

## Black History Month Interviews

Written by E-International Relations

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To celebrate Black History Month we asked several scholars about race and IR: *Do you think the discipline of IR has made important strides to equally incorporate the research, ideas and histories of People of Colour, both conceptually and institutionally? What could be done better?* Below are responses from Olivia Rutazibwa, Toni Hastrup, Adeoti Dipeolu, Yolande Bouka, Chantelle Lewis and Robert Vitalis.

**Olivia Rutazibwa is a Belgian/Rwandan political scientist and Senior Lecturer in European and International (Development) Studies at the University of Portsmouth in the UK. Read her previous interview with E-International Relations [here](#).**

It really depends on what we mean by IR. When people ask me what my discipline is, I often proudly claim that I'm an IR scholar because I study the international. However, I add that I'm a decolonial feminist IR scholar, and people might say that in order to do that properly we need to let go of the idea of "IR". So, if by "IR" you mean the poli-sci North American version, then my answer is very simply: no. But if we redefine what IR is, then I do see spaces and places where people are making these important strides. As I mentioned before, the more you go to conferences like BISA or ISA or Millennium, you notice that the needles are shifting as a result of the work people have been doing for decades now, often behind the scenes or in the margins. The result of this work is something like the GDS-ISA and their cooperation with feminists and other sections like political economy or political theory. We also see the overall themes of the last couple of ISA conventions being influenced by this.

I'm less optimistic about those trying to "pluralise" IR. I see a focus on adding or enlarging IR geographically by looking at China for example, to then just conclude that our theories still stand. I'm not sure that all people involved in this project are committed to a different normative project. For some, it's a way to revive or build their academic career on this internationalisation wave. While this might genuinely annoy me, I try to remind myself that it is not a zero-sum game; even those types of works create openings for other conversations or make us understand in more detail what we should not be doing.

On an institutional level, we cannot necessarily deploy the decolonial to come up with a universal checklist of things to do. The specific places in which we work – be that the classroom, in administration, or as the editor of a journal – require specific answers. But in general, I think we need to be more serious about the impossibility or the limits of anticoloniality from inside the institutions as they exist. For development studies for example, anticoloniality means contributing to the dismantling of that specific degree. However, we know how much money universities make by simply offering "International Development Studies", so it's unlikely that will happen. There are things we *can* do in the meantime, like reverse the order of things in our syllabus or de-hierarchise the learning dynamics in our classroom. It's a balancing act between not forgetting that the long-term goal is much more radical than what we're able to do now, while making pragmatic choices in that direction along the way.

The other tricky balancing act is the one related to power. One needs power to change things radically. To shift power anti-colonially still requires power, you just have to make sure you do not reproduce the coloniality of that power. In that sense, institutions feature in our struggle for change, but at the same time we have to remember that their survival is not a primary goal. We cannot be wedded to those institutions because in the present, they are part of the problem as the place where coloniality is continuously reproduced. This is, for me, the full meaning of being *in*

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the institution but not *of* the institution.

**Toni Haastrup is a Senior Lecturer in International Politics at the University of Stirling, Scotland, UK. Read her previous interview with E-International relations [here](#).**

Well, we too are the discipline of IR so I find this hard to answer in a straightforward way. If this question is about the extent to which hegemonic institutions incorporate our realities and scholarship, then I'd say we still have a long way to go, though it is happening. Would you have thought in a million years, that a black African immigrant woman would edit an International Relations journal whose primary focus is on the EU? Every time I open a manuscript to process, I still remember the incredulity with which White aspiring and established Africanist wondered why – I – would do a PhD that focused on the EU. But I am here now so something must have changed.

But it's not just me. In the latest offerings from Millennium: Journal of International Relations, Melody Fonseca's article deals with *Global IR and Western Dominance: Moving Forward or Eurocentric Entrapment?* Ideally, we really shouldn't still be having this conversation, but that it is published in a mainstream journal is huge. But already in 2017, Errol A Henderson articulated a contribution to IR that centred the work of the great Black thinker – WEB Dubois: *The Revolution Will Not Be Theorised: Du Bois, Locke, and the Howard School's Challenge to White Supremacist IR Theory* and, of course, there is the work of Bob Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: the Birth of American International Relations*, which re-narrates the history of the discipline of International Relations. This by no means even begins to scratch the surface of the ways in which Black people, and other people of colour have contributed to and continue to grow the discipline.

Doing better would require us to re-think what the boundaries of the discipline are. Despite the proliferation of 'critical' IR, it can still be a very conservative discipline that polices what may be considered International Studies or International Relations. Only through this can we see and gain from what has always been there – in the international – that includes indigenous knowledge production, knowledge from continents outside of the dominant Europe and North America (and specifically the United States and Canada).

Our journals should reflect on their gatekeeping practices. To what extent do we discount scholarship that ostensibly does not meet the (often Eurocentric even borderline racist) standards? Are we actively engaging and supporting scholars from the Global South? Not just those located in the Global South, but of the Global South. As someone who sits between/across/within these two spaces, I have watched endless 'capacity building' programmes that happen in Africa but no funding for African scholars in the West even though our bodies and our ideas are still said not to belong.

The awareness around gender equality these days is very welcome, but we should pay the same attention to the absences of PoC in our academic spaces as well. Of what use is it to have an all-White woman panel of colleagues from institutions in the Global North – how is that inclusive? Colleagues in positions of power should learn Solidarity. Let our experiences be testament enough. We should not have to evidence our pain, justify our humanity, and we shouldn't be having this conversation only during Black History Month. I wonder sometimes if there is a world in which I never have to ask these questions, but I have to believe we can do better, because I have seen changes, so I am generally optimistic.

**Adeoti Dipeolu is a Doctoral candidate and a Research Assistant at the African Leadership Centre (ALC) at King's College London and Coordinator of the ALC's Leading Practitioners Program. Read her previous interview with E-International Relations [here](#).**

In my opinion, there is still a gap in this area even as the field has evolved. There is still a lot to be done with regards to incorporating the works of people of colour in IR, both conceptually and institutionally. First and foremost, the nature of the discipline of IR and its foundational principles have contributed to this gap as arguably, they did not consider the contributions from the Global South as part of mainstream debates. The core of the IR discipline is driven by the ideas of western states and economies, especially when looking at the discourse around the state. It is only in very recent times that focus has been given to Africa's contribution to the discipline. If we talk about individual

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contributions, there is no readily available platform through which these scholars can emerge, especially at the global level.

A starting point to address this issue is for there to be a recognition of African agency in this discipline and acknowledgement of the discourses generated by these voices as pertinent to the debates. On a practical level, collaboration institutionally, especially between western institutions and those on the African continent for example can also begin to address the issue of recognition and increase the chance for their voices to be on a platform. The same with building partnerships that encourage interactions between academics. The agency of authors of colour can also be increased by addressing the publishing obstacles they may face. At an institutional level as well, curriculum development should take into account scholarship from the Global South. A decolonisation of curriculums should lead to raising the profile of authors who have been and are writing on these IR subjects who bring different perspectives and experiences.

**Yolande Bouka is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Studies at Queen's University. Read her full interview with E-International relations [here](#).**

There is a lot more to be done in IR to fully accept and incorporate the intellectual work and histories of people of colour. One of the biggest lies ever told was that white scholars had the objectivity and distance necessary to understand the rest of the world. First, Western scholars never seemed to question how their proximity to their own politics and wars and their blindness to their interests could cloud their judgment and analysis. Nevertheless, it did not stop them from universalising their theories, ontologies, and epistemologies. Then, when it came to understanding the Other, they assumed that not having skin in the game gave them an analytical edge. To do better, the discipline will need to own its whiteness, assess how it is reproduced in the scholarship, and be willing to shed it. Only then can there be a genuine acceptance of the vast intellectual footprint of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people. From there, we will see more engagement with work done by people of colour, both in terms of research and teaching. And with a little bit of chance, we will start creating an intellectual space where students of colour feel welcomed enough to make the discipline their own and where faculty of colour are valued.

**Chantelle Lewis is a part-time PhD student in the Sociology department at Goldsmiths UK, a research assistant on the ESRC funded project BrExpats and Programme Director of the Leading Routes campaign, [#BlackinAcademia](#) . Read her previous interview with E-International Relations [here](#).**

Sociology needs and must do better. There are not enough Black and mixed Black Caribbean and African heritage students with funded PhDs. There are few Black academics at early career, mid-career and professorial level (particularly Black women) and those that have defied the odds in attaining their doctorate and secured a job must also navigate the embedded white supremacy that haunts the academy. I reflect on these absences and exclusions on an almost daily basis which is probably why I found this question the hardest to answer. I regularly feel sad and frustrated by the inequalities that seem to persist within sociology and the social sciences. More recently and to contextualise this further, along with many other students and academics, I've been disappointed to see how many undergraduate reading lists within UK Sociology departments remain almost exclusively white.

The lack of representation of Black and people of colour from working class backgrounds beyond master's level in sociology and the social sciences in general is particularly troubling. So much of 'what' and 'who' is studied disproportionality focused on these populations, yet we are so often the furthest from having any control, insight or even culturally (and in more disturbing cases, economically) capitalizing on this research. I am not suggesting the way I conduct research is in any way utopian, but I cannot help (like so many before me) but feel frustrated with who is given permission (and paid!) to meaningfully engage within the social sciences.

I think the rise in social media and podcasts has become an important way for people to engage with the social sciences. Obviously it has come with quite a few issues in an ever-evolving post-truth society, but for the academy I think it has proven to be a timely challenge to the proliferation of binarised notions of how research and academic thinking should be communicated. Academic thinking has always existed beyond the academy, but these new forms of communicating ideas have extended the reach. I guess this example was an unintended stride for social sciences

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that wasn't initiated by the academy, but I believe has and continues to improve the discipline(s). Overall, I know there are many people and organisations within HE that are trying to make meaningful change, but so often it doesn't feel like there are enough of us. People will regularly say that equity takes time, but many of us working and studying on the margins are tired of waiting.

**Robert Vitalis has a PhD in Political Science from MIT and is currently full Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. Read his previous interview with E-IR [here](#).**

I guess it depends on what you mean by the discipline. I think virtually nothing has been done in the top twenty or so departments that, as I write in my book, reproduce the professoriate or discipline in the United States, to do so. It is different in what I call, because the leaders of the field treat it as such, the periphery. I will end with a true but depressing anecdote. If we consider ISA as a place where a more inclusive, complex, critical, decolonial field is emerging, those in my department who understand themselves as the discipline's gatekeepers treat it as a zone lost to hostilities and consider the American Political Science Association to be the place where the "real" or the "serious" IR is done. My department once circulated a ranking of journals in the field to be used for tenure and promotion cases. *Millennium* wasn't on it. *Foreign Affairs*, which of course is not a peer-reviewed journal, was.