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## REVISITING RHS'S 'RACE, ETHNICITY & EQUALITY IN UK HISTORY: A REPORT AND RESOURCE FOR CHANGE'

By Shahmima Akhtar

**ABSTRACT.** This paper considers the Royal Historical Society (RHS)'s 'Race, Ethnicity & Equality in UK History' report published in 2018. The report contained the findings of a survey sent to staff and students working or studying in History higher education in the United Kingdom. In this paper, I reflect on the various findings of the report related to staff and student numbers, the attainment gap between white and Black and Ethnic Minority students, the curriculum, and racial harassment in History within universities. The RHS report emerged out of the work done by a number of organisations championing race and equality in the sector over decades. By connecting the work of RHS to these earlier initiatives it is possible to map a broader societal change in the historical sector to address historic inequalities, racialised disadvantage and structural exclusion. The RHS and institutions such as Runnymede Trust, the Institute of Historical Research, and Leading Routes are championing greater racial and ethnic equality which reflects broader political, economic and cultural transformations taking place in Britain. In this paper, I show how the RHS is part of an important conversation in foregrounding racial and ethnic equality in the historical profession to the inevitable benefit of History higher education.

It has been almost three years since the publication of 'Race, Ethnicity & Equality in UK History: A Report and Resource for Change'.<sup>1</sup> The Royal Historical Society (RHS)'s Race, Ethnicity and Equality Working Group (REEWG) established in 2017 produced the Race Report, and its members (old and new) are still active in this space. The report offered a survey of History in higher education, detailing that History is the fifth least diverse subject in UK universities in

<sup>1</sup> RHS received around 730 surveys, completed by staff and students in History varying from undergraduates and early career researchers to permanent salaried and professorial level. Responses contained rich qualitative material in the free text boxes (amounting to over 100 pages of commentary).

terms of race and ethnicity.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the report found that undergraduate-level History had an overwhelmingly white student population, that the numbers of BME students were even lower when it came to post-graduate-level History and specifically that ‘History academic staff are less diverse than Historical & Philosophical Studies student cohorts, with 93.7 per cent of History staff drawn from White backgrounds, and only 0.5 per cent Black, 2.2 per cent Asian and 1.6 per cent Mixed.’<sup>3</sup> Since the publication of the report, there have been many events, meetings and workshops held by history departments throughout universities in the United Kingdom. The discussions invariably responded to a climate of change; a growing recognition of the pervasive inequalities within History higher education; and ultimately a desire to do something about it.

The Black Lives Matter movement originated in the United States, but its impact has been keenly felt throughout the world, including the United Kingdom, and England specifically.<sup>4</sup> Global protests against police violence, structural racism and white supremacy are a regular feature of our everyday politics. The movement encompasses everything from calling attention to statues of slave-owners to demanding that the curriculum no longer be white-centric. Cumulatively, these activists, young people and protesters are demanding a change to the inbuilt mechanics of racism that affect our daily lives, whether in our institutions, our education systems, our financial programmes, or else systems of language and knowledge. Inequality along racial, ethnic as well as gendered and sexuality lines is commonplace and inescapable. In response to growing calls to reconsider, re-evaluate and retell the story of Britain’s empire, a right-wing backlash has grown in earnest. In June 2020 a Conservative think tank, Policy Exchange, launched a monitoring project called ‘History Matters’ which ‘confirms that history is the most active front in a new culture war’ and tracks institutions that have taken steps to remove statues, rename buildings or update university curricula. Ultimately, systematic recognition of institutionalised

<sup>2</sup> Shahmima Akhtar, ‘Racism, Redistribution, Redress: Royal Historical Society and “Race, Ethnicity & Equality in UK History: A Report and Resource for Change”’, in *British Culture after Empire: Migration, Race and Decolonisation, 1945 to the Present*, ed. Liam Liburd, Emma Parker and Josh Doble (Manchester, forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> ‘Race, Ethnicity & Equality in UK History: A Report and Resource for Change’ (October 2018), p. 8. I use the term Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) throughout this paper, to ensure consistency with the statistical data on race in higher education whilst being aware of its conceptual limitations. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) classifies History, Archaeology, Heritage Studies, Philosophy and Theology and Religious Studies as one student category in its data sets.

<sup>4</sup> Wesley Lowery, *They Can’t Kill Us All: Ferguson, Baltimore, and a New Era in America’s Racial Justice Movement* (2016).

racism has moved people by the tens of thousands to demand that we no longer have monuments celebrating slave-owners, that we no longer avoid teaching histories of the British Empire, that we recognise that racism has real-world effects.

Importantly, the Race Report built on previous studies that have extensively documented the sustained racial and ethnic inequalities inbuilt within UK universities. The Black and Asian Studies network, the Young Historians Project, the efforts of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, the teaching resources of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded Runnymede Trust project 'Our Migration Story: The Making of Modern Britain' and the Institute of Historical Research's 'Teaching British Histories of Race, Migration and Empire', as well as the Museum Detox network, framed and continue to frame the RHS's and REEWG's work. They have led the sector in not only collecting qualitative and quantitative data on racial and ethnic inequality but also coming up with innovative pedagogical, research and methodological approaches to counter the inaccessibility of history to BME groups. For instance, resources from lesson plans to bibliographies of secondary sources, and archival material, as well as safe spaces are offered by the above networks.<sup>5</sup> These networks are responding to reports published concurrently with or in the aftermath of the RHS report. Specifically, there have been reports on the awarding gap and the experience of racial harassment, and 'Leading Routes: The Broken Pipeline' presented specific data on 'Black PhD Students Accessing Research Council Funding'. It found that over a three-year period, of the total of 19,868 Ph.D. funded studentships awarded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) research councils collectively, 245 (1.2 per cent) were awarded to Black or Black Mixed students, just 30 of whom were from Black Caribbean backgrounds (UKRI, 2019).<sup>6</sup> The cumulative efforts of this range of

<sup>5</sup> See 'Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK: State of the Nation', Report by Runnymede, Ethnicity UK and Policy Press (2020); Mia Liyanage, 'Miseducation: Decolonising Curricula, Culture and Pedagogy in UK Universities', Higher Education Policy Institute Report (July 2020); Equality and Human Rights Commission, 'Tackling Racial Harassment: Universities Challenged' (2019); Nicola Rollock, "'Staying Power": The Career Experiences and Strategies of UK Black Female Professors', University and College Union Report (February 2019); Universities UK/National Union of Students, 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment at UK Universities: #CLOSINGTHEGAP' (May 2019); Mohammed Ishaq and Asifa Maaria Hussain, 'BAME Staff Experiences of Academic and Research Libraries', SCONUL Report (June 2019); Runnymede Trust, 'Teaching Migration, Belonging, and Empire in Secondary Schools' (July 2019); Sofia Akel, 'Insider–Outsider: The Role of Race in Shaping the Experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic Students' (October 2019).

<sup>6</sup> 'Leading Routes: The Broken Pipeline – Barriers to Black PhD Students Accessing Research Council Funding' (September 2019), p. 3.

organisations paved the way for RHS's report to be welcomed in the historical sector.

With respect to higher education History, the RHS report found that, at undergraduate level, 11 per cent of historical and philosophical students are BME, despite BME students making up 23 per cent of the overall UK undergraduate population.<sup>7</sup> Further, at postgraduate level, 17 per cent of all UK students come from a BME background, but within historical and philosophical studies departments this drops to 9 per cent. There are varied reasons for these numbers, a key one being the curriculum: the report identified that history curriculum content from secondary school level to university diminished interest in History amongst BME students. Several institutions have instituted curriculum reviews as a result, prompted by campaigns such as 'Why Is my Curriculum So White?'. As part of this, history departments are engaging meaningfully with efforts to diversify reading lists in the first instance, with a longer-term aim of decolonising course content and course material. Importantly, colleagues should avoid such efforts that focus just on discrete courses, which are only one piece of the puzzle. Whilst changing a particular course is within an academic's control, equal attention should be paid to making survey and compulsory courses far more diverse, as students will inevitably be exposed to a broader range of teaching on a mandatory level.

There is a vast literature on racism and higher education that has guided these efforts, including Katy Sian, *Navigating Institutional Racism in British Universities* (2019); Lola Olufemi, Odelia Younge, Waithera Sebatiindira and Suhaimah Manzoor-Khan, *A FLY Girl's Guide To University: Being a Woman of Colour at Cambridge and Other Institutions of Elitism and Power* (2019); and Jason Arday and Heidi Safia Mirza (eds.), *Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy* (2018). For those of us who are willing to do the work of improving racial and ethnic equality in History higher education, the above texts are useful guides to the state of the field and provide actionable points of intervention. For RHS, specifically, in order to map the impact of the report, the society published 'Roadmap for Change' in 2019, and a follow-up Roadmap in 2020 which summarises how universities, learned societies and a variety of institutions have responded to the report and its findings. Both these reports contain useful examples of how different institutions have actioned the recommendations of the report, as well as lessons learnt from it.

When we begin to break down the data on staff in history departments, who are 94 per cent white, we can see that whilst 6 per cent

<sup>7</sup> 'Race Report', p. 22.

come from a BME background, only 0.5 per cent are black.<sup>8</sup> The report specifically found that the numerically limited BME staff and students in History higher education experience a discriminatory and exclusionary working environment. For instance, 44 per cent of BME respondents faced problems with unconscious or implicit bias around race and ethnicity. Thirty-three per cent of BME respondents reported witnessing discrimination or abuse of staff and students based on race and ethnicity. Further, 30 per cent of respondents reported having experienced such discrimination or abuse themselves. Finally, most discrimination or abuse was at the hands of staff within their own department, and the rest was by students or the public.<sup>9</sup> These statistics point to the fact that representation alone will not fix issues of racism, as the few students and academics of colour who do make it into History higher education still suffer abuse. Nowhere is this more clearly visible than in the attainment gap. This is now more accurately referred to as the 'awarding gap', to recognise the role of academics in sustaining this inequality.<sup>10</sup> For example, the RHS report found that BME students and white students are equally likely to get a 2.1 but BME students are 9 per cent less likely to get a first than a white student.<sup>11</sup> A primary next step for addressing this academy-wide awarding gap is to ask for specific department-level data on the awarding gap in order to come up with next steps, whether it be bespoke staff-training on equality, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) and the attainment gap, resourcing further support for BME students, or else raising awareness of the topic.

A small yet effective change that institutions can adopt based on a recommendation of the Race Report is to make EDI a standing item on agendas for department-, school- and college-level meetings. This ensures that there is a space for discussion and an opportunity to move forward and update colleagues on the adjustments or changes that are needed for successful EDI initiatives.

Whilst it is largely positive that universities, whether on a department or college level, are engaging with the many reports on racial inequality in our education systems and specifically universities, we must continue efforts to be anti-racist. Historian Meleisa Ono-George has discussed an anti-racist pedagogy, which is an understanding of racism as historically and socially constructed, embedded, and normalised within modern

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54–5.

<sup>10</sup> L. Sequeira, 'Three Unis Discuss What They're Doing about the Attainment Gap', *LSE Blog*, 9 May 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Race Report', p. 40. Debra Cureton, 'Bridging the BME Gap' (April 2016), and Kingston University have continued RHS's sector-leading work in closing the BME attainment gap through an externally funded Office for Students project.

society. Ono-George conceives of universities as sites of knowledge production, that are partially responsible for unequal dynamics of power in society given that ‘all education is political’; an anti-racist pedagogy therefore encourages students to be reflexive, active participants, and engaged in collaborative learning, which extends beyond the lecture theatre and into the outside world.<sup>12</sup>

Over successive years, many public history practitioners have done much to bring the debates on Britain’s history and racial equality into conversation with one another. David Olusoga’s work on Black British history, published as a monograph, screened as a documentary series and even turned into a children’s book, has brought Black British history to mainstream, not just specialised, audiences.<sup>13</sup> Afua Hirsch, Akala and Reni-Eddo Lodge have respectively published on the ways in which Britishness intersects with black identity in the discourse of race and injustice in contemporary Britain.<sup>14</sup> Many have pointed to the relative silence on histories of race, migration and empire as fuelling continued injustices that refuse Britain’s black and brown populace a place in British history. Failing to teach these histories perpetuates a false narrative of Britain that fails to consider the interconnectedness of the British Empire, the networks of food, culture, society and religions that have been present historically and continue to adapt and change today. By sidelining this history, not only are a whole generation of potential future black and brown historians being consigned to the margins of the history academy, whether at primary or secondary school or at university, but these young people are also being sidelined to the margins of British citizenship and British society. A more composite and holistically considered approach that considers the diversity of human experience across historical generations needs to be actualised. These vanguards of the historical profession are sustaining the societal conditions necessary for equalities work such as that of the RHS and some universities to thrive.

Localised networks of solidarity exist for BME historians, such as the Young Historians Project, the BME Social History Network, Leading Routes and more. These networks provide spaces for discussion, connection and collaboration, but ultimately a generative existence in academia needs to go beyond survival. As Toni Morrison thoughtfully expounded in a talk at Portland State University (PSU) in 1975:

<sup>12</sup> Meleisa Ono-George, ‘“Power in the Telling”: Community-Engaged Histories of Black Britain’, *History Workshop Online*, 18 November 2019: [www.historyworkshop.org.uk/power-in-the-telling](http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/power-in-the-telling).

<sup>13</sup> David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (2016).

<sup>14</sup> Afua Hirsch, *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* (New York, 2018); Akala, *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire* (London, 2018); Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (2017).

The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language, and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.<sup>15</sup>

Considering Morrison's astute remarks, how do those engaged in improving the historical sector go about equality, diversity and inclusivity work without being perpetually distracted – from our academic work, our articles that need to come out, our books that need to be published, our courses that need to be designed? It seems that EDI work functions as a double-edged sword – both acting as a necessary corrective to generations of injustice, minoritisation and harassment but further serving to abstract those people of colour engaged in these initiatives as inevitably distracted or else siloed as being exclusively interested in race and equality work. What of their research interests, their academic outputs and their career progression? Promotion criteria of course take into account administrative responsibilities, including EDI, but when this work requires emotional as well as physical labour, the cumulative effort cannot be quantified or monetised. Ultimately, the people engaged in this work are doing it because they care, because they want to change higher education for the better in the long term, or else change their working and learning environment, whether at department or school level, in the short term. There is no clear answer as to how this work is to be done equitably, beyond working in collaboration with colleagues and co-curating with students. In essence, it will take a toll on one's performance and outputs, but good EDI work engages in the three R's as Dr Jonathan Saha put it: it needs to be Rewarded, Recognised and Resourced.<sup>16</sup> These three R's demonstrate serious commitment whilst recognising individual and group effort. Recent examples of positive work in the historical sector range from the flurry of posts in Black British History, to the use of positive action in ring-fencing Ph.D. and Masters funding, to small grants for BME historians (funded by a range of history scholarly societies), to name a few.

In conclusion, the Race Report does not exist in isolation from broader societal changes. Importantly, the 2011 Census showed that just under 20 per cent of the UK's population self-identified as other than White British, while the UK's Black and Minority Ethnic

<sup>15</sup> PSU address transcribed by film-maker Ava DuVernay, which can be accessed at [www.wweek.com/news/2019/08/07/one-of-late-writer-toni-morrison-s-most-famous-quotes-about-racism-came-from-a-talk-at-portland-state-university-listen-to-it-here](http://www.wweek.com/news/2019/08/07/one-of-late-writer-toni-morrison-s-most-famous-quotes-about-racism-came-from-a-talk-at-portland-state-university-listen-to-it-here)

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Saha, 'A Response to Critics', *History Workshop Online*, 30 October 2018: [www.historyworkshop.org.uk/the-rhs-race-ethnicity-equality-report-a-response-to-critics](http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/the-rhs-race-ethnicity-equality-report-a-response-to-critics).



population doubled in size between 1991 and 2011, to eight million people (14 per cent of the overall population).<sup>17</sup> In recognition of Britain's multicultural, multiethnic, and multinational population, there is a need to underscore equality in our lives if only guided by the Equality Act of 2010. The discourse on race is changing in Britain, and its citizens are joining the call of generations before us that are no longer willing to allow racism to continue unabated, to see it as the work of singular 'bad apples' or else the eccentricities of older individuals (despite what our public press might tell us).<sup>18</sup> The history academy is in conversation with these broader discourses and we must continue to be reflexive in order to remain rigorous in practice, and relevant to the changing landscape of the British nation. History matters now more than ever before, and we must continue to fight for history that is diverse, honest and accountable.

<sup>17</sup> Bridget Byrne, Claire Alexander, Omar Khan, James Nazroo and William Shankley (eds.), *Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK: State of the Nation* (Bristol, 2020), p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> See Luke Harding, 'The Chequered Legacy of Prince Philip's Notorious "Gaffes"', *The Guardian*, 11 April 2021, for a particularly egregious example of Prince Philip's racist remarks being whitewashed as humorous quips.