



Figure 13.1 *Untitled*: Folake Shoga

meanings of 'race', gender, generation and cultures for women in Britain who by virtue of birth transgress multiple boundaries and challenge essentialized constructions of identities, place and belonging. Their narratives of identities demonstrate the hierarchical and at times paradoxical ranking of the essentialized constructs and concepts of Blackness, Whiteness, Englishness, Caribbeanness and Africanness in English society. Their remembered lived experiences also show us how *métis(se)* people must

manage, negotiate and interpret these paradoxes in their everyday lives. Overall, the *griottes'* remembrances, located in both colonial and post-colonial contexts, shed light on the complexities of African and African-Caribbean Diasporic social and cultural life too often distorted by historians. Their transnational identities represent both their family constellations as well as their individual experiences. These transnationalities challenge the very notion of the English-African Diaspora as a static and unitary formation which obviates cultural, national, ethnic, regional, and class differences, among others and, of course, ignores inter-racial collaborations.

The African Diaspora(s) in general and the English-African Diaspora in particular remain fertile ground for the cultivation of an orphan consciousness. An orphan consciousness emerges when one does not grow up with one's natal parents or kin – in this case 'Mama Africa'. In a metaphorical sense, one's image of that person can then only be an imaginary construction, such as the cultural imposition of an essentialized Pan-Africanism by some of Africa's displaced daughters and sons (Asante 1988). The Negritude movement, Rastafari, Garveyism and 'Americocentrism' are particular examples of orphan consciousness in that they do not recognize the significant influences of multiple lineages and fail to differentiate between the real and the authentic. In an Amerocentric perspective: 'Contemporary Africa as I have said appears nowhere, the newly invented criteria for judging authenticity are supplied instead by a restored access to an imagined, though not imaginary, idea of African forms and codes' (Gilroy 1993a: 197).

I am contending that the six featured *métisse* women speak against an orphan consciousness. By naming their gendered, class-bound, regionally specific and generation-centred experiences as those of *métisse* women, the *griottes'* identity narratives, which are both fictitious and real (Martin, 1995), become political testimonies. The *métisse* women re-insert themselves as active subjects, creating their own place in the re-telling of English-African Diaspora histories. A mosaic of cultures and histories is emblematic of their multiple reference points. This multicultural and diachronic scheme reflects the complex realities of all postcolonial, transnational people in the English-African Diaspora.¹⁰ Appiah's description of identities mirrors this perspective:

Identities are complex and multiple and grow out of a history of changing responses to economic, political, and cultural forces, almost always in opposition to other identities . . . that they flourish despite what I earlier called our 'misrecognition' of their origins; despite that is, their roots in myths and lies.

(Appiah 1992: 178)

Akousa, Sarah, Ruby, Similola, Yemi, and Bisi are all products of history, the by-products of colonialism and imperialism. Their fathers are from

Nigeria, and Barbados, formerly under British colonial rule, as well as Tanzania, formerly under the auspices of Germany. Their mothers are Irish, English, and German. The unresolved postcolonial struggles between Africa and Europe, Blackness and Whiteness, Black man and White woman are all permanently inscribed on the faces of these *métisse* daughters.

In closing, I will give Anglo-Nigerian film-maker Ngozi Onwurah the final word. This is an excerpt from the autobiographical film piece 'The Body Beautiful' wherein she declares her allegiance to her White English mother. In this scene, she and her mother are lying naked in bed together, pink and brown skins mingle, youthful and aging bodies lie side by side:

A child is made in its parents' image. But to a world that sees only in Black and White, I was made only in the image of my father. Yet, she has moulded me, created the curves and contours of my life, coloured the innermost details of my being. She has fought for me, protected me with every painful crooked bone in her body. She lives inside of me and cannot be separated. I may not be reflected in her image, but my mother is mirrored in my soul. I am my mother's daughter for the rest of my life.
(Onwurah 1990)

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I extend boundless gratitude to all the *griot(tes)* (men and women) who generously gave their time and retrieved painful and pleasant memories in order to make this organic project possible.

NOTES

- 1 In the primary text, the referents 'Black' and 'White' appear in italics to emphasize the fact that 'racial' categories are not biological concepts but rather social and cultural constructs which are frequently negotiated, re-invented, re-defined and intrinsically related to the dynamics of power and prestige. Ethnic affiliations and national identities are constructed in the same manner and are equally as problematic. However, in the interest of simplifying my argument, I have not italicized these concepts. In England, the locus of my current research, there is very little consensus as to where actual demarcations of the 'racial' (Black and White) end and the ethnic (eg. English, Jamaican, or Nigerian) and the national (eg. British, Caribbean, or African) begin. For an example of this, look at the 1991 Census categories for 'ethnicity' wherein in fact, 'race', ethnicity and nationality have been conflated. This lexical confusion makes the task of identities-construction a daunting project for *métis(se)* individuals in Britain.
- 2 *Métis(se)* (*métis* – masculine and *métisse* – feminine) is the French-African term I have chosen to describe project participants all of whom have British or European mothers and continental African or African Caribbean fathers. I will be discussing the genesis of this term at greater length in the primary text.

- 3 I write against the African Diaspora as static monolith notion propagated by so many Afrocentric/cultural nationalist scholars who situate the African Diaspora exclusively in its *locus classicus* – the transatlantic slave trade. Instead, I advocate conceptualizing the African Diaspora(s) as a dynamic, interlocking and interdependent network of specific and culture-bound geopolitical spheres, each of whose constituencies are sensitive to and impacted by the particular nation-states of which they are a part – i.e. the English–African Diaspora, the French–African Diaspora, the United States–African Diaspora, and so on. In other words, each of the African Diaspora communities has common cultural roots emanating from the African continent. However, these geographical and cultural groupings represent diverse outcomes to a common heritage of slavery, colonialism, ‘neo-postcolonialism’ and racism. These differences must be located in appropriate historical, social, cultural and political contexts that do not erupt simply in the either/or, margin to centre, push/pull dichotomies characterizing so much of the migration literature.
- 4 See Scheper-Hughes (1992), Chodorow (1978); Ruddick (1989).
- 5 The broad scope of the area I have carved out for myself dictates that any paper I write on my work devotes more time and space to the critique of and explicaton of terms, methodology and concepts than would ordinarily be necessary where there is both consensus and a glut of directly relevant primary and secondary source material.
- 6 There are qualitative and not quantitative gender differences in the degree of marginalization of people from the aforementioned backgrounds. That is, *métis* men and boys and *métisse* women and girls all seem to have the same degree of difficulty finding a niche for themselves in society. However, it is how these difficulties play themselves out differently in the lives of females and males and not the degree of difficulty. In contrast, Tizard and Phoenix’s psychosocial study of the experiences of racism of mixed parentage young people found specific gender and class differences, with males and working-class young people experiencing more racist taunts than females and those from middle-class backgrounds (1993).
- 7 Hence, Black continental African and African-Caribbean men sailed into the ports of Liverpool and Cardiff, had relationships and sometimes fell in love and settled down with local White English and Welsh women (Little 1948; Collins 1957; Fryer 1984). In fact, in Liverpool and Cardiff, romantic liaisons and marriages between Black seamen and local White women supposedly precipitated the 1919 ‘race riots’ in these two port cities with longstanding Black dockland settlements (Fryer 1984). Children were frequently the results of such unions and their birth brought to the forefront racist attitudes about purity, pollution and ‘racial hygiene’:

Flung out into the slumland culture of the port towns, black seamen focused upon themselves considerable racial hostility as they became linked in the public mind with growing crime rates and prostitution when they co-habitated with white women and produced ‘half caste’ children.

(Rich 1986: 121)

In 1927, the Colonial Office calculated 45 West African undergraduates; by the early 1950s the number swelled to 2,000 with 1,000 students in London alone. However, as Killingray states, in the introductory chapter to an edited collection on Africans in Britain, ‘all too often written records, invariably produced by men, focus on activities dominated by men so that research on women is additionally difficult’ (1994: 17). Quantifying the number of contin-

ental African women students in Britain between the turn of the century and the present is a perfect example of this dilemma. Historical research does support the fact that continental African men were sent by the colonial authorities to study in England in greater numbers than continental African women (Killingray 1994). At university, many men met their future White English wives and/or mothers of their children. Many African-American GIs stationed in Europe (England and Germany, in particular) during World War II left broken hearts and *métis(se)* children behind, (Fryer 1984; Opitz 1991).

- 8 Ethnographic fieldwork then becomes a series of conversations wherein according to Bakhtin, 'language lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. . . . the word in language is half someone else's' (1953: 293). Bakhtin uses the term 'heteroglossia' to describe this process (see Bakhtin 1953, 1981).
- 9 Rastafarians - members of a religious group (others refer to as a 'cult') which originated in Jamaica and who reject Western ideas and values ('Babylon') and regard Haile Selassie, the former emperor of Ethiopia, as divine.
- 10 Throughout this paper, I have neglected the other permutations and combinations of Diasporic *métis(se)* that exist in England. To put multiple and complex experiences together would have downplayed the social and cultural complexities within and without diasporic interwoven communities. Moreover, even now, in the age of globalization and as we approach the millenium, those of us of African origin are still at once revered and feared. Despite the fact that there have been longstanding *métis(se)* communities in Liverpool, England and Cardiff, Wales since at least the end of the nineteenth century, Black African mixed with White British is still viewed by the general populus and politicians alike as problematic. The words of White English politician Enoch Powell's 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech warning White English people of the evils and dangers of 'race mixing' ring true today and such ideas are evident in much right-wing propaganda.

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'It's a sun-tan, isn't it?'

Auto-biography as an identificatory practice

Sara Ahmed

How to begin a reflection on one's past? How to make the self in writing a scene on which issues of race and gender are played out? Why, and under what conditions, does that auto-biographical gesture become possible or desirable? How to perform that gesture without being implicated in a discourse of authenticity, whereby the remembering of my gendered and racialized encounters would become readable as representative?

In writing the self, one does not uncover or recover the truth of one's past experiences. This much may be clear from recent feminist interventions into autobiography, whether understood as a literary genre, or as a mode of critical intervention (Friedman 1988; hooks 1989; Stanley 1992; Probyn 1993). On the contrary, writing of the self in the form of an individuated memory may serve to de-stabilize the boundary between the subject and its others, and so dramatize the inseparability of the subject from the realms of the social and the political. Auto-biography as individuation – as a story of the gradual separation and perfection of the individual self – has been identified by feminists as a specifically masculine genre, as a way of writing that marks, and is marked by, privilege and social agency. As Susan Friedman puts it, 'The emphasis on individualism as the necessary pre-condition for autobiography is thus a reflection of the privilege, one that excludes from the canons of autobiography those writers that have been denied by history the illusion of individualism' (Friedman 1988: 39).

In Jenny Sharpe's *Allegories of Empire* the analysis of the exclusive nature of the auto-biographical self is taken further. In her reading of *Jane Eyre*, Sharpe argues that the story of the individuation of the female narrator relies on a racializing of the authorial signature. She writes:

One way to consider the power relations in *Jane Eyre* is to read the writing of a female self and the voicing of women's oppression as a privileged mode of address for the feminist individualist. It is a mode of address that is unavailable to the subaltern women who are represented in the novel.

(Sharpe 1993: 32)

The white woman gains partial access to the privilege of the authorial 'I', through the negation or exclusion of Black women. They become signs of that which she is not; of an abject and irrational embodiment which she can speak of through the discourse of enlightened authority (for example, the white woman as missionary). Her gesture of 'speaking for' the Black women presupposes their violent effacement as subjects. In this sense, autobiography as individuation functions as a racialized as well as gendered practice. I would take this point further and argue that autobiography as individuation never quite takes place. It is precisely those marginalized and abject figures which return to haunt the authorial self and to remind her of her immersion in a violent sociality. Here, Black women are present as a trace of the impossibility of the female signature, or of any *ontologically secured* category of 'women's writing'.

So in writing auto-biographically of my experiences as a mixed race, middle-class and migrant woman I am writing against this discourse of individuation which discloses the truth of the individual subject in terms of its withdrawal from the realm of sociality. Auto-biography may become of interest to Black feminism precisely because it renders explicit the subject's immersion within the social and the political. It is a critical reflection on the self – and its history or its becoming – that may dramatize the unstable but determinate relation between the subject and its others. Auto-biography may write its subject only insofar as it renders its subject a subject, that is, an embodied and located entity which is representable only through its partial negation or loss. As a writing of the subject, auto-biography may traverse that impossible distinction between the psychic and the social.

Indeed, it may be through a discourse on the personal – on the becoming of the subject – that resistant and resisting political (dis)identifications may be rendered possible. For already the story of the individuated self is exposed as phantasy, or the story of the woman who writes simply as woman. Auto-biography forges the possibility of a collective address – where, for example, one can speak as and to (if not for) Black women, precisely by exposing the determination of an individuated story by broader structures of identification. The subject is located, divided and immersed. It is this subject that may be the subject of Black feminism. To this end, I locate myself in my analysis . . .

I was born in England in 1969 but migrated to Australia with my family in 1974. I returned to Britain in 1991 to complete my studies and I currently teach courses on gender, race and colonialism at the Centre for Women's Studies, Lancaster University. I am a product of a mixed race marriage. My father, who is from Lahore, Pakistan, lost much of his own cultural heritage when marrying my English mother: he did quite literally marry (into) the West. So although as a young person I was very aware of not being white, not being like 'the others', I was never aware of actually

what I might be, never able to positively address what my difference really was. I was not simply in-between identities, for my upbringing was 'fully Western' (although infrequent trips to Pakistan did affect my own sense of another culture being there, it simply wasn't there *for me*). So as a young person I didn't positively claim an identity from an in-between-ness (I am mixed race, or I am a migrant).

More importantly, my sense of self was established precariously in terms of being inadequate to the model of appropriate (white, European) identity that I saw upheld around me. On one occasion (traumatic to recall) I tried to walk as far away as possible from my father when I saw some friends from school. I thought I could pass for white if I disassociated myself from him. But the jibes about my Asian-ness continued throughout my childhood and adolescence. At times I felt like an uncomfortable and dirty white person. It wasn't until I came to recognize the politics of racism as a form of social violence that I was able to recognize and critique my own discomfort. That ability was partly due to my access to power and knowledge determined by my middle-class upbringing. But it was also as a result of spending more time in Pakistan after my schooling. Now I remain uncertain how to name or identify myself, but take that uncertainty as empowering rather than simply risky.¹

I re-present myself here for the purposes of defining what or whom I *cannot* speak for: I cannot speak for either white British women, or for South Asian women in Britain or, really, for any particular or clearly demarcated group of women at all. But what I want to argue is that my inability to speak on behalf of any group of women is not an *exception* of biography or place, but a *trace of a dynamic that troubles the very collision of race and gender in structures of identification*. It is this *symptomatic nature of the failure of my own personal address* that my passage into auto-biography will attempt to explore: the way in which the impossibility of adequately naming myself for the demands of representation is symptomatic of the impossibility of the racially marked and gendered subject being addressed through a singular name. So here the negation and loss of the subject that is marked out by auto-biography is predicated on the play of different names or identifications which perpetually fix and lose their subjects (for example, woman, man, Black, mixed race, Aboriginal, white, working class, middle class). The contradictions between these names – understood as relations of address – which call subjects into being are played out in the unstable trajectory of an autobiographical intervention. In other words, the autobiographical gesture is structured – either implicitly (as phantasies of individuation) or explicitly (as political strategies of (dis)identification) by the antagonism between different relations of power, such as gender, class and race, whereby the subject is assigned into different, divisive and contradictory positions. This assignment is not a fixation, but a story of loss, difference and movement.

So I write, now, as a Black feminist living in Britain, and my chapter involves remembering an event that happened to me in 1984 when I lived in Adelaide and that seemed to me to be critical in the development of my own political identifications. But between that time, and this time, I have travelled. I have not kept still. I have been to Pakistan, and I have come to Britain. The structuring of my life around a series of dis-locations is a reminder of the impossibility of 'returning' to a previous place through memory. Return is impossible. As we move, we shift; the trajectories upon which we travel emphasize the fluidity of our identifications. So this narrative is not a dialogue between two times and two places, between now and then, and here and there. The telling is more complex than this.

Such instability seems to me to be constitutive of migration and of the subject as migratory. The migratory nature of subjectivity has been well examined and, in the work of some theorists, has become a privileged metaphor for the crisis of identification peculiar to the contemporary 'postmodern' and postcolonial world (for example, Chambers 1994). But I am not speaking of migration in this sense. I am not speaking of migration if migration is to be seen as a figure for a generalizable philosophy of difference. This generalizability is predicated on a loss of recognition of the antagonism between subject positions which renders the experience of migration both gendered and racialized. In the stories I was told of both my Pakistani family's flight from India to the newly created Pakistan, and my father's migration from Pakistan to England, in my migration from England to Australia, and in my 'return' to England, my experience of dis-location has not simply been pleasurable or radical (in its performance of de-stabilization); it has been violent as well. Migration as dis-location may remind us of the impossibility of the subject as an identity in general, but it may also function as a trace of the particularity of, and antagonisms between, subject positions. We may, after all, remember the difference between migrants and refugees; we may remember that a disproportionately large number of the world's refugees are Black women. When remembering these issues one can recognize *the violence of the rhetorical gesture which takes 'migration' as a privileged metaphor for the disruption of identities*. What my relation to migration may reveal is the way my remembering of the event performs the logic of dis-location which the narrative is itself about.

Furthermore, if the instability of my auto-biographical gestures bears a relation to migration then it also bears a relation to mixed racial identities. Such identities are often re-inscribed in critical discourse in terms of hybridity. The mixed race subject is a hybrid subject; a subject determined by a radical mixing of different 'races'; a subject whose impurity is a sign of its inability to belong to any singular time or place. Of course, 'hybridization' has, like 'migration', been generalized as a metaphor for the radical force of cultural difference – understood in the sense of cultural

untranslatability, as that which refuses the logic of identity (Bhabha 1994: 162–4). As you could imagine from my comments on migration, I see this as a potentially violent gesture in the sense that it may elide the structuring role of antagonisms between relations of address. I do see the hybridity of my mixed-race identity as exposing the 'fragility' of racial identifications (for example, by putting the system of colour coding under stress – I can 'pass' for a white woman). To this extent, I understand hybridity as having implications for the impossibility of a (pure) racial identity *per se*. But this symptomatic reading does not constitute its generalizability. For being of mixed-race identity also has a particular set of limitations and positionings – including an acute sense of being inadequate to any available cultural identity – which constitute the instability of *this* auto-biography and its trajectory of migration and loss. These positionings do not exist independently from the gendering of subjects and the different demands on women and men in relation to 'reproducing' cultural identifications (for example, the 'woman' as symbol of nation). So my narrative is *constrained* or *delimited* by the particularity of mixed-race, classed and gendered positionings. Both symptomatic and particular: what we have is the failure of my personal address as an unstable and irreducible *trace* of the violent collision between gender, class and race in structures of identification. Not being able to simply write myself in the security of names . . . this much may be clear. But what to do with that knowledge? Where do we go from here? How does this relate to the auto-biographical articulation of the Black woman as a subject position?

This question of how the 'Black woman' becomes articulated as a subject position within auto-biographical narratives requires a shift in analysis from identity to identification. That is, we no longer can assume that the subject simply 'has' an identity, in the form of a properly demarcated place of belonging. Rather, what is required is an analysis of the processes and structures of identification – both psychic and social – whereby identities *come to be seen as* such places of belonging. By shifting the analysis in this way, both race and gender can be theorized not as fixed and stable 'essences' but as construction-in-process where meanings are negotiated and re-negotiated in the form of antagonistic relations of power. Yet this begs the question: how to theorize identification? And indeed: how to theorize identification in a way which does not assume the singularity of 'the subject', regardless as to whether we understand the subject in terms of 'becoming' rather than 'being'?

The singularity of the model of identification – however much of it remains bound up with the failure of the subject – has implications for racial politics and for the relation between Black women and psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis has provided us with a model of both identification² and how the subject becomes sexually differentiated. Judith Butler suggests in *Bodies that Matter* that it is the assertion of the priority

of sexual difference over racial difference that has marked psychoanalytic feminism as white (Butler 1993: 181). Indeed, the use of psychoanalysis has invariably meant that other differences are explained through an act of translation back into the model which elaborates the division of subjects into sexes (the resolution of the Oedipal crisis, castration anxiety and the phallic logic of fetishism).³ As Anne McClintock concludes:

I do not see racial fetishism as stemming from an overdetermined relation to the castration scene. Reducing racial fetishism to the phallic drama runs the risk of flattening out the hierarchies of social difference, thereby relegating race and class to secondary status along a primarily sexual signifying chain.

(McClintock 1995: 183-4)

Given this, in order that a psychoanalytic approach to identification as phantasmatic and as an impossible resolution to otherness can help elaborate an understanding of subjectivity as racialized and gendered, in a way which does not assume the ontological priority of the latter, we need to be able to theorize the division *between* (as well as *within*) various structures of identification. I think this can best be done if we begin to see how identifications *traverse* the distinction between the psychic and the social and hence do not function as a logic of the subject. It is through such an approach that 'Black women' as a subject position (however unstable) can be made visible. That visibility is predicated on an analysis of the *antagonistic* and *divisive* nature of identifications.

The following auto-biographical example can be read as a text which negotiates these multiple regimes of identification. This example relates back to an incident when I was 14 years old, walking around the streets of Adelaide without any shoes on (I was in a 'scruffy' phase). I was stopped and addressed by two policemen in a car. They called me over, asked me what I was doing (I said I was walking) and then asked me why I wasn't wearing shoes (I can't remember my reply, but I was indignant about my rights). The policeman closest to me asked me if I was Aboriginal. Again I was indignant, replying 'no'. The other policeman interrupted, gave me a wink, and said 'it's a sun-tan, isn't it?'. I smiled, but did not reply. They asked me where I lived and I told them, and mentioned which school I went to (a private girls' school). They said that was fine, but to wear shoes. I asked them why they had stopped me. They said there had been some break-ins in the area recently, and that they were checking it out. Needless to say, this incident ended in tears, and left me angry and resistant.

Looking back, there were a number of complex identifications and dis-identifications going on, often unconscious, in the sense of forming contexts that were not obvious at the time, or upon a literal reading of the event. It seems to me now that the policemen addressed me, in the first instance, as working class (from dress), as Aboriginal (from colour). This

identification *read* me as a subject, *by rendering me a suspect*, as a danger to the Law (of property), a potential robber. Here, the absence of shoes becomes fetishized as an object which signifies not simply a lack of proper dress, but an improper status as somebody who does not belong to this middle-class and respectable suburb, somebody whose presence can only have the function and effect of a threat. Indeed, the address shifts immediately from the absence of shoes to a query about race. The address of the policemen in the first instance, their positioning of me as a suspect, somebody to be queried and interrogated, was on the mistaken assumption I was Aboriginal. Their question demanded to know the extent of my threat by demanding to know whether my racial origin was Aboriginal. In this sense, Aboriginality becomes figured as the most threatening or disruptive presence. But the error of their address gave me a space to address them, through denial and disavowal.

Through returning their address a shift occurred which forced a dis-identification from my identity as suspect. Not an Aboriginal (but perhaps only sun-tanned), not working class (in fact quite well off). My denial of being Aboriginal and my failure to name or declare my race (which of course was unnoticed or invisible to them) implicated me in their structure of address, by rendering Aboriginality something to be disavowed. The gesture of smiling can here be figured as a collusion, a desire in some sense to be figured as white, as respectable, as somebody who has a legitimate right to walk in these leafy suburbs. My disavowal thus suggests an implicit desire for 'whiteness'. That desire creates an imaginary (and impossible) conception of a purified and ideal self, as well as a coherent social order (to which I could 'fit in'), by assigning certain values to 'whiteness'. Such an assignment entails a disavowal and repudiation of the other, of 'Blackness', or Aboriginality. As such, desire itself projects an imaginary presence through a process of exclusion. The temporality of the act of disavowal stages the impossibility of desire's fulfilment generally, but also the racist logic that demands the purification of colour, as a reminder of an-Other that refuses to inhabit these terms and returns (to walk the streets) only as a threat.

However, the explicit racial confrontation cannot suspend the gendered nature of my position. The original address was surely then an address not simply to an Aboriginal, but to an Aboriginal woman. Theorists such as Jan Pettman in *Living in the Margins* have argued the Aboriginal woman is always already sexualized in White Australian colonial narratives (Pettman 1992: 27). So if the original address (Are you an Aboriginal?) positioned my colour as a stain, as a sign of a natural criminality determined by the fact of my skin, then how does this criminalization of colour link with the gendering of the address? It may suggest that the Black woman is defined in terms of the physicality of her skin, as a stain which confirms her over-sexed being, her threat to the proper social and sexual

order of the domesticated suburb. She is constructed in this sense as a social and sexual danger.

We may also consider, though, that if the address had been to an Aboriginal man the discourse may have been more confrontational, or less questioning. One can only speculate here, but perhaps the policeman's address and the way it constructed the subject (as being able to affirm or deny the question) traversed the distinction between criminality (Aboriginality) and desire (woman). In other words, the 'danger' posed by the woman when addressed as Black entails an ambivalent or contradictory positioning as somebody to be excluded *and* questioned (as a partial inclusion; an invitation to return the address). The ambivalence may be linked to the way in which the position of Aboriginal or Black woman is not explicitly named, functioning as an invisible sub-text to the encounter. That invisibility is a sign not of the *vacant* nature of the position of the Black woman, but rather of the difficulty of her being addressed through a logic of purely racialized interrogation (Are you an Aboriginal?) given her absence from *dominant* narratives of race. The way in which the gendering of the address to the Aboriginal is invisible will be taken up later on.

The disavowal of Blackness in my return of the policeman's address was also structured by a class dynamic whereby legitimacy was restored to my presence through naming my school (a private girls' school). This information was not asked for – but projected by me onto them as a sign that I was 'with them', that they were policing for me, rather than against me, as an owner rather than a taker of property. The disavowal and repudiation of Aboriginality hence structured a desire to be taken as inhabiting the policing demand, as somebody worthy of protection, as white and middle class: a tax payer not a dole bludger or a waster.

The structure of identification which involved the exchange of a wink and the quip about being sun-tanned caused me the most discomfort. Although inspired by my dis-identification as Aboriginal (which was implicated in the assigning of certain values to Aboriginality, as something to be disavowed) and my refusal to identify my race, this quip both made light of their mistake (their hailing of the wrong person, their error of reading) while positioning me as woman, a recipient of a wink (and of a gaze), and as someone who sun-bathes, who tans her body. The entrance of the body into the exchange shifted me from being suspect to object, from a threat to property, to property itself. While defining the body in terms of leisure, where colour is a sign of a 'higher' class, the quip shifted my *attention* from the social and racial relation of policeman to suspect, to the sexual relation of man to woman. Here, the gendering of the subject becomes an *explicit* aspect of the encounter. The colour of my body was evoked as an adornment rather than a stain, as 'a paying attention to the body'. Here, colour is literally a detachable signifier, inessential to the

subject, and hence acceptable. By rendering colour inessential rather than essential, the exchange rendered my body something to be valued, adorned, protected. Colour becomes inscribed as a detachable signifier, positioning me as essentially white, as truly and properly white underneath the luxury of a brown veil. The white woman, by sun-tanning, may appropriate and domesticate the hyper-sexuality which is signified by Black skin, rendering the presence of colour a temporary aberration which confirms the proper sexual order based on her protection from Black men by white men. Inscribed as a white woman, I became the legitimate object of the policeman's protective gaze.

I dealt with the uncertainty and anxiety over my body and colour by addressing the policeman, in the structure of a demand: a demand that they explained their presence, their interruption of my walk. That demand gave me a point of entry into identifying them as racist (although, of course, I would not have been able to return their address in the form of a demand unless I'd already dis-identified myself as Aboriginal, as I would not have had the inscribed agency to speak lawfully, to speak with legitimacy). Their explanation linked their project (fighting street crime) to their identification of me as Aboriginal, which made me a suspect. Through identifying the racism that constituted their identification, I withdrew from the situation very angry, and ashamed that I had disavowed being Aboriginal, and had so been implicated in a structure of racial identification which (despite my own desire for whiteness and legitimacy) I sensed was wrong. By returning their address in the structure of a demand, I hence read the policemen and assigned them to a place in my own self-identification as not-white and not-racist.

What this example may evoke is the complexity of the identification process. The very temporality of identifications renders not only that they can miss their mark, but that they always do miss their mark, by enacting the divisions that frustrate the identification of the subject by a singular name. The over-lapping of the issues of race, class and gender in this 'recalled event', suggests that the relation of power to identification is *constitutive but divisive*, where the position of the subject is perpetually assigned and threatened by their designation in related, but distinct, regimes of difference. The constant negotiation of identifications temporarily assign the subject to a fixed identity (both racial, class and gendered) which are open to contestation in the negotiation of everyday encounters with the Law, family and others.

It is here the position of Black women is rendered visible, in the very contradictions – the violent collisions – between the racialized and gendered gazes with which she is addressed and which constitute the *instability* of the encounter. For as it became clear in my account it is only through a recognition of the antagonism between relations of address that we can make explicit the positioning of Black women; the *explicit* con-

frontation shifted my attention from race to gender and hence elided the 'Black woman' as a site of contradiction and ambivalence. By rendering visible the collision between race and gender, 'the Black woman' becomes articulatable as a sign of the subject's inability to be fixed adequately by a single name or gaze in such encounters.

I have written throughout of 'the event' which has unfolded, perhaps significantly, like a kernel in a story. It has unfolded to disclose what may seem to function as a 'truth': the truth about subjectivity, the truth about 'Black women' as rendering visible the collision between regimes of identification. These may seem to be truths that I have disclosed to you as the 'author' and 'knower' of my own story. What I want to do now, by re-thinking and re-reading my interpretation, is to dislodge any such impression of knowability. Firstly, one can only begin by complicating the supposed discreteness of 'the event'. True, I have written of it as such. But it is the act of remembering, an act which is both critical, affirmative and selective, that places boundaries and edges around the story, giving it its seeming internal coherence. Through auto-biographical identification (and dis-identification), the event has functioned as a term in an argument. But this rhetorical gesture, in which memory plays a crucial part, is not exhaustive. And if I have written in a way which implies the exhaustability of the event, I have also exposed the impossibility of that exhaustion in part through the very *performative* aspect of my narrative. My story entails its own elisions, its own figuration, its own forgettings. It is the link between remembering and the loss of stability of my reading that I will now attempt to uncover; a link that may re-stage how the identification of Black women relates to the instability of social antagonisms.

How to do justice to the Black woman who has been re-claimed from this story of disavowal and repudiation? Is that reclaiming a figuring of the Black woman which loses sight of the *particularity* of her various inscriptions even as it renders visible her impossibility as a discrete identity? Returning then to this event (which I lovingly must fetishize as a lost object), we can see that the invisibility of the Black woman in the original encounter ('Are you an Aboriginal?' to 'Its a sun-tan, isn't it?') constituted a form of ambivalence in which the linear narrative (race to gender) begins to break apart. It is here that I thought I saw her (myself) struggling to get out – in the staging of a collision. But the gesture of taking the 'Black woman' as a figure for what is elided in the narrative of race to gender remains just that – a gesture. It relies on a *figuration*.

This figuring of the Black woman as a sign of an ambivalence which destabilizes the encounter is problematic precisely in what it cannot speak of. That is, it cannot speak of the divisions and antagonisms within the signifier 'the Black woman'. We need to ask: which Black woman? There are many possibilities that are at play – either explicitly or implicitly – in the narrative: Aboriginal woman, Asian woman, mixed-race woman. How

to speak of their difference? What history the slippage from Aboriginal into a generalized category of Blackness erases is the history of racism towards Aboriginal peoples, not just from White Australia, but also from Asian immigrants. How to speak of the difference of the Aboriginal woman, even if she is only present in this narrative in the form of a misrecognition? But then, this misrecognition led to a second misrecognition – it shifted the address to that of the (sun-tanned) white woman. Between these images the cultural and historical particularity of my racial identification (however much bound up – biographically – in phantasy) was left out. This elision of an identification that is neither Aboriginal woman or white woman was an elision that my own narrative kept in place. By focusing on the antagonism that is covered over by the signifier 'Black women', I am forced into naming myself – an identification which is temporary and partial: Mixed race; Pakistani father, English mother; hybrid woman. Inevitably this identification has the structure of a misrecognition and does not resolve the traumatic *lack of belonging* which is constitutive of the relation of address. Furthermore, the internal division within this signifier 'the Black woman' relates to class structures. It was through my self-identification as middle class rather than working class that I was able to re-negotiate my position within the encounter.⁴ If I had been *already positioned* as either Aboriginal or as working class, such movement within the encounter may not have been possible.

But the signifier 'the Black woman' or 'Black women' is not made impossible by 'confessing' to the internal antagonism that divides its terms. My figuration of the Black woman did perform an injustice against the particular positionings of Black women. This injustice does not entail a simple belief in the impossibility of the category. The *gesture* of conjoining Black and woman, of making that connection, still enables us to see that the instability of identifications are a result of social antagonisms, of the irreducibility of conflict and difference. But that irreducible conflict and difference is performed by the very gesture of figuring the Black woman in this way; where the conjoined signifiers get broken apart by the force of 'internal' antagonisms. The gesture undoes itself. But it still takes place. That 'taking place' has the form of the uncertain trajectory of this mixed race, middle-class and migrant woman.

CONCLUSION

The Black feminist critique of ethnocentrism in white feminist discourse was an important starting point for beginning to address the interlocking of race and gender in structures of identification (Carby 1992). No longer can we separate race and gender as separate or discrete categories but, if we are to make the experiences of Black women visible in feminist politics, then we must see them as mutually constitutive, as manifesting

themselves only in relation to each other (hooks 1989; Pettman 1992; Brewer 1993). Part of the critique of ethnocentrism was hence the questioning of the foundational nature of the category of 'women' in feminist discourse. But an alternative and equally pressing question may then become: Does Black feminism rely on the foundational nature of the category of 'Black women' in its very critique of ethnocentrism? Does the very idea of rendering 'Black women' visible in feminist politics undo the critical force of the critique of foundationalism that has enabled that idea in the first place? Indeed, can we speak of 'Black woman' in the singular? How does the 'Black woman' become articulated and identified within the context of a loss of proper (or ontologically secured) notions of either 'Black' or 'woman'?

My analysis has suggested that the categories 'Black women' and 'Black woman' need not function as foundational categories and that, indeed, the act of bringing the social relations of gender and race together in the form of adjoined signifiers (Black, women, woman) operate precisely to make visible the *identificatory practices* which constitute the subject's *instability*. The non-foundational nature of these categories was made clear through auto-biography; through the rendering explicit of the determinate and yet unstable relation between the subject and its others. That instability resides in the shifts of the narrative according to the contradictions and divisions between the relations of address which attempt to fix the subject. The conjoining of 'Black' and 'woman' through the auto-biographical gesture enables us to figure how the collision between such relations of address constitutes the (seemingly individuated) realm of the subject (who writes and is written) at the same time as it constitutes the subject's impossibility. So for me, 'Black woman' and 'Black women' are impossible but necessary categories. Beyond that, they suggest trajectories of becoming rather than being. To speak of 'becoming Black woman' is not to say that the position is an empty or vacant space that can be filled by any subject. Rather, 'becoming Black woman' points to that difficult auto-biographical trajectory in which the antagonism between relations of address – including relations of address between Black women – constitutes the instability of subjects in their encounters with others.

Given this I would argue that the difficulty of the singular and the plural – of either Black woman or Black women – cannot be understood as an indicator of degrees of essentialism (whereby the Black woman would be seen as an even more reductive phantasy of a singular identity). Both categories are identifications that position and partially fix subjects, both entail phantasy and misrecognition, and both are open to de-stabilization precisely insofar as they make visible the constitutive antagonism between relations of address. So to return to one of my questions: how does the 'Black woman' become articulated and identified within the context of a loss of proper (or ontologically secured) notions of either 'Black' or

'woman'? We can speak of the 'Black woman' insofar as the conjoining of these signifiers points to the collision between identificatory practices of race and gender that constitute the subject's migratory and hybrid passage into being. Identification practices partially fix subjects into positionalities – but it is an inadequate fixation. The conjoined signifiers 'Black' and 'woman' point to this inadequacy as predicated on the violent collision between gender and race in structures of identification. To speak of the 'Black woman' is not to deny the antagonisms between Black women, but to render visible the antagonisms that structure and de-stabilize encounters between gendered and racialized others. Moreover, as an overt political strategy, as an affirmative and auto-biographical (dis)identification, speaking as, of and to the Black woman, is to resist the dominant narratives of gender and race, whereby identifications are perceived as singular, or as divided only in relation to themselves. As a Black woman, I must remember not to forget.

NOTES

- 1 Although I could describe myself as mixed race I do not see that this simply constitutes a racial identity. Despite this, and for reasons that will hopefully become clearer throughout my article, I have come to identify myself as a Black woman. This identification (which is also a dis-identification from other forms of naming and evaluation) is self-consciously political and affirmative. However, it is not a confident gesture; it is not without its hesitations and uncertainties. The conjoining of two words (Black, woman) makes the identification unstable and shifting. And then there are the divisions within those words; as singular entities they may elide my specific positioning as a migrant, mixed-race woman.
- 2 The child's accession into the realm of subjectivity within Lacanian psychoanalysis is predicated on a structure of identification. In Lacan's 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I', the child sees itself in the mirror, and misrecognizes the images as itself. This act 'rebounds in the case of the child in a series of gestures in which he experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment – the child's own body, and the persons and things' (1977: 1). This play with an image structures the relation of the child to its body and to others, in the form of an identification, that is, in 'the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image' (1977: 2). Such an identification is imaginary and phantasmatic, projecting from the fragmentation of the bodily state a specular and Ideal-I, understood as the agency of the ego (1977: 2). I think we can establish from this the limits of identification as defined in 'the mirror phase'. For the act of the child seeing itself in the mirror and misrecognizing the image as itself is a singular process, however much that act is taken figuratively to signify that which structures the impossibility of 'becoming' a subject, in the sense of *being* an image. What is the significance of a theory which takes its *figure* of subjectivity in such a singular act? I use 'figured' here deliberately. I am not claiming that this figuring exhausts the terms of psychoanalysis (which complicates the discreteness of the subject again and again) but rather that the reliance on the 'mirror phase' and the figure of the child's encounter and

projection of an image, is over-determined by the status of the subject as *signifier*. In this sense, the narrative reliance on the figure enables the return of the letter to the subject whose singularity as signifier is already assured (the complication of identification is hence contained by the outlines established by this metaphoric reliance). That *figure* is certainly associated with the whole question of the *nature* of the subject, for the child's misrecognition of its image which comes to *stand for* 'the assumption of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the child's entire mental development' (1977: 4). Is it this very *metaphoric reliance* that situates the psychoanalytical refusal to complicate the discreteness of the signifier 'the subject'?

- 3 Such a translation is even evident in the work of a theorist who occupies the terrain of the postcolonial – Homi Bhabha argues:

For fetishism is always a 'play' or vacillation between the archaic affirmation of wholeness/ similarity – in Freud's terms: 'All men have penises'; in ours 'All men have the same skin/ race/ culture' – and the anxiety associated with lack and difference – again, for Freud 'Some do not have penises'; for us 'Some do not have the same skin/ race/ culture.'

(Bhabha 1994: 74)

Here, the recognition of racial difference as constitutive of the subject is enabled only through a re-working of the Freudian logic of castration anxiety. Racial difference is hence positioned as secondary or derivative to a logic of sexual differentiation which hence *already* functions as ontological; as a self-evident way of explaining *in itself* the structuring of desire and difference *in general*.

- 4 Indeed, I thank Beverley Skeggs for pointing out to me in a seminar discussion that I tend to lose sight of the class issues in my reading of the event. The relation between race and class is also divisive. Remaining at an auto-biographical level, I recall that however much I appealed to my school as an indicator of class in this encounter (and hence was able to re-negotiate my position through the authority of class), my experience of that school (as one of the few non-white students) was of profound discomfort and alienation. While occupying a privileged material position, I remained at odds with the ideological make up of this middle-class school with its assumptions about Christianity and whiteness.

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Charting the spaces of (un)location

On theorizing diaspora¹

Magdalene Ang-Lygate

The new moon, as science duly demonstrates, cannot be seen at all. To speak of the thin crescent moon as being new is to forget that only when the dark half faces the earth is the moon truly new.

(Trinh T. Minh-Ha 1991: 1)

To name ourselves rather than be named we must first see ourselves. For some of us this will not be easy. So long unmirrored, we may have forgotten how we look. Nevertheless, we can't theorise in a void; we must have evidence.

(Lorraine O'Grady 1992: 14–23)

SILENT SPACES OF (UN)LOCATION

Although I was born almost exactly a year before Malaya, as it was then called, gained its independence from Britain in 1957, I have no personal memory of British rule. Yet, because of centuries of British intervention in that country, I am a child of the colonial era and I grew up influenced by powerful remnants of British empire. As Straits Chinese, my grandfathers, my parents, aunts and uncles attended English speaking schools and they worked and identified with the British administration. I did not know it then, but a postcolonial world had begun and I was part of it. The cow who jumped over the moon and the dish that ran away with the spoon had the same surreal input into my childhood as Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, stories of Christmas trees, snow and memorized lineage of the British monarchy. Although I was a daughter, I was the first in my family to go to university and because I too was English-educated, it seemed very normal for me to travel several thousands of miles to study at a university in Britain. It took me a long time to recognize this as a privilege because all my white female colleagues at university saw their financial independence, freedom to travel and access to higher education as their right, not a privilege.

However, years later, in conjunction with my awakening to feminist politics and thinking, I also became conscious that I had never really

queried why it was that although I was by birth Malaysian Chinese, I was always more fluent in the English language than in Chinese or Malay. Or why it was that the name by which I was known was an Anglicized biblical one when I had a perfectly good Chinese name. Nor indeed why it was that Malaysian women and men of my generation considered it commonplace to be educated in the west² or to have family members scattered all over the globe. At the time, these contradictions did not register nor did they seem to matter. Looking back now at this period between when I first arrived in 1975 and the time when I realized that there was such a 'thing' as feminist discourse, I am intrigued by my own lack of analysis of my positioning as an immigrant Chinese woman in postcolonial British society. However, what was worse was the gradual realization that eurocentric feminist 'knowledge' was similarly ignorant and silent about transnational diasporic experiences like mine. I was more than half way through a Women's Studies course before a chance meeting with another feminist nonya³ alerted me to the large gaps of knowledge that feminist scholarship supposedly addressed.

In the 1980s, North American feminists bell hooks (1981), Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1983), Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith (1981), Audre Lorde (1984), Elizabeth Spelman (1988) and others like them began to address issues related to multilayered female subjectivities. They accused white feminists of suppressing differences amongst women and insisted instead on exploding the category 'woman'. For them, being female, being Black/Jewish/Chicana/Japanese, being lesbian/heterosexual, being working/middle/upper class – being whatever – were interconnected and inseparable from each other. Speaking from a variety of cultural backgrounds and social positions, they insisted for example that the privileging of 'race',⁴ colour or descent over and above other social categories, say of nationality, class, sexuality and so on, obscured the experiences of women's complex identities. Accordingly, because different meanings reside in different combinations of time and space, the twin aspects of historical and geographical positioning that contribute to the complex realities of diasporic women must be explored in resistance to systems that seek to perpetuate ahistorical and apolitical myths of universal women's experiences.

However, unlike the North American experience, daily realities of on-going global migration and resulting transnational diasporic experiences are often neglected and insufficiently accounted for in British feminist discourse. Partly because of its particular acquaintance with anti-racist discourse and the 'race' relations industry, Black feminism as practised in Britain was dominated by 'race' politics and important issues of diversity and difference were marginalized. By prioritizing the politics of 'race' identity and the pursuit of strategies that demanded a unitary Black female identity, many women who chose not to privilege 'race' in the makeup of

their complex identities became alienated and did not readily identify with such a narrow vision of Black British feminism. Subsequently, in spite of widely recognized acceptance of the need to contextualize women's experiences within given social frameworks, the hybrid influences of culture, politics, history and language that stem from postcolonial traditions are seldom acknowledged, let alone identified or analysed. In this chapter I want to explore some experiences of diaspora that I have either encountered personally or gathered during the course of my own empirical research work. The spaces of (un)location I refer to are uncharted territories where the shifting and contextual meanings of diaspora reside – caught somewhere between, and inclusive of, the more familiar experiences of (re)location and (dis)location.⁵

PROBLEMATIC LANGUAGE OF (UN)LOCATION

Most of my research work centres on the immigration⁶ experiences of Chinese and Filipina women who originate from Pacific and Southeast Asian countries and who have settled in Scotland. Paying particular attention to their notions of 'home', community, sense of self and sense of belonging, I listen to the oral accounts of these women. Although I had initially expected this process to be a straight-forward study because I am an immigrant Malaysian Chinese woman myself and the women were willing to speak to me freely, one of the main problems I have encountered is in the deficiency and inadequacy of available vocabulary. I try to write about women like us and place us within a feminist/anti-racist or womanist context.⁷ In writing from this perspective, I have had to use permutations, words such as 'black', black, Black, diasporic, immigrant, migrant, visible minority, ethnic, non-white, women of colour, 'Third World' women, native (female) Other – all of which are individually wanting and inaccurate. Instead of adopting longer descriptive styles like 'diasporic women of colour' or 'black and other minority ethnic', it has often been tempting to cut corners and revert to less verbose forms of description – using for example, the more familiar terms like Black, 'Third World' or ethnic minority. However, each of these terms is themselves problematic, tinged with ambiguous meanings and invested with unexamined notions of 'correctness'.⁸

Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge (1994: 50) coined the term IDPOL to describe a currently popular game where identity politics is combined with ideological policing. They observed that in recent years, identity politics has changed from a neutral term used by social scientists to describe the various methods that social movements have employed to 'alter self-conceptions and societal conceptions of their participants' to that of attempts by particular groups 'to gain political advantage from

whatever makes it identifiable as a (usually disadvantaged or oppressed) group'. In making this observation, they query the usefulness of trying to play or win such games without examining the underlying structures that permit these games to exist. For some time now, in both my research work and in my feminist activism, I have been concerned that the debates and practices surrounding 'black' issues, particularly diasporic women's experiences, which have been largely unproblematized and complicit with IDPOL. Whilst it is important to maintain academic integrity in using terms and descriptions in the proper context, it is just as important for feminist scholars to understand what is actually at stake when we neglect to see the implications of possible complicity with unproblematized and unlocated struggle. Given the legacy of white supremacy and a pathological denial of difference, it is all the more vital that the complex realities of (un)location are not silenced through a lack of suitable vocabulary.

The issue of 'black' women and the critique of 'white' feminism has gained prominence in recent years but what do we mean by 'black' and who counts as 'black'? The term 'black' has different meanings when used in different academic and cultural contexts. For example, in the USA, Black has a more specific reference to peoples of African descent with a specific history as slaves – whatever their countries of origin. Whereas in Britain, it is used more loosely as a political category that is grounded on skin colour and shared ex-colonial origins.⁹ However, in recognizing that this is in fact a eurocentric Americanism that is not always claimed by peoples of African descent, I use Black (in upper case) when referring specifically to peoples of African descent who are located in Britain. Although Mirtha Quintanales (1983), a migrant to USA from Cuba, was writing about immigrant experience in the North American context, her observations about the problem of racism and the anti-racist struggle there is equally applicable to immigrant experience in Britain when she commented,

Many African peoples are 'Black', but ask a Nigerian, an Ethiopian etc. what her identity is and she will tell you 'Nigerian' or 'Ethiopian', or whatever . . . Obviously, 'Black Culture' is an American phenomenon. Many of us don't really understand this.

(Quintanales 1983: 155)

It is a mistake to fall prey to a racist/sexist mythology that insists that our experience of 'blackness' as non-Caucasian women puts us all in the same category as victims of racism, or that social inequality and injustice is ultimately reducible to 'race' or colour differences, without also drawing attention to the specific histories and experiences of racism. In rejecting notions of a coherent homogeneous 'blackness', I use the term 'black' (in quotes) reluctantly to try and communicate the problematics of using such a term and limit its use only within the context of British anti-racist political

discourse, representing all peoples who suffer discrimination because of their skin colouring or racial descent.

I accept that in certain circumstances, identity politics as a political strategy has been used extensively and successfully. For example, in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa the category 'black' provided non-white peoples with a critical location from which to speak. Yet, the usage of the term 'black' other than with reference to specific campaigns falls into a binary opposition trap that artificially separates 'blacks' from 'whites' – as if racism is confined to these categories alone. What worries me is that when this kind of game is played, we are actually being complicit with a structure that is built on a principle of binary dualism that inevitably undoes the possibility of difference. Accordingly, the possibility of theorizing difference is confined to difference-as-opposition rather than difference-as-diversity. For example, translated into anti-racist discourse, there is no room in this particular schema for peoples of mixed parentage nor is there any space available for admitting the possibility of 'black'–'black' or 'white'–'white' racism, for example between South Asian and African-Caribbean or between English and Irish peoples. In retaining the current terminology of anti-racism in Britain that is based on this black/white rationale, the actual realities of many immigrant experiences of inter-ethnic racism is denied¹⁰ and the structures which feminists seek to change become reproduced. In the British context, the stability of terms such as 'black' cannot be taken for granted despite the political pressure to do so.

Similarly, the term 'Third World' is problematic because the concept of one distinct 'Third World' actually describes regions and individual countries of Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America and the Middle East. Although these countries share a common predicament with respect to their economic status in a competitive world economy having suffered the after effects of colonization, the differences and variations between and within 'Third World' regions is enormous – such as in religion, political systems, culture and class structures. 'Ethnic minority' is another difficult term as it is often used as a blanket term for all peoples of colour inclusive of 'white ethnic minorities'. Apart from its eurocentric imperialist overtones and the fact that globally, Caucasians are distinctively in the minority, its usage also draws attention to a curious anomaly whereby we all know what we mean when we use the category 'minority' to apply to an empirical majority. More recently, in the European context, the term 'visible minority' is being used to distinguish between 'white minorities' and 'non-white minorities'. In addition, on the strange assumption that black and white are not colours, the preferred phrase in the USA for non-African, non-Caucasian peoples is 'people of colour'.

Likewise, in Britain the term Asian is used to describe peoples who

originate from the Indian subcontinent (themselves widely varied culturally) and there seems to be no distinction between Asians who are British subjects and those who are not (Modood 1994). However, in the USA the category Asian usually applies to peoples from the Indian subcontinents as well as from Southeast and Pacific Asian countries such as Japan, Korea and the Philippines. Upon obtaining citizenship, these groups of peoples are then referred to as Asian-American, Chinese-American, Japanese-American and so on. The status of 'immigrant' seems to be more transient in the USA than it is in Europe. In Britain, we have no words to describe British-born 'immigrants'. Our adoption of a British 'black' identity does not convey notions of belonging and community. Instead, it is a sort of enrolment into a falsely coherent alternative national identity that otherizes us and sets us apart – dislocating emphasis on material commonalities such as the struggle for decent housing, good jobs, secure futures for our children. Subsequently, 'black' peoples – whatever their length of stay or national status – are automatically viewed as permanent sojourners rather than as active citizens who participate fully in society. The processes of otherizing are unchecked and it is as if non-white peoples, labelled as 'Third World' and such like, only exist outside of Europe and that ethnic minorities in the west exist only within their own ethnic ghettos.

However, everyday experiences and realities of diasporic women of colour are not easily dissected and separated. Whilst admitting that one's 'race' is a crucial component of identity/identification, the privileging of 'race' or descent over and above other social categories and the adoption of a 'black' identity may force such women to pretend that they do not engage in life on multiple and sometimes conflicting levels.¹¹ Yet, this is often what identity politics insists on. An unwritten assumption is made that goes like this. If you are non-white, then you are 'black'. If you are 'black', your oppression is racial and you will lay claim to and testify of your racial victimization. The impossibility of such simplistic rules of play hides other processes of racialization. For instance, in a male-biased society, the experience of racialization is different for 'black' men and 'black' women. For example, when Edward Said (1978) claimed that 'black' peoples are orientalized and demonized as 'heathens', 'pagans', 'uncivilized', 'barbaric', and so on, in eurocentric narratives of anthropology, religion and colonialism, his learned argument unfortunately failed to include a gendered analysis. The recognition of simultaneously multiple identities allows a more constructive argument that 'black' women are not only racialized but also sexualized, exoticized and eroticized – all at the same time (Fanon 1986; Kabbani 1988). Yet the use of a singular fraudulently coherent category 'black' persists even though it presents a different social division based solely on a perceived primary identity – 'race', itself a socially constructed identity – without acknowledging that 'blackness' is not a homogeneous experience for women and men.

IDENTITY ENCLOSURES OF (UN)LOCATION

Suniti Namjoshi (1988: 1–2) tells an amusing story about a blue donkey who lived beside a red bridge. The donkey was considered aesthetically unsuitable because the pinkness of the carrots she ate and her own blueness clashed horribly with the red bridge; the townfolk wanted her to do something about it. It seemed that a white donkey would have been more acceptable to the town councillors. The donkey's refusal to change colour or move away led to long debates over whether her blueness was inherent or intentional. In the end, most of the villagers got used to her colour and they did not notice it anymore. Some would occasionally bring her 'a bunch of blue flowers that she put in a vase'. This story appeals to me because it highlights the absurdity and arrogance of those people who go around telling others what they should be in order to fit in. Further, the blue donkey's resistance to such pressure pleases me because she refused to play that game. Not once did she suggest that the bridge be repainted blue to fit in with her. Nor did she attempt to justify the worth of blue when compared to white. If she had done this, she would have been complicit with the irrational colour-based logic that prompted the initial request. Instead, she refused to engage on the basis of colour by insisting that she was only different because she was a donkey.¹²

The influence of postmodernism on feminist scholarship has sparked significant contributions to the debates surrounding multilayered identities and subjectivities. A common consensus is that the notion of identity as a static and unitary trait is no longer viable. Instead, identities are seen as shifting, pluralistic, and dynamic aspects of all social relationships. It is not only about how we see ourselves but is also a social product that is negotiated through time and space, constructed within hierarchies of power (eg. Said 1978; Bhabha 1990; Haraway 1991; Hall 1992; Allen 1994; Bhavnani and Phoenix 1994). Women's realities encompass a whole range of different identities and subjectivities – all enmeshed, interconnected and inseparable – along shifting imaginary lines. However, postcolonial feminist theorists further assert that the agency/structure dyad through which identities are supposed to be forged and negotiated do not sufficiently account for the unequal power relations that lie not only in personal agency but also in institutionalized structures that perpetuate white male supremacy. They have repeatedly maintained that the native-woman-other identity enclosure that surrounds, in this case, the non-white ex-colonial immigrant woman, does not require her to acknowledge the imaginary spaces and meanings that have been assigned for her occupation. The seeming coherence of this enclosure – a racialized and sexualized space where a woman from Southeast Asia is homogenized mainly as an exotic/erotic sexual being, through popular stereotypes of say 'lotus blossom' or 'dragon lady' – hides the diverse structures which

operate beneath these notions (Kabbani 1988; Ling 1989). This identity enclosure to which she is confined is primarily a product of dominant eurocentric-imperialist imagination to which she has little control. Through the deconstruction of western literary texts, Gayatri C. Spivak's writings (1985, 1988, 1992, 1993) explore the subject-positions of 'Third World' women caught within power structures that are not only patriarchal but also colonialist and imperialistic. Similarly, Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1987, 1989, 1991) sought to describe from her own perspective as a Vietnamese-American film-maker the meanings of 'difference' for a woman who was both perceived of as woman and as alien. Chandra T. Mohanty (1988: 61) suggested that under 'western eyes',¹³ the identities of diasporic women who are seen as outsider-incomers are products of dominant-insider imagination and hence categorization. Unfortunately, social theorizing about what is material and not simply imagined or representational, has been slow to incorporate these observations. The colonialist and imperialist mentality met with little effective resistance and continues to construct enclosures – imaginary and material – within which immigrant women are racialized and sexualized.

During the course of my research work, in response to an invitation to describe their identity, all the women I interviewed insisted that while they may have assumed British identity, they were definitely Chinese or Filipina. Only one woman interviewed described herself additionally as 'black'. She had migrated from Malaysia with her family when she was a young teenager and happened to be an active anti-racist activist, highly politicized and familiar with the kinds of words she thought she should be heard using. This single occurrence raised a number of questions: Who counts as 'black'? Who identifies as 'black'? Who decides that the category 'black' should be applied?

It was unsurprising that 'black' identity did not figure in the interview narratives of most of the women I interviewed. They neither mentioned the word 'black' nor did they confirm or deny having a 'black' identity. Media portrayals of 'black' communities in Britain are dominated by images of peoples from the African and Indian subcontinents or of African descent from the West Indies. Although it is true that in Britain their populations are larger than other groups, these images exclude peoples of other ethnic origins. In this way, the notion 'black' renders many women, who are often unpoliticized and thus cannot visibly identify as 'black' (or 'white'), invisible. It would appear that as immigrants, the Chinese and Filipina women I interviewed failed to identify themselves as 'black' because they had not been socialized into thinking of themselves as a political category. Furthermore, in practice such women have at times been excluded from the category 'black' and 'black' groups have not always been welcoming because they do not see us as being 'black'

enough. Being excluded from the category 'white' and its privileges and not accepted by other non-white women is a dilemma that exists for Chinese and Filipina women in the spaces of (un)location.

Whether or not a Chinese woman is 'black' enough, the category 'Chinese' is itself problematic. Benedict Anderson had previously asserted that through mechanisms of social control such as the Census, European colonization imposed and legitimated certain categories of identities: 'The fiction of the census is that everyone is in it, and that everyone has one – and only one – extremely clear place. No fractions' (1991: 166). He cites Mason Hoadley's (1982) account of the recording of a particular murder trial that was recorded in 1696 by both the Cirebonese Javanese court and the Dutch Company (VOC). Whilst the Javanese court classified the accused by rank and status, the VOC racialized the high official and identified him only as 'Chinese'. It did not matter that the man had achieved a title 'whose high status attested to his and his ancestors' long integration into Cirebonese society' (Anderson 1991: 167). In the course of history and the grip of Eurocentric imperialism, racialized categories such as those adopted by the VOC have remained in place. Anderson further commented that by 1870, colonial presence was so entrenched in Southeast Asia that Census-takers were kept busy:

counting the objects of its feverish imagining and a 'Cochin-Chinese' woman could live out her life, happily or unhappily, in the Straits Settlements, without the slightest awareness that this was how she was being mapped from on high.

(Anderson 1991: 169)

In contrast to the one Chinese woman in the example above who identified specifically as 'black', all the other women interviewed did not claim this identity. Although each woman addressed the problem of racism at the level to which she experienced it, there was no indication that they were even aware that such a category 'black' might be applied to them. It would appear that the 'black' identity that anti-racist discourse promotes is a British phenomenon that is in fact alien to many immigrant women who may not realize that they have been identified and categorized as such. In such ways, some immigrant women, e.g. Chinese, Filipina, Malay or Japanese, unfamiliar with British anti-racist language are denied spaces from which they can voice their own rights and concerns. Mindful of the aforementioned Cochin-Chinese woman in 1870, it strikes me as ironic that anti-racist discourse has adopted what was originally an imperialist enterprise, when colonial powers imposed identities on colonized peoples and refused them the power to name themselves.

Meanwhile in contemporary Britain, the processes of social control through ethnic monitoring continue to be perpetuated. In previous census

counts, reliance was placed on birth place as an indicator of racial or ethnic origin but figures based on such reliance were not accurate because they included those white people born in former colonies and excluded 'black' and other ethnic minority people born in the Britain. However, in the 1991 Census, members of the public were explicitly asked to indicate their ethnic origin. After consultation with the Commission for Racial Equality among others, nine separate categories – White, Black Caribbean, Black African, Black Other, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese and Any Other Ethnic Group – were decided upon. Far from being a progressive step towards eliminating ethnic discrimination, or towards the recognition of difference within a multicultural Britain, this kind of structured racialization actually highlights the racist legacy of a neo-colonial society obsessed with categorizing those who are perceived to be immigrant outsiders.¹⁴ Subsequent to the 1991 Census, several debates around the 'ethnic group' question have highlighted the shortcomings of current vocabulary when attempting to categorize people in this way.¹⁵ Within the context of Marxist analysis, Louis Althusser (1969) previously proposed that ideology was not simply about ideas but that it was grounded in material systems of social practices. He asserted that social processes and ideological state apparatuses (ISA) serve to mask the mechanisms of these relations of dominance. More recently, Michel Foucault (1981) also drew attention to the ways in which the construction of social norms serve as a disciplinary strategy and that principles of exclusion determine what may or may not be permitted in terms of dominant discourse. In particular, the 'problem' of classifying peoples of mixed parentage betrays a hidden assumption about the desirability of racial purity. Once again, the creation of supposed identities based on an ambiguous mixture of racial, national and ethnic classifications demonstrate how administrative technologies of the state construct the categories they then proceed to regulate.

Additionally, 'immigrant' as a word is often wrongly linked only to 'black' people. The majority of immigrants are actually Caucasians – from Eire or the Old Commonwealth (Australia, New Zealand and Canada) or from other European countries. For example, the 1981 Census Country of Birth Tables revealed that nearly 3.4 million people in Britain were born overseas. The majority of these, 1.9 million, were Caucasians – 607,000 were born in Ireland, 153,000 in the Old Commonwealth and about 1.13 million in other countries including Western Europe. Surely if greater ethnic accuracy was intended in the 1991 Census, categories such as Australian, Canadian, Italian, French, Jewish, Spanish and so on should also have been included to reflect ethnic differences amongst Caucasians resident in Britain. Instead, in postcolonial times, it would appear that the same name game is still being played such that colonialists remain in control of how 'other' (meaning non-white) peoples are categorized.

IMAGINARY COMMUNITIES AND THE MYTH OF AUTHENTICITY

The term 'Chinese' is itself problematic. When it is used as a unifying category it forces a unilateral homogeneity on Chinese peoples and fosters the myth of 'authentic ethnicity'. Dominant racialized stereotypes whether manifested as 'typical immigrant' or 'true native', encourage an essentialist identity that ignores the materiality of other social factors such as class, ethnicity and sexuality – all negotiated historically and geographically. In my sample of Chinese women, when encouraged to speak about their friendships and personal support structures, only one woman admitted to having mainly Chinese friends. It was interesting that the others not only spoke warmly of their white friends but gave no indication that they had any close Chinese friendships in their locality. One woman in particular described how she depended heavily on her white friends when she suffered a family bereavement but received no emotional support from her own kind – her Chinese friends. In terms of community, she was clear that she belonged with her Chinese friends and spoke of her white friends as if they were outsiders – reflecting dominant modes of thinking. However, if we were to interpret her testimony in a non-racialized way and listen to her perspective as a woman who transgressed racial boundaries in her friendship circles, we can argue that she did receive support from her own kind – newly married women with young school-aged children. Apart from common Chinese descent, she had nothing in common with her Chinese friends whom she saw only once a week. The commonalities we share as women are not always overridden by 'race'. Other social attributes such as shared experience of childbearing, childrearing, mothering, marriage, political or religious beliefs and lifestyles are equally significant in the construction of social relationships and to our social location as women.

Only in choosing to privilege the racialization of myself and of my research participants, can I say that as a Chinese woman researching other Chinese women we share the same identity and belong to the same group. The moment we admit the possibility of other concurrent social categories, group membership becomes repeatedly re-negotiable. For example, as part of my research I tried to gain access to a particular group of Hong Kong Chinese women to interview them. When I made initial contact with the leader of the group on the telephone, I was dismayed to discover that she was reluctant to let me attend their meetings. However, when I realized that because she could not see me over the telephone line, she had assumed from my Anglicized first name and my local Scottish accent I was Caucasian, I specifically declared myself to be Chinese and her subsequent response to me changed dramatically. 'Oh! If you are Chinese, you are most welcome. I look forward to seeing you next Tuesday.' It was clear

that while my status as a Chinese woman gave me an immediate right of access to that group, I was actually not allowed to belong until I colluded with the myth of authentic ethnicity and confessed my 'true' Chinese identity. In the absence of visible and conversational markers – my skin colour and features, my choice of language, accent and name – my perceived identity allowed me, unintentionally, to masquerade as 'white' and allowed her to decide that I did not belong. The other woman's separate construction of a different reality demonstrated afresh that there was a parallel subjectivity and our individual subjectivities were equally dependent on the two 'realities'. While I was otherizing her as a potential research subject, she was in turn otherizing me as a potential intruder to her group. Due to our specific positioning in British colonial history, this Hong Kong Chinese woman had a completely different ethnic makeup from mine and our Chineseness alone could not be automatically assumed to be a source of commonality. Still it was upon this premise that I gained access to a group that would otherwise have excluded me. In this case, the imaginary boundary that demarcated Chineseness was shifted by her to let me in. Since that time, more imaginary lines based on sexuality, class, religion, nationality, ethnicity and politics have indeed been drawn and I have been routinely excluded or included depending on the circumstances.¹⁶

BEING INVISIBLE IS NOT A NATURAL STATE

The failure to acknowledge diversity also hides the reality that lighter-than-black skin colour may give some ethnic minority women the option of assimilating and 'passing' as white.¹⁷ In turn, this dubious privilege is at the expense of remaining 'invisible, ghost-like, identity-less, community-less, totally alienated ... merging and yet remaining utterly alone and in the margins of our society' (Quintanales 1983: 153–4). All the Filipina women I interviewed are married to British Caucasians and have mixed-race children. It may not be co-incidental but in all these cases, the women concerned described themselves as Christian or practising Catholics. Although their skin colour marks them as non-white and 'passing' cannot be applied in the usual physical sense, as might in their children's case, I wonder if the combination of marriage into white society, the adoption of Anglicized names and their active identification with what is perceived to be a western religion allows them to assume token white status. I suspect that these factors rather than fluency in English or familiarity with British culture have had greater significance in the assimilation of these women into British life. Passing depends on a series of markers – visible and conversational – and when visible markers like skin colour, foreign names, ethnic costume are removed or hidden, the non-white person can pass into the 'currency of normative whiteness' (Butler 1993: 170).¹⁸ In terms of

conversation, it is what is withheld that permits her to pass and diasporic identity is centred on a complicated subjectivity that constantly negotiates its way to avoid exposure and possible rejection.

Some forms of Otherness are recognized as appropriate and tolerated because they support and perpetuate unequal relationships of power, e.g. when 'authenticity' is demarcated and controlled by a dominant western discourse. But when forms of Otherness that break out of the confines of dominant defined identity enclosures are articulated, these are perceived as subversive and rejected or repressed. Trinh refers to 'inappropriate Others' who resist definitions of their Otherness by Others and insist on defining difference from their own perspectives (1991: 74). To illustrate, Maxine Hong Kingston (1981) broke silences and started to dismantle the popular stereotypes of Chinese women when she addressed the experience of fractured identities and fragmented consciousness that were part of her own experiences as the American-born daughter of an immigrant woman. Her book became a bestseller several times over and yet although more and more Chinese women like Kingston have since begun to write of their own experiences of diaspora and about their specific location and negotiation in western society, the fact still remains that such pronouncements can only be tolerated in the form of fiction but not as part of everyday recognized realities. Unfortunately, although the notion of inappropriate Otherness is not just a fictional construct, and they are part of diasporic experience, these realities are mostly invisible.

Many of the immigrant women I interviewed spoke of their need to conform to societal norms – as mothers, wives, daughters – as a matter of 'survival' and that aspects of their identities that were previously freely expressed before immigration had to be silenced in order to fit in. For example, it is customary for Chinese women to retain their family names upon marriage but British society assumes that women – especially Chinese women who are perceived to be submissive types – adopt their husband's surnames. And some Chinese women who wish to avoid the 'stigma' of co-habitation that is implied by their having a different surname from their male partner, feel the need to conform to western custom and abandon their family names.¹⁹ Adopting Anglicized names is another example. Like me, more than 90 per cent of the women I interviewed have Anglicized names, either given to them or self-adopted, and they did not use their Chinese names. Moreover, in the case of the women who have married Caucasian men and also adopted their surnames, this invisibility is even more insidious as they are hidden behind names such as Anne MacDonald, Julie MacNabb, Michelle Lawson.²⁰ Eurocentric naming practices render us invisible to each other, robbing us of pre-immigration identities, thus limiting opportunities for mutual recognition, affirmation and validation of our diasporic identities.

Assimilation on the basis of passing is not only a costly experience psychically but also an exhausting one for it depends on constant negotiation of what response is needed, working out what is appropriate and suppressing the inappropriate. Whether consciously practised or not, assimilation on the basis of passing is a diasporic experience that has yet to be explored from a feminist perspective. In the particular case of diasporic Chinese and Filipina women exiled from a 'home' culture, spiritual dimensions of psychic losses and separations become particularly cogent in the complexions of their social construction. The absence of local family support structures and her dependence on her spouse, not only financially but for her immigration status, are extremely strong factors in ensuring conformity. Yet, it is this physical (re)(dis)location, insider-outsider status and her polyphonic 'oppositional consciousness', that actually challenges the appropriateness and adequacy of current ways of conceptualizing diasporic identities and subjectivities (Cheva Sandoval, quoted in Kaplan 1987: 187). Spaces of silence need to be filled in. Or as Mitsuye Yamada (1983: 40) puts it, 'We need to raise our voices a little more, even as they say to us "This is so uncharacteristic of you".' To finally recognize our own invisibility is to finally be on the path towards visibility. Invisibility is not a natural state for anyone.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: MOVING BEYOND 'CORRECTNESS'

Sometimes the indiscriminate adoption of 'politically correct' language closes down ways of thinking rather than opening them up for the possibilities for understanding different women's experiences. Hence terms like 'black', Black or black are to be used with care not only for reasons of political correctness and political strategy, but to enable us to appreciate the complex, multi-dimensional aspects of women's identities. More importantly, in doing so we must not lose sight of our aim of working together towards social transformation – the meeting of women's needs. I would like to think that the ability to deal with difference is at the centre of feminism's survival as a movement for social change. In retaining the term 'women', we no longer insist on a universal homogeneity based on gender because we are learning to recognize differences and diversity along other social lines such as class, 'race', sexuality, nationality, abilities. Solidarity amongst all women is a utopian ideal and so long as it remains one, it would be strategic for us to continue to struggle together as 'women'. Yet this is no longer an unexamined strategy because the space is there to examine complexities and contradictions without losing sight of feminist ideals of sisterhood, social justice and freedom from oppression.

In the same way, I believe the time is here for 'black' identity to be similarly unmasked as only a useful strategy but no more. As a form of strategic essentialism that has the power to mobilize people, it is nevertheless a strategy not to be confused with substantive essentialism that stifles expressions of plurality (Spivak 1993). Too much effort has been wasted on ideological policing at the expense of neglecting feminist commitment to moving out of oppressive ways of living. In suggesting a way beyond IDPOL games, Judith Butler (1990) argued for an additional strategy of subversive repetition that interrupts the processes that define and endorse identity positioning again and again. Although Butler's remarks were made primarily within the context of gender identity and queer theory, they are applicable here; in establishing as political the very terms through which diasporic identity is articulated. In turn, bell hooks (1991: 29) argues for the practice and promotion of a 'postmodern blackness' which challenges colonial paradigms of 'black' identity – uni-dimensional identity that reinforces white supremacy – and opposes notions of 'authenticity'. However, this forces us to 'rearticulate the basis for collective bonding' and makes the recognition of multiple experiences of diaspora a possibility. Or as Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman (1993: xxiv) put it, 'The days of exclusionary solidarity as an unexamined strategy are long over . . . the dangers inherent in certain methods of accommodating difference need to be pointed out . . . we need to remain alert to their operations.'

Trinh (1991: 1) previously remarked, 'the new moon . . . cannot be seen at all.' Yet, the dark half that faces the earth is not an unnatural state for the moon to be in and the fact that it cannot be seen from the earth only reminds us that this is so only from the perspective of the earth. The uncharted territories of (un)location are like the 'new' moon. They are not new and they appear uncharted only because they cannot be seen from the perspective of dominant (feminist inclusive) discourse. The realities and immigration experiences of many diasporic Chinese and Filipina women have long been unmirrored because the inappropriate Otherness that they insist on illustrates the poverty of categorizations that are based on neo-colonialist definitions. What was interesting in Namjoshi's account of the blue donkey was that at the end of the story, those townfolk who used to think that white donkeys were preferable and who now supposedly accepted the blue donkey as she was, continued playing the colour game – they brought her blue flowers. Personally, I suspect the blue donkey would rather they brought her carrots – of any colour.

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NOTES

- 1 A shorter version of this article was published as 'Shades of Meaning' in *Trouble and Strife*, no. 31, Summer 1995.
- 2 Although I recognize they carry an inherent danger of totalization, I have little choice but to use the terms 'west' and 'western' before other terms introduced can have more precise meanings.
- 3 This term, pronounced and sometimes spelt as 'nyonya', refers to a Chinese woman born in the Straits Settlements of Penang, Singapore and Malacca who belongs to an ethnic minority Chinese community called Straits Chinese or 'peranakan'. Whilst retaining most of its Chinese customs and traditions, this community is mainly assimilated into the dominant Malay culture.
- 4 The term 'race' is used with the understanding that this is a historical rather than a biological and scientific construct.
- 5 I use the term (re)location to represent the logistics and processes of emigration and (dis)location to represent the outsider-insider realities and experiences of immigrants (see Magdalene Ang-Lygate 1996c).
- 6 I prefer this term to 'migration' because the processes of arriving and settling in a new place not only encompass the present and the future but also the past narratives of immigrant realities.
- 7 Alice Walker (1984) coined the term 'womanist' to represent an identity that has been informed by issues of racism/sexism, to distinguish it from 'feminist', an identity she saw as mainly appropriated by 'white' women.
- 8 For a fuller discussion of 'black' as signifier and as sign, see F. Anthias and N. Yuval-Davis (1992).
- 9 See Tariq Modood (1994) for a critique of the political concept of 'blackness' and how, from his perspective, it harms Asians.
- 10 Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Ann Phoenix (1994) argue that when people of South Asian and African-Caribbean origin in Britain together embraced the term 'black', racist definitions of black meant to divide these populations became weakened. Nevertheless, in the context of this chapter, when charting unexamined territories of say 'black'-'black' racism, the point remains that current social vocabulary is limited and unhelpful.
- 11 One example of perceived internal 'conflict' amongst Chinese women I interviewed was in the way we chose to communicate. In identifying each other as Chinese, it often felt as if we should be speaking Chinese instead of English. However, in reality the variance in our fluency in the many Chinese dialects made this impractical.
- 12 As the story was based on Marc Chagall's *The Blue Donkey*, it is questionable whether the donkey might have, when pressed, further identified itself as Russian, Jewish, or French.
- 13 Some postcolonial theorists further suggest that western eyes are not always 'white' eyes. It is possible for 'black' peoples resident in the west to view immigrants with eurocentric eyes too. In her article 'Under Western Eyes', Chandra T. Mohanty (1988) claims that some western feminist scholarship categorize 'Third World' women as a singular monolithic subject, thus refusing to confront the differences and diversity which are part of these women's lives.
- 14 The Third Policy Studies Institute survey (Brown 1984) estimated that 40 per cent of Britain's 'black' population were British born; moreover it estimated that 50 per cent of those who came to Britain as immigrants had lived in Britain for over 15 years.
- 15 See for example, David Owen (1994) where he draws attention to the problematics of 4-way, 10-way classifications and the OPCS coding adopted

- by various bodies and agencies in their attempt to reflect ethnic composition of the population.
- 16 Issues related to standpoint methodology as raised within the context of being a Chinese woman who researches other Chinese women are discussed in Ang-Lygate (1996a). It is also interesting that my nonya identity, mainly signified by an unfamiliarity with 'proper' Chinese language, has significantly contributed to my outsider status within the local Chinese community. I cannot 'pass' as 100 per cent ethnic - whatever this is.
 - 17 The phenomena of colourism - ascribing greater value to same-race people based on the lightness of their skin colour - is not discussed here but Virginia Harris (1994) critiques this form of internalized racism.
 - 18 See Frankenberg (1993) for a discussion on the social construction of whiteness.
 - 19 It is increasingly more acceptable in British society for women to keep their own surnames even after marriage but in the absence of specific instructions, educational, legal and financial institutions still assume a married woman will abandon her own surname in favour of her husband's.
 - 20 Due to confidentiality, these names are pseudonyms.

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Fractured or flexible identities?

Life histories of 'black' diasporic women in Britain

Naz Rassool

INTRODUCTION

Used as a *racially* descriptive term 'blackness' has historically provided a universalizing, homogenizing category in which the concept of 'foreign Otherness' has been encapsulated *par excellence* in both colonial and post-colonial discourse. Emphasizing the need to understand the '*processes of subjectification*' (original emphasis) in colonial discourse, Bhabha (1994: 67) argues that:

The construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of forms of difference – racial and sexual . . . it is a discourse crucial to the binding of a range of differences and discriminations that inform the discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchization.

Grounded in racist theories and encoded with meanings of 'foreign alienness', 'black pathology' and 'social and ethnic inferiority', blackness has historically provided the category *against* which the concept of the British 'nation' has been defined in popular consciousness. As such, black people conceived of as an amorphous, 'racially' and culturally homogenized 'outgroup' (captured in the all-encompassing term 'ethnic minorities') have served historically as a powerful hegemonic construct in shaping commonsense understandings of the British 'nation'. In the words of Hall (1993: 396) '*vis-à-vis* the developed West, we are very much "the same". We belong to the marginal, the underdeveloped, the periphery, the "Other". We are at the outer edge, the "rim", of the metropolitan world.' However, this homogenized (dominant) view contrasts somewhat with the reality that the British 'black experience' comprises a complex tapestry of historical experiences grounded in different diasporas. The black British diasporas have their origins in the voluntary and involuntary migration of groups of people from different parts of the world. Scattered and dislocated from their countries of origin these colonial, and now post-colonial, peoples bring with them their own historical and cultural

experiences within which both group and individual subjectivities have been shaped.

If we take account then of the range of cultures represented in the British 'black' experience it follows that the adoption of the term 'black' to describe different groups of people clearly needs to be appraised more critically. Aziz (1995: 162) exploring the contested nature of the concept of black-ness in Britain argues that:

Black people do not comprise a hermetically sealed or homogeneous category: skin colour, history and culture all play a part in their definition. Black-ness is a product of self-conscious political practice: its meaning has been given by, and has in turn affected the struggles of people in Britain who have identified themselves (and have been identified) as black.

This chapter explores through the life histories of four women within the black diasporas the complex ways in which some 'black identities' have evolved in Britain. Underlying this is the view, first, that 'black' identities are not linear constructions but rather that they reflect a tapestry of interwoven life experiences having their origins within different socio-historical epochs. Second is the view that the socio-cultural, political and geographical displacement effected by political exile, as well as the racism in which slavery, colonial and neo-colonial relations were legitimated, indelibly mark the 'black experience' within metropolitan societies. The shaping of 'black' identities in British society therefore arises out of historically specific material conditions. Thirdly, and relatedly, human beings are not uni-dimensional; the ways in which they experience the world derive both directly and indirectly, consciously and unconsciously, from their socio-historical experiences. Although cultures perhaps inevitably become transmuted across time and space, as memory 'traces' of past experiences, the cultural histories of peoples nevertheless and, however subliminally, continue to influence at different levels, the shaping of their subjectivities, needs and aspirations within everyday life. Meanings thus evolve dialogically in relation to society, culture and the individual. That is to say, although we recall past experiences individually we do so to the social world and it is ultimately in terms of that social world that we can understand and name our individual experiences. As is argued by Todorov (1984: x) 'culture consists in the discourses retained by collective memory (the commonplaces and stereotypes just as much as the exceptional words), discourses in relation to which every uttering subject must situate himself or herself'. This chapter explores the ways in which this organic and complex interweaving of 'past-present' (Bhabha 1994: 7) experience provides continuity, coherence and cohesion to what is, from the outside, often seen as a fragmented and alienated social experience.

CONCEPTUALIZING 'BLACK IDENTITIES'

'Black' identities therefore are not fixed states of 'being'; they are continually being shaped in their everyday interaction with the social world and thus they are flexible and engaged in a constant, reflexive, process of 'becoming'. The concept of reflexivity used here derives from Giddens' (1991) view of individuals' intentional use of knowledge of the social world in the re-ordering of the 'self' in relation to that reality. Cultural hybridity constitutes a key variable within this process of self-definition and, as is discussed below, it does not necessarily signify an unproblematic incorporation into the dominant culture. The notion of cultural hybridity is complex and can be viewed on different levels. At surface level, it refers to the reality that in an ongoing quest for rootedness within a society so fundamentally hostile to their presence, black people continually have to adapt, adjust and change their cultures, customs, behaviours, expectations, aspirations and cultural consciousness in order to 'belong' socially as well as to identify culturally and politically with the dominant culture. As will be seen later, this process takes place within a context of struggle, conflict, contradiction and ambiguity. At the same time, minority cultures by their very presence challenge the socially constructed 'homogeneity' of national cultures from within by changing expectations, behaviours and experiences of and within everyday life (Massey 1994). Moreover, within the context of the nation-state, minority cultures also create their own cultural space within which they can express their needs and suffuse society with a plurality of dissenting political voices articulating demands that often conflict with and/or challenge the hegemony of ethnic-nationalism. In this regard, their impact on the dominant culture can be viewed as being, intrinsically, counter-hegemonic.

However, analyses of different 'black' experiences and the shaping of 'black identities' in Britain cannot lose sight of the reality that racism is materially grounded. And, in terms of this, the notion of cultural pluralism as defined within the metropolitan nation-state, ultimately remains rooted in historically derived (unequal) power relations. Analyses of the social and self-construction of 'black identities' therefore cannot be examined within a de-historicized and de-politicized theory of cultural difference. Neither can the concept of cultural hybridization be addressed unproblematically in terms of the historical 'inevitability' of a globalized culture. To do so would be to ignore the materiality of historical forms of domination and control – and thus would run the risk not only of marginalizing black people's experiences but, indeed, to collude in the legitimation of their structured exclusion.

The notions of cultural hybridity and cultural differences then cannot be addressed in a politically meaningful way outside an analysis of societal racism and the impact of this on the everyday experiences of different generations of black people living in Britain.

REMEMBERING THE PAST: EXPLORING INTERTEXTUAL MEANINGS

In South Africa, where I have my cultural and political roots, Apartheid oppressed black men and women, making them 'acquiescent' by silencing their voices – and thus sought to render them invisible. Part of that 'culture of silence' (Freire 1972) follows the exile across time and space as historical experiences become interlocked with other forms of oppression within a different society. It is in this sense that the 'past-present' (Bhabha 1994: 7) is inextricably woven into the text of everyday living. Finding a 'home' within the adoptive country then becomes a journey of learning to understand past experiences in order to clarify the present – and from that position of knowledge to find a voice – and, more importantly, to define a future. Learning to make sense of the complexity of my own socio-historical and cultural legacy led me to consider other subjugated histories and the complexity of other experiences. This, it was hoped, would allow me to identify common themes within our experiences and also to explore differences. Todorov (1984: x), in his exposition of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism or intertextuality, states that 'all discourse is in dialogue with prior discourses on the same subject, as well as with discourses yet to come, whose reactions it foresees and anticipates. A single voice can make itself heard only by blending into the complex choir of other voices already in place.' Listening to different voices articulating different experiences and exploring interconnections thus holds out the possibility of synthesizing what may appear to be otherwise discrete experiences – and in the process perhaps yield a different, multi-faceted and multi-layered understanding of the construction of 'black identities' in Britain.

FRAMING THE SUBJECT

I locate my overall analysis within Giddens' view that although 'structures are produced by interactions that are constantly in the process of reproducing the overall characteristics of society; that such reproductions are not exact' (Giddens quoted in Ackroyd 1994: 291) – that they are subject to change through human action. Located within this context, the life histories of the women documented here will be presented in their own voices. That is to say, they will articulate their own understandings of how they have historically been constituted as subjects and of their social experiences. They will also describe the strategies that they have adopted consciously as agents of change within the context of their everyday living.

Adopting this framework should enable the participants' thoughts, experiences and actions to be placed at the centre of my analysis and thus allow their experiences to be articulated from a position of what Pecheux (1982) calls *dis-identification*. That is to say, rather than being regarded as

passive recipients of racism, sexism and structural oppression, 'black' women are presented as engaging in an ongoing process of working 'on and against prevailing ideological practices in which black and gendered subjection are constructed' (Rassool 1995: 24). Such a position places emphasis on both personal and political agency as key elements within a politics of self-identification, self-definition and self-actualization which, in turn, are consciously linked to broader struggles and resistances against prevailing and historically oppressive practices.

Self-identification, in this instance, refers to the cognitive re-appropriation of the categories of racialized and genderized subjugation and the process of encoding these with empowering meanings as part of the struggle to gain control over their lives. Self-identity within this context then does not denote a fixed state of being but rather signifies a continuous process of 'becoming'. This refers to the discursive 'self' as is 'routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual' (Giddens 1991: 52) and, in addition to this, the dialogical relationship in which the conscious self exists with the social and material world.

Self-definition, on the other hand, places emphasis on the affective and describes gendered and racialized subjects as they are engaged in an ongoing process of critique, negotiation, self-affirmation and validation of themselves in relation to their particular experience within society. As will become evident later, this process, by implication, involves social and cultural hybridization fundamentally as a survival strategy. Again, this is not to argue that hybridization is a neutral process since it also speaks of the conflict, contradictions and ambivalences in which the 'fractured self' exists within a society in which the concept of 'Britishness' has historically been defined in terms of an ethnic and cultural 'norm'.

In foregrounding 'experience' in this way I adhere to Probyn's (1993: 18) view that 'while experience describes the everyday, or "the way of life" it is also the key to analyzing the relations that construct that reality'. Speaking the 'self' in this way then is not to revert to forms of essentialism but effectively allows these women to explore the constitution of their life-experiences in relation to broader socio-political, historical and cultural processes.

USING ORAL HISTORY

Methodologically the study can be conceived of as a form of 'people's history' (Samuel 1981: xvi). In particular, it deals with the recovery of subjective experience which, in turn, is articulated within participants' maps of knowledge of the social world. Placing the 'remembered past' thus at the centre of analysis, the study draws experientially on the 'self-narratives' (Giddens 1991) of the focus group which comprises four women representing perspectives from different black diasporas. This

includes an articulation of the Afro-Caribbean experience and contains a view of their history of slavery and social displacement; an Iraqi-Kurd speaks from the perspective of a refugee from political oppression whilst the South African 'black' experience in exile represents a view of neo-colonialist experience. The fourth participant provides the perspective of an Afro-Indian refugee following Kenya's expulsion policy during the 1960s.

The unifying factor amongst this apparently disparate group of women is the central role that colonialism/neo-colonialism, diaspora, ethnic 'Otherness' and the development of a cultural hybridity have played in the shaping of their subjectivities, hopes, dreams and aspirations – and how these have influenced their lived experiences within the host society. Their experiences, although not representative of the 'black' female experience as a whole in Britain, within the context of the study, serve primarily as a concrete referent around which the concept of a multi-faceted British 'black' identity can be articulated. For the purpose of this exploratory study then the chosen focus group represents complexity of experience, a variety of subjugated histories whilst the limited number of participants featured in the study allows in-depth analysis to take place.

The voice of the individual speaking subject is central to this analysis which derives from oral historians who argue that 'people are not stamped into place by history and culture, but patch together a place for themselves ... in personal statements, we see the power of the individual to compose the terms of [her] life' (Modell 1983: 11). In providing individuals with 'cultural space' from which to reflect upon and speak about how they perceive their identities – and why they have been constituted as gendered and racialized subjects – it is hoped to crystallize aspects of the multi-faceted and multi-levelled forms of oppression that constitute the 'black' British experience in the 1990s. Situating themselves in relation to the historical discourses that have structured their lives, their accounts, at meta-level, also serve as an attempt to understand the nature of post-colonial society. In order to do so, respondents needed to be able to articulate the complexity of their experiences within the wider context of socio-cultural and historical relations. I selected a group of professional black women who have a grounding in concepts used in the social sciences and also have a politicized view of the world. The inclusion of these criteria, it was hoped, would enable the discussion to take place within a context of shared understandings and, more importantly, to minimize the power disparities between interviewer and interviewee.

Harding (1987: 7) argues the importance for researchers to place themselves within the 'same critical plane' as those interviewed and that the assumptions, beliefs and frame of reference used in the research need to be clarified. In doing so, those studied are treated 'as subjects of their experiences rather than as objects of research' (quoted Chase and Bell

1994: 64). They argue further that 'when we treat those we study as subjects – as active knowers and agents – we transform the research relationship. We open ourselves to interaction, to intersubjectivity, to others understandings of and relations to us as researchers' (ibid.). Respondents were contacted in person which allowed the nature and purpose of the study to be explained. They were then provided with a copy of a previous article written by me on a related subject plus a copy of the set questions prepared for the interviews. Respondents were thus given the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the nature of the issues to be raised in discussion – and presented with an example of how their views would be represented. It also provided them with an understanding of the frame of reference within which their views would be presented. Interviewees were informed that the interview would last for approximately two hours. On the basis of this, they could decide whether they wished to participate in the project.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as these allow the interviewer to focus on issues of particular importance to the research question whilst also giving the participants freedom to explore those issues relevant to their experience – within a structured framework. This internal negotiation of what can be said and discussed at length removes a rigid adherence to the set questions and therefore 'what should be said'. Again, providing the participants with a sense of relative autonomy and control during the interview process helps to equalize power relations within the context of discussion. Moreover, whilst doing research into people's lived and personal experiences can often be cathartic to the interviewees, it can also become a traumatic experience in which painful, sublimated, emotions can be re-opened. Similarly, during the interview the interviewees may reveal more personal information than they had intended. These variables clearly highlight the importance of sensitivity, maturity and sensibility on the part of the researcher – who should listen to people and respect their subjects' interpretation of reality and history and not exploit deep-felt experiences in a voyeuristic manner. The questions were open-ended and structured along thematic lines focusing on the interviewees' perceptions of history, culture, experiences and self-defining strategies.

INTERNALIZED RACISM AND THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE

The overall emphasis on British 'black' identity in the chapter derives from the fact that all the women interviewed expressed the opinion that societal oppression impacted on their lived reality first in racial terms. Indeed, it is within the historical discourse of 'race' that black family life has become pathologized and notions of black female 'passivity' and 'powerlessness' as well as the stereotype of black women's sexuality have been hegemonized in the metropolitan consciousness. In terms of this, they are excluded

from power first because they are 'black'. However, racism is not a clear-cut and linear issue. Within both colonialism and neo-colonialism, group and individual subjectivities developed within relations of overt domination and subordination between oppressors and oppressed. These oppressions were multi-levelled and divided communities along 'race', class and ethnic lines – and in the case of Indian culture generally, also included divisions of caste, language and religion. Within these contexts, women existed as non-essential elements at the outer-periphery of society. These forms of separatism, subjugation and exclusion were reinforced by the divide-and-rule policies of colonialism. Moreover, according to Hall (1993: 396):

The ways in which black people, black experiences, were positioned and subject-ed in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalisation. Not only ... were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as 'Other'.

Indeed, the success of colonialist policy was the internalization of racialized identities which, in turn, contributed to the development of an inverted racism amongst oppressed social groups themselves. These social relations of colonialism have been perpetuated in post-colonial Britain where in different ways they have continued to shape the consciousness of black immigrant groups. Racisms operating at surface level are revealed in day-to-day encounters. One interviewee stated that:

At school I remember my friend, Rana who is a British-born Pakistani calling her own friends 'Paki' and I laid into her for doing that. Also, my friend Sally whose father was a Ghanaian used to be called 'Kizzy' from the film 'Roots' – often also by her own black friends.

At a deeper level, one of the interviewees argued of the Caribbean experience:

There is still a lot of resistance and hostility towards African people and there are many reasons for this: part of Western culture is about fostering divisions and hostilities amongst people from the diaspora ... so they do re-inforce this view that we don't have anything in common with each other ... and many of us are so desperate to belong, to be accepted, to have roots ... that we collude with these racist views. Also, being distanced from our African roots historically and having been socialized as colonial subjects have contributed to these negative attitudes towards African people. I think that much of this has been shaped around feelings of self-hate which – again is a left-over of the slave experience.

These forms of inverted racism, sexism and other forms of internalized oppressions highlight the fact that the 'black' British experience is fundamentally constituted in difference and, moreover, that it is riven with inner contradictions, 'racial' tensions and inter-ethnic group discrimination. Therefore, although white racism is structural and institutionalized we, nevertheless, cannot adopt a 'purist' view of racism because we are 'black'. hooks (1991: 31) stresses the importance of the need 'to confront the enemy within' which means a critical self-evaluation as well as working towards transforming female consciousness. She states that: 'Working together to expose, examine, and eliminate sexist socialization within ourselves, women would strengthen and affirm one another and build a solid foundation for developing political solidarity' (hooks 1991: 3). This, it can be argued, should also be extended to include a critical examination of racist socialization which needs to be grounded in an understanding of the complex ways in which our subjectivities have been shaped historically. One of the interviewees highlighted the need for a critical evaluation of disempowering and subjugating cultural practices within the community:

I find the physical and emotional abuse that people within the community operate very distressing ... and my experience of that still lingers ... this business of authoritarianism ... beating children as opposed to negotiating with them, which to me is one of the most negative aspects of Caribbean life ... it still lingers as part of that whole slave experience ... an oppressive experience which we perpetuate rather than address critically. Then there is the male-female relationship ... although universal, it is also oppressive within Caribbean culture ... Our men carry with them their historical oppressions which they use to oppress women and children. I find that very difficult to understand, because Caribbean women are traditionally very strong ... we have tended to be mothers, fathers, providers yet we somehow seem to leave that aside and operate in victim-mode in our relationships with our men ... many Caribbean women still subscribe to that kind of behaviour.

This view highlights the fact that we need to acknowledge the subjugating practices within our own communities and to work actively against their reproduction; important are the ways in which we silence ourselves as well as the ways in which we undermine one another as women.

SKIN COLOUR, RACISM AND EXCLUSION

For a large section of black people in Britain, notably those who migrated from the Caribbean, India and countries in Africa, the diasporic experience originated within the 'master/mistress'-servant relations of colonialism.

As argued earlier, these relations are perpetuated within the metropolitan society where they form part of the nation's hegemonic consciousness. In their quest to belong many black people have tried different strategies in order to minimize their differences. The Afro-Caribbean interviewee stated that:

I consciously changed my accent because I felt so traumatized by comments such as 'Nigger, Nigger, pull the trigger, Bang ! Bang! Bang!' Although in St Lucia I was regarded as a bright pupil, here they sent me to a remedial class because of my dialect . . . after a long period of destructive rebellion I internalized my feelings and changed my speech register in order to belong.

The Kenyan interviewee arrived here later in life and had to change her accent because:

I was teaching in an inner city school – and although the kids there all spoke non-standard varieties of English, they would nevertheless roar with laughter whenever I did not place the accents in the right places in words. I had to survive as a teacher and therefore learned to adapt my speech.

Having a middle-class accent and speaking Standard English did not help the third interviewee who stated that:

My friends used to ask me 'Did you have elocution lessons, how come you speak like that?' They also used to say, 'You're just like a white person'. But although I was popular, well-liked, I was never invited to their homes . . . I was never included in the group. As a result, I consciously developed a negative attitude towards belonging to groups . . . still today, I don't have that sense of belonging. Speaking 'posh' did not prevent my fourth year History teacher from making racist remarks such as 'Oh, Selma doesn't need to worry, she won't get a black eye' . . . But I wouldn't let them get away without challenging them . . . maybe they saw me as this 'Paki' upstart . . . I didn't care, I had to protect and assert myself. I've made my difference a strength but yet it was also a hurdle in terms of making friendships, building relationships . . . two extremes to be reconciled.

These statements highlight conflict, ambiguity and compromise as intrinsic elements of the *process* of self-identification.

SELF-DEFINITION: DISPLACEMENT AND THE SEARCH FOR ROOTS

Experiences of marginalization thus for many create the need for a 'search for the self' which involves a critical examination of historical discourses

of 'Otherness' and social exclusion – and within that process the subjects in a reflexive process of 'self-definition'. This integration of experience and social knowledge, according to the Popular Memory Group (1982: 240) can serve 'as a basis for larger understandings, for the deepening of progressive knowledge and for active political involvement' – a process which often requires a conscious re-assertion of previously subjugated histories as a form of cultural self-determination. As can be seen below, what emerges is a politicized identity. One of the respondents stated that although she locates her history within a Caribbean register she, nevertheless, regards herself as an African who was born in the Caribbean:

I describe myself as African ... my name was Susan Jones and I never really liked that name. I changed my name by deed poll (to a Nigerian name) when I was about 30 after a lot of soul searching ... working on some rather painful issues around identity and alliances. I decided that I was very proud of being an African woman despite the fact that I was born within the diaspora. It took me a long time to come to terms with the fact that I was not culturally inferior to African people who were born on the Home Continent. I no longer wanted a European name tag.

Her conflict around cultural identity relates very directly to Caribbean emigres' search for 'rootedness'; a sense of historical 'belonging'. This, in turn, relates to their historical experience of social displacement and rootlessness grounded in the slave experience and colonization. For this interviewee, as is the case for many other Caribbeans and also African-Americans, 'Africa is the name of the missing term, the great aporia, which lies at the centre of (Caribbean) cultural identity and gives it a meaning which, until recently, it lacked' (Hall 1993: 394). In this particular instance, choosing to identify as a Caribbean rather than as a 'West Indian' or 'Black British' also constitutes a powerful means of dis-identifying with the host culture which is experienced fundamentally as being hostile. In response to this, the interviewee argued further that: 'You identify yourself as being different, being special from those around you because you need something positive to hold onto.' Speaking from a different socio-historical experience, another expressed a similar view. She stated that:

I've never really identified myself as British because you're always asked where you're from and they don't want to hear that you're from Plymouth or London, but your country of origin. Only in my adult years have I started to accept the role of Britain in my life. As a child I needed to hold on to being a black South African because I so desperately needed to belong somewhere. And I knew that they didn't want me to belong here because they always called me 'Paki' and I hated that. In

asserting that I was a black South African, I somehow felt morally superior and this provided me with tremendous strength.

Again, this self 'Othering' relates to her historical experience as an ethnicized 'Asian' in Apartheid South Africa where the concept of *eiesoortigheid* ('ethnic purity') had provided the basis of neo-colonialist divide-and-rule policy. Within that context, the disenfranchised identified very strongly as 'black' South Africans, as part of the struggle to fracture the racialized categories of hierarchized ethnicities. Faced with racism here in Britain, this interviewee's response was to revert to that self-defining concept of 'blackness'.

It could be argued that both these women responded to their situation in this particular way *because* of their particular historical experiences. And, rather than accept the disempowered social status accorded to them within the host society, they sought to displace and transform subjugated identities through a process of self-identification structured within dominant ideological discourses (Macdonell 1987) and thus they could, on an individual level, engage in praxis. Yet, whilst for the one, the change in name signifies her adoption of a permanent identity in relation to her African roots, for the other, the situation is more complex. Although she has retained her identity as a 'black' South African it has become less tangible because she argued that:

As I've grown older that identity has become more transparent because I came here when I was 4 years old – and my South African experience has largely been through others . . . through hearsay. All my formative years have been spent here in England and some aspects of that identity have been altered . . . and I have to acknowledge and accommodate that.

She went on to argue that:

As Left Internationalists our family did not really belong to any specific community and I still retain that worldview . . . but it brings me into conflict with myself . . . people always want to define me as an 'Asian' and when I contradict them, they regard it as some form of self-denial . . . but it isn't. My life has been shaped by different cultural and political influences . . . I cannot now opt for cultural or ethnic labels that we have fought against so vigorously in the struggle against Apartheid. But I find that the world, including the 'British Asians', still want to classify you into neat ethnic categories and I cannot accept that. They also expect me to behave like an 'Asian' woman . . . I don't know what that really means. I am a Black South African and will always identify myself as that, but there are also other aspects of my life here that are important to me. I need to acknowledge that. I need to find my place within this society and I cannot do so as a victim.

POLITICIZED 'BLACK' IDENTITIES

In their quest to belong, others have tried to assimilate into British culture and, in the process, have lost their own cultural identity. One interviewee expressed the view that many of the first generation have:

adopted not only British culture, but white British values and politics. I think that many of them have picked the worst of white working-class culture . . . and some very negative aspects of Black American culture . . . they have accepted the victim-like status. In this regard they have lost sense of their history and culture – and in the process, gained nothing but alienation . . . they still don't really belong. But there are others, those of my generation who have done well educationally and professionally because we set ourselves apart from the population – we identify as Afro-Caribbeans rather than to accept the 'West Indianism' bestowed on us by our colonial masters.

A similar understanding was reflected in another interviewee who argued that:

My family's history of South Africa and especially their willingness to discuss it with me, to help me put things into perspective, fortified me as a child. It was also important to have that perspective of Left Internationalism . . . of having a world perspective and to define struggle in terms of humanity.

She added that:

I always needed to know where I stood in terms of where I was living and identifying as a black South African helped me perhaps because I was different and couldn't be lumped in with the Indian stereotype . . . but maybe my denial of Indianness was a way of trying to be accepted on different terms by the whites. There was certainly a dual thing going on there. When my parents tried to integrate us with the Muslim community, I found that I had very little in common with them . . . I didn't understand, nor did I believe. Because my parents were secularist I didn't have any previous history of being a Muslim . . . as a result, I integrated more with British culture . . . although I value the inclusiveness of my black South African heritage.

The Iraqi Kurd interviewee, when asked what she identifies as in Britain, stated that she does so strongly as a 'black' person:

I do so because I'm excluded from British society because of my colour. Culturally I identify as a Kurd . . . a displaced person. I feel that I cannot identify with being an Iraqi because of what that regime is doing to my people.

The Kenyan, on the other hand, argued that:

When I think about my life now, I have lived it all as the 'Other' here and in Kenya. My life as a human being . . . being able to live my life with dignity now means much more to me than being part of any particular ethnic group. I want power and control over my own life not an ethnic label. I belong to the world and if it so happens that a significant part of that world rejects me because I am black and undermines me as a woman then that is where the struggle lies. I'm not fighting with myself anymore . . . I'm quite comfortable and happy about who I am. For many 'Asians', their identity is bound up very singularly with their religion rather than looking at themselves within a broader societal context, their relationship with this society, where they stand in relation to it, what their roles are . . .

Again, these examples serve to illustrate that rather than constituting a unitary and linear variable the 'black' British experience is grounded in social and geographical discontinuities, cultural and social differences, diversity in terms of historical experience, cultural hybridity – and also, significantly, fractured identities existing in conflict with themselves within the context of a 'norm-oriented' society. Thus rather than representing ethnic or racial absolutism, British 'black' identity constitutes a discursive, polyvalent variable. That is to say, it does not represent a statically determined state of being; in its ongoing contact with British culture it is always in the process of becoming.

CULTURAL HYBRIDITY

Hall (1993: 394) argues that:

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialist past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power . . . identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

The interviewee born in Kenya highlighted the complex dilemmas that this socially constructed identity has created for her:

Both my grandfathers came from India. The one married a German woman, the other a local African woman. Because mothers tended to be the main ones to rear their children, both my parents had strong influences from their mothers and therefore had no real 'Indian' identities. . . . We grew up as Kenyans . . . and I identify very strongly with that. . . . when we were growing up in Kenya the Indians there did not really want to know us because we were not 'pure'. Here in Britain the assumption, (especially by the Asians) is that I am 'Asian' . . . when

I challenge this it is assumed that I am willfully denying my cultural roots. The conflict for me lies in the fact that even if I were to accept their categorization, by colluding with what I call their 'ethnic essentialism', I am in fact denying the importance of my grandmothers and their struggles against so many different kinds of oppression – including that within the Indian community.

Although it highlights conflict, this example also illustrates the interconnectedness of countries and continents reflected in the lives of peoples from the 'black' diaspora – carrying with it, the evolution of a trans-continental cultural identity; the globalization of cultural experience – not as a new phenomenon – but in generational terms across space and time. Similarly, Mama (1992: 154) argues that 'Black women's experiences and struggles, apart from being rooted in so many different contexts are further complicated by the varying penetrations by and relations with British society.' In Mama's terms, and as is evident in the interviews above, fragmentation, cultural hybridity and flexibility of the concept of self-identity – defined within a conscious and unconscious 'past-presentness' (Bhabha 1994: 7) – can be seen as being intrinsic to individual survival within the black diasporic experience. Cultural hybridity then can be seen as having been intrinsic to how life has been lived by ethnic minority groups within different societies during various historical periods and, as such, it constitutes a signifier of cultural change across time and space. However, its success in terms of political empowerment remains debatable as is highlighted here by one of the interviewees:

I don't deny British cultural influences that have been positive ... for many years I felt very insecure about my identity so I rejected them ... I no longer do so ... they are very much part of what I am now. But I don't identify with British culture where it encourages dividing or separating ourselves from each other. Although they imply or state that we were born here and therefore need to identify as Britons, in reality that's not what we experience. On the one hand we are told to distance ourselves from our cultures and become British and on the other hand, we are not accepted ... we are rejected. Very few of them have really worked through their racist values, practices and attitudes – and can value differences. After thirty one years I still regard myself as a foreigner, as a stranger, as a guest in this country ... I'm certainly treated in that way ... I'm still discriminated against. Depending on the political message of the times, sometimes we belong and other times we are foreigners.

Ultimately then it would seem that the dominant, homogenizing discourses of societal racism remain to exclude and marginalize the collective experience of black people in Britain.

CONCLUSION: INTERTEXTUALITY, REFLEXIVITY AND CULTURAL HYBRIDITY

The important point to emerge from the study overall is that the dominant framing of discourse does not quite succeed in constituting black people as static subjects; they are actively involved in questioning, challenging and fracturing hegemonic meanings and practices within the concrete experience of everyday life. The voices of black women could be heard narrating their different experiences and describing their social reality as well as their complex struggles to gain control over their lives. Although strategies varied, their experiences of being 'Othered' and 'self-Othering' shared many similarities. Most significant was the complexity of their experiences and, particularly, the collaging of their continuously evolving identities. At the same time, the determination of the interviewees to identify as 'black' women as a position from which to articulate and transform their social experiences within contemporary British society provided the basis of their process of self-definition. This analysis illustrates the ways in which focusing on individual and group action within particular arenas of struggle enables exploration of not only affective aspects of self-definition but also provides opportunity to examine the discursive ways in which these connect with systemic and hegemonic variables of racial, gender and class oppression. The processes of subjectification (Bhabha 1994) could thus be explored concretely through the lives of the women who participated in this study.

The accounts of these women have provided evidence also of the fact that in the process of defining themselves in relation to their social world, black women (and men) use history and engage in cultural dialogue and critique; that they are all part of a community of discourse (Grele 1985). The extent to which these women drew on their understandings of their histories, the 'memory traces' of past collective experiences, serves to illustrate the importance of intertextuality as a variable in understanding the shaping of the 'fractured self' historically. At the same time, it also highlights the inner coherence that the ability to draw meaningfully from the past provides to the reflexive process of political self-identification.

Their life histories also illustrate that the ongoing process of self-definition necessarily involves some measure of cultural hybridization as an integral part of survival within a society shaped around the notion of an ethnically homogeneous 'norm'. This organic process of change bears out the point made earlier that 'black identities' are not linear social constructions; they represent richly textured cultural and historical tapestries that continue to evolve within the concrete reality of everyday life. At the same time, their individual experiences also concretized the point that cultural hybridization often creates conflict and contains ambiguities and contradictions for the individual in terms of the racist realities of the

social world. This multi-levelled and multi-faceted process of confrontation, compromise and self-empowerment highlights the complex and problematic inter-relationship between historical experience, socialization and individual struggles in the breaking down of historically derived racist and gendered structures within society. Nevertheless, in participating in this counter-hegemonic discourse, the self-defining strengths reflected in the lives of the women documented here have managed, at least to some extent, to fracture the 'power and pervasiveness of historical representations' (Popular Memory Group 1982: 207) of black women in contemporary Britain.

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In my father's house are many mansions

The nation and postcolonial desire¹

Nalini Persram

She is condemned to 'psychosis', or at best 'hysteria', for lack . . . of a valid signifier for her 'first' desire.

(Irigaray 1991: 411)

Autobiography is often a search for coherence and explanation [yet] we are strangers to ourselves.

(Duncker 1992: 56)²

As far back as I can remember, I loved to watch old black and white war movies with my dad, and still do. But the colours rubbed off on me, and for a long time, I viewed the issues without shades. When I was 10 years old, my dream was to feed the starving people of the world. It took another two decades for me to realize that both black and white cultures had been starved by empire. I remember the day when I became coloured.³ The image in the mirror at the age of 15 told me for the first time that I was the product of a black⁴ father and a white mother. At the threshold of 20, the world was my oyster, but the stones were not pearls.

DISLOCATION

Place

We moved to Canada from Guyana because the political situation had reached intolerable dimensions. Riots, burnings, lootings and threats were beginning to take their toll on the Guyanese. Burnham had ruled the country with a racist, dictatorial hand and we were part of the mass exodus of people, particularly East Indians, who began leaving at the end of the 1960s.

The usual plethora of questions – where was I from, what language did I speak and was I a red Indian? (my two long black braids were always cause for some concern) – were innocuous enough, coming from children my own age, just simple curiosity. Race was not an issue. But it was always there – to be exoticized, used abusively once in a while in

the form of 'Paki' or 'redskin', or to entertain through tales of the jungle, exotic animals, and, of course, my pet snake (a fabrication that none the less provoked the desired response).

Then my cousin showed up. She had accompanied her parents on a visit from Georgetown to see Guyanese relatives in Canada, but quickly found herself an unexpectedly permanent member of our family. Whilst my uncle and aunt were in Canada, Burnham had announced mandatory military service for all Guyanese schoolchildren. Spawmed by years of racial tension, rumours had begun about the rape of Indian girls by members of the predominantly Afro-Guyanese military and my aunt and uncle were advised by a friend in Guyana to leave their daughter in Canada with relatives. So, at the tender age of 11, quite literally plucked from her home, she was left behind and bewildered in a place she would never learn to call home.

By 1992, there were approximately 19 million refugees in search of political asylum (*Guardian* 1993: 20). That is a lot of outsiders. Edward Said observes that one's self-consciousness as an outsider allows a comprehension of how the inside works, given that one's distance from it offers a better view of its contours (Said 1986: 49). But there is a price for this privilege.

If the nation represents the epitome of universal legitimacy in contemporary politics (Anderson 1991: 3), what Paul Gilroy describes as cultural insiderism is a series of rhetorical strategies in which the ideas of nation, nationality, national belonging, and nationalism are marked by a fundamental sense of ethnic difference.⁵ Linked to some of the most powerful cultural kinship values, it assumes a sovereignty over all other forms of social and historical experience, cultures, and identities (Gilroy 1993: 8, 3). In this instance ethnicity, and all its associated indicators of identity – race, colour, culture – becomes intimately related to politico-territorial definitions of place, conceived both geographically and anthropologically. 'Nationalism, like patriarchy, favours singleness – one identity, one growth pattern, one birth and blood for all' (Boehmer 1991: 7). Thus, where one is from constitutes the determining factor in how far one's people have progressed.

RACE AND GENDER

Race did then become an issue. Being dark and with a 'funny' accent (and far ahead pubescently of everyone else), my cousin was subjected to horrendous mistreatment by her new classmates. Moreover, being extremely intelligent, but also from a British colonial education system, she was placed a year higher than her age would have suggested, which was nevertheless a year lower than suited her academically. Concerns

about her social development had warranted a measured response to academic placement. Nevertheless, her obvious intelligence was exercised at the mercy of racism's forked tongue of jealousy and intimidation.

I watched what happened. We were good friends, but I was not about to go through the same ordeal. What had begun, in my case, as humorous speculations about how many cows my father had traded me for turned into something much more sinister. Gender, the most salient, available and subversive weapon at my disposal became the protection against racism. The simultaneous conformity to social stereotypes of femininity and the refusal to entertain the idea of femaleness as victimage resulted in a strategy designed to contain or limit abuse directed at my femininity, and by extension, my 'race'. I adopted a set of manoeuvres marked by an unconscious acceptance that the act of appeasing white males and gaining respect would only come by acknowledging that it was a (white) man's world; masculist roles and values would inhibit racial and sexist abuse and at the same time guarantee legitimacy and success. Black skin, white masks; female body, masculist armour.

Some would call this a feminist strategy. But feminism to me was mere hysterics, all about unstable or militant females. 'Women' itself was a dirty word. In my experience, female solidarity was about as meaningful as the forced intimacy of the girl's toilet. And why not? As far as I could see, the male gaze provoked female exhibitionism. Furthermore, my own attempts at conformity to the feminine ideal, which neutralized politics and turned insults into flattery, were what was allowing me to keep my head above water. Other strategies were much more painful, as the Jewish girl sitting next to me who refused to show deference to the enemy quickly found out. She was mercilessly persecuted. (But I have no doubts as to whose integrity remained more intact.)

The masculist subject is the author of meaning. More accurately, patriarchy has positioned the masculine subject as dominant within a globally consistent (culturally specific articulations notwithstanding) system of masculist social values. Gender, that specific system of values that hierarchically structures males and females into recognizable roles surrounding the economy of reproduction, informs nationalism. As Benedict Anderson, author of that highly seductive account of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, asserts, modernity entails the imperative that 'everyone can, should, will "have" a nationality, as he or she "has" a gender' (Anderson 1991: 3).

With the rise of the bourgeoisie and the emergence of the middle-class family unit coincided a productive relationship between patriarchies in the domesticities of the nation-state, a development that characterized the emergence of nationalism. But if patriarchy was the ideological means of

establishing the dominance of men over women, it nevertheless relied on the reification, as well as the subordination, of the concept of the feminine in order to sustain itself. One of the ironies of this historical social construction, notes Elleke Boehmer, is that nationalism in turn achieves legitimacy and coherence through various configurations of gender which, ideologically or politically, may bear 'a masculine identity [even] though national ideals may wear a feminine face' (Boehmer 1991: 7, 6).

Hence, England as metaphor and source of colonial paternalism was (and still is) considered 'motherland' to people from the West Indies. It is an ambivalence that has wreaked havoc with the identities of those same people who travelled from the Caribbean to the metropole, confident in their search for confirmation of who they were, as taught to them by a colonialism that boasted the success of its own civilizing mission.

DESIRE

The Nation

Then identity. And the recognition that I had none. No secure origin, no opinion, no tangible cultural ontology. Only an unconsciously fractured individualist Self battling against a murky haze of desire.

Visiting my Guyanese relatives in Toronto had always given me a feeling of belonging to something larger than myself or my immediate family. It was a community with a certain language, music, food and ritual that represented that part of my (colonized) ethnicity I remembered most. But even there I was aware that I was still half something else. Half ethnically illicit. Half colonial. I was only half home.

Ireland for a semester witnessed, instead of the barrage of racist comments I had been expecting, a celebration of my colour. But it was there that the realization that I belonged to no nation, possessed no history, embodied no culture, hit me hard. When the time came to leave, it was with a great deal of kicking and screaming. Repatriated to Canada away from my vicarious existence as a European – as part of a people with a real history – I was left holding dual citizenship, but having no nation-ality.

The colonial legacy has left the imprint of history, or its absence, as the determining mark of cultural legitimacy. The experience of displacement, division and subordination within hegemonic ideologies of modernity, progress and civilization have created the conditions for counter-discourses of home, unity and self-determination based on the idea that temporal accumulation possesses the means to undermine the neo-colonial attempt at cultural imperialism through the consolidation of a collective, culturally specific consciousness. Whether it be movements in

the name of the retrieval and expression of the 'native', pre- or uncolonized voice, or those claiming to achieve inter-national status in a liberal order of globalized capital, identity as an inherent quality, eternal possession or intrinsic self-worth is the weapon, sheathed or unsheathed, against alienation and delegitimization in this postcolonial era.

The political issues surrounding culture and imperialism in this century have shifted from confrontation and colonialism to independence and national integrity. The postcolonial nation has become the symbol of emancipation, sovereignty and resistance; the site of the retrieval of lost and suppressed histories, histories that have yet to be written. For Marcus Garvey, 'a nation without its past history [was] like a tree without roots' (quoted in Gilroy 1987: 207).

The dominant discourse of the nation as source of identity, destiny and liberation that prevailed during the time of decolonization struggles was one that accepted Fanon's pronouncement that

it is national liberation which leads the nation to play its part on the stage of history. It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. And this two-fold emerging is ultimately the source of all culture.

(Fanon 1967: 199)

In Fanon's eyes, the nation expressed culture, and national consciousness was the most elaborate form of culture. The attempt by a colonized people to re-establish the sovereignty of their nation in a conscious and organized fashion constituted the most obvious and far-reaching cultural manifestation in existence. Culture depended on the support of the nation as well as the state for its existence and, in the colonial situation, culture collapsed and died. But it was not a simple matter of reviving it; retrieval involved an active struggle for freedom through which its creative potential could be unleashed (Fanon 1967: 198-9).

The narcissism of non-identity

Culture shifted from being a seduction to a commodity. Off to the south of France to try civilization. The Conservatoire kicked me out for being rude and untalented.

The existential lack of an identity, constructed through history, cultural heritage, or 'the nation' that could be expressed with others, and the absence of rituals in my life that could be identified with anything larger than the immediate family gradually became less the focal point of an on-going depression and more an issue of acceptance. Thus, the (non)being that was the longing slowly became resignation, and eventually simple reality.

Even the great narratives of human knowledge cannot answer the

question why is the sky blue. The questions posed by the solitary 'I' must therefore not be the right ones. The order of things must be so if they have been so for so long. Resistance is therefore misapprehension. There are no square pegs, only round ones that haven't yet been carved. I made a decision to be content in the knowledge that, even though I would never have any direction in my life, there was indeed a 'there' there.

Simon Gikandi writes of exile that:

By distancing the subject from the idealized space of the nation, [it] also generates the desire for a compensatory national narrative – one in which the individual's longing for a unified image of the self is cast within the country's epic quest for its soul.⁶

(Gikandi 1992: 382)

Conceptualizing this in terms of migration and home, Carole Boyce Davies notes that the former creates the desire for the latter, which in turn produces its rearticulation. The displacement from one's home, resulting in either a rejection or longing for it, becomes a motivating factor in this rewriting; and home, like nationalism, can easily be conflated with a 'myth of unitary origin' (Davies 1994: 113).

DISILLUSIONMENT

Unmasking masculism

But it was in my reading of *Madame Bovary* (Flaubert 1857) that a new reality thrust itself before me. The way that Emma Bovary had curtailed her own life, and constructed a world of alienation and insanity for herself through the Romantic submission to desire in and for itself, profoundly disturbed my sense of (non)identity. And if Flaubert had cast doubt on the idea of fulfilment through desire, it would be Garcia Marquez who would manage to throw into complete crisis the still sustained secret (and not so secret) faith in the notion of linear time and cumulative progress: that is, the mutually constituted ideas of destiny and identity. If desire and destiny on the one hand putrefacted in the bourgeois bastion of European civility, in *Love in the Time of Cholera* (Garcia Marquez 1989) it proliferated in a magical hot southern landscape filled with bodies struck down by disease.

In such a world, the earth is not spherical; it does not allow for a meeting of realms on the horizon. I was now presented with the truly heretical idea that there may, in fact, not be a 'there' there. That the nation may not, after all, be the ultimate destination and source of fulfilment.

Nationalism, national consciousness, and the nation – discourses indebted to the powerful idea that the search for authenticity is fundamental to the experience of modern society as well as the modern state⁷ – have

ceased, for some time, to be unproblematic bases for the emancipation of the colonized. The African dilemma, for instance, was characterized by its ambivalent relationship to the actual colonial culture it attempted to resist. The most significant implication is that the achievement of decolonization was endowed with an inherently revolutionary epistemology that overestimated the potential for emancipation offered by independence. Recent African writing has moved beyond the expression of disillusionment with the ineffectivities of independence. Recognizing that on the cultural level the new realities in many African countries necessitate a distancing from the deep oppositions – black/white, colonized/colonizer – structured by the colonial situation, this literature has begun to examine the complexities of neocolonialism and the inappropriateness of projecting the idea of decolonization onto the postcolonial world (Gikandi 1992: 382, 379). This move has been articulated as the problem of ‘opposing a local model of essentialist culture and identity to the universalist essentialist model of cultural imperialism’ (Griffiths 1992: 438).

In the case of Indian history, where there is a (legitimizing) tradition extending back in time several centuries, Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992) notes that even with socialist dedication and nationalist sophistication, there remains an adherence to, or mimicry of, a certain ‘modern’ subject of ‘European’ history that is destined to dismally represent a degree of lack and failure. The construction of Europe as idealized subject ensures that other subject positions of similar dimensions never achieve comparable status. Nevertheless, if indeed Europe is a theoretical category, one that renders all other histories a matter of empirical realization that merely confirms the essentially ‘European’ nature of social existence (Chakrabarty 1992: 3), then the great failure of its civilization has been to not put its privileged historical position at the service of elevating humanity.⁶

These difficulties, however, do not imply that nationalism ceases to be a hegemonic discourse of identity in the postcolonial world. They indicate that its seemingly uncomplicated logic is now caught up in the forces of a global capitalism that conducts the fracturing of national populations along class and (neocolonialist) cultural lines, at the same time that national identity is a *cause célèbre* for the political project of ethno-cultural survival.

A passage to Identity

But how to know if the unmasking was not another seduction – an intellectual mantra chanted in the face of, in the place of, cultural alienation?

I had been warned that this place that was once and still remained a colony held more mystery and madness than I could ever have conceived. The mysticism of colour and shadow were not things I was yet

ready to comprehend or master. For me, the crisis, the alienation, occurred through the practices of colour-coding and gender roles, and thus class positioning and sexual politics; those libidinal economies that structured the identities that constituted the nation.

This, moreover, not in the pallor of the great white north, but against the vivid background of my own place of birth. Desire for the nation, for a nation, blinded me and led me into the jungle. But it was not the primeval forest of origin, but a thicket of despair. Unlike Zora Neale Hurston, I felt most 'coloured' – that is, not white as well as white – when thrown against a sharp black background. Coloured skin, coloured masks. I do not understand them or their language, but, to my irritation, they seem to know me quite well.

Then Rushdie:

Outside the whale is the unceasing storm, the continual quarrel, the dialectic of history. . . . Outside the whale we see that we are all irradiated by history, we are radioactive with history and politics; we see that it can be as false to create a politics-free fictional universe as to create one in which nobody needs to work or eat or hate or love or sleep.
(Rushdie, in Said 1986: 51–2)

Gilroy (1993: 30–1) speaks of the intellectual heritage of Euro-American modernity determining the manner in which nationality is understood within black political discourse. This legacy fuels the need for acquiring an ostensibly authentic, natural, and stabilized identity, one that is almost always premised on a consciously 'racial' self whose continuity is derived from national identity. Goulbourne, on the other hand, notes that in Britain, the 'ethnicization' or 'racialization' of the West Indian has meant that the East Indian of the Caribbean is rarely perceived in terms of the former. 'He or she is slowly becoming an Asian – a category which has meaning for Britain and her empire in East and Central Africa where a milder system of apartheid than developed in South Africa existed and required there to be separate estates of Europeans, Asians and Africans as the three elements of humankind' (Goulbourne 1991: 212).

'HOME'

So on what estates, in which institutions, and through what kind of politics do we, the people with an ambiguous nationality, celebrate who we are, where we have come from, and how our origins are different but legitimate? But already the question is framed within a masculinist discourse of lack. The desire for national identity is a powerful and hegemonic ideology (and thus a form of masculinism) that posits the absence of a definitive nationality as a deficiency. In this way it operates as a means by which the hierarchies of power established by patriarchal Europe

during the colonial era ensure their reproduction in a postcolonial space. Nevertheless, notes Homi Bhabha:

the liminality of the western nation is the shadow of its own finitude: the colonial space [is being] played out in the imaginative geography of the metropolitan space; the repetition or return of the margin of the postcolonial migrant [serves] to alienate the holism of history.
(1990: 318)

In his critique of the ontology of stasis, the Guyanese author, Wilson Harris, undermines the reduction of history to geography – that is, the nation(-state) – and its appropriation of the idea of ‘home’. The process of change becomes the way in which the meaning of history and geography undergo rupture. Crumbling, a term Harris uses to describe this process,

is affirmative. Here what crumbles is ‘one’s native land’. The impossibility of an origin or an original home introduces a ‘process’. The continual recognition . . . becomes the historical vision. The vision of history as a non-original process reveals that process itself to be the site of history.
(Benjamin 1989: 83)

The authenticity of the past therefore does not produce the idea of a genuine and original past but a means by which to conceive the possibility of the past as the site of lost authenticity.⁹ Like Gayatri Spivak, who articulates a feminist strategy of seizing the apparatus of value-coding and effecting changes in the meaning and thus power of language and social forms (Spivak 1990: 228), Harris attempts to subvert the ideology of the nation as home – the ultimate reservoir of identity by virtue of origin, and place – by shifting the limits of identity implied by the idea of home away from the concept of a specific place towards a notion of movement, or process.

Along a parallel path, Hélène Cixous encounters an orange in her fruit bowl and suddenly experiences a deep insight into what life is all about for her. ‘The orange is a moment. Not forgetting the orange is one thing. Recalling the orange is another thing. Rejoining it is another’ (Cixous 1994: 88). To live the orange is to engage with contingency so that the past is never statically familiar, the memorable never a reified icon. So that the final performance is itself always a privileged rehearsal (Harris 1989: 20).

It often takes a crisis of some sort to initiate the difficult but empowering feminist process of renegotiating the masculinisms that dominate the discourses of origin, authenticity and belonging in a way that transforms margins into frontiers, lack into (ad)vantage. For home envisions a site of rest; somewhere that one does not have to try as hard, because one’s identity works, speaks and constructs itself. A respite where there is being but no longing.

‘The postcolonial space is now “supplementary” to the metropolitan centre; it stands in a subaltern, adjunct relation that doesn’t aggrandise the presence of the west but redraws its frontiers’ (Bhabha 1990: 318).

Homelessness on the other hand may be contingency, but contingency does not rely on myths of origin and geographies of belonging for its legitimation. The strangest irony of the imagination is that from a ground of loss one destabilizes assumed categories in such a way as to relocate them within a new capacity for self-judgment (Harris 1965). The idea of a 'there being there' is a masculinist form of closure that in the contemporary world still finds its most seductive form in the discourse of national identity. It takes a re-knowing of one's identity to effect a shift in the contours of its constraints. The question that must therefore be asked, observes Sneja Gunew, is not about being a migrant but of speaking from a position of migrancy (Gunew 1992: 168). The risks associated with this strategy are redirected, accordingly, away from dangers of an imposed alienation towards those of an embraced marginalization.

I may live in my father's house, but it is a house of many mansions. If I am able neither to dismantle it nor leave its confines, there nevertheless exist unexplored areas and unrealized possibilities that are awaiting my discovery, if only I would choose to conceive (of) them.

It is a place of barefoot levitations, a womb of space.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Dominic Marnier and, in particular, Heidi Safia Mirza for their careful readings and insightful comments regarding previous versions of this essay.
- 2 I have brought together two of Duncker's phrases from different contexts to emphasize the complexities of writing about the self.
- 3 Zora Neale Hurston remembers this day for her as well (Hurston 1979: 152).
- 4 I use the term 'black' cautiously with regard to my own father. Being a Guyanese East Indian, the term for him historically and culturally refers to people of African descent. However, the discourse within which I operate is one that draws upon British conceptions of colour and race which, unlike those of the American discourse, include Asians, Arabs and people from Latin America, not merely Africans, in the category 'black' (Davies 1994: 9).
- 5 The 1988 Education Act illustrates Thatcherism's dual task of unifying the British (white, European) nation whilst marginalizing non-white minorities (Goulbourne 1991: 125).
- 6 Gikandi is speaking about Nuruddin Farah's *Maps* (Gikandi 1992: 382).
- 7 Marshall Berman observes that Rousseau and Montesquieu were the first to account for the reasons and provide illustrations of this project (Berman 1970: 87).
- 8 Goulbourne also notes that the main element of this civilization in the eyes of most non-Europeans was British (Goulbourne 1991: 104).
- 9 This is Benjamin's (1989: 91) interpretation of Harris. The idea of the relationship between an economy of reproduction and the potential of the imagination to effect radical change is evident in Wilson Harris' notion of the 'womb of space', a theme that recurs throughout his writings. The concept of the womb as a place of production is avoided in both Marx and Freud.

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Two stories, three lovers, and the creation of meaning in a Black Lesbian autobiography

A diary

Consuelo Rivera Fuentes

INTRODUCTION

Black Lesbians have herstories, feelings and intellects to share. In this chapter, I want to share mine with you. Firstly, I must tell you that I feel both excited and confused at the prospect of contributing to this 'unique attempt'¹ to put British Black feminist theoretical perspectives together in order to have Black women's voices *listened to*, not merely heard or added. My feelings of excitement spring from the certainty that the articles will undoubtedly stimulate other Black feminist scholars to be active in the transformation and undoing of dominant discourses of feminism in Britain. As for my confusion I have to confess that it started primarily in my not knowing whether my identity as a self-defined Black Chilean Lesbian² living and doing feminist research in Lancaster fitted within a British Black feminist tradition³. This was due to various friends (both Black and white) telling me that they did not see me as a Black woman. Typical comments, after I had asked them if they would describe me as a Black woman, were:

'I would only describe someone as a black person if they have an Afro-Caribbean origin'; 'your skin is lighter than black; you are Chilean to me'; and 'you are not obviously black but I would say that you are politically Black, with a capital B'.⁴

These comments do, in a way, reflect some of the current debates surrounding the meanings of 'race' which have changed notably over the last ten years (see, for example Spivak, 1990; Spelman, 1990; Skeggs, 1995). I was certain in my mind that I was a Black feminist Lesbian⁵ but here there were all these friends telling me I was wrong and I began to panic! However, the confusion only lasted a day or two. I realized that the fact that people cannot (or do not want to) 'see' me as a Black person here in Britain is not going to change the fact that I am/feel/think as one.⁶ At some point in my confusion, I stated that I was certainly 'not white' but that redefinition of my racial identity is one of opposition and essentialization,

two 'sins' I have been trying to get away from – however, not always successfully. I realized that I was pushing myself in the marginalization that this dichotomy, i.e. white/not white, entails. This recognition and that part of my rebellious subjectivity which challenges oppressive structures, made me realize once more that my subversion has been/continues to be done *not* in opposition to dominant discourses but within the ones I choose; shifting in this way between my marginalizations (Lesbian, Black, working-class single mother, etc.) and my centres. In other words, I transform myself into a site of resistance and change.

The 'whiteness of theory' (Simmonds, 1992: 52) might question this shifting of mine with the argument that by putting my Black Lesbian self in the centre I am 'otherizing' white heterosexual women. However, I do not look for the implicit or explicit permission of dominant discourses (although I am willing to engage in dialogue with them) to transform myself; which leads me onto what this essay is about.

Briefly, this literary diary deals with the power of transformation and reconstruction of my Lesbian identity that the reading of *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* – from now on *Zami* – Audre Lorde's (1982) autobiography⁷ provides me with. This part of the paper is a brief example of the way I read/write Lesbian autobiographies and forms part of my current research on the construction of Lesbian identities in autobiographies.

SIMULTANEOUS AND NOMADIC TRANSFORMATIONS

The reading I do of *Zami* in my diary is informed by the notion of 'simultaneity' (Braidotti, 1994; Pearce, 1994a) and Braidotti's 'nomadic epistemology' of female subjectivities (Braidotti, 1994). These concepts allow me to move away from a long period of dialectic logic of reading literary texts, which means, very often, detachment from my feelings and the taking of sides in an almost always binary opposition against my identification with either the narrator(s) or the writer(s) or both. The Bakhtinian concepts of *simultaneity* and *dialogics* in which 'differences can be reconciled' (Pearce, 1994a: 10) have helped me in the past to provide a context to a love-hate dialogue with myself and other women readers/writers out of and within our differences. However, in order for this dialogic logics to have meaning in the type of experiential reading stage I am in at the moment, I must remove the boundaries set by the splitting graphics of the slash in Clark and Holquist's dialogic *both/and* (quoted in Pearce, 1994a: 10) and add an *or* which provides me with a necessary and healthy possibility of living with different subjectivities within and out of myself. In other words, although I am always looking for new ways of being, I do not want to 'waste the person I am' as some anonymous person said.

This dialogic *bothandor* (sic) will allow me to argue that when reading *Zami* the simultaneous co-presence (Thompson, 1995) of my many selves, intermingle with the simultaneous speaking co-present selves of *Zami* and Lorde to create new layers of meanings and subjectivities and, at the same time, prevent a definite and definitive separation of 'speaking' subjects. I will be using the necessary grammatical *I* (Braidotti, 1994) as the blending raw egg which holds together these layers of meaning and subjectivities in order to present a more or less 'coherent' mix of feminist Lesbian reading of an autobiographical text, such as *Zami*.

Also, because the notion of *identity* is central to the type of research I am carrying out at the moment, I will briefly attempt to give an overview of what it means to me in the context of this paper. Braidotti's (1994) 'nomadic epistemology' of female subjectivity in which she suggests that identity is 'the living process of transformation of self and others' (ibid.: 157) proves useful for the purpose of this essay. This type of transformation results, she argues, in a 'multiple, open-ended, interconnected entity' (ibid.) which is what happens in my reading of *Zami*. The different simultaneous identities which form part of *my(reader)self*, move within and out of my relationship with the text, thus giving my different 'structures of subjectivity' (Braidotti, 1994) a temporal and spatial shifting, as well as 'nomadic' signification.

However, this notion of identity is not enough, as it seems not to consider the *desire*, *decision* and *struggle* (not always located in an *I*) to engage in the process of transformation of self and others. I agree with Braidotti in that identity is nomadic, i.e., not a static, fixed and clearly conceptualized notion, yet I want to add to her definition that identity, as I understand it, has the power to defend itself and to form alliances in order to influence and exert social transformations through the 'daily deciding/risking' (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981) of our actions and reactions. Teresa de Lauretis's feminist consideration of identity as 'a political-personal strategy of survival and resistance that is also, at the same time, a critical practice and a mode of knowledge' (1986: 9) can provide the missing link between Braidotti's and my own notion of identity. Although '[t]he place [I am] most likely to find [myself] is in [myself]' (Sparks, 1990: 136), the space and time that this self occupies in my life colludes with the time and space I look for (and find) in *Zami* and other Lesbian autobiographies and I use it to re-define my Lesbian identity. With this mode of reading/writing in mind I want to suggest that the separation of the *writer-self*, the *autobiographical-self* and the *reader-self* is yet another construction and that the more these selves engage in a passionate, almost obsessive, love affair with each other, the more a Lesbian autobiography has meaning for me. Such a relationship with a text provides me with endless possibilities of re-creation. I read, therefore

I construct myself; I write, therefore I construct myself; I interact, therefore I construct myself and so on.

Because of the emotional⁸, moreover, *sensual-sexual* dimension of my reading process, I mix extracts from *Zami* with some of my autobiographical Black Lesbian reader responses and identifications. Sometimes, because my boundaries when reading tend to disappear, the voices, comments, feelings and silences will be uttered by *bothandor* (sic) Audre, Zami, Consuelo, Lorde, *Zami* (the text), *all of us with the power to give meaning to each other*. I am fully aware of the fact that this simultaneity of voices and identities does not mean harmony at all times. Moreover, I would say that it brings chaos and adds to my contradictions. However, I like this because it means that 'I am a Black woman warrior poet doing my work', in Lorde's words (quoted in Sparks, 1990: 131). Since my 'work' in this paper is to give you a glimpse of my relationship with *Zami*, let me dive into this loving love liaison which, because it is not over, will contain only five days in the shape of a diary.

LORDE, ZAMI AND I: WE

Sunday

Today I learned to talk:

Perhaps learn isn't the right word to use for my beginning to talk, because to this day I don't know if I didn't talk earlier because I didn't know how, or if I didn't talk because I had nothing to say that I would be allowed to say without punishment. Self preservation starts very early in West Indian families.

(Lorde, 1982: 21-2)

and in Chilean families too! Zami and I, once we started school, learned to 'talk' and recite the lesson that the institution of education was pushing down our throats. When Audre utters her first sentence by way of saying 'I want to read', her mother 'scooped [her] up from [a] low stool, and to [her] surprise, kissed [her] right in front of everybody in the library' (ibid.: 32). She had spoken, she had been a 'good' girl; she had 'for once done something right' (ibid.) and, in the same way my mother did so many times, hers also approved and rewarded the child for making her feel good in front of other people.

I have also learned today that

I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry as well as of her hidden angers.

(ibid.: 32, emphasis in the original)

As Zami, I carry in me my mother's way of changing reality from *within*, a place inside myself which plays with language and makes love to poetry.

However, very often, because I also carry her anger, I define my reality through actions frowned upon, through physical and intellectual desire, through getting into the systems in order to upset them so that they work with me, for me. To be able to do this, I physically and voluntarily leave my mother's land framed by the Pacific Ocean, The Andes, The Atacama Desert, Antarctica and centuries of *machismo*, but I take her (colonized) and my (subversive) voice in my baggage. She comes with me, although she lets me go. She knows that I am leaving and staying, at the same time. I leave Chile, my mother and the rest of my familial ties but I bring Pachamama, the Andean goddess/mother of our land, with me.

In *Zami*, Carriacou is a metaphorical, mythical land (like Pachamama) where *women work together as friends and lovers* (ibid.: 225), some place where Zami's mother used to have a voice which had not been silenced - neither throttled nor bound up, some place where the name for women who worked together as friends and lovers was *Zami*. When Audre Lorde finally finds Carriacou in *The Atlas of the Encyclopaedia Britannica*, she has actually come to terms with the fact that her mother had never really had a free voice or self, as she had imagined. Her mother's voice had been 'colonized', it had never been her own. Consequently, the long journey in search of some originary identity had come to an abrupt halt. Zami, therefore, had to create her own voice because Carriacou was no longer in the imaginary; it was as real as her disconnection of familial ties. She had to find a new 'country', not mapped, not silenced, not throttled, a place where she was not punished for speaking differently, for having a subversive voice; so she decides to leave her mother, father and sisters. She creates herself in the process and while reading and writing her, I create myself too.

Monday

I have just read one of Lorde's essays entitled 'Uses of the Erotic: the erotic as power' in *Sister Outsider* in which she argues that the erotic is that female power of the unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. She says that: 'the erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings' (1984: 54).

I was pleasantly surprised to realize that this is similar to what I said about the chaos of my selves. Somewhere in my other diary, the one I only read, and which I have decided to share with you in this space, I write:

My mind, my body, my soul! My mind is not my soul, my mind is not my body, my body is not my soul yet I am mind, body and soul trapped in a name . . . Consuelo.

Once I realized that I cannot separate my mind, my body and my soul from whatever I do, I began to be aware of my sense of self and recognize

that the erotic is something I refuse to resign, even if that gives me pain, sometimes. Moreover, I *lesbianize* my eroticism as I assert my Lesbian 'self' creating, recreating, reclaiming my own (as well as honouring the good things about my mother's, albeit 'colonized') voice – transforming, in the process, language as well. This erotic knowledge empowers me, at the same time that it gives me a 'lens through which [I] scrutinize all aspects of [my] existence' (Lorde, 1984: 57) and transforms me into the public Consuelo I am, the one who, I insist, *lesbianizes* all aspects of her existence. Furthermore, my eroticism emphasises the 'wild' woman, the *bad girl*, who asserts her right to be not only an object but also a verb, a noun, an adjective, an adverb, a subject.

Tuesday

I am full of questions today. Here is this Black Lesbian, growing up with me, loving her mother and hating her at the same time, having crushes on other women, rebelling, looking for a voice. This time the construction of my Lesbian self has merged with that of Lorde's and I've felt her desire and pain, I've made love to her and her lovers, and I've found my home in hers. Why is it that I feel like this with *Zami* and not with other 'lesbian-authored' texts (Pearce, 1994b)? Is it because I refuse to accept the 'death of the author' (Barthes, 1977) yet while reading and constructing my identity in and out of this text, I am Lorde giving meaning to our subjectivities? Is it because both Lorde and I belong by choice and geographical mapping to a part of the population which has been classified and neatly dumped/buried in a niche of 'exoticism' and wilderness? Or is it because Lorde's bodily and geographical journey towards self-construction of a Lesbian cast-out identity is my own? Was she exiled? Am I exiled in these two worlds I co-in-habit and which rip my voice? I am not sure but what I am certain about is that Lorde's literature 'lives on not just because her use of words is lovely, but because the words have meaning' as Jewelle Gómez asserts in her introduction to this year's reprint of *Zami* (1996: xi)

Thursday

I have just read chapter 10 of *Zami* and two things struck me and made me really angry to the point of weeping. First the fact that Audre, who at this point of my reading is already myself, had to 'squint' in an agonizing attempt to see the edges and shapes of things because her parents 'did not approve of sunglasses nor of their expense' (ibid. 70). Then everything turned red in my eyes and heart when she narrates the scene at the ice-cream and soda fountain.

There was I between my mother and father, and my two sisters on the other side of my mother. We settled ourselves along the white mottled marble counter, and when the waitress spoke at first no one understood what she was saying, and so the five of us just sat there.

(ibid.: 70)

until we heard it loud and clear: we were Black, we were not allowed to eat their white ice-cream, in their white heat. The waitress, the pavement, the counter, the stone monuments of Washington were all white. I had sat with Audre and her family, I wanted to eat that ice-cream, I had felt important sitting there, in that place for 'treats'. And suddenly the blow. You are Black, you don't belong here, in this all white atmosphere. A white country where neither Zami nor I belonged but which gave us, and here's the contradiction, yet another voice to express our anger. Back in 1995 I wrote:

There are so many noises in this ward . . . there is the breathing noise of an oxygen mask which leaves a very old woman dozing, dozing. . . . There are the steps of nurses who come and go; white, covered in white, white overalls, white plastic aprons, white plastic on my wrists with an identity tag reminding me of who I am, but I don't remember regardless . . . muffled noises, foreign conversations, white friends visiting me. On thinking about it I am the only Black being in the whole ward . . . well apart from a cockroach I captured this morning under a white plastic cup!

Without sunglasses, and in spite of the shadows and edges, both Audre and I finally saw what our mothers had been silencing: that Black is the exact opposite of white. But is it? Is it that simple/simplistic? I have to come back to this some other day.

Friday

I've read more articles in *Sister Outsider* (Lorde, 1984). The one that stayed with me all day is a conversation between Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich (ibid.: 81-109). They spoke of poetry and how that type of language can express feelings, even if not everybody understands what we mean. I suppose that moisture and soap do not love each other but we draw them together. After that, I went on reading chapter 18 of *Zami*. Funny how I could make love to Zami and Lorde and Ginger on the bus and nobody seemed to notice . . . I 'dove[d] beneath [their] wetness, [their] fragrance, the silky insistence of [their] bodies' rhythms illuminat[ed] my own hungers. We rode each other's need' (Lorde, 1982: 139). *Is this eroticism? Does this mean that I am reducing all Lesbian relationships to an expression of sexual desire? Is this pornography?* Well, not for me. This is not only sexual

love as people could imagine; this goes back to the way I construct my Lesbian identity; it is definitely not pornography because pornography does not speak in feelings; pornography leaves me cool, empty. The reading of this autobiography fills up my senses; Lorde's words blend in my blood and stay with me; they bring me tenderness and passion, and I be-come with her; I explode in the moist flesh of her poetry. I don't know how to explain this. Here's a poem for Audre, for my lover, and for Zami instead of explanations:

This ardent body of mine/ under-mines the soft sound of silence/
 echoes of whispers in the cold/ sheets of routine/ wake up my senses/
 once again/ I taste her lips/ in each page of this book/ booked this table
 to slowly put her/ in my mouth/ no interruptions of is-this-table-busy?
 sort of speeches/ of passers-by/ pass by the dawn of edges/ stitched to
 my brown skin/ with white thread (I had written 'threat')/ that cuts/
 splits, slits the fleshy mountains of my chest/ that part of me which fed
 her/ so many times/ the patchwork in this map of lust/ and agony/
 rips me vertically, horizontally/ from north to south/ from east to west/
 with my consent/ I lip the fresh lips/ of another name/ with no sha-
 me/ except for the revolutionary myth/ which carries blue deep
 waters/ to the bottom of my throat/ flooding feelings of thirst.

It seems that when I enter the world of *Zami* I be-come again and again but somehow always in a slightly different manner, depending on the way I approach the reading. If I'm thinking of the chapter I am supposed to produce for my research my brain denies the words I need and gives me poems instead. However, I force myself to read theory and I am keeping it there somewhere in that part of the brain which deals with philosophy. I suppose I will pick it up when I am ready to do so. In the meantime, I am enjoying this *trialogic* (both for trial and for love affair triangle) way of reading which stresses my own power and difference. This leads me to disagree in part with Lynne Pearce's idea that the reader-experience is 'located not in the reader's *life* but in her (dialogic) engagement with the text' (Pearce, 1994b: 163). My reading of *Zami* is located in my life because as I read I construct a Lesbian identity which will necessarily affect the way I live on earth. My reading is like twilight meeting dawn, kissing the waters in the horizon where I can see my home, my self. This hunger that *Zami* started has made me melt quotations and it is as if the *Osorno* volcano had erupted, burning layers and layers of acquired, received knowledge, leaving only the bare bones of my self . . . deep, healing fire and lava . . . all the rage unleashed, slowly calcinating the slopes of institutionalized love and wisdom, turning it into a refreshing 'ocean of brown warmth' (Lorde, 1982: 139). This explosion has mixed all the colours inside and outside of me changing me minute by minute,

this bursting of shades and colours which gives me endless possibilities of transformation is simply wonderful . . .

All the colors change and become each other, merge and separate, flow into rainbows and nooses. *I lie beside my sisters in the darkness, who pass me in the street, unacknowledged and unadmitted.*

(ibid.: 58, Lorde's emphasis)

They say that white is all the colours together. If this is true, maybe some of my ghosts are white but I do not let them haunt me. They also say that black is the absence of colour, yet the black of the coal lit in a brazier by my mother in winter winks at me from some un-familiar corner, un-known but present in the blending of colours and the erotic I re-create in poetry. Black for me has never been the lack of colour. It has been my home, my Pachamama, as Lorde's once was her Carriacou.

Dear reader, I must come to the end of this sharing of uncertainties, desires, feelings, thoughts, contradictions and love affairs. This paper might seem unfinished to you, not academic enough, not theoretical enough but I am an ongoing process and *enoughness* does not fit me. This is why I have not attempted an academic conclusion because my feelings refuse to be concluded with the ending of this paper.

NOTES

- 1 Heidi Mirza used this expression in a letter to me and I quote it here because it shows how passionately and strongly she feels about this book she is editing.
- 2 I write the signs Black and Lesbian with a capital B and a capital L to mark not only how important they are for me as a way of life, but also to emphasize their political connotations.
- 3 The fact that the students and staff in the Centre for Women's Studies at Lancaster University are predominantly from a white Western background made me wonder about this 'tradition' in the Centre. However, the few Black women who chose to do their research there are not a 'mere' presence. Our ways of doing feminist politics within the dominant discourse, albeit from the margin in this case, show that we are *actively* and voluntarily engaged in the undoing of dominant ideologies.
- 4 My friend was probably referring to the definition of Black offered by the Black Lesbian and Gay Centre Project, quoted in (Charles), Helen (1992: 35) which includes Latin American people as well.
- 5 My writing the word Lesbian after the word feminist means that I put my lesbianism before my feminism. For a more detailed explanation, see Rivera (1996).
- 6 It is here where my reconstruction of racial identity takes place. In Chile I would probably be considered 'mixed race' by peoples whose ancestors have a European (Spanish or other) origin only. However I would be considered 'Winka' (white) by native indigenous people.
- 7 Audre Lorde called her autobiography a 'biomythography'. In doing so she alerted Black women that all the things a Black woman must be are both ordinary and mythic (Gómez, 1996).

- 8 Lynne Pearce, who is doing something similar to me in this under-researched area of reception theory, defines her reading practices as 'emotional'. She has been doing this for a while now but her 'emotions' are clearer to me in her unpublished paper 'Feminism and the Emotional Politics of Reading' (from her forthcoming book *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*).

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My body, myself

How does a Black woman do sociology?

Felly Nkweto Simmonds

Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside of agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted.

(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 127)

INTRODUCTION

I have a particular relationship with the subject of sociology because of who I am. I am a Black woman and a sociologist. At conferences, for example, I am asked to speak as a Black female academic. Black academics (and students) are expected to talk about issues of 'race' as personal experiences. White academics, even when they are 'race' experts, are not expected to. It's as if 'race', as an experience, is only of concern to those who are 'racialized' by social theory itself. But when I use autobiographical examples to illustrate the relationship between my embodied experience, and my sociological practice, to an audience which is almost always white, the impact is always dramatic. Reflecting on my experience as a Black woman challenges the silence of those who are privileged by whiteness (MacIntosh quoted in Minas 1993). It forces them to ask themselves the questions they take for granted, to locate their own 'racial' experience as I have to every day.

As a Black woman, I know myself inside and outside myself. My relation to this knowledge is conditioned by the social reality of my habitus.¹ But my socialized subjectivity is that of a Black woman and it is at odds with the social world of which I'm a product, for this social world is a white world. I cannot be, as Bourdieu suggests, a fish in water that 'does not feel the weight of the water, and takes the world about itself for granted'. The world that I inhabit as an academic, is a white world. This white world has a problematic relationship with blackness. Academic discourses of the social have constructed blackness as the inferior 'other', so that even when blackness is named, it contains a problem of relationality to whiteness. The British Sociological Association's guide to anti-racist language acknow-

ledges 'white' and 'Black' (Caribbean/African/Other) as 'ethnic classifications', but fails to provide an actual definition of 'White' on its own. 'Black', however, has a detailed and problematized definition which begins with, 'This term is often used to refer to a variety of non-white ethnic groups'.²

Sociology gives me, even as a teacher of sociology, a 'non-white' existence, doomed to inhabit the margins of white theory. In this white world, the question becomes, How does a Black woman do sociology? As Fanon laments:

The black man [sic] . . . does not know at what moment his inferiority comes into being through the other. And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man's eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. . . . A slow composition of my self as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world – such seems to be the schema. It does not impose itself on me; it is, rather, a definitive structuring of the self and the world – definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world.

(Fanon 1986: 111)

In this white world the question becomes: What relationship can a Black woman establish between being a sociologist and being a person? I want to argue that an intellectual understanding of social reality is not enough, and that such an understanding has to critically examine the relationship between individual/personal and collective/social realities. In this white world I am a fresh water fish that swims in sea water. I feel the weight of the water . . . on my body.

'CERTAIN PRIVATE INFORMATION'

To talk about the body is to invite derision. We cannot invite bodies, ours and those of others, into sociological discourse without being accused of essentialism or narcissism. But I want to risk talking about the body, my body as a strategy, in the way that Gayatri Spivak suggests, as 'persistent (de) constructive critique of theory' (Spivak 1993: 3). In this sense talking about the body, my body, becomes both a strategy and a technique, to deconstruct my positioning as a woman, an African woman (a 'third world' woman) and an academic in a western institution. It is neither essentialist nor narcissistic. I want to explore the relationship between my body as a social construct and my experience of it. I want to examine the relationship I have with my body and how I negotiate, daily, with 'embodied social situations' (Scott and Morgan 1993: 112).

I live in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, which has a significantly smaller Black population than other British cities. I am the only Black person in my department, and in fact one of only a handful in the whole institution. Currently I only have two Black students out of the nearly two hundred I teach across the university. I cannot ignore the fact of my blackness, even if I wanted to. Neither can my colleagues or students,³ even if they wanted to.

This makes me vulnerable.⁴ In the final analysis, I might be an academic, but what I carry is an embodied self that is at odds with expectations of who an academic is. I can be invited and /or dismissed as the token (Black, woman, 'Third World'), and can be expected or presumed to be taking one or more of these positions in how I teach/what I teach. I can be invited to give conference papers as Black, woman, African or 'Third World' (but not British, which is what my passport says!). In her essay 'Marginality in the Teaching Machine', Spivak illustrates this position:

At the conference on Cultural Value at Birkbeck College, the University of London, on July 16, 1988, where this paper was first presented, the speaker was obliged to speak of her cultural identity. From what space was she speaking, in what space was the representative member of the audience placing her? What does the audience expect to hear today, here? . . . To whom did they want to listen?

(Spivak 1993: 54-5)

For some of us, it is impossible to escape the body and its constructions, even inside the 'teaching machine'. I am expected to not only carry my body, but to acknowledge it. I have a specific and clear relationship to the knowledge that I teach, through my body. The contradiction for me is that, whereas I can clearly be invited to speak about 'race' issues, it is only when I choose to speak about the experiences of the racialization of my body, that my authority to do this is questioned or dismissed as subjective and 'confessional'.⁵ I'm expected to *be, but not to know about being*. This relationship between being and knowing exposes the fragility of theory's insistence that we can articulate truths only through a rational and objective epistemology of social reality. Ontological knowledge is suspect and at worst pathologized. This tradition is sanctioned, even by some whose practice is reflexive. For example, when Loic Wacquant asks Pierre Bourdieu the question, 'Can we do a Bourdieuan Sociology of Bourdieu? Can you explain yourself? If so, why this unwavering reticence to speak about the private person Pierre Bourdieu?' Bourdieu's response is defensive:

It is true that I have a sort of professional vigilance which forbids me to adopt the kind of egomaniacal postures that are so approved of and even rewarded . . . this reluctance to talk about myself has another reason. By revealing certain private information, by making bovaristic confessions about myself, my lifestyle, my preferences, I may give ammunition

to the people who utilize against sociology the most elementary weapon there is – relativism. . . . The personal questions that are put to me are often inspired by what Kant would call 'pathological motives'.

(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 202–3)

This, however, is a luxury. A white male academic has the privilege to opt for silence about 'private information'. As Scott and Morgan have observed, theory 'may admit the body', but demand that 'the theorist remains disembodied' (Scott and Morgan 1993: 112). Theory thus becomes only that knowledge which is created from outside ourselves, outside our bodies, out of our heads (as it were). It is as if 'facts' come out of our heads, and 'fictions' out of our bodies. As Anne Game observes:

Sociological practice is conceived of as representation of the real, which for this discipline is conceived as the social. And there's nothing fictitious about the social and representations of it. Thus, the discipline is defined through oppositions, fact-fiction and theory-fiction. . . . Social reality is taken as determinant; theory as reflection. But, this reflection is privileged as adequate correspondence to social reality as opposed to fictional reflection.

(Game 1991: 3)

Although in this case Game uses the sociology of literature as the example of 'fictional reflection', the same can be said of experience (which in any case can be presented as literature), which reveals 'certain private information'. Bourdieu also acknowledges that literature can teach sociologists more about the 'truth of temporal experience' such as those found in biographical writings, and warns us that although 'there are . . . significant differences between sociology and literature . . . we should be careful not to turn them into irreconcilable antagonism' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 206). But he also adds, 'It goes without saying that sociologists must not and cannot claim to compete with writers on their own turf' (*ibid.*).

As an African woman my 'certain private information' is not only inscribed in disciplines such as anthropology, but also in colonial narratives, literatures, photographs, paintings and so on. Here the 'facts' created by social theory and the 'fictions' created by literature can be difficult to separate. At times social theory itself becomes a fiction.⁶ Anne Game concludes, 'the sociological fiction is that it is not fiction. . . . As an initial move in shifting the codes of sociology I will propose a reversal: that we think of sociological writing as fiction and fiction as social analysis' (Game 1991: 18).

One of the consequences, for a Black woman, of this insistence on the separation of the 'facts' of social reality, from the 'fictions' of experience and biographical knowledge is the creation of what Fanon has identified as 'the dialectic between my body and the world' (Fanon 1986: 111). The consequences are real enough. In academia, for example, I experience

what Bourdieu himself has acknowledged; the 'feeling of being a stranger in the academic universe' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: fn 208-9):

In France, to come from a distant province, to be born south of the Loire, endows you with a number of properties that are not without parallel in the colonial situation. It gives you a sort of objective and subjective externality and puts you in a particular relation to the central institutions of French society and therefore the intellectual situation. There are subtle (and not so subtle) forms of racism that cannot but make you perceptive; being constantly reminded of your otherness stimulates a sort of permanent sociological vigilance. It helps you perceive things that others cannot see or feel.

(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 209)

But such an analysis can be a dangerous. It can glorify oppression in a way that can only be spoken by those who are privileged. 'Permanent sociological vigilance' is the consequence of oppression, a consequence of the subtle and not so subtle racism that permeates academic institutions in Britain. For a Black academic this is one of the burdens we carry, everyday. It is for this reason that we cannot and must not remain disembodied theorists. To put it simply, we cannot write a sociology of the Black experience without revealing certain private information.

As a woman, as a Black person, as an African, social theory has fed on my embodied experience. In anthropology, for example, one of the central tenets of 'defining the primitive' (Torgovnick 1990: 1-41) was the very basic idea that: 'primitives live life whole, without fear of the body' (Torgovnick 1990: 9). I have a body prescribed not only as primitive, but at the very 'heart of darkness'. In her re/interpretations of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marianna Torgovnick exposes the relationship Conrad, through Marlow, gives between the African woman and Africa itself.

In my mind, I keep coming back to the African woman who stalks through the heart of darkness. . . . That African woman, is, for me the crux of *Heart of Darkness* . . . She is the representative 'native'. . . . She is, the text insists, the symbol of Africa. . . . Her death fulfils her role as emblem of the African landscape and makes . . . explicit the hidden reference of 'the feminine' and the 'primitive' to death. The African landscape is death in the novella. It is 'the white man's grave' . . . Europeans enter it but leave it either dead or ill or changed and marked for ever.

(Torgovnick 1990: 154-5)

Both the nature and value of the 'primitive' body are prescribed. The Black body must remain 'voiceless' (Torgovnick 1990: 9). How then, are we to write a sociology of the Black experience in Britain, without taking on the body, and without revealing 'certain private information'?

FEAR AND DESIRE

When a young Black man is murdered by a group of young white men, we could write whole texts on the politics of race and racism, such as the collusion of the legal system in the killing of our sons.⁷ But I fear such grand narratives ignore the very basic act of the killing of a Black body which is the final solution, the very logic of racism. History is littered with such bodies – Black bodies swinging from poplar trees in Alabama – Black bodies hanging from Mopane trees in Central Africa – Black bodies hanging from Flame trees in Kenya. Maybe, if we began by counting the bodies, we might arrive at a clearer picture of what the idea of race and racism as an ideology produces, socially and politically, and what the bodily experience can be.

In her essay, 'Myth of the Black Rapist', Angela Davis (Davis 1981) illustrates this with the example of the white institution of lynching (complemented by the rape of Black women). In the aftermath of the Civil War (and later, to a less extent), the lynching of Black men was used by white America as a valuable political weapon to guarantee the continued exploitation of Black labour 'and the political domination of Black people as a whole' (Davis 1981: 185) In this case, the history of the killing of Black bodies as a central political strategy cannot be separated from the social reality of how racism worked then, and continues to today, making a Black body always vulnerable to whiteness.

In this white world, the Black body, my body, is always on display. It has been documented by western disciplines such as anthropology. The essays in Elizabeth Edward's *Anthropology and Photography: 1860–1920*, chronicle how nineteenth century anthropologists used the authority of photography to construct and display knowledge of the 'other'. A particular fascination with the female body was quite explicit in the search for anatomical landmarks of different 'races'. For example, even Colonial Office records used Thomas Henry Huxley's standardized photometric methods to collect information on colonial subjects. As Frank Spencer notes in his essay, 'Some Notes on the Attempt to Apply Photography to Anthropometry during the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century':

In an effort to produce a photographic document that would permit the subsequent recovery of reliable comparative and morphometric data, Huxley recommended that all subjects be photographed naked, according to established and anthropometric poses. . . . In particular Huxley noted the desirability that the arm in female subjects should be 'so disposed as not to interfere with the contour of the breast which is very characteristic in some races' (Huxley to Lord Granville, Dec. 8, 1869).

(Spencer 1992: 100)

The spectacle of the colonized female subject in nineteenth century writings and readings of difference between the races was also symbolically

captured in the public displays of African women as curiosities. The African woman named Saartjie Baartman, also called Sarah Bartmann or Saat-Jee and known as the 'Hottentot Venus', was on public display in London and in Paris in 1810. After her death in Paris in 1810, her sexual parts, her genitalia and her buttocks were preserved and continue, to this day, to be displayed in the *Musée de l'homme* in Paris (Gilman 1992: 180-1).

These public displays of images of 'other' societies were common forms of entertainment in the nineteenth century. In his essay 'British Popular Anthropology: Exhibiting And Photographing the Other', Brian Street illustrates how exhibitions of other societies 'with their underlying associations of race, hierarchy and evolution, were most vividly experienced through exhibitions, photographs and postcards ... not simply as "entertainment" but as having educational value' (Street 1992: 122). In this case the 'facts' and the 'fictions' of 'others' were rendered one and the same thing.⁸ As a Black woman, my body cannot escape this history.

It is particularly poignant for me that some of the photographs of the 'curiosities' documented in Street's chapter are of the Batwa, 'pygmies from the Ituri forest region of the Congo' (Street 1992: 128-9). The Batwa were some of the earliest settlers across most of Central Africa, including the islands of Lake Bangweulu in Zambia. My maternal ancestors are from those islands. Looking at the photographs of the Batwa (in which they are virtually naked, and includes one bare breasted woman) taken of them in London, by one Sir Benjamin Stone, in August 1905, I cannot help but take a second look to see if I can recognize myself.

Adorned and unadorned I cannot escape the fantasies of the western imagination. Robert Young illustrates this desire for colonized bodies as spectacle, as labour and so on, as essentially an extension the 'desiring machine' of capital. This has particular implications for the female body, and is highlighted by anthropology's particular fascination with female bodies and with sexual lives. In this sense, sexuality becomes part of the political economy of desire, for money, for products and for those who produce. It becomes part of:

'the libidinal unconscious' [which] opens up possibilities for the analysis of the dynamics of desire in the social field. Racism is perhaps the best example through which we can immediately grasp the form of desire and its antithesis, repulsion, as a social production: thus 'fantasy is never individual: it is a group fantasy'.

(Young 1995: 168-9)

It is this politics of sex, race and desire which still affects 'racial' encounters in everyday life.⁹

As Brian Street concludes:

as in written representations of non-European peoples, nineteenth-century European discourses on race and evolution continued to frame

visual portrayals, even at a time when anthropologists themselves were beginning to move, via field work methods, towards a more characteristically twentieth-century interest in how people might see themselves and towards a more relativist less physically based view of cultural difference. The interest in legends of little people, in little bodies as signs of little minds, in 'savage' customs as a justification and rationale for 'scientific' and business 'progress' . . . was firmly rooted in a common framework of race, evolution and hierarchy [and] served to construct and perpetuate this conceptual framework, beyond its academic life, for larger proportions of the public than could be influenced solely by the books and literature available on the subject at the time.

(Street 1992: 130)

MY BODY, MYSELF

'Racial' knowledge constructed about 'the other' is what provides the contradictory experience of 'race' as an everyday reality even at the end of the twentieth century. Here I want to unearth some of these bodily and embodied experiences of My Body, My Self and of how others see me and how I experience being a 'curiosity'.

First sketch

One day, I walked from the bus with an Italian waiter I knew a little, I'd been in the restaurant in which he works several times. Suddenly he said, 'I bet you have a beautiful body.'

In his imagination, in his fantasy, of course I have. He has seen Black female bodies. The Black female body is etched on his sexual unconscious. As a white man he also has the weight of history behind him, which tells him Black women are available to him.

Suddenly conscious of my missing breast I say, 'No actually, no. I had a bad illness two years ago'. Illness? He vanished, didn't even wait for the end of the sentence, having conjured up in his imagination all the awful things I could be carrying. Blackness, dirt, disease . . . HIV AIDS, Ebola fever? He vanished.

I carry a contradictory body, so exotic and desirable, so threatening and deadly. Actually now, in my middle age, now that I've had to get in touch with my body, it feels OK. I think of my body quite often . . . pamper it with bath oils, take it to the gym twice or three times a week. . . . but still too much whiskey (Irish). My body never has hangovers from whiskey.

Second sketch

In Dublin a rather beautiful Irish man leans across the table, takes my hand and rubs the back of my hand: 'Do you know how exotic you are? Such beautiful ebony skin, so soft, so beautiful.'

Because he is so beautiful, and I suspect in love with me for the duration of the meal, I'm kind to him and remind him that I can only be exotic in Dublin, in my own space there are millions like me and we don't go round touching each other and telling ourselves how exotic our ebony skins are. . . .

And of course what he doesn't know, cannot know is that my skin is quite dry and I have to oil it everyday.

My skin, so soft, so black, so dry, the colour of my skin so exotic to a beautiful Irish man, such a deadly cloak to wear on a dark night on the streets of London, Liverpool, Birmingham, Leeds . . . Dublin.

Third sketch

Alice leans over and whispers; 'Barbara wants to touch your hair.' I take Barbara's hand and put it on my hair, on my dreadlocks, 'Ooh . . . Just like wool. I've always wondered what it feels like. Ooh.' She coos.

I try to remember Bourdieu's phrase 'permanent sociological vigilance'. Any Black person can tell you, hair is our special thing. It is as tanning is to white people, I suspect. We have special ways of torturing our hair, twisting, braiding, straightening, curling, colouring, extending . . . the perfect disguise. As this quote from the leading Black newspaper, the *Weekly Journal*, illustrates.

One . . . frivolous girl preferred white men for no other reason than that none of her white (and perhaps short sighted) lovers were ever sharp enough to work out that the cascading brown hair with blonde highlights reaching half way down her back was fake.

(*Weekly Journal*, 18 May 1995)

Fourth Sketch

Joe has his hands on my naked butt . . . kneading, 'I love this, I love this.'

With a Black man, I even like the idea that I have a big bum! But when I try to squeeze myself into a skirt from Warehouse, I realize that there's no life after size 10.

But I also think of Sarah Bartmann, The Hottentot Venus, whose image not only formed the 'central image of the black female throughout the

nineteenth century' (Gilman 1992: 180), but has also fed countless white fantasies about the Black female form.

Fifth sketch

Steven says, 'You have the most beautiful eyes'. I worry. On my right eye I have a small growth which is slowly growing over my cornea. It's quite common in those who have lived in tropical climates. Ultra-violet rays damage our eyes. I have to keep watching it, if it suddenly starts to grow, or begins to affect my vision, I have to have it removed. The only problem is, once it's disturbed, as it were, it's likely to grow back faster than it's growing now.

What did he say? Beautiful eyes. I think they say beauty is in the eye of the beholder

Or is it? My experience of my body, inside and outside of myself, leaves me with more questions than answers. But I need to unearth this bodily experience for myself as an act of sorting through the fictions of theory, of realizing that for me there is a very fine line between the 'facts' and 'fictions' of my body as I experience it in the here and now, and the history of that body.

I have come to this realization through my experience of breast cancer and the 'fact' and 'fiction' of the body I live with everyday.

Sixth sketch

From my Cancer Diary (Moss, Tuesday 24.3.92)

I'm trying to remember my body. With two breasts. With no pain. What did it feel like to have two breasts? To touch them . . . together or one at a time. To cradle a man's head between my breasts. . . . It all feels so impossible now. Will I ever let a man see my lone (lonely) breast? I don't know if I can relate to a whole body again. . . . This is how the surgeon broke the news to me:

'We have found a cancer in your right breast . . . in its early stage . . . a ductile carcinoma in situ . . . still contained in the ducts . . . has not invaded the breast tissue or the lymph nodes . . . but the whole breast tissue is unstable. . . . My recommendation is that we remove the breast, thus ensuring that the whole cancer is removed.'

I think he was talking about my breast. I felt it then, and knew I hated it, wanted it off, there and then. Little did I know how much I'd miss it at first, and how much I'd forget it, in time.

It is the loss of my right breast that has made me take account of the embodied experience in the making of social reality. It's not very often we get the chance of a new body. I was 42 when I lost my breast. On the outside I carry the same body; a fact and a fiction. But I'm different, not just because the shape of my body is different, but because I have to relate to that different body. I am transformed, and the world around me is transformed also.¹⁰ It is this new relationship with my body that has allowed me to re/think myself and my place in the social.

CONCLUSION

Being conscious of myself as a person, an embodied self, is what helps me perceive things that 'others cannot see or feel' as sociologists. This is what gives me a particular relationship with the subject of sociology. The relationship between my embodied reality and my sociological practice is at the very core of how I do sociology. I have to be equally as aware of the reality that my body imposes on my practice and of the reality that social theory imposes on that body. I cannot be silent about it. As Paulo Freire suggests:

men [sic] are aware of their activity and the world in which they are situated. They act in function of the objectives which they propose, have the seat of their decisions located in themselves and in their relation with the world and with others, and infuse the world with their creative presence by means of the transformation they effect upon it. Unlike animals, they do not only live but exist; and their existence is historical. . . . For animals, 'here' is only a habitat with which they enter into contact; for men, 'here' signifies not merely a physical space, but an historical space.

(Freire 1972: 71)

The 'here' of academia is also 'an historical space'. When I teach sociology, as a Black woman in an almost all-white institution, the social reality of academia and of academic discourse is transformed. My practice is reflexive in the way that Alvin Gouldner has argued, and that is:

A Reflexive Sociology . . . is characterized not by what it studies. It is distinguished neither by the persons and the problems studied nor even by the techniques and instruments used in studying them. It is characterised, rather, by the relationship it establishes between being a sociologist and being a person, between the role and the man [sic] performing it.

(Gouldner 1993: 470-1)

I have chosen to acknowledge this relationship between being a sociologist and being a person, openly, and to acknowledge the impact this has on my practice. A reflexive sociology allows me, as a person, to use embodied social realities, to do sociology and to inform theory. It is a process of

uncovering embodied social reality through the practice of sociology. In this process *sociological theory has to admit the body*. The body cannot remain 'voiceless'. This is how I teach sociology.

Recently a young Black man doing a Ph.D. on sport and identity, wrote to me after a conference:

you suggested that I keep a personal diary of my feelings about the research alongside the more 'serious' research notes. Anyway you'll be pleased to know that I did, grudgingly, start to do this and over time (and you'll no doubt be aware of this) I found it increasingly difficult to separate the two types of notes until my field notes became increasingly reflexive and 'personalised'. I am currently at the stage of writing up my notes and attempting to theorize them.¹¹

I'm aware that he has embarked on a difficult journey – toward the discovery of (an embodied) self through the practice of sociology. It is an act of transforming theory, an act of admitting the body and embodied social experiences into theory.

As Black academics (and students), one of our tasks has to be to transform theory itself, if we are not to remain permanent 'curiosities' in academia. For us, the habitus of academia is as dangerous as society at large, because we are not 'fish in water' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Our work is often marginalized and dismissed as 'not theory', because we challenge the limits of theories that will not admit our embodied realities. To have our bodies, ourselves, admitted on our own terms, will be an act of naming ourselves on this journey through the 'heart of whiteness' (Gates, quoted in Mirza 1996).

NOTES

- 1 As Diane Reay (1995) explains: 'Bourdieu has developed the concept of habitus to demonstrate not only the ways in which the body is in the social world but also the ways in which the social world is in the body (Bourdieu 1981):

The habitus as the feel for the game is the social game embodied and turned into second nature. (Bourdieu, 1990b: 63)

Thus, one of the crucial features of habitus is that it is embodied; it is not composed solely of mental attitudes and perceptions. Bourdieu writes that it is expressed through durable ways "of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby feeling and thinking" (Bourdieu, 1990a: 70).'

- 2 British Sociological Association, *Anti-Racist Language: Guidance For Good Practise* (undated, unacknowledged authorship), gives this definition:

Black – This term is often used to refer to a variety of non-white ethnic groups. This term has taken on more political connotations with the rise of black activism in the USA since the 1960s and now its usage implies solidarity against racism. The idea of 'black' has thus been reclaimed as a source of pride and identity. To accept this means that we should be sensitive to the many negative connotations relating to the word 'black' in the English

language (black leg, black list, etc.). However, some Asians in Britain object to the use of the word 'black' being applied to them and some argue that it also confuses a number of ethnic groups which should be treated separately – Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Indians and so on. One solution is to refer to 'black peoples' 'black communities', etc. in the plural to imply that there are a variety of such groups. It is also important to be aware of the fact that in some contexts – such as South Africa – 'black' can also be used in a racist sense.

- 3 In a seminar, I was asked by one of my white students if I had come to Britain 'to better myself'. I'm quite sure she wouldn't ask a white teacher on a lucrative 'Aid' contract in Africa the same question!
- 4 When, for example, I pointed out the racist nature of a policy document, the response of those in authority was to call into question the validity of my assertion.
- 5 I first aired some of the ideas in this chapter at a meeting of the Feminist Research Group at the University of Northumbria. A man (uninvited to the meeting!) asked if 'we all had to become confessional'. My reply was that he'd used the word 'confession' not me! I refused to be drawn into having to justify (to the white man) what I was saying and how I chose to say it.
- 6 See for example Adam Kuper (1988) and Mary Midgley (1985).
- 7 Since 1969 more than one hundred Black people have died in custody in Britain, (police, psychiatric and prison custody), nearly half of them in police custody (from a special report in the *Voice* 30 January 1996).
- 8 This practice continues today in television documentaries. For example, 'Watching Brief' (*Guardian* 7 January 1996) introduces the programme *Under The Sun: A Caterpillar Moon* (BBC2) thus: 'After the honey season, the caterpillar season is the favourite time of the year for the Aka pygmies of the central African rainforest. They get to gorge themselves on the juicy titbits which rain down from the tree canopy. . . . Julia Simmons' fascinating film focuses on the family of Bosseke, a warm and friendly Aka who tells his son to give the first caterpillar pickings to the film crew. At first you are just relieved for the crew that the hairy, squirmy grubs are in strangely short supply.' For myself, these 'hairy, squirmy grubs' are a delicacy.
- 9 See, for example, Kathryn Perry, 'The Heart of Whiteness: White Subjectivity and Interracial Relationships'; Inge Blackman, 'White Girls Are Easy, Black Girls Are Studs'; Helen (Charles), '(Not) Compromising: Inter-skin Colour Relations'; Felly Nkweto Simmonds, 'Love in Black and White' all in Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey (1995) (eds) *Romance Revisited*, London: Lawrence Wishart 1995.
- 10 One way I observe this transformation is when I first tell someone that I have one breast. I can literally see the bodily reaction to it . . . sometimes of surprise, confusion, pity, and even fear. I've also noticed that they also 'hear' or 'read' me differently, whatever I'm talking about. In these instances I catch a glimpse of the reality of those whose embodied realities, such as disabled people, cannot be ignored.
- 11 Personal communication 26.10.95.

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The fabulous adventures of the mahogany princesses

Gargi Bhattacharyya

In recent years it has often seemed as if all attempts to make sense of the troubled meanings of skin and genitals have returned again and again to pictures and words. Getting to the magic word 'politics' depends on guessing the right thing to say, the best picture to draw. Spending so much time arguing about representation has drained everyone's resources – we have all forgotten other ways of thinking and fighting it seems. Instead of seeing words and pictures as malleable parts of other battles, resources and entertainments, dreams and warnings, the battles become about words and pictures. We see only in absolute terms of positive and negative, to be framed and to be silenced – and forget all the other things we can and must do. This is my answer to those troubled years of watching what I said.

For us, telling stories has become a way of life. Living is hard and confusing and narrative promises to guide us through. Of course, things get left out, misplaced, but the stories help us to keep on. Fictional tracks for unplanned journeys, that last memory of progress binds us still. Please don't shout white boy teleology. This isn't quite the linear track of western science – that has its uses, but it isn't the right story for our everyday. Nor is it the overview of their panopticon god. We aren't waiting for the jailer of destiny to serve up the final sentences – there is no one watcher who can fix the ending here.

These are stories to live by – open to adaptation by ordinary contexts and unexpected giggles. Slip your self into your role of choice. Try things out – see what fits, what helps you fly. If you find yourself in a story which doesn't help you to live, give it up. Stories with no chance of a happy ending aren't worth telling. Save your breath for the adventures to follow.

Before we go too far, it's important to believe that you know what I am talking about, maybe not in this form, but still the same thing. Think of the words of our favourite brothers:

The early eighties . . . saw the gathering of critical mass through collectivist activities whose emergent agendas began to impact upon

public institutions during the mid-eighties around the key theme of *black representation*. But to call it a 'renaissance,' while capturing the atmosphere of optimism and renewal, implies an authenticating myth of origins which Black Britain did not really have at its disposal: which is to say, if such myths did not exist they would have to be reinvented, using whatever materials came to hand.

Having come to voice, what and whose language do you speak? What or whose language speaks you?

(Mercer 1994: 14)

This is the same will to enter the story, to be seen, to make sense – even if the bargain costs us dear, ties us to forms which can never be ours. It's too late to turn back, the plot is already in motion. Not being in the story isn't an option.

Think about representation, our bane and our obsession – why is this a good way to think about how 'race' and 'gender' work? Why isn't it? Where did class go? Here are some thoughts:

- 1 This kind of social analysis seems to be inevitably about pictures for us – place this kind of body in this kind of landscape and try to judge the effects. We think you can understand 'race' and gender by looking – you can see the different sorts there are and gauge what happens around them. How we make sense of what we see has an effect on our response – and our response feeds back into the scary real world of events.
- 2 The drawback is that we get fixated on looking. Looking becomes the main social relation, the one that counts, the activity which shapes the world. All our energy goes on looking different and looking differently. The things we can't see we have no hope of understanding.
- 3 Some dangers aren't about how things look. There is no picture to show how this works, what it looks like, where it lives. It makes a difference to what we see, but we can't see how, where, when. Even looking at the most ugly pictures is easier than this not knowing. As the shiver of the world hits our shoulders, the distracting activity of tampering with pictures comes as a welcome relief.

It is too late to give up on representation now – too many of our hurts are refracted through this frame. Better to push the logic until the contract snaps. Better to leap into adventure, changing stories like party outfits.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Fabulous – the stuff of fable, folklore at its most heart-warming and educational. The kind of story which tells it like it is, but also shows you

how it could be. A story where none of the characters are real, but you know them all. Remember Aesop . . . 'his complexion so swarthy, that he took his very name from it; for Aesop is the same as Aethiop . . . such an impediment in his speech, that people could hardly understand what he said' (Richardson, 1975). Named by our skin, we inherit his form. Garble our best truths through fantasy, telling stories which seem at once too obvious and too obscure. Not founded on fact, we mix supernatural characters and legendary tales, idle talk and false statements – halfway between possibility and deception, the special visionary lies of the undervalued. Instead of certainty, here morals are about confounding expectation – the things worth knowing are not straightforward to tell.

Adventures – what every life should hold. Experience as thrill not threat.

Battles of the good against evil, quests for lost treasures, a twisting plot which stays surprising. There is risk and danger, of course, the inevitable gambles of the still living. Daringly speculative, hazardously active, adventure turns away from past pain to what is about to happen.

Mahogany – dark brown polish with the time running out. Cut down, chopped up, from tropical forest to draughty dining rooms, only the shiny surface is left. No amount of benefit socials can make things how they were before. Better instead to love the colour, texture, smooth hardness, slippery feel.

Princesses – fantasy creatures fallen out of fairy tales, waiting to be discovered, appreciated, swept off their feet out of drudgery into luxury. Built to be adored, we have fallen on hard times. No calls to let down our hair, climb the mountain of mattresses. When we shout 'Rumplestiltskin', no one respects our ingenuity.

YESTERYEARS

Long ago, in the land of fairy tales, the mahogany princesses lived their lives of wild adventure with no fear but nature, no enemy but death. Their bodies were not yet the imagery of lascivious fantasy. The light bounced off the burnish of their skins, and they savoured the sensation of warmth. Not yet somebody else's picture, their bodies were still a source of non-scorpious pleasures. In this world flesh is about touch, smell, taste. Looking isn't the main thing to do and skin is for stroking.

Across the seas the white men dream of what the world might hold. Standing quite still and turning their heads, they imagine the reach of their territory. Looking makes them the centre of the world. They are the vantage spot, the place from which order emanates. Puffed up with this suggestion they crane their necks further, and imagine all the things which they could have.

It was easiest of all to believe that what was good for Europe must be even better for the 'natives'. By now the white man had worked himself into a high state of self-conceit.

(Kiernan 1986: 26)

Sold on the new range of narcissistic fantasy, the white men stretch out to print their mark on the world. The endless repetition of blockprint stamped on the delicate sari length covering all our bodies.

Adventure no. 1

This is a story for times of despair and exhaustion. A dream of that magical time before history – the idyll broken by destructive events and charted occurrence.

Here the princesses are still invisible to their enemies – subject to no one, not yet conquered. The story mixes up all these freedoms, from military occupation, economic impossibility, identity formation. As if that whole other world of pre-colonial civilization was blighted by the first white-man's glance.

In this other time, when some other logic prevailed, the mahogany princesses were happy and doubt-free. They achieved easily, collecting success as their due. From our jumpy shell-shocked world, this looks like a time of innocence. Unaware of the colonial complexes to follow, the princesses bounce around the world charged with expectation.

This is the story we whisper to our children at bedtime. Taking off the battles of the day, heads hitting the pillow, that moment when we sense their connection to what we all used to be. Soft words into nearly sleeping ears, breathing the hope that we could be those things again.

To work this story has to link certain key themes – these are the plot points which must be remembered.

- 1 There are ways of being beyond the ugliness of colonial relations. In this story we assume a before – the state of grace from which we have sadly fallen – but it is as much about possibility as nostalgia.
- 2 The time before – the place outside the damaging relations which form our consciousness – offered untold possibilities and achievements. We don't have to be constituted through a paralysed face-off in which we always lose. Beyond Hegel, Fanon, circular determination. The endless face-off of master/slave, colonizer/colonized, us only in relation to them, is a sickness of our time not all time.
- 3 For the mahogany princesses, this is importantly about a time before the regime of the scopic. We were not always constituted through someone's glance – maybe looking doesn't have to be the point.

THE COLONIZING GAZE IS TAUT WITH ENVY

Frozen in the white gaze, the mahogany princesses shiver. Suddenly surface is what matters. They still touch – fill their mouths with flavour, breathe deeply the smells of experience – but they are caught in the nets of representation. Looking becomes the route to knowledge. Information is what you can see. Increasingly the mahogany princesses imagine themselves as the two-dimensional mirage of someone else's look. Self as picture sucks away the pleasures of self as flesh. The things which can't be shown lose their power to the demonstrable.

The scopic pressures distort the lovely bodies of the princesses. Their skins take over their beings. They are engulfed by surface. Colour becomes a sensation so intense it hurts. What is visible is all there is – nothing else seems so stark, so conspicuous. Texture is the way light is reflected, warmth is the promise from a pleasing curve. Sight sucks out the essence of other ways of being. What used to seem thick and solid becomes less substantial than a picture – sensations float away without the shared currency of visible proof.

Adventure no. 2

This is more painful altogether – much too close to our everyday ambivalence for any comfort. This is the story we sing to each other – a hen night special to boost our broken self-esteem. In those moments aside, over chopping boards and bubbling pots, the chorus comes back. Helping each other dress, coiling the heavy hair slicked with coconut, smoothing dusty skin back into its shine – we remind each other how this trap works.

When we look for knowledge, we find a thousand stories of how we have lost. The pain comes not from being written out of their histories, but from being written in so insistently. Endless pictures, lascivious anecdotes, the background character in all their life-stories. Their most important stories are told through us. We are the shapes of their best dreams and worst fears. They look at pictures of us to recognize themselves, to see inside, to balance the thrill between feeling bad and feeling good. What we see doesn't come into it at all.

Looking at their pictures makes us feel like monsters – our sense of self shifts to fit what we see, all around, everywhere, from way back when to next week, month, year. They are the scopic masters, squashing everything jealously into two-dimensions. The weight of invasion flattens our volume out, the heavy breath of subjugation. Nothing left but the limp skins of their fantasy.

This story smarts with its telling – that moment of loss, the beginning of the end, the long descent to today. The plot needs these interludes of suffering. All superheroes endure ordeals on their journeys to victory. Dwelling on these downsides serves a variety of purpose.

- 1 We see more clearly how the past haunts our lives.
- 2 The reminder that we are living diminished lives prompts us to regain size, shape, weight, form. To imagine ourselves as something more than someone else's picture.
- 3 Most importantly, things are not what they seem. This is the lesson which could change the future. The mahogany princesses are demeaned by a culture which secretly loves them better than itself. The centuries of ugliness are rooted in fear, the destruction comes from a child's half-formed jealousy at sensing things beyond their reach. The worst things in the world spring from weakness masquerading as strength, a terror of what others have. This story reminds us that even our persecutors are awed by our gifts, stunned by our beauty, desperate to climb inside our bodies (Young 1995).

HALF DEVIL – HALF CHILD

The children of the sun feed the hungry white gaze – all the flavours of their previous lives offered up in one delectable image. Children's drawings, family heirlooms, holiday gifts – guzzled in to the visitors' appetite. And still more – today's breakfast, dinner, tea, favourite clothes, tomorrow's hopes – all fallen in to the void. Even before birth future generations became pledged to keeping the picture show going. So much work and so little to show. Whatever they shovelled in seemed to get lost, leaving no traces of the offered comforts but that one same image. No fat, no warmth, no love, nothing saved. Just a picture of fear and desire.

Adventure no. 3

This is a story about physical endurance – giving beyond reason, careless of scarcity. We tell this story to recall the mixture of innocence and largesse which we once were. Excess was possible, we thought, more than enough to go around.

Whole worlds of resources were sucked into the West's hunger. Nothing held back, no extra tucked away for later. These gifts are registered nowhere, subsumed in achievements which show no acknowledgement. Instead, all that shows is that same old fantasy – the one which registers psychic fear and vengeful desire, but no economic relation, no one-way traffic in goods and services. We tell this story to remind ourselves of what the pictures don't show. At those dangerous moments when we almost believe what we see, when only images seem true, this story asks 'Who is the child in this game of manipulation?' We are used up feeding an infantile fury which is never appeased. This story acknowledges this relation of care as a way of managing bitterness.

- 1 The pictures of ourselves hide our efforts, talents, resources.
- 2 Cutting close ties always leaves pain. Remembering how intertwined our lives have been explains the confusion that follows.
- 3 Now it is time to reclaim that pre-betrayal generosity as strength and possibility, not a foolish mistake to be put right by experience. So concerned not to be suckered again, we forget to live at all.

A daydream of alternative subject formation – THE EXOTIC WHITE MAN¹.

Not my object, my thing, my fantasy. I'm looking – but I can't fix him in my sights.

More and less human than us, he reddens easily. The scuffs of living come up tender on his skin. Not a story of the past, but still some map of pain. His surface cracks under pressure, grabs destruction from heat, weeps mucous tears. No lubricant to ease this brittleness – being wet just means being more sore.

Even as he flakes away and falls apart, the white man can't see himself. The world's audience can't recognize another's glance. Unaware, he lets it all hang out. Flaunts his paunch, scratches his crotch, wipes body ooze on his surroundings, convinced the marks don't show. Settling down for the performance, sinking into smugness, slumping as if the body belongs to someone else. Certainly no picture. Who'd look at that?

This weakness is touching. A clumsy child, finger in nose. So vulnerably oblivious. My job is to soak up the mess without accusing the source. Endless care and no more tears. My charge is too innocent for accountability, too pre-responsible for blame. The piss-stains on the carpet are nobody's fault. People with no sense of self deserve protection. I meet the bargain and hold the trust. The fiction of the one-way look, a master lie to live by.

I'm laying out the pieces – one by one, side by side. I touch, sniff, lick each fragment, curating carefully. The contract has come back round and I'm paying what I owe, the care that I have received. Who knows you better than me, recorder of your delicate places, vessel of your wounds. I hold what your life could never be. In the your fears are carried back as trophies, what hurts belongs to someone else. Trust me because I remember what you have been.

Looming in out of vision, she felt that she had won. Impossible to focus at this range – no barriers until, too late, they were broken. She knew that in his mind's eye he held a picture-reminder of her, a prompt for the frightening moments when looking didn't work. She knew that he remembered those other spaces where she was his object – that it was this memory of mastery which got him hard, guided him across her warmth. To him touch meant colour, form, responses filtered back through the thing he knew. Sensation as picture.

This was his weakness. She held his expectation, stroked and petted. Touched carefully, knowing he thought in pictures and stories, that her special skills were lost in his translations.

The artist is somewhat prone to see the foreigner as a comic creature. Our features were odd, our pinkish colour somewhat revolting, our kinder moments endearing. And this was how we were seen, odd creatures from far away who were sometimes quite charming, and sometimes hatefully cruel. In this book we shall have to take ourselves as others found us.

(Burland 1969: 11)

Boy flesh – unfamiliar meat. Less pliant, less movement. The polite words flick by – wiry, gaunt, artistic, sensitive androgyne, gawky manchild. Of course, that wasn't it. Nothing like the thrill of the new. She wanted to remake him as an image of herself. Her mirror, her object – vessel to her dreams, mould to her body. In him she saw a slip, a twist, an inside-out version of the world she knew. The same, the same, the same. Same picture, same story. A confirmation of her hopes and fears screening out the possibility of anything different. What he lacked was proof of what she had. Against him she puffed up, splayed out, shone.

Sometimes he turned his head as if pulled by recollection. Some other place from before or to come. A home elsewhere. She dried up in the breeze from that movement, the thought that she didn't centre the world. The idea of a place beyond their two cracked her heart wide open, and out flew the safety of her name.

TERRITORIAL BATTLES

In the struggles over land, people forgot to look. Flesh ripped and no one remembered the lures of warm brownness. The princesses waited for darkness, regained powers which had been lost to pictures – found their teeth had bite, their nails could claw.

The violence snapped the brittle contract of desire. Better not to look at that tantalizing flesh. Better to give up those favourite pin-ups. Sometimes it is too noisy for titillation. Delectation needs a moment's peace, a sense of leisure. Now you can't be sure it costs nothing to look. The edges are blurring, things you can't quite see creep up from behind, beyond, underneath. The lookers are scared to stand still in case they are eaten. No time for head-swivelling. Nothing in view to recentre that eye.

Adventure no. 4

This most heroic moment, fought just yesterday, seems the most distantly mythic. Such a well-known narrative, good against evil, the weak kicking

back, ultimate victory. A countless collection of individual sacrifices – everybody's uncle, cousin, village beauty, school sportstar – each told as proof of the master narrative of 'We whipped their arses, they didn't think we could, after so long, so long, but we did and now we are home.'

All over the world the mahogany princesses lap up the flavour of that victory, a nourishing supplement to spice up more everyday battles. This becomes our most formative story – an oedipalized break from interdependency to . . . interdependency? These are the stories of holidays and public events. Big crowd pleasers, sure to get them dancing. We know how to deal with the proud and defiant heritage of our homelands.²

But this story conceals other lessons to be saved.

- 1 That violence – the wrench that makes you, but from which you never recover. The desolation you wake up to. A story helps us encounter that unsettling rupture and move on.
- 2 Only victory songs which recall the costs of victory can help in what follows.
- 3 All wounds need mourning – maybe most of all the ones you don't know you suffer.

Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name?

(Morrison 1987: 274)³

JOURNEYS WEST

After the battle dusts settled, there was no moment of longed-for calm, no well-deserved relief. The princesses lifted their heads slowly and looked around, as the white men had taught them. What was left to survey? Smashed up, ripped out, cracked open. Shattered, splintered, torn, trashed. Not much to look at. Bits and pieces which didn't quite make a whole, injuries from no particular source. Plenty of pain.

The princesses scrunched up their lovely eyes and tried to imagine a better future. Spinning out, stretching into possibility – nostrils flared, fingers spread, reaching for all the things that might be. For a moment they float, on the edge of a new deal, a fresh space, the old contracts are almost broken. Eyes shut, we're almost there, sugar sweet, cotton soft. The hum of life takes over. Bodies feel like luxury items. The princesses throw back their heads and laugh.

Wallop. History smashes back. Dead weights on your back, rubble in the streets. The journey to this point, the ways things make sense. Yesterday's traces fill our todays. Cut out the past and there's nothing left. Of course, we follow where we can, what we know. Shifting our dreams to whatever seems likely.

Adventure no. 5

This story is about troubled journeys and permanent exile, about packing our bags and starting afresh. Like all women who love too much, we are addicted to destructive relationships. Run half-way around the globe to be close to those we've worked so hard to leave. In days wracked with homesickness, heads turned back to dreams we have left, being here is the punishment we choose, no one but ourselves to blame. This is the story of our journey to this place, pulled by history, not addicted to pain.

- 1 We are here for a reason, living out a logic of pathology set in motion long ago.
- 2 The ripples of past relationships always shake up the present. Nothing is ever completely over. Smart is learning to live with the repercussions.
- 3 The sense of travel makes us what we are – nostalgic for back homes which some have never seen, living with our bags packed, always ready to up and leave, holding on to nothing too heavy or bulky or breakable.

CONTEMPORARY ADVENTURES

Stepping out into unpredictable streets, it's hard to tell how people react to princess-skin. The old possibilities are there somewhere. The promise of warmth, the spread of colour – bodies smooth as appleskin, solid as hardwood. Pebble beach women who bruise their playmates, pushing hard to get back to touch.

Are all those things still true?

As time goes on, the princesses lose their burnish. Not so shiny happy. The past sinks away into water ghost hauntings – no sense of distance only a fear of depth. Princesses become everyday, hardly worth an objectifying turn of the head.

The millennium approaches and the exotic resides in the heartlands of the metropolis. There is no fantastic distance through which to imagine mammoth appetites, monstrous bodies. The edge of humanity folds in and suddenly these people are pushed right up against the white gaze.

At bus-stops and supermarkets, in the cities and suburbs of rundown cold old Britain, the daughters of the sun are here. The dark bodies which peopled the excesses of the orientalist imagination scatter the landscape of contemporary Britain. Fulfilling the fearful expectations of human imagination, things change, and keep right on changing.

The earth shifts and new monsters appear out of the cracks in its surface. Some mate with the horrors of yesterday and their mutant offspring emerge as fresh terrors for an unsuspecting humanity. The mahogany princesses glance backwards towards the mythic homelands of their mothers, then take a breath and prepare to fight.

Their battles straddle the worlds of yesterday and today – at once colonial fantasy and scourge of the white nation. The eyes that watch are hungry for contact – closer, closer, touch, taste. The dark women move through this network of scrutiny as best they can, alert or numb, slipping between impossible options.

Choosing our routes is an endless adventure – an exercise in balancing risk and possibility. The mahogany princesses, mixed up children of a changing world, weigh up their choices and jump right in.

BEING A GIRL

Girl is the opposite to boy – this story splits the world in two, endlessly, seemingly for all time. Either one or not-one, presence or absence, subject or object. If you're not one then you must be the other.

Boy is central, pivotal, tall, strong and hardly ever visible. Far too good for everyday. Girl is everything else, background, container, water, nature, earth and home. The most taken for granted and the least seen. Here gender is the zero-sum game filling up the world, assigning roles, determining response. The first name we learn, our entry into language, the social, human living. All other relations happen after this first one – echoes of this two of non-communication. Apparently.

In the arena of skin the white boys win again. Central, pivotal, tall, strong and hardly ever visible. So far so familiar. The powerful hog the privilege of the norm and the rest of us squeeze in behind, around, wherever there is room. Boys stride and girls cower, light skin preens while dark skin waits. In the economy of two there are only winners and losers, tops and bottoms bonded in a hermetic contract with no outside. The mahogany princesses fall out of both contracts – too much skin to be simply girl, too feminine to be just dark. If the world is full of ones and their others then white/black is an echo of man/woman is an echo of master/slave is an echo of culture/nature is an echo of coherence/confusion. We recognize the winning team again and again – the couplets must be true. But where are the mahogany princesses in this map of the world? Doubly marked, unspeakable in two, more than the other of white or boy – how do we choose what to be? Do we frock up? Primp our way into girlhood? Or swagger our way alongside gender and live in the names of skin? Of course, the answer is both and neither, whatever will work for right now. It is still impossible to tell which comes first, which hurts most, which is most precious, formative, scratched deep on the inside.

Try to picture a mahogany princess – what do you see first, her colour or her shape?

The picture may not be important to you, but it is to her. The pictures you have of yourself structure what you can do, tell you how to go about getting some of the things you want.

PASSING

Some pictures are pre-make-over – the before of the process of becoming a new and miraculous after. The point is to identify the weak points and conspicuous features which need toning down.

You might choose to be a girl – wear a dress, curl your hair, talk sexuality, domestic violence, personal politics. You might paint your face and go for ultrafemininity, dangerous dagger heels or sweet-enough-to-eat prettiness. You might collect the stories of international sisterhood, link up all those details about petty slights and major mutilations which punish girls and run straight to the women's caucus. You don't lose your skin, but you tone down its colours to fit in and get things done.

You might choose to let skin take over – wear ethnicity, authenticity, tradition, talk colonialism, racist violence, pride and heritage. You might wear clothes as extensions of your skin, back-home outfits cut to please grandmothers or those looks which white girls never wear. You might collect all those histories of slavery and colonialism, the scary disregard for the value of human life in a dark skin, then and now, and put your energies into black self-organization. You are still a girl, but you put that to one side for a while and concentrate on defending your community.

We learn these stories as dangerous cop-outs to be avoided at all costs – lose sight of the complexities of identity and things will never get better. We don't value disguise these days. We've forgotten the ballerina skills of those deceptions, the disciplines which played with perception and changed possibilities.

The most risky disguise is taking the centre – by yourself, on the enemy's terms. The least elegant passing, the walking-on-daggers bargain which never stops cutting. Desperate measures for desperate times, wiping out everything we used to be. This story is a cautionary tale.⁴

DIFFERENCE

We pretend that we have learnt better than to try and pass. No point trying to be what you are not, so instead we work hard at being ourselves. Everyone is looking for their own spaces, and ours is the tapestry fun palace, the sunken-bath land of exotic mysteries. Instead of camouflaging our most conspicuous features, we are building them up, showing them off. Flaunting what we have to those who don't. Preening for each other in mutual appreciation. We can't escape the world of pictures. Memory no longer extends to the time before. Now skin really is the main thing we are, the way we imagine ourselves. Feeling better depends on altering the picture, the criteria of visual values. It's too hard to see beyond that scopic contract any more. Other ways of being are forgotten – they don't feel real to us.

The only option is to rework the pictures to show off our best sides.

IMAGINATION

Eager to learn, heads in books, scrabbling up the schooling of our parents' sacrifice – too many of the lessons stop us dead in despair. Bolted down by circumstance and held tight by the knowledge of how things are. The kind of education which wears you out, grinds you down, makes you lie down, give up, hide. Knowing hurts so much that living seems impossible – and anyway, not worth the effort.

All the stories so far serve a purpose, but trap us where we are. Forgetting the exuberant pleasures of narrative, we play over and over the unhappy endings which it is too late to change. I want to stop – to take the lessons and move on, up, out, away.

The stories worth telling join the unbearable past to the exuberant future just a breath away. Everything is not yet lost. Now, in the middle of the film, battered by the events of yesterday and just now, the plot twists ahead seem unimaginable. Take a breath and jump right in.

NOTES

- 1 Worlds away from Luce Irigaray and *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985).
- 2 See Partha Chatterjee (1986) for a warning against these celebrations.
- 3 Toni Morrison (1987), *Beloved*, a book which was a big event for mahogany princesses everywhere.
- 4 See sad and familiar stories in bell hooks (1993), *Sisters of the Yam, Black Women and Self-Recovery*, particularly chapter 7, 'Facing and Feeling Loss'.

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Changing our place

Pragna Patel

The chapters in this final section of the book look forward to the future and explore new directions and opportunities for change that a black feminist perspective can engender. Black British feminism has from its inception been underpinned and informed by political and social activism. Black British feminism had its genesis over 50 years ago in the activism and political struggles of black women migrants from the postcolonial Caribbean, African and Asian continents. In this section, the chapters demonstrate the link black feminism maintains to this tradition of activism. Here the black women writers challenge official definitions, institutional marginalization and the limits of a dominant language that cannot speak of their experience. Through articulating black women's activity and agency, black British feminism remains a critical force for social change in the postmodern terrain that is postcolonial Britain at the end of the twentieth century.

Third wave feminism and black women's activism

Pragna Patel

The time has come, the Walrus said, to talk of many things . . .

(L. Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*)

I was born in Kenya and came to Britain at the age of 4. I have known no other landscape, but I never felt that I belonged here. With no other choice but to make my life here, I grew into a politics of resistance; against the racism that I experienced outside my home because I was the wrong colour, and against the injustices I experienced because I was the wrong gender. In this way I fashioned for myself a strong political identity, in struggle with other black men and women. Despite hovering on the margins of British society, this identity is a source of tremendous power and strength, and even, dare I say it, moral righteousness.

It was precisely this sense of belonging, this black identity, which fell apart in December 1992. When militant right-wing Hindu nationalists destroyed the sixteenth century Babri-Masjid mosque in India, I was forced to confront the elements of the 'Hindu' identity within me which I had supposed had all but withered away. By virtue of being a member of that diaspora of Indian-Hindu origin, I was, whether I liked it or not, also part of a Hindu collectivity. This collectivity contained elements which, as part of a majority in India, was embarking in the name of God and religion on a course of annihilation of minorities and dissenters, and attacking the very foundations of democracy in that country. Yet this very same collectivity, as a minority elsewhere in the world, knows what it is like to experience discrimination and hatred. These painful contradictions compelled me critically to re-examine my own Hindu background in order to be able to understand, and crucially to oppose those who, in the name of Hinduism, were acting in a way which was deeply inhuman and shameful to witness.

The recognition that I may belong at one and the same time to an oppressed minority and to an oppressive majority, with all the contradictions that entails, has found an echo in my experiences in Britain. Many of the struggles we have waged as black people here have rested, sometimes uncritically, upon a white majority/black minority dichotomy.

This has been useful in creating the sense of solidarity necessary to mobilize against racist attacks from the state and thugs on our streets, uniformed or otherwise, but in asserting a singular and absolute identity – as ‘victims’ of racism – we have evaded the need to look critically at the inner dynamics of our communities. This has resulted in a tendency to deny uncomfortable realities and has tended to give us a distorted and partial view of ourselves and the world around us. This tendency has been particularly difficult for black women to deal with, as our struggles often arise out of our experiences *within* our communities, and in fighting to force these onto the wider political agenda we have also often had to fight against the imposition of a singular identity either on ourselves or on our communities.

What follows is an attempt to locate these struggles by retracing some of the campaigns of Southall Black Sisters (SBS) and our sister organization, Brent Asian Women’s Refuge. Our struggles have, out of necessity, arisen from the routine experiences of many Asian, African, Caribbean and other women who come to these centres with stories of violence, persecution, imprisonment, poverty and homelessness experienced at the hands of their husbands, families and/or the state. In attempting to meet the challenges they pose in their demands for justice for themselves and for women generally, we have had to organize autonomously. But we have always endeavoured to situate our practice within wider anti-racist and socialist movements, involving alliances and coalitions within and across the minority and majority divides. This has not always been easy, but it is the only way we know in which a new and empowering politics can be forged.

By organizing in women’s groups and refuges, many of us have fought for autonomous spaces and for the right for our own voices to be heard in order to break free from the patriarchal stranglehold of the family. In the process we have also had to challenge the attitudes of the wider society, as well as the theory and practice of social policy and legislation which seeks to restrict our freedom to make informed choices about our lives. Our organizations and our practice are critical in unmasking the failures, not only of our communities and the state and wider society, but perhaps more tellingly, of so-called multi-culturalist and anti-racist policies.

Throughout our campaigns on domestic violence, whilst countering racist stereotypes about the ‘problematic’ nature of South Asian families, SBS has sought to highlight not only the familiar economic and legal obstacles faced by all women struggling to live free of abuse, but also the particular plight of Asian women; language barriers, racism, and the specific role of culture and religion which can be used to sanction their subordinate role and to circumscribe their responses. Culture and religion in all societies act to confer legitimacy upon gender inequalities, but these

cultural constraints affect some women more than others in communities where 'culture' carries the burden of protecting minority identities in the face of external hostility. We have had to formulate demands and strategies which recognize the plurality of our experiences, without suppressing anything for the sake of political expediency. Alliances have been crucial in this, not only in gaining wider support, but also in breaking down mutual suspicion and stereotypes, and to ensure that some rights are not gained at the expense of others.

We began our protests in the early 1980s over the murder of Mrs Dhillon and her three daughters by her husband who burnt them to death. In 1984 we took to the streets in response to the death of Krishna Sharma, who committed suicide as a result of her husband's assaults. Organizing with other women in very public ways, through demonstrations and pickets, we broke the silence of the community. Until that point there had been not a single voice of protest from either progressive or conservative elements within the community. The women who led the demonstrations had themselves fled their own families in Southall, but returned to join us with scarves wrapped around their faces so that they might escape recognition. We demanded and won the support of many white women in the wider feminist movement, although initially they were hesitant in offering support for fear of being labelled 'racist'! One of our slogans - 'self-defence is no offence' - was appropriated from the anti-racist 'street-fighting' traditions, but ironically it has now become the much quoted slogan of the wider women's movement against male violence in Britain. The form of our protests drew directly from the varied and positive feminist traditions of the Indian sub-continent. We picketed directly outside Krishna Sharma's house, turning accepted notions of honour and shame on their heads. It is the perpetrators of violence, we shouted, who should be shamed and disrobed of their honour by the rest of the community, not the women who are forced to submit. Another slogan - 'black women's tradition, struggle not submission' - was first coined on this demonstration, and that, too, has been adapted to become the rallying cry of feminists against male violence in this country.

The lessons of those early years have ensured that we have understood the importance of campaigns and direct action as an essential means of articulating the needs of the women who turn to us daily. From the murder of Balwant Kaur by her husband at the Brent refuge in 1985, to the life imprisonment of Kiranjit Ahluwalia for killing her violent husband in 1989, our response has been driven by a recognition that those tragedies reflected, albeit in extreme forms, the day-to-day experiences of many Asian women facing violence on the home. Over the years we have managed to retain a campaigning edge to our work, while also providing day-to-day services.

THE KIRANJIT AHLUWALIA CAMPAIGN

The campaign to free Kiranjit Ahluwalia following her murder conviction in December 1989 illustrated the need for, and the potential impact of, alliances as a form of political action. We had to raise the specificity of her experiences as an Asian woman, drawing on her own depiction of her life, but we also had to draw out the connections with the experiences of other women in order to make demands relevant to all women in this society. Black and white, young and old, activists and non-activists, we found ourselves involved in one of the main empowering mobilizations of women against injustice seen for a long time. The women who use our centre and refuge wept and laughed with joy at Kiranjit's eventual release. Many from across the religious, caste and class divisions claimed her personal triumph as their own personal and collective victory.

In July 1991, Sara Thornton lost her appeal to overturn her murder conviction because the legal system was not then ready to accept a feminist critique of the homicide laws. Her hunger strike and the consequent publicity, against the background of the case of Joseph McGrail who was freed after kicking his alcoholic wife to death, struck a chord with the public which was to change the course of the Kiranjit Ahluwalia campaign. In the face of government intransigence, there was growing support for our critique of the legal system's untenable position on 'battered women'. Every day yielded more voices of support, ranging from almost all sections of the media and lawyers, civil servants, members of Parliament across the political divides, academics, activists and the general public. On our part, we were able to mobilize women in SBS and at the refuge; women who had experienced violence and who understood Kiranjit's tragic act.

Our main allies were radical feminists, with their long and rich history in campaigning around violence against women, and Asian women, particularly those working in refuges and women's centres. The unity we forged had two main aims: to ensure the release of battered women who kill their tormentors and who are unjustly incarcerated, and to demand a reform of the homicide legislation responsible for their imprisonment. There were many points of contention within the alliance as to the nature of the demands we ought to make of the state. Should we agitate for a reform of the existing laws as a tactical demand, or should we campaign for entirely new homicide laws that more accurately reflect women's daily experience of violence? Should we aim for new laws which are specific to women, or should they subsume areas such as racial violence and harassment? These tensions were never entirely resolved, nor could they have been, but despite divergent and sometimes irreconcilable views, we have been able to sustain the alliance.

Recently our campaign for the reform of homicide legislation, and more generally for changes in the criminal justice system have led us into a new

temporary alliance with more long-established women's organizations with a far from radical image, such as the Townswomen's Guild and the Women's Institute. Although we have only been able to come together on the narrow issue of changing the law of provocation, it is, nevertheless, a tactically important alliance of wider political significance. Conservative and liberal women from these groups have joined us in mutual recognition of the fact that the law fails women. The outcome in this instance is less important than the process by which consciousness around domestic violence can continue to grow. The established women's groups are extremely nervous about the radical elements within the alliance, but they are still soldiering on with us to organize a mass lobby at the Houses of Parliament, and a letter-writing campaign to the Home Secretary. The alliance has already led to the right-wing Home Secretary, Michael Howard, developing a defensive posture when responding to letters by members of the Women's Institute and the Townswomen's Guild. A few years ago we would not have dared participate in such a forum, fearing that our politics or terms of reference might be compromised by such co-operation. We are now much more confident about the nature and boundaries of our participation in political alliances with other women's groups.

Since the Kiranjit Ahluwalia campaign we have witnessed a resurgence in campaigns around violence against women in the South Asian and other minority communities, often in consultation with one another. These campaigns seek to redefine the relationship of women to the criminal justice system and to change the language of wider movements. So, the term 'miscarriage of justice', which initially meant the wrongful conviction and punishment of those who are innocent, has been extended to include those who are routinely failed by the criminal justice system in other ways, through the failure of the police and the prosecuting authorities to protect women from abusive partners, to the transgressions of women which the law is unable to comprehend in its wider context. Internationally, too, the debates around domestic violence and other forms of male violence are defining women's rights as human rights, and issues like rape as crimes against humanity. These developments open up the potential for creating women's alliances which transcend artificial national boundaries.

By virtue of campaigns like ours, the law has been forced to take into account the social conditions and pressures which push women into contact or conflict with the criminal justice system. The years of hard campaigning by feminists against male violence are beginning to bear some fruit within the legal system, although contradictions remain. Gains in some areas of the law are offset by losses in others, and there is no room for complacency. In the Kiranjit Ahluwalia case, the legal definition of provocation has shifted to reflect the inability of some women to retaliate immediately after an assault or threat, and expert evidence to show the

psychological impact of cumulative provocation was admitted for the first time. However, the attempt to fit complex realities into neat legal definitions can construct women in ways which deny their anger and agency, rendering them less threatening to the status quo. Thus the 'battered women syndrome' has been used to explain women's inaction in the face of repeated violence, but in the process the experience of women is medicalized and relegated to the realms of mental disorder. In other words, women are not 'permitted' to be angry or to locate their actions in a socio-economic context or in the failures of the institution of the family.

As feminists we have to be careful about the uncritical acceptance of superficially attractive solutions offered by the state in response to our campaigns and demands. For example, recent shifts in police attitudes and practices on domestic violence may appear to have 'solved' the problem of previous police indifference. The domestic violence units and multi-agency forums which are the practical outcome of these shifts in police strategy have done nothing to bring the issue of police accountability any closer to being addressed. In our experience the police still continue to fail women in their response to women's calls for help, and this should not inspire any confidence in the view that the police are now 'on our side'.

Similarly, as feminists we have to be careful not to separate ourselves off from other human and civil rights demands that at first sight may not appear to be a feminist concern. For instance, the abolition of the right to silence will have a profound effect on the rights of many: blacks, lesbians and gays, new age travellers and women. Kiranjit Ahluwalia exercised her right to silence at her original criminal trial, but had she been forced into the witness box in the vulnerable, confused and frightened state she was then in, the outcome of her appeal might have been very different. The legal system is not like an onion which, if peeled, might reveal an egalitarian core. The institutions of the state represent and articulate vested interests, constantly shifting ground the better to maintain the status quo. Any gains we make can be reversed or diluted in the face of power and privilege.

THE STATE AND THE FAMILY

The state for us has never been an abstract concept. It has a real existence which defines our roles and position in society; it negotiates our existence as women within our families. Our understanding of a family as an institution governing our relationship with the outside world is therefore vital. It has been shaped by the women who came to us questioning their roles and their lack of rights within and outside the family. Their experiences of domestic violence, sexual abuse, forced arranged marriages and racism are reflected in their demands to assert their rights as individuals. Yet within dominant anti-racist discourse, the black family is

often constructed solely as a 'haven', a bulwark against the worst excesses of state harassment and racism. Whilst not denying that the family can perform this role, the construction of the homogeneous Asian family hides other realities, power relations and power struggles between different caste, class and ethnic groups, and especially between men and women.

There are different ways in which the state constructs families, whether in the majority or minority community. The law and social policy take as 'natural' or given certain power relations between different groups and between men and women. These power relations reproduce and perpetuate inequalities between different sections of society. One good example is the construction of minority families in current immigration law, which operate largely to limit immigration from 'Third World' countries, and to restrict freedom of movement and speech, by curtailing rights of appeal against unfair and blatantly discriminatory decisions.

Anti-racist politics has effectively illuminated the racist assumptions which lie behind the immigration laws. Black families are routinely denied the right to privacy and unity in contravention of internationally recognized definitions of human rights. Intimate and intrusive questioning is commonplace in immigration cases, and the relations between partners and their dependants is probed for the slightest hint of inconsistency. In these ways black families are denied the rights taken for granted by families in the majority community. Anti-racism, however, pays little attention to the complex interplay between racist laws and patriarchal control which acts to place women in the most vulnerable position in the operation of immigration law.

It has been left to women to highlight the manner in which immigration law can combine with the institution of the family to construct the women as an appendage to her husband, economically and socially dependant upon him, and a potential prisoner of violence and abuse within the home. When a woman has come from abroad to marry here, should the marriage break down within a year her immigration status is rendered illegitimate should she leave her husband (this is known as the 'one year rule'). In the absence of an immigration status in her own right, a women's option to leave a violent or abusive home becomes virtually non-existent. In such a situation if a women does leave her husband, not only is she ineligible for any form of state assistance in the form of housing or welfare benefits, which are a prerequisite for giving women a real choice about leaving a violent home, but she also risks deportation. As there is no right of appeal in such cases, her fate is then entirely dependent upon political decisions taken by the Home Office. The arbitrary and discriminatory nature of such decisions, underpinned by notions of Third World peoples as 'aliens' or 'undesirables', means that the majority of women in such cases are forcibly deported to countries where their futures may be at risk. Persecution based

on gender is not recognized as grounds for asylum in this, as in many other western countries.¹

In this way, as in many others, we see the state applying double standards to the treatment of families from different communities. The premise of social services intervention, for example, is to preserve the unity of the family as far as possible, whilst the police and immigration services end up dividing and separating many black families. Women in the majority community have, through women's own action, managed to extend their choices to enable women to leave unhappy marriages, but for women from minority communities, particularly those with immigration difficulties, that choice is absent. Our demand is for the right of black and minority families to live undivided when they choose, but for women to have a real option of leaving an unhappy marriage without the state and the community colluding to deny that choice. If all women are to be empowered, it is essential to understand how the intersection of race, class and gender has the effect of locking different groups of men and women into varying subordinate and dominant positions within the family, community and the wider society. It is at the point of these intersections that women's access to power and resources are differentially structured, as is their level of participation in decision-making within the family and the community.

The family has always been an important battleground for resistance. In a contribution written for a public meeting organized in 1990 to launch her campaign, Kiranjit Ahluwalia delivered a devastating critique of her circumstances, unpicking the intertwining threads of religion, culture and tradition to show how her family life had become a prison. She argues, as do many of the women who come to see us, that she tried to be a 'good' wife and mother, to live by the rules of her religion and culture.

My culture is like my blood – coursing through every vein of my body. It is the culture into which I was born and where I grew up which sees the women as the honour of the house. In order to uphold this false honour and glory, she is taught to endure many kinds of oppression and pain, in silence. In addition religion also teaches her that her husband is her God and fulfilling his every desire is her religious duty. A women who does not follow this part in our society has no respect or place in it. She suffers from all kinds of slanders against her character. And she has to face all sorts of attacks and much hurt entirely alone. She is responsible not only for her husband but also for his entire family's happiness. . . . This is the essence of my culture, society, religion. Where a women is a toy, a plaything – she can be stuck together at will, broken at will. . . . Today I have come out of the jail of my husband and entered the jail of the law.

The challenge to religion and culture is not easy. The choice for women

who dare break out of the very narrow confines of the roles prescribed by religion and culture is stark; either they remain within the parameters of permissible behaviour, or they transgress and risk becoming pariahs within their own community. Many women cannot even conceive of a life of isolation and loneliness, preferring instead to risk their health, sanity and even their lives. Suicide rates among Asian women between the ages of 16 and 35 in Britain are up to three times the national average. Others, like Kiranjit Ahluwalia, refuse to internalize their anger and rage, and transgress into the uncharted 'male' territory of outward expression through homicide, and by doing so they defy social constructs of women as nurturers and carers.

MULTICULTURALISM AND RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

Religion and culture is the terrain on which the politics of multiculturalism and variants of anti-racism are built, often amounting to nothing more than a preservation and celebration of minority culture and religion. Multiculturalism has its roots in past British colonial practices in such countries as India (Sahgal 1992). In Britain it allows the state to mediate between itself and minority communities, using so-called 'community leaders' as power-brokers and middle-men. Needless to say, such leaders are male, from religious, business and other socially conservative backgrounds who, historically, have had little or no interest in promoting an agenda for social justice and equality, least of all the rights of Asian women (Ali 1992). In return for information and votes, the state concedes some measure of autonomy to the 'community leaders' to govern their communities. In reality, this means control over the family - women and children. Together the state and community leaders define the needs of minority communities, to limit their influence and to separate off the more radical elements by labelling them extremists.

In the name of tolerance of 'cultural differences', the rights of women are dismissed, and many Asian women seeking support to escape from violence are often told by state agencies that such a breach is not an acceptable method of resolving their problems in 'their cultures'. They are denied protection and delivered back to their families and communities. In 1991 an Asian man was charged with grievously assaulting his wife, an assault which nearly killed her. He was given a very lenient (non-custodial) sentence by the judge on the grounds that he was an 'immigrant'. On passing sentence the judge commented that had he been white, he would have dealt with him more severely. The judge's remarks and sanctions are shot through with multiculturalist perceptions. He acknowledged the criminal offence that had been committed, but offered effectively to 'tolerate' it as it occurred in a different cultural context. Such views not only help to shape notions of Asian cultures as backward,

monolithic and static, with no internal contesting struggles, they also help to reinforce patriarchal control of women in Asian communities.²

Multiculturalism has provided the ideological framework for fundamentalist and conservative leaders within the Asian communities to emphasize the primacy of religious identities. In this country the rise of religious fundamentalism is in part a response to the upsurge in European nationalism and racism, and the failure of progressive left politics, coupled with the fallout from the Rushdie affair and the Gulf War. These developments have contributed greatly to the current state of race and gender politics. Unlike multiculturalism, religious fundamentalism privileges religion as the main mark of identity, and constructs itself in total opposition to secularism. It seeks to reaffirm and harness religious identity in the quest for power and resources at the local and national level.

The resurgence of religious fundamentalism feeds off parallel developments within the majority community. The reassertion of Christianity as the main signifier of 'British' identity in schools, or the 'Back to Basics' campaign, underlined by a Christian morality aimed at preserving the nuclear and heterosexual family unit, are developments that have fuelled reactionary demands for formal recognition of minority religious lifestyles. Fundamentalist movements may differ in detail, but they have two major objectives in common: recognition as distinctive (to legitimate the claim for access to resources); and the reclamation of family values, with particular emphasis on control over the sexuality and fertility of women.

Increasingly the received wisdom in the formulation and implementation of social policy is that minority communities are identified according to their religious backgrounds. Other social divisions of class, caste and gender are hidden beneath this monolithic characterization. Increasingly references are made not to Asian culture, but to Sikh, Muslim or Hindu culture. Such multicultural norms are also permeating popular perceptions of Asian communities.

Women's minds and bodies are the battleground for the preservation of the 'purity' of religious and communal identities. So the role of women as signifiers and transmitters of identity within the family becomes crucial. There is a growing phenomenon of organized gangs and networks of Asian men who hunt down runaway Asian girls and women who are perceived to have transgressed the mores of their culture and religion, and to have defiled their honour and identity. The family has therefore become a site of struggle for feminists and fundamentalists alike.

In Huddersfield in 1992 we saw the emergence of the so-called 'bounty hunter'. This man had set himself up as custodian of the morality of the local Asian communities. Offering his services to local Asian families, he claimed to be able to locate and return to their families young women and girls who had chosen to leave to make their own lives elsewhere. Some of these women had left to escape from violence, abuse, restrictions on their

freedom of movement, and forced arranged marriages. Many of the women possessed court orders to restrain their husbands and families from pursuing them. When challenged about his activities, the former taxi-driver maintained the sacrosanct nature of the Asian family. Like many others within the community, he was personally angry at the idea that Asian women could protest and demand assistance from the state in response to domestic violence and other abuses. So with the blessing of the 'community' he engaged in what were clearly illegal activities, utilizing a network of informers within the Labour-controlled local authority, social welfare systems and Asian mini-cab and business services to trace the whereabouts of 'missing' women. He even boasted that knew the secret addresses of every women's refuge and hostel in northern England. In such circumstances, success in 'reuniting' families may rest upon threats of violence and harassment.

The response of society at large to this 'bounty hunter' was salutary for its indifference to his victims. Like the Channel Four television documentary which brought him to wider public attention, the rest of the media, including the 'quality' newspapers, referred to him as a 'mediator' who was 'salvaging' Asian marriages from the crisis of modernity.

We refused to turn the clocks back. In December 1992 SBS, Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF), other Asian women from around the country and some white women who had worked with us on the Kiranjit Ahluwalia campaign, joined women in Huddersfield for a loud and visible demonstration. Armed with anger and songs set to the seasonal tunes of Christmas carols, we marched around the city centre to the bemusement of Christmas shoppers. The 'anti-racist' director of the Channel Four documentary turned up at the demonstration to lend his support to the 'beleaguered' and 'misunderstood' bounty hunter. He suggested that the underlying theme of his film was to explore the question of 'whether Asian women take freedom if given the opportunity'. His film, he claimed, suggested that they did not want freedom, as they eventually returned home! What was missing from his simple argument was any understanding of the oppressive context in which Asian women can make 'choices' about freedom. We demanded instead the right for women to speak for themselves and to tell their own stories, we would not be forced into our homes again. Instead we sang out:

Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way / We have come to Huddersfield to chase the thugs away! / We are not afraid, we will not retreat, we will struggle for our rights in victory and defeat / This is our tradition, struggle not submission, courage is our faith, and dissent is our religion.

The following year in Bradford, a committee consisting of conservative and religious men was formed to ensure that Bradford police and

social services refer to them for guidance and advice regarding every single case of a runaway Asian woman.

In the wake of the destruction of the Babri-Masjid and the burning of Hindu temples in this country, SBS and the Brent refuge became centrally involved in a loose coalition of predominately Asian men and women from a range of campaigning backgrounds – anti-racist, feminist, anti-caste (Ambedkarite), activist, academic, secularist and humanist. We came together to form an anti-communal organization, the Alliance Against Communalism and for Democracy in South Asia. The aim was to support anti-communalist forces in India who were facing an uphill struggle in turning the tide of sweeping Hindu nationalism, and to prevent communalism from breaking out in our communities in Britain. For many of us this was not only a way in which we could voice our horror and opposition to developments in India, it was also an opportunity for feminists active in the fight against religious fundamentalism to seek support from other constituencies in resisting movements which placed the control of women as central to their agenda. The Alliance was effective in unsettling the confidence of those who were galvanizing financial and other support for communalist forces in India, as they liked to pretend that their support from Hindus was absolute. Our campaigning was nevertheless difficult. We found that in the larger Hindu communities of London, Leicester and elsewhere, there was widespread cross-class support for the main right-wing Hindu groupings such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Bombay-based Shiv Sena. The response to us at many meetings and social gatherings was to adopt aggressive and disruptive tactics to suppress us. The vociferous presence of women was felt to be particularly provocative, and they labelled us as Muslim-loving prostitutes, outcastes, women in the pay of Muslim fundamentalists or the Congress Party of India.

Within the Alliance, despite its name, many of the left, anti-racist activists could not come to a decision to oppose all religious fundamentalist movements operating here and in the Indian sub-continent. Whilst willing to compare the rise of the BJP to the rise of the British National Party (BNP), to some extent a valid comparison, they failed to go further and to look critically at all our communities from within. The demonization of Islam by the West has led to a marked reluctance by progressive and left forces within our communities to confront Islamic fundamentalism here, for fear of alienating Muslims and weakening unity against racism and class exploitation. A good example of this reluctance is shown in the way many anti-racist activists have argued that in the current wave of anti-Muslim racism, all blacks should regard themselves as Muslims. Even as a political stance expressing solidarity, this is an extremely problematic position for women in our struggle for personal freedom and alliances with progressive social forces.

As feminists and anti-fundamentalists we were determined to maintain the unity of the Alliance, but its failure to make women's rights a central component of the wider struggle has enormous implications for its future development. Abandoning the women's question for short-term political gain, or making alliances with right-wing movements, offers us nothing. We must oppose all religious fundamentalism, and recognize that the strength of Asian women's struggle has been in its ability to mobilize across religious, caste and class divisions. To go further, in the feminist, secular political spaces we have created lies hope for the defeat of religious fundamentalism. This is an insight which, unfortunately, has not been appreciated by our male allies in left and anti-racist movements.

The task of confronting these fundamentalist and other reactionary developments within our communities has been left to women. The result is that we have had to develop a new politics and culture of resistance to oppose these undemocratic and misogynistic developments. Women Against Fundamentalism, with its heterogeneous composition of women from a variety of religious backgrounds, is an example of the new direction in which coalition feminist politics is developing. In WAF recognizing our differences gives us strength, and a better understanding of the complexities involved in resisting racism, sexism and fundamentalism.

CONCLUSION

With the collapse of the Babri-Masjid in India, I found that a wall surrounding some of my own guarded orthodoxies had crumbled. At the conclusion of a highly successful public meeting organized by some of us in the Alliance Against Communalism in the Hindu stronghold of Wembley in Brent in 1993, a friend and colleague of Muslim origin broke down and wept. Many of those who had attended the meeting had been mobilized by local and national Hindu organizations, and their virulent anti-Muslim sentiments and abuse, devoid of any rationality, had left my friend feeling as if she had been stripped of her own humanity. I understood then the full significance of the struggles we have been engaged in, and we pledged together to fight for the right to occupy and defend the secular space we had created for ourselves as feminists, even if we needed to rethink what to put in that space.

The third wave of feminism has a lot to contend with. The rise of new forms of racism, fascism, nationalism and religious fundamentalism world-wide demands from us a new and visionary politics. We must avoid the pitfalls of the identity politics of the 1970s and 1980s which made it so difficult to share experiences, and we must move beyond the limitations of anti-racism and multiculturalism which equally limit our perspectives and our ability to act. We must reject the vicious and blinkered vision of nationalism and fundamentalism. Our task is to find new ways of resisting,

and new ways of truly democratic thinking which give us the optimism to go beyond all of these failed forms of politics. Our alliances must cross our different identities, and help us to reconceptualize notions of democracy, human rights and citizenship. Whatever the dividing lines drawn by priests, mullahs, gurus and politicians, we will then be able to reach out to our each other, to support one another in our transgressions and defiance. Above all, we must leave room for doubt and uncertainty in our own orthodoxies. The time has come, in the words of the Walrus in Lewis Carroll's poem, to talk of many things. . . .

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NOTES

- 1 See Southall Black Sisters submission to the Home Affairs Select Committee, *Immigration and Domestic Violence*, HMSO, 1992.
- 2 For a more detailed account of the devastating effects of multiculturalism in practice, see Patel (1991).

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Black women in education

A collective movement for social change

Heidi Safia Mirza

This chapter is concerned with the issue of how to theorize the paradox of inclusive acts by excluded groups. Research on young black (African-Caribbean) women's strategies to succeed at school and into further and higher education raises the question, 'How can such conservative and instrumental actions be deemed subversive?' On the surface, it appears that they are conforming, identifying with the ideology of meritocracy, climbing the conventional career ladder, wanting to succeed on society's terms – buying into the system. The problem is simply this, how can I claim (as I do) that black women's desire or motivation to succeed within the educational system is radical? How can what appears on the surface to be compliance and willingness to conform to systems and structures of educational meritocracy, be redefined as strategic or as evidence of a covert social movement for change?

What we need is a complex analysis of what is going on among the majority of black women who are not, as we have come to expect from the popular presumptions, 'failing'. We need to move toward a coherent understanding of black female educational orientation that begins to reveal the subversive and transformative possibilities of their actions. From school through to university and into the community black women access educational resources and subvert expected patterns of educational mobility. This active engagement challenges our expectations. Black women who have been, after all, theorized in our dominant academic discourse as 'the most oppressed', deemed the least 'visible', the least empowered, the most marginal of groups, do relatively well. They appear to strive for inclusivity.

However, no one wants to look at their success, their desire for inclusivity. They are out of place, disrupting, untidy. They do not fit. The notion of their agency and difference is problematic for the limited essentialist and mechanical social reproduction theories that dominate our explanations of black female inequality (Moore 1996). Traditionally, and in common-sense accounts that rely on such theories, black women's contradictory actions are analysed in terms of subcultural resistance.

However, because young black women's subcultures of resistance are deemed conformist, the idea is cleverly reworked and presented instead as 'resistance through accommodation' (Mac an Ghail 1988). Black women, we are told, employ this particular strategy of resistance, because they are motivated by their identification with the role model of the 'strong black mother'. Such essentialist constructions presumes that the role model of the black mother provides young black women with special powers of endurance and transgenerational cultural understandings that especially equip them in their struggles against racism and sexism (Mirza 1992).

But in this chapter I want to suggest that black female educational urgency cannot be understood simply as 'resistance through accommodation'. Their desire for inclusion is strategic, subversive and ultimately far more transformative than subcultural reproduction theory suggests. The irony is that black women are both succeeding and conforming in order to transform and change. By mapping black women's covert educational urgency I hope to move toward a radical interpretation of black female educational motivation. Valorizing their agency as subversive and transformative rather than as a manifestation of resistance, it becomes clear that black women do not just resist racism, they live 'other' worlds.

EVIDENCE OF COLLECTIVE EDUCATIONAL URGENCY

Black women do buy into the educational system. They do relatively well at school, relative that is to their male and female working-class peers as measured in terms of *average* exam performance at GCSE level. This phenomenon was first documented over ten years ago in 1985 in the Swann Report and confirmed by the ILEA in 1987 (Mirza 1992). More recently the findings of the 1992 National Youth Cohort Study appear to confirm this (Drew *et al.* 1992).

In my own research for *Young, Female and Black* (Mirza 1992), which was a small local study of two inner city working-class schools, I also found black girls do as well as, if not better than, their peers in average exam performance. I found young black women collectively identified with the notion of credentialism. They subscribed to the meritocratic ideal, which within the parameters of their circumstances meant 'getting on'. In difficult and disruptive conditions the majority of young black women would sit in the back of the class getting on with their own work. However, whatever the young black women's achievements they were always within the constraints of the class conditions of inner city schooling.

What is clear from all the studies on race and education is that black girls have to stay on longer at school to achieve their long-term educational aspirations. In order to overcome obstacles of racism and sexism in school large numbers stay on in order to get the opportunities that enable them

to take a 'backdoor' route into further and higher education. Young women do this by strategically rationalizing their educational opportunities. They opt for accessible careers (gendered and racialized jobs) which give them the opportunity to get onto a college course. Their career aspirations were tied to their educational motivation and by the prospect of upward mobility. A job was an expression of their desire to move ahead within the educational process. The young black women chose 'realistic careers' that they knew to be accessible and (historically) available to them. For example, social work and other caring jobs such as nursing or office work. The occupations they chose always required a course or several courses of rigorous professional training, and is why they choose them. Thus while it may appear young black women are reproducing stereotypes of black women's work, they are in effect expressing their meritocratic values within the limits of opportunities allowed to them in a racially and sexually-divisive educational and economic system. They are in effect subversively and collectively employing a 'backdoor' entry to further and higher education.

This picture of collective educational urgency among young black women to enter colleges of further and higher education is confirmed by national statistics. The 1993 Labour Force survey shows 61 per cent of all black women (aged 16-59) to have higher and other qualifications (*Employment Gazette* 1993). Figures for 1995 show that 52 per cent of all black women (aged 16-24) are in full-time education, compared to 28 per cent of white women, 36 per cent of black men, and 31 per cent of white men (*Employment Gazette* 1995). Similarly a recent study for the Policy Studies Institute shows that in relation to their respective population sizes, ethnic minority groups, overall, are over-represented in higher education (Modood and Shiner 1994). This over-representation was especially apparent in the new universities. Here people of Caribbean origin were over-represented by 43 per cent, Asians by 162 per cent and Africans by 223 per cent! This compared to the white population which was under-represented by 7 per cent.

But educational urgency does not stop there. As mothers black women strategically negotiate the educational advantage of their children within the constraints offered by the decaying urban education system and limited access to cultural capital (Reay, forthcoming 1997). Black women are disproportionately involved in the setting up and running of black supplementary schools. They invest in the education of the next generation. In ongoing research on black supplementary schools, Diane Reay and myself have done a preliminary survey of black schools in London (Reay and Mirza forthcoming). So far we found sixty officially documented black schools within four London boroughs, but we believe we only scratched the surface. Through networks and word of mouth we hear of more and more everyday. Sometimes there would be several on one council estate.

They appear to spring up 'unofficially' in houses, community centres, and unused school rooms. Of those we found, 65 per cent were run by women; and of those run by men, women's involvement as teachers and mentors was the overwhelming majority input.

IS BLACK FEMALE EDUCATIONAL URGENCY A NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT?

It could be argued, as indeed I wish to suggest here, that the extent, direction and intensity of the black female positive orientation to education is significant enough to qualify their collective action as a transformative social movement. However, Paul Gilroy does not think so. He describes the black struggles for educational opportunities as constituting 'fragile collectivities'. He argues such movements are symptoms of 'resistance to domination', defensive organizations, with their roots in a radical sense of powerlessness. As they cannot make the transition to 'stable forms of politics' they are not agents for social change (Gilroy 1987: 230-1).

However, I believe an analysis of female collective action offers a new direction in the investigation of black social movements. As Gilroy's argument demonstrates, black female agency has remained invisible in the masculinist discourse of 'race' and social change. There has clearly been a black and male monopoly of the 'black subject' (West 1990). In the masculinist discourse on race and social change the assumption is that 'race' is contested and fought over in the masculine arena of the streets - among the (male) youth in the city (e.g. Solomos 1988; Keith 1993, 1995; Solomos and Back 1995). Urban social movements, we are told, mobilize in protest, riots, local politics, and community organizations. We are told it is their action, and not the subversive and covert action of women that gives rise to so called 'neo-populist liberatory authentic politics' (Gilroy 1987: 245). This is the masculinist version of radical social change; visible, radical, confrontational, collective action, powerfully expressed in the politics of the inner city, where class consciousness evolves in response to urban struggle.

Thus notions of resistance which are employed in this male discourse of social change to signify and celebrate black struggle, remain entrenched in ideology that privileges dominance. The black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins tells us black women writers have rejected notions of power based on domination in favour of a notion of power based on a vision of self-actualization, self-definition and self-determination (Collins 1991). However, the political language of 'community' around which black social movements are traditionally articulated in the masculinist discourse remains a relational idea. It suggests the notion of antagonism and oppositionality - of domination and subordination - between one community and another (Young 1990). But what if, for black women, com-

munity identity is not relational and antagonistic but inclusive with regard to the mainstream? This could be a possibility; there must be another way of understanding our lives other than always in relation to the 'other'. There is after all more to life than opposition to racism (Mirza 1995).

BLACK WOMEN'S ACTIVISM: STRATEGIES FOR TRANSFORMATION

Mapping the hidden histories, subjugated knowledges, the counter memories of black women educators in black supplementary schools, reveals the possibilities for covert social movements to achieve social change. Black supplementary schools, as organic grassroots organizations, are not simply a response to mainstream educational exclusion and poor practice, as they are so often described. They are far more radical and subversive than their quiet conformist exterior suggests. It is little wonder they are viewed suspiciously by uninformed observers as 'black power places'!

Such schools provide an alternative world with different meanings and shared 'ways of knowing'. As one mother said, 'There is white bias everywhere except at Saturday school.' It is a place where whiteness is displaced and blackness becomes the unspoken norm. It is a place of refusal and difference; a place of belonging.

In the four supplementary schools in our research black children discovered 'really useful knowledge' (Johnson 1988) which allowed them 'to step outside the white hermeneutic circle and into the black' (Gates quoted in Casey 1993: 110). Each of the four schools in our study was distinct, but they were underpinned by two main pedagogies. Some focused more on black images, black history and black role models. Others focused more on back to basics, the formal teaching of the 3 Rs. Some did both.

In the same way as the schools were paradoxically radical and conservative in their aims, so too were the teachers both radical and conservative in their praxis. On the one hand, the women, who were for the most part voluntary unpaid teachers, talked of their 'joy' of what they do, the 'gift of giving back', of their work to 'raise the race'. Many had been giving up their weekends for twenty years. Others had become ill from overwork and dedication.

On the other hand, the same teachers saw themselves as complimenting mainstream education. They were concerned about 'fitting in', assisting parents with home-school relations and getting the children to do better. On the surface these schools appeared conformist and conservative, with their focus on formality and buying into the liberal democratic ideal of meritocracy.

But as Casey writes in her excellent book, *I Answer with My Life* (1993) in a racist society a black person is located very differently than a white person.

In a racist society for a black child to become educated is to contradict the whole system of racist signification. . . . to succeed in studying white knowledge is to undo the system itself. . . . to refute its reproduction of black inferiority materially and symbolically.

(Casey 1993: 123)

Thus it could be argued, as I am doing here, that in certain circumstances, *doing well can become a radical strategy*. An act of social transformation.

The black women educators did not accept the dominant discourse. In their space on the margin they have evolved a system of strategic rationalization of the dominant discourse. They operate within, between, under, and alongside the mainstream educational and labour market structures, subverting, renaming and reclaiming opportunities for their children through their transformative pedagogy of 'raising the race' – a radical pedagogy, that ironically appears conservative on the surface with its focus on inclusion and dialogue with the mainstream.

Patricia Hill Collins (1991) calls our attention to the dual nature of black women's activist traditions in their attempt to bring about social change. She suggests black women engage in activism that is both conservative and radical. Black women create culture and provide for their families. Fostering self-evaluation and self-reliance, patterns of consciousness and self-expression shape their cultures of difference. This struggle for group survival may appear conservative with its emphasis on preserving customs and cultural maintenance. Collins argues this struggle for group survival is in contrast to the radical tradition of black women's engaged activism. Because black communities and families are so profoundly affected by the political, economic and social institutions they are situated in, black women also find themselves working for radical institutional transformation through legal and civil action in terms of the traditional and valorized (masculine) form of visible social action.

However, it is in the uncharted struggle for group survival that black women in supplementary schools are located. Rose, a mother in one of the schools, tells us:

We always have a session which is about giving children a voice. We teach them to speak, to develop a voice that can be heard. We tell them to be proud of what they are, to be strong about speaking out. I think perhaps that is the most important thing we do, helping them develop a voice that gets heard because it is easy for black children not to be listened to in school, to be thought of as a nuisance when they say something. I think in Saturday school it is quite clear that they are expected, entitled to speak out.

(Rose in Reay and Mirza forthcoming)

Charity's narrative on how Colibri was started includes similar themes of activism, community and commitment that characterize the struggle for group survival and the desire for social change:

There was a group of about six parents who like myself, as a black teacher, were dissatisfied with what was happening to black pupils. They felt if they had been in the Caribbean their children would be much further on academically and they decided something had to be done, schools weren't doing anything, so it had to be them. I really wish someone had the time to chart the enormous amount of work they put in those first few years. It was immense. The school started off in someone's front room on Saturday mornings. The parents doing all the teaching themselves to start with and it was very much focused on what was their main concern; their children not being able to read and write properly. Then these parents found the group of children grew from 10 to 15 and soon it was 20 and at this point it was unmanageable running a Saturday school in someone's front room so they petitioned the council for accommodation and finally got one of the council's derelict properties. They spent their spare time shovelling rubbish out of the room, tramps had been living there. Also doing building, repair work, getting groups of parents together to decorate. They pulled together and did all this work themselves, used the expertise they had to get the school on its feet.

(Charity in Reay and Mirza, forthcoming)

What the black women appeared to have learnt is an awareness of the need for social support and collaborative action through their experience of marginality in a white racist society. From this awakening of consciousness and socio-analysis (Bourdieu 1990: 116) the women created their own cultural capital. Their habitus embodied 'real intelligence' in their ways of knowing and understanding (Luttrell 1992). As their words show, this ultimately led to collective action and social change.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion the question we must return to is this: Is the coherent educational urgency uncovered among black women a radical social movement with transformative possibilities from the margin or, as some suggest, no more than a conservative act?

Research on black women in education shows there is much evidence to suggest black women do not accept the dominant discourse, nor do they construct their identities in opposition to the dominant discourse. They redefine the world, have their own values, codes and understandings, *refuse* (not resist) the gaze of the other. As Spivak says: 'Marginal groups do not wish to claim centrality but redefine the big word human in terms

of the marginal' (Spivak quoted in hooks 1991: 22). Black women live in counter hegemonic marginal spaces where, as hooks describes: 'Radical black subjectivity is seen not overseen by any authoritative other claiming to know us better than we know ourselves' (hooks 1991: 22).

For black women strategies for everyday survival consist of trying to create spheres of influence that are separate from but engaged with existing structures of oppression. Being successful and gaining authority and power within institutions that have traditionally not allowed black women formal authority or real power enables them to indirectly subvert oppressive structures by changing them. By saying this I do not wish to argue that black women are simply empowered through their educational achievement. Empowerment assumes a notion of power that is relational. It suggests the positive power of a collectivity or individual to challenge basic power relations in society (Yuval-Davis 1994). The assumption here is that black women's actions empower them, but any gains are always oppositional and in relation to the hegemonic culture (Steady 1993). What I have tried to show instead is that black women are not simply resisting, but have evolved a system of strategic rationalization which has its own logic, values and codes. Black women struggle for educational inclusion in order to transform their opportunities and so in the process subvert racist expectations and beliefs. By entering into dialogue with others they are not conservative or colluding with the mainstream. They are collectively opening up transformative possibilities for their community through their pragmatic recognition of the power of education to transform and change the hegemonic discourse (McLaren 1994; hooks 1994).

So, finally, can I claim black women's educational urgency and desire to do well within the system is radical and subversive? To answer the question I leave you with the words of a black woman university student:

When not given success we need to be successful . . . that is the most radical thing you can do.

(Alisha in Mirza 1994)

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The language of womanism

Re-thinking difference¹

Helen (charles)

BLANKET TERMINOLOGY AND GENERALIZING WOMEN

The politicization of the western black woman germinates at the moment of recognizable resistance to outside forces which deem her subordinate to others. The potential to understand herself is as justified within the context of a feminist ideology as it is within a non-feminist ideology. This chapter questions the viability of womanism as a doctrine for (black) women activists² who have been visibly ignored by the white women's movement. It is an attempt to think further towards an understanding of the notion of difference within the feminist arena and examines the terminology used by women who are conscious of feminism but resistant to taking on the white western labelling that goes with it.

As the focus of this chapter is directed to language, an understanding of feminist nomenclature provides a means to tackle areas of black women's invisibility that have long been ignored. I want to consider placing the black woman activist within mainstream feminist terminology. Using the notions of womanism and difference to illustrate, I argue for an examination of the necessity of a viable language from which the black woman activist can speak and, more importantly, is listened to.

Terminology: why is it needed? In what ways is it used and for what purposes? In terms of progression and development, how does it manifest itself? Terming the activities of the Self – political or otherwise – makes it easier to identify the causes and circumvents the assumption that feminism is essentially white feminism. It takes us to a place where we can question what feminism is *qua* feminism. The possibility within women's activism to overcome racial imbalances opens up greater political autonomy within such a feminism. Before exploring the main themes in detail I will examine briefly some aspects of political activism through an analysis of terminology.

Most would agree that given the worlds that we live in, to hope that a perfect term could exist to encompass all identities (class-wise, gender-wise, colour-wise, race-wise, sexuality-wise, and so on) is a fantasy. A term

that does not pay lip-service to, but encompasses black women's activism would recognize the viability and equality of all political women in the main body of the women's movement. The split or the branching away of 'black' and 'other' women from this main body would be a sign that these women are not being recognized for what they are worth by a dominant core. After the split three options are available to a black woman. First, she can join another organization. Second, she can give up the cause altogether and get on with her life, creating her own individual (feminist) framework which is perhaps shared with friends. Third, she can create her own movement, academic or otherwise, to which she attracts others like herself. With this third option, appropriate language is fashioned and created by her and her followers.

The evolution of the term feminist perhaps initially came about in an attempt to address all the issue-wise aspects of class, colour, race and sexuality. As we move through progressive waves which indicate that the majority view is changing, the etymology of feminism *per se* also changes. For example, in the early 1980s cultural difference made its debut on the feminist agenda, as some white women in North America collaborated with some black women to address issues of exclusion. Joseph and Lewis write in *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives* (1981) that, 'From the early generalizations about "all women," feminists are recognizing the need to understand the specific nature and conditions of women's oppression in differing cultures, societies, and economies.' (1981: 67). Significantly, as a consequence of the development of feminism, the term has become not only arguably passé but also one of generalization and exclusion. Feminism now is often linked to the theory that it is not reaching a potential activist populace outside the academe. A manifestation of this was the question which was beginning to be asked at the end of the 1980s. Has feminism gone out of fashion and is it out of date? Maybe, maybe not, but the language of feminism has definitely left newer generations and others who feel like they have seen it, done it, been brought up by it and read all the books, searching for alternative lifestyle politics.

There is no single woman who encompasses all the said issues, and fights for rights to be equated to all of them. Where limitations abide, you will always find the need for acknowledgement. This acknowledgement often arrives via term-creation, adding to already existing terminology. To place the word black, for example, or disabled before the term feminist, does not solve the problem. Instead, it makes it explicit that the term is exclusive of the previously ignored or acknowledged group. This instantly valorizes the situation of non-acknowledgement. The idea of a black, disabled or feminist utopia for instance, is useless as an idea on which to base a reality because its premise is not set up to encompass *all* of the so-called black, disabled or feminist people's realities at once. The view that

there are as many definitions of feminism as there are feminists runs counter to what a main definition of feminism ought to be striving for – eliminating the possibility of splits from the main body. While feminism should be the stem from which differences can branch out, instead there is a reluctance to put efforts into maintaining the growth of such a stem. Indeed, it could well be said that it was because of the laxity of a feminism which relied on whiteness, that feminism began to dissipate underground.

WOMANISM AS AN (IN)SUFFICIENT STRATEGY FOR BLACK WOMEN

The instance of womanism is interesting to examine at this stage, as it seeks to offer a universal means to a black women-based end. When Alice Walker came up with the idea of a special name for black women, her term 'womanist' provided an equivalent to 'feminist'. Composed and placed at the very start of her book, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1984a), the definition presents itself as introductory to the book's subheading, *Womanist Prose*. This book begins with the very kernel of its concept: 'Womanist. From *womanish* . . . A black feminist or feminist of color' (Walker, 1984a: xi). The specificity of the black woman's experience becomes a viable basis for feminist interpretation right from the beginning. Although the term 'womanist' has not made headline news, there was a possibility of it becoming more than just a notion, if only because its germination became possible through Alice Walker. However, this was not to be – at least not in this century – as womanism's seedling struggled from the very beginning when it was placed at diametrically opposed ends with feminism. It has been discussed from some positions in North America. bell hooks argues that womanism is not to be confused as an opposing doctrine to feminism: 'I hear black women academics laying claim to the term "womanist" while rejecting "feminist". I do not think Alice Walker intended this term to deflect from feminist commitment, yet this is often how it is evoked' (hooks, 1989: 181). Here in Britain, the term womanism is barely recognized or used. Nevertheless, the notion was taken up in the late 1980s by West African writer Buchi Emecheta (in Granqvist and Stotesbury, 1989: 19) and on a more local level by the London-based group, Camden Black Sisters (CBS). Valentina Alexander, formally of CBS, viewed activism for black and white women as the 'twin revolutions of Black Womanism and White Feminism'. Under 'Some Statements of Fact', she explains: 'Womanism for the Black Woman/Woman of Colour came about as a direct response to the oppression she experienced, through the exploitation of her gender, race and class' (Alexander, 1989a: 29).

It is not always necessary to look for the origins of terms and concepts but if the etymology exists as womanism did, as a potential twentieth-century phenomenon, then it presents a good opportunity to examine the

roots³ and reasons for invention. The term 'womanist', whatever its intention, is essentially for black feminists (Walker, 1984a). The black woman activist could not fail to respond to what seems like an answer for the need to re-evaluate an ignored, forgotten, marginalized section of society. The excitement, no doubt, reached many who, like myself, find it difficult not only in terms of what appendage (if any) to attach to themselves but also in terms of what is behind the difficulties of nomenclature: why the need for labels anyhow? If the majority of black women are unhappy about being called feminists then the advent of a new term that has a potential for black women in particular would have inevitable allure on a socio-political platform. But somehow womanism did not make the grade despite Walker's belief that she is, 'offering society a new word when the old word it is using fails to describe behaviour and change that only a new word can help it more fully see' (1984b: 25). The crucial question is not whether womanist as a new word can satisfy a new feminist vision, but whether womanist as a new and viable doctrine can make our ever-changing, traditional white feminism adapt to it. Additionally, it is important to consider at which point womanism as a North American experience departs from the experience of black feminists globally.

I want to now turn to looking closely at four sections of Walker's definition of womanism. In the first section of her definition she states womanism is: 'From the black folk expression of mothers to female 'children', "You acting womanish," ... interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown"' (1984a: xi). Walker shows here that womanish as a term comes from the experience of the language and folk culture which is central to a certain group of people with roots in the southern states of North America. Because black languages differ from place to place, the word womanish from a southern US context is not necessarily linked directly to the same experience of girls and women elsewhere. To adopt language in one culture from another is not unusual, but there must exist some initial identification of whatever the term is or is seen to substitute. Looking closely at Walker's dictionary-style definition of womanism reveals an ambitious attempt to cater for a stylized, individual, all-encompassing woman.

In the second part of Walker's definition, there is evidence of her preference to expand the definition womanism in order to escape the problem of exclusion, which is so much a part of white-dominated women's movements. Here she states that a womanish woman is:

Also, a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility ... and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire

people, male and female. Not separatist, except periodically for health. Traditionally universalist.

(Walker 1984a: xi)

It is punchy and humorous, a very important ingredient for anything new on the market. It is also clear in this definition that Walker, in offering a new concept for black women in particular, does not wish to ignore or not acknowledge 'non-black' women. Interestingly, black as a prefix to woman is not included in this second part of Walker's definition of womanist. While its absence magnifies a feminist need (Walker's?) to accept all women of all skin colours it can also be seen as slightly confusing. If the intention is to make 'womanist' follow a poly-textual mode of definition, then it would be safe to assume the utilization of womanist by white women too; used in preference to, or in conjunction with feminist to illustrate *white women's* development in changing society. However, in acknowledging the viability of black women who are as much women as white women are, the celebration of the possible change from exclusive white feminism to inclusive feminism has potential if we introduce the 'white womanist'. In so doing, the promise of a truly inclusive womanism would be eliminated in favour of a compromisory change, because as black feminists have suggested, 'In many cases the attitudes of white women researchers towards their Third World women subjects appears to be one of pity and distance' (Kazi, 1986: 87-8; Mohanty, 1988).

On the sexuality front, there is an assumption in Walker's second definition that womanist substitutes for lesbian as well as terms like transgendered, bisexual, heterosexual, celibate and so on. Does this term really have the power to account for all these issues, or would it give rise to exhaustive appendages? Having said this, issues such as class and race are strangely unrecorded in this second definition. If Walker presumes their inclusion, it is regretful to misinterpret the reading as equal to their explicit exclusion. Walker's 'universality' in this sense exposes a blanket terminology; a blanketing which attempts to cover up exclusion and is as such questionable in its generalization.

Diana Fuss, having written extensively on the subject of essentialism versus constructionism, attempts to throw up old notions that have been criticized for lacking theoretical substance. In her writings she talks about the work of Luce Irigaray (a scholar who has been labelled 'essentialist' by many in the western academe) who makes an interesting comparison to Walker, here. In *Essentially Speaking* (1989), Fuss talks about Irigaray's 'language of essence' in the search, 'not to create a theory of woman, but to secure a place for the "feminine" within sexual difference' (1989: 72). If the invention of essentialist terminology arrives because of the need to fit in somewhere on a macro level, then linguistically and politically, writers like Irigaray and Walker, as Fuss has said, are opting out of the 'P.C.' rat-race and choosing a path of strategic essentialism. Walker in inventing

womanism is, perhaps, not trying to create an essentialist theory of black feminism *per se*, but seeks to secure a home for the black feminine or essence embodied within racial or skin-colour difference which is strategic.

Walker's use of womanism, in raising the question of an essentialist universality, throws up more than the issue of theorizing. It also offers the chance to tackle the question of politics. The phrase which begins, 'Committed to survival ...' spotlights Walker's emphasis on the value of collective commitment as part of this womanist make-up. By referring to this commitment to 'survival and wholeness of entire people' it is difficult to understand the exactitude through which this proposed method ought to be practised. The implications of a politics of 'entire people' and 'wholeness' are at once evaded through a suggestion of global simplicity.⁴ Conglomerated into one body, like her view that there can exist a 'woman's culture', it is reminiscent of the notion of an all-encompassing 'single black super-woman'. If 'womanists' were meant to be ubiquitous humanists, committed not merely to international affairs but also to the whole notion and existence of universal affairs, a problem surfaces: if to be womanist means to be black, then the issue of western racism must affect and duly concern the would-be 'womanist', notwithstanding the fact that racism ought not to be a black problem.⁵

Given the triple subordination of the black-identified woman, her experience could be used to gauge the overall development towards attainment for freedom and recognition among all people. As Kwame Nkrumah once said: 'The degree of a country's revolutionary awareness may be measured by the political maturity of its women' (Francis, 1983: 36). Similarly, Staples heroically contends that 'Black women cannot be free *qua* women until all blacks attain their liberation' (Staples, 1985: 348). What is recognized here is a project of universal humanism that black feminism represents. However, this political germination has been prevented. And prevention is no cure as the Combahee River Collective well understand: 'If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free, since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression' (1983: 278). How is the commitment to universal humanism fostered and developed and in what ways is its development equally beneficial to all black and non-black thinking peoples? Given these problems would it then be safer to accept that womanism can be a viable concept only within the realms and parameters of a Walker-based theory? To foster the womanist thesis may only serve to encourage an essentialist notion based solely on instinct, and in 'nature', rather than in combination with activism or socio-political consciousness:

I don't choose womanism because it is 'better' than feminism ... I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it; because I cherish

the spirit of the woman (like Sojourner) the word calls to mind and because I share the old ethnic-American *habit* of offering society a new word.

(Walker 1984b; my italics)

If term-proposal is 'habitual' to black people then all the more reason to take a serious look at the terminology.

Walker's third definition of 'womanist' shows further, its apolitical nature. She states: 'Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless' (Walker, 1984a: xii). Now, some might say that in being black, one is already political and as Meridy Harris has rightly said, being black is certainly turning the English dictionary definition of woman 'upside down' making it 'an *immediately* satisfying subversion of "the weaker sex" ideology which appears to be contested by far too few to effect any radical change from within white culture' (1991: 4). But suppose I am looking for terminology which will give something more in the way of impact. A terminology that would make not only black women sit up, but will make white women listen. Instead of taking an ambiguous or excluded role, such a terminology would enable black women to be heard. The emphasis of Walker is not on political activism, as many, including bell hooks would like, and because of this, it could be said that Walker does not subscribe to a specific woman-activism. Here is what bell hooks has to say:

For me, the term 'womanist' is not sufficiently linked to a tradition of radical political commitment to struggle and change. What would a 'womanist' politic look like? If it is a term for black feminism, then why do those who embrace it reject the other?

(hooks 1989: 182)

Coming to Walker's fourth definition, 'Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender', I would say that it speaks for itself in that Walker places both states of being into a kind of extended family situation, a brave gesture of inclusion. My only difficulty with this is that purple and lavender, being traditional white feminist hues (recall 1970s British sartorial politics), are insinuating of a *plea* for inclusion. This attitude is not very symbolic of the western black woman's *amour propre* and as such, indicates an inevitable death of pride in the family.

For one person to 'offer' society a new term appears somehow uncollective in the decision-making process, though creative. But perhaps because of what appears to be an apolitical gloss on Walker's offer of womanism, this is uncollectively intentional. Her womanist ideology can be seen to describe more the spirit of black women, which also has a place, as opposed to a fiercely political identity. However, having said this, it is

quite common for language to evolve naturally alongside political change. Think, for example, of the term 'queer', which has in some circles been appropriated from 'odd' with perjorative connotations, to an umbrella term of (political) pride for those who do not consider themselves heterosexual.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE? IGNORING BLACK WOMEN'S VISIBILITY

What can be assumed is the general feeling that black women activists in Britain and in North America do not wish to remain on a perpetual feminist agenda as marginalized contributors to a political, woman-based cause. To be listened to is the *raison d'être*. Moreover, 'Black women resist being grafted onto feminism in a tokenistic manner [and] argue that feminism has to be transformed if it is to address them' (Ramdin, 1987: 469; my emphasis). Wanting 'our issues to be on the agendas in a wide range of political organizations [struggling] to raise racism as a central issue within the women's movement' (Amos and Parmar, 1984: 7) was paramount to the black woman activist at a time that seems long ago now. And black women have been re-stating the problem over and over again as they recognize the difference in approach, form, content and attitude within feminism. What that difference is exactly and how it can be attributed to useful and developing practical analysis, is now so important that it must be viewed from as many different angles as possible so as to provide maximum visibility. That this vision produces realization and also sets one up for exposure is inevitable and integral to moving obstinate and lazy ideology. What I have referred to as 'guilt-awareness'⁶ among white women activists, goes a long way to localizing very sore points in the activist's consciousness and it is a crucial part of her self-awareness and developing or evolving political clout. But there must be a place at which she surpasses the former condition where practical activism takes over to intercept the potential paralysis that can emanate from guilt-awareness.

THE DIFFERENCE WITHIN DIFFERENCE: DIVERSITY AND BINARY OPPOSITIONS

What follows is a short dialogue in identity politics which necessarily cuts across any discussion about language, terminology and women. A black woman announces a separate identity in adopting womanism as a doctrine viable to her own experience as a black feminist, she could adopt 'black feminism' as an appellation appropriate to her situation as 'black activist', or even place a safe bet and identify with an 'intra-ethnic feminism'.⁷ The very existence of all these terms is proof that even in the all-embracing universal world that Walker and her followers espouse, there is (and always will be) difference in black feminist identity. There is difference on

two obvious counts. First, within the parameters of blackness, not all black women are the same. They are diverse politically, culturally, sexually; colour, caste and class-wise. Second, within the parameters of whiteness, black women are seen as different and identified as 'other'. The difference here is understood as a binary opposition. So, if a woman is black in, for instance, South Africa she is aware of her blackness as something other than 'coloured-ness'. White South African women are more aware of their whiteness than those in, for example, Britain (Harris, 1991). A woman only knows she is black or white because the woman next to her is non-black or non-white. Walker's view would incorporate elements of the latter notion of binary difference to acknowledge the difference between, for example, women who are 'capable' or have reached the point of understanding and those who are not (yet) 'womanist'. I recall Walker: 'Tradition *assumes*, because of our experiences during slavery, that black women already *are* capable' (1984b: 25). An example of the binary opposition is for the already capable woman calling herself 'capable' to be placed next to the white woman (against which she must define herself) who is not already 'capable'.

Explanatory of the first point, that not all black women are the same, is the philosophy of bell hooks who tells us that difference can emanate also from a historical praxis: 'Often professional black women with academic degrees are quite conservative politically. Their perspectives differ greatly from our foremothers, who were politically astute, assertive, and radical in their work for social change' (hooks, 1989: 181). Ladner has a similar and perhaps more concise approach: 'In discussing the black woman from a historical perspective, it is important to know that there is no monolithic concept of the black woman, but there are many models of black womanhood' (1985: 271). The diversity among black women can also be seen as integral to the structure of Filomina Chioma Steady's work. She writes,

From the available literature it is already apparent that the black woman, within a cross-cultural perspective, represents much diversity in terms of nationality, class affiliation, generational differences, and particularly historical experience. The aim of this book is not to present a uniform profile or elicit a monolithic image.

(Steady 1985: 7)

In a pioneering presentation, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (1985), from which the previous extract is taken, the anthology as a whole explores the different experiences of black women cross-culturally. Steady provides food for thought on what she considers to be 'true feminism'.⁸ She says:

True feminism springs from an actual experience of oppression, a lack of the socially prescribed means of ensuring one's well-being, and a true lack of access to resources for survival. True feminism is the reaction

which leads to the development of greater resourcefulness for survival and greater self-reliance.

Above all, true feminism is impossible without intensive involvement in production. All over the African Diaspora, but particularly on the Continent, the black woman's role in this regard is paramount. It can, therefore, be stated with much justification that the black woman is to a large extent the original feminist.

(Steady 1985: 36)

True feminism does imply an essentialism and exclusivity here: placing one kind of woman over and above another or others. This can propagate negative divisions and visibility within a woman-based, cross-cultural experience.⁹ Conversely, Walker takes another angle on true feminism. For her feminism is true as in applicable to *all* women. She states: 'Feminism (all colors) definitely teaches women they are capable, one reason for its universal appeal' (1984b: 25). If this is the case, it is with some concern to discover that in the early 1980s some women of colour right here in Britain were not aligning themselves to feminism, but were instead opting for a separate black women's movement. This is explained in *The Heart of the Race* (Bryan *et al.*, 1985) and warrants a full citation:

We began to discuss our common experiences of racial and sexist oppression, and as we forge the links we were unknowingly laying the foundation of the Black Women's Movement which would emerge in the years to follow.

(Bryan *et al.* 1985: 148)

Following on from this is a statement from a member of the Brixton Black Women's Group:

A lot of people think black women began to challenge what was happening in mixed organisations because we were influenced by what was going on in the white women's movement. But I think we were influenced far more . . . by what was happening in the liberation movements on the African continent . . . although we had begun to form women's caucuses and women's study groups, what Samora Machel had to say about women's emancipation made a lot more sense to us than what Germaine Greer and other middle-class white feminists were saying. It just didn't make sense for us to be talking about changing life-styles and attitudes, when we were dealing with issues of survival, like housing, education and police brutality.

(Bryan *et al.* 1985: 148)

Does this view make imperative the western (as opposed to universal) need to re-term? What of the non-western black woman activist resident in the west? In an interview Buchi Emecheta states firmly,

I will not be called a feminist here, [England] because it is European, it is as simple as that, I just resent that. Otherwise, if you look at everything I do, it is what the feminists do, too; but it is just that it comes from Europe, or European women, and I don't like being defined by them.

(Emecheta in Granqvist and Stotesbury 1989: 19)

The views by black women are numerous. However the distinct differences within black feminist ideology remain distinct and, as such, perpetuate the divisions between different kinds of women, black and non-black.

The general fragmentation of the women's movement into splinter groups that focus on specific oppression (racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and so on) on the one hand, and concentrate on theoretical analyses of women's issues on the other, has had a knock-on effect within black women's movements. Here too, recognition and acknowledgement of difference in black women's cultures announce a stalemate: Giving voice to differences of opinion (an aspect that can disrupt or gel), exposes women activists as people who are different from one another. Their difference is, of course, not just because of their genders, their classes, their mobilities, or their nationalities,¹⁰ but also because of the un-sameness of their opinions: 'It is not only that there are differences between different groups of women, but that these differences are often also conflicts of interest' (Bhavnani and Coulson, 1986: 84).

In Britain, the fragmentation of OWAAD¹¹ and the struggles of pioneering black women's organizations, like the acclaimed Southall Black Sisters and the now defunct Brixton Black Women's Group in London, suggest that enthusiasm for a black woman-based politics has waned to a non-public presence. It would appear that a woman-based politics only exists within smaller groups who practise activism mainly on a local level. Pratibha Parmar looks back in retrospect to the mid-1980s. She writes:

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.

(Parmar 1989: 55)

On the second point of the binary difference between black and white women there are two examples which elucidate the notion of 'otherness'. First, more than two decades ago, Toni Cade questioned the emerging white women's analysis of the black women's experience. She asked whether, as another experience, difference ought to be treated as equivalent:

How relevant are the truths, the experience, the findings of white women to black women? Are women, after all, simply women? I do not know that our priorities are the same, that our concerns and methods are the same, or even similar enough so that we can afford to deal with this new field of experts [white, female].

(Cade 1970: 9)

Second, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn has explored the outcome of recognizing difference between black and white women. In her article, 'Discrimination Against Afro-American Women in the Woman's Movement, 1830-1920' (1985), she suggests the difference between women in the early women's movement was compounded by the fact of race-consciousness: 'Not all Afro-American women sought to join racially integrated organisations. Some organised separate racial groups in response to common problems and to a common sense of identity' (1985: 302). It must be accepted then, that if all feminists are to be regarded as different though they travel similar paths, the theory of difference ought to connect with the experience of difference within a women-based movement. It could be said that the theory and the experience of difference are separate entities:

The dialogues that have been attempted have been concentrated more upon viable empirical differences that affect black and white women's lives than upon developing a feminist theoretical approach that would enable a feminist understanding of the basis of these differences.

(Carby 1982: 221)

All too often there is a preoccupation with the assertion of difference within the black (and white) woman activist's text. Once asserted, the recognition of difference leaves no space for a 'come back' to a position where a total reckoning of black and non-black women's work against oppression might begin. It sets the ball rolling toward negating sameness. So, in terms of theory, it can be claimed that acknowledging difference in theory begins with the realization of a political motive. That seed - the one that germinates in the black woman activist, grows, but in its roots there is a (feminist) theory based on recognizing difference which is particular but not necessarily exclusive to black women. This can be seen in early black British feminist theory.

Hazel Carby's then-controversial article, 'White Woman Listen!' (1982), was the beginning of a response to a 'theoretical development of a critique of white feminist theories' (Parmar, 1989: 31). Theories specific to challenging white feminism were present long before and are evident in the many letters and statements produced in nineteenth-century abolitionist literature. Black women fighting to be heard refused the offers by white women abolitionists (Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example) to shadow-write their misfortunes as the slave under-class. Instead black women

wrote themselves a place in history. Harriet Jacobs' *Life as a Slave Girl – Written by Herself* (1987) testifies to their determination to be heard.

THE LANGUAGE OF DIFFERENCE: RECOGNIZING THE SELF

Taking the analysis of difference into the comparative subject area of language develops the theory of difference. It enables us to enhance and draw in interrelated themes without which a substantial and binding case for recognizing diversity could not be found. Language as a medium of communication finds itself as exigent and imperative when a belief is transcended into a movement. It would not be conducive to the development of a theory of difference for views which suggest a hierarchy of difference, such as the following, to be nurtured – 'The very language and style of the women's movement of the west is an admission of the women's belief that they are inferior to men' (John, quoted in Steady, 1985: 34). It would be essential that views on relative difference and the possibility of their existence be anticipated along with any other rash conclusions. For it is precisely the publicized views held by people that will dictate the continuance of the ideology that shapes the belief or movement. It is crucial to get the message across, enlighten potential followers and participants, work on manifestos and policies. These are the basic means for fostering whatever belief there is. These aspects need language as a vehicle. In the case of womanism, development of the term in language can only arise if it, as a doctrine, is successful in the transportation of its own meaning and is, therefore, meaningful (and viable) to its prospective supporters.

While difference exists between the black woman and the non-black woman, it also exists between a black woman and her *individual* black woman counterparts. The following linguistic interpretation given by Harland (1987) demonstrates the difficulty in finding a term within feminist language to suit all black and non-black women.

Harland¹² suggests that our ordinary methods of thinking are eventually taken over by the desire to think differently. A change from A to B in our understanding takes place in what Harland calls a 'superstructuralist' way, that is to say, the memory of a particular way of thinking is replaced and becomes more important than the memory of what *used* to be a particular way of thinking. Without entering into the complexities of linguistic analysis, what I want to pinpoint is the need to locate the purveyors of language within political frameworks particular to their set of beliefs. Change, which frames the construction of meaning, can be seen to alter language and thus perception. It is this need or desire felt by Walker and others toward a new politicized meaning which prompts the feeling of a 'habitual offering' of terminology. Words such as womanist show that meaning evolves from the experience of difference. There is

nothing inherent or fixed in language. If the meaning of womanism came from the experience of exclusion from feminism then its identity as a term would depend on its difference from feminism. This is precisely how bell hooks has treated womanist as distinct from feminist: 'When I hear black women using the term "womanist", it is in opposition to the term feminist; it is viewed as constituting something separate from feminist politics shaped by white women' (hooks, 1989: 181). The existence of difference in whatever form, makes for enquiries into the need for homogeneous terminology which labels representative groups of people in society. Ironically the most obvious reason is for the purposes of differentiation, for example, so that one group can be differentiated from another.

The persistence of reductionist terminology cannot be linked to the pro-woman movement as it changes from suffragette to feminist to potential womanist. These defining terms exist in contemporary obscurity insofar as splits within the movement produce a hazy understanding of what the aims of each phase of the women's movement actually is or was. That labelling gives rise to a form of cohesion, and is used to stabilize and bind together a newly forming group or movement, suggests that the process of naming is integral and imperative to a society that dreams of development. To invent or adopt terminology to suit a proposed development is to trigger a development *per se*. The remaining question is then, to what extent can the development be sustained?

As a visibilizing process, terming becomes a metalanguage to be used for the voicing of ideas, the standing of ground and the assertion of potentially viable doctrines. In the black feminist or womanist case, it is used as a specifying tool for politicization. It spotlights the seeming desire to call oneself a name which has been chosen by a core of like-minded people. As the black woman's voice is created, be it on a plantation or in a palace, a distinct and recognizable term from which a belief can emanate becomes more important. It stands to reason that if the Self, the Black Self as it is termed, is not given voice within the conglomerating body-term of woman, then the force with which the Self is asserted becomes far more exigent. Consequently, the black woman's Self is shaped by an encounter with the languages of western patriarchal white discourses. The black woman is seen in terms of non-Self. That is, she is untermed, invisible – but not absent.¹³

Being defined in terms of the non-Self never remains a static position. For the condition of being untermed triggers a response among those who are deemed to have no power, a demand to be recognized by those in power; a demand that those with power recognize that they have it. It is, therefore, important to foster positive self-recognition in (and outside) the sphere of black feminisms.¹⁴ However, Steady speaks of the black woman's predicament of how to valorize her many 'Selves'. It is neither uncommon nor an arbitrary claim to acknowledge multiple identities:

Several factors set the black woman apart as having a different order of priorities. She is oppressed not simply because of her sex, but ostensibly because of her race and, for the majority, essentially because of their [sic] class. Women belong to different socio-economic groups and do not represent a universal category.

(Steady 1985: 23-4)

FROM WOMANISM TO POST-BLACK FEMINISM

If I reject the notion of womanism the idea of a black feminism still remains. Black feminism remains current to the ideology of many black women in groups, organizations, and individually. Whether this is because womanism has not (yet?) been fully taken up, or whether it is perhaps used simultaneously with 'black feminism', I do not know. What I do know is that despite its relative demise, feminism has met with appreciation for a long time now. Feminism must change with the tide. Whether this is successful or not remains to be seen. Black feminism describes overall black women's activism within a socio-political structuring of black women's thinking. If a black woman wants to call herself 'Black-lesbian-feminist-warrior-poet' as Audre Lorde did, it is because of a desire to voice that which is personally and politically important as well as the almost desperate need to be recognized. In the Combahee River Collective, black women activists expand: 'A political contribution which we feel we [as black women] have already made is the expansion of the feminist principle that the personal is the political' (Combahee River Collective, 1983: 276).

If I embrace womanism and perhaps look to creating further terms to describe essentially black women's activism, the *sine qua non* of new terminology must be approached carefully. It is essential to ascertain the degree of cruciality and what particular *differences* the making of new terms warrant. Some might say that a change in terminology would be prophylactic to the progress of a core idea and struggle. In seeking to clarify the terms under which we struggle and succeed in the west, I have to say that the constant changing of terms can also impede the growth and development of the main aims and ideological development of a movement as well as of a people, never mind the erosion of fundamental racism.

If the focus for too long is on the terminology instead of what I call the inherent 'race-sexism' of feminism, the consequences point to serious circumvention of real change. Localizing the lesion where the black and white women's movements fail to adhere to their own principles of inclusion is to address the problem of adapting to a changing society directly and effectively. Understanding the 'problem' of circumvention can precipitate success. Perhaps the most valuable thing that came out of the birth of womanism was its direct challenge to white feminist racism.

It provided an instantaneous critique which some white feminists would find hard to ignore. But what worries me is that the term womanism could be used to further the distance between black and non-black women activists. How easy it would be to assume that the advent of womanism had absolutely nothing to do with anyone but black women, so that within a presumed homogeneous group of women it should stay.

The different and new ways that black women are organizing themselves (more focus on gaining higher education, fighting for better employment, better business opportunities and more improved domestic situations) seems to lead to a much needed expression and acknowledgement of an up-to-date feminism. The possibility of a post-black feminist ideology surfaces to co-join an era of post-modern ethics and theorizing. If feminism exists as 'post', then it could be said that it is still carved out of the present definition. However, there seems to be little point in term-proposal if there is no real demand. To ascertain a term's usefulness, questions must be asked. For example, if a term such as 'post' is agreed, what use, if any, will it have for the development of the movement? Does it make important moves, structurally, towards a specific and positive goal for black feminism? Does it advocate total rejection of prejudice – in a way that Walker's womanism does not clarify? Has the term been agreed collectively? Finally and crucially, does the goal of (black) feminism ultimately embrace a universal unity?

With white feminism's track record, it is not really surprising that younger generations are rejecting what they know older generations have been struggling with for decades. In an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (1994), bell hooks talks about how 'most young black females learn to be suspicious and critical of feminist thinking long before they have any clear understanding of its theory and politics' (1994: A44). She goes on to say that,

Even though feminist scholars like me have worked to create an inclusive feminist movement, one that acknowledges the importance of race and embraces black perspectives, many of today's black students seem to reject the entire idea of feminism . . . Just as some black males hold on to macho stereotypes about maleness as a way of one-upping white men, whom they characterise as wimpy, some young black females feel that they finally can one-up white girls by insisting that they are already 'real' women, taking care of business, with no need of feminism.

(hooks 1994: A44)

As someone who has 'followed' feminism for two decades, and as a victim of habit I, myself, cannot reject it. But I would favour more the idea of the inclusive feminist movement. I acknowledge the importance of discussing the adoption of more appropriate terminology, but alert the reader to the

inevitable and eventual situation of a *fait accompli* in doing so. The preservation of the terminology 'feminism', like the preservation of homogeneous grouping such as 'Asian', 'Black' or 'African-Caribbean' ensures a strategic identity. Within black women's activism it ensures kudos and sets up a legitimate basis for organized action. Feminism is thus constructed not as a strict and impenetrable concept but as one which is pervious to change. If it embraces our differences it can also give rise to our strengths.

My proposal now is for a halt to further umbrella terms until there is more cohesion within especially British black women's networks. Womanist creativity and spirit as an appendage to black feminist activism does provide a much fuller text for feminists to work with. In conclusion, despite Walker having been 'hailed as a developer of the "womanist process"' (Pinckney, 1987: 18), an upsurge of womanist power and politics, and even spirituality, has yet to come to Britain.

Womanism might be to feminism what purple is to lavender, but it must be remembered that when lavender wanes annually from mid- to late summer, the first task of the western gardener is to lop off its purple flowers so as to benefit the lavender as a plant.

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NOTES

- 1 This paper has been edited from the first time it was published as Occasional Paper no. 21, 1990, University of Kent.
- 2 The use of the term '(black) woman activist' is deliberate. It is not intended to replace or reject other terms such as 'black feminist'. It is a phrase to describe and convey (black) women's political involvement. The use in this paper of the words 'black' and 'non-black' is also deliberate. It is my preference for clarifying the issue of difference without adding confusion to an already complex debate. 'Black' for me means anyone who wishes to publicly call themselves black for reasons that are political or otherwise. And 'non-black' can mean white, or be appropriated to those who do not feel appropriated as 'black'. This is also a strategy (perhaps not the most effective) of resistance to the continual reading of "non-white" - as if most of the world operated on a white 'control' basis.
- 3 I am not using 'roots' in the usual sense as an originating source as I believe that there is no 'origin' as such. Roots, for myself, are the sources that extend *as far back as possible*. But it should be noted that seeds are subsumed as roots come into existence.
- 4 A dedication in Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) displays a projection of the Self which is in juxtaposition with the environment, in a way that is politically suggestive, but evasive all the same. The last sentence under the

acknowledgments in *Temple* says, 'I thank the Universe for my participation in Existence' (1989: 405).

- 5 To illustrate what I mean here, I use the following which is taken from Audre Lorde's presentation on 'The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism' at the National Women's Studies Association Conference, Connecticut, 1981:

After fifteen years of a women's movement which professes to address the life concerns and possible future of all women, I still hear in campus after campus, 'How can we address the issues of racism? No women of Color attended.' Or, the other side of that statement, 'We have no-one in our department equipped to teach their work.' In other words, racism is a Black woman's problem, a problem of women of Color, and only we can discuss it.

(Lorde 1984: 125)

- 6 See (Charles), H. (1992) 'Whiteness – The Relevance of Politically Colouring the "Non"', in H. Hinds, A. Phoenix and J. Stacey (eds) *Working Out: New Directions for Women's Studies*, London: Falmer.

- 7 Steady explains,

since sexism exists in the black community as well, sexism is relevant to the black woman, although some aspects of its analysis can best be conducted within a framework of what I term 'intraethnic feminism' – that is, within the black group's experience.

(Steady 1985: 3)

- 8 This is also taken up by Alexander (1989a).

- 9 The diversity of Steady's excellent essay-collection defies the unity promised in the title.

- 10 The pluralization of these issues is in recognition of the multiplicities of cultural make-up in the west today.

- 11 Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent. For a short historiography see Bryan *et al.* (1985: 164–81).

- 12 Because Harland's 'superstructuralist' thesis is taken from specific male-oriented sources it must be understood that his language pertains to something which does not include the feminist theorist. It is to be regarded differently and for illustrative purposes in conjunction with what I am arguing.

- 13 See Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992). She refers to this issue of the absence of blackness. She argues the narrative of whiteness is shaped by a fear of blackness – which is untermed but ever-present.

- 14 I pluralize this to illustrate that there are many varied possibilities of black women's activisms, whilst also pinpointing the necessity of a viable political option for black women.

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