Book Review

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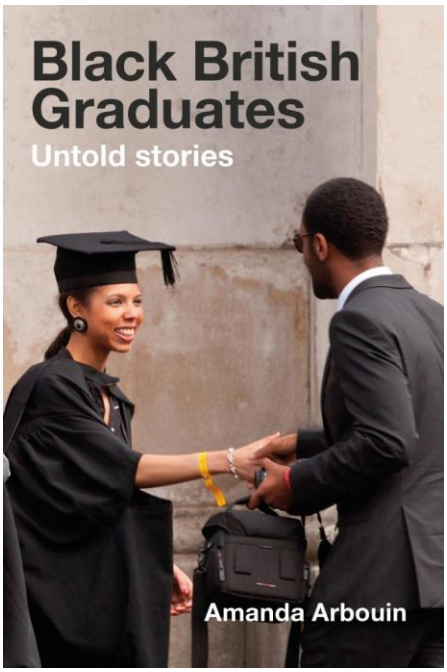
Amanda Arbouin (2018) *Black British Graduates: Untold Stories*, London: UCL Institute of Education Press (ISBN 978-1-85856-853-9 [Pbk], 148pp)



Black British Graduates focuses on the experiences of ten graduates of African-Caribbean parentage and, as Arbouin declares, is "The first to document the life chances of black graduates in the UK" (p. 1). In this qualitative account, the research participants, who were in their thirties and forties and established professionals, review their compulsory and post-compulsory education, and their careers. The book chronicles the personal testimonies in relation to the barriers negotiated in the pursuit of academic qualifications.

The 'life trajectory research approach' covers the participants' schooling (spanning the 1970s and 1980s) and university (1980s, 1990s and 2000s). I was enraptured by this sense of social history and, as my own schooling and university experiences (as a young Asian) spanned the 1970s and 1980s, I could empathise with many of the comments. Overall, it is a book of extraordinary texture, intimacy and purpose.

Applying purposeful sampling, the participants included five female and five male black graduates who had been educated entirely in the British education system. Referencing the work of Solórzano (1998), Arbouin justified not having a white British control group on the basis that "white studies do not require a black control group to validate them" (p. 5), but stresses that personal insights and experiences of racism, elitism and sexism to the research process "undeniably influenced… understanding and interpretation of the data" (p. 5). An elaboration of the theoretical lens is therefore important. The frame of analysis incorporates: reproduction theory (in particular, Bourdieu's treatise on the interplay between 'habitus' and 'capital'); critical race theory (accepting the centrality of race and its linkages to other forms of structural inequality such as class and gender); black feminist theory (defining oppression via the combined lenses of race, class and gender); and intersectionality (the connections between different elements of identity such as race, class, gender and

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sexuality, "so as not to further marginalise people").

The book is well structured and easy to follow, as it flows with a learner's journey: compulsory education (Chapter Two); motivations after compulsory education and entry to HE (Chapter Three); coping in HE (Chapter Four); and transition to professional lives (Chapter Five). Reading the chapters in sequence is important as it helps the reader to appreciate how certain barriers have persisted throughout the participants' lives. Thus, in Chapter Two there are accounts of negative stereotyping at school. Here, the female participants were judged as 'underachievers' (their accounts are fascinating given that some went on to teaching – including 'Nora', a headteacher); issues of behaviour and conflict with teachers loomed large in the male participants' accounts. The accounts are skilfully interwoven with key explanations and examples from the research and various theoretical positions.

School highlighted 'unfulfilled potential' as only two of the ten participants followed the traditional route to higher education. One cohort continued (or 'stayed longer') in post-compulsory education, whilst the other returned to education later. Their experiences were marked by 'stepping stones' or 'serendipity' as we get further glimpses of coping and of the resources used to progress further. For example, some forged bonds with important role models, particularly with other "minoritised and anti-racist practitioners." The female participants developed a pleasure for learning, and all saw education as the key to social mobility. Upon entering HE, in spite of the lack of diversity, university was a positive experience. Nevertheless, fitting into the fabric of the institution represented a significant challenge. Most of the graduates attended Post-92 universities – traditionally the most inclusive places – though the curriculum reflected a Eurocentric bias, and there were few black academics. Arbouin draws attention to emotional withdrawal adopted by some "to minimise disruption by poor relationships with white lecturers." A majority of the graduates went on to postgraduate study and a significant gender dynamic is noted. For instance, most of the females went on to PGCE study and though PhD study was contemplated "class-centred and gender-related issues" tempered their aspirations. Interestingly, the female graduates went on to study at 'old universities': two of the male graduates stayed on at a new university. The transition to professional life is revelatory. After noting their journeys to this point, it comes as no surprise to learn that these graduates gravitated towards public sector careers or worked in community service or were attracted to entrepreneurism (to circumvent "unfriendly structures in organisations").

Thus, whilst these accounts are of people who found success, it was bittersweet. From the unfulfilled potential at school, 'the long journey through post-compulsory education', and 'microaggressions at university'. Nevertheless, Arbouin counsels, that as a book that celebrates success, *Black British Graduates* confronts the rhetoric that "pathologises black communities as underachievers."

Overall, this is a very readable and engaging book. I was absorbed by the stories and reflections. Life history interviewing is an

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interesting device as it privileges a deeper understanding of quite sensitive issues. On the flip side, some accounts can be selective and contingent upon remembered events. I think the way in which Arbouin has textualised the accounts, and interwoven their accounts with key thinkers, theories and research is laudable. Whilst there were times when I was itching for more fuller analysis (this is a relatively slim volume), I think the concluding chapter skilfully and succinctly brings together the substantive points within an explanatory framework. It is a shame that the book did not reflect on the importance of the study in relation to the current narrative on social mobility. Thus, I thought there were more contemporary reports, for example from (post-2014) Equality Challenge Unit (Advance HE) and The Sutton Trust studies that could (or should?) have been referenced to add currency to the concluding narrative.

The timing of the book is somewhat propitious. At the time of writing (December 2018), the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the public body in England and Wales which promotes and enforces equality and non-discrimination laws, launched its inquiry into racial harassment on university campuses. It is worth noting the following, as reported by the BBC ('Newsbeat') on 4 December: "[The EHRC] pointed to racism as a possible link between the lower qualifications achieved by ethnic minority students, despite more entering higher education."

The book also complements many other new publications on issues such as Islamophobia, antiracist pedagogies and the tackling of insidious forms of racism. They include: Shirin Housee's *Speaking Out Against Racism in the University Space;* the National Union of Students' *The Experience of Muslim Students in 2017/18;* Pluto Press's *Decolonising the University;* and *Dismantling Race in Higher Education,* a collection of articles from Palgrave Macmillan.

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