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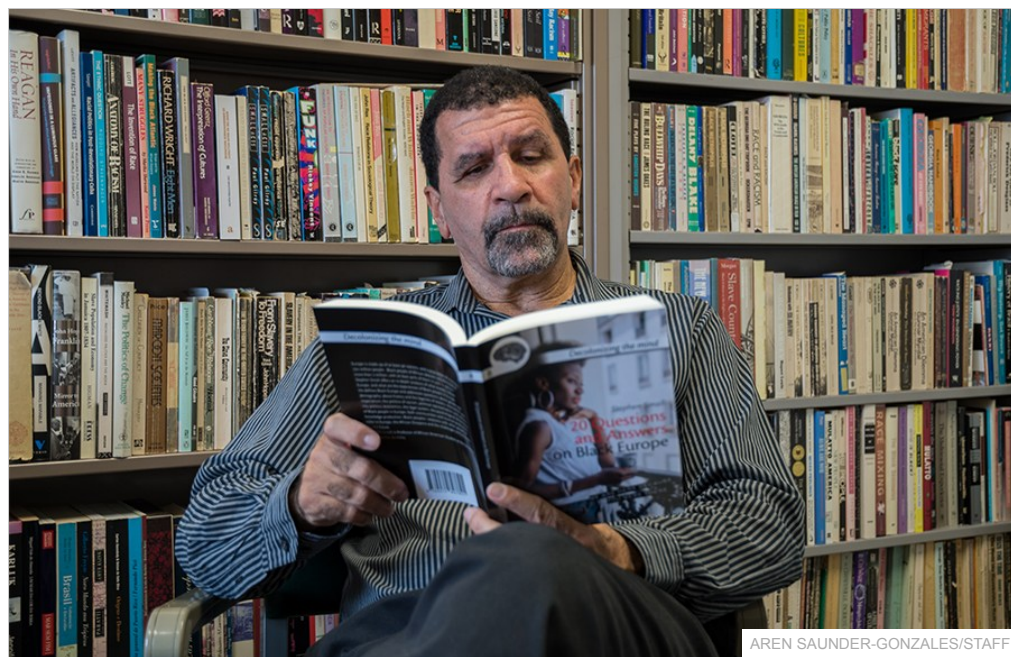
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BLACK HISTORY MONTH 2018

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2018

The importance of Black dialogues in the European academic sphere: An interview with UC Berkeley professor Stephen Small



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BY [REBECCA GERNY](#) | STAFF

LAST UPDATED 6 HOURS AGO

The narratives of Black communities across the globe have been systemically silenced from historical and contemporary dialogues and academic discourse. Seen as “nontraditional” forms of discourse, Black research and performance art are often seen as invalid or not academic. This highly problematic pedagogy is seen particularly in Europe, and this is the topic of UC Berkeley African American studies professor Stephen Small’s research and new book, “20 Questions and Answers on Black Europe.”

As part of a book series from the Dutch publisher Amrit, titled

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“Decolonizing the Mind,” Small and his colleagues work to introduce previously neglected narratives to public discourse. In the case of his new novel, he aims to “bring Black people to the center of academic and political attention and public discussion.”

His research focuses primarily on Black Europe and, in a discipline that primarily examines distinct national Black experience, provides a different perspective — a theory of a unified Black European experience that is shared beyond political borders and national ethnicities. Focusing on 12 nations where 90 percent of the Black population is concentrated in small areas, Small argues that there are “striking similarities” between the experiences of many different Black Europeans, specifically because of the fact that “all these nations in Europe were actively involved to a variety of degrees in colonialism and slavery, and part of that collective involvement involves stereotypes based on whiteness,” as well as stereotypes of “alleged African inferiority and African barbarity.”

He outlines these similarities in great detail — explaining primarily that Black people in Europe have common experiences of racist stereotyping and typecasting in all areas of society, from politics to pop culture — and claims that there is “not a single political or economic area in which Black people are doing better than non-Black people.” Whether that be politics (where Black individuals have 22 out of 4,200 nationally elected seats in his selected 12 nations, with 18 of those seats being in England), economics, medicine, and especially education, Black people are at a disadvantage.

Yet Small has an incredibly positive outlook, as he argues that across Europe, “despite these obstacles, despite these stereotypes, Black people are working on their own, but also with non-Black people, in alliances and multiracial organizations,” making clear that “Black people have consistently refused to accept discrimination.”

In particular, he cites that Black women’s organizations have, through protests, rallies and demonstrations, helped make Europe more “democratic, humane and socially just.” Here, Small emphasises that the groups with the most impact are ones that inherently link race and gender, race and religion, and race and sexuality. He argues that too often Black men have been at the center of the discussion, and he is working to change that, to include women’s powerful voices as well.

Written in “an accessible language, avoiding jargon and so and trying to be clear,” Small’s book is “designed to bring important topics to do with race and gender and migration and ethnicity to a more general public than academics.”

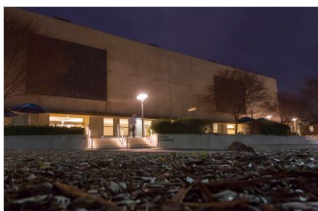
Small’s goal is a more comprehensive and inclusive educational system, one that is more “multiperspective and multidisciplinary.” Thus, his research includes not only traditional sources and statistics but also “nondocumentary knowledge” such as music, theatre, poetry, performance — “knowledge produced outside of academia.” He believes this “is where we get tremendous insights, tremendous pieces of information that are not available within the academy.”

According to Small, the University of California is particularly progressive in this aspect, having had the African American studies department since 1970, as well as gender and women’s studies and ethnic studies. Small cites progressive students, Black and non-Black, who lobbied to make these departments a reality.

Across the Atlantic, in 2017, the University of Birmingham became the first British university to have a Black studies program. But this is not just a phenomenon in Britain. Small has worked as the UC Education Abroad Program director for both France and Spain, as well as working as an associate professor at the University of Amsterdam. He argues that across Europe, “universities claim that they are objective, impartial, unbiased, open to all perspectives, but it’s not true when you look at what kind of research is funded.”



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In his experience and research, it has been impossible to get funding or even find professors interested in research on racism, slavery or reparations. His book is inherently a “critique of knowledge production and of European universities,” and he therefore includes different sources, typically outside the vein of academic discourse, to create a broad and inclusive examination of European Blackness.

Yet this is not just an academic exploration — for Small, it is an inherently personal one. As the son of a Jamaican man who grew up Black in Britain, he experienced racism firsthand. Remembering times when his white friends referred to him by the N-word, or when, after a Black Power demonstration at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, he was beat up by kids telling him they would show him “Black power,” Small says his research is “personal, political and academic.”

Additionally, Small, as well as many Black people in Europe, was heavily influenced by African Americans across the Atlantic, in the media, in academics and in history. He cites the United States as being much more cognizant of race, arguing that all of his heroes growing up were African American and that Europe’s Black movements are heavily influenced by the work of Black activists in America.

Though Small’s book is inherently historical and academic, his goals span beyond the academic sphere, as he hopes to bring Black individuals to the center of discussion in formal institutions and informal ones. Though deeply understood to most Berkeley students, Small outlines that many people in Europe believe colonialism was a beneficial practice, and this is the result of “miseducation” — once people are introduced to Black narratives, as he has been doing through his work, they are amazed and long to know more. This is his mission: Bring accessible knowledge to everyone, regardless of level of education, gender, race or sexuality.

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