**Professor Sir Hilary Beckles Keynote Lecture for the Symposium ‘Barriers to Black Academia: Slavery and Colonialism and The Case for Reparative Justice’ Transcript**

**Dr Leona Vaughn**

Hi, everyone, my name is Dr Leona Vaughn, I'm the Research Fellow for Slavery and Unfree Labour at the University of Liverpool.

**Malik Al Nasir**

Hi, my name is Malik Al Nasir and I am a PhD student at the University of Cambridge. And it's my great pleasure to be co-curating this symposium with Dr. Leona Vaughn on ‘Barriers to Black Academia, the Legacy of Slavery and Colonialism, the Case for Reparative Justice’.

For many years, I have been championing the idea of widening participation in academia, to give us an opportunity to really harness the talents within the Black and Minority Ethnic communities that have been marginalised, traditionally, within the academy. Much of this is due to the fact that there is a “lack of Black” within the academy, particularly within the higher echelons, amongst professors, and senior academics. This was illustrated recently in the report by leading groups called ‘The Broken Pipeline’ report. And they're going to be presenting here today to give us some of the ideas about what really needs to be done to address these disparities within the academy. My hope, in convening this symposium is that we can bring together a team of academics nationally and internationally, around these key issues, so that we can address some of these issues at a strategic level. And we're going to be convening a roundtable event at the end of this in order to be able to address those issues head on, with the hope that we will be able to get something helpful from that by way of recommendations for vice chancellors, pro vice chancellors, and also research councils and other funding bodies to see what can be done at a practical level, to widen participation, and to resolve this disparity that has been clearly illustrated by the Leading Routes report as to being a manifestation of the bias to block academia. There's a lot of talent out there in the community. We'd like to bring that talent forward. And for that, you really need to have a seat at the table. And we're hoping that this is a first step along that way.

**Dr Leona Vaughn**

So I'm delighted to welcome Sir Hilary Beckles. Sir Hillary is Vice Chancellor at the University of West Indies. He's also Chair of the CARICOM Reparations Commission. He is also the United Nations Expert Advisor on the future of Higher Education. So in Sir Hilary’s presentation he is going to be addressing the context of the three panels that will follow from his keynote. They are, firstly, the barriers to Black academia: what is it that Black academics face as barriers within their aspiration and their progression to become a Black academics, particularly in the UK; he's also going to be talking about how we get to tell our own story. So thinking about research and research methodologies for telling the story of the enslaved Africans by those who are descended from those communities. And finally, he will talk about universities and reparative justice, what works and how we can do this better.

**Professor Sir Hilary Beckles**  
  
It's a tremendous honour to be a part of this very important and historic symposium, ‘Barriers to Black Academia, the Legacy of Slavery and Colonialism, the Case for Reparative Justice’. I wish to extend my gratitude to Malik al Nasir, and to Dr Leona Vaughn, for this invitation to participate and to recognise and to celebrate all of you, who are participants in this symposium.

The timing is indeed excellent. The relevance is beyond question. The canon of historical interpretation around issues of race and justice is being exploded, and monuments are coming down as proof of an emergent consciousness and their new form of advocacy and agency. Critically, what we are experiencing is the unravelling of modernity, as we as we know it.

In 1972 Walter Rodney published his seminal work, ‘How Europe Underdeveloped Africa’. This is the work that laid the foundation for a new understanding of the economic history, not only of Africa and Europe, but of the rise of the Atlantic System. It was a book that changed the narrative not only in a classroom, in academia, but within the realms of diplomacy and grassroots political organisations. I can think of no more significant work in that regard, that established the relationship between the issues of reparatory justice as we understand them today, and the culture of economic exploitation, that was a part of the Africa and Africa diaspora world. Next year, in January, my own work, ‘How Europe Underdeveloped the Caribbean’, will be published. It is a work that seeks to bring that paradigm of Europe's extractive relationship to the African world to the Caribbean with a specific focus not only on Britain, but Western Europe, on the whole, focusing upon the persistence of under development, and the persistence of poverty in the Caribbean. The empirical detail will focus more specifically on the case of Britain and the English-speaking Caribbean. For reasons we fully understand that the British Commonwealth-context in which the West Indies continues to fit is associated with not only the longest possible history of extraction and plunder, racism, and post-colonial aggression, but a discourse that seeks to explain why, in 1972 George Beckford also publish his magisterial economic analysis of the Caribbean world, ‘Persistent Poverty’.

But there is a background to all of this, a more immediate background, which shows the continuity not only of Black historical analysis, but the reaction of white academia to the text. Walter Rodney’s work was not welcome in British academia, as part of an ongoing conversation about what became known as the Third World, what became known as under-development in Africa, what became known as later on ‘developing countries’. But the hostility to that kind of analysis was even deeper and more profound 30 years earlier, when Eric Williams had published in 1944, ‘Capitalism and Slavery’.

Undoubtedly, ‘Capitalism and Slavery’ was one of the most important texts that explained the rise of Western industrial capitalism. And on the other side, plantation Caribbean, persistent poverty in the Caribbean, white supremacy racism in the Caribbean. It was a scholarly work that had emerged out of his graduate studies at Oxford. But the hostility that surrounded this work was even more profound than the hostility that had been associated with the argument in the emancipation decades of the 1830s that the enslaved African peoples ought to be the ones to receive reparatory justice, and not the slave owners, not the slave invested. ‘Capitalism and Slavery’ was suppressed. It was a work that was targeted by economic historians of the day, mostly those who established the formal structures of the narrative associated with the rise of Britain and European capitalism. It was not only suppressed it was boycotted. It was boycotted by the British academic structures, the distinguished professors of the field, who all I know read it carefully, but it was never placed into curriculum. ‘Capitalism and Slavery’ did not find its way, despite its enormous importance in the curriculum of economic history, and British universities. I know a great deal of this because in the 70s, I was a student of economic history in a British University. As graduate students from the Caribbean, and Africa and elsewhere, we all read ‘Capitalism and Slavery’, but we read it in our homes, we read it in the parks, we read it quietly. It was not a part of our formal curriculum.

And when we made reference to it, when we rose up with audacity to speak to the power of capitalism and slavery, and what it meant for us, trying to understand the first Industrial Revolution, the first industrial nation, we were told categorically, that it was not an academic text. It was propaganda. It was protest, writing, and did not meet the threshold for academic discourse. This we understood as students, this we understood as young academics to be institutional racism, and it was persistent, it was consistent. I recall, on one occasion, a visiting professor to my university, in which there was a seminar on the Industrial Revolution. And he spoke of the audacity of Eric Williams, to argue that British industrial civilization had its roots within foul stench of slavery. This was audacious. This was clearly a political conversation with little to do with academia. But we received it for what it was, white supremacy, scholarship, suppressing alternative narratives, suppressing the historical truth, and emerging with the big lie, the big lie that Europe somehow possess a special culture that produce industrialism, that produce the modernity of the industrial complex, and other nations not possessing that culture, were doomed to economic under development. That it was a cultural narrative, that it had little to do with the plunder, and the exploitation, and centuries of extraction of wealth, not only from the enslaved people who were transported across the Atlantic, in their millions, but also the people of Asia, who joined in the aftermath of the emancipation process.

We all know and understood the tremendous sense of lineage edge involved in this. First they came for the indigenous people in the morning. Then they came for the African people in the afternoon. Then they came for the Asian people, in the evening, three acts of a common play, designed to extract value and reassure the financial sustainability of British and European capitalism.

But even before Eric Williams in 1944, there was the experience of Arthur Lewis, brilliant, brilliant young economist erupting with a clear comprehension of the rise of the West as an economic construct. The racism he experienced in British academia, not only in London, where he was routed, but also at the University of Liverpool, that rejected him. They thought in a subtle fashion, expunged from the professor class at the University of Liverpool.

These were just symbols of the experiences of Black people in academia, Black scholars, Black researchers, Black students, and the British and the British academic system, the racism of the academe, the racism, of white scholarship, that refuse to integrate a more comprehensive and realistic understanding of what actually had taken place. But it was everywhere. It was everywhere in Britain, it was in the primary schools. It was in the secondary schools. It was in the tertiary sector.

For many years, I served as a researcher and a project manager for the UNESCO Slave Routes Project. This was a global project. And there was a moment when we took a poll upon the situation, and British schools, we went through the curriculum, of samples of hundreds of schools at all levels of that structure. And we found that less than 2%, less than 2% of British secondary schools had within their curriculum, any reference to slavery, any reference to imperialism, any reference to colonialism as a part of British culture and civilization. The children were completely removed from the primary narrative that has surrounded the rise of their nation as a global Imperial hegemon.

And so, all of this cascaded into the conversation around development in the 1950s and 60s. Returning to Sir Arthur Lewis, who by the 1950s had distinguished himself as one of the famous development economics, economists and world. By this time, Eric Williams had moved on from academia to become a politician in the Caribbean, rooted to the commitment to economic development, Lewis and Williams, both victims, racial victims of the British university system.

We're now in the field of the politics of economic development. Lewis wrote his theory for the Caribbean, how to transform plantation colonies into economic nations. Williams was committed to the diplomacy of distancing the colony from the colonial scaffold. And so, these two brilliant Caribbean scholars, both victims of the British academic system, had now come together to create the culture of the politics of planning for economic development.

The Caribbean, was rejected. It was rejected in terms of its right to economic development funding. Lewis made the argument that Britain has a debt to the Caribbean that must be paid. He argued in the 1939 publication, that Britain had had 200 years of free labour from over 20 million African people in the Caribbean. It was this 200 years of free labour from 20 million people that constituted the basis of his claim for a development plan for the Caribbean.

Eric Williams and many other political leaders believe this to be true. No one, no one knew this better than Williams himself. But the British states in typical aggression towards the colonial world, rejected a scheme, rejected the notion of a British Marshall Plan for the Caribbean. If the colony wished to rise up politically, for its independence, then it was on its own, the British Government argues, you were on your own, and we the Imperial state, we owe you nothing. We owe you no development. We owe you no path to prosperity.

And that was what happened with Caribbean under-development at the verge of nation building. And this is why I chose to write this book that looks at the details of that conversation, the rejection of a Marshall Plan for the Caribbean, the rejection of the notion of a debt owed to the Caribbean, the use of diplomacy as a weapon against Caribbean leadership.

This is the moment then When the pedagogy of profitability, and the pedagogy of academia came together to constitute the big lie, the big lie that somehow the Caribbean was failing in its efforts at nation building, because of cultural circumstances, because of specific circumstances rooted in their own social development. My argument instead is that from emancipation through to today, we see the persistence of hostility towards the development project in the Caribbean.

If you take, on the other hand, the circumstance in the East Indies, yes, Britain had colonies in the West Indies, and it had colonies and the East Indies. But it chose to offer a development plan for the colonies in the East Indies. And so it met in Colombo, and between 1950 and 1951, they rolled out the Colombo Plan, the Colombo, the Colombo Plan, was a magisterial strategy to promote economic development, in the East Indies colonies. Meanwhile, the West Indies colonies were rejected. There was a clear, schism between the perception of the East Indies and a perception of the West Indies, the West Indies was born of slavery. Its system of exploitation was based on the African, the Black people of the world. Britain maintained that aggressive hostility that have given rise to slavery and slave trading, that hostility persisted all the way through the 100 years after emancipation, and found expression in the 1950s discourse about the future of the Caribbean.

Then we come to the role of the universities in all of this. We understood that the university had a critical role to play in all of this. The university was not a stander-by to history, the British university system was a pillar on which colonialism rests. The British academic institutional system of universities was the foundation on which slavery and the legitimacy of slavery emerge. Slave trade and slavery, colonisation, were not all we're not only legitimised by the British, the British university, there were a critical part of the curriculum, that sustained scholarship, scholarship for colonialism. One cannot possibly imagine the three to 400 years of British colonial development without understanding the role played by the universities in Britain. In this system, their professors, some of their finest professors, were the theoreticians of slavery and slave trading. Some of the finest economists were supporters of the economics of slavery. Indeed, in every discipline that was required to sustain slavery, whether it was a politics of managing and exploiting ethnic others, or the legal fraternity that participated in the conversion within Caribbean constitutions that Black people were not human beings, but they were property, chattel and real estate, and show the slave owners because many of them were themselves slave owners, show the slave owners how to utilise the property status of Black people that you could treat them like all forms of property, they can be bought, they can be sold, they can be mortgaged, they can be leased, they could be taxed, they could be used as collateral in transactions. All forms of property, were applicable to the African people. And the professors of law were the magnificent conceptualisers of these relationships.

And so, the professor's the universities were not just involve in the profits of slavery. They were not just receiving endowments from slave owners. They were not just receiving research grants and capital grants for infrastructural expansion from slave traders and slave owners. They were providing the pedagogy of slavery. They were providing the intellectual infrastructure that enabled the sustainability of slavery for centuries. We see this. In many universities, the evidence is unfolding university by university. How they competed for the slavery profits, how they competed for the endowments from slave owners, how they competed for the resources to expand their libraries, their faculties, their laboratories, from the slave owners and their respective cities. Some of them have recently come to the table to discuss this history. University of London has participated in detail analysis of how a slave owners profits found their way into universities and what the universities themselves did with this money. University of Bristol has come to the water's edge, but has refused to put its foot in the water. Bristol, of course, the quintessential town, the quintessential city, built on slavery and slave trading, yet its principal university reluctant to participate in the depth of that narrative. Oxford University had benefited from endowments from slave owners for centuries. Oxford itself is also tentative in the analysis of where it should go with its own identity, and slavery.

But all of this meant that there had to be a big cover up. And what better way to cover up this history than to deny Black scholars a place within their faculties. There wiould be no Black voices within the faculties, within the departments, within the research institutions. And thus, the academia grown up in the stench of slavery, express that in the 20th century, by a refusal to employ Black professors, to enable Black scholarship to thrive within their walls. The universities of Britain became part of the apartheid system, the post-slavery, apartheid system of white supremacy. They were all involved in the fear of diversity, of suppressing the Black voice within scholarship, of marginalising that scholarship within the faculties. The universities committed the ultimate crime, not only of receiving the profits from slavery, but denying a voice from the descendants of the victims of slavery. No matter how brilliant, they all suffered institutional racism and marginalism. It was clear.

It was evident that a professor in Britain, who was Black was as rare a phenomenon as a Black person on the plantation, who was not a slave, but who was free. That remains today, the fundamental truth, that remained essential through the number of free Black people in the Caribbean, during slavery was a small as a number of Black professors today, in British, in British universities, the fear of diversity. But of course, we know the history behind all of this. As British universities sought to analyse their own situation, what did they do? The notion of ‘research and run’. They ran away from what they found. Each of the British universities that have discovered the extent of their pedagogical curriculum, and financial association with slavery, have opted to research and run, not to read, not to research and repair, not to research and participate in reparations, but to research and run.

I remember very clearly my own alma mater, the University of Hull, when it launched in 2008, the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation, and the acronym has become famous, a household acronym in Britain: WISE. But at the time of that launch, and as a participant in that conversation, as a participant in the rise of that institution, I had argued for an alternate construct. Why should it be called the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation with the acronym WISE? Why not? The Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery, Emancipation and Reparations, with the acronym WISER? I thought then and I do believe now that wiser is better than wise, that wiser is more sustainable than wise. But then the inertia, the resistance within the academy could not embrace the R, could not embrace the R for Reparations, could not embrace the R that would have made wise wiser.

And this is typical. This is a typical circumstance you will find throughout British academia. And I do hope that the continuation of the discourse, how Europe underdeveloped Africa, and my own tax which will appear at the end of this year and early in early 2022, will add some energy and passion around the concept of how Europe under-developed the Caribbean, the role of the university system, the role of the British imperial government in undermining the foundations of Caribbean economic development in the 20th century, that persists with hostility today, towards the Caribbean’s call for a platform of reparatory justice, for development partnership. We are looking then at over 200 years of hostility, the same hostility which the British government rolled out against the former slaves in the 19th century, who wanted land and who wanted to build the villages and the towns, who wanted access to resources to create a developed platform for a modern form of social living. The British government sent into troops and massacred hundreds of Caribbean peoples, reduced them to poverty and famine and other parts rather than rather than to give them access to economic resources for their development. That was 150 years ago. Very, very little has changed in terms of this search, this continuous search in the Caribbean, for partnership, for development support and finding in its place cold, cold hostility. If you wanted your independence, if you're prepared to rise up against colonialism, then you are on your own. But we reaffirm the argument of Sir Arthur Lewis in 1939, reaffirm that Britain owes the Caribbean a debt, that debt of 200 years of free labour from 20 million people. That is a debt Arthur Lewis said must be paid, this is a debt we expect to be repaired in terms of development support, partnerships, projects, community upliftment, it is not it is not going to go away.

And so, I celebrate all of you who have brought this symposium together the very interlocking nature of these themes of economic poverty, reparatory, justice, institutional racism in British academia, the belief that if you suppress Black scholarship, then you suppress the Black liberation movement. It’s not a simple equation. Suppression is understood, the consequences will always be revealed.

I thank you all, for the generosity of your listening to this presentation. Thank you very much. Thank you.

**Dr Leona Vaughn**

So we want to give thanks to the Centre for Study of International Slavery at the University Liverpool. That is a collaboration between the International Slavery Museum and the University, they funded this event, and will help us to continue these conversations. And I'd also just like to say as well, that the Master's in Slavery that the University of Liverpool runs is also taking applications. So this is one way that we hope to address some of the under representation of academics in this space.

So it's been a pleasure having you all with us today. Please refer to the websites on liverpool.ac.uk. for all of the events, which will be recorded and placed on there, as will a report of all of the discussions which will set the scene then for the roundtable discussion in March 2022. And we hope that these conversations, these very important conversations continue beyond these events.