

Black Unsettlement: Embodied Blackness and Black Studies in the Irish Context

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Abstract

Reflecting the call for diverse opinions in knowledge production, this article is a personal perspective on the positioning of Black Studies in Ireland. Black Studies as praxi-theory foregrounds the inseparability of embodied experiences from epistemic subject, since the knowledge production process is inherently subjective. Within the Irish racial ecology, the specificities of being Black suggest using the term anti-blackness rather than racism to address systemic racial violence against the Black body. While the presence of blackness in Ireland challenges imagined narratives of racial homogeneity, anti-blackness is deeply entrenched within academic texts, materials and ideas, shaping knowledge production cultures and systems. To understand the nature of anti-blackness in Ireland, a number of concepts which inform the author's work will be introduced. Xeno/miso-phenotypic prejudice encompasses both bias and aversion in relation to the Black body. Unexpected Irishness reflects the dissonance in some imagined white spaces, discourses and epistemes when confronted by the onto-epistemological totality of blackness. The author, positioned as a Black academic teaching Black Studies, underscores the potential tokenisation of Black scholarship within Higher Education Institutions and the toll on Black academics' well-being. The text calls for a genuine elevation of Black Studies, acknowledging its power to unsettle academic complacency.

Keywords

Black studies, epistemic erasure, anti-blackness, embodied blackness, extraversion

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Introduction

I am grateful to the editors for inviting this personal perspective of Black Studies in Ireland. One of the guiding clauses in the call for this special edition was the emphasis placed on theorising ‘new, diverse opinions’ as being ‘critical for the undoing and unlearning of knowledge production cultures and systems that marginalise the already marginalised’ (Dey, 2023). Of course, this encouragement for novelty and diversity begs a number of questions. Who perceives them as new? And should we not regard all opinions, including those from the established academy, as diverse? Mignolo reminds us that theory is not simply a passive tool for comprehending external realities; rather, it is a power dynamic for actively ‘constructing knowledge’ (1993: 127), according to context-dependent epistemologies and sociocultural perspectives. These epistemologies and perspectives, in turn, reflect the values, biases and power structures inherent not only in the production of knowledge but also, I would argue, within the systems of consumption.

While the decolonial turn drives our engagement with knowledge production, we must acknowledge the truth embedded within the Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji’s concept of extraversion (Hountondji, 1995). Even as we labour and collaborate to create new knowledges, we are constrained (and deformed) by the immanent power matrix of the Global North’s episteme, which links capitalism, colonialism and modernity. The episteme may be characterised as a modern Procrustes, cutting or stretching in accordance with its dominance, giving validation and authority to the production of some knowledges over others. Viewed in this light even the most fundamental aspect of being an academic, research, is a conceptual battlefield:

From the vantage point of the colonized, ... the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary. When mentioned in many Indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. (Smith, 2021: 1)

On this battlefield, Black Studies emerges as a critical arsenal, whose praxi-theory of embodiment and advocacy is tailored to the needs of the already marginalised. It provides a number of epistemological and ideological instruments to interrogate and subvert dominant power structures, especially the under-theorised power dynamic of the liberal privilege of accommodating and acknowledging marginalised viewpoints (Vergès, 2021).

Adopting a synoptic approach, Irish Black Studies sets out to unsettle not only social and cultural perspectives on blackness in general, and being Black in Ireland in particular, but also the historical context, power dynamics, and episteme which underpin this worldview. It sees the Black body clearly as to ‘see [blackness] clearly is not only to look. It is to have a point of view’ (Sithole, 2023: 2). Positioned as one of the few Black academics in Ireland teaching Black Studies, this personal perspective will stress the inseparability of embodied Black experiences from the epistemic Black subject. The reduction of Black

agency, subjectivity, experience and episteme is characterised by a process whereby this inherent richness is flattened, making it susceptible to analysis and surveillance under a detached, often oppressive gaze (Césaire, 1950/1955; Fanon, 1991/2004). I will introduce a number of concepts which inform my work, such as anti-blackness, xeno/misophenotypic prejudice and Unexpected Irishness. One common misrepresentation of Black Studies is that it is a form of anti-racism training, and within the context of an education institution is more akin to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) than a formal academic discipline. I argue that while Black Studies embraces similar motivations to anti-racism and EDI, Black Studies is better understood as a means of constructing knowledge so as to challenge the epistemic limitations imposed by Hountondjian extraversion. This perspective will guide the discussion below. In the first instance, I will outline my use of the term Black, and why it is capitalised, before examining Black Studies within an Irish context.

Black studies and the word ‘Black’

The diversity of Black identities cautions against essentialising Black communities together as a single entity, adumbrated by assuming a uniform, unchanging concept of blackness, and indifferent to real-life circumstances and individual interpretations (Wilder, 2013). Blackness is shaped by societal and historical forces and is inherently tied to its relationship with whiteness: ‘Situated in sociogenetic terms—again, irreducible to either the constitution of the individual (ontogenetic) or the evolution of the species (phylogenetic) and historically inextricable from both—Blackness manifests in and as a certain relationship to whiteness’ (Gregory, 2022: 3).

Terminology is a fraught battlefield and I will follow a number of conventions for the purposes of outlining my argument. A frequently used term for people of African or Afro-descent in Ireland is ‘Black Irish’, but I consider that this term has been problematised by its incorporation into white racial mythology (see Hogan, 2017 for discussion). Nor does the term convey the embodied experience and knowledge of being African or Afro-descent in Ireland that a hyphenated collocation such as racialised-as-black/ened does. However, for linkage purposes to Black Studies, I have opted to use the metonymic term Black, or Black people, (accompanied, where relevant, by ‘in Ireland’). Black, as Michelle Wright argues, performs the role of ‘signifier for the complex negotiation between dominant and minority cultures that all peoples of African descent in the West...must make in order to survive, whether physically or psychologically’ (Wright, 2004: 25–26).

Secondly, I am guided by Kwame Anthony Appiah as to capitalising the word ‘Black’ but using lowercase for ‘blackness’: “‘Black’ in upper-case signals respect and parity with other racial categories, emphasising the importance of recognising Black people’s unique identity and experiences. It acknowledges their distinct history, culture and struggles. On the other hand, “blackness” in lowercase suggests a more fluid and less determined concept, allowing for diversity within the Black community, acknowledging individual identities, and emphasising the spectrum of experiences that may not fit a single mold’ (Appiah, 2020).¹

Black studies and the Irish context

The Black academic, Cedric X. Clark posed a question in 1972 that is key for understanding the conceptual foundation of Black Studies, namely is it Black Studies or the Study of Black People? (Clark, 1972). Black Studies is an affective project and is constitutive of the embodied Black experience as much as it is an intellectual, theoretical, creative, or advocacy project. However, rather than simply being the study of Black people,² the ontological underpinnings of Black Studies explicates two interdependent projects. The first is to rethink modernity via the history of the African diaspora,³ and the second is to examine the ways in which diasporic discourses have shaped the political and cultural history of Black people globally. They are, of course, interdependent since blackness ‘only became a racial category with the forced removal of West Africans to the Western Hemisphere’ (Wright, 2004: 1).

I would like to suggest that these two projects are predicated on the recognition that the Cartesian separation of subject from object, which privileges the epistemic subject distinct from empirical subjects, and purportedly allows for objective observation and analysis, is challenged by Black Studies. Black Studies contends that empirical subjects, specifically the embodied experiences of Black individuals, are inseparable from the epistemic subject since the knowledge production process is inherently subjective, influenced by the identities, experiences and social positions of those producing it. Recognising that objectivity is influenced by social, cultural and historical contexts, Black Studies emphasises the importance of acknowledging these embodied experiences as being integral to understanding the significance of empirical subjectivity in shaping knowledge and truth.

Ireland presents an exciting research environment for undertaking Black Studies. Just as many of the claims to diversity within Irish society⁴ can be shown, as Joseph (2020) so ably does with her investigations of Africans within the workplace, to be simply brand-enhancing, neoliberal rituals,⁵ so too does much of Irish academe’s decolonial turn risks falling victim to ‘national self-flattery and collective benevolent readings of the self’ (Wekker, 2016: 29).

Why this should be the case necessitates a careful reading of Ireland’s liminal (and still bitterly contested) positionality as colonised and coloniser within the British colonial matrix of power. This liminality requires reading Ireland’s particular racial ecology in relation to blackness (as phenotype associated with Africans and people of Afro-descent), and its existential memory(ies) and ideologies of being white, Catholic and Celtic (Fanning 2002; Schultz, 2007), but especially white (Mullen 2023). Space does not permit a full exposition of these elements. This is regrettable given the literature foregrounding the nature and legacy of Ireland’s close proximity to empire (Crosbie, 2011; McMahon et al., 2017), the racialisation of Catholic Irish as black (lowercase) by the British in the mid-late 19th century, and the Irish essentialising of blackness through its soft colonialism in Africa (Staunton, 2000) and ‘missionary nationalism’ (Fanning, 2002: 16).⁶ The result of these antinomies of colonised and coloniser is the curious form of Irish subalternity which situates the Irish as colonial victim and rarely as perpetrator. Another oppressive matrix which could occupy this paper entire, is that

of class, where, I would posit, even religion in Ireland can be understood through a classed lens of peasant and worker led by a priest-class, who in turn esteemed and were administered by an episcopal class of Irish, Anglo-Irish and Continental European upper middle classes for social, material and political gain (Grace, 2015; Ferriter, 2018).⁷ In relation to Black Studies, a class-based approach to the Irish racial ecology would help bring into focus Stuart Hall's most prescient observation from 1980, 'race is...the modality in which class is lived, the medium through which class relations are experienced' (Hall, 1980: 314).

Rather, the focus of the paper will be on the alchemy of blackness within the imagined white national community that is Ireland (Mullen, 2023). This analysis puts into perspective that Irish Black Studies is neither country cousin nor simulacrum of similar theoretical instantiations in the USA, Canada, or the UK. Similarly, as Irish Black Studies adopts a diasporic model of examination, this means that while it remains deeply informed by Continental (and regional) African onto-epistemologies, it differs from them. Therein lies its particular contribution, captured in the words of Aimé Césaire's exuberant observation after reading Hegel's *Phenomenology*: 'to arrive at the Universal, one must immerse oneself in the Particular!' (Nesbitt, 2003: 25). The particular framing of blackness in Ireland can inform universal understandings of the concept of blackness; the universality of wider theorisations in other jurisdictions may obscure the specificities of being Black in Ireland. For example, the foregrounding of the killing of George Nkencho, in 2020, as holding particular valence within Irish Black Studies is not to suggest some calculus of horror which would seek to ignore the killings of George Floyd in the USA, Adama Traoré in France, or Alike Ogorchukwu in Italy. Rather, it seeks to encourage an examination of the specificities of Ireland's racial legacies and how these are inhabited by Irish communities racialised as Black (MacNamee, 2021). Headline and harrowing trauma such as the Nkencho killing can only be properly understood by an engagement with the otherwise banal racialisation and marginalisation of Black people in Ireland.

To take another example, in a curiously Irish form of racialised synecdoche, migrants and especially those who linger in Direct Provision, regardless of their status and country of origin, are frequently interpellated as Black in migration discourses (Fanning, 2021; O'Riain, 2007; Sheridan et al., 2019), and thus subject to the complex social mechanism of oppressions that Black communities experience in Ireland (Michael, 2015; Ugba, 2009). A further area of investigation invited by the Irish Black Studies lens is the Balibar distinction between blackness in Ireland as internal and external Other (Balibar, 2005). We may understand this as indicating that Black people born in Ireland, and especially prior to the 2004 Twenty-seventh Amendment, which limited the constitutional right to Irish citizenship, represent an internal Other. Born within the national borders, they may have Irish citizenship, but they still face what I characterise as xeno/miso-phenotypic prejudice, an interleaved discrimination rooted in both bias and aversion related to their blackness. Post-2004 African migrants represent the external Other, with Ireland being constituted as a Bhabhaian third space, where the xeno/miso-phenotypic prejudice they encounter is compounded by the foreignness of their immigration status, which frames them as being 'wholly Other to the Western nation' (Wright, 2004: 24).

Any robust advocacy for the exploration of Irish academic knowledge production cultures and systems which impact Black people in Ireland is encouraged to consider two initial propositions. First, since it is difficult to disentangle Black Studies (or any other mode of enquiry) from the relentless racial violence which impacts the embodied experiences of Black people in Ireland, there is a need to reflect on the relationship between Black Studies and the construct of 'race' (the latter manifesting, as is its wont, as racism and racialised interpellations). It is germane to draw attention to the fact that the Balibar categories are not exclusive binaries when exposed to racism and racialisation in Ireland. In the week I was finalising this paper, the Vienna-based Fundamental Rights Agency reported on the experiences of people born in Africa or second-generation Africans in Europe (FRA, 2023). Ireland was ranked as the third-highest among EU member states for racial discrimination against Black people, and the highest when it came to racist comments and bullying/physical attacks against Black children. The fear of a racist attack was almost twice as high in Ireland (64%) compared to other EU states (35%).⁸

Second, the epistemic erasure and systemic bias that persist with regard to Black people in Ireland within the Irish academy, and society at large, are prompted, and maintained, by what I term 'Unexpected Irishness', in the form of Black bodies (and knowledges) in imagined white spaces, discourses and episteme⁹. For both town and gown, this Unexpected Irishness in the form of metonymic blackness engenders the peculiar Irish strain of melancholic whiteness, 'marinated in historical notions of western racial and cultural supremacy' (Marovatsanga and Garrett, 2023: 117), which obtains in Ireland, and which Black Studies seeks to unpack.

Black studies and 'race'

One of the more interesting appeals of employing a Black Studies lens is to examine how the construct of 'race' is 'performed and regulated' (Pabst, 2003: 208) as a hegemonic power dynamic that perpetuates biocultural discrimination and inequality, with dominant 'raced' groups exerting control and privilege over Black people and communities within an Irish context. I would argue that Black Studies possesses a reparative potential, though this invites the question, what is it repairing? What Black Studies seeks to repair are the layers of subordination which underpin racialised oppression, such as xeno/misophenotypic determinism, gender, class, immigration status, heteropatriarchy, sexuality and so on. The impact of racialisation, to quote Ta-Nehisi Coates, is a 'visceral experience, that dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth' (2015: 9). Coates goes on to add that the need for reparatory intervention, even within the academy, is apparent: 'You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the Black body' (9).

Black as phenotype must be understood to encompass a broader range of perceivable characteristics beyond skin colour, such as hair texture, facial features and body type. Phenotype transcends the Fanonian materiality of the body and also may be precipitated by socio-cultural/linguistic/psychological markers (names, accent, clothing, etc.). This

paper will not rehearse in any detail the construct of 'race' and the venal boorishness of the grievances and self-serving justifications from which it springs. Furthermore, I am attentive to the pitfall lurking within any discussion of the fungible construct of 'race', namely that engaging with the dialectic ecology of 'race' can attract the charge of racism, whereby 'talking about' it is itself 'considered an act of war' (Williams, 1995: 40). Rather my engagement with the construct is to argue that its common manifestations (racism, racialisation) are *verba parum* for current purposes of addressing the knowledge production cultures and systems that marginalise Black people and should be replaced, within the Irish context, by the more apposite and determinate term 'anti-blackness'.

In making this claim, I am minded that the delimiting and totalising semiotics of racism inadequately capture the depth of oppression and marginalisation experienced by Black individuals. While racism denotes a broad spectrum of prejudice, anti-blackness offers a sharper focus on the sustained racial violence that confronts Black individuals, communities and, for current purposes, knowledge production. It foregrounds over five hundred years of history which have dehumanised, excluded, and erased Black people. By accentuating this anti-blackness, Black Studies offers a potential means of rigorously interrogating the essentialised identities, racial hierarchies and conflicting worldviews of being marked as Black in Ireland, as well as their resulting structural manifestations in education, 'health, political, social, economic and spiritual situations' (Land, 2005: 55).

Anti-blackness and the materiality of the Black body are imbricated also within academic texts, materials and ideas. This is not a surprising claim. Much as David Nirenberg has argued convincingly that 'race' has 'its own logic' which is 'so closely akin to that of the disciplines (etymology, genealogy, history) with which we study the persistence of humanity in time' (Nirenberg, 2009: 242), so too a similar argument can be advanced for the framing of blackness within our knowledge production cultures and systems. Anti-blackness underscores the entanglement of social constructs, identity and belonging within imagined communities, be they nations or universities. It is a power dynamic which shapes our academic discourse and worldviews, and determines our unpacking of the buttressing onto-epistemologies of the episteme. Onto-epistemologies involve examining how the understanding of blackness is not only about what is known but also about the ways in which blackness exists and is conceptualised. Any possibility for a Black episteme is undermined by positioning Black as object category (Gregory, 2022; Terada, 2023; Vargas, 2018). Black Studies offers the possibility of establishing interstitial locations within the episteme and the promise of moving the Black body into subject position.

I am, of course, conscious that as a construct, 'race', being a 'fundamental organizing grammar' (Wekker, 2016: 23) of society and knowledge production, and one which offers a 'different account of the world', as Sara Ahmed puts it so well (Ahmed, 2012: 3), is more complex than what I put forward as mere xeno/miso-phenotypic agitation, with '[r]eligion, gender, class, and sexuality [also being] central to the formation of and workings of racial ideologies' (Loomba and Burton, 2007: 8). 'Race' as a construct and 'folk classification' (Smedley, 1993: 33), and its manipulated phenotypic agitations, are further determined, hence their fungibility, by the racial temporalities of historical events, social structures and cultural narratives. Nevertheless, I argue that anti-blackness better encapsulates, within the Irish context, the existential and onto-epistemological

relation inherent in Amiri Baraka's 1965 scarring indignities faced by the Black body in having to endure 'the torture of being the unseen object, and, the constantly observed subject' (Jones, 1966: 153).

Anti-blackness helps contextualise Angela Davis' observation that '[f]or most of our history the very category "human" has not embraced Black and Brown people. Its abstractness has been coloured white and gendered male' (2016: 87). Within the framing of knowledge production cultures and systems that marginalise the Black body, it explicates the hierarchy, or 'Chain of Being', identified by Black feminist philosopher, Sylvia Wynter, which has placed Black people 'at the nadir...; that is, on a rung of the ladder lower than that of all humans' (Wynter 2003: 300–301).

Finally, Black Studies hold many commonalities with anti-racism and this is an important consideration. As a professor of Black Studies and a Black woman, I cannot 'afford to get bored with the fight against racism..., that's a privilege for others' (Sutherland, 2021), and a 'critical scholarship on blackness is, and must be, about anti-racist practice, ... as well as the pursuit of decolonial and anti-colonial praxis' (Dei, 2017: 3). Both Black Studies and anti-racism training seek to educate individuals on recognising and combating racism in all its forms, from 'nanoracism' (Mbembe, 2019: 58) to the more egregious manifestations of what I term stochastic anti-blackness, which aims to stigmatise, injure and destroy 'those not considered to be one of us' (Mbembe, 2019: 58), where Mbembe's 'us' is constitutive of some imagined Irish nation. In dealing with this racism, the Black community would be then 'allowed to give all its time and thought to its own social problems' (Du Bois, 1903/2008: 5). To say that racism is foundational to the Black embodied experience is neither a reductionist nor totalising argument. It is simply an acknowledgement.

In a similar manner to Black Studies, some anti-racism training may even address the complex history, culture, experiences, and contributions of Black people, with a view to engaging with their political, socioeconomic and even spiritual conditions. However, while Black Studies enlists similar theoretical approaches and praxes to anti-racism training, it takes a more interdisciplinary and transformative approach by interpellating the specific context or situated perspective of existing and dominant onto-epistemologies. In challenging knowledge hierarchies, it proposes a mode of knowledge production which originates organically by connecting research with activism. Above all else, Black Studies adapts to the research environment of the Black embodied experience, and not the other way round.

Irish while Black

This interpellation is required when considering an interesting online artefact, which bookended my invitation to write this paper.¹⁰ A Reddit post in r/Ireland, dated August 2023, by the user SuccessfulCucumber40, outlined the following concern:

I'm black and born in Ireland does that make me Irish. I'm asking this because my parents are African and moved to Ireland 20 something years ago, I'm now 13 and have been raised in kildare [*sic*] all 13 years, [...] its annoying because when people ask where are you from and

I say Ireland they say oh where your parents from and I say Africa and they're like oh so you're African it confuses me. (Reddit, 2023)

The Redditor addresses a core ontological tenet of framing blackness within hegemonic conceptualisations and discourses of the Irish nation as white, which, in turn, seeps into academic knowledge production. The invocations and rejections of Irish identity which nestle securely within these conceptualisations and discourses prompt the onto-epistemological distinction I like to offer between the ontological collocation 'Black while Irish' and the epistemological challenge thrown up by the same three lexical elements, 'Irish while Black'. Both collocations are modelled on the formulation of 'Driving while Black' which reflects the research, especially in the United States, that traffic laws are enforced excessively against black drivers because of their race (Stanford, 2023), and which has been extended into many other sociological forms such as #LivingWhileBlack (Henderson and Jefferson-Jones, 2020), 'Learning Mathematics While Black' (Martin, 2012), and 'Sick While Black' (Hoffer, 2021), to name but a few.

What may seem initially like semantic wordplay reveals the broader sociological truth of the struggle for belonging if you are Black in Ireland as it invokes the difference between authentic Irishness, which is synonymous with white Irishness to the point of metonymy, and the Unexpected Irishness thrown up by the Black body. Black while Irish reflects a simple Fregean truth-value, the banal reality of being Black and Irish; for example, my mixed race identity of growing up in an industrial school in the 1960s and 1970s, the child of a white mother and Nigerian father. Irishness as identity then is a matter of social practice, informed by personal choice (Botts, 2016). Such identity for the Black body is truly authentic in an existential sense. From the Latin *auto-hentes* meaning to make or create oneself, to be authentic demands that one must 'negate or transcend our 'objective' essence in order to invent new roles to play, new personae to identify with, new masks to express our numerous projects of existence' (Kearney, 1994: 54). This identity of authentically belonging provides a 'sense of personal location' (Weeks, 1998: 88), however fluid (Botts, 2016). Though several of the children of African descent with whom I grew up in the industrial schools would fly the Joycean nets of Ireland, like so many Stephen Daedaloi, to forge their own uncreated consciences in the UK and further afield (Mullen, 2023), they and I knew we were Irish. These 'instinctive responses' (James, 1963/2013: 154) convinced us that our blackness was merely reflective of what Terence Brown referred to as 'the complex, variegated, transitional nature of contemporary Irish experience' (Brown, 1985: 322). The greater variegation of the 1990s and the arrival of more Black people simply meant that we no longer had to hang out in the Jazz or Reggae sections in record shops as frequently as before in the hope of meeting others whose phenotype echoed our own.

In wearisome contrast, being Irish while Black challenges the right of Black people to an Irish identity, as Irishness is constituted in an exclusivist manner with 'a normative whiteness at the core' (O'Malley, 2020: 2). It is an attribute intrinsically bound with 'Catholicism and whiteness' (Argáiz and Tekin, 2014: 158). In Catholic and settled Ireland (Fanning, 2002), whiteness was the 'constitutive and founding element' of Irishness (Connolly and Khaoury, 2008: 208). One of the more interesting historical

artefacts which supports this view of the centrality of white Irishness springs from the Irish revolutionary period (1916–1922), where leaders of the movement such as Eamon De Valera, Erskine Childers and Douglas Hyde, amongst others, framed their case for independence from Britain on the basis of the profound injustice of ‘Ireland [being] the only white nation on earth’ still enslaved (Walsh, 2016: 216).

Being Irish while Black is characterised by a profound sense of dissonance, being less about a definitive sense of belonging and more about an ongoing state of proving one’s legitimacy to belong in the white Irish nation. For Black people like me, born before the earliest agitations of the Celtic Tiger, this is an acute dissonance; to take just one example, did I even exist during the long decades before the category ‘Black or Black Irish’ was added to the 2006 Irish Census? This perspective on Irishness as some form of Manichaean inclusion and exclusion within the imagined national community, whose motivation is the ‘need to locate, identify and expunge those who are ‘Other’ to the national body’ (Wright, 2004: 21), is a useful primer for addressing the location of the Black body in Ireland. In a distinctly Irish Hegelian construction, the Black body finds itself positioned both outside the annals of Irish history and paradoxically indispensable as the racial ‘Other’ in shaping the epidermalisation of white Irish identity, since white Irish identity is itself contained within the colonising modern matrix of power (Garvey and Ignatiev, 1997). Thus, the Irish subject can confidently claim ‘we are not Black’, and contend that ‘Black people have no place’ in the Irish narrative. Such a reductionist notion of Irishness, rooted in phenotypic homogeneity, ensures that any intersubjective articulation and performance of being authentically Irish by Black people, in the existential sense as suggested by Kearney, evokes Freud’s concept of the Uncanny.¹¹ Freud’s concept, which involves the misrecognition of unsettling familiarity as being unfamiliar, is most apt to explain the reaction to blackness embodying any form of Irishness. The presence of a racialised group who should not occupy white Irish space challenges pre-conceived ‘raced’ notions and disrupts the expected norm, leading to discomfort and unease. So, any blackness encountered is perceived as Uncanny and is therefore constitutive of Unexpected Irishness.

In a country with a historical narrative of ‘foreign’ arrivals from the mytho-historical tribes of the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (the people of Cessair, the Partholarians, Fomorians, Nemedians, Fir Bolg, Tuatha Dé Danann and Milesians) (Gardner, 2017), through a kidnapped Welsh child named Succat (better known as Patrick), the Vikings, and then the Normans of Strongbow and Henry II, this nation has witnessed diverse populations (and individuals) becoming ‘Irish’ and asserting their right to call Ireland home (Fanning, 2021). The ‘migrants’ from Britain came in society-shifting numbers via the Norman and Elizabethan colonial projects, and the ‘settler-colonial or comprador bourgeoisie’ of the Stuarts’ Ulster Plantation (Gardner, 2017: 185), creating an inflection point in the Irish historical narrative which is still felt keenly today (Fitzgerald and Lambkin, 2008). Other immigrants from continental Europe have always been part of this historical narrative: German, Dutch and French migrants in the 17th century; the 3000 Palatine emigrants who arrived in 1709; the handful of Jews who made their own way to Dublin during the 17th century, eventually building up a small community by the late 19th century (Fitzgerald and Lambkin, 2008).

While all such groups experienced resistance from established Irish imagined communities¹² (e.g., the Palatines mostly fled Ireland, much as did the 541 Hungarian programme refugees in 1957–1958, while the Jewish community has steadily decreased since the 20th century), it is uncontested that these groups occupy a place in the Irish historical narrative, with some even progressing to becoming ‘Irish’ or, at a minimum, asserting a right to call Ireland home. However, Black Studies advances the argument that this sense of becoming ‘Irish’ and asserting a right to call Ireland home has not been extended to Black inhabitants, and a narrative of being essentialised as not belonging has prevailed in their regard. Much as they currently occupy a peripheral or hidden position in national identity discourse in the 21st century, the Black population before the Celtic Tiger has been written out of the annals of Irishness. They are denied the warm embrace of the Yeatsian discourse of ‘I am of Ireland’ (Yeats, 1956: 262), articulated by Mary Robinson in her first inauguration speech, and find themselves framed by anti-migrant voices, to use a phrase from Seamus Heaney, as interlopers merely ‘feeding off the territory’ (Heaney, 1975: 52).

Black Studies contradicts this exclusionary discourse with a counterdiscourse, whose sociohistorical perspective complicates firmly held historical images of Ireland to argue that Black communities have been a part of Irish society for many centuries.¹³ Such a perspective is indebted to William Hart. In his much-used 2002 paper, he estimates that in the 18th century Ireland had a Black population of between 2000 and 3000 (Hart, 2002). This is a tiny figure in relation to the population of the pre-Famine island as a whole, but it is larger than the recorded numbers of Black people in France, which had a population four times that of Ireland. In the same paper he suggests that Ireland possibly had a population of 10,000 Black people by the 19th century. He has identified hundreds of Black people, most of them born in Ireland, and some with Black parents also born in Ireland who emigrated post-Famine to the racial tinderbox that was 19th century US. Such numbers reflect, no doubt, the sentiments of the diarist below:

...a female black and child... was so closely pressed by the multitude of people crowding round, and staring at her,...*Had she in any manner differed from others of her colour and country so common to meet with [emphasis mine]*, it might have been some apology, to gratify curiosity; that not being the case, it reflects both scandal and ignorance on the company’ Freeman’s Journal, 23–25 Oct. 1777. (Hart, 2002: 19)

Black studies and melancholic whiteness

Reading Black people out of Irish history¹⁴ is not only exclusionary and reductive but given the historical record suggests a level of ignorance and avoidance bordering on the performative.¹⁵ The presence of Black bodies in Ireland, whether historically or in contemporary times, provides an opportunity to observe the complexity between emotions provoked by the desire for an idealised past racial homogeneity and the discomfort due to the challenge presented by the reality of a more blackened historical narrative (and

multicultural present). The detrition through ‘a gradual seepage of knowledge down some collective black hole’ (Cohen, 2001: 13) or manipulation of history through self-aware intentionality represents literal social denial (Cohen, 2001). It is here, in the face of denying this Black historical presence, and concomitant right to be part of a multicultural present, that an Irish Black Studies lens offers the possibility of Foucauldian Parrhesia, namely a form of candid truth-telling as a means of individual growth and societal change, often in the face of power or against prevailing norms (Foucault, 1983).

As part of this parrhesiac possibility, Black Studies addresses the concept I am developing of melancholic whiteness as it is operationalised in Ireland. As argued already, the presence of Black bodies challenges the entrenched whiteness of *anima gentis Hibernicae*,¹⁶ forcing a redefinition of the concept of Irishness, through the inscription of a Black identity into the Irish racial ecology. This redefinition disrupts conventional understandings of Irishness which are rooted in historical colonial legacies, and raises the possibility of embodying both Black and Irish identities. However, the coexistence of these identities remains a contentious issue for those who insist on discourses of mutual exclusivity, even as they encounter this Unexpected Irishness.

The concept of racial melancholia as deep-seated sorrow and unresolved grief has been developed in the work of scholars like Anne Anlin Cheng, David Eng and Shinhee Han, who conceive of melancholia as experienced by those ‘suffering from injunctive comparison to and rejection by the implicit standard of whiteness’ (Cheng, 2001: 176). Racial melancholia affects both dominant white culture and racialised Others, and ‘describes the dynamics that constitute their mutual definition through exclusion’ (Cheng, 2001: xi). This analysis explains how internalised racism and the quest for assimilation of racially marginalised groups may internalise societal prejudices and struggle with their own sense of self-worth before the ‘racialised situated gaze’ (Yuval-Davis, 2012: 154) of whiteness. These individuals may grapple with feelings of loss, rejection and a sense of not fully belonging, leading to a melancholic state occasioned by their incommensurate sense of ‘fragmentation, inapproximation and self-abhorrence’, that must be concealed from the outside world (Cheng, 2001: 54). Eng and Han (2000) suggest that this racialisation becomes an integral, yet often unnoticed, part of the identity and emotional lives of those subject to racial alterity.

Tobias Hübinette, Lennart Räterlinck and Arthur Little, Jr, extend this analysis to examine how this ‘condition of endless self-impoverishment’ (Cheng, 2001: 8) of the racialised Other can also take the form of a white melancholia, which emphasises the illusionary nature of the categories of white and Other, shifting the focus away from the underlying causes of subjection, and redirects attention towards how the racialised individual envisions their group identity in the context of the nation. Hübinette and Räterlinck (2015), for example, argue for a melancholic whiteness, within Sweden, in which race performativity sustains a perpetual state of melancholy for the white subject. This has the effect of reinforcing the idea of an absolute difference in terms of alterity between the Self as subject and the racialised Other (Little, 2016), since ‘[a]rticulated through the lexicon of mourning and melancholia, whiteness is nothing other than an object of veritable loss’ (Gregory, 2022: 3).

Viewed through an affective lens, a dominant response to this Unexpected Irishness of Black bodies is the evocation of an Irish strain of melancholic whiteness, which may be

understood as the emotional responses and societal implications provoked when internal beliefs are challenged by evidence of Ireland's racial diversity. As the empirical evidence of Ireland's racial diversity confronts these imprinted beliefs, a sense of melancholia is engendered. This melancholic state is marked by feelings of anxiety and discomfort, and multiple trolling events on social media, stemming from an internalised dissonance between a desired racial homogeneity and the demonstrable evidence of a multiracial Ireland. The realisation that past constructions of racial homogeneity do not align with historical reality evoke emotional responses, including anxiety, discomfort and nostalgia for this imaginary past, and leaving them 'psychically stuck' (Cheng, 2001: 8).

Since melancholic whiteness is predicated on the suppression of beliefs relating to the Black body, framing the familiar as unfamiliar, this suppression may result in a deep ontological dislocation. This dislocation helps to explain the failure to reconcile constructed blackness into white Ireland's participation in the project of modernity. For the Black body, this lack of agency and voice within the Irish context, and its associated knowledge production, leads to perpetual exclusion and epistemic erasure.

Black studies and EDI in universities

As mentioned in my introduction, one common misrepresentation and 'mis-positioning' of Black Studies within an education environment is that it is more akin to EDI than a formal academic discipline. This is a characterisation which does not hold up to any critical scrutiny. Moreover, while equality and diversity are touchstones in the discourse of any Irish Higher Education Institution (HEI) in 2024, an Irish Black Studies lens acknowledges the reality of Ahmed's statement: 'all universities often describe their missions by drawing on the languages of diversity as well as equality. But using the language does not translate into creating diverse or equal environments' (Ahmed, 2015). Ahmed's use of the term 'nonperformativity' to describe how a commitment to EDI principles can be made as a way of avoiding having to effect any such change is further problematised by Achille Mbembe's view of higher education, with its 'large systems of authoritative control, standardisation, gradation, accountancy, classification, credits and penalties', as being a 'marketable product bought and sold by standard units' (2015), and thus firmly set within the project of modernity.

The marginalised identities of those differentiated by colonial knowledge production cultures and systems, and maintained by current instantiations of these cultures and systems, are now used by these very institutions to promote their newfound diversity efforts. Black Studies offers a fresh and incisive perspective on the ongoing struggle for a truly inclusive and equitable educational environment. For example, the question may be asked as to whether the implementation of progressive gender quotas within academia is merely indicative of a shift from a white male middle-class demographic to a white female middle-class one. This transformation may be characterised (*pace* Fanon) as a manifestation of 'wilful narcissism' and 'intellectual laziness' (Fanon, 1991/2004: 98), being more concerned with promoting the interests of the upper-middle class than addressing the systemic issues facing the marginalisation of Black (and other) intersectional identities. In essence, this transition simply results in a Bourdieuan reproduction

using the ‘master’s tools’ (Lorde, 1983: 27), that is excessively self-focused, potentially missing the critical thinking needed for authentic social and political racial and ethnic diversity within the university and associated academic space. Or put bluntly, where are the Black bodies (within staff, student, text, or episteme)?

Final thoughts

Black Studies’ theoretical framework and categories of thinking are interdisciplinary, multiple and hybrid in nature, and draw from Black Critical Feminism, postcolonial theoretical paradigms, literature, philosophy, cultural studies, race studies, visual studies, performance studies, history and anthropology. It attracts students from various disciplines, including Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), languages, Drama, and those partaking in Erasmus and exchange programmes specific to the university. Given its complicated socio-political and epistemic potential, the influence of Black Studies extends far beyond the confines of academia. It has the potential to disrupt the complacency of white students in predominantly white institutions by offering a critical lens through which to examine power structures and systemic racism. The role of a Black academic entrusted with the task of teaching Black Studies in Ireland to a predominantly white student body is fraught with complexities, as the academic serves as both educator and advocate, while contending with structural biases, microaggressions and unequal opportunities.

It is important for me to reiterate my vantage point as a Black female scholar since Black women’s subjectivity in a diasporic context and space is a political venture. The distinct identity space of a Black academic within an Irish HEI necessitates a standpoint which recognises the validity of Nikol Alexander-Floyd’s observation that at the foundation of much intellectual culture are racist and sexist assumptions that preclude Black women from the life of the mind (2010: 810). My academic work and activism are heavily enmeshed with my experience as being Black and Irish, or to use my earlier collocation Irish while Black, with all its embodied sociogenetic meaning. Echoing the Ghanaian scholar, George J. Sefa Dei, I do not and will not claim to be speaking from a disinterested stance and position (Dei, 2017: 4). I recognise that I embrace Walter Rodney’s concept of the ‘guerrilla intellectual’ (Mwangi, 2022: 213), that is the intellectual who must engage also in grassroots activism and socio-political struggles to effect real change for their community.

My focus as a Black academic teaching Black Studies is to read and analyse the university through a critical Black lens. I aim to uncover hidden histories and connections that explain how dominant ideologies, which lay claim to authority over Africans with whose conditions and needs they may not be familiar, persist in the modern academic environment, while guarding against my scholarship becoming what Toyin Falola calls a ‘mere conduit for inculcating Western knowledge, values and worldviews’ (Falola, 2022: 9).

As operationalised within Trinity College Dublin, Black Studies fits very comfortably into the Department of Sociology because Black Studies looks at the embodied experiences, that is both the Black lived experience and the lived Black experience of

African and Afro-descent people and communities here in Ireland, in the wider diaspora(s), and in Africa. But Black Studies challenges Sociology, as it does other academic disciplines, if I may draw upon a phrase from Gurminder Bhambra, to ‘contextualise events and processes that are often presented as separate and to understand them within a connected frame of reference’ (Bhambra 2023: 22).

However, in keeping with Ahmed’s concerns, the positioning of Black scholarship within HEIs may reflect a reluctant concession to demands for diversity, potentially leading to the tokenisation of Black scholarship rather than its genuine elevation. While this is a debate for another day, it is essential to recognise the toll exacted by such an environment on the well-being of Black academics. Constantly confronting oppressive structures and tirelessly advocating for change can have deleterious impacts, emotionally, psychologically and epistemologically. The cumulative impact can be exhausting, potentially having detrimental effects on their careers and overall quality of life.

The connected frame of knowledge and power, woven together within the immanent power matrix of the Global North’s episteme, has long categorised Black people as existing beyond the scope of humanity, a classification which rendered them devoid of rationality, self-determination and by extension, participation in the faculties of universal reason. As Denise Ferreira da Silva posits, ‘[a]mong existing things, humanity is highest in the figuring of determinacy because it alone shares in the determining powers of universal reason, since it alone has free will, or self-determination’ (2017: 8). The paramount ontological enquiry for any academic field pertaining to Black Studies within a university must therefore reside in the examination of Black humanity, with a view to the parrhesiac restoration of the misappropriated reason and self-determination of those racialised as Black.

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Notes

1. These typographical choices hint at some of the complexity of Black Studies. I also note, but will not dwell on, terminological issues I have identified in my own research, especially when developing terms to reflect the complex specificity of Black identity(ies) in Ireland, and whose acronyms risk triggering deficiency narratives of Black people [such as Black Irish lived experience (BILE), Mixed African Irish descent (MAID) or African Irish decent (AID)].

2. Whatever that might entail!
3. Or, more accurately, diasporas (Dei, 2017).
4. For example, Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC). The Business Case for Diversity and Inclusion. Available at: <https://www.ibec.ie/influencing-for-business/diversity-and-inclusion/business-case>.
5. In addition to the extensive work done by academic and activist Ebon Joseph on interrogating the surface-level rhetoric (as opposed to actual substance) of Irish diversity, other voices (amongst many) which challenge the marginalisation of the Black embodied experience in Ireland include #iamirish, #BlackandIrish, and the Association of Mixed Race Irish (AMRI).
6. Hilary Carey, a leading historian of empires and religion, has asserted “the outbreak of Irish foreign missions ... tantamount to a second scramble for Africa” (Carey, 2008: 17).
7. For more general discussions about the specifics of class within an Irish context, Hatfield (2019) and Lane (2010), are useful introductions.
8. Other headline findings from the report include racial discrimination was prevalent in Irish education, with 24% reporting discrimination, and 39% of Black African parents noted offensive comments at school, alongside high rates of physical attacks. In employment, 41% experienced racial discrimination while job hunting and 42% at work. Housing discrimination was also prevalent, with 43% experiencing bias when seeking accommodation, and overcrowded living conditions affected 41% of people of African descent in Ireland. Only 10% owned property, in stark contrast to the 70% ownership rate among the general population.
9. A concept to which I will return in future scholarship.
10. Social media has a ready surfeit of such artefacts. Readers are encouraged to sample the Reddit comments which accompanied a post discussing that Trinity College Dublin were setting up the module that I currently teach. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/ireland/comments/hc6hhr/black_studies_module_to_be_offered_by_trinity_as/
11. I am grateful to Ronit Lentin for introducing me to the concept of the Uncanny (Lentin, 2016).
12. It is impossible to discuss ‘race’ in Ireland without also noting the abiding and pernicious essence of the racism and deleterious racialisation faced by the indigenous ethnic group, Irish Travellers.
13. For discussion, see *inter alia*, Akenson (1997); Hart (2002); Riach (1976); Rodgers (2007); Rodgers (1997); and Mixed Museum at mixedmuseum.org.uk.
14. And even from Irish mythology (see stories about the Fomorians, Gormund and his 160,000 Africans, etc.).
15. Reflecting the performative nature of ‘race’ itself, both for the racist and the victim, since the latter is obliged to perform ‘race’ (Mullen, 2023).
16. My formulation, literally ‘the soul or essence of the Irish people’.

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