



LONDON REVIEW OF EDUCATION

e-ISSN: 1474-8479

Journal homepage:

<https://www.uclpress.co.uk/pages/london-review-of-education>

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How to cite this article

Phoenix, A., Amesu, A., Naylor, I. and Zafar, K. (2020) 'Viewpoint: "When black lives matter all lives will matter" – A teacher and three students discuss the BLM movement'. *London Review of Education*, 18 (3), 519–23. <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.18.3.14>

Submission date: 30 September 2020

Acceptance date: 2 October 2020

Publication date: 13 November 2020

Peer review

This article has been through editorial review.

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Viewpoint: 'When black lives matter all lives will matter' – A teacher and three students discuss the BLM movement

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First published in two parts on the UCL Institute of Education Blog
(Phoenix *et al.*, 2020a; 2020b)

Abstract

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is generating a new appetite for understanding the ubiquity of systemic racism. In this short piece, a professor and three newly graduated students from different racialized groups reflect on the reproduction of social inequalities in key institutions and on what decolonization means for the nation, not just for education.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter, systemic racism, decolonizing curriculum and monuments, inequalities, colourism

The publicity following the death of George Floyd after the white policeman Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck in May 2020 galvanized support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. BLM and the attention it has garnered over the following months has thrown light on the ongoing discrimination and systemic racism that black people continue to face.

Alongside the unprecedented global protests against racism, there seems a new appetite to understand the specificities and ubiquity of anti-black racism and its subtle, everyday materializations as well as its murderous manifestations. That quest for understanding has seen an extraordinary outpouring of testimonies from black and mixed-parentage people, telling stories of events and day-to-day experiences that have generally been reserved for insider conversations on microaggressions and discrimination.

It is evident in institutions such as the media and universities that both like to see themselves as progressive but are repeatedly shown to reproduce social inequalities. A crucial issue is how to ensure that current debates and disagreements do not give way to life as normal but lead to real change in the direction of social justice.

In pursuit of that aim, we came together across socially constructed racialized and ethnicized boundaries and across generations as students and lecturer. We aim to put on the agenda issues that have struck us as important from BLM and that we consider need to be central to future policies and practices. Together, we argue for continuing to engage in difficult conversations, making a stand against systemic racism, recognizing the multiplicity of racisms and thinking through what decolonizing means for the nation, not just for education.

Using your voices, using your ears

'When black lives matter all lives will matter.' (Angela Davis interviewed in Maniapoto, 2020)

The BLM movement has called upon all those who believe that black lives matter to make a stand in their own spheres of influence to speak about the struggles black people routinely face. Yet personal experiences and stories shared by colleagues and peers have showed that a strange nervousness descends and cloaks some individuals when the topic of 'race' is raised, as if the word 'black' is taboo or offensive. All too often people shy away from discussions concerning oppression and prejudice because they feel uncomfortable and unnerved. Now, however, on a local, national and global level, there is growing recognition that this can no longer be the case. Through this movement we have all been reminded of the necessity to speak out against injustice and listen to previously unheard calls.

We are living in unprecedented times and we must, in such pivotal moments, reflect on our worldview and everyday practices in their social contexts. This reflection can only occur through candid and open conversations. Recently we have been involved in such conversations with people including close friends and university academics. These have caused us to reflect deeply on the power of narrative, of sharing rarely spoken stories with people who stand in different power relations to us. We have, for example, had the experience of explaining to friends feeling apprehensive and fearful about a group holiday in a notoriously racist country chosen by the group. Equally difficult was telling an old school principal about microaggressions experienced during secondary school and the lack of diversity provided in the school curriculum.

When speaking with university lecturers, we have explained the importance of creating an environment made genuinely inclusive through financial provision, mentoring and events targeted at black students. Each of these audiences was keen to hear black people's experiences and provided spaces for the sharing of such stories. Conversations like these, where black voices are given space and listened to with humility and respect, can be powerful and bridge social differences. It is, however, important to remember that it takes work, courage and re-engagement with pain to tell insider stories of black experience while recognizing how difficult it is for listeners to hear. Change is long overdue, and it will only come through ongoing commitments to speak and to listen across differences.

Forging new alliances

The scrutiny of racism that BLM has produced raises questions of commonalities and differences in experiences of racism across groups. One consequence is that Asian people have found themselves remembering the pain of being subjected to implicit and overt racism. One example is learning that others thought there was something inherently wrong with darker skin through being asked at age five, 'why is your skin black?' before having any concept of race, ethnicity or skin colour.

Part of the complexity ingrained in everyday racist practices is that it is not simply between those who are white and those who are 'other'. Instead, South Asian children learn early that not only is there a great deal of racism and casteism towards South Asians, but also within their own South Asian communities. Comments from elders range from complaints of becoming too tanned in the summer, and darker skin ruining marriage prospects for young girls, to offhand remarks about how beautiful a baby is for no other reason than their fair complexion. This is, arguably, as destructive

as external racism since it tears South Asians apart from the inside. This colourism is now recognized to be one face of racism that has gained strong footholds because of histories of enslavement and colonialism. It highlights the importance of recognizing what Avtar Brah (1996), in the 1990s, called 'differential racisms'.

Increasingly, young British Asians are fighting against these ideologies through not only embracing their own dark skin, but also breaking down the stereotypes and stigma associated with darker complexion for both Asians and black people. During the BLM movement over the past few months, people of all castes and creeds have come together to fight for an end to racial injustice. Many young South Asians have broadcast testimonies to show the world through various social media platforms their opposition to the tradition of South Asian colourism.

The BLM movement has helped open intergenerational conversations about 'race' among South Asians. The harsh reality is that we live in a culture which has favoured white people in terms of education, job opportunities and even social perceptions for centuries. In the UK where 3% of the population is black, 2.3% is Indian and 1.9% is Pakistani, alliances across racialized minorities are more crucial than ever. Such alliances, advocated by some since the 1970s (Alleyne, 2007), require a shift away from colourism, and towards cohesion. There is still a long way to go, but the fact that these conversations are even being had in households across the country is enormously hopeful.

Decolonizing the nation

On 7 June 2020, as part of a BLM protest in Bristol, the statue of Edward Colston was torn down from its plinth by a crowd of passionate activists. The body of the bronze statue was smeared in red paint representing the blood of slaves murdered under Colston's authority and dragged through the city in disgrace. A corpse representing slavery was thrown defiantly into the river Avon. Colston's statue had been a site of controversy in the city for years, having stood in Bristol city centre for over a century, despite frequent calls for its removal.

The inescapable realities of colonialism and slavery are deeply entrenched in the history of the UK and Bristol, as in many other settlements in the country and around the globe. Bristol is a city whose fame and affluence were built on the notorious slave trade.

We hope the toppling of the Colston monument symbolises a tipping point towards real transformations. Intensified by the fury and urgency generated by the BLM movement, antiquated racist beliefs and attitudes are being challenged and are perhaps changing. Acts of decolonization are taking place across the country, including the denaming of the Pearson building at University College London, the Rhodes Must Fall campaign at Oxford University and the numerous petitions circulating on the subject of decolonizing the national curriculum and the need to teach black history at schools in the UK.

These arguably long overdue acts of decolonization make an important start. However, we need to ensure that there will be more than tokenistic gestures in the examination of the role that British organizations played in the slave trade and the systemic racism that persists in these institutions.

Artist Kara Walker highlighted the need for this scrutiny in her testimony to the transatlantic slave trade *Fons Americanus*, a subversive allusion to the Victoria Memorial fountain (Tate, n.d.). Her monumental artwork, displayed in the Tate Modern Turbine Hall, aspired to bring the past back to the present and confront an often-

misremembered history of colonialism, empire and imperialism, as part of an ongoing analysis of historical narratives in the UK.

Just as water is a key theme through *Fons Americanus*, it was a symbolic act to drown Colston's statue in water since many slaves brought over from West Africa by the Royal African Company, under his command, perished in the Atlantic Ocean.

On 15 July 2020, artist Marc Quinn erected a temporary statue of BLM activist Jen Reid on Colston's plinth titled *A Surge of Power*. This temporary installation of a black woman where Colston had been memorialized was intended to encourage and advance a necessary, yet uncomfortable, conversation about racism in the UK. It was designed to take forward the campaign towards justice and equality. Unfortunately, due to a lack of formal permission, the statue remained on the plinth for a too-brief 24 hours before its removal. It did, however, ignite a debate on the future of the plinth and the possibility of a statue acknowledging the pain and suffering of black lives in the UK. The Bristol mayor, Marvin Rees, stated that it is up to the people of Bristol to determine the fate of the plinth.

One thought-provoking possibility which has emerged from this debate is the option of the plinth remaining empty, thus highlighting what is no longer there. The aim would be to prompt individuals to investigate the history of Bristol and the slave trade. However, others have suggested that this would, once again, render black lives invisible.

The empty plinth has presented both a metaphorical and physical platform for the BLM movement. In this way, BLM has contributed to making it undeniable that the world needs to wake up to the true history of our supposedly 'great' countries.

A socially just future?

All the examples above point to the conclusion that complexity, not knee-jerk reactions, is central to real social change. Black Lives Matter has already made an unprecedented statement in the fight for social justice. For any change to be sustained and taken forward, we need the difficult conversations that have started piecemeal in homes and institutions to continue. As students and faculty, we are committed to the continuation of such conversations in universities and for action towards real change to be identified and supported socially and economically. This requires a thorough examination of the power relations structured into universities and commitment to change in admissions policies, the curriculum, staffing, the student body and the value added to different ethnic groups in terms of the degrees awarded.

Universities need to show that they are shifting their practices away from the maintenance of the status quo and will reward good practices and censure poor practices. Anything less would suggest that universities are interested only in short-term 'virtue signalling' while their practices continue to emphasise that only some lives matter.

Notes on the contributors

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