As suggested by the Legacies of Enslavement Report, "intellectual and scientific justification for racism, including those developed at Cambridge, have long played a significant role in underpinning and supporting everyday racist assumptions of racial inequality and particularly of Black inferiority."

To what extent does Cambridge, as an academic institution, challenge the myth of Black inferiority?

The University of Cambridge is regarded as a world-leading institution for knowledge production. The knowledge produced by the university is inextricably linked to power relations (Foucault). In this essay, I argue that Cambridge helped to create the myth of Black inferiority and continues to perpetuate this myth in the present. As such, this world-leading academic institution, is also a white, middle-class space where Black people are out of place (Anderson, 2015). In recent years, the numbers of Black students accepted into the University of Cambridge has been the highest on record and the proportion of Black students has started to reflect the UK population. The Black students who are accepted into Cambridge are often marked as ‘excellent’. Whilst this seemingly challenges the myth of Black inferiority, I argue that these ‘excellent’ Black students are marked as exceptions to the rule of Black intellectual inferiority. The Cambridge education is a ‘badge of approval’ for Black people it deems ’excellent’ because they can assimilate into a white space and learn a white curriculum. Black people become ‘excellent’ once they become complicit in the very structures that deem them inferior. The fact that Black students are less likely to be awarded a 2:1 or 1st than their white counterparts indicates that the university perpetuates the myth of Black inferiority, as even those Black students marked as ‘excellent’, are still not equal to white students’ intellectual capabilities. This awarding gap is not unique to Cambridge but present across UK universities. However, as a world leading academic institution with its history and present complicity in violence towards people of colour, the University of Cambridge, (not Black students; and not grime artist Stormzy) need to do more to actively challenge the myth of Black inferiority.

Throughout this essay I draw on my lived experience of wearing this ‘badge of approval.’ From an ‘outsider-within’ status (Hill Collins, 1986) I enmesh autoethnography with sociological theory. This enables, rather than debilitates my analysis as I draw from first hand lived experience that is just as illuminating as the sociological theory, I use to understand these experiences.

The Myth of Black Inferiority Sold as Fact

The Legacy of Enslavement report demonstrates how the university’s very walls were created by the wealth produced from chattel slavery. The children of plantation owners were actively recruited to study at the university so their parents would be inclined to donate money to the university. The memorialisation of slavers, colonialists, and white supremacists throughout the university demonstrates how the legacy of these benefactors is still worshipped despite the violence on Black people that has enabled this wealth. Black people were dehumanised into objects that could be bought and sold. Whereas white people were deemed to be fully human and so had the right to rule over Black people for their own ends. As an academic institution the university helped to cast the myth of Black cognitive inferiority as scientific fact. Surprisingly, the Legacies of Enslavement report states that more research is needed to fully capture how Cambridge academics perpetuated scientific racism. Since, the university is primarily a knowledge making institution, more attention should have been paid to its role in legitimising scientific racism and white supremacy in the first instance, and how this affects the knowledge the university continues to produce in the present. Currently, research at the university is funded by arms companies that use this research to manufacture weapons used on people of colour in Yemen and Palestine. From the founding of the university to the maintenance of the university in the present, knowledge is produced by the university which inflicts violence on racialised bodies.

Heavy Is the Head That Wears the Crown

The increased numbers of Black students accepted into the University of Cambridge has led some to speculate whether Cambridge has introduced a ‘race quota’ to achieve this increase. Implicit in this speculation is the myth that Black students are intellectually inferior to white students and would only be able to get into Cambridge through preferential treatment. Cambridge has vehemently refused to ‘lower entry standards’ to increase the numbers of Black students accepted into the university. The university challenges the myth of Black inferiority by demonstrating that each Black student that gets into Cambridge has achieved their place through merit. The university and UK media has identified the ‘Stormzy Effect’ as a reason for the increase in the numbers of Black students. In 2018, Black British grime artist Stormzy started the Stormzy scholarship which would award two Black Cambridge students a fully funded scholarship a year. However, since this scholarship is fully-funded by Stormzy himself the university cannot take credit for the increase in Black students resulting from this initiative. Students are only eligible for this scholarship once they receive their offer. As such, students need to be encouraged and supported in their Cambridge application, for them to even see the Stormzy scholarship as a possibility. Therefore, access and outreach initiatives led by organisations like Brampton Manor, Target Oxbridge and student-led like the African and Caribbean Society (ACS) have played a larger role. Both Brampton Manor and Target Oxbridge have sought to increase the numbers of Black students at Oxbridge since 2012. Brampton Manor has gained notoriety by sending more students (most of whom are Black and working-class) to Oxbridge than Eton in recent years. Therefore, the university has challenged the myth of Black inferiority by rejecting claims of a ‘race quota.’ The increase in Black students has been due to the success of access and outreach initiatives which have supported Black students in their applications to Cambridge, just as white students in private schools have been supported for years.

Black students that get accepted into the University of Cambridge are regarded as evidence of ‘Black Excellence’, which challenges the myth of Black inferiority. Eyo Ndem (1957) argues that the acceptance of Black students into university is important to Black Brits because their success challenges the myth of Black inferiority. Getting into Cambridge has become a ‘badge of approval’ that has protected me against former feelings of incompetence and inadequacy. Imposter syndrome is the belief that one is not truly deserving of one’s place, and has achieved it through a mistake, or luck and will eventually be discovered as an imposter. It is typically racialised, classed and gendered, with those most marginalised feeling as though they do not deserve the success they have achieved. Strangely, this spectre of imposter syndrome that haunted me so strongly when I got my offer to the University of Cambridge, ceased to haunt me once I became an actual student at the university and was able to ‘cope’ with the Cambridge workload. With every positive comment on an essay, I received back, I was given a badge of approval, that shielded me against my imposter syndrome phantom. W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) argues that the most intelligent portion of the Black community – ‘the Talented Tenth’ – are instrumental in challenging the myth of Black inferiority. Du Bois argues that the Talented Tenth should strive to achieve the same education that white people receive. This ‘Talented Tenth’ will lead all Black people to racial equality. Black ‘excellent’ Cambridge students are a manifestation of Du Bois’ Talented Tenth vision. Therefore, Cambridge challenges the myth of Black inferiority because entry into Cambridge is a ‘badge of approval’ that marks Black people as excellent. This both shifts the public perception of Black people and shields Black people against the myth of Black inferiority that they can internalise.

However, the pressure of ‘Black Excellence’ takes a negative toll on Black students’ mental health that contributes to the Black awarding gap. F. Dennis, T. Iheonye, N. Bernard (2021-2022) define Black excellence as an ‘unwritten leadership expectation’ (p.17) placed onto Black students as conditional to their inclusion in the university. Black students must ‘go above and beyond and be exceptional’ (p. 8). Black students feel that they need to excel whilst they are at university to defy the accusation that they are inferior. Black excellence is a ‘strain’ on Black students, because it places external and internal pressure on them to succeed to improve the collective perception of Black people. Their research found that the burden of access and tackling the myth of Black inferiority is placed too heavily on Black students themselves, and the University of Cambridge should do more to alleviate this burden to close the awarding gap. Yet the university continued to commission another round of student researchers for the following cycle of the project of which I was one. When I asked what the success of the recommendations has been so far, the Centre for Learning and Teaching could not tell me what had been implemented. In my cycle we were hired to create a conference to showcase the solutions Black students have created to help kickstart action. Yet, the need for Black students to continuously scream and shout about this issue and the possible solutions, despite the fact the university has hired them in the first instance and pledged to close the awarding gap by 2025, demonstrates that the university is not seriously invested in challenging the myth of Black inferiority. Instead, the university uses the labour of Black students to *appear* like it is challenging the myth of Black inferiority. Black students are not listened to and this ‘burden of access’ (p.18) negatively impacts their mental health that contributes to the Black awarding gap.

To Be Right. I Mean White…

Black excellence maintains the myth of Black inferiority as ‘excellence’ is defined by the extent to which Black students can gain admission into, and successfully navigate the white, middle-class space of Cambridge. In October 2022, Homerton college in partnership with the ACS ran the first ever university-wide Black history month formal in the history of the 800-year-old university. The evening was framed by a keynote speech by civil rights activist Al Sharpton, which we eagerly listened to as we drank our fancy drinks and wore our gowns. As we gulped our drinks, one statement took us by surprise: ‘From the streets to the suites!’ Al-Shaperton exclaimed. Our entry into Cambridge had made us socially mobile. The ‘badge of approval’ we wore by virtue of our acceptance into the university, was a ‘golden ticket’ out of the black ‘ghetto streets’ and into the white middle class ‘suite’ (Anderson, 2015). We were called ‘Black excellence’ so often over the course of the evening I lost count. Successful Black people such as Dianne Abbot MP made speeches throughout the evening which continued to call us Black excellence. They knew nothing about us except that we were Black, and we were at Cambridge. Our ability to get into Cambridge had made our Blackness excellent. Steve Biko argues that the ‘Blacks who are a danger to the community’ are those that have their egos boosted by ‘drink[ing] tea, wine or beer with whites who seem to treat them as equals’ (Biko, 1987) Whilst, there were no white people at the Black History Month formal (except those that served us), we were celebrating our presence in a historically white university and were called excellent because of this. We were made to feel superior to other Black people who were unable to gain entrance into these white spaces and gain the badge of approval.

Black Excellence does not challenge the myth of Black inferiority because it maintains hierarchy between Black people – those that are deemed ‘excellent’ by white supremacist standards and those that are not. Black people still measure themselves with the ‘tape of a world’ that looks on in amused contempt’ (Du Bois, 1901). For this reason, Fanon argued the Talented Tenth cannot challenge the myth of Black inferiority, as they are deemed ‘talented’ by the standards defined by white supremacist society that will always define Black people as inferior. Fanon regards the ‘Talented Tenth’ as those that become the ‘native bourgeoisie.’ This group of people are enlisted by the colonists to maintain the colonial system of domination. The native bourgeoisie profits from colonial exploitation, and so have a vested interest in maintaining the colonial power relations which gives them social and economic capital. The native bourgeoisie are educated in the ‘mother country’ and learn to assimilate into white society. They see themselves as superior to the natives. This enables them to identify with the white colonisers more than their own people who they help to oppress. Fanon himself was educated in France, and so was part of the native bourgeoisie. He describes this experience as causing a genetic mutation in the native, as they become whiter through learning the language, culture, and education of the colonist. Fanon rejects assimilation when he realises that it is futile in attaining equality. His Blackness will always be seen, and so, the myth of Black inferiority will continue until decolonisation destroys racial hierarchy.

Whilst Du Bois claims that an equal education to white people, will liberate black people, Fanon (1952) argues that this white education will continue to teach Black people that they are inferior, and white people are superior. Through the years Cambridge has helped to educate colonists, slavers and native bourgeoisie who would go back to the colonies trained to maintain the colonial system of domination. This has led to a Eurocentric curriculum in the present which treats white people as the producers of knowledge and Black people as the subjects of study, that need to be known to be controlled. The omission of Black people in the curriculum makes it seem like we cannot produce knowledge, and this is the domain of white people. In the History of Political Thought c.1700 to c.1890 paper there is not one thinker of colour, let alone one Black person. Instead, Black students journey through a perilous sea of white thinkers. The white supremacist beliefs of these political thinkers are not regarded as relevant in the assessment of their political ideas, and the foundations of modern politics. The confines of the question are drawn in which the inclusion of their white supremacy as context can only be mentioned in passing without becoming irrelevant, and to avoid penalisation. Thus, Black students are encouraged to regurgitate the politics of those who believed they were inferior to succeed in their exams and get the Cambridge degree ‘badge of approval.’ Black students are forced to consume the myth of Black inferiority and are told that this is what a ‘world-leading’ education looks like.

Bridging the Black Awarding Gap

The ability to assimilate into whiteness disadvantages Black students. This white curriculum is disproportionately failing Black students as shown by the Black awarding gap in the university, in which Black students are less likely to get a 2:1 or 1st in their degree than their white counterparts despite entering university with the same A Level grades. This has a knock-on-effect on the Black students who choose to go onto postgraduate study, and those that decide to become academics. This chronic lack of Black academics has been defined as a ‘crisis’ (Andrews, 2015) ofUK higher education because it retains the notion that white people are the producers of knowledge. This in turn, helps to maintain the white canon. Black academics are encouraged to assimilate into the white university knowledge making space to succeed. Ahmed (2012) argues that Black academics must adopt the dominant white supremacist logics of the institution, which she regards as ‘institutional passing.’ Thus, like the ‘excellent’ Black students, Black academics are accepted into the university once they consume the white regime of truth: that white people and their knowledge are superior. As a form of assimilation, ‘institutional passing’ serves to maintain the myth of Black inferiority.

The Black Awarding Gaps and Decolonisation conference (2023) stimulated important conversations between staff and students across the university. The Pro-Vice Chancellor for Education defined the agenda for the post-Forum de-brief meeting as: ‘How to create and implement effective inclusivity and diversity policies at the University of Cambridge.’ The focus of ‘effective inclusivity and diversity’ demonstrates the myopic focus of the university, which is unable to see (or chooses not to see) the extent of the problem. The Black awarding gap will not be fixed by the ‘effective inclusion’ of Black students into the university as long as the university remains a white supremacist knowledge making production entangled in colonialism past and present. The fact that student-led, evidence-based research is not listened to indicates that the university as an academic institution is not committed to challenging the myth of Black inferiority. Rather the university is more committed to upholding face as a world-leading academic institution free from racial disparities. But to do so, the university needs to work to change structures, such as the curriculum, and sources of funding, that maintain the myth of Black inferiority-white-superiority that causes real life violence upon racialised bodies. Until then, Black students at Cambridge enlarge will not reach their full potential, and as an academic institution, the University of Cambridge, should not be regarded world leading.

In conclusion, whilst it seems as though Cambridge challenges the myth of Black inferiority by demonstrating that Black people are ‘excellent’, this ‘badge of approval’ maintains that Black inferiority is the norm. Secondly, ‘excellence’ is defined as a Black person’s ability to assimilate into a white space and adopt its regime of truth: black-inferiority-white-superiority. This leads to differential outcomes between Black and white students which means that even ‘excellent’ Black students are made to be intellectually inferior to their white counterparts.

I wish I could end this essay by saying: ‘And so, I’m taking my badge off.’ But ultimately that would be a lie. The competition reward is £1,000 *and* veneration. To have my thoughts acknowledged by a panel of Cambridge academics as valuable, is more proof to shield me against the myth of Black inferiority. The badge stays firmly in place.

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