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Black/Academia

Robbie Shilliam

Campaigns to 'decolonise' the British academy are under attack and critics have provided a set of defences for academic tradition. Universities, they argue, should be sites of free thought and free speech, and the so-called 'right of students not to be offended' is detrimental to the ethos of these sites.¹ Taking offence at a white curriculum and a white institutional space is considered a form of 'cultural policing' driven by a desire to 'censor history, literature, politics and culture'. Not only a form of censorship, some point towards an almost fascistic urge by 'young minds' to 'wipe away the past' in order to avoid having to grapple with intellectually difficult questions.²

A key line of critique pertains to the introduction into higher learning of identity politics, wherein intellectual positions are supposed to represent and map onto ascriptive attributes, such as race. The harm of this, say some, is that identity policing begins to matter more than the free flow of political ideas.³ Furthermore, the 'narcissism' bred by identity politics is considered degrading to intellectual inquiry by regarding all knowledge as equally competent, that is, vulgar.⁴ If every viewpoint were to be included by virtue of it representing a discrete identity, of what would 'higher' learning consist and how would knowledge claims be adjudicated? Thus, at stake, critics argue, is a defence of higher learning as an unqualified space of critique, curiosity and discernment against a contaminating wave of identity politics, narcissism and vulgarity.

None of these concerns are particularly original to our present time. Take, for instance, John Searle bemoaning, in 1993, the intrusion of Black, First Nations, Feminist and Latino/a struggles into the American academy. Searle sought to defend a 'traditional canon' against what he deemed to be a 'multicultural' challenge that politicised the attributes of canonical thinkers and the contexts in which they wrote.⁵ Or take philosopher Michael Oakeshott, commenting back in 1950 upon the prospective instrumentalisation of the British higher education sector.⁶

Oakeshott argued that there should be no 'ulterior purpose' to the scholarly conversation which, in the 'gift of an interval' from practical life, proceeded at its own conversational pace and for its own purposes.⁷

These various defences of the 'traditional' academy moot a higher education that existed *before* the contamination of identity, race, politicisation. And regardless of the implicit or explicit idealisation of such a space of higher learning, all critiques logically posit a temporal sensibility to their critique: the problem has been introduced into the space. Given this sensibility, I wonder where critics would place Britain's most accomplished public intellectual of the twentieth century, Professor Stuart Hall?

A Jamaican youth, Hall entered Oxford in 1951 (just after Oakeshott published his think piece) to read an undergraduate degree in English at Merton College. Hall's reflections of Oxford draw together a 'traditional' higher education experience with a vivid community of Black and colonial intellectuals discussing empire and its aftermath:

Some of my critics believe that I wasn't concerned about the Caribbean, or about Black culture and politics, until the 1970s. It's true, perhaps, that my publications weren't centrally preoccupied with Caribbean or Black matters. But they nonetheless formed an indispensable, active seam in my intellectual inquiries, from the 1950s up to the present.⁸

However, despite a quotidian politeness at Oxford, Hall collects that 'I was conscious all the time that I was very, very *different* because of my race and colour. And in the discourses of Englishness, race and colour remained unspeakable silences.'⁹ Hall was debating an expansive Caribbean and Black politics; but it was Oxford, institutionally, that refined him to an identity. Oxford would not allow Hall to take an Oakeshott-style 'interval' from his race.

It is certainly specious to place Hall *against* the 'traditions' of the academy; but it is also disingenuous to place Hall *within* these traditions along the lines laid out by Oakeshott, Searle and, indeed, contemporary critics of efforts to decolonise the academy. Such critics – historical and contemporary – assume a space of higher learning that is constitutively discerning, critical and curious. It is a space that must be consistently defended from outside forces that would compromise, vulgarise and partialise the higher pursuit of knowledge. So, was Hall, a (self-)avowedly

Black, Caribbean intellectual, a comforting-inside or threatening-outside presence?

Hall's contemporaries shared similar experiences. Take, for instance, African and Caribbean informants for Sheila Kitzinger's 1950s study of students attending Oxbridge institutions.¹⁰ Her interlocutors spoke of the difficulties in constructing friendships with white peers who took the activity to be a philanthropical gesture on their part: 'They speak to you very nicely, but all the time they seem to be thinking, "I wonder whether he can read?"'¹¹ Informants reported that the relationship would break down when the white partner became 'embarrassed by the Negro's self-consciousness'.¹²

In the 1950s, this shock of Black intellectual competency had political salience. In fact, by this point in time Black university students had become a key concern for British race relations.¹³ At the time that Hall was attending Oxford, Michael Banton, who would go on to be a formative influence in the 'sociology of race' tradition, looked towards the racist reception of Black Commonwealth citizens with apprehension. 'The slights, rebuffs and discrimination – real and imagined – which they experience may afterwards cause a reaction of resentment and may lead to a rejection of British cultural values and to political nationalism.'¹⁴ He further observed that 'leaders of public opinion' now realised that the racist treatment of students in Britain could be detrimental to the integrity of the Commonwealth and that such students had to be re-imagined as 'leaders of the rising coloured nations whose friendship is important to the imperial country'.¹⁵

Alternatively, Philip Garigue documented how the same movement could be interpreted as a process of critical political clarification for Black students. Garigue framed his study of the West African Student's Union in terms of the shift among participating students from a confrontation with the British 'colour bar' to a formulation of anti-colonial sentiments.¹⁶ By addressing the 'stresses and strains that living in Britain produced', the union, in Garigue's estimation, inculcated its members with a 'new consciousness of their own value and capacity for achievement'.¹⁷ Eyo Ndem, a Nigerian scholar who had been a representative at the 1945 Pan-African Congress in Manchester, similarly noted that the success of Black university students was important to Black residents in Britain insofar as this success challenged the general ascription of Black mental 'inferiority'.¹⁸

Paradoxically, by the end of the 1950s Banton was moving from an analysis of race and the diminution of empire to one defined by an abstract sociological category – the ‘stranger’. By considering the ‘coloured man’ as ‘a stranger to British ways’, Banton reduced the question of race to one of rule recognition: the stranger is ‘not only uncertain of the [societal] norms; he cannot read the signs.’¹⁹ Banton was well aware that Black students were mostly British citizens under the British Nationality Act (1948). But Banton’s category shift seems to entirely surrender to the racist standpoint of the white British population on their fellow citizens. Much race relations scholarship in the 1960s accepted Banton’s new categorisation.²⁰

It was, of course, hardly possible for a Black university student to be a stranger to British ways considering the copious amounts of colonial indoctrination that had accompanied their prior education. Indeed, Hall studied in the halls of Oxford as, in his terms, a ‘familiar stranger.’ There is an avowed self-reflexivity here, one that exceeds the identity reductions of much white scholarship at the time. In the halls of Oxford, Hall proceeded regardless to reason with fellow colonial intellectuals on the ‘values of co-operation and common ideals’ tortuously being negotiated at the time towards a West Indian federation.²¹ This, with all the embarrassing accoutrements of ‘Negro self-consciousness’.

I wonder, who exactly was producing the problem of identity politics in this era? Is it fair to depict anti-colonial politics as identity politics? Is it adequate to conceive of the space of higher education as anything less than colonially and racially inflected? And is it any wonder that Black intellectuals increasingly pursued their work outside of and besides the halls of British academia?

In 1963 Jim Rose, at the invitation of Philip Mason, director of the Institute of Race Relations (IRR), initiated a Survey of Race Relations, which eventuated in a landmark publication, *Colour and Citizenship*. Banton had provided the first article for the institute’s journal, which made the case for the utility of a sociological approach to race relations.²² But by the early 1970s the field had become politicised with the influence of civil rights, Black Power and liberation struggle. Ambalavaner Sivanandan led a ‘palace coup’ at the IRR which eventuated in the revamping of the institute’s journal into an explicitly anti-imperial digest, *Race & Class*. The new journal never enjoyed a strictly academic home.

Hall joined the Open University in 1979, an institution that focused upon distance learning for ‘non-traditional’ students. The successful radi-

calisation of ‘cultural studies’ by Stuart Hall during this era is the exception that proves the rule that it was the academy rather than the Black intellectual that had a problem with identity. While Hall’s project situated race and the Black presence within Britain’s postcolonial malaise, the field of avowedly Black Cultural Studies gestated mainly in North America (with several Black British academics migrating to carve out careers). Consider, also, the career trajectory of Beverley Bryan, a former Black Panther and founding member of the Brixton Black Women’s Group who, after receiving a PhD from the University of London, made an academic career only by re-locating to the University of the West Indies.

An academic tradition of Black thought, not on narcissism and identity, but on racism, citizenship and empire (or, as it was to be known in the United States, Black Studies) never galvanised in Britain. This is the case even excepting the longevity of the academic careers of Gus John, Suzanne Scafe, Harry Goulbourne, Malcolm Cumberbatch and others.²³ Some Black scholars also walked the line between community activism and university teaching. Take, for instance, Devon Thomas, employed by Goldsmith College’s Sociology and Anthropology department in 1975 working especially in the Community Studies section and, six years later, a member of the Brixton Defence Campaign assembled after the 1981 uprisings.

Another breakaway group from the IRR, comprising Darcus Howe, Farrukh Dhondy and Linton Kwesi Johnson, published *Race Today*. The journal’s tagline, ‘voice of the Black Community in Britain’, signalled the liminal position, vis-à-vis the academy, of mainly Black and Asian scholars who dared to critically confront the living legacies of the British Empire. Where such an intellectual tradition – or traditions – firmly coalesced was indeed outside of academia proper, in community-based institutions and initiatives. There, Black history and Black education was galvanised in the 1970s autonomously and alongside the work of Hall et al.²⁴ Some from those early days still write, teach and organise in a community setting, such as Cecil Gutzmore who, with Jackie Lewis, holds weekly education sessions in Brixton under the auspices of the Pan-African Society Community Forum. Additionally, Len Garrison’s work in Black community education led to the opening of the Black Cultural Archives in 1981, which now enjoys its own building and exhibition space in Windrush Square.

Indeed, the work of Black intellectuals has never been ephemeral but often aimed at building institutional capacities in fora that lie beside

the academy. John LaRose and Jessica Huntley (a member of the Black Parents movement) became co-directors of the International Book Fairs of Radical Black and Third World Books, which ran from 1982 to 1995. New Beacon Books and Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications – as well as more recent fora such as Dr Lez Henry's Nu-Beyond – testify to the vitality of extra-academic Black publishing. Bogle-L'Ouverture provided readers with the commanding thoughts of Walter Rodney as he 'grounded' with his brethren and sistren in the jungles of Kingston, Jamaica rather than inside the gates of the Mona Campus of the University of the West Indies (UWI). Previously, the campus had been part of the collegiate system of the University of London and its quotidian acronym was not UWI but UC (University College). Rastafari preferred the term 'U Blind'.

Meanwhile, in Britain, countless reasoning circles of Rastafari – in political spaces such as the United Black People's Improvement Organization (UBPIO) – sharpened analyses of racism, colonialism and Black redemption. Winston Trew was a member of Fasimbas, an early Black Power congregation operating in the early 1970s, around the same time as the UBPIO. Trew, with others, was politically targeted by police, abused and falsely charged. In the book that details – and seeks to make intellectual sense of – the 'Oval 4' case, Trew strongly makes the argument that they were 'Black for a cause, not just because'.²⁵ Most Black intellectual work has not been primarily concerned with what we would nowadays call 'identity politics'. Such work could not afford to be vulgar or narcissistic as the stakes at play were only too real.

Compare to academia. In the same year that Jim Rose embarked on the national survey of race relations, the Robbins Report announced the expansion of higher education in an age that he considered had set for itself the ideal of 'equality of opportunity'. Yet despite Lord Robbins' 'natural egalitarianism',²⁶ his 1963 report was silent upon the challenges posed to these principles by the structural racism of British society which, as I have demonstrated, were also infected within the academy.²⁷ Nonetheless, racist events of national significance historically book-ended the report. One year prior, the Commonwealth Immigration Act recused the rights of Commonwealth citizens to move unimpeded across the British realms. And one year after, the infamous Smethwick election in Birmingham was fought by the (winning) conservative candidate on the platform: 'If you want a nigger for a neighbour vote Liberal or Labour'.

There are many careful critiques of the decolonising project in academia.²⁸ I myself am a member and a critic. The project requires far

more detailed and nuanced analyses of legacies, contexts, mechanisms and effects of the racialisation of knowledge. I might even venture to say that, occasionally, students can voice their concerns and felt injustice in ways that seem rhetorically powerful yet analytically weak. But I wonder if student politics of all shades has ever been so dissimilar. At least they are acting in good faith.

The greater irony is that criticism of the decolonising project has gained more traction than the project itself. There is, then, something of a far more heinous nature going on. I would suggest that some of the political class look upon the changes to Britain's (and the West's) population pyramid with trepidation. They see the base of the pyramid growing relentlessly blacker, browner, poorer. They seek to preserve the whiteness of elite cultural reproduction in sites that are currently most detached from the pyramid's base. There is a melancholic, reactive mood to an inevitability born of empire, namely, that the fantasy of a pristine West could not hold for too long. *That* is the identity politics that we should be critically addressing.

Consider the following. All ethnic groups, as listed in the UK census, are over-represented in university student populations vis-à-vis their percentage of the general UK population. All, except white. Black students of continental African heritage have been one of the fastest growing ethnic groups entering university and are the largest ethnic minority of the UK student population. But Black students in general are recruited into less 'prestigious' institutions at percentages higher than any other ethnicity; their experience of higher education is significantly more negative than any other ethnicity; and their attainments are significantly lower than any other ethnicity.²⁹

Some have explained away these disparities by presuming that Black students arrive at the gates of university with pronounced social and cultural deficits garnered from their familial and community upbringing – that is, their blackness. I would direct their assumptions back to the image of Stuart Hall studying at Oxford. In fact, all the evidence so far points to the fact that these racialised differentials are in the main produced *within* the British academy and cannot be accounted for in terms of deficits that Black students bring with them to the gates of higher learning.³⁰

The Black Parents movement, initiated in 1975 attests to the relentless and under-acknowledged work and intellect of Black women in struggles against the educational maltreatment of their children. It was only in

1985 that the Swann Report finally refuted eugenicist explanations for the under-attainment of Black students in British secondary education. Yet higher education in Britain has never had a Swann Report. Why is it so hard to consider, then, that the traditional academy might still breed identity politics, narcissism and vulgarity at the same time as it promotes critique, curiosity and discernment. Is this a paradox? Not if we understand the differentiation to be racialised.

Those non-white people who have played the identity politics game with all due seriousness are not in academia. They have, of course, already been invited into politics, business and the civic sector. They want to hold power, not books. Most of us involved in projects that seek to decolonise the academy are not interested in identity politics, nor its narcissism or vulgarity. All of us value the decolonising project for its potential to deepen academic rigour and pursue intellectual challenge. Some of us connect the project to an ethics of epistemic justice. That is, we seek to confront and repair the racialised divisions of intellectual labour imposed by colonial rule in terms of who can think adequately for whom. Some of us even conceive of the project as an interconnected contribution to global justice, the key battles of which are fought in far harsher environments than the academy.

In any case, our concerns are profound, not narcissistic or vulgar. Few of us are eugenicist statisticians who wish to see more 'black' everywhere. On the contrary: *that* is the optical obsession of those who seek to defer an engagement with colonial injustice by labelling it 'identity politics'. Yet it is their identity which is at stake, not ours. Our knowledge cultivation has continued, despite and besides the racism of the academy.

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Notes

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