Toxic Whiteness: Michael Chekhov and the Atmospheric Analysis of Institutional Racism

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Abstract

This article proposes that institutional racism may be productively understood as an atmospheric phenomenon. It develops, from a dialogue between the work of actor-director Michael Chekhov and that of Frantz Fanon, a theoretical account of atmosphere as the material and affective medium of relation, which is directly responsive to structurally racialized conditions. It argues that recent public and critical discourse on institutional racism has been dominated by attitudinal accounts that have worked to foreclose structural change and proposes, instead, an atmospheric approach to analysing racialized conditions of institutional encounter. These it terms 'toxic whiteness', not in contradistinction to a putatively non-toxic whiteness, but to emphasise that. while being conducive to the collective thriving of white people, whiteness is toxic to those who are racially minoritised. Finally, the essay argues that atmospheric analysis provides a basis for effective opposition to the racialized interests that underpin the toxic atmospheres of institutional racism.

It is now a quarter of a century since the Macpherson report 'into the matters arising' from the murder of Stephen Lawrence on 22 April 1993 brought the concept of institutional racism into the UK's public sphere (1999, 2.8), where its existence has been variously misrepresented, minimised and denied ever since.[1] In the immediate aftermath of this sudden emergence into public discourse, institutional racism was likewise, as Nirmal Puwar observed, largely 'unexplored' by researchers (2004: 9). Puwar's work remains an important sociological critique of both institutional racism and sexism, which she famously framed as a question of 'space invaders', subjects whose gendered and/or racialized bodies were 'matter out of place' (2004: 10), forcing them constantly to negotiate their difference from the 'universal somatic norm' of white masculinity (2004: 10). Puwar's intervention echoed Sara Ahmed's use of the term 'bodies out of place' (2000: 78) to describe racist constructions of migrants, and our understanding of institutionality has been notably advanced by Ahmed's subsequent ethnographic analysis and affective theorisation of the experiences of 'diversity workers' (2012: 9). Such insights might be grouped under the heading of people who are 'in but not of', a phrase borrowed by Stuart Hall from C.L.R. James. James had used this construction to express his relation to Europe and the 'unique insight' into 'Western civilisation' it afforded him (quoted in Hall 2021: 375). Hall borrowed it to encapsulate his own experience as one of 'Europe's conscripts', able to view its 'constitutive outside' from within (2021: 376).

Hall's 'conscripts', Puwar's 'space invaders' and Ahmed's 'diversity workers' all share a denaturalized experience of their social or institutional location. Their insights clarify the extent to which institutionality may become so naturalized a condition that it is rendered functionally invisible except to those *in but not of* a given institution. Victor Ray has critiqued this invisibilising tendency in relation to theories of organisational institutionalism

that frame race as a question extrinsic to the development of organisations, proposing the 'racialized organisation' as a framework for 'incorporating organisations into a structural theory of racial inequality' (2019: 26). Relatedly, Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos has developed the concept of the 'lawscape', an 'expansive and diffused form of law', which becomes atmospheric (2014: 69–70) as we become unaware of its deep structuring force. In Alana Lentin's definition, race is also a deep, structuring force: 'a technology for the management of human difference, the main goal of which is the production, reproduction and maintenance of white supremacy on both a local and a planetary scale' (Lentin, 2020: 5). Thanks to a long tradition of 'radical critiques of racism, capitalism and imperialism' emphasising both the basis of institutional racism in colonial practices and 'how it became material through capitalist exploitation and state power' (Elliott-Cooper, 2023: 103–4), we are, by now, well aware of its systemic operation (Meghji, 2022). Nonetheless, the nature of institutional racism remains inadequately understood (Tikly, 2022b), and, as I will go on to argue, dominant accounts of its function have therefore depended upon the operation of attitudes to explain the process whereby it is made manifest in the experiences of racially minoritised people. This attitudinal framing has had the twin counterinsurgent effect of minimising racism by representing it as a question of individual biases and/or abstracting its structural operation to such an extent that it appears beyond the reach of concrete antiracist interventions.

This essay seeks to resolve this problem by working at the intersection of materialist, anti-colonial and anti-statist critiques of institutional racism, most centrally those of Frantz Fanon (1988, 2001, 2008), and accounts of affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009, 2017; Wall, 2020a). The latter seek to conceptualise the collective felt experience of social forces via a 'strange materialism appropriate for the reality of affective conditions' (Anderson, 2017: 138–9), and yet have rarely dealt substantially with questions of race and racism. I use

the concept of atmosphere, as theorised by the Russian actor and director Michael Chekhov (1891-1955), whom I place in dialogue with Fanon, to analyse institutional racism as an 'affective "background"' (Wall, 2023: 192), which I term 'toxic whiteness'. I propose that such an atmospheric account of institutional racism allows us to analyse its function at two related levels simultaneously. The first is conceptual: atmosphere enables us to consider institutionality as a social environment that constitutes the fluid conditions of encounter within which action and perception occur. It therefore enables us concretely to identify the material and affective operation of structural conditions. Secondly, atmospheres enable us to take this conceptual metaphor literally, and thus to view institutional racism as an affectively toxic environment, in which racially minoritised people, to borrow a phrase from the movement for Black lives, 'can't breathe', while others are able to thrive. I therefore propose that 'atmospheric antiracism' may have the capacity to override counterinsurgent co-optations of antiracism and enable activism more effectively to target and intervene in the reproduction of the racialized toxicity of institutional conditions.

'Un chant blanc [toxique]'

One of the twentieth century's most incisive accounts of the operation of race is Frantz Fanon's recollection of being fixed by the gaze of a white child, who cried out: 'Tiens, un nègre!', 'Maman, regarde le nègre, j'ai peur!' ('Look, a negro!', 'Mama, look at the negro, I'm frightened!') (1952: 90). Stuart Hall reads Fanon's account of this devastating moment as an appropriation of Lacan's 'mirror phase' (2021: 349). Whereas Lacan considers the division within the subject engendered in this phase as emblematic of the ambivalent condition of all forms of identification, Fanon shows that, for the black, colonial subject, this rupture is not ambivalent but pathological. His reasoning is simple: the 'schéma corporel'

(corporeal schema) (1952: 90) of blackness eradicates any other self except for, in Hall's phrase, 'the self as Othered' (2021: 342), setting the black subject fundamentally at odds with themselves.

This psychoanalytic critique of racialization can be augmented by attention to affective atmospheres. The gaze in which Fanon is fixed is crucially not that of a white adult, but a white child, who is not speaking, we can reasonably assume, from a position of decisive ideological commitment. Fanon later wrote about racism as an atmospheric phenomenon insofar as it circulates in 'the life-stream of psycho-affective, economic relations' (1988: 41), whence – we might surmise – it has been absorbed by the child who gives it voice. Indeed, immediately after this encounter, Fanon's attention shifts to the atmospheric: 'Alentour le Blanc, en haut le ciel s'arrache le nombril, la terre crisse sous mes pieds et un chant blanc, blanc' ('the white man/whiteness all around me, above me the sky tears at its navel, the earth shrieks beneath my feet, and a white, white song') (1952: 92). The white man suddenly surrounds Fanon in the figures of sky, earth and song in an instance of atmospheric violence. A song is audible, after all, thanks to our suspension within an atmosphere that permeates our bodies, and Fanon finds himself tortured, here, by a toxic atmosphere: 'Toute cette blancheur', he writes, 'qui me calcine' ('All this whiteness that burns me to a cinder') (1952: 92).

This conception of racism as an atmosphere is to be found throughout Fanon's writing. In 'Racism and Culture', for example, he argues that 'the oppressed […] perceives that the racist atmosphere impregnates all the elements of the social life' (1988: 40), and in the first chapter of *Wretched of the Earth*, he repeatedly characterizes colonialism as an 'atmosphere of violence' (2001: 55, 63). I follow Fanon, therefore, in proposing that we may usefully conceive of institutional racism as an atmospheric phenomenon in that it is a dispersed and generalized condition that mediates all encounters within a given organisation

or wider institution. Fanon writes, for example, that 'encompassing violence does not work upon the colonized people only', but also 'modifies the attitude of the colonialists' (2001: 55). Crucially, therefore, I argue that institutional racism is not only atmospherically experienced by racially minoritized people, but is an objective atmosphere. In other words, as Fanon argues of violence, institutional racism is not only atmospherically experienced by those it 'burns to a cinder', but also by those it benefits. I therefore propose that we give greater analytical weight to the widespread generalization, under the banners of the movement for Black lives, of the cry 'I can't breathe', following its famous utterance by Eric Garner in 2014 and George Floyd in 2020, while they were being killed by police officers (Okri, 2020). An adequate response to these words must recognise their capacity to capture the experience of both interpersonal and institutional racism. That is to say that racially minoritized people do not only suffer what Ruth Wilson Gilmore terms 'group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death' as a result of chokeholds and other forms of 'state-sanctioned or extra-legal' violence (2022: 107), such as disproportionate exposure to illegal levels of air pollution (Kerr et al., 2024). They also perish because of the toxic atmospheric conditions of social institutions including education (Tikly, 2022b), healthcare (Hamed et al., 2022; Yearby et al., 2022), housing (Dickerson, 2020; Imbroscio, 2021; Taylor, 2021), and the criminal justice system (Peacock, 2023; Phillips and Bowling, 2008; Rucker and Richeson, 2021).

Racism as Atmosphere

This Fanonian account of racism as an atmospheric phenomenon can be developed in dialogue with the work of Russian actor and director, Michael Chekhov, who defined atmosphere as 'a feeling which is independent of anyone — the feeling which lives in the

space in the room and belongs to no-one' (Cornford, 2020: 175). Chekhov saw atmosphere as what we would now call an affective phenomenon, or, in Katherine Ibbett's words. 'a way to think through "feeling" (including the bodily) without clinging to a particular notion of the subject' (2017: 244–245). Ibbett's usefully open definition helps to clarify Chekhov's potentially misleading phrase 'independent of anyone'. In his conception, atmosphere is not *impervious* to the actions of subjects, but its account of feeling doesn't 'cling' to subjectivity, and cannot be circumscribed by any subject. For Chekhov, atmospheres are dynamic and both produce and respond to events and the actions of subjects. They are therefore also affective in the Spinozan sense of being measured by 'the capacity to affect and to be affected' (Massumi, 2015: ix). For Chekhov, then, atmospheres consist in the ways in which the unstable 'affective field' (Wall, 2020b: 113) of a hybrid event-space affects and is affected by those who occupy it. A particular atmosphere may both produce action (in that it may make those who perceive it alter their behaviour), and be produced by action (in that it may be re-shaped by changes in behaviour).

Chekhov's conception of atmosphere was developed in the context of performance, of which he considers it a fundamental part (Cornford, 2020: 175–178). Without atmosphere, he writes, a performance 'can be intellectually understood […] yet it will remain cold and heartless' (Chekhov, 1993: 35). Nonetheless, Chekhov does not conceive of atmosphere as theatrical in the sense that he does not conceptualise it within the framework of theatrical semiosis. Rather, he insists that it is crucial to performance because it is a constant feature of everyday life, which actors must learn consciously to experience and skilfully to manipulate while performing: 'the space, the air around you filled with atmosphere will always support and arouse in you new feelings and fresh creative impulses', he writes (Chekhov and Powers, 2002: 50). For this reason, Chekhov's observations about the operation of atmosphere lend themselves to being transplanted from the creation of performance to the analysis of daily

experience. They can, for example, substantiate Fanon's diagnosis of a 'racist atmosphere' that 'impregnates all the elements of the social life' (1988: 40) by directly connecting social forces, affective conditions and human actions. Chekhov likewise treated atmosphere as 'the substrate of performance': its 'primary condition of encounter … from within which characters, action, and narrative were encouraged to live and grow' (Cornford, 2020: 209). For Chekhov, this relationship between action and its atmospheric substrate was literal. He described actions 'born out of the atmosphere' (Cornford, 2020: 176) and asked his acting students to 'find the atmosphere, and then find the dialogues and soliloquies in the music of the atmosphere' (Cornford, 2020: 177). In other words, for Chekhov, action must always be considered through imaginative engagement with the physical qualities of the atmospheres that both give rise to and alter along with it. To consider action otherwise would be like trying to swim without water.

For both Fanon and Chekhov atmospheres are crucially 'sociogenic' phenomena (Wynter, 2001), a metaphysical term developed by Sylvia Wynter from Fanon to describe the social origins of certain embodied phenomena (Lentin, 2020: 47). Wynter thus emphasises Fanon's insistence on distinguishing phenomena that are produced socially from those that originate at the level of a species or individual (these would be phylogenic or ontogenic phenomena) (Fanon, 2008). Just as atmospheres cannot be understood outside the frame of the social, racial categories could not exist or have any meaning except within particular social orders, which are the 'mode of sociogeny' (Wynter, 2001). Race and atmosphere are also both assemblages, in Deleuze and Guattari's sense that they are constituted by ensembles of heterogeneous elements that combine to produce what Manuel DeLanda calls 'wholes whose properties emerge from the interactions between parts' (2019: 5; Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 102–103). While uniting a diversity of components to a unified end in this way, and in the process 'blurring the distinction between them' (Puar, 2018: 195), assemblages remain

crucially contingent, 'always precarious' (DeLanda, 2019: 28) unities that belong to what Tim Ingold calls 'the world of becoming' (2013: 31). For Chekhov, atmospheres can therefore be considered assemblages constituted by the combined affective force of all of the elements of an event-space (its architecture, background noise, temperature, the tempo of movements and tones of voices in it, and so on), operating in concert as what Alexander Weheliye calls a 'shifting relational totality' (2014: 46). For Weheliye, race is likewise an ensemble of 'articulated political relations or assemblages' (2014: 19), cooperating in unpredictable and contingent combinations.

A crucial context for the production of such assemblages is the 'racialized organisation', through which, as Victor Ray argues, both policies and attitudes are 'filtered' (2019: 26). Chekhov's conception of atmosphere offers an instructive metaphor for this process, when he trains his students to develop their sensitivity to atmosphere by looking at each other through 'colored gelatine papers' (Cornford 2020: 176-7), and asks them to practice altering their behaviour in response to the ways in which the colour of the paper is mediating the impressions they receive. Chekhov's account of atmospheric mediation is, however, more fundamental and embodied than the mere construction of policies or attitudes. 'We must penetrate into the atmosphere with our hands, legs, bodies, voices, etc', he insisted (Cornford, 2020: 177). For Chekhov, then, an atmosphere is a sociogenic assemblage that forms a fundamental condition of our embodied instantiation as subjects in the world. For Weheliye, the effect produced by 'racializing assemblages' (2014: 51) is similarly fundamental to our embodied existence. Such assemblages are 'sociogenetically imprinted to create hieroglyphics of the flesh' (2014: 71), he writes, and thus to fix subjects within an (albeit flexible and shifting) hierarchy of 'full humans, not-quite humans and nonhumans' (2014: 61).

This structural compatibility of race and atmosphere offers a theoretical basis for understanding observations such as that recounted by Sara Ahmed, from a Black colleague who described a conference as 'a sea of whiteness' that she had become so accustomed to that 'I had stopped noticing it' (2012: 35). Ahmed reflects that 'if we get used to inhabiting whiteness […], it does not mean whiteness does not still affect us' (2012: 35). In spite of the frequency of such anecdotal testimony to the atmospheric function of whiteness, however, it is striking that critics who evoke the atmospheric invariably derogate to attitudinal logics in analysing it, shifting their ground from the atmospheric conditions of an encounter to the interpersonal dynamics produced within them. This tendency can be seen crystallized in a 2018 presentation by sociologist Shirley Anne Tate, based on her co-authored paper 'Whiteliness and institutional racism: hiding behind (un)conscious bias' (Tate and Page, 2018). To illustrate the function of 'claims to ignorance' in upholding racism, Tate observes that her colleagues may refuse to accept that 'I experience racism simply by walking into a room [*pause*] and people turning and looking at me' (2018, 46:46-46:56). The pause in Tate's anecdote marks a turn towards the interpersonal that her article likewise performs in its intersubjective (as opposed to institutional) focus on 'the white self and the non-white co-opted self' whose actions and critical capacities remain the focus of its intervention in spite of its intention to dismantle 'the toxic culture of institutional racism' (Tate and Page, 2018: 152). The same could be said of bell hooks, whose observation that 'the atmosphere [in 'a group of white feminist activists'] will noticeably change when a woman of colour enters the room' likewise initiates a turn to the interpersonal: 'the white women will become tense, no longer relaxed, no longer celebratory' (1989: 56). This is not to disagree either with Tate or hooks in their assessments of such encounters. It is merely to observe, with Sara Ahmed (who quotes this passage from hooks (2014: 224)), that 'depending on which way one turns, different worlds might even come into view' (2006: 15). These turns towards interpersonal

thinking are also turns away from another possibility, namely that racism might not always require 'people', but could inhere more fundamentally in an event ('walking into') and/or a space ('a room'). For Tate's pause to become a full stop, in other words, she would have required an atmospheric account of racism's affective force that can be experienced 'simply by walking into a room'.

For an example of such an atmospheric account of institutional racism, we might turn to *Barbican Stories*, a 2021 publication by anonymous workers at London's Barbican Centre, which comprised 'a collection of first-hand and witnessed accounts of discrimination' formatted to resemble 'a company sanctioned policy handbook' (Anon, 2021: 13). In response to such bureaucratic instruments of interpellation, *Barbican Stories* offers a corrective and collective institutional autoethnography. One particular piece of testimony stands out: 'The best way I can describe it is it's like there's this low-level hum always in the background, a reminder that my presence here, in this role I'm in, is an anomaly' (Anon, 2021: 36). That 'hum' names the atmosphere of institutional racism. Reading *Barbican Stories*, it is striking how often its testimonies emphasise the elite status of the Barbican as a cultural institution, and relationships with managers, supervisors, or the organisation's leadership as occasions when racist actions erupt from the hum of the institution's atmospheric substrate. An atmospheric analysis of the operations of institutional racism suggests, then, that the production and reproduction of racializing logics is predicated not only on the existence of race as a conceptual frame for articulating difference, but on institutional structures that depend upon the continual reproduction of division and inequality.

This conception of the direct rootedness of affective experiences of institutional racism in the material and physical conditions of institutional life is crucially absent from critical accounts of it. Ahmed, for example, pays close attention to what she terms the 'contact zone of the encounter' and its shaping by 'past histories of contact' (2014: 194, see

also 63), but her analytical approach is rooted in affective semiotics, and thus belongs – as she acknowledges – to the intellectual tradition of the 'history of ideas' (2014: 204). This is not to suggest that ideas and rhetoric do not produce affective conditions of encounter. Unquestionably they do, but they do not work alone, and they may not always be required for such conditions to be reproduced. We therefore require a critical vocabulary that can reach beyond ideas, rhetoric and signs. A truly institutional account of racism would, of course, include institutional rhetoric, but would centre other modalities of institutional existence that need have no direct or apparent relation to the conceptual vocabulary of race but nonetheless fundamentally shape racialized institutional atmospheres and are not amenable to antiracist interventions at the level of rhetoric or discourse. These would include organisational structures, histories and genealogies; the architectural and spatial configurations of buildings and rooms; the forms of interpersonal relationships explicitly and tacitly promoted within organisations; the behaviours and assumptions that are habitual within them; the rhythm of their activities, and countless other details that shape what Ahmed calls their 'contact zones'. To analyse institutional racism atmospherically, then, is to bring into focus the systemic reproduction – through these complex assemblages – of racialized atmospheres that reciprocally shape and are shaped by all of the elements of an institution's social life. Crucially, as we shall see, Chekhov's conception of atmosphere as the affective substrate of action enables a materialist conception of the operation of institutional racism to emerge as an alternative to dominant attitudinal accounts of this process.

Attitudes or Atmospheres?

At the start of debbie tucker green's 2018 play *ear for eye*, we witness an African-American mother attempting to coach her son in the use of his hands during an encounter with the police:

SON If I let them down?

MOM Belligerent.

SON By my side – ?

MOM Attitude.

SON (hands) in pockets?

MOM Concealing.

SON Jacket pockets –

MOM obscuring

SON pants pockets –

MOM cocky

SON hands together – ?

MOM Masking

SON what but / what?

MOM I know / Son.

SON My hands together – ?

MOM Sarcastic –

SON but

MOM challenging

SON but –

MOM provocative. Which is . . . can be,

is . . .

Incendiary.

To them. (2018: 4-5)

This is the first of three such scenes in the play. The next adds the boy's father, who is finally asked by his son 'What did you do with your hands?' (2018: 48). The final scene plays out along similar lines, but with Black British characters. At its end, the son '*looks to his* MUM*, he looks to his* / DAD. / *His* DAD *is struggling*' (2018: 58). The predicament is as clear as it is inescapable. There is simply nothing that these young men can do with their hands that will not place them at risk. As Marcia Willis Stuart, lawyer for the family of Mark Duggan who was shot dead by Metropolitan Police officers on August 4, 2011 testifies, 'Usually when there's a [police] encounter with a Black man, you hear that they're the strongest, most violent, most aggressive' (Forensic Architecture, 2021: 7). Defence attorneys for the police who assaulted Rodney King, for example, sought to justify his violent beating by a description that expanded their victim's 'presence' 'in size and proportion' (Puwar, 2004: 52).

It is incumbent upon any theory of institutional racism to offer an account of instances such as these where a structural phenomenon is made emphatically, violently and inescapably manifest in the experiences of racially minoritised people. The dominant source for such

explanations in the field of liberal antiracism for the last decade might be called 'privilege theory'. This can be dated back to Peggy McIntosh's expansion of the concept of 'male privilege' to 'white privilege' as a means of reflecting on her position as a white woman via the analogy of an 'invisible knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks' (1990). McIntosh began her career in education and ended it giving keynote speeches all over the world, a trajectory echoed by education scholar Robin DiAngelo, whose development of the hugely influential term 'white fragility' (2011, 2019) placed her at the forefront of the recent expansion of the antiracism training industry in the US. Although her account of racism does not centre the term 'privilege' and gives more prominence to structural conditions than McIntosh, DiAngelo nonetheless always returns to individually and interpersonally experienced forms of advantage as frameworks to establish its consequences. For example, she writes: 'to say that whiteness is a location of structural advantage is to recognize that to be white is to be *in a privileged position* within society and its institutions—to be seen as an insider and to be granted the benefits of belonging' (2019: 27, my emphasis). Thus, privilege theory reduces the structural and material to the interpersonal. The same pattern characterizes Reni Eddo-Lodge's best-selling *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, where we are told that 'structural racism is dozens, or hundreds, or thousands of white people with the same biases joining together to make up one organisation, and acting accordingly' (2020: 64). DiAngelo applies the same logic to the question of the origins of the racialized violence of policing. It is, she argues, predominantly a question of 'beliefs' and 'bias' (2019: 63, 59). Gestures are 'incendiary' (tucker green, 2018: 5) to police officers, in other words, because of those officers' attitudes (whether explicitly or implicitly held).

The Chekhovian and Fanonian conception of racist atmospheres set out above offers an alternative to this hegemonic view, beginning with the simple observation that gestures are

particularly incendiary when they occur within inflammatory atmospheres. On 22 November 2014 in Cleveland, Ohio, a police officer named Timothy Loehmann shot dead twelve-year-old Tamir Rice less than two seconds after arriving in a park where the boy was 'throwing snowballs and pretending to fire [a] toy weapon' (Lowery, 2016: 74). Following Chekhov's instruction, we must set aside (rather than discount) the possibility that Loehmann was simply a violent racist guided by his attitudes, and even suspend any consideration of his actions until we have established the atmosphere of the encounter. According to the factually mostly undisputed Justice Department investigation, two officers arrived at the scene following a 911 call reporting a 'guy with a pistol' that he was 'pointing . . . at multiple people' from a playground, and that although he was 'probably a juvenile' and the gun 'probably a fake', it was nonetheless 'very frightening' (United States Department of Justice, 2020). A 911 dispatcher then chose to put out a highest priority call describing 'a black male sitting on the swing' who 'keeps pulling a gun out of his pants and pointing it at people' (United States Department of Justice, 2020) – no mention was made of the fact this 'male' was likely to be a child with a toy, exemplifying the adultification and dehumanisation of racially minoritized children (Goff et al., 2014), and – crucially – imaginatively converting the playground from a space of safety to one of extreme threat. Responding to the urgent call, Loehmann and his fellow officer arrived in their patrol car at speed, skidding forty feet towards Rice before they stopped (United States Department of Justice, 2020). Loehmann then reported that 'I kept my eyes on the suspect the entire time, … I was fixed on his waistband and hand area. I was trained to keep my eyes on his hands because "hands may kill"' (Lowery, 2016: 74). The officers arrived, therefore, surrounded by an atmosphere that combined the following factors: high speed and instability, the racialized threat of adult violence in a space designated for children's safety, and the inculcated expectation of a weapon either in Rice's hand or waistband. This, then, was the 'music of the atmosphere' in which Loehmann acted: an

atmosphere of institutional racism that should never be considered to exculpate him, but certainly made his extreme violence much more likely. We might add to this account that it was also an atmosphere of permissiveness around the hiring and arming of young men by the police that caused Loehmann to be in that patrol car at all. Had Cleveland Police conducted a proper background check, they would have discovered that a former supervisor had assessed him as unable to 'be trusted to follow simple instructions' (Lowery, 2016: 75).

There are, of course, important reasons not to allow the term 'institutional racism' to encourage us to minimise the existence of racist attitudes, but the hegemony of attitudinal thinking goes far beyond such stipulations, and speaks to a deeper conceptual difficulty. There have been both persuasive critiques of privilege theory advanced across academic disciplines (Leonardo, 2004; Ngo, 2020; Zack, 2015) and a wealth of prominent analyses of whiteness as a system of domination from W.E.B. DuBois (1998) to David Roediger (2020), Cheryl Harris (1993), George Yancy (2012), Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015), and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2021). In spite of this, contemporary scholarship lacks a theoretical account of mechanisms whereby structural racism is made directly manifest in action and experience that does not require a detour into attitudes. The political consequences of this hegemonizing of attitudinal critique within antiracist discourse should not be underestimated since they can be seen, furthermore, to unite liberal antiracists such as DiAngelo and Eddo-Lodge with their opponents on the right.

The 2021 Report of the UK Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparities (CRED) (Sewell, 2021) was welcomed by many on the right, rejected by left and liberal media (Tikly, 2022a), and has since been comprehensively critiqued by numerous experts (Bhopal, 2021; British Medical Association, 2021; Day et al., 2021; Doldor et al., 2021). Crucially, it 'argued for the use of the term "institutional racism" to be applied only when deep-seated racism can be proven on a systemic level' (Sewell, 2021: 8). Although the report does not support this

argument with a definition of racism, it uses the term 'racism' interchangeably with 'racial bias' (2021: 34), indicating that, in the Commission's view, racism is a matter of cause not effect, involving the identifiable operation of 'discriminatory processes, policies, attitudes or behaviours' (2021: 36). Such attempts to redefine racism have typified recent attempts to undermine antiracist interventions in public policy from figures such as David Goodhart, now head of the Demography, Immigration and Integration Unit at the extremely influential and 'highly opaque' think tank Policy Exchange (Shone, 2024). Goodhart described the CRED Report as 'a counter-polemic to the BLM rhetoric of endemic racism and white privilege', and a 'case for shifting the debate about race and racism onto a new and more objective footing' (2021). Revealingly, Goodhart's rejoinder to 'BLM rhetoric' focused on 'biases and prejudices', which he sought to naturalise as 'tendencies to favour the familiar and members of in-groups' (2021), which Goodhart's associate, Eric Kaufmann, has euphemised as 'racial self-interest' (2017). Paradoxically, the structures of these arguments can be mapped precisely onto those of their opponents, such as DiAngelo and Eddo-Lodge, in two respects. Firstly, they assert that racism is primarily (indeed almost exclusively) a function of attitudes, and secondly, they therefore assert that structural conditions are only significant with respect to race because of their capacity to produce attitudinal tendencies. The idea that race might itself be a structural condition that can operate regardless of the attitudinal tendencies of certain groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Lentin, 2020) has thus been effectively excised from the field of political contestation.

The key, therefore, to resolving the apparent contradiction of political opponents deploying a shared theoretical basis is to consider each side as one wing of a larger counterinsurgency (Rodriguez, 2020; Ware and Rodriguez, 2024). Orisanmi Burton describes counterinsurgency as a process of 'encapsulating . . . potentially disruptive claims, demands, and tactics of movements within liberal institutions and discourses' (2023: 17). In Britain

there has been a long tradition of such encapsulation of antiracist claims and demands dating back at least to Lord Scarman's report into the Brixton uprising of 1981. Scarman's decision to emphasise 'social conditions which create a disposition towards violent protest' (1982: 16) while refusing to countenance 'the allegation that the police are the oppressive arm of a racist state' (1982: 64) was correctly diagnosed by Sivanandan as an attempt to foreclose the question of institutional racism. In its place, Scarman asserted what Sivanandan called a 'socio-psychological view of racism' (2008: 145) whereby family structures and social habits allegedly endemic to Brixton's 'West Indian' community, when combined with social deprivation, shape 'attitudes and beliefs' that convert racialized disadvantage into allegations of institutional racism (2008: 145). Sivanandan's critique is echoed by Adam Elliott-Cooper's analysis of the Macpherson report's likewise counterinsurgent attempt to encapsulate the charge of institutional racism by framing 'individual prejudice and racial bias as psychological or moral deficiencies, which then lead to otherwise objective and fair institutions reproducing racism' (2023: 107). Sustained advocacy for antiracist interventions addressing attitudes and interpersonal relations, in other words, serve to enable racist institutions to remain substantially intact, albeit somewhat disrupted (Saha 2022). Thus, an attitudinal conception of the operation of institutional racism has been a crucial component of anti-antiracist counterinsurgency.

By contrast, an atmospheric conception of the operation of institutional racism enables us to conceive of its affective operation without this counterinsurgent turn to attitudes. Such an account emphasises, instead, the directly atmospheric 'forces' (Wall, 2020a: 56) of the 'social conditions' emphasised by Scarman and echoes Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton's analysis of institutional racism's origins 'in the operation of established and respected forces in the society' (2011: 4). For Ture and Hamilton, the pseudo-colonized status of Black people in the United States in economic, political and social terms is not a

fundamentally attitudinal problem. Although it works in tandem with 'individual racism', it depends upon – and sustains – an 'established system of vested interests' (2011: 8). In the next section, we will, therefore, engage the question of how an atmospheric conception of institutional racism, which I term the toxic whiteness of institutions, can function like barium dye to expose its systemic operation.

Toxic Whiteness

It is a common feature of the literature on institutional racism that recent waves of liberal antiracist reforms ultimately justify and undergird institutional power (Ahmed, 2012; Elliott-Cooper, 2023; Saha and van Lente, 2022; Tate and Page, 2018) so that, as Ahmed writes, 'the very promise of inclusion can be the concealment and thus extension of exclusion' (2012: 183). We might read this situation atmospherically by distinguishing actions that perform inclusion (such as antiracism training) from the institutional atmospheres in which they take place, and in which racially minoritized people are always able to detect the 'low-level hum' of toxic whiteness, a far more reliable predicter of antiracist outcomes than commitments stated in antiracism action plans. Crucially, I am not asserting, here – as did the men's rights movements of the 1980s and 90s of masculinity – that only certain features or versions of whiteness are 'toxic'. Rather, my use of the qualifier 'toxic' is intended to emphasise that because institutional racism is the atmospheric condition of white supremacy, it is invariably constitutively toxic to people who are racially minoritised and conducive to the collective thriving of white people.

This analysis depends fundamentally on Chekhov's claim that atmospheres always have an objective character: that we can all agree, in other words – at the level of simple description – on their qualities. Because of this objective character, Chekhov asserted that

two atmospheres '*cannot exist simultaneously*', except in a brief battle for supremacy, which one of them will quickly win (Chekhov and Powers, 2002: 51). This is a generative provocation for antiracism because it forces us to treat institutional racism as an objective condition permeating entire organisations that is absorbed both by those it oppresses and those it benefits. Furthermore, it focuses our attention on the aleatory quality of atmospheres: their susceptibility to sudden and unpredictable change. Before we can begin to engage the question of effective strategies for altering the atmospheres of institutional racism, however, we will need to understand more deeply the apparent contradiction of their objective character and contradictory effects.

To clarify Chekhov's claim about the objective nature of atmospheres, we might think of events whose atmospheres are unmistakable, such as weddings or funerals. This is not to say, of course, that all weddings or all funerals have *similar* atmospheres – far from it – but that their various atmospheres tend to be unmistakable by virtue of their intensity. If two guests were to begin to fight during one of these ceremonies, we can see that one of two things will happen. First, the atmosphere of the ceremony might prevail – in which case, the fight may continue (albeit in a subdued manner, constrained by the atmosphere of the ceremony), but it will probably dissipate. Secondly, the atmosphere of the fight may overwhelm the ceremony, drawing all into it. In this case, the ceremony may be concluded, but in a way that will be wholly compromised by the atmosphere of open conflict in which it is conducted. What is much harder to imagine is that both the atmosphere of the ceremony and the atmosphere of the fight could be sustained in the same space. This is the basis of Chekhov's claim as to the objectivity of atmosphere: none of the guests at the ceremony would be in any real doubt about what the atmosphere felt like at any time. That is not to say, however, that they would all feel the same about it. They might have felt awkward within the formality of the ceremony, deeply moved or irritated by its intensity or solemnity, terrified or

exhilarated by the fight, but those feelings will all – this is Chekhov's claim – have been responding to the same atmospheric qualities.

An example from transcripts of Chekhov's rehearsals for an adaptation of Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* will elucidate this point. Chekhov instructs his student actors:

> Imagine the air around you filled with atmosphere — filled with this raging thing around you. […] Everything is in tremendous movement, in you and around you. If you will imagine this raging atmosphere truly, you will become either as small as a mouse or as big as King Lear. You will merge with it. Rachel will become like a mouse and Jingle like King Lear. Stiggins takes the atmosphere as inspiration. He is always involved in it, throughout the whole scene. The thunderstorm is his inspiration. It forms a cloud around him. (Fleming and Cornford, 2020: 85)

The same, objective atmosphere is experienced by everyone: it is 'raging', 'in tremendous movement, in you and around you', but it does not affect them in the same way. One character (Rachel) is overwhelmed by it, whereas the others (Jingle and Stiggins) grow with the energy it provides. Stiggins, in particular, seems to depend upon it to be able to act as he does. Translating this into the terms of affect theory, we might say that a single relational condition, or 'world' (in the Heideggerian sense of one set of relationships from among many possible 'worldings') may constitute the condition of many (possibly contradictory) possibilities, including the experience of toxicity. Ultimately, however, toxicity negates relation, in Glissand's sense of a condition 'in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other' (1997: 11), making toxic atmospheres invariably nonrelational, albeit to varying degrees.

To illustrate the point about toxicity and nonrelation, consider the following evocation of the atmospheric condition of England from the actor Daniel Kaluuya. Responding to the

footballer Marcus Rashford's reflections on the racist abuse directed at Black England players who missed penalties in the final of the 2020 UEFA European Football Championship, Kaluuya said this:

> That's why you get conflicted with supporting England. It just reminds you of being a kid in England. It reminds you of all them times when you're out … and then someone says something – so: 'you're black' or – or someone's parent said something… You know what I'm saying? And then it reminds you of that: when you're trying to get closer to the identity of being English and that, and then that happens, like – oh yeah! – there's *this* gap. Do you know what I'm saying? Because it's like you said there's feelings [about the loss of the final on penalties] … and this-this-that-and-the-other, but you instantly go *there* [to the issue of race], so why'd you go there? That means it's just there waiting… It was a jolt of a reminder, of like: oh yeah, yeah, *this* country. It's why I was never comfortable in the pub like that. As a kid, or… It's why I can't go certain places. It was *that* – what happened with you lot [the Black players in the England football team] – *that's* what it was.
>
> Paul Rivera: Do you still feel that way? Even winning an Oscar, you don't feel that's put you in rare air, or a different space..?
>
> Daniel Kaluuya: No, I'm Black bro. Nah, like, if I believe in that, that's when I'm in trouble. … It's nothing to do with what we've achieved. … The reason why they're doing it is not cos we've underachieved. (*The Shop*, 2022)

For Kaluuya, 'the identity of being English' is evidently not exclusively toxic. It's something he might try 'to get closer to', and whose racialized construction he might temporarily forget. Like the pub, whose atmosphere Kaluuya associates it with, however, the atmosphere of Englishness contains an element of threat, so that he can't be 'comfortable' within it. The

atmospheric world of Englishness, in other words, is constitutively racialized (and specifically anti-Black), but not openly and transparently so. Its racism is part-submerged, constantly at work beneath the surface, and threatening to erupt. Along these lines, Tyrone S. Palmer has critiqued 'the widespread idea that to experience the passage of affect is to feel bodily intensity as a positive force of connection to a larger world' (2020: 248). Palmer names this tendency the 'coercive "logic of affect"', which 'disallows the possibility of affect outside and against the world; of nonrelational affect; of Black affect' (2020: 249). Palmer's argument is that affect theory's assertion of a 'universal, relational essence' (2020: 271) naturalizes both the term 'relation' and 'world', obfuscating and perpetuating the 'world' as an 'ensemble of processes that function to ensure Europe's domination of the globe and the genocidal mode of its expansion' (2020: 253). Thus, affect theory cannot but operate in tandem with the racializing assemblages of anti-Blackness, and Black affect can only be 'nonrelational' insofar as Blackness must commit itself to 'the destruction of "the World" as the horizon of possibility' (2020: 255). It is for this reason – and emphatically not for any recuperative purpose – that we must name the atmospheric toxicity of whiteness, which ultimately can only be nonrelational for racially minoritized people because they cannot exist within it. Kaluuya's insistence that success has not relocated him in 'rare air' because he is Black, and can therefore never escape the atmospheric toxicity of whiteness, makes exactly this point. Chekhov's insistence on the objective nature of atmosphere thus offers a coherent theoretical basis for Kaluuya and Palmer's shared refusal to make Blackness responsible for its nonrelational condition within a world whose atmospheres are produced by whiteness.

The institutional atmosphere of whiteness is, of course, not only nonrelational. It is simultaneously hospitable to those whose interests are aligned with it. A pub, after all, is a public *house*, a space of collective domesticity historically essential to the reproduction of working-class communities, offering sustenance, warmth and conviviality to some of those

who could not necessarily rely on the private fulfilment of these needs (notwithstanding crucial exclusions and hierarchies of access along, for example, gendered lines). The toxic whiteness of institutional atmospheres highlights, in other words, the ways in which material interests are embedded in atmospheres. Such interests may, of course, occupy a latent position within material and social relations, but they are also, therefore, always waiting to be actualized. Jeremy Gilbert and Alex Williams write that 'part of the work of politics in any given moment is the practice of actualising certain interests as explicit political demands' (Williams and Gilbert, 2022: 143). We might add to this that another part of the work of politics is to actualize interests – or sustain their actualization – not only on the plane of active political demands, but also at the level of the atmospheric substrate of such demands: the conditions required for their emergence. Toxic whiteness must be challenged, in other words, not only where it erupts in the form of racist abuse, but in its latent state, in the 'low-level hum' of institutional racism, where it can serve the interests of white supremacy at a level that is both effective and easily disavowed. I will therefore conclude with some proposals for atmospheric antiracism.

Conclusion: Atmospheric Antiracism

In sum, I have argued that the atmospheric analysis of institutional racism constitutes an effective response to current gaps in theoretical conceptions of institutional racism for two principal reasons. First, it provides an alternative to the dominant view that, in order to be affectively experienced, institutional oppression must be routed through attitudes. Instead, atmospheric analysis demonstrates that institutional assemblages directly produce affective conditions of relation, which also underpin experiences of embodiment and subjectivity. Secondly, atmospheric analysis reveals that atmospheres constitute favourable conditions for

those in whose interests they are produced, while preventing others from thriving to the point of excluding them from relation and even killing them. Atmospheric analysis of racism is therefore both descriptively and analytically coherent, and it is congruent with Black radical accounts of institutional racism that emphasise its systemic character and its basis in material interests.

This capacity of atmospheric analysis to connect the affective operation of racism to a conceptual account of race as a system for ordering social reality in the service of the interests of whiteness at all levels creates an opportunity for antiracism. Namely, it enables antiracists to avoid the strategic error of conceiving of the interpersonal symptoms of racial domination as meaningful objects of study and adequate targets for action in and of themselves. An atmospheric account of institutional racism teaches us, on the contrary, that antiracist action plans are bound to fail unless their frame of reference can encompass the operation of any given institution in its entirety. Unless, in other words, activism seeks to deconstruct the entire racializing assemblage of an institution (the assemblage, that is to say, that generates its atmospheric condition), they will only serve further to embed racializing logics and racist effects into that institutional assemblage, and thus enable its toxic operations to persist further concealed from view. Atmospheric antiracism must proceed, then, from a detailed analysis of the complex unities of component parts that are synthesised within an institutional atmosphere: features of the built or material environment, structural features of its social relations, habitual patterns of behaviour within it, and so on. Crucially, such an analysis must remain alert to the ways in which atmospheric conditions intersect with the operation of material interests by asking what kinds of interests become actualized in particular atmospheric conditions, and which suppressed? The killing of Tamir Rice is only, in this account, an extreme instance of the normality of so-called criminal justice, whose

atmospheres directly produce ‘group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death’ (Gilmore, 2022: 107).

Atmospheres and institutional racism both operate, conceptually and in practice, at the level of a social totality. Chekhov spoke of atmosphere as the feeling that belongs to no-one, and it is also therefore the condition that no-one can escape. Likewise racial order has, since the advent of modernity, seeped into and reconfigured all aspects of social life, as Fanon observed. It is the air we breathe, and present in the shaping context of every social interaction. But it is not, therefore, either monolithic or constant. Rather it is a ‘changing same’ (Hall, 2024: 23), a fluid substrate that adapts to altering conditions just as it also constrains our capacity to alter them. Analysing and engaging toxic whiteness, therefore, both in its totality and its mercuriality, is a crucial insurgent task facing antiracists today.

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