

**Original citation:**

Warmington, Paul. (2012) '*A tradition in ceaseless motion*': *critical race theory and black British intellectual spaces*. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 15 (1). pp. 5-21.

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**Publisher's statement:**

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Race Ethnicity and Education* on 04 Jan 2012, available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13613324.2012.638861>

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# **‘A tradition in ceaseless motion’: critical race theory and black British intellectual spaces**

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## **Abstract**

In the USA, where critical race theory (CRT) first emerged, black public intellectuals are a longstanding, if embattled, feature of national life. However, while often marginalized in public debate, the UK has its own robust tradition of black intellectual creation. The field of education, both as a site of intellectual production and as the site of political struggle for black communities, is one of the significant fields in which black British intellectual positions have been defined and differentiated. This paper argues that the transfer of CRT to the UK context should be understood within this broader context of black British intellectual production. Through a critical examination of race conscious scholarship and the diverse literature produced in the UK since the 1960s, this paper identifies some of the dimensions of education that have been scrutinized by black British intellectuals. In doing so, it directs attention to questions being generated by the transfer of CRT to the UK and to the local materials on which those using CRT might draw, in order to build a historically grounded base for the development of CRT in the UK.

**Keywords:** critical race theory; black intellectuals; public intellectuals; black British history

## **Introduction**

One of the salient differences between the UK and the North American context in which Critical Race Theory (CRT) first emerged is that in the USA black public intellectuals are a longstanding, if embattled, feature of national life (Posnock, 1997; West 2001; Banner-Haley, 2010). However, while often marginalized in public debate and historical accounts, the UK has its own tradition of black intellectual production. The towering figures of the post-war era include CLR James, Claudia Jones, Ambalavaner Sivanandan, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy. In the field of education analyses of race and racism have been shaped by the work of Bernard Coard, Maureen Stone, Hazel Carby, Heidi Safia Mirza and Tony Sewell. Some of those named might balk at the very notion of being described as ‘black intellectuals’ – but then it is probably the reflex action, if not the duty, of black intellectuals to strain against that descriptor and the myriad conflicts it invokes: tensions between speaking for ‘particular’ interests and ‘universal’ values; between independent thought and

engagement in collective action; between representing ‘the oppressed’ and critiquing the injustices that exist even within their ranks. This paper offers a contribution to two intersecting projects. The first concerns the potential for CRT and its conceptual tools to become embedded in the UK as resources to account for and to counter racialized processes in the field of education. The second project is to promote the need for educators, inside academia and beyond it, to acknowledge and draw routinely upon the black British intellectual currents of the past half-century. How might CRT articulate with theories of race, racialization and racism developed over time by black British thinkers? The black British intellectual spaces to which this paper refers are not ephemera; they are rooted in historically specific dialogues with the disparate materials of pan-Africanism, Marxism, feminism, anti-racism, post-colonialism and post-structuralism. They have been inscribed in the pages of journals, in pamphleteers’ ink and through struggles in specific schools, streets and town halls. This paper identifies some of the dimensions of education that have been scrutinized by black British intellectuals and also considers education as a key field in which black British intellectual positions have been crafted. In doing so, it draws attention to questions being generated by the transfer of CRT to the UK and to the critical materials on which those in the UK using CRT might draw, in order to build a historically grounded base.

### **Notes on a ‘tradition’**

This paper might be read as a variant of what CRT refers to as ‘counter-storytelling’. Delgado and Stefancic (2001, 144) concisely define counter-storytelling as ‘writing that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority.’ Solórzano and Yosso (2009, 134) emphasise that critical race methodologies, such as counter-storytelling, are designed to challenge ‘ahistoricism and the undisciplined focus of most analyses ...analyzing race and racism by placing them in both historical and contemporary contexts.’ They define the counter-story as:

‘...a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told ...a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege.’

(Solórzano and Yosso, 2009, 138)

The counter-story works through the assertion of agency, voice and history. The story told in this paper is a counter-story in that it resonates with the voices of black British thinkers, so often silenced in majoritarian discourses of race and racism. Moreover, it insists on the historical agency of black intellectuals and the wider black and anti-racist movements through which they have often emerged. In asserting the ‘historical dimensions of black life’ (Gilroy, 1993a, 37), it challenges majoritarian

histories, in which black British people are depicted in passive, atrophied form as mere policy objects. This paper offers a kind of meta-story, in that it suggests co-ordinates for re-telling the history of race and education in Britain since the 1960s: not primarily in terms of Acts of Parliament, policy reports, newspaper coverage or theories of ‘race relations’ but through the work of black British thinkers. I attempt nothing as crude as a homogenised ‘black perspective’; these black spaces comprise analyses and arguments that are diverse, competing and shifting. As Gilroy (1993b, 122) remarks in relation to what the African-American Marxist thinker Cedric Robinson (1983) termed the ‘Black Radical Tradition’, if such a ‘chaotic, living disorganised formation ...can be called a tradition at all, it is a tradition in ceaseless motion – a changing same that strives continually towards a state of self-realisation.’ Early in planning this article I dispensed with the notion of offering a tidy narrative history of post-war black British intellectual production. I began documentary research in key archives, such as London’s George Padmore Institute, consulted growing on-line resources, including those of the CLR James Institute and the Connecting Histories Project, and returned to the major published works of the 1970s, 80s and 90s. As I immersed myself in these, I was simultaneously daunted and gladdened by the scale of the task: by the range and complexity of black voices speaking on education and by the hidden histories out of which spaces had emerged over time for conversation, critique, activism and dissent.

However, if I were to sketch notes on the history of black British intellectual production in the post-war era, what would populate them? Education, both as a site of intellectual production and as a site of political struggle for black communities, is certainly one of the significant fields in which black British intellectual positions have been defined and differentiated. It has rightly been argued that education was one of the key spaces in which the shift to a mass consciousness of being black British (or consciousness of the potential to become so) originated. That is, black Britishness became organic at the historical point at which black children, the offspring of settlers from the Caribbean, West Africa, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, began to populate the schools (Stone, 1981; Dhondy *et al*, 1985; Grosvenor, 1997; Phillips and Phillips, 1999). There has long been awareness among black British thinkers that the haphazard development of education policies designed to address the needs and experiences of black children in British schools told a revealing story about the wider struggle to overturn perceptions of people of colour as an alien problem visited upon the (white) nation. For Sivanandan (1989) the *belatedness* of race equality policies in education and the tendency of those

early initiatives to pathologize black children, families and communities defines race as a social relationship in Britain:

‘Policies is too big a word. There were no policies as such to begin with, except what grew out of the endemic racism in British society when labour was recruited from the so-called “new commonwealth”. After the 1962 Immigration Act, when the doors were beginning to close and the workers sent for their families, schooling became a moot question. And yet the policies were directed at what various local authorities thought was overcrowding on the one hand, and ...“under-achievement” ...on the other. Basically, ‘Blacks’ were seen as the problem, meaning both Afro-Caribbeans and Asians ...There was no coherent, systematic body of thought or proper work being done about educating Black children.’ Sivanandan (1989, 19-20).

In fact, as Sivanandan (1989) goes on to remark, organized work was emerging from black communities in Britain’s major cities. So – to scroll forward - the field implied by focusing on black British intellectuals and education ranges from the early stands taken by the Black Educational Movement and Black Parents Movement in the late 1960s, which fed into the radical structural analyses of British schooling offered by Bernard Coard and Farrukh Dhondy in the 1970s. Coard (1971) and Dhondy *et al* (1985) both drew in varying proportions upon their experiences of teaching in London schools, structural Marxist analyses of schooling in capitalism and the radicalism emerging across the black Atlantic, as well as their belief in the emergence of ‘second generation’ black Britons as an oppositional force. Carby (1982), much like Dhondy *et al* (1985), saw black pupils and communities forming active opposition both to the authoritarian dimensions of schooling and the distractions offered by a facile form of multiculturalism, asserting that ‘black youth recognize liberal dreamers and the police for what they are and act ...Black youth have led the way in the redefinition of who’s got the problem’ (Carby, 1982, 208). Such analyses should, in turn, be compared to the work of Maureen Stone and, later, Tony Sewell whose research was embedded in (to use Fisher’s, 2009, term) ‘capitalist realism’: that is, a rejection of radical ‘deschooling’ as utopian, combined with a rejection of liberal self-concept theories as being rooted in cultural deficit models. Both turned their emphasis towards school leadership as the key to improving the schooling of black pupils (though, unlike Dhondy, their focus was restricted to black Caribbean and African students). Stone (1981, 35) critiqued aspects of relationship-based teaching as a means by which the social structure continued ‘operating through schools to reinforce the low status of black pupils’.

Sewell's (1997) critical ethnographies were, in turn, critiqued by Heidi Safia Mirza (1999) as being constrained by an adherence to subcultural analyses and to the male lens. In the late 1980s and early 1990s the work of Mirza (1992) and Mairtin Mac an Ghaill (1988) on schooling and racialization began to draw upon notions of decentred blackness that derived, in part, from Stuart Hall's (1988, 1996) work on 'new ethnicities' and his rethinking of articulations between race, class and gender. These were cultural analyses in the truest sense, showing the influence of both Gramscian and post-structural analyses. In their concern with gendered modes of racialization Mac an Ghaill and Mirza countered the phallogentrism in which earlier accounts of resistance and opposition to the racialized processes of schooling were often embedded. Tariq Modood (1992, 2007), meanwhile, has persistently challenged dominant modes of political blackness and their reliance on both subcultural and Marxist analytical frameworks. More recently, research has emerged exploring the creative ways in which young people have negotiated 'in practice' the fragmentation, dissembling and reconfiguration of racialized identities in the UK. The research of Miri Song (2003), for instance, parallels similar work in the USA by Pollock (2004). Alongside these shifts has been intellectual work that has emerged from and fed into supplementary schools and community learning projects (Jones, 1986), as well as thoughts on education growing out of older traditions of black labour activism (Prescod and Waters, 1999) and pan-Africanism (Graham, 2001). In addition to research explicitly on schooling, the very nature of academic disciplines, pedagogy and methodological inquiry – of what it is to be an academic and educator - has been radically reimagined by those who have, since the 1980s, drawn from the conceptual innovations of Hall (1988, 1989, 1996) and Paul Gilroy (1987, 1993a/b; 2000).

### **CRT: Atlantic crossings**

CRT emerged in the USA during the 1980s as a framework for understanding the endemic presence of race within the American social and political formation. Its key analytical principles are aimed at countering the ideological claims to neutrality and meritocracy customarily proffered in fields such as law, social policy, news media and education. Through CRT analyses the 'taken for granted' racialized processes embedded in those fields are made visible. CRT is now well established in the USA through the work of academics and activists such as Derrick Bell, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic but it is a relatively new presence in the United Kingdom, where it has been utilized in the work of Gillborn (2005, 2006, 2008), Hylton

(2009) and Preston (2010). In considering its US origins, Gillborn (2008, 26) has argued determinedly that:

‘There is no reason ...why (CRT’s) underlying assumptions and insights cannot be transferred usefully to other (post-) industrial societies, such as the UK ...CRT is very much a work in progress ...As with British anti-racism, there is no single, unchanging statement of what CRT believes or suggests.’

Nevertheless, this Atlantic crossing (which is yet another instance in the long history of intellectual exchanges within what Gilroy, 1993b, terms black Atlantic culture) warrants critical reflection. One reason for scrutinising CRT’s transfer is that North American CRT has uttered its key conceptual claims in both global and local registers. Thus, speaking ‘globally’, Taylor (2009, 4) draws on Charles Mills’ dictum that ‘Racism is global White supremacy and is itself a political system, a particular power structure of formal and informal rule, privilege, socio-economic advantages’. However, CRT’s ‘local’ origins lie specifically in the break with the American Critical Legal Studies movement made during the 1970s by legal scholars such as Bell and Crenshaw, who insisted upon the need for a *race conscious* analysis of race in US legislation, as opposed to slippage into regarding race as merely a technology of class (Crenshaw *et al*, 1995). Some of CRT’s key analytical tools, such as interest convergence, contradiction closure and storytelling were crafted out of revisionist critiques of US civil rights law’s liberal assumptions. In addition, the paper that more than any other signalled the transfer of CRT to the field of education, Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) ‘Towards a Critical Race Theory of Education’, speaks CRT at this local level. So, for instance, its propositions around race and property include assertions that ‘Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States’ and ‘US society is based on property rights’ (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995, 48). There is nothing peculiar about this; all social theory originates somewhere along the line in local observations. However, it does mean that we should pay due attention to the local materials out of which CRT might be crafted in the UK. Gillborn’s (2005, 2008) critical analysis of whiteness and power in education has arguably signalled some of the shifts in focus entailed in the transfer of CRT to the UK. In particular, in Gillborn’s analysis of education *policy* has tended to replace the focus on legislation that has historically driven the development of CRT in the USA.

CRT’s robustness in the UK will be dependent upon taking the same kind of historically grounded approach through which CRT has been taken forward in the States. As such, rigorous CRT policy

scholarship will make use of the historical materials of black British thought and activism. One of the salient contributions of Paul Gilroy to black British intellectual production has been his insistence on resisting accounts of race, racism and identity that ‘suppress the historical dimensions of black life, offering a mode of existence locked permanently into a recurrent present where social existence is confined to the role of either being a problem or a victim’ (Gilroy, 1993a, 37). The assertion of black subjectivities in accounts of British history and society is, for Gilroy, vital to the project of transcending accounts wherein black people in Britain are rendered, within political discourse and practice, forever external and alien, drifting into public debate and policy at moments of crisis but remaining ‘objects rather than subjects, beings that feel yet lack the ability to think, and remain incapable of considered behaviour in an active mode’ (Gilroy, 1987, 11). This emphasis on black subjectivities is, it should go without saying, utterly different to what Hall (1988, 28) referred to as ‘the innocent notion of an essential black subject’; rather, it is born out of a concern that black people are understood as social actors, as history makers, as thinkers who are central to Britain’s social formation.

### **The ‘one millimetre’ rule**

The focus on black British intellectuals offers three highly contested terms for the price of one. Let me begin to unpack them by returning to storytelling mode. In early 2010 I attended the first John La Rose Memorial Lecture at the Institute of Education, University of London. Now as soon as I impart this information, I become aware of the need to consider how much contextual detail I should provide. For an international audience it is reasonable that I should explain something of La Rose’s contribution to black British activism and intellectual life from the early 1960s up to his death in 2006. However, I do not have a clear sense either of whether, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, I can assume common knowledge of histories of black activism with readers based in the UK, even taking for granted their interest in race, ethnicity and education. I might make reference to LaRose’s work with the Black Education Movement: the London-based largely African-Caribbean initiative which, among its other activism gave rise, in 1971, to Bernard Coard’s seminal *How the West Indian Child Is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System*. This, in turn, might usefully direct attention towards the community campaigns against the banding and bussing of black (African-Caribbean and Asian) pupils in London in the 1960s. I might refer to LaRose’s work in the Black Parents Movement and recall decades of parental campaigns against police harassment of young black people. I might cite his stewardship of the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third



World Books, which was a key driver of a now much reduced (at least, in the UK) network of activists, artists and educators. These are not mere asides; I include them to emphasise the constant necessity to make visible ‘hidden’ black British intellectual traditions (and, as in any intellectual space, there is always tension between tradition and radical, iconoclastic invention). There have been points when a momentum has been achieved in this respect: the mid 1980s, for instance, saw the republication of key works by CLR James, and the publication of Ron Ramdin’s *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain*, Buzz Johnson’s biography of Claudia Jones and Peter Fryer’s *Staying Power*. Additionally, I wish to signal that the history of black British intellectual production incorporates disparate strands, such as the work of bookshops and publishers (such as the Bogle L’Overture and New Beacon imprints), the Indian Workers Association, Southall Black Sisters, the *Race Today* Collective and the arts journal *Wasafiri*. It is not confined to the academy; indeed, it might be argued that black British intellectual life and academia have intersected only fitfully.

Anyway, whilst at the LaRose event a colleague whose experience of both academia and community activism dates back some decades recalled the expulsion of a body of black activists from a particular leftist group in the 1980s. He commented that the political party in question ‘did want black members but if those black members were one millimetre away from their party line, they would rather not have them at all.’ Needless to say, the ‘one millimetre’ rule does not apply only to 1980s Marxist groups. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the extent to which black and anti-racist academics are taken seriously in ‘mainstream’ academia in the UK is often in inverse proportion to the extent to which their work draws upon radical black or race conscious thinkers. In academic research, for instance, the ‘transgressive’ Foucault has a legitimacy not necessarily accorded to Dubois or bell hooks. For commentators such as Young (2006), Gilroy’s early, neo-Marxist contributions to *The Empire Strikes Back* are apparently more credible than his explorations of the intellectual histories of the black Atlantic. Similarly, some recent criticisms of the ‘importation’ of CRT into British education research have drawn a distinction between the ‘pre’ and ‘post’ CRT research of David Gillborn (Cole, 2009). The brain drain of black British social scientists to the USA (Phillips, 2004) may also be cited as further evidence of the marginal status of race conscious scholarship in British academia.

It is hard to calculate the educational losses that result from this conceptual and bodily attrition. The black British educator Maud Blair has written specifically about academia’s residual suspicion of race conscious education research (cf. Warmington, 2009) and tendencies for the work of black

thinkers to be trivialised as special pleading, as lacking neutrality. She remarks, in terms not dissimilar to those adopted by CRT scholars, such as Parker (1998) and Gillborn (2008):

‘When our contributions are thus judged and dismissed from within an ethnocentric framework, it presents us with a real dilemma. On the one hand, we consider our work important and wish to disseminate it widely, and on the other we are conscious that in order to do so we have to work within disciplinary conventions... (that) are themselves non-representative and exclusionary.’ Blair (2004, 249)

For race conscious scholars a minimum irreducible framework should be to insist upon and take part in embedding credible, informed, *well-read* consideration of issues of race, racialization and racism. This means that if, as educators and researchers, we are willing routinely to use Gramsci, we must also be willing to draw on and interrogate Fanon; if we routinely use Bourdieu we should also use Toni Morrison. Where we draw upon CRT we naturally turn to Gloria Ladson-Billings, Richard Delgado, Laurence Parker and Patricia Williams. However, we must go beyond these touchstones and also invoke intellectual histories in which black thinkers have wrestled with the particularities of Britain’s post-war context. Well-read consideration of race should draw upon the race conscious analyses undertaken across the disciplines by Ann Phoenix (psychology), David Dabydeen (literature) and Kobena Mercer (cultural studies). We should heed the educational research of Gus John and Audrey Osler. We should invoke the work of race conscious intellectuals, activists and artists who have worked outside of academia: Jeff Crawford, Leila Hassan, Gita Sahgal, Chris Ofili, Caryl Phillips and Julian Joseph.

At this point it is necessary to clarify what I am and what I am not attempting to achieve by using the category of ‘black British intellectuals’ and insisting on the need for adherents of CRT to build upon their diverse work. Firstly, in this article I have deliberately gone against academic ‘good practice’ by listing a large array of names, some better known than others, and some without biographical explanation. This is an effort not merely to advocate at a rhetorical level but to ‘do in practice’ the work of invoking black British intellectuals as reference points; at the very least, I would like to intrigue readers and their search engines. Secondly, I do not wish to claim these thinkers for some essentialist, ahistorical notion of blackness (this should be apparent from the fact that some of those I name would not usually be considered ‘black’). I do not attempt to characterise them as crypto-Critical Race Theorists; neither am I suggesting that there is a charmed, self-sufficient space of black intellectual endeavour: Ron Ramdin intersects with EP Thompson; Zadie Smith intersects with

Nabokov and Barthes. As regards the use of the word ‘black’, I am not interested in narrowly categorising the individuals named or in delineating ‘our side’ as opposed to ‘their side’. Rather, I wish to signify something about particular intellectual concerns and approaches: a determination to *account for* the social construction of race as an organising principle of human relations, not to evade race, racialization and racism by treating them as unfortunate marginal, aberrant experiences. Black intellectual work of the first order is subject-orientated in that it refuses to bind black people as problems/victims or to refashion the politics of race as murky, transient policy issues. If pressed, I shall also define black British intellectual spaces as those in which a concern with race (as a fully social relationship) and with dismantling racism is an ongoing project, not a checklist item.

The notion of black spaces remains salient, as Reay and Mirza (2001) point out in their research on black supplementary schools, another intellectual space (markedly black and female) whose history lies outside of academia. Drawing upon bell hooks, they acknowledge both the risks and potential value of black ‘sacred spaces’, in which conversations, alliances and intellectual work are freed from the pathologizing pressures of whiteness:

In the past separate space meant downtime, time for recovery and renewal. It was time to dream resistance, time to theorise, plan, create strategies and go forward. The time to go forward is still upon us and we have long surrendered segregated spaces of radical opposition.’ (hooks, cited in Reay and Mirza, 2001, 96)

The most fertile black spaces, I might suggest, have enabled exploration of both the material and the imaginative dimensions of the social formation, and have recognised the obligation to *go through* race in order to dismantle racism (or, perhaps, to dismantle race itself) (cf. Warmington, 2009). I am aware that not all black British intellectuals will (want to) tick all of these boxes. I am also aware that some will argue that I might have dispensed with the term ‘black’, perhaps simply using (after Leonardo, 2009) the notion of ‘race conscious’ analysis. After all, white thinkers such as Peter Fryer or Chris Searle should be included in the spaces I have defined. However, while I am all in favour of acknowledging the unstable, porous nature of these ‘black’ spaces I am keen not to lose entirely a focus on the history of intellectual endeavour by people of colour in Britain. One of my early encounters with CRT was at the British Education Research Association Conference 2005, where David Gillborn presented a series of photographs of CRT thinkers. It was a purposeful act of deconstruction of representations of intellectuals dominant in the UK, wherein theory is automatically assumed to be a white domain and blacks are assumed to concern themselves with

other, more junior forms of knowledge. In order to challenge the claims to neutrality of academia and the media, it is still necessary to invoke representations of African, Caribbean, Asian and Arabic thinkers and theorists. In the UK Black thinkers are not expected to ‘want to rewrite the history of the world’ (Hall, 1989, 25). Perhaps, in a future setting, the term ‘black’ might be displaced but, for the moment, we should not lose focus on tracing the work of George Padmore or Sivanandan or Avtar Brah – and their conversations over time and across the Atlantic with Walter Rodney, Angela Davis and Homi Bhabha.

### **Black and British**

Speaking of black British intellectual spaces also draws attention to the perennial slippage in racial terminology that exists between the UK and the USA and its implications for CRT’s transfer to the UK. In the USA the term ‘black’ is customarily used to denote people of African-American descent. By contrast, in the UK the term has a more complex history and continues, depending on context, to denote *either* people of African and African-Caribbean descent *or* to signify via the discourses of ‘political blackness’ the assembly of African, African-Caribbean, Asian and Arabic peoples constructed in the post-war period of immigration – the collective sometimes referred to in the USA as ‘people of colour’. As Gillborn (2008) points out when discussing the transfer of CRT to the UK, this is a discursive issue, not merely one of aesthetics, and ‘part of the reason for the ever-changing series of labels that are used in this field is the nature of the issues at stake’ (Gillborn, 2008, 2). Since the late 1980s Hall (1988, 1989), Modood (1992), Gilroy (2000) and Song (2003) have all interrogated the homogenising tendencies of British political blackness. They have raised questions about the dominance within political blackness of certain forms of African-Caribbean maleness; the marginalisation of women; the relegation of South Asian voices; the invisibility of queer sexualities; the complexities of articulation between religion and race; generational and class differences; the under-playing of the agentive potential of fluid negotiation of ethnic categories. Although Hall’s (1988, 1989) proclaimed ‘new ethnicities’ have not entirely replaced political blackness, they have modified blackness’ claims and necessitated critical self-reflection, hastening the emergence of unstable, decentred blackness. At the same time, it is still the case that many contemporary black British intellectual currents are derived from the moment (or idiom) of political blackness, even where they take issue with it.

The relevance of all this to the transfer of CRT is, once again, one of historical and conceptual lineage. In the USA the foundation texts of CRT (including Bell, 1980, 1992; Crenshaw *et al*, 1995;

Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995) prioritised the racialized experiences of African-Americans. That African-Americans have remained the dominant focus of the ‘core’ CRT movement is apparent from the fact that ‘offshoots’ such as LatCrit, Queer-Crit and Critical Race Feminism have developed in order to apply CRT’s framework in other spaces. In the UK Gillborn’s (2005, 2006, 2008) pioneering application of CRT has generally emphasised his studies of African-Caribbean pupils in English schools and he uses the term ‘black’ to refer solely to African and African-Caribbean people. By contrast, Housee’s CRT research (2008, 2010) has referred to black lecturers in the umbrella sense and has also explored the experiences of South Asian Muslim students. At present, it is unclear whether CRT in the UK will continue to house both depictions of black identity (doing so signifies an adherence, albeit qualified, to ‘traditional’ UK notions of political blackness) or whether quasi-discrete strands of CRT will emerge to address, for instance, Islamophobia.

In this paper the term ‘black’ is used in a contentious, even provocative, sense: with its umbrella, political meaning restored. In part, this is because this paper is concerned with *histories* of black intellectual production in the UK (and much work between the 1960s and early 1990s adhered to the uniquely British use of the term ‘black’). I do not suggest that umbrella usage of the word exhausts all possible meanings of ‘blackness’. Importantly, ‘black British’ signifies something far more radical than geographical location. As Procter (2003) argues, the emergence of the term signified a shift from being *black in Britain* to being *black and British*. Quoting Jim Pines, Procter (2003, 5) suggests that ‘it involves a radical deconstruction of the idea that “blacks are an external problem, an alien presence visited in Britain from the outside”.’ During the settlement phase of the 1960s and then in the 1980s and 1990s, as fully settled and ‘second generation’ black Britons began to write their own stories, black intellectuals began to appropriate Britain and Britishness as the legitimate objects of their work. This refocusing, this new self-representation constituted nothing less than a deconstruction of what it meant to be British. Note Hall’s (1996, 472) advocacy for:

‘the logic of coupling, rather than the logic of binary opposition ...You can be black and British, not only because that is a necessary position to take ...but also because those two terms ...do not exhaust all of our identities. Only some of our identities are sometimes caught in that particular struggle.’

Nevertheless, it is important to own up to the biases and inadequacies of the term ‘black British’ and not to suggest that the term is always appropriate. For instance, the term does not always overcome the old tendency to conflate ‘England’ with ‘Britain’. Most of the ‘British’ names I have mentioned

in this article have been based primarily in England, not Wales or Scotland. However, this does not of itself indicate that a focus, CRT derived or otherwise, on black British intellectuals should only be concerned with black English thinkers. Procter (2003) has done much to extend belated conversations across English, Welsh and Scottish settings, as has, for instance, the writing of the Scottish poet Jackie Kay. That said, because of patterns of post-war settlement, the majority of black intellectual production in Britain in the period from the mid 1960s onwards has emanated from England and a pre-devolution context. Moreover, 'black British' has remained a preferred term among many because, in theory at least, it implies the possibility of a Britain comprising multiple ethnicities and has allowed a creative fuzziness around the issues of the (still largely unpacked) limits of 'Englishness', 'Welshness' and 'Scottishness'.

The historical patterns of post-war black intellectual production also account for the bias in this article towards Caribbean thinkers (or those of Caribbean descent) and the dynamics of what Gilroy (1993) has termed the black Atlantic. Yet the spaces to which this article gestures are not 'African-Caribbean' in any exclusive or fetishistic sense. In historical terms it would be absurd to map black British thought in the post-war period without reference to Sivanandan, Gargi Bhattacharyya or Kenan Malik ('Asian' intellectuals all but, in various combinations, Sri Lankan, Indian, British, Muslim, Hindu and atheist – all having used the self-descriptor 'black'). Suffice to say, a historical definition of black British intellectual production, with all its untidy historical specificity and contingency, is preferable to a doomed ontological chase. The diverse range of current CRT derived work (Hylton, 2009; Housee, 2010; Preston, 2010) suggests that CRT in the UK remains open enough to work with decentred, unstable notions of blackness.

### **Black intellectuals and the problem of loyalty**

Banner-Haley (2010, 1) remarks that the complexity of defining what constitutes an African-American intellectual has generated a 'burgeoning subfield ... given to the study of African American intellectual history.' This is in stark contrast to the British context where sustained focus on black intellectual history is rare, notable work by Gundara and Duffield (1992), Schwarz (2003) and Carrington (2010) notwithstanding. Banner-Haley (2010) wisely resists attempts at exhaustive definition, instead favouring a historically grounded account that focuses on the 'constant' issues that African-American intellectuals have explored since Dubois' time but also on the social shifts that have led African-American intellectuals to address different issues and questions at different

historical moments. If we focus specifically on British (or English) education we can both distinguish between and relate to one another ‘constant’ and ‘specific’ issues. For instance, it seems reasonable to accept that the issue, in the 1960s and 1970s, of African-Caribbean children being disproportionately placed in what were then termed Educationally Sub-Normal (ESN) schools (as addressed in Coard, 1971) differs in its specifics from concerns about the under-representation of black students in higher education that were raised in the 1990s. Defining ‘constant’ concerns is more contentious. Sewell (2009) argues vehemently that the overt racism experienced by black children in British schools in the 1960s bears almost no relation to the racialized dynamics that pervade ‘post-multicultural’ British education. For Sewell, the continuation over forty years of, for instance, disproportionate rates of exclusion among black boys is a symptom whose 21<sup>st</sup> Century causes are quite distinct from their 1960s and 70s causes. In contrast Mirza (2007) argues that decades of superficial discursive shifts (assimilationism, multiculturalism, diversity) only conceal ‘patterns of persistent discrimination, both blatant and subtle ...the illusive chameleon nature of racism in education ... changes its mantle over time ...the more things change, the more they stay the same’ (Mirza, 2007, 114). Utilizing CRT, Gillborn (2008) goes further, naming the pervasive, ‘conspiratorial’ nature of white supremacy as a constant and arguing that, despite the contemporary rhetoric of social justice and cultural diversity, the function of schooling is not to counter racial inequalities but to maintain them at a manageable level.

To return briefly to wider notions of the role of the black intellectual, Banner-Haley (2010, 2) argues that, historically, African-American intellectuals have been, above all, *public* intellectuals. This is certainly true of CRT’s proponents and of, in large majority, black British intellectuals as diverse as Sivanandan, the black Marxist, Maureen Stone, the liberal system adaptor, or Gilroy, the advocate of ‘post-racial’ conviviality. However, invoking the archetype of the politically engaged public intellectual, as CRT thinkers such as Delgado and Stefancic (2001) regularly do, does not exempt black intellectuals from the dilemmas explored by Dubois, Fanon or Said – or, for that matter Gramsci, Kristeva and Arendt. In discussing the ‘problematic’ location of black intellectuals, Posnock (1997) identifies a perennial dilemma between, on the one hand, the obligation to speak ‘for’ black people against a racist society and, on the other, the rejection of the fetishisation of black authenticity. Posnock (1997) perceives, in WEB Dubois’ perpetual negotiation of the duty to bear witness for African-Americans (that is, to *speak of* race and racism) and his parallel concern to deconstruct the ‘veil’ of race (that is, to speak, *against* race), the emergence of the black intellectual

as a ‘social type ...resisting the lure of the prevailing ideology of the authentic’. Dubois’ often overlooked theorization of the black intellectual is post- and anti-racial in that it ‘renders incoherent a need to be true to a prior essence – be it abstract humanism or unalloyed blackness’ (Posnock, 1997, 324).

The rejection of the burden of black authenticity intersects with what Edward Said describes as ‘the challenge of the intellectual life ... found in dissent against the status quo at a time when the struggle on behalf of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups seems so unfairly weighted against them’ (Said, 1996, xvii). In *Representations of the Intellectual* Said (1996, 13) defines intellectuals, whether ‘universal’ or ‘organic’, as individuals with ‘a vocation for the art of representing ... it is publicly recognizable and involves both commitment and risk.’ For Said, among the greatest of these risks is the intellectual’s relationship to nationalism, to community (‘the intellectual is beset and remorselessly challenged by the problem of loyalty,’ Said, 1996, 40). However, for black British intellectuals focusing on education, problems of loyalty apply not only to their relationships to black communities but equally to the dilemmas experienced as educators who are part implicated in the sector’s racialized processes and outcomes. In short, how critical should a critic of the education system be? Are we obliged to uproot the system or to evaluate and renew it? Over the past fifty years black British intellectuals have divided over these issues. For Carby (1982) and Dhondy *et al* (1985), confidence in the instability of British capitalism inspired a rejection of a system they regarded as irredeemably complicit in capitalist domination and reproduction. In contrast, Coard (1971), even as he decried the structural racism of the education sector, offered guidance on how to improve schooling for black pupils. At opposite ends of the neo-liberal era Stone (1981) and Sewell (2009) have taken education in capitalism as a given, arguing for system adaptation (and in Sewell’s case a kind of moral reformism). Elsewhere battle lines are more provisionally marked. John (2006), in language that partly harks back to the Black Education Movement and partly prefigures the small state/ big society rhetoric of the current British government, calls for a revival of ‘independent organization and the self-empowerment of our communities’, emphasizing the need for greater reciprocity between black and anti-racist professionals and black working-class communities. Graham (2001) and Reay and Mirza (2001) seek, in community education and the supplementary schools, ways of nourishing the desire for emancipatory education that exists in black communities.



## Conclusion

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995, 62) conclude their seminal statement on CRT and education in the USA by stating that ‘critical race theory in education, like its antecedent in legal scholarship, is a radical critique of both the status quo and the purported reforms.’ Black British intellectuals have long records of critiquing both the education sector’s reproduction of racial inequalities and the limitations of the forms of ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘cultural diversity’ often proffered as a panacea. This paper has pointed to some of the currents of black British thought, developed over the last half century, upon which CRT in the UK might draw. Furthering the black Atlantic exchange, race conscious scholars in the UK should take courage from the determinedly *public* role inhabited by critical race theorists in the USA, who have continued, as did their many precursors, to mould, nurture and sustain the archetype of the black public intellectual. As this special issue shows, CRT has begun to emerge as an organising space for race conscious scholars in the UK. Moreover, the growing presence of CRT in education represents, by the very nature of the educational space, a public declaration of intent. However, in concluding his first book-length exploration of CRT’s potential, Gillborn (2008, 203) draws upon an interview with Stuart Hall in order to reflect on the divided loyalties of race conscious scholars who would intervene in the education system (‘We are all captured, to some degree, by the very machinery of racism ...that we seek to criticize in our work’). Gillborn (2008, 202) also re-emphasizes the role of the public intellectual, asserting that CRT ‘places genuine social action at the heart of its enterprise ...do not imagine for a second that an analysis of racism alone is a sufficient contribution to the struggle for race equality.’ I argue that, in order to use CRT to help us ‘struggle where we are’, we must turn to those black intellectuals who have endeavoured to work out where we are: those thinkers who have helped orientate struggles inside and outside of schools. This will produce a historically grounded form of CRT in the UK, one in which black people in education are imagined not merely objects of policy scrutiny but as powerful actors and radical thinkers central to British social life. In doing so, we renew anti-racist praxis.

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