

“The English education system is failing Black students.”

A Critical discussion on the relative merits of this statement with reference to the Higher Education sector

Introduction

In this essay I explore the failures of the English Higher Education (HE) system in its responsibility to Black¹ students within a framework of Critical Race (CRT) and Decolonial Theory. Here, I focus predominantly on the attainment gap, presenting this in a context of the historical markers that continue to impact and enable wider failings across the education sector. I look at the counter arguments against the key points raised and touch on measures that a number of universities have taken to address the gap over the last few years. I also explore movements such as Rhodes Must Fall Oxford (RMFO) alongside informal case studies and input from staff and students at University of the Arts London (UAL) and Goldsmiths College. I focus mainly on UAL and Goldsmiths due to personal ties with these universities and working closely with staff at both UAL Chelsea and Central St Martins. I complete the essay with a personal reflection of my undergraduate college experience.

Their (Black students) experience of education is significantly more negative than any other ethnicity; and their attainments are significantly lower than any other ethnicity. (Shilliam, 2014)

Over the last few years, an increasing focus has been given to the Attainment Gap² that demonstrates a significant difference in the degree outcomes of Black and Minoritised Ethnic university students in comparison to their white counterparts. I argue that this ‘gap’ is a key signifier of the failure of HE towards Black students.

A student’s race and ethnicity can significantly affect their awarded degree. Of the disparities that exist within higher education, the gap between the likelihood of

¹ For the purpose of this essay I use the term Black in its political context but with specific reference to Black African and Black Caribbean students

² For this essay I continue to refer to the gap as an attainment gap as this term is most commonly used but support and agree with Dr Gurnam Singh’s preferred term ‘awarding gap’ as this rightly identifies that the problem lies with the universities awarding system rather than the fault of the student to achieve a particular level. See “From Attainment Gap to Awarding Gap” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxUS55LhHcM>

White students and students from Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds getting a first- or upper-second-class degree was 13% among 2017–18 graduates...³

It should be noted that depending on degree and university the attainment gap percentage can fluctuate to 25%.

From a standpoint of CRT, and an inkling of understanding that stretches beyond the white centric viewpoint, it is sadly not hard to imagine why this should be the case. However this takes nothing away from the seriousness of the implications and the impact on the lived experience of the individual student.

For example, the Black student experience at university, much like the Black student experience at each key stage beforehand is overshadowed by a dearth of reference to anything outside of the Western / Eurocentric viewpoint, with many students made to feel out of place, not heard and dismissed. There is an abundance of white tutors and few tutors in whom Black and brown students can see themselves and their potential represented⁴.

Even prior to students' experience at college or university, there is evidence to suggest that minoritised ethnic, potential students face hurdles in the application process with fewer being admitted to more prestigious universities (Boliver 2015) than their white counterparts.

A Nuffield funded report by the London School of Economics in 2015 also found that:

In relation to the probability of an application yielding an offer (to higher or lower institutions), this study confirms that some black and minority groups appear to be disadvantaged in the allocation of higher education offers. Applications made by candidates from Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black African, Indian, Black Caribbean, Chinese and various 'other' groups were all found to be less likely to yield an offer than those made by white British candidates, controlling for a range of relevant variables including academic attainment. (p7)

³ Taken from the UUK report 2018

⁴ According to HESA, in the UK academic year 2018/19 'black and ethnic minority' academic staff made up 17% of the total number of staff in the UK. According to HESA again⁴, there were only 350 Black female professors, less than 2% of the total number.

Taken individually each of the above points has a dramatic impact on the experience of Black students, combining these points together, topped with rising incidents of racism in HE⁵ and a lack of trust in the universities to understand or take real action, we have a situation that is far from the “enriching” experience promised by UCAS.

The recent concerted move to address the attainment gap has led to some constructive projects being explored and analysed, which is helpful but feels less than hopeful when approaching this topic from a CRT perspective.⁶ CRT asserts the pervasive, embedded nature of racism throughout our continuing everyday structures and systems. As detailed by David Gillborn 2008, the understanding and acting out of race is ‘fluid’ and what underlines and drives actions and reactions around the subject is power. He details that ‘the term racism is used not only in relation to crude, obvious acts of race hatred but also in relation to the more subtle and hidden operations of power that have the effect of disadvantaging one or more minority ethnic groups.’ Gillborn 2008 p 27⁷

The statistics as shown above are clear, so too are the references found in Tomlinson 2008, Archer and Francis 2007 and Gillborn 2008 that demonstrate an accumulation of measures that have led to what can be renamed as the ‘educational debt’⁸. The idea that the methodologies and acting out of historical oppression and exclusion of minoritised communities has accumulated over time, resulting in what Daria Rothmayr terms ‘locked-in inequality’. Gillborn p64, underlines a need for the application of CRT within the educational context. This means that whilst attempts at rectifying the situation are valid, what is required is a much larger system shift - to address decades of inherent institutional racism at every key stage including HE.

⁵ <https://www.beyondteaching.com/highereducation/racist-incidents-at-uk-universities-have-risen-by-more-than-60-per-cent-/OTE5>

⁶ See for example Dr Sara Maria Camacho Felix’s Report: Addressing BME Attainment Gaps at Key British Universities

⁷ See also Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, 2001 and Derrick Bell

⁸ Ladson- Billings from Gillborn 2008 p.44

It is helpful to look at Gillborn's 2008 Phases and Themes table (p.73-74) which details the policy shifts and responses to race since the 1940's. In particular, the 1965 DoE and Science circular that 'no school (should) have more than 30 per cent immigrant children' (Tomlinson p.21). This policy has parallels in Vikki Boliver's study 2015, where Boliver suggests a potential reason for the low level of admissions of Black and minoritised ethnic groups to Russell Group colleges could be an attempt at replicating the national ratio in a misplaced sense of 'fairness'. That is, attempting to mirror the national population percentage of minoritised ethnic communities within the university populous, which according to the 2011 census for England and Wales is 14%. The percentage of those identifying as Black is 3.3%⁹.

It is possible that admissions selectors may be rejecting ethnic minority applicants at higher rates than comparably qualified white applicants in order to bring the proportion of ethnic minority entrants down to a figure closer to say, their actual or perceived proportion of the wider population. (Boliver 2015, p251)

The assertion that racism is at play within admissions is largely refuted by universities and UCAS. The alternative reasoning given for the disparity in figures is that there is an oversubscription of applications from minoritized ethnic students to certain courses and colleges.

"Approximately 30 universities educate 60% of all black students and 36% of all Asian students." (Pam Titlow via Runnymede 2015)¹⁰ This is something to consider and links to career path selection (a tendency for minoritised ethnic students to apply to law and medicine - see Boliver p250). However even taking this into account and adding controls,

⁹ <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/population-of-england-and-wales/latest>

¹⁰ <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/news/594/272/Black-Students-Must-do-Better-than-White-Students-to-get-into-University.html>

Boliver and Loke¹¹ of Advance HE / Equality Challenge Unit, have found that there are still lower numbers of ME students being allocated places than white students.

UCAS' analysis on entry to HE by ethnicity, offer-making, offer rates, and average offer rates all point towards admissions to HE being fair at a national level. While there are large differences in offer rates by ethnic group, in most cases this can be attributed to the applicant's predicted grades and how competitive the course is that they applied for. (Unconscious Bias Report 2016 p14)

They do however admit that "a small number of providers need to examine why there are significant differences between observed and average offer rates for some groups." (p.14) and suggest 6 recommendations, including name blind admissions, unconscious bias training, increased acknowledgement / accountability for any gaps and further investigation overall into the subject.

The fact that they initially found no bias, viewed together with findings by Boliver and Loke, does not embed confidence that there is any urgency in their commitment to delivering on their recommendations.

In a response to Labour MP David Lammy's insistence that Oxford and Cambridge address Oxbridge 'social apartheid', Cambridge insisted that "The greatest barrier to participation at selective universities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is low attainment at school."¹² This shifts the blame back on to the failure of schools in supporting Black and minority ethnic students and also plays into a stale narrative that Black students aren't able to make the grades.

Alongside Gillborn, Tomlinson's 2008 history of events that laid the groundwork for the continuing and consistent inequality (see also Archer and Francis 2008) is particularly helpful in understanding the context in which we explore the current issues of attainment

¹¹<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/does-ethnicity-influence-likelihood-admission-university>

¹²<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/oct/19/oxford-accused-of-social-apartheid-as-colleges-admit-no-black-students>

and sense of belonging within HE settings, and supports Gillborn's assertion that educational policies were built on the aim to widen gaps and not prevent or address them:

Essentially, race equality in education has continued to persist because social and educational policy has never seriously prioritised its eradication. (Gillborn, 2008 p86)

Back in 1965, the move to limit ethnic minority children to a percentage of the classroom meant that children were bussed to schools further from their families and their friends. It was done under the guise of "helping children to integrate" and ceased only in 1980. The reasoning is flawed and for many was damaging, alienating and discriminatory. It can't be ignored that by keeping numbers of 'immigrant' children lower in schools, this might have helped acquiesce the white middle class complainants (protests were held by white parents against the 'racial invasion' in 1963, see Kirp 1979).

Another key policy development that supports lack of responsibility around race equality by the education system is the Robbins Report on HE, also delivered in 1963. The report concluded that university places "should be available to all who were qualified for them by ability and attainment and that such institutions should have four main objectives essential to any properly balanced system."¹³

However Holmwood 2018, points out that the Robbins Report was 'a race-blind project of modernisation' containing no mention of race despite the time in which it was written (Enoch Powell's popularity was rising alongside anti-immigration rhetoric). Consider also, that the report was delivered just a year after the first Commonwealth Immigration Act 1962 that withdrew the right of citizens of Commonwealth countries to take up residence in the UK. Holmwood maps the shift of HE policy as it ducks and weaves alongside (among other

¹³ <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/robbins/robbins1963.html>

factors) colonial subjects taking up their right to live and learn in the UK i.e. the issue of access to all.

I am suggesting that universities in the UK and US were embedded in social structures that derive from histories of colonialism and Empire... rather than extend social rights (a demand for inclusion) in this way, neoliberal public policy began to remove social rights from everyone...(p43)

With the UK having had such a hand in constructing the ideology of race there is an interesting omission of the impacts within the development of society (education system).

As described by Holmwood and Gillborn 2008 the introduction of University fees for overseas students in 1981 and later (97) for all students, created a shift from policies that placed responsibility on the state / Government to support its subjects to the Neoliberal agenda that shifts responsibility to the individual. This focus is mirrored perfectly in the use of the term 'attainment gap': i.e. the gap is there due to the individual. The system is meritocratic therefore it is not the system, it is the individual that is at fault.

A report by Universities UK, chaired by Baroness Amos (OfS, 2018) states that:

...calls for the higher education sector to act have been ongoing for many years. In 2011, NUS published *Race for Equality*, in which it highlighted the societal and institutional barriers embedded in education (NUS, 2011). Similarly, the Runnymede Trust's report, *Aiming Higher*, highlighted the complex, interlinking issues of race within institutions, from inequalities in pay and promotions for BAME academic staff, to the difficulties in ensuring that diversity policies become standard practice (p7)

The report mentions that the "sector is under significant scrutiny and must demonstrate that it is doing everything it can to understand the issues underlying the attainment gap and to identify constructive ways of addressing it." However, as we have seen with the problems at

Goldsmiths University, even widespread protest and national news coverage¹⁴, has had limited success in moving the agenda forward to a place of trust and confidence.¹⁵

The attainment gap relies on facts and figures, however, these alone are not enough to provide an accurate picture of the inequalities within education. They can be pulled, twisted and distorted to fit any agenda. For example, Gillborn's exploration of and challenge to Professor Stephen Gorard's insistence (p47-49) that proportionate percentage vs percentage points is the correct way to analyse statistics leads to a very different picture: one where Gorard can reassure interested parties that gaps are shrinking rather than being maintained / increasing. This skewed or subjective reading of data is detrimental to the understanding and attention needed to support all children who are underserved by education.

Further, the *Underachievement in Education by White Working Class Children report in 2013* posited that white working class children were suffering more and being left behind in the classroom. Reporting in the media had clear undertones of shock that this group should have fallen behind ethnic minorities.¹⁶ The report's conclusion mentioned nothing of Gillborn, Rollock, Warmington and Damack's submission¹⁷ to the enquiry that highlighted the evidence that white working class boys, whilst clearly performing at a 34% point difference to white middle class boys, were still outperforming Black Caribbean, Mixed heritage, Gypsy/Roma and Traveller children.

Rollock et al also warn that labelling this underachieving group as working class is incorrect, instead suggesting that FSM¹⁸ be used as a marker. They also highlight that increasing the focus on the 'white working class' immediately racialises the problem in comparison to other

¹⁴<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/10/goldsmiths-university-to-tackle-racism-after-damning-report>

¹⁵ I refer here to the work of GARA and the promises made in 2018 to additional complaints and actions of Goldsmiths University in 2020 that undermine these promises, see also footnote 24.

¹⁶<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1163212/White-working-class-boys-worst-performing-ethnic-group-schools-age-11.html>

¹⁷ <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/WrittenEvidence.svc/EvidencePdf/2577>

¹⁸ Free School Meals

ethnic groups whereas the largest problem that white 'working class' children face is the difference in achievement to their white peers.

Based on a misrepresentation of the true picture, there is a danger of inciting racial hostility by encouraging a wholly misleading image of White racial victimization. Around 10 per cent of White children receive FSM but reporting their attainment as a 'working class' issue risks giving the impression that this applies to more than half of all White children (see para. 11b). This is not only untrue but wholly irresponsible and dangerous. (Rollock et al p18)

The Office for Student's welcome series of (significantly) funded projects looks specifically at closing the attainment gap. Analysed in a report for LSE by Dr Sara Maria Camacho Felix the projects include a University of Kingston led project that constructively uses the Value Added Metric and Inclusive Curriculum¹⁹ method to illustrate the attainment gap. This enables staff to see in an unequivocal way that these gaps exist and cannot be blamed on the students themselves, shifting responsibility back to the tutors. It has influenced work by UCL in helping staff to embed an inclusive curriculum, creating toolkits and new frameworks. However, alongside Dr Felix, I question the funding of the post-racial project led by the University of Derby. With any grace, post recent BLM protests, funding such as this would be scrutinised more thoroughly. Whilst there is a need for trials and controls surely at this stage the evidence is clear that any approach to reducing the attainment gap has to consider the lived experience of the students and the knowledge provided to those students and not return to a place of 'race blindness'.

Supporting this post-racial approach is the counter argument to framing this discourse within CRT, found in the work of Michael Cole, whose analysis and criticism of Gillborn and others (though intended in a 'comradely way') centres around his perceived lack of belief in CRT to encompass the global issues of capitalism. Cole refutes the use of "white supremacy" as a means by which to understand the continued state of the system in the UK

¹⁹ VA Value Added Metric and Inclusive Curriculum Framework. Further details on this project can be found here: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/addressing-barriers-to-student-success-programme/abss-project-kingston-university/>

and beyond. Beyond the scope of this essay, I am interested to explore how Marxism and CRT can work together (Mills 2009) however his argument, that draws on the subject of non-colour coded racism and the constant pull to apply theories of xeno / racialisation in order combine a critique of racism and capitalism combined²⁰ serves to dilute and distract from the weight of importance that is needed to uphold and support much needed and direct action within the education system.

Responding to his criticisms, Gillborn quotes Michael Apple:

... white scholars who think that everything of central importance can be fully understood by somehow merging race as a set of historically determined and determining relations and realities into a relatively economic understanding of Marx...risk practicing a form of whiteness themselves, a form...based on a privileged position of being white in our societies. (Apple 2006b: 686).

There is a need to be clear and damning about the experiences of Black students to counter the impacts of longstanding racist policies that consistently serve to uphold the white majority in positions of power and safety denied to others. Is not the reasoning behind this need of the white majority to maintain this position built on centuries of a constructed reality that places them above all other ethnic groups rendering them supreme?

Demonstrably, in response to the Decolonise the Curriculum movement²¹ the British academy have argued against the need for change, that “universities should be places of free thought and free speech” (Shilliam 2018 p.53). Reactions in the media demonised individuals, conflated core aims of the movement²² and dismissed students' concerns as emotional, feeding into the ‘snowflake’ rhetoric. (Bhambra et al 2018, Solnit 2019).

²⁰ See also Hewitt, Roger 2005

²¹ Decolonise the Curriculum is a movement that began alongside the campaign Why is My Curriculum White at University College of London in 2014 and spread to a number of other universities. Additional campaigns such as ‘UAL so WHITE’ led by Bolanle Tajudeen (2016) came together with DtC and RMFO to inspire more students at other universities e.g. Decolonise Sussex. See RMFO 2018 for more detail.

²² “You may have recently read false news reports that SOAS students have called for the removal of white philosophers such as Plato and Kant from their reading lists. It bears repeating that these reports are untrue – they are calling for a greater representation of non-European thinkers, as well as better historical awareness of the contexts in which scholarly knowledge has been produced.”
<https://www.soas.ac.uk/blogs/study/decolonising-curriculum-whats-the-fuss/>

Responses such as Mary Beard's comment that to decolonise would be 'a dangerous attempt to erase the past.' seem to miss the crux of the movement entirely and serve only to feed the white dominant voice.

As recently as July 2020, despite the focus on the need to address racism following the murder of George Floyd, Prime Minister Johnson commented in disagreement with the decision by Oriel College to remove the Rhodes statue: "I want to build people up, not tear people down. If we go around trying to bowdlerise or edit our history in this way, it's like some politician sneakily trying to change his Wikipedia entry."²³

This repeated denigration of voice feeds into a surface level understanding of the situation, reinforcing a sense that 'the other' is attempting to deny the 'Englishman's' true history.

'As it currently stands, a British student can study history to A-level standard without gaining more than a lesson's worth of time studying Empire.' (Bhambra et al, 2018 p25). Such an omission in teaching the history of this country surely amounts to "bowdlerising" and should send alarm bells ringing for the likes of Johnson and his peers. In contrast however, Nick Gibb, Schools Minister recently rejected calls and petitions from cross party MP's to reassess the curriculum in light of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.²⁴ This is despite the education deficit and mass calls to address an overtly white curriculum.

There are however positive, hopeful views that the situation is changing, for example Angela Drisdale-Gordon former Head of the Education Office at UAL comments:

I can definitely see and feel a tangible shift in the acknowledgement that a diverse workforce and student body is really important for all of us...The University has made a strategic decision to prioritise work in this area... (Drisdale – Gordon, DtAC 2 p1)

²³<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jul/02/boris-johnson-criticises-oxford-decision-to-remove-rhodes-statue>

²⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jul/30/exclusive-tone-deaf-ministers-reject-bame-review-of-english-curriculum>

There can be no denying that there is now, particularly following RMFO and the BLM protests, a greater awareness of systemic racism, particularly in relation to how little has moved forward since the red flags of institutional racism were raised following the murder of Stephen Lawrence 27 years ago. As Drisdale-Gordon suggests, there is a greater understanding particularly in young people, that creating an inclusive curriculum, addressing racism at all levels impacts everyone.²⁵

It is through these international protests that more students have found the strength to voice their disappointment, concerns and experience with their university curriculum and lecturers. As seen with the #MeToo movement there is a moment, (that comes following decades of work) which enables individuals to move beyond suffering in silence and step forward (Solnit, 2019), refusing to be as one colleague recently realised of his own behaviour 'complicit in upholding the structures that oppress me'. This narrative is familiar at a personal level within abusive relationships, reinforced by complaints of gaslighting that have been made in relation to the experience of black HE students.²⁶ Right now there is a moment of truth - of holding up prejudice and inaction to purveyors faces and expecting results. However the prejudice and inaction are entrenched.

In March 2020, in answering a question around UAL's 'strategic' commitment to equality (2017), a UAL member of staff demanded, "Where are all the Black students? Where are all the Black tutors?"

²⁵ "This moment feels like a tipping point." Paris Catton, 23 BLM protestor June 2020. (<https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/black-lives-matter-protests-london-2020>) I "Now is the time, I ain't waiting" <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/06/now-is-the-time-londons-black-lives-matter-rally-looks-like-a-turning-point> Greta Thunberg 'Tipping point' (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/06/20/black-lives-matter-protesters-march-london-scuffles-break-glasgow/>) With protests supported by a large number of young people across demographics, there is a feeling of hope that the next generations will change the status quo. But they are being given little space to breathe by the current Government and systems.

²⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jul/05/uk-universities-condemned-for-failure-to-tackle-racism> and <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/tackling-racial-harassment-universities-challenged.pdf>

In addition, through speaking with tutors and students from UAL and Royal College of Art amongst others, I understand that there is a nepotistic approach to recruitment in the arts, with a high number of tutors / lecturer roles given to (white) friends of (white) friends. Attention has been drawn to the language used for job advertisements including terms such as 'excellent international experience' that can be limiting and off putting to applicants from demographic backgrounds that don't have access to an international lifestyle.²⁷

Even without common sense, we know from the students themselves how important it is to have tutors that are reflective of the student body: "Their shared experience makes my future tangible." (Shannon Bono DTtA Zine, p20)

Gillborn, 2008 explores how the New Labour government in 1997 brought with it hope for a new approach - a recognition of the need to address equity (p75). However, as Gillborn describes, this hope was short lived. Again, we find parallels of systems that tread water - that pay lip service but do not shift in their structures to allow for real change. Through my reading of Decolonising the Arts Curriculum, RMFO and Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action, along with informal conversations and interviews with tutors and students from Goldsmiths and UAL it seems that the measures the universities seemingly put in place have limited reach, urgency or progress.²⁸

For instance, UAL's partnership with Shades of Noir²⁹, is lauded as an example of good practice³⁰. The work of the organisation is ground-breaking, important and overwhelmingly positive. Why then is their influence not being felt by students and by Black teaching staff?

²⁷ Conversations with Rahul Patel, Educational Developer, UAL

²⁸ I refer here particularly to Goldsmiths University's commitments to addressing racism as demanded by the work of GARA. The promises within their statement feel particularly hollow when hearing of the planned sacking of 500 casual staff, many of whom were Black or from minoritised groups <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/01/goldsmiths-sack-casual-staff-exams-universities-covid-19> and the experiences of Evan Ifekoye, the only Black contracted member of staff within the Arts faculty, whose resignation demonstrates a continuing and frustrating lack of awareness, and narcissism by Ifekoye's white colleagues. https://twitter.com/evan_ife/status/1272456549215211521/photo/1

²⁹ [Shades of Noir](#) (SoN) provokes, challenges and encourages dialogue through its programme of activities on the subject of race within Art, Design & Higher Education

³⁰ See Camacho Felix, 2018 p.9

One member of UAL staff commented that SoN is used as a get-out clause by other staff. They can be referred to, used as a shield but in practice the white academics are not having to shift or alter how they are working.

“(The university) relies on Shades of Noir as a cover all - what they are doing doesn’t get taken up across the board, it’s not reaching my students and colleagues I work with or the systems (that aren’t working).” (UAL staff member 2020)

These ‘systems’ refer to the programme of Widening Participation at UAL where pressure is being put on Outreach workers to increase applications from BAME students whether they are suited to the course or not. There is informal evidence to suggest that decisions are being made out of the hands of course leaders (or overturned) in order to achieve targets. This process can lead to damaging impacts on both the individual students and the course as a whole. In particular there is concern that students from minoritised backgrounds are being recruited when the college isn’t fit to serve them as detailed by complaints, lack of representational staff and representational curricula. The University is putting the cart before the horse and ladening it with the responsibility to make itself move.

How it will be possible to create real change within existing institutions is not clear. Andrews in reference to Audre Lourde’s famous ‘dismantling the master’s house’ quote discerns though that it is through the subversion of tools, not the abandoning of them that we might create the “science of liberation”. (Andrews 2018, p.30).

Personal experience

I attended Chelsea College of Art 1996 - 1999. I went into my course with a distinction at Foundation level and as commented by my head of course “was on track for a first”. I came out with a 2:2 - not bad nationally but pretty unheard of for an arts degree at the time. Midway through my course I lost all interest and found what I was doing pointless. Midway through my course I had to choose my thesis topic. I wanted to study mixed race artists. My (white) tutor gave me bell hooks and Paul Gilroy to read which was something but (having

grown up in an all-white town in Kent) I had no frame of reference for mixed race artists, something that I could viscerally connect to in a language that I understood. I did not stumble across nor was I directed to the artist Adrian Piper for example. I worked in performance and media as does Piper, Piper made work about passing, I pass³¹. Her work to me is of immense relevance. Ironically, I discovered in 2018 whilst working at Iniva³² that just prior to my starting at Chelsea an excellent publication by Iniva and Chelsea College had been produced entitled *Recordings: A Select Bibliography of Contemporary African, Afro-Caribbean and Asian British Art*. Despite the college having invested in this recent publication, there were no lectures by the artists included (I have canvassed former students on their memories also), there were no tutorials with or studio visits from the artists in that publication in our department. There was one Black tutor in the college at the time but due to departmental barriers I did not have access to him.

There were many reasons I 'failed' at college. I see now that I hit a wall of progression and that I was terrified: after enduring racism throughout my schooling I didn't have the strength to push what was important to me forward on my own. It was easier to stay hidden in the pseudo white student spot I had found safety in. Had there been a more open and accepted inclusion of Black artists and theory surrounding race my path may have been different. If I had been able to embrace and be proud of who I was from nursery school through to college would my entrance to work life have been different? Would I have felt more valuable and applied for more than just low paid, menial jobs? Would a true white middle class person have done the same? This was over 20 years ago and yet I am reading about and speaking to students facing these problems and much worse.

Conclusion

I have come to the belief that the only way to decolonise the university is to mount an insurgency. (Singh, DtAC Zine p31)

³¹ Passing is used to refer to passing as white, despite having mixed Black African and white heritage.

³² Iniva: Institute of International Visual Arts

In this essay, I have attempted to demonstrate key ways in which Higher Education is failing Black students. My aim was to highlight historical and consistent failures within education and wider Governmental policies that have compounded the current imbalance of access and equality within UK universities. Universities are sites of power and serve to embed and support societal norms, as the education institutions established in the British colonies helped to create the 'infrastructure of Empire' (Bhambra et al 2018 p5). This means that they are also in a position to challenge and overthrow the oppressive systems that affect Black students and benefit others. I ask though, whether this shift to an embedded anti-racist stance can occur within a wider societal structure that is upheld and justified by a neo-liberal approach. I agree with Singh above and watch the recent ambition and progress of Melz Owusu to open an all Black university with keen interest.³³

Access HE reported recently that by 2030 "three in four students at London universities will be ethnic minorities." Felix, 2018 p.8. This in part may well be fuelling Universities and the OfS's forays in supporting HE institutions to address their failures and 'gaps.' It will certainly give considerably greater weight to protests and student voice to hold their institutions to account.

Whilst the evidence demonstrates an historically sly and shifting response to previous attempts by students and staff to highlight these problems, the shift in awareness due to BLM has brought a renewed urgency for high profile institutions to better serve their student populations. Acknowledgement of the need to work with students and pay them accordingly has been taken up, for example in some departments at Goldsmiths University and the coverage of organisations such as Shades of Noir at UAL (whilst there are failures within UAL) does serve as an excellent example to other institutions. There is increasing

³³ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jun/27/payback-time-academics-plan-to-launch-free-black-university-in-uk>

acknowledgement of the existing imbalance, but we are a long way from change being implemented. For change to really be successful, each educational stage would need to be reviewed and overhauled and as we have seen, current Government appetite for this is lacking.

For now we salute the work of all those young people and academics who have worked on campaigns such as #UALsowhite, Why is my curriculum white?, Decolonise the Curriculum and Decolonise the Arts Curriculum, RMFO and BLM in continuing to not accept the situation and strive for change.

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