

## INTRODUCTION

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me (Ellison, R. 1949, P. 7 prologue).<sup>1</sup>

This book looks at the learning of African Caribbean pupils in art and design classrooms in the UK. It proceeds from the proposition that African Caribbean pupils, as the descendants of enslaved peoples, whose cultural lineage has been obscured by the skewed relationship with the white majority group, are uniquely disadvantaged in the classroom. British Imperial power engendered a culture of exclusion that has continued to this day in many areas, impacting even on the self-image of diasporic subjects (Shohat and Stam (1994); Fanon (1986); West (1993); Gilroy (1993) and (2000); Malcolm X (1964); Hooks (1990, 1992, 1994 and 2001); Parker (1992); Young (1993)). The study will therefore include an analysis of key historical influences that have shaped black pupils' identities and the pedagogies in which they are produced as learners. The issue of the rupture that was the slave trade and its enduring impact on the formation of African Caribbean student subjectivities will in this regard be central to the study. I advance the theory shared by others, that by framing learning in a culture in which children are positively produced as subjects, they are stimulated to learn (Grigsby (1977); Erickson and Young (2002)); Gillborn (1990); Moore, (1999); Barrow (2005); see also Adu-Poku (2002)). In the process, the book argues that African enslaved peoples who were made to adopt alien practices that challenged Western frameworks of identification, devised ways of surviving often at variance with the ambitions of those in the mainstream. Parker (1992) refers to such acts of subversion as '... the subordinate groups devising a whole range of (sometimes contradictory) strategies for survival (p. 296);' See also Boime (1990); Mintz and Price (1976); Farris Thompson (1993). Such concerns for identity and recognition shape the way students learn in all contexts including art and design classrooms (Atkinson 2002; John 2006; Moore 1999; see also Harland *et al.* 2000). The way we see ourselves as subjects, including the aesthetic valuation we place on our physiological attributes, are imbibed from the society to which we have been acculturated (Pascall 1992; Bogle 1994). As a consequence, African Caribbean learners in art and design education, historically located outside Western identificatory frame-works, are

faced with traditions of knowing and representing that often fail to recognise their presence and cultural histories. This study is intended to explain how this discourse of invisibility and alienation works.

An analysis of the key concern, the issue of the invisibility of the diasporic subject, is provided in this chapter. It also sets out the origins of the research by reflecting on my experience as a teacher in London schools. Initial teaching projects are shared that were attempts to address the issue of demographic change in the school population. These experiments, however, only served to emphasise the lack of Caribbean representation in art and design curriculum. This lack stimulated my investigation into the backgrounds of African Caribbean subjects. It was the beginning of the quest for an appreciation of African Caribbean cultural identity, one that would support the identification of resources that could be used in teaching. Much of the culture that surrounds African Caribbean student learning, the chapter argues, could be linked to the rupture that was the slave trade.

There has been since the start of the slave trade a distancing and alienation that have marked the experience of the African subject (DuBois in Lester 1971). The structures that were erected to ensure their subjugation, I will argue, are still embedded in our society both at a psychic and material level, and perpetuate a system of white domination and black degradation.<sup>2</sup> In other words black learners are required to succeed in environments that do not nurture their subjectivity with, inevitably, reduced opportunities for many (Coard 2005; Searle 2001). How does social marginalisation play out in the art and design classroom? Are the cultural voices of African Caribbean children stifled in such environments? These are some of the concerns that this book interrogates.

### 1.1 THE ORIGINS OF THE RESEARCH

My interest in the plight of African Caribbean pupils in art education started with appointment to my first teaching post in 1969. School-on-the-Hill, as I will call it, was a troubled West London comprehensive, a dysfunctional institution of low teacher and pupil morale. An ethos of disunity and failure, overseen by an ineffective head teacher, pervaded the school. Children attended out of habit, to see their mates or while away the time in disruptive and often violent behaviour. I shall always remember the sight that greeted me on my first day there. Walking down the main concourse I noticed that the glass panes in the door to each classroom had been removed. In a couple of them even the wooden panels beneath had been kicked in and, during registration, students secreted their legs through the apertures to make playthings of the frames, mindlessly swinging back and forth as if dawdling on a merry-go-round in a playground.

School-on-the-Hill must have been more than 80% black, and at break time it was noticeable, the first time I had been in such an overwhelmingly African Caribbean school environment in the UK. But the pattern of under-education, marked by poor attainment and particularly disruptive behaviour, was to be repeated in many largely 'black' comprehensive schools that I was to visit in subsequent years (see Coard 2005). This chaos of learning, which has an echo even in some present-day school contexts, fills me with disappointment and anger. Disappointment at the