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*“I FELT DEAD”: Applying a racial microaggressions framework to Black students’ experiences of Black History Month and Black History*

**Abstract**

This paper uses a Critical Race Theory perspective to explain the everyday racisms – racial microaggressions – directed towards students of African and Caribbean descent during a non-statutory Black History unit, at an English secondary school. Applying the racial microaggressions framework provided by Huber and Solórzano (2015) to ethnographic data, this paper finds that experiences of studying Black History by students of African and Caribbean descent are dominated by various types of racial microaggressions including: micro-invalidating, micro-insults, and micro-assaults (Sue et al. 2007). These experiences are symptomatic of wider racist structures and processes *within* the National Curriculum for History, based upon the ideology of White supremacy. This paper concludes that the racial microaggressions framework allows for useful ways of thinking about the function and purpose of Black History Month and Black History in schools, and its opportunities for exposing wider institutional and ideological underpinnings that legitimate deficit understandings about Black people in school classrooms.

**Keywords**

Racial microaggressions; Critical Race Theory (CRT); Black History Month (BHM); Black History; History curriculum; White supremacy

**Introduction**

The underachievement and negative experience of schooling by Black students is complex, multi-faceted and continues to dominate their trajectory in the English education system. Statistical data published by the Department for Education (2017) continues to support the trend within policy discourse, of the educational attainment of Black children, being synonymous with underachievement. Anti-racist scholars have identified a number of factors that could explain this entrenched pattern of underachievement, such as Black students being culturally pathologised: referred to in terms of a deficit where underachievement is the result of external factors such as

‘broken homes’, low intelligence, anti-school sub-cultures, and Black boys in particular, possessing a proclivity for gang-related violence (see Alexander 1996; Bhattacharyya et al. 2003; Gillborn 1990; Mac and Ghail 1988; Sewell 1997; Shain 2013). Research into other factors for underachievement has highlighted various acts of racism – direct and indirect – in the delivery of schooling through teachers’ assumptions, assessments and behaviour management decisions (see Blair et al. 1998; Dei 1999; Gill, Mayor and Blair 1992; Gillborn 1995; Gillborn and Mirza 2000). These factors have a cumulative and devastating impact on Black students’ experiences of self, and experience of schooling (see Osborne 2001; Graham and Robinson 2004; Blair 2001; Gosai 2009).

In this paper, I apply a racial microaggressions framework to ethnographic data obtained during Black History lessons, at a state-maintained school in the North of England. The racial microaggressions framework outlined by Huber and Solórzano (2015) has 3 components: at the centre is the racial microaggression (what happened in the classroom); directly surrounding this is institutional racism and this is characterised by structural inequalities in policies and procedures, in this case, schooling and the KS3 History curriculum<sup>1</sup>. Outside of the institutional setting is the macro level characterised by ideology: White supremacy. Each component of the model is causally dependent on each other and therefore, White supremacy informs institutional racism and in turn, this legitimates racial microaggressions that occur in the classroom. The framework reveals that curricular decisions and classroom practices for Black History have a White supremacist root, which continues to marginalise and have racist consequences for, students of African and Caribbean descent.

White supremacy is used here to refer to “a political system, a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties” that privilege those who identify as White (Mills 1997, 3). Therefore, this paper offers a fresh insight into an ‘old’ problem of racism in schools

and from a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective supports and extends the antiracist debate on the British education system<sup>ii</sup> being institutionally racist, by illustrating that everyday racisms in the classroom – microaggressions – do not occur in a politically unbiased vacuum (Grosvenor 1997). Indeed, “schools play a key role in the production and reproduction of power and social inequality” and Black students continue to bear its brunt as this power and social inequality is also *racialised* (Graham and Robinson 2004, 655). Thus, in order to understand *racialised* inequalities in education it is important to centre analysis on those the topic of Black History purports to represent - African and Caribbean students - in an effort to illuminate racist practices that legitimate their marginalisation.

This paper is divided into four parts; firstly, provide context to Black History in English schools through academic studies that have explored Black students’ negative experiences; secondly, outlining the key changes to the History curriculum at KS3 under the Conservative-led Coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, (2010-2015), which centred on developing a History curriculum that reflects an ostensibly socially cohesive British identity and understanding of Fundamental British Values (FBV). Thirdly, I will expand on the purpose of Black History Month from its foundations in the US to its institutionalisation in English secondary schools. Lastly, I explore the usefulness of utilising a CRT perspective to the racial microaggressions framework and, apply the racial microaggressions framework to ethnographic data at a state-maintained secondary school in the North of England. The findings shed light on how racial microaggressions directed towards students of African and Caribbean descent can be read through a wider institutional and ideological lens that legitimate these racist acts to occur in the classroom.

## **Academic studies on Black students' experiences studying history in English schools**

Academic studies have been consistent in revealing Black students' negative experiences of studying History in England. In the UK, there is a lack of research about Black History in schools; though where researchers have explored this, the data is often small-scale, focuses on history more broadly or subsumes Black experiences under minority ethnic. For example, Siblon's research in Northamptonshire (2005) found that 74% of schools across primary and secondary sectors do not, or rarely teach Black British history. Schools that rarely do so, reduced the topic to token American figures such as Martin Luther King and the rationale for this was because 80% of teachers across both sectors described themselves as having limited or no knowledge of Black British history. Teachers' demographics from the Department for Education could explain the lack of knowledge teachers have with teaching Black British history. Statistics show that teachers in state-maintained schools, who self-identify as White British, comprised of 88% in 2013 and 87.5% in 2014. This does not include those groups self-identifying as 'Other White Background' (3.6%) or White-Irish (1.7%) (DfE, July 2015). This is significant because a largely White teaching cohort are consciously or unconsciously contributing to the racial achievement gap through their teaching practices and, are unable to understand how this is possible (Taylor 2009, 9). The reliance upon American Black history reflects a lack of professional development for teaching diverse *British* histories, a 'poverty of knowledge' about teaching Black children (Maylor, 2014) and an attempt to position "black and minority ethnic and religious communities at the margins of the nation rather than as an integral part of 'our island story'" (Alexander and Weekes-Bernard, 2017, 5).

Grever, Haydn and Ribbens's (2008) comparative study between England and the Netherlands found that *ethnic minority* students had a different experience of History taught in schools compared to their White counterparts. Fewer than 50 per cent agreed that 'a common history creates mutual bonds' and this fell to 36.4 per cent for ethnic

minority students (2008,10). Rather, these students wanted to see an ‘objective’ view of a nation’s past. This supports Harris and Reynolds’s findings that ethnic minority students did not have a *personal* connection to the historical narratives taught in classrooms and instead wanted, “to be taught a more diverse past both in terms of geographical spread, types of history and historical perspectives” (2014, 484). Harris found that schools often focus the teaching of History on cultivating “collective memory: what is good about Britain, its history and contributions to the world” (cited in Harris and Reynolds 2014, 466) and this simplistic view of the past alienated Black children as the focus on ‘their’ homogenised history was based upon struggle and inequality (468). Research by Whitburn and Yemoh, revealed the consequence of focusing on Black history heroes, relegated its place to Black History Month. This is unhistorical rather than socially cohesive. Instead, deeper integration into the mainstream history curriculum was desired by Black students and within this, ‘positive aspects of change’ rather than victimhood was important (2012, 22).

Alienation and disconnection with History was a similar theme highlighted in Hawkey and Prior’s research (2011). In a study about perspectives of History amongst minority students, they found that Black students were dissatisfied with the disproportionate focus on slavery and that this was at odds with the history they were taught elsewhere. At present, Traille (2006) has specifically focused on African-Caribbean students and their mother’s experiences of History and found that schools’ focus on slavery was alienating Black children and conflating Black History with victimhood. The study also highlighted the paradox of teaching diversity: where teachers felt they were demonstrating ‘inclusivity’ and ‘diversity’, they interpreted this to mean having Black History *in the first place*, rarely considering the implications of the substantive content or the impact it had on Black students. The content however, lacked relevance to Black students and instead they wanted to see more positive recognition of their histories within the narrative of Britishness. However, research shows that teachers often express a lack of time and resources for not exploring Black histories besides slavery and Civil Rights (Bracey 2016). The

result of this is, the Whiteness-as-usual history curriculum remains overwhelmingly White and exclusive, and Black histories are assumed to have no influence pre-1945.

These important works shed light upon how contradictory the History curriculum is in being socially cohesive and reflective of the multicultural nature of British society; however, there remains a gap in literature expanding the lens of analysis outwards from individual schools or teachers, to identifying a congruent link between pedagogical approaches for engaging with Black History and wider macro processes mediating and legitimating what happens in the classroom. In so doing, it is possible to move away from individualising Black students' negative experiences studying history, to particular 'bad' schools or particular teachers who are 'bad apples'. Rather, a broader field of analysis seeks to identify the 'permanence of racism' well beyond classroom walls to wider institutional and ideological underpinnings that continues to view the Black student and thus, their history, as deficient (Bell 1992).

Put simply, portraying Black History as homogenous and defaulting its study to slavery and US Civil Rights should not be assumed as the fault of individual schools: either through lack of time or knowledge. Rather, these conceptualisations of Black History mirror a much larger, structural and ideological racism that legitimise these parochial decisions – a lack of commitment at national policy level to support teachers in embedding more British histories leading to an overreliance on the victim-centred narrative for Black History – and negative manifestations in the classroom characterised by what I argue, are racial microaggressions. Judge Robert Carter (1988) argues that we must look at the 'disease' (the ideology of White supremacy), which legitimises the 'symptoms': parochial approaches towards Black History and racial microaggressions. Only by illuminating racist practices broader than those that happen in the classroom, can we expand anti-racist scholarship on racism in schools and work towards improving the experiences of minority children.

Using CRT to theorise my analysis of racial microaggressions, I am guided by the following assumptions: firstly, racism, rather than being the conscious ignorance of a

few fringe groups, is a normal and endemic feature of society (Delgado 1995). Therefore, racism constitutes the very structures and institutions that make up British society, intersecting other forms of subordination such as gender, sexuality and class discrimination (Brah and Phoenix 2004). Secondly, the normalisation of racism in education continues to have a negative effect on the educational attainment and experience of Black students in English schools. Gillborn (1995) has shown that the promotion of seemingly value-free attributes of schooling including: equal opportunities, colour-blind policies and meritocracy, is fraught with racialised outcomes for ethnic minority students. Put simply, these attributes continue to entrench their marginalisation. Thirdly, interest convergence is the principle that the pursuit of equal opportunities for Black students will be permitted only *so long as* white interests can also be accommodated in some way from this pursuit. In education, a CRT perspective would argue schools' overreliance on slavery and Civil Rights is evidence of interest convergence because the narrative can more heavily include White complicity in *abolishing* slavery and promoting equality, rather than White enrichment from enslavement. Lastly, the most effective way of exploring racialised inequalities and practices that entrench the marginalisation of Black students is by centring the analysis on those students. A CRT perspective recognises that privileging the analysis on Black students experiences of education is equally valid and should be equally included in 'race' research.



### **The Key Stage 3 History Curriculum: Re-imagining ‘Britishness’ and the State’s version of social cohesion from 2010 to the present day**

Changes to the History curriculum at Key Stage 3 took place under the Conservative-led, coalition government with the Liberal Democrats (2010-2015) (Department for Education, 2013). History was seen as a key site of reaffirming a British identity and displaying national pride (Alexander and Weekes-Bernard 2017). Black History’s statutory inclusion in the National Curriculum was only made compulsory in 2008 but it was removed during revisions made to the KS3 History curriculum by (Conservative) Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove MP. Joining with pro-Empire Historian, Niall Ferguson (2004), the Key Stage 3 History curriculum was amended in 2013 to reflect ‘our’ island story for students who started school in September 2014. This change was also supplemented by a statutory focus on Fundamental British Values defined as: “[actively promoting] fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs” (Department for Education 2014).

Gove argued these revisions would cultivate greater social cohesion, as all students would relate to each other by sharing a common ‘British identity’. However, important work by Alexander, Chatterji & Weekes-Bernard (2012) has shown that the Key Stage 3 History curriculum promotes an exclusivist version of British history, culture and identity in which Anglocentric narratives are centred and prioritised as the only version of British history students are required to know and learn. This invariably excludes the ever-diverse nature of British histories, which cannot be pulled apart from each other in a way Michael Gove would assume, was possible. The shift also raises troubling questions for the promotion of social cohesion and equality if ethnic minorities can be so easily disinherited from Britain’s past.

The Key Stage 3 History curriculum represents the most explicit demonstration of a curriculum that privileges Whites: that is, its mono-cultural construction creates British subjects who are White and therefore, makes the successes, achievements and

conquests in history, White. Thus, Whiteness becomes the marker by which a British identity is judged and ostensibly equally shared. Osler (2009) suggests the traditional approach to teaching History portrays the British narrative as singular and unproblematic rather than multivocal and complex. Black History however, is placed outside this marker and thus, conceptualised in one of two ways:

1. In opposition to Whiteness: either to be compared to ‘White’ advancement (for example, studying Enlightenment in Europe and Britain with links to “key thinkers and scientists”) or in conflict with ‘White’ history (for example, decolonisation);
2. Celebratory and congratulatory: an addendum to the broader Whiteness-as-usual context and narrative (as with the role of Black and Asian soldiers in both World Wars), to celebrate the end of racism (for example, around slavery and abolition) and the success of multiculturalism (Civil Rights in America) (Doharty 2015, 2).

In the revised KS3 History curriculum, Black histories could, in theory, be explored at any point along its chronology as Fryer (1984) has shown the presence of Black peoples in Britain for thousands of years. This exclusivist approach to the History curriculum at KS3 remains unchanged by Gove’s successors, Nicola Morgan and Justine Greening under a majority Conservative government since 2015. This demonstrates the Conservative government’s commitment to an insular and assimilationist narrative of Britishness. Black History’s institutionalisation into the National Curriculum has a long and troubled history and it is to a brief historical context that I now turn.

## **Black History: historical context and institutionalisation**

This section will briefly outline the inception and institutionalisation of Black History Month (BHM) in the USA and UK exploring the following areas: its emergence, its intended purpose and relationship to the English National Curriculum. The section will end by explaining why the historical overview is important for understanding how BHM is approached today and some of the key problems with it.

### *Black History Month in the United States*

Dr Carter G. Woodson, an African American historian, founded what started as a weeklong series of events, “Negro History Week”, marking the achievements and contributions of African-Americans in the United States in 1926. These events are observed during the month of February, which coincides with the birthdays of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. In 1976, “Negro History Week” became Black History Month and has been criticised increasingly over the years due to its lack of focus on its initial purpose. Asante provides the clearest explanation of BHM’s core essence, “Afrocentric perspectives should question the imposition of the White supremacist view as universal and/or classical; demonstrates the indefensibility of racist theories that assault multiculturalism and pluralism; projects a humanistic and pluralistic viewpoint by articulating Afrocentricity as a valid, non-hegemonic perspective” (1991, 173). In this way, Black people are able to understand where they ‘fit’ within a globalised world and develop self-esteem and motivation to pursue their own interests rather than internalise racist stereotypes about ‘Blackness’ and the African diaspora. A series of events resulting from a deficit understanding of where a Black person ‘fits’ in Britain resulted in Black History being founded in the United Kingdom a decade later.

### *Black History Month in the United Kingdom*

In the UK, Akyaaba Addai-Sebo is recognised as the key individual that developed BHM in the United Kingdom (UK). In July-August 1987, an African Jubilee Year Declaration was sent to all London boroughs and across the country, to formalise October as BHM in the UK. October was chosen because of its significance in

African traditions: of harvest, tolerance and reconciliation (Every Generation Media 2013). Although it is unclear how many boroughs signed the declaration, those that did demonstrated recognition of

The contribution of Africans to the economic, cultural and political life of London and the UK...and it called on the boroughs to recognise this fact and take their duties as enjoined by the Race Relations Act very seriously and also to intensify their support against apartheid...to do everything within their powers to ensure that black children growing up here in the UK did not lose the fact of the genius of their African-ness (Every Generation Media 2013).

BHM began officially from 1987, but it has a much longer history dating back to the 1960s. Black History Month's relationship to the National Curriculum was borne out of competing and contested struggles over its intended purpose and function between Black parents and central government. For Black parents, Black History Month and the inclusion of diverse narratives was about countering a White racist system that portrayed Black people as politically, economically and socially redundant by failing to recognise at all, their contributions accurately in school textbooks. For central government, Black students' poor attainment was indication that Black students suffered low self-esteem and thus, Black History could be integrated in schools with higher levels of Black children, whilst also improving race relations between Black and White peers (Stone 1981; Warmington 2014; Doharty 2017).

Schools have often engaged with Black History without assessing the substantive content; therefore they have often been accused of tokenism: a 'saris, samosas and steelpans' version of multiculturalism (Troyna 1984). In light of this, what is less understood is how these narrow conceptualisations of Black History are grounded in wider anti-Blackness resulting in negative experiences by Black students, and the overall impact this has on teaching a History curriculum that is socially cohesive and accurately reflective of Britain's ethnically diverse past. I turn now to racial microaggressions from a CRT perspective to frame this understanding.

## **A Critical Race Theory approach to racial microaggressions**

During the 1970s, Dr Chester M. Pierce, an African-American psychiatrist, developed the concept of subtle, stunning and repetitive forms of racism having both physiological and psychological effects on recipients of these acts: microaggressions. His analysis of microaggressions became more nuanced during the 1980s where the concept was applied to the African-American experiences in psychiatry and the concept 'racial microaggressions' was created (Huber and Solórzano 2015). Pierce defined racial microaggressions as

Subtle, innocuous, preconscious, or unconscious degradations, and putdowns, often kinetic but capable of being verbal and/or kinetic. In and of itself a microaggression may seem harmless, but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence (Pierce 1995, 281).

Sue et al. (2007) provides a comprehensive continuation of Pierce's work on racial microaggressions. Developing further nuances to racialised inequalities, Sue et al. created taxonomies of racial microaggressions widely cited in psychology, in order to demonstrate the pervasiveness of their acts and the multiple ways in which racism maintains a pernicious energy by not only exercising its repressive power at the conscious or overt level of interaction. It is shown that such microaggressions are not homogenous, but manifest in many ways. This paper focuses on three racial microaggressions: micro-invalidating; micro-insults and micro-assaults.

Applying a Critical Race analysis to frame racial microaggressions, provides a theoretically informed understanding of racism in education and helps to illuminate racist practices that marginalise people of colour. In this paper, CRT centres racial microaggressions directed towards students of African and Caribbean descent and links these microaggressions to wider institutional and ideological processes which legitimate these acts to occur in the classroom. CRT provides the lens with which to explore how *and* why schools engage with Black History in particular parochial ways

and who this benefits and, illuminate the ways in which Black students may experience History negatively. Critical Race Theory recognises racism encompasses many areas – visible and hidden – which makes its effects particularly perilous. Occupying at least four dimensions, racism has “a micro and a macro component, institutional and individual forms, conscious and unconscious elements and a cumulative impact on both the individual and group” (Solózano 1997, 6). Therefore, racial microaggressions are a symptom of a much larger racist project that exists *outside* of the classroom too.

A racial microaggressions framework is useful in exposing direct and indirect marginality within schools and the KS3 History curriculum, that have inherently devastating consequences for students of colour. These effects are psychologically draining and a source of frustration, anger and feelings of alienation amongst persons of African and Caribbean descent (Pierce 1995). Identifying racist practices and centring the analysis on those harmed by direct and indirect marginality from a Critical Race perspective, also expands anti-racist scholarship on Black experiences on schooling.

In this paper, the examples are a single case study of ethnographic material collected in a field-note journal, from September 2014 to November 2014, when the school covered the topic of ‘Black History’ for Year 8s<sup>iii</sup> in order to coincide with Black History Month. This state-maintained school in the North of England has a majority South Asian cohort recruiting students from the local working-class neighbourhoods, this school has a large proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language and above-average recipients of pupil premium<sup>iv</sup>. Although the examples used are based on interactions with their primary history teacher, Kevin, who taught their classes four times per week, I expand the analysis to reveal the paradox of assuming Kevin is an individual racist teachers operating in a seemingly non-racist institution. There were two history classes referred to in the examples as Class 1 and Class 2. In Class 1, there was 1 African boy, 1 Caribbean boy and 1 dual heritage girl with a Caribbean parent. Class 2 had 1 Caribbean boy, 2 Caribbean girls and 1 dual

heritage girl with a Caribbean parent. The topic for BH was inherited from previous teachers before I arrived thus, lessons focused on the following areas: African enslavement; the journey and conditions aboard the Middle Passage; plantation life; British abolition and key (White) abolitionists. There were three History teachers: Kevin, a White English male who had been teaching at the school for a number of years, Joanna a White Scottish female who was relatively new to teaching and Anne, a trainee teacher who was Jewish and had Kevin as her mentor whilst on placement at the school. They all followed Kevin's lead as he was the primary history teacher and subject specialist.

My research in the school was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the current institutional pedagogies for teaching BHM and BH in secondary schools?
2. How do pupils of African and Caribbean descent experience BHM and BH and Black History?

### **Applying the racial microaggressions framework**

The racial microaggressions that follow have been broken down using Sue et al.'s taxonomy of microaggressions that take account of the varied nature of such interactions (2007). Sue et al. (2007) explain that microaggressions manifest in many forms, but the three I will focus on are micro-invalidating, micro-insult and micro-assault. I then draw the links between institutional racism and macro racism, theorising this analysis using CRT.

### **MICROAGGRESSION**

According to Huber and Solórzano,

Microaggressions allow us to 'see' those tangible ways racism emerges in everyday interactions. At the same time, they have a purpose. For instance, whether conscious or not, microaggressions perpetuate a larger system of racism. Microaggressions are the layered, cumulative and often subtle and unconscious

forms of racism that target People of Color. They are the everyday reflections of larger racist structures and ideological beliefs that impact People of Color's lives (2015, 6).

### *Micro-invalidations*

Micro-invalidations are characterised by “communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color” (Sue et al. 2007, 274).

#### Key of abbreviations used

SS – Student (Where I was unable to see who asked a question)

BCB – Black Caribbean boy

BCG – Black Caribbean girl

BAB – Black African boy

BAG – Black African girl

### **Class 1 example – The lesson covered the experience of enslaved Africans onboard ships crossing the Middle Passage and was based upon cultivating empathy.**

Writing task individually – How would you feel in a ship on the Middle Passage?

Mohit (Asian boy): “I would want to kill some people.”

Kevin: “Wow such extreme anger!”

Mohit (Asian boy): “Then go to my mum and cry like a baby.”

Khaled (another Asian boy) chosen speaks of being uncomfortable, in pain and lonely.

Aaliyah (Asian girl): “Terrified, not knowing where going.”

She speaks of problems not knowing the English language.

Kevin: “I don't know if anyone speaks an African language but it is nothing like English.”

David (BAB): “I do.”

Kevin: “Go on then.”

David speaks in his tongue

Kevin: “What did you say?”

David: “Hello, how are you?”

Kevin: “See, did anyone understand that?”

CLASS (in unison): “NO!”

In this example, language is used to create a White/Black (civilised/uncivilised)



binary. With a majority South Asian cohort, it is no surprise they would not understand David's language, but the exclusionary intention although unconscious, is much more severe than that. Colonisation involved the suppression of indigenous languages, in favour of the coloniser's language, in this case, English. English is assumed to be the culturally superior language in which we must all speak if we are to be understood; to speak in one's own tongue is to step back into primitivity. Feagin applies his analysis of mocking non-English languages to Asian-Americans, but it is applicable to Black communities, too. He argues that language mocking informs the contemporary framing of the immigrant who is unable fully to assimilate to the dominant English language and Anglocentric cultural traditions (2010). The expression by Kevin that the language is 'nothing like English' is a subtle insistence for non-English speakers, to accept and conform to the racial frame and hierarchy, and not threaten the non-reciprocal process of assimilation, by unquestioningly adopting White English norms and traditions.

### *Micro-insults*

A micro-insult is characterised by "communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity. Microinsults represent subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient of color" (Sue et al. 2007, 274).

**Class 2 example – The lesson was based upon performing life on a plantation so that students could gain a fuller picture of life on a plantation and also, as Kevin explained, bring out the talents of other students who less able to express themselves academically.**

Lesson task: A drama performance of Plantation Life

They're asked to get into 6 (3 groups of 6) and assign themselves a role:

- 1) Plantation owner
- 2) Slaves (domestic and in the fields)
- 3) Overseerer

Kevin: "Think how you're going to portray life on a plantation. We're going to be

dead sneaky at the end; we're gonna film it."

Class: "Noooo sir!"

Kaleem (Asian boy): "Can I film it?"

Kevin: "No. Someone who knows how to film it, you can't cos you're in it!"

Anne (trainee teacher) stops the class and says for students to research the following about slaves:

Punishment:

-What were they punished for?

-How were they punished?

Social Life:

- Were they allowed to practice their African culture?

- Did they have a social life? What was their work/life like? (Living conditions; families live together; do for leisure)

Shona (BCG) walks in from another class elsewhere (music), she joins a group and Kevin approaches and says she's been assigned a "slave" role, "congratulations" he says, "you weren't here to fight your corner so all these got the good jobs" (he points to other group members).

Critical Race scholar, Patricia Williams's concept of 'spirit murder' is useful for analysing how this example reflects wider anti-Black racism (1987). In this example, he snubs Shona because of her lateness by congratulating her for being assigned the 'slave' role, as she was not there to negotiate for better. I argue this interaction directed towards Shona, but also the wider focus by Anne, too, on the *conditions* of Black lives during enslavement, indicate a spirit murder for Black students in the class. A spirit murder is defined as a manifestation of racism – disregard shown to those whose quality of life depends on our regard – wherein "its product is a system of formalized distortions of thought. It produces social structures centered around fear and hate" (1987, 151). However, his demeaning comments and Anne's focus on negative portrayals of Blackness are more than just teachers' misguided comments and approaches; they indicate the permanence – and ubiquity – of wider, anti-Black racism and the unchallenged freedom in which they can embody and reflect patterns of social power. Essed's (1991) concept of 'everyday racism' is useful as it includes recognition of the micro and the structural-ideological reproduction of racism, which is something I explore later.

### *Micro-assaults*

A micro-assault is “an explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions” (Sue et al. 2007, 274).

**(Class 1) example – The lesson covered performing a slave auction in order to cultivate empathy and social cohesion in the class; to appreciate the humanity of fellow human beings and to learn first hand, how enslaved Africans were traded.**

Lesson task: selling slaves in an auction

SS use small cards to read out who they are i.e. “Strong man”, “Spent all my life in the village”, “Good worker”, “Helped mother in a hut”.

Kevin made these resources after he felt the auction from other class, didn’t go as well as students didn’t know what to say about Black slaves

**CLASS ERUPTS WITH OFFERS**

This time, students who “bought” a slave, walk up to the front of the class to collect their property.

Kevin asks: “what do you buy when you go shopping?”

Class: “Clothes” “Food” “Shoes”

Kevin: “How do you feel?”

Class: “Good” “Excited”

Class proceeds with another slave who may be ‘more’ or ‘less’ useful to the slave owner.

For the last slave, Kevin explains to the slave trader (auctioneer) that the last one would be in the worst condition like a “rag-end vegetable at a supermarket at the end of the day”.

Kevin asks slaves (students) how they felt

David (BAB): “I FELT DEAD.”

Bushra (Asian girl): “Not a human.”

Keisha (dual heritage): “Not normal because you don’t buy people.”

Nasir (Asian boy): “I felt that no one wanted me because I wasn’t strong or human.”

Aaron (BCB): “I felt like my identity was stolen from me. Who you are and people have taken it away and made you someone else...that you don’t want.”

Peter: “I felt used; they used me to make money.”

Students enquire whether they would see their families again and teacher explains very rarely or if they went to church and by happenstance, saw their relatives.

Aaliyah (Asian girl): “Oh, that’s nice then.”

Homework: Write an account of the auction OR draw a poster advertising the auction.

Aaliyah (Asian girl): “The men who bought the slaves, were they all White?”

Kevin: “Yes, no Black person owned a plantation”

An Asian boy whispers “racism”

Aaron (BCB) saying it twice: “Racist! Racist!” (Quietly...)

Kevin: “Or they might be from Brazil in which case we’d say they had a very good suntan.”

Aaliyah (Asian girl): “Were the slave owners male or female?”

Kevin: “Property always belonged to the man.”

Class: “Why?”

Kevin: “Because in those days, men owned property and women didn’t.”

Aaron (BCB): “Sexist!” (calling out)

Kevin: “Ok, ok, right, homework...”(he explains the homework again).

Blackness has been the negative counterweight to the positivity of Whiteness. The stereotype of Black people reflects White racial ideology of White superiority and Black inferiority – a product of White supremacy. Although the analysis is applied to the US context, I concur with critical legal/race scholar, Harris’s analysis that Blackness is central to

White supremacy...Black people embody the nigger...a creature at the border of the human and the bestial, a being whose human form only calls attention to its subhuman nature. To be a nigger is to have no agency, no dignity, no individuality, and no moral worth; it is to be worthy of nothing but contempt...Blackness is the worst kind of non-Whiteness (Espinoza and Harris 2000, 443).

In this example, which involved performing Black victimhood and White superiority, stereotypical traits of the downtrodden savage, keeps the image of the nigger alive

A source of contempt mixed with anxiety, shame, and self-hatred for Blacks. The image of the nigger keeps individual racism alive, providing a powerful emotional engine for the institutions of White supremacy, from individual unconscious racism to notions of “merit” based on contrast with the nigger (Espinoza and Harris 2000, 443).

In reinforcing the stereotype of the despised and pitiful Black slave, the example reveals the “close relationship between the stereotypes and the prevailing images of marginalized people” (Crenshaw 2009, 242). Kevin uses his White racial knowledge

of the Black other, to consciously or unconsciously, inform his choice of words for the slave auctions. They were based on stereotypes of the slaves' intellectual and physical characteristics and all humanity is removed from the "rag end" slave. This is evidenced by students' claims they did not feel human and lacked an identity. In using a slave trade re-enactment to convey White superiority and Black inferiority, Kevin is justifying pitying and resenting the Black image for not being valuable enough; for being the lowest form of humanity and for not being like Whites. Its positive counterweight, Whiteness, is stereotyped as aspirational because as Kevin explained, Whites owned people and property, and possessed the power to place a value on a person. He does not challenge this when Aaron (BCB) suggests this is the result of racism and sexism.

Although the image of Black people changes depending on the historical, political and cultural context, all three examples of racial microaggressions converge in demonstrating that a deficit-informed image of Black people is never far from the pseudo-scientific tropes of intellectual inferiority and physical superiority. Analysing these comments from a CRT perspective, not only are these comments dehumanising to students of African and Caribbean descent – during a unit ostensibly exploring 'their' history - but these microaggressions should not be treated as isolated incidents from a racist teacher; these manifestations of racial microaggressions are *endemic* rather than marginal and are legitimated by wider, institutional structures and processes that assume and entrench deficit ideas about Black people. It is to institutional racism that I now turn.

### **INSTITUTIONAL RACISM**

According to Huber and Solórzano, "institutional racism can be understood as formal or informal structural mechanisms, such as policies and processes that systematically subordinate, marginalize, and exclude non-dominant groups and mediates their experiences with racial microaggressions" (2015, 7). Using their framework to understand how microaggressions dominate the experiences of African and Caribbean

studying Black History, it is important to locate racial microaggressions within their wider context. These acts are not just isolated incidents, but reflect systemic racism.

The Key Stage 3 History curriculum has been characterised by Ball as ‘cultural restorationism’ – a curriculum based on traditional subjects, canonical knowledge and a celebration of all things English; a curriculum of facts, lists and eternal certainties” (2013, 19). The non-statutory nature of Black History means that schools can choose whether or not to engage with diverse histories and from a CRT perspective, this is not without intention: the larger racist project characterised by the preservation and proliferation of White supremacy, supports Gillborn’s assertion that,

The evidence suggests that, despite a rhetoric of standards for all, education policy in England is actively involved in the defence, legitimation and extension of white supremacy. The assumptions which feed, and are strengthened by, this regime are not overtly discriminatory but their effects are empirically verifiable and materially real in every meaningful sense. Shaped by long established cultural, economic and historical structures of racial domination, the continued promotion of policies and practices that are known to be racially divisive testifies to tacit intentionality in the system. The racist outcomes of contemporary policy may not be coldly calculated but they are far from accidental (2005, 499).

White racial domination is preserved and proliferated through the curriculum. Ladson-Billings suggests the curriculum is a "culturally specific artefact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script" (2009, 29). This means that whilst the rhetoric is that all students should learn ‘our’ history, only White identities and cultures are prioritised as ethnic minority children are disinherited from Britain’s past. Therefore, racist sentiments are deeply embedded in the meaning structure of the History curriculum and this is demonstrated in what is valued as knowledge; whose history is defined as British; and who will be privileged as a result of this type of ‘island story’. The statutory drive to embed Fundamental British Values and ‘our’ island story are laden with White privilege and as such, directly support

Macpherson's findings of institutional racism (1999) as the collective failure of institutions to

Provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping, which disadvantage minority ethnic people (Para. 6.34).

Although elements of Black History were engaged with at this school, a school-wide decision meant that it would now be up to individual teachers to 'put something on' rather than in previous years when they had a Black History co-ordinator in charge of running events and programmes across school. Making Black History optional is itself evidence of anti-Blackness at a structural level because without structural guidance concerning its parameters, its purpose or its impact, this effectively legitimates teachers' decision-making about whether Black History is significant enough to be engaged with. Ultimately, the institutional pedagogies for teaching Black History at the school was interest convergent: elements of it were engaged with *so long as* Whiteness could dominate its scope and direction. This shifted Black History's focus to Britain's involvement in the abolition of slavery. The findings of racial microaggressions also shed light upon the paradox of individual racism; namely that it is a fallacy to assume that Kevin is just a 'bad apple' in a non-racist system. As Essed explains, this view

Places the individual outside of the institutional, thereby severing rules, regulations, and procedures from the people who make and enact them, as if it concerned qualitatively different racism rather than different positions and relations through which racism operates (1991, 36).

Individual racism can only occur as an expression or activation of group power, according to Essed (1991) and therefore, Kevin is actively complicit in upholding the

structures of a racist education system, reproducing it through racist practices. An example of upholding the structures of a racist system is the structural privileging of White British history and even through Black History, repeating a victim-centred narrative such as life on the Middle Passage, life on a plantation and using performances to re-enact slave trading. In an expression of reproducing racist practices, Kevin does not integrate Black History into the wider British history unit, but instead engage with it separately as a distinct unit. This approach mirrors the wider structural non-commitment to Black History shown by its non-statutory place in the KS3 History curriculum; consequently, Kevin can conceptualise Black History in ways that are demeaning and insulting to Black students' heritage or identities. Therefore, it is important to turn now to macroaggressions in order to understand how wider society impacts structures that marginalise or exclude Black histories and legitimate racial microaggressions in the classroom.

### **MACROAGGRESSION**

According to Huber and Solórzano, macroaggressions are defined as “the set of beliefs and/or ideologies that justify actual or potential social arrangements that legitimate the interests and/or positions of a dominant group over non-dominant groups, that in turn lead to related structures and acts of subordination” (2015, 7). Using their framework to understand the taken-for-granted assumptions about Black people, exploring macroaggressions is a useful tool in exposing how wider deficit understandings about Black people inform institutional and classroom racisms.

Deficit understandings, or cultural pathologising the Black body is the foundation of Western epistemological knowledge about the ‘Other’ (Mills 1997; Tsri 2016). Therefore it is important to understand how ideology dominates wider understandings of ‘Blackness’ in order to understand why Black histories are often defaulted to a focus on slavery and Civil Rights. It is also important to explore wider understandings of Whiteness and thus, why White histories, cultures and identities are privileged in the KS3 History curriculum.



On privileging Whiteness, David Cameron stated that

We must never forget that Britain is a great country with a history we can be truly proud of. Our culture, language and inventiveness has shaped the modern world, and ensures we are still a significant player on the world stage. We need to bring our country together, and that means moving away from the wrong-headed doctrine of state multiculturalism (Conservative Home, July 2009).

These sets of beliefs reflect the ideology of White supremacy and justify a celebratory look back to Britain's empire and achievements as coloniser, and then linking visible minorities with loss. Black History provides the counter-weight to the Whiteness-as-normal history, where "White is everything that Black is not" (Maylor 2014, 53) and, subsequently, can be used to project White anxieties about Blackness, forever relegating Black people to a victim, savage, or primitive status on one hand; or using as a tool for antiracism to show the progress that has been made in "race relations". Black History in this case study has been shown to have a functionalist role in a way that 'normal' (White) History does not. In the latter, White History can be told because of its historical significance, to "help pupils gains a coherent knowledge and understanding of Britain's past" (DfE 2013). Contrastingly, Black History is racialised and annexed onto History for one month or a separate unit rather than being integrated, and inflicted with the problems of allowing Whiteness to dominate the scope and direction of the histories of Black peoples. Black History has an important 'stabilizing role' within the established Whiteness-as-usual curriculum (Bell 1992). Its functionalist purpose is to counterbalance Whiteness: to be the inferior counterweight to Whiteness's superior status. From a CRT perspective, racism becomes normalised and taken-for-granted in this way and racist beliefs help to support and legitimate racist practices in classrooms.

## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the usefulness of a racial microaggressions framework to ‘everyday racism’ directed towards students of African and Caribbean descent that contributes to their negative experiences of studying Black History (Essed 1991). Through a case study, a CRT analysis provides a theoretically-informed understanding of racism as ubiquitous – directly through classroom interactions and indirectly through structural processes within the KS3 History curriculum, and wider, White supremacist ideology. Exploring nuances within racial microaggressions, allowed for the identification of instances during History lessons that negated, nullified, excluded and marginalised Black students. However, as I have explained, these instances should not be seen in isolation, that is, attributed only to an individual racist teacher such as Kevin. In fact, Rochester Grammar School in Kent recently faced a backlash from parents for choosing to re-enact a slave auction for empathy and to condemn racism (*The Guardian* 2017). Rather, these instances are legitimated by systemic racism *within* the very construction of the Key Stage 3 History curriculum that reflects the same demeaning message to Black students: their histories are only significant where they provide a function. In this case study, the institutional pedagogies for teaching BHM/BH centred on cultivating feelings of empathy, social cohesion and anti-racism and it has to be asked why BH is engaged with only where it serves a function? Particularly as the wider History curriculum at Key Stage 3 can simply be taught for its historical significance. The use of dramatic performances reduces the seriousness of the topic of study and is a type of what Delgado terms, false empathy (1996). False empathy

Describes a response to the plight of oppressed individuals or groups by privileged individuals who visualize themselves in the places of members of oppressed groups and ask what they, the privileged, would want if they were oppressed (Duncan 2002, 137).

What is less understood in antiracist scholarship about Black experiences of schooling is the direct and indirect ways in which racism manifests and how those who bear its brunt experience this. Parekh's warning is still accurate in English classrooms today,

Not surprisingly many black children tend to underachieve, rarely feel relaxed in school, lack trust in their teachers and go through the school with a cartload of frustrations and resentment. When constantly fed on an ethnocentric curriculum that presents their communities and cultures in a highly biased and unflattering manner, black children can hardly avoid developing a deep sense of inferiority and worthlessness...The black child raised on a mono-cultural diet in an English school experiences profound self-alienation (1986, 25).

Where research previously showed Black students' experiences of studying History was negative due to the excessive over-reliance on tokenism and victim-hood, what was missing was linking pedagogical approaches to Black History, to wider institutional and macro influences that view the Black 'Other' as deficient. Therefore, the racial microaggressions framework gave rise to these wider sensitivities and broadens the lens with which racism is typically understood by acknowledging unconscious/conscious, structural and ideological dimensions. No meaningful change to the experiences of Black children in English schools can be achieved where the definition of racism is so restricted to solely individual 'bad apples'.

The consequence of reducing Black History to a non-statutory place on the KS3 History curriculum is that schools may only engage with elements of it where teachers find areas of converging interests, such as Britain's role in abolishing slavery. As a result, Whiteness, the foundation of institutions, has the power to dominate Black History's scope and direction or not engage at all. The Whiteness-as-normal construction of Britain's past could explain the disturbing poll conducted by YouGov showing that 44% of British people were proud of Britain's history of colonialism (*The Independent* 2016). This trend is arguably set to increase with the revised KS3

History curriculum being a source of pride about Britain's Empire and Black students continue to question their 'fit' in schools and wider society.

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<sup>i</sup> Most schools in England referred to as 'state schools' follow the National Curriculum, which has content organised and set centrally. The National Curriculum is broken down into Key Stages according to children's age. Key Stage 3 spans children aged 11-13 years old.

<sup>ii</sup> This paper focuses on the English education system, but earlier academic studies though located in England, referred to the British education system.

<sup>iii</sup> The Key Stage 3 National Curriculum is taught to students aged 11-13 years old, but spread over two years: Year 7 (11-12 years) and Year 8 (12-13 years).

<sup>iv</sup> The data used in this paper are drawn from Limehart Secondary School as part of a doctoral thesis (school and names are pseudonyms).

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