**TOWARDS AN ANTI-RACIST FINE ART PhD?**

*The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed flaws in traditional leadership models, whilst the Black Lives Matter protests have clarified how new, diversified prototypes of leadership are overdue. Cultural leaders who are considering undertaking a PhD as part of their leadership pathway should examine what universities are doing to introduce and embed anti-racism into their PhD processes.*

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**CULTURAL LEADERSHIP AND THE FINE ART PHD**

# Critical thinking, having an inquiring mind and intellectual insight are fundamental to cultural leadership. These are also key skills that can be acquired through a good PhD degree programme. ‘Research’ isn’t just about 'problem solution' or 'finding the truth', but the process of inquiry and the rigour of this process. This reflexivity isn’t just vis-à-vis a subject area or research problem, but the student’s standing as an autonomous thinker. Likewise, PhD supervision is not only to teach a student skills, but to guide them to be someone - an independent, self-aware and critical scholar and academic. This academic should become aware of the rights of other researchers, of research subjects, and of groups who may be affected by the research. They must have the confidence and integrity to challenge potential or actual unethical behaviour of others and even shape the academic sector’s policy and procedures.

But what can be said about the Higher Education (HE) sector? For an institution that demands intellectual reflexivity, UK Higher Education has, paradoxically, hitherto refused to address its systemic racism. White fragility – the discomfort, defensiveness by the white liberals when confronting issues on racism – combined with the British stiff upper lip of ‘restraint’ demanded by ‘polite’ society, have conspired to create a deafening collective silence. This is despite HE’s racism being well-established in academic scholarship; despite attainment gaps of over 20% for black, Asian and ethnically divsere students at many universities; and despite 24% of non-white students having experienced racial harassment, with 20% physically attacked (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2019).

If HE perpetuates ‘patterns of privilege’, issues are exacerbated in art and design. To begin with, art and design disciplines, and the PhD degree, can already present additional barriers for those from minority backgrounds. Postgraduate Research (PGR) is expensive. Fine Art and drama qualifications are historically ‘elitist’ and do not lead to secure careers. PGR culture is exclusionary not just because it attracts privileged, white students, but is governed by privileged, white managers and teachers, who continue to centre the work of white artists/theorists.

When the 2020 Black Live Matters movement (BLM) exploded in the US, then hit the UK, its force and scale meant that UK HE couldn’t be silent any more. Yet following grand proclamations for ‘solidarity’ on social media, many institutions were called out for their bad practices. The fallout for arts and drama schools is still unfolding (eg [Goldsmiths College Fine Art Alumni Campaign](https://www.change.org/p/make-goldsmiths-university-art-department-accountable-for-systemic-racism-and-extend-bame-contracts.); [BBC News, June 2020](https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-53027976)).

How can we move forward? What models can stimulate new conversations between PHD student, supervisor and examiner, enabling students from all backgrounds to flourish within Fine Art Schools and become anit-racist, autonomous researchers? The steps outlined below are intended as ‘warm-ups’ towards more comprehensive, longer term strategies for individuals, departments, faculties and universities.

**ANTI-RACIST PRODUCTIVE ANTAGONISMS (ARPA)**

The PhD, already an introspective process, necessarily pushes the artist-researcher to a greater level of critical self-reflection. As part of this deep dive, surely the student must be tasked to consider and evaluate how race relates to what and how they are investigating, what and whom they are using and working with, which geographical and/or social-economic class they are traversing, and more.

**The PhD supervisor** should assume the role of the ‘anti-racist productive antagonist’ (ARPA).From the beginning when the thesis and methods are being formulated, and at strategic points throughout the 3-6 year life-span of a PhD journey, the ARPA will interject by raising questions around race, even, and *especially*, if the inquiry does notconcern or consider race and its intersectionalities (why *not*?). An ARPA can also confront biases by student and/or other supervisors in the team. The ‘agreement’ would be that the ARPA has the permission to play devil’s advocate within the safe(r) space of the supervision. Embracing critical thinking and emancipation, ARPA will encourage students to self-interrogate the form of their own argument, analysis and synthesis, and illustrates the supervisor’s multiple roles as teacher, project manager, gatekeeper, mentor, coach and more.

**The PHD student** must participate in anti-racism training, as an obligatory part of their introduction to research ethics.In the ARPA model, students will learn historical, theoretical, practical, cross-disciplinary and creative tactics to interrogate selves, other students, supervisors, as well as the university environment and the wider HE contexts.Highlights could include debates around the questions ‘Why is my curriculum white?’ and ‘If “race” does not matter only class, then why is there still a blinding whiteness in terms of what counts as knowledge, in terms of what has become the canon, what gets taken up, and what remains erased?’

**An anti-racist PhD examination** would be one where the external examiner, internal examiner and/or independent chair is a person of colour. One of these examiners will cast an ARPA perspective across the key aspects of a PhD examination. How comprehensive is the work? Does it privilege or perpetuate white narratives? Does it include knowledge by black and minority contributors to the field? In terms of criticality, depth/breadth and accuracy, how far has the thesis probed into how existing knowledge relates to European colonial histories? The examiner assuming the role of the ARPA will also be able to challenge unnecessary displays of defence of Euro-centric philosophy and civilisation from other examiners.

**The Art School** must ensure ARPA is co-led by white staff, making anti-racism a jointly-owned problem, and not just the burden, responsibility or ‘niche interest’ of a small group of people. Practice-led, diverse, and co-created, ARPA can temper resentment, and instead make participants engaged and activated.It will raise their awareness of racism relating to other researchers, of research subjects, and of others who affected by the research, and enable them to challenge racist behaviour of others, and even shape anti-racist HE policy and procedures. ARPA will also not just focus on the trauma of racism but celebrate what equity, diversity and inclusion brings to an art school.

# WILL SUCH A CHANGE HAPPEN?

There are many challenging conditions in HE - not least a global recession and the impact of Covid-19 on student numbers - which will result in the sector seeking to protect the status quo. Yet there is also an opportunity for both academic staff and prospective students to help institutions realise that change, the call for change, and those who do the calling, are geared towards the same goal of making HE *better*.

Many of us in the arts, culture and HE continue to do what we do because we believe that the arts, HE, arts in HE and the Fine Art PhD, are powerful mechanisms to ask the difficult questions, to which we won’t get immediate feedback or answers. Which is also why we work artists and students who will help to change things over the next generations, and who will ask better questions, find better tactics and create better solutions. This is the value that universities must articulate to prospective students considering an investment in a PhD. Cultural leaders who are considering undertaking a PhD as part of their leadership pathway should also demand that universities reveal the specific short term and long term anti-racism measures within the PhD process that they are implementing before investing their time, money and energy in such pursuit.

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