

Truths and Reconciliation: Reflections on the University of the West Indies and University of Leicester International Summer School 2023

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The University of the West Indies and University of Leicester International Summer School is an annual event, a week-long programme of lectures, workshops and social activities aimed at supporting postgraduate research students and early career researchers predominantly from the UK and Caribbean. It is hosted alternately at the University of Leicester and the different campuses of the University of the West Indies, and since its inception has been spearheaded by Dr Lucy Evans and Professor Martin Halliwell at the University of Leicester, Dr Sonjah Stanley Niaah at the University of the West Indies, Mona, and Professor Michael A. Bucknor at the University of Alberta. The 2023 edition was hosted by University of Leicester's School of Criminology from 5th to 10th of June, under the theme of 'Crime, (In)Justice, Human Rights'. Sub-topics included crime and culture, histories and legacies, security, surveillance, the police and the state, human rights, gender and sexualities, reproductive rights, the environment, and race. It promised an opportunity to connect with researchers in similar or related fields from around the world, who we may have otherwise not met.

For some participants, injustice was not just a theory to be discussed but a reality to be lived, as they negotiated international border controls before the conference had even begun. Travelling while Black, Brown or Muslim can be a time-consuming, bureaucratic and demeaning process. Visa requirements are arduous and expensive, and set to become even more so with the UK government's recent decision to increase the minimum earnings threshold for skilled-worker visas to £38,700 – and its new policy of refusing visas for the dependants of many students (GOV.UK 2024). A few participants shared the lengths they had gone to in order to avoid or minimise being detained at border crossings: from lengthy preparations to meet certain medical requirements, to compiling an entire folder of documentation. I was reminded of a wallchart I once saw at the Migration Museum in London, which ranked different nations' passports by how many countries they allow entry to. Without the participants from overseas I feel we would have lost a great deal of insight and depth to the discussions, so I hope the summer school continues to foster and support an international cohort. I felt fortunate to have been able to take just one train to Leicester and join the week's activities, my place paid for thanks to a scholarship from the University of Leicester's College of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities.

The week proved rewarding but intense, partly because of the packed programme and also because the subject matter required careful listening, vigilance and emotional energy. Highlights included the historian Dr James Campbell's exploration of 'The Death Penalty in and After the British Empire' and Dr Tammy Ayres and Dr Kellie Moss's 'Workshop on MNS in Guyana's Prisons', both for their insightful linking of past and present in the administering and management of legal justice. Drawing links to understand how historical colonialism persists today, through structural racism and institutional 'norms', felt particularly important given the make-up of the cohort, which consisted almost entirely of researchers of colour. Difficult conversations inevitably arose during the week, including discussions as to the rights and responsibilities of White academics and students researching and teaching topics relating to the Caribbean, Africa and people of colour. How do you acknowledge your privilege while also working to dismantle it? How do you create opportunities for those whose voices and work are marginalised in academia? How do you ensure that your research or the advice you are sharing recognises the perhaps very different lived experiences of your research subjects or audience?

My own research explores representations of Mixedness by Mixed-race writers from Guyana. Although I have Guyanese heritage on my father's side, I grew up in the UK and do not fully understand the nuances of how mixedness is perceived and defined in Guyana. I have to be careful not to make readings or assumptions based on my particular experience of being mixed in a White-majority country like the UK, as opposed to a multiracial and highly mixed former British Colony like Guyana. The truth is no one can escape self-reflection. We all must examine our blind spots and privileges, as well as who we may be silencing or exploiting through our research. Having open, honest and vulnerable dialogue is necessary, and many such conversations took place during and outside of the sessions.

Even the programme itself and its name came under scrutiny. 'Summer' is a term more commonly used in the United States and UK to describe the educational break between about July and September; it does not exist as a season in the Caribbean. 'School', meanwhile, suggests an institution of instructional education, rather than the space of mutual learning and collaboration between researchers at various stages of their careers that the programme turned out to be.

At the student conference on the final day, most participants presented a ten-minute paper and took part in a brief Q&A with their fellow panellists. Through these presentations we were given a fascinating insight into a vast, interdisciplinary range of topics and theories that centred specific issues or interests in the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and ethnic minority communities within the UK. Every paper felt urgent and necessary to the time we live in. The violence of the border, and the arguments used to justify this violence, was exemplified in Melissa Williams' 'The Coloniality of Belonging: To What Extent Has Post-2000 British Immigration Legislation Developed to Conditionalise the Belonging of Descendants of the Windrush Generation?', while Shareed Mohammed's 'Invisible Gates Made Visible in the Anglophone Caribbean:

Projected and Sanctified Violence by the Liberal State upon Illegal Immigrants and Refugees' (as featured in this special issue) introduced me to Guyanese author Wilson Harris's concept of 'authoritarian paradiso'. Mohammed elsewhere describes this, quoting Harris, as an 'implicit barrier or "authoritarian texture [that] tends to be hidden beneath various legal codes that enshrine cultural and economic and racial distinctions between outsiders and insiders, economic migrants and political refugees"' (Mohammed 2020). Coya Halley explored a different kind of border – that of the prison gate – in 'Women, Domestic Violence, and Incarceration: Exploring the Use of Land-Based Interventions to Meet Wellbeing Needs', in which she highlighted the needs of an often-ignored group in Guyanese society. Other papers looked at the role that the arts can play in documenting and reframing the past and present, including Carol Ann Dixon's 'Examining and Reckoning with Transatlantic Enslavement as a Crime Against Humanity, Considered Via the Prism of African and Caribbean Diaspora Contemporary Visual Arts', Olajide Salawu's 'Returning to the Rural Necropolis in Caroline Enahoro's *Doing Dangerously Well*', and Raad Khair Allah's 'Resisting Through Art: Iconography of Revolution' (included earlier in this special issue).

The discussions we were having in breaktimes about positionality in research were extended in other presentations. Lindah Nelimah Wakhungu's 'The Enemy Within: An Ethnographic Account of Slow Violence in Migori County, Kenya's Macalder Gold Mines' (as featured in this special issue) demonstrated how formerly problematic colonial methods, such as ethnography, can be transformed when carried out by people from those same communities, while the impact of cultural differences in health provision was highlighted by Roman Gnaegi's 'The Role of Health Workers in Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) Case Management and Care in Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement Uganda' (also included in this issue) and Rianna Raymond-Williams's paper 'What Role Does Colourism Play in How Black women Access Sexual and Reproductive Health Care in the UK?', which centred the voice and experience of one Black woman. Melissa Beckford-Simpson's 'Resistance as Culture: "Blockroading" as a Colonial Cultural Conundrum in the Jamaican Society' and Nathan Chapman's 'A Matrix of Coloniality: Counter-narratives of "Frame Case" in Trinidad and Tobago' effectively used localised terminology to explore geographically specific discourses of resistance and injustice. Chapman directed us to the book *Affirming Methodologies: Research and Education in the Caribbean* (Nakhid et al. 2023) which inspired his use of 'liming methodology', a research approach which draws on the Caribbean social habit of 'liming', or relaxing with friends, to conduct his interviews. My paper, 'The Right To Be ... Reclaiming Mixedness in Contemporary Caribbean Literature', and Tom Lockwood-Moran's 'Global Queer Literary Resistance(s): Contemporary Caribbean Communalities' explored literary disruptions to essentialising and violent classifications of race, gender and sexuality, and I found much to connect our research in terms of asserting a fluidity of identity and rejecting constraining boxes or labels.

One takeaway that has really stayed with me from the presentations is that justice does not mean the same thing to everyone. For some people, justice is a sentence

issued by the legal system; for others it is reparations, truth and reconciliation, or the right to freedom and equal treatment. Justice, we were reminded, is not always quiet and neatly served up by a jury and a judge in a wig, it can be noisy, disruptive, uncomfortable. This second approach is just as important, if not more, than the first when it comes to challenging deep-seated injustices and human-rights abuses, as well as imagining new ways of conceptualising crime and delivering justice. As Martinican theorist Édouard Glissant notes in *Poetics of Relation*:

Every time an individual or community attempts to define its place in it, even if this place is disputed, it helps blow the usual way of thinking off course, driving out the now weary rules of former classicisms, making new ‘follow-throughs’ to chaos-monde possible (Glissant 1997: 137).

Discomfort was delved into even more deeply in ‘Criminal Intimacies and the Pleasures of Power’, led with care by Professor Michael A. Bucknor, Professor of Black Studies at the University of Alberta, formerly of UWI Mona, Jamaica. On each group’s table was placed extracts from Jamaican author Marlon James’s *The Book of Night Women* (2009): scenes of violence, rape and injustice. We were given a trigger warning and invited to leave the room at any time, but everyone stayed and together we explored our physical and emotional reactions to the texts. In the rich discussions that followed, we experienced for ourselves what Bucknor referred to as ‘the poetics of discomfort’. In a 2022 article co-authored with Cornel Bogle, Bucknor connects the poetics of discomfort to ‘the entangled histories of racial capitalism and colonialist violence’, describing how ‘a return to these histories of violence produces a poetics of discomfort’ (Bogle and Bucknor 2022). Looking back may be painful, he told us, but it is an ultimately necessary process that accompanies disrupting the status quo.

As we debated issues of perspective and appropriation using extracts from Saidiya V. Hartman’s ‘Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Suffering’ (Hartman 1997), I reflected on my own practice, in particular how a creative-writing activity I once led may have unconsciously erased the bodies and voices of enslaved people, much like the white abolitionist critiqued in Hartman’s chapter. The aim of the activity, which took place as part of a workshop at a London museum, was to highlight modern-day slave labour through poems attached to unethical products. I had intended that these would echo but challenge the famous ‘Am I Not a Man and a Brother?’ abolitionist slogans placed on sugar bowls in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, usually accompanied by the image of an enslaved man in chains, begging on his knees (Dabydeen 2011). However, many of the poems produced by the workshop participants reproduced this impression of dependency and lack of agency. I realised that I had not provided sufficient material about and by those impacted by modern-day slavery, so many drew on the closest thing they could think of: the desperate pleas of children featured in charity appeals for donations. Since then I have thought carefully about activities where participants take on the voices of minoritised or marginalised individuals or groups. In August 2023, UK diaspora platform Guyana Speaks and the University of London’s Senate House Library held a day of talks and activities to mark the 200th

anniversary of the Demerara Rebellion, a massive uprising of enslaved Africans in what was then British Guiana (University of London 2023). My poetry workshop, designed to centre the Africans whose voices are absent in the archives, followed presentations by researcher Alison Clark and Dr Juanita Cox, co-founder of Guyana Speaks. The lessons I had learned from the summer school proved useful in shaping the workshop activities and encouraging the participants, the majority of whom were of Guyanese descent, to draw not only on the richly informative talks they had heard but their own knowledge of Guyana's landscape, Creole language and revolutionary past.

While most of the summer school programme was conducted indoors, we did venture out on a field trip to Kedleston Hall in Derby, visibly colouring a White trickle of visitors with more Black and Brown shades. After an introductory welcome by University of Leicester's Professor Corinne Fowler about the hall and her work on the 'Colonial Countryside' research project, we explored this former home of Lord Curzon, the one-time Viceroy of India, who altered history and fostered Muslim-Hindu divisions by partitioning Bengal in 1905. Visiting stately homes today feels akin to watching a period drama: you can no longer admire the vast grounds and elaborate gowns without thinking of the exploitation that most likely funded the languorous lives of the central characters. The noticeable presence of a group of researchers – most of the global majority and all working to redress historic and/or current injustices – felt like a subversive act, even more so than the temporary exhibition on display in the house, intended to reassert the Indianness of the Curzon's collection of jewels. The building felt cold and not particularly welcoming, but as we posed for photos against the elaborate décor, drank tea in the café as the rain drizzled outside, and held normally voiced (not whispered) conversations about race, appropriation and colonial aesthetics in full earshot of those around us, the building seemed to me to finally warm up and come alive.

After the intensity of the week and spending so much time in close quarters, many who had taken part in the programme departed feeling tired or battling illness. Yet this intensity felt necessary. We had been challenged by what we had learned, discussed and experienced throughout the week. For me, it meant a valuable opportunity to present my work in front of a room of Caribbeanists. I was compelled to reflect on whether my research was sufficiently centred in the Caribbean, not only in terms of the primary texts I was using but also the theories and methodologies I was employing in my analysis. While I was initially somewhat disappointed that my presentation had not provoked any questions in the Q&A, a number of people approached me at different points later in the day to share their own experiences, talk about Mixedness, or confess they had given the Mixed perspective little thought. Given the advantages and attention often afforded to Mixed-race people both historically and today, for example through the colourism that privileges lighter skin shades, I had wondered how my research would be received. Was I taking space from more important discussions? Would eyes roll as I spoke of the racism, demands for racial accounting and other external pressures faced by Mixed people in their day-to-day lives? I realised that in

order to defend my research to others, I have to first defend it to myself. As I continue my research and prepare to attend the next International Summer School in Trinidad in May 2024, I anticipate another intense week of learning, conversations and growth. Most of all, I am looking forward to physically grounding myself and my research in the Caribbean. Given Trinidad's geographic and cultural proximity to Guyana, and the wealth of research into Mixedness coming out of the country, the setting is ideal. I hope to remain flexible and open to new ways of thinking, writing and researching that may emerge.

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