



## History Acts 23:

### Black History Matters

Online, 16 June 2020

Activists: Jabu Nala-Hartley (Mothers 4 Justice Ubuntu / Oxford Anti-Racist City), Florence Adeoye (Young Historians Project)

Historians: Dr Christienna Fryar (Goldsmiths), Dr Ashley Howard (Iowa)

#### **Key questions:**

- How can the momentum of the current Black Lives Matter protests be maintained and developed to achieve the total eradication of racism?
- How can the current protests encourage wider interrogation of the myths of national and political histories?
- How can these protests and the teaching of Black history inform each other and how can these ideas be applied in the practical decolonisation of the curriculum?
- What is the role of the symbolic value of e.g. statues in these campaigns and how important is this? How can we ensure that we do not lose sight of the wider structural problems in focusing on these symbols?
- What impact will the economic consequences of the pandemic have on the teaching of Black history in the academy and how can we resist this?

Jabu Nala-Hartley joined the meeting from a Black Lives Matter (BLM) march in Oxford. She explained that the march marked the historical significance of 16 June, the date of the beginning of the Soweto Uprising of 1976 which saw Black schoolchildren protest against the use of Afrikaans and English as the sole languages of instruction in South African schools. The march in Oxford called for decolonisation of the curriculum, including through the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes on Oriel College. She explained that statues like these are a symbol of oppression of Black people and glorify Britain's imperialist past. She pointed out that Oxford is a divided city in which this colonialist past is still present. Marches like this aim to disrupt structural racism by coming together in peace and unity to address racism of the past and present, resisting issues such as the persistent belief in Britain that imperialism was justified. She is glad that white comrades are asking to be educated on racism and called for all participants in the meeting to educate ourselves. She drew attention to present-day examples of structural racism such as the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on BAME communities and racism in job appointments. She noted that anti-racist resistance is and has always been peaceful,

pointing to the example of the BLM march in London the previous weekend and campaigners' peaceful response to far-right violence.

Florence Adeoye explained that the [Young Historians Project](#) (YHP) was formed around 2015 to address the low proportion of students and tutors in history from African or Caribbean backgrounds. YHP is currently working on a project using archives to trace the histories of African women in the British health service. She noted that it is important to help young people see themselves in history, but that such Black history as is often taught does not tend to be extensive or formative. YHP aims to teach Black history and create more Black historians.

Christienna Fryar discussed why BLM campaigns have focused so much on statues such as Edward Colston in Bristol and Rhodes in Oxford. These are ongoing campaigns against statues that are symbols of the oppression of Black people. It is relevant to consider the response from politicians and the media to these campaigns, which shows how little Black history is well-known or circulating in schools. She addressed some of the historical myths circulating in public and popular discourse, such as that Britain was first country to abolish slavery. In fact Britain was not even the first country to abolish the slave trade, but in addition there was a 30-year gap between the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery in the Caribbean. These myths reflect constant attempts to position Britain as a moral nation, but this kind of slippage in historical discourse is not just a misunderstanding of history. Examples like these also show how Black lives do not matter in British public discourse as they allow 30 years' experience of enslavement to be ignored.

She argued that this is a moment where nations are struggling with their national myths. All nations lie to themselves, but the UK and USA tell different lies about slavery. The US cannot pretend that slavery did not exist so it pretends that it was not so bad, citing examples of 'benevolent' slave owners. This removes the need to think critically about the founding of the nation. In comparison, the UK pretends that it was only a slave-trading rather than a slave-owning nation. Figures like Colston are presented as important civic philanthropists; but this view of them does not take into account what it meant to trade in enslaved Africans. The UK's national discourses are not grappling with what it means that so much of this country's wealth is based on trading in, abusing, and killing enslaved people. The persistent narrative of the 'benefits' of imperialism cannot exist when crimes of imperialism such as famine and violence are focused on.

She pointed out, however, that the conversation about statues should not stand in for other conversations about present and ongoing issues such as the impact of Covid-19 on BAME communities and the delays in publishing reports on this and implementing their recommendations, or police brutality. While the historical context is very important it should not overshadow real and current issues in Britain. These demonstrations are not solely about solidarity with US activists.

Ashley Howard said she has been inspired by the international solidarity in pushing back against anti-Black oppression. There is a history to this as well, as Black and indigenous people have often built international action on common experience, but this is often faced with responses attempting to deny both their history and suffering and their organising power. States 'forget to remember' their history and the primal violence on which they are built. She asked why toppling statues is more readily considered 'violence' than police brutality. Violence is currently institutional, interpersonal, structural, and ever-present, and the current protests are a blip of resistance in this constant stream of violence. She challenged the idea that there is a 'right way to protest'. Structural violence feeds into legitimised forms of protest such as elections through the inaccessibility of polling stations, ID checks etc. These protests indicate that this is a nationwide problem in the US and that people are fed up because 'acceptable' methods of protests have not worked. The idea that protests are aberrant and

unproductive is a myth, as historical examples of successful protests such as the fight against segregation prove; but the state apparatus also gets better at shutting down different types of protests. Ashley argued that, although the circumstances are obviously different, the example of the 1960s can provide social movement theories that can help to inform the current protests. She pointed to the strategic movements of protests from communities to downtown commercial areas, as well as the organisation of resources, both of information through social media but also of food provision within communities.

She framed the current protests in their context of five years of BLM activism which has radically shifted general understanding of anti-Black violence and policing. The fact that protests are now multiracial points to strategic alliances and political opportunities. The context of the global pandemic and austerity measures may help to create an opportunity to defund the police.

The general discussion recognised the interesting relationship between recovering the past and Black history and retelling foundational narratives. This awareness may work to change how we understand national histories but may also prompt rethinking of big ideas such as neoliberalism by learning to see it as racialised and drawing in the labour of enslaved people. Pulling down statues has been a feature of insurrection for much of the past as a way of challenging memory and narrative. Targeting statues highlights the link between symbolic and political power. Participants asked what, in addition to statues, might be other useful focuses for protest in a UK context? Christienna argued for focusing on the lived experience of Black people in the past in order to create a much larger body politic which questions national historical narratives and myths.

Participants asked whether the movement would peter out when the Covid-19 crisis is over as activists and a wider public will have less time to focus on these issues. The panel agreed that the current momentum should not be allowed to die away. While the immediacy of the current situation has been relevant in garnering support, Florence hoped that it would embolden more people in the future to hold (educational) institutions to account. Ashley emphasised that people have taken to streets in response to genuine grievances, not pandemic boredom. Ideas that were previously limited to activist circles, such as defunding the police, are now becoming mainstream. The current militancy is driven by young people who are anxious about their future. It is important to take this momentum forward by questioning the places where Black voices are not heard, such as in universities or specific jobs.

A participant who has long been campaigning without significant success to have racist street names changed in Plymouth raised the immediate impact of actions like pulling down Colston's statue where similar proposals for changes to the symbolic cityscape had previously been sidelined. The panel emphasised that activism must have more than one goal, but that it remains important to consider the symbolic impact of statues and street names. Florence pointed to the experience of students who may come to Oxford and find a statue of someone who murdered their ancestors. Education and the ways we teach and spread information are central to this campaign. Social media allows for the sharing of resources that were previously limited to the academy.

Participants asked about the role of white saviour narratives in historical discourse. How can we detach our past from our present through scrutiny of past actions? Ashley stated that national pride must acknowledge what has been done. Citing Vincent Harding, she explained that Black history means looking critically at all aspects of national history as a way of owning our own history and using it to inform the shaping of the future. Christienna added that there has never been a truth-and-reconciliation process in US or UK histories. She argued that Britain struggles to recognise Black people as part of the body politic. The national narrative sees Blackness as foreignness; this is reflected in the Windrush scandal, which was based on the assumption that Black people have no right to be here.

This is why national narratives have to focus on white saviours rather than Black historical actors; she gave the example of abolition history that primarily celebrates white abolitionists. These narratives are easy to access because only white people are recognised as part of the nation.

A participant asked how Black parents can help their children in responding to and understanding history. For example, could supplementary school be a form of activism, mobilising Black young people to understand their history? Ashley praised supplemental education and pointed to its long history including examples such as the Black Panthers' Freedom Schools. This kind of education can and should also include Black role models who should be cultivated in children's lives so they can see Blackness represented. It is important to protect children through the knowledge that discrimination is a reality, but also to raise them not to feel that they have to be afraid. Florence added that teachers may not know how to educate their students on Black history; it is important to make sure that teachers understand their own position.

Participants asked how the current BLM movement can centralise the voices of marginalised people, such as trans and queer Black people. What is the role of allies within these conversations, and how can they use their voices to be effective and not speak over Black activists? How can we counteract performativity and one-up-personship of white allies? Ashley pointed out that the movement did not need allies but co-conspirators. The performance of activism and wokeness does not move the movement forward. Allies should not dip into the movement but fall back on their privilege when convenient. They should be willing to assume the same risks that people of colour are having to take in these struggles. Christienna gave the example of Peter Norman whose public support of Black Power damaged his athletic career, showing that allyship does cost. She feels conflicted on this issue: on the one hand it is great to see allies learning and supporting new ideas, but she also fears that many are not going to stay in the fight. A few weeks of learning is not equivalent to a lifetime of learning and activism. Allies should consider humility and think about whether they are clearing paths or talking over activists.

A participant enquired how the panellists, who are all educators themselves, put Black lives back into historical narratives in their own classrooms, and whether they could advise on ways of scaling up their strategies. Ashley always assigns at least majority Black scholars and when assigning non-Black scholars she examines their politics and what they are trying to do with their research. Assigning problematic scholars helps students to think critically about why they wrote what they did. She asks students to interrogate knowledge and how centring Black history shapes how they now understand the history they thought they knew. Christienna is critical of how the language of decolonising the curriculum is being taken into discourses in UK universities. She argues that it has gone from a radical idea to an institutional buzzword that can excuse the failure to act meaningfully while Black staff continue to be marginalised. It is important to write Black experience back into British and European history, including through visibility of staff of colour in teaching it; but this should not just be the work of scholars of colour and/or junior and young scholars. She also makes a point of assigning Black scholars and asking why African-American scholars are more represented in course reading lists than Black British scholars. She argues for questioning with students why things are as they are in the academy. Florence added that Black history should not be considered niche in the academy, for instance through introducing only one dedicated module into the curriculum.

A participant asked how archives can be used in anti-racist work and how history can be made useful to organising in the present. Christienna noted that one consequence of the pandemic is that the current conversation about Black history is happening while archives are closed, and particularly archives of Black history are often not digitised. This raises questions about the politics behind this lack of accessibility.

Participants wondered whether there is too much pressure on young Black people and social media to explain structural racism and its impact. Florence agreed and pointed out that pressures on social media fail to recognise that individuals cannot have all the knowledge and answers. This tendency to question individual campaigners and people of colour also allows the people asking questions not to take responsibility for educating themselves.

Participants raised the economic impact of the pandemic, which has caused casualised staff to be let go and Black history modules to be cut, and asked about the practical consequences this will have for teaching Black history in universities. A participant cited the [letter](#) produced by women scholars of colour in the History department at Queen Mary in protest against the university's failure to act on its own rhetoric of inclusivity. Christienna pointed out that there are very few senior Black scholars in History departments in the UK; people with expertise in Black history tend to be more junior and often casualised. The narrative of 'streamlining' curricula and modules in universities has meant a loss of critical expertise, causing these subject areas to be left behind as opposed to more mainstream and better-funded and supported subject areas. Ashley explained that additional administrative labour and multiple contracts mean that many people with expertise in this area are already stretched; on top of this many are now also being asked to spearhead anti-racist projects, do community work, and support students of colour. All of this takes time away from developing the publication records that lead to tenure. Recruiting students of colour is often a numbers game for universities.

Participants asked what can be done to attract both more students and staff of colour. They also noted that it may be disingenuous to talk about decolonising the curriculum with only white staff. Some institutions place responsibility on students to specify what they want when they ask for more diversity in the curriculum. Students are often more clued up on debates, scholarship, and discussions on these issues than people in senior institutional roles; but what are the ethics of placing this burden on fee-paying students? Florence argued that it is important to create spaces for students to contribute to these conversations and show them that their knowledge is valuable and not just a box-ticking exercise. The burden of education should not be on students, however; if people are given this work to do they should be paid. Christienna added that educators have a responsibility to keep up with the breadth of new knowledge in their field. She agreed that they should listen to students (and pay them for their contributions) but should not ask students to do this work. It creates a hostile environment for students to suggest that they have to teach their professors. Scholars of colour are doing a lot of extra work, especially regarding pastoral care for students and juggling multiple appointments, so they cannot pick up the pieces for other colleagues, but this educational work cannot be turned over to students. If students are asked to educate their teachers, why do they need them at all?

As the discussion concluded the panel gave their final thoughts. Ashley argued that conversations like this, between activists and scholars, should be taking place all the time because they inform each others' work. It is especially important to do this while events are unfolding rather than retrospectively. She pointed out that scholars such as Jennifer Nash are addressing how Black feminist scholarship has been co-opted by institutions. Scholars are now putting Black women's agency into archives that have historically done violence to Black women. We must read against the grain and dismantle structural issues in the academy by supporting young scholars. Christienna stated that this is a moment of enormous possibility. It was unimaginable only months ago to have these conversations about defunding the police, and pulling statues down with councils agreeing not to put them back up. This has been made possible by people in the streets who are at grave personal risk, both in terms of their physical health through police brutality, and when the pandemic has caused gatherings to be restricted or prohibited. This is a testament to how serious this crisis is for Black

people, forcing them to be out even in a pandemic; but it also shows hope. It is exciting to think where we go from here, but it will be a long haul, and will require vigilance and scrutiny of what is actually done and achieved. We must ensure that the momentum of concessions being made now will not be lost in the long term as life returns to (more) normal. This is a powerful moment but the struggle is a long one. Florence emphasised the importance of unity, consistency, and collaboration between activist groups. She argued that centring queer lives in this movement is also the responsibility of organisations, and drew attention to the [Black & Queer Student Fund](#).

**Reading recommended by speakers:**

- Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016)
- Vincent Harding
- Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (Norton, 2020)
- Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Duke University Press, 2019)
- Diana Paton, 'Proper Channels', History Workshop  
<<https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/proper-channels/>>