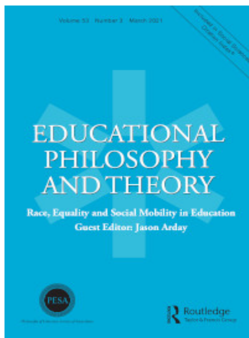

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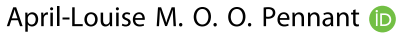

My journey into the 'heart of whiteness' whilst remaining my authentic (Black) self

April-Louise M. O. O. Pennant

The Department of Education and Social Justice (ESJ), School of Education, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT

The dire implications of navigating the overwhelming whiteness of the education system for Black women is foregrounded by the author's autoethnography about her educational journey and experiences. Within it, the author illustrates the key role of her Black identity - despite being immersed in whiteness– to provide a strong sense of self, pride and resilience, which ultimately leads to her survival in the unequal spaces of the education system. By way of her own educational experiences, the author shares how she becomes motivated to embark upon a PhD as a way to centre and affirm Black identities and in order to make palatable spaces within the hostility of whiteness. Drawing on her PhD research, which is framed by Black feminist epistemology, Critical Race Theory and Bourdieu's theory of practice, her findings, based on the semi-structured interviewing of 25 other Black British women graduates, illustrates that the participants share similar educational experiences and responses. The paper concludes by asserting that the attainment of Black girls and young women often does not reflect their strong commitment to education- which evidences one consequence of journeying into the 'heart of whiteness'. Therefore, the author argues for the necessity of more research and support for this diverse group.

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Race; Black women; whiteness; education; autoethnography; identity

Introduction

The pursuit of education for many Black girls and young women are considerable feats as they navigate within hostile white academic spaces, motivated by their commitment to education and the obligations they feel to themselves, their families and their wider communities to succeed (Mirza, 2006, 2008; Pennant, 2019). According to Casey (1993: 132), Black women embarking on such journeys occupy contradictory positions and thus experiences because they naively carry "expectations of mythic proportions; their odysseys, they believe … will transform not only their lives, but also those of other black people," yet; "separated from their families, from their cultural communities, from their system of signification, from their existing black identities, these young women's passages turn out to be isolated, individual journeys into the heart of whiteness."

However, despite these difficult journeys, there is evidence to illustrate the commitment of Black women to gaining education beyond compulsory levels. Data collected by Advance HE (2019: 169, 178) reported that while all ethnic groups have higher proportions of women

CONTACT April-Louise M. O. O. Pennant AXP510@student.bham.ac.uk The Department of Education and Social Justice (ESJ), School of Education, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK.

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participating in higher education, "this gender difference was largest among UK black students." On the other hand, statistics also indicate the consequences, in terms of attainment, of such journeys into the 'heart of whiteness' where only 50% of Black British African girls and 44% of Black British Caribbean girls achieved the national average at GCSE level (Gov, 2019a); where only 5% of all Black British students achieved 3 'A' grades at A-Level (Gov, 2019b); and lastly where Black women are the second least likely, compared to other ethnic and gender groups, to attain a First or a 2:1 at the end of their degrees (Advance HE, 2019: 190). It is this discrepancy between the commitment and obligation displayed by Black girls and women for education and their academic results, that strongly warrants more understanding and exploration into this group's educational experiences and journeys. In this regard, this paper will draw upon my own educational journey into the 'heart of whiteness' as a Black British woman who has beaten the odds (O'Connor, 2002) and retained my (Black) identity, progressing to complete a PhD. It will also reference my PhD research where I explore the educational journeys and experiences of other Black British women graduates, to illustrate how they have also centred their identities.

In order to do this effectively, an autoethnography approach has been selected. While there are many kinds of autoethnography, as stated by Lake (2015: 681), the "essential components of autoethnographic work are the public exposition of personal ideas and theories to further knowledge through analysis and dialogue with 'others', including the literature." More specifically, I align with analytic and critical autoethnography styles as developed and discussed by Anderson (2006) and Boylorn and Orbe (2014) respectively. For Anderson (2006: 375) analytic autoethnography is "ethnographic work in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena." In this way and as mentioned previously, the centring of my own identity and educational journey, along with my PhD research in this paper complements Anderson's analytic autoethnography. Additionally, Boylorn and Orbe (2014: 18–19) introduce critical autoethnography through a selection of scholarly works where they believe that it explores "the inextricable relationship between culture and communication and the influence of pre-existing potential … enhance[ing] existing understandings of lived experiences enacted within social locations situated within larger systems of power, oppression and social privilege." This kind of autoethnography is useful when exploring the educational journeys and experiences of Black women due to their intersectional identities positioning them in "ideological blind spots" (Mirza, 1997: 4) where they are often "falling between the cracks" (Ricks, 2014). The application of analytic and critical autoethnography also connects well with my theoretical frameworks and enables me to include my whole self in this paper. This is significant and conveyed by Lorde (2009: 182–183) when she said, "if I do not bring all of who I am to whatever I do- then I bring nothing of lasting worth, for I have withheld my essence."

This paper is structured as follows: first I introduce myself, my educational journey and my PhD research in order to provide context. Secondly, I review key literature regarding the whiteness of the education system. Lastly, the methods and theoretical frameworks employed within my PhD research will be outlined, as well as two participant narratives to illustrate the ways in which other Black British women graduates have grappled with the whiteness of the education system.

Self, educational journey and PhD research

Self

I remember vividly, at the age of four, announcing to my mother that I had decided that I was going to dress up as a *Black* Barbie for a friend's costume party. When she obliged and helped me to prepare my costume, I remember at the party beaming with pride as I told anyone that

would listen that I had not just come dressed up as Barbie, I had come as *Black* Barbie. I share this memory to illustrate the sense of pride in my Black identity that my parents had instilled within me, that I was displaying from a very young age and how I had used a costume to signal and perform my gendered and racial identity (Clammer, 2015). Looking back, it was this sense of pride that provided me with solace (and at times frustration) and resilience, carrying me through my educational journey regardless of how white the space was (Butler-Barnes et al., 2018). Parents play significant roles in the upbringing of a child and my parents were no exception. For as long as I can remember, they made sure that myself and my sister were exposed to different extra-curricular educational, cultural and creative activities so that we quickly became familiar with children from a wide range of backgrounds as well as different spaces and places (Vincent et al., 2012a). While my parents had modest incomes, through their extensive knowledge, interests, experiences and aspirations, they prioritised providing myself and my sister with many opportunities to explore ourselves, our communities and our society so that we were able to "locate [our]selves within wider UK society, [be] comfortable in [our] own skin and alive to the individuality of the diverse people around [us]," (Ajegbo et al., 2007: 23). Despite notions that *There ain't no Black in the Union Jack* (Gilroy, 1987) I was always made aware by my parents that I was in fact British and belonged here as much as anyone else did; but, that I was not *just* British, I was also a descendant of the rich, vibrant and powerful cultures of Nigeria and Jamaica (Rattansi, 2000; Lam & Smith, 2009). The well-known phrase 'knowledge is power' underpinned the love that I had for learning, as well as how education in all its forms were central within my household and established excitement to enter into the education system.

Educational Journey

Influenced by her own educational experiences, my mother was the architect of my educational journey where she desired for me to follow an academic route at the "appropriate educational age-stage" (Hamilton, 2018: 5); and she supported me vehemently at every step of the way (Vincent et al., 2012b). She was adamant that myself and my sister would attend academically selective schools- preferably private or grammar- because she was aware of the opportunities that such schools could provide and she would always explain to me that: "That is where the future leaders, managers and entrepreneurs go," (Brown, 2013). This pursuit of quality education led to my movement and participation in several different educational institutions- in both the private and state sector- at primary and secondary level.

Regardless of the type of school that I attended, I recall there being a lack of diversity in the curriculum which contradicted with my socialisation at home, and I became increasingly frustrated about that (Gray et al., 2018). One of the secondary schools that I attended was situated in the suburbs surrounding London and was Roman Catholic, predominantly white and working-class. Here, as a student, I often experienced racial slurs and had to defend myself against my peers and teachers alike (Chapman & Bhopal, 2019). For one of my GCSE subjects, I chose history because I craved being able to engage with other cultures, contributions and histories of people like myself, and I thought I would be able to gain this here. However, as a class, we were only taught about Black people in a limited capacity- particularly in the US, regarding slavery and the civil rights movement (Doharty, 2018). I remember challenging the teacher- who didn't have the knowledge, interest or tools to do so - about why he didn't highlight the experiences of Black British people (Alexander & Bernard-Weekes, 2017). I didn't understand why we were only learning about the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott in the U.S. and not about the 1963 Bristol bus boycott in the UK; I didn't understand why the Black Panther organisation was depicted as terrorists confined to US contexts and not about their global presence and their chapters in London (BBC, 2019).

It was not until I attended college that, at the age of seventeen, during the second year of my A-Level studies in my sociology classes, that my teacher introduced us to the canon of Black Feminism and more specifically, research that centred Black British experiences. In particular, the work of Mirza (1992) about second-generation Black Caribbean young women's experiences in schools stood out for me. It enabled me to connect because I could relate to these experiences as a young Black woman and develop deep understandings about the education system and the differences in experiences and outcomes due to the interplay of identities within it. I also remember being astonished because for the first time, I was able to see that Black British people could be both the author and subject of research, and from that moment, I wanted to be a creator of such knowledge (Rollock, 2013). Although I had not decided on pursuing a career in academia at that point, I went on to study sociology at university where I was able to strengthen my understandings, with the discovery of conceptual and theoretical tools, to articulate the mechanisms operating within society, as well as channelling and deepening my passions about Black identities in constructive ways (Maylor, 2009). It is necessary to add that alongside my formal education, from secondary school onwards, I was always actively engaged in leading, organising and participating in activities and events that empowered, enhanced or re-centred Black identities within the space. By doing these additional actions, I was able to preserve my Black identity and pride while simultaneously filling the voids and lessening the disconnect I constantly felt as a young Black British girl/woman navigating and progressing through a (white) education system (Payne & Suddler, 2014).

PhD research

While I was happy to have knowledge of Black British literature and educational research, I began to view it as limited in that Black British girls and young women were largely invisible (Mirza, 1986; Rollock, 2007a) and there were established underachievement discourses characterising Black British students as a whole (Crozier, 2005; Rollock, 2007b; Tomlin et al., 2014). Again, I became frustrated because these narratives did not reflect my own experiences as a third-generation Black British woman of dual Caribbean and African heritage; nor did they reflect the experiences of many of my Black girl friends. Therefore, I became keen and excited to identify, explore and illustrate alternative, positive and more up-to-date narratives that highlighted the diversity within Blackness, as well as the achievements of Black British students and specifically Black girls and young women (Dei, 2018).

My PhD is a qualitative research study that centres the educational journeys and experiences of 25 Black British women graduates. It illustrates the full educational trajectory from primary school to university and explores how the participants have navigated, strategised and engaged within the English education system. In particular, it focuses on the intersections of their gender, race and social class identities and how this shapes their journeys and experiences; as well as the role of their families and extended networks in supporting their trajectories. Based upon my interest in Black identities, a significant contribution that my research makes is expanding the boundaries of Blackness through emphasising the nuances and diversity within this group through ethnicity and cultural considerations alongside race, gender and social class. My PhD research also critiques notions of academic 'success' which are limited and underpinned by meritocratic and neoliberal ideals that fail to consider the inequalities inherent in the education system that dis/advantages particular groups. Overall, my research aims to- by foregrounding the experiences of a range of Black British women- highlight the transformative power of education- but only if the education system is understood and navigated effectively.

As is evident from the brief overview of myself, my educational journey and my PhD research, throughout my life and particularly within my education, my Black identity has played a significant role. It has provided me with confidence and resilience, motivating me in ways that have

enabled me to carve out spaces within the 'heart of whiteness' to insert my own Blackness and those of others. In this regard, my reflections and story emphasises that 'pro-black doesn't mean anti-white' (Herring et al., 1999) precisely because, I can love all of who I am and coexist, without hating others.

The next section will review the relevant literature regarding the whiteness of the education system, particularly the role of the curriculum, before discussing the methods, theoretical frameworks and some participant narratives from my PhD research.

Literature review

Why is my curriculum white?

Particularly within university settings, there has been outrage to and opposition of the overwhelming whiteness of the curriculum (Ajegbo et al., 2007; Arday & Mirza, 2018; Bain, 2018). Gaining momentum as a largely student-led movement in 2015, universities were increasingly being held accountable and asked, "Why is my curriculum white?" by students exerting pressure for the curriculum to be diversified (UCL, 2015; Swain, 2019). However, the whiteness of the curriculum can be viewed as one manifestation of the whiteness of the entire education system. According to Gillborn (2005: 498), this whiteness is upheld by education polices that "assumes and defends white supremacy through the priorities it sets, the beneficiaries that it privileges, and the outcomes that it produces." In this way, the education system symbolises 'institutionalised whiteness' (Puwar, 2004; Shilliam, 2015), positioning Black bodies as out of place- particularly within elite institutions- where microaggressions consistently marginalise them through "every day, interpersonal manifestation[s] of institutional whiteness and structural white supremacy … creating and maintaining white space," (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019: 12). Therefore, the curriculum should be viewed as a "culturally specific artefact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script" (Ladson-Billings, 1998: 18); a master script that "silences multiple voices and perspectives, primarily legitimising dominant, white, upper-class, mail voicings as the "standard" knowledge students need to know," (Swartz, 1992: 341).

Black Bodies in white spaces: implications and surviving within white spaces

For Dumas (2014), the education system is a 'site of black suffering' which is echoed within the work of Givens (2016). The established differences in experiences and outcomes at key stages in the education system (Gov, 2019a, 2019b); the higher exclusion and dropout rates (Social Market Foundation, 2017), as well as the consistent Black and Minority ethnic (BME) attainment gap at universities (UUK & NUS, 2019) can be used to indicate the implications of Black bodies within hostile white academic spaces (Cabinet office, 2017; Sian, 2017). Additionally, Carter (2007: 52) highlights the psychological aspects of young Black women in her study who she notes "were constantly negotiating Whiteness to survive, or in their words, to pass the course." Carter proceeds to explain that "I use the term survive to capture the intellectual and mental struggles that these young women had to endure as they believed that their identities were constantly challenged," (ibid: 52). In fact, similarly, one of the salient points that was made within the National Union of Students' (NUS) participation in the 'Why is my curriculum white?' campaign was that "Black British students are psychologically damaged by a white curriculum," (Osborne, 2016).

On the other hand, the deep commitment and obligation to gaining education has meant that Black students (particularly Black girls and young women) and Black communities have developed many strategies to survive within these hostile, white academic spaces (Fuller, 1980; Chigwada, 1987; Mac an Ghaill, 1988; Coultas, 1989; Andrews, 2013; 2016). These include creating safe spaces and social networks to affirm Black identities and offer emotional support (Rollock

et al., 1992; Guiffrida, 2003; Weekes, 2003; Carter, 2007; Ojo, 2009; Greyerbiehl and Mitchell, 2014; Cook and Williams, 2015), as well as utilising additional resources (Yosso, 2005; Kynard, 2010; Kelly, 2018) and creating ideologies like 'achievement as resistance' (Carter, 2008). While such strategies support Black girls and young women in navigating, resisting and disrupting white spaces; they are also underpinned by the maintenance and assertion of pride in their Black identities which become "a 'suit of armour" against hostilities of the environment" (Miller and MacIntosh, 1999: 161); and asserted in opposition to the erasure and/or negative portrayals of Black identities in the white educational space (Rollock, 2007a, 2007b).

Having discussed some of the literature regarding the whiteness of the education system by highlighting the role of the curriculum and the implications on Black students, along with the ways they have resisted to survive in these spaces; the next section of this paper addresses the methods, theoretical frameworks and introduces some findings from my PhD research.

Methods

As a qualitative research study, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were the method of choice in order to gain in-depth insights about the educational experiences and journeys of the Black British women graduates. With the permission of participants, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim after each interview. Using the computer software NVivo, interview transcriptions were uploaded, and a process of thematic analysis occurred. Ethical considerations were made such as informed consent, confidentiality, limiting harm and informing participants of their right to withdraw at any given time. Accordingly, participants were given information sheets and consent forms before interviews; pseudonyms were used to uphold confidentiality in the final work; signposting to relevant support was given in order to limit psychological harm that recounting educational experiences and journeys may trigger; lastly, participants were provided with my contact details if they wished to withdraw.

This research is underpinned by a theoretical amalgam of Black feminist epistemology, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Bourdieu's theory of practice (BTP) in order to articulate the intersectional identities of the sample. While Black feminist epistemology privileges and centres the lived experiences and knowledge production of Black women specifically (Collins, 2000); CRT illuminates the central role of race and racism within society and its educational institutions which deliberately disadvantages Black and minority ethnic students (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Chadderton, 2013). BTP supplies the social class dimensions in order to show how resources are acquired and utilised in order to navigate within educational fields, as well as, with the support of CRT, the underlining whiteness of such fields in which these resources operate and are given power (Rollock et al., 2015).

I was able to interview 25 Black British women graduates in the Midlands and the South East of England. These graduates came from a diverse range of ages, ethnicities, cultural backgrounds and socio-economic statuses, as well as an array of educational institutions, pathways and degree subjects which provided insightful and varied narratives. For the purposes of this paper, I will share the reflections of two of these participants: La'Shay and Deja.

Discussion

Within interviews, both La'Shay and Deja expressed similar sentiments to my own reflections of my education, namely their awareness of the whiteness of the space and the internal contractions they encountered as they navigated within it. In this way, I assert that for many young Black women, gaining an education within the English education system becomes a personal site of struggle (Pennant, 2019). In the following extract, La'Shay demonstrates how her

Jamaican heritage and culture means that she feels that it is inevitable that she will be marginalised in the space because of what she perceives it to represent:

> *"I think Jamaican culture has this legacy of challenging the system, I just think of Marcus Garvey and like Rastafarianism and it's very much like {Jamaican accent} "Bun Babylon and me nah waan … " Do you know what I mean? And I think there's that spirit of rebellion that makes- or in my opinion- made me very aware of what systems were at play and also gave me an understanding that not everything in Britain is for me. Even though uni was encouraged, I was already- whenever I enrolled- was thinking about middle-class white values and colonialism and these were things that I'd learnt from before, and race and how that might play into things. Just having that awareness was almost like when you're … I think what's it, double consciousness from W.E.B. Du Bois, so it was already having an experience but being an observer myself. I think that kinda made it harder for me cos whether it was true or not, I still had a perception that maybe there were some people in this institution that would rather not have me be here and maybe would rather that I did fail,"* **(La'Shay)**.

By way of her interpretation of Jamaican culture's "legacy of challenging the system" and "spirit of rebellion," La'Shay illustrates the way, using a Bourdieusian lens, "a field consists of a set of objectives, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power (or capital), while habitus consists of a set of historical relations "deposited" within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation, and action," (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 16). Based on this, La'Shay embodies Jamaican culture in her habitus and her presence within the education field as well as her awareness of the power dynamics in which middle-class whiteness dominates. Therefore, through previous racial and cultural socialisation, she has been able to "create spheres of influence that are separate from but engaged with existing structures of oppression," (Mirza, 1997: 276). Within a study about how Caribbean young women negotiate their racialised and gendered identities within education (Phoenix, 2009), the notion of education as a site of struggle is carried forward by Pratt (1991: 6) who writes that classrooms become "contact zones" as well as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today." Through her reference to W.E.B Du Bois's (1989) 'double consciousness', La'Shay is also calling out the internal contradictions and the struggles she encounters as a British *and* Jamaican young woman venturing through an education system which she feels does not and will never fully accept her. Yet, she still pursues education as a means to an end. Additionally, this resistance invoked by Jamaican culture and carried forward by La'Shay demonstrates the nuances of her Black identity and the ways in which she feels it is positioned within whiteness. By centring her experiential knowledge, she uses counter-storytelling to critically analyse the space (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

For Deja, she responds to her awareness of the whiteness of the space by actively resisting and navigating it as her authentic (Black) self:

> *"I don't want to conform; I want the things that make me different to stand out so that you can see it. I think that's why I have my nails as long as I want or I have my hair as natural as I want it to be and I wear bright colours in corporate colour environments, because it is becoming more ok for you to be yourself. But I'm also seeing it as being unapologetic about being who I am and being authentically me, because there's more value in that and it's more sustainable. In the education system, in terms of at university you don't have a uniform so you can see it from the things people wear and me coming to lectures … I'll wear my Afrocentric earrings without thinking about it because that's the style I want to wear, and seeing other Black girls who act in the same way … So I think it is about becoming, because they are doing it independently themselves, then the things and the environments that they are going to such as the education sector, they will bring themselves with them. I think that there is an integration between the two because that accepting of yourself allows you to then move into different environments and then be yourself,"* **(Deja)**.

Deja's belief that it is important that Black girls "bring themselves with them" throughout their educational journey is similar to the strategy I employed which enabled me to survive and thrive throughout my education. Deja's desire to make her differences stand out, as well as seeing value in doing so contributes to "a specialised knowledge produced by black women that

clarifies a particular standpoint of and about black women," (Reynolds, 2002: 596). From this standpoint, Black women are able to use the strength of marginal positions by using innovative ways or in the case of Deja, disruptive ways to challenge the perceived norm about who should be in that space, what they should look like and what they should wear. In fact, Deja employs her style of dress in this process, comparable to how I used my Black Barbie costume, to redefine herself by boldly wearing 'Afrocentric earrings' noting that other Black girls are also taking similar steps. This and similar acts "emerge from a different location … fundamental to the process of decentering the oppressive other and claiming our right to subjectivity and is the insistence that we must determine how we will be and not rely on colonising responses to determine our legitimacy," (hooks, 1990: 22).

Both La'Shay and Deja also illustrate the importance of understanding the operations of whiteness in academic educational spaces as well as the power that such understanding can provide. Additionally, both draw upon their Black identities- Jamaican culture for La'Shay and clothing for Deja- as a way to gain power and to survive within the whiteness. This resonates with previous research (Carter, 2003; Modood, 2004; Yosso, 2005; Wallace, 2017; 2018) which contends that ethnicity, cultural background and race can provide additional resources within educational experiences and journeys for Black and minority ethnic students.

Conclusion and recommendations

To conclude, it is evident that Black British women are committed to education but have unique experiences within the English education system based upon their intersectional identities. The overwhelming whiteness embedded within the education system means that young Black women have to constantly find energy and develop strategies that enable them to navigate within it. This will inevitably make it more difficult to concentrate on working towards achieving academic 'success' and statistical evidence suggests that for many Black girls and young women, doing so has proved to be quite a challenge. Therefore, moving forward, it is imperative that research about this group should employ intersectional approaches that consider all of their identities and how they impact upon their educational journeys. Moreover, attention needs to be paid to the diversity within this group such as differing social class positions as well as ethnicities and cultural backgrounds which further affect how they engage and journey within the education system. Lastly, as asserted by Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010: 22), Black girls' "existence at the margins presents both constraints and possibilities for all educational reform efforts and overall societal transformation. Therefore, research with and on behalf of Black girls benefit the whole of society," (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010: 22).

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

April-Louise M. O. O. Pennant is an award-winning doctoral researcher, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the Department of Education and Social Justice at the School of Education, University of Birmingham. She just passed her viva and is currently working in education policy in the Welsh Government.

ORCID

April-Louise M. O. O. Pennant http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1963-7832

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