UNBLOCK

Issue 1

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Black Women in Academia: Challenges, Collaborations, Communities

9 Interviews

Essays

Book Review

List of Resources

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY

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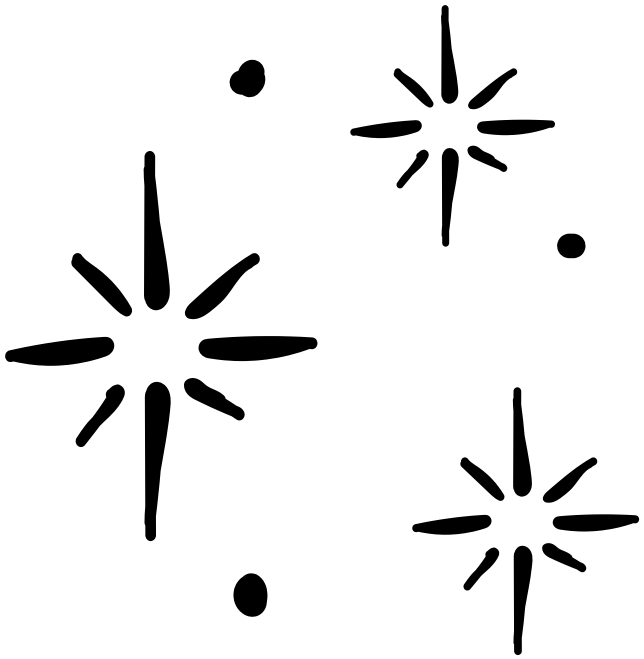

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A Change of Heart - Preparing the way for a Sincere Research Community

Dr Daniela Duc

'A word of Hope often heals many ills.'

In the current climate, research and higher education in the UK (and across the globe) are experiencing many challenges and uncertainties. Increasing demands on already exhausted individuals further exacerbates the anxieties experienced by many.

Yet, it is in this climate that we, as researchers and academics, are invited for introspection. The same way light shines brightly in the darkness, a sincere introspection as one research community in times of crisis is what brings forth a fruitful change of heart and long-lasting solutions to problems.

Unblock is your magazine that aims to provide a space to do just that, without judgement or condemnation. This magazine aims to be an open-door for kind yet sincere discussions of tangible issues in research, research culture and academia and their durable solutions that can be implemented as a research community

Through our journey in setting up this research culture magazine, we understand that it is in accord as one research community and faith in a better future that we can bring reliable solutions. Through generosity with our humanity and capacity, we can be the change we want to see in the world by bettering the way we function as a research community.

Our first issue therefore is dedicated to one of the smallest yet one of the most noteworthy minoritised population today in research -Black women researchers and academics.

In 2024, the report '*Unblocking the Pipeline: Supporting the Retention, Progression and Promotion of Black Early-Career Academics*', highlighted the lasting disparities experienced by Black Academics in the UK, with Black women affected the most. While many solutions have been implemented, few have had a real impact on redressing the situation in the past decade often because those affected are rarely involved in decision-making and implementation of such measures.

Introspection without judgement, generosity with our humanity, faith in a better future as one research community brings forth durable solutions that are reliable.

The first issue provides the opportunity for raising awareness of the challenges but most importantly of the contemporary solutions put forward by Black women in research and academia in Wales and UK to these lasting challenges. The magazine takes its cue from hooks' work by listening to the lived experiences of black women within contemporary academia and research, surveying the challenges, and seeking strategies and opportunities for genuine resolution.

The themes discussed encompass from PhD to postdoc, early career experiences, overcoming stigma, career progression, representation within faculty and student cohort, wellbeing and meaningful allyship.

We hope that this issue brings to the fore the many solutions for Black women in academia and research, highlighted through the rich and generous discussions presented in the magazine. We also understand that by addressing the challenges of one minoritised segment of our research community, it will pave the way to resolving issues experienced by other minorities and individuals in academia and research.

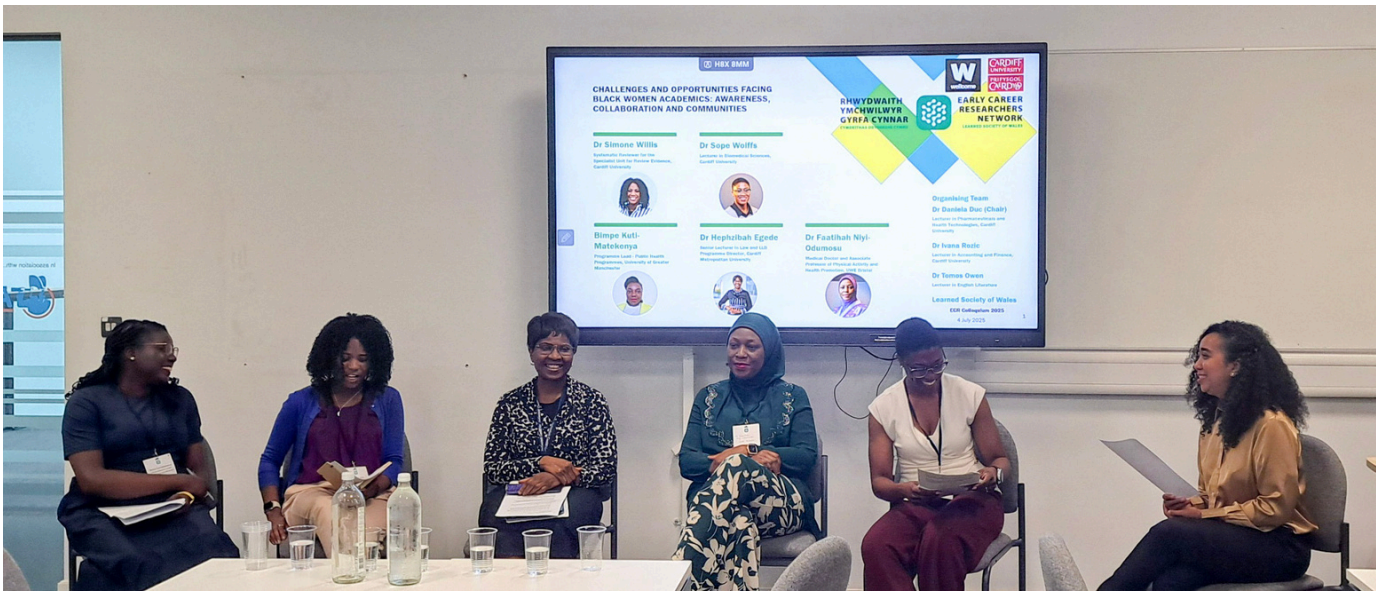
Roadmap towards peace ©Daniela Duc 2019 (Acrylic on Canvas - 62cm x 62cm). Roadmap towards Peace is a representation of the journey involved to reach peace and healing after a tragedy and crisis. Blue: Mutually Sincere and Engaged Justice and Forgiveness; Yellow: Healing and Reconstruction; Green: Serenity.
https://www.behance.net/gallery/91929151/Roadmap-towards-peace

Written by : Dr Tomos Owen

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FACING BLACK WOMEN ACADEMICS: AWARENESS, COLLABORATION AND COMMUNITIES

Learned Society of Wales ECR Colloquium 2025

On 4 July 2025 a roundtable panel discussion was held at the Learned Society of Wales's Early Career Researchers' Colloquium. 'Challenges and Opportunities Facing Black Women Academics: Awareness, Collaboration, Communities' was chaired by Cardiff University's Dr Daniela Duc and brought together five academics from four different institutions. On the panel were: Dr Bimpe Kuti-Matekenya (University of Greater Manchester); Dr Faatihah Niyi-Odumosu (UWE Bristol); Dr Hephzibah Egede (Cardiff Metropolitan University); Dr Sope Wolfs (Cardiff University); and Dr Simone Willis (Cardiff University). Each panel member brought their own personal and professional experiences to a discussion which voiced shared problems, obstacles and difficulties facing women of colour within academia. The discussion also turned, movingly and inspiringly, towards resources of hope through new forms of collaboration and community.



Question 1
Tell us about your career journey and what enabled you to reach this far?

Simone

Mine was definitely a non-linear trajectory. I now work as a Systemic Reviewer, while my first degree was in Music at the Royal Wels College of Music and Drama. But even here I have made connections between these interests: my PhD thesis focused on workplace stress, including musicians' stress, and systematic review formed a part of my approach.

Sope

My journey was not as windy, but it wasn't straightforward either. I am currently a Lecturer in Biomedical Sciences within the School of Biosciences. Following an undergraduate degree in Biomedical Science (Physiology) I was working on a Part-Time PhD in Biomedical Science. I would say that it is people – the people who I have worked with and encountered along the way – who have enabled the journey so far. These relationships and encounters have been very important.

Fatihah

From being a practising GP in Nigeria I am now an Associate Professor of Physical Activity and Health Promotion at the University of the West of England and Distinguished Professor of Public Health at MIVA Open University in Nigeria. So my journey is unusual because it has followed the uncommon path from practice into academia (not the other way around). I believe that openness is the key attribute which has helped me in my journey, and I encourage this to everyone. Openness means being open to opportunities, ideas and collaborations. It means openness to mentorship, sponsorship and networks. For me this openness includes my personal faith in God.

Bimpe

Unplanned, and certainly not deliberate: this is how I would describe my journey. My background is in Bioscience, but my current research interest is in taking the dissertation beyond the science and into the field of public health. I currently lead Public Health programmes at my university. I also think openness is important; openness, curiosity and initiative are very important. Just ask, and keep asking! The worst they can say is 'no'.

Hephzibah

Mine has certainly been a windy journey. My parents were academics in Nigeria in the fields of law and journalism. My journey has included volunteering for the Church (I am a qualified pastor) and work for the Lagos State Ministry for Justice. After a period of work with Exxon Mobil I requalified as a solicitor. Within academia I was an LLM Tutor at Cardiff Law School. My interests have focused on Environmental Law; in particular I am interested in connections between law, the environment and health care rights. After a period working at the University of Buckingham I returned to Cardiff, where I started the LLM programme at Cardiff Met.

Question 2
Tell us about one of the biggest challenges you encountered on your career journey and how you overcame it?

Fatihah

There were several! Perhaps first is the transition from clinical practice into academia, with no prior research training or expertise. As I said earlier, this feels like an unusual step, one which is normally taken in the opposite direction. The academic environment is different to that of clinical practice, so this transition was certainly a challenge. Alongside this was the challenge of relocating to the UK, in 2012. This was a time of adjustment – to a new culture and a new environment. I needed to devise an MA project and went about identifying good practice by finding old papers and researching in that way. My name means 'The Opener' or 'The Key' in Arabic, so I think this was appropriate at this time: I was looking for an opening, a way in.
By now I consider another challenge is how to be a leader, how to embody positive impact and make positive impressions.

Hephzibah

Having already established a degree of accomplishment in a professional context meant that the shift from practice into an academia presented particular kinds of challenges. In many ways I had to restart, to rebrand and reconfigure myself within a new context and a new professional environment. A sense of change and the need to adapt have been constants in my career – this is of course a constant challenge but it can also act as a motivator. My father's advice was to keep pressing on: keep on knocking!

Sope

Having moved from Nigeria at the age of 16 I also felt that sense of hyper-visibility within professional environments. I also was often the only one in the room. There is the consciousness of that kind of difference, of being an immigrant, and that challenges of assimilation that brings with it. But then comes the realization that this is also a kind of superpower. Mentorship, and the support of family and the security of a home life have all been important, as well as the sense of being truthful to myself throughout.

Question 3
There are several reported issues that black women in academia/research have been facing for decades and there are new challenges that are emerging. Solutions have been implemented but have often been found not to be very effective, as often the people being affected are not sufficiently represented at the decision-making table.

What do you think is the biggest challenge that black women in academia/research in your career stage are facing at the moment and what solutions do you (or black women in your career stage) think could be more effective?

Simone

The sense we've spoken about, of being the only one in the room, can also carry another pressure with it. There's a sense of expectation or responsibility, the weight of being somehow a representative or a spokesperson for your community. Identifying allies is really important here. I came across the Afro Caribbean Research Collective, which is a group geared towards supporting PhD and PGR students, and wishing there was a parallel group or community for ECRs.

Hephzibah

I personally have felt the tension, or the balance between EDI and my own merit. Being the only person in the room brings with it a kind of worry of being a token representative, rather than being in that room on merit, or that black women's skills, competencies and achievements are overlooked or undervalued as EDI considerations are foregrounded. That risk or feeling of tokenism through EDI initiatives can mean that for black women there is a perceived requirement to do more than the next person, to go above and beyond expectations.

Faatihah

Of the 23,000 UK professors fewer than 80 are black women. So there is a huge lack of mentorship and representatives in the rooms where decisions around appointments and promotions being made.

Bimpe

The sense we've spoken about, of being the only one in the room, can also carry another pressure with it. There's a sense of expectation or responsibility, the weight of being somehow a representative or a spokesperson for your community. Identifying allies is really important here. I came across the Afro Caribbean Research Collective, which is a group geared towards supporting PhD and PGR students, and wishing there was a parallel group or community for ECRs.

Audience Question:

In our own lives we can all list several instances of shocking and disappointing practices or instances we have experienced. What are we going to do with the feeling of being shocked?

How are we to form collectives out of events like today?

Faatihah

Family comes first; for me, this is a crucial realisation. In order to get the best from myself professionally I am aware of the importance to myself of close connection to family.

Sope

Identifying core values is very important. Knowing what and who are important to me, what are my priorities. For me being settled, staying put, and not moving around, have helped here. Having this foundation – this sense of belonging and rootedness – means that I can then build communities of trust. It gives the best hope of being seen fully; the challenge is how this can become institutional.

Hephzibah

I emphasize my self-singularity. I do not want to run anyone else's race, only mine. This comes from a realization that I am a unique person, and I want to fulfil that for myself in order to inspire it in others. It means wanting to embody the sense of making a difference. None of us have one single identity, but I want to be the best person I was created to be.

Talking with recent PhD graduate Stefania Akromah

Dr Stefania Akromah
Interviewed by Dr Daniela Duc & Dr Ivana Rozic

"There are no Black academics in my department"

Who is Stefania Akromah and tell us about your journey in research?

I recently completed my PhD at the Bristol Composite Institute, University of Bristol. My research focused on assessing the sustainability of mycelium composites in the context of Africa. I explored their potential deployment in African countries and developed a framework that could also be applied in other developing countries.
I completed my Bachelor of Science in Materials Engineering in Ghana. Originally, I wanted to become an architect, but I didn't achieve the grades required for the architecture program, so I navigated into the field of materials engineering. In my final year, I worked on a project in renewable energy systems, which I really enjoyed. After graduating, I spent a couple of years as a research assistant, working on several projects in renewable energy systems. Eventually, I received a PhD offer here in Bristol, and I have been pursuing my PhD for the past four years. Everything has gone well so far.

I think good planning and having a long-term goal have been pivotal in my research journey. To plan my research journey, I had to think long-term about what I really wanted to achieve. Once I defined my long-term goal, everything I've done in my research has been aligned with achieving that goal. My biggest goal is to use my knowledge in materials engineering to make a meaningful impact in sustainability, particularly in African countries. I also aim to promote STEM education in Africa, especially for young women, and contribute to sustainable education initiatives.

What does your day-to-day look like? Any challenges encountered?

As part of our four-year programme, we were supposed to do a one year foundation programme where we attended lectures and stuff like that. Having done my Bachelor of Science in Ghana, I had to adapt to how things worked here, to the different system, as well as trying to pick up on the British, Irish, and Scottish accents.

After that first year, the research-based part started. Usually, the projects are given to us; you have a list of projects and you pick one. I chose to propose my project because it had to be something in line with my personal goal. It was very hard because I chose a project without thinking about the infrastructure available at my university. Throughout my journey, I had to spend a lot of time reading, learning, watching tutorials, contacting the bigger network of researchers, improvising in terms of infrastructure, partnering with other departments within the university as well as other universities, and coming up with a project. I was lucky enough to have the support of my supervisor **Lots of crying and wondering, "Why am I doing this to myself?" Lots of, "Yeah, something is working finally." And then, here we here we are!**

How well are you supported as a PhD researcher? Or obstacles?

The biggest support was my primary supervisor, Steve, who gave me both the technical support that I needed as well as networks with other people that could help me achieve my project. I also had support from a few academics within our department, who gave a lot of input that has been very beneficial for my project. There was also support from technicians and technical specialists to help me build things that I could work with while ensuring it complied with safety regulations... and, basically , not burn down the labs! And also, I struggle with asking for help, so I had to get out of my comfort zone and reach out to people in other universities such as the University of Bath: they provided a lot of scientific knowledge and support as well.

Luckily for me, the CDT programme I was part of comprised different people from different backgrounds and different cultures. Most of us had in common the fact that we came from different cultural and educational backgrounds. So we supported each other whenever we could. I would say that's probably the second biggest support I had after my supervisor.

Another challenge for me personally was the language barrier. It's funny because I do speak English, but the Ghanaian accent is very different from the British accent. Trying to keep up with that was hard for me, and it was what was holding me back a little bit..

There are no Black academics in my department. So, there was no one I could relate to or approach for help. It took me about a year to feel confident enough to talk to the available academics and share my problems with them. Sometime, I felt like they didn't fully understood what I was going through, because the challenges I faced were different from those of a "female" academic in engineering, for example. I had the additional "black" factor and all the problems that came with it. Sometimes when sharing my problems with others, they'd say things like "We understand, we are also going through this," but in my mind, I thought, "It's different, it's not the same." That was the biggest challenge for me.

What are your thoughts on PhD supervision, particularly when it comes to supervising Black women in research? Based on your experience so far, and what you've heard from others as well.

It's a bit difficult to generalize because, within my department, most Black female students end up being my primary supervisor's students. We all work with him directly (or indirectly), I guess because he's the EDI director and very involved with racial and diversity issues, particularly supporting Black female engineers.

From what I've seen and from conversations with other female students, everyone feels more comfortable working with him specifically because he understands and is willing to listen.

With other people (academics), you can sometimes sense racial dynamics, and many of us feel uncomfortable around them. Hence, I would say my supervisor has been our biggest support. His knowledge, openness to diversity, and willingness to listen have made it much easier for us to work with him and thrive as researchers within the department.

Jemma, another academic in BCI was also very helpful, especially during my first year of research, because I was struggling a lot with cultural differences. For example, something that might seem small to others was a big deal for me. In Ghana, even if I don't know someone, I can see them and say "hi", and it often naturally leads to conversation and friendship. When I came here, I noticed that if I was walking alone in the corridors and someone passed by, they would often just look at their phones or almost avoid me. But if I was with someone they knew (usually white), they would suddenly be friendly and chatty. That used to bother me a lot. With the support of my Steve and Jemma, it became a bit easier to ignore these differences and focus on living my life and doing my work as best as I could.

So, what are your general thoughts? How would you compare your doctoral program with other programs you've heard about? And, what are your thoughts about the future?

I think the CDT programme is great because you join as a group with other people who also come from different backgrounds. Since we are all going through the same experience, we end up forming a kind of big family that supports each other. In contrast, there are PhD students who are not part of this kind of programme. You can really see the difference. They are usually on their own.
People don't usually approach them much, and because they're by themselves, it's also harder for them to reach out to others. Being part of a larger group, however, allows us to share experiences, work together, and even approach those who are alone, bringing them into the community. I think this kind of grouping should be encouraged more. It creates a kind of ecosystem with a supportive community, which is especially helpful for people coming from abroad.
In regard to the future... the doctoral journey can feel a bit overwhelming. Yes, I do have the skills required to move forward, but there are so many "what ifs." That's a bit scary. At the same time, I'm thinking about the next steps as well. I've realised that when you're about to finish your PhD, you suddenly notice you haven't really sat down to think about what comes next. Even if you have a bigger goal, you haven't thought through the immediate steps after submission. And because you're so stressed, it's hard to find the mental capacity to do that.

Everyone keeps asking, "What's next? What's next?" and you just want to say, "I don't know, I'm just trying to finish writing right now. We can think about that later." Definitely, the uncertainty is quite scary.

"I think there should be more representation. There should just be more Black academics..."

You've already talked a bit about the lack of representation. Thinking about that more generally, what effect do you think those experiences have on students? And what do you think could be done to better support people who face similar challenges in these environments?

I think there should be more representation. There should just be more Black academics, even if it's just a couple of them, they become a point of contact for someone who can relate to them.
I think that's really the answer to that question. For example, here they tried to do a workshop for Black engineers—undergraduates and PhDs. It was a nice event and share experiences, but I don't think that was enough because it was just a one-off thing, and it never happened again. So there's no one to really talk to.
One thing I hated, I must say, was a bigger workshop on EDI that was compulsory for everyone in the department. You go there, and the people who actually need to hear these things aren't interested. And it's like, why are we doing this? I don't need to be here. I know enough about EDI and how to treat people, why am I here? And the people who should be hearing this just aren't interested. Once, I was with a group of people, and I don't know if they realized I was there, but they were like, "Who cares about this stuff? It's just a waste of time." And I'm like, okay... I'm just standing here. Hello?
If there were more Black representation, I feel like they would understand better what's needed and be able to offer more ideas about what should be done.

In your view, what steps could be taken more broadly to provide better support for Black women navigating the appeals process?

I think there should be measures in place, obviously. As you said, getting a Black academic is not straightforward, so there need to be other forms of support.

One thing that really helped me was that my supervisor had a lot of Black postdoctoral students. There was also another Black PhD student. She is from Kenya. She started organising informal meetings where we (other black PhDs and postdocs) have a chat about everything, our frustrations, happy moments, needs, and so on, which gave you a break from everything else.

So, I think one good form of support would be to create more Black networks and engagement activities where people can meet, discuss, and share experiences. Not just lectures or workshops, but informal spaces for speaking and connecting.

For example, universities often have flyers showing who you can speak to for different matters. There could be something similar for Black students and academics, with clear points of contact and guidance on how to reach out. There could also be workshops or one-day seminars organized with academics, postdocs, or PhD students where people can share experiences and receive advice on navigating challenges.

How's the student union over there when it comes to supporting Black folks? Are there any groups or networks like that?

I just get an email every time there's a social event for Black engineers. But I don't attend because the emails are really frustrating. You can tell minimal effort was put into them. All the other emails from the student union are well-written, and free of grammatical errors. Then, on a random Sunday morning, you get an email about the Black Engineers program with grammatical mistakes in the flyer and very little effort overall. Honestly, I'm not going to bother attending if they can't even put in a little extra effort to make it engaging and professional.

So, what are some of the other challenges that your Black PhD colleagues have talked about?

Speaking to them, in general, it seems the support can be limited. Some of them have mentioned experiencing racial incidents within their research groups. For example, they noticed that certain people in their groups were reluctant to help them when approached. One woman told me about a guy in her group who would refuse to sit next to her during meetings.

There was also an instance with a new postdoc who had joined the group. For about a month, no one approached her to ask where she was from or what her work involved, while all the other newcomers were being engaged with. So, it was myself and another person who decided to reach out and talk to her. That led to us starting monthly meetings, which slowly grew into a slightly larger support group.

These are the kinds of experiences that happen. It's harder to get help when we ask for it compared to others. For instance, sometimes I approach someone for help, and you can tell they don't really want to assist, even if they don't outright say no. I get frustrated and let my supervisor handle it instead ... and suddenly the help comes immediately.

Are there any other things that you think would be nice to see in the future that could help make things a little easier?

I can't think of one specific thing, but I once suggested something to my supervisor. We have different offices, and sometimes different research groups share the same office. I suggested that if he could get an office for our group—because in his research group we are mostly Black or Asian students—it would have been nice to have a space dedicated to us. It would have made you feel more like yourself when you're around people from similar backgrounds. Right now, in the bigger office space, we're all dispersed, and you're surrounded by other people chatting, laughing, and interacting, which can often leave you feeling excluded. So, having a designated space would have been nice. Of course, I understand that there isn't always the physical space to do that, so it's not always possible.

Looking back, what would you like to see?

I think having more Black academics would help. That might solve many of the other problems because they would understand more and be more willing to advocate for us, if you want to put it that way. That would be nice.

I'm not so sure about having more Black PhD students, though, because even if there are more, the underlying issues might still remain. Unfortunately, individuals can start to isolate and exclude themselves, and once that happens, it's difficult to identify them and build a network.

So, I think the best solution would be to have more representation among the academics. If that's not possible, then perhaps postdocs and research associates could be the next point of contact, and they could be more involved in planning how to address these issues.

Any last comments or thoughts?

No, not really. I think I've covered everything. I also think it's nice what you're doing. This is another form of support, another way of highlighting some of these challenges, and hopefully people will be more aware and take action.

Dr Simone Willis
Systematic Reviewer
Specialist Unit for
Review Evidence
Cardiff University
Wales, UK

Photo by Bhagesh Sachania
Interviewed by Dr Daniela Duc & Dr Ivana Rozic

Early-Career Researcher in Professional Services

Who is Simone Willis and tell us about your journey in research?

My research journey started in 2016 when I joined my PhD programme. My thesis was about occupational stress and well-being of professional and conservatoire classical musicians. During my time as a doctoral student, I was looking for academic roles and saw this opening as a Systematic Reviewer with the Specialist Unit for Review Evidence (SURE) within Cardiff University Professional Services. In this role, I perform systematic reviews and other types of evidence synthesis on health and social care topics.

As an early-career black woman research professional, what are the positive aspects of your role and what things are done to support you in your current role?

In my current role, I enjoy doing research and having the autonomy, space, and time to explore new topics. I also have the opportunity to collaborate with academics across Cardiff and other universities and researchers working in the charity sector. As an early-career researcher, it's important to build a community and I've enjoyed opportunities to network with other early-career researchers. I have received support from my line manager to attend professional development courses and been given more responsibility in my department. I have also had the opportunity to develop my grant writing skills and to be a Co-Investigator on grant applications.

What are your thoughts about mentoring specifically for early-career black women in research?

I do not have experience of formal mentoring. Being a researcher in Professional Services is slightly different from the academic pathway, as mentoring is not required and it is optional.
I had a really good experience during my PhD as my supervisors were good at providing guidance and supported me to learn about working in an academic environment. The research environment during my doctoral studies was supportive in terms of staff and peers.
For me, reaching out to people I know works best compared to formal routes of mentoring. When I know people well, I feel comfortable to discuss situations and ask for advice.

What are the key challenges that early-career black women in research are facing at the moment?

Personally, career development is one of the key areas of challenge. There are a lot of opportunities to get involved in, but it can be difficult to know which ones will be beneficial for my career. The challenge of career development is heightened by the current climate where there is uncertainty in the sector, especially in terms of promotion and job security.

Additionally, I think the lack of representation is an issue for Black women academics, particularly for those of us from an Afro-Caribbean background. It can be difficult to feel a sense a belonging when there is nobody like you in the place you work. With increasing diversity initiatives, Black women can also end up doing much of the emotional labour to explain their experiences without any additional acknowledgement of this labour from colleagues.

> *Meaningful professional relationships at work are key for positive workplaces and well-being.*

What do you think can help resolve these challenges?

I think representation needs to be improved, in particular at the higher managerial levels of the university and across academia.

Additionally, I think that active allyship needs to be implemented from colleagues in more privileged positions. For instance, a colleague might agree with you in private that something shouldn't have been said or happened, but then be unwilling to do anything about this. More people need to actively do something when they encounter racism or other forms of discrimination.

To achieve a more inclusive workplace, I think it's important to employ experts in the area of equity, diversity, and inclusion. It isn't solely the responsibility of those who have been discriminated against to come up with viable solutions.

Locally, I think having more opportunities to network with other black women researchers would be beneficial. Having a channel where you can easily reach out to local researchers in Wales who have a similar background and context would be helpful.

Do you have any other thoughts to discuss today?

I think having meaningful professional relationships at work are important. It can help you feel comfortable to ask questions (e.g., about career progression or how to navigate the system). It is also key in enabling people to have a positive experience of the workplace and important for well-being.

Stepping Out and Stepping In:

By Luret Lar, PhD Student,
School of Social Sciences,
Cardiff University

Optimistic About What is to come...

As I navigated life in my home country, I realised that something was missing, which kept me striving for opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of what that missing piece was. I kept gliding through my day-to-day professional responsibilities. However, that deep longing kept nudging me to search for that opening. Exploring the internet, which unifies geographical boundaries, led me to a funded studentship at Cardiff University. Reading the eligibility criteria sent chills down my spine. I kept pondering whether it was worth risking such a competitive application, but something kept pushing me back to it. “Could I stand a chance?” was my recurrent, unending theme. However, some phrases within the application gave me a little bit of hope. I kept reminding myself that at least I could take the risk. The paperwork was intense, but I persevered. Then the invitation for an interview came. I was excited, but I pondered whether the outcome would be far from positive. Well, it turned out to be the fastest 30 minutes of my life! Although the interviewers began by commending my proposal, I still had the usual doubt that it would not end positively. Then came the period of waiting, with intense anxiety. The more I tried to forget it, the more it came to my disturbing remembrance. Finally, the cheering news of the selection came.

Leaving everything behind for a new and uncertain beginning came with mixed feelings. I had to unlearn and relearn. The bold but risky, subtle career change came with its challenges. However, looking at the past three years, which have honestly flown by, I smile through the storms to encourage other potential and current international scholars to declare that meritocracy exists! Do not be discouraged by the paperwork! Believe in yourself, even if you think you might not be the best! I have received immense personal and academic support from Cardiff University, my funders, the Welsh Graduate School of Social Sciences, the Economic and Social Research Council, and my experienced supervisors and progress reviewer, who have been consistently generous with their knowledge and experience. Accept criticism as an opportunity for improvement, as it often presents a valuable learning experience. As I gradually conclude this fantastic opportunity, I look to the future with brighter hope, knowing that I will leave in a drastically better position than I came in. Where next? I will keep persevering, remaining resilient and allowing an open door within my strengthened capacity to be my guiding compass!

> “Could I stand a chance?” was my recurrent, unending theme.

> Believe in yourself, even if you think you might not be the best!

Bio:
Luret Lar is a third-year PhD researcher in the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University. She is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, UK and the Welsh Graduate School for the Social Sciences. Her research is focused on Social Policy, specifically the lived experiences of forced migrant women as they integrate and rebuild their lives in Wales, A Nation of sanctuary. Luret's background is in Medicine and Public Health, where her previous research interests were focused on neglected tropical diseases.

Interviewed by
Dr Daniela Duc & Dr Ivana Rozic

INHALE. EXHALE. INSPIRE.

BLACK FEMALE ACADEMICS AND THEIR WELL-BEING

The Journey of Dr Sope Wolffs

Dr Sope Wolffs
Lecturer in Biomedical Sciences
Cardiff University
Wales, UK

Who is Sope Wolffs and tell us about your journey in academia and research?

I am Sope Wolfs, and my journey has been quite interesting – not the straightforward path. I came to uni as an undergraduate student. I was actually considered a mature student when I came in, even though I was 22 at the time. I knew I wanted to do something that involved helping people, particularly related to lung health. I grew up with really bad asthma and I always thought I was going to help people with breathing problems growing up.

After I finished my A-levels I spent a lot of years tutoring informally – I really enjoyed teaching. I gained a bit of work experience doing several roles and then somewhere along the line I found out about physiology, specifically a respiratory physiologist. I thought "Oh, what's that?" I looked it up online – it sounded interesting.

At the time, I was already applying to Cardiff University for a different course – to become a scrub nurse. So, I changed course and decided I was going to study physiology at the School of Biosciences instead.

I had this grand plan. I was going to do my undergraduate degree in Biomedical Sciences (Physiology), apply to the NHS, do something called a scientist training programme, become a respiratory physiologist, then work the rest of my life helping people with breathing problems. But...

I had this amazing personal tutor who gave me opportunities to take part in summer placements. I was an very keen student, I was here a lot! During my summer holidays I did research projects. After my first year engagement project, I got to meet a few more lecturers and one of them encouraged me to apply for a placement year. She said it would provide valuable experience. I think it's the defining moment in my career. I think that's what actually changed the trajectory of my career.

I ended up applying for a placement year, and I knew I didn't want to do a typical "wet lab" project. I wanted to go into clinical research. I found a research project in a hospital lung function lab, and I got to do a research project working with patients with an awful lung condition called idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis (IPF).

At the time there were no real viable treatments, and at the end of my placement year, I remember thinking to myself, if I can, in my own little way, move research forward in this space, I will. I came back, finished my final undergraduate year. I was fortunate to be placed in an amazing lab for my final year project. Their respiratory work was focused on the role of a receptor in asthma and COPD. I suggested that it'd be interesting to see if this drug target or this receptor plays a role in IPF. That was the start of my research career. And how I ended up doing a PhD, looking at the role of the calcium sensing receptor in idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis. And so that was that.

How did you feel in that moment of transition—were you feeling like you were letting go of your original plans, or did it feel more like a natural evolution of your journey?

During my PhD, I still felt like I was on the right track or on the same track, but slightly different. Since my dream was always to help people with breathing problems, meeting people out and about trying to live their lives and with these conditions, motivated me to get through my PhD. But I'll say that the lab side of things did take a lot out of me. I knew I was not a "lab person". My PhD proved that.

So, I never felt like I'd abandoned my dream. It just looked slightly different than what I thought it was going to look like. Because I ended up being in the lab more than I thought I was going to be, it was then very important for me to plug into what I call the social and human aspects of research – talking to patients and connecting with them. For me a big part of science and research has always been the people, not just the researchers, but the people that the research impacts.

That bridge is always very important, hearing, listening, speaking to people, finding out what's important to them and what they find useful.

I guess where I started to feel a little bit like I was drifting away from the original track was in the last four years. After finishing my PhD, I went into what I'd call clinical-adjacent research. I worked as a researcher in a biobank, speaking to patients with cancer, talking about tissue donation.

After that I worked in a colorectal cancer lab looking at repurposing a drug for colorectal cancer to reduce relapse. Although it was about patients, which is what I always wanted to do, it was missing that respiratory angle. Sometimes I wondered, *where am I in all this?* But because it was genuinely helping people, I was able to find fulfilment.

It's inspiring how unexpected turns in your journey led to even greater growth. So, where are you now in your path, and what does your day-to-day life look like?

My day-to-day is very different now. I'm now lecturing; no research, but teaching full-time. So, I work with students, not patients now. Although I'm not helping people with lung conditions, I would say academia gives me the flexibility to inject my passion into my work. So although my main task is teaching (which is something that I've always enjoyed), I also have the opportunity to run community projects that connect back to respiratory health – bringing together people living with conditions and thinking about how that can impact or shape research in the future.

As an early-career Black woman academic, what kind of support—whether during that time or even now—has been especially valuable to you, and how has it helped you move forward in your role?

Having people that support you and see your potential or even when you don't – makes a huge difference. They give you that encouragement to take the next step, to put yourself out there or to explore other avenues that you might not think you're ready for or might not see because they can see it, they've done it, they've been there.

"There have definitely been challenges, but.... support makes those challenges easier."

Having friends, allies and peer support have been really helpful. There have definitely been challenges, but that support makes those challenges easier.

Someone once said to me, you've done really well, you're in academia, you've just finished a PhD, you've started a lectureship and you've accomplished so much in between.

And you know, I had to look back at my life and try to work out what happened or why I'm actually here or why I've done so well. And I genuinely think it is because of the mentorship and the support I've had. And you can't quantify the value of people seeing your worth and advocating for you.

I've been involved in quite a few advisory groups and at a national level that I wouldn't have gone for except someone wrote to me and said, I think you should apply for this, you'll be great. Even when I doubted myself, they'd say "what's the worst that can happen? They say no?" Having that extra push when you need it the most is invaluable.

You've spoken about how your environment played a key role in building your confidence and resilience. When we talk about mental health and well-being—especially in the context of Black women in academia—what are your thoughts on how the work environment influences this? Are there particular pressures you've faced, and what kind of support do you think truly makes a difference?

I think that's a huge one to unpack and discuss because I can't separate myself from all the different parts (of my journey). I think being an academic has its own mental health impact, with the sheer amount of work that needs to be done – it's never ending.

The impact of workload on mental health is huge and it's something that should be looked at. There's the additional impact, and I guess the buzzword will be intersectionality, where being a Black woman has a compounding effect.

And in my opinion, in my experience, I think the isolation is the greatest challenge. Always being the only one makes you hyper-visible. You feel like there's, added pressure to perform, to achieve, to not mess up. There also tends to be a lot of EDI work that comes with this. Generally speaking, it's something I am interested in because I genuinely want to improve things for people, but it's tiring mentally and emotionally – and the impact (on you and your workload) is not often recognised.

I'd also say when working in an environment where you are the only one, dealing with microaggressions or not-so-microaggressions can be quite tricky. There are processes in place, but you might not want to flag issues with HR because irt might leave you exposed, or you don't want to get anyone in trouble, or you might just have started, and might not be seen as "part of the team".

How do you balance the pressures of work with life outside of it, and how does that impact your well-being and the people around you? What role does your support system—whether family, community, or colleagues—play in maintaining that balance.

There's a lot of pressure and guilt that comes with being a mum in academia. There's a lot of juggling, and a constant feeling like you're letting everyone down. There's often a sense that you're letting everyone down – your family when you're working, and your work when you're with your family. You just feel this never-ending guilt.

For example, if my son was not feeling very well and I had to take time off, I want to give him 100% of my attention. But what tends to happen is that I have my emails somewhere in the background, just to make sure the sky isn't falling, even though, nothing is life or death. But there's just this constant pressure. And then I end the day feeling guilty because I've not been 100% focused on work, which I shouldn't have been because I'm off. But I wasn't also 100% present at home, which I should have been because that's what I thought I was going to be doing.

Listening to other people's experiences, I know I'm not alone. It comes back to that thing of feeling like you have to be the best, you have to always be achieving, you have to be seen to not be slacking, and so you put that pressure on yourself, or maybe conditions around you make you feel like that pressure is on you, and so you can't switch off, and so the impact of that is not just on you, it's on people that love you... because they love you, they tend to pick up a lot of pieces.

So what are the things that, whether it is an institution that provides it, or things that have been accessible outside in terms of support for mental health and well-being that you found was helpful, and what are the ones that you thought are available but are not working?

What's worked really well in my experience is having a line manager or bosses who actually get what it's like to have a life outside of research or academia – it is an absolute godsend! Having someone who has life outside of work, is empathetic, compassionate, understands what you're going through and says, "take a breath – it will all be okay" is amazing.

I think the institution is trying. I know there are a lot of conversation about mental health, our wellbeing, I know there's a lot of support out there. I would say I find it more comfortable going outside of work, not because of anything that's happened, just because I won't feel comfortable sharing the "Black side" of the challenges I face. I don't feel that the support is tailored enough or culturally aware.

I'd say tailored or culturally sensitive support would make a difference – or having someone who understands your context or just looks like you to be able to discuss these things with can make it easier to open up. It's not a luxury a lot of us have.

"...tailored or culturally sensitive support would make a difference..."

It sounds like what you're really looking for is a sense of safety and support. Do you think that feeling of uncertainty comes from not having many examples or experiences to draw from?

Most people are on temporary contracts, and many contracts and placements within academia, even outside your institution, are done through word of mouth. And if you "kick up too much of a fuss", then you might be seen as someone that isn't congenial, or collegial, or a good fit. That fear of reputation follows people, particularly when job security is uncertain.

Sometimes you hear of contracts not being renewed and can't help wondering whether it's connected to someone having raised an issue. Experiences like that make it difficult to trust internal processes or feel safe discussing sensitive matters. So it's these kind of conversations that happen and these kind of experiences from other people that have made me decide that perhaps within the institution or within that team is not the place to unpack any issues because I also don't find that the wellbeing and mental health support is reflective of the staff it serves and it doesn't fill me with confidence reaching out for help.

We have spoken about several challenges and several measures that need improving, what do you think that could be done to help resolve these challenges and improve the support provided?

I think we are making progress. I know I wasn't overly positive on some of the leadership programmes, but I think they have a place and I think it's important to have them in place because they will make a difference for some people and it is a step in the right direction.

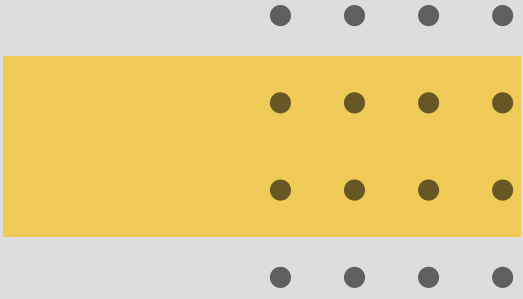
A good start is being aware of the issues. The fact that we're openly discussing openly mental health and wellbeing is important.

I would suggest that the university should look into structured and proactive mental health support for PhD students and early career researchers. Clear, accessible signposting of services would help students and early-career researchers understand that their well-being matters and that support is available.

There is a small set of us that don't see ourselves reflected in either academia or wellbeing services. Having an external person, or someone within the mental health and wellbeing support group or team that does reflect the demographic of the staff, regardless of how many of them they are, would be really helpful. If I was aware that someone who looked like me was on the mental health and well-being support team, either my department and the university, I'd be more willing to reach out.
At the moment, uncertainty remains a challenge. We are aware of some of the problems and challenges. I'm hoping that our awareness will help the institution put things in place to start addressing some of these challenges. It might be difficult for the next couple of years, but I'm hoping that moving forward, things can be put in place to support people better.
I often compare this to the Athena Swan initiative. When I became pregnant with my son, I directly benefited from the policies at my school (at the time), and it's only because of how much progress they'd made within our school that it benefited me quite significantly. It took years of gradual change before those benefits reached people like me, but they did. So, although it is slow-moving for a lot of us at the moment, I think we are making progress and in time, even the little tweaks being made to the system will make a huge difference.

Any other thoughts or themes you would like to discuss and closing comments

I think the future is exciting. We are at a pivotal moment, and I genuinely believe that as long as we still keep our vision and dreams, remain open to listening, learning, and considering others – not just ourselves – we'll continue moving forward. I'm hopefully that it will turn out well for future generations, because the only way is up.



Interviewed by Dr Daniela Duc

Supporting Black women academics and the importance of diverse representation

OUT OF THE SHELL, INTO THE SPOTLIGHT:

The Power of Mentorship

The Journey of Dr Faatihah Niyi-Odumosu

Dr Faatihah Niyi-Odumosu
University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

Who is Faatihah Niyi-Odumosu and tell us about your journey in academia and research?

I am a medical doctor, trained and practised in Nigeria, but I have not practised for over a decade and am now fully immersed in academia and research, with no regrets.

I am currently an associate professor of physical activity and health promotion at the University of the West of England, Bristol. I am a Distinguished Professor of Public Health at MIVA University, Nigeria, and the Founder and Director of ALIBSA, a knowledge exchange initiative for the ageing Black and Asian communities. I am Nigerian, born and raised in Lagos State, with three sons, and married to a consultant nephrologist and immunologist in training.

My academic journey began as a lecturer in Nigeria before moving to the UK, where I pursued postgraduate studies at the University of East London. I then returned to Nigeria to secure a Commonwealth Scholarship that funded my doctoral programme at Loughborough University.

My doctoral degree in Clinical Exercise Physiology examined the impact of exercise on markers of chronic inflammation, kidney function, and quality of life in patients with non-dialysis chronic kidney disease.

After completing my doctorate, I lectured at De Montfort University and also served as a visiting lecturer at the University of East London. Subsequently, I transitioned to the University of the West of England, Bristol, as a senior lecturer in human physiology.

I am currently enjoying my work, which has turned out to be an incredible and unexpected experience. This journey stems from my open-mindedness and passion for exploring new opportunities. It all began when I was presented with a vacant position in academia. Despite not fully understanding the role, I decided to take the plunge, reassured by the fact that I could always fall back on my medical qualifications if it didn't pan out.

I sought guidance from my former lecturers, who were also my mentors, and they encouraged me to pursue the opportunity, emphasising its potential. Admittedly, I felt uncertain about how to approach teaching, especially since I lacked research experience and had never written a paper. However, I viewed this challenge as an exciting prospect.

The need to identify a project topic and engage in rigorous research pushed me to embrace the difficulties and motivated me to excel. Ultimately, I attribute my success to a combination of my determination and **divine guidance**, which has brought me to where I am today.

Catering mentoring needs of Black women academics

As a mid-career black woman academic, what are the things that are done to support you in your role and that you think is very helpful?

My current employer is the University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol. We have a fantastic Vice Chancellor, Professor Sir Steve West, who is an exemplary leader. A passionate and empathetic leader who identified that there was a problem in the institution and he takes extra effort to develop measures to counter racism and to work collaboratively with people to provide a solution. To me, that is outstanding!

UWE enrolled me on the 100 Black women professor now Programme by Alice Chilver. The programme equipped me and other black female academics with leadership skills to advance our careers. We were all supported by our line managers, mentors, and sponsors, as well as the University executive members. This is outstanding. Also, we've recently launched a mentorship scheme within my school. They usually call out for names to be a mentor, a mentee and so some people choose mentors.

I feel that there's a need for individuals to identify their mentors and have a one-to-one talk or chat with them, not necessarily an intermediary linking people together, because it doesn't really strengthen the relationship when there's an intermediary.

My mentors are not tired of me, and I'm not tired of them so it's just all about that continuity in the relationship and updating them about my progress. I also provide reverse mentoring to my mentors; some of my mentors are referred to opportunities and receive feedback on their applications. In essence, it's a mutual relationship.

Outside my institution, I have outstanding mentors who I call on when I'm stuck or when I'm in the middle of not knowing what to do.

My mentors are global, and they all have their own unique strengths, and when I need their support, all I need to do is to identify who to talk to or who to call among all my mentors.

What are the key challenges that mid-career black women in research are facing at the moment?

One of the challenges we face is identifying a mentor. I think because of our upbringing and our orientation as black women, we tend to be modest in either talking about our needs, challenges or making requests.

We shy away from reaching out to people to be our mentors. We're modelled to be go-getters, we are modelled to be good at everything we do, and we feel we can do everything. We struggle and we have high tenacity, absorbing challenges and not calling for help or seeking out to identify mentors.

There's another part of reaching out to the mentor and ensuring you convince the person to be your mentor.

The third challenge we face is that we work in silos. We don't work collaboratively, thus we don't meet as a strong force.

What do you think can help resolve these challenges?

Teamwork, collegiality, a good network, and well-structured mentoring support. I think the act of *togetherness* is something I don't see often among black women, but we, and that could be linked to the other commitments we have, parental commitment and a family commitment. I also think that there are a lot of intersectional barriers that hinder us from having the privileges that our other contemporaries have. Network and a good mentor(s) would help us overcome any barrier.

“...MENTORSHIP IS ESSENTIAL FOR SUCCESS. THOSE WHO SUCCEED DIDN'T DO IT ALONE; THEY HAD MENTORS....WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE.”

Significance of diverse academic representation for a thriving student diversity or aspirations

One of the things often talked about is diverse representation or the lack of it in academia and research. As a diverse person, what are your thoughts about diverse representation and representation of black women currently in academia and research?

I believe it's all connected to having a role model, someone as a mentor with real-life experience. There are over 23,000 UK professors, yet recent data shows only 90 are black female professors. This means there are very few black female professors who could serve as mentors for black female academics. As mentioned, mentorship is essential for success. Those who succeed didn't do it alone; they had mentors, and these mentees thrived because they had mentors with lived experience.

Regarding the uniqueness of each mentor, a white mentor might not effectively guide a Black female academic on navigating some of the barriers she could face. However, it is important to seek mentors or sponsors from diverse backgrounds to point you towards opportunities that are not typically found within Black communities.

Therefore, you should not limit yourself to just one mentor but aim to have multiple mentors with different strengths.

The more white academics, mentors, and mentees there are, the more progress is made within White academic circles. The same applies to other ethnic groups, so the focus should not be solely on Black or White backgrounds but on embracing diversity.

It is important for mentors to truly understand the challenges faced by their mentees, recognising the importance of openness and awareness of diverse backgrounds.

What impact do you think the current state of black women representation in academia and research has on you as an academic, on staff and students?

I believe it’s essential to give back to the community you come from and to provide context for other ethnic groups regarding the importance of supporting that community. This impact extends beyond colleagues and staff; it also affects students, as there is a significant awarding gap among Black students compared to other ethnic groups. Research has shown that having more Black staff can positively influence this awarding gap.

Representation is incredibly important in everything we do. Everyone has a voice and a role to play in this initiative. It’s about fostering hope and ensuring that all voices are heard. Collectively, these voices can create a substantial impact.

Wherever you go as a Black or non-White staff member or academic, your presence matters. The more representation we have from various ethnic groups, the more diverse our student body will be, which can lead to greater benefits for both students and staff.

As a lecturer, can you share an example of how diverse representation (black women representation) has positively influenced students?

I can recall different scenarios of students walking up to me after classes and telling me they're really pleased to see me here. During open days, parents approach me and say: “This is one of the best open days they've had”. And not just blacks, but people covering their heads (hijabis).

What are the things that stand in the way of having academic representations of various minority groups, especially regarding black women's representation?

I believe that research funding is vital for academics in research and knowledge exchange. In academia, the more funding one receives, the more progress one can make.

For those primarily teaching, having access to a supportive network where challenges can be shared and preferred solutions discussed is essential for advancing black academic professionals. Equitable access to such networks and resources, especially concerning career development and progression for black academics.

It is great to see a support network for black academics, and I am hopeful that in decades to come, we'll see a significant improvement in our current situation.

Mentorship is vital in this process. A good mentor will help identify your strengths and weaknesses, signposting you to opportunities that can help you thrive. It is important to find someone who understands your situation and whom you can trust enough to share your experience. And that person will be able to signpost you. And like I said, it's not about receiving and receiving. It's also all about you coming out of your shell, ticking off the boxes and doing your own digging exploration. It shouldn't be one-sided, and somehow, there's reverse mentoring, emphasising walking together, which keeps relationships healthy and sustainable.

The first step is to find a mentor and build trust in the person. Being vulnerable and expressing your need for support will enhance your experience.

What steps are institutions already taking, or that you would like to see them take, to help support black female academics and representation a little bit more?

I believe other institutions can model what the UWE is doing by recognising the challenges and problems within their institutions. It’s important to say this is not limited to black female academics only, but other groups, including women of various backgrounds and men, particularly black men, as they also encounter significant challenges in workplaces, and they don’t talk about it.
So it's all about institutions identifying these issues and acknowledging them as part of ongoing dialogue. Now it's time to work collectively and collaboratively to provide a solution.
Additionally, fostering a strong sense of community within institutions is crucial. Establishing supportive networks for black staff and other ethnic groups can greatly aid their career advancement. This will encourage multidisciplinary collaboration and connect staff with opportunities beyond the institution.

Any other thoughts or themes you would like to discuss, and closing comments.

I am deeply passionate about making a positive impact on not only Black female academics but all academics. I believe in the importance of serving humanity. What I share with others becomes part of me, while what I keep to myself remains isolated. I am enthusiastic about transforming lives and reshaping the narratives surrounding the under-representation of Black ethnic groups, particularly in academia, where my own background comes into play.

> “ It's ... all about you coming out of your shell... ...find a mentor... build trust...”

Hard to Reach or Hardly Reached? - Rethinking the language of Inclusion in Public Health and Social Care

BY BIMPE KUTI-MATEKENYA

Language as a Determinant of Practice

In health and social care, language matters. It shapes perceptions, drives policy and influences practice. One term that continues to echo through strategy documents, funding applications and project briefs is “hard to reach”. It is most often used to describe service users, carers and communities who are not engaging with services or whose voices are absent from decision-making. This conceals a deeper, more troubling problem. But we must ask: who is truly hard to reach, and who is doing the reaching?

The phrase “hard to reach” subtly blames individuals and communities for their absence from systems that were never designed with them in mind. It implies a deficit on their part – unwillingness, apathy, invisibility, when in fact, many so – called (hard to reach” groups have been systematically excluded, marginalised or ignored. The issue is not that they are unreachable, but rather that institutions have not meaningfully reached out.

A more accurate and respectful framing is that these groups are *hardly reached*. This subtle shift in language acknowledges the failure of systems to create inclusive, accessible and trust-building mechanisms for engagement. It recognises historical trauma, cultural mismatch, language barriers and socio-economic constraints as factors that service users and carers live through, not as excuses for their non-participation. This shift in terminology is not simply about semantics, it is about reframing power, responsibility, and trust. It asks us to examine who defines reach, who is doing the reaching, and what barriers have been rooted into the way services are designed and delivered.

As someone deeply involved in championing Service User and Carer Involvement, I have seen the transformative impact when people are actively invited, resourced and supported to contribute. When the ‘reach’ is intentional, culturally aligned and relational, not transactional, people respond. They always have something to say. They just have not always been listened to.

In public health and social care, one of the numerous mission, is to improve population health and reduce inequalities. Yet the persistent use of the phrase “hard to reach” contributes to the very inequalities we aim to tackle. It obscures the structural, cultural, economic, and institutional factors that exclude individuals from care, from participation, and from having their voices heard.

Communities described as “hard to reach” are often those experiencing the greatest burden of ill health and are at the centre of health inequality. When these populations are absent from service planning, service commissioning and service delivery, public health research, or policy development, the system is weakened. Critical insights are missed, we perpetuate blind spots, and we widen the health equity gap.

The Responsibility to Reach Better

Reframing these groups as hardly reached directs attention back to institutions, professionals, and systems. It requires active practice based reflective enquiry into questions such as:

- Have we truly created spaces where people feel safe, seen, and heard?
- Are our methods of engagement inclusive, trauma-informed, and culturally relevant?
- Do our workforce and leadership reflect the diversity of the populations we serve?
- Are we funding and resourcing the community infrastructure needed to build trust over time?

This is particularly relevant in the current climate where public health and social care systems are grappling with the aftermath of COVID-19, deepening health disparities, and an urgent call for more participatory, co-produced approaches to care and prevention.

Reflective, strength-based narratives build trust. People don’t refuse engagement, they respond when they feel acknowledged, respected, and authentically invited. This is the difference between performing outreach and practicing inclusion.

Listening and Co-design: Relational Engagement in Action

As a care practitioner, I have witnessed the profound difference it makes when we do the hard work of reaching - when we meet people on their terms, partner with community leaders, and acknowledge lived experience as equal to academic or professional expertise. People want to be heard. But they want to be heard with respect, not as a tick-box exercise.

It is time we reframe this narrative. Moving from "hard to reach" to "hardly reached" shifts responsibility back where it belongs – onto the systems and structures that must change to become genuinely inclusive. This is not just about inclusive language—it's about inclusive practice. It's about designing public health and social care systems that are relational, responsive, and representative. Only then can we begin to close the inequality gap and fulfil the promise of public health for all.

Toward Inclusive Language, Inclusive Systems

To fulfil public health's promise, services must be relational, responsive, and representative. Language is the gateway to trust. Inclusive naming practices, rooted in evidence and policy precedent, signal respect. Structural competence frameworks reaffirm that inequity is rooted in design, not individuals, and policy frameworks like Core20PLUS5 and NICE's equalities-focused guidance embed these concepts into actionable commitments.

To close the inequality gap, it is important to stop labelling people as problems and instead, redesign systems to listen, learn, and adapt with the communities they seek to serve. It's time to start redesigning services that are open, humble and curious enough to listen.

Bio:

Bimpe Kuti-Matekenya is Programme Lead for Public Health Programmes at the University of Greater Manchester. With over 10 years' experience across practice, academia, and research, she specialises in Public Health, Social Care, and Service User and Carer Involvement. As University Lead for Service User and Carer Involvement, she champions the integration of lived experience into curriculum, teaching, and assessment and research. Her ongoing PhD research explores how co-production and involvement of people with lived experience can drive health and social care transformation, underpinned by a strong focus on health equity, inclusion, using qualitative research methodologies.

MENTORING MID-CAREER BLACK WOMEN ACADEMICS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF DIVERSE ACADEMIC REPRESENTATION

Interviewed by Dr Daniela Duc

Who is Hephzibah Egede and tell us about your journey in academia and research?

I am dual qualified lawyer. After my National Youth Service in Nigeria, I worked in Chris Ogunbanjo & Co, Nigeria's first indigenous Commercial law firm. I then took a gap period to volunteer with my local church and also did some legal consultancy work. I worked for a year as a contract lawyer in Mobil Producing Oil Nigeria (an Exxon Mobil upstream subsidiary) before moving over to the United Kingdom to join my family. I engaged first in research as an independent researcher before taking up a role as research associate within the ESRC funded BRASS Centre at Cardiff University (BRASS: Business Relationships, Accountability, Sustainability and Society). In that role, I created the first Law and Your Environment website with Prof RG Lee for the United Kingdom Environmental Law Association (UKELA).
I took up a full time role with the Buckingham Law School in the University of Buckingham working first as a lecturer and then as a senior lecturer of Law. In this capacity, I founded and served as co-director of the University of Buckingham Centre for Extractive Energy Studies (UBCEES). I then joined Cardiff Metropolitan University and took up the role as the first programme director for the LLB law programme. I pioneered this programme and led in its validation and revalidation. I continue to lead this programme till date.

Dr Hephzibah Egede

Senior Lecturer in Law
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Mentoring Mid-Career Black Women Academics

Have you experienced mentoring previously and how has your experience of it been so far?

I think mentoring is very helpful, especially from the perspective of boosting morale and enhancing career progression. My experience of mentoring has been both formal and informal. For example, Cardiff University offers very good formal alumni mentoring which I have found to be quite positive. At the Cardiff Metropolitan University, my current institution, I have also had formal mentoring for my senior fellowship which I found quite helpful.

Mentoring:
Access to information is key for career progression.

The second one is informal mentoring. This has been useful. For example, at the Cardiff University and in the University of Buckingham, I had senior colleagues who acted as my allies. They served as informal soundboards that I could talk to. They provided me with guidance on different aspects of my career.

No matter the type of mentoring (formal or informal), I would recommend that you make good use of it when it is provided. Even if you are not provided with formal mentoring, you can still **be proactive and make the effort to find informal mentors or allies**. In other words, be proactive in investing in yourself.

What are the key challenges that mid-career black women in research are facing at the moment?

I suppose my journey has been interesting in the sense that I have had to transition from one type of career to another due to moving from one country to another.

Because of this transition, there are a range of things that I have had to process and navigate my way through. To be honest, a transition process would definitely impact on career progression. This is because in many instances, you have to restart or reconfigure your career. I think this could pose a challenge as sometimes it makes you wonder where you are in your career journey and whether you have made as much progression in your career as desired.

This is why when you're transitioning from one career to another, you need to have good access to information that would help you have better insight on what is required for progression and promotion in different sectors.

This is not necessarily peculiar to black women as most people have to navigate their way through work to develop a better understanding of the organisational culture or the system that they work in.

What more can be done in your opinion?

Perhaps more can be done in terms of actively encouraging network groups or support groups for black and minoritised women in the academia.

It would also be good to think about the role that executive coaching may play in preparing for significant leadership roles. The literature shows that mentoring and coaching are two different things. I think that executive coaching may be useful in ensuring more black female academics attain more significant leadership roles.

I read somewhere that the lack of executive coaching may contribute to some extent as to why we do not see too many women including black women achieve significant high level positions in higher education. It is may be that more executive coaching needs to be done in this area.

In my current role, I have had the opportunity to participate in a leadership programme which has offered some coaching in boosting my leadership skills and qualities. I would like to see more leadership coaching opportunities offered to black and minoritised women in the academia. I would also recommend that some of these programmes should be specifically designed to meet the needs of black and minoritised women in mid-career roles.

The contributions of black women and other minoritised groups need to be better recognised. We are highly competent and we should not be regarded as providing some token representation in higher education as is sometimes suggested. I would like to see more celebration of the meaningful contributions that we make in higher education in teaching, administration, innovation, student recruitment and in research.

Significance of Diverse Academic Representation

What are your thoughts about the state of representation of black women currently in academia?

More black women need to be in certain positions not just for the purposes of tokenism or fulfilling a particular target. There are lots of competent black women and I think that there should be better ways of progressing to significant positions, in higher education.
I'm not saying this in the sense that black women should be given roles just to meet a specific target. No, it should be based on merit and competence. However, more needs to be done to ensure that an equal level playing field is provided to facilitate the career progression of mid-level career black female academics. This would encourage others along the journey.

What impact do you think improving the current state of black women representation in academia and research can have on staff and students?

I think this would help to inspire students that come from diverse represented groups. It obviously may put more pressure on us to represent our communities as best as we can and to strive harder to deliver exemplary work. But I think more representation of black women in academia would be inspirational especially for the diverse range of students that we teach in the class room.

What are the things that institutions or individuals can do to encourage black women and other diverse people to join academia and research?

Provide information about the roles and opportunities in the sector. I think that is already being done to some extent but widening access to information could be better. Offer trusted allies and mentors to support black women and other minoritised groups in their career journey.
I may seem to be repeating myself, but I think that these support mechanisms would help to broaden the trajectory of black women that we have in significant roles in higher education.

We know that black women have higher challenges than probably their male counterpart. So just providing them as much support as you can during the course of their career journey will help. But again, I keep on highlighting the fact that Black women are highly competent and our presence in higher education should not be regarded as providing some token representation.
Tokenism is never acceptable as it promotes negative branding. I repeat black and minoritised women are highly competent in the jobs and roles that they work in and should be better recognised for the contributions that they make in higher education.

> Representation:
> Black women are not there as tokens. Black women are competent.

Any last thoughts or words of encouragement for any black women academic reading this today?

I probably would say 'know yourself' and have a clear idea of your career expectations. Be clear on what you want to achieve in your career. You must also reflect on what stage that you are at in your journey and how you intend to advance in career progression no matter how long it takes. Seek for allies, if you don't have a formalised mentoring structure. And, then keep being motivated in the journey and understand the diverse ranges of careers that are available. If one door doesn't open then it may be time to explore and proactively seek other possibilities.
In keeping with equality frameworks and goals, institutions could still do more to provide black and minoritised women with more support mechanisms to attain significant roles in higher education. However, we still have to take ownership of our career journeys and excel in all we do.
In doing so, it is important to remain focused and motivated in the actualisation of our career goals regardless of challenges along the way.

Professor Steve Eichhorn
University of Bristol, England, UK

"I CAN SPEAK AS A WHITE MAN WHO HAS BEGUN TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE RACIALIZED AS WHITE AND TO RECOGNIZE HOW THAT RACIALIZATION OPERATES"

TALKING WITH PROFESSOR STEVE EICHHORN ABOUT BEING AN ALLY

Interviewed by
Dr Daniela Duc & Dr Ivana Rozic

Who is Steve Eichhorn and tell us about your journey in research?

I'm Steve Eichhorn. I am a white male, and my research journey began back in the early 1990s. I formally joined academia about 30 years ago when I undertook a master's program that included a research component. That project was at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology. The program was in Forestry and Paper Science. Before that, I completed a degree in Physics at the University of Leeds. After the master's program, I went on to do a PhD in the same department, the Department of Paper Science. In the late 1990s, I did a postdoc in Materials Science at Manchester. There was a Department of Materials Science there back then and there still is today, now part of the University of Manchester. After my postdoc, I was fortunate to be appointed as a lecturer in 2002. That's when I really began my own independent research career in Materials Science, focusing on the science and engineering of cellulose.

I continued that work until 2011, when I moved to the University of Exeter in the Southwest. I'm originally from Manchester, so that was a big move, a completely new part of the country for me. I've been living in Exeter ever since. I later moved to Bristol in 2017, where I've been for the past eight years as a Professor. I held a professorial position at Exeter as well before joining Bristol. My research is all about cellulose and bio-based materials. I also work on composites, fibers, functional materials, energy storage devices, and biomaterials. Over the years, we've explored a wide range of topics, including fiber spinning, but our main focus has consistently been on cellulose as a material.

I also spent a short time in industry … about a year … but my career has mostly been in academia. That said, I've held a variety of other jobs earlier in my life. My first job was on a farm, and I've also worked in supermarkets. During my university years, I had to take on part-time jobs to support myself. Those experiences gave me a broader perspective on the workplace, one that extends beyond academia.

What is your current role, and how does your leadership fit into your day-to-day work at the university?

I'm a Professor of Materials Science and Engineering. I'm also the Director of a Centre for Doctoral Training in Composites Science, Engineering, and Manufacturing. My job mainly entails research, that's really the focus of my role now. A fellowship took me out of a lot of the teaching I used to do, which has allowed me to dedicate more time to research. That fellowship also includes an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) programme, which I chose to focus around Black and Black-heritage staff and students. I can tell you a bit more about the motivations for that as we go along, but essentially my day-to-day work is a mix of research and supporting others.

As I've progressed through my career, it's become less and less about building my own career and more about supporting building the careers of others. I do quite a lot of mentorship and really try to help my team grow as individuals. I've now had thirty PhD students graduate… the thirtieth just this year, actually. That was quite a milestone and made me think, "Goodness, I'm getting old!"

But really, I enjoy spending time with young people and students helping them realize their dreams and ambitions. That's a big part of the job for me. Even in research, there's a strong teaching element. I've always believed that universities are fundamentally educational institutions; everything we do is about learning.

Even within research, we're engaged in education. We're learning new things, breaking new ground, and trying to understand the physical world within our discipline. That process of discovery, especially when shared with early-career researchers and PhD students — is incredibly rewarding.

So that's what I spend most of my time doing. You tend to spend your time on the things you enjoy, right? And I'm lucky — I recognize that I'm in a very privileged position to be able to do that.

Why have you started getting more involved with EDI, not just as part of your formal role, but also in terms of your personal focus? My understanding is that your work with the Centre for Doctoral Training has a strong EDI component. So what has motivated you to become more engaged in that space?

I was born in Manchester, but my parents moved us out quite early on to a rural village near Crewe. I grew up in this small village with very little diversity. I mean, we did have traveller communities there, which was probably the main form of diversity we experienced. I've reflected on that recently, recognizing that as a form of diversity in itself.

But otherwise, I went to school in a largely white environment. We didn't encounter much diversity in everyday village life. My parents, though, were always quite open-minded. Our home was welcoming; people would come through, and I did experience some diversity there … hearing people's stories, listening to what they were going through.

The real turning point for me came when I went to university, to Leeds University. I always tell this story. During "Intro Week," as they called it then (the first week of induction), we were all gathered in the hall of residence in Leeds. Our hall warden stood up and said: "Whatever you do, don't go into this area called Chapeltown — it's trouble, you'll get yourself into trouble if you go there."

Of course, that area, Chapeltown, was largely the Afro-Caribbean area of Leeds, as it was referred to at the time. So that was my introduction to the city, being told to avoid a whole community because it was supposedly "trouble."

Growing up in my village, many of the local farmers were openly racist. They would say racist things all the time — based on ignorance. And I was ignorant too, if I'm honest. I simply didn't have much experience of difference or diversity.

But I did have an instinct to question things. I would argue back — saying, "Surely that's nonsense, what you're saying?" Those experiences made me start to think critically about myself and my own views. I began to challenge the assumptions and preconceptions I'd grown up around.

When I moved on to Manchester later in life, I realized that I'd probably been doing "EDI work" before I even knew what EDI was. It wasn't really a thing back in the 1990s, at least, it wasn't talked about the way it is now.

In my academic career, I eventually became Director of Undergraduate Studies. That meant that any student facing serious issues would come to me. I began noticing that Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic or, as we now say, Global Majority — students were coming to me with very different kinds of problems than my white students. Their concerns were contextual, tied to identity, race, ethnicity and experience, and that really opened my eyes.

Over the years, I moved between several institutions. When I was in Manchester, which is quite a diverse city, I got involved in various youth programmes. I used to attend church, I don't anymore, but back then, I helped run youth clubs in the city centre, in areas like Moss Side and Old Trafford, which have large Global Majority and Black communities. Those experiences gave me very different perspectives on life.

I'm a white guy, but I started to see things from new angles. Later, when I became Head of Department at Exeter — Head of Engineering — I was asked to lead our Athena SWAN submission. The university wanted all departments to achieve an Athena SWAN award.

We built a new team, shifted the culture, and eventually earned the award. But that process made me think: this isn't just about gender, it must also be about other forms of inequality and exclusion.

I distinctly remember the first wave of the Black Lives Matter movement, before George Floyd. There was a protest in the centre of campus, organized by Black students at Exeter. That moment really made me stop and think: ***What's it like for Black students here?***

So I started talking to some of them, listening to their experiences. What I heard was powerful: "I'm visible, but I'm invisible." Those words came mostly from Black women students who were leading the protest.

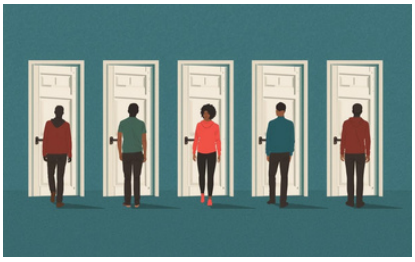
And, interestingly, I found that in most EDI work I was involved in, it was also mostly women, and particularly Black women, who were stepping forward and doing the work. That struck me deeply. Why were they the ones putting themselves forward? Why weren't white men, people like me, doing something too?

I moved to Bristol University in 2017. I found that people there weren't very open to talking about race or racism. That's when I really started to delve into this topic and tried to educate myself. I remember reading *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race?* I had to almost force myself to read it, because when I saw the title, I thought, *How can anyone be saying this to me?* I'd always considered myself fairly thoughtful about these issues but it turned out I hadn't really reflected on myself as a white man, or on what the real issues actually were. That book opened my eyes to the systemic nature of racism, something I hadn't fully understood before. Maybe about ten years earlier, I'd begun to sense that there was something structural about racism. It wasn't just about individual acts or someone calling someone a name. There were systems and structures within our universities that clearly weren't serving certain groups of people.

Reading that book really crystallized it for me. I realised that the focus shouldn't just be on what I call transactional racism, one person saying something offensive to another. It's much deeper than that. There are systems and structures that exclude, that fail to support, and that, if we're being honest, are racist, even if people don't want to see them that way. They don't see it because they lack a systemic understanding of racism. So I thought, ***We've got to engage with this and start opening up conversations.***

In my department within our EDI committee, I was probably the one who said, "What about race? Let's start talking about that." And that's how we began, by opening the conversation, particularly within engineering. We also developed programmes and training for staff to create space for those conversations. Now, I didn't lead those sessions myself and for good reason. I can't speak from the experience of being a Black woman. But I can speak as a white man who has begun to understand what it means to be racialized as white and to recognize how that racialization operates.

It's not just about the colour of my skin, though that's the visible marker. It's about the structure, the system that enables me to move through life with certain advantages. Looking back at my academic career, I can identify key moments when I was given chances, when doors opened for me, when someone spoke highly of me in a meeting I wasn't even in, when I was offered opportunities despite not always being the top candidate. And I can't help but ask myself: ***if I hadn't been white, would those doors have opened in the same way?***



I'll share a story from much earlier in life. I wasn't a particularly good student at school, I used to misbehave quite a bit. One day, a couple of my friends were in a shop, and one of them decided to shoplift, as people at my school sometimes did. We were caught by the store detective and ran out. I wasn't the one stealing, but of course I ran too. When we got to the back of the shop, we ran straight into my form teacher and a couple of other teachers. I can still picture it. They managed to talk the store detective out of taking it any further. And I think about that moment now, how different that outcome might have been if I'd not been white. That experience, among others, has made me reflect on how privilege operates, across education, crime, health, and other systems. I don't think it's helpful to frame people purely as victims, but I do think we have to acknowledge the systemic barriers that exist, or not depending on ethnicity.

That same book, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, also pointed to another striking issue: that Black students do achieve top grades. The data are there. So, the question becomes: if achievement is there, what are the barriers that prevent those students from thriving equally within the system? That, I think, is something we still need to confront.

What do you reckon are the challenges that Black women face, the ones you've heard about or observed, that are really important for people to understand or pay attention to?

What they've often told me is that they feel like they're the only one, one of very few, or sometimes literally the only Black woman in their year group.

We often look at data in a very broad-brush way. We say, "Oh, we've got an increase in Black students," or, "We've got more Black women," if we're looking at intersections. But when you break it down into individual courses, lecture theatres, and everyday spaces, it can still come down to one person, a single individual.

And that can lead to feelings of isolation of not being heard, or of being ignored. Some have told me that when they walk down the corridor alone, people don't acknowledge them. But if they're walking with white colleagues, suddenly they're greeted or recognized. I've heard that story several times.

I've also heard that they feel they have to constantly prove themselves, working several times harder than their white peers just to be seen as equally capable. They say they're not getting the same breaks or opportunities.
That's not just from Black women academics, but also from Black women working in other university roles, administration, research, professional services. I've spoken to people across all these levels, in all the universities I've worked in, and they've told me similar things.

They often describe being the only one, seeing others, particularly white colleagues with fewer qualifications, being promoted ahead of them. They talk about their work being scrutinized more closely than that of their white counterparts.

So the challenges facing Black women in academia, whether academics, researchers, or professional staff, are multiple and layered. Now, I should say that I have also spoken to some Black researchers and staff who've told me they haven't experienced these issues personally, so it's not universal. But what strikes me is that I've never once had a white academic come to me and say they've faced the same kinds of challenges. And that, I think, tells you something important. So I think **representation is a big problem.** Clearly, being listened to is another one. That's a major issue. Often, when Black women speak up, they're interrupted, or people question whether what they experienced "was really racism." That's a common problem, they don't feel truly listened to. And I don't think they're always looking for a solution from me. Often, they just want to be heard … to have someone acknowledge their experience and accept it as their reality.

So, to the second part of your question, how I support them, the first and most important thing is simply to be there. To listen. To really hear what they're saying, because sometimes it's the first time anyone has actually listened to them. Another challenge is the lack of representation itself. Very often, Black women don't have someone else in their environment who shares their experiences or understands what they're going through.

In engineering, for example, I worked with one of my Black students to help set up the Black Engineers Society, which now exists at Bristol. That was really positive … it created a space where Black students could come together and support one another. There's so much diversity within that group, different backgrounds, nationalities, and experiences. A Black UK female student, for instance, may have very different needs from an international Black student. But what matters is giving them the space and voice to express those needs. It's not about me speaking for them, that's not what's required. They need to speak for themselves. I can't speak on their behalf because, as I've said, I don't know what it's like to be in their position. I've been in lots of forums where people have tried to speak for others, and I just don't think that's right. Sometimes, of course, you do need to step up and speak out — especially when you have the platform or the data to back it up. But supporting Black women also means knowing when to step back and let them speak. Someone once told me it's called "taking the mic" — letting them take the mic, rather than feeling you have to hold it all the time. That really resonated with me. It's important to know when to listen, not lead.

When you talked about structures that might cause issues in terms of diversity, there are of course structures that exist on paper or physically — but there are also more abstract ones. Based on your experience, could you tell us a little bit about what those systemic structures were that you found problematic in terms of providing access or expanding opportunities?

When I looked at the original list of schools that Bristol University would go to … this was back then, and things have changed quite a bit now. But when I looked at the original list, it was very, very white. I don't want to point the finger particularly at Bristol here, because I've found the same thing in other universities as well. Please do put that in the article.I don't mind getting in trouble for this, by the way. Sometimes people can get a bit touchy about their university, but honestly, I don't mind.

Going back to my role, I think if you're going to be an ally, it's not really about you. It's not some act of benevolence, it's not like you're doing someone a favour. You have to be willing to put yourself in a position where you might lose something. Somebody once said, actually it was a Black man speaking to an audience, not to me directly — he said, *"We talk about white privilege, but perhaps 'structural advantage' is a better term."* Then he asked, *"How much of your white privilege are you prepared to give up?"*

That question really stayed with me. Because if you sit in a position where the status quo is working for you — and for most white people, it is — then how much are you prepared to change to make sure it works for everyone? To do that, you have to give up a little bit of that advantage. That's something Reni Eddo-Lodge talks about in her book — that idea of the inherent racial advantage you're born with. Anyway, going back to the structures, what I noticed was that the list of schools was very limited. So I went down to talk to Aisha Thomas (Founder and Director of Representation Matters) at City Academy and asked, "Why aren't your students coming to Bristol University?" It's a school that's about 70% Black and still is, actually; we still work with them. And she said to me, *"They see it as a racist institution."* So I asked, *"What does that mean?"* She said, *"That's how they perceive it. They see that it's not a place for them."* They'd rather go somewhere else, like UWE, the University of the West of England. If they go to university, they'll go there, because that's where Black students generally feel more at home. They don't come to the University of Bristol. And actually, if you look at the Hamilton Commission (research project launched by Lewis Hamilton and the Royal Academy of Engineering to understand and address the lack of representation of Black people in UK), I've just been elected a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Engineering … which I'm very pleased about … but part of that recognition comes from this kind of work, and from the research and engagement I've been involved in. So, the Hamilton Commission, set up by Lewis Hamilton to try and get more Black people into engineering, particularly in Formula One and the racing car industry really highlights the systemic issue. If you look at their findings, you can see that Black students don't tend to go to Russell Group universities to study engineering; they'll often go to other institutions instead. So it's not just about Bristol. But the very subtle systemic issue I found was this: when I went back to my university leaders and shared what I'd learned, they said, "Oh no, we have to change *their* attitudes towards that." They didn't perceive themselves to be a racist institution. They thought the problem lay with the people coming in and how *they* saw it, rather than recognising that the reality might actually be different. So there's a subtlety there … although, in truth, it's not that subtle. There's often a lack, institutionally, of a realisation that, yes … systemically, we *are* a racist institution. The admission of that fact is important. Now, is the University of Bristol institutionally racist? Actually, Bristol has been pretty good recently in trying to address that — and in fact, in admitting that yes, it is. I have to acknowledge that, because it's taken real work even to get to that point.

But I think universities, in general, need to adopt the mindset that they are part of the problem, that the way they're structured contributes to it. So that's one issue, but it's also something embedded in people's minds, not just in policy or systems. If I look at most universities — well, all the universities I've worked in — they don't often have multiple routes to entry. They're very strict about that. And I'm not going to say it's about A-level scores, because Black women get good A-level scores, right? It's really about having different routes in, having a variety of ways to enter engineering. Engineering itself has a problem in that it tends to have a very rigid view of who an engineer is and what an engineer should be. That's a structural problem.

There's often a lack, institutionally, of a realisation that, yes … systemically, we are a racist institution.

Now, there are more apprenticeship routes, which is good. **We started running this initiative called *Black Mentors*,** where we'd bring young people in from Bristol schools — largely Black students. That was quite difficult to organise, actually, because some schools weren't fully on board. We had a number of practicing engineers involved — Black engineers, many of them women — and I was struck by the variety of their entry routes into engineering. They spoke about doing apprenticeships, about families who didn't want them to go to university but wanted them to get jobs and earn money. So many came into university later on. But universities don't always make that easy. For example, Bristol doesn't offer many degree apprenticeships. Exeter does, and I think Manchester does some, but the Russell Group universities generally don't. We also lack access courses. In short, we're just not open enough to the richness and diversity of people and their creativity — and that's something engineering still doesn't foster enough. I think that's a systemic, structural issue.

Another big part of this is the international outlook of universities. Funding has become a major issue, so they rely heavily on international students to fill that gap. But I suspect, and I've seen this myself, that if I asked my colleagues, "Does the University of Bristol offer a better education than a university in, say, a West African country?" they'd probably say, "Yes, of course it does." But that's a mindset, a colonial mindset. We did some work on decolonisation recently and even wrote a book about it with some colleagues. The UK still tends to view itself as the "mother country", as the model for education. But actually, West African students are just as well trained, just as bright, and just as capable as students anywhere else. I've had many women from West African countries come through my programmes, and I've seen that talent firsthand. Yet some of them have told me that, when they applied to Bristol, their peers back home were surprised … saying things like, "They're not going to accept you," even though their grades were entirely equivalent. We really have to challenge that perception, that idea that equivalence somehow doesn't mean the same thing when it's coming from another part of the world. When we ran the Black Mentors programme, I remember a Black woman, one of the mentors, who stood up and said, "When I came to university…" She was from a West African country, and she said, "I didn't recognise the engineering they were teaching. It wasn't something I could relate back to my experience in my own country." And I think there's something really important there, about making courses more relevant to people, their experiences, and their circumstances. We also need to allow students to develop their research within those contexts, so they're better prepared for different environments.

"I think the Black Mentors programme really works….Another thing that I believe has worked is positive action recruitment."

What are some of the things you've seen so far that have really worked and that you think should be continued or explored further?

I think the *Black Mentors* programme really works. I've tried to get involved in things that have a long-term impact, that leave a lasting legacy. The *Black Mentors* initiative is great, but having consistent funding to run it year after year is actually quite difficult. I've been fortunate during the fellowship to have some funding for it, but that's the only reason it's been possible. It's not something that happens across the whole university or in every department but if it did, I think it could serve as a really strong template. It benefits both the students and the mentors. They get a lot out of it, coming together, sharing experiences, and realising, "Oh, we're not alone." I've always been amazed, even just sitting with them over coffee, listening to their conversations. They build a sense of solidarity through that engagement. It also works from another perspective, for me and for white colleagues, because it gives us a chance to listen and learn about what's really going on. That, I think, is incredibly valuable. Another thing that I believe has worked is **positive action recruitment.** It's a lesser-used tool within employment law, but I've made use of it. It's not positive discrimination; it's positive action. It allows you to consider a candidate's lived experience when that experience can genuinely contribute to the role. If you can demonstrate that there's a significant shortfall in representation, and there usually is, then it's valid. Many of the Black students, especially Black women, who've come to me over the years have said, "I've never had a Black lecturer or a Black professor." And that really affects their sense of belonging and well-being at university.

So why isn't that taken into account when hiring, the importance of representation, of reflecting the diversity of our student body? I think that can work very well, as long as it's done properly. I just think there's an exclusion issue, that people are excluded from entering academia.

What else has worked? Well, I've done some really great work with a group called **CARGO** — that's *Charting African Resilience, Generating Opportunities*. They're a Black-led business based in Bristol. One of the main people involved, Dr Lawrence Hoo, who's a poet, has a poem where he says, "When I went to school, I didn't learn about the achievements of my ancestors, of people like me. I learned about slavery, about how we were enslaved and taken away." But we didn't hear about our people's achievements, the civilizations that existed in West African countries, the universities that were there long before Western universities existed. So CARGO started doing work around history, going back to what we call origin stories, exploring the periods before slavery, and also during slavery, focusing on uprisings that happened in the Caribbean islands. Because, often, when white people talk about slavery, they quickly move to the abolitionists … you know, people like William Wilberforce — and the narrative becomes about how these "great men" ended slavery single-handedly. But what about the Black people who resisted, who stood up to slavery, who fought for their own freedom? CARGO tells those stories. And then we thought, well, why not extend that to STEM subjects, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics?

So we developed lesson plans around figures like Dr Lonnie Johnson, who's a NASA engineer. You can actually find those lessons on the CARGO website. These lessons work because they run alongside the national curriculum — for Key Stages 3 and 4 — supplementing what's already there, but with context. They include demonstrations of science and engineering concepts, all centred around this figure, Dr Lonnie Johnson, the inventor of the Super Soaker, the high-pressure water pistol, and the NERF gun.
The other thing is and this is often forgotten, you know we have Black History Month and so on. And I talked to a lot of Black women about Black History Month and they say, well, I'm black 365 days of the year. And this is basically history, why is it not just history? Why are we not written into all histories? Because we're there. We're there all the time. Right? So there is another aspect to this and I think, and I think it's important. It's 365 days of the year.
But also it's not just for people of Black, you know, heritage, it is for white people too, because they need to know about the achievements of Black people. They need to know, you know, there's a re-education to be had. I didn't learn about this at school I wasn't taught this. I was taught about, I don't know. The Romans. Henry the eighth. You know Queen Elizabeth the second. The Second World War. It was those things. But it was very white. It was Winston Churchill, It was these people.. Even when we talk about slavery, the focus is often on a white person who supposedly "saved" all these people from slavery. The emphasis is misplaced.

I think we need to disrupt that narrative, and I do think that approach has worked. It makes people stop and think; it changes perceptions.
Another thing that I think has worked really well is the work we've done around decolonisation. That's been incredibly valuable. At the university, we ran an open-access course on FutureLearn, which eventually attracted around 6,000 participants. What I appreciated most about it was that it created space for genuine dialogue. I'm very keen on that, I don't just want to talk to people who already agree with me; that doesn't interest me. I want real discussion and debate. This course provided exactly that, a forum for engaging with difficult, often contentious topics.

I think we need to know about Black women role models. **Althea Jones-Lecointe**, she was a biochemist in the UK, a research scientist doing her PhD in London during the 1960s and 70s. She also helped form the British Black Panther Movement in London. I think uncovering names and stories like hers is really important because they give STEM a different angle. Not only was she doing this incredible activism, but she was also completing her PhD at the same time, that's incredibly inspiring. Another example of a UK academic, not in STEM though, is **Olive Morris**. Have you heard of her? We don't often hear about British Black women like her. During Black History Month, for instance, we often hear a lot about figures such as Rosa Parks, who's American, but not as much about the Black British women who were equally influential.

Interviewer/ Daniela: I actually paint, I don't write, but I paint. That's why I really love the connection between art and science. I suppose I'm one of those rare or maybe weird ones, depending on how you look at it.

I think there are a lot of people like that out there and I'd love to see some of your art sometime. I'm a big appreciator of art.

What are your thoughts, especially within the current political context, whether here in the UK, in the US, across Europe, or even in other parts of the world like Africa, on how these political climates are affecting Black women academics … academics in general?

Yeah, I think it's very worrying at the moment. We're seeing a rise in the far right, and people seem to feel more emboldened to express anti-immigration opinions. What I'm hearing, again and again, is that this makes people from the Global Majority feel unwelcome in this country. We've had many years now of hard-line immigration policies, and all of that sends a message — "you don't belong." I think that's really detrimental, especially for Black women.

There's also this growing pushback against EDI, and that puts Black women in a very precarious position. As I've said before, when it comes to gender work, it's usually women who step up; when you intersect that with race, it's usually Black women. So they're often the ones trying to tip the balance and bring change in their institutions but now, with this backlash, they're exposed. It's already difficult for your career to take that kind of stand, and now there are fewer allies — people are afraid to speak up, worried it might affect their jobs or reputations. In the U.S., this is particularly acute. You can be fired simply for mentioning EDI, and everything is so heavily scrutinised. I hope we don't reach that stage here, because it would be incredibly damaging, especially for Black women. What we need, then, is to be vocal, to stand up and say we're against these trends, and to keep making the case for why this work matters. We do it because we want a better world — not just for some, but for everyone. I can't imagine any society that benefits from exclusion and fear.

Interviewer/Daniela: There's such diversity of course, today we're talking specifically about Black women, but everyone carries some form of diversity. And if we start to lose sight of that, eventually everyone will be affected …

You know I believe they don't fear what divides us. They fear what unites us […]. Access to healthcare, social structures, and support for education, especially for those who can't afford private education, all these things matter to everyone. We should look closely at movements led by Black women. I think back to the movements led by people like Olive Morris and Althea Jones-LeCointe here in the UK, and Angela Davis in the U.S. They were looking behind the system — at the real, systemic issues that effect everyone. Too often, we're deliberately divided, and that's not the point of diversity. And that division is purposeful so that these issues cannot be tackled.

I always get a bit frustrated by this narrative that the working class somehow has to bear the brunt of immigration, that they're the ones losing jobs or opportunities because of "others." But that's a deliberate ploy to divide people. We need to look critically at those structures and see them for what they are, because, as you have said, they affect everyone – and everyone carries some form of diversity. Whether it's people arriving on boats or people in post-industrial towns, like my own hometown, which is now deprived, at the end of the day, people want the same thing: a better life. That's where we need to find solidarity, in the shared desire for better outcomes for everyone. And I truly believe that if life within academia improves for Black women, it will improve for everyone, whatever their diversity. Within 'Black women' there is also incredible diversity anyway. So, everyone will benefit — better working conditions, better work-life balance, more fairness across the board.

Daniela/Interviewer: Part of resolving the problem is acknowledging the problem — that's how I see it. So, how do you see the future of Black women in academia and research moving forward, given everything we've discussed?

You know, there are some really great programmes, like the 100 Black Women Now programme. And yes, the numbers are still small, but we're, I don't know what it stands at now for Black women professors in the UK, is it…?

Daniela/Interviewer: Definitely over 100, they've definitely reached 100 now, yes, definitely.

Is it over 100 now? OK, because when it started, it was like, what — 30 or 40, something like that? So, I mean, it's still, you know, a drop in the ocean, but at least it's not a drought anymore. Things are changing. I can see a bright future. I see a bright future for the Black women in my group, they're doing great things, great research, and going on to do really good work afterwards. So yes, I think the future is bright. But, you know, the structures and the recognition of Black women's contributions to academia and research have to be much more widely acknowledged. There's still a lot that needs to change. I don't think we're ever going to completely rid universities of racism, I think it will always be there. And of course, as society develops, since racism is a societal construct, not a biological reality, it changes as society changes. So yes, I do worry that things might go backwards. We have to acknowledge that. Some Black women might be put off from coming into universities if they no longer feel like safe spaces. And we've got to be really careful with things like the free speech legislation that's coming in, careful that it doesn't open the door to hate speech. At the same time, we have to ask: what kind of speech is allowed, and who is allowed to speak?

Maybe there are also opportunities there, ways to ensure that the right conversations still happen under that framework. So yes, I'm hopeful, but I'm also doubtful. I think two things can be true at once and sometimes not true at the same time, too. There are multiple realities and multiple possible futures for Black women. We have to be mindful of them all. We can't just be super optimistic and say everything's going great — because clearly, it isn't.

"And I truly believe that if life within academia improves for Black women, it will improve for everyone whatever their diversity."

A final thought?

There's a book called *Inside the Ivory Tower: Narratives of Women of Colour Surviving and Thriving in British Academia* by Deborah Gabriel, a Black woman who I believe is at Bournemouth University, and Shirley Anne Tate. There's a quote in the book, from Deborah Gabriel:

"Our presence symbolizes visual diversity, often taken as a sign of progress, since diversity is frequently approached through higher education policy as a numbers game, where the aim is to add colour to the sea of White faces. Such approaches promote a conceptualization of Black people as additives to the existing structures and systems, which means that the institutional culture – which is the problem – remains unchanged while we get added to a system that was not created for us."

This makes a really important point: one thing that doesn't work is simply adding more Black faces. That's never going to bring real change. We have to change the systems and structures themselves; otherwise, nothing will change. This was put it absolutely perfectly. Unfortunately a lot of diversity schemes just add faces, and so nothing actually changes.

Practising Freedom

By Dr Tomos Owen

bell hooks, The Teaching Trilogy, comprising:

Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom
(originally published 1994; reprinted New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2024);

Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope
(originally published 2003; reprinted New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2024);

Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom
(originally published 2010; reprinted New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2024)

I

'Teaching is a performative act', declares bell hooks in Teaching to Transgress. The implications of this statement, as hooks shows, can be surprising, but they are significant and far-reaching. To describe teaching as a 'performative' act might invite us to consider similarities between what goes on in classrooms and what takes place on the stage: both activities occur in front of an audience who, ideally, will be watching and listening to the content being delivered before them. While this analogy is likely true of many kinds of teaching environments, it might be particularly resonant within the context of higher education, where teaching events are often held in theatres. Incorporated into the built environments and institutional practices of the modern university is an assumption that education is a kind of spectacle.

Such a spectacle –of teaching as a kind of theatricality and learning as a kind of show – is not what hooks has in mind, however. In describing teaching as a performative act hooks uses 'performative' in the stricter sense first adumbrated by the philosopher of language J.L. Austin in his 1962 book *How to do things with Words*. Austin's book famously outlines the difference between speech acts which are 'constative' and those which are 'performative'. A constative utterance is descriptive of a particular state of affairs and can be judged by its truth value. A performative utterance, by contrast, is language which brings about certain effects or which brings something into being. Promises, vows, oaths and declarations – such as when a judge passes a sentence or a priest declares a couple to be legally married – are all instances when language is used with a performative force to make something happen in the world; under the appropriate conditions, language is inaugural in the performance of certain acts. Since its initial appearance in Austin's book, the notion of the 'performative utterance' has been debated and developed across a wide range of fields and approaches. Judith Butler famously foregrounded the performative nature of gender as an identity 'instituted through a stylized repetition of acts'. For bell hooks, what happens in a classroom is also a performative act. Quite how this is the case, what it means and what are its implications, ranges widely across different contexts and takes several different forms: these are elaborated upon by hooks in the chapters that make up these three volumes. Nonetheless, the important thesis underpins the argument in each case. Teaching is performative in the sense that it *makes something happen*.

Teaching to Transgress was first published in 1994 and the book itself took on a performative force and made something happen. As hooks herself notes, the book opened up spaces and opportunities for conversations between herself and other teachers across a broad range of backgrounds about the theory and practice of teaching, about engaged pedagogy and the thorny questions of difference and struggle within the classroom. These conversations in turn prompted the addition of two further volumes – Teaching Community (2003) and Teaching Critical Thinking (2010) – which are by now known as hooks's 'Teaching Trilogy', though her approach to the topic permeates several of her other writings in addressing themes such as inclusion, participation, representation and liberation. hooks's choice of titles signals toward the animus behind the approach to teaching: to teach well is to be transgressive, to break from accepted norms and conventions; it is a way of building new communities and forging alliances across unexpected boundaries; it posits critical thinking and the asking of questions as central to a project of radical change.

II

Teaching makes something happen: that happening, however, cannot be scripted or programmed in advance. For hooks there is something fundamentally open and unpredictable about the act of teaching. No one, on either side of the teacher / student divide, can know exactly what will happen when they enter the classroom, nor what will be the effect. Recalling her own school days, hooks fondly invokes the classroom in contrast to a rigid home life which emphasised conformity and obedience; instead, school became a place where 'I could forget that self and, through ideas, reinvent myself' (*Transgress*, 3).

This is not to say that teaching is completely a random, unfocussed, off-the-cuff affair. As hooks makes clear across these chapters, effective teaching requires rigour, focus and attention. It requires an openness on behalf of teachers and the learners and calls for an ability to respond. For hooks, effective teaching is an experience of 'ecstasy', carrying with it both pleasure and danger: 'To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure. But to learn ideas that ran counter to values and beliefs learned at home was to place oneself at risk, to enter the danger zone' (*Transgress*, p. 3).

bell hooks is not the first or only thinker to emphasise the transformative and liberatory possibilities which follow from considering teaching as a performative act. The literary scholar J. Hillis Miller has written of the exhilaration of the unexpected or unforeseen insight that enters the classroom with transformative effect: the experience 'suddenly becomes no longer the presentation of something the teacher already knew when the class began. It becomes rather an active process of invention or discovery. Such teaching is an inaugural event in itself […]' (J. Hillis Miller, *Theory Now and Then*, p. 298). Like hooks, Miller was a literary scholar and theorist, so it is perhaps unsurprising to find that both thinkers relish those epiphanic moments in the classroom where insights arrive like unexpected gifts. Yet if both Miller and hooks share a structural similarity, there is an important difference of emphasis between them. Miller's writings emphasise that the call to teach is part of an obligation toward the *text* under discussion. Teaching is a process which exists on a continuum preceded by the singular and individual act of reading a text and followed by the dissemination and publication of that reading in a work of literary criticism. Thus, argues Miller, 'teaching is not primarily an interpersonal transaction oriented toward an interchange between teacher and students'; instead, it is the 'responsibility to the text' which spurs the teacher onwards, relegating students to the position of witnesses, spectators at an event where the teacher generates new and unexpected insights on the material under discussion.

For bell hooks, by contrast, effective teaching is nothing less than the practice of freedom itself. In this endeavour both teacher and students are involved as co-creators. Teaching is thus an act of invention and reinvention triangulating the text, the teacher and the students: no one is left unchanged by the encounter. If J. Hillis Miller's thesis orients the ultimate obligation of the class towards the text or material under discussion, bell hooks underscores the importance of the personhood of the participants within a classroom. As the title of the first volume indicates, there is something transgressive about this; as the second volume suggests, community is at the heart of the process.

Acts of teaching and learning are framed by contexts of race, gender and class from both sides. These intersecting identity categories form the focus of much of bell hooks's work, and the Teaching Trilogy is a powerful testament to their relevance to discussions of teaching and learning. Time and again, hooks emphasises the significance of the personhood of each member of the class and the importance of acknowledging what each participant brings with them in terms of background and identity. This extends to hooks herself. While she has written memoir and autobiography (notably *Bone Black*, published in 1996), the chapters of the Teaching Trilogy contain anecdotes and recollections which amount to a personal testimony of their own. We learn, for instance, of hooks's own formation in the initially segregated school system of her youth in Kentucky. The period of segregated schooling is recalled by hooks as the most intellectually and pedagogically invigorating period of her education: 'We learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act' (*Transgress*, p. 2). Perhaps unexpectedly, the shift towards a period of racial integration brought with it for hooks new forms of alienation and hierarchy, beginning in the classroom: 'Gone was the messianic zeal to transform our minds and beings […] Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved. […] Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us' (*Transgress*, p. 3). From here, hooks also describes the challenges facing her as a black woman from a working-class background when entering elite and predominantly white institutions, first as a graduate student and later as a member of faculty.

III

As she herself notes, hooks's personal formation and pedagogic practice are powerfully informed by the work of the Brazilian educator Paolo Freire. Freire's work, particularly the landmark *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), offered a revolutionary new understanding of critical pedagogy which placed social reality of learners at the heart of a teaching practice of liberation. Teaching for hooks becomes an act of service: 'Commitment to teaching well is a commitment to service' (*Community*, p. 83). The inheritance of Marxist and radical thought from theorists like Freire informs hooks's thesis around service, a notion which she argues is thoroughly devalued in an 'imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture' (*Community*, p. 83). Teaching-as-service may not be institutionally rewarded, yet it is for hooks a crucial bulwark of her intellectual practice. By 'serving' in a spirit of mutual commitment and self-reinvention – by thinking of teaching as a performative act – established and entrenched hierarchies are overturned. It is in this sense that hooks emphasises the 'transgressive' nature of effective critical pedagogy signalled by the title *Teaching to Transgress*. hooks frequently rails against what she describes as the 'banking system' of education (the term is derived from Freire). By this model, students are treated as repositories for knowledge; the teacher 'deposits' knowledge and students, like empty vessels, are gradually filled over time. Such a model reinforces structures of authority and hierarchy which privilege the dominant position of the teacher over the subservient position of learners.

Transgression and community are concepts which hooks shows to have hidden but very powerful attachments. Committing oneself to a model of teaching as 'service' is thus a transgressive act. It is also an act which has the potentially revolutionary and liberatory potential of building new forms of connection and community. As hooks says in a dialogue with Ron Scapp, 'When I enter the classroom at the beginning of the semester the weight is on me to establish that our purpose is to be, for however brief a time, a community of learners *together*. It positions me as a learner. But I'm also not suggesting that I don't have more power. And I'm not trying to say we're all equal here. I'm trying to say that we are all equal here to the extent that we are equally committed to creating a learning context' (*Transgress*, p. 153).

Form is therefore just as important as content. What we teach is important, but how we teach is equally significant. hooks teaches not only through content and argument but also through praxis and example. As she notes in *Teaching Community*, 'We may unwittingly collude with structures of domination because of the way learning is organized in institutions. Or we may gather material to teach that is non-biased and yet presented in a manner that is biased, thus reinforcing existing hierarchies' (*Community*, p. 45). There are important connections to be drawn between what happens in the classroom and broader social ideals and aspirations. Questions of voice, inclusivity, diversity, participation, and opportunity afforded to all members equally: these are concerns for teachers that are also a model for a democratic society.

Classrooms thus become models of community building. Educating democratically educates us in democracy. True to the openness of hook's 'performative' model of critical pedagogy, the nature of that community cannot be predicted in advance. 'As a student who came to [...] education by way of the radical movements for social justice that had opened space that had been closed, I learned to take community where I found it, bonding across race, gender, class, religious experience', recalls hooks (*Community*, p. 49). As she later acknowledges, the transgressive underpinnings of community are a risky business: 'If we really want to create a cultural climate where biases can be challenged and changed, all border crossings must be seen as valid and legitimate. [...] This risk is ultimately less threatening than a continued attachment to and support of exiting systems of domination, particularly as they affect teaching, how we teach, and what we teach. (*Transgress*, p. 131). The resonance of hooks's words, first published at the end of the twentieth century, will not be lost on readers in the twenty-first in a climate when the immigrant, the refugee, the crosser of borders is deemed a threat or contaminant to existing ideas of community. Not mere rhetorical flourishes, the tropes and images of openness, liberation, becoming, community, hope, freedom and coming-into-being which permeate hooks's Teaching Trilogy carry a significant political charge.

One of the most powerful instruments which a teacher can employ to cross borders and practice a liberatory pedagogy of hope is language itself. hooks invites us to teach 'New Worlds' and 'New Words' in a remarkable chapter on the significance of language in class. Her own sensitivity to language is attested to by her wider oeuvre, which moves freely across the generic borders which would separate literary criticism from critical theory, critical pedagogy, memoir, fiction and children's literature. hooks is also well aware of the link between a literate society and a democratic society: attentiveness to language (our own and the language of others) is a precondition of active and engaged citizenship. Yet it is not mastery or control over language that is urged by hooks at these moments. On the contrary, hooks is aware of the disruptive, transgressive qualities of language how it 'refuses to be contained within boundaries' (*Transgress*, p. 167). Language speaks us as much as we speak it: 'It speaks itself against our will, in words and thoughts that intrude, even violate the most private spaces of mind and body' (*Transgress*, p. 167). We are never fully in control of the language we speak. Likewise, hooks is attuned to the means by which language can encode forms of thought and structures of mind which are oppressive, closed and authoritarian: language is the perfect instrument of empire and the bulwark of relations of domination. Language, by this reasoning, *is* oppression.

hooks draws inspiration from a poem by the feminist American poet Adrienne Rich, 'The Burning of Paper Instead of Children'; in particular, the poem's memorable formation 'This is the oppressor's language yet I need it to talk to you' takes up permanent residence in hooks's memory. Counter to the embodiment of authority and control, hooks instead seeks out those moments when the oppressor's tongue can be re-heard 'as a potential site of resistance' (*Transgress*, p. 170). hooks attunes herself to the sound of other languages in her classrooms, to the moments when the dominant language might be turned upon or against itself, when the non-native speaker might yet expose a glitch in the dominant language. Indeed, a pedagogy of hope and the greatest practical wisdom might be found in those moments of non-comprehension: 'the moment of not understanding' becomes 'a space to learn', to listen without mastery.

Savouring such moments of non-understanding, welcoming them and reframing them not as failures of communication but rather as opportunities to truly listen and truly learn: this is a gesture typical of hooks's work in the Teaching Trilogy. Doing so invites the unforeseeable into the classroom; it builds new and unexpected alliances across boundaries of class, race and gender; it suspends and overturns relations of hierarchy and domination. In the 'performative' sense which informs hooks's pedagogy, it makes something happen.

Interviewed by
Dr Daniela Duc & Dr Ivana Rozic

Bimpe Kuti-Matekenya
University of Greater Manchester, England, UK

Black Women academics/researchers and their well- being

Local and Personable: Shaping Academia with Hope and Resilience

The Journey of Bimpe Kuti-Matekenya

Who is Bimpe Kuti-Matekenya and tell us about your journey in academia and research?

My name is Bimpe Kuti-Matekeneya. I'm a senior lecturer and a programme lead for public health at the University of Greater Manchester. I am currently developing a degree apprenticeship in public health and leading a Master's pathway with three intakes. I'm also the research coordinator for my school "School of Health, Science and Society" and I lead our university initiative on service user and career involvement.

My journey into academia has not been linear. I started my career in human sciences and then ended up working in health and social care practice with vulnerable adults before pursuing the Masters degree in public health at the School of Medicine and at the University of Glasgow.

During my master's, I became more and more interested in professional practice, especially after my own lived experience as a patient in a hospital setting. I wanted to start exploring the research around patient experience of care, and that was what began to shape my identity as a scholar and a practitioner. I actively started looking for PhD opportunities and found the PhD studentship around developing patient and public involvement in health and social care provision. I got the post and commenced my PhD, and then I was invited to teach a module and I fell in love with it. And at that point in your career and being a Black woman, you don't say no to any of those opportunities. You just say yes to everything along the way because I'm passionate about growing my career.

So academia opened doors for me, and now I see it as an avenue and a platform that creates spaces where voices that are usually absent, especially in my area of research in public health and social care, are heard. I've found a way of bringing together my love for teaching, research, practice and policy, so that's my journey.

As a black woman mid-career academic, what does your day-to-day look like juggling all of these hats?

No two days look the same. Some mornings could begin with teaching postgraduate students. Others are taking up with research meetings and research activities. Today, for example, it's just been research. Another day could be developing programmes, as I'm writing a new programme for the degree apprenticeship in public health at the moment. It could also be reviewing admission queries as the programme lead, or it could be that, as the lead for the service user and career involvement, I review the programme for regulatory compliance to ensure that our service user and career involvement initiative on their programme is not tokenistic.

I'm also currently involved in a research project with our local NHS Trust on Make Every Contact Count with NHS partners and developing strong relationships with public health in the local authority. So I am constantly moving between academic spaces and practice-based spaces because I am passionate about ensuring that, especially in public health, academia doesn't just sit on its own.

The positive for me in all of that is that it gives me an opportunity to innovate. I love generating ideas and leading on these programmes where it matters. I look at bridging the theory-practice gap, whether it's via our service user and career involvement initiative or research. But because I have been involved in all of those experiences, it has given me the opportunity to mentor colleagues and students.

The challenge for me as a Black woman in all of this is the sheer volume of the responsibility. And that can be overwhelming sometimes when I feel that hyper visibility, expected to represent, expected to continue to champion the course or look for ways to create opportunities to bring others on board as well.

Also, since the beginning of this year, I have been actively working on not allowing myself to downplay my contributions, which I tend to do. But this year, I was like, I'm going to let it get into my head and I'm going to share everything that I'm doing and not downplay anything that I'm doing because I work very hard. So that's the challenge. Just the sheer volume of responsibilities.

"I am fortunate to have supportive leaders and heads, and I also have colleagues who absolutely recognise and respect my expertise, ideas, and vision. "

How are you supported in your role currently? As a black woman academic, do you think the help you receive is sufficient?

I am fortunate to have supportive leaders and heads, and I also have colleagues who absolutely recognise and respect my expertise, ideas, and vision. While they do this institutionally, sometimes it's not within their remit, or they lack the authority to extend that recognition beyond themselves, merely verbal support and backing me in my work. For example, my role as the service user lead isn't a formal position with dedicated time, although it is acknowledged. This is because it aligns with my research interests and area of expertise. As a result, the support I receive for some of my efforts feels patchy rather than systematic.

So, the support is there, it is recognised by individuals, but not organisationally. I believe this could create a challenge for minoritised women or Black women. If you lack the grit or resilience that I have, for example, to map out what I want to do and what I want to get out of it, all you see are the obstacles. There are many barriers, and we know that there are loads of people even within my institution who feel like that sometimes.

Sometimes I also feel that support is reactive rather than proactive, and I think, given the current state of affairs and situation that the majority of higher education institutions are facing at the moment, that proactive readiness or approaches, as well as readily available resources, are becoming increasingly scarce.

For example, if I were solely the university lead for services and carer involvement initiative, and if this were recognised at an institutional level, it wouldn't be a reactive role. It is no longer a matter of choice whether we have people with lived experience embedded in teaching and training; it is now a mandated requirement. There are things I will be doing. I would have moved that initiative much further than where it is. To address this and pursue proactive actions, I now have to go above and beyond and do more of that work.

While I know I am supported individually, I wouldn't say the structures are always sufficient. They are not well-tailored, they're not sustainable and they're not intentional. However, I wouldn't say that this is an isolated situation for me alone. I believe it's something that, regardless of whether you're a Black woman or not, is influenced by the current state of affairs happening in higher education institutions.

As a black woman mid-career academic, what does your day-to-day look like juggling all of these hats?

Sometimes I also feel that support is reactive rather than proactive, and I think, given the current state of affairs and situation that the majority of higher education institutions are facing at the moment, that proactive readiness or approaches, as well as readily available resources, are becoming increasingly scarce.

For example, if I were solely the university lead for services and carer involvement initiative, and if this were recognised at an institutional level, it wouldn't be a reactive role. It is no longer a matter of choice whether we have people with lived experience embedded in teaching and training; it is now a mandated requirement. There are things I will be doing. I would have moved that initiative much further than where it is. To address this and pursue proactive actions, I now have to go above and beyond and do more of that work.

While I know I am supported individually, I wouldn't say the structures are always sufficient. They are not well-tailored, they're not sustainable and they're not intentional. However, I wouldn't say that this is an isolated situation for me alone. I believe it's something that, regardless of whether you're a Black woman or not, is influenced by the current state of affairs happening in higher education institutions.

It is often spoken about the impact of academia and research environments on the mental health on black women academics and researchers. As a black woman academic working in public health, what are your thoughts about the current state of mental health and well-being of black women in research and academia?

Mental health is one of those areas that remains a silent burden for many academics, not just black women, because of the pressure. I recently heard of a head teacher of a school who died by suicide after the Ofsted reports indicated that the school was going to be downgraded from 'good' to 'requires improvement'. And that's just to tell you the sheer burden.

I believe it's a combination of factors. It's the high expectations - those that come with working in a higher education institution and how that is revered. Sometimes, the burden might be institutional, or it could be yourself feeling the pressure to prove your worth, while working in a higher education setting. There is a lot more conversation around mental health now and inclusivity in academia. We see quite a lot. Many of these conversations are happening, and some institutions are beginning to recognise that this is uneven in terms of what people experience.

There is still a lot of work to do in terms of ensuring that people receive support because, again, it's bearing in mind personal life and professional life that people have to bring together. And for me, it depends on my current work situation and what I am doing; that fluctuation is definitely there. That fluctuation for me is between resilience and I'm just tired. Fatigue exists, but so does resilience because I have to find a way to develop my own strategy to continue to thrive.

It's not just fatigue that I am physically tired, it's the fatigue that the lack of structure creates, and the lack of institutional systems creates. For instance, nobody's overlooking things, is that things are done in different silos by different individuals. There is no overall institutional recognition for something that you know has opportunity and scope to be bigger and better if the structures were there. That pressure remains and still very slow in terms of changing and that in itself could add to the level of I'm tired.

So, I have ensured that any work or project I'm doing, or I involve myself in, or collaborate on, aligns with what I am passionate about. So that helps me to at least sustain myself. I've ensured that whatever I am working on, whatever is meaningful to me, while it's hard work, is also heart work. It is what I am interested in. It is what I champion. It is what I advocate for. So that helps with the resilience aspect, especially when fatigue sometimes sets in. So I am able to get up and come in to work each day because my resilience is bolstered by my involvement in projects and work I am passionate about, and I have managed to develop that resilience.

“ I've ensured that whatever I am working on, whatever is meaningful to me, while it's hard work, is also heart work. “

What do you think might be the underlying causes of these challenges?

For me, with my public health hat on, and I'm not saying this negatively. There are underlying causes around structural barriers that limits opportunities. I don't see this as negative in any way, but in the context of our diverse population, systems, and structures. For example, in public health, medication has been developed and that medication we know is not as effective for people who are from Black backgrounds. There is evidence to suggest this. This exemplifies what I would call structural racism, that there is not enough diversity in leadership that can promote or recognise systems and structures needing to be culturally and ethnically adapted to reflect the diversity of the population. This issue also applies in educational settings as well, where Black women often may be over-mentored, but they are under-sponsored because opportunities are not very clear or are not openly laid out. So even though the advice might be there, the tangible opportunities for progress don't keep pace.

Are you aware of any measures that have been put in place to support black women in the workplace (academia and research)? What are your thoughts about the effectiveness of these measures?

For me, even if those supports exist and are in place, they need to provide a safe space where people can share their experiences without fear of being labelled difficult.

I have known people, and this is their fear and they feel stuck, not knowing what to do or how to move forward from this situation. They feel like they will never progress from their current position. This is because there is no clear recognition or acknowledgement of their concerns or worries, and why there is always conflict between the department and those they work with.

So, even if we have those mentoring programmes and well-being initiatives, I am not entirely convinced they are genuinely addressing the needs of the participants.

It would be helpful to evaluate one of these programmes to see how effective it truly is. Are they merely discussing generic or reactive topics? Are they just there to tick a box- to say, “We have a mentorship programme, and a well-being initiative "- without genuine impact? While these initiatives are important, they often seem too generic.

I wonder if there's a lack of cultural responsiveness or an understanding of the unique pressures faced by individuals, like a Black woman navigating her specific challenges.

I am also uncertain how these mentorship programmes and initiatives are measured. How do we determine whether they are effective? And how do they contribute to meaningful change within the system of an institution?

What more can be done to support the mental health of Black women researchers and academics?

Well, for me, if I were in a role to find out more about support for mental health and Black women in research and academia. We can't run away from embedding accountability.

If I had the chance, I would gather data on the experiences of Black women staff in academia and bring the entire senior leadership team together. I would say, this is what Black women in this institution have reported experiencing at any point and that still ongoing. What do we do about it? Is there a solution? Have we examined the core issues? Is there scope to embed this type of accountability and share it with others in HEI? To say, this is work we've done internally, and when we saw the results, it was quite revealing. It prompted us to change how we talk about this within the organisation. If organisations did that, it would be a significant first step forward, providing Black women in academia with some insight. We need to assess our current environment, including the systems and structures we are establishing. Because what works in one institution might not work in another down South. It has to be localised. It must be created for those within that specific setting so they can see that the model is effective. That's how we can transform something that feels very generic into a targeted solution that genuinely addresses the local issues and develops real solutions for that area.

So local and personable is better?

Yes, because it's one of those areas where what works in my institution, in my setting, may not work in another institution down South. It has to be localised. And it has to be created for those within that setting so they can see that this model works. That's how you avoid growing more opportunities for something that feels very generic into something that genuinely addresses a situation and offers real solutions for that local area, yeah.

Any other thoughts you would like to discuss? Any closing comments/words of hope/encouragement?

It's still hopeful, and I'm seeing more extraordinary Black women in academia making an impact. We are certainly growing in number and capacity in what we do, whether it's designing programmes, leading research, mentoring, supporting students, or engaging in communities. However, we must ensure that this presence is not accidental or merely a response to an EDI issue. It should be something that is actively championed.

It is important for Black women entering academia to fiercely and proactively protect their well-being. They should take time to pause, reflect, and build networks— not just professional ones but also those that support their mental well-being as well. To actively look for people and opportunities where I feel like I'm valued and I'm heard, and that I truly belong. To create that space.

Academia may not have been designed with Black women in mind, but academia cannot ignore the fact that Black women are increasingly entering academia. Therefore, we need leadership that will help us to reshape it more effectively.

Dr Wayne A. Mitchell
Associate Provost (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion)
Department of Immunology and Inflammation - Faculty of Medicine
Imperial College London, UK

Overcoming Stigma and Coming as 'Yourself' to Work

Talking with Dr Wayne A. Mitchell

Interviewed by
Dr Daniela Duc & Dr Ivana Rozic

> *If you dare to dream, we can start to affect changes.*
> *We need to bring in individuals, who understand and recognise aspects of inequality we face, to start to affect the change.*

Who is Wayne Mitchell and tell us about your journey in research?

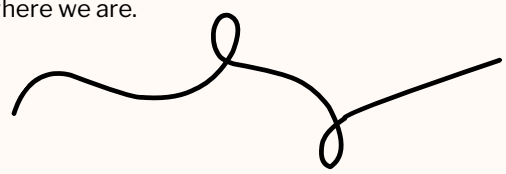
I am currently the Associate Provost for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at Imperial College London. I'm also a Principal Teaching Fellow and teach Research skills, focussing on how students learn their critical skills when undertaking laboratory. How did I get to that?

I was always interested in medicine and was fascinated how the human body works and was able to do so many things and repair itself.

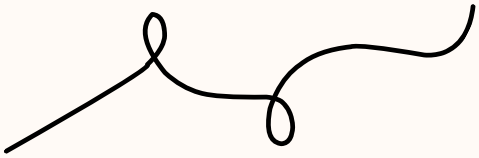
So originally, I wanted to do medicine, but for some reason I wasn't selected by any medical schools. Instead, I did Medical Sciences, and I really didn't mind doing the Medical Sciences because it gave me an opportunity to understand the basic biology behind many diseases, and that's what really sparked my curiosity. I was always curious but being able to have the skills which would enable me to interpret and understand how systems worked was really valuable.

I did all my studies in the UK, I did my undergraduate studies at the University of Birmingham and specialised in virology and human genetics. Then , I went to UCL and did a PhD in molecular genetics in a rare childhood disease called Neuronal Ceroid Lipofuscinosis that was predominantly found in individuals with Turkish origins. In my PhD, I was essentially a gene hunter looking for the disease-causing genetic mutations resulting in the manifestation of the disease. It is quite a debilitating disease as it was a relatively new degenerative disorder at the time and resulted in young people passing away quite early on in their lives. Having completed my PhD, I undertook postdoctorial studies, in a number of projects including Hepatology, Haematology, these projects related to cancer genetics and became involved in diseases such as leukaemia. My role this time was to identify disease-causing mutations but this time trying to see how we could use that knowledge in a therapeutic sense. Could we design personalise biological markers (Biomarkers) as a means detect the presence of disease after treatment, and to help improve the health and wellbeing of patients?

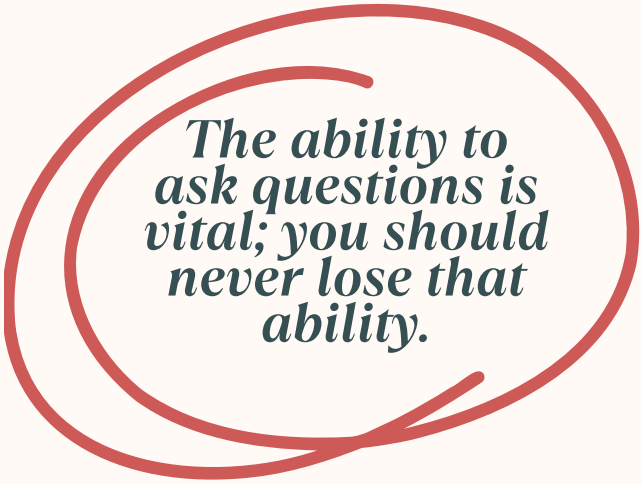
These experiences also sparked my interest in understanding people's behaviours, how and why people responses and behaviours are influenced by where we are.



From looking at biological aspects, I shifted to understanding behaviours and motivations of people.



One of the things I looked at was how people gain their sense of identity and belonging. I was curious about how we work or don't work together? What started this shift was when I was a postdoc, I was having many young students come into the lab. On paper, they were excellent in terms of exam knowledge. But there was almost like a lack of curiosity, and I couldn't understand why. What was missing between their academic ability and the innate curiosity which is essential to undertake good research.



Many just wanted you to tell them the answer as opposed to trying to figure it out. Why were they not questioning; why weren't they coming up with questions which they wanted to answer? They would just answer things on a very superficial level and not look at it any deeper. And I wanted to understand that.

So fast forward, I basically went on an educational journey to understand what it was through every stage of the UK education system, exploring the factors which meant that young people who are naturally curious to lose this curiosity and ability to ask questions? If you've got children, you will know young children are naturally curious. They always ask the question why is that? Why is that right? It's so much so that sometimes they are told to just accept it, right? But I think somewhere along the line, when people keep telling children: ‘just accept it’, they do start just accepting it. And, they lose that level of curiosity and that's where the problem starts. They just accept things and it prevents them from critically evaluating information for themselves.

I went back and I did a couple of teaching degrees to work out why that was. Then I came back into the university setting to say, how can we create a better environment for our young people.

The environment which you place people into is crucial in their development.

The way I would put it is, if you think about a seed depending on the environment, the ground which the seed is placed, it will determine whether that seed is able to grow or not, or the extent to which it will grow. So, if there are deficiencies within the environment, the seed won't be able to grow.

Are we creating the right environment for a seed to reach its potential? Are we creating the right kind of environments to enable that potential which exists within the young people to flourish and to grow?

That's when I also started to look at individuals who were from ethnic minority backgrounds or black students because when you look on the league tables, they seem to be always at the bottom end. Why should that be the case? I started asking questions as why have we not seen improvements over so many years. We always had fewer black students in the spaces. When I looked around, I noticed more black women going into higher education than black men. It is important also to understand the diversity of black populations; we have Afro-Caribbeans, south Americans, Africans. It is a melting pot with people from different trajectories, different identities, different cultural values. But unfortunately, they're all lumped together which can sometimes hide the various discrepancies within different populations.

This is what we are trying to do, break the information and examine it systematically to affect real change. This is a multifaceted problem as you may still have people who will deny that there is any problem at all and others might say it will take years for us to make any changes. There are many ways we can look at it but we still have to take the opportunity to say there are challenges. Much of it is related to perception. What we think is actually happening compared to the reality of what really is happening. What information do we need to be either getting into the right arenas?

How do we find out and connect with those communities who may feel underrepresented, undeserved, who may feel the systems currently in place aren't built with their progression in mind?

Once we're able to look at those things, then we're at a starting point where we can potentially affect change.

What does your day-to-day look like?

Often there's meetings (smile). It varies really. In my role there are at least 2-3 meetings. On my teaching days, then I will meet with my students, run tutorials, give feedback on lab work. In my EDI role, I will have meetings with my co-lead.

We've set out a strategy called **Imperial Cohesion**, which looks at how we address, issues not just based on race and ethnicity, but gender, disabilities, neurodiversity and all of the protected characteristics. '*We are looking to see the current data we have, the interventions and the current codes of practice* that we're undertaking? We are also looking at who do we need to be influence in order to affect change? It is both from the student and staff perspective. We are also looking into what it is that we need to measure, monitor and manage the type of change we would like to see through our initiatives.

What areas of EDI are you currently focusing your research on?

My research is about looking from the perspective of different target groups, whether it's students, black women, people with neurodiversity, disabilities, etcetera. We look at how the work which we're doing is actually impacting on their sense of identity, sense of well-being, their sense of belonging. For example, we look at Black PhD experience and understand as PhD students what are the things that prevent them from getting into the university, such as identifying the right supervisors, the type of supervision and support received from the institution and external groups (e.g. Black in neuro, plant science etc).

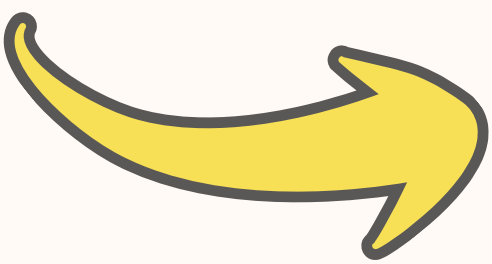
It may seem quite mystical getting through a PhD especially when one does not have those frames of reference which other communities may have. So how do we help to support each other to go through that? Those are the things which I'm interested in interviewing, researching now to ensure that we are getting that element right.

How are you supported in your EDI role and in your teaching role? Do you feel you are well supported?

The role I am in now it is 50/50 split. In my teaching role, I have trained someone who assists me in that role. In the EDI position there is actually a small team. I've got someone who assists with activities like the Race Equalities Charter, so all of the type of work in terms of collating information and setting up meetings for appropriate stakeholders.

All those things are coordinated through my Race Equalities Charter coordinator. We also have roles related to each *protected characteristics and individuals are tasked with acquiring information that we can assess in a logical manner*. Finally, I have support of my line manager, Provost and everyone I report back to.

I suppose everybody can always say that they want more support, right? Especially when, you've got such big jobs or big tasks, and you could always do with an extra pair of hands or another way. In my role, there are things I see as important. There are other aspects that people will want your opinion on which might be related to the work you are doing but essentially involves reviewing their work through your lens and expertise of equality, diversity and inclusion. So someone might send me a document saying: “Well, we've written this. What do you think?“ So they want me to use my expertise or my knowledge and to look at what they've written from the context of inclusion diversity, and equitable behaviours. And so when you then look at these, they take time to just digest, understand and to try to put everything in context.



Based on your role and your day-to-day, what is your view on the current challenges of black women researchers and academics?

Wow, that's a big question. I knew it was coming. It is important to look at it from an intersectional lens, as you can break to women in research or black/ethnicities in research. When you then have those two combinations, black women in research, it takes on a whole different dimension. And the data and many of the anecdotal stories and examples which I've heard and seen provide enough evidence to suggest that black women in research have a much harder time than any other ethnic group. As such, and I think that's also visible when you look at overall statistics of the number of black female professors which we have in the UK. If we look at it just on numbers alone, that can give people some real different connotations as to one, why are there so few? You can then start having those negative stereotypes that start describing why. But it’s not that. It's not that you don't have talent within the black community, male and female. Is that they don't necessarily get the same opportunities? Talent is everywhere. This is really the crux of the matter. Talent is everywhere. Opportunity is not.

Are black women being given the opportunity? Is the question that we should be asking. Are we developing and allowing black women and black men entry into a workforce and are they being listened to?
If they're not being listened to and they're right, or their ideas are being taken by other people, then their contributions are not being recognised. Or when you have certain individuals wanting to remove their contribution and saying that their contributions don't matter, therefore, we don't need to engage with them. There's a whole host of different barriers which are preventing other young people or other diverse people feeling that they can make it in that kind of environment.

It is important therefore to place them in the right type of environment, which enables them to grow, the right type of environment, which gives them the nourishment that they need.

If they're not placed in those environments, they will feel stifled. They will feel under attack. They will feel that they can't produce the best of who they are.

This is something that we are hearing as a backlash of EDI whereby many people are saying: you only got your position because you are a diversity hire; not because you have 4 degrees, or because you have published all these papers, not because you have gone above and beyond where you have tried to improve the environment while doing your research to make it better for everyone. Whereas some other people only have to think about their research because the environment is already conducive to their way of thinking. Some communities do not have to face these additional pressures at all and yet we are meant to be in a system that is supposed to be meritocratic. Yet, some individuals are actually doing two or three times as much as another person just by virtue of the fact that they are a woman or a black woman, which is totally wrong. It is important therefore to highlight that to move the dial from a place where people are not seeing, not cognizant to one where they are aware and cognizant that there is something that is wrong within the system which enables this kind of activity and attitude to be prevalent and perpetuates this inequality.

Black Women & Stigma

Do you think then that black women in academia are stigmatised?

Yes, I do. I do think they are stigmatised. There are certain things which have been held up against black women throughout history, which still exists. For example, if they respond in a certain way, they're labelled as emotional. They're this. They're that right? This places a stigma on them and in terms of things which people feel that they can do to black women, which they wouldn't dream of doing to any other ethnicity. Those are stigmatisations. Those are things which are preventing black women and is not creating the environment where black women can flourish and grow. So, I do believe and I do think that black women are stigmatised.

What do you think is the impact of stigmatisation on black women in academia?

We talk a lot about the academic pipeline: from the time one person gets into the university and goes through different levels of degrees and then postgraduate. When we look at these stages and the attrition rates, who are falling out of the system? Why is it that many young black boys, young black girls, after they've done their PhD, or they've done their undergraduates, they then don't go on and pursue activities as masters or postgraduate, doctoral level studies? So, that pipeline itself seems to be broken. We hear about the broken pipeline. But to me, I don't think it's broken or it's leaky. I think it's regulated; the system of going through university, etc., for some people, it's incredibly hard by default. And as a result of that they aren't being actually given the same opportunities to flourish as others. They're constantly behind and almost playing catch up just by virtue of the lack of opportunities, not because they're not as intelligent. The report Education in England: Annual Report 2018 clearly illustrates that. So when we look at intakes, we have white and black students coming through with 3 A stars which are excellent grades. Then why aren't they progressing at the same rate so that the attrition rate is the same?

Why do you think that this stigmatisation still is there today even if we clearly know about it and its impact?

I think it is partly because of society. It is the way people view black people in general. It is a complex issue, because one can also counter argument that we also self-regulate. For example, when we use language like: "it was not built for me". And so you are going to self-select or self-limit and say that I'm not going to enter that because I know it wasn't prepared or designed with me in it. So, you do have that element where the person is discouraged to put themselves in that kind of discomfort where there will be no appreciation, where there'll be no real reward for it. So, there's that element.

But that same element can also still hold true when people will still put themselves forward and they do see what happens to those who are engaged and they see how hard it can be with the stress levels and negativity that people like them experience. So, then the question becomes:

> *"Why put myself through this struggle from generation to generation – so that one generation may go off successfully to university"*

A friend of mine always says it is about representation. You have to see it for it to be effective. Often, I then say to him: I understand that but I also think you have to dare to dream. Nobody knew what it looked like to put a man on the moon, but they dared to dream and made it happen. **If you dare to dream, we can start to affect changes.** We need to be able to identify groups of individuals who understand and recognise the aspects of the inequality that we face and in so doing, bring them in to start to affect the change that we want to see.

An illustration of this is South Africa and apartheid. Many people would have thought that's never going to change, right? But it did and it took a huge amount of struggle in a number of ways to start that process. I am not saying that south Africa is perfect, but many in their lifetime would have never thought they would see it end, but they did. It was about daring to dream and to challenge the normality, to challenge what others thought as normality and motivate those that had the conscience to say that this is wrong, to influence others though their position and power.

Bringing 'Your True Self' to work

What are your thoughts about the 'bring yourself to work' idea and how do you think people can actually do that, especially as a black person?

It is interesting to ask this question. When we talk about bringing our true selves, what is our true self, it is all situational.

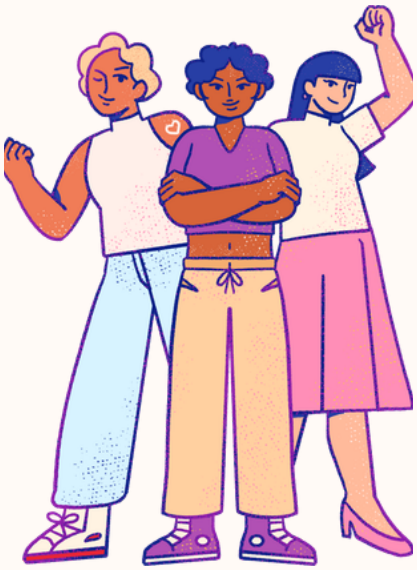
Why do I say it's situational? Depending on which situation I find myself in, I'm going to be a different version of self. Whenever I come to work, I'm a version of self which I want to display at that particular moment in time that I am comfortable displaying, so I think.

When we talk about bringing our true selves, is to bring somebody who is authentic, which shares your value systems but also knows how to navigate a system which could potentially look unfavourably.

For example, when I play football, I'm a different version of Wayne than when I'm in a meeting. I'm combative. I compete. But I compete in a different way. It's no less authentic to who I am. But I recognise that competing in that way, when I'm playing football is different to competing when I'm in the boardroom.

> *It's about knowing the lexicon, knowing the language and what's appropriate for those types of environments without losing your values, who you are.*

You don't want to change who you are and just become a yes person or no person? You want to still be able to have your authentic voice, your authentic value system when in those environments. That's what I would say is to bring your true self at work. When it comes to other things (I'm not going to call them superficial because they do have meaning). For example, when people say you're unprofessional because of the way that you've got your hair or because of this or of that. One question to ask is: Is that really that important? Is that really about the content of my character or is that more superficial about things which I look like or how I dress? And if they are, why are you judging me by my clothing instead of what I've got to talk about?



What can be done to help people to feel more comfortable to be their true selves and to be true to their values at work and bring diversity to the table?

I'm going to say that sometimes when we're comfortable, we're not growing. We grow in our understanding and in our perceptions when we're in a process of discomfort because we want to understand why it is that we're in that discomfort and to navigate our way to a place where we are then again comfortable.

About the idea of sense of identity and sense of belonging, sometimes I think what we need to be doing is that we sometimes have to be willing to be uncomfortable. But, we must also be willing to make other people uncomfortable so that we can start getting to a place of mutual understanding.

I think sometimes what happens is that people want us to remain in their comfort bubble, without taking their own responsibility and recognising if we're going to be working together, we need to understand how we work together and that's going to take time.

Sometimes, we have to be uncomfortable to get to a place where there's mutual respect, mutual understanding, so proper growth can take place.

Representation and 'Misrepresentation'

We talk a lot about lack of representation, but not so much on "misrepresentation". Unfortunately, not all black voices are in favour of or representative of black women or people. We can see that in several spaces, including in politics. What are your thoughts on this and what impact does it have on black women academics and researchers and other minorities?

Earlier, I mentioned that when we have lack of representation and have only a few black women or black male professors, it can be misrepresentative in that people may assume that black people are not intelligent enough. And that is not true and can be very damaging. Hence, why I will go back again to the idea of the regulated pipeline whereby deliberately or by coincidence, it is not allowing certain groups in the space.

This definitely has a knock-on effect of writing a narrative, whether true or not, that can be misrepresentative of the community.

As I used to be a 'gene hunter', I recall when the Human Genome Project was completed initially, many said we have sequenced the human genome. And when people started to look at it, they said, but you haven't got enough people from Africa, India. Mainly white Caucasians were sequenced. How can you call it the Human Genome project? Then there was a backlash to say more of our DNA, our mutate, our sequences needed to be included because otherwise you're misrepresenting what it is to be human.

And it is the same when we start to think about the academic space. If these voices aren't present, then there's a valuable resource which is missing from the conversation.

What can be done to help improve the sense of belonging of black women in academia?

That's a big question and one which I have been grappling for a while. For example, The 100 Black Women Professors Now Programme is an initiative that started after the investigation of Professor Nicola Rollock which highlighted the small number of black women professors (only 25 at the time - 2018) and explored their lived experience, what had influenced their journeys. Black women academics who have made it to the top positions, described a host of sacrifices made in order to get there. I don't want to belittle the process and say it's only black women who face that challenge. But by contrast, when you look at 20 years of Athena Swan and when we see that in 2018, we had only 25 Black Women Professors, and at the time Athena Swan has been in place for 13 years. When we compare to white and other ethnicities, the numbers were considerable higher than that of black women.

So, it is important to identify clearly what are the additional barriers which are preventing black women from making that same level of progress. A programme like WHEN I will mention as I like their three-pronged approach:

The approach of institutional change, line management change and then empowerment of the individual. Those I think are the blueprint.

It is a model which can affect real change. The institute itself needs to understand that we have an under-representation. It has to be through effective leadership, at the very top, to say that we are going to put in place and provide the resources or provide the mechanisms for black women to be able to excel. We will create the environment for them to flourish. We will nurture the talent, which in the past has been stifled, deliberately stifled. From the institutional perspective, putting those things in place from the line managers, making sure that they know how to handle, know how to encourage, develop, support, and develop the support mechanisms for those individuals. In addition, providing those empowering messages: You can. Yes, we can, as Barack Obama said. We can make it up. That, until we believe that we can do it right and we have the support mechanisms.

I'm not saying that it can't be done because it can, but it's going to be a struggle. Because if people are determined not to allow you in and are regulating those pipelines, you're always going to drop out because they will find ways of dropping you out. But what we're doing here is we're looking at ways of creating that environment where black women, people of colour are able to get the necessary skills, get the necessary exposure, get the necessary metrics for them to be able to demonstrate their excel, and to go on to lead careers that fulfil their purpose and potential.

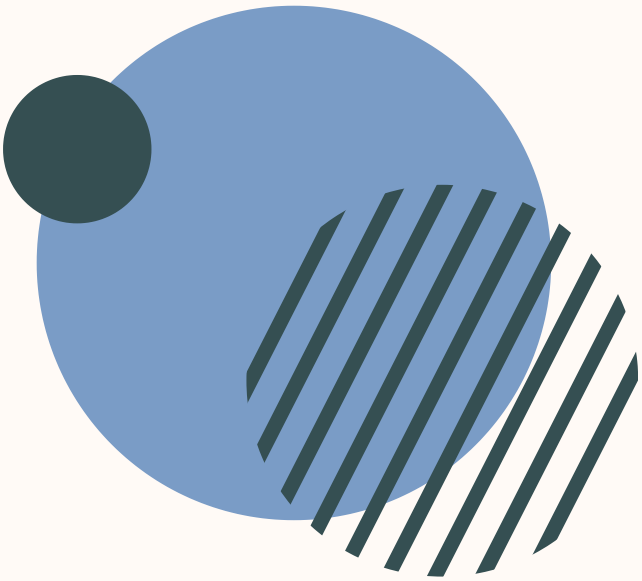
How optimistic are you and where do you see, the future of diversity and black women in research and academia?

I'm going to say it seems like Barack Obama is in my mind. I'm going to go to the book in which he said the audacity of hope.

If we lose hope, then we lose the ability to say that we can. We can make it.

I understand that there are going to be challenges. I understand that there are going to be backlashes. We're seeing it right now. But does that mean that I give up my hope that a better future is out there? No, it doesn't. As far as I'm concerned, I have to keep believing that if I put this information out and help to demonstrate why it's important that we have these levels of equity and equitable behaviours that is beneficial for everybody.
I know that for some people they'll say: 'It doesn't benefit me, so why should I bother?' There's a book called: 'Why do all the black kids sit together in the cafeteria by?' Professor Beverly Daniel Tatum. In it, she talks about her efforts to engage with students to see and understand their privilege. For a few of them will turn and say: "Why would I want to change a system when it benefits me?". That's the main challenge. Until we can show them that by changing, you're still going to get those benefits, and more, and not only you. Everybody else is also going to be benefiting from that change.

It's about that communication, that understanding that we all can get more out of the process if we're willing to engage in a much more equitable way.



BY DR VASSILISSA CARANGIO

Laundering Leadership Representation to suppress 'Blak' thought in Organizations

In 1975, Aimé Césaire (Césaire, 2000, p. 31) wrote, "Europe is unable to justify itself either before the bar of 'reason' or before the bar of 'conscience'." This sentence resonates loud and clear in a time of genocide in Gaza, one of the first in history to be livestreamed (Tatour and Lentin, 2025). People around the world have witnessed the silence and complicity of the colonialist bourgeoisie, while masses have started to mobilize in support of Palestine. Here in Italy, on the 22nd of September 2025, thousands of workers and students across the Italian peninsula joined a 24-hour general strike in solidarity with Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip, and in response to the blockage of humanitarian aid and the threats against the international Global Sumud Flotilla mission (Gambirasi, 2025), a coalition of everyday people bringing humanitarian help. Social media were filled with images of arrests in different parts of the world, including the UK, where elderly, disabled, and young people peacefully protesting for human rights in Palestine were detained under the British Terrorism Act (Amnesty International, 2025). Arrests did not happen in a vacuum. A variety of settler-colonial states (see Australia and Canada, for instance) and imperial-colonial powers such as the UK have attacked and repressed anticolonial actions and voices. Yet one may ask whether the ongoing colonization in Palestine, or other forms of imperialism, have any connection with scholarly, academic, political, or media representations, and consequently with the current project *Unblock*.

From a scholarly perspective, as pointed out by Rodriguez (2011) and Lentin (2025), imperial racial regimes can be recalibrated through multiculturalist white supremacy, thereby upholding existing racial structures. *Unblock*, a project led by Dr. Daniela Duc, a friend I met during our PhD journey in so-called Australia, has a promising goal: amplifying the voices of Black and racially minoritized scholars in white-dominated countries, such as British academia, where the number of Black academics in senior roles remains extremely low (see Arday, 2022).

Engaging with this project also led me to reflect on my own positionality. I was honored by Dr. Daniela Duc's trust in me, yet I initially questioned whether I could speak about Black representation or negatively racialized scholars. In so-called Australia, white Italians are still racialized as *not-white-enough* compared to those who are white Anglo. Yet here in the EU, white Italians are racialized as white. To what extent can I, therefore, contribute to this discourse as a white person? I do not have an easy answer. At the same time, the attack on teachers' autonomy in the U.S. and neoliberal university settings across the world —especially toward those committed to social justice and anti-racism—makes me question to what extent representation can actually center *Blak* critical thought. By moving beyond the aesthetics of representation, I contribute to this project by asking: What would it mean to have full representation of not-white scholars in neoliberal settler-colonial universities committed to white hegemonic power? How could this representation avoid reproducing institutional violence, such as police brutality on campuses? To what extent can non-white and Black intellectuals be free to challenge corporate power? Do all negatively racialized scholars embrace anticolonial thinking in Westernized universities once they reach leadership roles? Hence, can representation alone lead to the liberation of people who are oppressed?

Turning from my reflections to the Italian context, we can see how Black and non-white voices are claiming a central space across literature, academia, and culture, while also denouncing the persistent lack of representation in publishing, editorial boards, schools, media, and politics. Leading Italian-Somali writer Igiaba Scego has denounced the absence of Black representation in the anthology *Futuro: il domani narrato dalle voci di oggi* (Scego, 2019), a collection of stories written by Black women writers of African heritage in Italy. Not only in this anthology, but also in her other books, such as *The Colour Line* (Scego, 2022) and *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* (Scego, 2023), Dr. Scego highlights both the invisibility and visibility of Blackness within Italian society and its colonial legacy. Her reflection spans from universities to elitist literary circles and editorial boards that remain predominantly white and middle-class. In Italy, anti-Blackness is also denounced by several writers. These include Espérance Hakuzwimana Ripanti, Italo-Rwandan, with *E poi basta. Manifesto di una donna nera italiana* (transl. *Enough, Already! Manifesto of a Black Italian Woman*, Ripanti, 2019); Djarah Kan, Italo-Ghanaian, with *Ladri di denti* (transl. *Teeth Thieves*, Kan, 2020); and Nadeesha Uyangda, Italian-Sri Lankan writer and podcaster, with *L'unica persona nera nella stanza* (transl. *The Only Black Person in the Room*, Uyangoda, 2021), to name a few. In addition, Marilena Umuhoza Delli, Italian-Rwandan, with *Storia vera dell'Italia nera* (transl. *True History of Black Italy*, Delli, 2024), has centered the importance of Blackness in her collection of stories about Afro-descendants from the Roman Empire to today. Dr. Sandra Kyeremeh, Italian-Ghanaian sociologist, through her research on whiteness in Italian sport, has highlighted how Black sportswomen fight for recognition within the white Italian 'imagined sport community' (Kyeremeh, 2019). Representation issues also extend to Italian schools. Nur and Santagati (2025) have analysed what it means to be negatively racialized as teachers in Italian schools. Italian-Somali poet and writer Rahma Nur, in one of her poems, *Black in a White World*, from her collection *I, Too, Sing Italia*, writes:

> "Sono la barca che non si è arresa alle onde travolgenti e iraconde, sono nera in un mondo bianco: so cos'è la lotta, sopporto i colpi e vivo, nonostante tutto!"(transl. *I am the boat that refused to yield to the overwhelming, raging waves. I am Black in a white world: I know struggle, I endure the blows, and I survive—despite it all.*) (Nur, 2025, p. 20)

In Italy, some associations, such as QuestaèRoma (QuestaèRoma, n.d.), which aim to challenge all forms of discrimination—including anti-Blackness—through art and culture, also work to dismantle imperial whiteness through events and educational initiatives. Black representation in Italy still has a long way to go, a point also highlighted by leading Italian sociologists of mixed-race backgrounds, such as Dr. Angelica Pesarini and Dr. Camilla Hawthorne, who have analyzed the multiple ways Blacknesses is experienced in Italy (Pesarini and Hawthorne, 2020). PhD candidate Oiza Q. Obasuyi has also written a book, *Lo sfruttamento della razza* (transl. *The Exploitation of Race: The New Hierarchies of Segregation*, Obasuyi, 2025), drawing on anti-colonial thinker Cedric Robinson and applying his anti-colonial and anti-capitalist framework to analyze Italian society. Besides, we cannot forget Kaha Mohamed Aden, an Italian-Somali writer considered the first Black Italian writer to have made a difference within Italian literature. The new book *Sorella d'Inchiostro* (transl. *Sister of Ink*, Ghermandi et al., 2025), edited by Gabriella Ghermandi, Kossi Komla-Ebri, and Itala Vivan, pays tribute to her with a collection of 23 stories by Afro-descendant writers. Hence, strong alliances among Black and not-white writers are emerging here in Italy through writing and anti-colonial praxes.

Having considered the Italian context, I now turn to the UK, where the project *Unblock* is taking place. The imperialist monarch state shows greater diversity among people in leading positions as well as in the publishing industry. I remember that when I first lived in the UK as an au pair almost two decades ago, the director of the school where I took English classes was Black, and my host, the lady of the house, was a business lawyer of Indian heritage. People who worked in the banks where I opened my account were Black or non-white. My first boss in my first office job, after working in households and cafés, many of which employed Italian immigrants just before the first credit crunch, was also Black. Blackness in leadership roles was more visible than what I had observed in Italy, despite having grown up in multiracial Italy, where it was largely absent among people in leading positions in schools, hospitals, and other institutions.

Despite this, many academic papers—published in journals such as *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, among others—document the disparities between white and non-white people in leadership positions in white-dominant countries in the EU, such as the UK. Some of the most renowned books that highlight these issues include *Everyday Racism* by Essed (1991), *Space Invaders* by Puwar (2004), *The Racial Code: Tales of Resistance and Survival* by Rollock (2022), *White Privilege: The Myth of a Post-Racial Society* by Bhopal (2018), and *Psychosis of Whiteness* by Andrews (2024). Anti-Blackness is well-documented, researched, and analysed, and the proliferation of this type of research continues to grow. Andrews, in particular, has been the first professor of Black Studies in the UK and established the first Black Studies Program in Europe. Nevertheless, neoliberal academia in white-dominant countries remains an elitist space, which continues to be exclusive and focused on U.S. brands. These neoliberal institutions, "increasingly run by administrators whose names and faces are seldom even recognized by students or recalled by alumni," as stressed by Ginsberg (2021, p. 4) in *The Fall of the Faculty*, despite having roots in histories of slavery and the exploitation of contingent instructors, are still considered aspirational by scholars drawn to capitalist luxury brands to advance their careers.

As Prof. Tara Brabazon (2022) reminds us in *12 Rules for (Academic) Life*, we live in unintellectual times, where women who are granted leadership roles in universities are often offered so-called "glass cliff" positions—manager-academics tasked with mopping up budgetary or structural issues. What if these roles increasingly come to be filled by negatively racialized people? Will it change anything in the colonial order of neoliberal universities? While universities in the UK still have very few Black and non-white scholars in leading positions, political institutions such as the British parliament show that even a small number of non-white politicians can hold roles of enormous influence. Not only Rishi Sunak, the former prime minister, but also other Conservative politicians such as former home secretaries Priti Patel and Suella Braverman, both of Indian heritage, have held leading roles. Since November 2024, the Leader of the Opposition and of the Conservative Party is Olukemi Olufunto Adegoke Badenoch, a Black woman born in London to Nigerian parents. The Conservative Party is the first British party to have a Black woman in a leading position who has been able to break the "concrete ceiling," a term referring to the barriers that Black women face in their professional careers (Khosroshahi, 2021). Yet Badenoch, like her predecessors, has emphasized the need to strengthen British borders. She also joined the campaign against critical race theory (Abbey, 2023) and supported Israel's decision to refuse entry to Labour MPs Abtisam Mohamed and Yuan Yang, who were traveling as part of a charity delegation providing humanitarian medical aid to Palestinians (McKiernan, 2025).

Another Black leading politician, David Lammy, from the opposite party, has served as Deputy Prime Minister of the UK since September 2025. Yet in 2024 and until September 2025, as Foreign Secretary, he claimed that Israel was not committing genocide (Wintour and Abdul, 2025), despite the existence of UN reports (UN, 2024). We can therefore see that anticolonial thinking—or *Blak thought*—is not only defined by a literal phenotype of Blackness. The term 'Blak' is used in so-called Australia by Indigenous Australians to differentiate themselves from the broader racialized experiences of other Black communities, such as Black Africans, as it reflects a dynamic related to Indigenous identity. Hence, when I refer to *Blak thought*, I mean anticolonial resistance led, for instance, by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as well as South Sea Islander peoples, in so-called Australia. This includes all First Nations peoples on the same side of the color line and colonized by the white West, despite internal racial hierarchies, with those who are visibly Black experiencing a double form of oppression: anti-Black racism and colonization (see, for instance, Watego, 2021).

This raises questions about the role of representation beyond politics, including in academic settings: when structures of power shaped by colonialism endure, to what extent can Black and non-white scholars lead universities? Could non-white or Black scholars in leadership positions act in academia in ways shaped by colonial assimilation, similar to some politicians? And, consequently, what does this mean for knowledge produced by colonized, Indigenous, and Black people, as well as marginalized scholars—working-class, LGBTQI+, and disabled—who aim to disrupt the colonial capitalist order? Will this knowledge be recognized and embraced by all scholars who reach leading roles and become the visible faces of representation?

I am aware of my own white privilege in Europe. Despite my working-class roots, precarious employment, and gender, I am also part of the white Italian fabric that has contributed, and continues to contribute, actively to colonization and imperialism. Yet I embrace anticolonial thought and therefore in this magazine, I argue that the representation of negatively racialized intellectuals, politicians, scholars, or bureaucrats can also serve the interests of white imperial power. Professor of African American Studies Ruha Benjamin's famous speech, "Black Faces in High Places Are Not Going to Save Us" (Benjamin, 2024), highlights how whiteness can be laundered through so-called representative "faces" to suppress *Blak critical thought*. While anti-Blackness, one of the most oppressive forms of racism, persists, the war against anticolonial and *Blak* thinking can also be perpetuated by those who are not necessarily white, through processes of colonial assimilation.

Visible representation matters. Yet the practice of laundering representation by corporate imperialist organizations to suppress anticolonial thought is not new. Hence, instead of focusing solely on representation in "leadership," it can be useful to analyse the politico-social functions that scholars, scientists, or intellectuals assume once they reach leading positions. In Antonio Gramsci's (2014) *Prison Notebooks*, the Italian-Sardinian intellectual—harshly incarcerated by the fascist regime and negatively racialized as Sardinian in northern Italy soon after unification, at a time when Lombroso's racist book against the southern Italians, *The Criminal Man*, was still circulating—posed questions that remain relevant today. Gramsci was born in 1891, thirty years after the unification of the Kingdom of Italy, which included the annexation of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies by the Piedmontese military (Aprile, 2020). This internal colonization devastated the South and created social/economic disparities. Lombroso, a middle-class northern Italian criminologist from Verona, who had served, as a voluntary doctor, in the Piedmontese army in Southern Italy (Montaldo, 2013), developed the racist idea that southern Italians resisting internal colonization were biologically predisposed to violence (Gibson, 2013). Back in Turin, he turned his 'scientific collection' of skeletons of alleged brigands into a museum (Montaldo, 2013).

Although Gramsci did not witness the atrocities of Italian unification firsthand, he experienced their enduring consequences, including corruption, heavy taxation, and the collapse of the southern economy. He grew up in the post-unification period, which was characterized by a liberal elitist vision that associated *whiteness* with the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie of Northern Italy (Giuliani, 2019). At the same time, the northern bourgeoisie subjected Southern Italy and the islands, including Sardinia, to a process of internal colonization, reducing them to colonies of exploitation (Gramsci, 2014). This internal colonial dynamic unfolded alongside the political will to unify Italy as a modern nation-state and to transform it into a colonial power, as evidenced by the country's early attempts to colonize Africa (Deplano & Pes, 2023; Panico, 2024). By the time Gramsci was imprisoned, just one year before the Kingdom of Italy enacted antisemitic laws stripping Jews of citizenship and governmental or professional positions (De Napoli, 2009), he asked whether intellectuals consider themselves rulers, part of the ruling classes, or whether they adopt a servile attitude toward them. He also asked whether intellectuals possess a paternalistic attitude toward the instrumental classes or consider themselves the organic expression of those classes.

Nowadays many, though not all, neoliberal corporate universities are run by managers who have never undertaken any research or taught, where PhD holders in precarious positions are often treated as passive teaching commodity labor. Hence, do people in leading positions consider themselves educators, or even intellectuals? And, to what extent do Black and non-white scholars choose to represent "banking universities"? As a working-class scholar, surrounded by a concrete class ceiling as thick as the fog on Mount Etna in Sicily, I think that Black, non-white, and marginalized scholars, together with those embracing anticolonial and anticapitalist thinking, must provide the platform for positive change. According to Gramsci (2014), those who embraced the philosophy of praxis had the delicate task of carrying out research that required great finesse and complexity. For it is very easy to be carried away by outward similarities and to miss the hidden ones. There are therefore connections that can unite even scholars who appear very different but share anticolonial thought.

Hence, by pushing for a transformation of universities, which should provide concrete opportunities for every student regardless of background, faculty who share anticolonial thinking, even if not outwardly visible, can restore transformative knowledge for the benefit of society. The current structure of universities, now run like factories in Anglo-American contexts, should be rethought as sites of intellectual, proactive, and creative practice, independent from the decisions of states and focused primarily on learning and advancing knowledge. Boards of Trustees and decision-makers should also be faculty members—not merely symbolic representatives (included only to give the impression of 'diversity'), but individuals committed to real change and willing to take the risk of being active agents of transformation. This is no easy task, considering that neoliberal universities, built on the dispossession of Indigenous lands, maintain material links with companies that produce technologies of colonial violence (see Fúnez-Flores, 2025).

Yet there have been historical cases of ancient educational institutions that were autonomous and corporate-independent, and not tied to colonial exploitation. These include, for instance, Ancient Nalanda University in India (427 CE, later destroyed in the 1190s), the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco (859 CE), the University of Sankoré in Mali (13th–14th century CE), the University of Bologna (1088 CE), and the University of Naples Federico II, Italy (1224 CE). Far from perfect, these institutions cultivated embryonic seeds of independent educational models aimed at fostering critical thinking, a mission that seems largely lost today. Some may argue that some of these schools were born as monasteries or mosques, but they were centers of learning. Nowadays, neoliberal universities may have the label "university" on their walls, but if they have lost their research and teaching mission and are run as corporations, they are no longer higher education centers.

Brabazon (2022) reminds us that higher education spaces should create new knowledge, produce high theory, and advance research while engaging with complex thinking. Within this context, going back to the point of the *Unblock* project, I question whether neoliberal "universities" could be reinvented through the recalibration of visible representation. Drawing on Too Black's (2024) analysis—as a low-wage worker, poet, author, organizer, and filmmaker who highlights how rage was born from colonial acts of conquest—I wonder to what extent militant Black rage (see Too Black, 2024) will be laundered and commodified within departments of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for the interests of white capital, considering that neoliberal universities are integral structures of the imperial-conquest that Too Black has discussed.

In 1898, in a French newspaper, Émile Zola publicly denounced the French government through his article "J'accuse…!", accusing President Félix Faure of having overlooked the injustice committed against Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish French army officer and a member of the French military establishment. In doing so, Zola did not merely accuse individuals but exposed a broader, abstract system of institutional injustice, while leaving unquestioned the colonial order within which that injustice was produced. Since then, the expression J'accuse has been used to denounce structural injustices. Drawing on Zola's formulation, in this first edition of the Unblock project, I too accuse the contemporary fabric of neoliberal universities as business enterprises that have lost their founding mission: the enrichment of minds.

J'accuse the commercialization of visible representation by "banking universities" for imperial wealth accumulation, on the backs of Black and non-Black contingent scholars.
J'accuse neoliberal universities of commodifying Blackness for business purposes.
J'accuse unequal academia in which, to exist, you cannot dare to resist.
J'accuse.

Yet I also wish. I wish the first edition of *Unblock* to be received with an open heart and mind. I wish the voices emerging from the interviews collected here to bloom out loud and strong. Let these voices serve as a cleansing force. May they guide readers to actions, louder than the words. Let these actions center *Blak thought*, in the belly of the neoliberal academic-apparatus beast. To bring light. To bring healing. To progress towards a long-waited justice.

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Protect your space, nurture your network, and support others while pursuing your goals

Talking with Professor Victoria Showunmi

Interviewed by
Dr Daniela Duc & Dr Ivana Rozic

Who Is Victoria Showunmi, and could you describe your academic and research journey?

I am Victoria Showunmi, a Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies in Gender, Race and Identity. I chose this title because it reflects both the complexity of who I am and the ambitions that guide my work. My research is rooted in gender, race and identity, and intersectionality is central to how I understand the world. I also serve as Vice Dean EDI and Chair of Athena Swan for the faculty, and I am a member of the Academic Board. My thinking is always shaped by a feminist and intersectional perspective.

I began my life in rural Devon and Somerset before moving to Ramsgate in Kent. I was raised by white parents of German Jewish heritage who came from a very upper class background. This upbringing shaped me profoundly, influencing how I see the world, how I question it and the values that ground me.

My journey into academia was not planned or straightforward. I excelled in Hotel and Catering School and imagined a future in management. When I was offered the chance to teach part-time organisational and management studies at the same college, I accepted, even though it was far from the hotel management path I had imagined. I was after all still working in a local hotel. At the same time, I undertook a part time BA, choosing to focus on the experiences of Black girls in further education. Those were demanding years. I commuted daily to London, worked in a Further Education college, and raised my daughters as a single mother.

Whilst taking a sabbatical and doing a Masters I was offered the opportunity to lead a 1 year research project on barriers into teaching for ethic minorities at a university where the Dean was a friend of the college principal. At that time, there were no Black staff in the education faculty. I stepped into the project with determination, and it became a success, leading to a co edited book titled Teachers for the Future. Still, as a young researcher, I often asked myself, “Is this really for me. Do I want to build a career in a space where people like me are barely seen.”

Professor Victoria Showunmi
University College London, England, UK

When that project ended, I moved to Scotland to work on a consultative research initiative. I spent weekdays travelling and often returned home only at weekends. During this time, I kept my private life private. I did not tell anyone I had daughters. It was not secrecy, but principle. I am a strong feminist, and I refuse to apologise for motherhood. With the support of au pairs, I made sure that childcare did not become a barrier imposed by others.

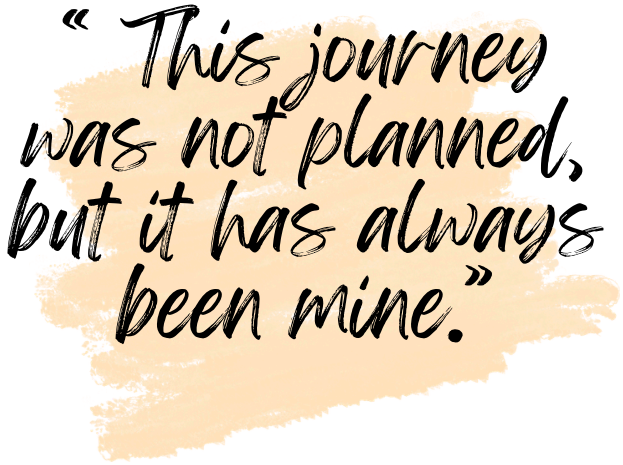
I later returned to London and worked part time at a London university on a BA programme and at a FE and HE College, contributing to teacher training. During this period, I began my doctorate, focusing on the experiences of unemployed Black women. I wanted to place their voices at the centre. Alongside academic work, I worked in public sector consulting, with local government, and continued running my own business. These experiences taught me the value of research, the value of money and, most importantly, the value of my own voice.

I later took on a senior position as Interim Head of Equality, where I held responsibility for equality work across the entire institution. This role allowed me to think both strategically and practically. In 2008, I joined the Institute of Education, a few years before it became part of University College London. That move opened the door to new possibilities and shaped the next chapter of my professional life.

I am a woman who is Black and in many ways, a posh girl. I did not grow up in London, I did not know its unwritten rules, and I did not follow a traditional route into academia. I never planned to be a professor. But the twists, the acts of courage, the moments of doubt and determination have shaped me into the scholar, leader and mentor I am today.

My outlook is international, my curiosity is constant, and my commitment to equity is deep. In my roles as Vice Dean EDI and Chair of Athena Swan, I work across the entire faculty. The remit is large and complex, but it is work that matters, and I carry it with purpose.

This journey was not planned, but it has always been mine.



Journey towards professorship

So, what does your day-to-day look like now that you’re a professor?

My day-to-day work is largely meetings. You’re very lucky I’ve come out to see you today, it’s nice to be outside! Alongside meetings, my work includes academic responsibilities: supervising PhD students and teaching in the summer term. I enjoy teaching in the summer because the material can be quite heavy, and it helps to have sunshine rather than grey skies when engaging with challenging topics. In addition, I’m involved in a European project focused on gender. I’m just finishing a COST Action project, a European initiative that I led for four years, with a particular focus on intersectionality. It was demanding work, especially collaborating with colleagues from across Europe, but extremely rewarding.

Alongside this, I’m working on publications. I currently have five books in progress, all reaching completion at the same time, as well as a special issue. It feels good to see everything coming together. That’s my day-to-day life. I also go to the gym, I run, I have my dog, and of course, my daughters.

How are you supported in your role currently? As a Black women academic, do you think the support you receive are sufficient?

It depends on what you mean by support. Are you talking about personal support for me, or the support I have in place to deliver the work I do? If we’re talking about support for the work I deliver, then I have a team that works with me. I have three equity leads across the faculty: one focusing on LGBTQ+ issues, one on diversity, disability, and neurodiversity, and another on mental health and wellbeing.

Within the faculty departments, there are usually one or two inclusion leads who focus on issues locally within their departments. This structure spans seven departments and one centre, so there’s a wide network of people involved. I also have a Self-Assessment Team (SAT), which is part of the Athena Swan process. This is a group of people who help bring others together. I work closely with them to deliver what we want to achieve. Since last year, I’ve also established two new structures: a Strategic EDI Committee at senior level, and an Operations Committee. These are the groups of people who actively do the work alongside me.

Now, if you’re asking about what support Victoria has personally, that’s a very different question. As Vice Dean, I meet regularly with the Dean, usually once or twice a term. I’m also a member of the Senior Management Team (SMT). When I joined SMT, I was the first Black colleague to sit on it within our faculty. We now have others, but I was the first. You might ask how significant that is—and it is significant. That said, I’m used to being in white spaces. I grew up in them, so I’m not intimidated or nervous in those environments.

In terms of mentoring, I don’t have a formal mentor. What I do have, and always ask for, is a coach. I prefer my coaches to be external to the organisation. I’ve had a coach through the university’s senior leadership programme, and I’ve asked for another one recently. I generally like to have a coach in place. People sometimes ask whether my coaches have been Black or white. Mostly, they’ve been white. I’ve never really had a Black mentor. I’ve had people I could talk to, people whose doors I could knock on to discuss particular issues, but never an official mentor. So, no, I don’t have a mentor. I have a line manager, and I mentor others, but I’m not formally mentored myself.

What has been your biggest hurdle? As a follow-up, why was this such a significant obstacle?
How did you overcome it? What was it like to go through this challenge, how did it make you feel? In your view, why do these hurdles exist in the first place?

That's an interesting question. When I first arrived here, I was very, very posh. I sounded posh, and I didn't think about class at all. As we know, privilege is often invisible to those who possess it. Coming from an upper-class background, I didn't initially understand myself in relation to class. When I entered the institution, people didn't quite know how to read me. They could see that I was a Black woman, but I also sounded—and, in many ways, still sound—very "white." My attributes, my mannerisms, my speech: these have been shaped by my upbringing, by Jewishness, by class, by culture. They're part of my DNA. I know who I am, and I did not need to adhere to whiteness, but I understand how my presence is interpreted.

This is something I explore in my co-edited book *Understanding and Managing Sophiscated and Everyday Racism.* When you enter the establishment, which I refer as the "big house", I find people don't know where to position you. Do they place you within their stereotype of who they think you should be, or somewhere else entirely? You end up occupying an in-between space: too white to be Black, too Black to be white. What does this have to do with my journey? Everything.

When I walk through the door, I own the space I enter. I don't tiptoe in or wait for permission to sit down. Many people who look like me feel compelled to humble themselves, to wait to be invited. That difference is deeply connected to class. Class teaches you whether you feel entitled to take a seat at the table, or whether you wait to be offered one. This becomes particularly visible around promotion. Sometimes you encounter people who see themselves as allies or saviours, people who believe they have "allowed" you into the space. There's often an unspoken expectation that you should be eternally grateful: grateful to be at the table, grateful for the biscuits and cake. But what happens when you don't perform that gratitude? When you say, actually, I don't need the biscuits, and I don't need saving?

That unsettles people. Especially if they are used to being the saviour. I don't suffer from imposter syndrome in the big house, I grew up in it. To me, it's familiar terrain. So what does this mean for promotion? It's simple. If you promote me, you promote me. If you don't, and I meet all the criteria, then we have a different conversation, possibly in court. Blocking progression because someone refuses to perform gratitude is not neutral; it's political. This is where things become strategic. They may try to block you indirectly, to slow you down, to destabilise you. They know where you're going, but they don't know how you'll get there. It becomes a game of chess.

Let me give you an example. Not long after I became Vice Dean, I was walking down the corridor and said "good morning" to a colleague. Instead of replying in kind, he said, "Look at you in your accelerated role." I had three choices: ignore it, dismiss it, or challenge it. I walked back to him and asked, "What did you just say?" He immediately backtracked —*Oh no, I didn't mean that*. But he had meant it. All I had said was "good morning." Why did my presence provoke that response?

Now, I'm a Vice Dean. Some people rise because they are sponsored by powerful figures, a white man, a white woman. I don't have that. I have myself. And I've had people try to cut my legs off, cut my arms off, and push me aside. But I'm still standing. That, ultimately, is why this journey matters.

So that's why it's hard sometimes. For example, you have to follow all the rules, and then you see other people cutting corners and getting away with it. How does that affect you?

Yeah, it's frustrating. But I guess that also shapes who you are. In my opinion, it gives you a certain freedom to navigate, because people don't always know what to expect from you. Well, that's a bit personal.

How do people perceive you?

They call me courageous, or sometimes troubling. Not troubling in a physical sense, of course, but in the sense that I observe very carefully, and they never know which angle I'm going to come from. I can listen closely in a meeting and then ask the most difficult question, cutting straight through like butter. That's the type of person I am.

What has been your number one enabler for all of this?

Spirituality. I am a Christian and I've practice Buddhism meditation chanting helps me to focus. Music is fundamental to my life; without music, things go badly wrong. I love all kinds of music. Humor is also crucial. Even on really tough days, I try to find humor in situations, and my daughters have learned to do that too. It doesn't diminish the seriousness of the issues I face, but it helps to cope.

Navigating discrimination, politics and conflicts in academia

How do race and gender play into your experiences?

I always say I'm a feminist. I am a woman, and I will be seen as a woman whether people like it or not. Yes, race is there, but my work is shaped by my experience as a woman. Some of the issues I discuss in my books relate to "sophisticated racism."

Can you explain what you mean by "sophisticated racism"?

When you grow up in rural areas like Somerset, Devon, or leafy Kent racism is raw, it's overt. People will openly admit to being racist, and it's unfiltered. In London or in more urban environments, racism is subtle. It's sophisticated. Not so many people are calling you the N-word or being openly racist in meeting but it's there. Only it is not so noticeable you can see it, and that can be mentally exhausting.

Can you give an example?

Sure. One time I was in a lift and asked someone about the number of Black students on their course. They said, "I don't see colour." I replied, "But you see me as a woman, right? How can you see gender but not race?" There response was weak. Moments like that reveal how sophisticated bias works in academia. More recently I was part of an interview panel and said good morning to other panel members when I asked if I have received an email from a person I am not in daily contact with I asked what was the email about they said check your email. I realized they had mixed my up with the executive assistant. Was that because they were not used to sharing the leadership space with someone looking like me? Or perhaps they were short sighted …

How does this kind of subtle bias affect people?

It's like watching the wind, you can see it through the movement of the trees, but others can't. Only you notice it, and it can be mentally exhausting. Allies may not always see what you see, which makes navigating these environments challenging.

How do you handle it?

You observe, you strategize, and you use your enablers—spirituality, music, humor—to stay grounded. You don't let it define you, but you stay aware of it, and you confront it when necessary.

There are lots of programs, especially in the U.K., aimed at supporting women. What are your thoughts on these programs for Black women?

Well, it depends on the program. Take W.H.E.N. (Women's Higher Education Network), for example. Someone wrote about me on LinkedIn, and everything she said was true. She came to discuss W.H.E.N. with me, and I listened. Honestly, at first, it felt like it was just a program for white women.

When she was challenged we took time to talk and I ended up mentoring her, and that's why the program changed. If you really reflect on these programs, most of them, when they talk about "women," they really mean white women. They'll show you stats, HR stats, accounting stats, but when you ask, "How many of these women are non-white?" they can't give you the data. Often, it's just one, two, or none. And when you press them, they give all sorts of reasons why they can't provide the data. My point is, if there are only five or ten women, just be truthful. Don't hide it. Data should reflect reality. If you ask how many dogs there are, and there are five of one type and five of another, you say that. Don't pretend the data doesn't exist because it's inconvenient.

I do think W.H.E.N has its heart in the right place. Beyond that, there aren't many programs specifically for Black women. There's Aspire, but that's not particularly targeted. I think Ignite—or UKRI gives funding, but again, it's not specifically easy to receive a grant if you are a Black scholar. Honestly, there aren't many. There's more support for Black men than for Black women. For Black girls, it's often up to people like me to push, because the structures just aren't there.

What do you think could be done more specifically to support Black women researchers and academics?

I think one of the most important things is creating spaces to talk. And I don't just mean formal discussions, sometimes it's just about sitting down, having a bowl of popcorn, and talking. Other times, you need spaces to strategize. We need to mix different levels together—high-level leaders, early-career researchers, but also acknowledge the importance of taking time out for yourself.

We also need to develop strategy across the U.K. I'm good at helping people navigate institutional culture because I grew up immersed in whiteness, so I understand how to move through these spaces without making a fuss. But for someone new, it can be confusing. People will say, "Go through the door," and you think, "Which door? One, two, three, or four?" It sounds trivial, but this kind of ambiguity can drive you insane if you're not used to it. English itself can be ambiguous. I've helped quite a few people figure out how to find their way, read the room, and get things done within the establishment.

It's especially hard when it comes to understanding the academic framework: what counts toward promotion, what doesn't, what earns points. You need someone who can take the time with you, be honest, and ask the right questions: *What exactly have you done? What should you include in your portfolio? How does this move you toward associate professor, professor, or other roles?* You need a sounding board, someone who gives you honest feedback, not superficial comments about appearance or personality. By honesty, I mean *tough love*. You need people to tell you clearly what works and what doesn't, but also help you understand the subtleties of the room, the eye movements, body language, and positioning at the table. All of that is part of navigating academia successfully.

> "You need a sounding board, someone who gives you honest feedback...By honesty, I mean tough love."

What has been your experience with dealing with conflicts and politics in academia?

I don't really engage in conflict, believe it or not. I try to read the room (however, this is hard if your meetings are online), understanding what's happening, deciding what to respond to, and what to let go. Some situations could become confrontational for others, but I tend to navigate them with as much care as possible. There's a lot of politics in academia. And you can think of it as politics with a small "p" and politics with a big "P"—it's all about positioning yourself. I'm also on the Academic Board, similar to a Senate, and that's an interesting space where you really see political dynamics in action.

Our provost has a group called Academic Leaders, which brings together all university leaders, including deans and vice-deans. I'm known for asking questions in those spaces, often the same question at multiple levels.

The key is shaping your questions strategically: thinking about why you're asking, what you want to achieve, and how it will support the work you do. I focus on culture, particularly how Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives transform culture. I'm not interested in EDI for appearances; I'm interested in moving the dial. Even small changes count.

Culture is inherently political. People are often comfortable in the status quo, even when some benefit while others don't. For me, progress may be incremental, I might not see the full change in my lifetime, but even small movements are success. We're fortunate to have a provost who is committed to equality, and that sets the tone. Everything I do, research, teaching, leadership, is political. I teach sociology of race and until recently, I taught a module on Minorities, Migrants, and Refugees. My research methods course for doctoral students incorporates decolonizing methodologies, like Linda Tuhiwai Smith's framework. Even quantitative researchers are encouraged to reflect on their positionality and the meaning behind their data.

I tell my students, "**The power is in the pen**." How you write, how you frame research, and how you document decisions has impact. You can either enable others to develop or hinder them. Most people stay neutral, but I choose to support and advocate. That's how I navigate politics in academia, strategically, thoughtfully, and with a clear sense of purpose.

So, it's like the teacher has the pen to write about you, a good reference or a bad reference.

Exactly. That's the power we all hold, whether in teaching, research, or leadership. You choose how to use it.

What impact have all of these realizations and experiences had on you personally?

That's a good question. I suppose the impact is that it's shaped me into who I am today. But honestly, I didn't need all of that to go through, my childhood had enough challenges of its own. I didn't have a typical childhood where someone held my hand, played skipping games, or cooked together. Sure, I lived in a big house, had accommodation, food, water, I had the basics. I might have been a posh girl, but that's very different from having a nurturing childhood in the way people often imagine. The impact? I'm a workaholic. If my daughters were here, they'd say, "Mum, you're a workaholic!" I enjoy what I do, and I'm very aware that some people don't like me—not as friends, anyway. Some may feel threatened by what I do or just see me as being difficult. There's more gossip than honesty sometimes, but I try not to get caught up in that noise. I just focus on what I need to do. If I let it pull me down, I wouldn't achieve anything.

If someone really tries to frustrate me, I won't avoid it, but they have no idea how I'm going to deal with it. You might think you know, based on your own biases, but you don't.

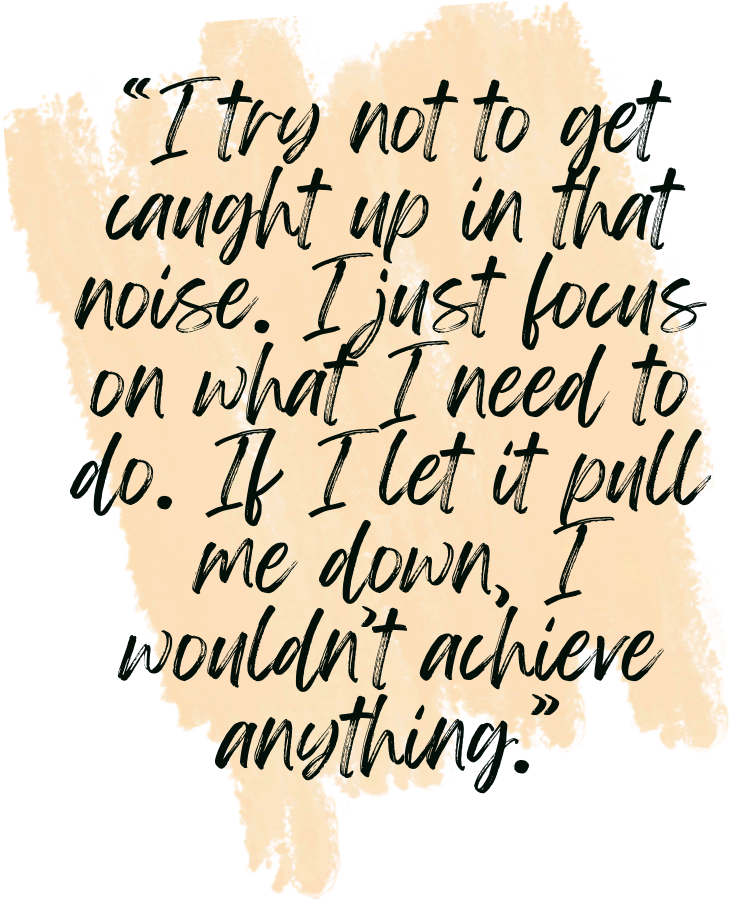
What would you say to women who avoid conflict or hesitate to position themselves because they're afraid of being stereotyped?

They need to be themselves. We're not angry. In fact, there's more anger projected from white women than from black women in professional spaces. Some people project their own emotions onto you, they get defensive or upset, and then it looks like it's your fault. I can only speak from my own experience as a Black woman. I don't come into a room banging on the table or shouting. People might perceive that I will, but it's not who I am. I do address conflict, but strategically, like playing chess. You need to see all the pieces, work out your moves, and bring things together thoughtfully.

I deal with a lot of confidential and complex conflict at work, but I don't run from it. I'm also a single mum, managing everything on my own with my three daughters and my dog. We make decisions together, sometimes even the dog is part of the decision-making process. That's my reality, and it shapes how I navigate life and work.

I think what you said earlier is very powerful, that it's important to position yourself and not be afraid. Purpose seems crucial.

Exactly. And authenticity. What you see is what I am. The same person I was when I met the Queen, Prince Charles, and other dignitaries, I'm still me. If Prince Charles saw me again, he'd remember our conversation about feminism because I made him laugh. I am who I am. If you don't like that, that's fine. But I am authentic, and authenticity is crucial. If you try to be someone else, that's when mental health issues arise.



When does conflict cross the line into abuse?

When someone slams the door in your face. A few years ago, an academic assumed I was making complaints about racism and slammed a fire door in my face while shouting. I just asked, "Are you okay?" and carried on. That is abuse. I've also experienced direct verbal aggression from colleagues. Once, a male colleague screamed at me with his finger in my face for twenty minutes. I stayed calm, shut the door, and asked if we could discuss the issue more calmly. I was shaking afterward, but it was about managing rage, not reacting impulsively.

Then there's subtle and overt abuse: colleagues refusing to acknowledge my academic work, dismissing my expertise in gender or race, or ignoring my contributions. Internationally, I am recognized as an academic, why not here? Often it comes down to assumptions about race and authority.

How do you navigate these challenges with colleagues?

Open communication is key. I once had a very difficult colleague. We were constantly at odds, and he even "threw me under the bus." In Denver, I approached him and said, "We need to talk. This isn't working." We had an open discussion, cleared the air, and set boundaries. Many people avoid these conversations, but letting resentment fester only worsens the situation. You have to open up the wound, clean it, and put a bandage on if necessary.

With all your leadership roles, what should universities do to support black women?

They need to embrace creativity and innovation. I'm very creative, I solve problems, think strategically, and see the big picture. But the norm rarely allows that. Institutions need to recognize that sticking to conventional methods doesn't get results. Sometimes, you have to flip the deck chair over for people to notice something has changed. Universities must also value vision. I can see what's coming and map out what needs to be done, but I might need others to help pin down the details. That collaboration works when institutions support creative thinking rather than stifle it.

How should institutions handle this creatively?

One of my papers is titled *"A Flame of Creativity That Gets Extinguished by White Dominance."* It captures exactly what happens. Creative energy comes in, full of ideas, strategies, and vision—and it gets snuffed out by entrenched dominance. Institutions need to actively prevent that extinguishing of creativity, especially for black women and other marginalized academics.

Does discrimination exist in academia?

Of course it does. In all forms, gender, disability, LGBTQ+, race, it exists everywhere. And yes, it's hierarchical. Some people may say, "Let's focus on disability." Great! But what about race and disability together? Suddenly, faces change. Why do you include race in everything? Because if we don't, the voices of Black people with disabilities remain silent. The same applies to LGBTQ+—what about Black LGBTQ+ voices, or Asian, or Chinese individuals?

Segmentation often doesn't help. It can make spaces very white. For example, I've read student dissertations on LGBTQ+ issues where the Asian perspective is completely ignored. White-dominated spaces often claim to represent a community, but Black or minority voices are excluded. This is why, in the U.S., many Black LGBTQ+ individuals feel the standard LGBTQ+ framework isn't inclusive, they are part of the community, but they don't belong fully.

Discrimination intersects with other factors too. Take disability: if you're from Croatia, you might be white, but language and cultural barriers matter. Girls with autism or ADHD were often never diagnosed because the research focused on boys. Without an intersectional approach—gender, race, disability—we're missing entire populations.

And with your Vice Dean hat in equity, inclusion, and diversity, what are the biggest impacts of discrimination on Black women?

Blocking. Being blocked from promotion, progression, recognition. Black women are often workaholics because they feel they must prove themselves, yet their work is ignored. There's emotional trauma, burnout, racial trauma, and lack of psychological safety. Another huge impact is invisibility: you are visible, but invisible. People may see your work but don't recognize you. They might cite your research later without acknowledgment. You get blacklisted, excluded, or sidelined, people only collaborate if it benefits them.

Does this discrimination create financial pressures as well?

Absolutely. Many underrepresented groups are stuck in casualized or zero-hours contracts. Women, especially Black women and those from migration backgrounds, struggle to get permanent positions. If they speak up, they risk losing even the small contracts they have. Discrimination here isn't just social; it's economic, and it can push people into poverty.

As Vice Dean and Chair of Athena Swan, do universities' current measures, like Race Charters, suffice?

Measures are useful, but it's how they are implemented locally that matters. Departments need to see these initiatives in action. Data is often used as an excuse for inaction, but the data exists—we just need to act on it.

"Measures are useful, but it's how they are implemented locally that matters."

Empowering the educational journey of Black women and girls

What was your experience in the UK education system?

I only know the British system. I started in a village school in Somerset, about 40 children. I was the only Black child. Parents, teachers, and classmates had never seen a Black child. It wasn't a healthy environment, but I was very bright. By age four, I was reading complicated books and helping the teacher with other students. Later, I moved to another school, took grammar school exams, and continued to excel academically. But I also faced dangers—like encountering a pedophile at school. I went to an all-girls school, top of the class, still the only Black girl. Nobody supported my homework at home, as my mother was focused on household responsibilities, not university education.

I trained in hotel management aiming to become a general manager, but I was repeatedly denied opportunities because of my skin color. I'd arrive for interviews and they'd look confused, expecting someone else. I wasn't misbehaving at school, I was conscious and disciplined, but I constantly faced racism from teachers and peers.

What about the current experience of Black women and girls in education?

Some girls feel they have to present "the whiter side of Black" to succeed, essentially disowning their identity. Seeing someone like me shows them it's possible to be themselves. In universities, many Black students are alone on their courses, whether biomedical sciences or other subjects. It's tough, isolating, and disorienting. For academics, connecting and working together professionally is crucial. The persistent theme? Invisibility. You're there, your work is there, but you remain unseen.

How do these experiences shape Black girls and women in their development and career?

My daughters have all gone to private school, and my youngest experienced subtle, but persistent, racism. She's tall, Black, sporty, and academically bright, qualities that made her highly visible but often misinterpreted as aggressive. Children like her are naturally gentle, but teachers and peers often label them incorrectly. The impact? Trauma, a tendency to retreat into a shell, and it can take years to recover.

It's like a tortoise: when danger appears, it withdraws into its shell. My job is to coax it out, gently, letting it regain confidence. Psychological safety is everything. One of my PhD students even referred to herself as a tortoise in our discussion about gender-based violence. That imagery resonates because it captures the vulnerability and need for careful nurturing.

What can educational institutions do to support young Black girls and women?

Open doors and networks. I was never included in faculty projects, except internationally. That exclusion stifles careers. Early career researchers need genuine opportunities, mentorship, and inclusion in meaningful projects. Nepotism kills progression, advertise positions and let talent in.

Recognize lived experiences, don't dismiss them. Many young Black girls are shy, yet their challenges are invisible. They battle daily just to exist in predominantly white spaces. Universities need safe spaces where they can talk freely, even about seemingly personal issues like hair or skin care, without judgment. These spaces build trust and allow conversations to move to deeper issues later.

Representation matters. Teachers, mentors, and allies who understand the cultural and social realities of Black students make a difference. For example, discussions about natural hair or skin care may seem small but are deeply tied to identity, confidence, and belonging.

Any advice for Black women aspiring to academia?

Be authentic. Follow your passion, whether it's studying bumblebees or researching Black women and girls, that passion must guide you. Stay true to yourself; don't let anyone pull you off your path. Academia isn't just about titles; it's about community and connection. I bring community into my classroom and my research. For instance, I host events where Black men from the community come to the university. This enriches learning and ensures research is grounded in lived experiences. Success isn't just about personal advancement, it's about lifting others and creating spaces where everyone can thrive.

Any final words?

Passion, authenticity, and community. Protect your space, nurture your network, and support others while pursuing your goals. Academia is a journey, not just a title, and we grow by helping others grow alongside us.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

This selective and curated list of films, scholarly works, and creative texts accompanies the first edition of *Unblock Magazine*, developed as part of the Cardiff University / Wellcome Trust–funded Cynnau/Ignite Research Leadership Development Programme.

While necessarily limited, these resources invite readers to engage critically with questions of race, racism, colonial legacies, Black radical thought, feminism, and cultural resistance across global contexts.

DOCUMENTARIES / FILMS

Adra, Basel, Yuval Abraham, Hamdan Ballal, and Rachel Szor (dirs.). *No Other Land. Documentary film*, 2024. Antipode Films; Yabayay Media. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AS6v3hC86Q

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This section highlights a limited selection of open access scholarship and journalistic contributions that complement the curated books, documentaries, and creative works listed above.

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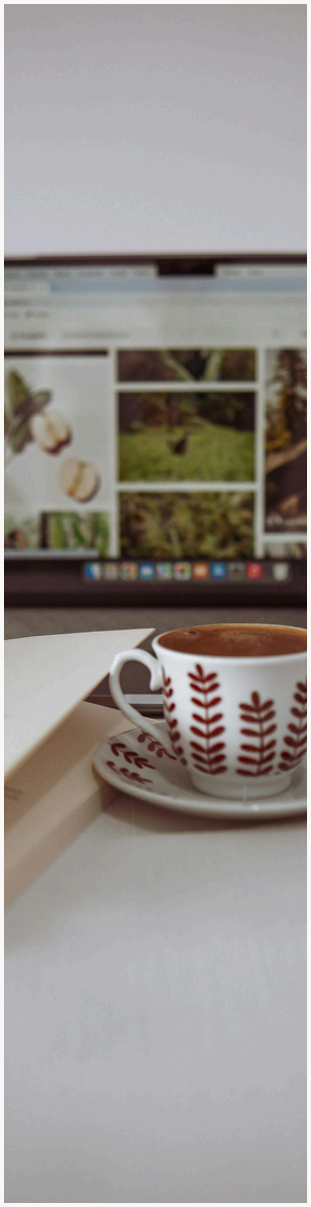

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