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Within the award funding gap: the im-possibility of an All Ireland Africanist network in 2020

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ABSTRACT
Patterns of research funding in the UK clearly evidence unequal awarding to the detriment of applicants of African descent. This paper presents a case from ‘within’ this larger machine of knowledge production: a failed funding application made by two applicants to establish a social science network connecting African/ist scholars in Northern Ireland (UK) to those of its neighbouring Republic of Ireland (EU). Rated highly in the positive peer reviews of those appointed by the funding agency, the deficit cannot be readily placed on the content of the application nor on the universities of the applicants at the time, both highly positioned within the institutional stratifications in the UK and ROI. To illuminate from within this darker side of structural knowledge delegitimation in the global North, we situate this application as an insider example of the conditions which militate against advancing marginalised study areas. We do so to work against the prevailing impression of such work being impossible; turning to that which is not structurally delineated by institutions nor national funding mechanisms. In publishing this paper, we re-assert our ethical obligations and agency as intellectuals to bring to light the defunding of such endeavours and the larger genealogies of influence in our times.

Introduction
Gaps, silences, gatekeeping, failure and barriers rarely are the objects of study in academic papers, despite the damage that the lack of such awareness about research does to the academic project. Yet some acknowledgment about the impact of this lack extends from even the most extremely conservative spaces of positivist science (such as about ‘negative results’ in Mehta, 2019) to those concerned with various tiers of research output in/validation (from challenging perceptions about self-publishing in Zambia in Banda, 2014; to local journal publication in Uganda in Ssentongo, 2020). These concerns emerge in the talks and writing of those with postcolonial and decolonial orientations who seek to identify, conscientize and address the geopolitics of knowledge de/legitimation (Arowosegbe, 2014). Doing so requires pointing to problematic exclusions, erasure and redlining in publication (Krishnan & Baxter, 2020; Larson, 2018; Roberts et al., 2020), and resource allocation...
(Mwambari & Owor, 2019), which is where this paper is situated. Unlike the many disciplinary fields which adopt the enabling fiction of their universality, those in African Studies often wrestle with the mechanisms of disciplining knowledges, the relations of that to the racial contract (Mills, 1997) and the EuroAmerican gaze in the politics of representation and authorship within the ‘global’ academy. Characteristics of such wrestling includes a concern with historicising and contextualising endeavours (Matthews, 2015), laying bear the impact of national and institutional interest (such as within a South African university Ntsebeza, 2020; and a Ghanian university: Sackey, 2014); and debates and critiques about the positioning of African scholars within African studies (Nolte, 2019), including by gatekeeping roles such journal editorship (Mendoça et al., 2018).

This paper contributes to these traditions of bringing to the fore that which is often backgrounded. Its objectives are distinct while also being entangled. Within the paper, we offer a situated insider example of the problematic conditions of such marginalised study areas in the global North, by presenting the substance of an unsuccessful proposal for Africanist social science to cross the borders of Northern Ireland (UK) and the Republic of Ireland (ROI). This is one of the most recent endeavours of two African scholars to extend and root this area of enquiry on the island of Ireland in 2020. Our intention, in sharing it in this way, is to create openings for continuing that endeavour, and to broaden the discussion to the related conversations about the continued marginalisation of such studies and its intellectuals. Doing so requires contextualising the larger sociocultural milieu of 2020 on the island; the discursive power of political influence from the USA and England on the two countries that make up the island (that is, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland); and the positioning of race, Black and African studies and peoples within universities in those contexts. Before this is undertaken, we outline the relation of the larger award gap to the specific example which catalysed this piece on impossibility.

The straw that broke the camel’s back: the awarding gap again in 2020

Competitive, capitalist approaches to funding research have been proffered as offering attractive solutions to driving forward innovation on the Continent against a global knowledge economy (Mugwagwa et al., 2020). However, uncritically adopting UK and US models threatens to reproduce their inequalities, which continue to be racialized, gendered, classed and abled. Due to the contexts which this paper relates, we focus on the UK and Ireland though readers may find resonances in other contexts.

Across the main funding bodies of research and innovation in the UK, which fall under the umbrella body UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), in the period from 2014 to 2019 white Primary Investigators (PIs) and white Co-Investigators (Co-Is) have been granted consistently higher award rates (UKRI, 2020a, p. 11) and higher award amounts (UKRI, 2020a, p. 13) than their ‘ethnic minority’ counterparts. Another pattern of inequality emerges in award rate and value, advantaging male applicants over female; however, there is no analysis of how race and gender intersect yet (UKRI, 2020a). Analysis of funding awards from the 2019 to 2020 period, shows that ethnic minority applicants receive lower award rates and values than white applicants in all three roles of PI, Co-I and Fellow, largely unchanged from previous years despite initiatives. The largest difference in award rate by value was for PI applicants, where ‘white applicants and applicants without disabilities respectively have higher award rates by value than ethnic minority applicants

Differentiated data relating to ethnic minority applicants was published in late 2020 (UKRI, 2020d). The largest of the award gaps are for Black applicants. The UKRI (2020d) report highlighted that such under-representation in the academic market share is relative to applications made and to the UK labour market. To provide a tangible sense of the award gap, if one looks at the period of 2018–2019, there were approximately 10 Principal Investigators from Black ethnic group awarded UKRI funding. Even when compared to the award rates of other ethnic minorities, the percentage is so low (0–1%) that the bar on a visualisation within the report (see UKRI, 2020d, p. 2) appears as if this group is invisible. When informed of these patterns the funding organisation released a statement of acknowledgement that

Cross-sector data and analysis makes it clear that there is nothing wrong with the brilliant Black, Asian and minority ethnic researchers and innovators in our sector. They don’t need fixing; the system needs fixing (UKRI, 2020e).

Such analysis of the research funding award gaps relates to the conditions of UK higher education. In that context, universities employ more of those members of the academic community who are not racialized as white at the bottom of the research ladder (up to 20% for ‘research assistance’ in the last count, for instance) than those at the top (at 6%) (REF2021, n.d.). A 2019 national study revealed that 0.6% of UK professors are Black, and less than five heads of institutions fell within the categories Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME) (3.1%) (Advance HE, 2019).

Not within the public domain are research award patterns that look at the relation between the citizenship and nationality of those applying for funding from within UK borders and those beyond, data which is required to be recorded in the online applications portals of most of the UKRI funding bodies.

In ROI, data about Black and/or African academics and researchers is not made publicly known or accessible. Recent tentative suggestions were that only one Black female professor was employed within the sector in 2020 (Royal Irish Academy and the British Council, 2020). A commitment has been made to commence the collection of ‘ethnicity data’ in the ROI tertiary sector (Advance HE, 2020). Yet to be scholarly explored are the intersections between race and the conditions for migrant academics’ practice and positioning on the island.

The question that emerges is, what is necessary to ensure that research funding does not conserve these historic inequalities nor curtail the contribution that African Studies on this island can make for the global common good? Contributing to those concerned with the effects of the many permutations of the ‘award gap’ (Loke, 2020) in the UK, this paper illuminates the dearth of funding awarded to research matter which falls within the whiteness gaze of ‘equality, diversity and inclusion’ in the UK, and that awarded to scholars of African descent or to build the pipeline for such scholars. As persons researching inequality in higher education and in labour, and strongly assertive of the need for agency and creativity when structural racism conditions silence, this paper is an attempt at utilising the relative ‘freedoms’ of academic journal writing (albeit with cognisance of the professional risks and the costs of
exposure, and the many exclusions of academic publishing (Shephard et al., 2021)). We do so to raise awareness and catalyse scholarly dialogue with our peers and readers of that which is commonly known from lived experience within universities.

This paper was constructed in the aftermath of many attempts and setbacks over the years to build capacity for (from the ground up) and interest in (within higher education institutions and with key agents) the importance of scholarly activity about and by Africans and those of African descent within the academy. This pre-dates us as researchers and is inclusive of our endeavours. In particular, 2020 was an intensive year of being asked to participate in various fora about ‘decolonising curricula’, ‘decolonising the university’, #Blacklivesmatter, ‘Black History Month’, ‘equality, diversity and inclusion’ (EDI), and anti-racism – in which not only the authors but many scholars of African descent on the island contributed. These were in the hope that such processes were genuine in their intent to centre knowledge production, and not performative of opportunistic, optical allyship (Sobande, 2020).

Before this, the second author of this paper has spent nearly a decade working as a researcher and consultant on race relations in Ireland, bringing her scholarly and personal experience as an Irish Nigerian to fruition in the development of the first, hard won, Black Studies module in ROI. The first author has served as a member of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) External Advisory Group for UKRI since quite soon after she arrived in Northern Ireland from South Africa, due to her scholarly expertise in critical Higher Education Studies, and the misrecognitions of Black academics and African knowledge delegitimation.

The straw that broke the camel’s back catalysing this paper, was the failure of an application made in response to a call for UK-Ireland networking grants (ESRC-IRC, 2020a). We received an email on 23 October 2020 from the representative of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) of the UK, with the outcome of our application for support to establish an ‘All Ireland African/ist’ Network.

Your proposal was recently considered for funding and we regret to inform you on behalf of ESRC that it was not ranked highly enough to receive funding as there were a number of other, stronger, proposals (ESRC, 2020).

Data on the number of applicants, success rates, the location of their institutions and the demographics of the applicants, had not been made public at that point, at the time of publication of this paper, nor are there indications that such information will be released in relation to this funding call specifically. Later, in December 2020, it was announced that twenty grants had been made (UKRI, 2020c). The limited public information released by the funders about the awards (ESRC-IRC, 2020b) included project titles, applicants’ names and organisations, and indicated that some of the successful applications were concerned with mental health, children’s welfare, public health and data protection. From what we can deduce, neither Black nor African scholars were awarded; and from the cursory information available, none of the projects seemed explicitly related to ethnic minorities on the island.

At the time we were notified of the outcome of the application, we were provided the two reviewers’ reports which we share here. Both of these were highly favourable. The numerical rating of one review was ‘Graded at 9 Outstanding proposals which are of excellent scientific merit involving pioneering innovation and with the potential to provide a major stimulus to new and novel streams of enquiry or practice’; the other was not visible within the response, and permissions to access the rating were denied by the funders’ correspondents. The funding of £20,000 was to support a series of activities and a scoping
study, which reviewers assessed as ‘value for money’ and ‘the budget is well-justified’. Satisfying all the criteria of the call, the project aimed to draw on established African Studies schools and scholars within England, Scotland and Wales, to build the capacity and networks of those in this area in Northern Ireland and ROI. Over and above the call specifications, we also identified how we would draw on and strengthen our existing networks with Africanists within the USA and on the continent of Africa. The first reviewer wrote,

The applicants have identified a networking and collaborative opportunity in an important but often overlooked area of social science enquiry. As the applicants state the significance of the work is well recognised and the proposal will go some way to ‘forge impactful relationships’ required to extend collaborative social science work on Africa. The case for support is well made, ambitious and the approach objective driven. Speaking to the need for decolonisation this is work that should be supported (Introducer 1, ESRC 2020).

Providing similarly affirmative remarks to these, the second reviewer additionally noted how we demonstrated that the project was aligned with larger international interpretative frameworks.

The project plan shows good awareness of relevant international frameworks for the enhancement of Africa-knowledge (Sustainable Development Goals, the UN’s International Decade for “People of African descent: recognition, justice and development”, European Parliament resolution on the Fundamental Rights of People of African Descent in Europe) and ability to contribute to them (Introducer 2, ESRC, 2020).

Moreover, the reviewer asserted that the project highlighted that ‘UK-EU-African institutional partnerships as such is a significant post-Brexit issue not so much discussed in policy level’. The ‘post-Brexit’ comment here is not insignificant. The award is a means of addressing the growing concerns about the divisions Brexit will bring to the research communities in ROI and the UK, of which Northern Ireland is perhaps to bear the largest cost due to its post-conflict settlement.

A considerable part of our proposal spoke to the importance and benefits of such social science research for those on the island. In this paper, we reproduce much of that proposal to share our concerns about the continued rejection of applications such as these, which call for structural support by funding bodies and by institutions of higher education, to address the deficits of knowledge misrecognition in the NI and ROI academy and to point to the effects of such impositions of power. Before we do so, we briefly raise considerations about why – after all the attention and currency which actions and discourses of #BlackLivesMatter and EDI in 2020 brought to the concerns of those of African descent in the academy – more powerful discourses and trends may have influenced the final decision. In such ways, we hope to situate this case within the larger entangled genealogies of influence which inform the award gaps of those excluded within the global North.

**Genealogies of influence**

Historicizing Blackness on the island of Ireland is a complex, fascinating and somewhat disheartening venture. It is largely undocumented and understudied. However, such ventures are required if African Studies in Ireland is to avoid both an ‘African history
problem’ (Williams, 2020) and the trappings of being disciplined by the EuroAmerican academy, where Africanness and Blackness may become flattened as objects of exoticised or pathologised study.

The island of Ireland was the first colony of the English empire, a legacy which perseveres in the political, governance and socio-cultural relations of Northern Ireland entangled with the Republic of Ireland and with ‘Great Britain’; in the decolonial processes of the Republic of Ireland; and the island’s relationship with African countries, peoples and social institutions. The latter has included the exchange of people, ideas and resources through politics, religion and commerce. While there are cases where individual academics have explored this (as we outline in more detail below), in the main universities on the island have remained structurally disconnected and unsupportive of such intellectual exchange. The research projects, disciplinary spaces, curriculum orientations, subject authorities, and academic staff are mostly absent of that which is African. Those few of African descent on the island are often marginalised, in the precarious positions of doing the domestic work of teaching or research on contracts (Delaney, 2020), with a lack of transparency in terms of data in both NI and ROI about our access, participation, awarding and leadership (Aodha, 2020). More often than not, Black Africans in particular experience misrecognition and discrimination in the workplace in these two contexts (Joseph, 2019).

The year 2020 signalled something of a window of opportunity for more public awareness and institutional accountability when it came to Black issues, voice, and scholars in the Western world. In the UK, this window opened through the public discussions that those from so-called BAME communities were differentially impacted by COVID19 in the UK in general (National Institute for Health Research [NIHR], n.d.; Women and Inequalities Committee, n.d.) and in research in particular (UKRI, 2020b). This was parallel to solidarity with BLM expressed by civil society, which was often twinned with calls for ‘decolonising’ within university communities. It was finally in this year that an authoritative study was conducted on British sociology which found that not only are those Black marginalised from its spaces of knowledge production, but there are barriers and resistance to the implementation of race and ethnicity studies (Joseph-Salisbury et al., 2020). This is despite the claim that ‘sociology has never been afraid to turn its critical gaze inwards’ (Halford in Joseph-Salisbury et al., 2020, p. 2). More widely, exclusion, unbelonging and discrimination experienced by Black staff and students became the subject of a plethora of webinars, conference and journal calls, and institutional meetings and ‘training’ in the UK and the ROI. Black individuals, activists, community groups and scholars were inundated with requests to offer their experiences for the consumption of the dominant group. Many contributed their insights, intellectual knowledge and time, in the hope that such ‘education’ may catalyse into action, structural change and the recognition that such issues should be studied. As an area of scholarship within Higher Education Studies in many parts of the globe, perhaps largest in the USA and South Africa, it was hoped by the authors that this would be a strategic time for the institutionalisation of related studies on the island of Ireland.

However, powerful trends, levers and discourses in the political arena have operated against such opening. Due in part of the legacies of empire, its institutions and ancestral displacements, the strong relations with the UK and the USA continue to translate into conditions where the citizens of the island of Ireland come second to the powerful buffering of those two superpowers’ political discourses and purses. The ‘hostile
environment’ in the UK and the USA’s shutting down on so-called ‘shithole countries’, are symptoms of a regulatory environment that not only limits and misrecognises but also stratifies the exchange of knowledge communities, to the detriment of their own citizens with ‘black or brown bodies’ and those on the Continent. Lifting the façade of political correctness in the governance mechanisms of these societies to curry favour with those on the right, has led to a direct assault on the most basic principles and policies of equality, fairness, justice et cetera. This is well documented elsewhere. Of particular interest for this paper, have been the attacks on Critical Race Theory and majority world feminism, both of which directly relate to African Studies and the two applicants’ research in particular (see, for instance, Belluigi & Meistre, 2021; Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2019, 2020, 2021; Joseph, 2019, 2018, 2020). We submitted our application in June 2020, with the period of the funders’ decision-making process marked by divisiveness. This included the vociferous proclamations of Donald Trump about such scholarship in August and September (Bokhari, 2020). In the week before the announcement of our application’s failure, this declaration was made by the equalities minister of Boris Johnson’s counsel,

We do not want to see teachers teaching their pupils about white privilege and inherited racial guilt … Any school which teaches these elements of critical race theory, or which promotes partisan political views such as defunding the police without offering a balanced treatment of opposing views, is breaking the law (Badenoch in Trilling, 2020, para. 1).

These larger gestures in the political sphere have been matched with the closure of schools within universities and un-employment of scholars who engage with critical theory and marginalised subjects in both the UK and the USA (Morgan, 2020). Early in 2021, a now infamous report by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (known as the ‘Sewell report’ after its first author) misrepresented research findings and dismissed much of the consultative responses (Gopal & Rao, 2021; Iacobucci, 2021). Completely ignored were those submissions which related to ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland, one of which was co-authored by this paper’s UK-based author (Belluigi et al., 2020). The Sewell report’s conclusion that Britain is no longer ‘deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities’ (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021, p. 8) and that few inequalities are directly to do with race, has been one of the many rejections of ‘institutional racism’ that serve to dismantle the gains of Macpherson (1999) report. This comes at the end of over two decades of deracialisation within policy and policy discourses in the UK, with scholars concluding that any serious race equality strategies in UK in the last decade have been ‘short lived’ and ‘virtually fallen off the policy agenda’ of HE (Pilkington, 2020), with “implicit bias” problematically proffered as a concept to combat “unwitting” prejudice (Beckles-Raymond, 2020). Within broader educational policy (Gillborn et al., 2016) this has involved ‘the literal removal of reference to race and ipso facto a concern for racism’, which effectively re-racialises policy by replacing attempts to address racialisation, racism and coloniality with nationalist, colonial myths (Smith, 2021, p. 3).

Even during the pandemic, with claims of concerns about differential impacts on BAME communities, there were signs of the ‘doublespeak’ (Smith, 2021) that the espoused was not aligned with the practiced in UK research and HE communities. For instance, not one PI falling within the BAME category was awarded funding for projects exploring the impact of COVID19 on BAME communities in the UK, with an assessment process than revealed a range of inconsistencies and problematics (Inge, 2020).
We highlight here the very tip of the iceberg of the many currents and discourses of suspicion in these contexts of the global North when it comes to scholarship exploring race, restitution and decolonisation. On the island of Ireland, they are areas of scholarship deeply neglected and conspicuously absent in the academy.

Proposing a social science network of All Ireland African/ist

In this section, we re-present our proposal to develop a social science network of All Ireland African/ists, in the hopes that even if we as individuals were unsuccessful in this call, the baton may be passed to others and the discussion broadened.

Before we do so, a brief note about UK funding. UK proposals for research funding are in the main written rather un-academically. Readers versed in the assessment literacy required for successful research grant applications in the USA and in most of the African continent, may be surprised about the valued norms of this so-called ‘excellent’ scientific ‘global leader’. Despite the highly literate and educated public (with one of the highest higher education participation rates in the world, a considerable amount of which includes PhDs), proposals are often assessed by laypersons and non-subject experts. Anti-intellectualism may play a role. The oft-spoken wisdom is that because public taxes pay for research, these documents require assurance of the public good through value-for-money for the UK public specifically. Proposals are to be framed in non-academic jargon and with little substantiation in reference to academic texts. The tone favoured is those that make strong assertions of certainty by pre-determining findings and ‘outputs’, and creating assurance of the ‘quality’ of the applicant/s – which is perhaps why those older than 60, white, male and Oxbridge-situated continue to be disproportionately awarded (UKRI, 2020a). In a sense, these proposals perform as the ‘business case’ for these projects: more akin to commercial enterprise than rigorous, critical academic proposals that seek to explore the unknown, engage about the injustice or power, or to practice truly divergent thinking and methodologies. Implicit within this, is the hegemonic knowledge order.

Added barriers are created by onerous submission processes, technical forms and requirements of application processes which serve to trump the espoused purpose of the funding calls itself. An example of this in our application was where the electronic system required check-box indications of ‘the subject area in which the programme of study may fall’. Under ‘political science and international studies’ appeared ‘Middle East Studies’ and ‘European/ EU studies’ but nothing helpful for categorising projects related to ‘African Studies’ and/or ‘Black Studies’, which we would not have situated as outside of the national boundaries in any case. The periodization options offered were rigidly Eurocentric, with an omission of options for the colonial or post-colonial (leaving us in little doubt that ‘Egyptian pre-history’ and ‘The Pharaonic: ca. 3000–300BC’ were not conceived of as African periodisations). We were left with ‘ethnicity’ as the only viable option for the subject area, with the ‘collaboration location region’ set to ‘Africa’ and ‘UK & Ireland’. For a social science call that claimed to be about workshops to identify and address knowledge gaps, and to build capacity for so-called early career researchers; and for the researchers’ concerns with geopolitical and epistemic justice, such assessment literacy and constraints posed rather obvious problematic for praxis. Regardless, we played the game and worded the project towards guaranteeing success.
Below we reproduce the excerpt of our application from the online portal which applicants are instructed to frame as a summary of the project using wording ‘that could be publicised to a general audience’.

Despite long-standing engagements, enterprise and solidarities that have occurred between the peoples, communities and organisations on the island of Ireland and the continent of Africa, neither the ROI nor NI have African studies within their social science provision. Since the 1960s, high-quality, impactful Africanist scholarly centres and networks have been established in England, Scotland and Wales, furthering the scholarship and praxes of Africanist endeavours.

Social scientists should play a direct and proactive role in comprehending the reception and responses of local institutions and their actors to their local, migrant, diasporic and scholarly African populations; and how they go about sharing and producing knowledge about the past, current and future relations with African peoples. This Project draws on the 2019 EU Resolution on Fundamental Rights of People of African Descent.

Bringing together key and early career scholars from the UK and Ireland, we will establish a scholarly network about the All Ireland university role and response to the current agendas for the recognition, justice and development of peoples of African descent, by:

1. Launching the project at the second symposium of the newly established existing African Scholars Association Ireland in Ireland (October 2020)

2. Documenting and archiving project and scoping activities on a website, with a co-curated reading list, podcasts and showcasing network scholars and UK-wide networks

3. Scoping of (a) current African/ist curricula in ROI and NI to produce an evidence gap map of higher education institutions’ responsiveness to the UN’s International Decade of People of African descent: recognition, justice and development (2015–2025); (b) identify possible future partners with cultural organisations, NGOs et cetera


5. Bringing together African/ists from England and Scotland to the island of Ireland, with capacity building for pipelines for research projects and funding.

6. Consolidating the project with feedforward at an African Scholars Association Ireland (2021) symposium hosted in Northern Ireland (October 2021)

Of importance is centring the academic knowledge, lived experience and capacity of African scholars to (in)form the All Ireland response to the African diaspora and African studies. With expertise in academic development and Critical Higher Education Studies, Dr Belluigi has built research and institutional connections between African-NI academic communities since her relocation from South African in 2017, in addition to contributing to academic development for academics in exile, and policy development related to diversity. In September, 2018, Dr Joseph implemented the first module on ‘Black Studies and Critical Race Perspectives in Education’ in Ireland, and chaired the first ever gathering of Africanist researchers in Ireland in 2019 (African Research Day 2019). Social scientists at that event expressed the need for a more sustainable network.

In addition to the well-placed academic practice of the two lead researchers, who themselves are African/ists at two of the leading HEIs on the island, a number of current opportunities within the island have emerged linking established researchers and early career researchers from Africa and those pursuing impactful studies about the continent, anti-racism and Blackness, in partnership with non-academic organisations and collectives. Recent changes
in development funding and the UN mandate that higher education drives the Sustainable Development Goals, have seen an uptake in new initiatives within Irish and Northern Irish institutions to connect with institutions and researchers on the continent of Africa and in the global South more broadly. To undertake such work ethically, social science research will require concerted critical scholarship of and by African scholars.

In addition, we outlined the projects ‘main objectives’ in principle, with specific short term and long-term objectives as reproduced below.

This project aims to foster an All Ireland network of African/ist scholars, to forge impactful relationships between social science researchers and relevant professional, practitioner and civil society communities within the United Kingdom (UK) and Republic of Ireland (ROI). The project will also engage in a mapping of the Northern Ireland (NI) and ROI university role and response to the UN’s International Decade for “People of African descent: recognition, justice and development” (2015–2025) to fully scope what is necessary to achieve the 2018 European Parliament resolution on the Fundamental Rights of People of African Descent in Europe (2018/2899(RSP)). A social science network of African/ists in Ireland and the UK is required to work in solidarity to address the challenges faced by All Ireland academics and universities engaged in research, teaching and outreach related to Africa and people of African descent.

Short-term objectives:
1. Establish a network of All Ireland African/ist scholars, by (a) building ROI-UK relationships to share expertise and experience, (b) identifying existing academic and partner capacity for knowledge production, exchange and translation, (c) building capacity of ECRs for the Project’s sustainability and their career advancement;
2. Identify common research priorities for this network and promote the sharing of research ideas, including (a) mapping the current university in ROI and NI, to identify gaps, barriers to and opportunities for African/ist research and teaching, (b) learning from African/ist social science provision in England, Scotland and Wales, and internationally, (c) contextualising, problematizing and delineating that which falls within African/ist social science inquiry, which necessarily will include discussion of racism, anti-racism and social change; heritage, arts and culture, museums; colonialism, empire, slavery; conflict, reconciliation, reparation, memory; post-conflict, crisis, development; displacement, diaspora, nationalism, nation-building; identity, indigeneity, blackness, whiteness; critical education studies, decolonisation, abolitionist et cetera;
3. Share knowledge and expertise of specific and innovative methodologies and interdisciplinary intersections between UK and ROI researchers, through (a) a programme of activities and exchange, (b) co-creating annotated reading lists and archiving documented Project activities on a website;
4. Produce a social network map for future African/ist social science collaboration (a) within NI and ROI, and wider UK, (b) internationally and the African continent particularly.

This Project will lay the groundwork for medium term and long-term objectives related to (a) the critical study of, (b) contribution to, and (c) capacity for, undertaking sustainable collaborations for interdisciplinary high-quality research and inter/national dissemination with local impact.

Medium-term objectives:
1. Create bridges with non-academic collaborators on the islands of Ireland and Great Britain;
2. Facilitate interdisciplinary collaborations between UK and ROI researchers, for the purpose of preparing high-quality joint research proposals for future funding calls, responsive mode competitions, and UK-EU-African institutional partnerships;

Long-term objectives:
1. Undertake impactful local and international African/ist research to produce knowledge about (a) issues of social, economic, educational and historic justice for diasporic Africans,
as outlined in the EU Resolution, including access and participation of Africans in education and higher education, and recognition and legitimisation of African historic and contemporary perspectives and knowledges in education and higher education; (b) interpretative frameworks guiding African/ist scholarship; (c) prioritised issues identified through the Project activities;
2. Community engagement through educational activities and public interaction at ROI and NI higher education institutions.

The three page ‘case for support’ was shaped to (1) identify how our project aimed to address this social science gap in Ireland and Northern Ireland, (2) the ‘state of the art’ of African/ist enquiry and capacity, (3) the central themes we intended to unpack, which included (a) the nature of the study of ‘Africa’, (b) recognition of African knowledges, methodologies and scholars, (c) the need to identify and respond to issues of local relevance and needs for All Ireland people of African descent. We include content from these sections below.

Addressing the social science gap in Ireland and Northern Ireland

Within current social science networking across the border between the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and Northern Ireland (NI), there is a vacuum for those studying Africa and the related areas of enquiry and methodologies that fall under the umbrella ‘African Studies’. No structured opportunities exist between these countries and the other UK nations either. As such, there is currently a dearth in opportunities and capacity building for Africanists and scholars of African descent on the island. Neither NI nor ROI has a research hub nor qualifications at the level of tertiary education dedicated to areas of enquiry about or for Africa, Blackness or people of African descent.

There are many untold stories from interactions between Ireland and Africa (Breier, 2015; Jones, 2003; Rassool, 2015), due to both the ROI and NI having long-standing social, political and historic relations with, and interests in, the African continent. With their complex histories in relation to empire, post-colonialism in Ireland (Howe, 2008; Rolston, 2019) and settler colonialism in Northern Ireland (Bennett, 2012; Cash, 2017; Thompson, 1999), migration, religious missions and conflict, Ireland and Northern Ireland offer rich terrain for Africanist studies. The current racial politics of both NI and ROI reveal alarming Afrophobic attitudes and behaviours, with a need for research-informed impact at the meso- and macro-level. African studies enable the critical interrogation of the politics of representation in the research, teaching and societal understanding of Africa/ns in that context (Matthews, 2015).

Current macro policies and initiatives indicate that this is the time to address this vacuum – at the midway point between the United Nations’ International Decade (2015–2024) for ‘People of African Descent: recognition, justice and development’; and a year following the European Union’s Resolution (2018/2899 (RSP)), which calls for:

Member States and the EU institutions to recognise that people of African descent, an estimated 15 million people of whom live in Europe, are subjected to racism, discrimination and xenophobia in particular, and to the unequal enjoyment of human and fundamental rights in general, amounting to structural racism. People of African descent are entitled to protection from these inequities, including positive measures for the promotion and the full and equal enjoyment of their rights (European Union [EU], 2019).
Ireland’s Strategy for African 2025 (Government of Ireland, 2019) includes the objectives of ‘stronger political partnerships’ and ‘working with Africa’. The past few years have seen increased funding for EU-Africa and UK-Africa knowledge exchange for mutual benefit to address complex challenges and the Sustainable Development Goals, supported by GCRF, charities, Erasmus Plus et cetera.

These policy and funding levers come at a time when academic communities across the world have been calling for the decolonisation of the curriculum and reparations within institutions, mirrored within many funding calls which call for the indigenous knowledge systems and inclusive, participatory methodologies for wicked problems and local challenges. It is pressing that higher education institutions make good on their social responsibility for the common good. Parallel to this, is a growing mass of scholars of African descent on the island expressing interest in collaboration but are lacking the funding, structural support and opportunities for international collaboration. This Project aims to address this gap by drawing on the expertise and experience of UK-based Africanists who have established successful and impactful networks, research projects and centres within England and Scotland.

Aims and objectives

This project aims to establish a sustainable and impactful All Ireland network of African/ist scholars. A summary of the project objectives in the twelve-month period are to

1. Build ROI-UK relationships by (a) sharing expertise and experience, (b) identifying existing academic and partner capacity for knowledge production, exchange and translation, (c) building capacity of ECRs for the Project’s sustainability and their career advancement;
2. Identify common research priorities for this network and promote the sharing of research ideas;
3. Share knowledge and expertise of specific and innovative methodologies and interdisciplinary intersections for African studies between UK and ROI researchers;
4. Produce a network map for future African/ist social science collaboration (a) within NI and ROI, and wider UK, (b) internationally and the African continent particularly.

These are the firmament for medium term and long-term objectives of undertaking sustainable collaborations high-quality research and inter/national dissemination with local impact.

The state of the art: African/ist

‘African/ist’ is an umbrella term inclusive of specialists in African studies; those who encourage solidarity among people of African descent; and those of African descent. The term’s historical usage is associated with anti-racist resistance; scholarship and activism against race-based discrimination and oppression; the promotion of pan-Africanism and African intellectual movements. The term signals that the network would be inclusive of the full range of interdisciplinary concerns, including Black Studies and African studies (inspired by others who have bridged them, such as Auma et al., 2020), studies of structural racism within society and the archives, in addition to the study of de/legitimation of knowledge systems, heritage, belief, language, curriculum et cetera.

The central themes

The programme of network activities is design to elicit contextually-relevant, timely thematics for future research to impact education and policy, in addition to building capacity within the network. Informed by the PIs’ knowledge of this area of scholarship, three central themes have been identified to catalyse the initial foci, as outlined below.
The nature of the study of ‘Africa’

This area of studies is dynamic, continually in flux and open to contestation because central to its formation are the problematics and politics of representation.

We cannot separate the question of how better to teach [or research] Africa from broader questions about how better to understand and represent Africa”. (Matthews, 2015, p. 8)

Bringing together scholars with a commitment to contributing to deepening and improving how Africa and Africans are understood, and how both are positioned in the contemporary global order, requires critical engagement with ‘Africa’ and ‘thinking in postcolonial and gender equality terms’ (Arukwe, 2014). Network activities will include interrogating the very question of how Africa ‘ought’ to be studied (Matthews, 2015), by problematising the constructions of and representation of Africa (Auerbach et al., 2019) and bodies of knowledge that subjugate Africa, which is so often badly misrepresented in the media, popular culture and in much scholarly writing.

Those who seek to teach it differently need to relate that pedagogical goal to attempts to produce different knowledge about Africa and to fight against the continent’s continued subjugation in the global order. (Matthews, 2015, p. 9)

African Studies are broad and varied. Within this field is the study of Blackness and identity (Andrews & Palmer, 2016; Harney & Moten, 2013; Kanneh, 2002; Lamola, 2018); racism, intersectionality and Europe (Burman, 2003); various theoretical schools including queer African studies (Abbas and Ekine 2013); African feminist thought, critical race theory, Africana studies (Berry, 2017), the digital humanities and southern theory (Breckenridge, 2014). One area of consideration would be the positioning of the island of Ireland itself, with its connections across the world, not least the importance of contributing to knowledge about the relation between European social and political imaginations and projects of justice and injustice in Africa (Robinson, 2000; Sanders, 1999).

Next, is how to create the conditions for the recognition of African knowledges, methodologies, scholars and histories under erasure. Within this would be scholarship related to addressing the intellectual marginalisation of Africa (Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2008; Obeng-Odoom, 2019), African researchers within the EU (Mwambari & Owor, 2019) and those seen as ‘other’ within publication power dynamics (Larson, 2018).

Recognition of African knowledges, methodologies and scholars

Aligned with the EU Resolution, the project aims to contribute to Pan-African intellectual growth and its relation to the social (Mazrui, 2013) by increasing exposure to African knowledges, methodologies and scholars. Traversing knowledge boundaries (Bhambra, 2020) is necessary for justice in global knowledge geopolitics (Connell, 2013; Connell et al., 2017, 2018b). The network will seek to curate and showcase the current and past work of African scholars. The commemoration of such individuals has occurred in an ad hoc manner at some institutions (see Queen’s University’s blog and events such as those commemorating Prof Martin Lynn’s work on ‘African Studies in Ireland’ held in 2018), but the structural support of research by Africans of Africa, and of sustainable intellectual exchange, has been missing. To address cultural hegemony within HE (Ehrhardt, 2017), requires conditions for the flourishing of scholars of African descent.

Proactively, the network will create opportunities for African/ist scholars to network, which is important as they are often in precarious positions within higher education, with experiences and concerns that are rarely made visible. Institutionalised African Studies has at times been
critiqued of being empty of African authorities (Odugbemi et al., 2019). Indications are that such inclusive process may identify inherent research foci of the institutional discriminatory effects of migration policies in universities, which have emerged of concern within other comparative in the EU contexts (Gutiérrez-Rodriguez, 2016) and with BAME scholars in the UK (Arday & Mirza, 2018). This falls within the larger umbrella of Critical University Studies, for which the UK PI, Dr Belluigi, can draw on her UK and African network (ACUSAfrica, n.d.) for strengthening scholarship in this area for All Ireland, as can the ROI PI Dr Joseph for her African American networks on critical race scholarship.

Capacity building and knowledge exchange is at the heart of the Project activities. Building on the newly established ROI African Research network, calls will be disseminated through that list-serve, the PIs’ social media networks and EDI officers in each HE institution on the island, inviting applications to two large scale symposia at the beginning and the end of the Project duration, through which a breadth of Africanists in ROI and NI (estimated 80 persons) will be exposed to resources, workshops and cross-border knowledge exchange. A selection of up to 25 of these scholars will engage in intensive knowledge exchange activities, including a two-day workshop with English and Scottish Africanists, with specific concern for strategic identification and preparation for funding in the following cycle. Three ECRs will join the PIs for research visits to the African Studies centres in England and Scotland, to ensure ECR-ECR interaction for the next generation of Africanists. To maximise the benefits of the network activities during and after the 12-month duration, participants will be invited to subscribe to a website feed with podcasts and the project log; and log in to broadcasts of workshop activities and webinars, and access edited asynchronous recordings. Selected materials will be archived on the website for longevity, including:

- A report from the scoping study of All Ireland tertiary institutions’ research, education and outreach engagement with Africa, African knowledges and diasporic African communities, with identified pathways to impact that exist within HEIs and gaps for provision of courses
- An annotated resource list, including relevant readings, policies and frameworks, toolkits, datasets, curricula, centres and networks of relevance to African Studies in Ireland and Northern Ireland
- A social network map for future African/ist social science collaboration (a) within NI and ROI, and wider UK, (b) internationally and the African continent particularly.

Within the application, we included a paragraph signalling our appropriateness for leading these developments for this network. This included what is generally known as our ‘track record’ for such activity, including funding awards, connections with well-placed persons, and a sense of our publications and projects because they would have access to our CVs within the attachments in the application. We have not included this paragraph here, as this does not align with the purposes of this article. Below we continue with the rest of the content . . . .

African Studies offers fruitful areas for comparison and benefit to those within Irish social sciences more broadly. This includes those concerned with post-conflict contexts, particularly the settler colonial conflicts of South Africa and Zimbabwe (Bishi, 2020; McGladdery, 2002); the positioning of language, heritage and rights; the contribution of Africanists to decolonising peacebuilding, in practice, research and education (Kurian & Kester, 2019; Turner, 2019; Weerawardhana, 2018); history, trauma, commemoration (Belluigi, 2001; Bisschoff & Van de Peer, 2013; Nhlapo et al., 2020; Mupotsa, 2020). In addition to the benefits for UK-ROI scholars, the network will have local relevance to laypersons as outlined below.
**Identifying issues of local relevance and needs for All Ireland people of African descent**

The rich history of interaction between Irish and African movement for social change includes ROI’s support of the Organisation of African Unity resolution for sanctions against apartheid as the first Western European state; South Africa and NI’s explorations of peace-making, reparations and victim rights as post-conflict contexts. Much more also needs to be learnt about African communities currently living in ROI (Murphy & Maguire, 2012; Mutwarasibo, 2002) and NI, particularly since Afrophobia in ROI (Joseph, 2018) and NI (Gilligan, 2018) is under-researched and under-funded. The network will consider the intersection of racism with social justice, labour, academic development and education.

Black students attainment and Black academics progression and experiences remain an understudied area of scholarship within ROI and NI, with most research from the UK (Ahmed, 2009, 2012; Arday, 2018, 2019; Bhopal et al., 2018) not inclusive of NI qualitative data (Alexander & Arday, 2015). Educational policy for social cohesion bridging the Catholic-Protestant divide in NI has continued in its blindness to the concerns of diasporic communities (Farren, 1991). So-called ‘colorblind’ laws and policies perpetuate existing racial inequalities in education policy (Su, 2007). Much can be learnt from gains made in the scholarship of decolonisation of education (McKerr & Murphy, 2014) and anti-racism in higher education in England and Scotland (Tate & Bagguley, 2017). Only recently through the work of the ROI PI, Dr Joseph have such resources and courses come to light on the island of Ireland (O’Toole et al., 2019). Towards building a robust knowledge base of local expertise and offerings, scoping will be undertaken to provide a map of the existing response to the Decade within the tertiary education sector in NI and ROI, acknowledging that while formal programmes may not exist, individuals may be infusing aspects within the formal curriculum, research and/or outreach. A report with recommendations will be shared with EDI practitioners and Africanists in each institution. In the long term, the network aims to prepare All Ireland Africanist scholars for participation in EU and UK policy-making circles, to avoid the reproduction of inequalities within international policy (Shahjahan, 2016).

The document then referred the reader to African Studies centres and networks, and specific key scholars in the UK, the island and on the Continent, with which we intended to connect during the project. We have chosen not to include that section of the application which would have identified them in this publication, as we are mindful not to extend the professional risk of this article to our colleagues during these times.

**Conclusion**

It may be considered imprudent to engage in this level of transparency in the public, scholarly arena. However, what can you do as an academic when you are situated within a context where scholarship is constrained by a funding climate characterised by a consistently unequal awarding gap? Who is to be held accountable? How might accountability be exercised by those whom it subjugates? And to whom might we share this experiential, persistent experience of the im-possibility within?

Academic agency is fragile terrain. Action against departments, disciplines and theoretical approaches enables us to rise collectively, as seen in the progressive union initiatives across the world and in recent cases legally challenging the actions in the US
against Critical Race Theory (Guynn, 2020), for instance, and discrimination within public funded university programmes in Canada (Greenfield, 2021). It is far more difficult to engender such solidarity for award gaps when the conditions pit academics against each other competitively, and when academics are marginalised, as we are here on the island of Ireland. As with many of our colleagues who are peripheral but not powerless (Connell et al., 2018a), in this paper we have chosen to follow in the long tradition of those who write the battle (Hare, 1972) into scholarship. Within the bounds of academic freedom, we share humbly with you whose scholarship is African Studies. We realise that you may read the content of our application with far more critical, and informed, eyes than those of the assessors of that application; and may find the narrative realism within the application style problematic and our objectives wanting. Our intention is not to complain – we are aware that funding applications are, more often than not, unsuccessful in the United Kingdom.

Rather it is to contribute one single case as an insight into the racialised politics of knowledge production in the diaspora (Kessi et al., 2020; Okech, 2020). This is because we believe that the ethical obligation is to continue with such work to counter this seeming im-possibility. We tentatively hope that by cracking the glass of this closed window to this audience, light and air will circulate regardless.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Dina Zoe Bellugi’s work relates to the agency and ethico-historical responsibility of artists and academics in contexts undergoing transitions to authority in the shadow of oppression. Shaped in part by experiences as a practitioner in creative arts education and later in academic development in her country of South Africa, she is concerned with the complex conditions which enable the development of artists and academics as critical consciousness. She is committed to the growth of international networks for advancing Critical University Studies, where committed scholars, practitioners and policy makers across the globe actively pursue an emancipatory imagination for the future university.

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