

**Professor Ono:** I'm Santa Ono, the president and vice-chancellor of UBC. On this season of the *Blue and Goldcast*, I'm speaking with the people who are leading some of the most innovative and creative work coming out of our campuses.

My guest today is Dr. Handel Wright. Dr. Wright is the Professor in the Faculty of Education's Department of Education Studies, as well as the Director of the Center for Culture, Identity and Education. He studies multiculturalism, African culture studies, and cultural studies of education. Last year, Dr. Wright was appointed as Senior Advisor to the President on Anti-racism and Inclusive Excellence. Dr. Wright, welcome to *Blue and Goldcast*. Thank you for being on the show.

**Dr. Handel Wright:** Thank you so very much, President Ono. It's wonderful to be on the show. Let me just start by saying greetings from my home in the city of Richmond. I want to acknowledge that what is now called Richmond, this place where I live, and in the time of the global pandemic, the place from which I work, is part of the traditional unceded land of some of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the Kwantlen, the Tsawwassen, and the Musqueam.

**Professor Ono:** Handel, I've really enjoyed working with you over the past several months. I want to say, at the outset, that we, at UBC, are very lucky to have you as a scholar, but also for your tremendous and tireless work on the task force. I am personally very indebted to you for your leadership, and I'm really looking forward to the work that we're going to do as a university together, to make it inclusively excellent. Before we go onto that, I just wanted to ask you if you could tell us about your work. I understand that it covers several different areas. How did you come to focus on these different areas?

**Dr. Wright:** Thanks so much for those nice comments, Professor Ono. My studies and my area of focus in my studies come from my background in English literature, and in education. Especially from my PhD in education. Those were the bases of my conceptual and theoretical foundation for my passion in these various fields. My work covers variously the articulation of African cultural studies, the articulation of cultural studies of education, the reconceptualization of youth identity, and representation of youth in multicultural and intercultural context.

Canadian and comparative multiculturalism, reconceptualist curriculum theorizing, and the use of anti-racism critical theory, post-colonialism, and decolonialism as theoretical conceptual frames for social justice education. My studies and areas of focus in my studies in English literature, and education, especially my PhD in education, were the bases of my conceptual and theoretical foundation, and my passion for these various fields. I did a BA Honors from Fourah Bay College in my native Sierra Leone and came to Canada on a Canadian Commonwealth scholarship.

Did an MA in English lit at the University of Windsor, and then an MEd at Queens, and a PhD at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. What my studies in literature gave me, my curriculum back home was very heavy on English literature. I liked Shakespeare John Donne, Dickens, and Alexandra Pope, but the smattering of African literature stayed with me the most. I got to know what Bell Hooks would call coming to voice, and gender equity issues through the work of

Ama Ata Aidoo, *Dilemma of a Ghost*, as Sister Killjoy, or Mariama Bâ, the Senegalese feminist writer, *So Long a Letter*.

I learned of the beauty of language and encountering literature, cultures so similar to mine, in the work of Nigeria and authors like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka remains probably my favorite piece of literature. I learned how different other African countries and cultures were. I learned about apartheid in South Africa through *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead*, by Athol Fugard. I learned about the Kenyan struggle for independence and the Mau Mau movement through the work of Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

My MA and my MEd taught me a lot about the modularization of other ways of knowing, and bodies of knowledge, and critical work coming from other places. In my MA, it was almost impossible to find someone who could supervise my MA thesis on a very prominent African writer, Wole Soyinka. When I was doing my MEd, no one could point me to the fact that what I was attempting to do already existed and was called critical pedagogy.

It was at OISE that I encountered critical pedagogy, a discourse in the field of education that focused on identity, race, class, gender, and later, sexual orientation and disability as ways of addressing representation and social justice. I also encountered both multiculturalism and anti-racism and much prefer the latter. I was an avowed anti-racist who had no time for multiculturalism till I got my first job, which was at the University of Tennessee, where I was told they did not know what anti-racism was, and were not interested in having me teach courses in something that sounded so radical.

When I said it was rather like multiculturalism, they readily agreed I could develop and teach courses on multiculturalism, which led me to take a second long look at multiculturalism and got me into what the Americans call critical multiculturalism, which is very similar to Canadian anti-racism. Finally, cultural studies. I absolutely fell in love with cultural studies when I encountered it well into my PhD at OISE. It was the discourse I had been waiting for. It is an interdisciplinary studies of issues starting with the issue itself, rather than a particular discipline.

It's explicitly social justice-oriented. I utilize cultural studies informed by critical pedagogy, in my PhD dissertation, and have undertaken work on cultural studies of education, and on Africana cultural studies ever since.

**Professor Ono:** Your academic work has a focus on representation and social justice. You're also something of a social justice activist, and I am too, so, I'm really happy that we're in the same boat. Is there a way these two paths come together for you?

**Dr. Wright:** That's a really interesting question. There's too often a tension between academics and academic work on the one hand, and activists and activist work on the other. Now I'm tentatively beginning to think of my work rather as an imperfect version of what I'm calling academic activism. Yes, I've always been interested in social justice activism, and for me, it has not been completely divorced from the academy. I was a student activist in my undergraduate days in Sierra Leone, organizing and protesting against politicians, corruption, and nepotism.

As an international graduate student in Canada, I refrained from being in actual demonstrations, but hung out with students and community activists, working on environmental, anti-racism, and feminist issues. School has been a place where I have learned activism, and from which I've practiced activism, but that activism was initially not about school or academia. Cultural studies helped me bridge the gap between the two worlds, teaching me that activism without a theoretical foundation is limited. You need critical theory, post-colonial thought, decolonial thought.

As the prominent post-colonial deconstructionist, Gayatri Spivak, once indicated, theory has a role in activism. She asserts that theory is world in the world. On the other hand, theory and academic work without activism, does not make for actual institutional or societal change. It was Gayatri Spivak who also declared that her area of theorizing deconstruction, she said deconstruction never constructed anything. Working for representation, equity, and social justice within the university itself has been where I believe I've brought these two worlds together. Here at UBC, I joined a few faculty and a student group, Africa Awareness, to cajole the institution into establishing African Studies. What we now have as the still very precarious, African Studies minor. I did more official service. One of the first committees I joined is an advisory to the provost on EDI, what is now called VPSICED.

I was only doing social justice work in the city of Vancouver. I serve on the city's Vancouver Advisory Committee on Black History Month and the City of Vancouver External Advisory on Equity and Inclusion. My new role as Senior Advisor to the President on Anti-racism, it's partly responsible, I'm sure, for the fact that I've been sought out for advice at the provincial level. For example, the Ministry of Education's efforts on anti-racism education, and the same ministry's efforts on ongoing anti-racism work, and the inclusion of Black history in BC schools.

It is this confluence of university and larger community activism, while undertaking regular academic work on social justice, that I'm calling academic activism.

**Professor Ono:** I know what you're doing at the university, but learning about the continuing work that you are doing with the province and the city of Vancouver makes it even more remarkable, the impact you're having at UBC. Tell us about your work on African cultural studies. In particular, what makes Black Pacific Northwest studies particularly interesting.

**Dr. Wright:** My work on Africana cultural studies involves work on both continental African Studies and Black cultural studies. The latter involving Blackness, both on continental Africa and in various Black diasporas. My PhD dissertation was an exploration of how and why we can change from an aesthetics-based literary studies approach to text in what we teach as literature studies in Africa, to a more utilitarian, social justice, and representation-focused and performance-inclusive African cultural studies. I loved cultural studies from when I first encountered it as a PhD student, but there was almost no existing African Cultural Studies at the time.

The field was dominated by British and American cultural studies. There was also Canadian, and Australian, and various nascent European national cultural studies. There was very little indeed in the way of African cultural studies, or even on cultural studies in continental Africa, with the exception of a small Centre for Cultural and Media Studies, and a small journal called *Critical Arts*, both at the then University of

Durban in South Africa. I contacted the director of the CCMS, Keyan Tomaselli, and he was very excited to know that someone, anyone was trying to work on African cultural studies.

Keyan and I have remained collaborators since then, working on the development of African cultural studies, in and of itself, and in conversation with global cultural studies. We have presented and organized panels at various international cultural studies conferences and have individually and jointly presented work on, and published on African cultural studies. In terms of Black Studies, I'm interested in identity and cultural studies, and just representation and social justice for Black people everywhere. Like most people, I have usually thought of Blackness as represented by what Paul Gilroy has identified as the Black Atlantic.

The triangle of Black presence involving the Western part of Africa, Britain and Europe, and Eastern North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean, and the slavery-based connections between them. Very few people think of the Black presence where we are located on the Westcoast in Western Canada and the Western United States. It is this very much under-examined and under-theorized Blackness that some are now starting to call the Black Pacific. To study the Black Pacific is to conceptualize Blackness very differently, to look outward to Asia instead of Europe.

To think not of Canadian Blackness originating from the underground railroad, but from immigration from San Francisco. To think of initial settlement of Blacks, not in Southern Ontario and Nova Scotia, but in Vancouver Island. To look at Black contemporary presence in Metro Vancouver is not to see substantial Black presence in distinct Black ethno-burbs as in the greater Toronto or in Montreal, but rather a negligible Blackness with absolutely no Black ethno-burbs.

To see Black representation here is to see a very small set of Black artists, activists, intellectuals, and academics punching way above their weight in terms of representation and activism. I find all of this very new, unique, and very exciting indeed. Some of us are advocating for Black Studies at UBC, and I am particularly excited about what a bi-campus, Black Studies at UBC, that includes the local, both Vancouver and the Okanagan, and is oriented to the Black Pacific, I'm very excited about what that could be.

**Professor Ono:** I'm excited about that as well. You're certainly correct that each of you is certainly punching above your weight as you say, and we're grateful for that. What do you think are currently our most urgent needs in terms of representation and identity on our campuses?

**Dr. Wright:** I would have to say the number one issue is representation of Blackness. We're beginning to make some strides, but UBC is woeful in its representation of Blackness. When I got here in 2005, I was shocked to find UBC had no African Studies, no Black Studies program, no Africana Studies. Whatever frame of examination of the Black world you want to think of, we simply did not have at UBC. Even now, we have only a very precarious, African Studies undergraduate minor. We're in dire need of a robust bi-campus manifestation of Black Studies at UBC.

We did not have Black people on campus either, not very many. There were so very few Black faculty, that we are and remain an oddity. Black bodies that do not belong. We need more Black faculty, not only for Black Studies but in all fields and disciplines. Indeed, we need more Black bodies at UBC in general. Black students, Black staff, and Black faculty. We need more Blacks in administration, especially in senior administration. Secondly, I would say we need a lot more work on EDI that reflects the intersectionality of identity. UBC was and remains a dominantly hegemonically White institution.

The principal work we have done around EDI, and for which we should congratulate ourselves, has been improvements in gender and sexuality. Namely, having more women and LGBTQ+ folks on faculty and in leadership positions. However, this has been done at the expense of the representation of indigenous and racialized folks. We have gender diversity, but mostly the hiring and elevation of White women. We have sexual orientation diversity, but of queer White folks at the expense of two-spirited folks and racialized LGBTQ+ folks. This is what Malinda Smith has called the diversification of Whiteness.

We need to take representation of indigenous and racialized folks in general, and especially in positions of leadership, much more seriously and as an urgent problem to be addressed. I know that we're starting down that road, but we have a long way to go. I would say those are maybe, for me, the two most important issues.

**Professor Ono:** Thank you very much. I certainly agree with that. We have made progress as you pointed out, but we do have a long way to go. The good news is that we have some very dedicated individuals that are focused on that, moving forward. Let's talk about your role as senior advisor to me, what has that worked look like so far? Aside from being a mammoth task.

**Dr. Wright:** [laughs] It's been the most intensive, demanding, and the most rewarding work I've done in my entire career. I believe in the work because I can see so much potential for positive change at UBC, through my collaboration not only with you but also with the anti-racism executive leads on anti-racism and everyone involved in anti-racism and inclusive excellence work at UBC. Including Shirley Chau who's my co-chair of the task force, all the leaders of the committees on the task force, and just other folks doing a lot of excellent work on anti-racism. The number of issues and tasks I've been involved with is quite comprehensive. I've been advising you on institutional, local, national, and international development related to anti-racism. I have participated with you on the very intensive presidential listening sessions with equity deserving groups. I believe some 18 to date, that's quite astonishing, participated on the anti-racism training for UBC leadership, which you initiated retreats for the executive, the two senates, the board of governors, associate deans, and deans.

I've worked on some of the communications about anti-racism that we're doing. It's now very prominent through the design and populating of the UBC anti-racism website. I've been helping to develop anti-racism resources for UBC. One of the most interesting right now is working with the UBC library system on the development of the anti-racism subject guide. I've been supporting both provosts on their work on EDI.

For example, I served on the hiring committee for the position of Manager for Racialized Faculty Issues, at UBC Vancouver. There's been continued work on UBC-wide EDI committees that I serve on, including Race and Leadership Committee, and the Vice-Presidential Strategic Committee on Equity and Diversity, and also on IBPOC Connections. Working with others on the development of webinars and panels on anti-racism-related issues. Most recently we've had a very successful webinars series titles, *Where Are All the Blacks?* which looks at the lack of representation of Blackness, Canada-wide, in certain academic fields.

**Professor Ono:** It's an enormous amount of work. There've been obviously challenging moments to work such as this. It's hard work and once again, I thank you. I've enjoyed every moment working with you Handel. What are you working towards now in the role, let's say currently, in the next couple of months?

**Dr. Wright:** The work on the task force, that has been a very huge amount of work. I really just want to thank all the members of the task force. It's been incredible work. People have been so very dedicated. Wrapping up that work, continuing that work, continuing to develop recommendations from the task force is what is consuming most of my time right now. The development of resources on anti-racism is something that I'm finding interesting. Work on the library subject guide, and on webinars and panels, and hopefully, later on, publications, academic work, and theoretical work on anti-racism would be great.

Other work includes- we hope that UBC will be receptive- advocating working with a small community of folks on trying to develop a model of Black Studies at UBC, which we will want to propose. I guess the overall idea I keep in mind, is what I call the normalization of anti-racism, which I hope is something that will happen at our institution.

**Professor Ono:** What are your goals and hopes for anti-racism? Looking actually further into the future at UBC, how will we know that we've succeeded?

**Dr. Wright:** The immediate goal, of course, is to complete the work of the Task Force on Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence and to submit our final report to the institution. That's an immediate and very practical goal. Second, and related to that, the Task Force on Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence has generated and continues to generate what I think are an excellent set of recommendations, which have the potential to enable UBC to make very serious inroads into addressing the perennial problem of institutional racism. I can't help but hope, that once the final report is submitted, all of our recommendations will be accepted by UBC.

Equally, if not more important, that all of them will be implemented and implemented expeditiously. I have no doubt that if this is done, the task force recommendations will contribute significantly to making UBC an institution characterized by inclusive excellence. Third, in a more general sense, my hope is that we ultimately get to a place where anti-racism is normalized at UBC. That anti-racism becomes a regular aspect of our institutional culture, and hence its goals of representation, equity, and social justice become ingrained, and regularized, and universal.

Right now anti-racism is being engaged prominently, but potentially, sporadically, in response to some very urgent issues. It is about addressing an immediate and

pressing set of problems of institutionalized racism as an extension of a recognition of national and international events of grotesque racism. We're all acutely aware of the context in which we're doing this work. The killing of George Floyd and the death of numerous Black folks in Canada at the hands of police, which is about institutionalized Black racism. The rise of a revived anti-racism spurred on by COVID-19, being the excuse for a new Yellow Peril discourse.

From spitting upon, to the murder of Asian-Americans, and Asian Canadians. The discovery of the graves of indigenous children on the grounds of residential schools, starting right here in BC at Kamloops, institutional racism in and via institutions of education. How grotesquely ironic. We also need to think of anti-racism as something needed to address the more mundane but nonetheless, pernicious problems. The under-representation of indigenous and world majority Peoples' thoughts, and ways of knowing, in the curriculum, and culturally appropriate pedagogy in the ways we teach at UBC.

The lack of indigenous and other racialized people in positions of leadership at UBC. In other words, anti-racism is currently what Deborah Britzman has called a special event. We need to come to a point where we realize anti-racism is not just for specialists, and not just something to be taken on urgently but sporadically, but rather, as my colleague in the Faculty of Education, and chair of the Faculty Committee of the Anti-racism Taskforce, Ryuko Kubota, has put it, anti-racism is for everyone. We need to come to a point where anti-racism is part of who we are at UBC.

The second part of your question is a really interesting one, which is, what are my hopes for anti-racism at UBC? I've given you three very concrete things that I'm hoping for. I just wanted to add to that, that the other things, the other plans that are being developed at UBC give me hope. We do have the Inclusion Action Plan, we do have the Indigenous Strategic Plan. These, together with the Taskforce on Anti-racism, are all about plans that could yield a lot in terms of the goals of inclusive excellence at UBC. The hope, my fervent hope is about implementation of all of these plans.

I'm also hopeful because of the atmosphere in which this work is being done, where there's plans at other levels, other than the overall institutional level. At the faculty level, for example, different units are making a lot of efforts. My own faculty of education, for example, has concluded a Taskforce on Race, Indigeneity, and Social Justice. At the other end of the spectrum, at the provincial level, the BC Ministry of Education is developing a K-12 Anti-racism Action Plan, and I'm involved in advising on some of that. At the institutional level, at the provincial level, there's a lot going on that gives me hope.

I just want to end by saying there are very concrete things that are already underway, or already achieved at UBC that make me very hopeful. First of all, there's the Beyond Tomorrow Program, which was initiated by Vice-president of Students, Dr. Ainsley Carry, and some of his staff, including Rohene Bouajram. That's a wonderful program that's working on recruitment and the successful support of Black students at UBC. UBC Okanagan is working on identity-based space, which is really needed. For example, there might be a Black resource center, so, Ananya Mukherjee Reed and the work that's been done there.

There's work about addressing systemic racism, a public forum which is at the academic or intellectual level. A series, an intellectual series that's working on that. There's the establishment of the position of Director of Faculty Equity at UBC Vancouver. A position that Ismaël Traoré has taken, which is absolutely wonderful. Then, of course, there's something like IBPOC Connections, and it has the president's recognition and celebration of IBPOC staff at UBC. Maryam Nabavi is heading that. These are very concrete things that are already happening. I think that together, all of these make for an atmosphere in which we can talk seriously about inclusion, and about excellence, and about the two together as inclusive excellence at UBC.

**Professor Ono:** Thank you very much. Hopefully, with the efforts of you, and the other members of the committee, and all of us, that we'll eventually reach that dream. Make it a reality, make it part of what UBC is all about. Dr. Wright, thank you so much for being on *Blue and Goldcast* today.

**Dr. Wright:** Thank you very much for having me.

**Professor Ono:** Dr. Wright, thank you so much for being on *Blue and Goldcast* today. Dr. Handel Wright is a Professor in the Faculty of Education Department of Education Studies, and Senior Adviser to the President on Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence. That does it for this month's episode. You can find links to our guest's work, as well as previous editions of this show at [blueandgoldcast.com](http://blueandgoldcast.com) You can also find us in your favorite podcast app like Apple Podcasts, Soundcloud, or Spotify. You can tweet me @UBCprez. That's prez with a Z. I'm Santa Ono. Thanks for listening.