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## Abstract

### Purpose

The author advances a theory of white generosity, a product of whiteness and of hierarchised relationships between races characterised by the giving to the racialised person that which has not been asked for and which has no practical immediate purpose, which can be used by anti-racist scholars as a framework for analysing racial oppression.

### Design/methodology/approach

Using postcolonial and cultural studies and deconstructionist techniques in tandem with autoethnography, the author uses textual readings to examine instances of “giving” shaped by white generosity, drawing on Jacques Derrida's work on the gift in order to deconstruct the structure and rhetorical moves of white generosity.

### Findings

White generosity demands gratitude in excess of the value of the thing given. If for Derrida the gift is given unconditionally, becoming devalued as soon as it demands acknowledgement or draws attention to itself as gift, white generosity is the gift's inverse: a “giving” that manifests itself only as a demand for its supposed recipient's gratitude. Emancipation is no gift at all; simply a deferral of debt. The “gifts” of diversity, decolonisation, widening participation or access are all objects of brokerage in a system that is inherently unequal and violent for black folk.

### Originality/value

White generosity is related to theoretical constructs, such as white fragility, that have commanded significant scholarly engagement. However, it has not previously been named or analysed in a systematic way. This article offers a theoretical framework for use by anti-racist activists and scholars to name, interrogate and deconstruct a powerful narrative used in the continued marginalisation of non-white folk.

### Keywords

Ethnic minorities, Culture, Diversity, Black people, Racial discrimination, White generosity.

### Paper type

Research paper.

## **White Generosity: Black Freedom Faced with Good Intentions**

I'm late. I hate being late. I finally make it to the black pedagogies event being held in a predominately white, elite, [Russell Group](#) university [1] in London. I stand outside the room and notice it has two doors. I stop.

Which door? No windows.

I cannot tell which side the presentations are likely to be on. Will I walk into a presentation? Are the doors in the back or the front of the room?

I chance the door that looks slightly more like a side door. The signage is on the other door. I open the door hesitantly, and sigh.

I'm at the front of the room, but the presentations are happening in front of the other door (the door not chosen). Still... it is a full room. I take a moment to scan for a seat. This makes me nervous, as it means standing at the front of the room for longer than I feel comfortable (which is no time at all, really). A black woman on the left side of the room looks at me and smiles.

I relax. I am among friends.

I slip into the seat behind the woman who smiled at me, beside a white man who I assume is a student. This opinion is based entirely on observing the copious volume of notes he has already taken, before the presentations have even started. The woman in front of me turns to me and whispers, 'Do you have a pen that I could borrow?'

I feel seen. Of course I have a pen for you. She smiles at me as if she knows that I would do the same for her. I search my bag. I always carry at least five pens. I search. I search. I search. 'It's okay,' she says.

'I know I have something...' I respond. She smiles (again). The man beside me perks up.

'What do you need?' he asks.

She responds, 'Do you have a pen?'

He gets excited and burrows into his bag. He looks up triumphantly and pulls out a lovely monogrammed Moleskine and hands it to the woman in front of me. We look at each other, perplexed. Certainly, this is related to the object she asked for, but what will she do with it if she has no pen?

His confidence is unrelenting. He pushes the notebook at her. Is he giving this to her? How does one borrow a Moleskine? Does he expect her to tear the pages out?

The woman and I are still confused. She pushes the notebook back and he pushes it towards her again, sure of her needs in a way that I never am about my own. She pushes the notebook towards him more firmly. Finally, he takes it. She reiterates, 'a pen.'

The man looks confused. He goes back to his bag and begins searching, but there is no pen in there. I hand the woman the pen I found and she proceeds to fill out the feedback form the organisers distributed before the event started.

For some reason this interaction stays with me. I have spent the months since the event reflecting on why this near silent communication sticks with me. I find this interaction metonymic of interactions that we have, as black [folx](#) [2], hourly, daily, monthly, yearly on individual levels as well as systemic ones. Our interactions with whiteness [3] are all-too-often defined by the same notion of the *gift* that underpinned this interaction, and by a phenomenon I am going to call *white generosity*.

White generosity is a product of whiteness and of hierarchized relationships between whiteness and non-whiteness, defined by a *supposed* gift made to the person racialized as non-white, which has not been asked for and which has no obvious practical purpose. White generosity, I want to argue, underpins a broad spectrum of interactions from undoubtedly well-intentioned but inappropriate gestures of white allyship [4] to insidious reinscriptions or justifications of white supremacy [5] in the guise of gift-giving. In its most benign form,

white generosity is a gesture from a white ally that holds no real-world value: an offer of support or a gesture towards ‘inclusivity’. At its most violent, white generosity posits emancipation from slavery – the restoration of a fundamental human right by those who previously violently wrenched it away, offered with no acknowledgment of wrongdoing but an expectation of gratitude – as a gift. In what follows, I make extensive use Jacques Derrida’s notion of *the gift* to analyse the paradoxical structure underlying white generosity and the expectation of gratitude generated by this ‘gift’.

As I will show in this article, white generosity is characterised across this spectrum of contexts by a *violence* that – even in its most well-intentioned manifestations – centres whiteness and consolidates the structures of white supremacy. This generosity supports and complements anti-black violence, reflecting Dionne Brand’s recent claim that ‘I know, as many do, that I’ve been living a pandemic all my life; it is structural rather than viral; it is the global state of emergency of antiblackness’ (2020). In thinking about anti-blackness and its implicit violence, I turn to Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake*, a personal and emotional analysis that examines the state of blackness today through the prism of a series of discrete tragedies, ranging from slavery to today’s anti-black atrocities. Sharpe’s book forms a call to perform what – evoking ‘wake’ as both aftermath and funeral – she calls ‘wake work.’ Sharpe asks: ‘In the midst of so much death and the fact of Black life as proximate to death, how do we attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness that is Black life, Black life insisted from death? I want to suggest that that might look something like wake work’ (2016, p. 17). For Sharpe, ‘wake work’ is the complementary movement between acknowledging the violence of black death while also focusing on the reality of black life.

When I think about white generosity as a framework with which to dismantle white supremacist narratives of what is *owed*, it is with the understanding that anti-black violence and black death are underpinned by the construction of black freedom as a token of exchange

within a racist system. At times, white generosity is characterised by the gift *forced* onto an unwilling recipient, at others by the declaration that a gift has already been generously given, whatever the experience of its supposed beneficiary. Its defining feature lies in the giver's conviction – in the absence of affirmation from the recipient – that something of value has been given, and that gratitude is due to the giver. The centring of the giver in this exchange puts the onus on the recipient to express gratitude and, in the face of ingratitude, constructs the giver as a victim. At all points in the exchange of white generosity, the giver of the gift is central and the supposed recipient secondary to the narrative.

In exploring the phenomenon of white generosity, I take my lead from two main strands of antiracist scholarship, in combination with the deconstructive reading practices central to postcolonial literary and cultural studies. The first of these strands concerns the need to interrogate whiteness without re-centring it. In recent years, works with 'crossover' appeal beyond academia (see, for example, Diangelo, 2018; Eddo-Lodge, 2017) have focused on the reluctance of white colleagues and interlocutors to acknowledge and interrogate white privilege. This reluctance underpins the exhausting demands for emotional and psychological labour placed on antiracist activists of colour to *explain* the most basic tenets of racism in the face of scepticism and willed ignorance. However, it is increasingly evident that privilege-checking and good intentions are by themselves inadequate defences against the centring of whiteness even within antiracist-activist contexts. The failure of self-identified allies 'to enter movements with the depth of understanding necessary to contribute to movement goals' or 'to engage without unleashing their privilege and entitlement onto activists of color' (Gorski & Erakat, 2019, p. 794) makes engaging with these 'allies' exhausting for non-white folk.

The second strand of scholarship that underpins my understanding of white generosity is the field of 'everyday racism', defined by its focus on

the ‘micro’ dimensions of historical social movements and epochs; ‘doing’ anti-racism in organizational/institutional contexts; negotiating cultural difference and countering racism in spaces of ‘encounter’; and victims developing ‘cultural repertoires’ to cope with racism. (Aquino, 2020, p. 216)

To the ‘micro’ dimensions of fragmentary narratives and fleeting moments, I bring the toolkits of deconstructionist and postcolonialist literary theory, aiming to bridge without diminishing the ‘multifaceted and contradictory processes of reproducing and contesting racism at both the structural and interactional, behavioural and ideological, macro and micro levels’ (Aquino, 2020, p. 217). I do so by reading each moment and interaction I discuss as a *text*, representing both an isolated event with its own narrative integrity and a participant in discourses of structural racism, imperialism and white supremacy beyond its author’s awareness and control, which are restored and elucidated by the act of *reading* (see, for example, Said, 1994; Young, 1990). I am therefore coming to this work as an antiracist scholar with a background in literary studies. I see the world as a series of texts that, when read, become useful tools in explaining and theorising everyday and systemic racism.

### **Black Voices**

Throughout this article, I use my own lived experiences to underpin my analysis of white generosity in a type of autoethnography, as defined by Heewon Chang as ‘cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative details’ that ‘follows the anthropological and social scientific inquiry approach rather than descriptive or performative storytelling’ (2008, p. 46). For Chang, the key expectation of autoethnographers is that they ‘treat their autobiographical data with critical, analytical, and interpretive eyes to detect cultural undertones of what is recalled, observed, and told’ (2008, p. 49). By strategically deploying an autoethnographic voice, I aim to engage critically in this vein with the space between *experience* and *analysis* in the effort to put forward a theoretical framework that engages with *knowledge*, with an

understanding that knowledge is all the ways that we construct something that we might claim to be *true*.

This article is calling for an interrogation of whiteness and its construction of black folk as *in the red* because they owe white systems a debt for emancipation. I hope that, by offering my autoethnographic *reading* of moments of white generosity, this framework can be used to highlight other voices by using “autoethnographic writing as a means of resistance” (Griffin, 2012, p. 139). I employ a black feminist autoethnographic voice as it “offers a narrative means for Black women to highlight struggles common to Black womanhood without erasing the diversity among Black women” (Griffin, 2012, p. 143). This black feminist autoethnographic voice does not come easily to me; in fact, it is a difficult thing for me to recognize the validity of my own experiences and voice.

I am not setting out here to define all possibilities of white generosity. Rather, I seek to advance a preliminary theoretical model for understanding and examining white generosity, which I hope will allow this peculiar phenomenon to be more easily named and analysed in the future. In particular, I want to provide the theoretical tools needed to unpack the degrees of violence inherent in this giving and the potential damage to people racialized as non-white when freedom is expressed as an exchange, where gratitude is the expected reciprocation of white giving.

For this initial exploration of white generosity, I restrict myself to its impact on black folk, and the particular set of relationships that exists between a history of slavery and forced migration, the supposed ‘gift’ of emancipation, and contemporary discourses around blackness. Yet the dynamics of white generosity are (of course) not restricted to blackness/whiteness alone, and I hope that the remarks I offer here provide the means of thinking about white generosity in all the unequal contexts in which it manifests.

In my own examples, I draw from my personal experience as a professional working in UK Higher Education alongside readings from literature and popular culture, to examine moments of white generosity through a deconstructionist lens. I approach these moments as a series of vignettes or snapshots, to provide an indication of the types and nature of interactions central to the phenomenon. These are by their nature sketches only, and I do not claim that my analysis of any of the moments I examine is exhaustive or definitive.

I originally wrote this paper before the tragic murder of George Floyd and the subsequent global protests, but there is an opportunity here for others to take forward this notion of white generosity in an analysis of the ways that businesses, universities, governments and allies responded publicly to these events. I will not do that work here. However, it is my hope that this framework will help others to articulate their thoughts and feelings about one period of time in the continuous state of violence that global anti-blackness brings to black folk.

### **Black Freedom and the Gift**

Let me return to my story. A black woman needs something. A white man does not have it. He has something else and insists that the black woman needs that instead. There is little understanding of the specificity of the need and the impracticality of the gift. In this interaction, the white man's perception of his own generosity, and his expectation of the gratitude he will receive in return, is located entirely in the *act* of giving, not in any value the thing given may possess. The material practicality of the object is unimportant, so long as the offer of a gift (some gift – *any* gift – whether or not the thing given fulfils the needs of the recipient or even has any value at all) is made – and *seen to be made*.

This, I am suggesting, is the basic architecture of the phenomenon of white generosity. And as I shall demonstrate, the power dynamics inherent within this exchange – structured



not around the gift *per se* but around the *desire to be seen to have given* – apply not only to the kind of trivial exchange I have described so far but to the forces that have shaped the lives of black folx in majority-white nations for over a century, and continue to shape contemporary political and popular discourse around blackness in the twenty-first century. So let us now raise the stakes and ask what happens when the ‘gift’ is something far, far more precious and fundamental than a notebook. What happens when the gift is freedom itself, as defined by Rinaldo Walcott as ‘a certain kind of sovereignty over the self in relation to collective and communal conditions’ (2018, p. 158)? Is it possible to ‘give’ black people their freedom? Who claims the right to bestow or withhold it?

For Walcott, the construction of black freedom as gift relies on the fictive narrative that black freedom is synonymous with black emancipation. Walcott names the living history of black unfreedom for us as ‘indignities that black beings suffer and continue to suffer, whether in the bellies of slave ships, in the corridors of airports and schools, or on the rafts of Lampedusa, demand a new perspective. The social site of these indignities is the accreted accumulations of knowledges designed and launched against black being’ (2018, p. 158). Walcott is, specifically, responding to Christina Sharpe’s work on black death and the wake, where black death is life ‘living in, and produced by, the contemporary conditions of Black life as it is lived near death, as deathliness, in the wake of slavery’ (Sharpe, 2016, pp. 7-8). Whiteness is not capable of giving black people freedom where freedom equals the dignity that systemic oppression inherently denies. If black freedom is self-sovereignty, then black freedom feels far away indeed, as for many black folx control over their own lives is an impossible feat.

Black and white is not a binary, but the experience of race has historically shaped the notions of whiteness around constructions of blackness: ‘anti-blackness goes deeper than the negative stereotypes all of us have absorbed; anti-blackness is foundational to our very

identities as white people. Whiteness has always been predicated on blackness' (Diangelo, 2018, p. 91). Whiteness is overrepresented and the white background the presupposed condition upon which the 'issues' of diversity, inclusion and widening participation are discussed. When I argue that white generosity impedes the imagining of black freedom, a process that needs to take place before any notion of sovereignty can even begin to be formulated, I am arguing that it is time for us to unveil the myth of white generosity. When whiteness is predicated on anti-blackness, the gift of freedom is impossible. The gift of emancipation is not only a myth, but an insult. You cannot give what you initially took away. White supremacy relies on popular constructions of black folx as indebted to whiteness in order that whiteness can react with indignity and aggression. However, whiteness has not given us anything.

In the face of black death, these gestures of white generosity are inadequate. As a staff member at a Russell Group university, I know that institutions like universities are not working to acknowledge their own inadequacies, instead using terms like *diversity* to address demographics (Ahmet, 2020), as if increasing the number of non-white faces in a university is an act of benevolence, a guarantee of fair treatment. Instead, what we have is a 'commitment to diversity [that] is not a commitment to acknowledging racism, sexism, classism and elitism that exists in higher education' (Ahmet, 2020). Higher education institutions across the UK brandish widening participation, decolonisation and diversity like gifts, as if the generosity of these gestures has the power to mitigate against colonial histories that continue to commit violence upon non-white bodies today. Diversity, as a term, has been 'historically a code word for just enough diversity to avoid claims of racism but not enough to actually dislodge white privilege' (Corrigan, 2016, p. 87).

I am sick of sitting in meetings at supposedly 'diverse' higher education institutions where everyone nods comfortably in the understanding that 'diversity' equals lower entry

requirements, desperate retention rates and middling student outcomes. This is unacceptable. It is always unacceptable to accept that black folk should nod along with the rest of the room when senior management claims that black lives are worth less than white ones. This is violence. In these discussions, there is no acknowledgement that the system itself is built to devalue non-white lives or that a diverse student body might require a diverse set of student supports, that the embracing of diversity, and its focus on demographics, allows institutions to be 'less reactive to racism within their own walls' (Ahmet, 2020). It was one month after sitting in one such meeting decrying the state of non-white student abilities that I spied the Jamaican food truck on campus with an accompanying staff email that we were celebrating Black History Month.

White generosity is about gestures. The giving of that which has no practical value to lived reality in the face of black death. Rather than food trucks and 'inclusive' emails from a predominantly white senior management, one way to signify commitment to black staff and students would be to think about hiring and promotion practices, as

Black and minority ethnic (BME) academics are less likely to be in senior decision-making roles and are more likely to be on fixed-term contracts compared to their White colleagues (ECU, 2017). Furthermore, of the 14,315 professors in the UK, only 80 are Black and there are only 20 deputy/pro-vice chancellors who are from BME backgrounds compared to 530 who are White. (Bhopal, 2019)

There is a disparity between those paying fees and those shaping the university experience for the 'diverse' student populations across the UK. I am moving back and forth here between an understanding of what it is to be black in the UK, working in higher education, and the violent reality of black death that black people face across the world because those are my realities.

White generosity will not lead to black freedom. There is a fundamental gap in understanding between the gestural and the practical, the expected gratitude and the desired sovereignty of self. In her powerful and personal work on black death, Sharpe says, '[t]he ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people are normative and, for this so-called democracy, necessary; it is the ground we walk on. And that it *is* the ground lays out that, and perhaps how, we might begin to live in relation to this requirement for our death' (2016, p. 7). Here, Sharpe asks us to think about black life in the wake of black death. The historical implications of slavery, colonialism and imperialism are with us and there is no distinction between *then* and *now*. We who work in university spaces in the UK need to recognise that we are working in sites born out of colonialism and dependant on colonial power structure (see, for example, Bhabra, et al., 2018). Colonialism is now.

### **The Impossibility of the Gift**

Academic institutions may be inhospitable venues for the work of black freedom, but antiracist events engage in an ongoing struggle to craft spaces in which this work can take place. As part of crafting these spaces, it has become usual at such events to begin with an entreaty to the audience, which implicitly references the more performative aspects of white generosity. This is a request to all attendees to give space to those who hold less unearned privilege than they do, to refrain from monopolising conversations, to appreciate the validity of lived experiences, and – specifically addressing the white people in the room – to refrain from demanding that non-white folx tell you what to do to *help*. My next vignette takes place at just such an event – a book launch I attended about a year ago.

As is now customary, the entreaty to the audience is made. The first question by a white person is a passionately long-winded question about what *he* could do *himself* to *help*. Ah well. The event is great. Interesting and engaging in wonderful ways. But... there is a

moment. Just a moment. A moment that sticks with me for different reasons. The room has become passionate; everyone is on the same page. Racism is definitely bad and it hurts people. White people need to be allies, but that allyship means looking at yourselves. This is not a burden for black people. A white woman raises her hand and demands, in the distinctive drawl of the American South, 'Use me!'

Have I misheard?

'Use me!'

Nope. I definitely heard correctly.

'I am a white woman. Use me!'

Use you? For what?

'I can speak for you. People will listen to me! Tell me what you want me to say.'

I am sorry. What?

We should perhaps acknowledge that this is a genuine offer of help and it comes from a place that could someday germinate the seeds of allyship. However, this startling and strident offer of an unasked-for 'gift' turns the room silent. How do you respond to this gift, with its inherent assumption that an American white woman is better-placed than a British black person to speak to and for their own freedom? To 'use' a person generally has a negative connotation, 'using' a person often suggesting ignorance on the part of those being used and manipulation on the part of those using. Why this figure of speech, then? Because the act of white generosity requires acknowledging your own complicity in the expectations of exchange and this woman is using language to manipulate the nature of the gift being offered. By objectifying herself, she is foregrounding the act of giving, and subsequently setting up the expectation of reciprocation, in the form of the gratitude of those in the room, and the sense of self-satisfaction in the giver that such gratitude bestows, which is a crucial component of white generosity's key exchange.

In his analysis of the relation of time as it pertains to the gift, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, Jacques Derrida tells us that the very notion of the gift is embedded in exchange and that ‘the gift, if there is any, would no doubt be related to economy. One cannot treat the gift, this goes without saying, without treating this relation to economy’ (1992, p. 7). The gift is never unattached, but always girded with expectations of recompense. The gift is sustained by the expectation of payback and can never exist as an isolated event of benevolence. In fact, ‘[f]or there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt. If the other gives me back or owes me or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift, whether this restitution is immediate or whether it is programmed by a complex calculation of a long-term deferral or differance’ (Derrida, 1992, p. 7). Hence, the inherent expectation of the gift – the recompense – undermines the notion of the gift entirely. The gift is an impossibility. The gift is destabilised in the act of giving and the expectation of recompense. The gift cannot be returned:

If there is gift, the given of the gift (that which one gives, that which is given, the gift as given thing or as act of donation) must not come back to the giving (let us not already say to the subject, to the donor). It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange, by the movement of circulation of the circle in the form of return to the point of departure. (Derrida, 1992, p. 7)

The exchange of the gift already negates the generosity in the act of giving. Circulation is not giving. The expectation of gratitude, as a response to the giving, works to undermine the act of giving. There is no gift. The gift is impossible. This consideration leads us to define more precisely the relationship between white generosity and the gift: if, for Derrida the ideal gift is given unconditionally and without expectation of reward (and the real-world gift always falls short of this ideal by drawing attention to itself as such, and thereby implicitly

demanding gratitude), white generosity is the exact inverse of this ideal gift. By foregrounding the act of giving when the thing given is inappropriate, unasked-for, valueless, outside the gift of the giver, or all of the above, white generosity is defined by its conditionality in the absence of a gift of value.

So, what does this mean for black folx?

What does this mean for acts of white generosity?

### **White Feminist Generosity**

To begin to answer these questions I turn now to another vignette, this time found in the domain of literary fiction, but depicting a situation familiar to many of us who have worked in education and experienced the double movement (towards ‘inclusion’ on the one hand and further marginalisation on the other) of white generosity with respect to non-white students. The passage I want to examine occurs in Bernadine Evaristo’s 2019 Booker Prize winning novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*, and involves both a reimagining and a rejection of white generosity. Evaristo’s novel is a set of interconnected stories about mostly black, mostly women who are negotiating a racialized world, which tries to imagine what black freedom could mean to a disparate group of people that are often homogenised in a system of diversity statistics and inclusion quotas. Is black freedom commercial success in a predominantly white field? Is black freedom the rejection of race in the effort to embrace ‘humanity?’ Is black freedom resistance and activism in the face of overwhelming odds? Is black freedom leaving Britain and returning home to the Caribbean? Evaristo presents all of these scenarios and undercuts each one with overlapping and interlinked stories of people all living in a system of oppression from which there is no escape. Black freedom is none and all of these things for Evaristo because black folx are not a homogenous group with one desire, but a beautiful and discordant tapestry of wishes and hopes and dreams.

In *Girl, Woman, Other*, there is one vignette that that occurs from a white woman's perspective. Penelope finds out through an online DNA test that she is 13% African, but that has not happened yet in her main story, where she recounts through various diary entries from childhood through to adulthood her experiences of finding out she was adopted, subsequently disavowing her parents, being married several times and working as a teacher. Throughout Penelope's story, she constantly revisits the notion of feminism, finding strength in feminist theory as a young woman and finding regrets in later life at the choices that she feels were forced onto her as a result of her feminist inclinations.

Penelope teaches at a school in Peckham, a school that has become representative of the neighbourhood around it, with a largely non-white student population who live in poverty with all of the difficulties that both those determinations entail. Let us just say that when one of the book's main characters, Carole, graduates from Peckham to attend Oxford that this is momentous in its singularity. Penelope resents the student population for their own marginalisation, reflecting what those of us who work in education see all the time: lowered expectations for non-white students, frustration with those students rather than systems, and a determination to blame marginalised groups for their own suffering.

In staff meetings, Penelope is the only woman strong enough to speak out alongside the men, according to Penelope. She congratulates herself on this fact. The novel gives an example of one such staff meeting where Penelope feels attacked by the sole black teacher at the school, Shirley, for daring to speak. In her memory/diary, Penelope does not contextualise the interaction, but we know (because Shirley's story occurs earlier in the novel) that it occurs in the midst of Penelope delivering a tirade on how half the students (i.e. the non-white students) should be expelled for being 'thick and badly behaved' (Evaristo, 2019, p. 226) and how the school should focus on those students *with potential*. However, Penelope leaves the context out when she recounts the story. She remembers only Shirley's ingratitude



for everything that Penelope has given her. So, for Penelope, the gift is abstract, unremembered and without context; she remembers only that there has been a gift. Penelope bemoans Shirley's ingratitude:

why didn't Saint Shirley attack one of the male chauvinist pigs who pontificated *ad infinitum* instead of a strong woman who'd brought petitions into work for both the Equal Pay Act and the Sex Discrimination Act, both of which were eventually passed in law

improving the situation for all working women

she should be admired and respected by her female colleagues. (Evaristo, 2019, p. 299)

Penelope does not remember what she or Shirley have argued about, only that she, Penelope, has been attacked – and the attack lies in Shirley's ingratitude for Penelope's generosity. As far as Penelope is concerned, she is the giver of the gift. She has saved Shirley and all the women at this school, and therefore has earned Shirley's gratitude. Shirley's ingratitude in the face of this white generosity is such an affront that Penelope must find it in herself to 'forgive Saint Shirley' (Evaristo, 2019, p. 299), which she magnanimously does, though 'it took her a long time' (Evaristo, 2019, p. 299). The act of forgiveness re-centres Penelope within her own narrative, underscoring her magnanimity and Shirley's aggression, dismissing Shirley's narrative with the wave of one white hand.

Shirley, on the other hand, remembers and agonises over the context of this staff meeting for years. Penelope's response to her Shirley's eagerness to support all the students at the school, regardless of whether or not they are 'thick and badly behaved' – which Shirley understands to mean that they look like her – is damaging to both Shirley and the students at the school. What Shirley does not understand is that, in this moment, Penelope believes Shirley to be the recipient of her gift of women's rights. However, Shirley can only be

ungrateful, as she only understands that Penelope feels threatened and responds with personal attacks:

Penelope doesn't disappoint, I, for one, am not a social worker, she replies in a tone that affects great weariness at Shirley's obvious naïveté and dim-wittedness, and I really think you need more than two terms on the job before you challenge someone with fifteen years' experience to a duel

someone who actually knows what she's talking about. (Evaristo, 2019, p. 227)

Where Penelope sees only the gifts that she has bestowed upon Shirley, Shirley only sees the damage of the conversation to both herself and her students. Shirley's concerns about the school's duty of care to all students are dismissed as beyond the school's remit. Penelope reminds Shirley of her youth and inexperience, ignoring Shirley's lived experience and real concerns about treating children differently based on exam performance. The gift is not stated; it is implied. Shirley cannot reject Penelope's gift, as she does not know that she has already accepted it. Here, white feminism underpins the gift that Shirley does not see and cannot understand as a black woman. For Penelope, gratitude is obsequiousness, which Shirley refuses to show. For Shirley, sovereignty is undermined through dismissal, underpinned by white generosity.

### **Gift or Prize**

Ironically, *Girl, Woman, Other* found itself at the centre of the very complex overlapping forces Evaristo depicts with such nuance when it was shortlisted for the 2019 Booker Prize, which it subsequently won (with an important caveat). With its household name status, its generous cash prize and the increased revenue it brings to winners (and nominees) via book sales, film and TV options, and speaking engagements, the Booker is the

example par excellence of the literary prize as a ‘gift’ that rewards both its recipient *and* giver (its corporate sponsors) handsomely, as ‘[t]he corporate prize [...] is a “gift” that brings publicity to the company while functioning as a symbolic marker of its authorising power’ (Huggan, 2001, p. 105).

Evaristo’s win was notable because she is the first black woman to win the Booker Prize in its fifty-year history. However, in a surprising turn of events, she had to share the honour with Margaret Atwood. The Booker Prize has been shared three times in total in its history, once in 1974 and once in 1992; however, after the last instance the rules were changed to explicitly disallow joint winners. So it was fairly shocking when the first black woman to win the Booker Prize (in 2019!) had to share the prize. This move caused consternation in many quarters and the media both reported on and participated in the various missteps that occurred in the aftermath of the decision.

*The Guardian* reported on the melodrama of the decision to split the Booker Prize between the first black woman to win the prize and another, reporting variously that ‘Sunny Singh, co-founder of the Jhalak prize for the best book by a writer of colour, said she was furious at the news, while a former Booker judge [...] said they felt it was a “huge disappointment that the chance to make history emphatically was passed by”’; that ‘Sana Goyal, digital Editor at Wasafiri magazine, mourned how the “judges’ rule-breaking antics took precedence over what could’ve been a truly record-smashing, history-making, trajectory-altering move for the prize”’; and that ‘Eishar Brar, editorial director at publisher Knights Of, felt it was “incredibly short-sighted for the prize to be split in the year it’s awarded to the first black woman to receive it”’ (Flood, 2019). However, opinions on the injustice of the splitting of the prize were only the beginning. Like most mistakes of this nature, there were immediate repercussions that made it clear that this tie was not, in fact, an

equal win at all, as evidenced by the contrasting representation of Atwood and Evaristo in the days following the award.

The consequences of splitting the Booker Prize between Evaristo and Atwood were real and damaging to what could have been unrivalled success for the first black woman to win the prize. Twitter was abuzz with stories of bookstores prioritising Atwood's novel in displays over Evaristo (if they mentioned Evaristo at all):

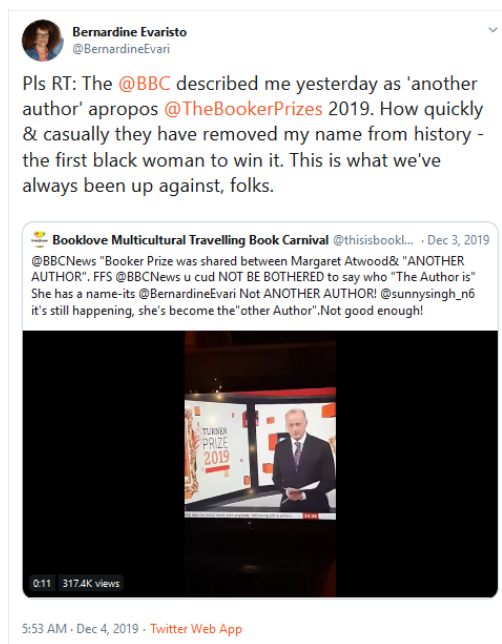


(Whitehouse, 2019)

Reasonably, bookstores reacted to the news of the Booker Prize by creating displays of the winner(s). However, Atwood's book was already well-stocked and a best seller (as one might expect of a sequel to a book that launched a popular television show). It is not difficult to imagine that Atwood's book would be easier to manage post-Booker announcement and that Evaristo's work would be sidelined, at the very least until stock (backlogged due to incredible demand) arrived. We know that, in previous years, stock management have been organised between the Booker Prize organisers and publishers in order to manage increased sales (Huggan, 2001), so the lack of stock and disproportionate in-store marketing is remarkable in its complete lack of foresight.

The reporting of the prize was almost as controversial as the announcement of the prize. The BBC ended up reporting on the winners by naming Margaret Atwood and 'another

author' (O'Connor, 2019), eliding Evaristo's accomplishment and leaving us no doubt who the author considered to be the true winner (Sherwin, 2019).



(Evaristo, 2019)

*The Guardian* had a similarly embarrassing experience (Obi-Young, 2019) when it reported the Booker Prize win in the headline, 'Booker judges split between huge event novel and obscure choice'. Defining an author of nine novels and multiple awards as 'obscure' (Jordan, 2019) would be inappropriate under any conditions, but was an especial affront considering this was the first black woman to win the Booker.

It was not, however, only those who dismissed Evaristo who presented her win in a problematic way. In an article for *The Evening Standard* that both reviewed *Girl, Woman, Other* and commented on the debacle, David Sexton managed to couch his argument about why Evaristo *should* have been awarded the prize singly in the terms of white generosity by reframing the award within the quantitative discourse of the most perfunctory gestures towards diversity: 'How did the Booker end up such a muddle? Perhaps partly because it was so overtly, this year, a prize devoted to celebrating diversity above other forms of excellence in fiction' (Sexton, 2019). This in itself is a striking claim: the 2019 Booker shortlist, the argument seems to run, 'overtly' prized diversity above 'excellence' *per se*, presumably

because it consisted entirely of authors who were women and/or non-white.[6] It is, according to this circular argument, inconceivable that a shortlist compiled solely on the basis of ‘excellence’ would have no white men on it, so naturally in 2019 the world’s most prestigious annual prize for fiction had decided simply to push ‘diversity’.

What ‘diversity’ means here is never precisely defined, but it seems to be in the vein of the catch-all term used pretty consistently in industry and higher education institutions as a blanket statement of benevolence capturing race, sex, religion, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and, well, really you name it. Or, in Sara Ahmed’s terms, a ‘branding exercise’ that allows predominantly white institutions to market themselves as open and tolerant places – and enjoy the self-congratulation, charter marks, and accolades that come along with this identification – through a quantitative measure of the non-white bodies who bear the burden of ‘embodying diversity’ on the institution’s behalf (Ahmed, 2009, p. 41). Yet, having unilaterally determined that the 2019 Booker Prize’s aim was to promote ‘diversity’, Sexton immediately finds it wanting on these terms, asserting that the winner should have been the ‘novel [which] is, as it might be almost quantitatively, the most diverse’ (Sexton, 2019). I *think* that means *Girl, Woman, Other* should have been the sole winner because race (black) + gender (woman) = more diversity than just gender (woman) alone.

While Sexton’s argument is both circular and self-contradictory, his pairing of literary prizes – and the Booker in particular – with the sterile, quantitative metrics of diversity as a box-ticking exercise is nevertheless telling. It is precisely this problematic pairing that the Canadian critic Gillian Roberts explores in her book *Prizing Literature: The Celebration and Circulation of National Culture*, where she argues that the awarding of prizes frequently reflects the exchange value of the ‘diverse’ author as a means of consolidating an impression of the harmonious, benevolent and welcoming nation state *and* providing a frisson of the exotic and foreign. Hence, Roberts argues, ‘[t]exts welcomed into a national culture, and

celebrated as part of that culture (particularly through national literary awards), can confer the status of host upon immigrant writers previously considered as guests' (Roberts, 2011, p. 7). While Evaristo was the first black woman to win the Booker, the sense that its winner should be determined by diversity metrics arises in part from its tangled history: established by a former sugar plantation owner and thus complicit in some of the worst atrocities in British colonial history, the prize (restricted to Commonwealth owners until 2014) was instrumental in the 1980s and 1990s in shaping ideas of Commonwealth and 'World' literatures, via awards to writers including Salman Rushdie, Keri Hulme, Ben Okri, Michael Ondaatje and Arundhati Roy (see Huggan, 2001).[7] Celebrating the diversity and exotic appeal of writers from former British colonies while retaining the UK firmly as the centre of aesthetic taste, the Booker regularly extended to its winners a kind of honorary citizenship of the fiercely protected territory of the English literary canon.

Questions of citizenship, and the authority to bestow or deny it, return us to the question of the gift, this time via the relationship between the state and hospitality. For Derrida, hospitality, like the gift, is an impossibility in its purest form, requiring absolute openness to the other with no expectation of receiving anything in return: 'absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home [...] to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them [...] reciprocity' (2000, p. 25). Yet the practical exercise of hospitality always undercuts this idea by making it conditional, transactional and reciprocal, admitting the guest as a 'foreigner.'

As with the examples of white generosity discussed earlier, the seemingly benevolent hospitality offered by the majority-white nation insists on the continual recognition of the supposed gift by its recipient, and foregrounds its expectations of gratitude and recompense. In the case of the immigrant writer, the expected recompense is a continuous performance by

the grateful guest, of a dual role that encompasses both the idealised aspects of the host nation (being a 'good immigrant') and the extra-national performance of otherness, which is in turn celebrated under the rubric of diversity. In this way, hospitality relies on the structured success of the foreigner, the easy containment of the marketability of the guest, rather than on the host's own benevolence, though the host reaps the benefit of this perception of benevolence nonetheless.

### **Bestowing Citizenship**

Who gives the gift of citizenship? The Home Office is responsible for issuing pieces of paper in exchange for the oftentimes debilitating experience of proving oneself worthy. For those of us who have been through visa, settlement and citizenship applications, we know that this is not a gift. This is an exchange. We are exposed and evaluated on, not just objective facts like income, but subjective opinions on what makes a person of good character. The process of having your character evaluated can be very different depending on where you were born, what language you speak and how easy your name is for a native English speaker to pronounce. Thank you dead slave owner for my very English sounding surname! However, I am not speaking of pieces of paper issued from the Home Office. I am thinking about the conception of citizenship and belonging. Can black folk ever truly belong in Britain, Canada, the US? Our belonging is predicated on gratitude for the gift of citizenship/residency.

For those of us who do not look white, we are already occupying the space between belonging and not-belonging, as '[n]ot to inhabit a norm (or not quite to inhabit a norm) can be experienced as not dwelling so easily where you reside. You might be asked questions; you might be made to feel questionable, so that you come to feel that you do not belong in the places you live, the places you experience as home' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 115). If those of us



who do not look white are sitting on the precipice of unbelonging, then every day that our existence is unquestioned becomes a gift. The message is clear, even for those born into their country of residence, citizenship and acceptance are gifts and these gifts demand gratitude.

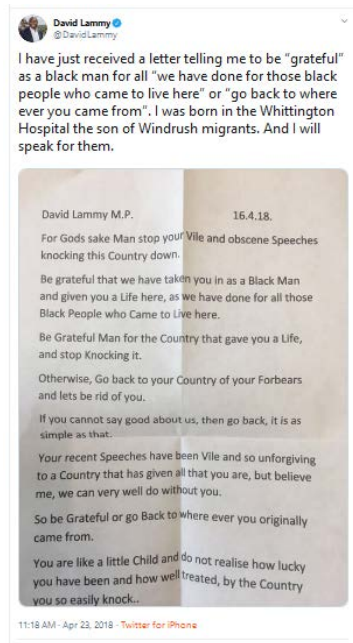
Let me turn to American actor turned British royal, Meghan Markle. If you are, like me, completely uninterested in the royals, you must still find something in the media coverage of Meghan Markle equal parts fascinating and terrifying because ‘[o]ne of the most potent ways white supremacy is disseminated is through media representations, which have a profound impact on how we see the world’ (Diangelo, 2018, p. 31). Despite right wing claims that the media’s coverage of Markle as racist are a ‘fable spun by the woke in the Twittersphere and the global media’ (Cohen, 2020) and that ‘[c]onsidering the welcoming reception by the royal family and the British people that Meghan received throughout her romance and then marriage, with Prince Harry, this nonsense is particularly offensive’ (Cohen, 2020), there is no doubt that references to Markle’s ‘exotic’ DNA (Johnson, 2016) and her child’s birth being celebrated with a picture of a chimpanzee (BBC, 2019) mean that ‘the racist treatment of Meghan has been impossible to ignore’ (Hirsch, 2020). While I have very little opinion about Markle herself, as I do not know her. I have been, since Harry and she announced their stepping back as active royals, confronted daily with more racist vitriol disguised as objective fact in the media than I have ever been. We all know that media constructions of Markle were racist, but the right-wing media will not let that stop them from continuing a tirade against the ‘woke’ who refuse to stop calling out white supremacy when they see it. I feel attacked. The message is clear: black folx are ungrateful for everything that they have been given. Markle is representative because she is such a clear case of ingratitude for a gift that was never given: ‘So much of the reaction to Markle and the couple’s decision reads as a belief that she should be grateful for what she gets. That women of color — in particular black women — should know their place’ (Goodfellow, 2020). We all need to learn our place. When *The Washington*

*Times* tells us that Markle's real offense is her ingratitude in the face of the royal family's welcome (Cohen, 2020), we black folx know what that means. Markle's belonging is, much like our own, questionable. Gratitude is the key to making non-white citizens acceptable to 'real' citizens, gratitude for the dubious gift of unbelonging.

This 'gift' does not exist. The gift of belonging cannot exist because to name it as gift undermines and erases the giving; thus, we, the non-white folx, are left with a gift that will not be named. We only experience the gift in the chant of ingratitude when we challenge the systems of white supremacy that tell us that we are not *really* a part of the country, the institutions, the neighbourhoods, the world. Ingratitude in the face of the gift that is not a gift is the worst offense.

We refuse to be grateful because '[y]ou experience a requirement to justify your existence in the manner of your existence. Diversity work can end up being about a manner of being. Diversity work can end up being about manners' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 120). Diversity work for Ahmed means two things: one, challenging institutions to do better and, two, to exist in the state of the questioned/questionable. One thing is certain, though: '[w]e embody diversity by appearing in a way that is inconsistent with the norms of an institution. In formalizing an arrangement, institutions create a residence for some bodies more than others' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 125).

Let us be clear that when black folx do this diversity work they are immediately deemed to be ungrateful. When Labour MP, David Lammy, calls out the systemic racism that underpins the United Kingdom's entire history and culture, he is told to '[b]e grateful that we have taken you in as a black man and given you a life here, as we have done for all these black people who came to live here' (The Young European, 2018). Lammy, who posted this letter on Twitter, responded that he 'was born in the Whittington Hospital the son of Windrush migrants. And [he] will speak for them' (Sykes, 2018):



Lammy's crime, like Markle's, stems from his ingratitude to this country, and all that it has given him. Unlike Markle, *he was born in this country*. However, Lammy, like Markle, is expected to be grateful in the face of this forced unbelonging, this questioning, this demand for recompense for the gift that was neither given nor acknowledged. Because we are no-citizens; 'we are Black peoples in the wake with no state or nation to protect us, with no citizenship bound to be respected, and to position us in the modalities of Black life lived in, as, under, despite Black death: to think and be and act from there' (Sharpe, 2016, p. 22).

There is something freeing in acknowledging the gift that is not a gift. I want to call out white generosity for what it is: an expectation that we put up, buck up, shut up because we have been given a gift and we need to be grateful.

What is that gift?

Freedom.

Diversity.

Equality.

No.

I have not been given anything. Let us call white generosity what it is – a fiction that relies on the absence of speaking the gift because it cannot stand up to inspection. However, so long as the idea of white generosity exists, there is always the expectation that non-white folx act grateful, supported by media that remind us daily that white people have *given enough* and it is time they demand recompense.

### **White Generosity**

‘I’m late. I hate being late.’ I opened with these words and I meant it. I am late, folx, as are we all. We are late to the notion of black freedom because someone told us that we already had it. Black folx are dying everywhere in this world. We are not free and ‘[a]t stake, then is to stay in this wake time toward inhabiting a blackened consciousness that would rupture the structural silences produced and facilitated by, and that produce and facilitate, Black social and physical death’ (Sharpe, 2016, p. 22). We need to call out white generosity, that gift that never was. We need to ‘re/[see], re/[inhabit], and re/[imagine]’ (Sharpe, 2016, p. 22) black freedom outside of the totalising myth of white generosity. In this article, I have presented a framework for understanding the implicit ingratitude that non-white folx must negotiate, specifically with regard to higher education institutions, classrooms, publishing, media and politics. However, I am hopeful that this framework can be taken forward by other antiracist scholars to examine and expose the damaging narratives that define us.

This article is an attempt to open a discussion on white generosity, by naming the phenomenon and beginning to sketch out its structure and some of its moves. I hope that this is only the very beginning of this discussion. I have not attempted even to name, much less analyse, every instance of white generosity. But, I want to suggest that exposing the myth of white generosity may, just may, allow for a new way to envisage black freedom. I write in the hope that by calling out white generosity we might open ourselves up to imagining a new

way of seeing black freedom. The construction of white generosity presented here is one that I hope can be refined and built on, and play a part in the efforts of all of us non-citizens who unbelong to be ‘conscious citizen[s] of this terrible and beautiful world’ (Coates, 2015, p. 108). It is my fervent hope that antiracist scholars will find, within white generosity, a framework to help analyse the fictive constructs of ingratitude that underpin white supremacy and racial oppression. I am offering a language with which to understand and speak out against social injustice framed as gift. We are allowed to be ungrateful; there is power in ingratitude.

As I mentioned earlier in this article, I wrote this before the events following George Floyd’s murder. As I reread what I have written, I feel that examining whiteness, and specifically the phenomenon of white generosity, is more important than ever. In the UK, higher education institutions are flagging their diversity and inclusion work and tagging it #blacklivesmatter. However, for those of us working in those institutions, we know this is not true. We know that our lives do not matter and no amount of publicity will change that. Our ingratitude is noted and we are, again, positioned as the perpetrators in the, again, re-centred narrative of white supremacy. Let us refuse these gifts, loudly. We need to tell our own stories. There is a world where black freedom is possible, but it will not be given to us; we need to take it.

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[1] The Russell Group is a collection of 24 research-intensive universities in the United Kingdom, including the likes of Cambridge and Oxford.

[2] I use the term “folx” in this paper to signify inclusion, as the [ForFolxSake](#) podcast sees the term used to ‘indicate inclusion of other marginalized groups including people of color (POCs) and trans people’ (For Folx Sake Podcast, n.d.)

[3] It is important here not to conflate whiteness with white people. As Sara Ahmed tells us, ‘Whiteness could be described as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they ‘take up’ space’ (2007, p. 150).

[4] After George Floyd’s murder and the subsequent Black Lives Matter activist protests, allyship has become a point of debate, resulting in many resources on responsible allyship (see the [Black Lives Matter toolkit for White People](#), the [Dismantle Collective’s White Allyship 101 Resource](#) or the [Guide to Allyship’s open source Resource](#) for a small sample). I am not focusing on this problematic overarching discussion of allyship, but a small and specific criticism of using allyship to re-centre whiteness.

[5] It is important to note that “white supremacy” is entangled in and is supported by the very notion of race. As Shannon Sullivan notes in her book, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*, white supremacy “refers to conscious, deliberate forms of white domination, such as those found in the law but also in informal social mores. Although racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nation offer some of the most obvious examples of white supremacy, one need not be a member of them to be a white supremacist” (2006, p. 5).

[6] The [shortlisted Booker list](#) included the following authors: Margaret Atwood (Canada), *The Testaments* (Chatto & Windus); Lucy Ellmann (UK/USA), *Ducks, Newburyport* (Galley Beggar Press); Bernardine Evaristo (UK), *Girl, Woman, Other* (Hamish Hamilton); Chigozie Obioma (Nigeria), *An Orchestra of Minorities* (Little Brown); Salman Rushdie (UK/India), *Quichotte* (Jonathan Cape); Elif Shafak (Turkey/UK), *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (Viking) (The Booker Prizes, 2019).

[7] It is worth noting that the notion of the ‘Commonwealth’ has itself been structured by the double movement of white generosity from the outset. As Jo Littler argues in her discussion of the representation of the Commonwealth in the 1951 Festival of Britain, ‘The very name “The Commonwealth” suggested a new order of common interest that was a step away from enforced subservience. But the fashioning of Britain as first among equals and the continuation of the missionary imagery of benevolent help or trusteeship meant that Britain was often fashioning this relationship as one which should remain within the confines of its control’ (Littler, 2006, p. 29). The field of ‘Commonwealth literature’, and the Booker Prize as a prominent means of promoting it, are thus inseparable from the construction of the supposedly benevolent ‘gift’ that nevertheless centres and reserves control for whiteness.

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