‘To be British you have to be White’: Black British Women

Challenging the Notions of Identity, Gender and the Nation-State

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Abstract: Drawing upon research for my doctoral study, this paper outlines how the changing definitions of what constitutes Britishness has impacted on Black British women, particularly in the last decade. Over one hundred women from six different geographical regions of Britain participated in the study and when asked to articulate their nationalities, their responses were complex and often contradictory. In order to explore the range of articulations about nationalities, this paper will outline how ‘Britishness’ as a form of nationality has been thoroughly moulded by notions of ‘Englishness’ and ‘Whiteness’; and how Blackness has been shaped by a largely diasporic, but also resistive and sometimes separatist nationalism. Furthermore, this paper will move beyond discussions which simply reinforce polemic positions of either/or, towards a more critical and multifaceted approach to understanding the dynamic nature of diasporic Black female subjectivities. This paper asserts that African Caribbean women in Britain take on a position that constantly questions, negotiates and (re)configures notions of Britishness and indeed, Blackness, as forms of national identity. These nationalities must be (re)read, to take into account the dynamic and multifaceted nature of African Caribbean women’s subjectivities in Britain. This reading will inevitably have major implications for other Black and indeed, White subjectivities in Britain and elsewhere.

Introduction

In order to explore the range of articulations about nationalities, this paper (based on a study of over 100 adult women of African Caribbean descent from six different regions across the UK during 1997-8), will outline how ‘Britishness’ as a form of nationality has been thoroughly moulded by notions of ‘Englishness’ and ‘Whiteness’; and how Blackness has been shaped by a largely diasporic, but also resistive and sometimes separatist
nationalism.

**Britishness**

Understanding Britishness requires some knowledge of the historical, economic, social and political context of Britain (Alibhai-Brown 2000; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Fryer 1993). Arising from its imperial and domestic legacy, Britishness as a form of nationalism emerged as an inter-class, and to some extent an inter-regional ideology. In this sense, as Nairn (1981) and Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) state, the British nationality is Anglo-British and patrician in character. Its success helped to forge a massive empire, which according to Fryer (1993) had by 1914:

Covered an area of 12.7 million square miles, of which the United Kingdom accounted for less than one-hundredth. It had a population of 431 million, of which the White self-governing population of the UK and the ‘Dominions’ totalled 60 million, or less than one-seventh (Fryer 1993: 29-30).

This minority White population justified its rule over this large geographical area using a highly racist framework, which advanced the belief in the superiority of the British, and their way of life. Britishness is regarded as essentially White, often English – this assumption was a given, and as such it had never been fully questioned or defined (Alibhai-Brown 2000, MacMillan 1999). The existence and identity of Whiteness is predicated upon defining, denigrating and exploiting Others, both domestically and internationally.

Today, Britain is an island of nearly sixty million people. It symbolically represents the countries of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. England represents half the landmass of Britain and the English make up almost 80% of the UK population. It is
impossible to examine the nationalities of Black people in Britain without referring to ethnicity, to Britain’s imperial past and to the current pervasive effects of ‘racism’. As Gilroy (1987), argues, ‘racism’ has enabled Black people to be viewed as either a problem or victim. In the case of the UK, Black people were and still are regarded ‘as an external problem, an alien presence visited on Britain from the outside’ (Gilroy 1987: p11). One of the clearest examples of difference stems from Britain’s imperial past and it is reinforced through its immigration policies. Black people remain the Other and are systematically treated as inferior, dangerous and foreign. The perception and the reality are that a British nationality is automatically and exclusively for White people and their descendants. The Immigration Acts of 1968 and 1981 confirm this state of play (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992).

As a consequence, despite our full citizenship rights in Britain, African Caribbean women who were born in Britain (and others) are excluded from full participation. Far from being members of society with the full range of civil, political and social rights, African Caribbean women born in Britain remain disadvantaged in all areas of policy. Our presence is constantly questioned, and our positions in the public and private spheres are lower than our White female or indeed, male counterparts.

In order to explore Britishness more fully, it is useful here to outline two central features, which advance the view that Britishness is inevitably about White people, and that Britishness signifies Englishness.
Britishness as Whiteness

Britishness is reflected in a range of symbols like the Monarchy, the Union Jack, the Last Night of the Proms, the British Bulldog, the political right-wing groups such as the British National Party and the image of Britannia riding on the crest of the waves epitomised in the anthem ‘Rule Britannia’—all of which reflect largely White Anglo-Saxon Christian culture. Indeed, the specific lyrics of the anthem, ‘Rule Britannia’ and others, were criticised by the women in this study for failing to acknowledge the history and contributions of Black people. As a result, these symbols represent part of a cumulative process, which places Black people firmly as Other. Consequently, many of the women stated that they did not and could not feel British in any patriotic nationalist sense:

Cynthia: I don't feel British i.e. I don't feel nationalistic/patriotic or part of what it means to be British

The women’s perceptions of what it means to be British remain locked in the traditional images of Britain as fundamentally White; which have been, and to a large extent still are, reinforced throughout society. These images have consistently advanced the notion that Britain is populated by White people, and owes its position solely to their skill and labour. Anyone else that does not fit this category, is an outsider. This feature is central to the discourses of Blackness as negative Other, and of Blackness internalised. Proving one’s credentials is never possible within this discourse, because our skin colour is different and therefore we will always be alien. This is confirmed by Modood, Beishon and Virdee (1994), who found in their study that although Caribbean women felt that they had a number of
things in common with White British people, their skin colour acted as a significant barrier to full and unquestioned acceptance. It is not surprising then, that a large percentage of the women in this study felt deep unease about identifying with Britishness. As one participant so aptly put it:

Phoebe: To be British you have to be White

By firmly equating Britishness as Whiteness, a number of the women explained that they cannot, and are not allowed to, identify with a country whose values and culture exclude or negate their experiences:

Leticia: British always feels so…it just feels very White to me. It feels like a very White – kind of ‘Last Night of the Proms’, waving Union Jacks, kind of nationalist stuff that feels very uncomfortable to me…I have no affinity to ‘British’ really even though I was born here.

Thus, Britishness remains associated with a place, which excludes Black people. It remains associated with a place where the class structure is epitomised by the monarchy. Britishness remains associated with a state that is complicit in its institutionalised forms of ‘racism’; and where in the political arena, the rights of all have to encompass the rights of a few to preach racial hatred and genocide. Britishness remains associated with a place where only selective wars and genocide are commemorated; and where the notion of a Commonwealth does little to recognise the brutal effects of an Empire, and creates instead yet another form of dependency under the guise of a paternalistic monarchy. Indeed, as Modood, Beishon and
Virdee (1994) argue, until there is a clear rejection with Britain’s imperial past, there will not been any real and lasting signs of reconciliation and thus positive association with Britishness:

Celeste: I just think there are problems with that term [British]. I think that I do not fit in here and that the UK does not want Black people.

For many, the label British simply does not belong to Black people. It is exclusionary. To identify as British, is often regarded illegitimately by some White UK citizens, who question our very presence; and also by Black people who feel that acceptance of such a label is a dilution/annihilation of Blackness into White notions of Britishness. The elements of each of these viewpoints reflect both the discourses of Blackness as the negative Other and of Blackness internalised, where both Blackness and Britishness as Whiteness are essentialised.

The women in this study also expressed concerns about whether the situation would ever change fully to acknowledge Black people as legitimate citizens:

Kalia: There is no recognition about us. I work in the health service and people ask me what part of the Commonwealth do I come from? The Commonwealth was a joke, evil. I was born in Wandsworth. Why can't people just look at me, see a Black person and see me as belonging?

Thus, there remains the strong feeling that despite being born in the UK, it is not home. We do not fully belong. Our presence is always questioned, and our loyalties often challenged.
Not being able to identify with the symbols of Britishness merely reinforces this premise:

Jasmine: It’s not home, so I cannot understand why Black people join the police force, the army... I can't... I have no time for the Royal family and as for politicians, you know I listen to all their policies but none of them say anything about me.

This disenchantment with those in authority, from the monarchy to politicians, reflects and confirms Black people’s sense of alienation. Accordingly, for the women in this study, there is a huge distinction between living in Britain and feeling British. One is a matter of place of birth, residence and legal citizenship, whereas the other remains a question of heritage and fully belonging. Until this gap closes, there will always be resistance by African Caribbean women to identifying with all things British.

**Britishness as Englishness**

English history is characterised by conquests against the Celts in Scotland, Ireland and Wales. These conquests lie at the basis of resentment in Britain today towards the English, despite the unifying calls of British nationalism. Nairn (1981) argues that British nationalism has not really been tested by defeat or a by a revolution. It was seen as interclass and inter-region, and quintessentially English (Fryer 1993; MacMillan 1999). British nationalism is therefore a superficial and somewhat symbolic form of nationalism. Furthermore, due to the dominance of the English population, it has been difficult to fully separate Englishness and Britishness. As a consequence, there remains a perception of Britishness being essentially Englishness. Rather like the concept of Whiteness, Englishness and Britishness has never really been
deconstructed. Dyer (1997) argues that:

Whiteness has been enormously, often terrifyingly effective in unifying coalitions of disparate groups of people. It has generally been much more successful than class in uniting people across national cultural differences and against their best interests (Dyer 1997:19).

This would have been helpful for asserting a common British national identity that appealed across regions and class boundaries. As a result Britishness remains an assumed, and largely symbolic and un-described form of national identity. The women in this study confirmed this fact:

Leticia: ‘English’ means nothing to me at all really; it has no meaning apart from the fact that they are great people at oppressing other people. It’s certainly British, in fact it’s horrible and to put ‘Great’ in front of it makes it even worse.

Its close links with Britishness also stem from the widespread and influential use of the English language. However, despite its distinctive history, Englishness has been subsumed by the concept of Britishness. The women could not fully explain what Englishness meant without referring to Britishness:

Celeste: I think there is a difference between this term [British] and 'English', in the sense that the former is about nationality. English is more…I don't know what it is
actually. It has connotations, which I would reject. Some uses of British I would also reject, but it’s easier to use this term on forms etc.,

Nonetheless, defining Englishness has become an increasing matter of concern; especially in the lead up to, and since, UK devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. MacMillan (1999) compares the more fashionable forms of Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalism to British nationalism, which is rather staid. Britishness is not a homogenous nationalism. It represents a contested site in terms of region, class, gender, religion and ethnicity. There have been recent attempts to update Britishness away from the old imagery that alienates Black people and others in the UK with the government sponsored ‘Cool Britannia’ initiative. Britishness however, is not Englishness, no matter how it has been purported.

**Not British or English – European?!**

In the light of discussions about nationality within the UK and Europe, the women readily dismissed the view that they could be part of a new European identity. In stark contrast, the women from Scotland and Wales related more to the labels of ‘Scottish’ and ‘Welsh’ than those in England did to being English. Interestingly, this study, and Modood, Beishon and Virdee (1994) and Modood et al (1997), all found that British Caribbeans had a reluctance to use the term ‘British’ in a British context, but were more likely to use it whilst abroad. This again suggests the desire to shift away from the negativity of Britishness as being White and exclusive, but to recognise the advantages and rights of citizenship that Britishness confers.
**Blackness**

In contrast, Blackness as a form of subjectivity proves to be significant for women in this study. It is a positive form of identity in spite of the negativity surrounding Blackness. As Modood, Beishon and Virdee (1994), assert, there are two key ways in which Black people seek identity. One is through ‘ethnic affirmation’ from family heritage, and the other is through advancing identity through more political means. These are not mutually exclusive paths, but they can be supplementary or competitive.

The shift towards a positive recognition of Blackness has occurred throughout Black history. However, it became more widespread in the UK following the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the Caribbean and the USA. In addition, the emergence of Rastafarianism in the Caribbean and Britain, and more recently the Nation of Islam, has added to the desire for more Black-centred perspectives; which have had a widespread appeal for Black people throughout the Diaspora. Despite the plethora of negative images that have shaped perceptions of Africa for Black people, it has emerged as a place of pilgrimage, real or imagined.

Nationalities then, were linked quite strongly to the feeling of being in the majority and belonging to a community, real or imagined. For example, Phoebe goes on to describe the positive and empowering nature of being part of a wider symbolic movement of Black people:

Phoebe: There is something quite empowering about being part of Black community
and sharing in that identity about the struggles African-Americans, African-Caribbean’s, Africans. There is something really nice about being a part of that

As a result, the women often referred to these countries as being ‘home’, and to, ‘having a sense of belonging’. It was not surprising therefore to find that most had either visited the Caribbean or intended to, and also that all the women stated that they had an affinity with the Caribbean. Thus, for many of the women in this study, the Caribbean is a significant factor in articulating their national identities. Indeed, compared to the discomfort of identifying with Britishness as Englishness, the majority of the women had a firm and almost unshakeable attachment to the Caribbean. The multiple ways in which Black people in the diaspora articulate nationalities reflect generational, regional, gender and a range of other positionalities. Nor can they be seen in isolation from other groups, either. As a result, the impact of Britishness, Englishness, Welshness, Scottishness, (Irishness) and Whiteness upon Black subjectivities and vice versa is also worthy of examination. As Hall (1993), remarks: I have been puzzled by the fact that young Black people in London today are marginalised, fragmented, unenfranchised, disadvantaged and dispersed. And yet, they look as if they own the territory. Somehow, they too, in spite of everything, are centred, in place...I do feel a sense of – dare I say it– envy surrounding them. Envy is a very funny thing for the British to feel at this moment in time – to want to be Black (Hall 1993: 134).

Being Black in Britain therefore reflects a rather contradictory status; marginalised on one hand and popularised on the other. This is most clearly seen in terms of popular forms of culture. Black culture and identity is a site of dispute as well as affirmation, and this has
influenced the ways in which nationalities have been asserted. There are clearly still a number of obstacles from, and within, Black and White communities to overcome. One of the ways in which the process can effectively start is by moving away from the meta-discourse of Blackness with its fixed concepts of Blackness, Whiteness, Britishness etc.; which limit the possibility of exploring and understanding the hybrid multiplicity of African Caribbean women’s subjectivities in Britain today.

(Re)reading nationalities

In spite of the attractiveness of calls for strategic forms of essentialism (Spivak 1988), it is important to tackle all forms of essentialism inherent in the discourses of Blackness, as it prevents a full appreciation of the shifting, simultaneous, multiple subjectivities of African Caribbean women in Britain. By grounding our exploration and understanding of Black subjectivities in a meta-discourse which constantly negates and resists the active nature of diasporic Black subjectivities, we simply reinforce binary and essentialised notions of Blackness, Britishness and Whiteness. Agreeing with Gilroy (1993a; 1993b), Hall (1996b) explains that:

We are always in negotiation, not with a single set of oppositions that places us always in the same relation to others, but with a series of different positionalities. Each has for us its point of profound subjective identification. And that it is the most difficult thing about this proliferation of the field of identities and antagonisms; they are often dislocating in relation to one another (Hall 1996b: 473).
Indeed, this is a task for Black and White people – to reject the discourses of Otherness and Blackness. The fact that one person can be a combination of influences ranging from Black, to African Caribbean, British, English, Welsh, Scottish, female, heterosexual, lesbian, working class, middle class, and Christian or Muslim, offers an opportunity to understand the dynamic, differential and simultaneous nature of diasporic subjectivities. Rather than having to fit neatly together, our subjectivities should reflect our varied realities, and these are inevitably a mixture of positionalities, which are in constant negotiation. Judgements about authenticity do not have a place here. This viewpoint was reflected by a number of the women in this study. As Mama (1995) states:

People are not simply either Black or White, but rather complex, multi-layered beings, with a capacity to move between positions, create new ones, and constantly negotiate and re-negotiate their identities as they struggle to make sense of a world in which fixed categories are constantly subverted and changed (Mama 1995: 142).

Exploring the subjectivities of African Caribbean women in Britain today then, requires a multifaceted approach; which allows for a number of different, simultaneous, and at times conflicting and contradictory standpoints. It is not possible to tick just one box. As Jasmine explains:

Jasmine: I tick a number of boxes, Black, British, Caribbean and Other. I am a number of different identities. None take priority
Specifying this distinctive, but highly differentiated range of experiences represents the future. In Hesse’s (2000) excellent edited book, he outlines a genealogy of Black Britishness, which may offer a useful step forward. By contextualising the concept of Black Britishness within the political, social and economic legacy of Britain and the wider, African diaspora, Hesse (2000) outlines the ways in which Black Britishness operates on both an intra-national and a trans-national level (112-120). We should embrace such openings as a beginning, and attempt to chart the journey of who we are, in ways that are continually challenging.

**Summary and Conclusions**

In summary then, the nationalities of African Caribbean women in Britain are complex, and require a shift away from essentialism towards multiplicity. This involves a new vocabulary, which emphasises the process of subjectivity and its ever-changing locations. This will allow for a more accurate analysis of the similarities and differences between African Caribbean women across Britain today.

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Endnote

1 The lyrics state: ‘When Britain first, at heaven’s command, Arose from out the azure main, This was the charter of the land, And angels sung this strain: Rule Britannia, rule the waves, Britons never will be slaves’ - Storry and Childs (1997, pp19-21).
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