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From ethnic minorities to Black majorities: The challenges and dilemmas of attempting to decolonize the British higher education system

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Abstract

Using a decolonial and Black feminist inspired analytical lens this paper explores the dilemmas and challenges that Black academics face in trying to bring about change in universities within the British higher education system. Higher education focused campaigns such as Why isn’t my Professor Black? Why is my curriculum White? Rhodes must fall has positioned education as a site of struggle for the empowerment and liberation of Black communities, but with less than 100 full Professors of African descent in occupying academic positions the article critically examines whether the British university can truly be a site for decolonisation and liberation for African descendants and people of colour. In reflecting on the 400th year anniversary African descendant forced migration to the Americas, the article argues for a renewal of African descendant collaboration along Pan-African lines to decolonize the British education system and foster systems of education that empower African descendant communities across the globe.

Introduction

The campaigns undertaken by students, community activists, and academics in British universities to decolonize their curricula are part of a broader struggle for recognition and restitution being fought by people of color in Britain. This article explores the dilemmas and challenges that Black academics face in trying to bring about change in British universities whilst existing in a precarious minoritized state. In reflecting on African diaspora struggles for rights and recognition in the Americas over the past 400 years, I argue that Black academics in Britain need to adopt an approach to decolonizing the curriculum, that draws on that intellectual history and also the contemporary experiences of the global African diaspora to fashion new ways of being and knowing. Acting in isolation our precarious predicament is unlikely to change but by creating alliances with African descendant educators across the globe we can develop pedagogical methods at all educational levels to empower and transform African descendant communities.
This work opens up new terrain by privileging and combining frameworks and methodologies derived from decolonial thinkers and African descendant feminists to explore contemporary dilemmas of Pan-African intellectual praxis. From these resources I develop and utilize an auto-ethnographic approach to reflexively examine my own experiences as diasporic African educated in Britain. The work then critically reflects on activism and campaigns that have sought to decolonize the curricula, before arguing for a more unified approach across the global African diaspora to bring about educational reform that empowers and properly educates African descendant communities. The bringing together of decolonial thought, Black feminism, auto-ethnography and critical reflection in this way offers important and unique insights in ways of being and knowing that will assist in decolonizing education systems that have been dominated by Eurocentric thought these past 400 years.

In critically considering the challenges of decolonizing current curricula the article draws on the theoretical and analytical framings of writers who examined the dilemmas of African-descendant elites in the colonial era. Frantz Fanon (1967), Albert Memmi (1965/1990), and Richard Wright (1957/1995) all addressed the psychological and intellectual dilemmas faced by those who had been educated in Western institutions and had experienced the contradictions of the colonial system. As Richard Wright explains:

My remarks will, of necessity, be confined to those Asians and Africans who, having been partly Westernized, have a quarrel with the West. They are the ones who feel they are oppressed. In a sense, this is a fight of the West with itself, a fight that the West blunderingly began, and the West does not to this day realize that it is the sole responsible agent, the sole instigator. For the West to disclaim responsibility for what it so clearly did is to make every white man alive on earth today a criminal. (Wright, 1957/1995, p. 3)
The entanglement of Black and Brown elites in the colonial system provides an excellent frame of reference to explore contemporary dilemmas faced by African-descendant scholars in the British education system (Ackah, 2012; Arday, 2018; Bernard, 2017; Shilliam, 2018; Tate, 2012). The colonizer-colonized frame is innovatively utilized to explain the existential dilemma of trying to defeat, transform, or change a system within which one is deeply embedded, and towards which one has an ambivalent attitude. I add to this frame the “outsider within” perspective emanating from the Black feminist lens of Patricia Hill Collins (1986, 1991). She articulates how the experiences of Black women, existing on the margins and yet so intimately connected to the world of whiteness, provide an alternative lens through which the world can be viewed, analyzed, and critiqued: “Black intellectuals, especially those in touch with their marginality in academic settings, tap this standpoint in producing distinctive analyses of race, class and gender” (Collins, 1986, pp. 14–15).

Collins work affirms African-descendant scholars’ right to draw on their own experiences to generate intellectual knowledge and, further, to appreciate the significance of African-descendant culture as a wellspring from which to gain support. The ground-breaking work of Collins and other Black feminists coupled with those of decolonial thinkers and activists provide the academic foundation for this work to generate new insights to explain and resolve African descendant existential dilemmas in Britain in the struggle to decolonize.

The article is comprised of five sections. The first outlines the connections between enslavement, colonialism, and the education system in the UK. The second explores the impact of these processes on the education of African descendants using an autoethnographic approach. The third assess the efforts of students and staff to decolonize the education system, and the fourth reflects on African-descendant scholars
working as outsiders within the system. Drawing on the important work of Sara Ahmed (2012), I explore the dilemma of utilizing one’s emotional, psychological, and intellectual labor on institutions engaged in “performance” in relation to decolonizing their institutions. Finally, I contend that the African-descendant scholar in the UK needs to forge international alliances and networks to break the sense of isolation that stems from operating within the British higher education system. The 400th year commemoration of African descendant experience and struggle in the Americas provides a timely reminder and reassertion of the ideals of Pan-African unity to defeat all forms of racism and neo-colonialism.

**British education in the context of transatlantic enslavement and European colonialism**

The British higher education system is a highly valued part of the economic, intellectual, and cultural fabric of British society. There are over 250 providers of higher education in the United Kingdom including 164 higher education institutions (Universities UK, 2018). The 2017/18 total higher education student population was 2.3 million (Bolton, 2019). Universities led by Oxford and Cambridge are, with the monarchy, Shakespeare, parliamentary democracy, the Church of England and the English language, constitutive elements of what made the “Great” in Great Britain. Less acknowledged as contributing to Britain’s eminence in the world is the role of Britain in the enslavement of millions of African descendants and the benefits accrued from “trading” them (Beckles, 2013; Eltis, 1979; Hall, Draper, McClelland, Donington, & Lang, 2016; Inikori, 2004). The colonization of nearly two thirds of the planet also made an immense contribution to Britain becoming an industrialized superpower (Boahen, 1990; Gopal, 2019; Rodney, 1972/1988).
Britain’s ascendancy to global superpower was turbocharged by its pre-eminent role in the transatlantic enslavement of African people (Inikori, 2002). Much of British society, including its higher education institutions, benefitted from that engagement. Transatlantic enslavement had a transformational impact on both its beneficiaries and its victims, the legacies of which are now being confronted on university campuses and the wider society. (Coughlan, 2019; Stanford-Xosei, 2019).

The wealth, manufacturing base, and broader infrastructural capacity that Britain gained from its role in enslaving Africans provided the basis for it to expand its colonial empire. Missionary explorers like the legendary David Livingstone provided the moral justification for Britain to engage in economic, political, and cultural domination of much of the world. In 1857 he gave a famous speech to students at Cambridge University urging them to take up the worthy cause of bringing civilization, commerce, and Christianity to Africa (Livingstone, 1857). Livingstone backed by the intellectual elite education establishment provided the justification for the brutalization and dehumanization of Africans. Livingstone has long departed but the institutional legacy and intellectual heritage remains to this day to inflict educational damage on African descendants on the continent and the diaspora.

The educational and religious institutions brought by the British to Africa and Asia taught their colonial subjects about the supremacy of the British way of life and attempted to indoctrinate Black and Brown peoples to despise their own cultural and religious values and practices. As Ngugi Wa Thiong’o explains:

Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others. For colonialism this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of people’s culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser. (Thiong’o, 1986, p. 16)
The language of the colonizer, as described by Thiong’o, exerted a powerful influence over the lives of the colonized and their descendants. This influence extended to the metropole, where ideas of racial superiority and Britain’s role as a civilizing agent to the world seeped its way into academic discourses and ultimately into disciplines and institutions. This colonizing ‘mission’ had global ramifications for African descendants then and now.

A noteworthy example is the science of eugenics with its hierarchical notions of “race,” which gave academic credibility to the extremely dangerous idea of “removing the lesser races” from the earth for the betterment of humankind (Jackson & Weidman, 2005). Its originator Sir Francis Galton, who coined the term in the 1880s, was influential in various disciplines, including anthropology, geography, genetics, and sociology. He established a laboratory and professorship at University College London, where a building is named after him (Gilham, 2001). This is in spite of the fact that eugenics was the intellectual foundation for heinous racist atrocities including Nazi experimentation on Jews (Coleman, 2014). The work of academics in geography, anthropology, and sociology amongst others was also used in support of Britain’s colonial endeavors abroad and to reinforce a stereotype of Black and Brown bodies as belonging to lesser “races” at home (Steinmetz, 2013). At the institutional level the famous School of Oriental and African Studies, founded in 1916 and now part of the University of London, was specifically established to train the administrators, armed forces, teachers, missionaries, and all the other personnel who would run Britain’s racist empire (Brown, 2016).

Britain was a terrorizing giant and a leading catalyst of white supremacist practice that has wreaked as Thiong’o rightly identifies (Thiong’o, 1986) social, cultural, intellectual destruction wherever its influence has reached. In the face of such a
brutal protagonist how should African descendant intellectuals respond? It is a dilemma, one that is personal and political, intellectual and foundational. Frantz Fanon in his seminal Black Skin White Masks answers:

For my own part, I would certainly know how to react. And in one sense, if I were asked for a definition of myself, I would say I am the one who waits; I investigate my surroundings, I interpret everything in terms of what I discover, I become sensitive (Fanon, 1967, P. 120)

I now become sensitive and explicitly drawing on Fanon’s directive and the theorizing of Collins (1986) I critically examine, investigate and interpret my personal experience as an “ethnic minority” student and academic in the British educational system.

The autoethnography of an ethnic minority student

I was born in London in the United Kingdom in the late 1960s to parents who migrated to that country from Ghana in the mid-1960s. All my formal education from infant school, through primary and secondary school, to undergraduate and postgraduate study at university has been undertaken in the British educational system. In all my years of being taught in Britain I have had direct experience of being taught by three people of color: an African-descendant woman at my senior high school, and a South Asian man and African-descendant woman for one course each during my undergraduate university studies. The implication was loud and clear that teaching was for White people (Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018).

Growing up in London with its sizeable Black and Asian populations, the schools I attended were all well integrated and I had friends from all cultures and backgrounds. In the classroom however lessons on the history and experience of African descendants and other people of color, either in Britain or elsewhere, was scant, and if it was mentioned at all it was generally in negative terms (Adi, 2019). Africans
were slaves and they sold their own people into slavery. It was the British who rescued them, we were taught. Africans came from backward countries and it was the British who provided education, transport infrastructure, and religion so that they could modernize. At school it was distinctly embarrassing to be an African. You would be made fun of, deemed to be uncivilized, and subject to bullying. As a result, I would downplay my African heritage and readily accept the broader identity of Black which was associated in the playground with Caribbean street coolness (Chambers, 2017; Hall, 2000).

In the latter part of my senior high school education, a progressive White female teacher introduced our class to African and Caribbean literature (Rhys, 2000/1966), but she was openly disparaged by her two White male colleagues in their lessons. They regarded the Shakespeare and Graham Greene that they taught as proper literature. The books by African-descendant writers that we were being taught were not creditable works. As a 16–17-year-old, I did not appreciate the significance of having the opportunity to read and study works by African descendants. I had been so indoctrinated with the idea that Africans could not produce anything worthwhile, and subdued by the gendered and hierarchical power relations displayed by the teaching staff, that I did not challenge the erroneous and prejudiced views of the White males. I was complicit in my own miseducation (Woodson, 1933/2017).

At university in the north-west of England, in contrast to my school experience, I was a lone Black face in a sea of 100 White undergraduate politics students at my first lecture in 1984. This was to be a frequent occurrence in my undergraduate and postgraduate years at two universities in that part of the country. At undergraduate level the sense of being a minority ethnic other was very acute and what I was taught deepened my sense of being a minority in deeply negative ways. After a first year as a
single honors politics student where I did not learn anything about the Black experience
I switched to a combined honors program, adding sociology to politics in the hope that I
could find some modules that focused on the experience of African descendants. I chose
modules that dealt with issues of race and ethnicity and African history and politics.
Most of these modules were a depressing experience. Where African descendants were
referred to, it was mainly negative. In sociology of education, African descendants were
the underachievers who came from lower socio-economic groups and single parent
families. In West African history, Africans were prone to tribal conflict and in African
politics, dictators and failed states were the order of the day. In the sociology of
religion, Black and Brown peoples had primitive and regressive beliefs. In other classes
where African descendants were referred to, they lived in the worst housing, or they
were victims of enslavement, underdevelopment, and every other problem that existed
in the world. What was taught in these classes was brutally compounded by the
inference that these were my people, and this was my experience.

I could not be myself in the university setting, which was psychologically
debilitating, but I could not quit. I had overcome many obstacles to get to university. It
was seen by my family and wider community in London as a great achievement and a
wonderful opportunity, so I could not disappoint them by dropping out or failing.
Education had been drummed into me and other African descendants of my generation
as the way out of a life of grinding poverty and the mechanism to rise above the
stereotypes of Black people as unintelligent and lazy. I had defied the odds, I had made
it to university from a working-class minority ethnic state school background, but I still
felt inadequate (Arbouin, 2018). As my mentor through trying times Bob Marley put it:

They say what we know
is just what they teach us
and we’re so ignorant
cos every time they can reach us
cos every time they can reach us
through political strategy
eye through political strategy
ey keep us hungry
ey keep us hungry
and when we gonna get some food
and when we gonna get some food
your brother got to be your enemy. (Marley, 1979)

Analyzing these experiences from a distance, it is shocking to recognize just how much
African descendants have to endure in these systems of education that valorize
whiteness and undermine blackness. The assault on one’s sense of being is subtle,
because it does not emanate from one quarter but is refracted through the teaching, the
reading, the images and sounds that the university produces. These convey subtle
messages that conflate university with whiteness. Academic excellence constitutes
whiteness, collegiality is whiteness, leadership is whiteness, and as an African
descendant you cannot measure up to these standards of whiteness without giving up a
part of who you are. So, you doubt yourself and, by extension, your community, your
history, and your culture. It is not a totalizing doubt, it is subtle, but it does impact your
relationship to self, to community, and to the academy, so that you are always seeking
to learn, to understand, to improve in order to erase the doubt, as Wright (1957/1995)
identifies in the aptly titled “The psychological reactions of oppressed people.”

The music of Bob Marley and Gil Scott-Heron was very important in my
academic journey, guiding me to alternative ways of thinking about the world and
pointing me to other references—cultural, political, and academic—written by African
descendants. The search for and finding of alternative points of reference as a means of
countering the psychological oppression of whiteness is an important component in
tackling one’s dilemmas. These points of reference, drawn from the reservoir of African
descendant histories, cultures and contemporary experience demonstrate that a Pan-
African approach to knowledge creation, production and dissemination, yields greater benefits than operating within national confines.

After undergraduate study, I thought I was finished with university, but I spent a year in Haiti teaching English and learning about the history of the great African-descendant republic in the Western hemisphere (James, 1938/1980) and its systematic undermining by European and U.S. governments. I was determined after living in Haiti that I would learn more about the history and experiences of African descendants and work towards ensuring that African descendants would break free from the shackles of White supremacy. So I went back to university and did a Masters by research in pan-Africanism (Ackah, 1999), and then went into education working in a local community college for predominantly Black students (Ackah & Christian, 1997). I combined that with working in various higher education institutions and studying for my doctorate, which I eventually attained and which eventually enabled me to get a permanent full-time position in a British higher education institution (Ackah, 2012). I share my education journey here in part as a unique experience but also because it is illustrative of the journey many African descendants take to navigate the system. Entering an institution and experiencing the subtle intellectual weight of White supremacist thought in its liberal guise is debilitating psychologically and physically. It is often endured in the hope of attaining a future greater good. Many students of color recognize that, to have access to jobs, recognition, and validation by the wider society, a degree or commensurate higher education qualification is necessary (Arbouin, 2018). So African descendants and other students of color get caught in an existential dilemma of trying to learn and develop in a system that by its historical framing and contemporary discourses continues to marginalize, minoritize, and exploit the lived experience of African descendants, in ways similar to that of the colonial educators.
My experience of British higher education as a student is of a system that refuses to acknowledge its history of complicity with its racist empire, but which still envelopes itself in the privileges, status, and prejudices of that empire to the detriment of Black and Brown students and staff. At the same time institutions are reluctant to divest themselves of their racist and imperialist heritage, they are increasingly targeting Black and Brown students to come to their institutions. Universities want the money that the students bring and the presence of a few “people of color” provides universities with opportunities to market themselves as modern, outward-looking, progressive institutions. Under the veneer it is clear that racism is prevalent and persistent across the sector, as demonstrated by the fact that African descendants are less likely to be offered places at the highest-ranking universities even when they have the appropriate qualifications (Boliver, 2016). They leave with poorer degrees than their White peers (Adams, 2019). They are less likely to be employed on graduating (Runnymede Trust, 2014) and are most likely to be taught by White men (Bhopal, 2014). Can these scenarios and statistics really be challenged and transformed from the inside? Will the entrance of more Black and Asian students and employees into the system create the necessary momentum for change? I will now assess some of the recent efforts to transform British higher education in relation to issues of racial justice and decoloniality and discuss their successes and limitations.

The struggle to decolonize the British higher education system

African-descendant students and staff along with other students and staff of color and their supporters have been engaged in various efforts to transform and decolonize British universities (Bhambra, Gebrial, & Nişancıoğlu, 2018). Campaigns have ranged from the international decolonial Rhodes Must Fall (Rhodes Must Fall, Oxford, 2018), to the national Why Isn’t My Professor Black (UCL, 2014b). Some campaigns have
been focused on teaching and learning in British higher education institutions, such as Why Is My Curriculum White? (UCL, 2014a), the demand for Black studies courses (Andrews, 2018), and the decolonizing the curriculum campaigns. Others such as Decolonizing the University have been advocating more fundamental redirections of wider society as well as the university (Johnson, Joseph-Salisbury, & Kamunge, 2018).

It is tempting to group all these movements together as part of a broad campaign to decolonize universities and the societies in which they exist. The movements and campaigns however, whilst sharing some facets, are diverse in their strategies, ideologies, and personnel. The same is true of course of the campaigns that were and are being waged against European colonialism, imperialism, and their legacies. Questions arise as to whether the issues at stake are local, national, or global: are they for Black British staff and students to tackle on their own or do African descendants and their allies across the world need to have a stake in these struggles? Can institutionally racist educational establishments be reformed and become places that are open and accepting of alternative ways of being and knowing, or do they need to be dismantled along with the societies that produced them? These are not new dilemmas, but during the anti-colonial struggle how one chose to deal with these questions could result in imprisonment, torture, or death, whereas one can legitimately ask what is at stake for African-descendant students and staff in challenging British higher education (Andrews, 2018, pp. 139–142)? If it is not liberation or death, are we really engaged in a decolonial process, where radical pedagogy is aligned with radical social, political, and economic change (Freire, 1968/1996), or are we just engaged in performance rhetoric and piecemeal educational reform?

I consider these questions from the perspective of both an activist and researcher. I have been engaged first-hand in decolonizing the curriculum, Why Isn’t
My Professor Black and the demand for Black studies, and I have been an interested observer and supporter of the other campaigns. From this vantage point, the quest to liberate African-descendant education in Britain from the legacies of empire falls between two positions; the intentions are liberative but the entanglements with the system and the existential and practical dilemmas and issues that emerge from these encounters often result in piecemeal outcomes. Rhodes Must Fall, the decolonizing campaigns and the demand for Black studies have included an engagement with literature and practice beyond the scope of the local and national domains, which is suggestive of a radical impulse. Rhodes Must Fall, Oxford drew inspiration and ideas from the original protest that took place at the University of Cape Town, South Africa (Chantiluke, Kwoba, & Nkopo, 2018, p. xx). This movement was about removing colonial legacies in the form of Rhodes’ statue, but also about decolonizing the curricula and challenging the dominance of Eurocentrism in the teaching, administration, and culture of the university. The movement was also intent on pursuing racial justice through the employment and promotion of Black academic staff and administrators. Rhodes Must Fall, Oxford had a similar trajectory: the call for the statue’s removal was part of a wider demand for the university to acknowledge its lack of diversity and to make changes to staff, culture, and curricula (Qwabe, 2018). Former students of the University of Cape Town were also part of the Oxford movement and also other African descendants and people of color from different parts of the world.

The call for Black studies and the establishment of the UK Black Studies Association in 2015 also drew on the formation of the discipline in the United States in the late 1960s (Ackah, 2014; Andrews, 2018, pp. 130–137). It used the pedagogical framing of the discipline in the US to develop courses in the UK that reflect the lives and experiences of global African descendants.
The decolonizing movements also had multiple frames of international reference, drawing on the claims of indigenous communities in North America and Australasia for land, recognition, and an end to settler colonialism (Tuck & Yang 2012). The UK movements also took inspiration from Latin American theorizing (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) and historical and contemporary colonial struggles in Africa and Asia and the theoretical framing that emerged during and after those struggles for liberation (Gopal, 2019). Another important feature of these movements is that many of them were led by young people. They came up with the ideas, they formulated the methods and strategies, and they fought for the ideals of inclusion, intersectionality, plurality of voices, and non-hierarchical structures in the movements. Justice internally was important for them in relation to issues of race, gender, and sexual identity, as they tackled injustice externally in the higher education system (Nkopo, Madenga, & Chantiluke, 2018). International solidarity, a commitment to justice and equity, and the capacity to create alliances outside of traditional academic spaces are important tools that are used in the struggle to decolonize higher education in Britain.

As in many movements for justice and social change, the ideals and the realities do not always cohere. The movements did well to get established, to get their voices heard, but they are fragmented movements, mostly run by volunteers, working with limited resources (Henriques & Abushouk, 2018). They are also trying to dismantle or disrupt a higher education system that is very well resourced, organized, and which constitutes a major social, economic, intellectual, and cultural component of British public life (Holmwood, 2011).

This makes efforts to reform let alone create conditions for decolonizing particularly challenging. Events at Oxford in response to Rhodes Must Fall and decolonizing efforts are a pertinent case study. When the students first demonstrated at
Oriel College and demanded the removal of Rhodes’ statue, they were supported by a
diverse range of students and by academics from all over the university. The college
administration also appeared to take the demands of the students seriously: they
received the petition of the students and agreed to hold discussions on how to move
forward. That was until the demands of the students got into the wider media domain.
Here the rhetoric was very different. A venerable British institution was under attack
from ungrateful Black students, was the outcry from the established right-wing
newspapers (Joseph, 2016). The students came under attack from all quarters, including
from students who had previously supported them, alumni, and most notably the main
figurehead of the university, Chancellor Chris Patten, who defended Rhodes’ legacy and
opined that students could “study elsewhere” if they did not like what Oxford was
offering (Espinoza, 2016). It was an educational volte-face; students had made
themselves vulnerable and had spoken out about the racism inherent in the institution
and now, having “outed” them, the institution utilized its establishment privilege in the
media and in the political classes to reaffirm its power and to put the students back in
their place (Espinoza & Rayner, 2016).

The tactics used to undermine the campaigners at Oxford could be taken from a
class entitled Dealing with Colonial Dissent 101. Oxford, whilst rejecting the students’
charges of racism, has appointed its first Black head of a college (Oxford University,
2019). It denied Black and Asian collective agency and the quest for real change, and
instead appointed a figurehead and made some piecemeal reforms to “demonstrate” it
was moving in a progressive direction. These actions evoke psychological angst in
African descendants. We are expected to cheer the fact that someone from our
community has made it to the top of the profession against all the odds; meanwhile
substantive demands for radical change remain unmet. African descendants once again
have been played by the system. The machinations of whiteness render activists and academics bemused and bewildered (Baldwin, 2018/1965, p. 42).

In response to other African descendants’ demands in the academy such as the demand for Black studies, the need for more Black professors, and the need to tackle the gap in the degree attainment rates of African descendants and White students, similar patterns of rhetoric and reluctant action emerge. The higher education establishment, in reaction to demands to eradicate institutionalized racism, also responds with statements of intent, reports, and with piecemeal reforms. For example, five or six African-descendant professors have been appointed since the outcry over the lack of Black professors (UCL, 2014b; Morgan, 2016). Reports have been written on the “problem” of the attainment rate (Universities UK & National Union of Students, 2019) and two or three academic departments have developed or are developing variants of courses that pertain to the lives of Black and minority ethnic experience in Britain and other places. (Only Birmingham City University has developed a Black studies undergraduate degree in line with the disciplinary parameters outlined previously.)

The issue of institutionalized racism in British higher education is a real scandal. African-descendant academics and students have been naming these awful practices and arguing for systematic change. The nature of the response from higher education institutions and government demonstrates how little these institutions and the wider British establishment value the intellectual currency of African descendants. It also reveals that the wider intellectual and philosophical concerns of Britain’s universities do not adequately reflect on the legacies of enslavement, colonialism, and imperialism and the damage they have caused and continue to cause to Black communities.

The British higher education system, in response to legitimate demands, is once again objectifying the lived experience of African descendants. Rather than genuinely
responding and owning its institutionalized racism, it is commissioning research, producing reports, assessing data, and making recommendations on how it should treat “the stranger amongst them.” The isolated African-descendant academic is both that stranger and the familiar. Our input is needed in order to validate the cycle of analysis, assessment, and recommendations that the institutions will produce as evidence of their commitment to tackle the problems. These are at least four hundred years old, but African descendants are continually told to be patient as more research into these issues is needed. These are, as Sara Ahmed (2012) has brilliantly argued, “performative gestures.” Staff of color are left in the invidious position of deciding whether to contribute towards piecemeal change or to leave things as they are and be made to feel responsible for contributing to an institution that is fundamentally racist. I will return to Ahmed’s analysis and its implications for the Black academic, but first I want to utilize her notion of diversity as performance to further critique the British higher education institutional space using the case of Glasgow University’s historic gesture of paying reparations for slavery.

On Friday August 23, 2019, Glasgow University was said to have made history as the first British institution to “pay” reparations for slavery (Carrell, 2019). In a service at the university it signed a memorandum of understanding with the University of the West Indies to signify its commitment. The university had researched its archives and acknowledged that it had received donations from people and companies who had made profits from being involved in the enslavement of Africans and African descendants. The university estimated that it had been given between 16.7 and 198 million pounds in today’s money and it would raise 20 million pounds to “rectify” the problem. The news received positive media attention nationally and internationally, with the Vice Chancellor of the West Indies Sir Hilary Beckles quoted in the media as
describing what the university had done as a “bold, moral, historic step” (Carrell, 2019). A closer interrogation of what the university has actually agreed to do, and the language used to describe it, demonstrates performance rhetoric in action. The statements of the university conceal the real extent of the evil from which they have benefited and portray the university as an innovative progressive institution, rather than the guilty beneficiary of criminal proceeds or blood money. In my analysis of Glasgow’s activities I will utilize the BBC Scotland reporting of the event (Capella, 2019). (Most news outlets had remarkably similar reporting of the announcement, probably emanating from a single press release.)

Glasgow University has agreed to raise and spend £20 million in reparations after discovering it benefited by millions of pounds from the slave trade

It is believed to be the first institution in the UK to implement such a “programme of restorative justice”. The money will be raised and spent over the next 20 years on setting up and running the Glasgow-Caribbean Centre for Development Research.

It will be managed in partnership with the University of the West Indies.

The centre, to be co-located in in Glasgow and the Caribbean, will sponsor research work and raise awareness of the history of slavery and its impact around the world. (Capella, 2019)

The language in the statement reveals a number of contradictions at work. Firstly, a university that for hundreds of years benefited from the blood, sweat, and tears of African descendants will “raise and spend.” It will not use its own resources to pay restitution for its complicity in the barbaric enterprise, but rather it will use other people’s money. It will actually be benefiting again from the enslavement of African descendants. Secondly the university was said to have recently “discovered” it had gained profits from enslavement. The language use is once again interesting in this context as it foregrounds the university’s research skills and portrays a sense of itself as
innocent through the use of the term “discovered.” An alternative reading of the university’s actions could be that it has been hiding or deliberately choosing not to reveal for an awfully long time just how much it profited from the so-called “trade.”

Thirdly the institution that will lead the venture is called the Glasgow-Caribbean Centre for Development Research. It does not refer to enslavement, African-descendant reparations, or redress anywhere in the title. Rather what is proposed signifies another colonial trope: that of African descendants needing assistance. The White knights of Glasgow in their beneficence will save the day through the diligent research done in the sparkling new centre. The final point to note is that the centre will “sponsor research work and raise awareness of the history of slavery and its impact around the world.”

Did the university not just engage in research and raise awareness concerning the impact of enslavement on the university of Glasgow? Does it not have (White) scholars working on the history of enslavement and its impact on Scotland and further afield? What is being written about here is what the university already does, and this “project” will undoubtedly lead to Glasgow being a world-leading institution in the study of African-descendant pain and suffering, from which it will gain even more academic credibility and standing. Due to its partnering with the University of the West of Indies and one of the leading academic exponents of reparations in the Caribbean (Beckles, 2013) it will be shielded from accusations of benefiting from enslavement.

The academic, cultural, and linguistic framing of the announcement and the service which was conducted to memorialize the occasion was designed so that the university would not suffer injury or harm. African descendants are expected to be grateful and happy for this attempt at decolonizing and reparatory justice, even as they receive nothing in practical terms. An institution that got its wealth from African blood in a city that built its wealth on that blood and that still frames its discourse in terms of
“development,” “discovery,” and “awareness” is cleverly performing rather than transforming the lives and experiences of the people it purports to bring justice.

**The pain of being: When your being is attached to what you are doing**

Sara Ahmed (2012) in her important work *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life* articulates the complex machinations that diversity workers in academic institutions cope with as they attempt to challenge, change, represent, defend, improve, or just survive their institutions’ work in this field. Ahmed forces us to think not only about the language of diversity and how it is utilized by academic institutions, but also the myriad ways its usage impacts on the lived experience of practitioners:

> If we start from our own experiences as persons of color in the institution of whiteness, we might also think about how those benevolent acts of giving are not “what they seem”: being included can be a lesson in “being not” as much as “being in.” The “folding into life” of minorities can also be understood as a national fantasy: it can be a “fantasy fold.” We come up against the limits of this fantasy when we encounter the brick wall; we come up against the limits when we refuse to be grateful for what we receive. (Ahmed, 2012, p. 163)

I, and I imagine many staff of color, would recognize what Ahmed outlines here. It is particularly painful when your labor becomes the celebrated diversity policy, or your presence in the institutional picture an example of how diverse the institution is. Your talks, posters, and plans to establish a diversity week, Black history month, or racism awareness day are used to demonstrate the progress that the university is making in regard to equality and diversity. Yet in reality most staff know from personal experience and from most measurable equality metrics, from student achievement to staff positions and promotions (data on race disparities are now being “rediscovered” by institutions as they start to face evaluation of their performance on student outcomes), that at their cores the universities are institutionally racist.
It is existentially painful as an African-descendant scholar to read and reflect on the dilemmas that academics and practitioners working in these spaces face (Rollock, 2019). You recognize the “performance culture” that you are entangled in and you know that the system uses your labor, your experience, your cultural heritage and resources to bolster its diversity credentials, whilst maintaining its White privilege and not dismantling its colonial heritage. And yet the sense of obligation persists that you are in the space to make a difference and that if you are not present no-one will speak up for staff and students of color. Whilst you wrestle with these issues and invariably engage with them, your own issues of standing, promotion, and position within the institution remain precarious. You are at the centre of the performance, whether present or absent. You are faced with the Dubois double consciousness conundrum writ large (Dubois, 1903/1969, p. 45)

The multiple positionings and possible positions of African-descendant academics in the institutionally racist academic space are challenging. African-descendant scholars have drawn on a range of framings both to make sense of their situation and to find common cause with others to engage in productive activist scholarship that can challenge institutional racism and colonialism and its legacies (Warmington, 2014; Etienne, 2016).

Patricia Hill Collins (1986), as I have outlined, utilizes the concept of the outsider within to convey how Black women occupy a space of privileged insight and a unique lens to view and critique the existing academic and social order. Marginalized in both feminist academia and Black male-dominated academic spaces, the outsider within draws on Black women’s intellectual, social, political, and economic life of struggle as the source of inspiration for their insights (Collins, 1991, p. 12). The outsider within captures the lonely, precarious, but critical space that African-descendant scholars
occupy within the British educational establishment. The isolated nature of the African
descendant within British academia often means however that our claims for justice are
minoritized and our analytical lens is not deemed worthy of sustained mainstream
attention. Our precarious status also makes it difficult for us to come together and
operate as a sustained collective. That however I think is the way forward but not just
on the local and national level; rather African-descendant academics need to come
together on global platforms to strengthen our efforts to decolonize universities and
society.

**From minority to majority status**

An important dimension to Black feminist thought is its embrace of knowledge and
wisdom from all domains of the lives of African-descendant women. Poets, cooks,
cleaners, preachers, artists, and artisans alongside academics become sources of
knowledge in confronting racism and patriarchy in contemporary societies (Collins,
1991; Etienne, 2016; Frederick, 2003). Lessons can be learnt here for African-
descendant scholars in the United Kingdom. We are not in fact isolated if we view our
experience in the struggle to decolonize the university through the lens of the wider
African-descendant academic and activist community. Seeing the decolonizing agenda
from a pan-African perspective moves us from being isolated minorities to being part of
what the Caribbean British-based educator Gus John (2006) in various spaces has
described as global majority peoples.

In the past anti-colonial activists from around the world drew on each other’s
writings, speeches, and actions as they fought for independence. The struggle to
decolonize these legacy institutions in Britain could benefit greatly from the support of
scholars and activists around the world. Organizations such as the African Association
for the Study of the World-Wide African Diaspora and the African Diaspora
Consortium, via conferences, student exchange programs and academic research ventures, are linking African-descendant scholars and students together in potentially creative and transformative ways. There are journals devoted to the research of African-descendant communities, such as the *Journal of Africana Studies*, and there are subject-specific groupings, primarily but not exclusively American, that bring Black scholars together in academic pursuits. There is however a need for more proactive engagement and organizing by African-descendant scholars to confront the particularities of the institutional legacies of enslavement and colonialism. Scholars need to work with the broader African-descendant civil society and even progressive governments who support efforts to decolonize their institutions and transform their education systems so that equity, justice, and empowerment for African-descendant women, men and children is realized. With the broader strategic support of African-descendant communities, Black British-based scholars can push for change from a position of solidarity, mutual recognition, and ultimately strength. The implications of this approach for teaching and learning at primary, secondary and tertiary levels is to place the African descendant learner at the center of the educational experience. To have educational curricula and the infrastructure that supports that curricula conceived and activated with the educational growth and development of the African descendant learner in mind. This also implies and requires the deconstructing intellectually and ultimately dismantling of education systems in former spaces of colonialism and enslavement that exist and thrive by relegating African personhood to the margins of teaching and learning.

**Conclusion**

This article has explored the dilemmas that African-descendant scholars working within the British higher education system face as they attempt to work in, and challenge institutions steeped in histories and legacies of enslavement and colonialism. Using an
innovative combination of decolonial theory, Black feminist thought and
autoethnographic critical reflection, the work opens up new terrain to critically consider
how the legacies of enslavement and colonialism still live on and require rigorous
challenge to overcome their effects. In commemorating the resilience, genius and
tenacity of African descendants in the Americas these past 400 years it is recognized
here that, for genuine transformation to take place in the British education system and
like-minded neo-colonial systems African-descendant academics need coalitions and
alliances. We need to be developing centers of teaching and learning where new
curricula are being conceived and new ways of being and knowing are taught that
emancipate the African descendant mind from the legacies of enslavement and
colonialism.

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