

“Why is it My Problem if They Don’t Take Part?” The (non)role of white academics in decolonising the law school

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The title of this paper is based on a question we were asked by a white colleague at a staff development session we were delivering. It is our problem because we are implicated in creating and perpetuating a colonized law curriculum. The focus of this paper is on what the role of white academics is in decolonising the law school; we contend that we cannot decolonise the curriculum if we do not first decolonise ourselves. This paper concurs with Freire’s position that the oppressor cannot achieve liberation, this is a role solely for the oppressed. The role of decolonised white academics is, we argue, to work within their own communities to ensure the unconditional surrender of power to oppressed Black communities. If this is not achieved, then an insurgent pedagogy where power is taken would be a just course of action.

Keywords: decolonization; race; pedagogy

Introduction: “Why is it My Problem if They Don’t Take Part?”

This paper is based on our understanding of the current state of the educational process in the United Kingdom, its effect on Black student engagement, the urgency of need to have education as the exercise of liberation and the (non)role of White academics on this journey.

We have been delivering staff development sessions at the University of Northampton that focus on student’s Black identities and the curriculum, the quote that is the title of this article is a direct quote from a participant in one of our sessions. The quote was chosen because it represents an attitude that is common to many of our colleagues, both white and of colour, who seem to subscribe to the view that Higher Education (HE) either is or should be a colour-blind meritocracy where issues of engagement, retention, progression and achievement must necessarily be about merit and not the colour of one’s skin. This, we argue, is an attitude that comes from a colonisation of so much of our view of the world and our students that we ourselves have become colonised.

There have been calls in recent years to ‘decolonise the curriculum’ in HE mostly because the curriculum is not reflective of the diverse communities HE institutions serve in modern Britain. While this change is long overdue, the magnitude of what is required from the HE sector does not seem to be understood. Firstly, in order to ‘decolonise the curriculum’, there has to be a general acceptance that the curriculum is colonised and has been for a long-time. Secondly, there must be a clear understanding of what ‘colonisation’ means in the context of HE. Thirdly, academics and those who work within the HE environment have to recognise and accept their implicit role with creating and perpetuating this colonisation. Finally, we argue that the process of decolonisation must therefore, necessarily, involve an explicit exercise of the decolonising of ourselves because self-decolonisation is a necessary foundation for collective decolonisation.

Whilst colonisation and Whiteness are interrelated the connection is not necessary. People of colour are as susceptible to colonisation and peddling the myths that perpetuate colonisation as their white counterparts. It is however true that the roles of those who have directly experienced racial oppression is different from the roles of those who have not and that White academics must adopt a very different position when decolonising the curriculum than their colleagues of colour. The focus of this paper is on the role that white power-holders can have in remedying the institutional racism that is endemic within many, if not all of society’s structures including HE.

The marketisation of education within the UK has led to a perception of students as passive consumers.¹ Very little consideration is given to the students’ lived experiences, perspectives or how the content of what is being taught applies to them. As we embrace the employability agenda Marx’s claim that education prepares students to become cogs in the wheel of

¹ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (1994, Routledge), chapter 5

capitalism seems truer than ever. Students seem to accept this unquestioningly because right from their reception years they have been conditioned to think that their perspectives and voices are irrelevant to their education. It therefore comes as no surprise that student engagement, particularly as it relates to Black students suffers. Considering the advances in the arts, sciences and technology over the last century, the way we teach and the power dynamics between teacher and student appears to be almost static: the ‘sage on the stage’ dispensing her wisdom to the humble yet hungry subjects (students) in the hope that her students will remember and be able to regurgitate this inauthentic knowledge at a later date.² This banking model of knowledge³ is a form of colonization and as colonization destroyed the cultural identities of the colonized, the legacies of which live on, so also our colonized way of learning and teaching destroys our student’s identities as active participants in their educational journeys, the ripple effects of which are felt in our classrooms. According to Paulo Freire: “It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors.”⁴ This creates a dichotomy both about the role of the oppressor, who has power but lacks the ability to change the power-relationship, and the oppressed who has the ability but not the power. As with all relational power dynamics, it is unusual for power holders to relinquish the power they wield unless there is something to be gained by so doing. However, in order to create a decolonized curriculum, it is imperative that all powerholders recognize and accept the full effect of colonization on the current identities of students of colour as something both real and that they can never fully understand. They must relinquish power unconditionally, without understanding how it will be wielded, conscious that this may undermine the privilege that gave them this power in the first place. Attempting to gift decolonization to our students is as patronizing as colonization itself and because it comes

² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2nd Revised Edn., 1996, Penguin), p.71

³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2nd Revised Edn., 1996, Penguin), chapter 2

⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2nd Revised Edn., 1996, Penguin), p.56

from a place where full knowledge is impossible, is doomed to fail. Similarly, relinquishing power with conditions, for carefully defined purposes is only ever going to be self-serving. Ultimately any project where power is not relinquished will only be an example of what David Bell describes as “interest convergence”; when giving some benefit to the oppressed is in the interest of the oppressors, the TEF metrics for BAME attainment being an obvious example.

Decolonizing the curriculum must be a shared project, but it must be led by our students of colour. We as academics become guides who recognize the value of each individual student voice and our classrooms become communities where our students, as active participants in their educational journeys, feel a responsibility to contribute, thereby making education the exercise of liberation for both students and academics. Within this project, the role including the passivity of white power-holders is a complex one which this paper explores.

To address the over-arching question of our assertion on self-decolonisation we need to address the following five questions:

1. What is **colonisation**?
2. How is the **curriculum** colonised?
3. How am **I** colonised?
4. How do we decolonise ourselves?
5. Why is self-decolonisation necessary to decolonise the curriculum?

However, first it is necessary to examine and contextualise the assertion.

The conversation about the effect colonisation still has on Black people and the way they are perceived is one our society has yet to confront and one that needs to be addressed. The ongoing impact of colonisation controls the identity of the colonised and their descendants

and it is so far-reaching that those who have made the United Kingdom their home, either as first or subsequent generation immigrants, are met with persistent reminders that they were ‘othered’ as barbaric to allow for a narrative where white saviours first discovered and then civilised them. According to Afua Hirsch⁵, even liberal progressives expect gratitude from the minorities they have supported. Being Black and British means adopting an identity but never being able to adopt the privilege that is an integral part of white identities.

Decolonisation must therefore be an intentional project beyond the mere passing of time as such, it must be Black led and white power holders need to be complicit in its realisation if it is to be achieved peacefully.

What is colonisation?

British society is one steeped in institutional legacies of slavery and oppression and since these legacies have yet to be properly acknowledged and addressed the identity of Black people within this society is in limbo: “Since, in British thinking, all black people are immigrants and some are illegal, the only thing to do is suspect the lot.”⁶ For some, this leads to searching for an identity when they are disconnected from a culture that they did not grow up in. They are not fully accepted into the ‘hostile environment’ where those who appear non-white are told to ‘go home’, and the contributions of people of colour are not fully recognised or are written out of history: “traces of black life have been removed from the British past to ensure that blacks are not part of British future”.⁷ David Olusoga describes his experiences of growing up in England as: “My right, not just to regard myself as a British citizen, but even to be in Britain seemed contested.”⁸

⁵ Afua Hirsch, *BRIT(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* (2018, Vintage)

⁶ Anon., ‘Background – British racism’, *Race and Class* (Autumn 1981/Winter 1982) XXIII/2-13, pp.243-4

⁷ John Solomon et al., ‘The organic crisis of British capitalism and race: the experience of the seventies’ in Centre for Contemporary Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in Seventies Britain* (1982, Hutchinson), p.32

⁸ David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (2017, Pan Books), p.xv

Colonisation is not, at least in this context, about removing flags or granting independence. It is about the historical and contemporary issues that have led to the circumstances in which people of colour in Britain live within a colonised environment. It is a system that privileges one ideology over another and adopts that ideology as if it is unassailable fact. The ideology becomes described variously as ‘British values’, ‘justice’, ‘fairness’ or even ‘universal truth’ and is ascribed a status which means to challenge it is ‘unpatriotic’, ‘political correctness gone mad’, and an act of ‘treachery’. The worst of these ‘traitors’ compound their guilt by not being white and therefore are viewed as having only a tangential relationship with Britishness which they are seen to have rejected in an act of gross ingratitude towards their ‘hosts’.

The historic roots of this colonisation can be traced back to the epistemology and ontology of the enlightenment which privileged rationality and elevated one epistemological and ontological model of theoretical knowledge to a position of primacy. Described as “the century of philosophy *par excellence*”,⁹ philosophy meaning literally the love of knowledge, has dominated subsequent debates about empiricism. Since the late 1940s theorists from differing disciplines have questioned this primacy, arguing that different forms of knowledge deserve greater recognition: “Over the past 50 years or so various practice disciplines have entered the fray, challenging the supposed superiority of theoretical knowledge, promoting instead the value of practical, tacit and experiential forms of knowing.”¹⁰ However, it is not only the relative values of different forms of knowledge that leads to the greatest inequalities, it is also the devaluing of those forms of knowledge that does.

⁹ D’Alembert cited in William Bristow, ‘Enlightenment’ in Edward N. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition) [online] Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/enlightenment/> [accessed 7 March 2017]

¹⁰ Mike Nolan et al., ‘Introduction: what counts as knowledge, whose knowledge counts? Towards authentic participatory enquiry’ in Mike Nolan, *User Participation in Health and Social Care Research* (2007, OUP) 1-13, 7

The way history is told is in part to blame for this one-sided concept of ‘knowing’. For instance, the perspective from which Britain’s involvement in the scramble for Africa is told in the history books and taught in schools fails to consider the impact partitioning the African continent to suit European imperialist agendas had on the culture and traditions of the African peoples the world over as well as its legacy on their present lived experiences. The description of African peoples as sub-human by seminal philosophers such as David Hume and Immanuel Kant as well as their display at ethnological expositions highlights the history of subjugation and impassivity in relation to Black people in Britain. If our history books fail to depict historical facts in their full gore and glory, it comes as no surprise that our enlightenment processes are skewed. It is clear that Kant and his contemporaries were obsessed with finding a scientific explanation for the causes of black skin, however their obsession was the catalyst for racist persuasions on human diversity; espousing the idea of white supremacy. It is paradoxical that these Enlightenment thinkers also adopted the view that there is a universal desire for true enlightenment, freedom and equality. While this may be true, history shows that equality was conceived as equality among people presumed in advance to be equal, hence the justification to treat as unequal those who didn’t fit within that confined paradigm. The academy has unquestioningly accepted this legacy of equality and reinforces it in their learning and teaching strategies.

Critical Race Pedagogy (CRP) holds that the American education system has historically taught Black Americans about respecting another culture, but not their own.¹¹ Woodson was writing in 1933 and both Eugene Butchart¹² and James Anderson¹³ have argued, much later, that this was part of a system of post-abolition emancipation and cites this as the main reason

¹¹ C.G. Woodson, *The miseducation of the Negro* (1993, Africa World Press)

¹² Roger Eugene Butchart, *Educating for Freedom: Northern Whites and the Origins of Black Education in the South 1862-1875* (1976, Ph.D thesis, State University of New York at Binghamton, Department of History)

¹³ James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (1988, The University of North Carolina Press)

that free education for Black Americans appeared before other welfare provisions. History, and the teaching of history, has created a dominant ideology which privileges whiteness and the ontological and epistemological preferences of the enlightenment persist as values in modern Britain which serve to justify the idea that HE is a colour-blind meritocracy. The historical debates persist in the contemporary through the #BlackLivesMatter and Rhodes Must Fall movements but remain unresolved.

How is the curriculum colonised?

As academics we make political decisions in the perspectives that we present to our students, the reading lists we ascribe to our modules and the way we assess our students. We talk about treating our students equally, but we still have huge retention, progression and attainment gaps in favour of white students.

The dominant ideology behind educational policy persists as one of colour-blind meritocracy. Meritocracy is a concept about how desert should be calculated¹⁴ and a pure meritocracy requires that benefits are accrued in a just way, irrespective of, for example, race or gender from which we may benefit.¹⁵ Meritocracy has become part of the common lexicon after its invention by Michael Young in his satirical monograph *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. The basis for merit is expressed by the simple equation: "I.Q. + effort = merit".¹⁶ The logical conclusion of this argument is of course that those who have done less well are also deserving of their desert because of their lack of merit.¹⁷

¹⁴ Owen McLeod, 'Contemporary Interpretations of Desert: Introduction' In Louis P. Pojman and Owen McLeod (eds) *What Do We Deserve: A Reader on Justice and Desert* (1998, OUP) 61-69, pp.61-62; Louis P. Pojman, *Justice* (2006, Pearson), p.21; George Sher, *Desert* (1987, Princeton University Press), p.7

¹⁵ Peter Celello, 'Desert' in James Fieser and Bradley Dowden, *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* [online] available at: <https://www.iep.utm.edu/desert/> [accessed 7 June 2019]

¹⁶ Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (2nd Edn., 2017, Routledge), p.xiii

¹⁷ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (1972, Clarendon Press)

The sleight of hand that shifted meritocracy from satire to the central plank of the widening participation agenda and the educational policy of all governments from New Labour onwards means that to decry meritocracy is viewed not as mere treachery but as insanity. The term has become almost universally accepted as the benchmark of a developed and just society so much so that there is a plethora of literature investigating whether we achieved meritocracy¹⁸ or whether we in fact can,¹⁹ whilst there is much less published on the more critical question as to whether meritocracy as an ideal is desirable.²⁰ Meritocracy is, according to Allen, something that a nearly just society should aspire to whilst recognising that this is unachievable.²¹

In terms of race, arguing there is a meritocracy leads to claims of colour-blindness, literally not being able to even see racial difference. After the civil rights era many Americans claimed that they “do not see race”²² leading to an attitude described by many theorists as ‘colour-blind racism’. If we have equality of opportunity for *all* and structures which are objective in their treatment of *all*, the argument is progressed that we have the egalitarian basis for a truly meritocratic educational system. However, if we have a system that privileges some whilst oppressing others, and those who benefit from this fail to see it then we risk sustaining structural injustices. Critical theorists argue that the apparently objective rules against which one is measured in a nearly just meritocracy are in fact gendered,

¹⁸ P. Saunders, ‘Might Britain be a Meritocracy?’ (1995) 29 (1) *Sociology* 23-41; R. Breen, ‘Is Northern Ireland an Educational Meritocracy’ (2003) 37 (4) *Sociology* 657-675; R. Breen & J. Goldthorpe, J. ‘Class, Mobility and Merit: The Experience of Two British Cohorts’ (2001) 17 (2) *European Sociological Review* 81-101

¹⁹ J. Goldthorpe, ‘Problems of ‘Meritocracy’ in A. H. Halsey, H. Lauder, P. Brown, & A. S. Wells (Eds.), *Education: Culture, Economy and Society* (1997, OUP) 663-682; J. Goldthorpe, ‘The myth of education-based meritocracy: Why the theory isn’t working’ (2003) 10 (4) *New Economy* 234-239

²⁰ S. Themelis, ‘Meritocracy through education and social mobility in post-war Britain: a critical examination’ (2008) 29 (5) *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 427-438

²¹ Ansgar Allen, ‘Michael Young’s *The Rise of the Meritocracy: A Philosophical Critique*’ (2011) *British Journal of Educational Studies* 59(4) 367-382, p.379

²² T. A. Forman, ‘Color-Blind Racism and Racial Indifference: The Role of Racial Apathy in Facilitating Enduring Inequalities’ in M. Krysan and A. E. Lewis (eds.), *The Changing Terrain of Race and Ethnicity* (2004. Russell Sage Foundation), p.45

racialised, heteronormative and/or ableist; the rules written by straight, white men privilege them and disadvantage others. This is why the formal equality stance of equal treatment has done little to erode the inequalities of outcome we see in pay gaps and educational outcomes.

The students' relationships to learning and knowledge and how they perceive knowledge is shaped by their 'working identity'.²³ According to this theory the roles and behaviours students adopt are racialised and students make unconscious, or even conscious choices as to how they wish to be perceived.²⁴ Carbado and Gulati argue that the working identity that a student has – both how she sees herself and how others see her – impacts upon her experiences of education.²⁵ If she has a working identity that assimilates whiteness and masculinity then her position in relation to learning and knowledge and the power and privilege this gives her are different from if she has a working identity that incorporates Blackness and femininity:

What *counts* as knowledge, the ways in which it is organized, who is empowered to teach it, what counts as an appropriate display of having learned it, and – just as critically – who is allowed to ask and answer all these questions are part and parcel of how dominance and subordination are reproduced and altered in society.²⁶

The meritocratic and colour-blind attitudes discussed above are founded in a view as to what knowledge and learning are which stands in contrast to the views preferred by critical theorists such as Paulo Friere²⁷ that learning and knowledge should be grounded in praxis, specifically a combination of action and reflection. There is a clear disparity between the

²³ Devon W. Carbado and Mitu Gulati, *Acting White?: Rethinking Race in Post-Racial America* (2013, OUP USA), p.1

²⁴ Devon W. Carbado and Mitu Gulati, *Acting White?: Rethinking Race in Post-Racial America* (2013, OUP USA), p.1

²⁵ Devon W. Carbado and Mitu Gulati, *Acting White?: Rethinking Race in Post-Racial America* (2013, OUP USA)

²⁶ Michael W. Apple, 'The Politics of Official Knowledge: Does a National Curriculum Make Sense?' (1993) 95(2) *Teachers College Record* 222-241, p.222

²⁷ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2nd Revised Edn., 1996, Penguin)

views of successive governments that knowledge and learning are instrumental and about the transmission of information and the views of critical educationalists that learning is a co-intentional process that focuses on the creation of new knowledge or new ways of knowing. These different epistemological perspectives necessarily impact upon learners and how they respond to education and see themselves positioned in relation to knowledge. The dominant view of successive governments has been that knowledge is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. The view of critical educationalists can be summarised as viewing education as either empowering or oppressive depending on whether it is used as a tool of oppression or of liberation.²⁸

For critical educationalists education that focuses on the transmission of existing dominant ideologies does not generate what Freire describes as “real knowledge”.²⁹ Real knowledge is gained through a co-dependent process in which the purpose of education is to invent and re-invent knowledge. Freire contrasts dialogical education, which achieves liberation³⁰ and anti-dialogical education which achieves oppression: “Anti-dialogical action explicitly or implicitly aims to preserve, within the social structure, situations which favour [sic] its own agents.”³¹

Freire contrasts dialogical education, which achieves liberation,³² and anti-dialogical education which achieves oppression: “Anti-dialogical action explicitly or implicitly aims to preserve, within the social structure, situations which favour its own agents.”³³ In Chapter 4 he sets out key characteristics of each form of education. “Cultural invasion” is a characteristic of anti-dialogical education which Freire contrasts with “cultural synthesis”, a

²⁸ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2nd Revised Edn., 1996, Penguin), p.56

²⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2nd Revised Edn., 1996, Penguin), chapter 2

³⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2nd Revised Edn., 1996, Penguin), chapter 3

³¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2nd Revised Edn., 1996, Penguin), p.179

³² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2nd Revised Edn., 1996, Penguin), chapter 3

³³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2nd Revised Edn., 1996, Penguin), p.179

characteristic of dialogical education: “Cultural action is always a systematic and deliberate form of action which operates upon the social structure, either with the objective of preserving that structure or of transforming it.”³⁴ Cultural invasion is a process where those in domination impose their view and inhibit the creativity of the oppressed, Freire argues this creates a sense of inferiority which further fuels oppression. Conversely, cultural synthesis involves continuing dialogue between the student and the teacher.³⁵

The answer that HE gives to the questions ‘what counts as learning and knowledge’ and ‘whose perception of knowledge counts’ according to critical educationalists, is that powerful white men’s perceptions of the world count as learning and knowledge and it is the powerful white man’s his perception of what knowledge is valuable that counts. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reflected this in a comment on the content of textbooks, that: “The impression gained is one of the women’s inferiority, her domesticity, her lack of intelligence, ability, sense of adventure or creativity.”³⁶ Women and individuals of colour are either invisible in the teaching materials or their contributions are trivialised.

Critical educationalists further argue that the oppression minorities suffer within education is intentional. That, for example, women’s lived experiences are trivialised by men, including male teachers and peers, is well documented.³⁷ It is contested that the belittling of minority experiences by white male teachers and peers is a form of control: “they [minorities] are not simply the unlucky recipients of prejudice!”³⁸ For critical theorists like Spender the liberal project of widening participation in HE is flawed because the system into which they would

³⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2nd Revised Edn., 1996, Penguin), p.179

³⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2nd Revised Edn., 1996, Penguin), chapter 4

³⁶ OECD, *Women in scientific careers unleashing the potential* (2006, OECD), p.14

³⁷ For example see: Sandra Acker, *Teachers, Gender and Careers* (1984, Falmer); and Becky Fancis and Christine Skelton, *Reassessing Gender and Achievement: Questioning Key Debates* (2005, Routledge)

³⁸ Shammaas Gul Khattak, ‘Feminism in Education: Historical and Contemporary Issues of Gender Inequality in Higher Education’ (2011) 5 (1-2) *Occasional Papers in Education and Lifelong Learning: An International Journal* 67-81, p.74

be entering replicates and reinforces oppression because HE: “ignore[s] the distribution of power in society and the academic world, and the way in which males have appropriated and defended that power.”³⁹ CRP charges the institutions and structures within which they operate as being systematically racist. An anti-essentialist approach does not regard this claim as excluding other forms of prejudice. Rather institutions and the society in which they operate can function in a way that privileges certain characteristics, such as race, gender and economic class, over others. Further, lived experiences are more complicated than this, for example a Black woman may experience prejudice because of her race or gender, however these are indistinguishable and the fact of the intersection of these characteristics may in fact be the cause of prejudice.

The purpose of education, Freire argues, is not to understand the circumstances that cause oppression but to change them so that the student can achieve liberation. The banking model of education is oppressive and the end achieved is domination. Freire proposes instead a model of education for liberation.⁴⁰

College campuses in the US are described as ‘white spaces’⁴¹ and similar charges have been made of HE institutions in the UK which Heidi Mirza characterises as: “complex entrenched institutionalised gendered and classed racial discrimination in British universities”.⁴² The predominant belief among white Americans is that Black people are doing as well as whites,

³⁹ Dale Spender, *Invisible Women: The Schooling Scandal* (1982, Routledge), p.110

⁴⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2nd Revised Edn., 1996, Penguin), chapter 2

⁴¹ J. R. Feagin, H. Vera, and N. Imani, *The Agony of Education: Black Students at White Colleges and Universities* (1996, Routledge); P. Kivel, ‘The Culture of Power’ in F. W. Hale Jr. (ed.), *What Makes Racial Diversity Work in Higher Education: Academic Leaders Present Successful Policies and Strategies* (2004, Stylus); N. Purwar, ‘Fish in or out of Water: A Theoretical Framework for Race and the Space of Academia’ in I. Law, D. Phillips, and L. Turney (eds.), *Institutional Racism in Higher Education* (2004, Trentham Books)

⁴² Heidi Safia Mirza, ‘Racism in Higher Education: ‘What Then, Can Be Done?’ in Jason Arday and Heidi Safia Mirza (eds), *Dismantling Race in Higher Education. Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy* (2018, Palgrave Macmillan) 3-23, p.4

and any differences in outcome are explained by merit, choices, or sometimes social class.⁴³ There are four beliefs that are ascribed to what is described as colour-blind racism,⁴⁴ the first is that society is meritocratic, the second that for most race is something they pay little or no attention to, thirdly that therefore any patterns of inequalities of outcomes for certain racial groups must be because of individual desert or collective cultural reasons, and fourthly that there is therefore no need to act to address the causes of inequalities of outcome.

This colour-blind attitude steeped in a belief that our society is close to being a meritocracy could be argued to underpin British educational policy. If this is true then it may also be the case that HE institutions and those who teach and learn within them have bought into the ideology of colour-blind meritocracy.

Our students have been exposed to an ideology of education that is grounded in both meritocracy and colour-blind racism and “[a]s a result of this belief system, the true structural, institutional, and societal causes of inequity go unnoticed, and efforts to address these causes are viewed as illegitimate and unnecessary”.⁴⁵

The educational institutions that these students will have attended are likely to have been influenced by government policy. Stage and Manning map six presumptions that educational institutions make when working with students of colour which reflect meritocratic and colour-blind attitudes.⁴⁶ Firstly, it is students of colour that are expected to change to fit the dominant white, Eurocentric culture and not vice-versa. Secondly, racial diversity and

⁴³ T. A. Forman, ‘Color-Blind Racism and Racial Indifference: The Role of Racial Apathy in Facilitating Enduring Inequalities’ in M. Krysan and A. E. Lewis (eds.), *The Changing Terrain of Race and Ethnicity* (2004. Russell Sage Foundation)

⁴⁴ T. A. Forman, ‘Color-Blind Racism and Racial Indifference: The Role of Racial Apathy in Facilitating Enduring Inequalities’ in M. Krysan and A. E. Lewis (eds.), *The Changing Terrain of Race and Ethnicity* (2004. Russell Sage Foundation)

⁴⁵ Robert D. Reason and Nancy J. Evans, ‘The Complicated Realities of Whiteness: From Color Blind to Racially Cognizant’ (Winter 2007) 120 *New Directions for Student Services* 67-75, p.69

⁴⁶ Frances K. Stage, and Kathleen Manning, (eds.) *Enhancing the Multicultural Campus Environment: A Cultural Brokering Approach: New Directions for Student Services, no. 60. (J-B SS Single Issue Student Services)* (1992 Jossey-Bass)

inclusion is made the responsibility of staff or students of colour. Thirdly, students of colour are expected to share the interests of other students and subjected to criticism when they do not participate or try to organise their own, race-specific groups. Fourthly, students of colour are criticised for their failure to engage with study skills or support sessions, being labelled as lazy or ungrateful. The assumption that underpins this attitude is claimed to be that all students of colour need remedial support. Fifth, the institution adopts the colour-blind stance of offering equal opportunities for all. Finally, the white culture of the institution is assumed to be functioning properly and not in need of any change.

How am I colonised?

We conclude in this paper that, as academics, it is impossible to decolonise the curriculum if we don't first decolonise ourselves. Self-decolonisation is the necessary foundation for collective decolonisation. In order to access the practicality of decolonising a curriculum, over the past year we've listened to the lived experiences of Black students and academics and related these counter-narratives back to academics through developmental workshops. This is a complex activity as many Black people are not fully aware of the oppression they have suffered or of how to articulate this to an audience that has not shared in their lived experience. Giving someone a voice without impacting upon what they say is a very difficult task and for many Black people, it is too easy to fall into parroting the myth they are expected to tell of egalitarianism, meritocracy, and self-blame. Further, the justifiable anger that is sometimes part of the counter-narrative can antagonise the listener who may already be minded to belittle these experiences. The identities of Black British people are in fact difficult for anyone to comprehend, they have both a Black identity which is necessarily imbued with historic injustices, although this relates to a geographic space they may have never called home, and a British identity which is viewed with suspicion, as somehow fraudulent because Britishness and whiteness are perceived as necessarily related.

I (redacted for review purposes), as a Black woman from Nigeria, found it difficult to understand the plight of Black British students for a number of reasons, which we find are typical of Black people from former colonies. Firstly, British education was my first encounter of being treated as intellectually inferior based on skin colour, I still find this bizarre. In Nigeria I was a member of the dominant racial group so whilst the subject-matter of my education I now know to be problematic, I never felt unable to participate in learning activities. Secondly, I thought Black British students had the advantage of ‘knowing the ropes’ as they unlike me, knew the system. I was moving to a new country so already felt like an outsider, they were home students. I also thought that they had access to funding and opportunities that I had only dreamed of, so my initial perception of the so-called BME attainment gap was that the students who were not doing well were simply lazy; making excuses; had too much choice; or were lacking in aspiration. I felt that if I was able to work hard and succeed despite the obstacles I faced, ‘they’ had no excuse. This myth of meritocracy is perhaps the greatest threat to decolonisation. It assumes that the playing field is level and that hard work guarantees success.

I (redacted for review purposes), as a white British man, went from an all-white secondary school to a predominantly white and very middle-class university in the mid-90s. People of colour were not part of my educational experience so the seeds of otherness and even exoticism were already sown. As the first person in my family to go away to university I was allowed to feel like educational opportunities were now more widely available and that once we had broken in the meritocratic HE system would give us social mobility. During the 1990s the British National Party (BNP) were active in deprived areas and this exasperated the ‘town and gown’ divide – they perceived us in our ivory towers and we perceived them as the uneducated racists - racism was about marching and painting a St. George’s flag on the roof-tiles far removed from the post-racist world which I felt I inhabited. To acknowledge that my

attainment was as much to do with my white male privilege as it was to do with my academic ability and effort would have been to distance myself from what I believed were my achievements. As an early career lecturer, I started to encounter students of colour but I perceived no difference between them and their peers, even buying into the myth that their over-representation in academic misconduct hearings was due to some cultural predilection for parroting as a form of respect. It was not until I was researching for my PhD that I realised my data showed that there was a disconnect between what I was observing in my students, which was constant micro-aggressions, and less often aggressions, and how students, both the oppressed and oppressors, described the same in interviews as confidence, preparedness and intelligence that it slowly started to dawn on me that our students of colour were being unfairly disadvantaged and that we were all ignoring it. Since then I have gone through stages of patronising those I had previously oppressed – another form of oppression, thinking that toolkits and checklists provided meaningful solutions, to my current position that can perhaps be best described as one of realising I am part of a problem but that I am unsure as to what the answer is.

How do we decolonise ourselves?

My (redacted for review purposes) perspective changed when I read the history of Black people in Britain, coupled with the historical narrative parroted in my country's history books that we, as Black people, were the problem – we were told, and believed, that but for the British and their 'White Jesus', we'd still be savages living in huts. I had to re-educate myself to open my eyes to the reality of my own history. I had been through the same education system as most Afro-Caribbean's and had been taught about how the white man had first discovered and then civilised my homeland, as if it did not exist in a meaningful way until he noticed it.

The enlightenment was presented as the next stage of the development from the perceived savagery of my ancestors. Everything we had done and were doing was swept aside in order to be replaced by something that was seen to be the only way; to cling to our own traditions was backward and ignorant. We were supposed to be grateful for this gift of being civilised and in the most part we were. As CRP argues State controlled education is popular because it is such an effective tool of emancipation – who is going to seek liberation if they are constantly told that they are not oppressed? I was raised as a Christian, told that I was created in the image of God. A God who when he took human form did not look like me, in fact the Church told us that the snow-white skin of Jesus and his mother were a sign of their purity. White Jesus offered salvation but only if we quietly accepted our positions in this life, ready to be rewarded for our suffering in the next. One of the sources of my anger as I came to realise how colonised I had become was that this was a complete mis-representation of the religious traditions on which these views claimed to be based, Jesus' whiteness is not biblical but an intentional construct of subsequent white institutions. White Jesus had been weaponised from the crusades onwards.

I started to learn what CRT calls anti-histories, grateful that the internet made material I was never given access to at school available to me. America seems both ahead and behind the UK in addressing race in HE, predominantly Black colleges are world-leading in progressive action whilst many predominantly white institutions appear to be wilfully dragging their heels. This, coupled with the boon in popular literature written on identity, has meant that there has been an explosion in material available to someone who wishes to seek alternative narratives as I did. Historically, feminists have been feared by men and some women, because of the threat that equality might diminish the advantages men have enjoyed and the same is now true as the consciousness of people of colour is rising. In the same way that men became obsessed about what feminism said about them, labelling feminists as man-haters,

many white people have looked at progressive movements like the #BlackLivesMatter movement and asked what it says about them. The reality is that the conversations are about women or people of colour respectively, they say nothing about white men, which may in itself create resentment from those used to being centre stage.

I got angry. Really angry. I could not talk to white people, I either avoided my partner, a white man, or actively sought an argument. How could all these white people be carrying on like nothing had happened whilst enjoying the benefits of enslaving my ancestors like animals? After a fortnight (and without physically harming my partner) I realised that I needed to channel this anger if it was to do anything other than harm me. Since then I have read, and read as much as I can, avidly consuming this new perspective. I have worked in HE on BME focused projects, given conference papers, co-written this article and taken every opportunity to generate positive change. The slow progress, and regular backward steps, reignite a visceral anger that I struggle to check. As a person of colour I can contribute to sorting my side of things but there is a role for the other side, those who created and perpetuate this state of affairs.

My (redacted for review purposes) journey of decolonisation has been a stumbling of mess. I, like many white people brought up to not mention colour, struggled to find the words to have the conversation. I now know that we need safe spaces perhaps as much as people of colour do in which we can ask what we should say and, most importantly, listen. The academy is full of well-meaning people in positions of power convening meetings of various ilk's to bring people together to discuss issues of race, only for white people to dominate the conversation and subject people of colour to the same micro-aggressions they are too used to. I was one of these people. I knew best. I was always passionate about pedagogy and I looked to L&T for answers, still believing that I could ride in as a white saviour and make things better. I still struggle to listen. I am grateful to Joel Modiri for telling me in no

uncertain terms that the Black community did not need whites to sit with them, if we wanted to be allies we should work in our own communities. These are the communities that created and now perpetuate the *status quo* which is one of oppression.

Why is self-decolonisation necessary to decolonise the curriculum?

Self-decolonisation is necessary because otherwise, we risk falling into the trap of colonizing in a different guise, that of white saviours. These guises can be crudely categorized as the patronizing liberal, the L&T expert, and the colour-blind.

In his introduction to the thirtieth anniversary edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Donaldo Macedo talks of “facile liberals and pseudocritical educators”⁴⁷ with whom I (Nick), in my earlier career, belonged. The patronizing liberal has the pretence of an understanding of the struggle of people of colour in a manner that can best be described as sloganizing. By flag waving with the anti-racist movement a feeling of understanding is gained that has the real risk of turning into paternalism. Freire is often misinterpreted as presenting a radical opinion on the methods of teaching rather than of the philosophical construct of the entire educational system. Those who perceive themselves as liberal, or even radical, therefore risk falling into the trap of becoming paternalistic. Whilst the effort to look after and do the best for our students should in no way be diminished the risk that this morphs into speaking for them is very real and the project of giving a voice becomes the project of speaking for. Hirsch in her writing characterises this as having an expectation of gratitude for their support.⁴⁸

There is a further risk, characterized by the L&T expert, that a solution based in teaching methodology can solve all ills. Active, as opposed to didactic, approaches to learning and

⁴⁷ In, Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2nd Revised Edn., 1996, Penguin), p.13

⁴⁸ Afua Hirsch, *BRIT(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* (2018, Vintage), chapter 4

teaching clearly present more opportunities for empowerment but this has in some circles been misinterpreted into edicts for learning and teaching practice that seek change without realizing the deep-seated nature of colonialization. In our staff development work we have been asked for toolkits, take-aways, and sessions that can achieve the project of decolonization in two-hours. We have been told that staff will not do the reading but if we can give them a quick-fix in a staff-development workshop that would be great. In an industry which is based on exposure to thought and that has advanced some of the worst excesses of colonialism the request that the effort is made by people of colour to provide a simple solution to the majority is at best problematic. Toolkits and away days are not going to solve the endemic problems of generations but the almost desperate desire for quick fixes in the post-TEF era has neither the will nor the capacity to recognize this. This is apparent in the lack-luster efforts to pay lip-service to reducing progression, retention and attainment gaps when completing the self-audit for TEF. At our own institution the small amount of funding for work on these areas was axed once the reports necessary for the TEF had been drafted.

The colour-blind are a type of alleged anti-racist that exasperates rather than diminishes the issues. It is primarily white people who claim not to see colour, refusing to acknowledge their own privilege and the oppression on which this is built. As race is an important aspect of the identity of many of us, refusing to see race is in reality the decision not to see to people of colour. I ('Teleola) feel that when people claim not to see race they are choosing not to see me as a Black woman. This necessarily leads to not seeing the true issues and instead ascribing issues of race to other attributes. The belief is that Black people are doing as well as whites, and any differences in outcome are explained by merit, choices, or sometimes

social class.⁴⁹ There are four beliefs that are ascribed to what is described as colour-blind racism,⁵⁰ the first is that society is meritocratic, the second that for most race is something they pay little or no attention to, thirdly that therefore any patterns of inequalities of outcomes for certain racial groups must be because of individual desert or collective cultural reasons, and fourthly that there is no therefore no need to act to address the causes of inequalities of outcome. This leads to a claim of objectivity and a belief that equality is about treating everyone in the same way without seeing that people start from very different places and that the enlightenment values that are claimed to be objective are in fact gendered and racialised in favour of white men.

Conclusion

We are in a situation where the power to change things for the better rests with white powerholders and the ability to action that change rests with the oppressed. The space for action therefore must necessarily be at the intersection of these two groups - unless power is going to be taken by force. The real and present danger is that this is the same space in which previous action has occurred, where white power-holders have, under the guise of reducing inequalities, in fact been self-serving, which, as noted above, Bell describes as “interest convergence.” White power-holders cannot work from within Black communities, this would itself be a form of colonization. White people have plenty of problems within their own communities which they could usefully work to address and this is where their solidarity is best expressed. Ultimately the role of white people must be to work within their own communities to create the circumstances in which white power-holders relinquish at least

⁴⁹ T. A. Forman, ‘Color-Blind Racism and Racial Indifference: The Role of Racial Apathy in Facilitating Enduring Inequalities’ in M. Krysan and A. E. Lewis (eds.), *The Changing Terrain of Race and Ethnicity* (2004. Russell Sage Foundation)

⁵⁰ T. A. Forman, ‘Color-Blind Racism and Racial Indifference: The Role of Racial Apathy in Facilitating Enduring Inequalities’ in M. Krysan and A. E. Lewis (eds.), *The Changing Terrain of Race and Ethnicity* (2004. Russell Sage Foundation)

some of their power to those they have oppressed, unconditionally and with the full realization that this will damage their own short-term interests. If people of colour are not given the power to remedy historic injustices and continuing oppression then the only realistic option is an insurgent pedagogy in which they take the power for themselves and if this happens those who are white and decolonized can do little more stand aside and wish them luck.