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### **Why Black Studies Matters**

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Black scholars and scholarship are marginalised in British academia. The lack of jobs and opportunities has led to an exodus of Black British academics to the United States,<sup>1</sup> where there is a tradition of Black Studies that has produced a vibrant academic presence of African Americans. In order to redress the chronic lack of representation of the Black population in British academia (for example only 50 out of 14,000 professors are Black in the UK)<sup>2</sup> development of British Black Studies is essential. We outline the basis for Black Studies in Britain and its vital importance.

### **The importance of Blackness**

We define Black as people of African Ancestry including those in the Diaspora and on the continent of Africa. In British academia this is a definition that is itself marginalised because a more expansive definition of 'political blackness', used to denote all people who are not White, is the dominant perspective. For advocates of political blackness, Blackness rooted in African ancestry is too restrictive and a source of disunity amongst minority groups who are seen to need to unite together to combat racism.

There is a critical debate between these perspectives, but it is political blackness that is the dominant perspective within the academy. Racism has worked to silence other articulations of Blackness, which is why the chasm exists in the academy. We organised an extremely successful conference, Blackness in Britain, with over 150 delegates in attendance.<sup>3</sup> One of the main reasons for the success of the conference is that we openly branded it as a place for research and discussion based on Blackness. Delegates spoke of how powerful it was to be able to come and talk about their work, without having to justify or explain the position of Blackness.

Blackness has been tarred with the same feather as reactionary approaches to multiculturalism, which reduce and restrict people to cultural categories whilst lacking a politics of resistance. However, such criticism of Blackness is unfair. Blackness is not meant to denote how people should talk, dress, act or think; rather it is the political commitment to resisting the oppression of Black populations. The diversity of the perspectives and approaches that were present at the conference demonstrate the flexibility and complexity of Blackness. Opening up spaces for work on Blackness is not just essential to make the British academy more inclusive, but also to root it in the reality of lived experiences within society.

### **A space for Black academics**

Black Studies is not a subject reserved for Black scholars only. There are number of scholars from a variety of backgrounds who have done important work looking at the Black population. Again, this demonstrates how Blackness is not a closed and exclusive shop. However, one of the principle reasons to support Black Studies is to develop a critical mass of Black academics. The significant presence of African American academics is due in large

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part to the existence of a longstanding Black and African American Studies tradition, which offers a route into academia for a number of Black scholars. Creating a Black Studies tradition in Britain would help to redress the lack of representation of Black staff in the academy.

Academia is so overwhelming White and that it is essential to create Black-led spaces to nurture a new generation of scholars. The importance of this is difficult to explain to those who are used to being in the majority. The normative Whiteness of academia has the effect of isolating Black scholars and scholarship, preventing discussions and ideas from developing. It is no coincidence that we who have organised a Black Studies conference and are planning to develop the agenda are two Black members of staff in the same department. Without the mutual support that this provided it is very unlikely we would be pushing this agenda. As such representation in a department is a rare occurrence, it is no surprise that Black Studies has such a low profile in Britain. However few we are in number, there are Black academics in post in British universities and it is incumbent on those who are fortunate to be employed to create spaces and opportunities for others to follow. It can be difficult because of personal circumstances, temporary contracts and working in isolation to promote Black studies, which is why it is vital we build networks of support.

The poor representation of Black staff in higher education in Britain is an outrage, which has consequences not just for the equality agenda but, more importantly, for knowledge production. If a significant section on the population is locked out of academia then the knowledge produced is itself exclusionary. It is no surprise, then, that the policy agenda and discourse is so endemically discriminatory when the knowledge upon which it is based is so exclusionary. The call for Black Studies does not relate only to the Black population, but is necessary for the whole of society to create inclusive and liberatory knowledge.

### **Interdisciplinary in nature**

Black Studies is an interdisciplinary subject that examines the state and place of the Black population. The subject draws in academics from a range of disciplines, including education studies, criminology, literature, health studies, history, sociology and theology. A strength of the interdisciplinary nature is that Black Studies exposes us to a range of ideas and discussions that can forge unexpected connections that can be built on in the future. Had we not begun to develop a Black Studies agenda and build a network, there are people who we may never have encountered but whose work is relevant to our own and we can now work with going forward. Different disciplines bring with them differing perspectives, which can enrich an area of study.

Interdisciplinarity also presents challenges because the different terms of reference in various subjects can make conceptual agreement difficult. For example, there is often tension between the sociological focus on society and the psychological one on the individual, which can play out in numerous contexts. There can be fierce debate about how to understand an issue and move forward. However, Black Studies is vital because it is directly concerned with documenting, interrogating and improving the conditions in Black

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communities. When applying concepts and theories to complex realities it is usually the case that more than one framework of understanding is needed. Therefore, theoretical agreement is not always necessary and approaching an issue from different perspectives can be empowering in practice.

### **Future developments**

The first step we have taken to building a Black Studies agenda in Britain is organising the Blackness in Britain conference that was held in September 2013. This was always meant to be first stage of a long process of developing critical spaces of Black Studies in Britain. The conference was highly successful and generated a great deal of momentum to push the agenda forward.

We are, therefore, planning two initiatives in the medium term. The first is to put together a working group to ensure that the conference runs again and becomes a regular event in the calendar. The second is that we are coordinating a seminar series that draws on the themes and debates with Black Studies. The aim is to have events in different venues across the country to promote discussions of Black Studies and develop collaborations that can push the agenda forward in Britain. The series will be ongoing and, if you have an event that you would like to include, please get in touch. We are also very keen to expand the series to include events in run by community organisation and in arenas outside of the academy.

### **Conclusion**

People of African ancestry have a long history and tradition in Britain. This history has been hallmarked by a number of struggles for recognition and against discrimination. In the present context of global uncertainty, and the reshaping of the British welfare state, it is essential that we examine the place of the Black population and the challenges that lie ahead in the future. Developing a Black Studies agenda in Britain is essential for both addressing the lack of representation of Black academic staff and also creating inclusive and liberatory knowledge for all.

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### **References:**

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/why-do-we-go-abroad-there-are-no-opportunities-for-us-in-britain/194485.article>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2011/may/27/only-50-black-british-professors>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.newman.ac.uk/news/3621/blackness-in-britain-conference>

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and resistance in the UK', republished in *Archipelagos of Sound: Transnational Caribbeanities, Women and Music* (2012) and 'Black Masculinity and Lover's Rock' in *Black Popular Music in Britain since 1945*, edited by John Stratton and Nabeel Zuberi (forthcoming). She is currently writing a book, *Loving Blackness in Britain*, which explores the deployment of decolonial strategies against contemporary racism in the UK.

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