

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

The Insistence of Blackness and the Persistence of Antiracism in Ireland

Philomena Mullen 

Trinity College Dublin, Dublin 2, Ireland

Correspondence: Philomena Mullen (mpmullen@tcd.ie)

Received: 11 November 2024 | **Revised:** 31 January 2025 | **Accepted:** 12 March 2025

Keywords: Black Irish identity | epistemic erasure | generational antiracism | Irish Black Studies | situated resistance

ABSTRACT

This paper positions Ireland as a critical site for examining the insistence of blackness and an antiracism created and sustained through Irish ethnonationalist imaginaries and exclusionary processes. Drawing on connected sociologies and Irish Black Studies, this enquiry argues that antiracism in Ireland operates as a generational force, shaping racial boundaries of belonging for those racialised as Black. Blackness is problematised as both a product of imposed racial frameworks and a generative category, one that resists the confines of traditional diasporic trajectories. This paper advances a rhizomatic understanding of blackness and being Black in the Irish context—as both product and *poiêsis*—as a form of diasporic linkage. The emergence of Irish Black Studies at Trinity College Dublin offers a critical corrective to dominant frameworks within Irish historiography and sociology, frameworks that erase the epistemic and material presence of blackness in Ireland. By engaging blackness not as a static identity but as a site of rupture and resistance, Irish Black Studies cultivates a disruptive force that redefines the potential for transnational solidarities and epistemic reclamation within and beyond the Irish context.

1 | Introduction

Confronted with national discourses that construct Irishness as inherently White and ‘ethno-racially rigid’ (Lentin and Moreo 2015, 4), Ireland’s exclusionary practices in relation to blackness¹ foreground the persistence of antiracism within the national imaginary. Blackness in 21st-century Ireland is mostly ‘borrowed’ (Walcott 2003, 146) through recent migration patterns. Out of a total population of 5,149,139, the 2022 census data reveal a growing Black population in Ireland, with 67,546 individuals identifying as African, reflecting a 17% increase from the 2016 figures (CSO 2022). A total of 8699 individuals identified as Black or Black Irish (from any other Black background), representing a 28% rise. The combined number of those identifying as African and those in the broader Black or Black Irish category constitutes approximately 1.5% of the total population.² This figure is significant enough to warrant critical research on the positioning of blackness within the largely monoracial nation, especially in the light of the demographic patterns

indicating a youth predominance within the African group, where over 40% are aged between 0 and 19 years (CSO 2022).

Ireland as a site for examining blackness offers a singular environment for exploring how antiracism is configured and how the Black community in Ireland resists this framing. The island’s context diverges from the racialised-as-Black diasporic formations encountered in societies with either enduring legacies of chattel slavery—such as the United States or the Caribbean—or in colonial metropole-diaspora contexts, such as the United Kingdom or France. Unlike these locations, where blackness is deeply enmeshed in historical narratives and community legacies grounded in generational continuity, blackness in Ireland is largely shaped by recent African migratory flows and their ‘ontology of African mobility’ (Knudsen and Rahbek 2016, 292). That is not to say that blackness has no history on the island prior to this migration (as we will see below), but its imprint remains less evident in the contours of the nation’s self-conception and historiography. The majority of these migrants come from

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2025 The Author(s). *Australian Journal of Social Issues* published by John Wiley & Sons Australia, Ltd on behalf of Australian Social Policy Association.

South and West Africa, with the largest number from Nigeria; indeed, the category African 'was sometimes interchangeable with' Nigerian in Irish official discourse (O'Brien-Olinger 2016, 32). This further differentiates it from its UK neighbour, where Black migration came first from the Caribbean during the 1940s–1980s, before shifting in the 1990s to a predominately African migration. Ireland's particular Black demographic configuration, alongside its complex colonial histories, necessitates an analytical framework that captures a racialised social space emerging through postcolonial tensions of problematised migration and neoliberal spatial ordering.

The Celtic Tiger era (mid-1990s–2000s), characterised by substantial economic growth due to globalised neoliberalisation, foreign direct investment, tax incentives, export-oriented growth and the ever-increasing need for a skilled workforce, fundamentally altered Ireland's migration patterns. This transformation from emigrant nursery (MacLaughlin 1994) to one of the world's most globalised nations, with an increasing demand for migrant workers (McCabe 2013), created a tension between Ireland's need for migrant labour to sustain economic growth and the perceived existential need to maintain a homogeneous national identity, especially in the face of an increase in African migration to Ireland. While the presence of migrants from 199 different countries (Waterhouse 2014) demonstrated the potential for a more vibrant multiculturalism, the influx of immigrants in general, and Africans in particular (Lentin 2005), was instead constituted as a problem. This diversification challenged notions of Irishness and ethnic homogeneity (White, Christian, settled population³), sparking racial tensions and restrictionist migration policies.

This 'fatal coupling' of race and citizenship (Gilmore 2002, 15) was exploited by the Irish state so as to (d)evolve into a crisis (Mullen 2024a). Drawing on the well-established framework of securitisation, the state catalysed a transition in public discourse away from the potential generative or reparative force of such migration to a legitimised exclusion and policing of racialised-as-Black bodies. Highlighting the ways in which neoliberal globalisation converges with colonial anxieties around purity and autonomy, the state invoked tropes of contamination to preclude any genuine inclusion of Black identities within the Irish national project. Nowhere is this more evident than in the construction of viable migratory routes for Africans into Ireland. Elisa Joy White has noted '[f]or Nigerians, asylum becomes the most viable means of gaining access to opportunities in Ireland', with 4050 Nigerians applying for asylum in 2002, whereas only 54 new work permits and 33 renewals were issued to Nigerians that year (2008, 70).

The passage of the 2004 Citizenship Referendum, which changed the entitlement to citizenship from *jus soli* to *jus sanguinis*, was a significant development in this context, as it eliminated the automatic right to citizenship for children of non-national parents born on the island.⁴ A dialectical of migration controls that embraces an 'implicitly white Western position in racial hierarchies of a neocolonial globalized economy' (Huber 2022, 778) and 'racialized governance [...] routinised through euphemisms, myths and stories' (Moriarty 2006, 126) established Irishness as being based on bloodline descent. The African migrant faced what I have characterised as xeno/miso-phenotypic prejudice,

an interleaved discrimination rooted in both bias and aversion related to their blackness (Mullen 2024b), and the creation, if I may borrow a word from Sylvia Wynter, of 'throwaway lives' (1994, 53). From a metacritical perspective, the referendum also created a distinction between blackness and noncitizenship, which is pertinent to this paper as it forces a rethinking of antiblackness as an exclusionary mechanism—one that racialises access to national belonging.

And so, the editors' invitation to frame this analytic work on antiblackness as a provocation—given that provocation implicates agency—offers an ideal opportunity to foreground the interrogation and problematisation of blackness within Irish onto-epistemological frameworks, which rationalise the exclusion of those racialised-as-Black in Ireland. Ongoing research by the author (discussed in part in Mullen (2024b)) argues that the presence of blackness within the historical record has been systematically denied, fluctuating between the ultracrepidarian proclamations of a homogeneously White Ireland and racial performativities that align the Irish self with whiteness. Blackness—as both product and *poiësis*—then becomes not merely an imposed social or ontological identity, but a relational resistance, pushing against state-sanctioned erasure and challenging the racialised logic that ties Irish identity to this imagined White normativity. The interrogation presented in this paper positions antiblackness as an active, structural force in Irish society—a force that reproduces racial exclusions and delineates the boundaries of belonging. By engaging with refusal as an analytical practice, as well as a 'grammar of possibility' (Camp 2017, 17)—a 'quarrying inwards', if you will, 'before reaching outwards' (Soyinka 2012, 20)—this paper asserts blackness in Ireland as a mode of epistemic rupture, which disrupts the social and historical narratives confining Black lives within racialised frameworks. While conscious that '[n]ation-centered discourse can only be a trap that prohibits black folks from sharing common feeling, especially when common actions and practices of domination seem to present themselves time and again in different spaces/places/nations' (Walcott 2003, 147), this paper argues that blackness in Ireland must be read within an Irish frame of reference more than from an African or the United States/the United Kingdom/European/Caribbean-centric diasporic one. Global processes of antiblackness are anchored in localised onto-epistemologies, and produce distinct, context-specific forms of blackness.

1.1 | Terminology as Refusal (Or Rather Terminology as the Start of Engagement)

To be racialised-as-Black in Ireland involves navigating a range of imposed identities, starting with the term Black itself. When Antonio de Nebrija, author of *Gramática de la lengua castellana*, explained to Queen Isabella in 1492 that 'language is the consort of Empire' (DeGraff 2024), he was articulating how language works as a technology of power. Language acts not as a neutral descriptive tool but as an apparatus of containment. In interrogating blackness (and exposing antiblackness), it behoves Black Critical scholars (and Black scholars engaging critically) to take the time to define the terms being used, as well as their limits, for the purposes of facilitating understanding, but also as an invitation to colleagues to engage and challenge. In dedicating a

substantial portion of this paper to an analysis of terms used, I position this as a form of epistemic refusal. Such linguistic precision is not mere semantic exercise but reclamation and refusal that seek to unsettle static, external definitions of Black identity and experience configured by the dominant and epistemically violent structures and schema. As such, it aligns with an emancipatory praxis, which insists on disrupting Ireland's sediment of racialised classifications and conceptual legacies. The discursive space surrounding Black identity, still nascent and the lexicon of blackness, equally emergent, necessitate a double refusal: a rejection of externally imposed racialised categories and a critique of local frameworks that essentialise blackness.

While the term Black Irish is increasingly adopted by younger generations of Black individuals in Ireland as a form of self-identification and by scholars,⁵ I will use the metonymic term Black rather than racialised-as-Black, alongside the specification 'in Ireland' where relevant, to refer to those of African or Afro-descent who possess the embodied experience and knowledge of being racialised-as-Black in Ireland. The use of Black is not without its tensions in Ireland. As part of their refusal of imposed Irish categorisation and a desire to assert subjectivity and reject situated epistemologies, scholars such as Kwesi Tsri present cogent arguments against the symbolic reductions and categorical uses of the term (Tsri 2016a, 2016b). Tsri argues that using 'black' (lower case) and 'white' as human categories perpetuates the view of African inferiority because of their symbolic associations. This dichotomy, he argues, rooted in religious and linguistic frameworks, is reflective of a semantic system that valorises 'white' and denigrates 'black'. Efforts to reclaim a categorical use of blackness (lower case) fail on the grounds that the term buttresses racial inequality by embedding oppressive associations into African identities.

Njabulo Ndebele is correct to state that '[t]here is more to the world than the history of 'white' racism' (Manganyi 2019, 129) and such a reclamation of identity conjures up N. Chabani Manganyi's powerful affirmation that it is 'on the African continent [...] the great and intricate drama of being black-in-the-world is taking place' (Manganyi 1973, 3). However, a metanarrative that constructs blackness synecdochically as only Africanness, thus obviating the need for blackness, is reductive. This dialectic between Africanness and blackness implicates the tension between blackness as multiplicity or singularity. Is a b/Black identity singular? Or should it be understood as a collective narrative tied to struggle and resilience, which unites people of African descent, regardless of location? Stephen Small points out that '[t]here are currently just over 7 million black people in the 46 nations of Europe, the majority of whom are born and raised in Europe [and are] highly stratified by ethnicity, including language, religion, and family structure, as well as ancestry and national origins' (2019, 513). In articulating blackness, one encounters throughout the diaspora not a single, unified Black experience but 'multiple experiences, subject positions, and fissures within Blackness' (Anderson 1995, 38).

Korang (2004) suggests that despite their diverse experiences and internal disputes, Black people cannot escape the historical burden imposed by the significance of blackness in the modern world, shaped by intersections of class, gender and place (both symbolic and material). Places, as Johanne Trew reminds us are

'not merely physical but are also cultural, historical and psychical – they can be imagined' (2009, 31). While Africanness ties blackness to a specific origin, it risks reducing the manifold expressions of Black life to a single locus, overlooking the cultural, political and philosophical developments that have emerged in diasporic contexts. A universal Africanness homogenises and subsumes difference within the Black diasporic community and excludes the particularities of diasporan experiences.

Blackness as both historical production and critical stance 'reaches beyond any one diasporic experience' (Partridge 2022, 11). It is these diasporic linkages of 'envisioned selves' (Biko 1996, 49) that cultivate a collective consciousness and a resistant politics (or Ndlovu's (2012, 155) 'resistance stories'⁶) as counternarratives to essentialism across transnational contexts. Blackness, as Moten notes, is an 'extended movement of a specific upheaval' (2003, 2)—an ongoing resistance that challenges the assumptions equating personhood with particular subjectivities. This movement pressures the boundaries of categorical identity imposed by phenotype. Phenotype, of course, is but 'one paradigm in the racial matrix, one that developed late and always operated in relation or in tension with the older paradigms of class and religion' (Ndiaye and Markey 2023: xvii). Phenotype is to be understood not just as a static set of characteristics but as a dynamic and evolving construct influenced by historical, social and cultural contexts that go beyond the ocularcentric epidermalisation of racial difference (skin colour, hair texture and facial features). The sensory aspects of phenotype are well-documented, with nonvisual cues and sociocultural markers—accents, names, home/street addresses, mannerisms, styles of dress, foods and odours—interpellating racialised identities. Obasogie (2013), for example, has demonstrated that his blind participants internalised racial concepts regarding Black Americans, relying on nonvisual means such as language, social interactions and embedded cultural narratives.

Being-black-in-the-world (Manganyi 1973) is not simply being born into a skin, but an existential obligation to engage with:

questions pertaining to blackness and its relationality to whiteness; the contingent nature of blackness in various historical, temporal, and spatial contexts; the embodied, affective, and psychical components of Black subjectivity; the continued marketisation of blackness within contemporary capitalism; and the im/possibilities of a transgressive blackness that extends beyond its hegemonic essentialisation.

(Stevens et al. 2017, 461)

I am cognisant of the ineluctably violent practices of being racialised-as-Black in Ireland, which incurs what I term 'rudification' (a Gaelicisation of the Césairean concept of 'chosification' (Césaire 1950, 23), 'rud' being the Irish for 'thing')—that dehumanising process by which the lived experiences and affective dimensions of the Black body are annihilated, reduced to static, observable phenomena and subaltern positionality. This rudification is especially acute in the case of African migrants who may become b/Black (with its associated racial inferiority and fascination) for the first time upon their arrival in Ireland. This

becoming racialised-as-Black inexorably leads to the process of rendering them 'ungeographic' (McKittrick 2006, 10) through state practices and discourses aimed at denying and excluding blackness from the spatial narratives that define the nation.

I employ the term Black then not as an 'assigned category about who can and cannot be Man, and therefore human' (Crawley 2020, 29), and thus imposed by dominant discourses around 'race' and those racialised-as-Black, but as a means of tracing the possibilities of thinking about blackness as holding full subjective agency, so as to defy fixed, ontological designations. Here, blackness is not a condition in the restrictive, phenotypic sense imposed by an essentialised reading of the 'between' in Du Bois's concept of 'double consciousness'—that is, as a series of 'deficit racialised discourses and social constructs' (Udah 2023, 128). Rather, it operates relationally, as an expression of resistance to rigid ontological determinism (Jung 2019). Blackness, thus understood, exists not as an ontological fact but as a form of paraontology that exists alongside or outside traditional ontological structures, yet possesses a definitive *being* in a broadly Fanonian sense (Sithole 2016). I say broadly as I am wary of such a totalising understanding of blackness as it is invariably (though inconsistently) gendered; normativity from Fanon to Wilderson is masculine and presents gender as contingency, not ontology.

Unlike conventional ontologies that suggest entities within structured, hierarchical categories, a paraontological blackness positions it as resistant to categorisation under dominant, normative frameworks of existence. Such a conception of blackness challenges us to reframe it not through the lens of the ontologically determined 'manner that is otherwise than being' (Moten 2008, 1747), but through a conceptualisation that foregrounds blackness as inherently resistant to such containment. This stands in opposition to the presumption that blackness could be enclosed by or subordinated within the apparatus of racialised phenomenology. Blackness is then revealed as an open, dynamic realm of possibility and relationality, a relationality that is embedded in the 'betweenness' of the Du Boisian formulation.

In arguing for an understanding of blackness as paraontology, I propose that we may also consider its diasporic linkages as suggesting the need to comprehend a rhizomatic understanding of blackness. I envision blackness as a complex, nonhierarchical and connected network of experiences, identities, histories and cultures. Rather than being defined by a single origin or linear path, a rhizomatic blackness acknowledges and values the relational manifestations of Black life and thought across diasporic and historical boundaries. It stresses the nonlinear and subversive connections that blackness forms across different social and political terrains. So, a blackness in an Irish context connects to but does not replicate blackness in a British, African or other contexts; it simply forms new connections based on local histories of racialisation processes and resistance to essentialism.

Essentialism, of course, leads us to antiblackness. I use 'antiblackness' rather than 'anti-B/blackness' in my work. Using antiblackness as a single, unhyphenated term reflects a critical onto-epistemological position that recognises antiblackness not as an external opposition to individual Black persons but as an ontological and epistemological condition that subverts

and denies Black existence itself. By rejecting the hyphen, antiblackness signifies a pervasive, systemic negation that onto-epistemologically constructs blackness as nonbeing and limits Black existence within a framework of negation.

The relationship between blackness and antiblackness is not one of ontological dependency but rather a dialectical engagement wherein antiblackness emerges as a systematic negation that seeks to render blackness invisible and nonexistent within the overarching structures of power and domination. Antiblackness best characterises the production/reproduction cycle of racialising logics projected onto the Black and 'putatively biological human body' (Weheliye 2014, 5). Antiblackness is not incidental to the Black experience but constitutive. Frank Wilderson makes the case that 'the structure of the entire world's semantic field ... is sutured by anti-Black solidarity' (2010, 58), which ensures that blackness is not merely marginalised but fundamentally negated in its capacity for recognition within a normative social structure. Black existence is systematically denied the ontological status afforded to others, situating blackness as a condition outside the sphere of social and symbolic life.

Which raises the question; from a decolonial perspective, is the intractability of antiblackness a condition of Western modernity? This complex, 'chicken-or-egg' debate about causality would see colonialism *qua* antiblackness as prioritising colonialism as the dominant frame, situating antiblackness as arising from or functioning as a specific dimension within the broader structure of colonialism. While colonialism may engender various forms of exploitation, extractivism and domination, one of its essential aspects is the construction and perpetuation of antiblackness as a necessary corollary to the colonial project. Its inversion, antiblackness *qua* colonialism would suggest that antiblackness itself serves as the primary framework, with colonialism being one (though not the only) form it takes in its pursuit of subjugation. This *ur*-antiblackness primed European colonisers to see blackness as synonymous with nonbeing, leading to the brutal hierarchies and racial stratifications that colonialism would later enforce to turn Black bodies into objects of profit, labour and power. This is a critical debate for Black scholarship, though I should like to suggest that a foundational antiblackness helps explain 'the incommensurability between the terms of the investigator's analytic and the subaltern as "object" of investigation' (Cherniavsky 2011, 157) when it comes to interrogating blackness (and whiteness as well).

Finally, while it is beyond the scope of this paper, talking about colonialism within an Irish context raises its indeterminacy. Ireland as colony, or 'metropolitan colony' since 'both Ireland and England shared the same language, legal code, urban culture and geopolitical location' (Castle 2001, 7), is best understood as a 'complicated semi-peripheral "mixed colony"' (Khoo 2024, 79). This framing acknowledges the distinct socio-political conditions that mark Ireland's colonial past and complicate its claimed postcolonial present, especially in the ways racial codifications have been embedded within its neoliberal order. The assertion that Ireland exists as a fully postcolonial state overlooks the complex realities of its historical proximity to British imperial power. Loyal (2011, 173) contends that '[a]lthough born as an anti-imperialist state, the modern Irish State fits easily into the ethnic and racial hierarchies that were ultimately created

by the imperialist conquest of the world.' The Irish embrace of a white Western modernity is further underpinned by its deficit framing of blackness as 'the collective embodiment of the malnourished child' (White 2002, 112) through its missionary work in Africa, and its 'economic subordination on the geographic periphery of an integrating European Union [which] facilitated a relatively racially homogeneous society' (Huber 2022, 776).

I will employ the term 'postcolonial' without a hyphen to reflect the theoretical stance that emphasises the continuity of colonial legacies rather than a disjointed transition from one state to another. The hyphenated form 'postcolonial'⁷ within the literature suggests a stadial break from colonialism, with an assumed teleological progression from colonial subjugation to liberated self-determination. This framing risks oversimplifying the complexities of Ireland's colonial histories and the persistent influence of colonial structures on the contemporary state. Postcolonial invites a more critical engagement with the enduring effects of coloniality, particularly in relation to the simultaneous performance of postcolonial sovereignty with a latent coloniality that manifests as antiblackness.

1.2 | Antirblackness as Generational Renewal

Antirblackness pervades Irish society, from the regular attacks on public figures such as Olympian Rhasidat Adeleke (Browne 2024) to the mistreatment of a 12-year-old Black gymnast by the national body overseeing the sport. In a line-up of 13 other young White gymnasts, she was ignored during a medal ceremony, prompting intervention from Simone Biles and resulting in a muted apology from Gymnastics Ireland (Graham-Harrison 2023). This animus extends to the performative callousness surrounding Ireland's own George Floyd, the December 2020 fatal shooting by Gardaí⁸ of George Nkencho, a Black man experiencing mental health issues at the time of his death.

Antirblackness in Ireland is rooted in historical currents and is not temporally confined to the recent African migrations of Celtic Tiger and post-Celtic Tiger periods. It has deeper historical roots predating these economic phases and needs to be conceptualised as part of what I term a generational antirblackness, being coeval with the birth of the state and even the proto-state. The secular father of the nation, Arthur Griffith, projected a view of blackness as having no place in the Irish public conversation, spending more than a quarter of his 1913 preface to John Mitchel's 1854 *Jail Journal* defending Mitchel's proslavery and anti-Black views, adding, 'as if excuse were needed for an Irish Nationalist declining to hold the negro his peer in right' (Griffith 1913: xii).

In the same year that the Irish Free State was established, Matthew Brennan's 1922 farce, *The Young Man from Rathmines*, was playing to packed houses in the national theatre. The play offers a revealing lens through which the Irish were taught to read blackness, embedding racial exclusion within the cultural fabric of newly independent Ireland. Set in a Dublin tenement, the Dowd family has aspirations for upward mobility through the marriage of their daughter to George Jackson, a medical student from Rathmines.⁹ Their

hopes are dashed when George is revealed in the final moments to be Black, prompting a violent rejection as the father prepares in the final lines of the farce to thrash the young man for his unexpected raciality:

MR DOWD: An' it was for a black haythen that I was made put on this.

(Wrenches off the collar and dashes it on the ground, then strips off his coat, and starts rolling up his shirt sleeves). Just wait a minit, me buckoo, an' I'll give ye such a pair of black eyes that the rest of yer face'll look white. CURTAIN.

(Brennan 1923, 23)

The farce recalls the tradition of racial caricature and blackface in Ireland, normalising the exclusion of Black bodies from Irish identity, even in its most impoverished forms. Whiteness, as depicted here, remains an insurmountable barrier to social and racial inclusion, and blackness is constituted in the Irish imaginaries as being what I have termed Unexpected Irishness (Mullen 2024b), a dissonance in the nation's imagined White spaces, discourses and epistemes when confronted by Irish blackness. This antirblackness (the first person deported from the new state was a Black man from Jamaica, the picaresque Prince Shervington of Abyssinia) is a persistent theme within Ireland's cultural architecture throughout the 20th century. The Irish antijazz movement in the 1920s-1930s, which, although ostensibly targeting British cultural influence, also bore distinctly racial connotations. Large crowds marched against jazz, and the population was warned not to 'disgrace our Irish Saints' but to resist the 'music of John Bull, niggers and cannibals' (Leitrim Observer 1934). The racial animus of the time was visible in newspaper accounts on the African students (and princes), Al-Haj Massaquoi and J.C. Messely, who recounted the overt racism they faced while studying in Dublin (Irish Independent 1932). If we look at newspaper accounts throughout the 20th century, reports of the violence of this antirblackness, from being fined for relations with White women to physical assaults, suggest a refusal to confront uncomfortable truths about Irish antirblackness, the dynamic of 'not knowing and not wanting to know' (Wekker 2016, 17).

This construction of blackness as Unexpected Irishness is an egregious manifestation of antirblackness as it denies a Black presence in Ireland pre-Celtic Tiger. From a historical perspective, this is surprising since a diarist in the popular *Freeman's Journal*, dated 23 October 1777-25 October 1777, felt able to chastise a crowd who interfered with a Black woman and child near a park in the fashionable part of the city centre:

...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.

While the historical record accepts the presence of a small number of celebrated Black swans (from Rachael Baptist, George Paddington, Pablo Paddington to renowned Black visitors such as Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass), the biologisation of Irishness as unchallenged whiteness fails to account for an Irish Black population from the 1700s. In Ireland, information on Black individuals emerges only sporadically, in newspapers, parish records and other fragmented sources which refer to 'blackamoors' or 'negro blacks' (Hart 2002, 20). These scattered references hint that the Black presence was notable, particularly within urban centres. Reports, such as an account from 1791 describing a 'coach-full of sable Africans' (ibid, 21), suggest that Black individuals in Ireland may have occasionally formed recognisable groups. Hart estimates the Black population in Ireland in 18th century as between 2000 and 3000 individuals, concentrated mainly in urban hubs such as Dublin, Cork and Belfast. Dublin, in particular, appears to have had the highest concentration, with numbers potentially surpassing those in other European cities outside London. As Hart concludes, this figure, though modest, was as large as the recorded numbers of Black people in France, a country with a population four times greater than Ireland's. Within Europe, the scale of Ireland's Black population was likely only exceeded in England and, perhaps, Spain or Portugal, and their accretion into the wider pool of Irishness may account for the following anecdote contained in the *Freeman's Journal*, dated 3 October 1843. During a meeting at the Dublin Corn Exchange, 'a black boy respectably attired' mounted the platform and shook hands with the great Irish political figure and champion of Frederick Douglass, Daniel O'Connell, saying how glad he was to see O'Connell as 'he save [sic] the life of black people'.¹⁰

By the 20th century, Eslanda Goode Robeson, wife of Paul, could write that she and her husband found Black people in Ireland (as well as in England, Scotland and France) 'in the universities, on the docks, in the slums' (Robeson 1945, 15). From the 1930s onwards, hundreds of colonial students and professionals such as doctors and engineers from several African states came to work and study.¹¹ One enduring legacy of the arrival of these students were the hundreds of Black children born to White Irish mothers and African fathers. The author is one such baby, a Black glyph within the White Irish imaginaries, and like many of her contemporaries, was incarcerated in the Irish institutional care system, spending her first 16 years in an industrial school (see Mullen (2023) for discussion of this system). By the time the sociologist, Fr Micheál Mac Gréil, conducted his 1972 survey of attitudes to racial and ethnic difference, his 3000 Dublin participants revealed a profound undercurrent of antiblackness, decades before Ireland's Celtic Tiger-era inward migration. His findings of 'a high and severe degree' of animosity regarding Black people (Mac Gréil 1977, 244) foregrounds this pervasive antiblackness.

Antiblackness in Ireland continues to manifest through the synecdochical framing of all migration into the country as Black migration. Ronit Lentin summed this up by drawing on the example of a demonstration in June 2003, where a large crowd of migrant parents of citizen children gathered outside to protest the impending deportation of migrant parents of Irish-born children. Although most of the demonstrators were White migrants from Eastern Europe, the press chose to represent

the demonstration through a picture of a Black African baby (Lentin 2004). An important text from the Celtic Tiger era entitled *Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Ireland* (Cullen 2000) exemplifies this tendency to visually conflate migration with blackness. Although the text addresses migrants from varied racial and ethnic backgrounds, its cover features a Black child gazing up at several Black men, symbolically recasting immigration as a distinctly Black experience. Such visual framing prioritises Black bodies as emblematic of foreignness and overshadows the complexities of Ireland's migratory patterns. This imagery reinforces a narrative that positions blackness as synonymous with immigration, embedding antiblackness within Irish public consciousness by overdetermining blackness as inherently foreign.

Such overdetermination seeps into Ireland's political and social conversations. In 1997, politician, Gay Mitchell, encountered this antiblackness on the doorsteps of central Dublin, as one prospective voter predicated his vote in this manner: 'get the nignogs out and I'll vote for you' (Corless 2007, 257). By the time of the 2004 Citizenship Referendum, the debate, which on the surface pertained to reflect ethnonational/neoliberal concerns that the 'nation [would] surrender [a] vibrant merit-based society for a pond-life of refugees' (Gurdgiev 2004), very firmly rested on a bedrock of 'keeping the niggers out' (Brannigan 2009, 223). This anti-Black messaging was rendered incarnate in the hanging of a Black body in effigy from a railway bridge in Longford town just a few days before the vote took place. A bag was placed over the doll's head, and a sign hung around its neck which read 'Niggers go home—you'll never be Irish' (Brannigan 2009, 222).

1.3 | Refusal as Praxis: Reclaiming Blackness in Ireland

I argued above that blackness in Ireland constitutes an aporia in the Irish historical record; it also does in relation to global blackness. One of the hardest things I face as a scholar and as a Black woman is the repetitive query I get from colleagues or through general enquiries from the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe, are there really Black people in Ireland? Black refusal on the island is a resistance to this epistemic erasure through the means of developing a rhizomatic connection to global blackness. This refusal brought Black people in Ireland together with other racialised groups to help form the community action group, Harmony in 1986 (a decade before the Celtic Tiger), constituting their visible blackness as both sites and sights of resistance.¹² The work currently being done by young Black academics in Ireland's universities, who are interrogating their community(ies) with a lens previously impossible within the epistemic space, speaks to this rhizomatic embrace of Irish blackness with African and diasporic blackness. My Black Studies PhD student is of Irish and Caribbean heritage and is introducing a new perspective to debates about the ineluctable modality of Irish blackness beyond a dominant African-focussed one. One example of the strength of this refusal to be erased is the number of young Black people who are adopting the Black Irish label and recognising the viability of a Black identity in Ireland. The chiasmic framing of 'Irish is not Black, Black is not Irish' is not for them, as their modes of refusal, negotiated on individual and collective levels, assert agency and belonging. The vitality of organisations such

as Black & Irish (blackandirish.com) and #IamIrish ([iamirish.org](https://twitter.com/iamirish)) amplifies this insistent refusal to be erased, and speaks to understanding blackness as a world-making practice that this old body (author!) wishes had been around when she was growing up in 20th-century Ireland.

In turning to my understanding of (and contribution to) this refusal, I will discuss Irish Black Studies (IBS), at Trinity College Dublin (henceforth Trinity), a module I devised, coordinate and on which I lecture. IBS was introduced at Trinity following the events of 2020 (the resurgence of Black Lives Matter, the killings of George Floyd and the Black Irishman, George Nkencho) as part of a spirit of a national reckoning with Ireland's antiblackness. Arising from a student-led campaign, and housed in the Department of Sociology, IBS emerged as a corrective module to the Eurocentric biases within the university, a space that long neglected Black experiences and epistemologies (Dei 2017; Wynter 2003).¹³

The strength of IBS is that it contends that blackness in Ireland embodies a decolonial struggle aligned with Global South epistemologies. Although geographically located in the Global North, Ireland shares historical and sociopolitical affinities with the Global South due to its colonial past and ongoing encounters with British imperialism, which continue to shape its racial and social hierarchies. This colonial legacy establishes it as a site where the internalised hierarchies of race and ethnicity mostly¹⁴ echo the stratifications typical of Global South spaces. By viewing the Global South as an epistemic framework that captures the representation of historically marginalised groups, we can see IBS as intrinsically linked to a space of epistemic resistance. This is especially true when examining how Black lived experiences and identities have been rendered both invisible and hypervisible within Ireland's racialised cultural architecture, an erasure that parallels colonial mechanisms of silencing and misrecognition.

While welcomed by the student community, the module has had to accommodate the neoliberal logic within higher education, where degrees are increasingly measured by their economic utility. The student body at Trinity remains predominantly white and privileged, and IBS is offered as an elective, which has the potential to marginalise it within the curriculum. Furthermore, the module's emphasis on epistemic disobedience and subjugated knowledges directly challenges not only neoliberal educational framings but also Ireland's projected amnesia regarding its own racial projects. This carries the risk of positioning IBS as peripheral to College's academic engagement.

Despite this, the module has become embedded within the university. Although originally intended to run for just three terms, the module is now in its fourth year (two terms/year, +70 students/term), and has secured the author a tenure-track position. The module is frequently the students' first encounter with race (as the customary way that 'dehumanization achieves ideological normality' (Gilmore 2007, 243)) and blackness in an academic setting. A metric worth noting is that many students on the module have continued to pursue further studies in race and ethnicity within the university, especially at postgraduate level. Other students report employing the module's reparatory epistemologies within their own disciplines, thus demonstrating

the lasting impact of the module beyond the confines of the classroom.

My vision for IBS was for it to be a praxis of community dialogue, engagement and a collective set of 'critical practices of interrogation performed on other theories' (Hunter 2007, 7). It incorporates lectures from African scholars and artists, a former Black Panther,¹⁵ and experts on West and East African colonialism in keeping with its conception of a rhizomatic blackness of related embodiment. These critical practices seek to disrupt the archival record. The White, and determinedly masculinised space of historical archives arise because they are 'exclusive, exclusionary, and deeply implicated in western discourses of race and empire' (Ndiaye and Markey 2023, 84), leading inevitably to the 'archival silences' (Tanksley 2023, 559) of Black 'lives and mobilities' (560).¹⁶ This year's theme for Irish Black History Month was reclaiming narratives. It is this reclamation of history's 'particular bundle of silences', as Michel Trouillot (1995, 27) so eloquently phrased it that unsettles the implicit assumptions of Irish historiography, and speaks to the role of IBS as Black refusal.

Finally, in lieu of a conclusion, I wish to outline that IBS currently attends to a current challenge of blackness as being onto-epistemically contested. As Black scholars, we find ourselves, amid the first universally televised genocide (of the racialised Palestinian people)—an atrocity we witness yet remain strangely unable to see—compelled to engage with distortive debates. The developing claim by Zionist Jews in the United States to be 'the new Blacks' (Kaufman 2024) empties blackness of its historical and ontological specificity. Stripped of its distinct relationship to racial capitalism and its legacies, its co-option is weaponised as an interchangeable, and therefore unviable signifier of oppression. In recalling Césaire's critique of Europe's moral collapse at the terminus of formal humanism (Césaire 1950), IBS argues that blackness, disfigured by this appropriation, ceases to be a force of resistance and becomes instead a symbol hollowed by its own co-option. Not merely an act of rhetorical subversion, this co-option enacts a profound erasure which treats blackness as yet another spectacle in the colonial theatre. For Black scholars, resistance lies in upholding the specificity of blackness as a refusal of colonial domination.

Author Contributions

Philomena Mullen: writing – original draft.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to my two reviewers, whose comments required me to examine and, oftentimes, challenge my own thinking.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

- ¹ I am sufficiently in agreement with Kwame Anthony Appiah (2020) as to follow his argument on capitalising 'Black' but use lowercase for 'blackness.'

- ² In addition to these numbers, my research suggests that some non-African Black people were among the 64,992 who chose a third option on the census form, Mixed or Other categories; so this percentage may be fractionally greater.
- ³ Ireland has a long history of Othering and status-differentiating Ireland's indigenous ethnic group, the Mincéirí (Irish Travellers), as well as a centuries-long Othering of White migrants such as the 17th-century Huguenots, Palatines in the 18th century, Jewish community since the 19th century, Belgians, Hungarians and even Irish Protestants in the 20th century.
- ⁴ Officially framed as an effort to curb citizenship tourism and align Irish law with European standards, the referendum was characterised by a racialised discourse targeting non-EU migrants, particularly Black Africans (Mullen 2024a). The campaign stoked anxieties about national identity, culminating in overt anti-Black messaging—including the hanging of a Black effigy from a railway bridge days before the vote. With 79% voting in favour, the referendum codified racial exclusions in Irish citizenship law.
- ⁵ Including by my PhD student, Eve Doran, the first doctoral candidate in Black Studies in Ireland.
- ⁶ I have been moved by multiple readings of Siyanda Ndlovu's 'I Am More (Than Just) Black. Contesting Multiplicity Through Conferring and Asserting Singularity in Narratives of Blackness', who died while preparing same for publication.
- ⁷ Or the insightful 'post-post-colonial' form suggested by Joseph O'Neill, a Cork-based writer of Irish-Turkish ancestry, in his appraisal of 2011 Ireland, 'the condition of Ireland, currently in its post-post-colonial Shit Creek period' (O'Neill 2011).
- ⁸ Irish police.
- ⁹ An affluent middle-class suburb of Dublin for much of the 19th and 20th centuries.
- ¹⁰ I am grateful to the remarkable work of William Hart for pointing me to both of these anecdotes in the *Freeman's Journal*. His contribution to Irish Black Studies is inestimable.
- ¹¹ A project I am coordinating in Trinity College Dublin has identified nearly 700 students during this time period from just this one university.
- ¹² I am currently working with Miriam Nyhan Grey and Eve Doran in digitising the Harmony archive.
- ¹³ Trinity's IBS is not alone in doing this; African-Irish scholar, Ebum Joseph, examines the Black condition, especially exclusionary practices in Irish employment, and runs the Institute of Antiracism Black Studies (iabs.ie).
- ¹⁴ The qualification is necessary, as Ireland was also an enthusiastic coloniser, through soft religious colonisation and as a helpmeet to the British colonial project.
- ¹⁵ Elmer Dixon, cofounder of the Seattle Chapter, and whose 1968 image—holding a rifle on the steps of the Washington state capitol building—is one of the most iconic photographs from the Black Power movement.
- ¹⁶ The example I like to provide my students is to imagine a group of future Black Studies scholars examining Irish census records, using my name and the fact I am Black, for information on racial formation in 20th century Ireland. The questions I pose is what will it reveal to them about being Black in Ireland, about how Irish people understood Blackness, the lived experience of being Black, or of how racism was embedded in Irish society during that time period, given my Blackness is not recorded until the 2006 census?

References

- Anderson, V. 1995. *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*. Continuum.
- Appiah, K. A. 2020. "The Case for Capitalizing the B in Black." <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-black-and-white/613159/>.
- Biko, S. 1996. *I Write What I Like: A Selection of His Writings*. Ravan Press.
- Brannigan, J. 2009. *Race in Modern Irish Literature and Culture*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Brennan, M. M. 1923. *The Young Man From Rathmines*. Talbot Press.
- Browne, N. 2024. "Sport Against Racism Ireland 'Appalled but Unsurprised' by Online Racist Abuse of Irish Athlete Rhasidat Adeleke." *Hot Press*, 17 June. www.hotpress.com/lifestyle-sports/sport-against-racism-ireland-appalled-but-unsurprised-by-online-racial-abuse-of-irish-athlete-rhasidat-adeleke-23030931.
- Campt, T. M. 2017. *Listening to Images*. Duke University Press.
- Castle, G. 2001. *Modernism and the Celtic Revival*. Cambridge University Press.
- Césaire, A. 1950. *Discours sur le Colonialisme*. Présences Africaines.
- Cherniavsky, E. 2011. "The Canny Subaltern." In *Theory After 'Theory'*, edited by J. Elliott and D. Attridge, 149–162. Routledge.
- Corless, D. 2007. *Party Nation: Ireland's General Elections*. Merlin.
- Crawley, A. 2020. *The Lonely Letters*. Duke University Press.
- CSO. 2022. "Census 2022." <https://www.cso.ie>.
- Cullen, P. 2000. *Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Ireland*. Cork University Press.
- DeGraff, M. 2024. "Linguistics for Liberation or for Domination?" <https://thetech.com/2024/08/22/degraff-linguistics-for-domination>.
- Dei, G. J. S. 2017. *Reframing Blackness and Black Solidarities Through Anti-Colonial and Decolonial Prisms*. Springer International Publishing.
- Gilmore, R. W. 2002. "Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography." *Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1: 15–24.
- Gilmore, R. W. 2007. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. University of California Press.
- Graham-Harrison, E. 2023. "Black Girl at Centre of Irish Gymnastics Race Row 'Badly Let Down', Says Ministry." *The Guardian*, 25 September 2023.
- Griffith, A. 1913. *Jail Journal of John Mitchel*. Gill & Son.
- Gurdgiev, C. T. 2004. "The Referendum: For." *The Irish Times*, 8 June 2004.
- Hart, W. A. 2002. "Africans in Eighteenth-Century Ireland." *Irish Historical Studies* 33, no. 129: 19–32.
- Huber, K. M. 2022. "Decolonizing Irishness: Assertions of Afro-Irish Self-Determination in Nicky Gogan and Paul Rowley's Seaview and Melatu Uche Okorie's This Hostel Life." *Interventions* 25, no. 6: 775–804.
- Hunter, I. 2007. "The Time of Theory." *Postcolonial Studies* 10, no. 1: 5–22.
- Irish Independent. 1932. "Dublin Charged With Discourtesy." 22 March 1932.
- Jung, M. K. 2019. "The Enslaved, the Worker, and Du Bois's Black Reconstruction: Toward an Under-Discipline of Antisociology." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 5, no. 2: 157–168.
- Kaufman, D. C. 2024. "The Josh Hammer Podcast, 2 October." <https://open.spotify.com/episode/5CCdfnNPZvW8fKcvmides7J>.
- Khoo, S. 2024. "Decolonising the Social Sciences." *Irish Journal of Sociology* 32, no. 1–2: 79–97.
- Knudsen, E. R., and U. Rahbek. 2016. *In Search of the Afropolitan: Encounters, Conversations, and Contemporary African Literature*. Rowman & Littlefield.

- Korang, K. L. 2004. "Where Is Africa? When Is the West's Other? Literary, Postcoloniality in a Comparative Anthropology." *Diacritics* 34, no. 2: 38–61.
- Leitrim Observer. 1934. "To Gaels of Breffni." 20 January, 1934.
- Lentin, R. 2004. "Strangers and Strollers: Feminist Notes on Researching Migrant M/Others." *Women's Studies International Forum* 27: 301–314.
- Lentin, R. 2005. "Black Bodies and Headless Hookers: Alternative Global Narratives for 21st Century Ireland." *Irish Review* 33: 1–12.
- Lentin, R., and E. Moreo. 2015. "Migrant Deportability: Israel and Ireland as Case Studies." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 6: 894–910.
- Loyal, S. 2011. *Understanding Immigration in Ireland: State, Capital, Labour in a Global Age*. Manchester University Press.
- Mac Gréil, M. 1977. *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ireland*. College of Industrial Relations.
- MacLaughlin, J. 1994. *Ireland: The Emigrant Nursery and the World Economy*. Cork University Press.
- Manganyi, N. C. 1973. *Being Black in the World*. Raven Press.
- Manganyi, N. C. 2019. *Being Black in the World*. Wits University Press.
- McCabe, S. 2013. "Ireland Once Again Among Top Globalised Countries." *Irish Independent*, 13 March 2013.
- McKittrick, K. 2006. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Moriarty, E. 2006. "Ireland and Race: Ideas, Intellectuals and Identities." PhD thesis, Trinity College Dublin (unpublished).
- Moten, F. 2003. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Moten, F. 2008. "Black Op." *PMLA* 123, no. 5: 1743–1747.
- Mullen, P. 2023. "Defying the Exclusionary Homogeneity of Irish Whiteness: Mixed-Race Children in Irish Industrial Schools in the Twentieth Century." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46, no. 7: 1456–1477.
- Mullen, P. 2024a. "Racialising Irishness: The 2004 Citizenship Referendum and Its Enduring Legacy." Paper presented at 'Racialised from the Start' Revisiting Ireland's Citizenship Debate: A 20-Year Retrospective, The Centre for Forced Migration Studies and Black Studies, Trinity College Dublin, 18 October 2024.
- Mullen, P. 2024b. "Black Unsettlement. Embodied Blackness and Black Studies in the Irish Context." *Irish Journal of Sociology* 32, no. 1–2: 8–27.
- Ndiaye, N., and L. Markey. 2023. *Seeing Race Before Race: Visual Culture and the Racial Matrix in the Premodern World*. ACMRS Press.
- Ndlovu, S. 2012. "'I Am More (Than Just) Black': Contesting Multiplicity Through Conferring and Asserting Singularity in Narratives of Blackness." In *Navigating Multiple Identities: Race, Gender, Culture, Nationality, and Roles*, edited by R. Josselson and M. Harway, 143–166. Oxford University Press.
- Obasogie, O. K. 2013. *Blinded by Sight: Seeing Race Through the Eyes of the Blind*. Stanford University Press.
- O'Brien-Olinger, S. 2016. *Police, Race and Culture in the 'New Ireland'*. Palgrave.
- O'Neill, J. 2011. "Man Without a Country. The Atlantic." <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/09/man-without-a-country/308604/>.
- Partridge, D. J. 2022. *Blackness as a Universal Claim: Holocaust Heritage, Noncitizen Futures, and Black Power in Berlin*. University of California Press.
- Robeson, E. G. 1945. *African Journey*. John Day.
- Sithole, T. 2016. "The Concept of the Black Subject in Fanon." *Journal of Black Studies* 47, no. 1: 24–40.
- Small, S. 2019. "Ethnicity, Race, and Black People in Europe." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity*, edited by S. Ratuva. Palgrave.
- Soyinka, W. 2012. *Of Africa*. Yale University Press.
- Stevens, G., D. Bell, C. Sonn, H. Canham, and O. Clennon. 2017. "Transnational Perspectives on Black Subjectivity." *South African Journal* 47, no. 4: 459–469.
- Tanksley, T. 2023. "Towards a Method of Black Feminist Archival Bricolage: Memory-Keeping Within, Beneath and Beyond the Archive." *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 38, no. 2: 559–581.
- Trew, J. D. 2009. *Place, Culture and Community: The Irish Heritage of the Ottawa Valley*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Trouillot, M.-R. 1995. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press.
- Tsri, K. 2016a. "Africans Are Not Black: Why the Use of the Term 'Black' for Africans Should Be Abandoned." *African Identities* 14, no. 2: 147–160.
- Tsri, K. 2016b. *Africans Are Not Black: The Case for Conceptual Liberation*. Routledge.
- Udah, H. 2023. "Anti-Black Racism and Othering: An Exploration of the Lived Experience of Black Africans Who Live in Australia." *Social Identities* 29, no. 2: 185–204.
- Walcott, R. 2003. *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada*. Insomniac Press.
- Waterhouse, K. 2014. *Ireland's District Court: Language, Immigration and Consequences for Justice*. Manchester University Press.
- Weheliye, A. G. 2014. *Habeas Viscus*. Duke University Press.
- Wekker, G. 2016. *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*. Duke University Press.
- White, E. J. 2002. "The New Irish Storytelling: Media, Representations and Racialised Identities." In *Racism and Anti-Racism in Ireland*, edited by R. Lentin and R. McVeigh. Beyond the Pale Publications.
- White, E. J. 2008. "Paradoxes of Diaspora, Global Identity and Human Rights: The Deportation of Nigerians in Ireland." *African and Black Diaspora* 2, no. 1: 67–83.
- Wilderson, F., III. 2010. *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Duke University Press.
- Wynter, S. 1994. "No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues." *Knowledge for the 21st Century* 1, no. 1: 42–73.
- Wynter, S. 2003. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." *New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3: 257–337.