church of England – would significantly improve her and her community's wellbeing. Habiba characterising Oxford as a place where you have to "suspend your disbelief a little bit" indicates the dichotomies student activists face, where dissent is encouraged in tutorial and academic environments but repudiated when directed at the university in the public sphere. There exist implicit boundaries around acceptable behaviours and delineated areas of controlled debate, such as at the Oxford Union, where explicit dissent is allowable. Student activists, especially WoC holding multiple marginalised identities, are dismissed or disciplined for daring to let their politics and emotions influence their academics, which Habiba characterises as an intentionally non-emotional discursive space in Oxford.

The prejudicial presuppositions that WoC students wade through at Oxford can be constant and emotionally taxing. Participants recounted the lack of institutional support upon experiencing backlash or barefaced discrimination for speaking out. Instead, they

commiserated and found solace by forging relationships with other women of colour, activists, and communities outside university systems. This attests to Low's scholarship on embodied spaces, where "the intentionality of individual and group trajectories do more than create space and place; they also open up space to innovative political and social possibilities and imaginings" (2016, 118). For women of colour students at Oxford, it is in environments that grasp the conditions of their lived realities, where "the woman of colour life *is* the crossroad, where no aspect of our identity is wholly dismissed from our consciousness, even as we navigate a daily shifting political landscape" (Moraga, 2021, xxxii, emphasis in original) that beginnings of a socially just future can begin to be crafted.

4.5 Women of colour and labour

The women of colour students who took on activist or activist-adjacent roles often did so because they felt a sense of obligation to their community to take on the mantle of representation and leadership for their peers; for example, WoC students nominating themselves for positions (such as JCR BAME representative) that would otherwise go unfilled. The emotional labour required of women of colour in such positions can lead to burnout and resignation, commonly experienced by WoC in academia and the workplace (see Dobbs & Leider, 2023; Olufemi et al., 2019). Social movement scholars have written extensively on the role of emotions in activism, particularly the resulting 'activist burnout' that occurs for racialised activists contending with the weight of their work (Gorski, 2019; see also Linder et al., 2019). Historical precedent also exists where women of colour, particularly Black women, are depicted as 'saviours' with little regard for the harm the trope can cause (Gay & Kazemi, 2022). In their research on the anti-austerity activism of women of colour in the UK, Emejulu and Bassel argue for the urgency and necessity to "take seriously women of colour's knowledge production about the diverse, contradictory and competing notions of what justice and quality might mean" by foregrounding WoC lived experiences, which they define as "the collective understandings and resistance that arise from being constructed as a subordinate and alien Other" (2017, 120). This section examines three elements of WoC students' experiences of emotional labour at Oxford: Activist labours, unpaid labour, and the weight of representation.

Activist labours

Activist labour is defined as the "work and care activists expend in attempting to achieve their goals" (Emejulu & Sobande, 2023, 7), spanning physical, psychological,

emotional, and other forms of care in service of sustaining solidarities and social relations. Emejulu and Sobande name WoC activist labour as an act that evokes "intersectional vulnerabilities, [which] represent a tension in that harms must be endured and survived, somehow, but this survival is made possible in community and in solidarity with others" (2023, 9). WoC students articulated the acute heaviness of their emotional labour while conducting activist work. Ming, an alumna and former organiser with the now-inactive anti-racist, anti-colonial group Common Ground Oxford, recounted her experience:

> "Other people would come in and help, but it always felt like the majority of the work and all the responsibility fell on the women of colour, unfortunately. Which is like classic, right? I could've said that in everything, the world, even … I know [another woman of colour leader] said she felt the same sometimes, too, like people would come in and have these great ideas, they try and run them or start them, and we always felt like we were doing the cleaning up after."

Ming recalling that WoC were the ones doing the "cleaning up" is both metaphorical and literal – gathering up the work of others to fruition and physically being at the forefront of events or movements that take a bodily toll. Leila's experience participating in the Oxford Action for Palestine (OA4P) encampment of the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Radcliffe Camera is an apt example. The spring 2024 encampment, the events of which I analyse in 7.7, exposed Leila to the inequities in activism through the uneven amount of work WoC and women organisers were undertaking compared to others:

> "When I actually got involved, I was like, oh, it's the same. It's the same structures we've always set. It's always women, women of colour, who are working the very difficult shifts, who are having to – again, I don't know if it's the same as Pitt Rivers, people have just been so busy because of exams because of Oxford drilling it into you that you can't come along for an hour, an hour and a half, but I can't lie. Dare I even say it, I don't know if it's even women of colour, but women, in general, are carrying this camp, and at what cost? I don't know if you notice it when you're here, people are so tired all the time, and on edge … Again, it's women, queer women of colour who are holding the fort at 3am. I'm like, why? Where are other people?"

Ming and Leila's experiences, though several years removed as Common Ground was founded in 2017 and active until roughly 2020, are strikingly similar. WoC students continue

to bear the emotional and physical labours of activism in ways that directly impact other dimensions of their lives, specifically how the realities of students' academic responsibilities conflicted with their activism and led to burnout. Linder et al.'s research on the experiences of student activists of colour on US college campuses found that "activists with minoritised identities experience even more significant burnout and exhaustion than their dominant group peers as a result of trying to manage their experiences with oppression in the larger society and in the activist groups with which they are affiliated" (2019), echoing Ming and Leila's observations.

Moreover, Leila also pressed the importance of acknowledging that the OA4P encampment was not a utopia in part due to the uneven burdens borne by women of colour in the movement:

> "I feel like there's almost this sentiment that this place can't be criticised, the encampment can't be criticised, when it can. Also, now that I think about it, there's another example – again, this is institutional, horizontal – the people who are reading out the names right now [of the martyrs] are Arabic speakers. Native Arabic speakers who usually end up being a woman of colour. I was thinking, again, it's a question of time, space, whatever – it's labour, but it would be labour for white people, why didn't people spend the night learning to read fifty names, or forty names? That would have taken the labour off. That's why there's no one at camp right now, because all the people who work here are right now over there reading."

The omnipresent sense of obligation for WoC to engage in activism is evident in Albertina's musings on her dual desires to both influence the institution and protect herself:

> "I feel like in my ideal world I'd want to take down this, and do this, and transform this, and create this space for people, and do this kind of really important, impactful work. But then it's kind of like, you are limited by the fact that how much time do I have, how much energy do I have, and how do I prevent burnout in this institution, which is just so ever-present, and it feels like it's always just looming on you. I would love to do greater things with my time as BAME rep, but I also feel like I'd let myself down or the students down because this institution is so stressful anyway."

Albertina's anxiety that she would let herself down or let her fellow students of colour down, whom she serves as BAME representative, resonates with other participants' testimonies that they are afraid of burning out at Oxford. To stave off the most acute effects of burnout, Micah sees her role as primarily signposting others to resources:

> "I think my biggest form of activism is attempting to stay educated and to point other people in a good direction of being educated themselves. Because I know I'm not at a level for everything that I can help educate them, and also, that's so much emotional labour. It's so much."

Micah and others' resignation towards doing activist labour engenders Emejulu and Bassel's theory of a politics of exhaustion (2020). As Iman conceded when discussing her attempts at starting a conversation around whiteness in the Oxford Labour Society: "Sometimes, you do want to fight the fight, but I had had enough of fighting the fight at that point." There comes a point where, despite their intentions or passions, activism becomes too much. Iman's isolation as a WoC in the Oxford Labour Society and her accompanying critique of the class inequalities in the Labour Party at large speak to how "understanding the politics of exhaustion explodes fictions of political equality when power dynamics at the grassroots drain women of colour of energy in the name of solidarity. 'Mixed' spaces … may never be politically productive if women of colour are expected to bear exhaustion unequally, disproportionately, and ideally, in silence" (Emejulu & Bassel, 2020, 404).

Unpaid labour

There exists a pressing need to honour and materially recognise the labour and knowledge production that emerges from WoC-led activist movements, including at the student level. At Oxford, no student activists or organisers (including JCR and MCR committee members) are financially compensated for their work except for sabbatical officers elected to the Student Union for year-long terms.[41] The economic inequities at Oxford, exacerbated by the fact that undergraduate students are, in effect, banned from working during term time, are heightened for WoC student activists who must manage their academics and advocacy in addition to their social lives.[42] Carmen summed up this dilemma:

[41] They may, however, receive benefits in kind such as priority room balloting, free formal dinners, and invites to official college events otherwise closed to students.
[42] Guidance for undergraduate students: "Term-time employment is permitted only under exceptional circumstances and always with the explicit agreement of your tutor and senior tutor. During vacations you will have academic work, and this should take priority among your other commitments." (University of Oxford, 2025).

> "I feel like students, especially here, are given so much stuff to do, so much work to do, and then the paraphernalia of Oxford is treated as things which are essential, but it's not essential. So, going to summer eights, and rowing, and formals, and going to the Union, and all these things that are very much pitched, especially for undergrads, as things that everybody does, and everybody needs to do. And then, of course, well, you can't have a job, so they sort of stuff you full of so much stuff, and then it's like, you've got so little head space to think about challenging the environment you're in, especially because everyone's telling you this is the biggest opportunity of your life. Especially if you come from one or more marginalised backgrounds, like this is your only shot, don't bite the hand that feeds, basically. So, I feel like there's not very much headspace for students to turn to activism."

Carmen's reference to the "paraphernalia of Oxford" directly relates to Jas' image of the typical Oxford student in 4.3, a privately educated, middle-class white man who, in theory, has ample free time and resources to participate in 'Oxford activities' such as rowing and can afford the cost of regular formals and other social events. For WoC students whose activist activities are often inextricable from their identities, facets of which include race, class, gender, and schooling backgrounds, the freedom to be a 'typical Oxford student' is not afforded to them in the same way. Furthermore, Carmen's use of the idiom 'don't bite the hand that feeds' reflects the embedded respectability towards the institution marginalised students are expected to adopt, where complaints and protests against the university are anathema because they willingly chose to attend Oxford, with knowledge of its stressors.

However, in adopting these voluntary, unpaid roles in tandem with their academic responsibilities, WoC students come up against the 'inherent stress' of Oxford University. Many participants suggested that a simple, actionable solution to ease the burdens of students in these positions is to hire professional staff trained in conflict resolution, anti-racism, welfare, and other forms of community resources to support students. Anna, a former co-chair of the SU's Campaign for Racial Equality, put it bluntly:

> "Honestly, I think they can hire professionals. I'm not sure exactly what they need to be doing, but the first thing that came to mind is about how prestigious universities like Oxford operate and how it's intrinsic to the institution to be exclusive. I don't have specific answers about what they should be doing, but I guess more outreach,

definitely. Just hiring professionals, for example, for the race workshops that you have to do in fresher's week. We have to create them, and we have to put ourselves in unsafe situations talking to a bunch of students that we've never met before about race, and horrible things come up in those workshops."

Forcing Anna to act as the spokesperson for a racial awareness workshop, knowing the risks endemic to conversations about race and racism that Anna subsequently faced, parallels Leila's experiences at the OA4P encampment, wherein WoC protestors were placed at the forefront of a political campaign that confronted several violent threats from the public. Anna goes on to state that the status quo of Oxford's reliance on student labour is 'unacceptable' when coupled with the needs of their academic workload:

> "I think the point everyone makes about the amount of labour and emotional labour that you have to put in as women of colour and a student at Oxford, I just think it's very unsustainable. Oxford is already so much work, and feeling like you have to get involved and all these things to just create safe spaces for yourself is unacceptable."[43]

Sage, a previous committee member in her JCR, recounted similar feelings of duty and 'love' that are meant to motivate student leaders but disregard their labour:

> "I think being on [the] JCR Exec Committee is a form of activism. Oh my God, the amount of unpaid labour you have to put yourself through, on top of your degree, you know, in the name of, like, love, it's a bit ridiculous … It takes so much out of you, and no one actually tells you how much it does take out of you because again, you've got your degree, you've got your other commitments, and you've got like a sort of responsibility to almost take care of your peers."

Sage's naming of this responsibility, which amounts to a collective sense of student welfare, lays bare that those in the JCR committee or related roles are not trained welfare professionals. They may receive the university welfare or peer support training offered by Student Welfare and Support Services, but this does not qualify them to serve as de facto counsellors for their peers, especially those in 'liberation representative' roles who are charged with supporting the needs of an entire marginalised community at their colleges (see

[43] See 6.1 for more on safe spaces.

5.2). Emily further identified the dangers of WoC students not receiving the appropriate support promptly:

> "[WoC] students have to turn to other students who don't have the training, and there's a few people who are kind of on my watchlist at my college who I feel really worried about. There's actually nowhere that I can turn them to for people who are paid to do the work, so I'm worried that lots of these students will get to a point where they need to access crisis support, and then that's when they start engaging in the health system."

Emily again reflects the sense of obligation felt by WoC students, particularly by postgraduate students like herself and Micah, to act as a caretaker and a peer supporter for their younger counterparts, taking pains to ensure their welfare by worrying about them when the university has not provided them with adequate resources. Alongside the lack of practical support, WoC student activists must also withstand the emotional weight of representing a subsect of their peers and the perils of being 'The One' in the predominantly white academy (Ahmed, 2012). Pressure to be 'the One' reveals the belief held by majority-white institutions that "we, as minoritised women of colour, do not belong; that we are only allowed to be part of these institutions because of our race and gender rather than despite them … it disturbs our physical movement through spaces, while it also burdens us with the responsibility for institutional labour regarding issues of race, diversity, and inclusion" (García Peña, 2022, 7).

The weight of representation

The prevalence of such excessively laborious relationships, interactions, and responsibilities results in undue exhaustion for WoC students. It contributes to the cycle of burnout that leads many to become disillusioned with activist work. Nancy, one of the BAME representatives at her college, expressed her discomfort with representing all students of colour, especially as a mixed-race WoC:

> "All the BAME people at my college are represented by two of us, which is not ideal, but is our job to try to navigate that and be careful to acknowledge that we ourselves only represent a subset of what a BAME experience can look like … I know you can't be like 'more BAME' than somebody else, but maybe I am half as BAME as everyone else because I'm half white. It was really confusing, but because no one else was running, I was thinking, oh, I can run, and I can still bring something to the table,

> and what I have to bring is important. But I wouldn't feel comfortable running against somebody else who was, in my mind, maybe more BAME, which I know is not really a thing, but it's a different experience."

During our conversation, Nancy gradually became more comfortable airing her grievances that echoed the testimonies of other participants. For example, attending college administration and welfare meetings about how to respond to student concerns about the war in Gaza and feeling overwhelmed at being the only people of colour in the room:

> "We're students; we're 19; it's a really fragile conversation and topic; it's a lot of pressure and trust to be putting into us to handle it and tackle it well. It's also, just because my dad is Chinese doesn't mean that I'm better suited to talk about this than you are; you're literally being paid to do this. We're not being paid; nobody gets paid at my college to do anything, so that was a bit weird, and it also felt like a massive responsibility."

Dylan also raised the exhaustion felt by WoC and criticised the obligations and duties felt by women of colour when taking on activist work at Oxford:

> "I think what I sort of want for women of colour in the next 20 years at Oxford is not constantly having to feel tired because you're trying to prove something, or you've got to be an activist, or you've got to do this, that, and the other, or you've got to use your diversity for something. Obviously, use what you've got, kind of thing, but I think a lot of women I know definitely feel pressure because they are the person representing so many other unseen women … I hope that women who have chosen not to be in an activist role don't have to step up and be activists just because no one else is doing it."

Dylan's assertions relate to Lorde's theory on the use of anger as a response to racism (1984). Lorde calls for solidarity between women of colour and an explicit need to reject white feminism, writing that "anger is loaded with information and energy … we cannot let our fear of anger to deflect us nor seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty" (1984, 127-128). In the activist context, Dylan emphasises the undercurrent of anger in WoC:

> "From what I've seen, the most outspoken, angry, activist women I know are women of colour because we've just got so much to be angry about."

Rodriguez and Boahene, reflecting on Lorde's theory, further stress the need for WoC anger in the academy: "We cannot deny our own rage, for doing so will only keep us from recognizing how we have been and continue to be marginalised in the academy" (2012, 456). Micah's experience of being repeatedly shut down by a white woman in a reading group after suggesting they read works by Black women exemplifies the rage that racism warrants for WoC:

> "I've been called aggressive. I've been called mean, which you also get when you refuse to participate in the emotional labour of saying why your existence matters. But I was like, my beef with [the racist white woman] is not like this superficial thing. And I think this solidified for me kind of how people here view any type of racial sensitivity, which really means any type of racism."

Micah's rejection of additional emotional labour placed onto her by others' demands substantiates the competing and exhausting physical and mental labours WoC are forced to perform at Oxford. WoC students' experiences typify the concept of "amplification" and the intensity inherent to marginalised women's lives developed by Parker's research on Black women's lives in Milwaukee, USA (2017). It denotes the "emotional and bodily intensity of living lives of precarity, and of responding with creative and alternate subjectivities" when their labours – both of "work and love" – were not adequately rewarded (117). When considered in tandem with Dunne and Kostansis' (2023) conceptualisation of ontic burnout, used to "capture disassociative explanatory fatigue" (351) of, in Micah's words, having to constantly justify "why your existence matters", the burden of emotional and physical labour on women of colour activists is apparent. The labour of WoC students at Oxford is not financially compensated nor materially recognised by the institution, which leads them to justified feelings of anger. The breadth of emotions elicited as part of activism can be a generative tool in fostering collective solidarities in an otherwise repressive environment, as WoC activists continue to do in their work.

4.6 Activist identities and tensions

Throughout the interview process, participants had varying conceptions of what it means to be an activist. For some, a discursive shift occurred in understanding activist identities as the research progressed. Since the participation requirements were intentionally broad, the students did not have to actively identify as activists to partake in an interview, and

the majority of my interlocutors did not claim the label at the start of the research. However, many reconsidered their stance on the term 'activist' as we conversed. By broadening the definition of activism, we can consider 'small' actions for change as equally meaningful *within* individuals' capacity to engage with the theories of change accessible to them.

The predominant feeling of participants towards the term 'activist' was apprehension. Many took care to say 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 pictured activism as a 'grand' endeavour, likening it to the actions of the famed American political activist and Black feminist Angela Davis:

> "I don't think I see myself as an activist, just cause in my head when I picture activism, I'm thinking like Angela Y. Davis, people like that who are really kind of – I don't necessarily feel like what I'm doing threatens me in any way. I feel like there's sort of, to me, an activist is either grander scale or feels like there's something at risk, whereas I think everything I'm doing is like, it's more about creating these spaces which in itself, you could argue in the theory terms, is doing some sort of activism because you're going against an institution that doesn't want you to have spaces. But I don't feel like I do something that's active enough to be activist."

There also lies an assumption that activism must be inherently radical and disruptive to be legitimate, which was one reason why some hesitated to claim the term. There is a concern that their work did not 'count' as activism, which is how Maisie described her volunteer work at a local community centre. Gabriella framed her work in similar terms and identified her fear of the responsibility that comes with the label:

> "I think having studied [histories of resistance] and sometimes knowing the connotations that can come with the word resistance and activism, the radicalism that can sometimes be intertwined, I think if I'm honest, it – not scares me, but sometimes if I think about my experience, I don't feel like I've done anything radical or really transformative."

The "radical and transformative" element raised by Albertina and Gabriella as critical to activism may be because they are both historians and possess a depth of knowledge about influential activist figures like Angela Davis, whose storied activism can feel incomparable to

their work at Oxford. However, Gabriella was one of the participants who shifted her view of activism in the same breath but remained unsure about calling herself an activist:

> "But even during this conversation, it's made me realise like, wow, it doesn't have to be a major big change; again, very small contributions, individual change, probably would be categorised as activism in some sense, especially if you're standing for a cause and standing for a people or a society that faces similar experiences and doing your best to combat that in an institution such as this. Yeah, I guess it would be considered activism. Would I call myself an activist? I'm not sure."

Gabriella characterising Oxford as "an institution such as this" indicates WoC students' normative perceptions of the university as one that requires intervention, where the mere presence of women of colour can be considered a change to said norm. She represents a faction of WoC students who are disaffiliated from the activist label but are nevertheless proud of and value their contributions. Roma, a third-year student who was part of her JCR committee, 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."

The idea that different types of activism are equally valid and can be considered under the 'activism' umbrella was enlightening for Yamuna:

> "I feel like student activism has a more like student union-slash-political leaning, so I feel like before this, I was wondering, am I a student activist? I don't think so. I don't think I would've identified with that. But if we're approaching it in terms of like how you defined it, I think I would, because I would like to make change. I think I've been very radicalised by the university's approach to Palestine, and I've found solidarity within other groups … You don't get to difficult conversations by just being a nice person, so I'm not a nice person. I'm an activist, I guess."

Similarly, Gumption was surprised at my invitation to interview her with the word 'activist' attached but came to embrace it:

> "When I got the email, I was thinking, 'Oh, me? A student activist? Whoa!' I do want to claim the title now … I feel like that is an appropriate term for it; it's something I never would've maybe called myself before, but it does actively describe my passion for what I do and specifically representing working-class background students because I'm a working-class student and that sort of sub-group. It's just a nice way to describe what I've always felt that I've been doing, just never had a word for it."

One of the key takeaways from my conversations with participants like Yamuna and Gumption was their shift in thinking towards the oft-vilified conceptions of activism and their modification of its definition to encompass a comprehensive set of actions for change, regardless of scale. Figure 2 offers a typology of activists at Oxford, identifying their theories of change, their spheres of engagement, and personal risk levels (i.e. Embodying 'high personal risk' can look like international students protesting at an event where there are police presence and threats of arrest). The matrix also notes the degrees of their action, whether they were participants, contributors, or leaders, the scales of their involvement, and whether they claimed the activist label. Such categorisations are fluid, and not all participants can be classified into these set profiles, but consider the matrix as a composite of my interlocutors.

Figure 2. Women of Colour Activist Profiles Matrix[44]

	Quiet supporter	***Activist hopeful***	***Peer champion***	***Frontline activist***
Theory of Change	Collaborate - Institutional reform	Confront - Institutional reform	Transformation - Community building	Transformation - Abolition
Engagement Sphere	University/college governance	- University/college governance - Education / consciousness-raising	- Political campaigning - Education / consciousness-raising	Political campaigning
Risk Levels	Low personal risk	Low personal risk	Medium personal risk	High personal risk

[44] The 'typology of activists' matrix is adapted from an experimental typology of the climate activist by Kirsop-Taylor et al. (2023).

Degrees of Passivity/Activity	Contributors	- Event-specific leaders - Contributors	- Event-specific leaders - Contributors	Leaders
Scale	Individual	Institutional	Group	Coalitional
Activist Label	Non-claimant	Non-claimant	Claimant	Claimant

The fluidity of participants' relationships with the semantics of their activist identities is aligned with Kohl and McCutcheon's conceptualisation of 'kitchen table reflexivity', which "provides a platform to consider, among other things, what it means to occupy positions of power, how these positions change over time, and how relationships with research participants impact perceptions of positionality in the research process" (2015, 748). Whether or not individuals claim the activist label is inconsequential to the value of their work. To borrow from Parker's (2017) use of amplification, we can further conceive of 'small' acts of activism as ones requiring amplification and whose intensities deserve recognition, even if their perceived impact is minimal. For example, organising events for their peers of colour at college is not typically considered activism; if it is, it is deemed 'low-level' activism. Yet the logistical (unpaid) labour required to host the event successfully is more often diminished than amplified. Emejulu, using the example of women of colour advocating for social welfare, asserts the following:

> "You can't only look for activism in terms of spectacle. If we're honest about refocusing our attention on the most marginalised, then we also have to go looking for activism in other spaces and places … [activism around quality of life, such as schools closing down] *is* activism, but it's not 'sexy'. You're not covering your face, in the streets, or smashing windows, you're not part of an encampment sleeping in the streets for several months – because you need to go to work and you have kids to look after. But sometimes that's the only kind of activism that's seen to count. This other stuff often doesn't get labelled as activism but as voluntary or community activity" (Emejulu & Littler, 2019, 81, emphasis in original).

In the Oxford context, there are two clear parallels: the Oxford Action for Palestine encampment at the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Radcliffe Camera in the spring of 2024 can be viewed as a form of 'spectacle activism', which does not diminish its significance but was a highly publicised news event; and the women of colour holding JCR, MCR, or society

committee roles voluntarily in service to their community. If we place an arbitrary measure of value on the former as the 'better' version of activism simply because it is louder and therefore more amplified, we ignore Lorde's warning on the dangers of inter-movement violence: "If I participate, knowingly or otherwise, in my sister's oppression and she calls me on it, to answer her anger with my own only blankets the substance of our exchange with reaction" (1984, 128). There lies value across a spectrum of activism types, from the 'Quiet supporters' who sign petitions or volunteer for mutual aid efforts to the 'Frontline activists' who are seen as the faces of movements in the media. Holding space for variegations of activism facilitates a pluriversal, intersectional worldview that rejects the idea of tokenism and 'The One' (García Peña, 2022), where women of colour are allowed to fail and triumph without shouldering the burden of representing all marginalisations.

This chapter introduced the WoC interlocuters and their identity formations in relation to their gendered and racialised experiences, explored how activist work is conceived and interpreted at Oxford, and dissected the intrusions of whiteness in their student lives. The following chapter analyses the modes of engagement by which women of colour students participated in activism at Oxford, dissecting the 'engagement spheres' from Figure 2 of internal university and college activities, initiatives to increase access and outreach, anti-sexual violence initiatives, and the temporalities of activism in HEIs.

Chapter 5: Modes of Engagement

"Oxford is a weird place with a long, racist heritage. So, I think someone in our course described it as the 'reflexive shimmer' where you tell someone you're studying at Oxford, and because Oxford's shiny, they like glow back at you. And when you receive that glow, you immediately feel shame because all of your friends and activists have certain views about what it means to be in an institution like this, and those views are also correct." — Emily, Postgraduate Student

Understanding the identities and positionalities of women of colour students acts as the foundation for exploring the ways in which they engage with student activism at Oxford. This chapter proposes a conceptual framework for understanding modes of engagement, comprising three key elements: roles, activities, and motivations as a typology of activisms at Oxford. This leads into subsections analysing the experiences of women of colour students at the college and university levels, their engagement with the university's access and outreach initiatives, the recent anti-sexual violence actions undertaken by WoC students, and the challenges they faced regarding time constraints and activist burnout. These examples offer a picture of contemporary student activism and collective action at Oxford; here, I use Crossley and Ibrahim's definition (2012), which characterises collective action as constructed through social and art worlds which then (re)produces "emergent political worlds found on university campuses" (597). In resisting stereotypes of university students as "entitled or coddled", Linder et al. (2019) claim that "students' drive to change their campuses arises from their love for their institutions" (75) in an American context. The results from my study suggest more complicated rationales behind the motivations of student activists, particularly women of colour who identify with multiple marginalised identities in the hyper-specific culture and historical site of the University of Oxford. I argue that women of colour students are agentic actors who seek to challenge the deficiencies they perceive in their academic and social worlds at Oxford through diverse modes of engagement with activism, working within, against, and outside of university structures for change.

5.1 Typologies of activism framework

I. Activities

The first element of an Oxford modes of engagement framework describes WoC students' activities based on the level of formalisation, with classifications of 'informal' (ex. Signing open letters, attending events), 'in between' (ex. Organising college-level events, training as a peer supporter), and 'formal' or formalised (ex. Leading protests, liaising with university stakeholders). Paid roles are few and fall under the 'formalised' category. Students typically become eligible for such roles after gaining experience through unpaid positions, such as JCR or MCR roles. The only role identified by the participants as being paid by the university was as Student Ambassadors for the Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach department (2025). A clear line of demarcation between 'informal' and 'formal' activities can be seen in a participant's willingness to confront and potentially cross the university's established protocols through tactics such as occupying public space or disrupting official university events in protest. 'Formal' activists align themselves against what they perceive to be inaction from the university and can adopt a confrontational theory of change that "challenge[s] power directly and seek to force change upon an institution from the inside" (Kirsop-Taylor et al., 2023, 4). There is also the possibility of intra-institutional change at this level, built on shared values and goals that allow for national or international coalitions to form, though their intended goals may take longer to materialise. 'Informal' or 'in-between' activists tend to work within the boundaries of the university or college to advocate for change on a smaller, yet still impactful scale, which can yield more immediate results for their peers. Table 5 offers examples of different activist activities in which WoC students participated.

Table 5 – Activist Activities (cross-referenced with profiles from Fig. 2 WoC Activist Matrix)

Levels of Formalisation	
Organised Protests	Different dimensions between protest organisers vs. protest participants
e.g. Frontline activist	Participants see marching in protests as informal/small-scale
	Physical safety concerns
	Primary example cited for 'actual' activism
Formal or Formalised	Running for JCR/MCR roles
e.g. Peer champion	Proposing motions to pass at JCR/MCR meetings
	Committee membership on university societies
	Representing their college at access/outreach events
	Occasionally paid
	Liaising with university administration
	Paid work & events held by the Equality & Diversity Unit
	Working with the system despite not always agreeing with it in order to ensure some change occurs during their time at Oxford
The in-between	Organising events for college communities ex. BAME or welfare teas
e.g. Activist hopeful	Creating consistent 'safe' spaces
	Work that is not year-round, ex. outreach work, deemed as not 'active activism'
	Trained peer supporter
	Differing levels of responsiblity for JCR roles (ex. executive vs. committee/representative roles) created different categorisations of activism/impact levels
Informal	Attending/speaking at FemSoc L&Ls, joining student societies
e.g. Quiet supporter	Delivering supplies (ex. plywood, food) to the OA4P encampment
	Signing open letters for Palestine
	'Quiet' vs 'loud' types of attendance
	Confronting university/college administration
	Speaking out about curriculum diversity/lack thereof
	Existing as activism
	Expressing solidarity with peers/their community
	Sharing lived experiences

Table 5 - Levels of formalisation for four categories of activist activities: informal, the in-between, formal or formalised, and organised protests.

II. Roles

The second element of an Oxford modes of engagement framework is the roles in which student activists serve. Participation in more than one activity is more common than not. The salient differences between the types of roles lie in their spheres of influence. For example, elected SU Sabbatical Officers serve a full-time, year-long term, receive an annual salary, and are the designated student representatives on over forty university committees (Oxford SU, 2025).[45] Their direct line to university leadership channels distinguishes them from roles with a more localised focus, such as within a college or the structure of an academic course. Though roles such as course representatives do have access to certain levers of change, like providing feedback on course curricula, these are voluntary roles and faculty are not bound to adopt any suggested changes year to year. Those working on SU campaigns are responsible for university-wide initiatives, but remain under the SU umbrella and are subject to organisational restructuring, as demonstrated in the SU's decision to dismantle the campaigns starting in the 2025-2026 academic year.[46] University societies have more agency and their own democratic structures, appointing their leadership committees through elections or applications. Larger, established societies also benefit from external sponsorships; for example, the African-Caribbean Society (ACS) has a dedicated sponsorship and careers officer who liaises with law firms, consultancies, and other industries to provide support and mentorship to ACS members (2025). At the college level, although the sphere of influence is smaller, those serving on JCR or MCR committees have regular meetings with college leadership. In 2024, the largest undergraduate college, St. Catherine's, had 510 students, while the largest postgraduate-only college, Kellogg, had 1,345; thus, the work of college-level representatives remains consequential for a significant portion of students across the university (University of Oxford, 2024). Table 6 presents the various roles undertaken by WoC in their activist activities.

[45] The SU is also a registered charity (Register of Charities, 2025).
[46] See 5.3 for further details.

Table 6 – Activist Roles

Modes of Engagement	
Student Union Campaign Roles	*Including*: Wom*n's Campaign; It Happens Here; CRAE (Campaign for Racial Awareness and Equality); Class Act; LGBTQ+ Campaign Co-chairs & committee members under the campaign arm of and funded by the Oxford Students' Union, comprised of elected (paid) Sabbatical Officers who liaise with university administration about students' concerns. Campaign events are open to students across the university. These campaigns theoretically reach more people across the university but it depends on the level of student engagement.
Academic/Course Roles	*Including*: 1) Reading group convener 2) Course representative 3) Common Ground conveners (now defunct) Voluntary roles performed by postgraduate students with established research interests on topics not covered under their Oxford curriculum who formed breakaway discussion groups.
Untitled Roles	Access & outreach ambassadors/volunteers for colleges Participation in and/or supporting OA4P, refugee/border action groups Student representative for external organisations e.g. Target Oxbridge Ad-hoc roles for access and outreach to state school students in their colleges, giving tours and answering Q&As. Non-university affiliated roles that arose organically in accordance with global movements, like OA4P, and do not require formal/titled membership.

University Society Roles	*Including*: 1) African-Caribbean Society (ACS) 2) Islamic Society (ISoc) 3) Women of Colour Society (WocSoc) 4) Feminist Society (FemSoc) Student groups dedicated to serving students' specific political, racial, and gender identities. Operates with their own budget through membership fees and/or support from external sponsors. Committee members are either elected or chosen through application.
Elected JCR/MCR Roles	*Including*: President; Vice-President | Representatives: Welfare Representative, BAME, Environmental, Women's, Foundation Year, LGBTQ+, International Students. Class, Disabilities Representatives directy support a subsect of their in-built college community, are democratically elected by current students of all years. Executive committee members have frequent interactions and negotiations with college administration. The extent of their activities depends in part on the JCR budget and therefore the wealth of each college. Impact levels on students may be higher due to the smaller demographic they serve.

Table 6 - *Modes of engagement for activist roles held by women of colour: positions in the Student Union and its campaigns, academic representatives, student society committees, elected JCR or MCR positions, and untitled roles.*

III. Motivations

The third element of an Oxford modes of engagement framework lies in the beliefs and motivations of WoC students for activism. In a study of youth activism across Athens and Cologne, Paschou and Durán Mogollón (2024) theorised that micro (personal values), meso (influence of familiar environments), and macro (broader sociopolitical context) level influences shaped participants' motivations for political participation. The authors also noted that these factors are not discrete but highly interactive with one another, which matches the experiences of WoC at Oxford, who cited multiple drivers for their activism. For my participants, micro-influences included lived experiences of racialisation and classed identities; meso-influences of attending state schools or growing up in specific areas of the UK or the world that then shaped their beliefs and attitudes; and macro-influences of local and global political events, such as the effects of asylum and detention policies in the UK or the war in Gaza. In deciding where to focus their activist energies, many participants were motivated by their capacity to effect change across both short-term and long-term temporalities. Given their position as Oxford students, their motivations were most often tied to their visions for the university, with three distinct foci:

A) Desire for internal institutional, structural change (ex. Policy changes to ban staff-student relationships)

B) Desire for community engagement for peer groups (ex. Establishing spaces for women of colour)

C) Desire for the university to wield its influence externally (ex. Responses to global events through material efforts such as scholarships or signed statements)

Table 7 charts the motivations WoC expressed for their engagement in activism. The following sections of this chapter map modes of engagement by which women of colour engaged in activism at Oxford, conceptualised through their activities, roles, and motivations for activism. The latter is particularly marked by their personal histories and emotional entanglements with specific causes, which are explored through examples of collegiate and university-level activities, anti-sexual violence activism, and initiatives increasing access and outreach at Oxford. The chapter ends with a discussion on the temporal challenges of sustaining activism in conjunction with students' academic and personal lives.

Table 7 – Motivations for Activism

Motivations	
Increasing access	Want to see more women of colour at Oxford, people who 'look like me' to act as a role model Demystifying Oxford and its reputation, normalising their existence here as WOC Encouraging colleges putting material investment into access/BAME representation through hosting successful events/activities
Education	Education as activism through discussion-based events - simultaenously, it is not the responsibility of the oppressed to educate the oppressors Connection to real-world issues - ex. Galvanised by pushback to activism like the University's responses to Palestinian activism Learning from other peoples' experiences
Shaping Identities and Lived Experiences	Raising awareness, lived experience as their knowledge of/expertise in activism - Ex. Having experienced misogyny at Oxford, they do not want it to happen to others. Or, knew they had to get involved because of their identity and its correlated experiences Interest/passion for social causes (ex. feminism, anti-racism, migration) predates Oxford Desire for change and to be part of change, broadly speaking Builds self-confidence and a sense of fulfillment through solidarity actions Wanting to explore more of their identity as WOC/other facet (ex. ethnicity)
Creating Collective Communities	Organising (in)formal events for BAME, women, etc to find likeminded people/build coalitions Breathing space for marginalised communities where they cannot find it elsewhere at Oxford Space to discuss uncomfortable topics See themselves as a person for others to come to about their concerns - embodying a safety net for WOC/POC Supplement a sense of home for fellow students

Table 7 - Four main motivations for the activism of women of colour: increasing access, shaping identities and lived experiences, education, and creating collective communities.

5.2 Collegiate 'liberation representatives'

The collegiate system at Oxford comprises 43 colleges and permanent private halls, 36 of which operate as independent, self-governing institutions under a royal charter (2025). Each college has its own governance body, including individually elected student governance committees. Of the 47 participants, 17 undergraduate students were primarily involved in student activism through their college Junior Common Rooms (JCRs), and three postgraduate

students through their college Middle Common Rooms (MCRs). Out of the 19 participants involved in college-level governance, 16 interviewees all held what are colloquially known as "liberation representative" roles – those who are elected to represent the interests of a specific marginalised identity, including racialised students, LGBTQ+ students, working-class students, disabled students, or female-identifying students.[47] The remaining three participants served at the executive level as vice presidents or presidents of their respective Common Rooms. I analyse the following three elements of college-level student activism by WoC students: perceptions of "liberation representatives" and experiences of embodying identity-based roles, the expectation to address racism at their colleges, and the prevalence of uncontested elections for these roles.

Identity-based roles and representation

Though the remit for such representative roles may differ, the primary goal for the WoC holding these positions is to create specific communities of care within their colleges. The description of the JCR "Diversities and Equalities" representative at my college, Brasenose, includes the following responsibilities: "Train as a peer supporter, distribute information about the welfare of minorities, organise one event per term, liaise with the Oxford SU's minority representatives and their MCR counterpart, and chair the Diversity & Equality committee, oversee its work, and support all members of this committee" (Brasenose JCR, 2025). The 16 participants who held these roles mostly welcomed the opportunity to effect change and the freedom to spearhead related initiatives. However, they recognised the limitations of their one-year terms. Ravinder says of her task:

> "I think it's one of those roles that's very much what you make of it. I could easily kind of do nothing in that role, but I wasn't really comfortable with that, so I've mainly been organising welfare sort of events within my college to get more of a sense of community, cause I think that for me was the one big thing at Oxford, that I feel like I lack the sense of community of people of colour in a smaller circle."

Many liberation representatives, especially those in roles serving racialised minorities, considered their primary duty to be the welfare of their fellow students of colour and, in turn, how creating 'a sense of community' among their peers can improve their time at Oxford. Similarly, Nancy speaks of her desire to represent her community of mixed-race people:

[47] Each college has differing names for their liberation representatives, see glossary for a non-exhaustive list.

> "I wanted to be more integrated; so, I'm going to try and take this position, not only so I can be like a representative of people like me, because I think there aren't many mixed-race people – being mixed-race and being BAME is quite different. There's obviously overlap, but they are quite different, I wanted to be that face for people who did feel a bit like, oh, I'm in between these two groups."

If being 'that face' of comfort and recognition for one's peers of colour is a positive aspect of such roles, the converse is the challenging interactions with the institution. A significant amount of pressure is placed on WoC who take on these positions, as their college often sees them as 'The One' person (see García Peña, 2022) who can advise on all issues relating to their particular remit. Sage, a third-year student, summarised the weight of this expectation:

> "You were kind of seen as the moral compass of your college, which is huge. Like, it's nuts."

The 'moral compass' role can look like sitting on college committees as the only representatives for students of colour, which is further complicated by the fact that college governance bodies are generally heterogeneous in their makeup, as Raj notes:

> "Oftentimes, college committees are really not representative of the student body. They're all white, I'm the only person that's not white on most of these committees. So, I'm like a brown woman pitching [a] project to elevate diversity, which is really uncomfortable, in a way."

The embodied discomfort extends to the pressure of feeling like you have to represent every race and minority, even if it is not your lived experience, as Nancy explains:

> "I can't speak for all BAME people, obviously, so I'm trying to speak for people like me and be an active representative to people like me, but not necessarily everyone, not claiming that I understand everyone's experiences. That's also the thing with JCR positions like that, they sort of lump you under one or two representatives, which I guess it can't really be helped."

The 'lumping' together of roles is, as many 'equality and diversity' roles are, an attempt to make specific marginalisations indiscernible – for example, there is no student

representative that specifically advocates for the concerns of women of colour (or other identity intersections of race and marginalisation). Nancy's statement of 'it can't really be helped' suggests systemic constraints, where, in most cases, student representatives lack the power or resources to lead wide-ranging change. For example, Ella's experience responding to a concern raised by the transgender representative on her JCR about a tutor's transphobic remarks demonstrated the limits of her remit, as the tutor responsible for diversity and equality could not guarantee tangible change, only addressing it in an informal context. Yet, she was positive about the overall takeaways of her position:

> "I suppose it was realising that the role wasn't, 'Okay, I get to go to board meetings and say this', and maybe have something done, it's kind of like, allowing ideas to float but in a very informal and kind of like, non-structured way … It's definitely helped me to see in a different way how, for example, a role, a junior role, can evoke some kind of change within a smaller setting."

When asked to describe their experiences on the JCR, Ravinder, Nancy, and Ella — all liberation representatives for students of colour at their college — expressed nuanced feelings about their role and acknowledged its challenges alongside its net benefits for their peer communities. Their experiences underscore the dichotomic nature of being a woman of colour at Oxford and serving in these formalised activism roles, where one must balance their desire to make change against the limitations of the university.

Responsibility for addressing racism

The liberation representatives are also responsible for handling racist complaints that arise at their college, whether it be between student peers or students experiencing racism from staff. Albertina said that although fielding such complaints was not a significant aspect of her experience, it was not entirely avoidable:

> "Sometimes there are draining points, especially this term, I've had a couple [of] reasons to meet with the deans and go through the complaint process of racist remarks. So, there are points where it's a reminder."

These representatives are not extensively trained in anti-racism or conflict resolution techniques; most of them will not have had any specialist training in the field of 'equity,

diversity, and inclusion'. Yet these WoC students, many of whom at the undergraduate level are under the age of twenty-two, are charged with being the first point of contact for someone who has experienced a racist attack, often when the reporter is at their most vulnerable. Some students undergo voluntary peer support training, but as Iman notes, these sessions are not extensive:

> "These sessions that are for people of colour, there's only one. It's not mandatory. Same thing for disabled peers, same thing for queer peers as well. That would be really nice, to have more mandatory training around it. That, in a way, forces you to re-question privilege and where you're from."

Iman voicing that she would like to have more mandatory trainings tailored to specific identities links to the lack of an embedded institutional understanding around intersectionality. This upholds Evans and Lépinard's (2020) conceptualisation of intersectionality as "a strategy and repertoire used by organisations to address issues of inclusivity and solidarity" (9). The authors establish privilege as inherent to theorisations of intersectionality and propose the possibility of intersectionality as a tool with which to confront privilege. Adopting an intersectional approach to Oxford's current institutional peer training framework would serve as a means of re-questioning one's privilege, as Iman noted, and thus operationalise intersectionality to address the varying needs of multiply marginalised students. The lack of institutional training and support was also reported by Dylan, who served as the disabilities representative on her college JCR:

> "I don't feel like I was supported in the role, not for anyone's fault, just because there were not the facilities to support me. I was offered peer support training that clashed with my exams, so I obviously turned it down because it physically clashed with the exam dates, and then asked to be put on another one, and they said there were no more places. It wasn't made easy. It wasn't like I showed up and was given a full list of contacts and a full list of 'this is the low-down'."

The expectation for women of colour students to conduct this laborious emotional work mirrors the testimonies of women of colour faculty members who feel tokenised and exploited by the academy as a routine part of their employment (Dobbs & Leider, 2023). In response, academics — often those who hold marginalised identities — have taken on scholar-activist work, broadly defined as activism conducted in the academy to address

racism and other injustices through scholarship (Quaye et al., 2017). Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly's (2021) treatise titled *Anti-Racist Scholar Activism* proposes thinking of scholar-activism as a verb rather than a noun, "anchored by counter-hegemonic notion of working *in service* to communities of resistance, and to anti-racism more broadly" (2). It is also valuable to consider Choudry's (2020) critique of the narrowness of scholar-activism as centring institutional implications such as career successes and disciplinary contributions rather than meaningfully engaging with how academic knowledges can inform social movements. The experiences of WoC students, particularly those who openly identified as activists (the profile of a 'Frontline Activist' from Figure 2), underscore the argument made by Quaye et al. (2017) on the need for scholar-activism: "We are not disembodied people who can separate our work from our personhood and values. We see the option to not engage in activism as a false option" (396).[48] The reality of WoC students serving as the first point of contact for anti-racism complaints in their colleges raises questions of institutional accountability for racism and the long-term ramifications for both marginalised students experiencing and reporting racism, as well as students processing these complaints.

Uncontested elections

Several participants serving as liberation representatives ran for the positions uncontested, in that no one else challenged them for the role in their college's JCR or MCR elections. Thus, WoC became responsible for representing a class of marginalised people in part because they did not want the role and its work to be abandoned. As Ella articulated,

> "I'd rather somebody have the role than nobody have the role. I started to think, maybe if the role is there, then there's definitely a need for it."

Kim had a similar experience in her college as the ethnic minorities representative, a role she served in "mostly because there was no one else to do it, to be honest." Likewise, Maya originally wanted to run for international students' representative, but she "got involved in student activism because, to be quite fair, nobody had signed up to be RAEM rep for our college." She also noted the pressure associated with the role and how it initially conflicted with her identity as a woman of colour:

> "I'm not as connected with my Indian culture, it was like, well, I'm a woman of colour, but I wouldn't go for RAEM rep. That's sort of an undertaking where there

[48] See also Sobande's concept of 'accidental academic activism' by women of colour (2018).

> are certainly many people at Oxford who are specifically involved in racial student activism, I was like, maybe that's not necessarily my place to step in. But we got to the [election] meeting, and it was like, well, nobody had done it. Nobody had signed up in advance."

Nancy also noted the poor student engagement with elections for these positions and the lack of interest:

> "We had such bad engagement that nobody ran for the first time for BAME reps this term, and then somebody ran in the by-elections because I was telling her to, like, I can't do this by myself, I need somebody else. But again, it's my circle, it's my college daughter and my friend. It's not like people are actively really going out of their way to seek this [position]."

Nancy encouraged her existing circle of friends to join her in her work, thereby reducing some of her unpaid workload. At Ravinder's college, the role is also meant for two people, but due to a lack of interested candidates, she was the sole BME rep during her term:

> "There wasn't really two of us who applied. And I think one of the main reasons I applied was one, I was actually really interested in doing it, but I was also thinking, I wasn't sure who would apply. Because I am a woman of colour but I'm also half white, so I was always more conscious of other people would maybe be in a better position to do this, or whatever. But I was like, no, I think sometimes you have to take it on. I felt like an internal responsibility."

The dearth of students from ethnic minority backgrounds running for representative positions in their college common rooms results in WoC volunteering to take on the necessary responsibilities out of a sense of moral obligation, despite their initial ambivalence towards serving in a formal capacity. Emejulu's theory of ambivalence in women of colour activists, "a process by which to recover themselves, to recuperate from the gross everyday and institutionalised inequalities and violence they experience as they collectively insist on moments of care, joy and pleasure in their activism" (2022, 1), can be applied towards WoC student activists. Emejulu further argues that "holding onto exhaustion and joy simultaneously creates an ambivalent subject yearning to feel otherwise" (2022, 5). The WoC students who serve as collegiate 'liberation representatives' hold such ambivalences while acknowledging the bounds of institutional change to which they are tethered during their

tenures. The following sections in this chapter further corroborate the complexity of "emotion work – the misfeeling, the refusal" (Emejulu, 2022, 5) felt by women of colour students in their diverse modes of engagement with activism at Oxford.

5.3 University-wide representation

Alongside college-level representatives, there also exist positions at the wider university level, namely roles in specific Oxford-wide student societies. Three participants were committee members of the African-Caribbean Society (ACS) at various points in their degree, one of the largest student groups in Oxford that supports students from African and Caribbean backgrounds. Gabriella, a former Vice-President of ACS, saw herself as a role model for other Black students:

> "I think I saw the importance of the Black community having people to look up to within Oxford. So rather than thinking about those that are coming in, what about the students that are here? The one thing about this university that is amazing, obviously a lot of incredible access initiatives, but cool, you're bringing in all these students in, but what do you do to make their experience more comfortable? How do you make them feel like they can fit in, how do you help them just thrive as students?"

Gabriella's statement addresses the prevalence of access and outreach initiatives at Oxford and the importance of *in*-reach for current students. The cultures of Oxford do not naturally facilitate kinship and connection with your peers, especially those from similar racial or class backgrounds; the prescribed 'starter' communities of your college or faculty do not come with a longevity guarantee. This is illustrated by ACS' introductory statement on their website: "We understand that coming to such a prestigious yet daunting institution can be particularly challenging for African and Caribbean students … the ACS is a home away from home where members can remain rooted in their identities proudly, happily and safely" (2025). It becomes the responsibility of individual students to search and form affinity communities through student societies, or, in Albertina's case, through living arrangements:

> "I now live with five other Black students, I absolutely love it. It's almost like our little ethnic enclave in our college. So, this is the kind of diverse part of my life."

Designating a 'diverse part' of life can take many forms, with participants choosing to immerse themselves in an array of racial, gender, or religious environments at Oxford. Mary,

a committee member for the Islamic Society, one of the largest religious societies in Oxford, spoke about contacting individual colleges regarding their welfare provisions for Muslim students due to the rise of Islamophobia in Oxford:

> "I know when all the Islamophobia stuff was going on, I did contact all the colleges, and I was like, 'just to let you guys know, look out for your students, cause this stuff's happening'. And like you'd be surprised how many colleges just ignored it."

The decentralised structure of Oxford means that independent colleges are not bound by a standard set of welfare or disciplinary guidelines, which, when coupled with the significant disparities in their endowments, means that not every Oxford student receives the same level of support (Somerville College, 2021; Mathur, 2024). Mary also emphasised, as many others did in 4.5, the onus put on marginalised students to advocate for themselves through additional labour they feel they must perform to ensure their welfare:

> "I feel like until we started contacting people and trying to do this [advocating for Muslim welfare], the University themselves didn't, but also I guess maybe the University didn't know about the incidents that were happening. But it was just a bit like, as a student-run society, we can't carry the whole, trying to educate the whole of Oxford as to what's going on. I feel like we need the news to say stuff so the public knows as well, cause there's limited emails we can send to college."

A distinct function of university-wide societies versus college-level roles is the capacity to speak on behalf of a subset of Oxford students, such as releasing statements about global affairs or student politics, without having to pass a formal motion through a JCR or MCR that requires a majority vote. Yasmine and Habiba's experience of hostility and discipline from their college in advocating for Palestine is a notable example; Alice, the women's representative at her college, had a comparable negative experience when she tried to pass a motion condemning the violence in Gaza. Whereas university-level organisations can, in theory, release collective statements from their leadership on behalf of their group membership without a vote. Throughout the past year, numerous Oxford-wide student groups have issued opinions on relevant matters; for example, OUISoc's magazine, *Ikhlaas,* published a section in its most recent 2025 issue recounting Muslim students' experiences participating in the pro-Palestinian movement at Oxford; in 2024, ACS released a statement[3] declaring they "unequivocally stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people" in support of

the OA4P encampment; and in March 2025, the Oxford Feminist Society issued a rebuke of the Oxford Union's decision to invite the rapper Dizzee Rascal as a speaker after he was convicted of sexual assault.

The relative freedom to speak openly about politics and non-Oxford-specific matters also extends to the Oxford Students' Union (SU), which is undergoing a 'transformation plan' in the 24/25 academic year to restructure the organisation (2024). The most common way through which WoC engaged in university-wide activities was through participating in SU Campaigns. Six participants were involved in campaigns including Class Act, the Campaign for Racial Awareness and Equality, It Happens Here (IHH), and the Women*'s Campaign (Wom*Cam).[49] However, the SU have announced that they are dismantling the campaigns in favour of electing part-time 'Equity Officers' and 'Community Officers' from the 25/26 academic year onwards (Oxford SU, 2025). Like the campaigns, these are unpaid, voluntary roles, and Equity Officers will be responsible for chairing an associated Representative Committee, described as "a space for marginalised or specific student communities to come together, organise, and propose policy" (2025). It is unclear whether the new committees will have the capacity to host informal events or facilitate community engagement beyond a policy-making apparatus.[50] The 23/24 SU committee openly characterised the campaigns as student activism, imploring potential candidates who are "interested in leading student activists and campaigners" to nominate themselves for campaign elections (2024).

The intricacies of internal SU business are not the focus of this section, but are pertinent in contextualising the shifting nature of student activism at Oxford. WoC involved in SU campaigns were motivated by the opportunity to enact far-reaching change beyond their colleges. Arya, a former co-chair of Wom*Cam, explained that she felt there was a ceiling to which she could conduct activism at her college:

> "I applied to [the campaign] because I did feel frustrated by not being able to do enough in my JCR role. My JCR role was basically letting the reps do what they want by helping them do that, whereas my [campaign] role is very much me being able to

[49] Class Act and IHH now operate as independent student societies.
[50] The SU Disabled Students' Campaign released a statement in Hilary term 2025 reporting that they were not informed of the decision to discontinue campaigns and were not consulted throughout the transformation process, leading them to scale back their activities for the remainder of the 24/25 academic year (2025).

> give life to the ideas that I have and do the stuff I want to do, and I also have a great committee to help me. I think that's efficient in a different way."

Arya expressing that she was unable do enough at the college level signified her desire to propel, in her view, a more consequential series of changes for women students at the university level, as opposed to a college-only population of around 350 undergraduates on average (University of Oxford, 2024). Likewise, Gumption stressed the freedom she was given to lead her own initiatives at Class Act:

> "I was really looking forward to working on a university level, the Class Act campaign co-chairs are great, and they just gave you the room that you needed and the support that you needed to just be able to materialise all of these ideas that you have to better the community."

Gumption, who, like Arya, was a former committee member on their respective college JCRs, further justified why she believed activism at the university level was more appropriate for her:

> "The good thing about working on a university level is that because it's such a big commitment, those who take on the role are very serious about the role … People have their studies and things like that but being on the JCR – as much as it's 'I want to contribute to college life', it's not as demanding, it's less of a commitment. The role is what you make of it; there's no real requirement, per se. It just wasn't as easy to work with them."

Gumption's assertion that her peers at the university level are "very serious" denotes the influence student union campaigns are thought to have, which reinforces the argument of Brooks et al. (2016) that student unions and the 'student voice' they are assumed to represent are vital to the HE ecosystem. Yet, recurring limitations of budget and capacity still occur at the university level, as Zayna describes her experience on Wom*Cam:

> "I know that Wom*Cam doesn't particularly have quite a large budget. So it's a bit hard in that vein to put on as many events or do as much as we'd like to do. So I think with that in mind, even though the SU is sort of pushing these campaigns, it's not always necessarily successful because of things like funding."

The stagnation of change experienced by Zayna parallels Ella's realisation at college, where she described being "met with reality" at a meeting that "you're not actually important except for making change on a local scale." However, even university-level activism can still be considered a 'local scale' given that those involved are campaigning for *internal* institutional changes to the University of Oxford, even if they are linked to global causes. WoC students' conceptualisations of change and the impact of their efforts appear to shift depending on the scale of their engagement with activism. Regardless of whether at the university or college level, WoC encounter comparable institutional barriers at informal, 'in-between', and formal levels of organisation. It is also not a distinct split between the college and university-level spheres of engagement; many WoC participate in both or opt to take on a leadership role in one area and a purely participatory role in another. For example, Sree simultaneously served as LGBTQ+ representative on her JCR and as BAME representative for the It Happens Here campaign; on the funding disparities, she remarked that she "somehow get[s] more money each term for being LGBTQ rep than the campaign gets all year." Sree also stressed the importance of involving oneself in various forms of community, not just isolated to the colleges:

> "I think also the way Oxford is set up, if you don't have a community, it's quite a hard place to be, so I think it's quite difficult in terms of things like that as well. I think a lot of these cultural communities that exist in the university-wide are quite important, because the colleges are so small that a lot of people don't find their community in their college, and it can almost feel like the end if you don't do that. I think people knowing that they can is important."

WoC participants reiterated the criticality of community building and the isolation that can occur at Oxford when one is disconnected from their peers. Histories of feminist organising have proven that "community is the product of struggle, unstable and contextual and constantly shifting" (Rodriguez & Boahene, 2012, 456). At the college and university-wide levels, WoC continually renegotiated their relationships with their communities, depending on their mode of engagement, often motivated by their personal histories. Their incentive to participate in activism aligns with research from Linder et al. (2019) on identity-based student activism in the US, who found that the motivations for college student activists were "explicitly tied to students' articulations of their own social identities as a propellant to engage in activism" (77) to support their communities, to address a gap in university

resources, or to diversify an existing pool of organisers. The remainder of this chapter outlines specific examples of activist causes at Oxford, anti-sexual violence and improving access and outreach in student admissions, and discusses the temporal challenges WoC repeatedly confronted in their efforts to create enduring change.

5.4 Anti-sexual violence initiatives

The recent history of anti-sexual violence organising at Oxford was presented in 2.5. The emerging nature of UK-based scholarship on sexual violence in universities and the broader cultural shift around such discussions is promising. Sector-wide research published by the Office for Students (2025) found that 25% of final-year undergraduates have experienced sexual harassment since they began their studies, and over half of the incidents reported involved someone with a direct connection to their institution. The need for robust anti-sexual violence measures in HE is crucial. Three of my participants were deeply involved in anti-sexual violence organising at Oxford, and though they are few in the sample, I believe their testimonials merit a dedicated analysis.

The two-year-long Al Jazeera "Degrees of Abuse" investigation exposed the pervasive nature of sexual violence, with numerous perpetrators employed by the University of Oxford (Howlett & Davies, 2021). Two professors were banned from all contact with students for at least the 2021-2022 academic year. There were sustained demonstrations at Balliol College, one of the institutions named in the investigation as having failed to protect its students from sexual abuse (Hancock, 2021; Ross, 2021; Siddique, 2021; Oxford Student News, 2021). A grassroots advocacy group was established at Balliol, named the Balliol Community for Safety, whose demands included "an admission of failure by the college … in the wider culture and procedures of the college in regard to allegations of sexual abuse" and enhanced welfare and training provisions (2021). Four years later, it remains unclear whether Balliol has implemented the demands of the Open Letter. At the university level, human resources banned 'intimate' staff-student relationships, effective April 2023 (HR Support, 2021).[51]

The decentralised nature of the university comes into play once more in attempts to address sexual violence at Oxford. Sree, a member of It Happens Here (IHH), the anti-sexual

[51] New guidelines for student disciplinary procedures regarding responses to sexual harassment and misconduct were published in 2025.

violence organising group formerly housed under the umbrella of the Oxford SU, highlighted the challenges of inter-collegiate organising:

> "I didn't realise that because of the collegiate system, it's quite difficult because every college has so many of their own policies and their own different things where they can mandate people to go, [or] they can't, they have to do a consent workshop, [or] they don't."[52]

Since there is no centralised policy around sexual violence governing how colleges must respond when incidents are reported, survivors face differing and confusing systems of redress depending on their college affiliation. 38 out of 43 colleges participate in the Safe Lodge scheme, which allows any student to enter a college's porter's lodge and ask for support (such as escaping street harassment) (University of Oxford, 2025). Twelve colleges also offer a Solace Taxis scheme, which provides free taxis to a sexual assault referral centre in Bicester and other local locations (It Happens Here, 2025).[53] However, Kushi, a former co-chair of It Happens Here, reports that awareness and uptake of the scheme are low and therefore it is rendered ineffective:

> "It's not advertised to the point where I've had a survivor tell me a bit of while after they were assaulted, and I was like, oh, you know the college offers solace taxis, and they're like what? I was never told that by the welfare person I went to. Staff. They don't tell you these things on purpose, I'm sure of it."

Kushi's conviction that colleges purposefully withhold information from their students links to her overall experience being stymied by her college and the university at large in leading anti-sexual violence campaigns. She continues:

> "A member of our campaign put a motion in to [the college student union] being like, 'fund solace taxis cause information isn't clear on it even though it actually does happen'. We've been basically told to remove our motion because the head of welfare emailed us [to say] 'we already offer this, blah blah blah' … [the IHH member] was also absolutely furious because it's like, you don't offer this to survivors when they need it, but then, once we start fighting you, you turn around and say, oh but we do offer this, here's all the information. You don't advertise this anywhere, but you have

[52] As of July 2025, IHH is no longer affiliated with the SU and has become an independent society (IHH, 2025).
[53] The current availability of other welfare and survivor-centric provisions, such as anti-spiking kits, is unclear.

> this in your arsenal just in case someone accuses you. So, actually, do you have this opportunity? No, you don't. Because I bet you if I did an FOI [Freedom of Information request] of how many people have used a solace taxi, a) they're gonna say no [be]cause it's identifiable information, which I get it, but it's also, I know why you're not doing this, there's another motive. But b), I bet you the uptake will be like, zero, or one, because no one knows about this."

The palpable frustration in Kushi's story underpins the arguments of scholars like Rodriguez and Boahene (2012) who argue that anger, specifically the anger of women of colour, is necessary and can be used as a tool of empowerment while also serving as "a reminder of the need to renew our efforts at politicization" (456).[54] Sree further corroborates Kushi's experience, emphasising the importance of Safe Lodges and the solace taxis scheme, and acknowledged that "a lot of people don't know that [it] exists at all". Kushi's role as the IHH co-chair and the de facto face of the organisation also meant that she was responsible for additional labour and direct interactions with the university, which is captured in her summary of the situation:

> "Every level of what we try to do, we're stopped, or administrative burdens are put in our way, or an email like this will come that will piss us off, cause it's like this doesn't actually exist, you're just chatting bullshit."

The powerful emotions Kushi expressed are linked to arguments of 'Slow Feminism' that embraces anger and encourages collaboration towards "the acceptance that we are *allowed* to have feelings … Why should we not be angry at those who try and make us small?" (Rutter et al., 2024, 63, emphasis in original). Kushi also identified the contradictions in anti-sexual violence work and echoed what other participants shared about respectability politics at Oxford:

> "It feels like a trap of all these 'isms' like misogyny and racism and whatever. What can you do? But at the same time, we're very respected cause we're doing anti-sexual violence campaigns – I don't know. I use the term 'respected' for an anti-sexual violence campaign sceptically, because I think a lot of people very easily say that, like

[54] See also Lorde's 1981 essay on *The Uses of Anger.*

> ‘I really appreciate the work you’re doing,’ but in the same breath will denigrate the work you’re doing or do something along those lines.”

Herein lies the inherent paradox of activism, particularly activism at Oxford: supportive rhetoric does not translate into tangible action. Sage notes her attempts to address sexual misconduct as a welfare provision at her college:

> “I think the way that it's the way that the uni sort of like tackles it, it needs to be revised like deeply. It needs to be like abolished and rebuilt because yeah, like it just needs to be redone because like again, even including myself, like so many of my peers have kind of like gone through it, and you know, we've gone to the Proctors and stuff, and nothing has really like been improved or whatnot, and like it puts the work of like, campaigns like It Happens Here in so much pain because they're really putting in the work. And I think they're the only sort of people that I can actually see who are providing, like an adequate level of care. But they're also students as well, and so it takes a lot out of them because again, they're doing it out of love, but probably out of experience as well. They probably want to be the people that they would have wanted to like counsel when they were kind of going through it.”

Sage raises issues of added emotional and physical labour and suggests a motivation for students’ engagement in welfare initiatives as they want to improve others’ future experiences, similar to how WoC who are involved in access and outreach activities viewed their goals. Concerning the racialisation of sexual violence, there are few studies published in the UK context. A 2018 survey published by the National Union of Students (NUS) titled *Power in the Academy: Staff Sexual Misconduct in UK Higher Education* had 24% of respondents who identified as non-white, of which 8.3% of non-EU international students and 6.7% of students of colour who reported experiencing sexualised comments about their race (NUS Women’s Campaign & The 1752 Group, 2018; Bull et al., 2023). The still-emerging status of intersectional research on sexual violence in the UK reflects Carmen’s initial feelings towards anti-sexual violence activism being a space for white feminists:

> “I think in general, I do still think that yeah, it is still dominated by those voices [white women] because I think an institution like Oxford, firstly lags behind the rest of the world, but the rest of the world also takes a lot of time to change… I think in terms of how we can navigate those spaces, I guess for me, I’ve found that if I’m just

honest about it, then people tend to respond to that and be like, oh sure, and it opens up space."

Engaging in anti-sexual violence activism is a particularly vulnerable mode of participation, especially without adequate institutional or peer support.[55] UK scholars and advocates of anti-sexual violence in universities are clear in their recommendations that additional research specifically addressing the experiences of women and students of colour is needed. In Carmen's words, the act of "open[ing] up space" for WoC to engage in activist dimensions previously thought to be reserved for white subjects is vital to developing WoC solidarities in anti-sexual violence activism.

5.5 Access and outreach initiatives

A wealth of research exists on widening participation initiatives in UK HE dedicated to increasing access and outreach to elite institutions, targeting demographics of working-class students, state school-educated students, racialised students, and other historically underprivileged groups (University of Oxford, 2025; Penn, 2025; Stewart, 2023).[56] At Oxford, each college is responsible for a region of the United Kingdom under the 'Oxford for UK' banner, where they focus their undergraduate outreach efforts; each college has a specific London local authority designated as its 'link region' for London students (2025). Of my participants, 14 were involved, informally or formally, in their college's outreach activities as student representatives or as part of the university-wide Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach ambassador programme. This section is not intended to debate the challenges and successes of widening participation efforts, but to examine the engagement of women of colour students with this work as a form of activism.

Participants' decision to engage in access and outreach work is tied to a desire to see, as Gumption put it, "more of us" at the University of Oxford. The 'us' generally referred to fellow state school students, but also applied to other women and people of colour. For example, one of Charlie's primary goals in her outreach work at the African-Caribbean Society was to spread awareness and "demystify Oxford to people that want to come here, especially people that look like me". The act of 'demystifying' Oxford has to do with its historical reputation as an elite institution, with the age of the institution as one of the

[55] Ahmed's 2024 monograph *Complaint!* researches the institutional roadblocks to making successful sexual violence and/or harassment-related complaints against academic superiors; see 5.6 for more.
[56] See also Brooks & Timms, 2024; Fernando & Kenny, 2021; Montacute & Cullinane, 2023; Dent et al., 2022.

markers of elitism. Bhopal and Myers write that Oxbridge's recognition of status as an 'Ancient University' is a "key feature of how elites work; there are shared assumptions by elites and non-elites alike of how such status and validated … the broadly held, socially assembled perception of elite universities works to constrain a belief that the University of Oxford, for example, could be understood as anything other than an elite university" (2023, 3). The cultural capital afforded to Oxford students is associated with class and whiteness, and "whiteness as a form of power lies at the heart of elite universities core structural procedures and values" (103). Therefore, an integral part of access and outreach work performed by WoC is to counter these racialised, gendered, and classed assumptions of Oxford. Toni, an Astrophoria Foundation Year student, recounted her experience returning to her sixth form as an Oxford representative:

> "I remember when last year when I first started the foundation year, I went back to my sixth form, and they wanted me to like give a talk to the students and like encourage them to also apply. And yeah, I just thought that was so strange because there would be students when I was in sixth form who came back to give talks. But it was a first – well, I never saw a woman or even like a woman of colour. So yeah, I just felt like that was definitely something I really wanted to do because I think it is really important to encourage other women of colour to apply and they did, which was amazing."

Toni's pride in her talk was evident, especially as a representative of Foundation Year students, an access scheme piloted by Lady Margaret Hall in 2016 and now implemented at eleven other Oxford colleges that provides fully-funded places for UK state school students who are otherwise unable to directly apply for their undergraduate degree due to personal disadvantage or educational disruption (LMH, 2023; Astrophoria Foundation Year, 2025).[57] For Yamuna, an access ambassador at her college, tackling Oxford stereotypes is part of her job when speaking to secondary school students:

> "I feel like when I'm doing access tours, it's really important that we don't just wait for someone to ask a question about racism, we actively address the question straightaway. Not straightaway, but we kind of talk about it and normalise that racism is inherent in these institutions, but we are actively trying to counteract that."

[57] The first full cohort of the Astrophoria Foundation Year was admitted in October 2023 (Foundation Year, 2024).

Yamuna stating that "racism is inherent" at Oxford echoes other participants' views of Oxford as an institution with a checkered colonial and racist past, which the university has selectively addressed in the wake of the global Black Lives Matter uprisings against police brutality in 2020 (University of Oxford, 2020).[58] The now-inactive Oxford and Colonialism project aimed to "engage with Oxford's colonial past and its ongoing manifestations" (University of Oxford, 2020); its access and outreach programmes were ostensibly part of this initiative. However, as Kim, a former committee member on ACS, said, these recognitions are not sufficient:

> "I don't think that it's enough, but at the same time, I don't know what else you could do because it's such a like, such a historical place. A reputation that's hundreds of years old is hard to just defeat through a couple access events. I'm not too sure, I think there's somewhat … the fact that they are cognizant of the issue and they are acknowledging their faults, type of thing, and I would call it a fault, is kind of indicative of the fact that they are on the right lines in implementing measures, but there's still a long way to go."

Kim articulates the conflicting feelings felt by many Oxford students involved in access work, where they recognise the significant efforts of the institution to increase access, and thereby broaden the racial and class demographics of the Oxford student body, but also contend that it is not enough. Lily, an outreach ambassador at her college, recounts her experience visiting Oxford as a secondary school student and her perceptions of access work now:

> "So, it's not just that Oxford isn't doing enough, because they are trying. I'm an outreach ambassador for [my college], and we do try, and we do invite schools, and we do sessions, and we target schools from more diverse areas where they don't think they'd be able to come to Oxford. But a lot of it has to come from schools promoting it as something that kids can aspire to, because I was not discouraged, when I got to my sixth form, everyone told me, 'Yes, apply'. In my first school, when we went on an outreach trip to St. John's, the way they published it in the school newsletter was 'Oxford, really? *Me*?' So, there was still that attitude that you know, wow, they've

[58] Specific departments and divisions (i.e. the Ashmolean Museum, the Department of Statistics) of the University also published pages on their website regarding their histories of colonialism.

gone on this trip somewhere they'll never be able to get into, even though so many of our teachers had been there, studied at Oxford."

Similarly, Freya also mentioned the constraints of working within the system and her dissatisfaction with the access programmes:

> "I don't entirely think that the access programs are the best, but I still like to get involved with them as much as I can so that I'm not a complete – I'm not just not doing anything, you know … I just sort of make sure I work with the systems available to sort of increase access and so on, not that I always agree with them."

Freya's disagreement with the 'systems available' echoes a frequent obstacle to activism in academic spaces, where scholars, activists, and scholar-activists must balance their ambitions for transformation with institutional limitations. Richter et al. characterise themselves as "tempered radicals" in the academy who recognise the neoliberal harms of academic institutions but "also feel invested in [their] university's success as a transformative educational setting" (2020, 1023). WoC students in my research were mainly driven by passion due to their lived experiences rather than a desire to transform the university; however, their work *resulted* in incremental improvements to Oxford's access and outreach landscape, which was rewarding in itself. Gabriella described her access work in similar terms:

> "I really, really was so passionate about becoming one of the junior access officers because of my negative experience in the application process and I know how put off I was about applying to Oxford because I didn't want to be in an institution that I felt wasn't for me … I think for me, I know how much seeing that visual representation was so important, and if I could in some way or another encourage and uplift the next generation to not shy away, to come here and be the change that they want to see, I know it sounds so cliche, yeah. That was access work."

Research on working-class participation in HE articulates how the university is seen as "a type of 'creditor' to whom the working-class participants are symbolically indebted, while the middle classes pass through unencumbered" (Loveday, 2015, 572). Gitanjali's reference to 'diversity hires' parallels Lucy's discussion of the racist comments she experienced when she first received her offer from Oxford:

> "Just little things like when I got in, everyone's like, 'they're focusing on minority intake at the moment,' blah blah blah; it's like well, yes, but I also got my offer and got my grades and everything. Things like that."

Working-class students continue to face persistent stigma in 'elite' institutions, where they are expected to "adapt and change in order to fit into, and participate in, the (unchanged) higher-education institutional culture" (Reay, 2022, 181). Though widening participation programmes aim to increase the number of BAME or state-school educated students, their efforts do not automatically instigate cultural changes within a university that do not view WoC and students of colour as typical Oxbridge archetypes (Hensby et al., 2024). Gitanjali pinpoints the dangers of a deficit-based rhetoric against working-class students:

> "I think with increasing conversations about admissions, and like increasing quotas and reaching targets and all of that, I think there is a lot of like subconscious mutter about [state school students as] the equivalent of a diversity hire, that kind of comment, which is obviously so sad and so damaging."

The harms of belittling WoC students as mere 'diversity hires' contribute to the looming impostor phenomenon, more commonly known as 'impostor syndrome' (Clance & Imes, 1978), faced by many Oxford students who do not fit into the classic Oxford stereotype.[59] Overall, the achievements of access initiatives at Oxford are worthy of celebration, as are the motivations of women of colour students to increase gender and racial representation of their peers through outreach work and mentorship. As participants have noted, change is slow but notable; Gumption cited an example of Black women in year groups below hers openly "walking around with bonnets on your head and stuff like that," whereas when she first came to Oxford, she was initially uncomfortable doing so compared to when she was at home. When asked if there are any further changes the university can adopt, Lucy responded with pragmatism:

> "[Out]reach again, for women and non-binary people and people of colour and any sort of marginalised group, I feel like that comes with time. I think it's already growing, it's already a big thing by the fact that so many people are here and so many people of colour, women of colour, everyone, already attends the university, which is

[59] Further discussion of WoC experiences of impostor phenomenon in 6.2.

great. But yeah, I feel like that comes with time. It's not something that happens overnight, and that's okay. You can't help history, really."

Oxford's history and reputation as an elite institution can seem inescapable or unchangeable. Still, WoC students involved in access and outreach work are committed to dispelling myths about the 'Ancient University' to encourage and witness new generations of women of colour to succeed.

5.6 Temporalities of activism

A fundamental issue in activist organising is the shortage of time. At the University of Oxford, time is a perpetually scarce commodity, with three academic terms lasting eight weeks each and a six-week break between the first two terms, during which students receive further assigned revision tasks and are required to vacate their accommodation if they live in college-owned buildings. These temporal realities not only constrain student activist possibilities but also reinforce Ahmed's assertion that "the usual is the structural in temporal form. If you were to complain about structures, you would be complaining all the time" (2021, 117). This section addresses four key obstacles relating to temporality and sustainability in WoC activism at Oxford: 1) Activist burnout; 2) The longevity needed for activist movements to succeed; 3) The university's tactics to 'wait out' activist movements; and 4) The unreliability of institutional memory.[60]

Activist burnout

The effects of activist burnout, particularly in academic settings, have been well-documented (see Linder et al., 2019; Gorski, 2019). As I first discussed in 4.5, Dunne and Kotsonis offer the term "ontic burnout" to describe "a form of interminable explanatory fatigue brought on by repeated requests to educate the privileged about what it means to be oppressed" as a kind of epistemic exploitation (2023, 343). The labour of scholar activists in otherwise repressive institutions can result in burnout or 'pushout' from the profession (Rodriguez, 2022); Emejulu and Bassel similarly attest that "activists cannot be activated all the time, thus activists experience burnout and ironically, leave the activist scene altogether" (2020, 402). Albertina articulates the dilemma of energy preservation:

[60] Scholarship on crip and queer time is also relevant, theorising the different ways in which time is experienced by disabled and queer bodies. Although no participants raised these theories, intersectional scholarship on crip and queer time by Kafer (2013), Muñoz (2009), Halberstam (2005), and Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) are worthy of note.

> "You are limited by the fact that how much time do I have, how much energy do I have, and how do I prevent burnout in this institution, which is just so ever-present, and it feels like it's always just looming on you."

The 'ever-present' nature of burnout underscores the personal costs of engaging in activism, especially for women of colour students, at Oxford. Leila's observations of the Oxford Action for Palestine encampment organisers is another poignant example:

> "It was sad to see, and this goes exactly into what you're talking about in terms of temporality, a few days down the line, it's almost as if there was nothing happening. I don't know if it was weather, exams, loss of energy, but when I was abroad those two weeks, I was like, damn, so much is going on at the encampment. I don't know if you remember, but there were ten activities going a day going on, I was like, wow, how are you going to do this? You're going to burn yourselves out."

As Leila described in 4.5, it was primarily women of colour at the frontlines of the encampment. Gorski (2019) employs the lens of racial battle fatigue, a framework for understanding the physical and emotional strain of racism and racial microaggressions, in tandem with activist burnout to demonstrate the differences between "privileged-identity activists and activists who cope with the stressors of activism while also coping with the kind of oppression they are battling" (16). Racial battle fatigue then exacerbates activist burnout, which in turn poses the greatest threat to sustaining social movements because "it wreaks havoc, not just on activists but also on movement stability" (Gorski, 2019, 1). A remedy for activist burnout is increased advocacy from full-time, non-precariously employed staff members of universities (Eckert & Broadhurst, 2025), as well as a sharpened focus on activist community care rather than individual self-care that accounts for the effects of racial battle fatigue (Gorski, 2019). Emily, who fits into the 'peer champion' activist profile, saw herself as a provider of community care:

> "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."

Emily elaborates on shifting cultures of activism that advocate for sustainability over burnout:

> "I think there is something good in young women who are activists today saying, I don't want to take this time, I don't want to simplify myself to convince people, I don't want to make nice, I am going to be selective about who I speak to and why, and who I direct my activism at … make[ing] sure that you can do a lifetime of activism and not just a few short, intense years and then burn out. I think it's good that people are not, people are selecting to not go all-in, and that can be seen as protective rather than lazy or dispassionate, and people are looking for ways to sustain themselves over the long term, I think that's wonderful."

Although activists may be adapting their organising strategies and norms to stave off burnout, movements at Oxford are often hindered by the university's reluctance to engage with student activism, which allows them to wield time and the staggered nature of institutional timelines to its advantage.[61]

"You can't afford to process these feelings": Lacking time for activism

Women of colour students consistently reported that there is simply not enough time to devote to activism alongside their studies in a meaningful way; consequently, if they do, their work struggles, and may result in an unwanted compromise of personal values. Sage shares their struggles balancing activism and their degree:

> "I guess the moment you think it like hinders or interferes with your studies, [tutors are] a bit like, they kind of wanna crack down on how much time you invest in activism, which is fair enough. It's not great, cause like I realized, I guess in first year in particular, I just didn't know how to juggle doing activism and doing a degree. No one ever told me, and so I kind of didn't do well in either, if that if that kind of makes sense. My tutors were like, maybe if you toned down the activism, and it's like, I can't really tone it down if it's kind of my life."

Sage's experience reinforces Linder et al.'s findings that when "minoritized students spend time and energy addressing hostile campus environments – something other students do not feel they have to do – they must work harder to engage in learning, the core purpose of higher education" (2019, 538). Sage also characterised their activism as 'adjacent', even

[61] Oxford's responses to activism are further discussed in 6.5.

though they identified as an activist and political campaigner pre-Oxford (in the mould of a 'Frontline Activist' from the Figure 2 activist profiles matrix in 4.6):

> "You can't afford to process [intense] feelings because you know, you've got 2000 words to write by the end of the week and like five books to read; if you didn't do like the reading during the vac because you're telling yourself that you need to rest, and so you never really find a balance in anything. Which is why I guess my activism is so adjacent. I try not to get like too involved because when I have done in the past, it's like taken so much out of me."

The intensity of a three-year Oxford degree is a significant impediment to creating sustainable change, especially as most students either change or leave elected positions or society committee roles after one year. Arya addresses the systemic constraints of student activism at Oxford:

> "I think activism by its nature has to be something that's long term, because nothing can happen overnight. But I think the issue with activism at university with students, especially in the SU [Student Union] when we only are in our positions for a year, it's practically impossible to do anything. So, I really think that the system itself is sort of broken in that regard. I think either the terms need to be – as in our terms of power need to be longer, or the SU needs to be more efficient in responding and communicating quickly, otherwise we're not going to make any headway."

Dylan also remarked on the limitations of a one-year term and the importance of having a willing successor to their work:

> "There's no point in starting a project that's more than a year long unless you know that you're going to be there next year, or someone is that's going to continue it. I feel like so many things just get lost halfway through."

There is a sense of resignation amongst some WoC students on the seeming futility of creating long-term change, especially when weighed against the demands of their degree, as Maisie described:

> "I think it's so hard to make the time for it, to be honest, at Oxford. Even if you have things you're unhappy with, a lot of the time it's easier just to sort of accept it. I don't

know, we all have things that we're supposed to be doing, so it's like quite easy to overlook it."

Conversely, Roma offers almost an antidote to a passive acceptance of the status quo, where friendship and community are prioritised over transformative change:

> "Three years, the majority of people do a three-year degree, which is long in a way but also quite short. You can take it both ways, the time goes so quickly, and you very quickly realise that the university is not going to change, and the way you're going to make your experience better is to surround yourself with good people, to teach them about your culture and your ways. I've spoken to my friends as well, what's made my Oxford experience is my friends that I've been with and the people that I've surrounded myself with. Activism within the student body will definitely make it a better place."

The choice to foreground community typifies a politics of pleasure and conviviality, which Khalili theorises as being about "overcoming atomisation or individuation even if it does not sow transgression or resistance" in research about collectives of young Palestinian women, arguing that these collectives hold "a political promise – however utopian – of 'a life held in common'" (2016, 585). Even though dedicated time for activism is sparse, WoC envision the time spent in community *as* time spent on activism, even if the activities itself are not typified as activism. The 'complaint collectives' created and documented by Ahmed are another form of resistance, since "institutions try and separate and isolate complainers: they can make a complaint seem smaller by keeping us apart. Complaint collectives become a shared conclusion"(2022, 29). At Oxford, a 'complaint collective' (although not named as such) manifested in the form of the pro-Palestinian protest movement, who were similarly constrained by the temporal limits of Oxford's academic terms in their lobbying for the university's immediate divestment from entities supporting the war in Gaza.

The university 'waiting out' activist movements

With the constant flow of students matriculating and graduating each year, the university can rely on tactics of 'waiting out' student activism. In combination with gaps in institutional and community memory, wielding the violence of institutional time can effectively stall activist progress. As Whitley et al.'s complaint collective shared in Ahmed's *Complaint!*, "to make a complaint was to witness institutional time conflicting with the time

of experiencing sexualized abuses of power … this slow time of violence overlaid our time in higher education. It coexisted with witnessing the workings of an institution that maintained structures that intricately tied this violence of time to the progression of our studies" (2021, 268). Women of colour students, especially those organising in support of Palestinian liberation in 2024, acutely experienced the arrested temporalities of their efforts. Yasmine described the delays she and Habiba faced at their college in seeking a meeting about the need for Muslim student-specific welfare provisions:

> "We have a meeting next term, we asked for the meeting this term, but they've pushed it to next term, because I think specifically with college, they're betting on this stereotype of the 'student activist'. Like, we're young, in the heat of all these political, international events, we're just enraged and young, and we're just not thinking straight, and we're probably going to forget about it in a month or two. So, they've pushed this meeting we want to next term."

Ruby echoed their perception of an institutional playbook designed to wait until student activists give up their causes, but was defiant in her refusal of these tactics towards the movement for Palestine:

> "You feel like you go insane when you look at this [the news], when these institutions come out with these statements and these things. And they kind of want you to. They want people, they want us students – they're not negotiating, well, they are now, apparently, but they hadn't been for ages and all these things because they want students to just get tired and be exhausted from it and feel like they're going insane and then give up, right? … We're not gonna then be like, I'm kind of over the protesting. I think they underestimate that, and they're counting on it. But we're not going to."

Moreover, these tactics have been recycled for each wave of student activism at Oxford. Ming, an alumna who was a student at the time of the Black Lives Matter and anti-racism protests in 2020, made the same reference as the 2024 students:

> "We felt at our time there [at Common Ground], and I'm sure you probably feel it too, that Oxford and universities in general really benefit from the high turnover, they're just like, oh, it's the new kids and they're complaining about racism again, we'll just wait three years, and they'll be gone, there'll be the next ones in. So, it's always step

one, it's just [a] repeat of step one. Yeah, really difficult in terms of that, and that was something we were very aware of."

Student activists' hyperawareness of the university's hostility towards their work, and the advantages afforded to the directors of institutional time, recurred at the 2024 OA4P encampment. Before the encampment closed under threat of legal challenges from the university, Leila expressed a mix of concern and hope about its future:

> "I can't lie, I know people are hopeful, but I wonder what's going to happen in the next few days, in the next few weeks. I think the university has time and space on its side. The activism I've felt here and experienced has been beautiful, but it just feels like, how're we going to keep it going, tangibly, empirically? I'm hopeful."

As we now know, the university indeed succeeded in 'waiting out' the physical OA4P encampment, as it closed on 8 July 2024, shortly after the end of Trinity term. However, the group itself continues to operate and organise at Oxford. The activities of OA4P were openly disparaged by university leadership, upholding Stenson's (2020) findings that sustainable student activism must be in collaboration with universities: "Success of activist campaigns hinges on institutional support … activists should be at the forefront of change when they are listened to, resourced, and supported, but institutions must carry this on when one set of activists leave" (as cited in Bovill & Popadec, 2022, 9). A consequential roadblock to ensuring the sustainability of student-led movements is the failure, whether intentional or unintentional, of universities to preserve institutional memory of activism.

Unreliable institutional memory for activism

Institutional memory is the preservation of information beyond the length of a student's enrolment at university. A lack of robust institutional memory affects the recruitment of new activists, and without it, "college officials can wait out student movements knowing that when a new crop of students arrives, they'll have to start from scratch" (Whitford, 2019, as cited in Bovill et al., 2021, 180). Bovill et al. (2021) propose an online repository of previous activist action to address gaps in institutional memory and provide a digital history that would endure regardless of the students present at the time. Ming expressed her desire for an archive of Common Ground ideas:

> "I wish there was some way where we can store all our ideas and all the knowledge and everything and give it to someone one and keep it in a safe place. But we don't know where that is, and often times a lot of the stuff that we were doing was very resistant to the institution, so the institution wouldn't want to keep it. So, it's really hard."

A Common Ground WordPress site still exists, serving as a vital source of information on the activities of the now-defunct anti-racist group (2020). Perusing its contents is almost bittersweet, as their advocacy was clear and targeted, especially in response to the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. Still, the issues they raised (including decolonising curricula, Oxford's colonial history, and classism at Oxford) remain unresolved and were highlighted by my participants as ongoing areas of concern for WoC students. Anna explains the complications of student activism she encountered as an SU campaign co-chair:

> "I think that time and the way that Oxford is set up by colleges makes it so difficult to create any long-lasting change, because if co-chairs are so involved and they lead a campaign for a couple of years, then they leave, and their work can be completely lost. Trying to influence policy, like discrimination policy or trying to get every college to have the racism workshop in fresher's week, you can't just do something for all the university at the same time. You have to tackle it college by college, and there's just not enough time to do that."

Addressing individual college policy is a time-consuming endeavour for university-wide campaigners, whether it be discrimination policy for Anna or sexual harassment policy for Sree:

> "I think it's hard because I think activism is most successful when there's people that spend a prolonged period of time on it. [There's] the whole collegiate system and their regulations, and then university regulations and SU regulations, there's so many complicated [parts]. If you want to make a small thing change, there's so many things to wrap your head around, so every year there's a committee handover, and it takes about half the year for everyone to wrap their head around what's going on and what we can change. And then you start making change, and then everyone graduates, then there's a whole handover. It would help if people could do three years on a committee, but then there's also so much going on in Oxford that people want to try

as many things as possible, so it's completely reasonable that they won't do that. So, I think time is definitely an issue in creating actual change."

The progress that can be lost in yearly committee or membership transitions is not insignificant and requires trust on the part of departing leaders that their successors will sustain any projects already underway. Kushi's experience substantiates the need for detailed institutional memory of activism:

> "When the staff-student relationship policy got through [in 2023], I can't lie, it was It Happens Here, but it was not my year of campaigns. In fact, it was a couple years before. And so, me and my co-chair didn't really do anything about staff-student relationships, but it just goes to show the longevity, how long you need to work at something to get somewhere … If it takes three years to get a policy through, the same person is not gonna be on it. Also, we're overworked, which means institutional memory is crap."

Ming also articulated the anxiety she felt as a student activist and the efforts Common Ground members went through to maintain proof of their work:

> "[Student leaders] had the memory, that was always a thing we were so conscious of when we were doing it is like, we're gonna leave, and because of COVID, we felt like it had kind of died a bit. It was like, this is so sad, because in the future, another group will form, right, because it has to. Oxford's not gonna change. And they're just going to have to reinvent the wheel. So, we were desperate to try and find ways to somehow preserve what we had, or leave our tools or our knowledge, or the work that we'd done, for others. One way was getting involved with archive work in the Bodleian, so I think our website is archived in the Bodleian or something like that."

As this section has established, activism is a lengthy, exhausting process, and most Oxford students do not witness immediate changes occur as a result of their labour. Gumption remains grounded in the hope that student activism will weather the delay tactics and temporal advantages held by the university, so long as organisers commit to preserving institutional memory:

> "As long as you have those handovers, as much as college or the university moves at a slow pace, those ideas will never be lost. They will never completely not be done

unless the person just decides not to do them. If you pass them on, hopefully they will be implemented, even if you're not there to see it happen."

The three elements of activist modes of engagement theorised in this chapter — roles, activities, and motivations — offer a conceptual framework for how women of colour students participated in and led activist work at Oxford. Regardless of their affiliation with each engagement component, WoC faced the constraints of institutional environments in both rhetoric and practice.[62] The established cultures of the University of Oxford, as the 'Ancient University', do not naturally facilitate kinship or solidarity, nor does it provide adequate space and time to do so. Yet, I witnessed women of colour students carve out autonomous realms of community, affirming Ahmed's proclamation that "the openness that gathers in the struggle against 'what is' involves the coming together of different bodies in this present time … the opening up also takes time. The time of opening is the time of collecting together" (2014, 188). The subsequent chapter analyses student activism by women of colour in the institutional environments of Oxford, examining university cultures and bureaucracy, responses to activism, and the spatial politics and affordances of activism.

[62] Osman (2025) wrote a relevant piece on fighting structural barriers in student activism at Oxford using the metaphor of 'bashing' in *The Isis,* Oxford's independent student magazine.

Chapter 6: Institutional Environments

"We continue to do this work across the fictive boundaries of the academy, constantly wrestling with its costs, and knowing that the intellectual, spiritual, and psychic stakes are high but believing that it is imperative to engage in the struggles over the production of liberatory knowledges and subjectivities in the belly of the imperial beast."

Chandra Talpade Mohanty & M. Jacqui Alexander, Cartographies of Knowledge and Power, in Insurgent Visions: Feminism, Justice, Solidarity (2025, 177)

Following the analysis of the modes of engagement through which women of colour students partake in activism, this chapter seeks to situate their work and answer the third research question: "How does the institutional environment of Oxford affect their student experience as women of colour? By utilising theories of spatial politics and its relationalities, what Massey (2004) coins as "geographies of responsibility", I analyse participants' relationships with the spaces and cultures of Oxford. These relationships are fraught and fluctuate (often depending on how far along they are into their degree) and involve a constant negotiation of their women of colour-ness as an inherent 'other' that clashes with Oxford's colonial histories. I conceive of institutional environments through Gilmore's understanding of political geography of race, which centres the "fatally dynamic coupling of power and difference signified by racism" as well as facets of spatiality, gender, and class (2002, 15). The physical and imagined spaces of the University of Oxford, as experienced by women of colour students, structure unique forms of institutional environments shaped by multiple axes of oppression within, as 4.3 established, an inherently white space. Since there is no singular 'campus' in Oxford, the fluidities of its institutional environments are marked by participants' judgements of safety, elitism, bureaucracy, and openness of the spaces they inhabit. Brooks et al. argue that the "'spaces of higher education (broadly conceived) are engrained with particular values. They are thus not neutral spaces, but ones in which particular relations of power and/or ideologies are played out" (2016, 475). These embodied spaces, meaning locales that address "both the experimental and material aspects of the body in space as well as the merging of body/space as a location that can communicate, transform, and contest existing social structures" (Low, 2016, 94), exist as unique, dynamic constructions by WoC students to fit their needs as they navigate Oxford. Their engagement

with university spaces involves recurrent negotiations of their embodied selves as they work with and against the university's normative (white, male, middle-class) spatial grain.[63]

Participants have an overwhelming desire to both be part of the creation of and to actively find solace in what they deem 'safe' spaces consisting of like-minded and affinity peers of similar gender and racial identities, where they can stave off the effects of the impostor phenomenon felt by many WoC. This chapter also addresses classism at the university, where the cultures and institutional bureaucracy of Oxford act as impediments to long-term transformation. When coupled with the university's reputation as an elitist and exclusive space, this results in exceedingly frustrating roadblocks for women of colour activists aiming to effect change. Beginning with an analysis of 'safe' spaces, the chapter then details participants' experiences of the impostor phenomenon at Oxford, which leads into how the effects of classism impact the lives of women of colour students. I conclude by scrutinising how Oxford's institutional bureaucracy hinders the possibilities of short and long-term activisms, and the university's mixed responses to student activism efforts, which I argue is rooted in their desire to maintain its prestige and reputation. Women of colour students explicitly call for the university to embrace change in collaboration with its students, not as antagonists to activist-led transformations.

6.1 'Safe' spaces

In my interviews with participants, the most frequent assertion I heard from women of colour students was their desire for 'safe' spaces at the University of Oxford. Safe spaces were created in the civil rights and women's rights movements of the mid-twentieth century to mark locales safe for organising and discussion, such as community centres or bars (Harless, 2018). These spaces are often intentionally "insulated and insular" (334) to nurture strong internal bonds and provide a shield against the violence members may face outside the space. The constitution of such 'safe spaces' are debated, with feminist scholarship understanding it as a constructed space where marginalised groups do not face threats of emotional or physical harm, (The Roestone Collective, 2014). In a study on racialised queer spaces in universities, "protective" spaces are developed to counter white heteronormative spatialities that "move with the ebb and flow of how power and privilege are presented within

[63] A description provided by participants.

our context at the time" (Arayata & Vigneswaramoorthy, 2024, 246). WoC participants envisioned 'safe spaces' at Oxford in the following ways:

1. A welcoming space where fellow women and students of colour can share their experiences and create friendships (ex. WocSoc).

2. Providing spaces for discussion of topics not otherwise available at other Oxford spaces (ex. FemSoc).

3. Critiques against existing Oxford spaces that include marginalised students but do not make an active effort to ensure their safety.

Inherently welcoming spaces

One construction of an affirmative safe space was built through social events hosted by student societies, ones that did not necessarily have a directive to focus on experiences of oppression, but allowed for an organic sharing of lived experiences with their peers. Arya remarks on her goals when organising events:

> "I think mainly I wanted to make a safe space so I could make friends with other women or women-identifying students at the uni, and that really did work. We have some amazing people turn up to our events, and also because we're creating this space, a lot of people feel safe enough to share their experiences with us."

Ana shared similar ideals, specifically noting that these spaces did *not* have to be activism or campaign-based:

> "It's just sort of trying to make, you know, people of colour, have someone who they can come to and like, feel a bit safe. And for me, it's kind of just about creating like an environment where people can feel welcome. And even if that's not necessarily sort of like campaigning or like anything like that, it's just, you know, like a feeling where someone else can relate to you."

My ethnography with the Oxford Women of Colour Society corroborated the existence and importance of these spaces. I elaborate further on a key example in 7.3, where I analyse a WocSoc event I co-chaired on parental expectations for women of colour. Members of the WocSoc committee understood the society as a safe space, as described by Lucy:

> "It's a very open society for anyone who identifies as a woman or non-binary person of colour, it's just sort of, I guess, a safe space, especially in an institution that – well, stereotypes and all, but you assume very male, white dominated."

Lucy's assumption reflects Oxford's historic reputation as a university exclusively for white, male students and the ongoing geographies of race that shape its legacy. Gilmore writes that it is key to understand the "territoriality of power" in relation to race, space, and place as "simultaneously shaped by gender, class, and scale" (2022, 152). The ways in which various axes of oppression have been wielded by Oxford as an institution are laid out by Zhao, who contextualises its past with her hopes for the future:

> "I think that my hope for Oxford is just that like the academic pursuit and the intellectual development of women of colour students is encouraged and like supported just as much as white cis men's education has always been, because I think it does hold so much potential to be a place where you can really flourish intellectually. And I just think that like there needs to be more space made and it needs to feel safer for women of colour to be able to access that in the same way that, you know, white cis men have always felt entitled to that makes sense."

While Zhao referenced academic and intellectual safe spaces, Jessica, a WocSoc committee member, pointed to the society as a safe space that directly counters the harms of Oxford's reputation:

> "I think WocSoc can contribute to creating a safe – not even safe, but kind of a comfortable community for other women of colour at the university, especially like we said, Oxford is [a] very historical, very white, male, institution. I think it's really important to have these kinds of spaces where people who don't fit that kind of traditional mould can feel comfortable at this uni."

Antitheses of safe spaces can ones that are discomforting and tokenizing, as demonstrated in Linder and Rodriguez's 2012 study where college students of colour felt obligated to speak for their whole race in 'unsafe' spaces, whereas having safe spaces on campus "encouraged [students] to explore more of their whole selves, which is critical given their daily negotiation of intersectionality" (393). I argue the same logic applies to WoC students at Oxford who contend with racialised and gendered dynamics of the university and may have to 'shrink' their whole selves (a term used by Albertina), whereas in spaces like the

Islamic Society (ISoc), attendees do not have to be concerned about their emotional or physical safety around their peers. Mary, an ISoc committee member, explains:

> "It's not just about religion, it's also just about making the community for mostly students of colour, but also we do have other students who come, but just making a safe space for them where they can be around people from the same beliefs as themselves. Because I know especially for Muslims, we don't drink, we don't go clubbing, and I think college life is a lot of bops, club nights, let's go to the bar and get drunk. Well, it's like for Muslim students, and also other students who don't drink, it's very – they get very worried [about] how they're going to make friends in college. So, it's just nice to have a safe space."

Mary's description of the exclusions that can occur in Oxford college life extends beyond the norms of socialisation. One of the hallmarks of Oxford culture is the abundance of academic talks and workshops hosted across the university and colleges, and WoC participants recognised that the discourse in spaces prescribed for intellectual discussion were not always open areas of debate and, at worst, were unsafe for women of colour students. Instead, societies like FemSoc sought to curate intentionally safe spaces for dialogue.

Alternative spaces to typical Oxford spaces

FemSoc is an apt example of what a safe space can look like, especially when contrasted against the other options available at Oxford (such as the Oxford Union debating society, which Ella described as a space she felt "really uncomfortable in").[64] It stood out in my ethnography as a generative arena emboldened by its proud designation as a *feminist* space. Maisie, a FemSoc committee member, summed up her experience with the society:

> "I really love FemSoc. I think it was such a — it sounds so cheesy, but it was such a safe space, especially considering that Oxford is… everyone here kind of wants to debate, you know what I mean? Lots of things can turn into arguments when they're not supposed to, when you don't mean to. I think maybe it was just because it was such a non-male space that made it feel quite non-threatening, and I went so much in first year."

[64] For more on the Oxford Union's uses and challenges, see 6.3.

Though FemSoc was not a strictly women-only space, its feminist identity ran counter to Oxford's historical refusal of non-white, non-cisgender male bodies.[65] Instead, FemSoc follows the ethos of other feminist collectives seeking to occupy hostile environments, in spaces that "do[es] not assume that these spaces are felt *in common* between us, but they enable us to take up our own space, to tell our own stories, to move across boundaries and borders, to be heard and visible (where desired), and to resist" (Smith et al., 2020, 1302, emphasis in original). Another iteration of a safe space for discourse at Oxford is the now-defunct discussion group and virtual student-run magazine, *Melanin.* (Common Ground Oxford, 2019). Alumna Ming was a founding member who recounts the success of their first event, a discussion about the treatment of Duchess Meghan Markle by the British media:

> "It was just so rewarding because so many people came up to us afterwards and were like, gosh, 'we've missed a place like this, this is what we've been missing'. Even if it was just talking about Meghan Markle, I think there was a sense that we were kind of getting our larger frustrations out about our experiences at university, too. Just being able to be surrounded by people who can, to some extent, understand, because obviously, each racial group has very different experiences. But just creating that safe space and again, hearing really intelligent people talk about their experiences and their viewpoints, and just having a nice time."

The examples above do not seek to limit safe spaces as places where uncomfortable discussions cannot happen; rather, designating safe spaces can facilitate necessary conversations about power and oppression in a calibrated manner that prioritises safety for marginalised communities. It is worth acknowledging that definitions of 'safety' are nebulous, as notions of safety can differ greatly between diverse communities and their members. Lewis et al. (2015) theorised safety in a feminist, women-only space as one where attendees felt "cognitive and emotional freedom that enabled exploration of their potential as human beings" (9) and offers a layer of ontological security, even if their viewpoints are being challenged within the space.

An example of debate in FemSoc's safe space occurred at the first Liberation & Liquor event I attended, with the discussion question, "Should we prioritise cultural norms over Western feminism?" on 29 January 2024. The conversation was chaired by the society's

[65] Each FemSoc event I attended had a majority of women/women-presenting participants.

BAME representative, who offered her perspective as an international student from India and a 'cultural norm' as the expectation for her to enter an arranged marriage. In the first half of the event, only women of colour spoke, sharing their opinions about Western feminism — for example, one woman of colour opined that discourse about news items such as *Barbie* (2024) not receiving enough recognition at the 2025 Academy Awards was a "non-issue" compared to the need for public outrage over the treatment of women in Gaza. Another WoC concurred, saying that white feminists were exercising willful ignorance around concerns originating in the Global South, concluding that "it's not inappropriate to stop talking about Barbie and talk about Gaza [instead]". In my field notes, I asked myself:

> "Are the white attendees afraid to speak up because it's a topic that's not focused on them? Is that a good thing?"

I acknowledged the distinction the WoC participants were making between white women who are feminists and the specificity of white feminism, which Ahmed posits as a "killjoy equation: white feminism = blanking. Feminism became white not because Black and brown women were not there, speaking, knowing, creating, as feminists, but because we were blanked, *not recorded as being there*" (2025, emphasis in original). However, it may be that the white women in the room did not automatically gauge said difference, which led to their decisions not to participate in the first half of the discussion; or they recognised that the women of colour students held the epistemic privilege in this situation. The latter possibility reinforces FemSoc's capacity as a consciousness-raising arena, as "epistemic privilege requires engagement in consciousness-raising to *develop a framework in which these resources and features have epistemic significance*" (Toole, 2023, 422, emphasis in original). Similarly, when the discussion chair again raised a personal example of her intention to enter an arranged marriage, no one in the room offered a dissenting opinion; however, a white woman did emphasise that as long as it was the chair's *choice* to do so, because "that's what feminism is all about." However, the chair pushed back on the notion of inherent choice and critiqued 'choice feminism' as a predominantly Western construct, a viewpoint that was supported by other WoC in the room. Thwaites writes that choice feminism "encourages neoliberal values of individualism and consumerism, while downplaying the need for political and collective action against systemic inequalities" (2017, 55). Several WoC reaffirmed this point, with one saying that 'choice' is not what defines feminism as a political

movement; instead, feminism needs to be relational and distributive rather than purely stopping at choice.

The vocal opposition to 'choice feminism' by WoC and the examples they contributed from Global South perspectives (ex. India, Gaza, the Caribbean) underscores Moraga's declaration about white feminism: "Racism affects all of our lives, but it is only white women can 'afford' to remain oblivious to these effects. The rest of us have had it breathing or bleeding down our necks" (2021, 58). It was clear that the women of colour in the room were dominating the conversation, with speakers sharing not only personal anecdotes but also citing academic literature from their respective disciplines as part of their response. At the end of the event, the chair took a vote on the initial discussion question; the majority voted 'yes', with some abstentions. The possibility of engaging in genuinely interesting discourse in a self-described safe, feminist environment was abuzz and a distinct departure from other normative academic Oxford discussion spaces.

Critiques of existing Oxford 'safe' spaces

In our interviews, WoC participants raised their objections to the idea that the university, or at least institutionalised spaces such as colleges and classrooms, can be safe for students of colour.[66] Albertina describes the problem:

> "Some colleges will take the initiative to have more students of colour, but they won't create an environment which is safe for students of colour or is encouraging of students of colour."

The encouragement of students of colour instead comes from student societies built for racialised students, as the majority of colleges, in their conception, were not created with non-white men in mind. Carmen speaks to the 'violence' present in Oxford's history and its current ramifications:

> "I think there's a lot of pressure in activism spaces in general, not just here, to really kind of disavow any of the things that we engage with, or institutions that we're part of, and I really understand that because every part of this institution is steeped in violence. And that's a really strong thing, it's a presence, it weighs heavily on me. I

[66] The new Chancellor of Oxford University, Lord William Hague, claimed that there will be no 'safe spaces' for Oxford students and there will be 'no cancel culture' under his tenure (Sanderson, 2025).

> came in today and I was walking from the station, and I haven't been to Oxford in a while, a while for me, anyway. I went past the History Faculty and like, when I was doing all this, complaints about the lecturer and things like that, through the Faculty. And considering that I'd done two degrees there for four years and spent close to a hundred grand in fees there, I felt that there was actually really no protection or true loyalty that came from that. I think institutions have a real way of making you feel like you are family, that you're part of them, and then a way of spitting you out. I think there's a lot of hurt a lot of people, not just me, have around Oxford because of that."[67]

Carmen's naming of hurt as a specific emotion speaks to the hostile affective atmosphere she specifically associated with the History Faculty, despite the University proclaiming that it is "committed to fostering a safe environment in which all students can thrive" (Student Welfare, 2025). The arguments against safe spaces in the university assert that they stifle free speech, coddle students from the realities of the world, and inscribe further exclusions within student populations (Trento et al., 2025; see also Chapter 7 in Brooks et al., 2022). Trento et al. also write that for genuine safe spaces to exist in universities, institutions "must move beyond mere performative representation and engage with dynamic spacings that celebrate difference and allow for diver*ging* as a continuous practice" (2025, 7, emphasis in original). The authors' findings concur with the testimonies of WoC students who demand holistic safe spaces that can hold room for both consensus and dissent, and they have chiefly found these conditions to exist outside institutionalised Oxford environments.[68]

6.2 Imposter phenomenon in Oxford spaces

Impostor phenomenon, more commonly known as impostor syndrome, was coined by Clance & Imes (1978) in their study of high-achieving women who reported living in constant doubt and fear that they would be 'found out' as incompetent in their professions, despite their significant qualifications.[69] Husbands et al. (2025) conducted a study with Black female undergraduate students that proved the prevalence of impostor phenomenon for racial minorities in UK HE, where they emphasise the need for "culturally relevant support,

[67] Carmen was one of the students who lodged a complaint of sexual and racial harassment against a professor who remains employed by the Faculty of History.
[68] The specific need for spaces exclusive to women of colour are discussed in 7.3.
[69] Addison et al. (2022) published a handbook on impostor syndrome in education addressing its manifestations in academia; see also Breeze (2018) on impostor syndrome as a 'public feeling' for feminist academics.

acceptance, and encouragement" to foster belonging and combat the effects of the phenomenon for students of colour. The consequences of the impostor phenomenon for women of colour students are influential at various stages of their Oxford experience, from the application process through to becoming alumnae.

Impostor phenomenon is especially prevalent for WoC from underrepresented backgrounds applying to Oxford, as illustrated by the access and outreach discussion in 5.5. Gitanjali elaborates on her experience advocating for access in admissions:

> "I think confidence is a big issue that arises and like I've definitely experienced that myself, being part of the imposter syndrome. I guess I would wish that, like anyone who gets in actually just believes that they're worthy to be here. Because the issue doesn't end like once you get that admission, you're so likely to second guess that or like made to feel uncomfortable."

The persistent questioning of one's worth at Oxford, even after one receives admission, was highlighted by Micah:

> "It's really, really [hard] because you're like, you shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be here. It's not imposter syndrome. It is survival mode. It is unsafe and unhealthy for us to be here, and so I will never stop someone from applying. I give the best advice I can, I help them as much as I can. And I always say this, they need you more than you will ever need them, and that is especially true the second you are accepted, because the second you're accepted, it is up to them to prove to you why they deserve you. And after they've been admitted, I'm like, OK, real talk, because you should never go in unprepared. And my dream for the future is that that conversation never needs to happen because I believe it right now to be an essential conversation."

As a fellow graduate student who engages in access work, I deeply resonated with Micah's experience. I am frequently asked by acquaintances and strangers for advice on applying to Oxford, and I do my best to support the women of colour students I know in their bids for admission and scholarships. However, only offering a rosy picture of Oxford would be misleading, and as many participants have shared, their experiences of discrimination at Oxford are very real. For some, their initial apprehension translated into sustained impostor phenomenon in their student lives and leadership roles. In Roma's tenure as JCR President,

she assumed that she would not be considered as a capable leader by the college staff (despite receiving no such indications from college) simply because she was a woman of colour:

> "I think quite early on, because I met the Bursars of the college quite regularly, every two weeks if not every week, I made sure to get them to respect me and make it a very equal playing field, because I feel like especially me being a woman of colour, I kind of went in with some sort of – they gave me no reason to believe this, but I for some reason thought that like they wouldn't take me as seriously … I just hope that women of colour in the future don't feel like they don't have a shot, or don't feel like they're not taken seriously, because as I said, I felt that way, but I had no reason to feel that way. It was really just a subconscious, unconscious bias thing. And it's so natural for people to feel that, especially women of colour and people of colour."

Even as the most senior student representative in her college, democratically elected by her peers, Roma did not automatically expect to be treated as equitably as her non-WoC peers who may have previously held the role, which would have been especially consequential in elements of her role as President, which included leading student accommodation rent negotiations with college administrators. Roma acknowledged that it was indeed impostor syndrome and came to believe in her abilities:

> "I kind of just got over it by making sure they did respect me, which was very clear from early on that they were listening to me and I was listening to them, and that was quite a good relationship to have."

In contrast, Zhao recognised the trappings of impostor syndrome right away upon her arrival at Oxford:

> "You come to Oxford and it's almost like you feel like, as a person of colour, that they're kind of going against the rules to even let you be here. So, you're like, well, if you're letting me be here, I should probably like help you advance your little agenda. I'll be a little pawn in your little diversity picture that you're gonna take."

Though Zhao emphatically rejected these characterisations of the 'diverse' student in her time at Oxford, it reveals the insidiousness of 'unbelonging' narratives at Oxford for WoC. The persistent feeling that the physical and affective spaces of Oxford were not built for WoC echoes Ahmed's theory of a "phenomenology of whiteness" wherein spaces "take

shape by being orientated around some bodies, more than others" (2007, 157). Yasmine spoke about the emotional experiences she 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."

Yasmine's use of the word *haunting* is noteworthy, as the concept has been theorised by scholars of race, education, and activism that merits exploration. Yoon and Chen (2022) posit hauntings as processes of institutionalised violence and erasure that leave affective legacies. They write that the act of being haunted is to be "repeatedly visited by multisensory and affective evidence of spirits who are not alive and not quite dead …haunting is a process of distorting and repeating time that is instigated by violence and challenges boundaries around reality and possibility" (77). Habiba affirms the affectual consequences of being haunted at Oxford:

> "I think it's very difficult for the higher ups to kind of wrap their head around the fact that Oxford is an incredibly alienating place to exist in and to have to navigate. It's not necessarily that you yourself, I'm sure of my right to belong in this space, I've never once questioned whether or not I should be here, but I'm constantly questioning whether or not other people think I should be here. And I think those fears constantly haunt your experience at Oxford."

Moreover, Gordon (2008) argues that "haunting always harbours the violence, the *witchcraft* and *denial* that made it, and the *exile of our longing*, the utopian" (207, emphasis in original). Here, the violence originates in the ways Habiba has experienced the institution; the fact that she does not doubt her innate abilities, but rather doubts whether 'other people' accept her presence, is indicative of the backlash she and Yasmin have faced for their activism. Habiba continues:

> "I would've loved if someone came to us and said, you belong here, you've worked to get here, you've worked harder than some people to get here. That's not in spite of, that's everything, everything you bring to the table: your activism, your anger, times when you're not acting respectably, times when you're acting emotionally, at your lowest moment, your place here is still secure. It's not conditional how nice you are or how smart you are, or how good you make other people feel about that. You should be here."

Habiba and Yasmin's experiences substantiates the respectability politics WoC are expected to perform (as discussed in 4.4) and evinces Emejulu and Bassel's research on the loneliness faced by WoC activists in activist spaces that reproduce white supremacy, where "white denials constitute a haunting: the feeling rules of activist spaces promote amnesia about white supremacy, patriarchy, and queerphobia" (2024, 60) that lead to profound loneliness and subsequently burnout. A connected affective condition faced by WoC is Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, the relational idea that something one desires serves as an impediment to thriving (2011). In education, cruel optimism has been applied to the neoliberal logic of the academy and what occurs when students are promised a 'product' – capital – and do not receive marketable returns through their degrees (Hansen & Mellon, 2022). Carmen used the word 'cruel' when reflecting on her affinity for Oxford after graduation:

> "It's cruel in a way because it's like they get you to really identify with something that really you have no business identifying with, I guess."

Carmen's statement references the enduring stereotype that women of colour have "no business" identifying as an Oxford student; both haunting and cruel optimism amplify the effects of impostor syndrome for WoC. It can also set an expectation that gratitude should be the primary emotion felt by marginalised students at Oxford. My participants referenced gratitude for the opportunities that have been afforded to them as a result of their Oxford education, gratitude for the roles they took on as student leaders, and gratitude for not having experienced racism. Sree sums up these feelings and encourages students to express their discomfort:

> "I think there's also kind of an expectation that because you're at this place that's so renowned that you should be grateful to be here, and okay, maybe you'll face a bit of

whatever, but you shouldn't really complain about it because you should be grateful to be able to study at the best university in the world. I think making sure people know that it's okay to talk about their experiences."[70]

Kushi also noted that you can hold gratitude in tandem with other, more critical emotions about the university:

> "I'm so grateful to be here, but this is an institution, and I don't mean that in a nice way. And it refuses to change. And because I think Oxford thinks, and I'm personalising it because I think it's easier to talk about, but I think that it thinks that if that is how it got in the world rankings, then that is how it will stay there."

During the interviews, I made a point to impress upon the participants that they do not inherently owe the university their gratitude, nor do their experiences have to be wholly based on resistance. Dazey writes that "the inner life of marginalised group members — made of desires and vulnerabilities, fears and ambitions — is not entirely determined by a public language of inferiority, and their agency is not limited to resisting public discourse" (2021, 590). Women of colour should not have to be defined by the setbacks they overcame to enter the institution or how they subverted expectations while at university. Instead, their labour and contributions to scholarship and community can be seen as one facet of their dedication to collective, meaningful change.

An evening at High Table

To conclude this section, I share a personal incident of epistemic injustice that occurred during my DPhil that mirrored Habiba's suspicions, where I do not doubt that I have earned my place here, but it is clear that others who ascribe to the normative image of *the* Oxford student do hold those beliefs. I elaborate further on epistemic injustices in the context of curricular transformations in 7.2, but I foreground this section with Fricker's interpretation of hermeneutical injustice where "someone is socially constituted as, and perhaps even caused to be, something they are not, and which it is against their interests to be seen to be … they are prevented from becoming who they really are" (2006, 107). In this experience, my epistemic privileges were denied in the multi-layered spatiality of the Brasenose College Senior Common Room. In the second year of my doctoral degree, I received a scholarship

[70] See also Olufemi's essay "On Cambridge and Being Grateful" in *A Fly Girl's Guide to University* (2019).

from my college that recognised my scholarly achievements, which came with a nominal annual monetary grant and, more consequentially, rights to dine at High Table for free, three times per term. Though I held the scholarship for two years, I only used my dining privileges twice, likely because my first time was harrowing enough to deter me until I returned at the end of my scholarship eligibility. I discuss the culture of formal hall and High Table in 6.3, but I construe the latter as a liminal, calibrated space that represents the peculiarities of Oxford. Students can be invited to dine at High Table, but weekly, it is largely populated with senior members of the college or academic visitors, who also have access to the Senior Common Room (SCR). At Brasenose, the formal dinner routine of High Table-goers begins in the SCR, which is up a flight of stairs and inaccessible unless you have a staff fob. At the first dinner I attended, sometime in the spring of my second year, I was lucky to have a few friends attend with me as fellow scholarship grantees, and we chose to forgo the pre-dinner SCR routine; instead, we were shuffled into our assigned seats at High Table, processing through the hall as the non-High Table diners stood for our entrance. The reproduction of formality and elitism through an Oxbridge formal dinner is strange to witness, but it was even stranger to join as someone who, for one evening, belonged to the upper echelon of college ranks. The dinner itself was uneventful; I remember speaking to no one, feeling minuscule sitting in a giant leather chair, and eating silently until the gavel was banged by whoever presided over High Table that evening. After which, we processed out of the hall to the SCR, while the other diners stood, once again, even if they had not finished their meal.

The following part of the evening is titled ‘Second Desserts’, a post-dinner tradition in the SCR that mostly continues only at the older colleges (like Brasenose), where port and other alcohols are abundant, and small talk flows over copious amounts of wine, cheese, and grapes. We were instructed to sit next to someone we had not yet met at dinner, and I sat at the end of the table, across from my friend, and between us sat a middle-aged, white male fellow of the college at the head of the table. Neither of us had met him before, and my conversation with him started with the typical Oxford pleasantries, where he asked us about our degrees and research topics. His research was in the physical and life sciences fields; I cannot remember which one. I am always cautious when sharing the details of my research with strangers whose politics were unknown to me; I have had previous experiences of being accosted when I told someone my research was about race and gender. But is Oxford not meant to be a place of academic freedom, where intellectual thought can flourish, and we value the contributions of all disciplines?

I kept my explanation brief, saying that I looked at the experiences of women of colour at Oxford; I dared not mention that I was studying student activism or critiquing university responses to activism in the event that he, as a fellow of the college, would take offence at my diagnosis of the university's problems. This was an impromptu calibration for my safety, which would quickly be shattered; I am in no way afraid of receiving criticism of my research, but I did not want to have to process his criticism at a dinner that was meant to be an enjoyable evening. Yet even my succinct description was not enough to satisfy him, as I had thought my research would not be of any interest to him, and he was only asking out of politeness. His responses proved me wrong. Here is a selection of his replies, to the best of my recollection, in the notes I scribbled down in a panic right after I left the dinner:

- "Qualitative research is just opinions."
- "I think Oxford is pretty diverse."
- "Do women of colour have a different experience here?"

When he asked me about my methods, he criticised my lack of a 'control' variable and how I was taking the "easy way out" by having participants self-identify as women of colour, as opposed to another unnamed form of recruitment. According to him, I needed to have more robust statistical research and have a larger data set than 47 interviewees, as it would not be enough to deduce a conclusive or "accurate" result from such a small sample. Needless to say, this conversation was incredibly demeaning, and I shrank from the conversation, waiting until he turned to my friend, where he spoke with enthusiasm about chemistry research. As soon as we were able, my friends and I left the SCR, and I began recounting what had happened before we even reached the flight of stairs back down to the dining hall. They were appalled, but could not have done anything as we were spread across the room. I doubt even my friend sitting across from me was able to hear the entirety of the conversation.

As I headed home, I emailed my supervisors for an emergency meeting the next day; they also encouraged me to speak to colleagues at the college if possible. I contacted one of the two women of colour professors I knew worked at Brasenose, and she graciously spent an hour with me dissecting what happened and shared similar stories from her professional career. She also assured me that the incident was, in fact, racism, even if it did not present as

such. I felt better after these conversations, but as I recount this event two years later, I feel a sense of being haunted, much like Habiba. My haunting does not come in the form of the portraits on the walls, or even the man who said these things to me — I have not seen him since — but haunted by the *lack.* The lack of other women of colour at High Table that night, who could have sat next to me instead, or allies who would have asked curious questions about my research, even if it did not pertain to them. The layered spatialities of attending second desserts, in the SCR, in Brasenose, in Oxford, replicated my outsider nature in the academy that evening, even though I had theoretically done all the right things to earn my place there. Yet, in his eyes, I had failed the performance of what it meant to conduct 'legitimate' research.

It is very easy to view these events as trivial or just minor complaints about some offhand comments I received during a free meal. This, of course, is my impostor phenomenon at work. Even if I were to give this fellow the benefit of the doubt about his remarks, at the very least, he was questioning the validity and rigour of this empirical research. His comments illustrate the entrenched hierarchies of not only the institution's staffed ranks (the pipeline from tutors, to fellows, to professors, etc.) but also an enduring perception by some that qualitative research on marginalised communities is not worthy of study. In this fellow's case, he reasoned that Oxford was "pretty diverse" and therefore, highlighting its inequalities was moot. My research proves that this is not the case, but as my supervisor reminded me, this work is not for people like him. It is for the participants, for other women of colour, for critical researchers who face epistemic injustices, and it galvanised me further to assert my convictions through my work.

6.3 Classism: Cultures of Oxford

The issues of classism in UK HE have been extensively studied, with the intersections of racism and classism in elite universities like Oxbridge highlighted as a pervasive and enduring concern (Bhopal & Myers, 2023).[71] Crozier et al. (2019) found that BAME working-class students assumed 'hybrid identities' dependent on the racialised and classed environments of their universities and sought to "manage multiple versions of themselves, moving in and out but locating themselves at the interface – in that liminal space" (934). At Oxford, the economic disparities faced by working-class students go beyond standard tuition

[71] For more on classism in UK HE education in the student context, see Davey (2024), Reay (2018; 2025), Hensby & Adewumi (2024).

fees and student loans; the institutional and social cultures of the university are rooted in white, upper-class traditions that hinder their equitable participation for women of colour. It is evident that WoC have not faltered under the weight of these traditions by any means, and this analysis rejects any deficit-based narrative towards working-class students. Instead, this section calls attention to elements of a distinctly classed environment at Oxford as experienced by women of colour, from socialisation rituals such as formals, class consciousness (or lack thereof), to niche, exclusive spaces like the Oxford Union, all of which risk perpetuating the continuation of classism in elite institutions.

Class consciousness and markers of privilege

In our interviews, WoC participants naturally raised issues of class and economic disparities faced by working-class students at Oxford when asked about their experiences at the university. This is not surprising, as Oxford has consistently ranked as one of the most expensive cities in the UK for students, with the University estimating the cost of living in 2025-26 to be between £1,425 and £2,035 per month (University of Oxford, 2025).[72] As Iman summarises:

> "Class is always there, your accent, where you shop. It reproduces inequalities. What is also blinding about British class, what it blinds you to, is the fact that other systems of class elsewhere in the world work differently."

Phoebe, an American student, also mentioned the particularities of the British class system in our discussion in the context of Oxford students being barred from part-time employment during term-time (see 4.5):

> "I notice that class is a really big factor here, of course, which it was in the US, but even more obvious in the UK. And it just sucks because I think it's a lack of acknowledgement that like just because you prevent students from working through the university doesn't mean that they aren't going to find other ways to work. You're just driving people underground, the same way that it is in every kind of prohibition."

[72] In comparison, the average rent for universities in the North of England per month is £530.27 compared to Oxford's monthly estimates of between £825-990 per month depending on the college (NatWest, 2025; University of Oxford, 2025).

The limitations of the term-time employment ban were reflected in my participant sample: at least one person disclosed they had a part-time job to cover their costs of living, and others, like Zayna, consistently worked during breaks between terms:

> "I have a job outside of term, I work at Tesco during the holidays, and then if I didn't have that job, I don't think I would be able to afford to stay here because I need to make up a lot of the money for my own groceries and stuff for when I'm here. And the student loan just about covers my rent, so everything else that I need to get during term, I have to make the money up for from Tesco. And so it's a bit frustrating that only is there not time to have a job in term-time, you're just flat out not allowed a job."

Class disparities extend beyond struggles related to the cost of living. Attridge's (2021) study of working-class students at Oxford found gaps in students' pre-existing academic knowledges compared to their privately educated peers, which Zayna also referenced:

> "It's always been a little bit hard to sort of keep up with people from a better education than me, and even as I was saying with [her subject] law now, they're choosing to shift to closed-book, handwritten exams. As someone who's just spent the last one and a half years now doing open book, I'm probably gonna find it a harder shift than someone who's probably had a better education than me and is probably gonna be more adaptable to that change."

Zayna's concerns regarding her faculty's decision to shift to a different examination format reveal the cultural capital afforded to privately educated students compared to state school pupils, who may not have been taught 'embodied' elements of cultural capital that enhance one's learning, including thinking under pressure, problem solving, discussion, and adaptability (Stenhouse & Ingram, 2024). Habiba, who self-identified as a low-income student from the North of England, concurred:

> "I think Oxford is like, for most people, but especially for disadvantaged, low-income people, disadvantaged people generally, Oxford is kind of this realisation after realisation that the playing field is not level. You realise when you come in, and then you just keep having these realisations that put you further and further away from your peers."

The realisations Habiba references are related to the development of a place-distinct Oxford class consciousness. Gumption explained how she became acutely aware of her class background at university:

> "Coming to Oxford, I knew that I came from a working-class background, but I always was around people who came from that same sort of demographic. Coming here really made me realise, oh, some people really have it different in life, wow. You know about it in like a vague sense, but you see it and you experience it. I guess that even explains why, for example, I went to a sixth form in what could be considered an affluent area, I never really got involved in anything to promote the working-class student experience there. But when I came to Oxford, I did. Just seeing that sort of difference and disparity makes you more passionate about your identity and about where you come from and owning it as well."

Elizabeth made a similar comparison between how class was viewed during her upbringing versus at Oxford:

> "Growing up, I was never made to feel kind of conscious of my family's economic background, but for the first time, I did here. In ways that I didn't really realise, like some snide comments and stuff like that. It was all a bit of banter, and I didn't take it to heart or anything, it was just interesting that those were the kinds of conversations that are had here. Where I grew up that would never have happened."

The emergence of a sharper form of class consciousness felt by WoC students exemplifies Oxford, as Raj observed, as "a space where you're very perceived. It's a very socially calibrated space." However, students' class identities are not as immediately visible as assumed racialised or gendered identities, which can lead to the obfuscation of classism and its reproductions, like Gumption, a Class Act committee member, described:

> "I feel like with BAME reps and disabilities reps and all of these other roles, it was almost more automatic that there's a sense of unity, because those sorts of minorities are a lot more – I don't know if I can use the word visible. Working class or being from a low-income background wasn't as visible, so it's pretty hard to be like, I see you, you look like me, or you relate to me in that way. So, I wanted to encourage that ... the kind of issues or challenges that I faced, felt invisible. They felt unaddressed, they felt like something I couldn't discuss or talk about."

These ‘invisible’ challenges are most frequently manifest in the form of Oxford’s social traditions, such as formal dinners and college balls, which are considered essential components of the Oxford experience by many, but can remain inaccessible to working-class students.

Barriers to socialisation, tensions in social situations

The conditions of Oxford are poised to expose class markers, primarily because of the sheer expenses one incurs as a socially active Oxford student, the most common being formal hall. Formal dinners, a three-course meal served by colleges with varying regularity (some daily, others twice weekly, or a few times per term), can either be heavily subsidised or as expensive as going out to eat at a restaurant.[73] There is always a dress code; most colleges require matriculated students to wear their academic gown and dress in ‘smart’ or black tie attire, depending on the event.[74] Gumption recounted her experience of her first dinner in an Oxford hall:

> “I remember my first ever dinner in hall, it was like, ‘What are all these knives and forks for? This is so intimidating.’ It’s small things like that, but it can have an impact on your experience here. Like I said, it just didn’t feel discussed. When we were having that committee meeting and it was brought up about doing a guide to formals, and I mentioned cutlery etiquette and stuff like that, I saw how everyone was like, ‘oh my gosh, yes’. And it was just like, ‘whoa, so where were all of you guys when I was trying to figure this stuff out?’ Because you felt like you were going through it alone.”

The peculiarity of Oxford formal dining can be understood as a method of “preserving ritual exclusivity” that strives to maintain social norms of the elite university (Di Domenico & Phillips, 2009, 332). There is also the physical and symbolic separation of the college elite (such as senior leadership, research fellows, and special guests) who dine at High Table and must process into the hall before each sitting as the students stand.[75] Formals can also been seen as a function of “institutional maintenance” that then reproduces norms of exclusivity that extend beyond Oxbridge, with the ritual allowing alumni to “use the shared experience of dining and other college rituals as a kind of social glue to bond with one another and to

[73] There is no repository on the average formal dinner cost as colleges may raise the price every year with inflation; however, in the 25/26 academic year, formals at my college (Brasenose) cost £11 per student; at Trinity College, it is around £6; at St. Edmund’s Hall, it is £21.75.
[74] St. Hugh’s MCR provides an overview of formal dinners and the typical decorum expected of attendees (2025).
[75] Not every college has a High Table tradition, such as the majority of postgraduate-only colleges, but most do.

promote a shared identity that reinforces a sense of entitlement and justifies their dominant class positions" (Dacin et al., 2010, 1414). The financial expectations placed upon Oxford students in order to socialise also apply to less formal events that are still considered part of the 'Oxford experience'. For Marie, a visiting student, the financial costs of an Oxford social life were unexpected:

> "I think I was not totally prepared for all the ticketed things that would be available at Oxford, even speaking from a more social perspective. You were talking about state schoolers, and I was having a conversation this weekend about how state school doesn't necessarily mean that you are from a less well-off family, it just means that you didn't pay for school. So, I think that's one thing that's often used as a way to signal progress, like 'we accept x percentage of state schoolers,' but sometimes that can be a little bit misleading because it doesn't necessarily mean that you're actually making the university more economically diverse. I think that Oxford can be very inaccessible sometimes with the amount of [ticketing]; club nights are all ticketed, a lot of the events are all ticketed, the balls, a lot of the big grand things that Oxford puts on often will cost £100."

The culture of spending and excess at Oxford places an inequitable burden on working-class students who deserve to have a full social and academic life while at university, without increasing their debts or harming their socioeconomic stability. To counter this, student organisations like Class Act have published undergraduate financial guides for low-income, state-school students with an overview of available college and university bursaries, comparisons of student bank accounts, and advice from current students (2024). In addition to ex-Student Union campaigns like Class Act, WoC also found peers from similar socioeconomic backgrounds in organisations not explicitly dedicated to class, as Mary did:

> "[Oxford] was a bit of a culture shock because I'd never been around so many private school people. I'm Pakistani as well, I think Pakistani is one of the least [represented] in Oxford, city-wide as well, so it was weird to not have like so many people. I think that's also why I became quite involved in the ISoc [the Islamic Society], cause it's nice to be around people who are like in your community."

WoC students negotiate their class background in tandem with their racialised and gendered identities at Oxford, building socioeconomically diverse networks that counter,

though do not outright reject, the continuation of elite social rituals that have come to define the 'typical 'Oxford student life. The final section of my analysis on classism at Oxford focuses on how WoC conceived the reproduction of Oxford's elitist reputation through their engagement with spaces internal and external to the university.

Reproducing elitist reputations

WoC identified elitism and the reproduction of Oxford's elitist spatialities as another way in which classism materialises in their experiences of the university. One example raised by Ming is the historic 'town and gown' divide present in Oxford, referring to the tensions between the townspeople and the 'gowned' members of the university (University of Oxford, 2025; see also Cochrane & Williams, 2013, for an analysis of how universities are embedded in regional sociopolitical geographies):

> "Its foundations are rotten, and I just don't really – the upheaval that it needs to become what it should for serving the community, even the kind of town versus gown stuff, the fact that so many Oxford people who live in Oxford can't access the majority of their city."[76]

Oxford's reputation as historically a 'place for rich white people', as Elizabeth put it, has varied implications. For one, it can deter potential students who are not 'rich white people' from pursuing Oxford for fear of not fitting in or succeeding at university, which Elizabeth alluded to:

> "Oxford has that reputation. It's still changing now. I'm not trying to point fingers, it's just a fact … It's the kind of thing I try not to be too aware of. I guess before coming to Oxford, you must've felt the same way; this whole fairy tale place, it's just not an attainable thing, and talking to them and them realising that actually, we're just people. We're not these mad smart brainiacs who just spawned from the earth, we're just people like them."

[76] There are repeated criticisms of the university's housing and building expansions into extended areas of the city and exacerbating housing inequalities in Oxford (Johnson & von Krosigk, 2019; for more on economic inequalities in Oxford, see Oxford Inclusive Economy Partnership, 2025; Oxfordshire Mind, 2025). In response, the university launched more local and community engagement initiatives in its 2025-30 strategy (University of Oxford, 2025).

Yet the need to reframe Oxford's image to be more accessible and working-class friendly is made difficult by its global renown, which allows it to be more impervious to criticism, as Ming explained:

> "[The reputation] is really inescapable, especially being outside of the UK, I feel it so much. People are just so, especially being in East Asia, it's 'oh my gosh, you went to Oxford, wow!' and just no pause for any criticism, don't even. If I say 'oh, I didn't enjoy it', it's like, well, you got the degree. Which they're right, in many ways, it's just a gold key or a big stamp that makes my life easier."

The 'gold key' that Oxford students and alumnae receive may come with significant advantages for their future careers; however, WoC also recognised the discomfort of attending an institution whose past is inextricably linked with histories of colonialism and imperialism, as Emily elucidates:

> "I think that coming here, I felt like lots of my other friends [thought that] to stand in solidarity with the activisms we came from would mean to not enjoy our experience here. That is a real tension, of course, because I feel like all the beautiful people in my cohort deserve nice things, and they deserve to enjoy being here, but there is also that shame I talked about before of engaging with an institution like this and paying it fees, and having such a nice time and knowing that you're having a nice time based on the complex suffering of many others, including probably your families from the colonies in the past."

The notion that being a student at Oxford is incompatible with activism underscores a dilemma that WoC students, including myself, must reconcile: are we producing more harm to our communities by attending the University of Oxford? While there is no one answer to the question, Jessica describes the broader tenor of the debate:

> "I think at the moment, I would say this is quite a transitional period. Change could happen, but people are kind of trying to figure out how to reconcile change in a more modern approach with the history of the university and what the university kind of stands for, as such as an old, British institution."

WoC pointed to a specific locale of elitism and exclusion enduring within the university that could threaten the possibility of adopting 'modern' approaches to Oxford: the

Oxford Union. The reputation of the Oxford Union precedes itself, known as a bastion of free speech and calling itself "the most prestigious debating society in the world" (Smith, 2025). One key factor is the prohibitive cost of membership: in the 2025/26 academic year, lifetime membership is £343, course length membership ranges from £171 to £343, and 'access' life membership is available only to undergraduates and ranges between £206 to £297, depending on the student's eligibility for maintenance loans (The Oxford Union, 2025). Habiba, who is not a member of the Union, illustrates the layers of exclusion that exist within the institution:

> "All of Oxford wants you to – there's an in-group and there's an out-group, and your whole experience in Oxford is constantly chasing after what the in-group is. I don't mean that in the Union or rich white people or whatnot, but it's almost like you feel like, oh, I'm on the outskirts, but I got let into Oxford, I'm now in. And then you realise, even within Oxford, there's another in, and within that in, there's another in-group, and another in-group. It's almost like the way that these social groups enact discipline in whether or not you're included or excluded."

Despite the Union technically being an independent, private members' society external to the University of Oxford, participants typified joining and attending the Union as part of the 'traditional' Oxford lifestyle, though Ella and others had negative experiences as women of colour in their spaces:

> "It's very, very clear that it's not a space where women and people of colour are welcome in all forms, if that makes sense. It's not that there is no diversity in the Union, but that it feels like if you stepped outside of some kind of boundary that is invisibly imposed, then you wouldn't be accepted, if that makes sense."

The history and complex regulations of the Union and the University of Oxford at large represent some of the ubiquitous challenges activists face when attempting to change the institution. Such efforts for change are made more arduous when forces of multiple oppressions are institutionalised into another echelon of exclusion based on class, race, and gender. In discussing her hopes for the university, Zhao summarises the structural failures of the institution and the Union as follows:

> "I would love to see us, like Oxford, become a place where women of colour can feel safe enough to be part of the Oxford Union and actually like take more of a leading role in the way that the school is operated. Because I think as it is right now, we may

be invited into the space, but we're not necessarily welcome there as much as like past the tokenization of diversity."

The prevailing reputation of Oxford as a superlative educational institution belies the legitimate concerns women of colour have about its weaponisation of diversity and, as Micah emphasised, its reluctance to address race and racism:

> "Gluing yourself to the Rad Cam is bad for them because it means people can't come and take pictures and continue their thoughts of this being the best place on Earth. Spray paint is dangerous because it literally prevents people from thinking this is a perfect university with no issues. And it's not that they don't think or know there are issues, it is that they do not want to acknowledge them, and that is the energy about how talking about race in the UK feels."

Racism and classism work in concert to reproduce spatial inequalities at Oxford, affecting WoC from the point of application to their perception of whether institutionalised spaces like the Oxford Union are safe or allowable for them to enter. This section sought to highlight the ongoing ways in which classism appears and affects women of colour at Oxford in both elusive and discernible means, and demonstrates the need to integrate class considerations into conversations around reforming the institutional environments of Oxford.

6.4 Institutional bureaucracy

As a collegiate university, Oxford is a notoriously bureaucratic and decentralised institution that, in turn, can impede the efforts of activists. The gulf between the 'central' university operations versus the Conference of Colleges, a governance body made up of representatives from each college advocating for collective collegiate interests, is palpable to student activists who encounter the system but are generally less visible to the average student. The differing challenges of college versus university-level activism were discussed in 5.2 and 5.3, whereas this section addresses bureaucracy at large across the university and the obstacles faced by student activists.

For undergraduate students in particular, their academic and social lives primarily revolve around their college, which can mean a disconnect from understanding the wider operations of the university, as Albertina describes:

> "It kind of feels a bit unreachable, the university body. I think except for the Vice-Chancellor, who I could vaguely recognise on the street just cause she was at matriculation, I couldn't name a single other position within the university's structure or recognise a single other person, I wouldn't know who to contact or how to contact them … College level does make things easier because you recognise faces, you're aware of them, but I think this disconnect between students and the university level is a shame, especially when you want to do something that would require university-level support or awareness or things like that. It's not like we exist only as college students, we exist as university students, so that could've been really helpful or useful for a lot of people. The university just feels like this distant kind of board of executives that no one really knows, and they've just got these weird powers over us, but I don't know. There's not much relation to them, or at least I'm not aware of much."

The idea that the university's senior-level governance members are viewed as a corporate board of executives contributes to a perception that Oxford is a business first and an educational institution second, as Lily responded when asked about whether Oxford is receptive to change:

> "Oxford University, there's two sides of it. There's yes, the uni, but I think they first and foremost run as a business. I've learned that my eyes have been very open to that within college, and having friends who work for the JCR, and how they have to negotiate for rent, and they're only our age, and they have to literally go in and do a whole meeting, negotiating to get rent prices down. Oxford is a business."

WoC repeatedly identified a *lack* when characterising their interactions with institutional bureaucracy, including the lack of communication, clarity, and transparency from senior administrators, which can result in a lack of motivation by students to push for change because they do not know who to approach first. Arya named bureaucracy as the university's "biggest flaw" and remarked on the barriers to implementing university-wide change:

> "There's not always enough transparency about what route you should take, so I think the uni needs to be a bit more forthcoming with information to student activists, but also maybe chop down a few of the avenues [through which] they can do stuff. Going

to five different meetings just to make sure that every college has sanitary products for everyone, it's a bit ridiculous and it's overkill."

Dylan similarly raised the ridiculousness of colleges not having free sanitary products available as a basic issue that remains unresolved because of bureaucratic hurdles. She also discussed the differing inter-collegiate attitudes towards activism:

> "I think in terms of even just thinking on a college level, I know it's so different depending on the college you're at, but [my college] is quite a traditional college. The student body, great, the management and the deans and all that, very traditionally run; even the way that the MCR is separate to the JCR, people get different privileges. Trying to make any change, you just come up against so many hurdles. It's often just, 'well, that's not the way things were done.' There's only so many ways you can respond to that."

The adherence to tradition and, consequently, the bureaucracy ingrained in tradition, hinders opportunities for expeditious change at Oxford. Ming recalled her interactions with the institutional roadblocks to change:

> "[The university] will listen to you, but there's a sense that nothing can be done. And I'm sure you feel this too, but Oxford as a place is really, really good at making change hard to happen because of all these meetings and these bodies that only meet once a year, or they meet once a term, and then once they've decided that something's going to go ahead, they need to check with these people, and these people need to meet with these people. So, it's all this meeting and meeting and discussion and meeting, and it just essentially means that nothing ever changes. And as I said, three years go by, we've all left, the new kids will be starting on ground one again, and it's just, yeah."

Once again, the temporal limitations of the average Oxford degree hamper student activism, as Raj notes:

> "I find that [activism] is a very unsupported thing most of the time, and it's very difficult for students to maintain it time-wise. In terms of the turnover, we're always at a disadvantage. Unless you can really effectively hack college bureaucracy, if they don't want you to do something, you won't be able to do it within your tenure."

Moreover, the emotional and physical labour required to navigate institutional bureaucracy is a significant toll for students, even for those who voluntarily stood for labour-intensive governance roles (such as MCR President) like Raj:

> "Colleges are really quick to be like, 'hey, actually, let's take this out of committee and set up another meeting. It's like, that's unpaid labour. You're asking for a meeting of my time when the base functioning of my role is to curate a social life for graduates, not to curate college policy. I think there's not a lot of conscientiousness about what time means for students."

Financial bureaucracy is another component of how student activism is immobilised at Oxford. Small, newer student organisations like the Women of Colour Society must confront a bureaucratic dichotomy: to be recognised by the institution and receive its benefits, they require funding, yet the easiest way to receive funding is *from* the institution or the Student Union. Though this paradox does not detract from the society's mission, Lily, a WocSoc committee member, admits such recognition would be useful:

> "WocSoc isn't an official uni society yet because you have to pay to get registered, and then you have to have a certain amount of members that you can prove go to your society. It's quite hard to be a proper, full-fledged society. We don't need that to do events with the community and help the community, but it would be nice to be on the website and be more public-facing. So yeah, I guess it's a struggle in that it's not needed, but it would be a bit nice if it could be given to us."

Convergent factors of labour, time, and the general obligations of a student can also lead to disillusionment with bureaucracy, which threatens the potential of systemic change if activists are mired in institutional processes. The sheer size of the university adds to the daunting nature of proposing change, which Emily, who previously worked in a government bureaucracy, describes as a 'machine':

> "The intention of a bureaucracy is often very impersonal, and so changing it also means that lots of things that feel deeply personal have to be changed by an institution that's very impersonal. And I think a lot of the frustration of activism comes from there, that like people have deeply held beliefs but then it's not very clear how to move a machine as opposed to changing a person's mind."

The rigidity and complexity of Oxford's bureaucracy were clear to Phoebe, who found it incomparable to her experiences in other institutions:

> "I have found that the bureaucracy here and the structure of the university makes it uniquely non-receptive to change … I think I was also really struck by the inadequacy of these institutions to actually address these problems [of coalition building], particularly in Oxford, which is decentralised and predicated far less on student democracy than I think any other institution I've ever been at. It has been a real — what I've found, it's about symbolic and political pressure as much as it is voting or democratic pressure. The only real way to make binding decisions in this university is to go through Congregation, which is faculty and staff. Of course, that's incredibly important, but that means that it leaves students with very little recourse to actually change material things at this university."[77]

The material change Phoebe referred to was regarding her participation in Oxford Action for Palestine's divestment campaign, which is linked to wider global calls for Palestinian liberation; however, WoC students also identified a central internal campaign that is similarly impeded by bureaucracy: tackling sexual violence at the university. There has been a throughline of analysis focusing on the anti-sexual violence movement in Oxford from previous chapters, denoting it as an urgent activist cause that has yet to be rigorously addressed by the university. Ahmed's 2021 monograph *Complaint!* exposed the institutional violence in higher education that serves to maintain established power structures, one of which is the bureaucratic complaint process: "If complaints can be what you end up doing, where you end up going, the lack of clarity of the process *becomes the world you inhabit*" (44, emphasis in original). Kushi explains from her experience advocating for sexual violence survivors:

> "Every level of what we try to do, we're stopped, or administrative burdens are put in our way … I think every moment in the road, Oxford will try and stop you and delegitimise you, this is on an activism level, and throw obstacles in your way, deny what you're talking about exists, say that 'oh, it's not me, I can't do anything'; and then you go to the college [who] says, 'not me, I can't do anything', and you're like, okay, what next?"

[77] For more on coalition building in activism, see 7.8.

The de-legitimisation of student activists is a recurring dismissal of students' lived experience as a genuine form of knowledge. Sree acknowledges the distress that bureaucracy can cause for survivors:

> "A lot of the issues these people [survivors] are facing are really sad, because it's like, they go through the sexual violence, which in itself is an awful experience, but then what they're almost finding more awful is the fact that they're really struggling with their college administration to try and make any change … I always feel so bad because they're sending so many emails, they're trying to do so many things, they're in 50 meetings, and they're going through something really hard as well, they shouldn't be struggling this hard to try and figure out how they can finish their degrees that they worked so hard to get into."

Sree's statement evinces the multifaceted forms of violence bureaucracy can inflict on not only survivors of sexual violence but student activists as a whole. When activists are forced to grapple with elaborate bureaucratic processes in order to advance their theories of change, the already perilous balance between their activism and academics becomes further jeopardised. This is especially true for women of colour student activists who, as established in previous chapters, must contend with the additional effects of racialisation and sexism at Oxford whilst engaging in activism, particularly with causes that directly work against the norms of the institution. The bureaucratic obstructions to lasting change are magnified by Oxford's mixed, though largely apathetic and/or negative, responses to student activism.

6.5 Oxford's responses to activism

When I asked participants about their thoughts on Oxford's responses to activism, the overwhelming response was negative, believing that Oxford was wholly unresponsive to activism, or they were only responsive with caveats. Freya's answer is indicative of other WoC participants' attitudes, answering that Oxford is "sometimes" responsive to activism, "if it's in some way beneficial to their image, then sure. A lot of it is about reputation." I categorise Oxford's reception of activism in three ways, as described by WoC who have experienced or witnessed their reactions firsthand: first, I argue that the institution responds to activist aims only *if* it is in service of their public image. Secondly, I place the university's EDI efforts in context with WoC testimonials about its performative nature. Third, I argue that the university considers change as the sole obligation of students and instead, I present

assertions by women of colour who demand Oxford take further responsibility for meaningful change.

Responses to preserve Oxford's public image and tradition

The importance of maintaining Oxford's public image and reputation was apparent to WoC, especially those who were interviewed after the establishment of the OA4P encampment in May 2024. Institutional responses to activism are tempered by the university's need to preserve its history, which results in a reluctance to change, as Roma elucidates:

> "I think this university especially is so grounded in its tradition, in its culture, in its history, that ultimately, they're not going to change anything. I think the main purpose of student activism in this university especially is to just make the student body more aware, which is I think the most you can do. Obviously, you can bring it up to university staff and things like that, and maybe they will make a small change, but again, ultimately this university is so rich in its history that it really does not want to change it."

The richness of Oxford's history contains remarkable achievements and deep flaws, including the university and Oriel College's refusal to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes, which Roma raised as a prime example of the university's restrained approach to activism:

> "If you take, for example, Rhodes Must Fall in 2020, that's not going to change. The statue's still up, it's got the little mesh over it, but that's a big example of how the university will treat issues like this. They are proud of their history, whatever it is, no matter the people."

The claim of 'no matter the people' applies to Oxford's modern history, including its continued support of Emeritus Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology, Nigel Biggar, who is a member of the House of Lords and a staunch defender of the British Empire, arguing in favour of colonialism as a positive period in history (Owolade, 2025; Adams, 2017).[78] Oxford's concerted defence of all facets of its public persona was also articulated by Maisie:

[78] For further evidence of Oxford's support, see their statement congratulating Biggar on his appointment to the House of Lords (Faculty of Theology and Religion, 2025).

> "I think for [my college], maybe for Oxford in general, it's just very much about image. You only have change if it kind of benefits them, which is such a cynical thing to say, but it is true. It makes sense because they have to make money, but also, it's a little disheartening."

Emotions of cynicism and disappointment at the university were also echoed by Ruby when reflecting on the student versus institutional response to the war in Gaza:

> "I just think that fundamentally, the student response has been incredible. The university should be proud of it, to be honest, they're not, but they should be. This is what you've been teaching us to do. To stand up, to critically think, to examine, to lead history. That's what they're teaching us to do, right? They should be proud, and the student response has been incredible. And the university has disappointed me. In fact, disappointed is not even the word, because I expected it, but I was hoping that maybe somehow, they would surprise us. And I'm disappointed in them going with the expected, in them going with the status quo, and I think they have revealed themselves and shown themselves to be nothing more than a facade of free thinking, and nothing more than a liberal facade of just maintaining the status quo while looking good. No matter how violent [and] bloody that status quo is."

Oxford touts its long list of esteemed alumni and their global accomplishments, but as I analysed in 4.4, there is no distinct focus on imbuing its students with a collective sense of global or moral citizenship. Ruby's argument that the student outcry to the university's inaction is more than proportional, it is the natural outcome of education, and yet it seems Oxford has not caught up to its modern consequences. WoC classified university responses to activism as conditional, which is how Maisie understood her college's actions when there was mounting public pressure to support the OA4P encampment:

> "You hear all these things, but it seems like they are quite disturbed by all of the colleges moving in support towards the encampment, and also the encampment itself. I think that's quite encouraging … [the JCR executive committee] said, 'yeah, the college is much more concerned and conscious of this than you would think.' What they were saying was, 'this is the time, we need to push the subcommittee through now,' because there's like a crack where you can sort of take this opportunity. It's basically a point of weakness right now. It doesn't really look that good for them, and

> I think that's so much of what it is. Oxford is so based on image and prestige and status and things like this. This definitely threatens that."

Though forming a subcommittee can be read as yet another iteration of bureaucracy, it was the extent to which Maisie's college would allow for the potential of change, in this instance, a subcommittee to demand the college divest from certain companies and organisations that support Israeli apartheid. A subcommittee, of which I do not know the outcomes of its divestment campaign, is an example of a gesture that does not harm the university or the college's wider reputation, as the operations of an internal subcommittee remain strictly within the bounds of the institution. Maya's thoughts assess the fundamental missions of the university when responding to activism:

> "A lot of the action that you could do just seems either like an insurmountable task that would have other consequences, or it's just so big that it's like, where do you even start? Colleges are on board for diversity, but not at the cost of destroying the institution. So, the answer is like, who knows?"

'Not at the cost of destroying the institution' is key, an aim women of colour believed the University followed in order to preserve the sanctity of its image as an educational institution first and foremost, not a business, and not willing to become entangled with wider activism and politics. However, HEIs are intrinsically part of the political fabric, because universities have inevitably become politicised entities — for example, the impact of shifting government immigration policies on international student enrolment, and the ongoing impacts of the UK's exit from the European Union on student mobilities, among other related policies — and therefore enmeshed in societal debates, even if institutions like Oxford reject their connotations.[79]

Responses as performative EDI efforts

WoC portrayed Oxford's EDI efforts as pre-emptive rather than reactionary, aiming to protect the university from accusations of inequality and absolving it of liability in future debates. Raj dissects the issues with this approach:

[79] For more on the links between universities and politics, see The Policy Institute, 2024; Weimer & Nokkala, 2020; Jarvis, 2023; and the University of Cambridge's 'Higher Education, States of Precarity and Conflict' project (2021-2025).

> "Oxford loves to slap a label on and say it's taken care of. If you have a person that's going to be the EDI fellow, but they aren't familiar with EDI, they don't actually inherently, truly believe in it, they just vaguely like diversity, that's not good enough. That means that they're not going to start things, they're not going to see where there's problems, because they haven't walked in the shoes that are tight, so to speak. I think it's important for colleges to have those officers and these more essential roles that have been pushed onto committees, in terms of sustainability, in terms of welfare, in terms of EDI. EDI always gets pushed onto student committees, and colleges weirdly frame EDI as a student issue. It's like, no, no, this is a societal issue, this is an organisational issue, and it's a student issue."

The issues inherent to 'diversity work' in HE and the burdens placed on women of colour in the academy were discussed in 4.2. Mirza further argues that diversity talk produces 'diversity paralysis' in HE at the expense of Black and minoritised women and their flourishing (2006). In recent years, Oxford has participated in the act of 'institutional polishing', as coined by Ahmed (2012), to describe the "public relations technology in which equality and diversity generate a marketable image of the university rather than tackling the inequitable truth" (Phipps & McDonnell, 2022, 518). In concert with Oxford's foundations of whiteness, as discussed in 4.3, the university's EDI efforts are employed to "advance rather than dismantle racism by adopting the work of a few racially minoritised groups, but exploitatively draining the useful parts of their scholarship to meet institutional metrics" (Doharty et al., 2021, 241). The attempts at diversification rang hollow for Habiba, whose experience in pro-Palestine activism at Oxford left her and her peers deeply harmed by the "indirect and direct threats" they received from their college:

> "We felt that being called in for a meeting regarding Palestine, and not once having them inquire about our welfare, made us kind of understand that they thought that our political opinions were a separate concern from our welfare when they're one and the same … I think it's even more disingenuous because Oxford pretends it's so good, it's so progressive, it cares so much; and yet, the actual experiences of the people they claim to want to protect are so not matching up with what they claim."

WoC felt this lack of protection by seeing past the veneer of EDI performed by the university, as represented by Zhao, through initiatives like mandatory consent workshops in freshers' week:

> "I think there's just so much that needs to be done and like anything that's done without dismantling the whole structure to me is just like kind of a facade … you can have your DEI [EDI] initiatives and programs, you can have your consent talk during fresher's week, but if they're just gonna sit there and you know have problematic faculty continue to encourage, you know, colonial structures of knowledge production and citation invite problematic speakers to come, still celebrate colonial people and holidays and all these things. And I think it's kind of a load of bullshit, to be honest. That's my take."

Colleges mandate consent workshops and racial equality workshops during freshers' week, most of which last for one hour, after which students can choose not to engage with the topics for the remainder of their degree, reinforcing a point made by Ruby:

> "It's literally just so consistent, and it's this idea of pushing, trying to diversify, and all these things; it's not helpful if the structures in place don't facilitate the well-being of the marginalised people in those spaces in the first place."

The institution does not draw a clear link between racism and poor well-being, despite the patent evidence that exists (Walcott & Nightingale, 2025; Mental Health Foundation, 2023). The duty of care falls upon student-led, peer supports that offer emotional and physical safety for WoC, provided by their community, rather than relying on welfare distributed by the university.[80] Instead, the institution wields EDI as a catch-all to any potential issues of race or discrimination because they are less likely to be implicated should consequences arise, as Holly reasoned when sharing her thoughts on Oxford's responses to activism:

> "To a certain extent, yes. I'd say recently, with the protests that have been happening with Palestine, I would say they haven't been receptive to that very much. So, I guess when it's something that affects them directly, in a negative way, they're less receptive to it, whereas with things like racial equality, it's less that they're directly negatively impacted by supporting that, which means that they're more likely to support it. So, I'd say they're not *not* receptive to it, but definitely a lot of systems I'd say do the bare minimum."

[80] See 7.4 for more on women of colour and community building.

The performativity of EDI can also manifest in semantic choices, as Ming recounted from her experience in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests:

> "I always felt like [the college Provost] she was toeing the university line. It's expected, I guess, but I just felt she did it too much. For instance, she didn't want to call it the anti-racist working group; she wanted to call it the race and relations working group, something you know, everything was dampened down."

The 'dampened down' nature of the changes pushed for by student activists additionally takes shape via institutional attitudes to student activism, which assigns the mantle of change exclusively to students whilst simultaneously disregarding demands that arise from their activism.

Shifting the onus of change and institutional accountability

There are two interrelated elements to how women of colour envisaged improved responses to activism at Oxford: first, the university should more openly embrace its role in activism (even if it is not branded as such), and second, Oxford should abide by the high standards it holds for itself to be bolder on issues that matter to the student body. WoC expressed a clear conviction that Oxford has the ability and the moral imperative to pursue change, given its international influence and standing. As Ruby asserted, it is their duty because they have the credibility associated with their history and legacy:

> "They pride themselves on being leading academics and this historical, leading institution of academia, and lead the change. If Oxford divested from oil and companies that are selling arms, other universities will follow suit, other institutions will follow suit … because of their reputation, other institutions, attitudes, and places in the world would follow suit. Change the status quo. They have the power and the reputation and the means, and apparently the intelligence to change that. You've got to. It is their responsibility. It's not just their responsibility, it's the Western world's, really, but it is theirs. It fundamentally is."

Like Ruby, other WoC students perceived the university as non-actors in instigating or enacting activism, instead primarily only taking action when publicly pressed, as Lily remarked:

> "I think when it helps them with their image, they're very much willing and receptive to embrace student activism and advertise societies and events. But I don't think they consider it their job; they consider it [to be] the body of the students, which is true, to an extent, but it would be more helpful if they were more receptive."

The desire to have increased institutional support for activism was also mentioned by Arya, who commented on the difficulty of creating lasting structural change without cooperation or collaboration with the university and reasoned that "because we're students, we're often sort of like pushed to the side or our worries aren't taken into full account." If the university does respond to activist acts, it can be seen as a reassertion of its dominance over the student body through either implied or explicit threats of punishment. Habiba's experience was with the former:

> "I think Oxford shies away from very obvious enactments of power. They don't like being 'these are the rules, and you must follow them,' they've kind of taken on this compassionate authority, where it's like, we're here if you need help, and you feel that a lot. But when you actually interact with that system, you realise how punitive it actually is; it's not a compassionate system, it's a disciplinary system, it's a system that keeps students in check. Disproportionately, it responds punitively and has this kind of mirage of compassion and openness, which kind of muddies the power imbalance; it kind of makes it seem like we're friends, we can have this friendly relationship. In reality, it's not that and when it's mask off, it's very mask off. It's very much, you're the student and you have to listen to me."

The more insidious version of an institutional response results in a palpable fear of change that results in passivity despite students' calls for and actions befitting activist change, as Raj explains:

> "There's a lot of fear in Oxford. There's a ton of fear. There's a ton of control, too, that the administration of the university, that college administration tries to impose on students. They try to get so heavily involved in student politics, because a lot of activisms happen through MCRs and JCRs in Oxford. And college is so afraid of that activism, and they're so afraid of saying anything. I've literally heard people say, 'I'm afraid.' I just wish, I don't know what it is, whether they're afraid because donors are contingent on their political neutrality, whatever it is. People always say, Oxford's an

> institution and it's been able to stand for 800 years plus because of its neutrality, like that's not true. Oxford has gone through serious social and political movements, and the buildings didn't crumble, and it was fine."

Here, Bhopal and Myers' (2023) designation of Oxford as an 'Ancient University' is useful to expose the contradiction at play: Oxford is afforded immense privileges due to its ancient, elite status — and as Raj notes, withstanding centuries of global political and social development — but it does not operationalise those privileges in meaningful enough ways to effect the large-scale changes possible with their power. This reveals an underlying challenge, where Oxford must reckon with its privilege and, in doing so, may be forced to recognise the inequities it perpetuates by remaining neutral. Lorde, writing about class privilege in queer communities, declared that "to use privilege requires admitting to privilege, requires moving beyond guilt and accusation into creative action. And of course, unused privilege becomes a weapon in the hands of our enemies" (1990). Participants noted that, thus far, Oxford has not exercised its authority to make a forceful statement on the war in Gaza, as Zayna observed:

> "I understand that they may not want to take a stance just to remain out of politics and things, because fundamentally they are an educational institution. But I also equally think that they do have a lot of sway. And that's really evident in how members of this university will do something like in the Union or in the SU, and it will make national news. So it's very clear that they have the ability to say something and people will listen … they definitely have the scope to be saying something and they're not, which is a bit frustrating. But then I do also understand that they'll probably come under heavy criticism, but if there's something to be heavily criticised for, it's a stance on wanting peace. I definitely feel like there's a way to go with Oxford where they need to be taking a firmer stance on things, even just internally, like sending out a message that's more than just, 'if you have an issue, talk to your welfare rep.'"

Zayna's final remark on how the university chooses to address the effects of geopolitical events on the student body is emblematic of its larger systemic attitude towards activism, which is to refer the problems back to students. The directive to 'talk to your welfare rep' is an instruction to speak to an elected student peer, which then absolves the university of the need to attend to welfare or wider political concerns stemming from demands for peace. Zhao also believed Oxford should adopt a firmer stance on urgent societal crises:

> "I think that like Oxford has the ability to address a lot of like the key issues that are, you know, really being tackled in the world like right now … I've come to the point in my life where I think there's a huge difference between politics and humanity. There are some things that are meant to be politicised, and there's some things that should be God-given human rights. The fact that like trans livelihoods are even something to be debated or politicized, to me says enough about like where Oxford is if they're willing to have, you know, a member of faculty that's outwardly and explicitly transphobic, which would explicitly also, you know, endanger and target a group of students and a group of people at Oxford, then I don't think Oxford is doing like nearly enough."

The example Zhao raised about transphobia at Oxford is especially relevant in the face of mounting transphobia nationwide, amplified after the UK Supreme Court ruled that the definition of 'sex' in the Equality Act referred to biological sex in the *For Women Scotland v The Scottish Ministers* case (Home Affairs Section, 2025).[81] Oxford has not been immune to the transphobia of so-called 'gender-critical feminists' whose campaigns have harmed the safety of trans and non-binary students, with the Vice-Chancellor admitting in her 2023 annual Oration that the university "should have done more to support them" (Tracey, 2023; see also Outram, 2023). Returning to Zhao's declaration that Oxford is not doing 'nearly enough' to protect trans students despite its outsized capacity to impact international discourse, it is evident that WoC students are dissatisfied with the status quo of the university. The current institutional environment of Oxford lends itself to a culture of recusal from matters outside the dreaming spires, which can be understood at best as maintaining neutrality and at worst, complicity in the normalisation of genocide. Throughout this chapter, I have highlighted the experiences of women of colour students navigating the emotional and physical terrains of Oxford and their negotiation of activism in a change-averse institution. Their demands for modernisation — that is, for the university to meaningfully support the creation and maintenance of safe spaces, tackle enduring cultures of classism, and streamline avenues for activism — demonstrate the innate knowledge and aptitude women of colour students possess for spearheading change.

[81] I acknowledge that anti-trans activism and 'gender-critical' activism are *also* forms of activism, whose organising power is widespread.

Chapter 7: Community, Solidarities, and Hopes

"I think my dream is that women of colour will get to go into spaces of higher education, not having to constantly think about the objectification they're automatically facing in this space. And my other dream is that they do not – no one ever has to waste any more time or words or paper or breath explaining why these people belong at universities like this … I wish less stories could be told in Oxford in which women of colour must identify with the sufferers. And I wish they had the ability to not have to continually think about their oppression and ongoing suffering at a university that should provide adequate support to its students, and especially women and women of colour."

– Micah, Postgraduate Student

This final analysis chapter seeks to answer the fourth research question: "How do women of colour build community and create meaning-making narratives at Oxford through student activism?" and its contents are the thesis's main contribution to university studies and feminist organising discourse. Returning to the titular keywords of 'collectives' and 'solidarity', I analyse how WoC students theorise hope within and beyond the structures of Oxford University, with a sub-focus on curricular developments. This chapter charts how WoC have responded with courage and tenacity in their activism, often despite the efforts of the university. I examine how they cultivate activist communities through coalition building, both with other WoC and other aligned groups, as well as their practice of a politics of solidarity in both local and global contexts. Ethnographic data is a key focus throughout this chapter, with the ethos and activities of FemSoc and WocSoc serving as exemplars of how women of colour and allies foster collectives of solidarity and empowerment at Oxford. I conclude that their hopes and desires for change extend far beyond the realm of the university, and I emphasise the value of learning from the lived experiences of women of colour to empower and support those living on the margins.

7.1 Hopes for the future

Hope is a generative tool in activism, with Freire writing that "the oppressed may learn that hope born in the creative unrest of the battle, will continue to have meaning when, and only when, it can in its own turn give birth to new struggles on other levels" (2021, 199). In tandem with Freire's notion of hope in practice, I posit that WoC students have (un)wittingly enacted a politics of refusal towards the university that facilitates the creation of

collectives 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). I align my understanding of an activist hope as *actionable* hope, where a hopeful perspective is a "form of doing otherwise, an everyday activism that is both practical and intellectual" (O'Shea et al., 2025, 706). To understand how WoC envisaged hope, I asked every participant the following question to conclude their interview: What is your hope for Oxford? Women of colour characterised their hopes for Oxford in three interlinked spheres of change: for future WoC students, for the University of Oxford as an institution, and their hopes for larger-scale, global change.

Hopes for future women of colour students at Oxford

A recurring hope articulated by women of colour was their desire to share collective experiences and to minimise pain for future WoC students, to better their experiences of belonging and community and create more natural facilitators of kinship. For Toni, this comes in the form of representation:

> "There's strength in numbers, and I believe that so much because like you said, just existing in this space, like the more of us there are, like the better is for future generations of women of colour who will be applying because it's like all these people have done it, like people that look like me have done it, so I could too, and I think that's just really important."

The power of representation extends beyond the admissions process to pursuing leadership roles whilst at university, tied together by the idea that WoC should not discount themselves from opportunities because of factors such as the impostor phenomenon, as Roma describes:

> "I just hope that women of colour in the future don't feel like they don't have a shot, or don't feel like they're not taken seriously, because as I said, I felt that way, but I had no reason to feel that way. It was really just a subconscious, unconscious bias thing. And it's so natural for people to feel that, especially women of colour and people of

colour. But I was JCR President last year, the JCR President before me was a woman of colour, the current one is a woman of colour, and that makes me feel so happy."

WoC emphasised the importance of embedding meaningful representations of women of colour and ensuring the availability and necessity of inclusive spaces. Maya argued that these efforts should be intrinsic to the culture of the university:

> "I want spaces that we can be diverse in that I didn't have to make myself. So, on that sort of level, I wish that my wishes for this role [RAEM representative] didn't have to be wishes for this role, simply because there would be enough people of colour or a more diverse community that this whole, I feel homesick because none of my culture is here, doesn't happen in the first place."

Hope is also realised on a small scale, with Jas saying that to be an activist imbued with hope, "even just joining WocSoc, or even just following them, or even just acknowledging that their presence and wanting better for them, I think maybe is enough." Recognition and acknowledgement can lead to further avenues of change, with Albertina commending its wider impacts, specifically speaking to other BAME or liberation representatives:

> "I hope with each new BAME rep and each college, you've done something, okay, the next person does more. Or even if all your steps are the same size, it's still going towards a greater progress."

The notion that WoC are building towards a more robust, long-term community of like-minded peers at Oxford also comes with exhortations on its potential pitfalls. Marie implores her fellow WoC to support rather than compete with one another:

> "For future women of colour at Oxford, I would say for one, unlearning this expectation of competition … not thinking that you have to really compete against especially women of colour to gain something or to beat them, or that there's only space for one of you in a certain area. I think also just creating a strong social community around women of colour can be very powerful."

As previous chapters have demonstrated, a "strong social community" is not guaranteed; instead, they are intentionally created. WoC have mobilised the knowledge borne

out of the struggles to create these communities of practice and refusal, with Micah asserting to future students the importance of rejecting imposterism and embracing self-assurance of their intelligence:

> "I think what I want to say most of all is – women of colour, you automatically usually already improve space just by being there. You are smart. There should be no need for imposter syndrome. You do not ever, ever have to prove yourself in any way, ever, ever. You did the application already. [Everyone else] is also 18, and you don't have to prove [yourself] to them. Everybody got in. Everybody got into Oxford, and you're good. And you should be here. And I'm really, I'm sorry, more than anything, that it is awful. No one deserves that. That's my point, because I don't want to be like, women of colour, you're amazing and beautiful. No, your experiences alone, just being in the room, it's enough. You're smart and you're good and you don't have to prove it."

A final example is Anna, who specified the need for a community for queer women of colour because of her distinct experiences of race, gender, and sexuality:

> "My hope is specifically for women of colour, queer women of colour, because I feel like there's not a lot of spaces where we can meet other people. There are lots of societies for specific nationalities, and there's ACS, but these spaces don't tend to be very queer-friendly. So, I hope that queer women of colour can feel safe and comfortable and not excluded when they come into the university."[82]

These hopes are largely localised to the individual, welfare-related experiences of women of colour students at Oxford; however, WoC also shared targeted hopes for how Oxford can transform as an institution to better serve future WoC students.

Hopes for the future of Oxford as an institution

In conveying their hopes for Oxford as an institution, the primary directive WoC had for the university was to practice harm reduction for women and people of colour, as they viewed the current state of the institution as inadequate in this area. Yamuna puts her demands succinctly: "Actual systematic change where women of colour are invited,

[82] There existed a student society for queer people of colour, The QPoc Project Oxford, but it has not been active since 2023. The Oxford LGBTQ+ Society has a private subgroup for queer people of colour named the Oxford QTIPOCS (Queer, Transgender, Intersex and People of Colour Society) (2025).

appreciated, and the community grows here." The need for Oxford to be *active* in its pursuit of belonging for all was echoed by Zhao, who said that Oxford "needs to take a more active rather than passive stance of uplifting and encouraging, like racialised and women of colour, like scholars and students, to feel like they have a place in the school." Both Yamuna and Zhao gesture towards the insufficiencies of Oxford's institutional policies on diversity, whose 'passive' stances do not facilitate the 'actual systemic change' required of true EDI initiatives that benefit students of colour. Similarly, Habiba called on the university to evaluate their internal policies to better champion marginalised students instead of 'cashing in' on hollow gestures of solidarity:

> "My hope is that change in Oxford starts inwards, where college acknowledges how its executives are set up, where its money goes, how it sets up colleges and the internal structures of colleges, and only then do you earn the right to fly a trans flag, or to fly a Black History Month flag. These are not sides you can easily take. These are not symbols and movements that should be taken lightly. You don't get to cash in on solidarity. You have to show up, you have to be there, and then I will thank you and be so grateful."

WoC also had hopes in addition to transforming the university's approach to EDI that spoke to larger questions around the legitimacy of institutions themselves, as Carmen mused:

> "I definitely do have hope for [Oxford], and I think that comes into the whole complex thing around whether we disavow these institutions completely or to what extent we identify with them. There's definitely people who I'm sure you've spoken to who are like, 'Jesus Christ, I don't give a shit', you know? For me, I definitely do think there's real potential here, but there's a whole lot of change that has to happen."

Carmen's indication of the 'potential' for change is notable when contrasted to Ming's views, who described Oxford's foundation as 'rotten' and inextricable from its present. WoC participants did not have a universal detest of, nor praise for, the university; the plurality of their differing perspectives on hope demonstrates its expansive possibilities. Ming also expressed her hopes in the context of Oxford's institutional standing:

> "Obviously, I would hope that women of colour feel more comfortable to be in these spaces, but just fundamentally, I think the end goal would be that Oxford wouldn't have its reputation that it has, and it wouldn't be seen on a pedestal. It would just be

any other university, and I would want any woman of colour to feel comfortable in any other higher education setting. I think that's what the goal should be to do, to take Oxford down a peg or two, all the pegs, and equalise higher education."

Notably, Carmen and Ming were the only two alumnae I interviewed, and they discussed their hopes in much broader terms compared to current students. This could be because of the physical and emotional distance they have cultivated since graduating from Oxford, whereas current students remain embroiled in the day-to-day effects of university policies and practices. Yet WoC participants remain keenly aware of how their hopes for the university can be augmented to hopes for global justice.

Hopes for the world

In expressing their hopes for the world, it indicates that WoC are conscious of and believe that change is bigger than Oxford University. They tied these hopes back to the institution to highlight Oxford's influence and therefore its obligation to participate in movements for change, as Ruby asserted:

> "I guess my hopes aren't specific to Oxford, but much more to the world. I think we genuinely need an upheaval of the moral fabric of the entire world. That sounds dramatic, but we do. I just think any small, little change here and there that isn't accompanied in the process of that will never truly be equal. I don't think we'll see it in my lifetime, but I think we can see movements towards it in my lifetime. I guess my hope for Oxford is for it to be an active part of that."

Zhao similarly viewed her hopes for Oxford in tandem with the need for societal transformation to reduce inequality, foregrounding her strength in her identity as a woman of colour and an activist, which may have been better defined as an older, postgraduate student:

> "I think my hopes for Oxford are my hopes for the world … I think what I want for Oxford is that future women of colour go to Oxford, and they don't inherit difficulty, then they don't have this difficulty of moving through life. There's this idea of like people that are the most privileged move through life with ease. They don't come up upon a lot of barriers or things that slow them down, and I think that being a woman of colour and going to Oxford, you have a lot of drag. You can't necessarily move

through spaces with ease, and I would love if Oxford celebrated women of colour more."

As Zhao and others have stated, the present experience of WoC students at Oxford is one that requires them to "inherit difficulty" at the university, however briefly. Casting a generational outlook on hope and progress is a perspective adopted by Emily in her assessment of Oxford:

> "As for institutions like this, I don't know, I feel like there's something very deeply enduring about them, and I'm sure, I can tell from the way lecturers on our course speak that the Oxford they see today is a much more hopeful one than the one they perhaps studied in 30 or 40 years ago. So, I can only hope it continues in that direction, but I do think it's quite good to grate against the system, and I do think it's good to be in a place where there is some friction and disagreement, because it means you think more deeply about the values you hold and how you'd like to effect change. For me, I guess what I'm saying is that over time, with a lot of people's hard work, institutions like this can change, but it's not necessarily where I think institutional change needs to be focused."

Once again, WoC declare that change can and should move beyond the confines of the University of Oxford, which can include leveraging institutional resources and reputation in service of the systemic change they view as necessary to improve the global state of affairs. I end with a quote from Phoebe, who spoke about her time organising with the Oxford Action for Palestine encampment:

> "It's not that I don't have goals, but I don't necessarily have hopes for this [specific encampment]. I don't feel like if these things are not met, I will be disappointed, because at the end of the day, I have so much to show for my time here. This encampment has so much to show for their time here. This will never be a failure. It will never not reach something, if that makes sense."

Phoebe's experience illustrates the impact of student activism and how her and others' thinking extends to more long-term, collective efforts of global solidarity outside of Oxford. Olufemi recounts how WoC at Cambridge rooted their understandings of hope in distinct ways: "Anti-racist feminist work is the work of those who understand hope not as an abstract feeling of expectation, but as a foundational belief that another world is possible" (2019,

220). Phoebe's experience parallels this belief, and she ends her anecdote by paraphrasing a quote on power:

> "We don't do this to speak truth to power, which will not listen to us, but we actually do it to speak the truth to each other. I think about that a lot. Obviously, I'm incredibly looking forward to the fact that we have a negotiation with [the Vice-Chancellor]. I say we; I mean collective we. At the end of the day, it was just a success because we were able to reach so many people, we were able to touch so many lives, and build this deep community support."[83]

Phoebe's anticipation about a meeting with the VC reveals the need for engagement with institutional forces in order to progress activist goals. Moreover, the temporal realities of the encampment exemplify the possibilities of activist organising at Oxford: it allows WoC and other marginalised communities to feel and enact hopes for the future that will outlast their time at the institution. On hope, Ahmed writes: "One does not hope alone, but for others, whose pain one does not feel, but whose pain becomes a thread in the weave of the present, touched as it is by all that could be" (2014, 188). Women of colour engage with hope on multiple scales of change, envisioning hopes for transformative change at the community, institutional, and global levels in solidarity with their peers on the margins.

7.2 Curricular transformation

Numerous participants raised gaps within their curricula as a central issue for Oxford to address; this was a topic organically raised by WoC as a notable concern in their degrees. There are longstanding calls to decolonise the curriculum, particularly in HE, that strive to move beyond mere inclusion of works by underrepresented scholars and embrace new knowledge practices through critically designed reading lists and coursework (Arshad et al., 2021).[84] Organising to decolonise the curriculum has primarily been focused on embedding anti-racism principles in academia, which saw a surge after the global uprisings against police brutality and anti-Black racism in 2020. A report on decolonisation in UK universities, published by the Higher Education Policy Institute, argued that "decolonising holds the

[83] It is unclear whether this negotiation actually took place – neither OA4P nor the university has issued a statement regarding the state of negotiations to date.
[84] See also Begum & Saini, 2019; Mogstad & Tse, 2018; Moosavi, 2023; Esson, 2020; Jivraj, 2020, and Sheoran Appleton, 2019.

potential to revamp tired courses, inspire disillusioned staff and equip students with the knowledge they need to face the modern world" (Liyanage, 2020, 58).[85] At Oxford, efforts to decolonise the curriculum span a broad range of disciplines and colleges, including those published by the Faculty of English (2020), Experimental Psychology (2020), Balliol College (2020), and resources from the Bodleian Library subject guides (2020). However, it is unclear whether these initiatives were sustained beyond the short-term focus on anti-racism garnered in 2020; at the time, other UK universities offered comparable measures to do the same as part of their strategic plans and established communities of practice.[86] The unique nature of Oxford's teaching system at the undergraduate level, where teaching primarily occurs in individual colleges by tutors with varying subject expertise in addition to faculty lectures, results in significant challenges to enact sweeping changes to curricula. Women of colour identified three noteworthy elements of their academic experiences in relation to curricular transformation: first, the dearth of faculty of colour; second, the need for a non-Eurocentric curriculum; and third, the epistemic injustices observed by postgraduate research participants.

Faculty and teaching representation

The racial and gender imbalances of British HE teaching and research faculty have been repeatedly stated and researched, most notably through data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency reporting only 70 Black female professors in the UK as of 2023 (2025; see also Arday, 2022). The Women in Higher Education Network (WHEN) has run the '100 Black Women Professors NOW' campaign since 2018, when there were only 25 Black women professors in the UK, compared to 12,500 white men (WHEN, 2025).[87] At Oxford, the demographics of teaching staff are only published at the university level; there is no widely available data on the makeup of individual college staff. The lack of faculty of colour is palpable for WoC students across disciplines and degree levels, and many expressed a desire to see more women and people of colour in teaching and leadership roles at Oxford. Albertina, a history student, raised this issue when asked about her hopes for the future and pointed out the need for safe intellectual spaces:

> "I think the way that racism [has] impacted this institution is on so many different levels, that not only do you need to create environments where students of colour feel

[85] See also a case study of decolonisation conducted at King's College London that argued decolonising HE should be viewed through a human rights framework (Tamimi et al., 2024).
[86] See initiatives by the Universities of Leeds, Glasgow, Lincoln, Durham, Manchester Metropolitan, Liverpool John Moores, Keele, Exeter, and South Wales in the reference list.
[87] Essilfie-Quaye et al. (2025) found that in STEM, only 0.6 professors are Black in UK HE.

> comfortable, it's curriculum where they feel reflected in. It's tutors, like I haven't been tutored by a single tutor of colour. Maybe there's been a lecturer or two I've had over my year and a bit here that might have been a person of colour, but there's just so many things they need to do."

Yamuna has been tutored by women of colour in her English degree, but is conscious of how faculty from marginalised backgrounds become tokenised at the institution:

> "I'd like to see more professors, really, who are women who identify as an ethnic religious minority. I'm grateful that I have my tutor, but I'd like to see many more. I'm always rooting for them in my lectures because I feel like they are a token there as well. If they mess up, they mess up for all of us, and that's a lot of pressure to put on a person. I feel like it's so nice that in my group, I'm not the only ethnic religious minority, I don't feel like a minority. I feel like I'm part of a group, and that feels great because I get to develop a personality beyond one, being an ethnic religious minority."

The women of colour in STEM I interviewed also remarked on the lack of diversity in their respective faculties.[88] Anmol, a material sciences student, noticed the differences between the gender makeup of students versus lecturers in her course:

> "As someone who does a STEM subject in a field conventionally dominated by men, my year is surprisingly many more women and non-binary people, but a lot of other years, especially in subjects like engineering, is so male-dominated. It's really hard to find your people. Most of the lecturers are men. The head of the Materials department is a woman, though. It's really important because sometimes, people don't think that this stuff matters, but it actually does matter."

It is important to note that the virtues of mere representation have been criticised in the context of EDI policies, where choosing someone from a marginalised community for a leadership role solely for representation is insufficient (Esposito, 2023).[89] For example, the current Vice-Chancellor of Oxford and her predecessor are both women who held high-ranking roles, even before their installation as VC, yet have been roundly criticised by student

[88] See 3.8 for literature on the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields.
[89] This is also an issue even in intersectional feminist circles, as the journal *feminist review* received criticism from women of colour in its Collective about the 'Crisis of Care' that occurred during the pandemic (Feminist Review Collective, 2020).

activists and staff allies throughout their tenures for their resistance to activist demands (Le, 2024; Balonwu, 2024; Jewish Voice for Liberation, 2024; Dimitrova, 2025; Oxford UCU, 2024).[90] Moreover, these issues recur at the postgraduate level. Emily, a master's student in an interdisciplinary humanities course, shared her and her peers' frustrations with their reading list:

> "I think there was an observation early on that people felt like the reading list was quite dated, and also that there were many, many white scholars and the scholarship of people of colour or people from the Global South or people who had non-Western-centred experiences weren't really being prioritised, and it had been an expectation. I think on top of that, the fact that all of our teaching staff this year are white, felt really complicated. But I think it was lucky that we have had what feels in my experience to be like a strangely, unusually receptive set of conveners who really seem to be living their feminist values. Coming to them with suggestions has always been very easy, but them following through incredibly swiftly has also been one of the real joys of being on the program."

Here, Emily remarks on the criticality of having supportive faculty who actively listen to student feedback as white allies in positions of power, whose responses illustrate possible institutional reforms that could occur by listening to student voices. In the process of raising their concerns, Emily and her coursemates have participated in what Ahmed calls feminist complaint (2021) as a form of reparation in these quotes against the lack of representation in teaching staff. Finally, Phoebe offers her thoughts on representation as a master's student in the Faculty of Law:

> "My hope for women of colour is to understand that like of course, I think the classroom should be a place that is more inclusive, both in terms of racial and gender representation. We talked about the fact that people of colour, women of colour, are vastly underrepresented here, including in my department, so of course I think that they should be hiring more women of colour generally. But also, to understand that I don't know that the classroom will always be a place that will be welcoming for women of colour."

[90] Former VC Louise Richardson, the first female VC in Oxford's history, was criticised throughout her tenure for her views and responses to the Rhodes Must Fall movement – see Coughlan, 2020; Rao, 2020, Allnutt & Holden, 2016.

There is no easy consensus on how to ensure that the representation of marginalised communities in the ranks of HE teaching faculty is fair and meaningful, rather than as reactive stopgap measures to quell claims of racism and sexism in academia. The repercussions of not having women of colour faculty in place can result not only in WoC feeling unrepresented in their classrooms, but also in their learning of standardised Eurocentric course content at Oxford.

Curricular representation

The lack of collective knowledge around critical histories of race and colonialism is most prominent for students of the humanities and social sciences, who constituted a majority of my participants. Anna, a PPE student, searches independently for scholarship relevant to her research interests:

> "I don't know if they have to, but there's always at least one reading that's written by a woman, and at least one reading that's written by a person of colour. But nothing is ever critical enough, so I always find that I'm either asking tutors for some suggestions and then they can't give them to me, or I have to go out and find them myself ... I'm doing international relations right now, and they won't add anything about colonialism, so I have to go and do my own research on top of everything else that's suggested."

The additional research conducted by Anna in her own time is yet another example of the manifold labours women of colour perform in order to affirm their identities, in this instance through their academic pursuits. Gabriella shared her similar experience in studying history:

> "As someone who is really passionate about Black history, African history, global history, imperial history, and sometimes having to go out of my way to study those things that I enjoy in a place where you can never second guess that you're going to find a book on the Reformation, or Edward the something, or the Victorians, your bog-standard British history. I think that's made my relationship very love-hate. When I'm doing papers I love, I love it. When I'm not doing papers I love, it's like why am I doing this, I don't care about this. I think that's the academic side."

Toni's experience is analogous to that of Gabriella and Anna, and she commented on the tokenisation she perceives in her English curriculum when it only includes select authors for select weeks:

> "I just feel like when it's one week's reading that centres all these voices of colour is a bit like — it feels like they're saying, 'oh, yeah, we've thrown this in, like, don't worry, it's there', but it is just one week's worth of reading. So, I don't know. There's definitely more that can be done."

Anna, Gabriella, and Toni all identified as Black women who felt that their experiences were not adequately represented in their academic work, which reflects Sobande's (2019) argument that the inclusion of Black feminist thought can support students' intellectual growth, informed by their lived experiences. Similarly, from the perspective of an alumna, Carmen realised that her expectations for curricula were not reflected in the realities of the Faculty of History:

> "I also came – and this sounds very naive now – but I definitely came thinking well, I'm going to get to learn the history of why I exist. I'm gonna get to learn about empire, learn about all these things that I didn't get to learn at school, and then very quickly realised that this was not the case at all, and this wasn't the kind of history that the university was interested in teaching, or even acknowledging."

Holly had more encouraging interactions with her curriculum but recognised that it was not a universal experience in comparison to her peers completing other degrees:

> "I do Economics and Management – the teaching for that, it's very new. The syllabus is not as problematic as, for example, PPE or History. I think for those, it's a lot more close-minded, whereas for management, they're constantly updating it. My tutors have referenced my background before, but I've never felt it in a way that they've been uncomfortable about it or anything like that. They're adding it to the conversation, which I've actually found quite nice, because they're acknowledging it, they're not completely ignoring it, or they're not uncomfortable by it, they're acknowledging it."

The benefits of bringing identity into the classroom were also echoed by Yamuna, who said that her peers doing so is "enlightening and it builds me up as a better intellectual" to

learn about others' religions and cultures. Likewise, Roma felt seen when she read books by authors with the same background in her geography course:

> "If I have to read a book by an Indian author, that makes me feel really good, and I hope that other subjects do that, and that is just something that gets slowly more and more adopted throughout the years. So that people of colour feel more represented not only in their experience, but also through their education while they're here, which is the main thing."

Due to the decentralised nature of teaching, especially at the undergraduate level, the complexities of decolonising the curriculum are manifold at Oxford. WoC students faced epistemic injustices in their attempts to conduct research outside of the Eurocentric norm, and the lack of institutional support for their scholarship. The responsibility lies upon the institution's various levels of instruction to proactively pursue the decolonisation of any standardised (such as Faculty-wide) curricula, and further train lecturers and tutors who design new curricula to ensure meaningful representation from non-Western intellectuals and histories for WoC and other marginalised students who wish to incorporate their personal interests in their degrees.

Epistemic (in)justices

Epistemic oppression was first theorised by Fricker (1999) to highlight how "the powerful are likely to have a peculiar epistemic advantage of a kind which means that the powerless are epistemically oppressed" (208) in their collective social and intellectual knowledges. In an educational context, Dunne and Kotsonis (2023) build on Fricker's (2007) later theory of epistemic injustice to analyse how epistemic exploitation harms oppressed people who face "oppressive double-binds, triggered by unsolicited requests to educate their oppressors" (344).[91] For WoC scholars at Oxford, especially at the postgraduate level, where one proposes their own avenue of independent research, there is an expectation to justify why their work on non-Eurocentric subjects is a valid area of inquiry, as Micah's anecdote points out later in this section. The result is a form of academic imperialism, where the boundaries of research and knowledge production are limited to Western thought and histories that then delimit the possibilities of WoC and other marginalised scholars (Chilisa, 2019). The

[91] See also Madhok's (2024; 2025) work on anti-imperial epistemic justice.

structural whiteness upon which Oxford is constructed shapes the academic experiences of women of colour. Toni, an undergraduate student in English, articulated the burdens associated with the additional labour required to defend the validity of their race and gender-related interests:

> "I wrote an essay recently where I kind of called out the English degree at Oxford, saying that one of the papers specifically is very much focused on like the white male voice. So, like the canon is just based on that and my tutor didn't really like it, like he was a little bit on the defensive side. He's just saying that they've been working so hard as a department to decolonise the curriculum, and because there's no set reading list, obviously it's hard to make definitive statements, but many, many provisional reading lists do centre this image of the canon, like it is based on the white man, like their voice. I feel like when you wanna study something that is to do with like race or gender, it's like most of the time something you have to seek out yourself."

The defensiveness of Toni's tutor to her essay, on both topic and content, exemplifies the epistemic barriers that remain for WoC in academia. Toni further recounted the invalidation she felt from this tutor and alludes to feeling disempowered in her course as a woman of colour:

> "I do like respect what he's saying because I know this is a paper that he has taught so many times, but I feel like when a student is saying that this is how I feel, this is how the degree feels to us. I don't know, it feels a bit defensive or unprogressive, if that's a word. But to sort of say that's [her argument was] invalid, I don't know … I think it's more with my actual degree, like when I'm in a class, and there's only one other person of colour in my class, and it feels like I do kind of have to work a little bit harder to, like, make sure my voice is heard and to get my point across."

Parallel epistemic injustices occur at the postgraduate level. Micah, a master's student in the history faculty, describes the toll such defences take on women of colour researchers:

> "It was really like consuming my thoughts in the UK, and it reminded me of this thing that really bothers me about any writing, but specifically writing historical writing or trying to write about marginalised histories where I'm like everybody has the same word count or whatever. And some of us have to waste time explaining why we think like women are important and why we think, like their history or the history of people

> who aren't white, is important. And those guys studying 14th–century kite making never have to do that, and that just bleeds into your life, where I'm like, there are people who just truly never think about it. They never. If we all get the same amount of years, the amount of years and time that I've had to spend thinking about things like this and worrying about things like this, like racism, like its prevalence, like kind of the isolating, the purposefully isolating nature of experiencing the microaggressions of racism that are deeply rooted in a nation."

The concept of epistemic exploitation is relevant to Micah's point, as the process of explanation and justification of research interests outside the Eurocentric norm can be considered a form of exploitation that understands oppression as "'their problem to fix', 'your truth to prove'" (Dunne & Kotsonis, 2023, 347), among other adages. Zhao, a master's student in an interdisciplinary humanities course, also addresses the insufficient support for WoC scholars to thrive at Oxford:

> "I think that like my hope for Oxford is just that like the academic pursuit and the intellectual development of women of colour students is encouraged and like supported just as much as like white cis men's education has always been because I think it does hold like so much potential to be a place where you can really flourish like intellectually."

Once again, whiteness as a tenet of Oxford's operations permeates the experiences of its women of colour students. For the WoC participants quoted here, the institution has always supported 'white cis men's education', and yet it fails to champion their students who contend with racialisation, gender, and other factors of oppression as inseparable parts of their lives. The vestiges of Oxford's colonial and imperial legacies remain in numerous sections of the university's academic constitution, including the foregrounding of Eurocentric curricula in subjects like History. I end this section with Spivak's (2016) response when asked what role the curriculum plays: "Not much … It is the *method* of teaching/reaching that is important — an uncoercive re-arrangement of desires — reaching the cognitively damaged epistemic instrument" (27, emphasis in original).

7.3 The value of women of colour-only spaces

As part of nurturing collectives of solidarity, WoC stressed the value of having dedicated spaces intended solely for fellow women of colour to commune, learn, and

socialise with one another. While 6.1 addressed 'safe' spaces at Oxford in a broad sense, this section focuses on why women of colour students prioritise creating and attending WoC-only spaces to cultivate solidarity and kinship through shared collective experiences. Sebatindira (2019, 110) explains why WoC-only spaces are necessary:

> "With regard to allies, while their support is genuinely appreciated, their presence within a safe space can be counter-productive, particularly for women who seek out safe spaces not for political reasons but simply to find solidarity with women with similar backgrounds to their own. Even the best ally won't share the lived experiences of a woman of colour and safe spaces cease to be safe once you continuously have to explain your experiences and justify your emotional reactions to others."

Numerous participants concurred with Sebatindira's argument, including Anna, who disclosed that her friendship group is mostly comprised of other women of colour:

> "I think we're just providing the space for people to discuss things that they will be uncomfortable discussing with their friends, and I found this very interesting. I'm a person who always — I gravitate towards being friends with women of colour only, which I find interesting. I was talking to people in one of the discussion events that we put on, and they were saying that sometimes with their white friends, they just don't discuss things about their identity, which I find so interesting. I don't know how you can not discuss your identity with your friends. So yeah, I think providing that space is activism."

Anna reaffirms the idea that engendering WoC-only spaces is a legitimate form of activism, especially when WoC feel safe to confide and converse about their identities; though, as Tundra adds, safety is not always guaranteed:

> "[It's] so important [to have those spaces]. Especially because of things like having a conscious awareness of intersections and stuff, if I hadn't done [a] Feminist Theory [module], I'm sure I would've come across it at some point, but again, if you can start these conversations earlier just by creating spaces where you can debate and discuss and educate each other, I think that's really powerful. But also again on the flip side, sort of a space to destress and feel safe around people that are like you. It's not a guarantee, you might not always feel kinship or a likeness with other people just

because they're people of colour, but even creating the opportunity for the ones that do appreciate and can take advantage of it, I think that would be really useful."

Like Tundra said, kinship is not automatically present simply because other women of colour are in the room, but Jas reasons why WoC-only spaces like the Women of Colour Society (WocSoc) are assumed to be safe:

> "I think it is really important that you have those like women of colour only spaces, because I mean, while I can't guarantee that other people aren't going to be like that, I can guarantee that I'm not gonna be like that. And I'm not gonna allow anyone into this space, at least for as long as I'm in it, that I'm not gonna allow people like that in here, and people who agree with that kind of behaviour. I think it's important that women know that there is somewhere they can turn to."

WoC-only spaces are distinct from groups designed for people of colour from specific ethnic or cultural backgrounds, like the Oxford African-Caribbean Society (ACS). Charlie, an ACS committee member, expounded on why she attaches importance to women of colour spaces:

> "I love ACS a lot, but I think having those women of colour spaces, it's good to have that collective group cause I think there are a lot of shared experience with being a woman and of colour. There are certain things and privileges you might not be able to encounter because you are a woman, and it just worsens because you're a woman of colour. So I think it's good to not differentiate, but have those opportunities within those groups being there, to kind of like, I don't know, just have some fun with some other people that have shared experiences to you."

The ease of socialisation with other women of colour accompanies a sense of relief because WoC do not have to be the spokesperson for their race; Charlie called it a "breathing space where I'm not very aware of being Black or being a woman," and she can just be herself. When juxtaposed against other Oxford spaces, Charlie's comments indicate that the normative Oxford environment is not one where she or other WoC feel an innate sense of emotional security. There is also the opportunity to intentionally design spaces to uplift women of colour, even in groups that are not exclusive to WoC. For example, in Gabriella's year of co-leading ACS, the committee was comprised entirely of women of colour. She reflected on its significance:

> "I don't think we understood the magnitude of that. The fact that we were all women, yes, we were all of Afro-Caribbean descent, but we were all of different demographics … We [showed] people that there's not a monolith to being Black or African Caribbean, or a person of colour. We come in all different ways, and have all different types of experiences, come from different types of schools, so yeah, I'm really, really grateful. It was like a sisterhood within a bigger brotherhood, sisterhood community, if that makes sense, and being able to support one another, uplift one another, give each other space when we needed to."

Creating a sisterhood of women of colour within a space like ACS, dedicated to cultivating community for Black and African-Caribbean students, is another way in which WoC are reimagining what safe spaces are in Oxford. Furthermore, Freya asserted that WoC should be able to feel safe to express themselves in all spaces, but qualified it as an "airy-fairy" aspiration:

> "This is such an airy-fairy one to say, but like just not having spaces that are just marginalised spaces. Where women of colour can speak, they are made for women of colour. We should be able to speak in broader spaces, you know, like it should be without these allowances or like these sectioning offs. We should just be allowed to speak in general, you know."

The Oxford Women of Colour Society, one of my ethnographic sites, is a prime example of how WoC students find and sustain collectives of solidarity through their shared identities as women of colour. I interviewed one of the founders of WocSoc and several committee members from 23/24.[92] Jas, one of the founders, recalled the process of creating the society:[2]

> "We found that we were sort of looking through the different committees, and we were like, oh, they're all men. And yeah, it was kind of just coming out of frustration like, where are all the societies led by women apart from, like, FemSoc? And we were like, we want something a bit more cultural as well. I guess just out of the idea that there was no WocSoc."

[92] As they are part of the wider participant cohort, their contributions are pseudonymised and appear in other chapters, ex. Jas is the pseudonym chosen by the participant and is used here as well as any interview quotes.

As introduced in 3.4, WocSoc primarily functions as a welfare and events society for women of colour students. The decision to prioritise welfare for WoC as a tenet of the society from its beginnings was intentional, as Jas described:

> "I have found that sometimes I go to events — and this is not like strictly a cultural society thing, but I think committees that are men-led are sort of going to have this like, man-centred kind of, you know, like welfare and stuff. Maybe if the welfare committee's all men, there's something about that's maybe not so comforting to some women."

Though Jas came to recognise her work founding WocSoc as a form of activism, she did not characterise the society itself as an activist organisation, especially in contrast to the Oxford Feminist Society:

> "FemSoc's really nice, but I think FemSoc is much more activist-y, and I think the events that I have been to are all like, debates, and I've really enjoyed them, but sometimes people just need a space to unwind. And I think that's why I maybe don't view WocSoc as activism because I sort of saw it as … like activism is great, and I love debating, and I love listening to people's ideas but sometimes, like after a long day, I just want to have, like mindless chit chat and I don't want it to be so … sometimes I don't want the real world to penetrate, and for it to be like, you know, for us to be talking about really deep things about like, racism. And of course, those things are important and we should talk about them, but sometimes people just want a space to just feel comfortable, and if I can offer that to them, then that's enough for me."

Whilst FemSoc is a majority-women space, it is not a WoC-exclusive space. Jas elucidates a vital component of WoC-only spaces, that it is *enough* to be in those spaces, and as Charlie said, one's identity as a woman of colour is not the sole focus. WocSoc demonstrates that while nurturing a space for racialised women is imperative, it does not necessarily prescribe it as a place to *only* discuss race. As Jas emphasised, it can be tiring to constantly think about oppression, and Gorski (2019) argues that this can be a direct link to student activist burnout. Holly, who served as President, similarly denoted WocSoc as a welcoming, informal space:

> "With the Women of Colour Society, the stuff that we're trying to do, it's more so creating an environment that people feel welcome in rather than getting involved in writing letters to people or things like that, which I think makes it a lot easier to keep up with and less intimidating for people to join, which I think is great … It's been very chill because we're not a career society or anything, there's not really an expectation to be doing crazy things. It's very much that people just like having a space, less pressure that comes with that."

Though WocSoc is not billed as an activist group, the society issued the following statement in response to the far-right riots in the summer of 2024: "In light of the abhorrent far-right riots in the UK, as members of WOCSOC, we would like to firmly express our support and solidarity to anybody in our community affected by these events, and strongly condemn all forms of racism, Islamophobia and hate" (WocSoc, 2024). The society became more politically engaged in 2024 when it hosted a charity fundraiser supporting Medical Aid for Palestinians and the Mary Dinah Foundation, which provides emergency food and water relief, as well as aid for women and children (WocSoc, 2024).

The sense of safety, bolstered by an affective register that does not reproduce the "time and space of estrangement through the operation of racial affective economies" (Tate, 2014, 2482), profuse in normative Oxford spaces, is further enforced because women of colour feel they do not have to caveat their lived experiences or explain facets of their identities to non-WoC. The potential of racism and sexism manifesting in WoC-only spaces is greatly minimised because it is plainly not tolerated, as Holly explained:

> "I wouldn't be against having [WocSoc] events where it's not just women of colour, I think the fact that it's organised by a society that acts to create a space for women of colour means that at the baseline level, it's already a place that's welcoming. There's an implication that any abuse or racist or sexist things won't be accepted in that space. I think even if it wasn't just women of colour, it wouldn't be an unsafe space because people coming there know that that won't be tolerated at all, whereas in other societies, that's not a given. It's something that more needs to be said explicitly."

In my ethnographic interactions with WocSoc, Holly's goals for the society were repeatedly realised, even if they arose from moments of shock, as I will recount in my experience of volunteering at the WocSoc Fresher's Fair stall. I conclude this section with my

analysis of the two WocSoc events I attended: first, a discussion on parental expectations, which I co-chaired with Holly; second, my volunteer shift at the WocSoc Fresher's Fair stall with another committee member.

I. "When you don't have it, you're starved of it": WocSoc Parental Expectations Discussion

On a warm, spring afternoon in Trinity term, I sat on the mowed lawns in one of the quads of Jesus College — only in Trinity term do (most) Oxford colleges allow their students to step on the grass. In a circle around me were a dozen students, all of whom were women of colour and here for the WocSoc discussion event on parental expectations, which I was due to chair with the President of the society. There were familiar faces from my participant interviews; of course, Holly (the WocSoc President), a member of the committee (Lucy), and Nancy, whose interview was especially memorable in the way we swapped stories about our East Asian backgrounds. Holly began the conversation by encouraging attendees to share their stories or just to listen, and I was very aware of being the oldest person there as a postgraduate student compared to the undergraduates at the event. I started by recounting the pressures I faced in childhood from my parents to achieve, excel in school, and the palpable fear of failure I felt in certain subjects like maths. People nodded in agreement as the conversation began to flow. There was an implicit understanding of the 'strict Asian parent' stereotype, which could be applied to other cultural backgrounds, that WoC recognised straightaway from my anecdote. The conversation quickly turned to Oxford, and both Holly and Lucy shared they felt pressure from not only their nuclear family but their wider cultural community of aunties and uncles to succeed, and for whom the pinnacle of success equalled an Oxbridge education. Yet even as they made it to 'the best' university, WoC still felt pressure to be the best *of* the best, as one attendee said her mum "can't come to terms with mediocrity." This elicited a laugh and some knowing nods from the other attendees as we continued telling stories, talking about the guilt that comes with having immigrant parents and recognising their sacrifices, and the expectation to repay them through achieving perfection. I felt the compassion exuding from the group as WoC shared struggles of being raised by single mothers, one student's pride of her Afghan heritage, and the ease that came with not having to over-explain your identity, an experience rarely found at Oxford.

The discussion shifted towards how our parents expressed love, or lack thereof. The vulnerability associated with such frank conversations was evident, but I did not feel

discomfort at sharing the details of my upbringing with the group. There was an unspoken comprehension of the stereotypical ways in which our parents communicated affection and a collective acknowledgement that, as Nancy put it, "when you don't have it, you're starved of it." WoC then mused about how they would raise their children differently, with an emotional clarity and nuance that I certainly did not possess as a twenty-year-old. After around forty minutes, we finished the discussion by talking about the pressures of dating within or outside of our cultural backgrounds, a discussion I had never dared broach with my parents or my peers as an undergraduate student. I admired the frankness of the attendees to express their desires; one WoC immediately said that she wanted to be with someone who, like her, had Ghanian or West African heritage because she did not want to have to explain her culture to her partner. The Afghan student shared her family's antagonism towards her desire to marry a non-Afghan man, with attendees sighing in collective exasperation when the student revealed that someone had called her 'whitewashed' as a result.

Unlike myself, most of the attendees were born and raised in the UK, and thus had a different set of cultural expectations placed upon them as second or third-generation immigrants growing up in proximity to whiteness in Britain compared to my experience in North America. Lucy described the 'ideal man' she and her peers envisioned as a child, and it was always a tall, white man. When I confessed that growing up, I always wanted to be closer to whiteness and, in a way, be white, everyone in the group agreed. The desire for proximity to whiteness was a global phenomenon. Yet this admission did not have to be caveated with an additional explanation of how today, I do take immense pride in my cultural background and identity — this was already understood. Lucy's final thought was a fitting end to the conversation: whiteness remains considered a prize, which of course, is flawed logic, but she ends up marrying a white man; does she then win? None of us had an answer, but the provocation itself was an example of how a rhetorical question that could be controversial in a different setting was instead received with a mix of humour and sadness amongst our group of women of colour. I ended by emphasising how much hope I felt throughout this event, and again, cognisant of the age gap between myself and the participants and the potential weight they could put on my opinions (as many WoC did in the interviews), said I was proud of them. While parental and cultural expectations exist, we can forge our own chosen families and paths.

Upon reflection on the event, it was not the topics of discussion nor the commonality of our experiences that surprised me, but the intimacy of our shared vocabularies. Even as we sat in the centre of an Oxford college, in the heart of the city, with scores of other students passing and chatting around us, the conversation felt like a haven. For me, this was a pure display of what a true 'safe space' could look like at Oxford. While passersby would glance at us as they, too, enjoyed the spoils of a sunny Oxford day towards the end of term time, the attention of the group was always dedicated to the speaker. Here, the possibility of being cut off by your coursemate or tutor was non-existent. We listened, commiserated, and laughed; two attendees stayed the entire time and just listened. Their silence was not questioned; their presence was enough. It was this event that allowed me to feel 'pleasure activism' (brown, 2019) in practice, in community with women of colour who, in this moment, had nothing to prove.

II. "Is it just for girls?": WocSoc Fresher's Fair Stall

My volunteer shift at the WocSoc Fresher's Fair stall was one of the most striking encounters of my entire doctoral journey (the other being the incident I recounted in 6.2). The Fresher's Fair, organised by the Oxford SU, is an annual, hectic two-day event held at the Examination Schools on the High Street, a building that participants like Ella identified as one of the most 'Oxford-like' structures in the city. This means traditional architecture, sweeping ceilings, and many, many oil paintings of (white) men adorning the hallways. For two days, the Exam Schools transforms into a colossal student society fair, meant to introduce and induct new students into the countless groups, sports, academic clubs, and other activities available at Oxford. The Fresher's Fair includes a slew of corporate sponsors giving out student discounts, societies luring students to their booths with the promise of free food, and endless invites to join a new mailing list. Student IDs are checked at the door, and from there, hordes of attendees snake through the two floors of the venue that they must traverse in order to reach the exit.

Societies that sign up and pay for a stall spot (£48 per stall) do not get to choose their location; they are grouped by category. WocSoc seemed to fit somewhere between the ethnic and cultural societies, the hobbyist societies, and the political societies; its stall neighbours included the Oxford Cheese Society at an adjoining table, the Oxford University Conservative Association and the Communist Society diagonally across, and a stall encouraging U.S. citizens to register to vote abroad for the impending 2024 Presidential

election. The FemSoc stall was around the corner, and I recount my volunteer shift there in 7.5. As I made my way to the WocSoc stall, I ran into some of my previous participants, including Maisie and Lily, who were representing other societies at the fair. My check-ins with them were pleasant surprises before beginning my shift. My fellow volunteer at the WocSoc stall was an undergraduate student and committee member, whom I will refer to as M. in this section.[93] We had met twice before, once at the WocSoc committee meeting I attended and at the Parental Expectations event. The two of us quickly settled into an easy rapport, with M. explaining the pitch for the society she had been telling interested onlookers at the fair, describing WocSoc as a welfare and discussion society. The laptop used to sign up for the WocSoc newsletter had run out of battery, and instead, there was an overflowing list of names and emails recorded on reams of paper and pen at the stall.[94] To pass the time in the hour-long shift, M. and I tried spotting other women of colour in the crowd and attempted to flag them down; of course, this system was purely based on our assumptions of who presented as a WoC, but it almost served as a rapid, half-joking bonding exercise between M. and me as we staffed the stall. This foundation of levity proved critical, given the subsequent interaction we faced.

About halfway through our shift, two tall, white male students strolled past the stall. They presented as the typical Oxford stereotype: white, male, cisgender or cisgender-passing, and spoke English without any regional linguistic affects. They lingered in front of the stall for a few seconds, glancing at the materials; M. and I didn't try to pitch WocSoc to them as they were clearly not the target demographic. One of the men then said, "Is this a society just for girls?" I cannot recall whether I responded or M., but one of us said something along the lines of, 'This is a society for women of colour students.' The men then said, "That's the second one we've seen. Not very inclusive." The 'second' presumably being a society dedicated to women students, of which there are plenty at Oxford. They walked away immediately after, with M. and I sharing a knowing look, our eyes wide and, at least in my case, seething with quiet rage. I had my laptop on the stall table to take notes, and as soon as they left, I knelt on the ground and began furiously typing. M. checked that I was writing down what happened, but we didn't need a debrief as to why it was yet another frustration,

[93] The WocSoc committee member I volunteered with is not an official participant in this research. I only paraphrase our conversations over the course of the shift; she is not quoted directly because she did not provide a pseudonym or participate in a formal research interview. She was aware of my research purpose and of why I chose to volunteer at the stall, and consented to her experience being included as part of my ethnography.
[94] See an image of the WocSoc stall board in A3.

yet another example of why women of colour spaces are vital in this university. Once I had written a paragraph, I sighed and looked at M. Neither of us was surprised that something like this had occurred. She shared how she hated that incidents like that annoy her, when she knows it shouldn't bother her. She's more annoyed that we can't have our spaces without others being upset because of their exclusion, the 'others' being the white male students at Oxford who can otherwise occupy any other environment without concern.

We commiserated about their tone, how they emphasised 'is it just for *girls*?' with an air of disdain, as if the concept of a space for women, racialised women, was an affront to their being. M. pondered the effects of 'self-selecting' spaces like WocSoc, where we may be more insulated from the reality of misogynistic or racist opinions that continue to proliferate at Oxford, echoing a sentiment shared by the Vice-President of FemSoc on the demographics of their event attendees. M. also commented, as I did, on the strange layout of the fair stalls, having groups that are ideologically opposed to one another be adjacent (i.e. the Tory society next to the Communist society). We did not have the luxury of time to dissect the incident further, because doing so would not only be more emotional labour in a very public space, but it would mean neglecting the purpose of having a stall at Fresher's Fair. Instead, we continued to seek out women of colour and prioritise our collective needs for space and joy, counter to the men's aversion to the mere idea of women's spaces, and reinvigorate ourselves through recruiting more women of colour to our community.

The remainder of my shift passed without any other confrontations. Women of colour students were excited to learn of WocSoc's existence, asking questions about the society's foundations; a fourth-year WoC student admitted she hadn't heard of the society and wondered if it was a new group. The 2024-25 academic year would be WocSoc's third year since its founding, and its first time at Fresher's Fair, so it was not entirely surprising that returning students were not aware of the group. M. explained that this year, they had pared down the committee to allow for more streamlined operations and, therefore, this was their first opportunity to spread information about the society. A student commented that WocSoc seemed like a 'nice way to get to know other women of colour,' an observation that made me smile. There was a palpable desire by WoC students, new and returning, to join communities intentionally comprised of their WoC peers. Perhaps they were apprehensive of other Oxford spaces; maybe they just wanted a sense of belonging and identity in their new home. It pleased me that they were considering WocSoc as a potential space to spend their

leisure time, as one is not short of options at Oxford. The idle comments by the men, which they likely never thought about again because they have the privilege of choosing *not* to engage with discussions pertinent to women of colour, was a bittersweet ending to my time with WocSoc. I did not want this interaction to overshadow the remainder of my time at the stall, where my conversations with other women of colour were reminders of why WocSoc exists and the work its committee members have done to ensure its success. The struggles are weighed with the triumphs, and M. and I experienced both in small doses at the Fresher's Fair. I can only hope that WocSoc continues for many years to come, and future committee members are able to proudly announce that yes, it is *just for girls*, and they do not have to explain why. It is not their role to provide an education to strangers, ignorant of the entitlements with which they were born and reinforced as part of the Oxford norm, why women of colour deserve safety and community.

7.4 Building community through activism

As previous chapters of this thesis have illustrated, such as 5.2 and 5.3, women of colour build meaningful communities through an array of activism at Oxford. This section foregrounds the joy, pleasure, and acts of care generated through activist communities for women of colour students; their pride in contributing to change movements at Oxford, and the feminist community of the Oxford Feminist Society (FemSoc). I argue that FemSoc and the Women of Colour Society are exemplars of "community as a set of practices," repeatedly shaped and re-shaped by its membership (Lewis, 2020, 96). I close with a discussion on the threat of fissure and contradictions within movements through further analysis of my ethnography with FemSoc.

The need for joy in activism

There are two primary channels of how joy is realised and felt by women of colour students: one by WoC who do not consider themselves to be activists but nonetheless, engaged in community building work; the other by WoC who openly identified as activists and balanced the losses of activism at Oxford with moments of joy. brown's work on the concept of pleasure activism asserts that "pleasure is a measure of freedom," and to practice pleasure activism is to "begin to understand the liberation possible when we collectively orient around pleasure and longing" (2020, 4-5). Maya, a liberation representative at her college, articulated her position as facilitating enjoyment with her peers:

> “There’s sort of two categories for me about what being a person of colour at Oxford means. If you're in any way connected to your culture and any other sort of culture, there's going to be a kind of disconnect when you come to Oxford, right? Which is sort of the surface level, what I felt and then what I was trying to achieve was like, well, even if nobody comes to our events, we're going to buy a bunch of snacks and sit in the hall and listen to K-pop or Bollywood music and eat our weight in jalebis I bought from the Indian store. Even if nobody else comes, that's what we're doing … It was just a fun day, because we just got to sit around, goofing around, in a way that was sort of personal to us, abstracted from the greater narrative of race and equality in Oxford. It was just a small scale, like this is something that’s important to us, and we get to enjoy ourselves in that way.”

Maya recalled how her ‘small-scale’ event received positive feedback from her peers, who were also feeling culturally isolated at Oxford, and served as a genuine act of care for the community she was elected to represent. Conversely, Tundra’s experience as a fellow college liberation representative was not necessarily one of underrepresentation, but what she perceived as deficit-centred representation of marginalised communities:

> “So, a big thing for me was that I think very often, ethnic history and discussions about race can be quite negative and quite – what's the word I'm looking for? It's quite — it often feels quite tragic talking about how people of colour have suffered historically, or been marginalised, and I think that's definitely a very important part of our history, but I think more than that, ethnic culture and diversity is about more than just suffering. It's about uplifting, it's food, it's music, and I think bringing those elements together and pulling out those stories is what I've tried to do a lot.”

Both Maya and Tundra highlighted the role of arts and culture in affirming joy, which was not quite the case at Tundra’s college during Black History Month celebrations, an issue that she raised with the college administration:

> “So one of the things that was raised was to do with the Black History Month display of books, because 90% of the books were just about slavery. Which is interesting and everything, but there's so much more to Black culture than that.”

Albertina’s objectives as her college liberation representative also explicitly included expressions of joy and celebration:

> “I made it really clear when I was doing the hustings and going for the role that I didn't want it just to be a role about the negative sides of being a student of colour. I didn't want it to be just about doing the procedures and the complaints, I wanted it to be about celebrating, both the culture, the people, creating spaces and things like that.”

In pursuit of activism as a joyous activity, WoC also sought to reconceptualise activism, away from media portrayals of activists as ‘aggressive,’ discursive tones present in coverage of both the 2011 fees protests (Hensby, 2014) and the 2024 student encampments for Palestine (Brooks, 2026), to instead view activist acts as more quotidian and approachable. Tundra shared her thinking:

> “I think the thought of activism can be quite scary, usually what comes to mind is protest and you know, rallies and standing outside the Rad Cam with banners and things like that. And I think the idea of that can be quite daunting, but realising that you can protest and resist and validate and express different sentiments in different ways is really powerful and really cool, and it can take anxiety away from people that maybe don’t desire to do those traditional forms of activism.”

Ming, who did self-identify as an activist, similarly emphasised the value of cultivating joy through community, even when the goals of their activism have not been met:

> “It doesn’t worry me anymore that Oxford hasn’t changed, cause I’m just like, it never was going to anyways, no matter how hard we worked. What matters is that we made people, the students that were there, feel a sense of community and feel less powerless; and, as well, we ourselves have gained so much experience from that and can go out and take it into the world. Cause also, we would always talk about pleasure activism, the fact that we can be in Oxford and enjoy ourselves and have fun, in a place that’s explicitly not meant to have us there, and the fact that we can do activism and forge really strong bonds and communities and have fun together, is in itself a form of resistance.”

The idea of existence as resistance, particularly in academia, has been theorised by numerous scholars, including Moraga’s ‘theory in the flesh’, where “the physical realities of our lives — our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings — all

fuse to create a politic born out of necessity" (2021, 19).[95] WoC stressed that regardless of any outcomes of their activism, for example, whether the university engaged with their calls for change, the benefits and relationships they formed as a result outweigh the downsides of their experience. Ming, who was concerned that she was too pessimistic in our conversation, accentuated the rewards of her experience:

> "I do just want to stress that the communities I met through activism gave me so much joy and so much sense of self and identity and fulfilment that I never felt before in my life. For me, that was worth it, completely, and I'm sure a lot of my friends feel the exact same way. To just be understood in such a way is so meaningful and so impactful."

Likewise, Arya implored future women of colour students to embrace their presence as a form of activism:

> "What I try to do is try and make myself very prominent, not in an attention-seeking way, but in an 'I exist, and you can also exist in this role' kind of way. But also, there's lots of other smaller societies that do great things, like the Women of Colour Society, and that is completely a safe space for women of colour, so [Wom*Cam] love to do things with them. Just normalise it more, and making people see that you know, there is a space for you here, you just need to be brave enough to take it."

Activist communities are where women of colour feel understood, who, in Sage's words, "get it". As I wrote in 3.5, it is not necessary to define what the 'it' is — it can be dynamic and ever-changing, operating as needed in applicable circumstances. Micah adds to this with her notion of community:

> "I think a huge part of community is also like deeply entrenched support, with kind of a flexible understanding of what that might look like for people. And I remember, I'm not super plugged into many things, so how I find out about most stuff is my community and through those channels of kind of doing whatever I can do, especially in an activist way, where we recently [with] the decolonial reading group, we've been kind of working through a lot."

[95] See also Emejulu & Sobande, 2019; Ali et al., 2022; Pitts et al., 2020.

Like Maya, Micah's activism looks different from 'traditional' forms but is equally meaningful; as 7.7 demonstrates, peer-to-peer education is a powerful form of activism, such as the reading group Micah convened. Zhao summarised the value of holding both the joys and struggles of activism in tandem with one another:

> "It's not that there aren't people trying to make these changes [at Oxford], it's just that there's so many challenges coming up against them. But there are very notable student movements and activists all around that, you know, are really powerful and really making a difference. And I think that like as much as we should focus on how we can make things better, I think there are things to celebrate as well for sure."

I consider WoC communities as sites where hope is a "quotidian practice embodied in daily acts of rebuilding care and intimacies that build concrete utopias" (Pérez Rodríguez, 2024, 82). Following the analysis of the roles joy and pleasure play in activism comes a discussion on the affective reverberations of pride and accomplishment felt by WoC through their work, often providing them with purpose and self-empowerment.

Pride in making change

Several women of colour took care to tell their stories of achievement earned through their organising work, shared with humility and hope that their efforts will be continued by the successors of their respective roles. Gabriella took pride in how her access and outreach work increased the number of Black students at her college:

> "I am proud to say that in my measly three years of being here, even in the first year, seeing the cohort of increased diversity in freshers. Like I said, I was one out of three Black students in my college, and I was the only Black girl, there were two other mixed-race boys. The year below, I think there was one, and now in first year there's about four. So even something as little as that, but even speaking to so many of my other friends, we're just walking around like, specifically for the Black community, like wow, there are more — we're visibly seeing more Black students."

Like other WoC who found friendship through participating in activism, Sage reflected on what she was grateful to have gained through her activist work:

> "I'm grateful for like, I don't know, the social aspects of doing activism or like some sort of like society, but because it really does pay off and it does make you feel really

good. And you get to just build really meaningful relationships with people that you can call your good friends. And for that, I will always be grateful for and like I don't regret a day of activism that I do in Oxford, even if it burns me out to the ground. I would say I wouldn't have any other way, I would. I would have it in every other way if it meant I wasn't burnt out, but I am grateful for the fact that I can actually do it at all. But I think with me, it's just always just going to be a case of trying to not do the most all the time, cause I don't actually have to. I can just take a step back."

While Sage's experience of activism led to burnout, they realised the importance of withdrawing from their work in order to continue organising in the future. Sage may have been particularly cognisant of this as they are an activist outside of Oxford, having co-founded an environmental campaign in their home city before arriving at university. For those who began their activist engagement at Oxford, their pride lay in the immediate changes they saw for their communities, as Maya did in her role:

"If I can identify that there are people here who don't currently have events to go to or places to — I don't think I did the perfect job of it, but I think the aim was, if we only are able to help or provide spaces for people who don't have a space currently, then that's a win."

For others, their activism allowed them to grow as individuals and build self-confidence as a result of their efforts, like Roma in her position as JCR President:

"It just really helped me grow confidence, and it made me really comfortable speaking to people of senior positions, very comfortably gaining their respect and having them respect me as well, and I've had a really fun year doing it. Definitely the skills I learned doing it, I don't think I would've got if I didn't do the role, so it was just an extremely rewarding experience doing that."

Furthermore, once students graduate from Oxford, WoC are then able to transfer and prove their employable skills gained from activism. Carmen, who now works in the HE sector, came to accept the term 'student activist' in conjunction with her organising abilities to succeed professionally:

"I struggled with the label of activism for a long time. Weirdly, and certainly not ideally, my embracing of it – or at least my not utter rejection of it – really came when

> I left Oxford and I was in the world, and I was trying to explain what experiences I had that led me to be qualified to work on a project about anti-racism in Scottish universities, for example, which is one of the projects I worked on. So, I found myself saying things like 'I'm a former student activist' or whatever, and I did that so I could express who I was."

For Carmen, student activist work became part of "who she was" because of her sustained involvement in student-focused, student-led work at Oxford, which then informed her career trajectory. Individual WoC embody joy and pride through their activist endeavours, even if they choose not to pursue activist-related work after university. I witnessed the enactment of brown's 'pleasure activism' theory (2020) in action during my ethnographic encounters with the Oxford Feminist Society as an emblem of the possibilities forged through feminist community at Oxford.

FemSoc: A beacon of feminist community

I observed FemSoc functioning as a vibrant and active student society with a committed core of attendees and curious weekly participants throughout my ethnography. Critical ethnography and feminist ethnographic approaches seek to empower participants while recognising that researchers are "inextricably entangled in the contexts we inhabit and in the processes of knowledge production" (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022, 2). The communities created in these often intimate environments by student societies offer a third space for students, especially those who identify with groups historically excluded by Oxford, to become active participants in a discourse arena that is not solely defined by their academic or social lives. Evans' 2016 research on feminist student societies in UK universities includes a typology of activities undertaken by such groups, including campaigning, charity, consciousness-raising, educational, self-care, and social. The author notes that advocacy is not a category because it is typically the work of a Student Union's elected Women's Officer; in the Oxford context, I believe FemSoc engages with advocacy work in place of the SU not having a dedicated women's officer, which allows them to build a more politically aware community of feminists.

When I asked the 23/24 President (P) and Vice-President (VP) about their experience with the research process, their reflexivity and conscientiousness about my hopes for its impact reinforced Dorion's (2021) argument that feminist ethnographers conducting

fieldwork develop emotional bonds with participants, where they trust that their voices are epistemically privileged as women:

> G: What has the experience of having a researcher there been like?
>
> P: It's so exciting.
>
> VP: Yeah, absolutely.
>
> P: We're so curious about what you think about it all.
>
> VP: I think it's been really good. I think it's sort of made me think more about how – it always made more analytical of the way it's done. Obviously, not to the same extent, but I've tried to be like, 'oh, I wonder what Georgia's thinking right now.' I wonder how she's analysing this. That's just personally for me, but I think it's been good to have and effectively show the people at the L&L that this is a) a viable PhD option and b) activism is still so important in academia, and that FemSoc can be activist. I think that's come through in hustings that your presence as [someone] researching activism, people want to do that and that's really good.
>
> P: I think it made me conscious of being a proper society. I definitely wanted to do an AGM, but I would've let it be a backseat, but I was like, 'Oh, I bet Georgia would be interested in this.' When we were doing it, I thought for your work, that was a really interesting one. Really important and worthwhile discussions of 'should there be men in certain committee roles', and that's really interesting for the mission of FemSoc and who we exclude and the progress we're making. I remember thinking that was a really interesting one from your perspective.

Their intentional decision to host an AGM with the research in mind reflects their genuine engagement with this project as a means of advancing feminist knowledge. They also asked me what my experience was like, to which I responded:

> "I've really loved it. I'm really hopeful that there is the space for these kinds of conversations to happen. I've found it really rewarding and it's going to help a lot in terms of looking at the broader scope of my research, because it is about collectives

> and what that means, working in solidarity with other people. This has been a huge part of that. Seeing that there's space for these kinds of conversations is really inspiring and really important. I'm really glad that [FemSoc] gets to continue in whatever shape or form in the future.

During my two interviews with the President and VP, conducted over two terms, we discussed what constitutes an activist society and whether FemSoc is inherently political. The VP raised a historical example of feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 70s (Kinnamon, 2024; Firth & Robinson, 2016):

> "I think [FemSoc] sort of fits into that consciousness-raising tradition of women talking together and learning … I would say it's activism, because it's about getting people engaged, it's getting people involved, making people think more critically about feminism."

The President concurred:

> "I think it's definitely an activist mission to make people even more interested in feminism, or make people learn more about diversifying their feminism and things like that."

The society uses its platform to spread awareness about relevant political issues, such as encouraging people to vote in the 2024 UK general election, condemning the far-right riots that occurred in the UK in the summer of 2024, and hosting a fundraiser for ActionAid UK to end violence against women that raised £400 from 46 donations (Oxford Feminist Society, 2024). In response to the pro-Palestinian encampments established at Oxford in the spring of 2024, the FemSoc social media team shared posts in solidarity with the encampment. The President noted the difficulty of claiming that any political opinions are shared by *all* members of FemSoc:

> "There's currently [in spring 2024] an open letter in support of the encampment and condemning the Vice-Chancellor from societies. I ran it by committee. Saying something is 'from' Oxford FemSoc is kind of dicey because our membership is so diverse and not defined. I said, we'll say the Oxford FemSoc committee supports it. We have quite a big following, and we have a following that extends to [feminist

societies] at other unis, feminist organisations outside of universities. I think it's good for the feminist networks to be really on board with this."

The VP was also aware of how their positionalities and privileges affect their stance on political issues while maintaining an activist ethos:

> "I just think it's tricky to sort of – when you're speaking on behalf of the society, making sure you say the right things and do the right things, because at the end of the day, we're two white women. This isn't our space to speak on this, but it's our space to elevate what other people are saying. I think we need to, and we have tried to, commit to that. I think it's tricky and again, we're in such a position of privilege at Oxford University, even though it isn't feminist, we've established that, it's still trying to make sure we don't speak over anyone or speak for anyone. Currently, as it stands in the sort of non-feminist institution, as a feminist group, trying to find the right way to say things is quite present in our minds."

The following section recounts an ethnographic encounter I had with FemSoc that illustrated the society's balancing act of striving for feminist discourse within the institution's non-feminist spaces.

Liquor & Liberation (L&L): Is feminism inherently socialist?

The L&L discussion I co-chaired with the Vice-President was an example of how feminist community was enacted in the non-feminist environment of Oxford. The normative spaces of the university can be characterised as "hostile environments where we [feminists] are made to be out of place, where our presence is often unwelcome, and where power is increasingly enacted through the demarcation and policing of spaces" (Smith et al., 2020, 1302). The L&L, themed around feminism and socialism, posed the following debate:

> "In our L&Ls, themes of community, economic disparity and structural advantages and disadvantages come up repeatedly. This begs the question, is feminism inherently socialist, or do socialism and feminism simply share some ideas? We'll discuss patriarchy and its relationship with capitalism, collective vs individual action, systemic barriers, and more. No prior knowledge of feminism or socialism is needed, but please come along for what will definitely be an interesting discussion!"

I was conscious of not taking over the discussion as co-chair and avoided positioning myself as an expert on the topic; I did not want to seem condescending or patronising to a group of mostly young women engaging in intellectual conversation. Nor did I want to overshadow my co-chair, whom I had established a rapport with in a previous interview alongside the President, in her role as a moderator; however, they both knew that I had completed a degree in women's and gender studies and could look towards me for guidance if needed. This tacit understanding can be read as an enactment of a feminist ethics of care in the academy, which I strove to practice during my ethnography (Aranda, 2020). The discussion itself was nuanced and varied, where attendees (31 total, including 3 men and 6 women of colour-presenting individuals) raised points about intersectionality, unpaid domestic labour, the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy, and so forth. The six women of colour naturally steered the conversation, perhaps because much of the dialogue around forms of care work concerned the labour of women of colour.

There was one notable moment in the second half of the conversation, where the group shifted to the topic of feminist revolution and the role socialist movements play in achieving liberation. At L&Ls, there is no formal queue for participants who wish to speak; those who want to contribute simply raise their hand. As the chairs, the Vice-President and I were responsible for ensuring everyone who volunteered was heard, and having moderated many panel conversations in the past, I kept a list in my head of who had raised their hand in turn. One attendee, a woman of colour whom I had not seen at previous FemSoc events, was next in the queue, but as she began to speak, she was interrupted by a white woman. This was not intentional; I do not think the latter even noticed that the WoC was preparing to speak. She began her point by admitting she was nervous and had never spoken at an L&L before, and then carried on. As this slightly awkward queue jump took place, the WoC and I made eye contact and shared a knowing look, almost a shrug, something akin to a shared feeling of 'this isn't the first time' that a white woman had cut in front of us. Neither of us addressed it after; the incident passed without further concern, and I ensured the WoC was next to speak. The fact that someone had unknowingly interrupted another woman of colour was not particularly noteworthy to those in the room; I doubt anyone else in the room noticed what happened except for us. Yet it was significant in the sense that this WoC and I did not know each other, had not spoken previously or after the fact, and we still understood each other through a glance. I hope that I provided her with a sense of being seen, at least for a moment, even if others had no idea anything was afoot.

It was these seemingly minute interactions during my ethnography with FemSoc, whose committee and attendance were predominantly comprised of well-meaning white women, that the inadvertent marginalisation of WoC voices continues. It is our responsibility to ensure women of colour are heard, and in retrospect, I could have mentioned it to the President or Vice-President after, but there was no guarantee that the participant would return to an L&L. Overall, FemSoc prioritised intersectionality in its debates and discussion topics, and practised its welfare-forward philosophy for women-identifying students where other environments of Oxford did not, or refused to do so. The preservation of the society and the feminist community it engenders is a necessary lifeline for feminists at Oxford who desire spaces for intellectual, intersectional feminist discourse without academic judgment of their oration or ideas, and as FemSoc touts, no prior knowledge is required.

7.5 Example 1: Responses to anti-abortion activism

This section highlights a recurring point of debate I encountered in my research, both during the interviews and the ethnography, on the presence of anti-abortion campaigns at Oxford. The specific loci of anti-abortion student activists reveal the ideological rifts in feminist activism, as experienced by the new 24/25 FemSoc committee, and how women of colour contend with fissures in broader movements for liberation. At Oxford, these debates are traced to a group titled 'Oxford Students for Life' (OSFL), a pro-life, anti-abortion student society. The most contentious interactions WoC have experienced with this group are at the annual SU Fresher's Fair, where their attendance has been contested since at least 2021 (Blue News).

The 2024 Fresher's Fair was my final ethnographic engagement with FemSoc, where I volunteered for an hour-long shift at their stall, as I did with WocSoc. I had interviewed the new 24/25 President and Vice-President two days prior, and they were both excited to begin their tenures. However, when I checked in with the President the night before my shift after the first day of Fresher's Fair, her tone was much more distressed. In a series of messages, she sent me images of the pamphlets OSFL were distributing to students passing their stall promoting anti-abortion, and informed me that a member of the new FemSoc committee had resigned that day because unbeknownst to them, she was a member of OSFL. The committee had discovered this only because the member was identified as an OSFL stall volunteer by those at the diagonally adjacent FemSoc stall. According to the President, the committee

member chose to resign because her opinion on abortion was not going to change; the President accepted her resignation, as she did not want the member to have a continued affiliation with FemSoc if she maintained her pro-life beliefs.

Before this discovery, the 24/25 FemSoc committee had not seen a need to make a statement about the society's position on abortion. However, on the second day of the fair, the FemSoc stall was newly adorned with pro-choice banners, and the President was adamant in her pitch to interested students that FemSoc is a pro-choice organisation (see image in A2). This decision was an intentional response to OSFL and to alleviate new students' concerns, as the President informed me that numerous people had approached the FemSoc stall, curious about their position and worried about the impact of the OSFL stall. Openly being pro-choice is consistent with the politics of previous FemSoc committees, with the society issuing a statement and links to support resources in response to the same anti-abortion organisation's presence at Fresher's Fair in 2021:

> "Oxford Feminist Society takes a firm stance against the pro-life organisation being promoted at the Oxford SU Fresher's Fair. The stalls' ideology is a threat to the safety, health and autonomy of women*. The reproductive policy of the SU to 'support the rights to choose' and to 'campaign and extend students' rights of practical access to an abortion and extend rights of choice over pregnancy' are undermined by having an anti-abortion stall."

During my volunteer shift with the President, we only had brief moments to discuss the whirlwind turn of events and major decisions she had to make as a new leader, as the stall was incredibly popular with attendees. In our short windows of rest, the President updated me that since the pro-life committee member resigned, her scheduled volunteer shift earlier that day had to be filled by the former 23/24 President. The new committee also held an emergency consultation with their predecessors the night before on how to address the situation. Their collective dedication to a pro-choice feminist politics, in tandem with their devotion to ensuring that FemSoc remains an intact, intersectional society, was proven by the inter-committee collaboration that came together within less than twenty-four hours. The location of the OSFL stall, only a few feet away from the FemSoc stall, added to the urgency of recruiting more new members to the society. The President remarked that she knew they were allowed to be here because of free speech, but it didn't mean she liked it. She 'hated'

that the OSFL stall was before the FemSoc stall on the route students had to walk to pass through the fair. After the fair, instead of issuing a direct rebuke to OSFL or having the committee member's resignation become a scandal, FemSoc published a series of Instagram stories defining its pro-choice feminist politics ahead of its first L&L event to its large social media following. The President insisted that the views of OSFL are held by a minority and wholly opposed by FemSoc. As I saw during my shift, students were reassured by FemSoc's presence at the fair and its overt expressions of pro-choice beliefs as counter to the views of OSFL.

Whilst the anti-abortion campaigners were top of mind for me and the President, the true purpose and success of the fair was expanding the feminist community that FemSoc had laboured to cultivate over the years. The 24/25 President, who had not previously been a member of the committee, gushed to new students about the joy she felt attending FemSoc events and the importance she placed on a welcoming environment at the society. Clearly, her pitch was a success, as there were fifteen double-sided sheets of sign-ups for the mailing list at the end of two days at the fair. It was proof that there were students at Oxford who craved feminist community and discussion, and it was fitting to have the culmination of my ethnography with both FemSoc and WocSoc on the same day, one that juxtaposed the ongoing challenges and achievements of student activism.

FemSoc was not the only stall in the vicinity to oppose OSFL; M., my co-volunteer at the WocSoc stall, told me that their presence made her feel 'a bit sick' and called the society insensitive to people's relationships to pregnancy, especially as it displayed numerous images of foetuses in utero that could trigger passersby. M. did not think OSFL has a place within the university Fresher's Fair, which echoed criticisms by past student leaders that by allowing OSFL to purchase a stall, the SU were endorsing — or at least not denouncing — its beliefs (JCR Representatives, 2021). Arya, speaking as the co-chair of Wom*Cam (the Oxford SU's former women's campaign), shared a similar opinion on the SU's decision to allow the stall at the 2023 Fresher's Fair:

> "I think it's honestly really shameful. I think we all have misconceptions before we come to Oxford, and people tend to glamorise it. I know before I came here, I thought, well, if everyone here is supposedly intelligent, maybe we won't be running into these sorts of issues. But you come here, and you realise that you still do, and I think it's

> ridiculous at a Fresher's Fair as well, where there are so many women-identifying students, you don't know the history of these people. You don't know their relationship to pregnancy or abortion; you don't know anything about them at all. You want to make them feel safe and welcome, and it ceases to be a safe space if you're openly advocating against them. Also, the fact that there were men on the stall. All the people on the stall were male, and we had many students coming up to us throughout the Fresher's Fair, confiding in how that made them feel, and it's really disgusting that it still is a debate that needs to be happening. So, we wrote a whole statement about that because it was so gross."

Arya's assumption that Oxford would be a place where the right to abortion would not be up for debate parallels M.'s reflection on 'self-selecting' spaces, where the only time she and those at FemSoc have to confront these viewpoints is annually at the university-wide Fresher's Fair. I consider these 'self-selecting' spaces as a form of self-preservation, where pro-choice feminists can insulate themselves from the opinions they view as harmful, but it does not mean they are uninformed. Even if they were reminded through graphic images presented by OSFL, it is evident that Oxford houses a multitude of ideologies, and student-led organisations like FemSoc and WocSoc are best poised to counter their narratives. Micah explains how she navigates disagreement in her activism:

> "I think, of course, my friends and I, who I find in my community disagree, don't think the same way. I think the ability to have like productive, helpful, kind, conversation, whether it's agreement or disagreement or venting or whatever it is, is kind of central to my definition of community. And so I think part of that, too, is like standing up for people, standing with people, actually, because I think standing up for implies a control of the narrative that really belongs to the person that things are happening to."

Whether those "productive, helpful, kind" conversations were possible at the Fresher's Fair, an overcrowded, noisy locale filled with hordes of nervous students, I do not know. I do believe, however, that I witnessed community in action through the ways in which the FemSoc leadership defended its values, recruited new members with emboldened convictions to pro-choice feminism, and did not waver from its principles in the face of anti-abortion student campaigners.

7.6 Education as activism

Women of colour students singled out education as one of the most effective tools for activist movements. Education here is not applied in a formal sense; rather, I understand it through hooks' conception of an 'informal' teaching pedagogy, wherein she impresses upon students that informality does not mean a lack of seriousness (1994). In my fieldwork, education was mobilised by WoC and allies in two principal forms: one, peer-to-peer education, often circulated through social media; and two, the mobilisation of student societies and organisations such as the OA4P encampment to practice consciousness-raising as activist education.

Peer-to-peer education as an accessibility measure

The proliferation of social media in activist movements has been well-documented, particularly in feminist activism (Saraswati, 2021; Bishop & Rigakos, 2024). Examples of student societies in chapter five evidenced how student-led groups provide a "networked milieu whereby young students can explore a range of contemporary political practices and repertoires" (Loader et al., 2015, 821). This network is also scaled down to the individual level, where one's personal social media following, whether public or private, serves as an avenue for accessible information sharing. For disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent activists who may not physically be able to attend activist events due to their health, the role of online activism is vital to maintain their own knowledge of activism, but also to contribute to the education of their peers.[96] This was Ruby's reality as her physical health declined:

> "I've always had lots of mental and neurodivergent disabilities, but from becoming physically disabled in terms of chronic illness at the end of first year, which is a whole other story, I found it much harder to do things like organise or go to protests, so I spend a lot of my time educating in the circles that I'm in, and doing lots of shouting online and spreading the message; I do lots of activism from bed. During my time here, in an educational setting, I've spent much more time thinking about the arts and the role of arts in education, but also the role of arts as a means towards and a voice for liberation."

[96] Disability justice activism, and activism by disabled people, is a rich scholarly discipline – see Kafai, 2021; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022, 2018; Schalk, 2022; Wong, 2024.

Micah also shared how her chronic illness and its related physical effects shift her choice of focus in activism:

> "Because of some of my pre-existing conditions, I can't always go out and do the what I think most people immediately associate with activism, but I think education is one of the biggest parts of it, and to not let yourself be uneducated and also not let the rest of your community be uneducated where it's like, I mean, I feel like it's pretty clear cut and there's a clear timeline of things that have occurred. And even if there isn't, the purpose of this community needs to be able to work through that understanding in a safe, productive space."

Moreover, Micah asserted the criticality of education in activism, even if it is uncomfortable or rudimentary. As a co-convener of a decolonial reading group, she exhorts the need for growth and the evolution of knowledges in activist circles:

> "I think another part of community is evolution and introspection, being introspective and retrospective in that things are always changing and a community staying stagnant is so unproductive … I don't think activism is about being perfectly educated, but I think education has become a way out for people who are not ready to fully grapple with their relationship with certain conflicts and disasters that are happening. I think the worst you can do is be uneducated in a space where education is the primary goal."

Women of colour also reinterpret their activism to foreground education because of the challenges they have encountered through other mediums at Oxford. Freya explains her decision to prioritise educating her peers at Oxford about her activist interests:

> "I like to take more of like an educating stance on things, and that's how I prefer to like sort of push things through, which I don't think you have much – I mean like you've got so many really intelligent and loud voices in this place, you can't really always take that stance. Everyone's speaking over each other, so I don't know."

The presence of competing voices at Oxford recalls Marie's appeal to other women of colour to unlearn the expectation of competition (see 7.1) and instead, express acts of solidarity. For Lily, this means sharing more about her identity as a mixed-race woman:

> "I'd like to take a bigger role in talking more about my identity, just in a WocSoc sense, like if we did identity spotlights, educational things on the Instagram. Because it's not the fault of anyone that they don't know, it's because our education system isn't that wide."

Lily also ruminated on the influence of social media activism and how her perspective has shifted as she aged:

> "I guess there's a lot of responsibility that young people feel to change the world around us. I definitely felt it a lot more when I was sixteen, [in the] Instagram activist era, I was posting about everything, everywhere, feeling so stressed, like I can't solve every world problem! And then I was like, well, it's not my job to. Maybe posting about everything everywhere isn't the solution, but now, at twenty, I've learned that it doesn't matter what other people think of you. It's more the small actions you can take that you know are making a difference."

Activism, especially youth and student-led activism, can feel insurmountable and futile. WoC students are proof that activism can be effective in a multitude of forms, including simply expressing one's identity to others on social media, as an instrument of change through education.

FemSoc and the consciousness-raising tradition

In my ethnography with FemSoc, it became evident that feminist education was a pillar of its community, a belief reinforced by its members and attendees who felt these discussions were not accessible elsewhere in Oxford. The 23/24 FemSoc President (P) and Vice-President (VP) expanded on the connections between activism and education:

P: We talk about 'is FemSoc activist', and I think education is such an important part of activism. We could push that further by getting experts in, I agree. I think discussion is activism.

VP: Definitely, and I think educated activists are better activists. I think that's what we're providing.

The 24/25 FemSoc President concurred with her predecessors:

P: I really think education is such an important part of the feminist movement. The best way to get through to people is just education, and making that sort of accessible. I think the Feminist Society is sort of the first point that people would go to if they were looking to learn about feminism as a whole … I just hope that we change people's minds but not in a forcible way, they're welcome to changing their minds, and they come to that on their own, but they're educated in a nice space from us. That's sort of my hope.

The 23/24 President and Vice-President identified as white women, and thus acknowledged the limitations of their authority to speak on or understand the issues affecting racialised women. However, the 24/25 President is a woman of colour, and placed a responsibility on addressing intersectional topics for feminist discussion at FemSoc:

"I want to cover all of our bases in intersectionality as much as possible. I think coming as a woman of colour, that background sort of puts it really actively in the forefront of my mind. A lot of things I've found with that is – I went to a philosophy feminist event a couple of weeks ago, and the one thing that I was sat there thinking when they were all thinking was [that] it was from such a white feminist point of view. It sort of surprised me in the sense that at this event that we were at, I was expecting it to have just a bit more consideration, maybe a bit more nuance. I think one thing that it did make me feel was that [FemSoc] as a society as a whole, we do get into quite a good load of – we cover a lot of areas in our topics. That made me quite proud to think that, wow, we're doing this, and I've gone to this event to hear this talk, and I've just not heard half the things I expected them to get into. It's quite a big part of my identity as well. It's really strange because I'm a mixed-race woman, so I have a really weird relationship with it as just a thing in general, but it is also something that I'm quite proud of. I do want to sort of have that come through, and it be recognised that women of colour are even further disadvantaged than their white counterparts. We just need to make people aware of it as well."

Here, she acknowledges a marked difference between other feminist or women-focused societies at Oxford, of which there are plenty, but spotlights FemSoc and, in my ethnography, the Women of Colour Society, as organisations dedicated to exploring intersectionality and identity. The goals of the 23/24 President and Vice-President were aligned with those of their successors:

G: What do you think the goal of FemSoc is? Obviously, it's to hold feminist discussion, have a feminist space, but do you consider it to be activism?

VP: I think it sort of fits into that consciousness-raising tradition of women talking together and learning. I was doing some reading about women during the AIDs epidemic in America, and talking about how these discussions were held, talking about how we can empower women during this epidemic. In some way – obviously I'm not drawing comparisons there – but it's similar.

P: It's about shared experience and things like that.

VP: I would say it's activism, because it's about getting people engaged, it's getting people involved, it's making people think more critically about feminism. Some people come here and haven't really engaged with feminism, some people are very engaged. Regardless, they're all getting something out of it. And if there are protests regarding feminism, we go to them and endorse them.

P: I agree. I mean, I think we have a self-selecting clientele of already feminists, or people interested in feminism. I think it's definitely an activist mission to make those people even more interested in feminism, or make those people learn more about diversifying their feminism and things like that."

Their arguments align with Evans' (2016) assertion that the "educational dimension [of feminist societies] acts as an important tool for intersectional feminist praxis, allowing ideas and theories to spread beyond the narrow confines of the classroom to those who are unlikely to encounter feminism or gender in their curriculum" (70), which as 7.2 demonstrated, is a widespread complaint by women of colour about their degrees. Finally, the 24/25 President cast a long view on the future of FemSoc and her hope for its enduring engagement with activism:

> "I have a lot of faith in our generation as a whole, that might just be because of all the social media echo chambers I'm a part of. If we can change people's mindsets or just encourage this active conversation, then I have a lot of faith and hope that that will spread to more people across Oxford and then, like you said, if these people end up

staying in Oxford, or going on into further things, our points of view, our message, can hopefully be carried forward. We have a generational change."

WoC students and their allies are imbued with hope for the future of feminist and activist movements by broadening the landscape of what it means to conduct meaningful, engaging social change through social media and other contemporary avenues of discourse. In concert with their communities, women of colour practice solidarity and build coalitions to envision new, liberatory futures.

7.7 Example 2: Palestinian liberation at Oxford

In the early hours of 17 April 2024, students at Columbia University set up the first university encampment in solidarity with Palestine as a response to the ongoing destruction of Gaza, calling out their and other HEI investments in the arms industry, and demanding an end to their complicity in genocidal violence. Dasha et al. (2024) offer a detailed account of how their solidarity group, Columbia University Apartheid Divest, came to establish the encampment, the retaliation they faced from their university, as well as the physical and legal threats they endured from the police and other state entities. Soon after, scores of allied encampments were erected across the US and around the world, including 36 at UK universities (Freeman, 2025; Swain, 2024).[97] This section is not to debate the war in Gaza or the geopolitics of conflict; my stance was articulated in chapter 3.1. Instead, I present a narrative of the Oxford Action for Palestine (OA4P) encampment as my participants shared in their interviews, and an analysis of the university and media responses to students' calls for Palestinian liberation.

On 6 May 2024, students from the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge jointly launched 'Liberated Zones' in solidarity with Gaza on their respective campuses (Henson, 2024). OA4P's inaugural statement declared that 'Oxford men orchestrate occupation', particularly Alfred Milner, an Oxford graduate who was responsible for helping craft the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which led to further annexations of Palestinian land (2024). The group had six core demands of the university, which mirrored the calls of other global campus encampments, to disclose, divest, and boycott entities supporting Israeli occupation and apartheid in Gaza (see Images 3 and 4 in A6). An open letter from Oxford faculty and

[97] Harvard's Crowd Counting Consortium collated empirical data on the breadth of pro-Palestine encampments at US universities (Ulfelder, 2024).

staff in support of the encampment received over 650 signatories (2024). The OA4P encampment, first established on the lawns of the Pitt Rivers Museum, then re-established in front of the Radcliffe Camera in the centre of Oxford, lasted for 63 days, ending on 8 July after receiving legal threats of forcible removal by the university (2024). The OA4P encampment and the series of events that occurred at Oxford thereafter can be considered what Knops (2023) calls an 'affective tipping point' in activism. Though Knops wrote in the context of climate activism, the theory of what causes an affective tipping point is transferable: In tandem with indignation, affective tipping points "also materialise in the affective transformation that shifts bodies and subjects from sleeplessness and denial into wakefulness and action" (206). If we take the university to embody 'sleeplessness and denial', then student activists forced them awake — but not necessarily into action.

I recount three salient points of encounter surrounding the encampment relevant to women of colour students at Oxford; first, WoC interviewees' perception of the encampment and its reception by the media; second, what is arguably *the* 'tipping point' of the OA4P encampment, when protestors occupied the Wellington Square offices of the university and were met with police, called by the institution; and third, the aftermath of the occupation, as told through follow-up interviews and statements given by previous participants.

Perceptions of the OA4P encampment

Several of my participants were engaged in the encampment in various ways; Leila, for example, was an active organiser of events and could be found at the camp on most days, including volunteering at the welcome desk, facing the public. Phoebe participated as a 'frontline activist', to use the categorisation from the typologies of activism in 5.1, attending rallies and protests, even when it meant personal risk — I share her story further later in this section. The bulk of my interviews with WocSoc committee members happened to take place days after the encampment was established, and Lily described how she was supporting the cause:

> "I started posting about the encampment because I was like, this directly relates to us as Oxford students. My friend, they were like, 'I hadn't realised so many people share the same views, I thought I was quite alone in being so pro-Palestine in college.' Because I think especially college systems, it can feel quite personal to some people,

as in people raising their voices can feel like you're admitting a big secret to a lot of people who know you too well to know that about you, especially where there would be people who disagree. It can be quite different in a college system to then raise your voice in a way that you can in a big uni, where you're just a small fish in a big sea; the college means there's lots of little ponds and we're all medium-sized fish. I think recently, especially now that the encampment is in Oxford, activism has got a lot more solidified, thanks very much in part to the efforts of American unis. I think it's easier to be empowering and to consider yourself an activist, because there's lots of ways in which you can help."

Lily's observations on the influence of American university encampments demonstrate the physicality of community and solidarity, not merely as abstract terms, but as tangible manifestations of collective global action. I witnessed as such during my visits to the encampment, where I painted banners with other students I had never met, sat at the welcome desk with Leila when someone came up and expressed his support for Palestine as a Christian, and joined an event led by local members of the Sikh community, where we ate plentifully and chanted our collective hopes for a free Palestine. Alice, a committee member on her JCR, who received pushback on her attempts for the JCR to acknowledge apartheid in a statement, explained why marginalised students were drawn to supporting Palestine:

"We're able to feel strongly about it, to take it up as our cause, because as mostly women or queer people, or as people of colour, we know what it feels like to be — not entirely silenced, but to be spoken for."

Habiba shared another perspective as someone who faced disciplinary repercussions for her pro-Palestinian activism at her college:

"Legal threat is scary, you have so much money, [the college] is so rich, and we don't have a lawyer. What would we do if we really had to come up against that sort of battle? But also, it's scary because it's alienating. It's like, you have to watch what you're saying, it's almost like if you watch what you're saying, we'll let you back into the view that you can cash in on if you're a quiet ethnic minority. You can cash in on being let into the club. If you don't watch your words, if you're a bit louder and prouder, the threat isn't even a material legal threat, the threat is just this threat of

exclusion or being on the outskirts. Which is kind of more scary in a place that is so dependent on inclusion."

It is admirable that Habiba and her co-interviewee, Yasmin, never wavered on their convictions, even in the face of mounting pressure from their college to yield in their activism. Participants also raised, in Yamuna's words, the "hypocrisy" of the university when comparing their responses to the conflict in Ukraine versus Gaza. Alice hypothesised the reasons why:

> "This is the narrative [about] people of colour who hold very little economic or political leverage; a lot of people have been making parallels to the situation in Ukraine, where a lot of JCRs came to condemn it immediately, or even more recently, the issue of Kathleen Stock coming to the Union. In terms of trans rights, people rally around it, JCRs are so willing to condemn it. And this is not an attack on Ukraine or trans people at all, but I just think that there's such a double standard when it comes to people of colour. I mentioned that in the statement as well, I think we're finding it difficult to empathise with people of colour."

Yasmine and Habiba's comments on the Ukraine-Gaza comparison revealed a deeper truth about activism at Oxford that, in hindsight of responses to the Wellington Square occupation, became even further crystallised:

> Y: "There's activism that's okay and good, and then there's activism that's too much. For example, everyone brings up this comparison, but Ukraine. Everything that was done for Ukraine, they had this concert that was raising money for Ukraine, I'm pretty sure they flew the Ukrainian flag. If we did any of what was done for Ukraine for Palestine, we are obviously seen as too radical, terrorists, and too much, extremists, whatever. Again, even within activism, there's activism that's okay and activism that's too much."
>
> H: "It does actually just directly follow the government line. The UK's foreign policy is one to one with what is acceptable in Oxford … It feels like the University of Oxford is a ministry of our government, the ministry of Oxford, almost. Where it matters, they don't change. Ukraine and Palestine are for sure that. You can be as loud and proud as you want, the minute it's not our accepted position, it's wrong. You'd

like to think a place that claims to challenge accepted positions wouldn't police them so strongly."

Ruby also raised the university's hypocrisy in her first interview, not only in the context of Ukraine, but also relating it to Oxford's imperial history:

> "On the outside, let's publish a list every year of which colleges are meeting sustainability quotas or whatever, and who's doing what and what order of that; let's recycle, let's do a bake sale for Ukraine, but do nothing about actually addressing a refugee crisis and how you've benefited from colonialism. Let's talk about equality and diversity and culture, but let's not give anything back that we've stolen. There's no action, it's all a mouthpiece to make them look good. That's true of every institution and every tenet of the Western world, it's not just specific to Oxford, but when you're in such a place of proximity to an environment that is so entrenched in that elitism and has such a history, when you're in such proximity of it, it is more evident than ever. Actually, it's much more infuriating."

The infuriating nature of Oxford's double standards on select global issues, and what participants view as Oxford's responsibility to address the consequences of geopolitical conflicts on education, reached a critical point when student protestors occupied the university offices of Wellington Square to demand action.

Tipping Point: The Wellington Square Occupation

On 23 May, 2024, protestors affiliated with OA4P began a sit-in at the university offices in Wellington Square, where one of the Vice-Chancellor's offices is located, to demand that the university begin negotiations with OA4P. The university characterised this action as trespassing and called the police within the hour, after which a large police presence accumulated on Little Clarendon Street and seventeen protestors were arrested (Gudge & Mercer-Kelly, 2024). There is visual evidence of the police violently handling protestors, and Oxford's decision to invite police onto its campus began an alarming trend of police violence against pro-Palestine student protestors across the UK (Barker-Singh & Santa Cruz, 2025). The VC was condemned by multiple outlets, including the University and College Union, for her decision to involve the police; the St. Antony's College Graduate Common Room and the

Somerville College JCR motioned to call for the VC's resignation in response to her actions (St. Antony's GCR, 2024; Mathur, 2024).

It was the university's message to all students and staff in response to the occupation, in essence a reprimand of the protestors, that received the most damning criticisms, particularly the final paragraph (University of Oxford, 2024):

> "There is no place in our community for the threatening and violent actions of some of the protesters. This is not how dialogue should be conducted within our university. We are better than this and we do not have to follow others' playbooks. As we have said many times since the conflict arose, we lead by example and there is no place for intolerance at Oxford. We must teach our students how to disagree well and with respect and courtesy and through our many formal and informal channels. This is not how to do it."

The letter was signed by the Vice-Chancellor, senior members of the university administration, including all divisional heads, but notably, by only three heads of colleges representing the Conference of Colleges. The backlash was swift, including from OA4P organisers who refuted the university's claims of non-communication (2024). The university's foremost channel for academic discussion on race, the Race and Resistance flagship programme at TORCH (The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities), wrote the following rebuke in their weekly newsletter the day after the occupation (2024):

> "Yesterday (23/05) OxAct4Pal undertook a peaceful sit in at the University Offices on Wellington Square. In response, the Vice Chancellor, Irene Tracey immediately called the police. After arriving in force, the students agreed to vacate. However, the police refused to let them leave, instead choosing to begin arrests. 16 individuals were arrested. What we witnessed yesterday was the full violence of the state and we are disgusted.
>
> Yesterday evening, the VC sent a harrowing university-wide statement, which entirely misrepresents the events of the day and spreads misinformation. It is clear the VC would rather criminalise, silence, and endanger Oxford staff and students, rather than meaningfully engage with the campaign. OxAct4Pal has our whole support at this time, and we urge everyone else to do the same. VC Tracey — this IS how to do it."

The university's prescription of the 'right way' to do activism illuminates previous findings presented in this thesis, particularly sections 4.4 and 6.5. Their branding of OA4P as 'violent' in their statement is also laden with meaning, as Oxford student Peck-Suzuki explains: "By claiming they do not know who we are, the university's senior leadership have renounced their duty of care. The university has indicated to our aggressors, whether that means the police or the passersby who call us terrorists, that it will do little to protect us" (2024). Although I was in Oxford that day, I was too afraid to attend the rally because, as an international student, I am in the UK on a visa, and if I were to be detained by the police, there would be a threat to my legal status. However, I walked by the blockade of protestors sometime during their three hours of the street sit-in to prevent the police from leaving with the arrested students, and watched their chanting, wishing I were courageous enough to join them. The following final section details my interactions with participants after the events at Wellington Square and their thoughts on what comes next.

"We'll see it. We will remember …"

In the wake of the student arrests at Wellington Square, I reached out to all my former participants to express my solidarity with the encampment and the protestors. I also invited anyone interested to partake in a second follow-up interview to respond to the university's actions, or if they were unable to do so, share a statement with their thoughts. I conducted three follow-up interviews with Leila, Phoebe, and Ruby, and received two written statements. Phoebe was at the Wellington Square protests, though she was not arrested; I asked her how she weighed the risks of her presence as an international student facing the police, to which she replied:

> "At the end of the day, every lawyer who I've spoken to is just like, 'everything you do makes you liable to arrest. Every single thing you do.' And it's just a matter of gauging those risks. My determination was to absolutely not get arrested. Then, I woke up one day, and they were like, 'sit in at Wellington Square, everyone come down and de-arrest.' I was on the phone with several people being like, I don't know if I should go. I thought about it for a long time, and I decided to go. But I genuinely advised multiple people not to go."

Phoebe further said that even if her visa made it too precarious for her to be physically present, continuing her involvement with pro-Palestinian activism was "not even negotiable,"

and she would have found ways to participate remotely. Ruby, whose preferred modes of activism were discussed in 7.6, denounced the university's actions and its refusal to engage in conversations about divestment:

> "I genuinely don't know what they actually want from students. I don't want what they want. Is it for students to shut up and be pacified? But actually, this is our tuition money that you're investing. Like, never mind the fact that it's wrong anyways, but like I think they forget that students do actually have a stake in it. This is actually our money."

Ruby also criticised the university's supposed neutral political position as an educational institution:

> "It's not good enough for the university to say, well, our domain is university. We're offering out scholarships, and we want to collaborate with former universities in Gaza or, you know, with the academic institutions, without acknowledging why you need to be collaborating with them in the first place, why you need these scholarships. They want to act like this is a safe-filled domain where they can feel that it won't cost them anything. But like, if that's your domain, why are you investing in arms sales? If you've got no business in discussing military operations and in discussing sort of like constituting what is genocide, why is your money in arms sales? It's like investing is not political, but de-investing apparently is."

An open letter from the Registrar and Senior Proctor called the Wellington Square protests and a later occupation of the Examination Schools "totally unacceptable" (2024), echoing the language of the VC's earlier letter prescribing acceptable and unacceptable modes of activism. The letter's signatories include the line "For and on behalf of the Chancellor, Masters and Scholars of the University of Oxford" at the end of the statement. Whether this is required as part of formal university communications through an open letter is unclear; it may be another one of Oxford's antiquated traditions. However, the claim to speak for all scholars of the University on this matter reads as a calculated choice, that there is one universal voice of the institution, and it comes from the administration, not the students. Micah's statement in response to the university's actions highlights the insincerity of the university's supposed embrace of free speech:

> "The students of Oxford, and across the globe, showing and acting in support of Palestine gives me such hope for the future and present. The global solidarity efforts and actions are remarkable, but it comes as no surprise institutions across the world, including Oxford, are not showing support, or appreciating the bravery and empathy of people they claim with use their education to become the leaders of the future. I can only hope those who acted in the interest of marginalized and oppressed people facing genocide will be remembered for their actions and not simply the university on their degree, especially since the likelihood that Oxford will attempt to rewrite their support into history within the next few decades seems high."

The potential of Oxford 'rewriting history' was also raised by Ruby, who pointed to the anti-Vietnam War protests (as discussed in 2.3) as an example:

> "Now you realise it's going to cost you something, as soon as it's going to socially cost Oxford, and then not cost them monetarily, watch them flip. We'll see it. I mean, you see how they talk about Vietnam, where literally opposite the encampment, it still says 'hands off Vietnam'. We'll see it. We will remember, and we'll be here to say, actually, no."

Ruby's assertion underscores the importance of not only institutional memory but also activist memory, which OA4P has sought to maintain through the upkeep of its social media accounts, amplifying news from Gaza, and hosting community events. On the first anniversary of the encampment, OA4P released a statement reiterating their demands to the university and emphasised that though the physical camp no longer exists, the aims of its political campaign remain intact (OA4P, 2025). The continual operations of OA4P serves as an example of the shifting legacies of student activism, where they "extend the encampments in the wake of their dispersal, amid their continued criminalization, to offer — if not blueprints — then lessons for those us still gripped by the old revolutionary inquiry into the relationship between theory and action" (Wind & Elhalby, 2025, 409). Returning to Dasha et al.'s (2024) telling of the Columbia University encampments, the authors' analysis of how universities fracture and repress student activist movements also applies to the Oxford context: "It is tremendously beneficial to the university to shift the battleground into their offices, relying on their students' inculcation into liberal ideas of dialogue and changemaking as a tool by which to undermine actions that truly pose a threat to the university's financial interests" (510).

As I write this section, the war in Gaza rages on after more than two years since the 7 October attacks, with more than 67,000 Palestinians killed, including 20,000 children (Ali et al., 2025). Academics across the world have been censored for supporting Palestine and pressuring their institutions to divest from genocide (Fúnez-Flores, 2024; Hajir & Qato, 2025; Deeb & Winegar, 2024). Oxford have made some inroads to support displaced scholars from Gaza and the West Bank (2024) but have not addressed other elements of its complicities, especially in relation to the critiques of its investment portfolio.[98] The lawns of the Radcliffe Camera and the Pitt Rivers Museum have been returned to their former states, as if the encampments never existed. Tourists now take photos without the encumbrance of fences blocking their vista of the Ancient University, and ancient it remains. I align with Phoebe's view on the impacts of the OA4P encampment:

> "I think that this is just one step in a much longer struggle. I see this as a very long-term project."

The mobilisation Oxford and the world witnessed from students, staff, and community members in support of Palestine, of the encampment, of student voice in the spring of 2024, was a testament to the power of student activism. It forced universities to reckon with their complicities in violence and question to whom they were accountable: their students or their investments? It remains to be seen whether HEIs will listen to student demands and heed their calls to divest from genocide, but I end with Wind and Elhalaby's (2025) assessment on the revolutionary impacts of the global student uprisings for Palestine:

> "[Students] refuse to inherit a university that so narrowly defines the category of the human. They dare to use their years in higher education not merely to understand the world but also prepare to transform it" (409).

7.8 Solidarity and coalition politics

This final section of analysis concentrates on the manifold ways in which solidarity and coalitional politics are understood and implemented by women of colour student activists. While there exist many definitions of solidarity, I foreground Ahmed's (2004, 189) interpretation:

[98] The School of Geography and the Environment at Oxford has established a Palestine-Oxford scholarship, developed with local support from Gaza institutions, starting in 2026 (2025).

> "Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground."

Olufemi designates solidarity as a 'doing word' which, at its core, is based on mutual aid, "the idea that we give our platforms, resources, legitimacy, voices, skills to one another to try and defeat oppressive conditions" (2020, 136). She further names three dimensions of solidarity: the symbolic, the practical, and the aesthetic, categories through which this section is structured to illuminate the experiences of women of colour students at Oxford. In the symbolic sphere, WoC at Oxford articulate the purposes of their activism that extend beyond the length of their degree, and the significance of the foundations they built for future WoC students to continue their labour. In a practical sense, WoC acknowledge the limitations of activist change possible at Oxford and offer their lived experiences as documentation for the tangible contributions to the cultural and attitudinal changes at the university. To conclude, I offer an analysis of the aesthetics of solidarity at Oxford, which Olufemi describes as "the beauty that arises from instances of solidarity [that] evokes emotive responses that make us feel like it is possible to change the world as we know it" (2020, 136). The aesthetics of solidarity for women of colour at Oxford are often intangible and fleeting, but nonetheless summon alternative, just futures for their communities.

Symbolic solidarity: Oxford as static, community as dynamic

WoC Oxford activists come to realise, through their experience of organising at the university, that the symbolism of their activism does not require the immediate transformation of the university. Instead, community serves as the focal point of building liberatory futures, which may begin during their time at Oxford, but whose tenure will survive even after they leave the institution. Arya reflects on the value of forging these relationships in solidarity:

> "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."

Notably, Arya describes the 'feeling' of material change *as* the connections she shares with those she met through her activism. The importance given to relationships, especially between women of colour, allowed WoC like Phoebe to "validate" their experiences of Oxford. This sentiment was echoed by Leila during our interview, where she lamented the fact that we did not meet organically through a shared community, but instead through an EDI event hosted by the university:

> "Often, I don't know if this is your case, most of my relationships that have worked very well, friendships, moments where I've had love and support have come from extreme suffering first. I had to get to the EDI event from being MCR Welfare Officer to meet Georgia. Why couldn't I just meet Georgia at an event where we had a cup of tea? It's lovely that we've gotten to this point, but you know … I think my conclusion on that is, what do we expect from an institution like this? What does change mean for you and I? I've long given up on dreams of revolution. The change I see within this institution are small moments of life, like sitting with my sister and discussing."

The "small moments of life" that buoy WoC students at Oxford can also look like realising how their communities have shifted their meaning of belonging to stretch beyond designated spaces like the ACS, as Ella did after meeting other women of colour at Oxford (including Albertina, a fellow research participant):

> "I think especially with having met Albertina, and having already kind of had this pleasant surprise of coming to Oxford, in like, the accessibility of diverse spaces and kind of, it not being a struggle, I was all of a sudden like, oh my gosh, maybe I don't need to attend every Afro-Caribbean Society event. Not that I wouldn't want to, but that like, I kind of found a community outside of that, and if people wanted to head to something, or go to something together, like share whatever, then I kind of had people to do that with."[99]

In reflecting on her hopes for the university, Tundra also conveyed the solidarity felt between her peers in relation to their collective Oxford experience:

[99] Ella and Albertina met each other and were friends prior to the research beginning, but referred to one another during their interviews.

> "I definitely do [have hope], I just want to articulate it right. I hope that Oxford recognises the need to change, and if it doesn't in time, I hope it's forced to. I hope, cause I do feel like my experiences and my struggles in Oxford aren't unique at all, and that's one of the reasons why I think you can form such close relationships with people, because we're all struggling, we're all suffering, like it sucks. But for some reason, it doesn't feel like those struggles matter … everyone's going through it."

The symbolism of solidarity can include displays of struggle, but Micah notes that solidarity requires the labour of more than just women of colour and those on the margins to be realised:

> "A lot of people say this about women of colour, and like, they're our 'saviours'. And I'm like, ew, no. I think women of colour with an understanding of history and a willingness to acknowledge solidarity, how identity plays into everything, can only ever come into a space and improve it."

The goal of improving spaces *through* acts of solidarity within activist movements is how women of colour operationalised their formations of practical solidarity at Oxford.

Practical solidarity: Oxford as it is

Solidarity in practice positions women of colour as agents of change, owning and amending its processes as movements progress. The boundaries of practical solidarities possible at Oxford can be delimited by financial or logistical realities, but WoC wield agency in how they choose to communicate their solidarities within the interstices of Oxford's institutional constraints. For Iman, solidarity looks like care through mutual aid and the intimacy of communing with her friends:

> "[Solidarity] can be as simple as giving your friend a home-cooked meal, bringing back a present for your friend from their home country if they didn't get to go, but they've gone, 'oh, I've really missed this one dessert that I had, gula melaka', and I'm going to Malaysia and they're not, I'll pick some up for you. It's very small things like that, as well as supporting in discussion, having positive, open, respectful discussion, all of that. Running a magazine, anything. It can be very small and big at the same time … I think solidarity for me is also about connection, who I'm able to connect with. It's not really about advice, it's kind of about being with someone and saying

that I understand to the best of my ability your pain and your trauma and your experiences and who you are."

Holly, as President of the Women of Colour Society, contends with the finite resources available at the university and contemplates potential collaborations with other organisations dedicated to marginalised students:

> "This is probably the only society that exists that is only for women of colour, but I do think that is reasonable because there aren't that many, so it wouldn't really make sense to have WoC officers in the JCR or anything, like there is for women or for racial minorities. But I definitely think there's a place for those two people, those two groups, to collaborate to create more of those spaces, which can be difficult. For example, there's a women's officer and there's a D&E [Diversity and Equalities] officer. A lot of the times both of them won't be women of colour, so they won't necessarily have that experience, so they won't be able to hold those events, but I do think it would be good for them to consult women of colour and their experiences to have more of those spaces, maybe like a joint college one could be good, just to make sure that there's enough people there."

A practical way Holly envisions solidarity is the creation and maintenance of spaces within the university that preserve solidarities cultivated between, for example, WoC and students of colour as a whole. For Micah, solidarity can involve not only conspiring with others but also allowing for contradictions within her communities:

> "I think there are different pockets of community that I can find in which we are relating in a common experience. That's like enough of what we're going through that we aren't fighting about it, cause I think sometimes people relate or we're not unproductively interacting about it. Because I think, of course, my friends and I, who I find in my community disagree, don't think the same way. I think the ability to have like productive, helpful, kind, conversation, whether it's agreement or disagreement or venting or whatever it is, is kind of central to my definition of community. And so I think part of that, too, is like standing up for people, standing with people, actually, because I think standing up for implies a control of the narrative that really belongs to the person that things are happening to."

The embrace of differing but aligned visions of liberation in activist movements has a rich legacy, summed up by Black feminist Barbara Smith, a co-founder of the Combahee River Collective:

> "Ultimately, any kind of separatism is a dead end. It's good for forging identity and gathering strength, but I do feel that the strongest politics are coalition politics that cover a broad base of issues. There is no way that one oppressed group is going to topple a system by itself. Forming principled coalitions around specific issues is very important. You don't necessarily have to like or love the people you're in coalition with" (Smith & Smith, 2021, 124).

The implementation of practical solidarity acts can lead to stronger coalitional politics, as WoC performed small and large gestures of solidarity for their communities in resistance to the separatist nature of Oxford's organisational structure.

Aesthetic solidarity: Oxford, and the world, as it could be

The aesthetics of solidarity for WoC students imagines futures of Oxford realised through both incremental and monumental changes. I contextualise the futures proposed by women of colour with Bhambra and Margree's (2010) concept of a politics oriented towards a tomorrow wherein identity politics will no longer be required, by re-theorising identity as "that which is continually produced and reproduced by political projects in the present, and on the basis of a shared vision of the future" (59). WoC are selective in the communities they build to pursue solidarity, and those like Ming choose to operate in circles outside of institutional parameters:

> "It's in communities where you can envision, that's where the hope is. I think sometimes when we're just fighting and fighting against the institution, we can kind of get lost. It's actually when you come together as a community and you talk and envision a future, and you become hopeful, especially with creative people and artists, you can think of — basically, what I'm saying is that when you work outside the box or you think outside the box, everything is so much more hopeful and happy and pleasurable than when you try and stick in it. And obviously you have to stick in it to try and make a little bit of change, but we very much found that when we just put down all of this stuff and do our own thing or try and create these spaces that are slightly more detached, that's where the actual joy comes."

Within the institution, WoC strive for a solidarity imbued with previously discussed elements of pleasure, pride, and joy — intimate affects of activism that arise out of a shared struggle. Charlie describes the tacit acknowledgement she feels with other WoC she does not know:

> "I'm just like, look at us, I'm so proud. So even though at times I do feel isolated, I know there are people around. Sometimes I'll literally go on the street, and I'll see another Black girl over there, and I see her college puffer, and she sees mine, and we're looking at each other, and we're just doing like a silent 'yeah, okay, we both get it.' I just feel there is a sense of collectiveness in those spaces, even when I do feel isolated, and I'm really happy that they're there."

I conclude contributions from my participants with a quote from Leila, whose honest assessment of her Oxford experience compared to her hopes for future women of colour serves as a poignant close to my analysis:

> "I truly, truly hope for a form of belonging. I'm talking about belonging in moments like this. I'm talking about belonging in spaces, belonging with a friend, with a sister, and feeling like they belong completely and entirely. Not like they have to change, because that happens within groups of women of colour, unfortunately, chang[ing] the way they act, the way they talk, the way they carry themselves. Even the things they talk about, and that's why 'women of colour' is misnominal, almost, because it all depends on nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, so many things. I hope they find that space, a safe space, which actually doesn't mean a hijabi being with another hijabi. That's not enough. A Black person being with a Black person, it's not enough. It's finding those people who will treat you and value you dearly and re-energise you."

The re-energisation is necessary to achieving sustainable, impactful activist movements, ones that can hold micro and macro victories for social change as consequential to our shared liberation. Such transformations may not be possible at Oxford, as many WoC students impressed upon me, but they believe it is worth trying.

Solidarity is alive

To end my analysis, I return to the formidable feminist thinkers who have informed my research and weave their writings as accompaniment to the experiences of women of

colour students at Oxford. As Leila stressed, kinship and solidarity between women of colour are not automatically guaranteed based on shared experiences of racialisation. In her interview, Kushi admitted that a queer woman of colour caused her the most interpersonal and professional issues during her time as an SU campaign co-chair. She then confessed that her candour in sharing her negative feelings about another WoC made her feel like a "bad person" for holding another woman of colour responsible. Even so, Kushi's story proves that solidarities based on collective marginalisation are not promised. Building coalitions larger than the sisterhood of women of colour, a historical term in twentieth-century feminist thought whose critiques are charted by Mitra (2023), requires a twenty-first-century approach to solidarity, a solidarity reflective of its foundations in feminist organising and that understands our underlying yearning for a better world. In Kuo's writing on the pursuit of solidarity in activist movements, she declares that "there is a revolutionary and radical politics inherent in uncertainty and not knowing all the answers — we can be open to future possibilities without knowing exactly where we're going" (2025, 200). Women of colour students, activists, and friends have shown me what it means to fight for "the possibility of living" (Mitra, 2023, 450) through our collective solidarities. In the face of the ongoing violences in the world, women of colour teach us how to be alive.

Chapter 8: Discussion

"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."

— Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Decolonising Methodologies (2021, 4)

This thesis argues that women of colour students are agentic, empowered actors of change in HEIs who engage with varied forms of activism to enact micro and macro-level transformations during their time at university. Through conceptual lenses of intersectional feminist theory, women of colour feminisms, and critical university studies, my research found that WoC students at the University of Oxford possess acute understandings of how their gendered and racialised identities influence their experiences of studying and activism at university. Assessing the intersections of their multifaceted identities in tandem with their lived experiences in the elite — and therefore also racialised and gendered — environment of Oxford proved that WoC counter and actively resist ongoing legacies of colonialism and oppression in their educational environment. I address the outcomes of my research questions (RQs) and posit a theory of student activism by women of colour *as* collectives of solidarity to conclude this discussion.

RQ 1. How do women of colour student activists negotiate their collective and individual positionalities and politics at Oxford?

WoC students at Oxford negotiate their gendered and racialised positionalities by growing and learning about their identities whilst at university. For many participants, attending university was the first time they felt the weight of racialisation, especially when they took on representative roles in their activism, due to the demographics of their homes being more ethnically diverse, or they had not previously encountered such overt intersections of class and racial privilege until they arrived at Oxford. Though the majority of my participants said they had not experienced explicit racism at Oxford, the impact of microaggressions on their lived experiences should not be minimised. Moreover, the sharpening of their positionalities in relation to gender and race often catalysed their involvement in localised student activism; that is, activities pertinent to improving their experiences of Oxford, such as running for roles on JCRs. Their thought processes on what constituted student activism, and thereby their collective and individual identities in relation to activism, also evolved throughout their time at university. For some, the student

encampments for Palestine and the university's response to pro-Palestinian activism in general galvanised WoC into identifying as activists in a markedly political sense. For others, activism was innate to their identities before attending university and thus informed their positionalities as activists and political actors in the specific spatial geographies of Oxford. Others still had a tenuous relationship with, or outright rejected, the activist label for fear of it being unearned, or they had negative connotations with the term. The 'Quiet Supporter' type often falls into the latter category of students who do not claim the activist label and serve as an emblem of 'quiet activism' (Pottinger, 2017), which broadens the definitions and meanings of student activism.

RQ 2. What are the ways in which they engage with student activism at Oxford and why?

WoC at Oxford engaged with formal and informal forms of activism throughout their time at Oxford, with some viewing their remit as contained within their communities in the institution (for example, their college or society), and others extending their reach beyond the university to communicate with prospective students, such as other women or students of colour, through access and outreach work. Activities in each mode of engagement were challenged by the temporal constraints of student activism, wherein the length of a degree is not enough time to witness end-to-end changes, especially due to the decentralised nature of Oxford's collegiate system. Yet the pride and sustenance WoC gained from their activist activities, in tandem with the tangible, short-term changes they instituted, were nevertheless integral to strengthening their student experiences. The value of engaging with student activism was profound for WoC. It enhanced a sense of collectivity with their peers, in their shared adversities and successes as marginalised students attempting to improve the antiquated conditions some faced at Oxford. Most WoC who participated through university-sanctioned channels of activism, including serving as common room representatives, university society leaders, or ambassadors for widening access, fall into the 'Activist Hopeful' type, where they acknowledged their desire for activism and change but did not wholeheartedly embrace the label.

RQ 3. How does the institutional environment of Oxford affect their student experience as women of colour?

Regardless of perceived or actual racial representation in its administration and faculty, how the University of Oxford reproduces the structural and affective conditions of whiteness

as the norm directly impacts women of colour students. WoC noted the spatial politics of certain Oxford spaces that were more imbued with institutional colonial histories and affective legacies of whiteness than others, and instead carved out 'safe' spaces through their participation in student societies, such as the Feminist Society, which had clearly expressed and aligned values not guaranteed in other arenas of the institution. Safe spaces were value-laden and not only physically but also emotionally safe, where uncomfortable discourse could occur, contrary to the depictions of university students as 'coddled' when they initiate calls against injustices (Linder et al., 2019). Furthermore, WoC established distinctions between 'institutional' spaces, such as their tutorials or the Oxford Union, and student-led spaces, like societies or common rooms, as part of why and where they chose to expend their labour or build community. WoC also emphasised the internal barriers to change at Oxford, both attitudinal and structural, and attributed the institution's reluctance to transformation to its desire to preserve its elite, historical image. Participants who actively challenged the homogeneity of institutional environments, emblematic of an Oxford of the past, not its present, did so through their intentionally curated communities as 'Peer Champions' of empowerment and welfare.

RQ 4. How do women of colour build community and create meaning-making narratives at Oxford through student activism?

The crux of this thesis lies with the power engendered by women of colour students through the communities they built as part of activism. Women of colour students conduct activism, in its many forms, with conviction and passion for change, and the support they provide for one another is critical for resisting and surviving the university. Their goals are oriented towards building community spaces for and alongside one another that serve them throughout their time at Oxford and beyond. The conscientiousness of WoC activist communities to relate their university experiences to global affairs, advocating for more inclusive curricula, and reimagining activism to encompass intersectional, accessible forms of education simultaneously reinforces their autonomy and collectivity as an organising bloc. WoC students also recognise that change is bigger than the University of Oxford, whether or not they continue as activists after graduation. By viewing Oxford as a reflection of national and international discourse on pertinent political and social issues, WoC can translate the lessons of solidarity and coalitional activism learned at university onto future endeavours. At the heart of activism is the desire for joy, which does not have to be congruent across all WoC communities. WoC students at Oxford are not afraid to 'kill joy', as "there can be joy in

killing joy. And kill joy we must, and we do" (Ahmed, 2010, 592). The 'joy' that requires killing at Oxford, identified by WoC, includes its Eurocentric norms and, more recently, a narrative of political neutrality in contrast with its financial portfolios entangled with global conflicts.

8.1 Student Activists as Changemakers

One of the primary contributions of this research is the argument that student activist movements in UK universities must be taken seriously, without dismissal or infantilisation, as organisers are doing crucial work to challenge outdated institutional norms. Though the most public examples of student activism in recent memory were the global pro-Palestine encampments that swept campuses in 2024, quiet moments of activism continue to take place alongside a reimagining of what meaningful activism looks like. My work adds to the broader body of literature on the diverse modalities of activism, what Gülsüm Acar and Melis Uluğ (2022) call "multi-level outcomes" (34) of collective action that are crucial to sustaining engagement in activism. Moreover, as I addressed in the literature review, much of the existing scholarly works on student activism have been published in an American context or focused on the experiences of faculty of colour. As the HE landscape in the US faces increasingly volatile political attacks on academic freedom and diversity initiatives, and as UK institutions are being denigrated for being too 'woke' or offering 'Mickey Mouse' degrees (Bhopal & Myers, 2023; Gibbons, 2026) — often categorised as arts, humanities, and social sciences courses deemed incapable of contributing to a capitalist society — research on collective resistance is as timely as ever.[100] This work also offers a more nuanced perspective by focusing on women of colour students and the ramifications of classism, misogyny, racism, and other oppressions on the student experience. If we are to continue valuing elite institutions such as Oxbridge as the pinnacle of academic success, we must continue to question their relevance, purpose, and suitability for the contemporary student activist. Perhaps transformational change cannot occur at Oxford in our lifetime; WoC students' attempts over the past ten years have yielded immense personal and collective growth for the student movement, but less so in material or policy changes by the university. Nevertheless, student activist movements have proven that they cannot be ignored, and there is power in channelling one's identity as motivation for engaging with activism.

[100] For reporting on political attacks on American HE, see the American Association of University Professors (2025); Rippenberger et al. (2025); and the Scholars at Risk Network (2025).

My research also adds to the growing discipline of scholar-activism and expands its definition to include students, especially as my postgraduate student participants were engaged in both scholarship and activism during their degrees, even if they were not aware of the label. Viewing scholar-activist literature as a foundation from which HE studies can evolve, one which prioritises the voices of students, not institutions, opens possibilities for new conceptions of the university. Though universities remain ivory towers, with Oxford's spires as a patent example, by looking to the experiences of WoC students highlighted in this thesis in tandem with scholar-activist literature (Connelly & Joseph-Salisbury, 2025; Philipson Garcia et al., 2025; Stephens & Bagelman, 2023), the academy can be reshaped — however slowly — to become institutions worthy of praise.[101] Whilst I implore universities to take the demands of student activists seriously, it comes with the twin stipulation that students — especially women of colour and other marginalised students — are not only listened to as tokens, nor as gestures to parade institutional diversity. My analysis has repeatedly emphasised the emotional, social, and physical toll activism inflicts upon WoC in an Oxford environment that systemically remains more likely to exclude, not include, their experiences. The qualitative interviews I conducted in my research add to the testimonials collected by Ahmed (2021), Bhopal & Myers (2023), and Kwoba et al. (2018) on the student activist experience in UK universities, as well as bolstering the potency of intersectional feminist research methods previously elucidated by Mirza & Nyhagen (2024), Rutter et al. (2024), and Brannelly & Barnes (2022).

Finally, I return to my theories of activism as presented through the activist profiles matrix, first introduced in 4.6, in conjunction with the typologies of activism from 5.1, summarised by the following four vignettes of WoC participants illustrating the connections between the two concepts through each exemplar diagram. Each participant is an activist, if not in name but in their activities, and it is not my place to assign a value judgment on the parameters of their activism or deem any as 'not enough'. Regardless of the 'success' of student activist movements, the overwhelming takeaway from WoC participants is the fulfilment, joy, and community they experienced as a result of their engagement with activism. Each vignette presents unique facets of student activism that can be undertaken by WoC in the future or as models of participation from which to amplify activist desires of

[101] See also Bashiri et al. (2025) for how scholar-activism has been studied across disciplines.

marginalised communities.

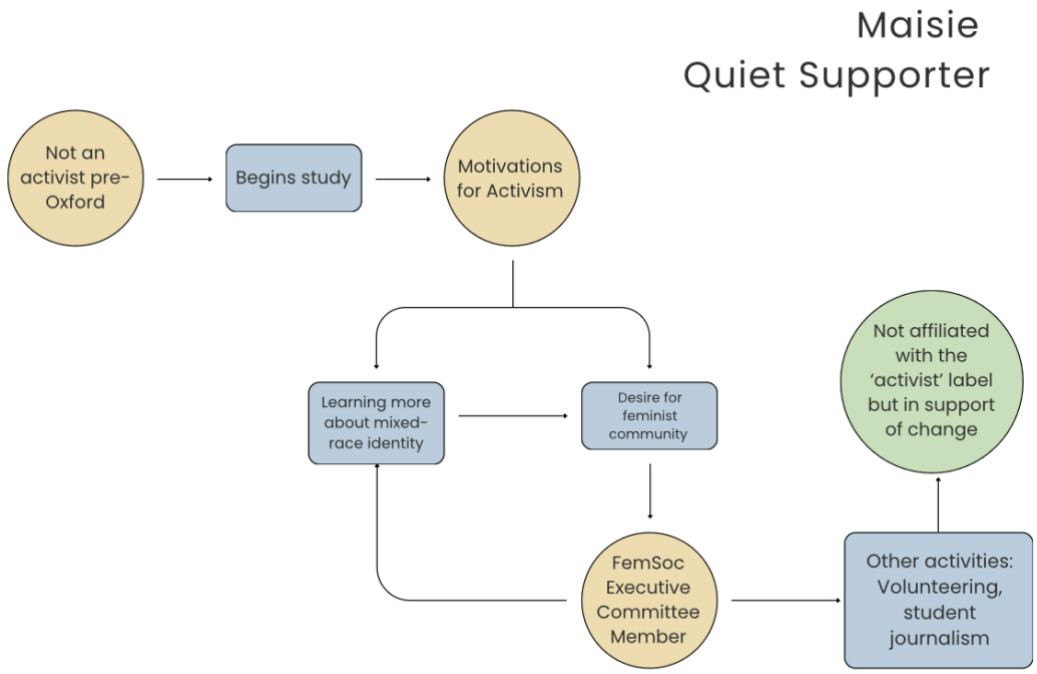


Figure 3. Maisie as a 'Quiet Supporter' and examples of motivations for activism.

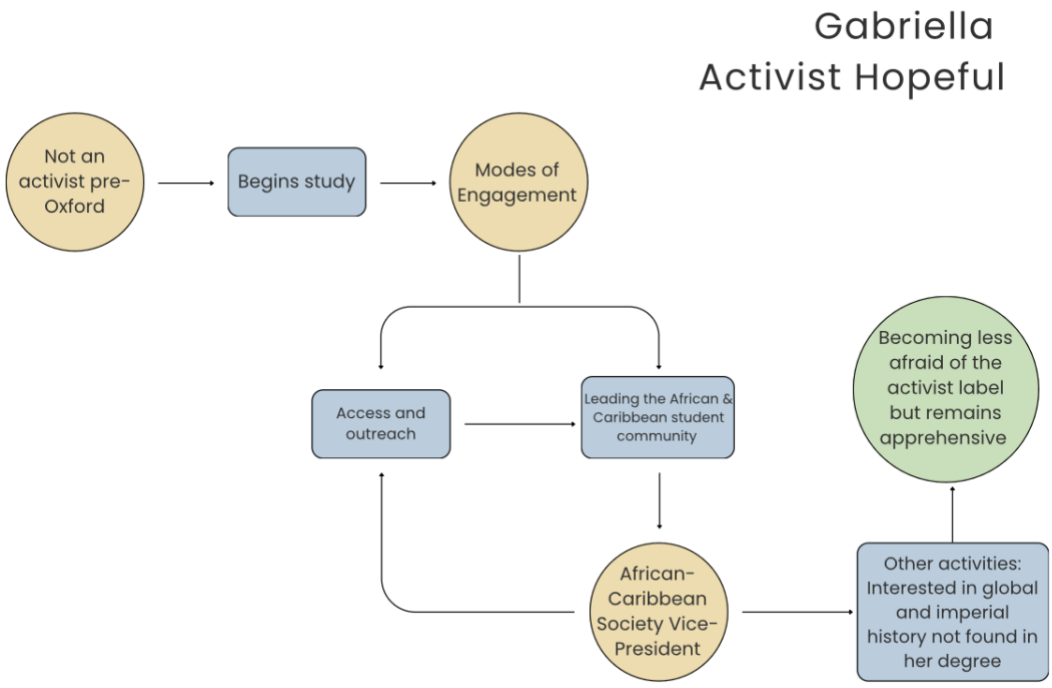


Figure 4. Gabriella as an 'Activist Hopeful' and examples of modes of engagement.

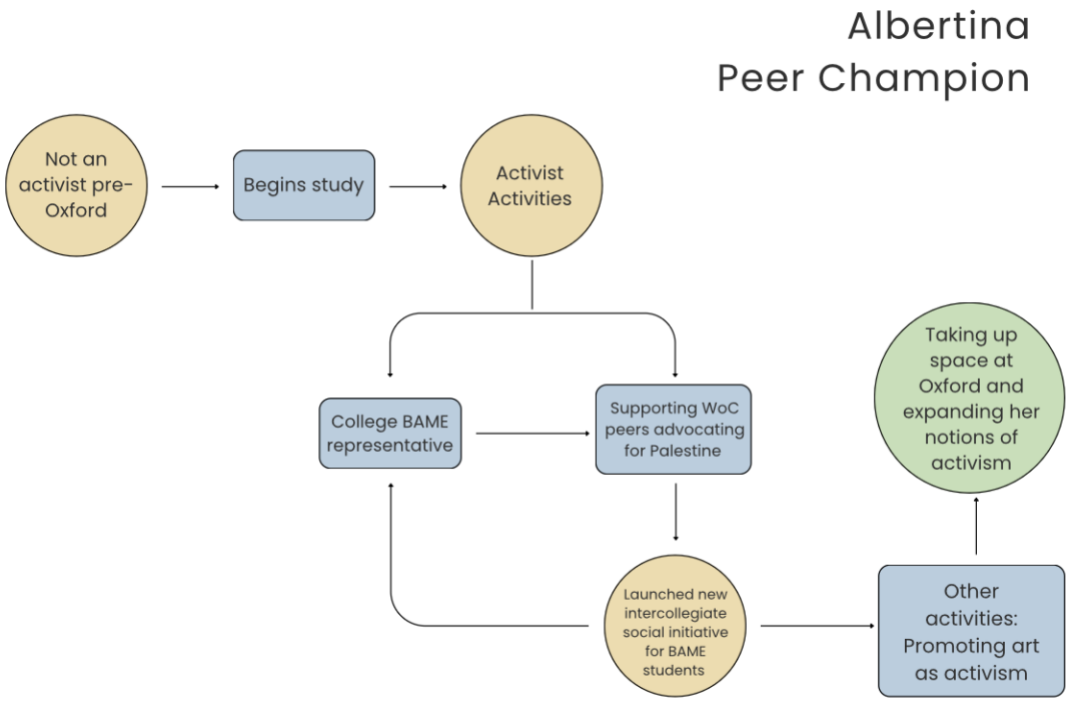
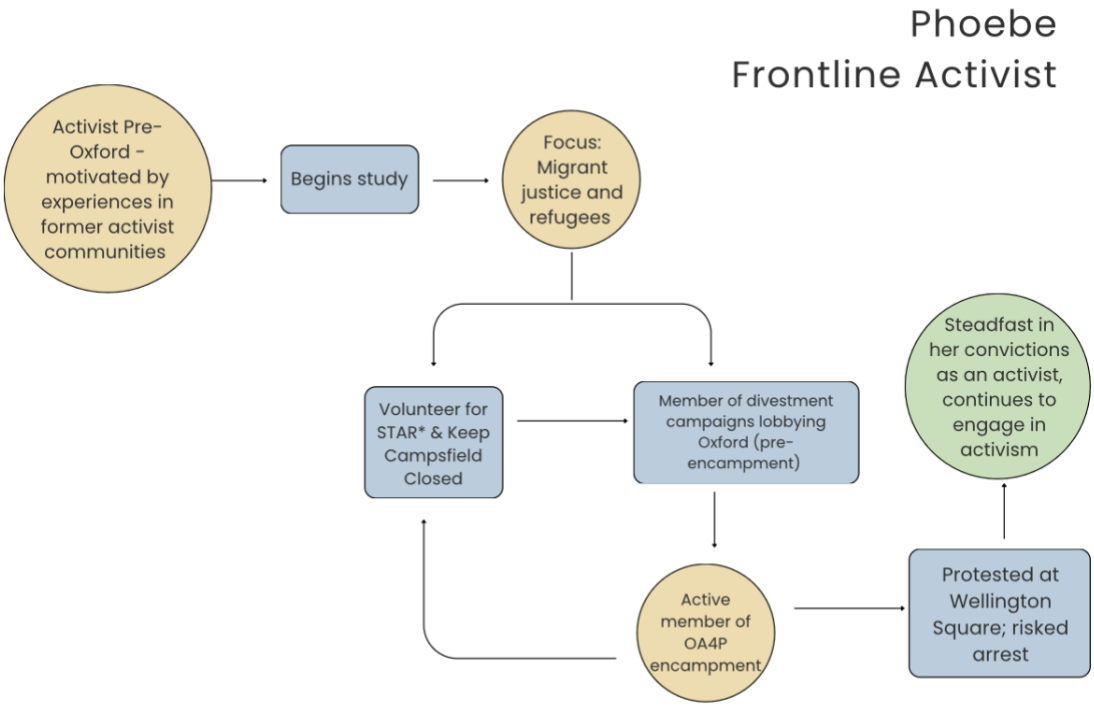


Figure 5. Albertina as a 'Peer Champion' and examples of activist activities.



STAR: Student Action for Refugees; Coalition to Keep Campsfield Closed (immigrant/asylum detention centre in Oxfordshire)

Figure 6. Phoebe as a 'Frontline Activist' at the vanguard of transformation change, beginning at Oxford and continuing globally, alongside a summary of her motivations, activities, and roles.

8.2 Towards Collectives of Solidarity

By understanding women of colour in the UK HE context as dynamic and influential organising collectives pursuing manifold avenues of transformation, we can imagine new, just futures of education that do not rely solely on institutional reform. Building upon the activist typologies and profiles, I propose a theory of women of colour activists as collectives of solidarity, wherein they enact three intertwined elements of activism in pursuit of their shared goals: 1) agency; 2) kinship; and 3) community. I envision these as theoretical layers upon which collectives of solidarity are achieved (see Figure 7). The stages do not have to be successive; however, my research indicates that WoC university students follow a trajectory of first growing their individual sense of agency and identity, which leads to them seeking out kinship with other WoC through affinity-based groups such as student societies, and finally to engaging with activism as participants or leaders. Together, these components weave a theory of WoC engagement in activism as collectives of solidarity, grounded in not only shared struggles but shared visions of the future, as the bedrock of their activism.

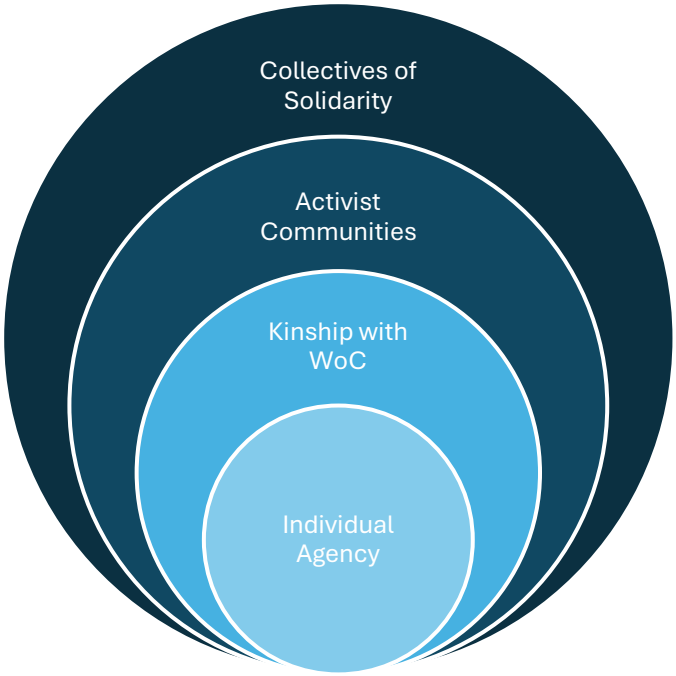


Figure 7. Illustrated theory of collectives of solidarity as a series of non-linear stages of activist engagement.

WoC students' agency formation at university is the focus of the first stage. Agency can include personal growth, political awakenings, or a desire to further explore intersecting identities (Paschou & Durán Mogollón, 2024). For example, there exists research on the identity developments of queer university students of colour (Duran, 2021; Wagh, 2025), where meaning-making is the crux of becoming agentic individuals with a strong sense of

self. At Oxford, WoC came to claim agency after being thrust into the racialised spaces of the institution, as I discussed in 4.3.

Similar catalysts, often as a result of recognising one's separation from the normative Oxford student, lead to WoC then seeking out kinship spaces with fellow WoC in the second stage. The wide array of settings in which kinship emerges can be casual, such as finding other students of colour in one's course or college, or more formal, such as joining societies dedicated to supporting students from specific ethnic backgrounds (such as ACS), designed to foster kinship through care networks.[102] This desire is exemplified through histories of political organising – Anim-Addo (2014) writes that Black British feminism is rooted in affiliative political and social kinship structures, emphasising the *quality* of such support networks offered by other Black feminists compared to white spaces. At Oxford, some WoC participants described the quality of institutional supports, such as welfare or pastoral provisions, as insufficient in addressing the intersections of racialisation and gender and its impacts on their university experiences. The shortages of WoC-specific spaces led to the foundation of societies like WocSoc, whose marker of quality lies in its ability to act as protected, safe spaces where the conditions of WoC students' presence at Oxford are not questioned, but welcomed. As WoC learn more about themselves, they are spurred on to grow and enact their knowledge of shared histories by then creating or joining communities of activism.

In the HE context, WoC take on student leadership roles and engage in campus politics, thus forming and expanding their kinship networks to aligned movements and forging relationships with non-WoC, such as white allies with more institutional power. For WoC students who have reached this theoretical third stage, community can look like us sitting together on a college quad and talking about our upbringings, or it can be forming a reading group dedicated to works by authors of colour to contrast against a Eurocentric curriculum. Community does not have to be a physical gathering; it does not even have to be a tangible action (Lewis, 2020). Instead, communities of activism concentrate on the ways in which their communal values can be implemented in practice, with an idea of community as "common ground … this ground that is 'common' is an *effect* of the meetings we have with

[102] Acevedo et al. (2022) offer an aligned model of 'accessible kinship' through enacting disability justice praxis in and against the neoliberal academy.

others and the tread of the feet that are weary across the land – a treading that shapes the land to come and allows it to surface differently" (Ahmed & Fortier, 2003, 257). It can be a refusal of neoliberal academic norms through an embrace of slow methodologies, or it can be a public demonstration of dissent through a protest march.

The interconnected, multi-directional notions of agency, kinship, and community link to form a theory of WoC as collectives of solidarity, where one element does not supersede another, and there is no requirement to be fully realised in any sphere to participate with meaning and care for one another. Solidarity becomes an affective, felt experience for WoC student activists, with its transnational feminist origins realised today as "an ethics based in mutual exchange" (Mitra, 2023, 449). Collectives of solidarity builds on Ahmed's complaint collectives (2021) as groups rooted in shared lived experiences that channel the power of solidarity, intent on affirming its members' strengths and resiliencies. They serve as kinship networks between WoC and allies, whether in the face of institutional indifference to sexual violence (Ahmed, 2021), or opportunities to "harvest our collective intelligence" as Mirza asserts about the Black British feminist movement (2015, 1). It is by envisioning and actualising these collectives that we can embody a politics of care towards university students, which seeks to transcend the "destructive drives of our neoliberal half-century" that have damaged the HE sector without 'carewashing' the labour required to survive in academia (Littler, 2025, 244). I propose that, in addition to the construction of students as earners, consumers, citizens, current and future workers, and socialites posited by Brooks and O'Shea (2021), we can foreground the needs of WoC students and regard their lived experiences as a group worthy of extensive study precisely because we occupy the intersections of race, gender, and other axes of oppression that facilitates a felt understanding of activism.

Moreover, a paradigm of critical university studies that is attuned to how WoC engage in activism, making calculated choices in the dimensions of their lives as students, individuals, and collectives, broadens the possibilities of the university as not merely an institution, mired — as Oxford is — in the messiness and complexity of history, but one brimming with undisciplined hope. I use 'undisciplined' in Garcia-Rojas' (2017) terms, meaning "the deployment of a language of self and an ethics of survival that emerges from the core of [women of colour's] experiences" to inform women of colour feminisms (267). By constructing WoC students as collaborators in collectives of solidarity, universities

striving to emulate Oxford can do so through more than admiring its academic accolades, to instead listen and value the voices of women of colour student activists as guides for how to best champion a university's greatest asset: its students.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

Claudia Tate: What can you share with the younger generation of black women writers and writers in general?

Audre Lorde: Not to be afraid of difference. To be real, tough, loving. And to recognize each other. I can tell them not to be afraid to feel and not to be afraid to write about it. Even if you are afraid, do it anyway because we learn to work when we are tired, so we can learn to work when we are afraid. Silence never brought us anything. Survive and teach; that's what we've got to do and to do it with joy.

— Black Women Writers at Work (2023, 152)

Collectives in/of Solidarity: Student Activism by Women of Colour at the University of Oxford explored the lived experiences of WoC students and their engagement in student activism by employing a mixed qualitative methods study over a year-long fieldwork period. Through in-depth narrative interviews with 47 current and former WoC students and critical ethnographic site visits with two student societies, the Oxford Feminist Society and the Women of Colour Society, this thesis investigated four key dimensions of WoC student activism through the theoretical lenses of intersectional feminism, women of colour feminisms, and critical university studies. First, I developed an understanding of how WoC conceptualised their racialised and gendered identities and positionalities as Oxford students, in the context of the university's complex histories and its modern-day legacies. I argued that there exist multiple and overlapping activist identities for WoC students and outlined their varying relationships with activism. Second, I presented WoC students' modes of engagement in activism at university and proposed a framework for a typology of WoC student activism that encompassed their motivations, roles, and activities. I discussed different engagement avenues at numerous scales, from college-level to university-wide activism, and narrower foci, including access and outreach initiatives and anti-sexual violence activism.

Third, I analysed the spatial politics of Oxford's institutional environment and its repercussions on WoC student activism efforts, weaving in my ethnographic fieldwork to supplement the interview data to discern how WoC viewed 'safe' spaces, the affective environments associated with imposterism and classism, and their perspectives on the institution's constructed barriers and responses to activism. Finally, I concluded my analysis by highlighting the individual and collective strengths of WoC student activism and how they shaped communities and solidarities with one another through their involvement in activism. I posit that, irrespective of their unique roles or titles in student activism, WoC derive meaning and fulfilment from being in community together, especially in the face of

institutional opposition to change. A politics of solidarity and coalition-building that student activism, led by women of colour, can have reverberations institutionally and on a larger global scale to challenge oppressive systems of power and imagine new worlds and ways of being.

9.1 Research contributions and recommendations

Scholarly contributions

This study makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the experiences of WoC students and student activism through rigorous qualitative research in the context of UK HEIs. It adds to the growing body of literature that researches other marginalised subjects in British HE, such as investigations of Black students' experiences and resistance efforts in HE (Osbourne et al., 2023; Dattatreyan & Mehta, 2020), religious minority students (Mahmud & Islam, 2024; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021), refugee students (Lambrechts, 2020; Odette et al., 2019), and care-experienced students and student carers (Evans, 2025; Ellis & Johnston, 2024). The proliferation of studies on marginalised communities in the field of HE signals a wider interdisciplinary shift to centre previously overlooked perspectives and the need to interrogate enduring systems of power. This is particularly resonant for universities characterised as 'elite' in the UK, namely Oxbridge and the research-intensive member institutions of the Russell Group (2025). My research is as much a critique of the University of Oxford as it is of the broader racial, gender, and class politics in Britain and its effects on the HE sector. The links between Oxford and its influence on British society remain pertinent, especially as the university continues to be seen as a global bellwether in education and research standards. It is easy to place Oxford and similar institutions on a pedestal, as places that advance intellectual thought and house the world's foremost academics; however, students are often lost in this narrative. The past two years have proven that student activist movements, more often than not led by women and people of colour, have a profound global impact. Yet UK universities have not genuinely listened to their demands and therefore have fallen short of their duty of care to their students.

Since my data collection began in the autumn of 2023, I have not witnessed any tangible changes to the institution's attitude towards student activists; if anything, the hostility has increased as the university pursued disciplinary action against activists and other

institutions took legal action against protestors. When juxtaposed with Oxford's policies on EDI, the university's stated priorities do not appear to address student needs, which participants named as a primary welfare issue. This is evidenced in the university's most recent Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan, published in September 2024, which asserts its commitment to EDI both as a legal duty through the 2010 Equality Act and its enshrining of "protected characteristics" and its goal to "strengthen a culture of belonging" (2024). In an institutional context, such declarations can become what Ahmed calls acts of 'doing the document rather than doing the doing' where "diversity and equality become 'things' that can be measured" (2007, 596). In Oxford's EDI Strategic Plan, this is evident in their stated goal of having "85% of staff agree that their department is committed to promoting equality and diversity" by 2027 (2024). The usage of 'commitment' — 19 times in various tenses throughout the 30-page document — belies its emptiness, as "the statement of commitment does not commit the institution to anything, but allows the practitioner to support their claims for or against specific action" (Ahmed, 2007, 603). There are no stated consequences if 85% of staff do not agree to promote EDI by 2027, thus allowing the institution to continually move the goalposts in its EDI initiatives.

Furthermore, there is notably no use of the words (anti)racism, colonialism, sexism, or classism in this document, which infers that Oxford does not plan to include recognitions of, or reckonings with, such oppressions. The document also does not use the word intersectionality. Bhopal and Pitkin's (2020) critical policy analysis on Race Equality Charters in UK universities highlights the 'performativity' of policymaking and its reinforcement of a normative whiteness that "inevitably reproduce existing patterns of inequalities through the *enactment* of policy" (544, emphasis in original).[103] Bypassing the explicit naming of white privilege and whiteness as the norm indicates that Oxford is prone to actualise the authors' warnings on the dangers of not recognising racism. Moreover, the university's most recent printed discourse on EDI starkly contrasts the opinions and experiences of its women of colour students who thoughtfully consider, or are forced to consider, the roles their marginalised and intersectional identities play at Oxford. My research and the presentation of WoC students' experiences are not immune to being absorbed into a corporatised version of EDI, where there is a risk that our voices will be flattened or, worse, co-opted to suit the university's promotion of diversity (Jones & Sirriyeh, 2025). Though I

[103] See also Bhopal & Henderson, 2021, for a critique of the 'competing inequalities' of gender and race through an analysis of the Athena SWAN and Race Equality Charter marks in UK HE.

cannot control how my work is received, I can state my intentions: though the research was conducted — and funded, as I am a university scholarship recipient — by the University of Oxford, it is not *for* the University of Oxford. Above all, I hope my research empowers WoC participants and affirms their lived experiences. I encourage HEIs to recognise the value of WoC-led student activism and how the expertise harnessed from collectives of solidarity can help enhance the student experience, both academically and socially, and ultimately contribute to the growth and survival of universities as critical arenas for social progress. However, I caution against exploiting marginalised voices to inflate a university's publicity campaigns, or against presenting research on marginalised communities as an indication that institutions support student activism.

Research recommendations

This thesis does not concentrate on policy, and the findings are not intended to inform future policy. However, there is an argument that the empirical data collected as part of this study through qualitative methods rooted in listening — narrative interviews that allow participants to share full, nuanced stories of their lived experiences without interruption — illustrates the power of student voice. Instead of adopting a punitive or disciplinary approach to student activism, the institution may greatly benefit from paying attention to the opinions of its students, the very ones whom they admitted because of their intellect. There is also a need for Oxford to actively address the functions of whiteness, colonialism, and imperialism in its contemporary forms, as their legacies are deeply felt by women of colour who navigate the university. In the short term, this can involve attending to ongoing political issues raised by students, most notably the global divestment movement from the arms industry and militarised violence, and collaborating with students to establish new investment policies. In the medium term, Oxford can wield its significant endowment fund to introduce fully funded scholarship places for WoC students at all degree levels, as well as pay student activists (most notably Presidents and other senior leadership roles of college Common Rooms, who shoulder the most responsibility in their respective communities) for their labour. It can also heed the longtime calls of student activists to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes and place it in a museum with contextual information. To cast a long view of change, Oxford can begin addressing the invisible inequities within the institution for students before they apply. For example, outlining the financial and logistical disparities between colleges so that students can enter the system better informed about the resources available to them, including

publishing the number of WoC and BAME students in each college cohort. Overall, universities must earnestly engage with manifold theories of change, like the examples I outlined in 4.6 and 5.1 through the matrix of WoC activist profiles and the typologies of WoC student activism, to pursue collaborative (re)constructions of the student experience, guided by student experiences attuned to the needs of marginalised communities.

Any reforms at Oxford will inevitably be complicated by the entanglements and autonomies of the collegiate system, but it can also serve as a challenge to individual colleges to lead transformations that may spur others in the Conference of Colleges to do the same. Finally, Oxford and other HE institutions can engage with the work of critical university studies to embrace and operationalise a non-neutral status, not to endorse a political stance, but to defend human rights and access to education globally. There are no universities left in Gaza as a result of the war (UNRWA, 2024; UN Human Rights Council, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024). As the top-ranked university in the world, Oxford has a moral imperative to ensure that HEIs do not succumb to scholasticide, amidst a genocide, and exercise its influence to promote justice, even when it is difficult.

I refer to the University of Oxford as *the* institution, placing accountability on its senior leadership, namely the Vice-Chancellor, the Pro-Vice Chancellors, and the heads of colleges, who possess the ability to enact lasting transformations that could benefit current and future generations of students. Membership in Oxford's leadership ranks does not automatically make one an enemy of student activists; my thesis demonstrates that students encourage and pursue active collaboration with university leaders who share common goals. As I explain in 9.2, my relationship with the university is complicated as a result of my intensive research on its history and operations, but I recognise that any critique of Oxford must be assessed equitably with all its flaws and benefits. Agendas for future interdisciplinary research in this area could involve further inquiry into anti-sexual violence activism in HEIs, or employing feminist methodologies to investigate related axes of oppression such as class, religion, or migration status in tandem with WoC identities. Highlighting the lived experiences of queer WoC is also vital, and there lie many possibilities in integrating more gender and sexuality research into HE studies. The contributions of this research affirm that listening and attending to student concerns, especially those voiced by women of colour and other marginalised student communities, is essential for universities like Oxford to maintain

its relevance in the twenty-first century. Only by doing so can the credibility of HEIs as places of intellectual flourishing remain authentic.

9.2 Reflections of a critical researcher

Conducting and completing this thesis as a critical researcher has been immensely rewarding and utterly draining. For the past four years, my intellectual realm has centred on thinking about and contesting injustice at the University of Oxford, while the world faces what feels like endless onslaughts of political and social upheaval. Doing research at the place where I have been situated for the past five years, including my one-year master's degree, has made me jaded to the limitations of change possible at Oxford. However, I would never discourage others from pursuing change here — it is an institution that desperately needs it, and does not have to come at the expense of the traditions that make Oxford special. I do not know if my research would have been as effective had I studied another HEI. Investigating Oxford as a distinct site of inquiry where the affects of colonialism, imperialism, and whiteness confront lived experiences of racialisation and gender has taught me about the acceptable parameters of transformation at the oldest university in the English-speaking world. I have been accused, in subtle and direct ways, of attempting to tarnish the university's reputation; I have been called too polemic, as having too assertive a voice on contentious topics, when all I want to do is scream in frustration about the strangleholds of the academy. Yet, I will forever be proud that I was able to share the experiences of fellow women of colour students through my research.

I do not view Oxford as a place where genuine, meaningful liberation can occur. But ultimately, this thesis is not primarily about Oxford; nor is it about my intertwined feelings of gratitude and disaffection for the institution. It is about the possibilities and power inherent to women of colour students, especially when harnessed through feminist collectives of which I hoped to showcase a sliver through this work. Building solidarities with and against institutional formations are necessary instruments in achieving change, and I believe in Finn and Jeffries' (2025) argument for "the value of gentleness as part of a multi-tonal politics of activism and academic labour in the neoliberal academy, in which gentleness has a constitutive place alongside, rather than in place of, other stances which might also be championed" (3). I hope that the lessons imparted by WoC participants do not ring hollow for

Oxford, and they begin a new era of gentleness through which sincere strides towards change can take place.

I conclude my dissertation with a reflection on the results of my feminist citational praxis, where I aimed to cite a majority of Black, Indigenous, and feminist scholars of colour throughout my research to counter the reproduction of hegemonic, Eurocentric knowledges, as I discussed in 3.7. The inclusion criteria for qualifying sources are academic texts (peer-reviewed articles, books, and edited collections) whose authors, or lead authors on multi-authored publications, identify as scholars of colour through positionality statements, author biographies, and information from faculty profiles. This also includes dual-authored texts in which one of the two authors identifies as part of this group, or multi-authored texts in which the majority of authors identify as scholars of colour. The criteria exclude any cited newspaper articles, social media posts, public reports, or citations authored by student societies or organisations (including official University webpages). When there was insufficient information about the authors' identities, I erred on the side of caution and did not count them in the total number of scholars of colour. I cited a total of 406 academic sources, with 257 written by BIPOC scholars; this includes each source by authors from whom I cite multiple works.

There are certain authors on whom I rely more than others; notably, the writer I cite most is Sara Ahmed (20 sources), followed by Akuwugo Emejulu (9), as their scholarship as women of colour, and that of their collaborators, is centred around the experiences of WoC in HE.[104] I also frequently cite non-scholars of colour, such as Brooks (7), Hensby (6), and Linder (4), as their bodies of research are vital to the field of HE and student activism. All three authors also frequently collaborate with scholars of colour, with Hensby and Adewumi's 2024 monograph on race, capital, and equity in HE and edited collections by Brooks et al. on HE student perspectives across Europe being of relevance for my study. As I stated at the beginning of this work, I sought to place my research within the wider discipline of feminist studies, hence my repeated citations of scholars such as Hill Collins (6), Mirza (6), Olufemi (5), hooks (5), and Mohanty (4). I am proud of producing a thesis that cites a majority of sources authored by scholars of colour. Though challenging, it is an example of what adopting an intentional citational politics for a full-length doctoral dissertation can achieve, what I hope is empowerment and affirmation for women of colour students,

[104] Counting lead author publications only.

scholars, and communities. I end with a quote from Sara Ahmed, as I have done numerous times throughout this thesis, and view her words as a clarion call for the new, creative, and just worlds we are yet to build together:

"Be willful, we will, and we are." — Sara Ahmed (2010, 8)

Appendices

A1. Oxford glossary

University Specific – see the University's 'Oxford Glossary' for more (2025).

- Bodleian/Bod | The Bodleian Library
- Class Act | Student Union campaign for working-class/state school students (now an independent student society)
- Chancellor | Ceremonial head of the university; currently Lord William Hague
- Collegiate University | The University of Oxford, its academic divisions and departments, together with the Oxford colleges and permanent private halls
- Crankstart Scholars | Undergraduate scholarship for low-income students with a household income of £32,500 or less (for 2026 entry)
- DPhil | Doctorate of Philosophy, known as a PhD in other institutions
- First | Highest class of degree awarded to undergraduate students
- FemSoc | Oxford Feminist Society
- Fresher | A first-year student
- Hilary Term | Second of three terms in the academic year
- Matriculation | Confers membership of the University on students enrolled in a degree-level course through a ceremony at the start of Michaelmas term
- Michaelmas Term | First of three terms in the academic year
- Oxbridge | Portmanteau for the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge
- Proctors, Proctors' Office | Senior & Junior proctors elected by colleges to ensure student discipline, manage complaints (including complaints related to sexual violence)
- PPE | Politics, Philosophy & Economics degree
- Rad Cam | The Radcliffe Camera, an Oxford landmark and part of the Bodleian libraries
- Sabbatical Officers/Sabbs | Elected full-time student union officers on the Student Union
- Subfusc | Formal attire worn by students/academics at examinations, matriculations, and graduations, meaning 'dark brown' in Latin
- SU | The Oxford Student Union, the official students' union of elected representatives
- Trinity Term | Third of three terms in the academic year

- The Oxford Union Society | Private members' debating society, established in 1823, bills itself as 'the last bastion of free speech'
- Vac | Shortened term for Vacation, the term for the 6-week break between Michaelmas and Hilary terms and Hilary and Trinity terms; the 'Long Vac' describes the elongated summer break between Trinity and Michaelmas terms
- Vice-Chancellor/VC | Chief academic and administrative officer of the University elected by Congregation for a five-year term; currently Professor Irene Tracey
- Weeks 1-8 | Numbered weeks of term
- 93% Club | The state school student society

College Specific

- BAME, BME, E&M, EDI, RAEM representatives | Black, Asian & Minority Ethnic representative; Black & Minority Ethnic representative; Ethnic Minorities representative; Equity, Diversity & Inclusion representative; Religious and Ethnic Minorities representative elected to college JCR and MCR committees (terms vary by college)
- Bops | Short for 'big open parties', entertainment events frequently held at college
- Bursar | Chief financial officer of a college
- College family | College parents, spouse, children, grandchildren - a community of people in your college studying the same subject in years above/below you
- Conference of Colleges | Forum for the 39 colleges and 4 permanent private halls of Oxford
- Dean | Title for senior members of various colleges responsible for student discipline; also title of Head of House at Christ Church
- Formal/formal hall | Traditional three-course meal held by colleges every week with a dress code (ex. Academic gowns)
- High Table | Raised table in a college dining hall for senior members of a college
- Hustings | Meeting where candidates for JCR/MCR committees, SU, or student societies present their candidacies and policies to voters
- Liberation Officers/Lib Reps | Alternative term for EDI representative that can encompass class, women's, disability, access and outreach, LGBTQ+, BAME portfolios on JCR and MCR committees (term and scope of roles vary by college)
- LMH | Abbreviation for Lady Margaret Hall

- JCR | Junior Common Room for undergraduate students
- MCR | Middle Common Room for postgraduate students
- Porters | Guards/support staff located at the entrance of each college
- SCR | Senior Common Room to which all Fellows and Lecturers belong in a college
- Summer Eights | Inter-collegiate rowing races held in Trinity term
- Tutor | Instructor who teaches students on an individual basis/in pairs, most commonly at the undergraduate level
- Tutorial | Undergraduates attend weekly 1:1 or 2:1 tutorials, often shortened to ‘tute’
- Tutorial System | College teaching system whereby undergraduates are taught in small groups by tutors

A2. Oxford Feminist Society

The Oxford Feminist Society, founded in 2018, bills itself as "the hub of feminist exploration at the University of Oxford, campaigning for equality and empowerment for all" (FemSoc, 2025).[105] Their flagship weekly term-time event, titled "Liberation and Liquor" (L&L), is described as a place where attendees can "debate diverse and thought-provoking feminist questions in a welcoming setting" (FemSoc, 2025). As with most student societies at Oxford, FemSoc leadership is comprised of an elected committee, with four executive roles (President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer) and various representative roles (BAME, LGBTQ+, Men's, Class, Welfare, Events & Charities, Graduate, Gender, Disabilities, Social Media). At the 2024 Annual General Meeting, members voted to restrict the roles of President and BAME representative to those identifying as women or non-binary, as well as constitutionally mandating that the committee be at least 50% female. Elections are conducted at the end of every academic year, with hustings held for executive committee roles and online applications for all other roles. Each candidate is required to provide a manifesto for their role as part of their nomination. In the 2024 election for the 24/25 committee, there were 28 total applicants, and 12 were successful in their election results. Committee members have 50% of the vote on executive positions, provided they attend the hustings; if not, their votes are counted as part of the popular vote. All other positions are elected by general popular vote, and any Oxford student, regardless of membership in FemSoc, is eligible to vote. Membership of the committee costs £7 annually, with a £3 access membership offered for Crankstart Scholars and those entitled to full maintenance loans (FemSoc, 2025). Members are entitled to discounted drinks at L&Ls, discounted event tickets, and are eligible to run for committee positions.

The L&Ls are structured around a general question, with the discussion chaired by a committee member. In Hilary term of 23/24, the topics were as follows:

1. Is social media harmful for women and the feminist movement?
2. Is gender the most important part of identity?
3. Should we prioritise cultural norms over Western feminism (Attended)
4. Can we save women's healthcare? (Fundraiser for Pink Week)
5. Should we abolish single-sex schools? (Attended)

[105] All ethnographic data were collected in the 2023-2024 academic year; therefore, references to their constitution, committee, and elections are based on information from that year.

6. Will we ever escape the male gaze?

7. International Women's Day topics: What makes a woman inspirational? Are fairytale princesses feminist?

In Trinity term of 23/24, the topics were as follows:

1. Can relationships be feminist?

2. Is feminism inherently socialist? (Attended, co-chaired)

3. Should FemSoc have a men's rep?

4. Annual General Meeting (Attended)

5. Feminist consciousness in the eighteenth century and now (Collaboration with Bluestocking)

6. Has feminism regressed in the past 20 years?

7. What is the most feminist way to talk about women? What counts as good representation?

On average, around 25 people are regular attendees at each L&L. In an interview with the 23/24 President and Vice-President, I remarked that the consistent turnout is a relative rarity for Oxford events, and the President concurred: "The feminists are there, the demand is there." At each L&L, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages are available for purchase, but from my experience, there was never pressure to drink, nor was it an alcohol-forward environment. Each L&L concludes with an informal vote based on the question, but the votes are inconsequential to future events or topics, rather serving as a summary of the discussion. Other events included bracelet making, crafting social events, and bar socials, often with food and materials subsidised or paid for by the committee. FemSoc frequently collaborates with other societies to co-host L&Ls or other social events, with collaborators in 23/24 including Oxford Philogyny (a female-centric reading group), the Oxford History Society, Oxford Pink Week (raising money and awareness for cancer charities), Bluestocking Oxford (a female literary salon society), and the Oxford Women of Colour Society.

At the 2024 Annual General Meeting, the President disclosed that the annual operating budget hovers around £500, comprised of £200 from JCR donations, membership fees, and weekly L&L drink purchases. Weekly earnings from L&Ls are occasionally donated to charities, such as Pink Week for cancer charities and Palestinian relief efforts. In the 23/24 year, FemSoc also started sending weekly 'Feminist Fridays' newsletters, which

recap the L&Ls of the week, including any votes for/against the topic question, upcoming L&L topics, shares feminist news articles, details of events run by other Oxford feminist or women's societies, and recommendations of feminist books, podcasts, and other media. Each newsletter is written by a different committee member, and the newsletter continued into the 24/25 academic year. Their primary form of communication, like most Oxford student-run societies, is through their Instagram account (@oxfordfemsoc), which has approximately 3,500 followers. A summary of the society's 23/24 activities shared that FemSoc hosted 17 L&Ls, 3 craft socials, and 6 collaborations with other societies; gained 43 new members and 73 mailing list subscribers; and the highest-attended L&L had 45 attendees (2024, FemSoc). The society does not collect data about its members' identities (ex. race, gender, class, course of study), but the 23/24 President and VP commented that in their experience, the demographic of FemSoc attendees is more racially diverse than that of other Oxford societies. The majority of L&L attendees are women or female-presenting individuals, with a small number of men or male-presenting individuals also attending each L&L.

FemSoc maintains an active campaigns arm of the organisation, with Instagram posts dating to 2019 in support of trans rights (2019), and encouraging volunteer sign-ups for Turl Street Homeless Action (2021) and Oxford Mutual Aid (2022). In my interviews with the President and Vice-President, we discussed their thoughts on how to sustain FemSoc for future generations of Oxford students; both agreed that continuity of their flagship L&L event was the primary goal, but acknowledged the financial difficulties of running a tenable student society at Oxford. While they could generate additional income by charging for events or increasing membership fees, the President was reluctant to do so:

> "The paid membership – although it has benefits like cheaper drinks and a sticker – in a big way, it's just supporting the society financially. And we do rely on it, because we don't have SU funding, we don't have sponsorship. It's something we could look into, but we feel a bit weird about it from an 'is feminism an anti-capitalist ideology' angle … it doesn't seem like a FemSoc thing."

Their organisational strategy of declining to pursue sponsorship opportunities stands in contrast to that of numerous other large Oxford societies. For example, the Oxford Women in Business society, the largest women-led society at the university, is sponsored by major

legal, financial, and consulting companies. As a result, the society does not charge a membership fee (OxWIB, 2025).

The Oxford Feminist Society Fresher's Fair 2024 stall, Examination Schools.

A3. Oxford Women of Colour Society

The Oxford Women of Colour Society (WocSoc) was founded by three WoC undergraduate students in 2022 as a society that "exclusively welcomes women* who come from an ethnic minority background, and by doing so we hope that we provide a comfortable and prosperous safe space within the university" (WocSoc, 2023). The three founders comprised the first executive committee with the roles of President, Secretary, and Treasurer. The society hosts social and welfare events and promotes itself as "the first society of its kind – providing a much-needed intersectional space for BAME female students at Oxford" (WocSoc, 2023). Membership costs £20 for a lifetime membership, £12 for a yearly membership, or £6 per term; however, events are open to WoC attendees regardless of membership status (WocSoc, 2025). Since its foundation, the committee has expanded to include standard student society roles, such as positions for welfare, events, publicity, and, notably, a sponsorships officer, which FemSoc does not have. WocSoc does not hold elections for its committee positions; instead, candidates submit an online application form, which is reviewed by the executive committee.

The Women of Colour Society Fresher's Fair 2024 stall, Examination Schools.

Similar to other student societies that lack a history of continuous financial backing, much of its funding comes from membership fees and small donations requested from JCRs through meeting motions. WocSoc has a mailing list and an active Instagram account with approximately 1,000 followers (@oxfordwocsociety), and they also operate a WhatsApp group called 'WOCs of Oxford' with approximately 125 people that shares relevant event details and announcements. In the 23/24 academic year of my ethnography, they hosted events such as study sessions, themed discussions, zine-making, and craft workshops. They frequently collaborated with other societies, including FemSoc, Oxford Women in Business, the Oxford Society for International Development, Oxford Women in Government, and hosted a careers panel featuring WoC speakers with CRAE (the then-SU Committee for Racial Awareness and Equality), the Oxford Asia Pacific Society, and the Oxford Tamil Society (WocSoc, 2024).

A4. Codebook

Outline of Coding Scheme

Activism

- *Defining activism or activists*
    - Change in attitude about activism
    - Just doing their part
    - Preconceptions of 'actual' activism
    - Subtle or subdued activism
- *Dimensions of change*
    - Change is bigger than the university
    - Conflict within movements
    - Formal or large scale activism
    - Low engagement with events
    - Making a difference now
    - Needing collective education
- *How and why students engage*
    - Coalition building
    - Existing is a form of activism
    - Goals as activists
    - Motivations for activism
    - Students care about global issues
    - Understandings of resistance
- *Inequities within activism*
    - (Un)paid work
    - Funding issues
    - Infantilisation of student activists
- *Oxford's relationship to activism*
    - Policing 'right' and 'wrong' activism
    - Surface diversity for the university's image
- *Perceptions of identity-based 'liberation' roles*
    - Handling racist complaints

        - Uncontested elections
- *Temporality and sustainability*
    - Experiencing burnout
    - University 'waiting out' activism
- *Terminologies of activism*
    - Already identifying as activists pre-Oxford
    - Negative connotations
    - Not identifying as activists
    - Thoughts on the term in general
    - Too heavy of a term

Community

- Building community through activism
- Desire for women of colour and people of colour communities
- Ease of being around people that 'get it'
- *Emotional responses*
    - Easy to be isolated or lonely
    - Enthusiasm and gratitude for this research
    - Limits of emotional labour
- Fostering solidarity between women of colour
- *Hope for the future*
    - 'More of us'
    - Low bar for change
    - Teaching and curriculum change
        - Representation in professors
    - Wanting things to be better for future women of colour
- Overlapping identities and causes
- *Oxford Feminist Society (FemSoc)*
    - Education as activism
    - Feminist community
    - Feminism is political
    - FemSoc as 'radical'

        - Importance of intersectionality
        - Liberation and Liquor (L&Ls)
        - Leadership style
        - Logistics – communications
        - Logistics - finance
        - Men at FemSoc
        - Safe, welcoming space
        - Society as consciousness raising
        - Society history
        - The power of the Oxford name
- Political engagement
- Pride in making change
- *Relationships to space*
    - Creating and desiring agentic spaces
    - Importance of safe spaces
    - Taking up space
    - Thoughts on women of colour-only spaces
- Welfare for women of colour
- Women of colour identities and their development
- Women of Colour Society (WocSoc)

Oxford

- Ableism at Oxford
- Abolitionism
- Access & outreach developments
- *Bureaucratic roadblocks*
    - Decentralisation of Oxford impeding progress
- Class(ism)
- *Colleges shaping experiences*
    - College bubble preventing intercollegiate organisation
    - College financial disparities
    - Racial disparities of college makeup
- Colonial legacies of Oxford

- Elitism, prestige, and its powers
- Global influence and reach
- Institutional responses to activism
- Inter-peer conflict
- *Limits of academic discussion vs activism*
    - Freedom of speech arguments
    - Theory only bubble
- Making (some) progress
- Oxford aesthetic
- Oxford culture – the 'Oxford student' & life
- Oxford is a business
- Oxford's reputation and its maintenance
- Oxford Union's uses and harms
- Reconciling with being at Oxford despite its history
- *Responses to Palestinian liberation movements*
    - Oxford Action for Palestine encampment experiences
- Sexual violence and lack of survivor care
- Student Union issues
- *University administration has a responsibility for addressing inequality*
    - Change as students' responsibility
- You're not meant to do activism here

Race and Racialisation

- Confronting white womanhood
- Experiences of misogyny
- Feeling race-d out
- Need for joy and celebration
- Oxford is a white institution
- *Race in Britain*
    - Oxford as a reflection of Britain
- Use of BAME/BME acronyms
- *Women of colour students' experiences at Oxford*
    - Cultures of in/exclusion
    - Imposter phenomenon

        - Language of silencing versus speaking up
        - Micro and macro aggressions
        - Not experiencing explicit racism
        - Respectability politics
        - Shrinking oneself for protection
        - Wanting better cultural foods
        - Weight of representation
- Women of colour taking on more labour than others

A5. Participant information

Participant Name (Pseudonym)	*Year of Study (at the time of interview)*	*Degree Subject / Postgrad Faculty*
Albertina	2	History
Alice	3	History
Ana	2	History
Anna	2	Politics, Philosophy & Economics
Anmol	2	Material Sciences
Arya	3	English
Carmen	Alumna	History
Charlie	2	History
Dylan	4	Clinical Medicine
Ella	2	Linguistics
Elizabeth	2	Maths
Emily	1-year Masters	Interdisciplinary Humanities
Freya	2	Psychology & Linguistics
Gabriella	3	History
Gitanjali	2	Politics, Philosophy & Economics
Gumption	3	Psychology & Linguistics
Habiba	2	English
Holly	2	Economics & Management
Iman	2	History
Kim	3	Law
Kushi	3	History & Politics
Jas	3	Modern Languages & Linguistics
Jessica	2	

Lily	2	Classical Archaeology & Ancient History
Leila	1-year Masters	Global & Area Studies
Lucy	2	Theology
Maisie	2	History
Mary	3	Medicine
Marie	3	Economics
Maya	2	Politics, Philosophy & Economics
Micah	2nd year Masters	History
Ming	Alumna	English
Nancy	2	Modern Languages & Linguistics
Phoebe	1-year Masters	Law
Ravinder	2	Modern Languages & Linguistics
Raj	1-year Masters	School of Government
Ria	2	Human Sciences
Roma	3	Geography
Ruby	4	Linguistics
Sage	3	Linguistics
Sree	2	Law
Toni	1	English
Tundra	3	Politics, Philosophy & Economics
Yamuna	2	English
Yasmine	2	English
Zayna	2	Law
Zhao	1-year Masters	Interdisciplinary Humanities

A6. Images

Image 1 – 'Hands Off Vietnam' graffiti outline on the walls of Keble College, Parks Road, across from the Natural History Museum (taken by Georgia Lin).

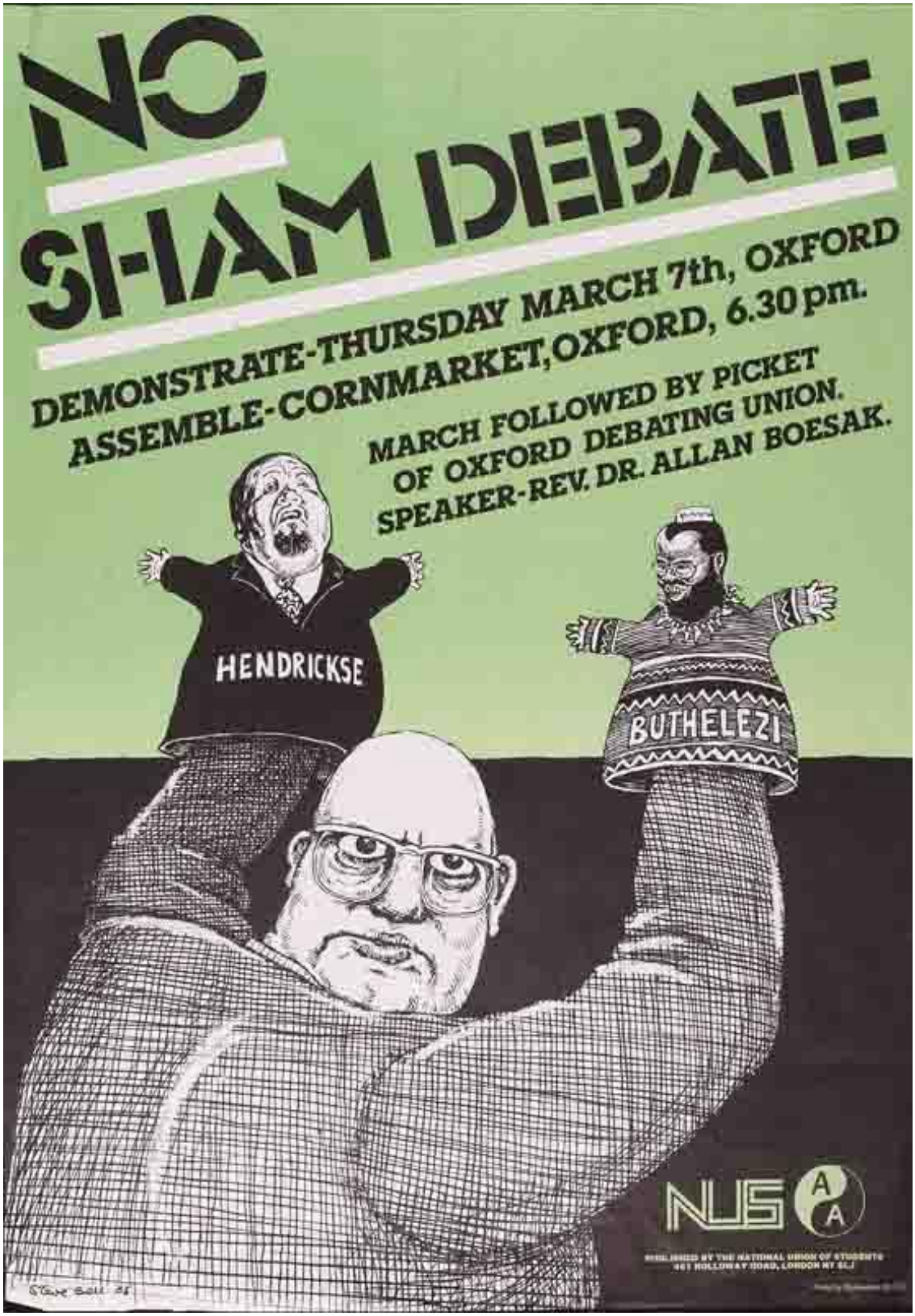


Image 2 – 'No Sham Debate' poster protesting the Oxford Union's invitation of apartheid South Africa's ambassador to the UK (National Union of Students, 1985).

Image 3 – Site of the first OA4P encampment in front of the Natural History Museum (taken by Georgia Lin).

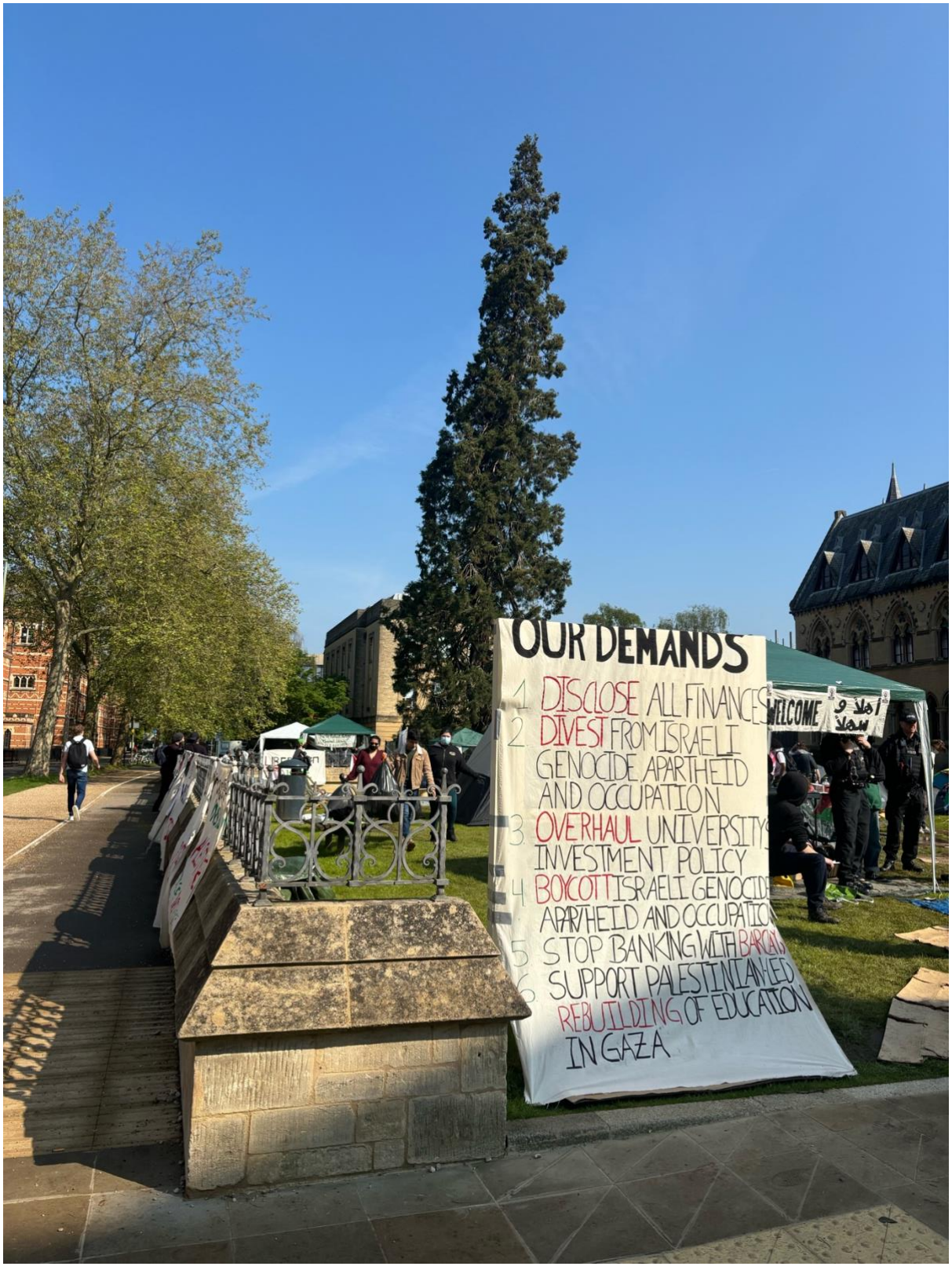


Image 4 – The OA4P encampment demands at the first Gaza Solidarity Encampment (taken by Georgia Lin).

A7. Ethics approval and amendment

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
DEPARTMENTAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

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Yun Fei Georgia Lin georgia.lin@education.ox.ac.uk
Department of Education, Social Sciences Division
University of Oxford

14 June 2023

Dear Georgia,

Research ethics approval

Research title: Collectives in/of Solidarity: Student Activism by Women of Colour at the University of Oxford

Research ethics reference: EDUC-C1A-23-232

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study.

Please note the following:

Personal data: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's guidance and legal requirements.

In-person activities: Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's website.

Amendments: Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the SSH IDREC webpage.

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk / student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk or ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely

Dr Emma Rawlings Smith
DREC member

cc Dr Alis Oancea alis.oancea@education.ox.ac.uk

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
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Yun Fei Georgia Lin
Department of Education, Social Sciences Division
University of Oxford

18 December 2023

Research ethics approval

Research title: Collectives in/of Solidarity: Student Activism by Women of Colour at the University of Oxford

Research ethics reference: EDUC_C1A_23_232

Date of Amendment: 27.10.23

Amendment Number: 1

Dear Georgia,

The above amendment has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this amendment.

Please note the following:

Personal data: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's guidance and legal requirements.

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Yours sincerely

Ian Thompson

Ian Thompson Associate Professor of Education, DREC member

cc: Alice Oancea; Student CUREC

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