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To cite this article: Harshad Keval & Toni Wright (2021) Necropolitical constructions of happiness, COVID-19 and higher education, Critical Studies on Security, 9:2, 170-173, DOI: [10.1080/21624887.2021.1978644](https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2021.1978644)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2021.1978644>



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Published online: 21 Dec 2021.



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Necropolitical constructions of happiness, COVID-19 and higher education

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This piece provokes discussions about the pathological performativities of COVID-19, the British state and UK higher education. We argue that despite the apparent disconnectedness of these components, the connecting fabric is one of a *necropolitical* (Mbembé and Meintjes 2003) nature. This socio-political hegemony is constitutive of and through the ‘performativity of happiness’ as a mechanism of oppression. Universities as sites and locations where multiple oppressions are produced and enacted, can also be sites of potential mobilised empowerment. The pathological politics of COVID-19 rests on these mechanics, while the potential for liberatory solidarities is already at work in resistance.

The return of key workers to university campuses reflects the experience of general UK key workers during the March 2020 COVID-19 lockdown. Health, social care and food supply workers, many people of colour, and at the low economy end, women and more so women of colour, were required to leave their homes and families during lockdown to risk their health and the health of their families to provide for others. By designating a percentage of in-person teaching on campus as essential for the academic year 2020/21 the university assigned teaching, cleaning and catering staff as key workers. They were conscripted into the frontline to bear the greatest burden. As noted on the UCU website, this ‘essential’ status is coupled with low pay and increasingly precarious employment contracts as well as direct and indirect coercion around in-person presence.

There has been a general acceptance of middling unexceptional leadership in the UK explained by the structure of whiteness. Kehinde Andrews understands this manifestation of whiteness as a form of irrationality. A mix of folly coupled with nationalist and neoliberal discourse and politics that coalesces as incompetency that puts lives at risk and leads to unnecessary deaths. This same structure of whiteness is not only at state level but is being operationalised within the university. The hallmarks are an obsession with maintaining status quo hierarchies and of valuing economics and individualism as policy and decision-making drivers.

An insistence on in-person teaching solidifies economics-dominated thinking. Policy relating to workers returning to campus involves staff being accountable and responsible for their own risk mitigation and negative consequences to their health. This operationalises individualism and discounts the need to protect those most at risk from COVID-19 because of their age, health status and/or racialised positionality.

Uncovering concealment of the impact of these policies can do more than highlight irresponsibility and folly. It reveals structures that allow the impacts to continue, and how those structures buttress each other. In turn it can arm us with critical knowledge for informing counteractive strategies. For ‘bodies out of place’ (Puar 2004), the university is a site of exclusionary boundaries, producing parameters of legitimacy across a series of intersectional dynamics. People of colour, women, disabled people, older people, those who defy white, male and heteronormative middle-

class presentations are those designated illegitimate and unproductive, and therefore consistently marginalised. The university is not only a prime site for the production and maintenance of multi-level intersectional, racial logics but has a long and sinister history of such harm production (Shilliam 2018).

Happy shoppers, keeping calm and carrying on?

University students remain largely unaware of imposed detrimental changes to contracts for staff, who are under pressure not to disclose this information. Leadership discourse divests from clear, present and continuing COVID-19 risks through celebratory veneers that maintain business as usual. The concealment of important, impactful information from the students who in other, strategic instances are requisite ‘partners in learning’, is neither a surprise nor an anomaly. The economic system of HE requires concealment and selective displays of particular narratives in order to fulfil its mission. But this is not solely HE institution-based politics, it is a necropolitical concealment feature of the British state. For uncovering concealment work in celebratory and happy messaging, Ahmed (2010) offers a useful tool. Her work lays out the historical and socio-cultural turn to happiness. She documents philosophy and science foregrounding capitalism as the route to happiness lived out through a set of normative individualistic structures. It is a powerful notion that holds human society mesmerised by the endless pursuit of financial and material gain. Ahmed pays close attention to markers that expose dysfunctional happiness projects for those in the margins. Her scrutiny helps us to gain knowledge of how we are situated and implicated in happiness projects.

One can situate such a happiness project within the context of how COVID-19 ‘securitisation’ has been fuelled and furnished by a combination of militaristic, war-time analogies that convey both nation-state boundary making, as well as forays into global links via the joint experience of the pandemic. This however is also underwritten by initial ignorance of the deathly consequences of the disease and its almost immediate detrimental impact on the most vulnerable (Mitha et al. 2020). The moral cushioning of such ‘happy-talk’, was evident from the start of 2020, when there was a global awareness of the deadly impact of the disease, while the UK PM was not only seen happily mixing with the public and shaking hands but performed the role of a model ‘legitimate-happiness’ figure. Incisively Battacharya et al.’s (2021) analysis of the British racial state excavates the ‘buffoonery’ that masks deadly negligence. The pathological inability to engender professionalism, decisiveness, an ethic of inclusive care and a commitment to social justice, is in fact part of finance capital based neo-liberal institutions. ‘Dithering’ and lack of decisive decisions in such dangerous times is as much a form of strategic neglect as coercing HE staff into coronavirus exposure, using the commodified currency of ‘student experience’.

Normalised pathways to critical thinking only skirt the surfaces and perimeters of deeper, embedded structural injustices. By extending paradoxical ‘happy-talk’ via wartime and heroic-narratives, including the ‘Thursday clap for key workers’, and the PM’s constant Churchillian metaphorical reverberations, calling on notions of ‘battles’, ‘wars’, ‘togetherness’ in the face of a common enemy, etc., some substantial functions are performed. Firstly, in a nation beleaguered by island-state insularity (Bhambra 2017), exclusionary discourses (e.g. the EU referendum result of 2016 (Shilliam 2018), and frequent dismissal and denial (Lentin 2018) of institutional racisms, any challenges are extra-societal, peripheral and illegitimate. They counteract the needed ‘COVID-securitisation’ for the nation. Secondly, the result of such happy-talk – paradoxically deathly – destabilises collective resistance to such power moves. These moves provide a mobilisation of parallel necrotic policies around violent exclusions of ‘others’. This demands questioning the necropolitical failure of state governance. However, rather than situate this as pathological *per se*, this happy-talk-crisis-paradox is precisely the core function of social systems in current, social injustice-based society. The pathologies and dangers presented to society are neoliberal, extractionist capitalism at its most highly functioning. The British state has defined itself through harm, death and insufficient inclusive care, for the operation of business as usual.

Social media posts of smiling faculty staff, 'happy' to be back in their offices, is a troubling and incontestable 'pollyanna-esque' social relation. Their happiness *could* be rage and alarm in this pedagogic moment of harm production. Their happiness makes opaque the realities of what this time means for key workers. Performative 'happiness' modifies the temporal and spatial locations of the possibilities of change, so that the 'where', 'who', and 'what' questions crucial for critical justice-based living, are rendered inoperable. Such mutations turn the experienced, manifest inequalities in society into historical, apolitical, atomised and individualised issues (e.g. the recent Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities Report (2021)). The current turbulences need to be read as part of a connected thinking process, placing the necropolitical state at the heart of the racial, classed and gendered production of harm. The ways in which COVID-19 has been addressed at the national and international levels speak volumes about the colonialities of power (Mignolo 2007) in how risk, contagion, survival and security are fluidly reproduced according to the requirements of neo-colonial control. The recent, massive infection and death rates in India points to large, necropolitical formulations of human value. That such global deathly consequences exist are performatively distanced precisely through the happiness lens of neo-liberal, UK political rhetoric and action, and renders national problems seemingly surmountable and unrelated.

Within the HE context, issues of intersectional inequalities are rampant with everyday harassment, micro aggressions and structural oppressions commonplace for staff at the margins (Bhopal 2018). Pandemic 'happy-talk crisis management speak' elevates the convenient amnesia about these experiences and disorients staff, preventing palpable direction for resistance. As Ahmed in her blog, 'Feminist Killjoys' tells us, 'Power works by making it hard to challenge how power works.' Thus, the mechanics of power in this moment are revealed by resistances that stem from those positions and experiences that feel that power every day. Such 'border' lives, those who inhabit the margins and borders (Anzaldúa 1987) of society and institutions undergo a rendering that is dangerous and harmful at several levels. Firstly, the invisibilisation of these border experiences results in denials of injustice and contests the very presence of particular bodies in particular spaces. Secondly, this 'happy-talk' flips the complaining gaze back onto the complainer (Ahmed, 'Complaint'), thereby re-constituting the terms of engagement using whiteness structures as moral engineering machinery. Thirdly, any intersectional oppression emanating from 'unhappy' quarters is re-categorised as unworthy of discussion, debate or reparation, since it represents an unmanageable, psycho-social attack on the fragile but dangerous hegemonies at play. As Gordon (2007) reminds us, we become a problematic people, because we inhabit the problematic landscapes laid out before us by fundamentally racialised and gendered structures and systems. After all, who can argue with happiness?

What is needed is happiness through liberation, through an understanding of oppressive structures and enablement of a radical creativity to re-imagine ourselves. This requires a fight against happiness projects to question and derail their happy and joyous discourse. Ahmed (2010) says, we need to become and sustain being 'killjoys'. Ironical then that many apparently radical university staff, often carrying 'transgressive' pedagogic labels of honour, fail to acknowledge and support the 'talk-back' resistance by intersectionally oppressed groups.

In advanced neoliberalism, with a lack of presence and positive intervention by the institution, we need to build our own educational worlds based around fugitive and futurity approaches because they illuminate manoeuvres aimed at pitching us against each other and build understanding around common cause. Maybe from here we can begin to imagine the University that pays reparations to those it has damaged, the University built on care, mutual aid, reciprocity and cooperation. Indeed, what might a campus imbued with speculative insights from feminist, Queer, Black and Brown, Trans, Indigenous, and Disability justice thought look like?

Radical criticality offers us a way to understand the experiences felt most acutely by those living the devastating effects and affects of capitalist-driven happiness projects. They are sites of hope and solidarity for re-visioning and re-worlding because the stories they tell show us alternatives, instruct us in the art of resistance and compel us to action. They are pedagogy for a new world, and where better to start building a new world based on pedagogy than in the University.

Societies built on these insights are such stuff as dreams are made on. They centre epistemologies of care and the stories of the marginalised. They join up disparate struggles, fuse technologies of residence, and their endeavours historicise trauma and violence. This centring of alternative praxis is nothing new – freedom schools, historically Black and women’s colleges have and are refuges that transform anew by breaking down the old (Haraway 2016). The stakes are high as capitalism provides a convincing version of happiness that is very seductive, robust and much esteemed, but real happiness does not reside there. Real happiness can be unlocked through our capacities for altruism, care, empathy and freedom. Among the campuses as such stuff dreams are made on, the relatively little but devastating life of capitalism can be rounded with a sleep.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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