

Black History Month 2020

Sas Amoah and Joan Simons

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Before we start, I think it's good to just state that we know a lot of people do have a lot of mixed feelings about the idea of Black History Month in the first place. I think we can all agree that having a single month to celebrate Black History is deeply problematic for a number of reasons, not least because it implies that somehow Black history is somehow distinct from history in general which, of course, is ridiculous.

But nevertheless, I think until we start to adopt a more diverse and representative idea of history. We try to make the most of this month that we can in an ideal world, I think we'd all agree that it wouldn't be necessary. So, I think in light of everything that had happened over the summer myself and the BME networks home groups tried to have discussions about what would be a really good and interesting way to current events for Black History Month this year.

I've had lots of discussions, and over time we kind of thought the best approach might have the theme week celebration. And that was very much inspired by Patrice Belton who you'll see later. So, thank you very much Patrice for the idea. And we thought having weekly themes had a lot of benefits to it, and I'm sure some of you have probably seen the themes, anyway. But I thought we'll just talk through them.

So, the first week between the fifth and the ninth was what we know. And the second week, the week where we now are what we do not know. So that's particularly relevant to this event in relation to the race equality charter. Next week, we're going to have what we need to know between the 19th and the 23rd. And for the last week between the 26th and the 30th, we're going to do what to do next.

So, what will help all these things are fairly self-explanatory. I would hope in a sense that they were good work engaged in stuff and kind of taking them on a bit of a journey. I thought what was particularly useful about this structure actually was that it could accommodate any institution, regardless of where they were in relation to having these discussions. So, for me

anyway, I think one of the key takeaways from the social justice protests that we had over the summer was the idea of racism moving beyond it.

I mean, moving beyond the idea of it being just explicit and overt acts of prejudice and realizing that actually there's a lot of nuance, and it can be a lot more insidious. So, for example, I tend to get to work quite early and most people who know me would know that. And there have been occasions when I've been on campus and I've been accosted by members of staff demanding to know who I am and what I'm doing on campus that they've just seen a rogue Black man in a hoodie in their offices.

And no longer that I've been at the security lodge and kind of in conversation because I forgot my pass, and I've had some of the officers just automatically assume I was some of the cleaning staff. And I've even had good friends of mine and colleagues who I love dearly and have implied that I don't talk like a Black person. And these are all relatively recent examples. So, I think what's been quite encouraging actually about what we've received back the submissions we received back after we got a call to action out to the faculty and the units is particularly the content.

A lot of content scrutinizing what we think of as race, and lots of discussion about the systemic nature of racism. And questions that have been raised in some of the sessions so far tend to be quite varied. How do racial power dynamics inform decision-making whose voices are the ones being heard? How does race shape the way we think our assumptions, and also how does it feed into our snap judgments? How do ideas of race intersect with everything from the criminal justice system to employment to, of course, in our case education?

So, the network steering group, I hope and, in many ways, that these events can really help to start encouraging conversation. Many of these sessions will hopefully work as a means of prompt in start having these important discussions that I think we probably picked off for far too long. One of the most notably at the moment is the idea of kind of the acronym BAMA and is it fit for purpose anymore. OK, so I'm kind of realizing the complexities of these issues and they are going to be incredibly difficult conversations for some of us really uncomfortable.

But like I said, I think there's no reason that we shouldn't push forward and it's completely OK to start having these conversations. And so, we do have the calendar up-- can you scroll to the top right to the top, please? Thank you very much. OK, so before we talk about the events, we within the network put together a statement, which I think is really important. And it kind of just explains our thoughts and ideas behind kind of putting together this calendar for Black History Month. We thought we'd just share those with you.

So, the course structure and events of this Black History Month 2020 has been planned and organized by the Open University's BME staff and BME student network. Black History Month 2020 provides an opportune moment to foster new relationships, as well as develop existing relationships as we work towards the institutional and organizational ambitions of becoming a more racially and culturally inclusive University, while celebrating and promoting equality and diversity.

Black History Month, as well as being a celebratory program, also looks to expand upon the commitments made by both the Open University and the Students Association in light of the notable Black Lives Matter Movement. The movement highlighted to us as a University and association areas in which we must improve in order to contribute to the wider societal aims of toppling systems of oppression, eradicating hate, discrimination and inequality. And most importantly, to promote diversity and inclusion of Black and minority ethnic voices and developing our culture and practice in order to provide an environment which truly functions to create equity and experience no matter your background.

Inspired by the Student Associations Vice President of equality, diversity and inclusion, Patrice Belton. We have decided to approach Black History Month slightly differently this year. We as the BME staff and BAME student network believe that, although, it is important to celebrate Black History and raise awareness of the issues, which face the Black community within society. We believe we should also look forward and begin to explore what we can do, not only by acknowledging the past, but to pay a path for the future.

So with that, we present the four week program, which looks to take all members of the OU community on a journey to understanding Black culture and celebrating its successes through to raising awareness of the barriers that exist, as well as provide critical information and resources on how to challenge them moving forward. Most of the events in the program will aim to focus primarily on the experiences, challenges, and history of being from an Afro Caribbean background. However, we believe part of understanding what it means to be Black is exploring what it means to be white.

So be content that reflects this in addition to exploring colonialism, religion, and education, employment amongst other key things. That will also be sessions that discuss issues and initiatives that fall under the wider BAME umbrella. So yeah, we would like to thank all the faculty that go back to us including a kind of MarComms and APP and EDI and all their teams for their support. And I'd like to thank Myles help me put that statement together.

And so, I've been personally very, very, very impressed with the range of research happening within the OU. And I had no idea how much interesting work had been produced until we started getting the submissions to you. But that could you put the calendar back on again. I

just want to go through some of the individual sessions, which I really enjoyed. So, I know many people have been in contact asking if these sessions are being recorded.

So just to confirm, most of it not all are being recorded and they will find themselves out on the Open platform. And we're hoping in November to officially launched the race and ethnicity hub and hoping to add that to all the existing content that we've been commissioning in that interim. So anyway, I'll just talk about some of my few personal highlights of the sessions that we've covered to date. So, we can see on the first week there what do we know, we've got an event coproduced and curriculum questions around racial injustice.

So, in that session Steve, Lynne, Jenny and Parvati discuss the opportunities and challenges of incorporating issues of racial inequalities and injustices into the curriculum. But what really resonated to me, I think was some of the points that Jenny Douglas made, and you'll be hearing a bit about Jenny later. And she said COVID-19 and the global pandemic has really shone a light on racial inequalities. And what was interesting is Jenny said she was part of a project actually set up in 1982 when I was born to look at inequalities in health, particularly in relation to BAME people.

And she said so the light that COVID has shown on racial inequalities isn't anything new. And she was saying that actually when she looks at the reports from 40 years ago when she looks at the reports that we got now, unfortunately, it seems like there's very little change. Many of the same themes seem to be re-emerging that were identified in the past. So I think it was really interesting to stress actually the lack of progress that has been made. And that was a really interesting part of that event.

There was also another event on the first week called Black students and staff in STEM examining our data by Diane Butler and report them, and they had some fascinating data on the participation, engagement and attainment of black students on OU STEM programs. And what I really like to do refer to a piece of research done by Quan Nguyen, Bart Rienties and John Richardson called learning analytics to uncover inequality in behaviour engagement and academic attainment in the distance learning set in.

What was interesting is that research showed BME students were between 19% and 17% less likely to complete a pass or achieve an excellent grade compared to white students. So even given the same academic performance, BME students were spent 4% to 12% more time studying than white students. But the containment gap remained persistent even after controlling for the same level of academic engagement. And that's something that I wasn't aware of.

Another session I really enjoyed is on the-- well, this week and the second week and was one called, why it might be important for white people to talk about whiteness by Rod Earle. So Rod put together like a really interesting presentation. And if you view that already, a few of you who were there are here, for their presentation critically examining what we understand as whiteness. And I think to quotes really stood out to me from that talk, and one was from Stuart Hall from 1980 on teaching race.

We have to uncover for ourselves in our own understanding, as well as for students we are teaching. The often-deep structural factors, which have a tendency to persistently, not only generate racial practices and structures, but reproduce themselves through time, which accounts that extraordinarily immovable character. And another one that I think we pinched from Twitter but was perfectly after this lecture. He said white privilege is not so much about enjoying unearned economic advantage as it is about the daily existential benefits of not having to deal with race.

It does not mean that your life hasn't been hard, just that the colour of your skin isn't one of the things making it hard. And I could go on, there was a really fantastic one yesterday by Anthony Gunther looking at crime and this effect on young Black men and Muslims as well. But those are just some of the highlights that I thought I'd put up. So yeah, as you can see, we're only in the second week. We have plenty of events to go and we'll pop the link to the site, the host the calendar. So please take time out to attend.

But I think, for many of us on the BME networks group. This wasn't really just a month per se, but I highly suggested whether these events the start of a conversation that will continue in years to come and help shape the next application for the race equality charter. So, thank you very much for your time and I hope you enjoy the rest of this evening and the rest of the month.

That's great. Thank you, Sas. A very powerful message there, and really helpful to have a look at that amazing program that has been put together. We're celebrating Black History Month. And for those of you who don't know, although, I'm sure many of you are very well versed in this, but I suspect there's some people who-- this might be your first Black History Month event that you've been to. So very much welcome if it is.

So Black History Month is in America, and it was called the African American History Month. It started in 1926 date. And they chose February for their month. And the reason they did that was because it coincided with the birthday month, I should say of Abraham Lincoln and also of Frederick Douglass, who was a national leader of the abolition movement. So very fitting that two really powerful change agents determined what time of the year that America celebrates this.

So, in the UK, we celebrate this in October. Next slide, please. So, this is the statement from Catherine Ross. Now let me tell you a little bit about Catherine Ross. Catherine was born in Saint Kitts in Caribbean. She moved to the UK in 1958, and she spent a lot of her time working in education or youth services. And then wrote two books and then around, I think it was 2004 she did a-- sorry, she completed a master's in museum management in 2014. And then set up the first ever museum on Gold Museum and to celebrate Caribbean culture.

What she realized as she lives in UK and went from around different museums was there was none celebrating Caribbean culture, or the recognition of famous figures of contribution from Caribbean culture. So, she said that this was quite a deficit. And so instead, she actually has started with her daughter this museum. And this is a statement from Catherine. And she said, "This year's Black History Month is a time to shine a light on our shared Black history and to tell the whole story honestly and truthfully, to decolonized and reclaim history, and tell stories from the perspectives of all people, not just the rich white men in power."

So, a fairly powerful statement there from Catherine. So, in UK Black History Month celebration for the first time in 1987. If you remember I said earlier, it's been going on in America since 1926, so we were very late coming to this. But there is some controversy about the notion of Black History Month having a month rather than other times of the year. And those who believe in Black History Month was limited to educational institutions questions, whether it was appropriate to combine the celebration of Black History Month one month as opposed to integration of Black history into the mainstream education the rest of the year.

I think I have heard from both Sas and Liz Marr this morning that really, we need to expand this. Today is an example of reflecting on race, for example, reflecting on the race equality charter. But it should be a pivotal moment when people who haven't engaged in this before actually think right, what am I going to do differently? And there's that famous saying, "Be the change you want to see." So, we can as a collective be the change we want to see. But we have to get together and do this together.

So, I asked four faculties if they could send me a couple of names that they would like mentioned as a celebration of famous people for our Black History Month event. And from the faculty business and law, I got the name of Leonard Woodley. And let me see my notes here. I do have his date of birth, but I'll punch in a second. So, he was called to the bar in 1963 and experienced discrimination on the grounds of race during his early years of practice. He became Queen's Council in 1988 and was a recorder between '89 and 2000.

His lasting legacy is the Leonard Woodley Scholarship at Inner temple, given to Black or Asian pupils to promote greater diversity at the bar. And it's sad to think that somebody is

imminent and successful as Leonard Woodley actually experienced discrimination. So, a famous woman. We have Dame Linda Dobbs was called to the bar in 1981 and became Queen's Council in 1998. In 2004, she became the first Black High Court judge.

And during her career she did a lot of work to promote equality and diversity in the profession. Linda was included in the published list of Britain's 10 most powerful Black women and 100 Great Black Britons in 2008. Some hugely successful. OK, many of you may have come across Andrea Levy. So, Andrea was born in 1956, but very sadly died last year. And she explored topics related to British Jamaicans, and how they negotiate racial, cultural and national identities. Next slide, please.

And after she passed away on 14th of February 2019, the bookseller wrote. "Andrea Levy will be remembered as a novelist who broke out of the confines assigned to her by prejudice to become a both a forerunner of Black British excellence and a great novelist by any standards." So, I've just pulled up a few of the front covers of some of her very famous books. And my favourite of all her books that I've read so far is Small Island. And if you've never read any of her books, I would really recommend it to you.

And what this is about it's England 1948, and it's focused on a lodging house in London. And this lady who runs the lodging house takes in some Jamaican letters, which the neighbours objects her. And the largest are Gilbert and Horton's and they get the perspective of them moving from the Caribbean to the shock of London Gray, dreary, cold, and of course, the prejudice of the discrimination and the rage racism that they face. So, it's a fascinating read, and I would highly recommend this.

Another of her famous books is Long Song and Fruit of the Lemon and Every Light In the House Burnin. So, another famous character and a person of note, I should say, was Mary Seacole who lived between 1805 and 1881. And Mary was a British Jamaican nurse, healer and businesswoman who set up British Hotel behind the lines during the Crimean War. She described this as a mess table and comfortable quarters for sick and convalescent officers. And provided succour for wounded servicemen on the battlefield and nursed many of them back to health.

Mary was a contemporary of Florence Nightingale, but didn't get the same recognition despite her contribution. She was posthumously awarded the Jamaica Order of Merit in 1991. In 2004, she was voted the greatest Black Briton. So, a couple of suggestions from STEM. Thank you for them. So, it goes Evelyn Boyd Granville on May 1st, 1924. And Evelyn was the second African American woman to receive a Ph.D. in mathematics from an American University. She earned it in 1949 from Yale University. She performed pioneering work in the field of computing. She's has been a fierce advocate for STEM education.

And even after she retired, she travelled across the state speaking about the importance of maths in learning. David Harold Blackwell 1919-2010. Was an American statistician and mathematician who made significant contributions to game theory, probability theory, information theory, and Bayesian statistics. He was the first African American inducted into the National Academy of Sciences. The first Black tenured faculty member at UC Berkeley, and the seventh African American to receive a Ph.D. in mathematics. So hugely successful.

And finally, onto FASS, so we've got a couple of suggestions. So, we've got Mariame Kaba is a US-based organizer, educator and curator. And Mariame work focuses on ending violence, dismantling the prison industrial complex, transformative justice and supporting youth leadership developments. She is the founder and director of the Project NIA, the grassroots organization with a vision to end youth incarceration. And you can see that working obviously with youth that FASS's work is going to be incredibly impactful on their lives as they go forward into adulthood.

So, Professor Stuart Hall sadly passed away in 2014. And we have a picture of him here in front of what looks like a very effective screen, D103. And unfortunately, I couldn't see what the title of D103 so maybe somebody will tell me what this was. So, Stuart worked at OU as a Professor of Sociology and Head of Sociology for 18 years. He was a Jamaican born British Marxist sociologist, cultural theorist and political activist. Along with Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, he was one of the founding figures of the school of thought that is now known as British Cultural Studies or The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. And he has been described as one of the country's leading cultural theorists by the observer.

So, I'm going to leave you finish this session with a quote from Professor Stuart Hall, which I think we should really have a look at society and social science at foundation course. Thank you, Naomi. I knew somebody would respond. So, it's society and social science, a foundation course was the one of the three freedoms. So, multiculturalism rests on inclusiveness. And we're going to hear more about inclusiveness in general session, and hopefully at other times during the day because Patrice talked to our students about inclusiveness within the focus groups.

But without an impossible imposition of monoculture and a fantasy about the suppression of differences. I think this is a really powerful and quite compound— almost like a compound statement. So, the notion that we are looking for a monoculture, even it's not an impossible imposition is what first of all says. And it would be a fantasy of ours if we're to suppress circumstances.

So, we need to acknowledge difference, celebrate difference, appreciate difference, and use the differences to actually be our strengths, rather than this notion of trying to make us all the same. We're not all the same. We never will be. And rather than striving for that, which Professor Hall was saying is a fantasy. We need to actually appreciate our differences. So, thank you very much. I'm going to end the session now.