

Interview - Chantelle Lewis

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of our Black History Month features and our continuing series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews speak to the fundamental aims of Black History Month and discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for young scholars.

Chantelle Lewis is a part-time PhD student in the Sociology department at Goldsmiths, UK. She is co-host of the sociological/political podcast *Surviving Society*, a research assistant on the ESRC funded project (UK in a Changing Europe) *BrExpats*, Programme Director of the Leading Routes campaign *#BlackinAcademia* and is on the board for the International Centre on Racism at Edge Hill University.

What (or who) promoted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

It's difficult to name just one person or one aspect of my life that has significantly shifted my thinking about social research. Particularly within the last five years, I've been fortunate enough to meet some of the most inspiring people. In the first instance I would say that my partner and his two daughters have been integral to my ongoing and developing scholarship. They constantly inspire me with their words and actions, always making me reflect on how I can do better in my personal and professional life. I believe my family life has been a very important aspect of my ever-evolving *sociological imagination*.

It's mainly women that have been central to the significant shifts in my thinking about research. Whilst studying for a Sociology and Criminology undergraduate degree at Loughborough University, Professor Karen O'Reilly encouraged me to continue my studies after I felt completely overwhelmed by the whiteness of the academy and isolated by my own working-class credentials at the time. Similarly, during my final year at Loughborough University, Dr Line Nyghagen (my undergraduate dissertation supervisor) helped me think more carefully about how to use and incorporate feminist methodologies within my research.

Whilst studying for an MA at Birkbeck I was taught and mentored by Dr Yasmeen Narayan. Yasmeen has played such an important role in how I think about doing research. She introduced me to the fact that so much of what we learn is taught through a colonial lens (secondary and university education in particular) and how we can begin to decolonize our minds through the close reading of Du Bois, Fanon, Hall, Davis, Crenshaw, bell hooks, Bhabra, Bhatt, Bhabha, Hill-Collins and Said, to name just a few (yes, I managed to get all the way to MA level without critical engagement with this work!). Whilst studying for the MA I had quite a lot of mental health problems and my economic instability continued. Now, when I look back at that period, I know that Yasmeen's scholarship was an important aspect of my recovery and overall feeling of belonging within higher education (HE). For the first time, I was seeing myself in academia through teaching, reading and learning.

I've had a surplus of unconventional routes into academia. I failed to gain PhD funding on numerous occasions; had a (funded) PhD place withdrawn a few weeks before starting at a prestigious UK university; worked full time throughout all three of my degrees and have never quite managed to achieve 'the best grades'. On paper, and in line with what the academy consistently describes as 'academic excellence', my experience so far has been facilitated by women

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who have taken a chance on me – something so few students on the margins ever experience. Some of the amazing women who have taken a chance on me, and who have been integral to where I am now and how I think about research are (in chronological order!): Professor Bev Skeggs, Dr Emma Jackson, Dr Michaela Benson, Saskia Papadakis and Paulette Williams.

Finally, as a listener and co-host of my own show with Tissot Regis, I must stress how essential podcasts have been for my academic development, both written and oral. Some of these include, *Say your Mind* with Kelechi Okafor, *The Receipts Podcast*, *About Race* with Reni Eddo-Lodge and *Busy Being Black* with Josh Rivers. I think my engagement with political/social commentary podcasts that are led and produced by Black people and people of colour have been a fundamental part of how my sociological thinking has evolved over the past two years. I also think the exceptionally curated podcasts, mentioned above, are a reminder that critical thinking is not exclusive to university environments and peer reviewed academic journals.

What is the importance of Black History Month and what does it represent to you?

I have a mixed relationship with Black History Month. This isn't because I don't see its value, but more because when I receive invitations to speak at an event, it often feels like tokenism (on the part of the institution). I have no doubt there are some exceptional Black people across the U.K putting on some truly inspiring events, but over the last few years I've chosen to sit out of taking part. I try to engage both personally and professionally with Black History in Britain throughout all twelve months of the year.

You're the Programme Director for Leading Routes/Black in Academia, which aims to improve the outcomes and experiences of Black students and staff in academia. What are the biggest barriers Black students and staff face in academia? What needs to be done to tackle them?

When Paulette Williams, the founder and CEO of Leading Routes started the organisation back in 2016, her vision was to democratise information about university to ensure Black sixth-form/college students and their parent(s)/carer(s) were making informed decisions about university from a Black-led organisation. The spaces that Paulette has led on creating for Black students and their parents via the Paths to University event series have been exceptionally valuable. Attendees are able to ask questions without feeling like an imposter and see people from similar backgrounds who have navigated the system. Through various workshops, they are equipped with the knowledge to make informed decisions about whether university is the right choice for them; what subjects they are interested in; and which type (including location) of institution would be best for them to study at. At the moment, these events are held on an annual basis in London but we hope to extend them beyond the U.K in the near future.

We launched Black in Academia in 2018 with a view of contributing to tackling the lack of Black students achieving funded PhD places within UKHE. Through our own experiences and with the Black academics in our Leading Routes network, we've curated practical and informative events across the UK focused on practical moves that could possibly put Black scholars in a better and more informed position when it comes to applying for funded PhDs at UK institutions.

We're also doing our best to have an impact on HE policy when it comes to PhD funding for Black students. We recently produced The Broken Pipeline Report where we revealed – through a Freedom of Information request – that over a three-year period just 1.2% of the 19,868 studentships awarded by all UKRI research councils went to Black or Black Mixed students, only 30 of whom were from a Black Caribbean background. Watch this space, we have lots more to come!

Your PhD focuses on the lived experiences of Black (and white) mixed race families in a predominantly white town in the West Midlands. Can you tell us more about your research and what interested you in this area?

In my PhD research I have explored the retrospective accounts of racialisation and racism experienced, negotiated and managed by six Black (and white) mixed-race families who live/have lived in a predominantly white town in the

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West Midlands-where I spent most of my childhood and adolescence. I've been undertaking a nearly two-year ethnography with family members through both solo and group ethnographic interviews.

Much of the previous literature on mixedness has focused on (mixed) racialised identities and how race and race thinking has affected lived experiences. I'm attempting to move beyond conceptualising mixedness by attending to experiences of racialisation and racism in relation to place, space and family formations. This is a further contribution to the scholarship on mixedness that has sought to challenge frequently binarised portrayals of Black mixed-race families within public life. Through ethnographic observations and conversation between family members, I stress that the emphasis on place, space and the family unit help to confront the doxa around 'progressive' and 'problematic' representations of Black mixed-race populations.

Throughout the PhD I draw upon the omnipresence of whiteness within the town and the Black mixed-race family as fundamental to the racialisation and racism narrated in the research. I discuss how negotiations of racism and racialisations that family members have endured have either remained silent, been purposefully muted or have been understood without – or even through dismissals of – recognitions of 'race'. I've been interested in how families have collectively and individually made sense of the whiteness of their hometown, but also how this whiteness manifest as a subtle structure and ideological force within their own families. It is through this discussion where I break down the possibility that racial literacy is not a universal tendency for parents who have brought up Black mixed-race children within a predominantly white place.

Finally, I explore how the specifics of mixedness can at times allow for whiteness -both structurally and demographically – to become partially habitable for Black mixed-race families. Though I outline that this habitability was not a universal experience for all participants, I contest that the lives and narrated experiences from various family members suggest that there have been times when their proximities to whiteness – or a lighter skinned privilege – has allowed the participants to have more space to negotiate structural inequalities individually and collectively as a family. With this, I explore how the participants have made sense of their family's position on both a racial and colourist hierarchy and how this has at times caused them to engage with internalised anti-blackness themselves. I contend that these lived proximities should be understood through negotiations of place and with this, how the specificities of their hometown have the capacity to either reject or make allowances based on what has been deemed racially palatable.

You're also a Research Assistant on the Brexit Brits Abroad study, which questions what Brexit means for Britons resident in other EU member states. What are the different emphases and concerns for people of colour living in the EU27?

Firstly, I've been really lucky (and very privileged!) to work with Dr Michaela Benson, Prof Karen O'Reilly and Dr Katie Colins on such an important sociological research project on Brexit. Similar to many of the white Britons who have made their lives in countries within the EU27 that have taken part in the project, the people of colour that I interviewed were mainly shocked, concerned and visibly upset about the EU referendum result. However, a consistent theme amongst all the participants I spoke with (over 30 different people of colour in 8 different countries), was their familiarity with Britain electing for a policy deeply embedded in racism and xenophobia. Although they expressed dismay and concern, we describe their expressions surrounding the political motivations of Brexit as "business as usual and unexceptional". By looking at the lives of those frequently missed during discussions about freedom of movement, we present how Brexit is not Britain's racist moment nor is Europe a utopia of racial tolerance. The testimonies precede and succeed Brexit, taking place in both Britain and other European Union countries. Overall, the lack of coverage within academia, the government and the media surrounding the effects of Brexit for people of colour (regardless of location) is deeply frustrating as so often political moments like this – fueled by racism and xenophobia – disproportionately affect these populations.

What are you currently working on?

Over the next twelve months I'll be working quite intensely on finishing my PhD thesis (wish me luck!). I would hope that towards the end of 2020 I'll be looking for a job (I'm not sure what this will look like!) within academia. I'm

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presenting at a few seminars in late 2019 and throughout 2020 to hopefully get some feedback and useful critique about my research. I'll be continuing to work with Paulette Williams and the Leading Routes network. We are bringing the Black in Academia events to key cities outside of London during 2020 supported by SAGE publishing. We are also expanding the Paths to University events (within London) to include more ongoing and sustained support for Year 13s applying for university.

Surviving Society has been a great outlet and inspiration during the PhD process. We'll be continuing to release weekly episodes in 2019 and 2020. We'll be launching a new series in February 2020 too, so if you're not already subscribed – get involved! We're keeping the details secret for now but expect something with a bit more of a global sociological feel! Our ambition for the podcast is to continue to communicate sociology in a way that is accessible within and beyond the academy. Tissot and I have also just joined the board on the International Centre on Racism at Edge Hill University; I'll begin this work in early 2020.

What advice would you give to young scholars?

Don't let people tell you that you're not good enough or that your way of thinking, writing and communicating is outside what is deemed 'academic excellence'. Always ask questions; even if you feel like the question might seem obvious – ask! We must keep reminding ourselves that when we aren't asking for help or advice about academia, there are always pockets of people who are (we know who these people are most likely to be!). You've paid huge fees and I find myself constantly referring to what my friend and anthropologist Dr Adom Philogene Heron said at the first Black in Academia event – "Your fees are like a subscription or membership, you need to make sure you are getting all of the benefits you are paying for". For Black students in particular, I would say keep going. The academy is lucky to have us, and our perspective is important and vital for the future of academic research.