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Decolonising Oxford: The Student Movement from Stuart Hall to Skin Deep

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In recounting our particular trajectory of decolonial student activism at Oxford University, what we hope to do in this chapter is to emphasise that any attempt to analyse and quantify the successes and failures of student-led movements must recognise that there are no ‘finished’ conversations. These narratives of the various Oxford-based movements, in particular the ‘I, too, am Oxford campaign’, the BME conference, Skin Deep and the Rhodes Must Fall Oxford (RMFO) movement, are examples of particular types of political interventions which occurred at a specific historical conjuncture. In these 2014–2016 campaigns, what we find are iterations of an ongoing struggle, which must continue to grow, adapt and respond to changing times and historical contexts.

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Linking Histories: Oxford Students Then and Now

In an essay entitled the ‘Life and Times of the First New Left’, the famed cultural theorist, sociologist, activist and one-time Oxford student, Stuart Hall reflects on the founding of the New Left Review back in the 1950s and the significance of having such a journal emerge from a conservative institution like Oxford. Hall writes,

How and why did this happen then—and why, of all places, partly in Oxford? In the 1950s universities were not, as they later became, centres of revolutionary activity. A minority of privileged left-wing students, debating consumer capitalism and the embourgeoisement of working-class culture amidst the ‘dreaming spires’, may seem, in retrospect, a pretty marginal political phenomenon. Nevertheless, the debate was joined with a fierce intensity, self-consciously counterposed to the brittle, casual confidence of Oxford’s dominant tone, set by the attempts of the ‘Hooray Henries’ of its time to relive *Brideshead Revisited*. In fact, Oxford also contained its rebel enclaves: demobbed young veterans and national servicemen, Ruskin College trade unionists, ‘scholarship boys’ and girls from home and abroad. Although they were unable to redefine its dominant culture, these outsiders did come to constitute an alternative—not to say beleaguered—intellectual minority culture. This was the *NLR* constituency.¹

At the time of his arrival in Oxford, Hall’s political sensibilities and inclinations were primarily anti-imperialist. Marxism would come later as Hall began to engage more regularly with leftist politics at the University. Hall explains,

I was sympathetic to the left, had read Marx and been influenced by him while at school, but I would not, at the time, have called myself a Marxist in the European sense. In any event, I was troubled by the failure of

¹Hall, Stuart. “The Life and Times of the First New Left”, *New Left Review* 61 (Jan/Feb 2010): 181.

orthodox Marxism to deal adequately with either ‘Third World’ issues of race and ethnicity, and questions of racism, or with literature and culture, which preoccupied me intellectually as an undergraduate.²

What is particularly significant about Hall’s recounting of his early days at Oxford is that almost seventy years later, his experience rings true for the types of politics that many politically engaged students of colour come to university with. Although today their politics are more often anti-racist as opposed to explicitly anti-imperialist. As it was in the 1950s, the left in Oxford continues to be a heterogeneous outfit that encompasses a wide range of views, making it hard to say what ‘the [student] left is’ definitively committed to.

There are, however, a few generalising statements that one can make: the student left is majority white, and while many are sympathetic to, and a small minority even seriously committed to anti-racist, decolonial and anti-imperial politics, for the most part the left has had limited engagement with these struggles since the end of Apartheid in South Africa in 1994. Moreover, whilst most in the student left are committed to wider societal structural change, that has not successfully translated to a sustained demand or consistent agitation for structural change within Oxford itself. Some of this certainly has to do with the fact that the student left has not been able to put forth a coherent programme for radical transformation that students can get behind. But in large part the inability of the student left to redefine the University’s dominant culture has more to do with banal realities such as the fact that students are generally only in university for three to four years, they tend to be separated by colleges and degree programs, and there exists no real sense of institutional memory which means that many student organisations either end up repeating work that has already been done by their predecessors, or are too invested in claiming for themselves the coveted title of ‘first...’ to continue with the work that others have already started.

²Hall, Stuart, “The Life and Times of the First New Left”, *New Left Review* 61 (Jan/Feb 2010): 179.

Skin Deep: Capturing the Legacy of Decolonial Voices

It is with this in mind that one should think about the emergence of Skin Deep, which was realised in its first iteration as an online platform created in January of 2014 on Facebook for Oxford students of colour. Much like how the New Left Review emerged for Stuart Hall and his fellow Oxonians as a space to articulate their frustrations, debate solutions and refine their nascent ideas as young Marxist intellectuals who were just beginning to come into political maturity, Skin Deep became a space in which students of colour could centre their voices and experiences at a predominantly white and academically conservative institution.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that Skin Deep had any real political or activist motivations from its inception. It was created primarily out of a sense of alienation that one of us, Anuradha Henriques, felt within the University and a sense that other students probably felt similarly. The initial online discussion forum (which is now called Race Matters) emerged at a time when there were few spaces in Oxford whose primary aim was to give matters surrounding race, racial representation and racial identity a platform. At its core, the goal of Skin Deep was to allow for the exploration of why racial equality is paramount, and how we can and should challenge the ways in which race is represented in the media, literature and education.

Skin Deep created a virtual space that existed outside of the ethno cultural societies like the Afro-Caribbean Society, whose concerns had over the years shifted from being political to primarily being concerned with providing entertainment, networking and helping prospective students apply to Oxford and enrolled students connect with job recruitment agencies. It also remained distinct from the Campaign for Racial Awareness (CRAE), a student union led campaign that gained prominence in 2012 when it published the much needed *100 Voices Campaign 2: Black and Minority Ethnic Students of Oxford Speak Out*.³

³Tuck, Stephen, and Henry L. Gates. 2014. *The Night Malcolm X Spoke at the Oxford Union: A Transatlantic Story of Antiracist Protest*. Oakland: University of California Press. Print, p. 202.

Given that Oxford is a majority white institution, it was inevitable that Skin Deep, despite primarily being targeted at students of colour, would begin to reflect that. The very nature of online and open discussion spaces is such that curatorial control is all but impossible, meaning that the forum soon shifted to being a space where Black and brown members were often called upon by the growing number white members of Skin Deep to explain and justify the frustrations that had arisen from their experiences within the institution. If the intention was for Black and brown students to be part of a space that existed independently from the institution, where they could discuss issues of representation within and outside of Oxford, then the space quickly became unable to accommodate that goal. The demand that students of colour continue to explain and justify their lived realities and their desires for reform in a majority white institution detracted from the meaningful actions that could have been galvanised in that online space.

Skin Deep magazine, which was first published six months after the establishment of the Facebook discussion forum, emerged out of a desire to produce an intellectual and artistic product that addressed themes and issues that were of concern to students of colour, away from explanations and qualifications that were demanded on the online forum. The magazine would accompany other established leftist magazines that enjoyed wide readership within the University, such as *Cuntry Living* (a feminist zine) and the newly released *No Heterox** (a magazine for LGBTQ issues). The print publication would serve as an avenue for students to develop an archival project that chronicled the experiences and reflections of students of colour. Through the curation of a print publication, we felt we would be able to raise contemporary issues that affected students of colour within a global context, whilst simultaneously contributing to the institutional memory of decolonial and antiracist organising within our institution. It was not so much a critique of the institution itself, but rather an attempt to capture the voices and experiences of previous generations, which were reflected in the pieces written on the work and legacies of Stuart Hall, Maya Angelou and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, all of whom had passed away that year.

The magazine became a termly publication, each addressing a particular theme: *Roots/Routes* (Issue 2), *Terrorising the Masses* (Issue 3), *Theorising from Outside (the Academy)* (Issue 4). For example here is an extract from the introduction of *Root/Routes* (Issue 2):

The colonial garden was pruned to the point of predictability. No weeds were allowed to grow, no “exotic” flowers were allowed to bloom, and no other garden was to be imagined. The garden was a project that could not accommodate a diversity of vision and growth. In our efforts to uproot this imaginative roadblock, we challenge you to plant your roots and to find new routes out of this dull and deceptively beautiful garden. We seek not to build a better garden, but a more engaging and inclusive one.

I, Too Am Oxford: ‘Speaking Back’

The inspiration for I, Too, Am Oxford campaign, was a BuzzFeed article entitled “63 Black Harvard Students Share Their Experiences In A Powerful Photo Project”.⁴ That it was shared on Skin Deep just two months after it was started is a testament to the fact that even in the early days of the forum, members were concerned with translating what was happening at the level of discourse on the platform into concrete and impactful action in the real world. To date, the ‘I, too, am Oxford’ campaign is perhaps the most important political action to have emerged from that space. The BuzzFeed article inspired much excitement amongst students of colour on the platform and a call for spontaneous organising occurred. As a movement, the ‘I, too, am...’ campaign required very little in terms of actual planning. All that was necessary was a few whiteboards, some marker pens for students to take it in turn to write out their messages and a willing photographer—none of which were hard to source in a network of a few hundred students. In the comments section a time was agreed upon and students were expected to show up in front of the Radcliffe Camera, a building that

⁴Vingiano, Ali, “63 Black Harvard Students Share Their Experiences in A Powerful Photo Project”, *BuzzFeed*, 2014, Viewed 6 May 2017. <http://bzfd.it/2qLF15k>.

has come to signify Oxford as an institution. The broad spectrum of political affiliations and opinions that students of colour came from is evidenced by the range of sentiments that were expressed in the photo series. Some of what was written spoke to personal or social experiences and interactions, whereas others commented directly on issues with curriculum and institutional structures that needed to be addressed. For some students of colour it was the first time they were given the opportunity to speak back, and (re)claim the campus. We created a tumblr page for the campaign in which we uploaded all the photographs that had been taken by the various students. Shortly thereafter, we created a twitter account to share the link and tweet at various media outlets that we thought might be interested in the campaign. The aim was to get word out as far and wide as possible in the hopes that public pressure might encourage the institution to take the concerns raised by students more seriously. BuzzFeed UK, a subsidiary of the media outlet that had first published the I, too, am Harvard photographs, was one of the first media outlets to release an article on the campaign. Of course, both the tumblr and the subsequent article were shared on the Skin Deep platform, where the campaign garnered a great deal of support and also some criticism. Separately from the platform, many of the students who participated in the campaign also made it a point to change their profile pictures on their various social media profiles as a way to both share what they'd done and to promote the campaign. Examples of I, too, am Oxford whiteboard messages:

On Afro-Caribbean Society: How would you feel if I started a 'white society'. Look around, Oxford is white society.

All the post-colonial and other critical theories you study does not entitle you to speak for me or over me.

No, my family did not have to flee the Sudan... Sorry I don't have a more "exotic" African story

Yes, I have the right to be offended when you confuse me with the only other black girl in my year.

If you 'don't see race', how don't we see that in the admissions statistics?

Why are only 0.4% of UK professors black? #InstitutionalRacism

“Are you here on an access scheme?”

“You’re such a bounty!” Valuing education does not make me less black or more white.

Don’t use ‘where are you from’ as a euphemism for ‘explain to me why you’re not white.’

Even if I was religious, Muslim Land is not a place I can just swim back to.

Of course you got in, you fill both Black and Asian quotas.

I am the voice of Africa #AllAfricansAreBlack #AfricaIsACountry #BeCarefulIMakeUpStories

Oh you’re from Ghana! My cousin’s nanny is from Kenya.

It has been noted elsewhere (see Tuck and Louis Gates Jr. 2014)⁵ that the launch of the ‘I, too, am Oxford’ tumblr coincided with the Race Summit, a CRAE organised initiative that brought administrators, faculty and student representatives together “to address the existence of racism at Oxford, and how they can work towards creating a more just and inclusive student experience”.⁶ While a happy coincidence, and hopefully one that helped to bolster the arguments being made at the Summit, the reality is that few of the students that partook in the campaign were aware of what was going on with regards to issues of anti-racism, access and curricular reform at the University level. The choice of date arose more from a practical concern—to get the message out before term was up—rather than a symbolic one. Any other interpretation would suggest that the campaign had long term reform goals and a clear sense of how to realise them at an institutional level, when in actuality many students saw this as a one-off event that allowed for them to share misconceptions of what life in Oxford was like for BME students.

⁵Tuck, Stephen G. N, and Henry Louis Gates. 2014. *The Night Malcolm X Spoke at the Oxford Union*. Oakland: University of California Press.

⁶University Oxford University Student Union. n.d. *Press Release for Race Summit*, Viewed 6 May 2017, from https://ousu.org/pageassets/whatson/newsracesummit_pressrelease2.pdf.

For those of us who would continue to agitate and organise around these issues, it became increasingly obvious that a coherent political movement could not have occurred from this particular campaign. What it did do was bring people together, with no particular or overt political agenda, to give an informed expression to ideas and frustrations that were simmering amongst students of colour.

The BME Conference: Dissidence in an Era of Diversity

As a follow up to the campaign, during the following term (Trinity), we led a group of students in organising a conference titled “The BME conference: Dissidence in an Era of Diversity”. The conference was a concerted effort to engage with a more specific and formulated political agenda. It was an attempt to build a coalition with other student movements around the UK, such as the ‘Ain’t I A Woman’ collective at SOAS and the SOAS’s iteration of ‘I, too, am...’, as well as to interrogate the methodologies and share experiences of organising student led campaigns in the age of new media and the usefulness of American activist methods in British institutions. Professor Patricia Daley (one of the few Black Professors at Oxford) and Professor Elleke Boehmer who are part of the Geography and English departments in Oxford respectively, addressed questions of curricular reform and representation within the faculty and student body. The inclusion of faculty in the conference was crucial to ensuring that these conversations were being had at several levels and spheres within the university and for us, as students, it helped us get a better understanding of how to frame demands for curricular reform across the disciplines.

Most importantly, the conference helped establish student-faculty alliances, which are crucial to any long-term and sustained effort for institutional reform in higher education. Students come and go and the movements they start rise and fall, but the faculty are the ones who remain and are put in charge of instituting the changes that students demand. Hence it was crucial for students in Wadham College,

following the BME conference, to establish the colleges' first people of colour and diversity officer in the student union, alongside the implementation of a Tutor for Race and Racial Equality on the college governing body. Given the many student lifetimes that faculty live out in institutions, their institutional memory is far longer and in some ways far more realistic than that of the student-body. Ensuring that student-faculty networks and alliances are in place, means that students can continue to agitate, protest and organise for transformation without concession and guarantee that someone inside the institution will take up their struggle and try to implement those changes. It is worth noting here that in our particular context the academics who were invested in institutional reform and supporting student-led activist initiatives were unfortunately in the minority. As you can imagine, there are indeed a large number of academics who are keen to ensure that the university and its curriculum are preserved in a way that they recognise and feel reflects their specific, Eurocentric understanding of a 'world class' institution.

The conference, on reflection, allowed for what the campaign had not, which was for us, as students and now activists, to think strategically about developing a political and academic decolonial and anti-racist initiative, led by the students and centring curricular reform. The hope was that the focus on these issues would effectively address the structures of whiteness and the colonial systems that were upheld by the institution. What became evident fairly quickly, however, was that the conference was a far less 'sexy' platform for students. Organising the conference did not create the same kind attention or mobilisation that the 'I too, am Oxford' campaign had encouraged. What did emerge from the conference, however, was the idea to create a print publication of *Skin Deep*, the first edition of which came to fruition in June 2014.

The guiding influence of academics who were working both in and outside of Oxford at that time and the assistance they gave in helping structure the conversations around decoloniality and the histories of global decolonial movements cannot be overstated. Dr. Nathaniel Tobias Coleman, a former student of Merton College, Oxford, was at that time working as an academic at University College London and organising events and teach-ins that raised important questions

such as: “Why Isn’t My Professor Black?” and “Why Is My Curriculum White?”—both of which are titles of talks that he had given. Whilst he was in Oxford for an event, he was invited by a small group of student activists of colour to meet to discuss the shared issues that students and academics were facing in both UCL and Oxford. Crucially, he invited us to consider organising around a specific decolonial struggle with which we were already familiar: Rhodes Must Fall, which had gained significant momentum in early 2015 in the University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa. The context from which the resistance in Cape Town emerged was clearly very distinct from the Oxford context, but there were particular grievances about representation, curriculum reform, and access to quality higher education for students of colour that resonated on both campuses.

Rhodes Must Fall Oxford (RMFO): In the Footsteps of Malcolm X

It’s difficult to say whether RMFO would have emerged were it not for the mobilisation that occurred around the ‘I, too, am Oxford’ campaign. Certainly, members of that campaign who were still pursuing their studies both at the undergraduate and postgraduate level at Oxford went on to participate and indeed lead the actions of RMFO. Of course, this movement was not entirely home-grown, given that it primarily began as a solidarity campaign with Rhodes Must Fall South Africa. Moreover, the arrival of Rhodes Scholars to Oxford, who had been part of the movement at UCT, meant that new tactics and a new type of vocabulary was introduced into the rhetoric of anti-racist discourse in Oxford. Indeed, prior to RMFO, no student movement in recent memory had utilised and centred the term ‘decolonial’, or considered what its implications might mean in the physical and architectural context of Oxford. It was from these early conversations with Dr. Coleman in the spring of 2015 that student activists in Oxford were able to make the link with their South African counterparts. We were able to identify with the significance of the deep colonial ties that run through the history of Oxford as an institution, and how these

ties continue to influence economics, curriculum and power structures within the university. What Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford necessarily facilitated was a transnational discussion around structural transformation which would force the university, an institution which is highly resistant to change, to be self-reflective and consider learning from both its British and international students.

The aims, gains and successes of RMFO have been widely documented both by members of the group and the media. Therefore, to give a brief account here would be both futile and unfair to the complex and vibrant history of this ongoing movement. That said, it is worth thinking through how differently 'I, too, am Oxford' and RMFO were received by the University, the media and the public. In large part, because the difference in treatment speaks to how readily institutions of higher education, and the media and public by extension, are willing to engage with and admit shortcomings when it comes to issues of 'diversity', which can be easily remedied by greater representation, a few workshops on micro-aggressions perhaps featuring one or two more BME students on the university brochure. Whereas 'decolonisation', as iterated by RMFO, demanded the removal of statues, the acknowledgement of past wrongs and the rewriting of a whitewashed colonial history that defined both national culture and the ways in which the humanities and social sciences were being taught at the University. The former is inoffensive, superficial and affordable to implement, whereas the latter requires serious existential and epistemological considerations and comes at the expense of alienating wealthy donors and spending a great deal on architectural restructuring.

Therefore, it is unsurprising that the University opted to delay responding to the demands of RMFO in the hope that the students who were putting pressure on the university to address issues of institutional racism, global economic structures, and colonialism would do what most students do when their time at University has come to an end: leave, never to be heard from again. Yet, despite all of this, we can be encouraged by the fact that RMFO activists, like Malcolm X fifty years before them, debated in the most hostile institution within the university—the Oxford Union—and won.

From Roots to Routes: Towards a Global Student Movement

It is perhaps wise at the end to return to the words that we began with by way of Stuart Hall, ‘and why, of all places, partly in Oxford?’ There can be no doubt that these movements emerged at a particular juncture in global student of colour activism. The ‘I, too, am’ movement is part of a long history of American student activism, influencing discussions and activism around race in the United Kingdom. The RMF movement begins where the decolonisation movements of the twentieth century left off, bringing the question of decolonisation both to the academy and home to the metropole.

In order to create sustainable student movements that force a shift from the much more convenient position of political apathy and docility, which continues to be associated with privileged leftist politics, we must continue to document and archive the decolonial struggles that have taken place and build on the long history of student-led activism within the academy. In this way, we can disrupt the cycle and limitations of time frames offered by an undergraduate or postgraduate degree, and build on the roots laid down by those before us, whilst informing the routes of those who will inevitably come after. Student activists must continue to reflect on the benefits of seeing their work in a global context, and understand what can be gained from recognising that a particular struggle should be in constant conversation with global struggles and solidarity movements.