Maya McFarlane

Cambridge prides itself on being a "globally diverse institution" at the forefront of social and political progress. Since Crummell's graduation, to what extent has the University of Cambridge changed as a space for Black students, and as an institution responsible for transformation?

"It is possible to love, hate and feel indifference towards an institution at the same time. It can be infuriating and exciting in equal measure. Being 'grateful' that we are here does not mean that we should view Cambridge uncritically, and the criticism doesn't make us any less worthy of our places at university." (Olufemi, 2019:98)

Introduction

When attempting to measure political progress, we often focus on firsts: the first Black man to win an Oscar, the first Black US president, the first Black student to graduate from the University of Cambridge.

These moments come to be viewed as symbols of unequivocal transformation. They are quickly regarded as the end of a particular era of inequality, thrusting the world into a brighter future on a linear trajectory of progress. It is understandable that we tend to interpret 'firsts' in this way and view the uphill struggles which preceded them as definitively over. However, I argue that we clutch to these signposts of progress as a way to protect ourselves from the bitter realities of transformation. Transformation is not linear, nor a one-way road on which liberatory fights are won, and never repeated. To transform is to learn, and to learn is to recognise our imperfections, even if it hurts our pride and self-image as champions of change to do so.

Maya McFarlane

The University of Cambridge prides itself on being a 'globally diverse institution' due to the changes it has undergone since its first Black student, Alexander Crummell, graduated in 1853. In the 2020 admissions cycle, 152 Black students were accepted into the University. On the outset, this numerical increase in representation appears to be quantitative proof of change. I argue that a closer qualitative analysis of the Black student experience points towards a far more complex reality. Cambridge has changed as a space for Black students in the sense that there are more of us within its walls. However, despite this statistical diversity, our ability to unapologetically take up space is yet to fully materialise. There is no use in claiming that our experiences as Black students in the 21st century are identical to that of Crummell. Nonetheless, it is vital to recognise the particular hardships we still endure and the gaps in social progress which are yet to be made.

This essay shall thus explore several areas in which Cambridge is yet to fully change for the better as a space for Black students. Firstly, I argue that academic spaces such as lectures and supervisions remain sites of intellectual and political exclusion for Black students due to the colonial knowledge practices embedded within them. Secondly, I argue that Black students continue to face hardship when navigating collegiate life and recreational social spaces. Thirdly, I highlight Black students' experiences of activist spaces where they repeatedly fail to be compensated for their emotional labour.

In terms of theoretical grounding, this essay is largely rooted in the intellectual traditions of decolonial and Black feminist thought. These frameworks challenge the hegemonic epistemological hierarchy in Western sociological scholarship which views detachment and the uncovering of 'objective fact' as primary concerns of social research. A 'detached' standpoint in sociological writing is neither possible nor desirable; we are never wholly

separate from the social phenomena we analyse and to ignore our lived experiences means sacrificing the rich insights they produce (Collins, 1998). By reconceptualising knowledge as always situated and positional, Black feminist scholars expose these standards of knowledge production as colonial tools used to reproduce the oppression of marginalised communities and legitimate their exclusion from academia. Therefore, in line with a Black feminist framework, this essay shall draw upon some of my first-hand experiences as a Black student at Cambridge University, connecting these personal insights to wider literature on 'race' and taking up space.

Furthermore, it is crucial to note that there is no single universal Black student experience. Intersectionality thus becomes an invaluable theoretical tool, providing us with a framework for understanding how converging axes of gender, sexuality, class and disability shape our experiences of race (Crenshaw, 1989). While my experiences reflect my particular positionality as a Black, working-class woman, I am simultaneously cis-gender, able-bodied and heterosexual, meaning that I inhabit various modalities of privilege that other Black students may not. Overall, I argue that intersectional thinking is vital because without this framework, Cambridge changing as a space for *some* Black students could be interpreted as changing for *all* Black students. As articulated by Audre Lorde (1981:10), "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own." Meaningful transformation cannot be linear; even when change has been acquired by particular groups, we cannot rest until it is the case for all.

Academic spaces and the Colonial Construction of Knowledge.

Academic spaces such as supervisions and lectures are not neutral arenas of intellectual exploration because colonial knowledge practices are inextricably embedded within them. A

"zero-point epistemology" exists within the modern European paradigm where 'objective' knowledge is viewed as that which is produced from a non-situated vantage point (Castro-Gomez (2005:18). This standpoint, which stands outside of race and gender, is viewed to be that of the white cis-gender male body. Whiteness and maleness here operate as a normative device, acting as the 'default' position within race and gender relations. This allows these particular bodies to express what Donna Haraway (1988:581) refers to as the "god trick" of seeing "everything from nowhere", viewing themselves as wholly detached and neutral within racial and gendered structures. The zero-point epistemology thus functions as a colonial tool, employed to discount the lived experiences of people of colour, in favour of those of the white cis-gender male agent of colonialism.

Within supervisions where students are required to debate viewpoints, there is a particular pressure to conform to the zero-point epistemology, remaining 'objective' throughout. Black students inhabit explicitly racialised bodies and are highly aware of how our arguments could be interpreted as inherently biased by virtue of our Blackness. For instance, Manzoor-Khan (2019:123) recalls how, in their time at Cambridge, women of colour would have their experiences "trampled on by those who told us they were not persuasive enough, merely anecdotal, too personal and emotional". The fear of "playing the race card" often means that Black students "hold our points back because we [don't] want to come across as loud or angry, thereby living up to the tropes that society repeatedly projects onto us" (Kwakye and Ogunbiyi, 2019:34). Even upon writing this very essay, I strongly fear that utilising the first-person plural 'our' when referring to the Black student body will put me at a disadvantage, rendering my arguments 'non-objective' and thus of less intellectual value. Furthermore, Patricia Hill Collins (2000:69) notes that the stereotype of Black people, particularly women, being overly loud and aggressive functions as a "controlling image", limiting their behaviour

and ability to express themselves freely as they engage in self-censorship to avoid being interpreted in this way. Academic spaces within the university are not immune from the reach of these controlling images, but are largely informed by them. Black students thus find ourselves unable to intellectually engage on a level playing field as we bear the weight of colonial knowledge practices on our shoulders.

"Can I see your CamCard?": Social spaces and collegiate life

The End Everyday Racism Project (2020:20) found that "racist incidents perpetrated by college porters" were frequently reported as instances of "spatial exclusion" by students of colour. Upon entering colleges, Black students are commonly asked for proof of their student status, often in the form of their Cambridge student identification card, colloquially referred to as a 'CamCard'. While on the surface, this appears to be proof of porters doing their job and protecting the security of college grounds, being deemed a potential threat by virtue of our skin colour can be an immensely disturbing and frightening experience. As pointed out by Sara Ahmed (2009:161), "[s]topping is both a political economy, which is distributed unevenly between others, and an affective economy, which is distributed unevenly between others". Black students are unable to navigate collegiate spaces within the university in the same way as white students because we are continually conscious of our perceived 'otherness' and subsequent likelihood of being stopped.

Therefore, despite the increase of Black students within Cambridge, we are unable to move through these spaces comfortably due to the way in which our presence is racialised. Even if such racist incidences are reported, there is an implicit fear that our accounts will not be taken seriously due to a lack of 'objective evidence'. The colonial construction of knowledge here functions beyond the walls of a supervision room, denying the validity of our feelings as a

legitimate measure of harm. Furthermore, a pernicious side effect of the increased numerical representation of Black students at Cambridge is that "the very fact of our arrival can be used as evidence that the whiteness of which we speak is no longer in place" (Ahmed, 2009:164). We are expected to express appreciation and gratitude for the ways in which Cambridge has changed as a space for Black students and "are expected to perform deference; "aren't we so lucky to be here?"" (Olufemi, 2019:98) By verbalising our experiences and reporting racist incidents, Black students vitally disrupt the idea that Cambridge has concluded its journey of transformation, highlighting the implicit ways in which racism persists.

The 'BME Officer-to-burnout' pipeline: Student activist spaces and emotional labour.

A common element of the Black student experience of Cambridge is some engagement with student activism and advocacy work. Students run to represent the needs and welfare of students of colour on committees, such as college-based JCRs [1] and University-wide Student Union Campaigns. Having been elected as BME Officer for my college and Women's and Non-Binary Officer for the SU BME Campaign[2] myself, I have spent a large portion of my student experience trying to enact change. Once Black students gain access to Cambridge, there is an implicit pressure to 'carry on the torch' of progress by championing the needs of other Black students and making the university more accessible for others in years to come. While this can be a tremendously rewarding process, it is also immensely laborious. On one occasion, after being repeatedly dismissed and gaslit in a meeting with college officials regarding the college's financial ties to slavery, I had to email a supervisor requesting an extension for the sole reason that I did not have the mental or emotional capacity to work.

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[1] Junior Common Room: Name for a college-based student representative committee.

[2] Student Union BME Campaign: Name for university wide student union committee representing students of colour.

The emotional burden of this role was so immense that I felt incredibly guilty passing on my role to my successor. As expected, within a matter of months of their election, the new officer decided to take a break from the role due to the impact on their mental health.

For far too long, universities such as Cambridge have wielded diversity statistics as a sign of progress to the extent that "diversity becomes about changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organisations" (Ahmed, 2009:45). There is a huge discrepancy between the effort put into ensuring there is a diverse array of skin tones on introductory pamphlets and brochures, and those channelled into qualitatively improving the experiences of Black students once we get here. A key trope of these promotional materials is the image of the smiling ethnic minority student. Ahmed (2009:46) points out that through these images, "diversity becomes a technology of happiness", portraying the institution itself as a 'happy' one that has incorporated diversity seamlessly into its structural fabric. However, these students of colour are not simply asked to perform happiness in the moment of this picture being taken, but throughout their time at the university, functioning as embodiments of Cambridge's 'commitment' to transformation.

We are asked to speak at open days about how positive our experiences have been; "Cambridge will drag you out as their token minority, their "success story" […] but in the process, demand that you be quiet about the reality of your experiences whilst you are here" (Olufemi, 2019:97). It is therefore evident that despite the numerous changes brought about by Black students themselves in student advocacy roles, Cambridge still remains a space in which we are unable to exist as authentically ourselves. Collins' (1986) concept of the 'outsider-within' proves useful in articulating this dilemma; for Black students, full 'insider' membership of the University of Cambridge is rarely reached due to their continual

racialisation as 'other'. We thus exist in a state of partial belonging, being included on our point of entry, but continually excluded as we navigate college porters, academic staff in supervisions and our peers in social settings. Black students are at once working with the institution, assisting with diversity initiatives and encouraging others to apply, while simultaneously working *against* the institution in pointing out the various ways in which Black students are treated unfairly. Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* is formulated around this very idea; in the colonial world, Black people are forced to exist in a state of duality, performing in particular ways to please the white gaze, whilst also being unable to shed their racialisation as Black. The impact of this tension is an inevitably fractured sense of self and perpetual state of "self-division" where the Black student is "one with his fellows, the other with the white man" (Fanon, 1986:17). Therefore, under persistent pressure to be grateful for our acceptance here, Black students are thrust into a position where we must sacrifice our personal truths in order to belong.

Conclusion:

In summary, it is true that Cambridge has changed in many ways since the graduation of the first Black student here; there is a much larger Black student body and there are opportunities to voice concerns about our welfare which did not exist in 1853. However, it is crucial to note that the mere existence of bodies of colour within a space does not make it any less institutionally racist. As exemplified in this essay, Black students are unable to navigate academic, collegiate, and extra-curricular settings without persistent reminders of our 'otherness'. Through engaging in self-censorship, biting our tongue when we want to speak out, Black students attempt to construct a smooth academic path for ourselves. However, with every racist incident we do not report, and every comment by a supervisor we simply 'brush off', our personhood is gradually chipped away.

Maya McFarlane

It is not a nice feeling to be whispered about. It is unsettling to feel like staff are discussing your 'aggressive' tone in a meeting and lack of gratitude for their efforts. It is painful to attempt to make friends knowing a white person in your year has told others to be 'wary' of you due to your inability to stand by when racist incidents occur. In my three years of being the only Black woman in my year group, my college is still not a space where I feel safe. Silence appears to be the ultimate solution, but as Audre Lorde (1984:41), pertinently reminds us, "your silence will not protect you." Internalising our pain and attempting to gloss over it with positive anecdotes from our time here will ultimately do little to protect us from the bitter realities of racism. Writing this essay is not something I would have done in my first or second year here, but I have learnt from thinkers such as Lorde, and past students such as Ore Ogunbiyi and Lola Olufemi, that stifling my truth will not do anything to transform the University.

I refuse to stifle my truth any longer.

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