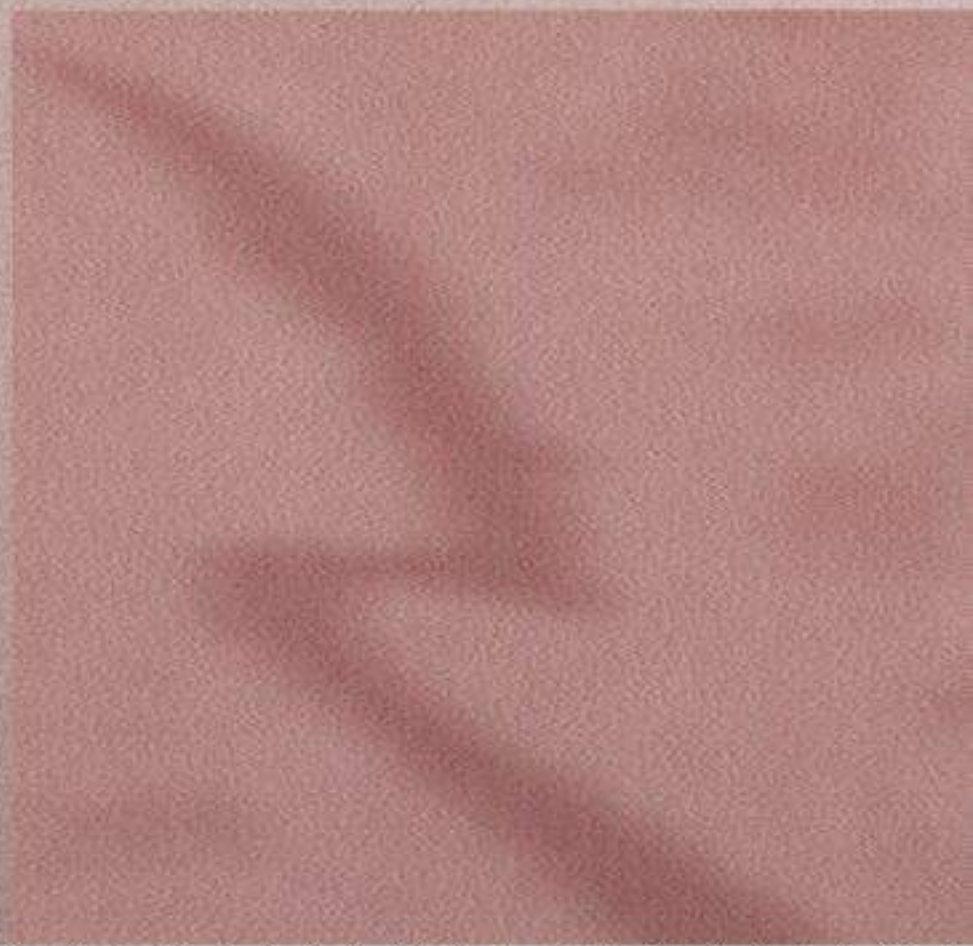


Black British Feminism

A reader

Edited by
Heidi Safia Mirza



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Black British Feminism

Black British Feminism: A Reader is an outstanding collection of classic key texts and new black feminist scholarship. Tracing the crucial developments and debates of the last twenty years, this volume is the first to be entirely dedicated to the writings of black women in a British context.

The essays in this collection bring new critical insights to bear upon analyses of gendered and racialized exclusion, 'black' identity, and social and cultural difference. The specific topics discussed range across 'white feminism'; religious fundamentalism; 'mixed-race' identity; sexuality; cultural hybridity and postcolonial space; educational achievement; autobiography and oral tradition.

This timely and important book is essential reading for students and scholars of cultural studies, women's studies, sociology, literature and postcolonial studies.

Heidi Safia Mirza is Reader in Sociology at South Bank University, London. She is author of *Young, Female and Black* (Routledge 1992).



London and New York

Black British Feminism

A reader

Edited by Heidi Safia Mirza

The Women's Library



London and New York



Contents

For Asha
who has just learned to count potatoes
and sings in her sleep

and

Part I Stepping the debate

Hanā

1. Finding a Place: Ancestral Land and the New World
Dana Nelson 17
2. Black Women, the American West
Loretta Fowler 37
3. The Heart of the Matter: Black Women's Lives in Hawaii
Dorothy Roberts, Jennifer Lee, and Catherine Kim 57
4. White Women, Black Men, and the Second Act of
Resistance
Marilyn Kelly 77
5. Challenges, Imperial Encounters
Linda Dowd and Pamela Turner 97
6. Transforming social relations: The class of education
Ann Annunzio and Margaret Oakley 117
7. Theories of gender and race families
Ann Turner 137
8. Other acts of resistance
Linda Dowd 157
9. Feminism and the challenge to white America's
Karin Hall 177

Contents

Contributors	ix
Acknowledgements	xii
Introduction: Mapping a genealogy of Black British feminism <i>Heidi Safia Mirza</i>	1

Part I Shaping the debate

1 Finding a voice: Asian women in Britain <i>Amrit Wilson</i>	31
2 Black women, the economic crisis and the British state <i>Amina Mama</i>	36
3 The heart of the race: Black women's lives in Britain <i>Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe</i>	42
4 White woman listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood <i>Hazel V. Carby</i>	45
5 Challenging imperial feminism <i>Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar</i>	54
6 Transforming socialist feminism: The challenge of racism <i>Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson</i>	59
7 Theories of gender and black families <i>Ann Phoenix</i>	63
8 Other kinds of dreams <i>Pratibha Parmar</i>	67
9 Feminism and the challenge of racism: Deviance or difference? <i>Razia Aziz</i>	70

Part II Defining our space

- 10 Raregrooves and raregroovers: A matter of taste, difference and identity 81
Bibi Bakare-Yusuf
- 11 (Mis)representing the black (super)woman 97
Tracey Reynolds
- 12 Shades of Blackness: young Black female constructions of beauty 113
Debbie Weekes
- 13 Diaspora's daughters, Africa's orphans?: On lineage, authenticity and 'mixed race' identity 127
Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe
- 14 'It's a sun-tan, isn't it?': Auto-biography as an identificatory practice 153
Sara Ahmed
- 15 Charting the spaces of (un)location: On theorizing diaspora 168
Magdalene Ang-Lygate
- 16 Fractured or flexible identities? Life histories of 'black' diasporic women in Britain 187
Naz Rassool
- 17 In my father's house are many mansions: The nation and postcolonial desire 205
Nalini Persram
- 18 Two stories, three lovers and the creation of meaning in a Black Lesbian autobiography: A diary 216
Consuelo Rivera Fuentes
- 19 My body, myself: How does a Black woman do sociology? 226
Felly Nkweto Simmonds
- 20 The fabulous adventures of the mahogany princesses 240
Gargi Bhattacharyya

Part III Changing our place

- 21 Third wave feminism and black women's activism 255
Pragna Patel
- 22 Black women in education: A collective movement for social change 269
Heidi Safia Mirza
- 23 The language of womanism: Rethinking difference 278
Helen (Charles)
- Index* 298

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Black British Feminism: A Reader has been a project two years in the making. Babies have been born, Ph.Ds achieved and lives forever changed.

It has been filled with heartache and pleasure, trials and tribulations and surprising revelations. But it was necessary, and what I have taken away with me from this place of change and newness are lasting friendships from a community of warm and generous women.

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Introduction

Mapping a genealogy of Black British feminism

Heidi Safia Mirza

So you think I'm a mule?

'Where do you come from?'
'I'm from Glasgow.'
'Glasgow?'
'Uh huh. Glasgow.'
The white face hesitates
the eyebrows raise
the mouth opens
then snaps shut
incredulous
yet too polite to say outright
liar
she tries another manoeuvre
'And your parents?'
'Glasgow and Fife.'
'Oh?'
'Yes. Oh.'
Snookered she wonders where she should go
from here -
'Ah, but you're not pure?'
'Pure? Pure what
Pure white? Ugh. What a plight
Pure, Sure I'm pure
I'm rare ...'
'Well, that's not exactly what I mean,
I mean ... you're a mulatto, just look at ...'
'Listen. My original father was Nigerian
to help with your confusion
But hold on right there
If you Dare mutter mulatto
hover around hybrid

hobble on half-caste
and intellectualize on the
"Mixed race problem",
I have to tell you:
take your beady eyes offa my skin;
don't concern yourself with
the "dialectics of mixtures";
don't pull that strange blood crap
on me Great White Mother.
Say I'm no mating of a she-ass and a stallion
no half of this and half of that
to put it plainly purely
I am black
My blood flows evenly, powerfully
and when they shout "Nigger"
and you shout "Shame"
ain't nobody debating my blackness.
You see that fine African nose of mine,
my lips, my hair. You see lady
I'm not mixed up about it.
So take your questions, your interest,
your patronage. Run along.
Just leave me.
I'm going to my Black sisters
to women who nourish each other
on belonging
There's a lot of us
Black women struggling to define
just who we are
where we belong
and if we know no home
we know one thing;
we are Black
we're at home with that.'
'Well, that's all very well, but ...'
No But. Good bye.

Jackie Kay (1985)

In a time when your 'belonging', who you *really* are, is judged by the colour of your skin, the shape of your nose, the texture of your hair, the curve of your body – your perceived genetic and physical presence; to be black (not white), female and 'over here', in Scotland, England or Wales, is to disrupt all the safe closed categories of what it means to be British: that is to be white and British.

Black British feminism as a body of scholarship is located in that space of British whiteness, that unchallenged hegemonic patriarchal discourse of colonial and now postcolonial times which quietly embraces our common-sense and academic ways of thinking. Whiteness: that powerful place that makes invisible, or reappropriates things, people and places it does not want to see or hear, and then through misnaming, renaming or not naming at all, invents the truth – what we are told is 'normal', neutral, universal, simply becomes the way it is (Dyer 1988; (charles) 1992; Morrison 1992; Bonnett 1993b, 1996; Frankenberg 1993; Hall 1993; McLaren 1994a; Wong 1994; Hickman and Walter 1995; Fusco 1995).

To be black and British is to be unnamed in official discourse. The construction of a national British identity is built upon a notion of a racial belonging, upon a hegemonic white ethnicity that never speaks its presence. We are told that you can be either one or the other, black or British, but not both. But we live here, many are born here, all 3 million of us 'ethnic minority' people, as we are collectively called in the official Census surveys (Jones 1993; Storkey 1994; Mason 1995; Skellington and Morris 1996). What defines us as Pacific, Asian, Eastern, African, Caribbean, Latina, Native, and 'mixed race' 'others' is not our imposed 'minority' status, but our self-defining presence as people of the postcolonial diaspora. At only 5.5 per cent of the population we still stand out, we are visibly different and that is what makes us 'black'.

Thus being 'black' in Britain is about a state of 'becoming' (racialized); a process of consciousness, when colour becomes the defining factor about who you are. Located through your 'otherness' a 'conscious coalition' emerges: a self-consciously constructed space where identity is not inscribed by a natural identification but a political kinship (Sandoval 1991). Now living submerged in whiteness, physical difference becomes a defining issue, a signifier, a mark of whether or not you belong. Thus to be black in Britain is to share a common structural location; a racial location (Mercer 1990; Hall 1990, 1992).

In Britain in the 1980s, this shared sense of objectification was articulated when the racialized disempowered and fragmented sought empowerment in a gesture of politicized collective action. In naming the shared space of marginalization as 'black', postcolonial migrants of different languages, religions, cultures and classes consciously constructed a political identity shaped by the shared experience of racialization and its consequences. As a political articulation, it appeared strategic, but in terms of community

and personal identity 'black' remains a contested space. Localized, personalized struggles for who could or should be named as 'black' (i.e. Asians, Chinese, 'mixed race') characterized the political terrain of multicultural Britain for over a decade. It was argued that such a reductionist notion of blackness erased religious and ethnic difference (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983, 1992; Modood 1994). The desire to be named according to (cultural) difference and not (racial) sameness, demonstrated the need for recognizing the meaning of hair, skin and colour, the importance of a shared history and religion, in the construction of identity and belonging. The translation of such need into fictions of essential racial and cultural origins among Britain's black and ethnic populations represented the desire for 'a place called home' (Martin and Mohanty 1988; Rutherford 1990). It is the desire for a 'place' that anchors us in the strategic battle for cultural preservation in the continuous war of hegemonic cultural reappropriation of difference (Higginbotham 1992; hooks 1992; Fusco 1995).

In this context, then, black feminism as a spontaneous yet conscious coalition is a meaningful act of identification. In this 'place called home' named black feminism, we as racialized, gendered subjects can collectively mark our presence in a world where black women have for so long been denied the privilege to speak; to have a 'valid' identity of our own, a space to 'name' ourselves. Challenging our conscious negation from discourse – what Gayatri Spivak calls 'epistemic violence' (Spivak 1988; see Young 1990) – we as black British women invoke our agency; we speak of our difference, our uniqueness, our 'otherness'. In a submerged and hidden world where there is no official language, words or narratives about that world (except those held in our hearts and minds), black women inhabit a third space (Bhabha 1990). It is a space which, because it overlaps the margins of the race, gender and class discourse and occupies the empty spaces in between, exists in a vacuum of erasure and contradiction. It is a space maintained by the polarization of the world into blacks on one side and women on the other (Higginbotham 1992; Crenshaw 1993).

The invisibility of black women speaks of the separate narrative constructions of race, gender and class: in a racial discourse, where the subject is male; in a gendered discourse, where the subject is white; and a class discourse, where race has no place. It is because of these ideological blind spots that black women occupy a most critical place – a location whose very nature resists telling. In this critical space we can imagine questions that could not have been imagined before; we can ask questions that might not have been asked before (Christian 1990; West 1990).

But this is not a claim to theoretical legitimacy through authentic voice. To simply 'have a place' in the academic discourse is not the project of Black British feminism. Black women do not want just to voice their experiences, to shout from the roof tops 'we have arrived! ... listen to me ... this is my story'. We do not claim to have a special knowledge,

a privileged standpoint, a valorized subjectivity, a unique consciousness, borne out of our collective experience of marginalization and the mere 'living life as a black woman' (Collins 1991). Such a claim to epistemic privilege would be to assume a naive essentialist universal notion of a homogeneous black womanhood, no better in its conception of the self and the nature of power than that embodied in the authoritative discourses we seek to challenge (Bar On 1993; Gilroy 1993: 52; Suleri 1993).

We are engaged in a far more subtle project, a project in which over the last 20 years we have attempted to invoke some measure of critical race/gender reflexivity into mainstream academic thinking. In telling our different story, in exposing our personal pain and pleasures, Black British feminists reveal *other ways of knowing* that challenge the normative discourse. In our particular world shaped by processes of migration, nationalism, racism, popular culture and the media, black British women, from multiple positions of difference, reveal the distorted ways in which the dominant groups construct their assumptions. As black women we see from the sidelines, from our space of unlocation, the unfolding project of domination.

Genealogy offers us a way into revealing the project of domination. The Foucauldian method of genealogy attempts a critique of dominant discourses. It draws on knowledges and ways of thinking that are marginalized and stand outside the mainstream (Sawicki 1991: 28; Smart 1992: 57; Dean 1994: 138). The retrieval of counter memories, of subjugated knowledges, which are thought to lack a history, functions as a challenge to the taken-for-granted normative assumptions of prevailing discourses. Thus genealogies operate not so much as theories but as mechanisms for criticizing theories (Sawicki 1991: 53). For black feminists this provides a means to interrogate the discourses which embrace and so wish to structure our very being – the racial discourse, with its obsession with black (male) desire and fear (Goldberg 1990; West 1993); the discourse of gender, dominated with the (white) feminist project of truth seeking (Weedon 1987; Nicholson 1990; Barrett and Phillips 1992); and the discourse of class, that central structural discourse of our time, with its privileging of the universal, exclusion of agency and reduction of all things to the economic (Nelson and Grossberg 1988; Callinicos 1989; see Hall and Jacques 1989).

It could be argued that mapping the counter history of Black feminism can be no more than a mapping of the history of the objectively assigned and dialectically constructed subject positions as written and spoken for black women by others. True, if the black woman is traced in history what we see is how she is permitted to appear. We see glimpses of her as she is produced and created for the sustenance of the patriarchal, colonial and now postcolonial discourse (Spivak 1988; Mani 1992; Hawley 1994; Ching-Laing Low 1995; McClintock 1995; Parry 1995; Jayawardena 1996). She

appears and disappears as she is needed, as the dutiful wife and daughter, the hard (but happy and grateful!) worker, the sexually available exotic other, the controlling asexual mother, or simply homogenized as the 'third world' woman (Mohanty 1988). In her representation she is without agency, without self-determination, a passive victim, waiting to be inscribed with meaning from those who wish to gaze upon her and name her. She is an object, not the subject of her story. However, the project of black feminism asserts and reclaims our agency in the telling of who we are. Our voice, our being and our very presence within the patriarchal imperial project of sexualized racialization is to actively contest the system of which we form a part.

However, if genealogies span centuries, can we undertake a genealogy of Black British feminism when the immediate history of concerted black feminist activity in Britain reaches back only over the last 50 years, over the relatively short time of postcolonial migration and settlement here? West (1993) talks of a micro-institutional or localized analysis, which is part of a bigger genealogical, macro-institutional, materialist inquiry of racism. Black British feminism with its location – and with its critical project to reveal the mechanisms that promote, contest, and resist racist logics and practices in the everyday lives of black people – can be seen as such a micro-institutional genealogical project; it is to the mapping of this project that I now turn:

PART I SHAPING THE DEBATE

Migration

Using a broad notion of the project of Black British feminism as a critical social force, it could be argued that a genealogy of black British feminism as a theoretical and intellectual movement has its genesis over 50 years ago in the activism and struggles of black women migrants from the postcolonial Caribbean, Africa and the Indian sub-continent.

Official statistics and texts written about and documenting the main period of postcolonial migration from the 1940s to 1960s writes out the female story of postcolonial migration. What remains for us to gather are the snippets of black women's stories as they emerge to challenge their negation and disrupt the neat telling of those times. The narratives of black women soldiers in the Second World War (Bousquet and Douglas 1991); the writing and campaigns of Una Marson for the League of Coloured People in the 1940s; the internationally recognized political activism of Claudia Jones in the 1950s; and the sustained collective organizing of Olive Morris in the 1970s, have been kept alive by black women writers and narrators (Prescod-Roberts and Steele 1980; Dodgson 1984; Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 1985; Jarrett-Macauley 1996).

But these stories of black female activism and engagement are in contrast to the picture that is commonly painted of black women in Britain. In the British Government's conscious drive to recruit cheap labour from the newly independent colonies in the early 1950s, it was simply assumed, that migrant workers, like their own workers, are always male. The colonial violence of enslavement and economic plunder that structured black female work as a necessity was, of course, unenounced in the assumption, erased from official logic. Women in the colonial patriarchal discourse were invisible non-entities. Immigration law and welfare policy reinforced this assumption. Women, it was believed, came as either wives or children, dependants on the man. However, the majority of Caribbean women came independently and in almost equal numbers to men (Foner 1979; Fryer 1984) – a fact erased from the telling (Mirza 1988). Migrant women could only claim rights on the grounds of marriage: that is, through their association with men. Women emerged in the official patriarchal, neo-imperialist discourse only as subjects for sexual and racist humiliation. In the construction of women as objects of male ownership the British Government invoked a twisted cultural legitimacy to harass and deter male migrants. They used the ultimate transgression of power, the forcible and violent entering and defiling of the bodies of the invisible. Unbelievably, they tested Asian women to see if they were bonafide 'virgin' wives (Parmar 1982: 245; Brah 1992a: 70; Mama 1992: 88). Crude, overt racist brutality has been the hallmark of immigration and asylum policies in the declining embattled British state (James and Harris 1993; Solomos 1993).

Work

The pervasive image of the invisible or passive black woman was rudely interrupted by the labour struggles that exploded in the 1970s, exposing the British sweat shops (Parmar 1982). In the first chapter of this collection, Amrit Wilson in 'Finding a voice: Asian women in Britain' gives a first person account of the conditions and struggles of Asian women workers. The narrative speaks of the agency of these women in their sustained, organized class struggles in the workplace. The women themselves tell of the historically specific nature of their class and cultural consciousness which was embedded in the material relations of capitalist production. On one hand, the women were positioned in a cultural context as Asian women and were exploited and harassed on those grounds. On the other hand, the women's socio-awareness of their objective class status meant they sought collective action and trade union affiliation; a strategy that ultimately led to their defeat. The complex cultural identities and social subject positioning that were manifest in the struggle for social justice are articulated by the women themselves in their narratives of everyday life on the picket line.

While Asian women were largely located in the private sector in factory and production, Caribbean and African women were situated in the public service and caring industries. Amina Mama's chapter 'Black women, the economic crisis and the British state' maps the clear-sighted, lucid project of a restructuring of the postcolonial capitalist state; rationalizing its logic through the active production of a disenfranchised and thus contingent and disposable workforce. Black women, in large numbers compared to the white female population, were (and are) disproportionately employed in low paid, low status work (Breugel 1989; Lewis 1993; Bhavnani 1994; Owen 1994). The insidious erosion of rights emphasizes black women's shared social and material conditions in a highly-structured, gendered and racialized labour market. Race, in the context of the globalization of capital, places gender at the centre of the new working class (Ong 1987; Brewer 1993).

Identity politics

In the early 1980s black women organized not only to protect their rights in the workplace, but also to engage with the sustained fascist and racist onslaughts of white British politicians, their vanguards, the police and their lackeys, the white street mobs which inhabited (and still do) the heightened sensitized place that is the national racialized terrain of late twentieth-century Britain (Hall 1975; Gilroy 1987; Solomos 1988; Keith 1993, 1995). In this context, Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe reveal the political agency of black women in their chapter 'The heart of the race: Black women's lives in Britain'. The story of OWAAD (the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent), which is the story of the coming together of black women in 1978, challenges the official racial discourse where black men are the valorized racialized agents, named and feared through their visible acts of riots and rebellion. Women, permitted to appear in the racial discourse (if at all) only as mothers of sons and carers of husbands, demonstrated their collective politics of engagement and subversion. The call to Afro-Asian unity by OWAAD demonstrates the emergence of an organic racialized consciousness from which evolved the conscious naming of ourselves as 'black'. It was an empowering act in an empowering time, but one that did not last (Lewis and Parmar 1983a; Brah 1992b; Williams 1993).

Ironically the legacy of that reductionist naming of 'blackness' was to shift the racial discourse onto new ground, away from confrontational struggle in the political and economic domain towards the struggle to be heard among ourselves in the social and cultural domain. OWAAD folded under the pressure from within to assert heterogenous identities. The desire for visibility through celebrating cultural, religious and sexual difference characterized the struggle for a claim on the racialized terrain

in the 1980s. Seduced by this opening, a space to express our hidden subjugated selves, identity politics superficially appeared to empower marginal groups.

Identity politics, a political ideology that consumed the 1980s, was based on the premise that the more marginal the group the more complete the knowledge. In a literal appropriation of standpoint theory, the claim to authenticity through oppressive subjecthood produced a simplistic hierarchy of oppression. The outcome was the cliché-ridden discourse which embodied the holy trinity of 'race, class, and gender' (Appiah and Gates 1995), within which black women, being the victims of 'triple oppression', were the keepers of the holy grail.

The solution within this conceptualization of oppression was to change personal behaviour rather than challenge wider structures. In a time when what should be done was replaced by who we are (Bourne 1987: 1), the freedom to have was replaced by the freedom to be (Melucci 1989: 177). Identity politics offered no radical way forward in the critical project of revealing how we come to be located in the racialized and sexualized space where we reside. Whiteness, that silent pervasive patriarchal discourse, the father of identity politics, with its complementary discourse on anti-racism and new-right anti-anti-racism, was never named (see Gilroy 1990; Bonnett 1993a, 1996; Dunant 1994; Gillborn 1995, 1996).

Imperial feminism

Just as the political arena witnessed a backlash to the reductionism of identity politics, so too was there a reaction to the reductionism inherent within white feminist theory in the 1980s. The desire for equality, the struggle for social justice, and the vision of universal sisterhood was the consuming unidirectional project of white (socialist) feminism throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. Patriarchal power, its manifestation in terms of female invisibility, and the inevitable psychic social and economic oppression it engendered across the globe, was the central logic driving the feminist discourse. However, racial power within the white feminist production of knowledge about gender relations was never problematized. Whiteness was a 'given' social position. Ironically it meant that an epistemology that rests on inclusion and equality was itself excluding and unequitable. The explanation as to why feminism should be locked into such an untenable position lay in revealing the foundations of a feminist epistemology which was embedded in the project of modernity, its premise being rational universal humanism (Weedon 1987; Barrett and Phillips 1992; Harding 1992; Yeatman 1994; Alway 1995; Charles 1996).

In feminist theory, knowledge about social relations was experiential. The central drive of the feminist project was to reveal hitherto obscured realities, other worlds – the 'woman's' world, a world silenced by the

privileging of masculinity. But if the 'woman's' standpoint was embedded in that given, unproblematized space of whiteness – and it was – then how could feminism claim universal legitimacy? Black women's experience was invisible, or if made visible spoken for and constructed through the authoritative, imperial voice of whiteness (Mohanty 1988, 1992; Ramazanoglu 1989; Ware 1992). The call to recognize difference and diversity in the feminist project was incompatible with the notion of an essential, universal 'woman' subject.

The struggle of black women to claim a space within the modernist feminist discourse, and at the same time to engender critical racial reflexivity among white feminists, consumed the black feminist project for more than a decade. The writings of Hazel Carby, Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar exemplify the height of this critical time. Hazel Carby's chapter, 'White woman listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood', embodies the classic Black British feminist response to exclusion and white feminist authority. Centring her argument around the key areas of feminist discourse – the family, patriarchy and reproduction – she interrogates the contradiction of the white feminist theoretical claim to universal womanhood on the one hand, but the practice of exclusion of women who are different on the other. Similarly Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar in 'Challenging imperial feminism' focus on white feminism's subversion of the discourse around the family, sexuality and the peace movement in its unconscious attempt to valorize and represent nothing more than white women's own cultural experience as global.

White feminists were reluctant to relinquish the authority to name the social reality of the gendered subject, a reluctance manifest in a particular white feminist appropriation of the black feminist critique. While black feminists called for the recognition of racism in white feminist theorizing, white socialist feminists strategically responded with a recognition of their ethnocentrism (the valorizing of the white cultural perspective). In an article in *Feminist Review*, Barrett and McIntosh (1985) suggested the solution to the problem of black female invisibility was to simply insert an appreciation of black cultural difference into the analysis of the family, work and reproduction. Racism, the acknowledgement of which is central to developing a truly critical position in relation to the discourse on whiteness, was not up for debate in the work of white feminists, as Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson in their chapter, 'Transforming socialist feminism: The challenge of racism' point out. This article, when originally published in 1986, opened out a heated but necessary and productive debate between black and white feminists. The focus on the centrality of an open reflexive appreciation of racism in the production of an ethical feminist discourse, was continued and kept alive in the constructive dialogue between black feminists (Kazi 1986; Mirza 1986) and white feminists (Lees 1986; Ramazanoglu 1986) in a special

section in the journal *Feminist Review* entitled 'Feedback: Feminism and Racism'.

Throughout the 1980s black feminists in Britain responded and resisted the overarching imperial mission of white feminism by refusing to be 'named'. They invoked their agency by challenging stereotypical images of black women as passive victims through studies, research, and writing that revealed the hidden world of migrant and black British women. In that world, women were brave, proud and strong. They wrote of Asian girls' resistance in schools (Parmar and Mirza 1981; Brah and Minhas 1985) and at work (Parmar 1982; Brah 1992a); they told of the African Caribbean experience of schooling (Carby 1982b; Stone 1985; Wright 1987); they revealed black women's struggle against domestic violence (Mama 1989, 1993a) and immigration (James 1985) and the police (Mama 1993b). They engaged in black lesbian activism (see Lewis 1990); and spoke of enriching, empowering but complex alternative family forms and other ways of living and being (Lewis and Parmar 1983b; Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 1985; Visram 1986; Bhachu 1988; Phoenix 1988, 1991).

Postmodern difference

By the end of the 1980s, the black feminist critical project to excavate the dynamics of racial power and the silences it produces within white feminist discourse left black feminists exhausted and in need for self recovery. The flattening out and reduction of difference and diversity which had been assigned to interrogate whiteness within the feminist movement had outlived its purpose. The homogenizing of black women, that empowering act of collectivity rooted in racism, began to erode black feminist theoretical legitimacy. Black feminism, it was now being said, was a politically limited project. It undermined its own position as a critical discourse by exclusionary practices which did not recognize the ethnic, religious, political and class differences among women (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983, 1992; Brah 1994). Now the call was for black feminists to enter into the diversionary discourse of anti-racism. Anti-racism appeared to offer a form of inclusive, strategic, engaged political activism which, (superficially at least) could cut across difference by initiating black/white or local alliances articulated around the unified struggle against the racist practices of the state (Bourne 1983; Tang Nain 1991; Knowles and Mercer 1992). The emphasis on the manifestation of racism(s) and not the deeper underlying structures of what constitutes 'race' in the British context meant that anti-racism, as a political ideology could only ever put a 'coat of paint' on the problem of black inequality (Gilroy 1990).

Sensitive to the limitations of reductionism, and with a desire to explore our difference, the black feminist theorists turned to locating black female identity at the centre of their analysis. By opening up a critical inquiry into

theories of social reproduction and class inequality, black feminists de-centred the authority of such established theories to speak of and on behalf of all marginalized groups (see Mirza 1992). Ann Phoenix, in her chapter 'Theories of gender and black families', articulates the complex levels of gender difference from a race and class position. Gender is not experienced in the same way when you are positioned as working class or black, or both. Children learn these differences and reproduce them in their knowledge about the social world. Ann Phoenix shows that specificity and difference is important.

A sense of reflexivity and re-negotiation within the black feminist critical space is articulated by Pratibha Parmar in her chapter 'Other kinds of dreams'. Autobiographical reflections of black women emerge in this time that speak of a desire to claim a space and so enable the healing processes of self-discovery necessary after the long journeys through migration, work, identity politics, racism and feminist exclusion of the 1980s (see Grewal *et al.* 1988). The explosion of black women's literature and poetry also makes possible new contexts for creativity. Sharing their pain and pleasures, these black women writers living in Britain give strength and wisdom to others (see Burford *et al.* 1985; Cobham and Collins 1987; Ngcobo 1988; *Wasafiri* 1988; Nasta 1991; Boyce Davis 1994). Photography, art, film and performance produce images and acts that, in celebrating diversity, reflect, deflect and destabilize the white gaze (see Rasheed 1989; Parmar 1990; Sutler 1990; *Ten.8* 1992; Fusco 1995; Ugwu 1995; Boyce and Diawara 1996; Tawadros 1996; Young 1996). Black women gained a space to write about the body and mind in terms of colonial appropriation (Kanneh 1995; Mama 1995) and in terms of disability and exclusion (Begum 1992). They explored possibilities of new social movements in Europe (*Feminist Review* 1993) and social change in the UK (Jayaweera 1993). They organized against religious fundamentalism (Sahgal and Yuval-Davis 1992), and campaigned for lesbian sexual politics (Mason-John 1995).

Even though black women demonstrate their undeniable presence, the theoretical inclusion of their difference still appears elusive. Whereas 1970s and 1980s feminism centred its struggle on 'the right to be equal', postmodern feminism in 1990s turned to a celebration for the 'right to be different'. The black feminist critique makes visible the inherent contradiction of such relative pluralism. As black women we ask: is it possible to achieve equality within difference? As the concept of difference is analytically weak and ill-defined, the discursive terrain is unsure. Are we talking about difference in relation to sexual difference (men/women); difference in relation to 'race' (black/white); or difference in relation to subjectivities (between women - class/ethnicity/age/religion, etc.) (Barrett 1987; Di Stefano 1990; Scott 1990; Barrett and Phillips 1992; Brah 1992b; Farganis 1994; Maynard 1994; Charles 1996; Williams 1996).

However it is defined, difference is plagued by some central philosophical problems. First, it could be argued that celebrating and valorizing difference of any sort depoliticizes feminism. It effectively dissipates the basis for collective activism as we look inward to the self with claims to relatively oppressed status, deflecting attention away from power which is still materially located (Bourne 1987; Bordo 1990). Thus, ironically, the discourse on difference obscures how we come to give meanings to our differences. Second, the discourse on difference privileges whiteness (Spelman 1990). Razia Aziz takes up this point in her chapter 'Feminism and the challenge of racism: Deviance or difference?' The very notion of difference is relational; you are always positioned in relation to the norm, which is whiteness. In such a politicized construction, other differences of class, age, ethnicity, religion have been subdued in the selective valorizing of black/white difference. A postmodern black feminist identity, Aziz suggests, is not just based on racism and oppression but on recognizing the fluidity and fragmented nature of racialized and gendered identities. In this sense we can reclaim subjectivity from the *cul de sac* of identity politics and reinstate it in terms of a powerful, conscious form of political agency. This is the task facing black feminism now.

PART II DEFINING OUR SPACE

In the space opened up by the discourse on difference, black women continue the critical task of genealogical enquiry: to excavate and so reveal the seemingly imperceptible, the smallest of the small ways in which we are absorbed into the resistance of that which we are expected to be, while we live trying to be what we want to be. Oriented around issues of difference, essentialism, representation, and cultural hybridity the collective project of black feminism is now, in the late 1990s, concerned with mapping our experience. But this is not a simple mapping of experience to uncover the 'truth', but rather an engagement with experience; a placing of the self in theory so as to understand the constructions and manifestations of power in relation to the self (Essed 1994; Griffin 1996). A critical black feminist theory is grounded in relation to practice, it cannot be not separate: praxis is central to our survival (Christian 1994, 1995).

Challenging essentialized images

For a black woman to be different is to be what she is not expected to be. To be different, as Bibi Bakare-Yusuf reveals in her chapter 'Raregrooves and raregroovers: a matter of taste, difference and identity', is to subvert the restricted codes of a narrowly defined racialized essence and acceptable femininity. If young black women do not behave as 'black' in the narrow

cultural sense of Jamaican underclass, then does that mean they are not 'black'? The raregroove scene is a space of re-invention, where young women appropriate black female identity; rescue it from fixed essentialized constructions of the way they 'should be'. Aspirational, middle-class young women express difference in terms of their taste and style, choice of leisure and pleasure. They are engaged in the risky business of strategic tactical cultural re-inscription which makes the hegemonic discourse of race, class and gender imperceptible.

It is argued that the new cultural racism that marks this postmodern era is legitimated through dominant regimes of representation (Hall 1992; Giroux 1994; McLaren 1994b). But are we what we are expected to be or are we much more? In her chapter '(Mis)representing the black (super)-woman', Tracey Reynolds takes on the unchallenged discourse of the black superwoman; that powerful, indomitable work horse; that matriarchal giant that pushes aside men and climbs on up the career ladder; that single minded calculating woman who has babies alone; that untrustworthy woman who even consorts with white men when she achieves. Does she really exist beyond representation? Whatever the evidence – and Tracey Reynolds shows there is very little in terms of substantive research on motherhood, work and education – everyone still believes she does exist. She is valorized and reproduced in white academic and social policy discourse. Reinforced in the black press, the superwoman has even become a celebrated empowering notion among black women themselves. The call is to refuse voyeuristic reception of the 'other' and to imagine the self differently in order to act otherwise.

Racialized, sexualized meanings seem to have engulfed our very ways of thinking and knowing ourselves. Debbie Weekes, in her chapter 'Shades of Blackness: Young Black Female Constructions of Beauty', explores black female assertions of black female identity through the lived reality of fixed biologically verifiable notions of blackness. Black women erect boundaries of what counts as blackness based on skin colour and hair texture which they then police. This is how identity is experienced – on the streets, on the bus, in the classroom, at home. That is how young black women talk, think and walk. High brow cultural theorists would wish to wish away such ugly, 'racist' unpleasantries in effort to cool out what does not fit (Gilroy 1987; Hall 1992; Weeks 1995). But such essentializing is not a 'fiction', an imagining, a misinformed unsound politically-incorrect, false consciousness. It is these young women's reality. If it is ugly, then it is only as ugly as the racial discourse from which it is honed. Lived, essentialized blackness is a mirror of pervasive unenunciated whiteness – the 'Thing'. The perverse nature of this re-inscription of power and agency through becoming a self-defined, essential racial subject needs to be understood not dismissed (hooks 1991, 1992).

Erasure: finding the spaces in between

The pervasive use of essentialist definitions of blackness has a price. In the racialized terrain, dominated by fixed racialized beliefs, those who are defined as neither black nor white carry the pain of erasure. In her chapter 'Diaspora's daughters, Africa's orphans?: On lineage, authenticity and "mixed race" identity', Jayne Ifekwunigwe reveals the lives of the *métisse*, those who are neither considered black or white, those who exist everywhere but belong nowhere. Through their construction of self, *métisse* women illuminate the contradictions and logic of an impoverished racialized discourse, a discourse grounded in crude culturalist notions of 'race', nation and culture. The *métisse* are thus the product of racialized discourse. They occupy a critical position, an orphan consciousness, creating their own space in the recalling of their English-African-Diasporic histories. By assuming visibility in their role as *griotte* (storytellers), these *métisse* narrate what is 'real' (as lived) and fictitious (as constructed) in racial discourse.

The critical place that *métisse* women occupy is interrogated by Sara Ahmed in her chapter "'It's a sun-tan, isn't it?": Auto-biography as an identificatory practice'. Memories and reflections, which are always selective, can only tell us about the way you are seen, and hence addressed, within the dominant categories of the social world. When asked, with a wink, if her colour was just a sun-tan by predatory white police, multiple levels of identification and dis-identification in the incident illuminate the instability, temporality and negotiation of racialized, gendered, classed meaning. The incident shows the impossibility of being fixed by a single name or gaze in the process of identification, when you are a racially-marked, gendered subject. Modes of address that attempt to fix the subject are riddled with contradictions and social antagonisms. The process of identifying with the collective term 'black women' makes visible the clash between two regimes of identification: gender and race. By invoking the generalizable category 'black woman', Sara Ahmed shows the impossibility yet necessity of the politically-affirming gesture of naming the self as 'black woman'.

But is the notion of a 'black woman' a viable concept? Identity politics, that ideological policing of who counts as 'black', Black or black, that has invaded our thinking and being, has without doubt, closed down our possibilities for self-definition and political engagement. Magdalene Ang-Lygate in her chapter 'Charting the spaces of (un)location: On theorizing diaspora' explores, through the invisibility of Filipina and Chinese women living in Britain, the enclosures and erasure inherent in the racialized discourse of identity politics. The political concept of blackness does not convey belonging and community, but instils a false sense of national identity that sets those with dark black skin colour apart, while silencing those who are lighter than black. It consorts with the colonialist imperialist

categorization of immigrant as outsiders, alien, different. Constructions of unidimensional black identity can only reinforce white supremacy by the logics of duality. To refuse such limited racialized constructions and create over and over again our difference is to disrupt and so subvert neo-colonialist paradigms.

Moving: new identities, new meanings

Naz Rassool in her chapter 'Fractured or flexible identities? Life histories of "black" diasporic women in Britain', explores how a conscious black identity evolves among women coming from very different socio-economic, historical and geographical places now living in Britain. Life histories of women as diverse as African-Caribbean, Iraqi-Kurd, black South African and African-Indian Kenyan, reveal the organic, complex interweaving of past-present experience in the recovery of diasporic subjectivity. In the search for the self in traces of memory, what may seem on the outside as the fragmented and alienating social experience of migration and dislocation has an inner coherence and continuity. Cultural hybridity, the fusion of cultures and coming together of difference, the 'border crossing' that marks diasporic survival, signifies change, hope of newness, and space for creativity. But in the search for rootedness – a 'place called home' – these women, in the process of self-identification, dis-identify with an excluding, racist British colonizing culture. They articulate instead a multi-faceted discontinuous black identity that marks their difference.

The desire to belong, the search for a 'place called home' is interrogated by Nalini Persram in her chapter 'In my father's house are many mansions: The nation and postcolonial desire'. Through a personal narrative she takes us on a journey of unbelonging, of changing colour codings and shifting gender roles. She unmasks the hegemonic masculinist discourse of national identity that structures and informs our search for who we are. The search for our authentic self rooted in a time, a place, with a history and a culture, is reproduced in the diasporic, migrant counter-discourse on 'home'. The compensatory narrative of 'home' – 'that there is a *there* there' – with its myth of unitary origin, is produced through the masculinist discourse of 'lack'. If you lack a nation, as diasporic travellers do, then how do you celebrate who you *are*? Re-knowing identity is to remake a space that valorizes movement not location, that is determined by migrancy and not being a migrant. It is a personal journey toward belonging (see Hesse 1993).

Re-claiming and re-centring our bodies

To take the inner journey to 'self' reveals different ways of knowing. In

'Two stories, three lovers and the creation of meaning in a Black Lesbian autobiography: A diary', Consuelo Rivera Fuentes transforms herself into a site of resistance. In her reading of Audre Lorde's *Zami* she creates and recreates her identity in and out of the text. In her diary she shares with us Lorde's bodily geographical journey towards self-construction which changes reality from within. Consuelo reveals a place inside which plays with language and makes love to poetry. It is a sensual inner space that is not determined by the dominant discourse of being black and lesbian. In this place, her many selves – the writer, the reader, the autobiographer – passionately engage with each other, until the boundaries between each identity disappears. In the end no one knows where one identity starts and where another one finishes. It is possible to create an identity with new layers of meanings, to have multiple subjectivities without separating the self into different speaking subjects: to be one with many parts. Identity is a living process; though it is temporal, spatial and shifting, it can be transformative through risk, desire, decision and struggle.

There is an assumption that theories (and hence facts) come from our heads and feelings (and hence fictions) come from our bodies. In 'My body, myself: How does a Black woman do sociology?', Felly Nkweto Simmonds makes the point that sociology labours under the fiction that social reality has nothing to do with the body. However, for black women, social theory has fed on their embodied experiences. Black bodies are killed, displayed, watched, analysed, stroked, desired because of their embodied 'otherness'. Anthropology's fascination for the anatomical landmarks of different races has fed the fantasies of the Western imagination which fuelled the desiring machine of capital. Black women cannot be dispassionate, disembodied theorists. Their social reality, their habitus, is to be black, gendered subjects in a white world. For Felly cancer gave her a new relationship with her body which allowed her to rethink her place in the social. For the black woman, revealing certain 'private information' is necessary in order to understand how others see her and her experience as a 'curiosity'.

The one thing we do know as black women, is that our eroticized, exoticized bodies have become objects of desire. They preoccupy and obsess the white gaze. Gargi Bhattacharyya, in her chapter 'The fabulous adventures of the mahogany princesses', weaves a tale in the oral tradition of her parents, and parents' parents. It is a tale that tells of the violence of colonial exploitation which has reduced us all to looking at skin colour as a way of being, defining and living. Locked into a racialized, sexualized discourse, represented as exotic others, we have forgotten other ways of imagining who we are. Gargi's folk narrative enables the reader/listener to find wisdom and meaning in sagas made up of endless episodes without having to hear the whole thing. The unfolding narrative's central logic asks: does studying our representation in pictures, books and films

reveal how gender and race really work? The postmodern preoccupation of studying the effects – our action and reaction to how we are pictured – has locked us into a distracting cycle of reflecting on how we are perceived, and then believing how we are perceived is who we are. What we see as mahogany princesses does not come into it at all. The story of the mahogany princesses is part dream fantasy, part bedtime story, and part twelve-step self-help programme, which is disciplined in another way – other than what is expected in ‘power tripping, name dropping’ academia. It can allow us to escape our mental confines, use our knowledge, and think differently about who we are.

PART III CHANGING THE FUTURE

For black feminists, a politics of difference is a politics of engagement, which operates from a site of critical location (hooks 1991). As ‘critical organic catalysts’ (West 1990) we desire neither acceptance, transgression nor transcendence with regard to the mainstream. What we are involved in is active insurgency through conscious alliances, critical dialogue and intellectual rigor in our task to reveal the operations of power in which we are implicated. Our hope is, if we change the way we think and speak about things, then we might change the way we live.

Pragna Patel, in her chapter ‘Third wave feminism and Black women’s activism’, tells of the struggle of Southall Black Sisters (SBS) and Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF) to uphold women’s status through legal rights. SBS and WAF struggle in the twilight zone of the dominant patriarchal discourses of anti-racism, multiculturalism, and religious fundamentalism. Cases of domestic violence, sexual abuse and forced marriage illuminate the alliances between the state and patriarchal authority by legitimating the rhetoric of Asian male community leaders who seek to maintain the sanctity of the family for ideological empowerment. SBS and WAF are involved in campaigns to redefine the relationship of women to the criminal justice system. In so doing they work to change the language and so meaning of the law to embrace an understanding of transgressions against women (such as rape) as violations of human rights.

The sites of engagement, the locations for our insurgency are not always in the political domain where they are expected. In ‘Black women in education: A collective movement for social change’, I ask the question: is the desire to do well and succeed in education a subversive act? The positive orientation of black women to education is significant. They may appear on the surface to be engaged in instrumental, seemingly conservative acts of buying into the system, but this is an illusion. Black women, without access to power and privilege, redefine what education is for. The analysis of female collective action offers a new direction for thinking about new social movements, challenging masculine assump-

tions of social change through confrontation. Ultimately, to do well in a racist society is a radical act. Given the parameters of the world we live in, we must think about transformative struggle through inclusive acts.

Coming full circle, this collection of Black British feminist writers ends on a note of hope, for an inclusive feminism that can embrace our class, race, sexual, and (dis)ability differences. Terminology constructs boundaries and meaning. If excluded from meaning, as black women were from the meaning associated with feminism, then they become invisible. Helen (Charles), in 'The language of womanism: Rethinking difference', asks if an inclusive universal feminism is both possible and desirable. The organic nature of terming means that a word must come from its value to those who use it. 'Womanism' as a self-conscious, black-based term stopped short of popular appeal. Naming the self as 'black feminist' comes from a demand to be recognized by those in power. But to focus on terminology rather than a critique of the race-sexism of white feminism leads to no change. The black feminist critique engendered a guilty paralysis among white feminists for over twenty years, and this needs to be intercepted if feminism is to move forward. Feminism as a term, and as a movement, is not static, it is not impervious to change. If feminism changes to embrace differences, rather than to be preoccupied with difference, then its meaning will change and strengthen black and white feminist activism through a unified cohesive and strategic identity.

CONCLUSION

Postmodern theory has allowed the celebration of difference, the recognition of otherness, the presence of multiple and changeable subjectivities. Black women, previously negated and rendered invisible by the inherent universalizing tendency of modernity, finally have a voice. We appear to have 'arrived'. Here we are, afforded the status of *Black British Feminism*.

Postmodernity has opened up the possibility of a new 'feminism of difference'. Such a feminism now allows black women the legitimation to do what we have been doing for long time, in our own way; we have now been afforded an intellectual space to valorize our agency, redefine our place on the margins.

But in a genealogy of Black British feminism, we need to ask how do we appear in the emerging postmodern discourse on difference? How are we being produced, and implicated in that production? The answer is, through ourselves. In writing about our world, our place on the margin, black feminists take the risk of what happens when we expose ourselves as objects of study. Laid bare by our unveiling, our inner-most life stories become objects for public gaze; our resistance is known. We engage in naming our subjectivity, telling our story. We undertake journeys of self-discovery, which are then appropriated and recorded as objective know-

ledge, 'original context', and 'specificities'. The dominant culture achieves hegemony precisely by its capacity to convert and recode for the authoritative other (Chow 1993; Grossberg 1996).

In this so called fragmented, dislocated, experiential reality that is postmodern Britain, the celebration and voicing of our otherness has been appropriated by the masculinist postmodern discourse, which now seeks a new legitimation through 'owning' our 'marginal' experience. In the vacuum produced through abstract theorizing, bourgeois social theorists search for a role in relation to the 'social' they deconstruct (Skeggs 1991; Jackson 1992). In their postmodern malaise, the privileged and elite wish to enter and share our third space, our place on the margin, which has now become 'trendy' to occupy. Once our problem was invisibility in white feminism now its recognition in the white male academy!

But what is this 'third space', the place of 'hybridity and translation' which privileges those who claim to be oppressed? 'Becoming marginal' appears to be a place everyone seemingly wants to occupy, to lay claim to, no matter how elite, privileged or empowered by their class (Jacoby 1995; Sivanandan 1990). The work of some male academics, both black and white, articulates a new 'imperialism of oppression' as they enter the (counter-hegemonic) space of the *truly* dispossessed and seek, through a perverse legitimacy of their 'displacement' or search for 'new knowledge', to know it better than we know it ourselves (see for example Soja and Hooper 1993; Scheurich and Young 1996; Bhabha 1990, 1996; Hall 1990, 1996).

It could be argued that we should be glad that black feminism is getting this sort of air play. After all, is this not what we have struggled to achieve: visibility and legitimation? But black feminists must be conscious of this subtle and seductive space that has opened up for us in the postmodern project of knowledge production. Black women's agency in the context of this intangible, dangerous discursive terrain means being ever 'sociologically vigilant' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 209).

To valorize our 'different' experience means we have to locate that experience in materiality. Holding on to the struggle against inequality and for social justice anchors the black feminist project. For it seems whatever the project of postmodern theorizing, black women remain subject to discrimination and exclusion. Black women remain preoccupied with their struggles against low pay, ill health and incarceration, and for access to care, welfare and education. In spite of postmodernism, little has changed for the majority of black women, globally and nationally. For them power is not diffuse, localized and particular. Power is as centralized and secure as it always has been, excluding, defining and self-legitimizing (Callinicos 1989).

In this book, we speak of black feminism, not black feminism(s). This is because the political project has a single purpose: to excavate the silences

and pathological appearances of a collectivity of women assigned as the 'other' and produced in a gendered, sexualized, wholly racialized discourse. Black feminism has many ways of doing this. Over the past 20 years, as has been revealed in this genealogy, there have been many sites of struggle: migration, work, white feminist theory, and now identity and difference. Strategic multiplicity and contingency is a hallmark of Black British feminism. If anything, what our struggles demonstrate is that you can have difference (polyvocality) within a conscious construction of sameness (i.e. black feminism).

As long as there is exclusion, both in academic discourse and in materiality, there will be a black feminism. It is in this sense contingent. As long as such exclusion is produced spatially in regions, nations, and places, there will be a Black *British* feminism.

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Shaping the debate

Amrit Wilson

This section explores the early direction of the black feminist debate in Britain. Over twenty years ago black British women began to document their work experiences and political struggles through the narrative accounts and testimonies of black women migrants. By the early 1980s, Black British feminists, conscious of their inability to articulate these experiences within the framework of feminist theory, began a critical dialogue with mainstream white feminism. As the key classic texts collected together in this section show, it was the charge of exclusion and ethnocentricity within white feminist scholarship that galvanized black female scholars to make visible the social and political conditions of black women in Britain. The debate took shape around a critical exchange on the centrality of the family and the definition of patriarchy in other cultural contexts. Primarily a critique of white feminism, this important but essentially reactive perspective of Black British feminism reached an impasse by the early 1990s. The white feminist discourse, unable to embrace black feminist demands for equality within the confines of its modernist logics of universalism, shifted to postmodern concerns of 'difference'.

Finding a voice

Asian women in Britain*

Amrit Wilson

WORK OUTSIDE THE HOME

'Next time I won't cry, I'll make you cry'

No one, least of all Asian women workers themselves, would claim that they are highly militant or strong. What they have been in the past, in the face of their grim working lives, is resilient. They have refused to despair, accepting quite stoically what they have been given. Now this stoicism is changing. Partly it is changing because women are getting more familiar with the industrial scene and partly because of the tremendous impact and influence of the strike at Grunwick Photoprocessing. That strike has proved for always that Asian women workers can be strong, resourceful and courageous, that they can stand up, face the world and demand their rights.

In Britain there has for many years been a sub-proletariat, a sub-class of the working class who are far worse off than the main body, consisting of sweat-shop workers and homeworkers, people who are treated by employers as though they have no rights at all. Before Asian immigrants came to Britain, these jobs were done by previous waves of immigrants in certain areas (like the East End of London). But elsewhere in the country in general they were usually done by indigenous working-class women whose mothers often had similar jobs before them. Now that Asian women have taken over their positions, they move upwards, even though only slightly upwards, in the labour hierarchy. But this means more than just one group replacing another. The change is a tremendous one. At the bottom of the hierarchy of the production structure, where spirits are assumed to be crushed, have come a new army of workers – fresh, vivacious and increasingly angry. Their expectations are high because many of them have, until recently, had a middle-class life and outlook (i.e. the East African Asians) and because, unlike the British working class, they have not been ground

*Extract from Wilson, A. (1978) *Finding a Voice – Asian Women in Britain*, Virago Press, London, pp. 48–71.

down and prepared for their jobs by the British education system. Apart from this, their race, and often their language, gives them a solidarity which white workers can only rarely achieve. If they can win their battles, as one trade union organizer put it (while describing Grunwick), 'it will be a new dimension in trade union activity'. In other words it would mean that battles could be won which people have previously thought could not even be fought . . .

The strike at Grunwick Photoprocessing is exceptional in many ways. Not only are the men and women involved people of remarkable courage and strength, but unlike Imperial Typewriters or Spiralynx it is a strike of black workers in an area well known for its tradition of left-wing trade union organization . . .

However, even in this atmosphere of working-class confidence there are a number of factories and work-places where working conditions are utterly degrading. Grunwick Photoprocessing could be any factory employing Asians in any part of Britain. It is not in the mainstream of capitalist enterprise. In 1976, 80 per cent of the 440 workers were Asians, in fact it seemed that management deliberately set out to employ Asians since employment application forms asked for passport numbers and dates of arrival in the UK. Jayaben Desai, perhaps Britain's best known Asian trade unionist, described to me in the early days of the strike what it had been like working at Grunwick:

At the Dollis Hill factory the conditions were the same as elsewhere in Grunwick, the aim was to employ our people and from them to take as much as possible, for as little as possible. At Dollis Hill they had developed their own system. On two sides there are glass cabins for the management so that they can watch you as well. He is English. He moves around and keeps an eye. You have to put up your hand and ask even to go to the toilet. If someone is sick, say a woman has a period or something, they wouldn't allow her home without a doctor's certificate, and if someone's child was sick and they had to take it to the clinic or hospital they would say 'Why are you going, ask someone else from your family to go.' Perhaps they thought that having a day off would be a chance of getting another job and breaking their hold on us.

Even pregnant women who wanted to go to the clinic were told 'You must arrange to go at the weekend.' On the rare occasions when a woman did go during working hours she would be warned that that was the last time. Everyone would be paid a different wage so no one knew what anyone else was getting. And to force people to work they would make them fill in a job sheet saying how many films they had booked in. If someone did a large number they would bring the job sheet around and show the others and say 'She has done so many, you also must.' Not that they were paid more! . . .

Then one day the foreman came and said 'Mrs Desai, why have you packed up?' I said 'Why not?' . . . I went out where the rest of the staff were working and I told them 'I am leaving. You all know very well what the management are doing. This has happened to me today, it will happen to you tomorrow. You have to wake up.' Why aren't they employing white people in this factory? Because the white workers would teach them how to treat them. We are not teaching them, that is why they are treating us like this . . . I walked out and my son Sunil was behind me - he walked out too . . .

I suggested forming a union. They asked me, how? I said I didn't know either but between us all we could find out. We all agreed on that.

It was Friday, 20 August 1976. On Monday we arrived at the factory with placards we had made demanding a union. We thought, specially the boys, that placards and a demonstration were important. We stood outside the factory and asked workers entering to sign a petition demanding a union. Then we went to the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) at Wembley, as my husband had suggested, and asked them for information about how to join a union. It was soon after that that we contacted APEX and the Willesden Law Centre, and got in touch with Jack Dromey . . .

But taking this stand was not easy, particularly for the women. There were at Grunwick a group of exceptional women, women of great dignity and strength of personality like Jayaben Desai and Kalaben Patel who although in no sense 'westernized' had rejected traditional attitudes that women should be submissive and passive. It was they who formed the core of the strikers, persuading and supporting other weaker women. They visited the homes of these women, talked to husbands, fathers and fathers-in-law who did not want them to take part in any struggle, and they urged the women themselves to assert themselves. This was a tremendous task . . .

The management at Grunwick had always made use of the poverty of Asians: they had preferred them to English workers to the extent that white women applying for jobs there would actually be turned away. As the Grunwick men and women frequently commented, 'Imagine how humiliating it was for us, particularly for older women, to be working and to overhear the employer saying to a young English girl "you don't want to come and work here, love, we won't be able to pay the sort of wages that'll keep you here" - while we had to work there because we were trapped.' But the directors of the company were also aware of the position of Asian women in their community and they tried to use it when they

came out on strike. George Ward, the owner of Grunwick, is an Anglo-Indian. Jayaben said:

He would come to the picket line and try to mock us and insult us. One day he said 'Mrs Desai, you can't win in a sari, I want to see you in a mini'. I said 'Mrs Gandhi, she wears a sari and she is ruling a vast country.' I spat at him 'I have my husband behind me and I'll wear what he wants me to.' He was very angry and he started referring to me as big mouth. On my second encounter with Ward he said 'Mrs Desai, I'll tell the whole Patel community that you are a loose woman.' I said 'I am here with this placard! Look! I am showing all England that you are a bad man. You are going to tell only the Patel community but I am going to tell all of England.' Then he realized that I would not weaken and he tried to get at the younger girls. About one girl he started spreading the story that she had come out only to join her boyfriend. He did this because he knew that if it got to her parents they would force her to go back in. You see he knows about Indian society and he is using it. Even for those inside he has found for each one an individual weakness, to frighten some and to shame others. He knows that Indian women are often easily shamed.

But the women were changing as well. As Mahmood, the secretary of the strike committee, put it in the tenth month of the strike: 'When the women first joined Grunwick they were just like ordinary Indian women. But now many of them can stand up in front of the gate and talk back to the managing director. If he swears, swear back at him. They can face it, which they wouldn't do before' . . .

In June 1977 the Strike Committee had finally had enough of these bureaucratic manipulations forced on them by APEX. They decided to call upon the support of the rank and file of the labour movement. A week of action began on 13 June with a mass picket at which 84 people were arrested and there was large scale police violence. In the next few weeks the size of the picket increased reaching 2,500 on 23 June. Police injuries, 243 in August 1977 (according to Merlyn Rees, Home Secretary), continually made the headlines but in fact about three times as many pickets were injured. According to a Willesden doctor quoted in *Time Out* (August 12-18): 'Two types of injury are particularly common: the first is a result of testicles being grabbed by the police. The second is a result of women having their breasts grabbed.' These injuries went in general unreported in the media . . .

On the 22 November four members of the strike committee (among them two women, Jayaben Desai and Yasu Patel) went on hunger strike outside the headquarters of the Trade Union Congress in London. They were

immediately suspended from APEX and had their strike pay taken away . . .

At Grunwick the unity of the working class was achieved. Hundreds of trade unionists came day after day to support the Grunwick strikers on the picket line. But in the end it wasn't enough because they hadn't the courage to confront and defy the handful of men who control the trade union bureaucracy.

Black women, the economic crisis and the British state*

Amina Mama

BLACK WOMEN AND THE ECONOMY

The relationship between the various organs of this state and its Black citizens have been discussed along with some of its many ramifications in the context of the economic crisis (Gutzmore 1975, 1983, Hall *et al.* 1978, Sivanandan 1976, Solomos *et al.* 1982). The effects of this crisis on Black women at the levels of state and economy, and effects of the strategies of Britain's ruling class for dealing with the crisis on us, have rarely been discussed. These are addressed here. Throughout it is recognized that both the crisis and the strategies have political, ideological and economic manifestations, and that these amount to a regrouping, reformulation and restructuring by forces that have a history of domestic and international exploitation in the interests of capital.

Our relations to the economy are discussed here primarily with reference to the NHS and office work, and as such focus on African and Caribbean Black women, unless specified otherwise. It is argued that these relations are constructed along the dimensions of race and gender, to the detriment of Black women, and that the contemporary situation is one in which these divisions are being upheld and accentuated by the present government's strategies for dealing with the economic crisis, and by its policies and legislation in general.

The relations of Black women to the British economy should be considered in the context of Black people, but must in addition be analysed in terms of gender. This is because they are not equatable with or reducible to those of Black men, or subsumable to those of the Black community. It is not simply a matter of going into detail about Black women as a subgroup. There are qualitative differences along the dimension of gender and its meaning in British society which have implications for Black women, and have textured the economic relations of Black people in

*This chapter is a series of excerpts from Mama, A. (1984) *Feminist Review*, Special issue, 'Many Voices, One Chant', no. 17, July 1984, pp. 22-34.

general. We have played a specific role in the rationalization processes of British capitalism.

Studies of the post-war period are often discussions of 'immigrants', and therefore collapse all of us into a single, and by implication recently arrived, generation. A second deficiency is that little of this material is gender-differentiated although there are a few recent publications on female immigrant labour (Foner 1976, Phizacklea 1983). Peach (1969) in *West Indian Migration to Britain* presumed female migration to have been a passive following of menfolk. He put the proportion of 'women and children' at over 40 per cent of the total between 1955 and 1964 (p. 45). A substantial proportion of the women are likely to have been single, since women were specifically recruited. Regardless of marital status, the vast majority of these middle-generation Caribbean women came to this country as workers. Concerning recruitment, the National Health Service and the then Ministry of Labour were in consultation with the Colonial Office as early as 1944, and the local selection committees constituting a centralized recruiting system had been set up in sixteen countries (including Nigeria, Sierra Leone, British Guiana, Trinidad, Mauritius and Jamaica) by 1948. Doctors and dentists were recruited primarily from the Indian subcontinent. It is notable that restrictive immigration did not hinder recruitment, since quota systems allowed the NHS to continue importing unskilled labour for ancillary jobs, and skilled labour was not restricted (Doyal *et al.* 1981).

The 1981 Labour Force Survey shows 47.2 per cent of white women to be economically active, as compared to 67.6 per cent of 'West Indian or Guyanese', 48.1 per cent of Indian women, 40.5 per cent of African women and 15.5 per cent of Pakistani or Bangladeshi women. This gives Black women an officially higher rate of 49.4 per cent. The location of Black women in the labour market reflects and compounds the dimensions of inequality intrinsic to British society. In accordance with racial differentiation, we are to be found in the lower echelons of all the institutions where we are employed (this in itself reflecting the patterns of a segmented labour market), where the work is often physically heavy (in the factories and mills no less than in the caring professions), the pay is lowest, and the hours are longest and most anti-social (night shifts, for example).

In accordance with gender divisions, Black women tend to be employed in particular industries (clothing and food manufacture, catering, transport and cleaning, nursing and hospital ancillary work). Jobs in the 'caring' professions (nursing, teaching, community and social work) exploit oppressive notions of 'femininity', and yet actually involve heavy labour as in the case of nurses, ancillary workers and cleaners (see Unit for Manpower Studies 1976).

The National Health Service

The NHS is a major component of Britain's Welfare State, which has been developed since the last war. Its birth was fundamentally a fruit of wartime class collaboration and social democratic consensus, and financed by the post-war boom. This was also a time when workers, like soldiers before them, were recruited from the colonies to staff the boom and facilitate white upward (and outward) mobility, while keeping wages to a minimum that would have been unacceptable to the increasingly unionized white working class. Black labour was allocated by the market to specific purposes as we have seen.

Nursing is where professional Black women are employed in the NHS, usually as State Enrolled Nurses (SENs) rather than as State Registered Nurses (SRNs), despite the fact that the lower status SEN qualification is unrecognized in many of our countries of origin. National data on overseas nurses in the NHS are not available, and the studies that have been done reveal a large and fluctuating proportion that have been recruited from Ireland, Malaysia and the Philippines. In the hospitals they studied Doyal *et al.* (1981) found 81 per cent of the qualified nursing workforce to be from overseas (within this, Irish and Malaysians were more often SRNs, ward sisters and nursing officers, while Afro-Caribbean and Filipino women more often SENs or nursing auxiliaries).

With regard to ancillary and maintenance workers the same study found that 78 per cent of ancillary workers, and within this 84 per cent of domestic and catering workers, were from overseas. The proportion of female overseas ancillaries was more than double the number of males, and within that 78 per cent of domestic and 55 per cent of catering workers.

For more detailed exposure of the stratification within nursing and the role of Black labour in facilitating the rationalization of the labour process both within the NHS and industry, the reader is referred to Doyal *et al.* (1981). They argue that, in general, migrant labour has been used to enable changes in the organic composition of capital on terms more favourable to capital accumulation. In the case of the NHS immigrants are seen as having provided a crucial source of cheap labour, enabling the NHS to meet the demands of Britain's changing demography. The ever-increasing numbers of geriatric and chronically mentally and/or physically handicapped people has resulted in a growing demand for long-term care in unpopular areas; migrant labour has been used to facilitate caring for these people without dramatically increasing costs.

The economic crisis and its attendant legislative and political changes have affected Black workers disproportionately across the board. 'Restructuring' involves closing down old, declining areas in favour of new expanding ones. It so happens that because of the historical role Black labour has played, it is exactly those sectors of the market that have

employed Black people that are now closing down, while persisting discrimination ensures racist recruitment patterns in those areas being expanded and developed, which are exacerbated by unemployment. Racist redundancy policies must also be taken into account. While the NHS cannot close down overnight, as we have seen recently, it has been a focus of Tory cutbacks. The government strategy is to whittle away as much as possible while privatizing, and it is the areas where Black women work (ancillary services) that are going first. For workers, privatization means an intensified exploitation; longer hours, less bargaining power, lower wages and fewer people employed on these inferior terms. The laying-off and sacking has already provoked protest from Black women workers (see, for example, *Caribbean Times*, no. 158, March 1984).

The recent 'fish raids' and deportation of Filipino nurses are evidence that the state is using immigration legislation to regulate Black women workers according to demand, much as the Ministry of Labour and the Colonial Office acted together in earlier recruitment strategies. The current context of high unemployment means that inferior jobs are becoming attractive to white British workers who previously enjoyed the luxury of regarding these as 'below' them.

Offices

Seventy per cent of all jobs in the GLC are office jobs and 50 per cent of the Black community live in London. Recent years have seen some Black women employed in some office jobs. These have generally been low-skilled ones, in local government and welfare offices. Offices have been at the heart of the so-called 'technological revolution'. Emma Bird had this to say about it:

women are disproportionately affected by the introduction of new technology. Not only are they more likely to lose their jobs, but they are also more likely to find that the quality of work has deteriorated in the jobs that remain.

(Bird 1980)

Her estimates are comparatively low; 2 per cent (21,000) office job loss by 1985, rising to 17 per cent by 1990. In 1979, APEX predicted a quarter of a million job loss by 1983. Assessment of actual job loss is complicated by the fact that many are lost by 'natural wastage'. The West Yorkshire trade union case study concluded amongst other things that new technology leads to job losses in all the areas of women's employment, that new jobs in scientific and technical areas will favour men, that there are disturbing increases in stress and new health hazards are evident (100 per cent increase in headaches, 77 per cent increase in eye troubles and 69 per cent increase in tiredness are reported) after the introduction of new techno-

logy. As in industry, restructuring has had the effect of decreasing certain areas while increasing new ones. Predictably by now, it is the less skilled secretarial jobs, where Black women tend to be employed, that are most affected. The areas currently expanding (banking, finance and telecommunications) are not those which have tended to employ Black women, and racist recruitment and selection for training in the new skills required is preventing proportionate representation of Black women in these areas. In short, what is bad for women is worse for Black women.

To conclude this section, it needs to be pointed out that the Black woman's status as a worker is particularly important because we are more often heads of families, and have more dependants than our white counterparts. Black women are also more likely to have unemployed menfolk, and when this is not the case, Black male wage levels are low. The Black woman's wage is therefore crucial to our communities, and changes to it affect all Black people.

We can conclude that the sexist and racist devaluation of Black female labour in Britain is not only historical but also a contemporary fact and that the situation, far from improving, appears to be deteriorating. In addition to this we have particular relations to the British state, firstly as workers to capital's needs, and secondly to the legislative apparatus, particularly through immigration legislation which is used to mediate this relation and keep it on terms that do not include our interests as workers. Finally, the present strategies for coping with economic decline/crisis are particularly detrimental to Black women workers, in the NHS and offices, and presumably in the areas not covered here.

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The heart of the race

Black women's lives in Britain*

Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe

CHAIN REACTIONS: BLACK WOMEN ORGANIZING

The Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent, or OWAAD as it came to be known, was undoubtedly one of the most decisive influences on Black women's politics in this country. As the first national network of its kind, it brought Black women together from all parts of Britain.

OWAAD's lifetime spanned only five years, from its foundation in 1978 to its demise in 1983. During this time, it captured the imagination of many Black women and succeeded in bringing a new women's dimension to the Black struggles of the 1980s. Its national conferences, held annually from 1979 to 1982, along with its day-schools, special project committees and its newsletter, FOWAAD, served as essential points of communication for Black women, presenting us with our first opportunity to meet as women on a national scale, to exchange ideas and lend each other mutual support.

Three hundred Black women attended the first OWAAD conference in March 1979, and its effects were to ripple through the community for several years to come. The variety of women who participated in terms of age, background and politics ensured that the mood would be conveyed back into our communities at every level.

Many women were inspired to go home and set about the task of forming local Black women's groups, some of which were to outlive OWAAD by several years.

Above all, we strove to develop an internal organizational structure which was non-hierarchical, enabling Black women to determine their own priorities and the level at which they would pitch their contribution. By devising a system of rotational representation, to take account of childcare demands and other commitments, it was possible for women to choose whether and when to participate in the overall running of the

*This chapter is a series of excerpts from Bryan, B., Dadzie, S., and Scafe, S. (1985) *The Heart of the Race - Black Women's Lives in Britain*, Virago Press, London, pp. 164-181.

organization. Although the system was by no means flawless, it represented a new and self-determined approach to political organization which remained unhampered by leaders or appointed spokeswomen.

The fact that we were active and involved was not, in itself, unprecedented. What was unprecedented was that Black women had begun to articulate demands *as an organized body*, with the assurance which could only come from a strong sense of self-knowledge and mutual solidarity:

Our group organizes on the basis of Afro-Asian unity, and although that principle is maintained, we don't deal with it by avoiding the problems this might present, but by having on-going discussions.

When we use the term 'Black', we use it as a political term. It doesn't describe skin colour, it defines our situation here in Britain. We're here as a result of British imperialism, and our continued oppression in Britain is the result of British racism.

Obviously we have to take into account our cultural differences, and that has affected the way we are able to organize . . . if we're involved in a Black feminist group and we take ourselves seriously, that means questioning and sometimes rejecting aspects of our culture which oppress us, and that includes marriage and the family. We don't actually take that position as a group, though. We accept that individual Black women have to work out that contradiction for themselves and as far as we're concerned, we're there to support them, not to tell them to get in line.

As the Black women's movement took shape and form, the relevance of feminism to our struggles became an increasingly contentious issue. OWAAD was built on the long-standing tradition among Black women of organizing together within our community. The basis of that organization, however, was not necessarily a feminist one, and some Black women have always rejected the term outright:

We're not feminists - we reject that label because we feel that it represents a white ideology. In our culture the term is associated with an ideology and practice which is anti-men. Our group is not anti-men at all. We have what I'd describe as a 'controlled' relationship with them. When we have study sessions on Black history and culture, men come along. Other meetings however are exclusively women's meetings. . . . We don't alienate men because they put down Black women, because we recognize that the source of that is white imperialist culture.

The belief that feminism is 'anti-men' and therefore divisive and counter-productive is not the only reason why Black women have traditionally organized outside the women's movement. The failure of white feminists seriously to address women's issues which are to do with race and class

has been a barrier which relatively few Black women have been prepared to cross:

I think if you're a Black woman, you've got to begin with racism. It's not a choice, it's a necessity. There are few Black women around now, who don't want to deal with that reality and prefer sitting around talking about their sexual preferences or concentrating on strictly women's issues like male violence. But the majority of Black women would see those kinds of things as 'luxury' issues. What's the point of taking on male violence if you haven't dealt with state violence? Or rape, when you can see Black people's bodies and lands being raped everyday by the system?

Despite such scepticism, not all Black women have chosen to reject feminism as a basis upon which to organize. Recognizing how sexism and reactionary male attitudes towards women have worked to keep us down, we have set about the task of redefining the term and claiming it for ourselves. This has meant developing a way of organizing which not only takes account of our race and our class, but also makes our struggles against women's oppression central to our practice.

White woman listen!

Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood*

Hazel V. Carby

The black women's critique of *history* has not only involved us in coming to terms with 'absences'; we have also been outraged by the ways in which it has made us visible, when it has chosen to see us. *History* has constructed our sexuality and our femininity as deviating from those qualities with which white women, as the prize objects of the Western world, have been endowed. We have also been defined in less than human terms.¹ We cannot hope to constitute ourselves in all our absences, or to rectify the ill-conceived presences that invade herstory from *history*, but we do wish to bear witness to our own herstories. The connections between these and the herstories of white women will be made and remade in struggle. Black women have come from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean and we cannot do justice to all their herstories in a single chapter. Neither can we represent the voices of all black women in Britain, our herstories are too numerous and too varied. What we will do is to offer ways in which the 'triple' oppression of gender, race and class can be understood, in their specificity, and also as they determine the lives of black women.

Much contemporary debate has posed the question of the relation between race and gender, in terms which attempt to parallel race and gender divisions. It can be argued that as processes, racism and sexism are similar. Ideologically for example, they both construct common sense through reference to 'natural' and 'biological' differences. It has also been argued that the categories of race and gender are both socially constructed and that, therefore, they have little internal coherence as concepts. Furthermore, it is possible to parallel racialized and gendered divisions in the sense that the possibilities of amelioration through legislation appear to be equally ineffectual in both cases. Michèle Barrett, however, has pointed out that it is not possible to argue for parallels because as soon as historical analysis is made, it becomes obvious that the institutions which have to be analysed are different, as are the forms of analysis needed.² We would

*This chapter is a series of excerpts from The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (eds) (1982) *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, Hutchinson, London, pp. 212-35.

agree that the construction of such parallels is fruitless and often proves to be little more than a mere academic exercise; but there are other reasons for our dismissal of these kinds of debate. The experience of black women does not enter the parameters of parallelism. The fact that black women are subject to the *simultaneous* oppression of patriarchy, class and 'race' is the prime reason for not employing parallels that render their position and experience not only marginal but also invisible.

We can point to no single source for our oppression. When white feminists emphasize patriarchy alone, we want to redefine the term and make it a more complex concept. Racism ensures that black men do not have the same relations to patriarchal/capitalist hierarchies as white men.

It is only in the writings by black feminists that we can find attempts to theorize the interconnection of class, gender and race as it occurs in our lives and it has only been in the autonomous organizations of black women that we have been able to express and act upon the experiences consequent upon these determinants. . . . Black feminists have been, and are still, demanding that the existence of racism must be acknowledged as a structuring feature of our relationships with white women. Both white feminist theory and practice have to recognize that white women stand in a power relation as oppressors of black women. This compromises any feminist theory and practice founded on the notion of simple equality.

Three concepts which are central to feminist theory become problematic in their application to black women's lives: 'the family', 'patriarchy' and 'reproduction'. When used they are placed in a context of the herstory of white (frequently middle-class) women and become contradictory when applied to the lives and experiences of black women. In a recent comprehensive survey of contemporary feminist theory, *Women's Oppression Today*, Michèle Barrett sees the contemporary family (effectively the family under capitalism) as the source of oppression of women.

We would not wish to deny that the family can be a source of oppression for us but we also wish to examine how the black family has functioned as a prime source of resistance to oppression. We need to recognize that during slavery, periods of colonialism and under the present authoritarian state, the black family has been a site of political and cultural resistance to racism. Furthermore, we cannot easily separate the two forms of oppression because racist theory and practice is frequently gender-specific. Ideologies of black female sexuality do not stem primarily from the black family. The way the gender of black women is constructed differs from constructions of white femininity because it is also subject to racism.

Black women are constantly challenging these ideologies in their day-to-day struggles. Asian girls in schools, for example, are fighting back to destroy the racist myth of their femininity. As Pratibha Parmar has pointed out, careers officers do not offer them the same interviews and job

opportunities as white girls. This is because they believe that Asian girls will be forced into marriage immediately after leaving school.

The use of the concept of 'dependency' is also a problem for black feminists. It has been argued that this concept provides the link between the 'material organization of the household, and the ideology of femininity'. How then can we account for situations in which black women may be heads of households, or where, because of an economic system which structures high black male unemployment, they are not financially dependent upon a black man? This condition exists in both colonial and metropolitan situations. Ideologies of black female domesticity and motherhood have been constructed, through their employment (or chattel position) as domestics and surrogate mothers to white families rather than in relation to their own families. West Indian women still migrate to the United States and Canada as domestics and in Britain are seen to be suitable as office cleaners, National Health Service domestics, etc. In colonial situations Asian women have frequently been forced into prostitution to sexually service the white male invaders, whether in the form of armies of occupation or employees and guests of multinational corporations. How then, in view of all this, can it be argued that black male dominance exists in the same forms as white male dominance? Systems of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, have systematically denied positions in the white male hierarchy to black men and have used specific forms of terror to oppress them.

Black family structures have been seen as pathological by the state and are in the process of being constructed as pathological within white feminist theory. Here, ironically, the Western nuclear family structure and related ideologies of 'romantic love' formed under capitalism, are seen as more 'progressive' than black family structures. An unquestioned common-sense racism constructs Asian girls and women as having absolutely no freedom, whereas English girls are thought to be in a more 'liberated' society and culture.

The media's 'horror stories' about Asian girls and arranged marriages bear very little relation to their experience. The 'feminist' version of this ideology presents Asian women as being in need of liberation, not in terms of their own herstory and needs, but *into* the 'progressive' social mores and customs of the metropolitan West.

Too often concepts of historical progress are invoked by the left and feminists alike, to create a sliding scale of 'civilized liberties'. When barbarous sexual practices are to be described the 'Third World' is placed on display and compared to the 'First World' which is seen as more 'enlightened' or 'progressive'.

For example, in an article comparing socialist societies, Maxine Molyneux falls straight into this trap of 'Third Worldism' as 'backwardness'.³ Molyneux implies that since 'Third World' women are outside of

capitalist relations of production, entering capitalist relations is, necessarily, an emancipating move. This view of imperialism will be addressed in more detail later in the chapter. At this point we wish to indicate that the use of such theories reinforces the view that when black women enter Britain they are moving into a more liberated or enlightened or emancipated society than the one from which they have come.

If we take patriarchy and apply it to various colonial situations it is equally unsatisfactory because it is unable to explain why black males have not enjoyed the benefits of white patriarchy. There are very obvious power structures in both colonial and slave social formations and they are predominantly patriarchal. However, the historically specific forms of racism force us to modify or alter the application of the term 'patriarchy' to black men. Black women have been dominated 'patriarchally' in different ways by men of different 'colours'.

In questioning the application of the concepts of 'the family' and 'patriarchy' we also need to problematize the use of the concept of 'reproduction'. In using this concept in relation to the domestic labour of black women we find that in spite of its apparent simplicity it must be dismantled. What does the concept of reproduction mean in a situation where black women have done domestic labour outside of their own homes in the servicing of white families? In this example they lie outside of the industrial wage relation but in a situation where they are providing for the reproduction of black labour in their own domestic sphere, simultaneously ensuring the reproduction of white labour power in the 'white' household. The concept, in fact, is unable to explain exactly what the relations are that need to be revealed. What needs to be understood is, first, precisely *how* the black woman's role in a rural, industrial or domestic labour force affects the construction of ideologies of black female sexuality; and second, how this role relates to the black woman's struggle for control over her own sexuality.

If we examine the recent history of women in post-war Britain we can see the ways in which the inclusion of black women creates problems for hasty generalization. In pointing to the contradiction between 'home-making as a career' and the campaign to recruit women into the labour force during post-war reconstruction, Elizabeth Wilson⁴ fails to perceive migration of black women to Britain as the solution to these contradictory needs.

Black women were recruited more heavily into some of these areas than others. Afro-Caribbean women, for example, were encouraged and chose to come to Britain precisely to work. Ideologically they were seen as 'naturally' suitable for the lowest paid, most menial jobs. Elizabeth Wilson goes on to explain that 'work and marriage were still understood as alternatives ... two kinds of women ... a wife and a mother or a

single career woman'.⁵ Yet black women bridged this division. They were viewed simultaneously as workers and as wives and mothers. Elizabeth Wilson stresses that the post-war debate over the entry of women into the labour force occurred within the parameters of the question of possible effects on family life. She argues that 'wives and mothers were granted entry into paid work only so long as this did not harm the family'. Yet women from Britain's reserve army of labour in the colonies were recruited into the labour force far beyond any such considerations. Rather than a concern to protect or preserve the black family in Britain, the state reproduced common-sense notions of its inherent pathology: black women were seen to fail as mothers precisely because of their position as workers.

One important struggle, rooted in these different ideological mechanisms, which determine racially differentiated representations of gender, has been the black woman's battle to gain control over her own sexuality in the face of racist experimentation with the contraceptive Depo-Provera and enforced sterilizations.⁶

It is not just our herstory before we came to Britain that has been ignored by white feminists, our experiences and struggles here have also been ignored. These struggles and experiences, because they have been structured by racism, have been different to those of white women. Black feminists decry the non-recognition of the specificities of black women's sexuality and femininity, both in the ways these are constructed and also as they are addressed through practices which oppress black women in a gender-specific but none the less racist way.

Black feminists in the US have complained of the ignorance, in the white women's movement, of black women's lives. In Britain too it is as if we don't exist. The accusation that racism in the women's movement acted so as to exclude the participation of black women, has led to an explosion of debate in the USA.

US black feminist criticism has been no more listened to than indigenous black feminist criticism. Yet, bell hooks's⁷ powerful critique has considerable relevance to British feminists. White women in the British WLM are extraordinarily reluctant to see themselves in the situation of being oppressors, as they feel that this will be at the expense of concentrating upon being oppressed. Consequently the involvement of British women in imperialism and colonialism is repressed and the benefits that they – as whites – gained from the oppression of black people ignored. Forms of imperialism are simply identified as aspects of an all embracing patriarchy rather than as sets of social relations in which white women hold positions of power by virtue of their 'race'.

The benefits of a white skin did not just apply to a handful of cotton, tea or sugar plantation mistresses; all women in Britain benefited – in varying degrees – from the economic exploitation of the colonies. The

pro-imperialist attitudes of many nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century feminists and suffragists have yet to be acknowledged for their racist implications. However, apart from this herstorical work, the exploration of contemporary racism within the white feminist movement in Britain has yet to begin.

Feminist theory in Britain is almost wholly Eurocentric and, when it is not ignoring the experience of black women 'at home', it is trundling 'Third World women' onto the stage only to perform as victims of 'barbarous', 'primitive' practices in 'barbarous', 'primitive' societies.

It should be noted that much feminist work suffers from the assumption that it is only through the development of a Western-style industrial capitalism and the resultant entry of women into waged labour that the potential for the liberation of women can increase. For example, foot-binding, clitoridectomy, female 'circumcision' and other forms of mutilation of the female body have been described as 'feudal residues', existing in economically 'backward' or 'underdeveloped' nations (i.e. not the industrialized West). Arranged marriages, polygamy and these forms of mutilation are linked in reductionist ways to a lack of technological development.

However, theories of 'feudal residues' or of 'traditionalism' cannot explain the appearance of female 'circumcision' and clitoridectomy in the United States at the same moment as the growth and expansion of industrial capital. Between the establishment of industrial capitalism and the transformation to monopoly capitalism, the United States, under the influence of English biological science, saw the control of medical practice shift from the hands of women into the hands of men. This is normally regarded as a 'progressive' technological advance, though this newly established medical science was founded on the control and manipulation of the female body. This was the period in which links were formed between hysteria and hysterectomy in the rationalization of the 'psychology of the ovary'.⁸

These operations are hardly rituals left over from a pre-capitalist mode of production. On the contrary, they have to be seen as part of the 'technological' advance in what is now commonly regarded as the most 'advanced' capitalist economy in the world. Both in the USA and in Britain, black women still have a 'role' – as in the use of Depo-Provera on them – in medical experimentation. Outside of the metropolises, black women are at the mercy of the multinational drug companies, whose quest for profit is second only to the cause of 'advancing' Western science and medical knowledge.

The herstory of black women is interwoven with that of white women but this does not mean that they are the same story. Nor do we need white feminists to write our herstory for us, we can and are doing that for ourselves. However, when they write their herstory and call it the story

of women but ignore our lives and deny their relation to us, that is the moment in which they are acting within the relations of racism and writing *history*.

CONSTRUCTING ALTERNATIVES

Concepts which allow for specificity, whilst at the same time providing cross-cultural reference points – not based in assumptions of inferiority – are urgently needed in feminist work. The work of Gayle Rubin⁹ and her use of discrete 'sex/gender systems' appears to provide such a potential, particularly in the possibility of applying the concept within as well as between societies.

This concept of sex/gender systems offers the opportunity to be historically and culturally specific but also points to the position of relative autonomy of the sexual realm. It enables the subordination of women to be seen as a 'product of the relationships by which sex and gender are organized and produced'. Thus, in order to account for the development of specific forms of sex/gender systems, reference must be made not only to the mode of production but also to the complex totality of specific social formations within which each system develops.

What are commonly referred to as 'arranged marriages' can, then, be viewed as the way in which a particular sex/gender system organizes the 'exchange of women'. Similarly, transformations of sex/gender systems brought about by colonial oppression, and the changes in kinship patterns which result from migration, must be assessed on their own terms, not just in comparative relation to other sex/gender systems. In this way patterns of subordination of women can be understood historically, rather than being dismissed as the inevitable product of pathological family structures.

At this point we can begin to make concrete the black feminist plea to white feminists to begin with our different herstories. Contact with white societies has not generally led to a more 'progressive' change in African and Asian sex/gender systems. Colonialism attempted to destroy kinship patterns that were not modelled on nuclear family structures, disrupting, in the process, female organizations that were based upon kinship systems which allowed more power and autonomy to women than those of the colonizing nation.

In concentrating solely upon the isolated position of white women in the Western nuclear family structure, feminist theory has necessarily neglected the very strong female support networks that exist in many black sex/gender systems. These have often been transformed by the march of technological 'progress' intended to relieve black women from aspects of their labour.

In contrast to feminist work that focuses upon the lack of technology and household mechanical aids in the lives of these women, Leghorn and Parker¹⁰ concentrate upon the aspects of labour that bring women together. It is important not to romanticize the existence of such female support networks but they do provide a startling contrast to the isolated position of women in the Euro-American nuclear family structure.

In Britain, strong female support networks continue in both West Indian and Asian sex/gender systems, though these are ignored by sociological studies of migrant black women. This is not to say that these systems remain unchanged with migration. New circumstances require adaptation and new survival strategies have to be found. However, the transformations that occur are not merely adaptive, neither is the black family destroyed in the process of change. Female networks mean that black women are key figures in the development of survival strategies, both in the past, through periods of slavery and colonialism, and now, facing a racist and authoritarian state.

Families do not simply accept the isolation, loss of status, and cultural devaluation involved in the migration. Networks are re-formed, if need be with non-kin or on the basis of an extended definition of kinship, by strong, active, and resourceful women. Cultures of resistance are not simple adaptive mechanisms; they embody important alternative ways of organizing production and reproduction and value systems critical of the oppressor. Recognition of the special position of families in these cultures and social structures can lead to new forms of struggle, new goals.¹¹

In arguing that feminism must take account of the lives, herstories and experiences of black women we are not advocating that teams of white feminists should descend upon Brixton, Southall, Bristol or Liverpool to take black women as objects of study in modes of resistance. We don't need that kind of intrusion on top of all the other information-gathering forces that the state has mobilized in the interest of 'race relations'. White women have been used against black women in this way before and feminists must learn from history. The WLM, however, does need to listen to the work of black feminists and to take account of autonomous organizations like OWAAD (Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent) who are helping to articulate the ways in which we are oppressed as black women.

Black women do not want to be grafted onto 'feminism' in a tokenistic manner as colourful diversions to 'real' problems. Feminism has to be transformed if it is to address us. Neither do we wish our words to be misused in generalities as if what each one of us utters represents the total experience of all black women . . .

In other words, of white feminists we must ask, what exactly do you mean when you say 'WE'??

NOTES

- 1 W. Jordan, *White Over Black*, London, Penguin, 1969, pp. 238, 495, 500.
- 2 My thanks to Michèle Barrett who, in a talk given at the Social Science Research Council's Unit on Ethnic Relations, helped to clarify many of these attempted parallels.
- 3 M. Molyneux 'Socialist Societies Old and New: Progress Towards Women's Emancipation?' in *Feminist Review*, no. 8, Summer, p. 3.
- 4 E. Wilson, *Only Halfway to Paradise: Women in Postwar Britain 1945-1968*, London, Tavistock, 1980.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 43-4.
- 6 OWAAD, *Fowaad*, no. 2, 1979.
- 7 b. hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, Boston, Mass., South End Press, 1981, p.138.
- 8 B. Erenreich and D. English, *For Her Own Good*, New York, Doubleday Anchor, 1979.
- 9 G. Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex' in R.R. Reiter (ed.) *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, New York, Monthly Review Press, p. 167.
- 10 L. Leghorn and K. Parker, *Women's Worth, Sexual Economics and the World of Women*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 44.
- 11 M. Davis Caufield, 'Cultures of Resistance' in *Socialist Revolution*, vol. 4, no. 2, October 1974, pp. 81, 84.

Challenging imperial feminism*

Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar

It is our aim in this article to critically examine some of the key theoretical concepts in white feminist literature, and discuss their relevance or otherwise for a discussion and development of Black feminist theory. However, our concern here is to show that white, mainstream feminist theory, be it from the socialist feminist or radical feminist perspective, does not speak to the experiences of Black women and where it attempts to do so it is often from a racist perspective and reasoning.

Our starting point is the oppressive nature of the women's movement in Britain both in terms of its practice and the theories which have sought to explain the nature of women's oppression and legitimize the political practices which have developed out of those analyses. In describing the women's movement as oppressive we refer to the experience of Black and working-class women of the movement and the inability of feminist theory to speak to their experience in any meaningful way.

Few white feminists in Britain and elsewhere have elevated the question of racism to the level of primacy, within their practical political activities or in their intellectual work. The women's movement has unquestioningly been premised on a celebration of 'sisterhood' with its implicit assumption that women qua women have a necessary basis for unity and solidarity; a sentiment reflected in academic feminist writing which is inevitably influenced by the women's movement and incorporates some of its assumptions.

While one tendency has been for Black women to have either remained invisible within feminist scholarship or to have been treated purely as women without any significance attached to our colour and race, another tendency has been the idealization and culturalism of anthropological works. Often we have appeared in cross-cultural studies which under the guise of feminist and progressive anthropology, renders us as 'subjects' for 'interesting' and 'exotic' comparison. For instance, the book *Women*

*This chapter is a series of excerpts from (1984) *Feminist Review*, Special issue, 'Many Voices, One Chant', no. 17, July 1984, pp. 3-19.

United Women Divided (Bujra and Caplan 1978) looked at women's solidarity in cross-cultural perspectives and 'discovered' that solidarity was no unitary concept. The authors defined feminist consciousness and then proceeded to judge other cultural situations to see if they are feminist or not. While acknowledging that there are problems about uncritically accepting women as a universal category, this is purely on the basis of differential relations in class and status hierarchies as well as factors such as age and kinship affiliation. There is no apology for, no awareness, even, of the contradictions of white feminists as anthropologists studying village women in India, Africa, China for evidence of feminist consciousness and female solidarity.

The failure of academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. Divide and conquer in our world must become define and empower.

Many white feminists' failure to acknowledge the differences between themselves and Black and Third World women has contributed to the predominantly Eurocentric and ethnocentric theories of women's oppression.

We now turn to look at three critical areas in which Black women's experience is very different from that of white women. White women have benefited fundamentally from the oppression of Black women and before any kind of collective action takes place it is necessary to reassess the basis on which we ally ourselves to the white feminist movement. The three areas we have chosen as illustrations of our thesis are the family, sexuality and the women's peace movement. Each of these areas, in very different ways, points to the 'imperial' nature of feminist thought and practice.

FAMILY

The socialist feminist view of the Black family in Britain relates strongly to the politics of the British left, and their perception of colonial, neo-colonial and imperialist relations. Within this framework the Black family is seen as a problem in terms of its ability to adapt to advanced capitalist life – it is seen as a force prohibiting 'development' – and this view has been informed by the broader political and social analysis of our countries of origin as backward, needing to emerge into the full force of capitalist expansion before overcoming their economic, social, political and cultural 'underdevelopment'.

Black women cannot just throw away their experiences of living in certain types of household organization; they want to use that experience to transform familial relationships. Stereotypes about the Black family have been used by the state to justify particular forms of oppression. The issue of fostering and adoption of Black kids is current: Black families are seen as being 'unfit' for fostering and adoption. Racist immigration

legislation has had the effect of separating family members, particularly of the Asian community, but no longer is that legislation made legitimate just by appeals to racist ideologies contained in notions of 'swamping'. Attempts have actually been made by some feminists to justify such legislative practices on the basis of protecting Asian girls from the 'horrors' of the arranged marriage system.

SEXUALITY

The struggle for independence and self-determination and against imperialism has meant that for Black and Third World women in Britain and internationally, sexuality as an issue has often taken a secondary role and at times has not been considered at all.

As we have increasingly grown confident in our feminism, some of us have begun to look at the area of sexuality in ways that are relevant to us as Black women. The absence of publicly overt debates on and around sexuality by Black women does not mean that such discussions have not been taking place.

Black women's continued challenges to the question of forced sterilization and the use of the contraceptive drug Depo Provera has meant that such campaigns as the National Abortion Campaign have been forced to reassess the relevance of their single issue focus for the majority of working-class Black women, and to change the orientation of their campaigns and actions.

It is worthwhile at this point to look back at history and highlight the fact that some of the unquestioned assumptions inherent in contemporary feminist demands have remained the same as those of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminists who in the main were pro-imperialist.

Women were being defined as the breeders of the race, bearing and rearing the next generation of soldiers and workers of the imperial race. Within this context developed a new definition of women's role and the pressures which led to the formation of an ideology of motherhood.

White feminists have attacked this for its oppressiveness to them but not on the grounds of race and anti-imperialism. Such a development of women as mothers duty bound to reproduce for the race went alongside the development of an imagery of them as vulnerable creatures who needed protection not only at home but also in the colonies.

There are historical counterparts of contemporary white male use of the image of vulnerable and defenceless white women being raped and mugged by Black men, images which are reinforced by racist ideologies of Black sexuality. Also in responding to the use of physical violence to control white women's sexuality, white feminists have singularly failed to see how physical violence to control the sexuality of Black men is a feature

of our history (e.g. lynching). This has implications for analyses and campaigning around sexual violence.

The racist ideology that Black and immigrant men are the chief perpetrators of violent crimes against women permeates not only the racist media fed regularly by police 'revelations' of 'racial' crime statistics, as in 1982, but also sections of the white women's liberation movement as illustrated by their actions and sometimes their non-action.

NUCLEAR POWER ON THE NORTH LONDON LINE

With the setting up of the Greenham Common Women's Peace camp in 1981, world attention has focused on the women's peace movement in Britain.

The women's peace movement is and continues to remain largely white and middle-class because yet again their actions and demands have excluded any understanding or sensitivity to Black and Third World women's situations.

Internationally, while Black and Third World women are fighting daily battles for survival, for food, land and water, western white women's cries of anguish for concern about preserving the standards of life for their children and preserving the planet for future generations sound hollow. Whose standards of life are they fighting to preserve? White, middle-class standards undoubtedly. Recently, Madhu Kishwar, an Indian feminist came to speak to the Women For Life on Earth and she stressed that what is needed is a realization that:

A movement for disarmament begins with a movement against the use of guns, the everyday weapons. Here (in Britain) you may have a fear of nuclear holocaust and death and destruction – in India millions die of water pollution – that is a more deadly weapon for women in India. I think it is very important that nuclear piles be made targets for political action, but we have to begin with confronting the guns and the dandas (sticks) that is disarmament for us.

(Kishwar 1984)

Many women at Greenham have begun to experience for the first time the brutality of the British police and some are slowly realizing why many Black women are not willing to deliberately expose themselves to it when it is an everyday occurrence for them, anyway. Black women are up against the state everyday of our lives, and the terror of a coercive police force, a highly trained military and the multifarious arms of the 'welfare' state are familiar ground to us.

The choice to demonstrate 'peacefully' or take non-direct action has never been available to us. When thousands of Black people marched against the National Front racists in Southall, in Lewisham, police were

ready to do battle with their truncheons, riot shields and horses. Self-defence in such instances has been the only option and the armoury available to us has consisted of bricks, dustbin lids, chilli bombs and petrol bombs. The question of deliberating over how best to fight our oppressor is not an abstract one for us nor for people involved in national liberation struggles around the world.

CONCLUSION

For us the way forward lies in defining a feminism which is significantly different to the dominant trends in the women's liberation movement. We have sought to define the boundaries of our sisterhood with white feminists and in so doing have been critical not only of their theories but also of their practice. True feminist theory and practice entails an understanding of imperialism and a critical engagement with challenging racism – elements which the current women's movement significantly lacks, but which are intrinsic to Black feminism. We are creating our own forms and content. As Black women we have to look at our history and at our experiences at the hands of a racist British state. We have to look at the crucial question of how we organize in order that we address ourselves to the totality of our oppression. For us there is no choice. We cannot simply prioritize one aspect of our oppression to the exclusion of others, as the realities of our day-to-day lives make it imperative for us to consider the simultaneous nature of our oppression and exploitation. Only a synthesis of class, race, gender and sexuality can lead us forward, as these form the matrix of Black women's lives.

Black feminism as a distinct body of theory and practice is in the process of development and debate both here in Britain and internationally and has begun to make a significant contribution to other movements of liberation, as well as challenging the oppression and exploitation of Black women.

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Transforming socialist feminism*

The challenge of racism

Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson

In their article 'Ethnocentrism and Socialist-Feminist Theory' in *Feminist Review* no. 20, Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh promise a re-examination of their own work in the light of criticisms raised by black women, and they do summarize some of the criticisms which have been made (Barrett and McIntosh, 1985: 41-2). They state that they endeavour to identify 'elements of ethnocentrism in our previous work, and [we] have pointed to important issues where the analysis we have presented has been seriously marred by the failure to consider ethnicity and racism' (1985: 44).

Although Michèle and Mary present an important and interesting contribution, it fails to open up the kind of area of discussion which is needed. This is because they lose sight of the central issue in the challenge which has been made – which is racism. By bringing another issue, namely ethnocentrism, into the foreground, they end up with their own previous conceptual categories intact.

The challenge of racism can often be avoided, particularly in quasi-academic discussions. In calling their article, 'Ethnocentrism and Socialist-Feminist Theory', Michèle and Mary suggest that ethnocentrism is the central problem for socialist-feminism. To us, the central problem for socialist-feminist theory is racism, of which ethnocentrism may be a consequence. As far as we can see, the role of the state and international capital in creating and perpetuating inequalities between black people and white people is lost through the use of a term such as ethnocentrism. Further, the word and indeed the concept seem to imply that the problem is one of cultural bias, supported by ignorance. It then follows that, if more sociological information is presented, the problem can be overcome. We are arguing, however, that to consider racism as the central issue involves a fundamental and radical *transformation* of socialist-feminism.

Despite their intentions, Michèle and Mary's method of re-examination denies the possibility of a radical transformation of their own previous

*Extract from (1986) *Feminist Review*, no. 23, June 1986, pp. 81-92.

analysis. The conceptual framework of *The Anti-Social Family* (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982) provides the fixed reference point from which modifications and additions are considered in the light of more information about black women. 'Woman' continues to be defined as a universal category and the oppressive and anti-social character of 'the family' is reasserted. Many feminists have been justifiably angered when (male) socialists have used this method in response to feminist critiques of socialist theories and practices. We do not dismiss the significance of the analysis of family/household forms and ideologies. However, we think that if we are to change the conceptual framework we have to begin by asking different questions. When we try to understand the condition of women we ask, what is it that oppresses women? What shapes the lives and identities of women? What shapes the lives and identities of black women? One way into the last question is through an examination of the political dynamic. If we consider what issues black people have been struggling over during the past five or ten years in Britain, we see that these struggles have revolved around challenging racism, specifically in relation to the state: over deportation and anti-deportation campaigns, and the police. From asking these questions and reviewing these struggles we are drawn to the need for fresh analysis of the relationship between the state and 'the family' and of how this differs for black and white people. This may lead us to an analysis, and some understanding, that the state may have different strategies for each group.

In resisting the pressure to review their conceptual framework/categories, Michèle and Mary let go of the possibility of developing a new and challenging discursive space. In reinstating 'the family' as a key concept and as a key site for the oppression of women, the only concession they appear to make to the charge of racism is in acknowledging culturally different household forms. Because they recast this charge of racism into ethnocentrism, they only identify cultural differences; 'race' drops out of focus and ethnicity comes to the fore and this is reflected in the title of their article. By treating racism as almost synonymous with ethnocentrism, they obscure, and thus avoid examining, how racism relates to black families.

The analysis of *The Anti-Social Family* cannot be stretched to cover the situation of black women in Britain. In many circumstances 'the family' is not socially privileged and protected in respect of black people; indeed, it is often under attack from the state and from individual racialists. In the context of racist oppression, black families are often not 'anti-social' in the sense used by Michèle and Mary but can become not only a base for solidarity but also for struggle against racism. Not only is there a basis for solidarity within black households, but that can also lead to very real material distinction between black women and white women. For instance, as we have noted elsewhere, black and white mothers may have completely different experiences and perceptions of the oppressive nature

of the state. The worries black mothers may have about children being late home from school can be as much to do with fears of police harassment as with fears of sexual assault. To carry this discussion further requires a fuller analysis of the relationship between 'the family' upheld by the state, in dominant ideology and social practice, and black families, within the overall context of a racist society.

The first point we would wish to make is that through arguing that an analysis of racism must be central to socialist-feminism, we do not claim to be presenting 'an answer'. We would, however, see that an analysis which we all, as socialist-feminists, need to develop is based on the idea of a racially structured, patriarchal capitalism (excuse the mouthful!). This leads us to examine how 'race', class and gender are structured in relation to one another. How do they combine with and/or cut across one another? How does racism divide gender identity and experience? How is gender experienced through racism? How is class shaped by gender and 'race'? To take these questions on does require a fundamental redrawing of the conceptual categories of socialist-feminism, and it may help us to develop a more adequate politics.

To have placed 'ethnic difference [as] necessarily ... as important a consideration as racism itself' (Barret and McIntosh, 1985: 28) is, at best, to forget the substantial critiques of the concepts of 'multi-culturalism' and 'ethnicity' and the ways in which these can be used to bolster and legitimate racism (e.g. Carby, 1979). Thus, Michèle and Mary's conclusion (1985: 44) can appear rather dishonest. They summarize their article but do not explicitly state that they have, in effect, *rejected* the criticisms of Hazel Carby and the editors of 'Many Voices, One Chant' (Amos *et al.* 1984). These critiques, amongst many others, have jettisoned ethnicity and ethnic disadvantage as analytical concepts, but Michèle and Mary do not take up and challenge these arguments; they reject them by ignoring them. As we have tried to show, one consequence of not understanding the centrality of racism and its challenge is that socialist-feminism becomes distanced from the political dynamic. The danger of this distancing can be seen in the language used: Michèle and Mary's use of 'disabling' ('[we have] to recognize this disability in ourselves' (1985: 24)) is inappropriate and offensive. Offensive because it ignores the movement of women with disabilities and the criticisms they have made about disabilist assumptions. Inappropriate because when feminists have ignored and refused to see or hear black women, this has not been due to a 'disability'. White academic women, especially, are not so powerless; they have some responsibility for the political and academic choices which they have made. In the instance of Michèle and Mary's piece, they have *chosen* to highlight ethnicity as an analytic concept rather than racism. Thus, they are not 'disabled', they are mistaken.

The importance of this is in relation to political action. Many feminists

employed as academics and teachers have been struggling within their educational institutions for greater equality of opportunities for women through challenging conditions of service, employment practices, gendered segregation in jobs and education, and so on. Rarely do these same women, if white, challenge the racism of such institutions with the same clarity and energy. Indeed, sometimes they see anti-racism as competing with anti-sexism for resources and support – for example, in recruitment of staff or students – thus operating on an assumption that anti-sexism concerns white women and anti-racism concerns black people.

The final point of our conclusion is to repeat that an assumption of automatic sisterhood from white women towards black women is ill-founded. Sisterhood can only be nurtured and developed when white women acknowledge the complex power relationships between white women and white men in relation to black women and black men. This needs to be done not only through acknowledgement, but also through re-examining feminist practices.

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Theories of gender and black families*

Ann Phoenix

While different processes for the acquisition of gender have been theorized, the structure that facilitates those processes (that is, the nuclear family) is . . . usually implicitly assumed. In a similar way the content that is to be processed is presumed to be obvious and commonly shared. However, societal divisions of race and class mean not only that the process of gender development is different for different groups of people, but also that gender is differently experienced by black people and white people, by working-class people and middle-class people.

Comparing differences between any two groups tends to polarize them and minimize their similarities. A secondary effect of this is that the two polarized groups appear internally homogeneous. However, there are important within-group differences between women and between men which have relevance for theories of gender development. The effects of racism and what this means for the class position of black people means that black children grow up knowing that black women and black men are in a qualitatively different position from white women and white men.

Since stereotypes usually have political implications and can provide a window on how different groups are perceived in a society, it is useful to consider how women and men are commonly stereotyped. Women are stereotyped as being the complementary opposite of men. They are supposed to be nurturant, passive, weak and non-competitive, while men are supposed to be aggressive, active, powerful and competitive – qualities which have frequently been used to justify male dominance of society. This is allegedly the content that girls and boys learn in the process of becoming gendered.

Black children's acquisition of gender identity is therefore qualitatively different from that of white children. Contact with the media and with other societal institutions means that black children cannot help but learn that black people and white people occupy different structural positions.

*Extract from Weiner, G. and Arnot, M. (eds) (1987) *Gender Under Scrutiny*, Hutchinson in assoc. with the OU, London, pp. 50–63.

They learn that their parents, and hence they, are excluded from positions of power within society. Black children simultaneously learn that black people are stereotyped in different ways to those in which white people are stereotyped. From this they learn that gender differences between black males and black females are qualitatively different from white female-male differences. Hence black children learn about racism as well as about gender differentiation.

However, in contrast with what they learn from the wider society, black children learn more positive gender models from their own social networks. Black women's participation in the labour market means that black children grow up accepting that mothers can also be employed. The fact that black children are more likely than white children to live with other relatives as well as their parent(s) means that they have a wider variety of people to interact with and with whom to develop close relationships.

While there are undoubtedly gender differences between black women and black men (see Hull *et al.*, 1982), the denial of power to black people that results from racism, and the fact that black women and black men occupy different gender positions from white women and white men, mean that the 'dominant/subordinate model' of sexual power relationships is not applicable to black people in the same way it is to white people (Lorde, 1984).

This does not mean that black people automatically reject the dominant ideological stereotypes of gender roles. Being subject to the same ideological forces as white people means that many black people accept dominant ideologies of gender (see Staples, 1985). This probably occurs for three reasons. First, because being relatively powerless makes people desire the positions, and so espouse the attitudes of those who are perceived to be more powerful (see Fanon, 1952; and Henriques *et al.*, 1984). Second, because being at variance with accepted societal practice means that individuals are subject to stigmatization. Avowed acceptance of dominant ideology may well be (in Goffman's (1963) terms) in compensation for the stigma that attaches to individuals who do not fit societal norms. An effort is thus made to reduce the social distance between stigmatized individuals and the rest of society, and hence to remove stigma. The third reason is because the pervasiveness of patriarchal structures means that individual subjectivity cannot help but be affected by them (Thompson, 1977).

It is important to recognize that individuals can simultaneously accept dominant gender stereotypes and actively resist racism because they disagree with the basis on which black people and white people come to occupy different societal positions. It is because black women and white women occupy different structural positions that many young black women actively resist the gender stereotypes that are constructed as 'normal' femininity. So, for example, the passivity and weakness that is

meant to elicit a powerful male's protection is redundant for black women (and white working-class women) whose fathers and male peers do not occupy positions of power. It is not surprising then that black female school students and white working-class school students are reported to be more boisterous at school than their white middle-class counterparts, and should be sceptical about the benefits of marriage for them (Sharpe, 1976; Bryan *et al.*, 1985; Lees, 1986).

Because racism operates structurally to maintain black people in a state of relative powerlessness in comparison with white people, most black people are working class. Black children and white working-class children therefore have some common experiences of what it means to be gendered – in particular learning what it means to be excluded from and different from mainstream society. To be a black child, to be a working-class child, or to be a white, working-class child is to occupy qualitatively different societal positions from white, middle-class children.

However, racism does not only differentiate between black women and white women. It also differentiates the working class in such a way that in a public context white working-class women are advantaged over black working-class women and over black working-class men. This is graphically illustrated in the following quote from Gail Lewis's description of relationships between her black father and white mother.

Another thing was my Mum's contempt for my Dad because of his humble demeanour in the face of white authority. Throughout their marriage it was agreed that Mum would deal with any authorities that had to be faced. . . . And since they both believed that by 'rights' the man should do this kind of stuff, then it only served to reinforce their shared belief in my Dad's inadequacy. Which led to him having to 'prove' himself by reasserting his dominance over her as a man. It was a situation that was fed by racism and their attempt at overcoming it.

(Lewis 1985, p. 232)

CONCLUSIONS

By ignoring issues of race and class, current theories of gender, and the research on which these are based, actually address the development of gender identity in the white middle classes. This means that black children (and white working-class children) are rendered invisible in the processes of normal gender development, but visible in pathological categories like 'father-absent' households.

Theories of gender will become ecologically valid (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) if they take account of household organizations other than the nuclear family, and the different experiences of people of different classes and colours. This must not, however, be an adding-on of an account of

black gender development to an unchanged account of white middle-class development, since this would still result in black people appearing pathological by comparison with the familiar account of white gender development.

Instead, theoretical accounts of gender development must centrally include structural factors like participation in the employment market, household structure, the operation of class and of racism. Gender development is therefore much more complex than current theories recognize. To concentrate solely on race would obscure the fact that shared class means that black working-class people and white working-class people have common exclusions from sources of societal power. However, the fact of racism means that there are experiences which are exclusive to black people. Structural relations and emotional relations need to be related together so that we gain insights into the psychic development of black children and white working-class children.

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Other kinds of dreams*

Pratibha Parmar

In 1984 a group of us who guest edited a special issue of *Feminist Review* entitled 'Many Voices, One Chant: Black Feminist Perspectives' stated in our editorial: 'We have attempted to provide a collection of perspectives which are in the process of continual development, refinement and growth. It [the issue] also indicated some of the diversities within Black feminism, a diversity from which we draw strength' (Amos *et al.*, 1984: 2).

Rereading that issue now, four years later, it seems difficult to fathom where the optimism and stridency which many of us had who were active in the black women's movement has gone, and why. Where are the diverse black feminist perspectives which we felt were in the process of growth? And where indeed is the movement itself? In moments of despair one wonders if those years were merely imagined.

There is no doubt about the dynamic effects that the black women's movement and black feminism has had, not only on the lives of black women but also on the Women's Liberation Movement and on other progressive movements. One of the challenges that black feminism posed was to the Eurocentric theories and practices of white feminism. The take-up of this challenge was very slow, indeed sometimes defensive and racist.

For me, while there are several problems with some of the critiques and responses that have emerged in recent years to this debate on the challenge of black feminism to white feminist theories, the most important point has been that at least and at last white socialist-feminists are beginning to rethink their positions. But it is not only white socialist-feminists who are rethinking.

Critical self-evaluation is a necessary prerequisite for *all of us* engaged in political struggle if there is to be any movement away from intransigent political positions to tentative new formulations. And such self-evaluation has already begun amongst some black women. In the preface to *Charting the Journey*, the editors ask:

For where are we at present? Instead of at least the semblance of a Black

*Extract from (1989) *Feminist Review*, Special issue, 'The Past Before Us: Twenty Years of Feminism', no. 31, Spring 1989, pp. 55-65.

women's movement, the futile 'politics' of victim and guilt tripping runs rampant and is used to justify actions that any self-respect would deem impossible. Or there is the tendency towards the collective adornment of moral and political superiority which is supposed to derive from the mere fact of being a Black woman. That this is so gives rise at least to a wistful sigh and more often to a scream from the far reaches of the soul - the only way to express one's disbelief and bewilderment that we could have got here from there.

(Grewal *et al.* 1988: 3)

What follows is a number of initial and exploratory thoughts which have emerged out of discussions with friends and fellow activists; discussions which have focused on how to move out of the political and theoretical paralysis that seems to prevail.

IDENTITY POLITICS

In these post-modernist times the question of identity has taken on colossal weight particularly for those of us who are post-colonial migrants inhabiting histories of diaspora. Being cast into the role of the Other, marginalized, discriminated against, and too often invisible, not only within everyday discourses of affirmation but also within the 'grand narratives' of European thought, black women in particular have fought to assert privately and publicly our sense of self: a self that is rooted in particular histories, cultures and languages. Black feminism has provided a space and a framework for the articulation of our diverse identities as black women from different ethnicities, classes and sexualities, even though at times that space had to be fought for and negotiated.

To assert an individual and collective identity as a black women has been a necessary historical process, both empowering and strengthening. To organize self-consciously as black women was and continues to be important; that form of organization is not arbitrary, but is based on a political analysis of our common economic, social and cultural oppressions. It is also based on an assumption of shared subjectivities, of the ways in which our experiences of the world 'out there' are shaped by common objective factors such as racism and sexual exploitation.

However, these assumptions have led to a political practice which employs a language of 'authentic subjective experience'. The implications of such a practice are multifold. It has given rise to a self-righteous assertion that if one inhabits a certain identity this gives one the legitimate and moral right to guilt trip others into particular ways of behaving. The women's movement in general has become dominated by such tendencies. There has been an emphasis on accumulating a collection of oppressed identities which in turn have given rise to a hierarchy of oppression. Such

scaling has not only been destructive, but divisive and immobilizing. Unwilling to work across all our differences, many women have retreated into ghettoized lifestyle 'politics' and find themselves unable to move beyond personal and individual experience.

Identity politics or a political practice which takes as its starting point only the personal and experiential modes of being has led to a closure which is both retrogressive and sometimes spine chilling. Take for instance, the example of an article that appeared in *Spare Rib* entitled 'Ten Points for White Women to Feel Guilty About'. The title alone made some of us cringe in despair and consternation. There is an inherent essentialism in such articulations which has become pervasive within the women's movement in general and has led to political fragmentation. Lynne Segal has convincingly critiqued the biologicistic and essentialist thinking which has begun to dominate much feminist analysis and practice in the 1980s and I would agree with her conclusion that 'Whereas the problem for women's liberation was once how to assert personal issues as political, the problem has now reversed to one where feminists need to argue that the political does not reduce to the personal' (Segal, 1987: 243).

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Feminism and the challenge of racism

Deviance or difference?*

Razia Aziz

THE PROBLEM OF DIFFERENCE

Black women bring to feminism lived realities of a racism that has marginalized and victim-ized them in the wider world. In their writings the bid for a feminism that 'sees' agency and struggle in black women's lives is explicit. This involves giving black women centre-stage, and refusing consignment to the role of exotic sideshow.

In attempting to shift the ground of feminist discourse, the adversary has at times appeared to be *white feminists* but is in fact, I would venture, white feminism – by which I expressly do *not* mean any feminism espoused by white feminists. I refer, rather, to any feminism which comes from a white perspective, *and* universalizes it.

I do not propose that white feminism is a clearly defined, coherent and internally consistent body of thought that feeds off conscious racist intentions. It is, rather, a way of seeing which, however inadvertent, leaves identifiable traces. It subsists through a failure to consider both the wider social and political context of power in which feminist utterances and actions take place, and the ability of feminism to influence that context.

Much of the black women's critique has highlighted the suppression within feminism of black/white *difference*. This can happen in one of two ways: the first is the denial of difference which is implicit in the assumption that all women have certain interests (rather than others) in common. On closer inspection, supposedly universal interests turn out to be those of a particular group of women. For instance, the pro-abortion feminist stance of the 1970s did not take into account the fact that many black women's reproductive struggles were around the right to keep and realize their fertility. For these women abortions, sterilizations and Depo Provera¹ were all-too-easily available, and were often administered without adequate consultation and/or under the shadow of poverty. These are not experiences restricted to black women, but it was the intervention of black

*Extract from Crowley, H. and Himmelweit, S. (eds) (1992) *Knowing Women: Feminism and Knowledge*, Polity Press, OU and Blackwell, Cambridge, pp. 291–305.

women which exposed the in fact narrow base of what seemed to some to be a universal demand, and transformed the campaign – which now focuses on choice and reproductive rights.

The second way in which it was claimed black/white difference has been suppressed in feminism is through its re-presentation as black deviance. The issue is that black women have been marginalized in feminist discourses, so that when they are depicted, it is as the exception. This problematizes the ways in which black women differ from white feminism's standard of woman, rather than the general applicability of this standard.

To address this problem requires the prior recognition that black women's historical position as peripheral to the grand workings of power in society has precluded them hiding behind a mask of generality: too often the exception, the special case, the puzzling, more-oppressed or exotic anomaly (even within feminism), they have been largely denied the voice of authority by which white women appear to speak on behalf of the female sex as a whole. Black women's particularity is transparent because of racism; any failure of white women to recognize *their* own particularity continues that racism.

THE INSEPARABILITY OF BLACK AND WHITE EXPERIENCE

In keeping with the politics of black resistance, an appropriation of imperialist history has been integral to black women's political practice. In this way they have forged an identity deeply imbued with temporal and spatial solidarities: with their political and familial predecessors on the one hand, and with Third World liberation movements on the other. It is not my view that black women have a monopoly on internationalism, or that black women – in the First World – have an identity of interests with Third World women. Nevertheless, black women have frequently been left 'holding' the argument for the simultaneous consideration of class, 'race', imperialism and gender. This is not because only they can see it, but because they live it in a particularly acute way.

White women are as much part of social relations as black women are. Therefore, they must be as knowledgeable about the interactions of these structures of domination, albeit from a very different position. Racism, however, relies on a perspective of deviance which obscures white particularity. This masks the fact that white-ness is every bit as implicated as black-ness in the workings of racism. Thus, whether or not they are aware of it, *racism affects white women constantly*.

In articulating black women's experiences of the British state, the labour market, their families and their sexualities, black feminist writers have

emphasized black/white difference (sometimes at the expense of other issues). However, it is important to note that theirs are not stories parallel to those of white women, but intricately intertwined with them. Black women cannot – even if they wanted to – speak of their struggles outside of the context of racism and resistance (if only because their colour is never ‘invisible’); white feminists, on the other hand, can speak – and many do – as if that context did not exist.

The point is not, I would argue, that white women experience the state (to take one example) as patriarchal, whereas black women experience the state as racist *and* patriarchal: if the state is racist, it is racist to everyone; it is merely more difficult for white people to see this, because part of the racism of the state is to treat and promote white-ness as the norm.

BEYOND THE DEBATE

I (wish to) make a point which is conceptually simple, but politically complex: namely that the energetic assertion of black/white (or any other) difference tends to create fixed and oppositional categories which can result in another version of the suppression of difference. Differences *within* categories – here black and white – are underplayed in order to establish it *between* them. Consequently, each category takes on a deceptive air of internal coherence, and similarities between women in the different categories are thus suppressed.²

These effects are not deliberate: in fact the writers I have drawn upon all note the heterogeneity of black women as a group. Having done so, however, they tend to leave this fact untheorized. The heterogeneity of *white* women as a group, on the other hand, goes almost unacknowledged. Here I concur with Martin and Mohanty’s observation that critics of white (or Western) feminism have concentrated on its inadequacy in dealing with black women, but have left virtually unexamined the implicit assumption that it is ‘adequate to the task of articulating the situation of white women’ (Martin and Mohanty, 1986, p. 193).

In order to unravel the issues raised by stressing black/white difference, I will focus first on how issues of *class* are raised or ignored in order to emphasize that difference. I will then offer some comments on the strategy of black-ness as it relates to the problem of *culture* and identity.

THE PROBLEM OF CLASS

There has been some acknowledgement by black women that white working-class women have also been marginalized in the feminist movement. Take, for instance, Amos and Parmar:

In describing the women's movement as oppressive we refer to the experiences of Black and working-class women of the movement and the inability of feminist theory to speak to their experience in any meaningful way.

(Amos and Parmar 1984, p. 4)

However, this observation drops out of their argument. They were not alone in failing to engage with white working-class (or Irish) women's struggles, and – crucially – *how the existence of these struggles affects black/white difference and potential black/white solidarity*. Class often disappears in the desire to make a point against white feminism; for instance when Carby states that, 'Black people . . . have a solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men' (1982, p. 213), she is clearly not thinking of white working-class struggles such as the 1984–5 miners' strike.

It is of course not only class, but also ethnic, religious and even imperialist differences among white women that are implicitly denied here. In the attempt to deliver a jolt to white feminist complacency, certain issues of political significance are neglected, with the effect of homogenizing white women. The significance of such omissions is that they de-emphasize the oppression of *white* women by other white women, leaving black women *apparently* the sole aspirants to that dubious accolade.

A different problem arises when we consider the *self-preservation* of black women. Here class has been used selectively in a way that seems to deny the diversity of black women. The most common manifestation of this is the majoritarian approach: since *most* black people are working class, it is okay to behave as if they *all* are. I am not attacking analyses of the exploitation of black people and the role of capitalism in producing it, only noting a tendency to *class-ify* black people – a social group that displays class diversity *and* mobility.

This tendency inadvertently supports the unexamined position demonstrated in the following quotes:

All black people are subordinated by racial oppression, women are subordinated by sexual domination, and *black women are subordinated by both as well as class*.

(Foster-Carter 1987, p. 46; *emphasis added*)

Black women are subjected to the *simultaneous* oppression of patriarchy, class and 'race'.

(Carby 1982, p. 213)

The effect of this is to represent black women as *homogeneously oppressed in almost every politically significant way*. In bringing this argument, I could (as a black middle-class woman) be accused of special pleading; which is

precisely my point: unless black identity is class identity, black middle-class people cannot be considered a 'special', or deviant, case.

Black people are an extremely heterogeneous group, and racism does not affect them all in the same ways. Some of us – thanks to factors such as a university education – manage to publish articles and speak, in spite, and because,³ of racism, with the voice of authority afforded by class privilege! Many black struggles have focused on the issue of survival with dignity in the face of violence, poverty and humiliation, but black identity is not built on that alone.

THE PROBLEM OF CULTURE AND IDENTITY

The tendency to homogenize the oppression of black people comes from an understandable desire to find common ground and to resist the power of racism to divide black people from one another. However, it remains the case that perhaps more than half the people who may be labelled 'black' do not identify as such: I refer, of course, to the majority of British people of South Asian descent.

In spite of the criticisms of the 'ethnicity' approach there is a real political and experiential issue to be answered which is not just about divisive strategies of racism but about actual historical differences in the nature of colonialism, imperialism, racism and representation – and how these are appropriated.

The growth of anti-Muslim racism and the Islamization of Muslim communities in Britain during and since the Rushdie Affair is only one particularly acute example of why cultural identity matters. This example is of interest to all black women because of the profound consequences for Muslim women (many of whom identify with Islam) of the move towards fundamentalism (which is, of course, not confined to Muslim communities). The strategy of underplaying inter-black difference has never been equal to this challenge of *subjectivity*: at a time like this, it can appear at best politically naive, and at worst irresponsible.

Any line of argument chosen to emphasize black/white difference will tend to deny the complexity of both black and white experience. This may be unavoidable, but unless it is explicitly acknowledged a racial essentialism can emerge through the back door of fixed and oppositional identities. If alliances are seriously sought, the strategy of stressing one difference is limited. The dilemma is clear, even if its solution is not: in order for difference to be taken seriously it has to be established in debate and action; but it is important to take a broad view of the political consequences of this process, otherwise there is a risk of again detaching difference from history.

The issue of identity is one which best crystallizes this dilemma. Rooted as it is in complex layers of struggles and contexts, identity is not neat and

coherent, but fluid and fragmented. Yet attempts to assert it seem to undermine potential solidarities between specific groups of women. In the final section, I address the question of identity more directly. I ask what post-modernist thinking can offer feminists seeking to progress on the issues raised by racism. In doing so, I attempt to locate a space in which a feminism of difference might take root.

LOCATING A FEMINISM OF DIFFERENCE

Recent years have seen the demise of grand (or modernist) theories; namely those which claim to establish a *fundamental determinant* of history (such as class or patriarchy). This demise is very closely related to the inability of such theories to respond to the complexities of difference and power. Socialist-feminists have attempted to juggle the grand structures of 'race', class and gender without giving one of them overall primacy. This strategy has not, however, been totally successful. It has become increasingly apparent that the attempt to combine (and so 'democratize') grand theories of 'race', class and gender may be unworkable. The endeavour tends to produce and multiply unwieldy and static categories without much analytical power (such as 'the white, middle-class male') as the list of oppressions becomes as long as the range of political struggles is multitudinous.

This 'democratization' of oppressions can be seen in retrospect as an attempt to push grand theory to its limits. It was accompanied by the growth of a phenomenon often labelled 'identity politics'. Oppressions tended to be increasingly regarded as 'relative', with attached identities that tended to be elevated above criticism. This can lead to an inward-looking identity politics where oppressions are added and subtracted. The capacity to analyse the *interrelations* between identities and social relations, and to establish political priorities, is thereby seriously weakened.

Identity politics ceases to be progressive when it sees the assertion of identity *as an end in itself*. Jenny Bourne (1983) urges us to ask what identity *does* in relation to the politics of resistance. Does identity politics promote or does it divert resistance, providing a sanctuary for people who do not want to acknowledge that they are oppressors? Bourne laments the analytical and political loss of privilege of the *material* (particularly the economic) as a determining factor separate from and somehow more real than language, culture and representation. Yet this dethroning need not take the ahistorical route Bourne criticizes. The view that language is constitutive of reality can, instead, open the field for historically aware analyses of the relationship between, for example, 'race', class and culture.

A focus on representation as a social *act* allows us to understand the ways in which the historical, the biological and the material are given a reality and meaning through language. It offers us a more complex

conception of power as exercised in all manner of social interactions. Crucially, it allows us to see competing discourses – for instance those of dominant racism, of ethnicity and of black resistance – as *intrinsic* to the exercise of power in society.

This paradigmatic shift is rightly labelled *post-modernist* as it is a response to – and an attempt to move beyond – the weaknesses of grand theory. At its heart is an entirely different treatment of *subjectivity* – or the way in which people live and understand their selves and identities.

Post-modernism is *deconstructive*: it sees subjectivity as a *product* of power rather than its author; and agency as power's way of acting through the individual. Power, in this understanding, is exercised in historically specific discourses (or ideologies) and practices: in contrast to the modernist conception, it is not unitary and zero-sum, but diffuse, constantly changing and plural. Post-modernism is therefore antithetical to essentialism of any kind – racial, sexual or human.⁴ It proposes that the selves we think are fixed and unitary are actually unstable, fragmented and contradictory. It can thus potentially help us look at changes and tensions (such as that of oppressor/oppressed) in who we understand ourselves as being.

Such a perspective can save identity from 'mummifying' by challenging us self-consciously to deconstruct our identities. This act of deconstruction is *political*, as it exposes the intricate operations of power that constitute subjectivity. Thus the particular deconstruction of the identity 'woman' that black women have achieved can be seen as exposing the link between racism at large and its subjective articulation. Nor is black identity somehow privileged (as I have tried to show): the cost of a 'home' in any identity is the exercise of a power to include the chosen and exclude the Other.

I may appear at this point to be espousing contradictory positions – am I *for* or *against* the assertion of identity? – in response to which I simply restate the question: 'What is identity for?'

In providing us with self-presentations of black women as subjects of history, black women have established their identity as an influential political fact. An anti-humanist insistence on always *de*-constructing subjectivity ignores political context and the importance of identity in resistance. The assertion of identity is a process people can relate to because it reclaims agency and makes them feel powerful. The importance of this cannot be underestimated. Furthermore, any focus on language and subjectivity which divorces them from material forces (such as the current crisis and restructuring of capitalism) also divorces theory from some of the things that affect people most severely.

Post-modernism does not immunize us from the responsibility to locate ourselves relative to the political movements of our time: as a discourse, it is part of – and is implicated in – the very power relations in society that

we analyse and aim to change. If a feminism of difference is to compete with reactionary forces for the spaces caused by political schisms, it needs to incorporate *both* the deconstruction of subjectivity *and* the political necessity of asserting identity. Additionally, its recognition of the fact that language and culture constitute reality needs to coexist with a recognition of the unmitigated realities of violence, economic exploitation and poverty. For a feminism of difference, these questions need to be answered in relation to the imperatives of each historical moment. This requires a degree of self-consciousness and responsibility of thought, utterance and action from our oppressed and oppressor selves alike, which is nowhere near prevalent as yet. But the potential for alliance between and among black and white women depends upon it.

NOTES

- 1 A long-acting, injectable contraceptive banned in the United States because of disturbing side-effects.
- 2 See Phoenix (1988) for a good, short study which challenges this tendency.
- 3 By this I mean that being black made it far more likely that I would be asked to write this kind of article.
- 4 In other words it is anti-humanist, rejecting the idea of an essential humanness shared by all human individuals.

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Defining our space

The new and original chapters gathered together in this section demonstrate that while black British feminism now in the late 1990s is still concerned with the specific task of challenging cultural imperialism in its many forms (including white feminism), black feminists have also had to shift their focus to a new project – that of interrogating intellectual possibilities. Questioning the postmodern preoccupation with 'difference', identity, subjectivity and essentialism, black feminist scholars in this section explore issues as diverse as 'mixed race' identity, lone motherhood, popular culture and media representations. They challenge theories of racism and nationalism, re-think definitions of blackness and re-define black female sexuality. Revealing their world through the oral traditions of story telling, life histories and autobiography, and reworking sociological and psychological theory, black British feminists demonstrate that they are now not only engaged in the process of claiming a space within their disciplines, but also exploring the power of their diversity and difference. Examining the critical creativity of the 'marginal' space they occupy, black British feminism, though positioned 'on the margins', can no longer be considered marginal scholarship.

Raregrooves and raregroovers

A matter of taste, difference and identity

Bibi Bakare-Yusuf

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Britain, black women¹ have access to a wide range of black and non-black expressive cultural practices that they can and do participate in. However, there is a tendency for the cultural practices of one particular black national group to appear as the essence of all black cultural practice. The patterns of migration and the timing of various waves of immigration into Britain have resulted in a hegemony of Caribbean culture in general, and Jamaican culture in particular. It is the under-class and working-class Jamaican cultural practices which are called upon to speak for and represent the cultural taste of all Britain's blacks. For example, Rastafarianism, blues parties, reggae and Ragga music, shebeens, the use of ganja, etc., have become synonymous with black everyday life and expressive cultures. This is also the case in both black and white youth cultural practices, 'yoof'-media discourse, and also in cultural studies.

Constructing a notion of a collective black community as though untouched by difference or internal contradiction has the effect of homogenizing the expressive cultures of the various black groups in Britain. This kind of homogenizing reflects the power of racism on the one hand, and on the other, a refusal by white mainstream culture to come to terms with difference among black settlers in Britain, who may have originated from Africa, Asia or the Caribbean. Stuart Hall has argued that because the political and the cultural struggle of black Britons has constituted an attempt to stave off invisibility in the white mainstream discourse, this has resulted in the construction of a singular, unified black community (Hall 1992). Difference within black communities, however, almost always threatens to disrupt any effort to construct a notion of 'the black community' or a uniformed 'black experience'. These differences are important and refuse to be contained by what Hortense Spillers (1987) has referred to as 'the ruling episteme' that tries to contain all difference. Baldwin (1985), Gilroy (1987), Bhabha (1984) and, from a feminist perspective bell hooks

(Childers and hooks 1990), have pointed out that ignoring difference among black people has had the disastrous effect of disregarding the different cultures, histories, customs, gender, sexual practices and the economic reality that operates in the formation of diasporic experience and post-colonial 'identity'.

The invocation of a unified experience may serve the purpose of providing black communities with an 'organising category of a new politics of resistance' (Hall 1992: 252). This is especially the case for a group who have experienced the violence of mainstream exclusionary practices. Appeal to a common experience is often invoked as a kind of harmonious entity that will liberate and offer protection from 'racial capitalism' (Hill Collins 1990; Benhabib 1986). Iris Marion Young has argued that the appeal of communitarian ideals in feminist politics and in social relations generates exclusions which helps reproduce homogeneity (1990: 301). I would suggest therefore that once the aims of coming together have been achieved, any notion of communitarian ideals or shared experiences should be abandoned and new alliances should be formed. Failure to do so only serves to show our own complicity in a racist discourse which tries to lock black communities in the fixity of its own construction. It also obscures the way appeals to communitarian ideals or shared experiences can potentially oppress and exclude the very same people it seeks to liberate.

Over-emphasis on black commonalities, at least in the political and to an extent, cultural fields, neglects intra-racial differences which constitute the complex nature of post-colonial black British experience. Points of connection, disconnection, cross-connections among black people get subsumed under the limited code of 'race', which impedes critical reflection. Reasons for this are touched upon by Audre Lorde who observed that, 'within Black communities where racism is a living reality, differences among us often seem dangerous and suspect. The need for unity is often misnamed for homogeneity' (1984: 119).

This homogenizing tendency to perceive the diversity of a heterogeneous collective sets in place strategies which police deviation. Black women who find themselves deviating from the norm impose measures of auto-correction by adopting habits, linguistic patterns, style, attitude, taste and aspirations of the dominant black culture to the neglect of their own culture and social origins. An example of this would be second generation Africans who wear dreadlocks² and listen to Reggae, and also those who adopt Jamaican patois. Alternatively, black women might reject the norm and select from the full range of black expressive cultures. These rich wells of black cultural expression affirm and validate their own experience of being black and female in Britain. I am in no way positing a kind of ethnic or cultural exclusivity; the expressive culture of the black diaspora, as Gilroy has usefully shown, has been one of borrowing and cultural inter-mixture (Gilroy 1987). On the contrary, I am inviting us to

recognize that Britain's blacks are not only from the Caribbean, but from Africa and Asia. As Hall points out:

What is at issue is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category 'black'; that is, the recognition that 'black' is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantee in Nature.

(Hall 1992: 254)

This chapter then is a tentative exploration into the notion of taste, in order to understand the way black women in Britain struggle to articulate the plurality of their identities, cultural ethnicity, cultural capital and experience, against the backdrop of some 'essentializing past', which attempts to homogenize the (re)presentation and experience of the black (female) subject. I do this by examining how their identity is expressed through the choices they make in the pursuit of pleasure and/or leisure. This will be placed within the context of the 'raregroove' scene in London in the mid-1980s which attracted specific groups of black and white youth. The popularity of raregroove music and raregroove dance space, I will argue, is important to the theorization of youth subcultures and the rethinking of black identity. Questions of race, gender, education, cultural ethnicity, region and economic capital as aspects of black identity – that are often elided in mainstream (black and white) discourse – are reflected in the raregroove scene. It problematizes the idea (perhaps more appropriately the 'ideal') of an unworked theory of 'the black community' by attending to diversity and internal contradictions; and simultaneously it attempts to problematize the notion of an homogeneous 'authentic' black female experience.

RAREGROOVE AS A SUBCULTURE

Although the raregroove scene is primarily dominated by black men and white women, I am interested in the ways in which black women who are visibly present use this 'anti-aesthetic cult' (Gilroy 1993a: 40) to re-draw their characteristic positionings. This is a novel development because the shared racial and cultural values which usually inform the theoretical construction of black female identity are displaced by diversity. Furthermore, the presence of black women in the raregroove subculture is a challenge to their exclusion from writing and research on youth subculture.

Much of the work on youth subcultures which developed in the early days of CCCS (1982) had very little to say about the activities of women in general and black women in particular. In her early critique of subcultural theory, Angela McRobbie (1991) bemoans the marginalization

of young woman from subcultural theory. The absence of women, McRobbie argues, has to do with the narrow preoccupation of the theorists involved. Until very recently subcultural theory has been concerned with the activities of working-class white male youth; especially when they showed signs of resistance from official culture (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979; Willis 1978). In general subcultural theory exhibited a romanticized reverence for youth culture as expressed in street culture, as opposed to the night-club culture, and made a distinction between youth culture and consumer culture. Because it upheld the concept of youth culture as being totally autonomous and opposed to the vagaries of capitalist seduction, youth cultures were viewed as authentic, capable of exerting changes in the social structure from below.

Recent works on youth cultures have shown that far from being distinct, consumer and youth culture have always 'merged, involved in an ongoing relationship' (McRobbie 1994: 156). The narrow preoccupation of subcultural work with the activities of white working-class boys necessarily excluded the activities of women in general and black women in particular because they do not fit so neatly into an analysis which fundamentally draws on a class analysis (Mirza 1992). More recent critiques suggest that youth cultures are an effect of various factors which do not solely rely on class antagonism. We can now explore the way class, gender, sexual and racial meanings affect and inform the performance of youth cultures. To this end I will attempt to analyse the activity of black women in one youthful arena – raregroove – by locating their activities within the context of the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Donna Haraway.

The raregroove scene developed in London in the early 1980s at warehouse parties and on pirate soul radio stations. DJs from pirate radio stations pursued the Pandora's box of the past, revitalizing forgotten and unknown soul tracks as a reaction to the commercialization and incorporation of black expressive music into a bland 'format' – such as pop soul – which is served up for the white mainstream. Raregroove music then, is an eclectic mix of black musical genres which 'placed a special premium on politically articulate American dance-funk recordings from the Black Power period' (Gilroy 1993a: 40). There are several defining characteristics of 'raregroove' as a musical aesthetic: funk and early rap, which reflected urban experiences, issues and black consciousness with its funky, chunky, bassy and dance vibe. Most importantly, 'raregroove' according to Judge Jules 'is a testimony to the power of the DJs' (Jules 1986: 6). Songs like Lyn Collins' 'Think', Black Bird's 'Rock Creek Park', Hank Ballard's 'How You Gonna Get Respect? You Haven't Cut Your Process Yet', Maceo and the Macks' 'Cross the Track' and The Equals' 'Funky Like a Train', together with tracks by The JB's, James Brown and early Roy Ayers are the quintessential anthems of raregroove. The 'conscious rap' prior to 1987 – such as NWA's 'Express Yourself', Public Enemy's 'Bring the Noise' or 'Rebel Without a

Pause', and Eric B and Rakim's hip hop rendition of Bobby Bryd's 'I Know You Got Soul' – are some of the few contemporary tracks that were popular in London's black night clubs in the mid- to late 1980s.

With this rediscovery, DJs brought together in their warehouse parties 'groups that hadn't previously been under one roof together: yardies, trendies, yuppies, punks, sloanes, soul boys and girls' (Jules 1986: 6). As the warehouse faded due to over-zealous police tactics, the scene became fragmented, re-emerging in West End night clubs. The social mixture that had existed within the context of the warehouse parties became more diffused. Now the sloanes, yuppies, trendies and soul boys and soul girls that remained made connections with each other, and with a much maligned era, expressing their dissatisfaction with mainstream culture through their music and fashion.

The predominately male DJs expressed their dissatisfaction with the musical taste of mainstream culture through their control over the music deck. Women voiced their dissatisfaction by speaking through the body, especially as expressed in the arena of dance and fashion. Fashion was used to express their discontent and total indifference to the conformity and uniformity of the dominant culture and the safeness of 1980s mix 'n' match fashion. They turned their attention back to the 1970s fashion with its tacky masquerade of provocative hot pants brazenly worn with crocodile skin knee-high platform boots, garishly coloured turtle neck sweaters, yellow halter tops, mohair sweatshirts and flares, all paraded in a carnivalesque performance of grotesquerie. The 1980s revitalization of this fashion moment recovered the dissident spirit of the 70s. It also introduced that motif of 1980s youth, the flagrant display of youthful flesh in coquettishly ripped Levi 501s. This fashion bricolage represents the way these women have read society.

Night clubs such as Carwash, Raw at the YMCA on Tottenham Court Road, Babylon at Heaven, Dance Wicked under the Arches, Soul 2 Soul at the Africa Centre and Delirium at The Astoria served as outlets to express allegiance to 1970s music and fashion motifs. They paid homage to the Black Power and Civil Rights movements which gave rise to much of the music we now call raregroove (Gilroy 1987; Brown 1994). Past associations, however, were severed so as to express and encapsulate the cultural and racial mix of these integrated London clubs and parties in the 1980s. The nostalgia for this era is imbued with an authenticity which is absent compared to the ephemerality of 1980s music and style.

RAREGROOVE AS A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL EXPRESSION

When these women's activities are placed within the context of Pierre Bourdieu's work on the 'judgement of taste' it illuminates that process

which he terms distinction (Bourdieu 1992). It allows us to understand how the articulation of similarity and difference among raregroovers and non-raregroovers is negotiated. According to Bourdieu, cultural preferences such as the choice of clothing, leisure activities, food, entertainment and all matters of taste are, 'the production of upbringing and education' (ibid.: 1).

The legitimacy we impart to our own aesthetic choices are bound up in dominant regimes of cultural representation. These aesthetic choices and cultural performances, he argues, are invariably social. For Bourdieu, the aesthetic and cultural choices being made by people function to indicate their social position in a field composed of different classes. The making of these choices is the process by which the field of difference is constituted. The process of distinction Bourdieu proposes, has the effect of:

being the product of the conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence, it unites all those who are the product of similar conditions of existence while distinguishing them from all others.

(ibid.: 56)

If distinction is a process by which a class of people unite and separate, then the aesthetic choices people make, 'are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference' (ibid.: 56). For black female raregroovers steeped in the 'conditionings' of a black community with its own internal contradictions and differences, black women raregroovers' choice of a particular leisure activity which is not normally considered characteristic is an attempt to make a separation from the lived reality of a shared history of white domination. Not only is this act a separation from white expectation, but it is also an attempt to foreground their material existence in a way which separates them from other black women. Therefore, the invention and enactment of a black expressive culture – such as the raregroove scene – is an occasion wherein they can position themselves in a social world that is not predicated solely on the expectation of racial homogeneity, but which acknowledges other factors which affect black people in Britain such as education, parental nationality, career aspirations, regional upbringing, family history of migration, etc. Matters of taste, such as in music, the arts, fashion, furniture, even friends, are shaped by the social environment. As Bourdieu explains, 'One would have to analyse fully the social uses, legitimate or illegitimate, to which each of the arts, genres, works or institutions considered lends itself' (ibid.: 18). Furthermore Bourdieu contends that objects which serve the social purpose of distinction the most, are those considered legitimate as works worthy of veneration, or those about to be legitimized, such as jazz, photography and cinema. These matters of taste, 'enable the production of distinctions ad infinitum by playing on divisions and sub-divisions into genres periods,

styles, authors etc.' (ibid.: 16). Thus, distinction becomes a tool for the basis of social judgements.

An understanding of raregroove music, dance and lifestyle, developed within this paradigm of consumer choice, provides an entry into this musical pseudo-genre. This permits us to address the multiplicity and diversity of black women's positioning within discourses of race, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, region and leisure. It also enables us to recognize the different ways black women negotiate, construct and deconstruct their parental culture, other black cultures, and dominant white mainstream culture. Because black women are variously positioned within regimes of black and white discourses, the raregroove scene is a liberatory space used for the re-articulation of an individual self; which becomes one identity in a range of social groups which now constitute British post-colonial nationality and experience.

In this context then, the participation of black women in the raregroove scene can be seen as a subversive response to a totalizing definition of black female identity. In this definition, black women are always presented as one homogeneous mass perpetually acted upon by a coercive power in which they have no way of 'talking back'. But what we see in their participation in the raregroove scene is an attempt to challenge this totalizing definition through their musical taste and its visual corollary in dress and life-style. 'Nothing more clearly affirms one's "class", nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music,' writes Bourdieu (1992: 19).

For Bourdieu, music classifies one's class position because music, in the bourgeois world, is perceived to be the most spiritual of the arts and thus a love of music is seen as a guarantee of spirituality. This is so because

Music is bound up with 'interiority' ('inner music') of the deepest sort ... [and] for a bourgeois world which conceives its relation to the populace in terms of the relationship to the body, 'insensitivity to music' doubtless represents a particularly unavowable form of materialist coarseness.

(ibid.: 19)

This dialectic between the coarse and the refined is precisely what the raregroove DJs are responding to. This is reflected in their strategy of recovery, retrieval and repackaging of music in which the political spirit of the various moments of black struggle through the 1960s and 1970s are reflected.

A significant number of songs subjected to the labelling effort of DJs were previously unreleased B-sides or had failed to gain acceptance when they were first released in the US. DJs on pirate radios sought to give this music a new lease of life. The rarity of some of these records accord them a legitimate aesthetic appreciation which was absent in their original

formulation. Bourdieu explained that the social use that is made of a product is part of the process of making distinction:

Nothing is more distinctive, more distinguished, than the capacity to confer aesthetic status on objects that are banal or even 'common' (because the 'common' people make them their own, especially for aesthetic purposes), or the ability to apply the principles of a 'pure' aesthetic to the most everyday choices of everyday life.

(ibid.: 5)

For example, Tom Brown's 'Funkin' for Jamaica' was an ordinary 'common' soul track, it was undifferentiated from other soul tracks of the period, readily available from any car-boot sale for about 50 pence. However, once subjected to the 'labelling effect' of DJs like Norman Jay ('Godfather of raregroove'), the music ceased to be 'common' and accessible. The value of the music is radically altered in relation to 'the social marks attached to them at any given moment' (ibid.: 86). Music labelled as such is infused with a 'symbolic capital' not accorded to more popular forms of black music. A hierarchy of taste is immediately constructed in the process of distinction-making. This process Bourdieu terms 'the principle of hierarchization' (1993).

Because raregroove is a reaction against a popularized aesthetic, music included under the term is inflected with a 'symbolic capital' that only those with relevant 'cultural accumulation' and a certain image of 'cultural competence' are deemed able to decode in the way raregroove DJs have encoded it. For example, whereas a song may have originally been a celebration of black self-love and pride, black power, autonomy and unity, in the new context of raregroove it was appropriated, becoming an expression of individual autonomy and representing a utopian ideal. Expressed in collective pleasure, unrestricted by fixed racial boundaries, gender codes, or ideals of cultural homogeneity, the music changes meanings. This suggests that the consumption of music and the production of musical meaning are deeply interdependent. Consumers construct new meaning out of existing meaning to express their own specific social, historical and economic position.

Raregroove music then, exhibits instances when cultural competence and social positioning are used profitably in the market-place. This reinforces the cultural product, and induces new investments, as well as reassuring the legitimacy of the cultural product (Bourdieu 1992). Raised from its semi-existence, music labelled as raregroove acquires a symbolic meaning which reinstates and redefines it as, 'sets of stylistic possibilities', from which raregroove DJs and raregroovers, 'can select the system of stylistic features consisting of lifestyles' (ibid.: 230). We can observe this in their adaptation of 70s music and fashion motifs combined with a utopian element, whose aim, according to Gilroy, is to 'defend and extend

spaces for social autonomy and meets the oppressive power of racial capitalism' (1993a: 41-2). We can note this in the cultural and racial mix of the scene.

THE CHALLENGE OF RECOGNIZING DIFFERENCE

The multi-racial character of the raregroove scene attracted black women who felt confined by ideas of black and female activities and roles. As black women we occupy a place in which tensions exist in both our relationships amongst ourselves, and also in the wider black communities. Black women's participation in this scene highlights difference, what Bourdieu would call 'conditionings associated with a particular class' (1992: 56). As I suggested earlier, black communities are modulated by factors such as education and material privilege. These differences makes alliances predicated solely on race almost impossible. Our identities as black people have always to be contested and negotiated along multiple axes. Gilroy makes the point that we must engage in

rethinking the question of racial identity, secure in the knowledge that people inhabit highly differentiated and complex, even decentred, identities. Race carries with it no fixed corona of absolute meanings. Thus, gender, class, culture and even locality may become more significant determinants of identity than either biological phenotype or the supposed cultural essences of what are now known as ethnic groups
(Gilroy 1993a: 109)

I suggest, therefore, that the imperative for participation in the raregroove scene is pleasure, coupled with a secret desire to address the different ways black women occupy, in Audre Lorde's term, a 'house of difference':

Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different[. . .] It was a while before we came to realise that our place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference.

(Lorde 1982: 226)

This concept of difference provides a language with which we can begin to address the different ways we are oppressed as blacks, as women, as lesbians and all the other 'others', and the different ways we might be privileged. The diverse experience of black women in Britain cannot be theorized as a seamless list of oppressions.

It is often the case that when the emphasis is placed on the way particular groups are oppressed, the tendency is to overlook how they might be privileged in other arenas. We need to develop a language which

will take into account our different positioning in the social world. In particular, we need to acknowledge the way a privileged black woman can make choices that are out of the reach of her non-privileged sister. For example, the fact that I have made the choice not to work and devote a whole year to writing has to be located in my own position as a privileged woman with a family willing to support me in my choice. My own choice and individual history cannot be compared with other black women for whom the reality of poverty or the threat of poverty is a hindrance to even dreaming of writing. Therefore, as bell hooks reminds us, it is important not to allow our desire to share in the collective reality of 'black women' stop us from recognizing the difference in our social circumstances (hooks in Childers and hooks 1990). These differences are real enough for us not to assume that all black women experience oppression in the same way. bell hooks has called for the need 'to make a distinction between what it means to be from an oppressed group and yet be privileged - while still sharing in the collective reality of black women' (ibid.: 75).

It is no longer viable nor useful to reduce black women's reality to the taxonomy of oppression. As Donna Haraway suggests, focusing on 'victimhood as the only ground for insight, has done enough damage' (1990: 199). It does not allow us to recognize the profound, pleasurable differences between us, particularly those of sexuality, economic position, aspiration, politics and desire. I am in no way attempting to negate or discount the reality that black women are affected by various oppressive regimes, but in looking at black women's involvement in the raregroove scene, I emphasize the way the black female body becomes 'both a locus of action and a target of power' (Crossley 1995: 60).

The black women who participated in the raregroove scene cannot easily be compared to black women in such subcultures as reggae or hip-hop and more recently ragga (Rose 1990; Skeggs 1994). Raregroovers are a group whose specific 'conditionings', which are reflected in their consumer choices and access to either/or both 'economic' and 'educational capital', separates them out as relatively privileged. Women in the raregroove scene have access to skills and official qualifications in a way that other black women in other black subcultures do not have. Although black women in the raregroove scene are united in part because of their blackness, this shared experience of migration and post-colonial positioning is of less significance than their shared stake in asserting a certain value system; one which situates them firmly among those with the desire for upward social mobility.

Furthermore, I suggest that cultural inter-mixturing occurs in all situations where migration informs identity. The raregroove scene is a site of this radical inter-mixturing. Black female raregroovers are interacting with a group whom by virtue of their race and class position are already in possession of racial, educational and economic capital, which is neces-

sary to participate in the social field. Thus black women too are able to enter into a series of social networks which may procure them access to a wider social field than that which they will ordinarily have access to. This kind of amassing of social networks Bourdieu terms social capital. Citing Bourdieu, Moi describes social capital as a 'relational power' whereby a given person accumulates a number of useful cultural, economic, or political relations (Moi 1991: 102).

For aspirational black females, the interaction with people from diverse social backgrounds (that is different class, race, ethnic, geographical location and so on) provides the opportunity for social contacts, and access to future 'life-skills' in the form of work and employment (McRobbie 1994: 161). While I am aware that the exchange of any capital between and among white raregroovers will not necessarily circulate among black women in the same way, I am however, concerned to show that black women who are already consecrated (Bourdieu's term) within the field of legitimacy are able to participate in the field. Situated thus, they are in a position to amass social capital which will enable them to 'develop or increase other forms of capital and may greatly enhance [their] chances of achieving legitimacy in a given field' (Moi 1991: 103). Since capital is needed to produce more capital, those black women without the necessary capital to begin with are effectively debarred from benefiting and participating in the social web of interrelated networks that is raregroove. The fact that some black females can participate within the field of legitimacy, as Bourdieu might argue, allows the dominant culture to demonstrate their libertine ideals. It is the presence of this small minority within the dominant structure that Bourdieu refers to as the 'miraculous exceptions'. The presence of this 'miraculous exception' within the dominant group always gives legitimacy to the lie that the black presence is racial and gender neutral (Moi 1991).

Interactions between any groups or individuals, especially with the dominant groups, is never treated (with good reason!) as innocent, but viewed with suspicion and ambivalence. However, as Gilroy points out, youth cultures are often sites for contesting ideas of nationalism, racial exclusivism, subjectivity and identification, precisely because they are based on a distancing from the sobriety of mainstream culture. Gilroy puts it thus:

I think it is possible to show that youth cultures are essentially hybrid social and political forms ... their transnational and international character points to new conceptions of subjectivity and identification that articulate the local and the global in novel and exciting patterns ... the notion of any culture based primarily around age and generation contains an inherent challenge to the logic of racial and national and ethnic essentialism.

(Gilroy 1993b: 6)

In the process of making distinctions between themselves as raregroovers and non-raregroovers, I suggest that black women are aware of the material reality which separates them from other black women. They recognize points of connection and similarity with other raregroovers who may be white, whilst also aware of the distance between them because they are lacking in racial capital. Thus, black female raregroovers may bond with other black women non-raregroovers on account of race, however, this bond maybe disrupted by other factors such as status, aspiration, pleasure, desire, access to a given cultural capital and so on – the absence of which may necessitate a bonding with white female raregroovers.

Read against a backdrop of economic recession, mass apathy and neo-conservative ascendancy, this kind of social contact for black women raregroovers can also serve as a future investment through the forging of strategic friendships (Moi 1991). By choosing wisely to befriend members of the dominant culture, black women demonstrate awareness of their lived reality, and the importance and relevance of 'social capital' which is necessary for them to participate, effectively in the wider social world.

TRANSGRESSING THE BOUNDARIES OF 'IDENTITY'

I suggest that Donna Haraway's cyborgian metaphor could posit another way of re-evaluating black women's participation in the raregroove scene, challenging Bourdieu's notion of distinction-making.

Haraway's use of the cyborg metaphor (1990) helps to elucidate on the multiplex possibilities and foreclosures which is characteristic of the present moment. She recognizes the rich, pregnant, and contradictory locations of our identities. Accordingly, the cyborg is a phenomenon which pleurably violates seemingly fixed boundaries; a phenomenon which 'transgressed boundaries' – particularly those between humans and machines, animals and machine and idealism and materialism (ibid.). While a Bourdieuan notion of distinction-making enables an analysis of black women who are separate from other black women in terms of musical taste, Haraway's cyborgian metaphor facilitates the disruption of that process. That is, black women in the raregroove scene are able to cross boundaries and make connections with groups they may have no previous connection with.

The raregroove scene, then, can be read as the moment of the dissolution of old boundaries between socially disparate groups: white women and black men, black women and white men, white women and black women, Africans and Caribbeans and Asians, yuppies and trendies. Social distinctions such as gender, race and ethnicity are open to microscopic scrutiny for their validity as referential categories in contemporary positioning and identity.

This invariably opens up new avenues and new sites for rethinking black female subjectivity, experience, pleasure and desire. The apparent fixity of the innocuous and coherent notion of identity tightly structured around the codified prison house of race, gender and class which according to Haraway has become the basis for belief in 'essential' unity is now disrupted. Furthermore as Haraway posits:

There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, racism and capitalism.

(*ibid.*: 197)

Contesting the signifier 'black', James Baldwin posed this question in the 1950s, and I quote him at length:

Is it possible to describe as a culture what may simply be, after all a history of oppression? That is, this history and these present facts, which involve so many millions of people who are divided from each other by so many miles of the globe, which operates and has operated under such very different conditions, to such different effects, and which has produced so many sub-histories, problems, traditions, possibilities, aspirations, assumptions, languages, hybrids – is this history enough to have made of the Earth's black population anything that can legitimately be described as a culture? For what beyond the fact that all black men [and women] at one time or another left Africa or have remained there, what do they really have in common?

(Baldwin 1985: 49)

As these two quotes illustrate the signifier 'black' or 'woman' becomes deeply problematic when it is called upon to stand for and address a diverse experience. The dissolution of these signifiers is inevitable. The dissolution of boundaries, even if only temporarily, Haraway suggests, facilitates the recognition of the interconnection and cross-connection of all living organisms:

a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory stand-points. The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from other vantage points.

(Haraway 1990: 154)

For black women who are unhappy with what Greg Tate calls the 'romance with being black' (see Dent 1992), the raregroove scene provided them with a context in which they could give expression to the diverse ways in which black female subjectivity is lived. They can invent and reinvent themselves without adhering to the fixed racial regime. The raregroove scene offers this context precisely because it is *not* modulated entirely by ethnic, cultural or racial particularities. Rather it is an important space for the (re)negotiation of the terms by which race, ethnicity and culture are expressed, normalized and contested. The women who entered such a space were struggling, 'to remake the world in their own image' (Baldwin 1985: 50). Raregroove space enabled them to do so as they affirm their cultural identities and, if need be, relinquish the restrictive code of racial essence and acceptable femininity. Thus, women in this space could still be Swiss, Scottish, English, and still be white; Nigerian, Ghanaian, Indian, Trinidadian and still be black and British. This marks the moment which Stuart Hall describes in 'New Ethnicities' as the 'end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject' (1992: 254).

This is not to suggest that the raregroove scene is immune from the politics of race and racism, but rather to offer an example of different forces which come to bear on the 'fact of blackness' (Fanon 1993: 109), and the way it is lived in and through gender, sexuality, ethnicity, culture, aspiration and class position. In essence, what I am trying to suggest, is that it is precisely their resistance to the fixity of racial and gender identity which propelled black women into the scene. An analysis of the raregroove scene illustrates the point at which racial homogeneity is merely a template for the more diverse and significant social conditionings which act to distinguish these black women from others.

This way of viewing black women's contradictory locations favours a more complex theorizing of black and female identity, which privileges the different facets of black female experience. We can then begin to understand how the lived reality of black women is contested and negotiated along lines structured by difference. This recognition will invariably create the condition where difference can be rethought using Bourdieu's idea of distinction-making. Similarly, assertions of homogeneity can be disrupted and connection can be established using Haraway's cyborgian metaphor. Central to raregroove music and lifestyle is distinction-making, and the transgressing of normative expectations. Statements of difference enable black women to actively challenge the constraints of identity and identification. This facilitates a move towards a politics of affinity. In moving toward a politics of affinity, our contradictory perspectives as black women are revealed as we embrace our individual and collective identities, that are unique to this particular historical moment.

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NOTES

- 1 The term 'black' is used to connote women with one or both parents descending from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. It used as a political category, 'coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain and [it] came to provide the organizing category of a new politics of resistance, amongst groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions and ethnic identities' (Hall 1992: 252).
- 2 We need to understand that the context in which dreadlocks are now worn is a far cry from its early association with the religion of Rastafarianism. It has now become a sign appropriated by a variety of groups in order to articulate their subject position.

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(Mis)representing the black (super)woman

Tracey Reynolds

INTRODUCTION

In Britain during the last decade the press has been preoccupied by the 'Crisis in the Black Family',¹ (*Voice*, 28 February 1995). This 'crisis' has been constructed around the perceived degeneration of male-female relations within the African-Caribbean community. Evidence of this phenomenon has been taken to be the increasing number of black households where the female heads the family and the male is absent. Two images are employed by the press to explain the assumed breakdown in family relations. The first casts the black man, who exists on the fringes of family life, as lazy, feckless, unreliable, sexually irresponsible, and undeserving of their female counterparts. In great contrast the second image characterizes the black woman as the strong, single, and independent 'superwoman'. Acknowledged as the 'lynch pin' of black family life, she excels both in educational attainment and career success, while still finding the time to rear her children single-handedly. This image of the 'black superwoman' is clearly a celebratory one.² To what extent is this image an honest representation of the lives of African-Caribbean women in Britain or a mythical image fabricated by the media?

This article aims to demystify the construction of the 'black superwoman' by investigating the inconsistencies between the popular media discourse and sociological evidence. In doing so two central themes are addressed. First, how closely do black women's lives in Britain correlate with that of the 'superwoman' image? Second, to what extent is the image central to the identity of African-Caribbean women? In an effort to answer these questions, during the course of the chapter I examine the historical cultural tradition of African-Caribbean women, including the matrio-focal family structure; high black female educational and career success; the presence of economic independence and autonomy among black women, and the deteriorating nature of relationships between black men and women. My argument is that the 'superwoman' is a fiction popularized by the media which has now filtered through our common-sense discourse

and influences both policy and academic discourses on African-Caribbean family life.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE 'BLACK SUPERWOMAN'

Black women are out-performing them [black men], educationally and in the job market. These women acquire senior status at work, become part of a different culture and they move onto a world where they have few black male equals.

(*Guardian*, 2 July 1994, p. 11)

She [black woman] is more likely to work full time than other women. She [black woman] is ambitious and is more likely . . . than black men to continue her education after school leaving age. And she still has time to bring up her children single-handed.

(*Guardian*, 21 March 1995, p. 3)

In investigating the social construction of this 'positive' image of the 'black superwoman' there appears to be two contradictory explanations for her origin. On the one hand she is constructed within a biological and hence essentialist paradigm. On the other, the 'superwoman' is an outcome of a narrow and reductionist account of historical struggle.

In the first emphasis there is an assumption that, in the black women's physical and genetic make up there is something that predisposes her to be naturally resilient and hard working, with the ability to survive and succeed against all odds:

Many of them [black women] have endured incredible hardships and have children to support but they are determined. . . . They seem to be very resilient.

(*Voice*, 18 June 1991, p. 13)³

Black women have long been central to our community and little recognition has been given to our resourcefulness and endurance in bringing up our children alone.

(*Voice*, 24 August 1993, p. 6)

Such a biological determinist standpoint as a means to define the experiences of African-Caribbean women is problematic. Firstly, it is one-dimensional, assuming the homogeneity of black women and ignoring the very real differences that exist between them. Factors such as social class, age, island of origin/descent and spatial locality inform black women's experiences of living in Britain. Ideological, social, economic, historical and political forces which are also significant in determining these experiences are therefore obscured from analysis.

By assuming a biologically defined homogeneity among black women

the differential achievements and progress made by black women in the struggle against racial and sexual inequalities in society cannot be explained. Similarly, by defining the success of black women as natural gives us no explanation other than a biological one to account for black women who are deemed 'not successful'.

Recently, there has been the re-emergence of the essentialist debate which claims that black people are genetically less intelligent (see Murray and Herrnstein, 1994). Murray and Herrnstein's argument is essentially a re-working and reconfirmation of Murray's previous work (see Murray, 1983). Its central premise is grounded in the theory that there exists a fixed and immutable hierarchy of intelligence which is genetically defined and racially specific. White people, as a racial grouping, are positioned towards the top of this hierarchial strata whilst black people reside at the bottom.

Murray and Herrnstein's debate is given a powerful legitimating function by the use of statistical data, charts and other 'scientific tools' to elucidate their findings. This enables Murray and Herrnstein to move their discourse away from an emotional subjective viewpoint towards 'objective knowledge'. Discussions challenging their use of statistical data for analysis and the notion of 'objective truth' have been dealt with elsewhere (see Fraser, 1995; Fischer *et al.*, 1996). My central concern here is that Murray and Herrnstein's debate acts to throw a 'smoke screen' over wider social issues and again pathologizes black people. Murray and Herrnstein, in presenting their argument as 'objective knowledge', obscure the political agenda in their writing. The re-emergence of this discourse coincides with a period in American politics which has witnessed a backlash towards liberal policies such as affirmative action and welfare spending and programmes targetted at deprived individuals, primarily in urban city areas (*ibid.*).

Although cultural and political differences exist between America and Britain, the Murray and Herrnstein debate has met with some support here (Thatcher, 1995). However, the black British press condemned it for the racist attitude it adopted:

Murray and his friends should have taken a much more responsible approach while carrying out their so-called studies. . . . Any study that ignores the social, psychological and moral impact of slavery and colonialism on not just the victims but also on the perpetrators is not worth its weight in dried ink.

(*Voice*, 29 November 1994, p. 6)

Ironically, the black press appear to be using the same essentialist terms of reference as Murray and Herrnstein when discussing black women.

A second emphasis in the social construction of the 'black superwoman' has been the persistence of the reductionist discourse on slavery. As Mohammed suggests:

The restrictions on marriage enforced by slave owners weakened the conjugal ties while often leaving the mother/child bond intact. This has led to the paradoxical view of Caribbean women as overburdened superwoman castrating and evicting men from the family.

(Mohammed 1988, p. 5)

For the media slavery is viewed as the primary rationalization for the experiences of black men and women in post-colonial societies:

Since slavery destroyed the traditional Black family... Black men and women have been in the process of negotiating a new type of relationship, perhaps unique in the western world. This relationship has had to acknowledge the independence of the Black woman, who under slavery had already established herself as the breadwinner, and in post-slavery society, had increasingly become the matriarchal figurehead of the family.

(*Voice*, 2 August 1994, p. 12)

Although there is no doubting that the impact of slavery was significant on the development of cultural traditions, to valorize slavery as the primary determinant of the black experience in Britain today greatly underestimates the adaptive capacity of black people to cultural change. Arguments that attribute existing black family structures and familial/gender relations to slavery inadvertently portray black people as objects rather than subjects of their cultural development. The assumption is that black people allow only outside forces to structure their development. Black people have always assumed an active, participatory and progressive role in adapting and subverting their oppression. The early feminist movements in the Caribbean in the 1800s (Momsen, 1993), and in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s (Bryan *et al.*, 1985), show how black women made rational, economic, and political choices, independent of the dominant patriarchal and racist discourses.

The impact of a reductionist discourse on slavery is used to reinforce a static, culturally specific, perception of black family life. The dominant common-sense perceptions of black life as an outcome of this discourse include: the matrio-focal or female centred family; lone-motherhood; high male absenteeism from the household; black women in the dual role of domestic and economic provider; and high educational success. I now turn to an interrogation of each of these assumed phenomena in the light of sociological evidence.

INTERROGATING LONE-MOTHERHOOD

The 1991 Census recorded that 49 per cent of African-Caribbean families are headed by a lone-mother compared to 14 per cent of the general

population (OPCS, 1991). Analyses which attempt to explain this phenomena are centred within two causal explanations: firstly, the historical cultural tradition of the matrio-focal family, an outcome of slavery, (Gonzalez, 1985; Powell, 1986); secondly, the pervasive idea that black women are forced into lone-motherhood as a direct result of black men's behaviour and actions.

On the first point that the persistence of matrifocality accounts for a high percentage of lone-mothers, there is little evidence or consensus about such a familial structure. No single clear definition exists of what exactly constitutes a 'matrio-focal' family:

Matrio-focality may imply that the women in a society have a 'rather good status' generally, or that they may have more control over income or expenditure . . . it may refer to the society where male absenteeism leads to a predominance in households headed by women.

(Mohammed 1988, p. 172)

In this sociological definition 'matrio-focality' is used to embrace diversity of experiences and situations. However, the very real differences between these black women are often diluted, or at the very worst ignored in media constructions of the matrio-focal family. Here the matrio-focal family is often portrayed as fixed and immutable. In reality conjugal relationships and familial structures are not static as individuals move through a series of relationships over their lifetime.

In her analysis of family formations, Powell developed a four-part classification of conjugal unions to illustrate the diversity and fluidity of familial structures: single; visiting; common-law; and married (Powell, 1986). Powell noted that Caribbean women move in and out of these unions, spending only a brief period of time in each. Importantly, marriage and the 'traditional' nuclear family structure is still held in high esteem, and is a family model which many women, across all socio-economic groups, aspire to. This is borne out in the statistics. In Barbados, 39 per cent of the population exist within the nuclear family structure, as do 37 per cent in Antigua and 38 per cent in St Vincent (Powell, 1986). Evidence of this challenges the media assumption that the matrio-focal is the norm throughout the Caribbean and amongst African-Caribbean families.

Central to media discourse of the matrio-focal family in Britain, is the idea that black women assume household headship, power, and authority within the family. It is an oversimplification to suggest that black mothers will automatically assume household headship if there is no permanent male spouse present within the home. Other factors which may determine household headship, for example household composition (number of adults and/or presence of male figures in home), income, skills, age and status of household members, are often overlooked from analysis (Moses, 1985). Furthermore, not all households follow the same pattern of having

one person at one given time assuming power and authority within them, an example being households where a number of adult members make decisions and occupy positions of power and authority in areas of specific interest to them.

On the second point – that black women are forced into lone-mothering as a result of black men's behaviour – there appears to be a social class context to the way in which this is conceptualized by the press. In debates rationalizing lone-motherhood amongst black middle-class professional women, often personified as the archetypal 'superwoman', the idea is that lone-motherhood is deliberately and rationally chosen by them. Lone-motherhood, it is argued, is the only option available to these women, as a result of a lack of available, eligible black men who can equal them educationally and professionally.⁴ There is acknowledgement of a:

cry by Black women, particularly those in work or who have middle class aspirations, about the lack of eligible Black men. More and more, they are increasingly echoing their American sisters who have long bemoaned the fact that all Black men are either gay, in jail, unemployed or only interested in white women.

(*Voice*, 2 August 1994, p. 12)⁵

As a result black women are:

Fed up waiting for the right man to come along . . . [and] are increasingly deciding to have babies alone without the would-be father's knowledge. . . . It's very cool, calm, and collected. They're the type of person who is going to have a year's supply of nappies delivered.

(*Voice*, 18 April 1995, p. 19)

In contrast the working-class black lone-mother is often personified as the teenage single mother, with low income and dependent on welfare benefits. It is argued that women who belong to this social group actively choose motherhood as their only viable route into adulthood or rather naively perceive motherhood as a prime vehicle in which to exert control over their 'irresponsible', 'unreliable' and 'sexually promiscuous' male partners:

Faced with high unemployment and under-achievement at school . . . pregnancy is the best of a bad lot. . . . Frustrated by their lack of control over a man they will 'pin prick a condom'.

(*Voice*, 18 April 1995, p. 20)

Acting as a direct antithesis to the middle-class 'superwoman' image, the teenage single mother represents a potent media image of black family life in Britain. Whilst lone-motherhood amongst middle-class black women is seen as a rational, calculated ploy in response to a lack of eligible black male partners of equal social status, the treatment of lone-motherhood amongst low income black women is altogether different. It is attributed

to promiscuity and desperation (and welfare greed!) rather than a preferred cultural choice.

In her study of teenage motherhood, Ann Phoenix challenged many media assumptions concerning teenage motherhood. Teenage mothers make up only 5 per cent of lone-mothers in Britain. Phoenix's findings determined that young women, both black and white, under 20 years old, become pregnant for many of the same reasons as older women. The fact that many of the young mothers in her study were welfare recipients had more to do with their socio-economic position, independent of the age they become mothers. Furthermore, the fact some of the young women in Phoenix's study were married (22 per cent), challenges the assumption that teenage motherhood equates to lone-motherhood (Phoenix, 1991). None the less, somehow one has become synonymous with the other in social policy, particular among the New Right.

Women who become lone-mothers through death or incarceration of a male spouse/partner are never given consideration in media representations of the black lone-mother. Presumably, it does not fit in with the 'superwoman' image, which highlights black men negatively. For it is black male attitudes and actions which are presented as one of the primary causes of the high incidence (relative to white women) of black lone-motherhood in Britain.

The sexual fate of the single 'black superwoman' appears to be a central preoccupation with the media. Having pathologized the black male as lazy and ineffectual, the solution appears to be inter-racial relationships. This form of media attention is certainly divisive and contentious, creating hostilities between the sexes, preventing a forum in which a progressive debate on wider issues on racism and inequality can take place:

They [black women] have got fed up waiting for an eligible man, who has a job, has ambitions and will offer them the emotional and financial security. They are now seeking these qualities from white men.

(*Voice*, 2 August 1994, p. 12)

The single status of black women is also another preoccupation of the popular press:

One of the most shocking figures which emerged over the last few weeks was that something like 60 per cent of black women between the ages of 20-39 were single . . . amongst these women there must be a problem of appalling unhappiness and loneliness; and a terrible feeling of rejection.

(*Voice*, 28 February 1995, p. 8)

Paradoxically, while singlehood is celebrated as a 'superwoman' trait, it is also perceived as psychologically damaging to black women's well-being!

Notions of black femininity appear to be constructed around the dual

and often interrelated images of motherhood and the 'superwoman'.⁶ Motherhood has always been a central preoccupation of theorists, attempting 'to get to the heart' of black women and their experiences. Although not exclusive, British analysis of African-Caribbean mothering preoccupies itself with an emphasis on the strong mother-daughter bond. This bond is seen as essential to an understanding of how black mothers raise their daughters to survive and succeed in the face of racial and sexual discrimination in society (see Foner, 1979; Bryan *et al.*, 1985). The construction of black motherhood also centres on the 'double burden' of having to combine both domestic and employment activities endured by the black mother.

The *Guardian* newspaper on 12 June 1991, in article entitled 'Flying Colours', reported on a meeting held by a black community organization to address the issue of black male-female relations in Britain today. One of the key speakers, Tony Sewell, implied mothering skills accounted for the difference in societal success between black men and women (see *Guardian*, 12 June 1991, p. 12). Sewell, a black journalist, trivialized his explanations of differentiated success with his suggestion that black mothers spoil and pampered their sons whilst exposing their daughters, at an early age, to the social realities of life for black people in Britain. Not only does this article make mass generalizations from unsupported evidence about parenting behaviours of black mothers, but it ignores the significant issues at work which determine the differential male/female experience, for example, the effects of labour market patterns and institutional racism in informing differentiated gender career and educational success. Instead Sewell, like the New Right, targets and holds the black mother accountable for wider societal problems by pathologizing her behaviour.

Constructing the identity of black women around motherhood undermines the contributions made by black women outside the mothering role. Also, no rationale is provided as to how women who do not have children define their identity and gain status in society. Fundamentally, by conceptualizing black women primarily in the role of mother, racist stereotypes of black women, which attribute 'breeding' as their primary function in life, are reinforced (Murray, 1983).

EVALUATING BLACK MALE MARGINALITY

Black men are perceived as occupying a very marginal position in the lives of African-Caribbean women. Male absenteeism from the family unit is a popular focus of the media. In no other culture is the issue of male absenteeism given such dominant coverage. This makes male absenteeism appear to be culturally specific to black families of Caribbean descent, although it can be identified across different societies and cultures.

The social and economic factors which determine black male absenteeism are rarely discussed. Instead distorted generalizations concerning the black man form the basis of explanations:

For too long black men have failed to support women and our children, a reality that all black men and women must seriously reflect upon.

(*Voice*, 24 August 1993, p. 6)

If today's black woman has brought credit to her race, the black man is a different story. Not only does he have a tendency to opt out when the patter of tiny feet comes along, he is over represented in prisons and the dole queues.

(*Guardian*, 21 March 1995, section 9: p. 3)

The 'Linford Christie syndrome' of one-parent families is now disturbingly ingrained in black society. . . . Young black males have adopted societal norms and are a lot more care-free in their responsibilities.

(*Sunday Express*, 13 August 1995, p. 2)

Not only does this negative discourse reinforce racist stereotypes and assumptions but it also greatly obscures the influence and involvement black men have always possessed within the family, not just as fathers but as grandfathers, uncles, brothers and other male kin of which there is much evidence.

Mirza's study redefining the social construction of black womanhood in Britain vividly illustrates the active and influential role fathers assume towards their family. In interviews of black 16-18-year-old schoolgirls, black fathers were viewed in a positive manner by family members (Mirza, 1992):

'Most men do understand the problems faced by women, I think so anyway. I go to my dad whenever I have a problem.' (Laurie, aged 16, aspiration: journalist; father: telephonist)

'Since my mum died my dad brought us up. . . . All he cares about is seeing us do well and going to college' (April, aged 16, aspiration: art therapist; father: British Rail ticket collector).

(Mirza 1992, p. 159)

Bryan *et al.* also acknowledge the significant support and contribution black men in Britain have provided towards childrearing and other domestic duties within the home. This is especially true of the early migration years. In the 1950s and 1960s, when the vast majority of black women were first generational mothers in Britain, they did not have female family members and kinship relations to depend on for support. Support from others, outside the black community, was often not forthcoming in this openly hostile and racist society (Bryan *et al.*, 1985).

From my own personal experience, as a typical second-generation, black, working-class woman growing up in South London, my father performed a very active and supportive role in the family, particularly during my formative childhood years. My father undertook a variety of domestic functions commonly regarded as 'traditional' female roles, so as to support my mother who was in full-time employment and had to commute daily to Central London. Indeed, some of my earliest memories are of my dad bathing and dressing my sisters and myself for school and later beginning preparations for dinner. There exists no evidence to suggest that my childhood experience and the vital role my father played within this is the exception to the rule rather than the norm in black family life.

In second-, third- and even fourth-generation African-Caribbean families in Britain, the majority of black women are still fairly young (of working age) and are more likely than women of other cultures to be in full-time employment (Bhavnani, 1994). As such, they are less likely to have time to provide full comprehensive female support. This challenges the popular idealized notion that female kinship networks are the primary vehicle employed by mothers to obtain childrearing and domestic support. This popular notion assumes kinship networks are cultural phenomena specific only to black communities (Stack, 1974; Collins, 1994).

Many studies inadvertently reinforce the centrality of black female kinship networks by valorizing women and marginalizing men. One such example is Pulsipher's study on the life-cycle of Jamaican women sharing a houseyard (Pulsipher, 1993). In the study men are identified as peripheral to the lives of these women, crucially obscuring their influence in effecting family forms. By their very absence, in effect, it is the men who maintain the persistence of female-dominated houseyards across successive generations. This reinforces an important point which often goes unaddressed: even where the male spouse is deemed absent (in a normative sense) from the household, he will still maintain a significant effect on the lives, perceptions and social realities of family members.

In the United Kingdom, the relatively high incidence of black female-headed households, 49 per cent (OPCS, 1991), does not give an accurate picture of what is occurring in reality within black families and male-female relations. In a life-cycle context, Mirza observed that although single parent black women are categorized as 'lone-mothers', a significant proportion of these women (79 per cent) actually have a male partner and exist within a stable conjugal union. As such the majority of black children, at any one given time in their life, exist within a stable traditional two-parent household. Admittedly, black women do most of the childrearing and domestic tasks, but this is by no means culturally specific to the black community and can be identified in studies of white British family lives (see Oakley, 1974; Richardson, 1994).

From media representations of black family life it could be easily

assumed that the black lone-mother is an over represented group among single-families in Britain. In reality, ethnic groups including African-Caribbean people comprise only 7 per cent of single-parents in Britain (NCOPE, 1993). Despite this evidence, the dominant image of the single parent as being the black lone-mother, remains persistent among the media and hence in the public mind.

MAPPING THE ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF BLACK WOMEN

The image of the 'black superwoman' has been sustained in part by the high levels of black female economic independence and labour market autonomy. The 1993 Labour Force survey revealed that 76 per cent of black women are economically active (*Employment Gazette*, 1993). However, it could be argued that this high incidence of black female economic activity in Britain is more a direct response to social and economic conditions in this society rather than the outcome of a cultural historical tradition where women always work. In the past, migration policies during the 1950s and 1960s encouraged both black men and women to seek employment in Britain. Today, the sex segregation of the labour market, a decline in 'traditional' male sectors of employment and the increasing 'feminization' of the labour market has resulted in more employment opportunities for black women (Bhavnani, 1994). Such economic phenomena has given fuel to the 'superwoman' image.

A popular misconception is that female economic activity equates to economic autonomy and the opportunity to freely assume responsibility over money earned. Caribbean feminist theorists persistently reinforce the image of the strong, independent and autonomous black women (see Barrow, 1986). However, at the same time they also reveal a profound sense of female powerlessness and dependency on familial relations, kinship groups, men, the Church, and the community at large for support. Despite this contradictory stance in the Caribbean theorists' work, black female independence and economic autonomy is also assumed to prevail among African-Caribbean women in Britain. As a result, high economic activity is misrepresented by the popular press, as a cultural phenomena which is passed down intergenerationally from mother to daughter. Rationalizing it in this manner ensures that the assumption of high African-Caribbean female economic activity persists despite evidence to the contrary.

The concentration of black women in specific fields of employment directly challenges recent press coverage that leads us to believe that African-Caribbean women are excelling in all occupational sectors. Black women have traditionally been concentrated in specific sectors of employment. The last twenty years has seen a shift in the areas of employment with movements away from the National Health Service, as semi-skilled

and unskilled manual labour, towards clerical/administrative employment and other service industries.

A significant proportion of African-Caribbean women are now employed in public administration (40 per cent) and, to a lesser extent, retail and distribution (25 per cent) and banking and finance (12 per cent). However, it is a misconception to presume that black women are over-achieving in these areas. Often career choices and opportunities are narrowly defined so the majority of black women are concentrated in lower positions such as clerical officers, secretaries, sales assistants, etc. Moreover, a significant proportion of black women are clustered at the bottom of their respective professional and career ladders with little opportunity for promotion, often earning less than their white male and female colleagues (Breugel, 1989).

Despite a relatively high proportion of women employed by central and local government, a 'glass ceiling' is clearly in operation. Only 8 per cent of black women are found in senior and middle management positions (Jones, 1993). Furthermore they are becoming increasingly channelled into areas where there exists a high proportion of black service users (Bhavnani, 1994). Stringent government policies ensure that job security is now an issue for black women in public sector areas. Horizontal occupational mobility, often to private sector organizations, is increasingly being used as an effective strategy with which to combat and resist changes in the public sector occupational structure.

In a bid to maintain the image of the 'black superwoman', poverty and unemployment, very real issues for black women, are often obscured from media representations. Instead, poverty and unemployment are primarily analysed from a black male perspective. This contrasts with recent studies examining poverty within white communities in Britain. Increasing emphasis is now being paid to the growing visibility of white women in poverty or what is usually referred to the 'feminization of poverty' (Glendinning and Millar, 1991). So far systematic academic research into black female poverty in Britain, outside the confined area of teenage motherhood, has yet to be adequately addressed. Black male and female unemployment is rarely compared. However, comparisons measuring the extent of unemployment between black and white men, and black and white women prevail (Mirza, 1993). In reality there exists little difference in unemployment figures between black men and women: 16 per cent and 13 per cent respectively (*Employment Gazette*, 1993), which dispels media myths that black women are 'having it all' in terms of career success, and 'leaving behind' the 'lazy' and 'ineffectual black man' (*Sunday Times*, 19 February 1995, section 9: p. 8).

A similar distortion of the black female experience is apparent in the debate on the widening gap in educational attainment between black men and women. It was reported that African-Caribbean men comprise less

than 1 per cent of the student population in higher education compared to 16 per cent of African-Caribbean women (*Times*, 31 March 1992). The 1991 Labour Force survey stated that 61 per cent of black women, aged 16–59, possess higher and other professional qualifications (*Employment Gazette*, 1993). These figures actively encourage the 'black superwoman' image and its oppositional counterpart, the 'ineffectual' black man. Behind the celebration of academic achievement of black women is an implicit idea that as a group black women 'naturally' possess the skills to overcome struggles which black men do not have. It is often assumed that black men see education as futile and support other short term, often illegal, means as a way to progress in society:

The BMWs and gold chains have more of an instant attraction to the youngsters [young black men] than education and pursuing professional careers. . . . They see that educated people still come up against racism, so they decide to take what they see as an easier route to earning money.
(*Voice*, 18 June 1991, p. 13)

In contrast it is argued that black women favour the meritocratic ideal which advocates education as being the prime vehicle for upward social mobility, and a means of 'getting on' in British society (*Guardian*, 21 May 1995). However, these oppressing attitudes to education are not gender specific, that is characteristic to either males or females, nor are they culturally specific to the black community. Differing attitudes among young men and women to education can be found across other cultures in Britain.⁷ What determines people's attitudes to education has more to do with experiences of schooling. For example, it is well documented that due to racism and sexism black people, no matter how motivated, are often denied the opportunity of an adequate level of education (Mirza, 1992; Gillborn, 1995).

Investigating black women's experiences of higher education Mirza (1995) noted that over 90 per cent of mature black female students came from administrative and caring professions. She argued that as a result of inequalities suffered by many black women within the educational system, such careers which encouraged further training and education increased their opportunities for access to higher education. Mirza states that in effect, black women have had to use 'the long (back door) route' as the primary means with which to obtain further education. A segregated labour market, with a large proportion of black men concentrated in semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations, ensures that this route is effectively closed for the majority of black men in Britain.

However, despite increasing numbers of black women acquiring high academic and professional qualifications, they are more likely than their white counterparts to be employed in jobs for which they are overqualified and do not reflect their academic achievements (*Employment Gazette*,

1993). Therefore, upward social mobility for black women through education and objectively defined by occupation is not as rapid a progression as the popular press would have the public believe. Nor is there much evidence to support the belief that the majority of black women are 'leaving black men behind' in terms of educational and job success:

Black women seem to be getting on better in Britain, in terms of having good careers, than black men. . . . 'We [black women] have worked hard to get where we are and we're mixing in different social circles. . . . We've somehow outgrown the black men of our age.'

(*Evening Standard*, 9 October 1994, p. 20)

CONCLUSION

The 'black superwoman' is an image fabricated by the press that has little to do with the reality of black women's lives and the social realities faced by them. None the less, this image has been accepted by the public and now assumes a 'common sense' reality. Even amongst academics she is celebrated as a positive social phenomena. However, the 'black superwoman' in Britain is constructed in essentialist terms (such as in terms of her natural qualities of resilience) or through employing a reductionist historical cultural rationale (with a static and naive approach to the effects of slavery).

The detrimental consequences of the media's construction of black male and female identities can be clearly seen in the way they are narrowly defined, that is, 'the black superwoman' and 'the irresponsible feckless black man'. Both of these definitions are mythical. They have the effect of deflecting attention away from more substantive issues that concern black people such as racism, nihilism and incarceration. The never ending media debates, investigating the pros and cons of inter-racial relationships and absent fathers, prevent other issues of importance to black people from being discussed. It is only by discarding these narrow and highly contentious stereotypes of black family life and male-female relations that our energies can be channelled towards more positive and constructive discourses.

NOTES

- 1 For example see: 'Flying Colours', *Guardian*, 12 June 1991; 'Black Men: Losers in a One-sided Sexcess Story?', *Voice*, 18 June 1991; 'A Question of Mixed Emotions', *Evening Standard*, 9 October 1991; 'Sisters do it for Themselves', *Times*, 31 March 1991; 'Young, Single and Black', *Independent*, 2 July 1993; 'Our Families Need Fathers', *Voice*, 24 August 1993; 'The Silent Revolution - Part II', *Voice*, 2 August 1994; 'She's gotta have it all', *The Sunday Times*: section 9, 19 February 1995; 'No Finance, No Romance', *Voice*, 28 February 1995; 'The Myth and the Mister', *Guardian*, 21 March 1995; 'The Ethnic Timebomb', *Sunday Express*, 13 August 1995.

- 2 The popular press and black feminists alike have celebrated the 'black superwoman', the latter advocating the term as one in which to combat racist and patriarchal ideology (see Davis, 1981; Collins, 1991).
- 3 The *Voice* is a popular black newspaper concerned primarily with topics which specifically affect the black community. Established in 1982 the newspaper is circulated throughout the Greater London and Midlands areas of Britain. Current readership figures stand at approximately 300,000. In contrast, the *Guardian*, *Evening Standard*, *Sunday Express* and *Sunday Times* are mainstream British newspapers circulated throughout the United Kingdom.
- 4 The debate focusing on black middle-class lone-motherhood is an American one. It is argued that the pool of available African-American women significantly outnumber that of men, so that there today exists a widening gulf between single affluent black men and women (Chapman, 1988; McAdoo, 1988). This debate has been uncritically adopted by the British media in depicting the experiences of black men and women in Britain. In doing so, obvious cultural differences that exist between the two countries are overlooked.
- 5 This viewpoint is popularized in the recent film version of Terry MacMillan's book *Waiting to Exhale* (see *Guardian* 24 January 1996).
- 6 Although an association between femininity and motherhood is by no means restricted to analysis of black women and can be found in analysis of white women in Britain (see Richardson, 1994; Ribbens, 1994) the image of the 'superwoman' is.
- 7 A BBC1 television programme, *Panorama*, broadcast on Monday 16 October 1995 at 9.40 p.m. indicated that differing attitudes to education amongst white male and female teenagers in Britain may be the key reason why an increasing number of white women and a declining number of white men are entering higher education.

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Shades of Blackness

Young Black female constructions of beauty

Debbie Weekes

Her blackness is fine. The blackness of her skin, the blackness of her mind.
Her beauty cannot be measured with standards of a colonised mind.

(Méshele NdegeOcello 1993)

This chapter aims to explore the complex ways in which beauty is defined by young Black women. It explores why specific physical signifiers such as hair texture and skin colour have come to symbolize the boundaries along which young Black women define Blackness. In my own conversations with groups of young Black women, many have spoken of their identities in essentialist ways, in terms of fixed, natural, immutable characteristics. In contrast, however, definitions of Black identity in the academy and certain forms of popular culture, move away from fixed and unitary conceptions of Blackness, towards conceptualizing it as fragmented and diverse (hooks 1991; Gilroy 1993; Mercer 1994). This chapter will argue that the restrictive definitions of being Black for these young women are located within ideas of Blackness which exist within their own communities. These fixed definitions have to be understood in the context of Black people's marginal positions within society and as such, can be seen as 'strategic' (Spivak 1987; Fuss 1989). For these young Black women, talking about Black identity as one-dimensional and based on specific physical and phenotypical signifiers may serve a certain purpose for marginalized groups – that of relative empowerment.

The ways in which Black women talk about their identities are highly gendered. It is their use of hair texture and skin colour as specific signifiers of Blackness that this discussion will primarily focus upon. It has been well documented by Black feminists that Black women occupy experientially unique spaces in relation to both Black men and White women (Carby 1982; Collins 1986). Black feminist thought has the potential to theorize and develop an understanding of how Black women come to construct definitions of themselves which are clearly situated in the way they *experience* their social positions and hence their racial identities. Through conducting a series of interviews with young women of African descent,

aged 14–20,¹ the tensions within essentialist definitions of Black identity are explored. Some of the women who defined themselves as Black were placed on the boundary of 'acceptable' Blackness by others who claimed racial authenticity. What became clear from this research was that the racial definitions of what constitutes 'acceptable' Blackness was framed in terms of an essentialist construction of Black womanhood. Black womanhood was signified by the length and texture of a young woman's hair, the shade of her skin, and often by the nature of her parentage.

Black popular culture's attempt to construct an image of what it means to be 'Black' through music, dress and art defines Black identity in monolithic and essentialist terms. The theoretical rejection of this popular notion has gathered momentum in the academy, especially within post-modern analyses (hooks 1991; Hall 1992; Gilroy 1993; West 1993). These analyses argue against authenticity and instead recognize that Blackness is a social, political and cultural construction. If attempts are made to proscribe what Blackness should be, this assumes the existence of an essential Black identity. As Dyson (1993) argues 'although it is undeniably rooted in pigment and physiology, racial identity transcends their boundaries' (Dyson 1993: xx). However the authenticity of a Black woman's identity can often be measured in relation to the physical signifiers of hair and skin. Criticism has been applied to Black women who have sought to alter their physical appearance and are seen as attempting to move away from their racial identity. Criticism has also been directed towards those who are constructed (by others) as closer to 'Whiteness' by virtue of such signifiers as straight hair and light skins.² The question then is how does the outward representation of physical features of Black women come to be aspired to or rejected?

STANDARDS OF BEAUTY

Though femininity is bound up with heterosexuality and the ability of women to appear attractive to men (Wolf 1990; Mama 1995), Black women occupy a differential racialized space within and against these constructions. The entire concept of feminine attractiveness has been heavily based upon dominant definitions of beauty which have far reaching consequences for Black women. Not only has female beauty been constructed to objectify women, the assumption of Whiteness as the norm indicates that Black and White women are objectified differentially. The signifiers of hair texture, skin shade and shape of lips and noses are reacted to in terms of their approximation to Whiteness. Constructing boundaries around Blackness in relation to these signifiers illustrates a response by Black individuals that Whiteness and its associated outward signifiers have been used as a yardstick by which difference has been measured.

The issues of definitions of beauty being tied to male notions of

attractiveness have been discussed in relation to body image and the negative effects of these definitions (Wolf 1990). The effects of White masculine definitions of beauty on Black women have meant racialized criteria of attractiveness are often inextricably linked to the European standard. Thus though on the whole Black women may not suffer greatly from the problems of anorexia,³ their perceptions of body image become problematic when the health implications of bleaching creams are considered (James 1993: 238). Additionally, as one Black female respondent in Alibhai-Brown and Montague's study highlighted, some of the Black women she had seen with White partners had attempted to hide the shapes of their bodies, which were often bigger than White counterparts, in order to please and remain attractive to them (Alibhai-Brown and Montague 1992: 290).

The historical association of Whiteness as a yardstick of beauty has become internalized not just by Black women but by Black men also. This process of negating the beauty of Black textured hair and darker shades of skin has strong implications for Black women in terms of appearing attractive to males. As young women, many Black girls experienced rejection from Black males as 'in white dominated situations black and white boys alike tend to conform to the prevailing aesthetic, and fancy white (if not blonde) girls more' (Mama 1995: 103). Contemporary Black writers have explored the implications for Black women when Black men negate their physical appearances in favour of women who represent the European ideal (Morrison 1979). The construction of Black femininity as ugly and White womanhood as beautiful is highlighted by Cleaver's description of an elderly American Black man's construction of these images:

There's a softness about a white woman, something delicate and soft inside her. But a nigger bitch seems to be full of steel, granite-hard and resisting . . . I mean I can't analyse it, but I know that the White man made the Black woman the symbol of slavery and the White woman the symbol of freedom. Every time I embrace a Black woman I'm embracing slavery, and when I put my arms around a White woman, well, I'm hugging freedom.

(Cleaver 1968: 107)

James has noted that skin bleaching and hair straightening are practices carried out in the main by Black women which he directly relates to the preference of Black men for women with European-like phenotypical characteristics (1993: 282). Therefore some of the persistence which exists amongst Black women who seek to deny and reject the importance of European standards of beauty are made more urgent in view of the ways in which they are judged as beautiful or not by male peers.

Black female discourses around the issues of hair and skin illustrate the nature of the 'emotional ambiguity' which physical constructions of Black womanhood evoke for Black women (Mercer 1990). Mama's research on

Black women illustrates their ambiguous feelings about their natural hair textures and dark shades of skin. As one respondent in her study explained 'I used to press my hair with a hot comb, but I never really liked straight hair, I used to just *ease it out* so that it wasn't too tough, but *not really straighten it*' (Mama 1995: 115; italics added). Mama suggests this displays an ambivalence between wanting and yet not wanting to have hair that was straighter and not 'too tough'. Additionally, with the redefinition of Blackness in the 1960/70s, Afro hairstyles became associated with political change and Black self-knowledge. Artificial straightening of hair and bleaching of skin with creams, processors, hot combs, etc., which were equated with White definitions of womanhood were rejected. It then follows that women who continued to ascribe to these processes were perceived as victims of self-hatred. For example Bryan *et al.* have talked about the ways in which negative racialized imagery within the media and elsewhere constructed young African-Caribbean girls in the early 1980s. They describe the way young women wore school cardigans on their heads to emulate White female peers, used bleaching creams for 'uneven skin tones', processed their hair until it became damaged and suffered the pain of regular use of the hot comb (1985: 223-6). They explain these processes in terms of 'mental slavery' whereby Black women saw attributes of Whiteness as a way of escaping poverty and racism. hooks, on the other hand, has argued that though at one time Black women adopted straightened hair styles because they were easier to manage at times when they were particularly over-worked and exploited, straightened hair continues to remain a dominant form of dressing the hair when such conditions no longer exist (1993: 85). However, Mercer (1990) has argued that stressing the importance of 'natural' styles such as those exhibited in the 1970s Afro and the dreadlocks of Rastafarianism does not necessarily rectify the negation of Black beauty. Though he believes that these styles attempted to revalorize the previously negated texture of Black hair (which has been historically conceived of in similar ways to the blackness of the skin), he finds the opposition between natural and artificial problematic. The Afro and the dreadlocks were constructed as a return to nature, and rejected the European notions of 'cultivating' and taming Black hair into straightness. Black hair was politicized by positing the aesthetic of beauty. However, Mercer argues that the synonymy of Afro with natural invoked a 'dualistic logic of binary oppositionality' between that which appears natural and hence 'authentic', and that which has been cultivated (Mercer 1990: 255). Thus in view of the assumed rejection of European standards, these oppositions between that which is natural (and hence Black) and that which is not were nevertheless symptomatic of eurocentric notions of duality. Therefore he questions their very oppositionality as signifiers of Black subversion. Additionally, once the Afro was commodified through the design of wigs for White individuals, it was no

longer a Black political statement. The ease with which the style was commodified illustrates for Mercer that its aesthetic value was already dictated by the White dominant culture.

THE BLACKER THE BERRY

Discourses of Black womanhood, which are played out within Black popular culture, influenced how the young women in my research constructed ideas of beauty and definitions of Blackness. The extracts below are taken from readers' letters pages in a British Black woman's magazine called *Pride*. The magazine suggests it is aimed at the 'woman of colour', and has a wide Black female readership. These extracts can be used to contextualize the young women's ideas of Blackness.

I feel I must comment on the front cover of the [latest] issue featuring Veronica Webb. I feel insulted that you should use her picture on the front cover when two pages further in you have a selection of 10 beautiful Black women. Veronica Webb does not reflect the image of a Black woman, as she is obviously of mixed race. I actually thought she was white until I read the article. Why couldn't her picture have been on the inside? Maybe you should launch a magazine for mixed-race people. After all Black is beautiful and we should not have to apologize for our dark skin.

I was under the impression that [this] is a magazine for Black British women, so why does the winner of [the *Face of 94*] competition resemble a white woman? No disrespect to the winner herself, but she is nearer to white than Black. I presumed the whole point of such a competition was to give Black British women a chance to portray their beauty. There are many light skinned, coolie haired women in the modelling industry already. Why wasn't a dark skinned woman given a chance?

And in response:

Does a Black woman have to be as Black as coal with a nose spread from ear to ear before she is a true beautiful Black woman? . . . I find it very offensive that because I may not be the right shade of Black (I'm mixed race) I might not be considered a true Black woman. How many Black people can honestly claim that they are descended from a pure Black family line?

When oh when are we going to get rid of this dark skin/light skin divide? White people must be laughing at us. They no longer need to abuse us for our skin colour because we seem to be doing a fine job all by ourselves. They hated us for being Black (no matter what the shade) and we're hating ourselves for the same thing. A fair skinned person

does not look white – he/she looks fair skinned. A dark skinned person with thin lips, a flat behind and long, flowing hair looks dark skinned. Does a fair skinned person with thick lips, short Afro hair and a big behind look more Caucasian than the person I described above? No. If you break this down to its lower common denominator, it would read 'Why are Black people like white people?' and you can't get more absurd than that.

(Extracts from the letters pages in *Pride* magazine May/June, Dec/Jan 1994, February/March 1995)

This selection of letters from *Pride* appeared in response to two separate events. The first was the placing of a mixed parentage model, Veronica Webb, on the front cover of an earlier issue, and the second relates to the selection of the winner of the 'Face of '94' modelling competition, hosted by *Pride* magazine, who was also of mixed parentage. Both women were light skinned with naturally straight hair textures. Important questions arise about the way in which the writers of these letters have erected boundaries related not only to shade of skin, but parentage. They appear to be using biological definitions of Blackness. How far does the redefinition of racial signs, such as broad noses and dark skin, become strategic in terms of embracing positive possibilities, or restrictive in becoming exclusive and closed?

One of the important ways in which such essentializing can be understood is related to the historical legacy of a preoccupation with skin shade. Colonialist ideas have fed into contemporary representations of Blackness through the legacy of 'shade prejudice'. This legacy emerged historically from slave owner preferences for mulatto slave women, and the prevalence of pigmentocracy which dominated many of the Caribbean plantation societies. Mama (1995) refers to this persistence as 'colourism' – the 'desire [of Black women] for long flowing hair, lighter skin and aquiline features' (Mama 1995: 150). Black African Caribbeans living in Britain have brought with them a conception of *Caribbean* identity which distinguishes between various shades of Black. As Lewis (1969) has argued: 'in absolute terms . . . West Indian life is . . . a multi-layered pigmentocracy suffering from its own private disease of subtle "shade" prejudice' (quoted in James 1993: 243). The ways in which colour coding came to signify social status in many Caribbean islands, where darker skinned individuals were located within the poorer sections of various island societies and the lighter skinned within the middle class, illustrated the pervasiveness of the links with Whiteness (Foner 1979: 32). The women who spoke ambivalently about using hot combs and lightening creams in Mama's study are situated within ideas of beauty which existed around them. What Mama defines as the 'colonial-integrationist discourse', permeates the ways in which the parents of her female participants responded

negatively to their children's dark skins and 'nigger' hair (Mama 1995: 103-4). Many Black feminist writers have recalled the importance placed upon 'good hair' and 'good colouring' by parents both within the Caribbean and America (Jones 1970; Collins 1990; hooks 1993). Parents born in the Caribbean would often derogate (or have experienced criticism themselves) those in their families who had failed to marry 'light'. As Walter Rodney observed of the Caribbean:

The language which is used by black people in describing ourselves shows how we despise our African appearance. 'Good hair' means European hair, 'good nose' means straight nose, 'good complexion' means light complexion. Everybody recognises how incongruous and ridiculous such terms are, but we continue to use them and to express our support of the assumptions that white Europeans have a monopoly on beauty, and that black is the incarnation of ugliness.

(Rodney 1975: 33)

However, though the hierarchy of shades may have been undermined once migrants attempted to settle in Britain, through a subsuming of all individuals within a homogeneous racial categorization, its legacy does not go unnoticed. Despite the reclamation of Blackness on the part of the Black Power Movement, 'shade prejudice' has persisted. Thus the legacy of colonialist definitions of beauty cannot be ignored when attempting to theorize the essentialist discourse among young Black women, which in their letters clearly policed each other within a biologically reductionist definition of Black womanhood.

BRIGHT IS BEST?

Creating essentialized identities on the basis of skin colour and hair texture places many mixed parentage individuals on the boundaries of Blackness. This is relevant to the young mixed parentage women in my research. Many spoke of the preoccupations of others with *their* shades of skin. This had differing effects on the young women in terms of how they viewed Black women. Here Sandra, a young woman of mixed parentage, talks about the way she felt ostracized by other young Black women:

At school it was really like you had a bunch of Black girls and a bunch of White girls. In my class there was a bunch of White girls with one Black girl who was really White, y'know? I went round with them. The other Black girls would always be like, oh Sandra, y'know your hair, your this. You know, they used to go on about my hair because my hair was really long but they used to make it out like you shouldn't have long hair and you shouldn't be light skinned and you shouldn't be this. They were really stupid. And I made friends with a couple of them, really

good friends and they calmed down. But it was like they were really jealous. It was more jealousy than anything. So I felt more comfortable with White girls cause they didn't go on about anything, they just took me for Sandra. It was just kid's stuff, I don't think it really meant anything.

Candice in response to similar forms of ostracism from young Black women responded differently. She continued to have Black women as friends though the majority of young women she considered to be close were also of mixed parentage. Here however her response has led to additional forms of essentializing girls of same race parentage:

Candice: 'cause they [other Black girls] say 'look at them, you mixed up bitch, she thinks she's black' and things like that. You get it all the time. Or you get called a 'no nation' ... yeah 'cause you ain't got no White nation, no Black nation.

DW: Is it more from guys or girls?

Candice: Girls, bitchy ones ... there's nuff Black bitches ... they're all bitchy, they really are bitchy, you find that most Black girls are really bitchy.

DW: When does this happen ... on the street, at school or what?

Candice: Street, when you're in a dance.

DW: And do they say it to your face?

Candice: No. You can hear em saying it ... 'look at 'em, look at 'em, they think they're hot', you know you just hear it. You just walk by.

DW: How does it make you feel?

Candice: Good sometimes, 'cause they're just jealous.

DW: They're just jealous of you?

Candice: Yeah, they want to be like me ... it's true though they're jealous, 'cause most of 'em's got no hair, when their skin's dry it's just tough and ... they have to buy cream ... they have to, they're jealous.

Candice felt that she was being placed on the margins, outside of the concept of Blackness as employed by young Black women. Concepts of Blackness were being defined at her expense. She thus defined her racialized identity by rejecting the definition as 'other' and placing Black females on the margins. However, the policing of Black womanhood and constructing of essentialized boundaries around racial identity has implications for both reinforcing the identities of the women who are positioned within its boundaries, and negating the identities of those it places outside.

It is the recognition of the physical signifiers of facial features and hair textures as European and a subsequent rejection of their significance, which indicates a general movement amongst racialized groups to distance themselves from Whiteness. Processes of 'distancing' involve plac-

ing specific groups on the margins of definitions of Blackness, which may include reinforcing the links which people of mixed parentage have to Whiteness. In other words this may involve reminding them that though the 'one drop' rule⁴ may place them within the boundaries of the group 'Black', their White parentage problematizes how they may experience their membership:

I mean I was in this salon one day, my friend is the manageress ... and whenever they do new hairdo's right, they done the relaxed look and everything, she takes me in to show to the other stylists how to do the hair. So one day I was in there and there was this Black girl in there and she had short hair, I mean she was a really lovely girl, and this girl says 'oh your hair's come out really nice, you've got really nice hair' and I goes 'oh thank you', and she goes 'yeah, all half breeds have nice hair'. That was it, I just went apeshit. Because she didn't say it like, 'oh yeah all half breed' ... I mean, if she said it in a more polite way ... but she did say it to be offensive, she really did, and even if she didn't say it to be offensive, I'd say 'no love, I'm mixed race'.

(Sandra)

Attributing the category of mixed parentage to an individual who is not of mixed parentage on the basis of shade of skin or hair texture illustrates how these signifiers are often the initial basis for categorizing individuals in racial terms. One young woman in the sample had long straightened hair and light skin which confused people who sought to categorize her:

DW: Well tell me the difference, why did you put light skinned here [on the form] and you only put Black there [on an earlier form]?

Jasmine: I dun ... why did I put that? That's a point, I dunno. Yeah why did I put that?

DW: Do you know why?

Jasmine: Light skinned, no probably because ... I put light skinned black 'cause everyone thinks I'm half caste, if you know what I mean?

DW: Do they?

Jasmine: Everyone sees me as half caste, and ... I say to my dad, oh everyone thinks I'm ... 'Oh are you mixed race or whatever?' and I says no I'm black and they go 'Oh my gosh!' and they start feeling your hair and, 'Oh I didn't know you was black.' That's why I put that, you know.

DW: Does it get on your nerves?

Jasmine: Sometimes it does, but it don't really bother me anymore. And then my dad goes 'Just tell them that you're *black* you're not half caste.'

Jasmine and her father reject the label of mixed parentage, not only because it is not a racial 'reality' for them, but also because it holds the stigma of

linkage to Whiteness. In relation to the ways in which individuals seek to categorize others on the basis of specific signifiers, it is useful to examine how young Black women responded to the issues of mixed relationships and children of mixed parentage. Some of them felt that the shade of skin categorized an individual:

Naomi: Well I wouldn't go out with a White person, [must be either] half-caste or Black.

Mariah: Well what I'm saying . . . right, I probably . . . I would now but . . . I don't think I'd like to marry [a white person] 'cause I . . . wouldn't have a . . .

Desiree: Three-quarter . . .

Mariah: Yeah [I'd like] a dark kid.

DW: So you're saying exactly the same thing [as Naomi] Mariah?

Mariah: No, no, no . . . I don't know. I says I don't want to but I would like to have a [dark] kid, but then again, I would marry one [a White person] if, it depends if it's love or whatever.

Here Mariah, the only one in the group above who is of mixed parentage is concerned about the skin shade of the child she may have if she has a relationship with a man who is White. Though she disagreed with Naomi who did not want a mixed relationship, her reason was her recognition of the way in which others may respond to a child of mixed parentage. Francine, who is of same race parentage, rejected a mixed relationship as it would call into question her and her child's racial authenticity, which would be clearly physically defined:

'Cause I want my child to be Black, don't want it to be mix up. Mind you I'd go out with a half caste person, but I s'pose they're Black really aren't they?

(Francine)

These examples show how physical characteristics (signified by skin colour) have been conflated with 'racial' authenticity.

CONCLUSION

The displays of boundary making evident within the *Pride* letters and the mixed parentage women's accounts illustrate that issues of 'colourism' and essentialism have become intricately woven. The constructions of Black womanhood in the *Pride* letters were based upon essentialist boundaries which sought to exclude lighter skinned women. The rejection of fair skinned women was in terms of their closeness to Whiteness. In contrast the women of mixed parentage in the research sample felt they had been positioned by the influence of colourism, in which closeness to Whiteness was envied and desired. These two separate issues illustrate

the complexity of discussing Black female constructions of beauty. At one extreme there is a rejection of European ideas of womanhood and at the other an assumption that these qualities are desired. However what these issues also highlight is the underlying influence of Whiteness as a yardstick for beauty.⁵

The debate on defining Black womanhood illustrates the tension between essentialist and anti-essentialist ideas in the construction of racial identity. With its emphasis on deconstruction (of concepts such as Blackness and womanhood), postmodern analysis has far reaching consequences for the darker skinned women who police the boundaries of Black female identity. These women who in the letters attempted to construct an image of Black womanhood, used a specific racialized script which promoted an image of Blackness. Within postmodern frameworks such definitions are rejected because they are informed by the same biologism which constructs 'Black' as inferior. The consequences of such narrow definitions are clearly shown in the pain experienced by Black women who fail to conform to these standards by virtue of their parentage. However, attempting to understand the assertions by the dark skinned women within a historical framework has gone some way towards explaining why these attitudes persist. It also illustrates that not only are Black women attempting to reject the ways that they are considered unattractive due to length/texture of hair and shade of skin, but also in this rejection, that they wish to move away from the position of 'Other'. By exercising their ability to control their definition of womanhood, now redefined in terms of the visual and physical distance from Whiteness, Black women become 'strategically' empowered. Through this process, Black individuals who wish to redefine notions of Blackness do so from the position of subject rather than object. Black people who do so wish to redefine themselves as subject in order to exert some control over their lives (hooks 1989; Hartsock 1990). As hooks has argued:

As subjects people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history . . . as objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject.

(hooks 1989: 42)

The movement from object to subject is illustrated by the emphasis on the importance of natural (hair) styles (despite the commodification of the Afro) which shows the wish to move away from the negative associations of kinky hair with ugliness as defined by others. In similar ways the women readers who felt affronted at the image of Veronica Webb (though not, interestingly, at the image of British model Naomi Campbell who

exhibits straightened hair, and quite recently was abrogated in the media for agreeing to promote a lipstick with images of her skin whitened (see Dowdney 1995: 3)) wished to move away from the negative associations of dark skin with ugliness. However, the ways that such strategic essentializing occurs creates rifts between Black women which means that essentializing on the basis of skin shade and hair texture has limited political possibilities. Brooks (1953) in her novel *Maud Martha* exemplifies the internal divisions inherent in this destructive discourse. She wrote in reference to a darker skinned woman whose husband was attracted to a lighter skinned woman, 'I could go over there and scratch her upsweep down. I could spit on her back. I could scream . . . [but] if the root was sour what business did she have up there hacking at a leaf?' (quoted in Collins 1990: 422). Similarly, Collins articulates the relationship between racial identity and racial power that informs the essentialising discourse in which young Black women are embedded in her discussion of Toni Morrison's (1979) *The Bluest Eye*:

Frieda [is] a dark skinned 'ordinary' Black girl. . . . She wonders why adults always got so upset when she rejected the white dolls they gave her and why light-skinned Maureen Peal, a child her own age whose two braids hung like 'lynch-ropes down her back', got the love and attention of teachers, adults, and Black boys alike. Morrison explores Frieda's attempt not to blame Maureen for the benefits of her light skin and long hair afforded her as part of Frieda's growing realization that the 'Thing' to fear was not Maureen herself but the 'Thing' that made Maureen beautiful.

(Collins 1990: 82)

Engaging in bitter dialogue between darker and lighter skinned women does not address the social relations which have produced this discourse. Thus it is necessary to focus upon the 'Thing' which constructs Whiteness as the yardstick by which beauty is judged. Hair and skin are used as physical signifiers for the purpose of judging how 'Black' a person is, and as one of the *Pride* letter writers suggested earlier, they are used to indicate how near or far a Black person is from Whiteness.

Theories of 'race' and womanhood have become separated from the way identity is experienced. The complex ways in which we talk about our identities at the experiential level do not always fit with those expressed at the conceptual level. The tendency toward fluid, multiple constructs of identity in anti-essentialist theory is in contrast to the fixed and narrow constructions expressed, at times strategically, by young Black women. Black feminist theory, in reinforcing the importance of Black female experience to an understanding of gender, can go some way towards bridging the gap between theory and lived reality. Though I have attempted to initiate discussion around the ways Black women position

each other, one of the most important signifiers for Black women is the way we experience our Blackness, and negating this aspect of each other can only make it more difficult to challenge the 'Thing' which constructs the categories of race and gender which we inhabit.

NOTES

- 1 The research for this chapter constitutes part of a larger study on the identities of 31 young Black women aged 14–16, of whom 13 were of mixed parentage. It also includes conversations held between myself and an older mixed parentage woman (aged 20) on aspects of her identity. All mixed parentage women interviewed categorized themselves as such, and many of the sample considered their ancestry African.
- 2 The extent of media criticism which has been levelled at the music artist Michael (and his sister Latoya) Jackson over the years illustrates that these associations of physical signifiers with Whiteness are not only made within Black communities.
- 3 It has been suggested that issues of body image and eating disorders may not occur in the same way amongst Black women as they do with White women (see Quindlen 1994; Fine and Macpherson 1994).
- 4 This rule refers to the categorization of an individual as Black, by virtue of known African ancestry. Many persons of mixed parentage were historically rejected by White society on the basis of an identity created out of a taboo sexual relationship (see Tizard and Phoenix 1993; Gordon 1995).
- 5 This has led to the suggestion that White women, though oppressed by the 'beauty myth', are complicit in its negative effects on the bodies of Black women, because this myth is constructed around them (see Trepagnier 1994).

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Diaspora's daughters, Africa's orphans?

On lineage, authenticity and 'mixed race' identity

Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe

INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses problematic conceptions of place and belonging for individuals in Britain who are classified as neither Black nor White.¹ By virtue of lineage, those of 'mixed race', as they have come to be known, or *métis(se)*², as I wish to rename them, situate themselves within at least two specific and yet over-lapping historical narratives. While they can claim both indigenous and exogenous roots, this duality has implications for their constructions of identities. Stuart Hall suggests:

Cultural Identity . . . is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within the narratives of the past.

(1990: 225)

In gender-specific, family centred narratives of *métisse* women, the inherent tensions between being and becoming Black, being and becoming continental African or African Caribbean, and being English as opposed to British epitomize the psychosocial struggles between subjectivity and alterity. The specific lived and named realities of the *métisse* women in this study represent heightened forms of the angst facing all people in the Diaspora.³ Their experiences of multiple identities, which are necessarily contradictory, socioculturally constructed and essentialized, demand new paradigms for looking at citizenship and belonging.

The particular focus of my study is the interrogation of postmodern

Diaspora constructions of gender, selves and communities and paradoxical representations of 'race', nation, culture, and generation. My pioneering qualitative ethnographic work with *métisse* women in Bristol between 1990 and 1992 had six purposes. First was to formulate a new lexicon which more appropriately describes individuals who by virtue of birth and 'blood' do not fit neatly into preordained sociological and anthropological categories. Second, my intention was to create non-hierarchical discourses of difference which silence colour-blind ideologies. Third, I wished to address unique psychosocial dynamics between societally deemed White mothers and their Black daughters by adding a racialized dimension to previous feminist psychoanalytic work on mother/daughter relationships.⁴ Fourth, I intended to invoke the textual strategy of the *griot(te)* in order to acknowledge and work with inherent tensions in ethnography between orality and literacy. Fifth, I proposed to popularize usage of the term 'orphan consciousness' to describe the 'late modern' (Gilroy 1993b) plight of Diaspora sons and daughters. Finally, in the context of different family forms and communities, I intended to normalize the lived and complex cultural realities of *métis(se)* individuals and their families, thereby writing against previous psychopathological and monolithic interpretations of experiences.⁵

RE-NAMING AND RE-CLAIMING

At the moment, countless terms abound to describe 'mixed' people and usually reflect the prevailing political and social attitudes regarding racial and ethnic pluralism. As part of a constantly expanding inventory there are: 'mixed race', 'mixed parentage', 'mixed heritage', 'mixed blood', 'mixed racial descent', 'mixed descent', 'mixed origins', 'mixed ethnicity', 'multiethnic', 'dual heritage', 'multiracial', 'biracial', 'inter-racial', 'creole', 'mestizo' or 'mestiza' to the more derogatory and colloquial 'half caste', 'mulatto' or 'mulatta', 'half blood', 'half breed', 'hybrid', 'zebra', 'Heinz 57' and the list goes on. In England, currently the most popular terms appear to be 'mixed parentage' and 'dual heritage'. Tizard and Phoenix, the authors of *Black, White or Mixed Race?* (1993) define those of 'mixed parentage' as 'people with one White parent and one Black parent of African or Afro-Caribbean descent' (1993: 6). Although an improvement on 'mixed race' which legitimates and reifies the sociocultural construct 'race,' the term 'mixed parentage' fails in its presumption that the 'mixing' is first generation. Anthropologist Michael Banton has attempted to popularize the implicitly ambiguous 'mixed origins' which could describe any individual with a diverse background – i.e. English and Scottish – and not solely individuals who stem from a mixture of so-called different races. 'Dual heritage' pinpoints the convergence of different cultures and

ethnicities; however, the fact that it is de-racialized also broadens its potential relevance.

A complicating matter is the concomitant lack of consensus in Britain over who is Black, which has become an essentialized political term lacking both dynamism and fluidity and frequently confused with nationality (Modood 1988). The Census classification system clearly embodies this rigid fixity of terminology. The first time the government Census attempted to calculate the number of non-White people in Britain was 1991. Out of a total British population of 54.9 million people, just over 3 million or 5.5 per cent were then designated as ethnic minorities. The major 'ethnic' subheadings of the Census are Black-Caribbean, African, or Other; Asian-Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Other; Chinese; and Other. This classification system is flawed in its conflation of race, ethnicity and nationality and discriminatory in its homogenization of peoples from continental Africa and the Caribbean. This categorization scheme is most problematic when accounting for the ethnic origins of people of so-called mixed or multiple ethnicities, wherein there are two significant and interlocking factors at work. First, the prevailing and inconsistent social and political stance that anyone who does not look White is seen as Black impinges on identity construction for many multiethnic *métis(se)* people. Second, in specific temporal, spatial, and sociocultural contexts, self-identification for this group may or may not coincide with the aforementioned classification. They often negotiate several different identities depending on 'where they are' both physically and psychologically and with whom they are interacting. I will talk about the negotiation of the public and private later on. However, both Anne Wilson's study of mixed race children (1987) and my own research (Ifekwunigwe, forthcoming) on *métis(se)* adults and identity formation coincide with Okamura's notion of an ethnic identification which is by nature operationally situational (1981). In other words, on the night of the Census, for simplicity's sake, an individual may have reported themselves as Black-Caribbean (of which there are 500,000) when in fact they have one White English parent. In another context, that same individual could just as adamantly identify or be identified as *métis(se)* or at times even White.

Accordingly, presuming that individuals self-identify as 'Other' rather than as one of the eight other possible categories, this group comprises what the 1991 Census would classify as that nebulous 'Other' - Black-Other (178, 400); Asian-Other (197, 500) and more than likely, Other-Other (290, 200) (NEMDA 1991). In the county of Avon, out of a total population of 932,674, ethnic minorities make up less than 2 per cent of the population, and cumulatively the 'Others' - Black, Asian, and Other - comprise less than 1 per cent (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys 1991). In Bristol, the city where I conducted my ethnographic research, out of a total population of 376,146, ethnic minorities constitute 3.6 per cent and the 'Others' 1.4 per

cent (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys 1991). Hence, a representative sample of this group is actually not a very large number. Having said that, my ethnographic project included only twenty-five women and men with British or European mothers and continental African or African Caribbean fathers. They constituted the core group of participants in my two year long Bristol-based ethnographic doctoral research.

In his essay, 'Critical "Mixed Race"?', L.R. Gordon teases out six different claims in favour of what he calls 'a critical race theory premised upon mixed race identity' (1995: 388). A 'mixed race' standpoint, he suggests, is a necessary part of a racial discourse that is based on the premise of skin colour. If 'race' means 'pure' Black or White then there must be recognition of mixtures which are neither 'pure' Black nor 'pure' White. This acknowledgement of 'other' forms of 'race' in turn debunks the notion of racial purity by suggesting 'racelessness'. Mixture thus is an enigma that some choose politically to acknowledge as a category and others not. In practical terms, Gordon argues that 'mixed race' can lead to an anti-racist strategy. By diluting identities based on racial purity and mythical filial ancestry, 'mixed race' can point to the possibility of a 'raceless' future with a new and cultivated shared existential identity and reality.

What is needed is a term that does not glorify 'race' yet acknowledges the existence of racialism while also centring the lived manifestations of the sociocultural markers of ethnicity, class, gender, and generation. Similarly, Gilroy states:

In these circumstances, it may be easier to appreciate the utility of a response to racism that doesn't reify the concept of race, and to prize the wisdom generated by developing a series of answers to the power of ethnic absolutism that doesn't try to fix ethnicity absolutely but sees it instead as an infinite process of identity construction.

(Gilroy 1993b: 223)

I introduce the terms *métissage*, *métisse* for females and *métis* for males. My own operationalization of these concepts emerged after much reading and research as well as the result of a series of conversations with both a Senegalese Comparative Literature scholar (Diop 1993a) and a Senegalese cultural critic (Koubaka 1993). *Métissage* is a concept which is generally associated with France and French speaking Canada, and certain Francophone African and Caribbean countries (Marquet 1983; Lionnet 1989; Burley *et al.* 1992). The English translation of *métis(se)* which appears in the second edition of the Collins French Dictionary (1987) is 'half-caste', 'half-breed' or 'mongrel'. However, it has been re-appropriated by others including myself in much the same way as 'hapa', a derogatory term with Hawaiian etymological origins and describing people who are half native Hawaiian or Asian and half White, has been reinscribed by a politicized

group of students at the University of California, Berkeley who stem from the aforementioned backgrounds.

In the French African context, in its conventional masculine or feminine forms, *métis(se)* refers to someone who by virtue of parentage, embodies two or more world views, 'A Euro-African' to use Leopold Senghor's term (Marquet 1983). However, in Senegal, *métis(se)* is not exclusively a 'racial' term used to differentiate individuals with one French parent and one Senegalese parent from those who are 'pure' Senegalese. *Métis(se)* could also pertain to people with parents from different ethnic groups within a country (i.e. Yoruba and Ibo) or from different countries (i.e. Senegal and the Congo). One can go one step further with this definition to include the postmodern 'cultural' *métis(se)* or *métis(se) culturel*. This describes anyone who by virtue of travel, education, and experience represents an amalgamated 'hybrid' identity. Historian Vovelle also uses the term *métis culturel* which for him is synonymous with 'cultural broker', 'traffic officers' and 'bricoleurs' (1982). In the words of Trinh Minh-Ha, 'the place of my hybridity is also the place of my identity' (1992: 29).

On the other hand, *métissage* is a mind set or a newfangled shorthand way to talk about the now universal constructs: oscillation, contradiction, paradox, hybridity, creolization, mestizaje, 'blending and mixing', polyglot, heteroglossia, transnationalities, multiple reference points, multiculturalism, so-called multiraciality, 'belonging nowhere and everywhere,' and endogenous and exogenous roots. For me, *métissage* is also that prescriptive antidote to Diaspora angst. It is about the process of opening up hybrid spaces and looking at the sociocultural dynamics of 'race', gender, ethnicity, nation, class, and sexuality and their relationship to the mechanics of power. This is quite similar to Appiah's definition of postmodernism: 'Postmodernism can be seen, then as a new way of understanding the multiplication of distinctions that flow from the need to clear oneself a space; the need that drives the underlying dynamic of cultural modernity' (1992: 145). Lionnet refers to *métissage* as 'the site of undecidability and indeterminacy, where solidarity becomes the fundamental principle of political action against hegemonic languages' (1989: 6).

Métissage is a concept which at its best operates simultaneously and differentially at the level of the individual, the family, the community, and the state. *Métissage* works within the realm of what Goffman (1959) would refer to as 'front stage' and 'back stage' or at what Anzaldúa would refer to as the 'borderlands' where life exists on borders and margins with a shifting multiplicity of identities (1987). Barth (1969) would also situate *métissage* at the 'ethnic boundary' where according to Wallman (1979), one can differentiate between 'us' and 'them'. Wherever one locates *métissage*, what is most significant is that:

the notion of crossroads as a special location where unforeseen, magical things can happen might be an appropriate conceptual vehicle for rethinking the dialectical tension between cultural roots and cultural routes, between the pace constituted through and between places and the space marked out by flows. The irreducibly diagonal concerns that grow from the desire to take diaspora intercultural seriously suggest that the image of the crossroads might contribute something to rethinking the relationship between time and space in modernity and the narratives of nationality and location it generates.

(Gilroy 1993a: 193)

METHODOLOGY

I met project participants myself along the first year of my ethnographic journey, through friends, acquaintances, teachers, social workers, artists and other professionals or through other participants themselves. The small size of my sample does not make it representative in an empirical sense. However, even with just twenty-five respondents certain important themes emerged which contribute to previous, more recent important sociological, psychological, and anthropological British research by Sue Benson (1981) on mixed race families, by Anne Wilson (1987) on mixed race children, by Yasmin Alibhai-Brown and Anne Montague on mixed race relationships (1992) and by Barbara Tizard and Ann Phoenix on mixed parentage young people (1993). In addition, qualitative social scientists attempting similar naturalistic analyses can benefit from my recommendations and conclusions.⁶

I collected the original narratives in Bristol via open-ended tape-recorded interviews, between 1990 and 1992. The age of the primary participants, both men and women, ranged from 13 to 45. With the exception of two native Bristolian women, everyone I spoke with had been born and had come of age elsewhere – Jamaica, the United States, London, the north of England, Liverpool, Wales, Nigeria, Birmingham, and so on. They had found their way to Bristol either for work, education, or for personal reasons and their current subject positions can only be articulated in light of the city of Bristol's previous involvement with the slave trade. This unspoken association mirrors the uneasy relationship other English-African Diaspora constituents have with the former Empire; 'They see their place in the metropolis as the inevitable consequence of an earlier act of trespass and transgression' (Oguibe 1994: xx). Similarly:

It starts from recognition of the African diaspora's peculiar position as 'step-children' of the West and of the extent to which our imaginations are conditioned by an enduring proximity to regimes of racial terror ...

it seeks deliberately to exploit the distinctive qualities of perception that DuBois identified long ago as 'double consciousness'.

(Gilroy 1993a: 103)

In the introduction to their book, Tizard and Phoenix report that, at present, 'nearly 30 per cent of people (27 per cent for men and 28 per cent for women) of African Caribbean origin who are under the age of thirty who are married, or cohabitating have a White partner' (1993: 1). The fact that this figure excludes continental Africans limits its utility. According to the 1991 Census, there are 212,000 continental Africans in the United Kingdom. How do their marital and co-habitation patterns compare with those in the African-Caribbean communities? Alibhai-Brown and Montague quote a 1985 figure from the last Office of Population Censuses and Labour Force Survey: '27 per cent of Black British husbands are in mixed marriages and 14 per cent of Black women' (1992: 13). However, the ambiguity of the term 'Black British' leads one to wonder whether individuals who were born either in the Caribbean or continental Africa are included in this sample. Regarding children, Coleman (1985) estimates that of all the people of mixed White and African-Caribbean origin, more than 50 per cent are under the age of 10. This figure makes the work that my colleagues and I have completed all the more significant for the mental health and well-being of future generations. One can surmise that more African-Caribbean and continental African men than women engage in mixed relationships of which children are frequently the product. Nevertheless, the number of women of continental African or African-Caribbean origin mothering children with British or European men is rising in response to shifts in social attitudes, and the economic and educational mobility of Black women among other factors.

The majority of people I spoke with were the product of a union between a White 'majority' female and a Black 'minority' male. One can explain this in terms of gender politics and economics. Historically, across cultures and classes, it was generally the man who was mobile and the woman who remained at home (Fryer 1984; Walvin 1973; Patterson 1963). Respondents' fathers came from Nigeria, Ghana, Jamaica and Tanzania or were African-American and their mothers were Irish, English, Scottish and German. Nigerian men followed by Ghanaian men fathered the most children in my particular sample. There was one woman whose mother was Trinidadian and her father White American. Her parents had met while he was stationed at an American military base outside London.⁷

Participation in this project consisted of respondents providing me with a series of tape-recorded testimonies about their childhoods, gender politics, racial and ethnic identity, class background, nationalism, family, sexuality, creativity, parenting, and racism, among a variety of topics. I acquired separate notebooks for each storyteller and I used them to record

my responses to each session as well as to keep track of all the questions generated from each listening. By the time the edited testimonies appeared as text I had listened to them in full four times. The first time was immediately after each session. While their voices were still singing in my head I formulated questions that were in direct response to their testimonies. These questions would serve as a guide, not as the basis, for the next storytelling session. I repeated this approach until the participants decided that they had finished testifying and concluded that we had reached the core or the marrow – what was/is significant to each one of them in their everyday lives. I refer to this interview technique as the ‘artichoke method’. The ethnographer has to peel off several layers of skin before the heart of the matter is revealed.

Upon finishing the sessions I listened to every single testimony again for insights and patterns. The third listening entailed labour-intensive transcription, which was at times encumbered by regionally specific accents. The final listening was for clarification and verification of specific segments of testimonies. It was at this final stage that I realized that I had far too much rich and evocative material to work with and that I would have to wittle my original focus down to one or more key themes. From the first to the fourth listening, I maintain that so much was lost in committing oral performance to tape and then translating the tape to text – the cadence and rhythm of the men and women’s regionally specific accents, as they spoke to me, the visual beauty carved out in detail on their ‘Euro-African’ faces, as well as the cultural medleys manifesting themselves in both their living spaces and their sociocultural worlds.

When I began the process of writing, I confirmed for myself what I had suspected earlier – there was no way that I could adequately do justice to all twenty-five life stories. Including them all in the final ‘polythesis’ which ethnographic film-maker David MacDougall (1993) refers to as ‘an interplay of voices’ – and I add ideas – would have been a lengthy process and one that would ultimately have resulted in my truncating their experiences. I tried working with fifteen, then nine and finally six. The task of selecting the final six was not an easy one. All twenty-five were eloquent and engaging storytellers. Among a larger cast of nineteen stars, the ones I had to leave behind included Andrew, a polylingual Anglo-Ghanaian; Twilight from a multigenerational so-called multi-racial Jamaican family; Harmony, an extremely talented and wise-beyond-her-years 15-year-old Anglo-Ghanaian poet; and three very insightful women who were now social workers but as children had been adopted by White English middle-class families – Anglo-Nigerian Zaynab, Scots-Nigerian Claudia and Anglo-Ghanaian Sharon, who had grown up completely in care in a socially isolated children’s home in the north of England.

In order to highlight the problematic racialized relationship between mothers and daughters, the final polythesis featured the narratives of six women – two sets of sisters and two women who had grown up in care with what I refer to as mother surrogates. Two of the women were raised in Liverpool in the midst of the then burgeoning Black Power Movement by a working-class Irish mother and without their Bajan (from Barbados) father. The other two sisters were brought up in Nigeria during the turbulent postcolonial 1960s and neocolonial 1970s by middle-class parents – in particular, a Northumberland (English) mother and a Yoruba (Nigerian) father. The other two women, one Anglo-Nigerian and the other Deutsch-Tanzanian, spent their formative years in care in middle-class, all White English or Welsh children's homes outside London and Cardiff, respectively. They were each socialized by 'mother surrogates' prior to the explosive debates about welfare policy as it pertains to transracial fosterage, placement, and adoption. As a Nigerian-Irish-English-Guyanese anthropologist, my own auto-ethnographic narrative which unfolds in Nigeria, Lancashire, and Los Angeles, California, is also interwoven with their stories to create a Bakhtinian 'dialogic' patchwork.⁸ In so doing, I purposely challenge conventional ethnography and tackle phenomenological and epistemological concerns associated with prior conceptualizations of Diaspora, 'race,' nation, generation, and identity. Consequently, as insider and outsider, I blur the boundaries between subjective experience and objective social scientific inquiry.

INVOKING THE ORAL TRADITION: MÉTISSE WOMEN AS GRIOTTES

I argue that the ways in which the women I worked with tell their stories are as newfangled *griottes*. Their memories preserve and reinterpret senses of past cultures, while also providing scathing sociopolitical commentary and cultural critiques of contemporary English-African Diasporic life. *Griotte*, as it appears in the feminine form, is another term I have re-appropriated. It is a West African, Senegalese – that is Wolof – term which describes a traditional story-teller. However, though they may not be actually named *griots*, most African cultures have a specific term to describe someone who functions as tribal poet, story-teller, historian or genealogist and whose role is to recount culturally specific and provocative parables of daily life (Jegade 1994). Moreover, these definitions will have different operationalized meanings in different cultural contexts and more importantly at different historical moments. For example, in traditional Senegalese society these individuals, usually men, were part of a caste, were generally attached to royal families and learned the craft of story-telling or 'praise singing' on an apprenticeship basis. However, with

the impact of social change the *griot's* traditional role has changed. Membership in this group no longer precludes specific training handed down from one generation to the next. There are now what one could only call '*faux griots*'. That is one can now call oneself a *griot* without having received specialized training from an elder *griot*. Upon hearing of a ceremony or public celebration taking place which will honour the members of an elite family, an enterprising individual would simply approach the head of the family and for a certain amount of money offer to sing the praises of the family in much the same manner as a court jester or entertainer (Diop 1993b). Furthermore, scholars of African popular culture – most notably music – have also broadened the usage of *griot* to describe the performance styles of artists such as the Senegalese Baaba Maal, Malian Salif Keita, or Alpha Blondie from Cote d'Ivoire. With the exception of a community of women musicians in Mali, women performers are generally not recognized in this genre. In light of this gendered over-sight, my research seeks to redress women's invisibility by placing women in the role of *griotte*.

WHITE EQUALS ENGLISH?: AKOUSA'S TESTIMONY

While I was in the midst of conducting the initial research between 1990–1992, there was an ad campaign for the sweets 'Smarties'. Billboards and sweet wrappers read: 'Find out the real secret to the white Smarties.' The answer was: 'They are white all the way through . . . they are made with white chocolate'. An analogous assumption would be that only people fitting the prototypic phenotypic description of a White person can be English. Everyone else will have to make do with British. In addition, the former is a citizen and the latter a mere subject. For example, Oguibe states: 'That one is born in Hackney, London of parents born in Hackney, London themselves is never sufficient proof of belonging for people of African descent in Britain' (Oguibe 1994: xvii).

Akousa

Akousa is Irish-Bajan and grew up in Liverpool amid a strong African-Caribbean community and with her Irish mother and her brother and sister. She is a Rasta⁹ and yet not everyone sees her as a Rasta. She sees herself as a 'light-skinned' Black woman, and yet not everyone sees her as Black. Here she describes some contradictory English attitudes towards 'race', colour and citizenship:

I think at the end of the day, White society has never accepted me. They've seen me as a contamination to their stock. Diseased person, and even worst than havin' two Black parents, worse than even that. If you come to extermination, we would probably go first. Nazi Germany.

That's the sort of vibe I get off White people. With Black people generally, I know they have accepted me as I am. I've been part of their community. I've been raised with Caribbean culture. . . . I don't consider myself half of any ting. I cannot be half. When people call me that I say, 'Do you see Black on one side and White on the other?' If they call me 'Coloured', I say, 'You see my stripes?' Like I've been coloured in or somethin'. There was this White woman on the coach one day and she said to me, 'If you put a straight wig on you, you'd be White. You'd look White.' Friggin' hell. Man, I may be light, but you can't get away from the fact that I do have strong African features. Even if you did stick a wig on me, it surely would look strange. And what makes her think I would want to wear a wig in the first place, and that I want to look like a White person? Rather than lookin' the way I look, which I was quite happy with. You have a lot of White people tryin' to get you to change to look White. You want to get rid of this African look that you've got. I find that really weird. That was another sort of problem that I had with White people.

The other thing that they used to do to me which used to really make me cringe was they'd been on holiday to Costa del Sol and they've got their sun tans, and this was when I was workin' at Marks and Spencers. They love the scene of a light-skinned Black person so they can come up to you and say 'Look, I'm darker than you.' Then, I'd go, 'Well yours only last three weeks, mine last forever, love . . .'

Akousa's commentary brings to the forefront what I refer to as the social chameleon phenomenon: *Métis(se)* people with so-called 'ambiguous' phenotypes, i.e. very fair complexions; blue, green or hazel eyes; more 'pointed/sharp' facial features; light coloured or straight hair, who can 'change colour' from one social context to the next. Here, Akousa has described herself or has been described as *métis(se)*, White and Black.

IS IT ALL IN THE BLOOD?: RUBY'S AND YEMI'S STORIES

The founder of the American Negro Academy, Alexander Crummell, defines a 'race' as 'a compact homogeneous population of one blood ancestry and lineage' (1862). While Paul Gilroy refers to 'race' as 'kinship where . . . the family is the approved natural site where ethnicity and racial culture are reproduced . . . and in this authoritarian pastoral patriarchy, women are usually identified as the agents and means of this process of cultural reproduction' (1993a: 195-7). These two definitions serve my analytical purposes well although operationalizing them within the familial contexts I researched produces a major paradox. Apparently, White English women are mothering Black British children.

Ruby

As previously mentioned, many factors influence the ways in which White women accomplish the task of bringing up so-called Black children. The circumstances surrounding the birth of the *métis(se)* child, the prevailing attitudes towards mixed relationships, the class background all affect the uniqueness of experience. Ruby is Anglo-Nigerian and was brought up in a children's home outside London until she left at age 16, even though both her birth mother and other blood relatives were alive. Their rationale for placing her there was they wanted her to 'have a proper growing up experience.' There was an overwhelming shame surrounding her birth. Her father was married and Black African, which made it impossible for both Ruby's birth mother and grandmother to fully accept her. However, like a benevolent missionary, her grandmother would visit Ruby under the guise of 'Auntie,' taking care of her material needs, buying her presents, taking her and her mates on outings and so on. However, as the following narrative reveals, this benevolence did not include acknowledging Ruby as a 'blood relative':

So I became very adept at hiding. I was sixteen or seventeen – quite big but I had actually lived quite a sheltered life. That period of time with my Gran brought out very much to the fore what her attitude to me was and why it was like that. It was 80 per cent because of the colour of my skin; the other 20 per cent was the fact that I was an illegitimate child. For my grandmother and her generation, that was quite a shameful thing. But had I been a White illegitimate child it would have been very different. So as I say 80 per cent because of colour – she didn't want to be associated in the blood line with a Black grand-daughter. She was ashamed of me and her neighbours didn't know that I was related to her. She never had any photographs of me or anything like that.

She was selling her house at the time so there were all sorts of people coming to the house. I remember this awful period where people would come to the house and I would do crazy things: do things like hide under the bed, in the wardrobe, hide in the bushes, in the garden all the time. It was very important that they didn't see me there so they didn't ask any odd questions about who I was and therefore embarrass my grandmother. That was very odd and really sort of sharpened up the conflict that I had with my grandmother, really up until the time of her death, that in a sense never really got resolved. It became clear to me that she was ashamed of the colour of my skin more than anything else.

What Ruby clearly needed was a place to belong, not a place to hide. Her grandmother's public embracing of Ruby as a legitimate blood relative would have facilitated the process of self-incorporation that to this day Ruby has not accomplished.

Yemi

Yemi, whose mother is English and father Yoruba from Nigeria, grew up in Nigeria in a middle-class family where both her English and Nigerian relations accepted her. However, her troubled relationship with her mother drove her to attempt suicide at age 13 and transformed her kinship relationship with her father from daughter to honorary son:

By the time I was 13, my mother and I started to have very serious head-on collisions. . . . The long and short of all this is I attempted suicide around that time. She liked to exclude me. She tried all sorts of things. She played the piano. She would be playing the piano downstairs in the living room, this musical. She had a big thick book of songs you could sing. Some were hymns; some were sea shanties. All sorts of different things we could sing. We'd come down and start singing and she'd say to me, 'Go away, you're spoiling the song with your voice.' I wouldn't be trying to spoil the song. Maybe I was singing too loud or off key. Who cares. So on a particular Saturday, I searched the whole house for what I was going to take to kill myself, because I had had enough. I felt she didn't really love me. . . . Everything I could find I took. . . . They were supposed to be out for hours. . . . When they came back I was so shocked and I thought YEEH they're back already and I'm not dead. . . . I told her, 'Oh you idiot,' she said, 'Get inside the car. You're nothing but trouble you.' She put the other ones in the house. Got inside the car and drove me to our family doctor. An old man called Dr Renshewe, who had been our doctor since I was a little little girl. He took me quickly to his own bedroom gave me an emetic to make me sick. He gave me some salt or soap. I don't even know what it was; it tasted like soap. I was sick. I told him, 'She doesn't love me. She'd be much happier if I wasn't there.'

The result of this was that she had very little to do with me after that. My Dad took me every evening when he came back to my uncle's house. Every single evening. When he was going out, he didn't actually leave me with her ever again. He took me whenever he went to my uncle's. He took me when he was going to his farm. He took me when he was going to Ijebu or when he was going on one of his trips. My Dad and I became very close which was very good. My mother and I can't actually get along very well. It's now that I see her that I realize I'm not the crazy one when I was young. I was in no way disturbed. She's the nutter. She's the difficult one and picks favourites. It's not reasonable to have more than one child if you have this mentality of picking favourites and having the others as horrible. Also, because of this change with my father, I got very close to my cousins. So, I am closer to my cousins than my other sisters, very, very close. They are all boys. So, I now get to know how to speak Yoruba, Yoruba morals, the life itself better than my

sisters. Ostensibly this was because I was actually flung out by my mother, or stepped away from my mother. Then all of these things were accessible to me.

What Yemi has to say about her family of origin does not really differ from family dynamics which play themselves out in contexts which are not *métis(se)*. As such, Yemi succeeds in normalizing *métis(se)* family life and strife. However, her narrative is also in keeping with a prevailing theme which is the impress of the White English mother or the White English mother surrogate in the transmission of White English culture in all its variations. Even if the Black father is physically present, as was the case in Yemi's family, White English cultural codes are frequently reified at the expense of Black African or Caribbean referents in all their complex manifestations. From linguistic silences to dietary omissions, more often than not it is Black/African/Caribbean culture which is subverted. The privileging of White English culture in *métis(se)* households has serious dialectical implications for *métisse* identity formation since it is a racialized, essentialized and socially constructed Black/African identity that society-at-large imposes. In Yemi's case, her squabble with her mother puts her in a position wherein she now has access to Yoruba culture which had previously been perceived as male and from which she had been excluded.

ON ADDITIVE BLACKNESS: TESTIMONIES FROM SIMILOLA, SARAH, AND BISI

The well-intentioned political mandate encouraging *métis(se)* people to identify solely as Black renders their White parent invisible, but not forgotten. As aforementioned, until recently the White parent was the mother. The six women featured here all have White English, German, or Irish birth mothers. Akousa, Sarah, Bisi and Yemi were raised by their biological mothers. The other two women, Ruby and Similola, were raised by White English women, who were the matrons in the children's homes where they spent their formative years. Consequently, their first experiences of gender and of what it means to be a woman are witnessed through their White caretakers. Yet society tells them that they must deny this reality in the name of an ill-founded racist system.

The push by Black and implicitly White people to encourage *métis(se)* people to identify as Black is supposed to provide what *griotte* Bisi refers to as 'protective colouration'. Actual biological origins and cultural realities have little bearing in a society that discriminates on the basis of phenotype. With the criteria for Black membership as limited as they are, society at large generally 'sees' *métis(se)* people only as Black. What one's family and life experiences have been as well as the cultural constitution of one's household account for very little in a racially confused world.

Aligning themselves with Black people can provide a cushion against the inevitable blows of racialism. However, what this recommendation ignores is the indelible impress of individual circumstance which makes the process of identifying with Blackness, Black people and Black cultures painful, mystifying and gradual for many *metis(se)* women and men. Black children, that is with two Black biological parents, who have grown up in care, in transracial adoption situations, or in predominantly White suburbs, also struggle with these issues.

For many *metis(se)* people who grow up in predominantly White English environments, this form of Black-washing also threatens to erode a substantial part of their psychosocial foundation, which at the contested time is either White or *metis(se)*. Psychologists refer to this process as 'negriscence' or coming to terms with one's Blackness or being Black (Russell *et al.* 1992). Though this model is a cumulative or developmental one, its typology of Black traits seems to suggest that there is an essential Blackness which *metis(se)* people can strive towards but never completely attain. This paradigm also does not stress the qualitative starting point of the journey. I refer to the process of coming to terms with one's Blackness as Additive Blackness. That is, the person starts with her or his foundation and builds forward, without having to sever ties with their often White English roots. From their own emblematic experiences, the *métisse griottes* I worked with speak against the generalizing and subjugating tendencies of much of the discourses on Black people in the English-African Diaspora. Their collective voices demand a revision of the British double caste system which binds Black people both economically and racially.

Similola

Similola is Deutsch-Tanzanian. She grew up in a Welsh children's home where she was made to feel that being White and Whiteness were the ideal standards by which she should measure her self-worth. In the long run, she knew she could never be completely White and being White-identified always seemed to lead to disappointment and rejection for her. Here she describes a strategy she devised for coping with her ambivalence associated with Blackness and Whiteness:

I decided, I'm going to have a Black day or a White day. My White day I was . . . I'd dress differently for starters. I'd usually wear jeans on my White days. I used to wear jeans because I thought it's more acceptable amongst White students to wear jeans. It seemed like kind of a White uniform in a way and you didn't see many Black girls wearing jeans at that time. So, I'd wear jeans, and whatever else – the bits and pieces that go with it – t-shirts, whatever. Then, on my Black days, I'd

wear flowery skirts and very bright clothes and people used to say 'God' and I actually got to quite enjoy it. It sounds very silly at that time. I'm not sure if it affected my behaviour in any way. At that phase, I was more outgoing and I tended to be a bit more – to let more of myself show, and not be so self-conscious. Because it was my Black day and I'd think: Oh, I can get away with these things in front of White people because they don't expect Black people to act like them so I can be a bit more outrageous than I normally would. In the end, I couldn't cope with both of these identities. I'd decide the night before. Not necessarily one day... sometimes it would be like I'd enjoy my Black day so much on one Monday and I'd think... it must have been all psychological, I don't think so totally, but I used to notice people treated me differently as well and they reacted towards me in a different way.

To me it was something to do with acknowledging my Blackness. To me, I thought, I can't be Black if I don't wear bright coloured clothes. I had this period of going round dressed all in black clothes and I thought if I wore black clothes all the time I wouldn't be noticed. It wasn't like now where people wear black clothes all the time. It was the time when black wasn't even vaguely fashionable. It was only worn for funerals and that was it. I got into this wearing black clothes thing thinking I'd be totally unnoticed. My whole wardrobe was full of black clothes. To me it was an even greater step to suddenly switch into really bright – 'cause I'd got so comfortable with black. Even though people do notice you it's what you yourself feel. I used to feel that when I wore black I was totally insignificant and totally unnoticed. It suited me at that time to be like that and to just fade into the background and not be noticed for any reason. The giant leap into brightness for me was so huge that I used to dare myself. I'd go into shops and buy very, very, bright coloured clothing and then dare myself in the evening to put it on the next day. I'd say, 'God, are you gonna wear that tomorrow or not?' Sometimes I would, sometimes I wouldn't. Now, I don't even, I don't want to try and dress in a Black way, just because I want to identify with being Black. 'Cause to me now that's so superficial anyway, there is so much more to it than that and I don't feel the need for that kind of thing anymore. People have to accept me for what I am and if they don't it's just tough.

The way Similola describes her Black days/White days scheme is similar to the ways in which *métis(se)* people who are 'trying on' being Black for the first time oscillate uncomfortably between the two. Clothes supposedly being an extension or reflection of one's inner self, this binary dress scheme points to the notion that one's appearances determines the way one is categorized and there are essentialized Black and White ways of dressing/being.

Sarah

Irish-Bajan Sarah is Akousa's younger sister and her recollections of her childhood and adolescence in Liverpool are remarkably different from Akousa's. Recollections of her life are interwoven with vivid descriptions of the houses she and her family lived in and they become veritable signposts along her journey. At one stage she recalls the way in which she found solidarity in difference and marginality through her friendship with two other *métisse* girls:

My friends at school were: I had one friend who was White, and then she moved to this new housing estate that they built. I had one friend who was Indian, Esther Pamjit. She was really big, very big. She was mixed race as well. She was half Indian and half English. Her Mum was English. She had this hair that was really thick that went really down to her bum – really thick, thick, thick head of hair. She used to always have it in a thick plait going down her back. She's really big and she's quite like a tomboy. Very quite masculine; she wasn't you know like – 'Huh ha hoh' [feminine gesture] – she was very – 'Uhhh' [masculine gesture]. Then, I used to have another friend, let me see if I can remember her name . . . Her father was Nigerian and her mother was English. I can't remember her name, maybe it'll come back. I seen her when I was in Liverpool. I hadn't seen her in years. Ngozi that was it, Ngozi. She was really tall. Like somebody who's too tall for their age. Ngozi, and she was big as well. And I was the smallest one amongst them. So we used to hang around together. 'Cause we were all just – we didn't fit in. Do you know what I mean? All three of us were from mixed race families, and the three of us were all funny shapes and sizes for what little girls are supposed to be. So we used to kind of hang around and find solace with each other.

Like most of the *griottes'* identity narratives, Sarah's testimonies are framed in terms of turning points – leaving school, first love relationship, getting married, having children, etc. However, in light of what I refer to as Additive Blackness, the awakening of Black consciousness is also a milestone that each of the women reaches at different stages and in remarkably different ways. Here Sarah talks about the beginnings of her emergent Black identity:

At home, Black Power was just comin' in and my sister went to the corner shop and seen her first Afro and came home and said, 'Oh, I've seen some Afros in the shop. Oh, they're really brilliant.' These group of women with Afros, she's sayin' how brilliant they were. At home, we were startin' this awareness of Black power and Black identity. We always related to bein' Black, because all of the signals we got from when we were growin' up, we were nothin' else. We definitely were not White.

Even when we were growin' up, my Mum would get angry with us, she always used to call us 'Black bastards'. It was always that we were 'Black' this or 'Black' that. When the Black Power started comin' along and all the positiveness that brought at that time was like brilliant. Like somethin' we could really feel good about.

Bisi

Racism is most difficult to swallow when it is dished out by members of one's own family. Here, Bisi, who is Yemi's younger sister, talks about how she coped with her own White English mother's racism:

A lot of the modern consciousness I have of being African and being Black, which is not the same thing, is probably in spite of my mother. Being Black in the sense that I feel now, that would be in spite of her. It's not something she agrees with. But you must remember that when she went to Nigeria she was in her twenties. She spent her formative years there not here. She has very little knowledge of how racism operates and how it affects people – American, Caribbean and African. The sort of feeling that there is the unity there, consciousness. One can get something from it and one owes something to it. She would say things like, 'Why do you want to put yourself on the side of those who are feeling victimized? Put yourself on the winning side.' She would stress this to us very much, that we have an English family and English roots, and some heritage from them as well which is bannered. It's funny though, when I started relaxing about it and owning that there is quite a lot of English in me, basically. When I could come up with that admission, then that's almost when I started making Mbari [an Ibo art form primarily practised in Eastern Nigeria – the artist erects shrines to placate the Earth goddess] and really finding that yes, there is a lot of English, but there is also a lot of African.

When I left Bristol in 1992, Bisi gave me an original pastels self-portrait as a going away present (illustrated here, Figure 13.1). In it her hands are each noticeably painted a different colour – one brown and the other white. Her hands are clutching at her mouth and at her eye seemingly searching for some recognition. This piece is a powerful emblem for all *métis(se)* people who try to make sense of their place in society. Here Bisi has re-framed the negativity that usually dominates most depictions of our lived experiences.

CONCLUSION

In the ethnographic contexts of families and communities, I have demonstrated the different ways in which cultural memories shape contradictory