



Nella's Otherness in Zakiya Dalila Harris's *The Other Black Girl*

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Abstract. Otherness is a concept that explains how dominant groups define themselves by creating contrast with those they perceive as different. This study aims to identify and describe the forms, factors, impacts, and strategies related to the experience of otherness and the process of othering faced by Black women in Zakiya Dalila Harris's *The Other Black Girl*. This research applies a postcolonial approach and uses a descriptive qualitative method. The analysis is supported by theories of otherness and othering from Edward Said, Sara Ahmed, Tappan, and Powell & Menendian. The result of the study shows that the main character, Nella Rogers, experiences multiple forms of othering, including institutional, implicit, internalized, and intra-racial othering. She faces exclusion in the workplace, microaggressions, emotional isolation, and pressure to assimilate into white professional norms. The factors that generate her otherness come not only from the institution of Wagner Books but also from workplace culture, job demands, and fellow Black characters like Hazel and Diana Gordon, who act as enforcers of conformity. The impacts of othering on Nella include anxiety, paranoia, strained relationships, emotional exhaustion, and a conflicted sense of identity. However, the findings show that Nella employ strategies to overcome their marginalisation, ranging from quiet resistance and knowledge-sharing to outright defiance. These findings demonstrate how internalised norms shape the identity, agency, and psychological well-being of Black women in professional settings. The novel highlights the cost of visibility without power and challenges the illusion of diversity within white-dominated institutions.

Keywords: culture, exclusion; institution, otherness, postcolonial, workplace

INTRODUCTION

Otherness refers to the state of being perceived as inherently different from what a society deems as normative or dominant. It is intrinsically linked to structures of power, where dominant groups establish their identity by contrasting themselves with those they consider outsiders, the other, thus reinforcing their sense of superiority. As explained by Staszak (2020:25), this process, known as othering, categorises individuals into unequal groups: the dominant in-group (us) and the marginalised out-group (them). Those assigned to the out-group are frequently defined by oversimplified or distorted stereotypes that strip them of their individuality and portray them as inferior, dangerous, or abnormal. This categorisation enables the dominant group to affirm its authority while legitimising exclusion and maintaining existing social hierarchies.

Othering, however, is not confined to personal biases; it is deeply entrenched within broader institutional and cultural frameworks. Ahmed (2012:1) argues that the production of the other is sustained through systemic structures such as education, media, legal frameworks, and workplace practices that centre whiteness and Western ideals, while positioning marginalised identities as problematic or inferior. In professional contexts, these mechanisms are evident in practices like tokenism, implicit bias, and microaggressions—subtle yet persistent forms of exclusion that maintain inequality under the guise of diversity. Consequently, individuals who are othered often face a paradox: they are hyper-visible as markers of inclusion, yet their voices and contributions remain ignored or undervalued.

Understanding the distinction between otherness and othering is critical. Otherness refers to the condition of being marked as different, whereas othering is the continuous, active process that constructs and reinforces these differences. As noted by Zevallos (2023), otherness emerges from socially constructed identity markers such as race, gender, religion, class, or sexuality that are used to marginalise certain individuals and deny them full social recognition. Furthermore, the experience of otherness is not uniform; it is shaped by the intersections of multiple identities. Staszak (2020:25) emphasise that the ways racial and gendered forms of othering are experienced differ from person to person. For example, the marginalisation of a Black woman cannot be equated with that of a White woman or a Black man, as each position involves distinct layers of exclusion.

The novel *The Other Black Girl* centres on Nella Rogers, the only Black employee at Wagner Books, who initially feels hopeful when another Black woman, Hazel-May McCall, joins the company. However, Hazel's sudden rise in popularity among white colleagues and the appearance of anonymous notes warning Nella to leave the company lead her to uncover a disturbing truth: a secret group of Black women who willingly suppress their racial identities to succeed in a white-dominated industry. This revelation forces Nella to confront the emotional toll of assimilation and the institutional mechanisms that control and marginalize Black voices in the workplace.

This study focuses on Nella's experience of otherness and the process of othering she faces in her role as a Black woman in a predominantly white corporate setting. The analysis highlights the novel's critique of tokenism, exclusion, and racial conformity within professional spaces. The goal is to understand how Nella's character reflects the broader challenges faced by marginalized individuals in modern work environments. The analysis is structured around four key aspects of Nella's experience: (1) the forms of otherness, (2) the contributing factors behind her marginalization, (3) the psychological and social impact, and (4) the strategies she uses to resist or cope with the pressures of assimilation and exclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Otherness

The concept of otherness originates from postcolonial sociological discourse, which investigates how dominant groups acquire and preserve power by defining themselves in

opposition to those deemed different. While rooted in colonial dynamics, otherness also extends to everyday social life, where distinctions based on race, gender, class, religion, and other identity markers are constructed and maintained by societal norms. These socially constructed boundaries are not natural or neutral but serve to reinforce hierarchies. Scholars such as MengStie (2020) and Abrahams (2022) argue that otherness reveals how systems of power uphold inequality through stereotyping, exclusion, and marginalization. AbdulMegied (2022), drawing from Dervin, further explains that these distinctions are hierarchical and context-dependent—some individuals are treated more harshly than others based on how society interprets their difference.

Otherness is produced not only through external labelling but also through internalization. Individuals may come to see themselves as different or inferior, which can lead to feelings of isolation, self-doubt, or disconnection from the dominant group. This highlights that otherness is not simply a static label but an ongoing process that affects both personal identity and one's sense of belonging. In conclusion, while *difference* refers to the condition of being unlike others, *otherness* describes the active social process through which institutions and dominant norms construct and reinforce that difference. Both concepts are interrelated, reflecting how power operates to define who belongs and who does not.

Factors Contributing Otherness

Otherness is deeply influenced by social identity and the boundaries drawn between groups, where a dominant group (us) defines and marginalizes subordinate groups (them) by emphasizing perceived differences that result in discrimination and exclusion (Staszak, 2020:25). These divisions are upheld through identity markers such as race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, language, skin tone, age, and other demographic factors that determine whether individuals are seen as part of the in-group or excluded as outsiders. In addition, the use of stereotypes and symbolic boundaries plays a significant role in the process of othering by constructing distorted and reductive images of the other. These representations reinforce systems of inequality by distinguishing what is considered normal or acceptable within the dominant group and what is perceived as deviant or threatening in the marginalized group.

Types of Othering

Depending on the situation, otherness can take various forms.

1. **Racial Othering:** As Molla (2023) states, racial othering reduces the dignity and social value of racial minorities, portraying them as inferior to the dominant group. This process reinforces systemic racism in social, economic, and political spheres.
2. **Institutional Othering:** Powell & Menendian, (2023) argue that institutional othering is not about individual prejudice but the normalization of inequality through systemic design. This form of othering limits access, inclusion, and belonging for marginalized groups.

3. **Internalized Othering:** Internalized othering is when members of marginalized groups adopt the negative views and stereotypes imposed on them by dominant society. As Tappan, (2006:2120) notes, it leads to feelings of inferiority, self-concealment, and powerlessness.
4. **Intra-racial Othering:** Intra-racial othering occurs when people within the same racial group discriminate against each other, often based on internalized norms of colourism, class, or cultural distinction Kwan, (2023:2-3).
5. **Tokenistic Othering:** Tokenistic othering involves the superficial inclusion of individuals from marginalized groups to create the illusion of diversity. According to Childress et al., (2024:32), those who are tokenized often face increased scrutiny, limited influence, and emotional stress.

METHOD

This research applies an extrinsic approach because the novel explores themes of race, identity, and power within a corporate setting. The analysis uses a postcolonial perspective to examine how dominant power structures construct and maintain systems of otherness. This framework draws on the works of (Said, 1978; Zevallos, 2023; Ahmed, 2012; and Powell & Menendian, 2023), who explain that dominant groups maintain control by portraying marginalized individuals as inferior or deviant. This approach helps analyze how Nella and other Black women in *The Other Black Girl* experience marginalization, tokenism, and institutional exclusion in a white-dominated workplace. Thus, the extrinsic and postcolonial lens allows the study to critically assess how the novel reflects racial power dynamics and exclusionary systems embedded within corporate culture. This study also uses a descriptive qualitative method to examine the forms and impacts of otherness in the novel. According to Creswell, (2018:256), descriptive qualitative research aims to present detailed and naturalistic insights by focusing on participants' perspectives and social contexts. This method suits the analysis of fictional texts that reflect real-world dynamics. The data are taken from Zakiya Dalila Harris's *The Other Black Girl* (2021), which consists of 308 pages, 4 parts, and 19 chapters. Relevant phrases, dialogues, and narrative events illustrating otherness and othering are selected and analyzed using postcolonial theory. Through this method, the study captures how the novel mirrors systemic racial and gender-based marginalization using both literary and sociocultural analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section explores the story of Nella Rogers, the main character in *The Other Black Girl*. The story is set in the American publishing industry, which is often criticised for its lack of racial inclusion. Nella's journey illustrates her experiences of being labelled different due to pressures to conform, microaggressions, and racial isolation. This section examines the different types of differences Nella experiences, their factors, their effects, and her strategies, demonstrating how these experiences shape her identity in the face of discrimination in a predominantly white workplace.

A. Forms of Otherness

Otherness

Nella is afraid that addressing racism in the workplace could jeopardize her job, revealing the deep power imbalance and lack of protection for Black voices within predominantly white environments. Her worry that criticizing a bestselling author's depiction of a Black character might lead to termination underscores how institutional authority silences open discussions about race, pressuring Black professionals like Nella to choose between career security and staying true to their values.

“I don’t think either of them would really get it. A Black girl telling one of Wagner’s bestselling authors that his Black character is written a tiny bit racist? C’mon, now. I could get fired.” (Harris, 2021:44)

Nella’s reluctance to challenge Vera and Colin on the racial bias in a manuscript reflects both her experience of otherness and the mechanisms of othering. As a Black woman, her identity positions her as inherently vulnerable within the workplace, exemplifying what Zevallos (2023), defines as otherness—the process by which individuals are seen as fundamentally different and subsequently marginalized. Simultaneously, her fear of repercussions demonstrates the presence of institutional othering at Wagner, where exclusion is not simply rooted in individual prejudice but entrenched within the organization’s structural power, as Powell & Menendian, (2023) describe.

Racial Othering

Malaika underscores that Nella is being singled out due to her race, exposing the fragile and uncommon nature of Black representation within Wagner’s predominantly white workplace. Her observation that no white staff members have received threatening messages, and that Nella often forgets Hazel is even there emphasizes Nella’s racial isolation and the subtle disconnect that can exist even among Black women.

Malaika, cutting into Nella’s thoughts, “let’s talk facts. Fact one: You’re Black. Fact two: You’re Black. Fact three: How many white people do you think have gotten a note like this at Wagner? Or ever? ... “I forgot about that other Black girl. What’s her name again?” “Right, Hazel.” Nella herself still sometimes forgot that Wagner wasn’t all white anymore, perhaps because she and Hazel felt like extensions of one another, two sides of the same coin (Harris, 2021:92).

Malaika’s candid remark reveals how Nella’s racial identity functions as a marker of exclusion in her professional environment. This illustrates what Molla, (2023) concept of racial othering, where individuals are perceived as fundamentally different or inferior based on socially constructed racial distinctions. Additionally, the situation reflects tokenistic othering, as discussed by Kwan, (2023:3), wherein Nella and Hazel are not recognized as unique individuals but are instead reduced to symbolic representations of diversity. The notion that Wagner is no longer entirely white solely because of their

presence reinforces the idea that they are included more for appearances than for meaningful inclusion or value.

Institutional Othering

Hazel tries to persuade Nella that embracing assimilation will lead to emotional relief and personal liberation. She portrays it as a cleansing process that will release Nella from inherited trauma, thereby reframing institutional othering as a form of healing—an erasure of Black identity masked as empowerment under the label of Black Girl Magic.

“You can. Stop fighting the tide, Nella. Once you stop fighting—once you let this wave wash over you—you’ll see. It’ll wash over you so quickly, you won’t even feel it. You won’t feel the pain, the white supremacy. You’ll read those articles, watch the police footage, then go to work the next morning without feeling like another part of you has died. That heavy anvil of genetic trauma that’s been strapped to your ankle for all these years... gone. You’ll swim to the top and be free. You’ll be you. This is Black Girl Magic in its purest form.” (Harris, 2021:305)

In doing so, Hazel urges Nella to stop resisting and accept a version of assimilation disguised as psychological comfort. This moment exemplifies institutional othering, in which the demand to conform is not imposed overtly by white authority figures, but rather through intermediaries like Hazel who play a role in upholding the existing system Powell & Menendian, (2023). Ultimately, what appears to be liberation is, in fact, a subtle form of erasure that undermines solidarity within the Black community and reinforces dominant cultural norms.

Internalized Othering

On a different occasion, Nella experienced a confrontation with Colin, a white male colleague at Wagner Books. After she confronted him with the truth about Shartricia, Colin became defensive and accused Nella of calling him racist. In response, Nella offered an apology not out of full conviction, but as a way to diffuse the racially tense situation. This act highlights the emotional burden often placed on Black women in white-dominated workplaces, where maintaining harmony frequently takes precedence over asserting one's perspective. Nella's unease and partial remorse demonstrate the internal struggle marginalized individuals face, often having to choose between honesty and professional stability.

“I’m sorry that you thought I was calling you a racist, Nella had conceded, trying her best to move her mouth without vomiting. ... Because at the end of the day, she was sorry—just for slight reasons.” (Harris 2021:77).

This moment captures Nella's experience of internalized othering: she occupies a subordinate role that prevents her from safely expressing her truth. Her instinct to accept blame reflects a psychological absorption of discrimination, which Tappan (2006:2120),

defines as internalized othering when individuals internalize oppressive values and misinterpret them as personal failings. In this context, the quote illustrates how Nella's external marginalization evolves into self-directed doubt and silence.

Intra-Racial Othering

Malaika implies that Hazel is attempting to push Nella out as a form of competition, highlighting how tokenism and intra-racial dynamics can foster conflict within marginalized communities. She emphasizes the limited opportunities available to Black women in predominantly white workplaces, where instead of forming alliances, individuals may feel compelled to compete for the few positions available deepening divisions and mistrust within the same racial group.

“She knows there’s only space for one Black girl, and she wants to be it. I think she wants you out, girl,” Malaika continued picking up a green tuft of hair next. “She’s playing you. How else would she have snuck those notes to you so smoothly, without you noticing? And the way she threw you under the bus today, in front of everybody?” (Harris, 2021:170-171).

This situation exemplifies intra-racial othering. As Tappan, (2006:2119) explains, intra-racial othering occurs when members of the same racial group discriminate against one another. Malaika's remark “She knows there's only space for one Black girl, and she wants to be it” reflects an organizational structure that restricts the presence of Black women in professional environments, thereby pitting them against each other. Hazel's perceived efforts to remove Nella stem from an understanding that only one Black woman can occupy a space of visibility and acceptance. This not only exposes institutional limitations but also reveals the psychological toll of othering, which encourages distrust and competition among individuals who share the same marginalized identity.

Tokenistic Othering

Hazel advocates for assimilation by promoting a product intended to diminish individuality and resistance among Black women. Her comment about the cream symbolizes how conformity is both chemically and metaphorically encouraged to align Black identity with white societal norms. *“Yep. The contents within these jars are clutch,” Hazel was saying. “They’ll make you more amenable when it comes to working for and with white folks.” (Harris, 2021:302).* Within the environment at Wagner, where Hazel appears complicit, tools like the cream are used as mechanisms to mold Black women into fitting seamlessly within a white-dominated professional culture discouraging protest, dissent, or authenticity, as evidenced in the quoted statement. Hazel's words reflect how racist and capitalist systems reshape Black individuals to appear more acceptable by encouraging them to suppress their true identities. This aligns with Childress et al., (2024), who define tokenistic othering as the selective and superficial inclusion of marginalized individuals, which reinforces the boundary between

the dominant and the marginalized while masking ongoing exclusion and structural inequality.

B. Factors Generating Otherness

Hazel and Diana as Establishing Otherness

Another critical factor that generates otherness in *The Other Black Girl* is the internalized enforcement of dominant norms from within marginalized communities. This is embodied by Hazel-May McCall and Diana Gordon, two Black women who use their positions not to resist marginalization but to sustain it. Rather than challenging institutional racism, they become enforcers of white-dominant standards, pressuring other Black women to assimilate. Hazel initially appears as a potential ally to Nella, but she quickly manipulates workplace dynamics to isolate her, sabotage her credibility, and present herself as the more “acceptable” Black employee. Her use of politeness, coded language, and performative professionalism illustrates how conformity becomes a tool for advancement and social control. These pressures are not only external but also internalized. Hazel reinforces this through her advocacy for a hair cream designed to make Black women more “amenable” in white workplaces. This symbolic act highlights how the suppression of Black identity can be both chemical and psychological, reflecting Tappan's (2006) notion of internalized othering when marginalized individuals absorb dominant ideologies and begin to view their own identities as inferior. In conclusion, Hazel and Diana demonstrate that otherness can be produced not only through external exclusion but also through peer-enforced assimilation within marginalized communities. Their roles reveal how institutions sustain control by rewarding those who comply and punishing those who resist. This internalization of dominant norms leads to a dangerous cycle where marginalized individuals perpetuate the same structures of exclusion that once oppressed them. In doing so, they become both products and agents of systemic othering.

Workplace Culture and Job Demands

One of the key factors that generate otherness in *The Other Black Girl* is the workplace culture and job expectations at Wagner Books, which promote assimilation into white-centered norms. These norms are not written but are strictly enforced through subtle social cues. Black employees like Nella are pressured to remain silent about racial issues, conceal discomfort, and adopt behaviours deemed professional by white standards. Nella's fear of being labelled difficult or expendable leads her to tolerate microaggressions and suppress her voice, showing how emotional labor becomes a survival mechanism in such environments. Her internal conflict and anxiety illustrate how systemic power discourages authenticity and forces conformity to maintain employment. The marginalization of Black women is further reinforced by institutional distrust and lack of support. Nella is often met with suspicion when voicing concerns, revealing a culture where Black perspectives are not only underrepresented but also devalued. Advancement is not based on merit but on proximity to those in power, as seen when her

career depends on Vera's subjective approval. Characters like Kendra Rae, who resists institutional pressure, are professionally excluded, while others like Shani initially internalize the system's expectations until they quietly choose solidarity over complicity. Even symbolic acts such as wearing a politically charged shirt are policed through nonverbal judgment, revealing the hidden mechanisms of exclusion. These examples reflect Powell and Menendian's view that institutional othering is often embedded in subtle, normalized practices rather than overt discrimination.

In sum, Wagner's workplace culture does not merely reflect racial disparity; it actively produces and reinforces it. Through unspoken codes, lack of diversity, mistrust of Black voices, and suppression of critique, the institution maintains white-dominant standards of professionalism. As such, workplace culture and job demand function as powerful agents in generating otherness, shaping how Black women like Nella experience identity, opportunity, and belonging in corporate spaces.

C. Otherness Impacts to Nella's Behaviour

Nella's experiences of otherness also significantly influence her emotional and psychological well-being. Her status as the "other" consistently impacts her social interactions, self-identity, and sense of inclusion throughout the narrative. As a result, her personal development and mental state are deeply shaped by these experiences. According to Jayne Leonard, as cited in Sarungu & Andayani (2023), "*psychological trauma is a response to an event that a person finds highly stressful. A person who has experienced trauma may feel denial, anger, fear, sadness, shame, confusion, anxiety, depression, numbness, guilt, hopelessness, irritability, [and] difficulty concentrating*" (Medical News Today, 2020). This section explores the ways in which Nella's continuous marginalization affects her on emotional, psychological, and social levels, showing that her burden is not only personal but also reflective of broader systemic injustices.

Nella experienced deep unease following the events she had endured. She had a persistent sense that someone was watching or trailing her. Her ongoing vigilance reflects how existing as a Black woman in a predominantly white environment often compels one to remain on high alert, even during everyday situations. This heightened awareness stems not from any direct threats but from broader societal expectations and biases that perceive Black individuals as out of place or inherently suspicious.

"Throughout her entire train ride ... she'd been convinced everyone was looking at her. Was she being watched? followed? Was that man who was standing by the doors looking at her because he wanted to knock her down and take her wallet, or because he didn't like the idea of Black people working at Wagner?" (Harris, 2021:87)

Her overwhelming sense of fear and distrust manifested as paranoia, feeling surveilled, followed, and even fearing potential harm. This experience illustrates what Zevallos

(2023) defines as otherness: the condition of being marked as fundamentally different and subsequently marginalized due to racial identity, even in the absence of overt conflict or confrontation.

The second anonymous letter Nella receives while waiting on a train platform illustrates the deep emotional and psychological toll of being othered. The message "*LEAVE. THE LONGER YOU STAY, THE HARDER IT'LL BE...*" (Harris, 2021:133–134), intensifies her anxiety and further cements her position as an outsider. This moment goes beyond exclusion in the workplace; it shows how Nella's experience of otherness spills into public spaces, turning ordinary settings into sources of fear and constant watchfulness. Consequently, her sense of professional isolation grows into a more profound feeling of social and emotional disconnection.

Nella's experiences with surveillance, threats, symbolization, and emotional isolation demonstrate that difference isn't just a label; it's a real burden. She transitions from optimism and enthusiasm to fear, paranoia, and emotional withdrawal. These changes are the result of the transformation she's experienced personally, as well as the long-term impact of living in a workplace that consistently strips her of her identity.

D. Strategies to Overcome Otherness

At the beginning of the story, Nella optimistically and naively accepts a job at Wagner Books. She believes that following the company's rules and promises can change the world. Initially, she attempts to navigate the workplace by conforming to the standards of the white-dominated environment, hoping that her adherence will get her ahead. However, Nella becomes increasingly aware of subtle but pervasive forms of institutional discrimination through repeated microaggressions, such as the dismissive attitude toward her ideas, the intense scrutiny of her appearance, and exclusion from informal networks.

The structural forces designed to control and divide Black employees become even more evident with Hazel's arrival, as she employs manipulative and assimilationist tactics. In response, Nella shifts her approach—moving from quiet compliance to active defiance. She begins to critically evaluate the intentions of those around her, confronts Hazel's deception, and ultimately rejects both symbolic and literal tools of control, such as the hair cream, which represents forced conformity and covert systems of dominance. Her resistance is clearly expressed when Hazel attempts to persuade her by saying, "*What I'm offering you here is an opportunity to be a part of something that will allow you to let go and go further.*" Nella's firm response—"Well—I don't want it" (Harris, 2021:303). This signals a definitive break, illustrating her refusal to submit to a system she no longer trusts.

What stands out most is Nella's dual struggle, external and internal, as she deliberately chooses not to comply with institutional neglect and instead holds on to her

authentic self. She openly declares her stance in a direct confrontation: “*We're not the same,*” she said, *glaring at Hazel. “I have convictions. I speak out. I don't ostracise other Black people.”* (Harris, 2021:304). This moment underscores not only her ethical clarity but also her conscious rejection of intra-racial othering and her refusal to participate in it.

Nevertheless, Nella's experience reveals that resisting exclusion does not equate to dismantling the oppressive system itself. Rather, her resistance lies in preserving her identity and autonomy despite systemic demands for conformity. Even if it comes at the cost of connection or acceptance, she chooses not to be reshaped by a structure she sees as unjust—demonstrating resilience, self-awareness, and integrity in the face of marginalisation.

CONCLUSION

Nella's otherness is shaped by multiple intersecting forces within her professional and social environment. As the only Black editorial assistant at Wagner Books, Nella experiences various forms of exclusion including racial, institutional, internalized, intra-racial, and tokenistic othering. These forms of marginalization manifest in microaggressions, emotional isolation, surveillance, and pressure to conform to white professional norms. Her identity is often undermined both by the dominant white culture and by other Black characters such as Hazel and Diana, who enforce assimilation under the guise of opportunity. Nella's growing anxiety, paranoia, and self-doubt illustrate the psychological toll of navigating a space that simultaneously demands visibility and silence from marginalized individuals. Her story reveals how otherness is not just a social label but an embodied, ongoing struggle for dignity, authenticity, and belonging.

The writer found that *The Other Black Girl* critiques institutional diversity that masks exclusionary practices beneath surface-level inclusion. Nella's journey reveals broader structural inequalities that define the business space, particularly for Black women. The novel demonstrates that racism is not the sole source of power; it also reveals subtle modes of tokenism, internalized oppression, and intra-racial surveillance. However, Nella's rejection of conformity, her principles, and assertion of her identity demonstrates a powerful act of defiance. These findings demonstrate that difference can impose social and emotional burdens, but it can also fuel agency and resistance. Ultimately, Harris's book challenges readers to question the legitimacy of institutional inclusion when it comes at the expense of individual identity and freedom.

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