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Julia Sudbury

Abstract

This article analyses the (re)construction of black identity as a multiracial signifier shared by African, Asian and Caribbean women in Britain, from the framework of recent social movement theory. The collective identity approach calls attention to naming as a strategic element of collective action, but has overlooked the experiences of black women at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression. A focus on the process of constructing black womanhood allows us to move beyond static and unidimensional notions of identity to question how and why gendered racialized boundaries are created and maintained. I argue that multiracial blackness should be viewed as an oppositional identity, strategically invoked by black women activists in order to mobilize collective action. Drawing on everyday theorizing by black women, the article examines the shift from the policing of authenticity claims, to a more open and fluid collectivity, and suggests that explicit interrogations of identity are a prerequisite for effective and sustainable alliances between diverse movement participants.

Keywords: Black women; difference; collective identity; social movements.

This article explores the construction and negotiation of multiracial blackness as the basis for organizing by African, Asian and Caribbean women in Britain from the 1970s to the 1990s. While a burgeoning literature is beginning to map the complex contours of racialized subjectivities among British black communities (Modood, Beishon and Virdee 1994; Mama 1995), there have been few systematic attempts to analyse identity construction as a political project in the context of social movements for racial justice. British studies of gendered identities and ideologies in the feminist movement have a similar tendency to evade the theoretical questions raised by social movement theory (Somerville...
1997, p. 673). This article places black women’s autonomous organizations in the context of a broader emergence of social movements which utilize identity as a basis for mobilization in search of access to political power, material resources and the control of representations (Melucci 1989). I argue that a collective identity approach can assist our understanding of the meanings and distinctive politics of ‘blackness’ in the British context and help us to move beyond the static debate about black versus ethnic identities. The complex processes of negotiation and contestation over naming within the black women’s movement, documented here, also have implications for social movement theory.

The first section of the article summarizes relevant developments and weaknesses in social movement theory. I examine next the establishment of a national movement of black women’s autonomous organizations and the construction of blackness as an inclusive political category. The third section reviews the attack on this usage of blackness by some activists and social scientists and explores the ways in which relations between women of African and Asian descent have been mediated by representations of Asian women as ambiguous blacks. I then trace the construction and subsequent dismantling of a unitary notion of black womanhood. I argue that gendered notions of black identity fostered within black women’s autonomous organizations, while complex, contingent and fragile, are nevertheless an important and effective tool for mobilizing diverse women in a strategic political unity.

As a researcher who has been involved in some of the organizations described in this article, I cannot claim to be an impartial observer of black women’s activism. Writing within a womanist tradition of politically engaged scholarship (Ladner 1973; Collins 1990), I have not attempted to reproduce ‘the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere’ (Haraway 1991, p. 189). Rather, my research process emphasized accountability to the organizations being researched and reflexivity about my interactions with interviewees and interpretations of the research data. My own location, as an African diasporic, British, womanist scholar both opened doors to hidden dimensions of black women’s activism and shaped the ways in which I would write about these organizations. As an engaged scholar, I embraced the challenging task of producing an account which reflects the vitality, audacity and innovation of black women’s activism, while resisting the temptation simply to tell heroic ‘new stories’ as a counter to invisibility and negative stereotypes (Bhattacharyya 1998, pp. 32–8).

Black women’s narratives of community organizing are what Patricia Hill Collins terms ‘subjugated knowledge’ (Collins 1990). In most cases black women are obscured from written histories of both anti-racist and feminist movements in Britain; important theoretical contributions conveyed in poetry, speeches, pamphlets and newsletters are overlooked because of their non-academic format or mislaid because of a lack of
archives. This article draws on everyday theorizing by black women activists and utilizes twenty-five taped interviews with women from twelve organizations as well as primary materials and participant observation. The organizations were located in diverse geographical locations, including urban areas of large black populations – Coventry, London, Liverpool, Manchester – as well as towns with smaller black communities – Cambridge, Sheffield and Edinburgh. Two were established in the 1970s, six in the eighties and four in the nineties. All the organizations were multifaceted and played a broad role in encouraging oppositional creative and discursive practices. The respondents were of diverse ethnic, religious and national origins, and included South Asian, Chinese, Middle Eastern, African and Caribbean women.

**Social movement theory and the collective identity approach**

Social movement theorists encompass a wide range of perspectives. Traditional scholarship, which viewed social movements actors as socially frustrated, marginal and irrational has largely given way in the past twenty years to resource mobilization [RM] theory. This framework views social movements with more sympathy as the logical reaction to socio-economic and political exclusion, and emphasizes the organizational questions of recruitment, motivation, strategy and tactics (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tilly 1978). From the 1980s, however, there has been an outpouring of scholarship which finds RM theory limited in its approach to the values, symbols, meanings and subjective beliefs which appear to be of great significance to participation in green, feminist, anti-racist and other non-class based mass movements (Buechler 1993). Scholars seeking to explain the growth of these ‘post-materialist’ struggles have labelled them ‘new social movements’ and identified them with the rise of a post-industrial, information society which presents a growing threat to personal autonomy (Melucci 1987; Touraine 1988). Although the question of what is new about these movements remains contested, the shift from economic and political resources to issues of cultural autonomy and collective identity formation has opened up some interesting paths (Buechler 1995).

Drawing on these observations, collective identity theory has emerged as a new sub-field. Exploring in particular feminist, lesbian and gay organizing, collective identity approaches focus on the shifting process of boundary construction which create ‘us’ versus ‘them’, that is, a community sharing common grievances and political outlooks (Taylor and Whittier 1995; Rupp and Taylor 1999). These scholars have placed post-structuralist analyses of identity formation at the core of collective action:

Our analysis relies on recent sociological research on social movement identity construction, especially the insight that people do not bring ready-made identities – gendered, racial, sexual, or national, for
instance – to collective action. This work, then, treats the collective identities that people deploy to make public claims as an accomplishment of an organization or a wider movement (Rupp and Taylor 1999, p. 365)

A collective identity approach to black women’s autonomous organizations, enables us to develop a nuanced theorization of gendered racialized identities by suggesting we view them as fluid, contested and strategically invoked. This approach therefore challenges notions of identities as pre-given and directs our attention to processes of boundary construction and the strategic uses of naming. Recent analysts have also drawn our attention to internal differentiation within movements, and the tension between the need to create a unified collectivity and the simultaneous tendency to destabilize these identities from within (Gamson 1995; Thayer 1997). In so doing, they offer us the tools for a nuanced reading that enables us to capture the contradictory impulses and dilemmas involved in identity formation.

While feminist social movement theorists have dissected the ways in which the diverse constituencies that make up the women’s movement in the West have come to develop a common politicized identity (Taylor and Whittier 1992; Whittier 1995; Rupp and Taylor 1999), they have yet to engage fully with the unique locations of black women. At the brunt of (at least) two interlocking systems of dominance, black women pose a challenge to unidimensional understandings of oppression. While their experiences point to the need to address ‘race’, gender and class simultaneously, they are often asked to prioritize the struggle against one form of domination over another. Faced with the construction of a women’s liberation movement which overlooked racism, many black women have rejected (white) feminism and turned to black community struggles (Combahee River Collective 1983; Amos and Parmar 1984). At the same time, black women’s distinctive experiences of gendered racism and oppression on two fronts, from outside and within black communities, have largely been ignored by the anti-racist movement in Britain. The intersections of ‘race’, gender and class debated by black women activists have been inadequately theorized by social movement theorists who have barely explored the racialized dimensions of (white) women’s, (white) gay and lesbian movements or the gendered dimensions of black (male) activism. Black women’s voices therefore pose an exciting challenge to social movement theory.

**British blackness: emergence of a multiracial signifier**

The use of ‘black’ as a multiracial political category in Britain traces its genealogy to the post-war migration of colonial and former colonial subjects. In the popular white imagination, immigrants of diverse African, Caribbean and Asian origins were conceived as a homogeneous group of
‘coloured commonwealth citizens’, and were uniformly considered to be a potential threat to the British way of life and harmonious ‘race relations’. Racist mobilization against this ‘coloured immigration’ led to the passing of the Commonwealth Immigrants Acts in 1962, 1968 and 1971 which redefined black British passport holders as non-citizens and black women as dependants. While the African, Caribbean and Asian populations of multiracial Britain were divided by language, religion, national origins and cultural practices, they nevertheless shared a common history of colonial oppression, common designation as ‘Commonwealth immigrants’ and similar discriminatory treatment as the victims of race hatred, housing discrimination and social and political exclusion.

The visits of leading African-American activists, including Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X and Angela Davis provided an ‘identity narrative’ with which to express these commonalities (Ramdin 1987). As powerful images of revolution and change were projected on television screens in the inner cities, blackness was adopted by settler communities along with the oppositional consciousness of the Black Power movement. The openness of the signifier ‘black’, newly invented in the American context to replace the outdated and offensive categories ‘Negro’ or ‘Colored’, was reinvented to fit a particularly British context where African, Caribbean and Asian communities had a history of joint struggles.² It was in this context that South Asian, Chinese and Middle Eastern young people were able to rally with those of African descent to form the ‘black struggle’ (Sivanandan 1990).

In the early 1970s, black women created the first black women’s autonomous organizations and, by the end of the seventies, had established organizations in London, Nottingham, Coventry, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool. With the founding of the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent [OWAAD] in 1978, black women activists from all over the country were unified by the first national autonomous network. OWAAD was founded with the aim of linking struggles of women in Africa with those in the African diaspora and, in particular, Britain (Mason-John and Kambatta 1993, p. 12). This pan-Africanist vision, promoted largely by women from the African Students Union, many of whom were active in national liberation movements in Africa, was defeated by those that felt the organization should unite all black women around common issues such as immigration controls and reproductive rights. The black women’s movement at its outset, then, was a site of contestation over the meanings and politics of blackness (Brixton Black Women’s Group 1984).

**Challenges to black collective identity**

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, ‘black’ was deployed as a forceful unifying term which projected an uncompromising demand for rights
and an end to discrimination. Yet by the late 1980s, the term was being attacked by some community activists and social scientists as being little more than a ‘coercive ideological fantasy’ imposed on Asian communities by zealous anti-racist bureaucrats and leaders (Hazareesingh 1986; Modood 1988, p. 403; Modood 1990). Tariq Modood argues that the term ‘black’ is centred on the African experience, from its origins in the Black Power movement to the current imposition of an African Caribbean political leadership:

Because as a matter of historical and contemporary fact this positive Black identity has been espoused by peoples of sub-Saharan African roots, they naturally are thought to be the quintessential or exemplary cases of Black consciousness and understand Black consciousness to be at its fullest, something only achieved by people of African ethnicity (Modood 1988, p. 399).

The idea that blackness includes Asians, it is claimed, sits uneasily with the more ‘natural’ association of blackness with Africanity, which is in turn reinforced by the predominance of African-American cultural production equating black identity with African descent. Modood points out instances of doublespeak which this dual positioning generates, whereby writers and politicians slip from ‘black and Asian’ to ‘black’ without acknowledging the inherent erasure of an Asian presence. For Modood, the black political project cannot help but position Asians as ‘secondary or ambiguous blacks’, thus creating a new hierarchy even as it seeks to depose the existing racist ordering.

Interviews with members of black women’s organizations suggest that there is some substance in Modood’s findings. Some of the Asian women who defined themselves as black also referred to the struggle to maintain an open definition of blackness in the face of increasing African-American cultural influences:

When I do read “black”, its Afro-Caribbean, when I read books and stuff. bell hooks is a classic example, her experience is Afro-Caribbean people [sic], people from Africa in America. But I can still relate to those things... There needs to be more discussion of how to encompass all the differences and not just think, black is that people’s property (Misa, Asian, black organization).

Many of the African Caribbean women used the term ‘black’ to refer to women of African descent. This usage was predominant in organizations which were limited in membership to women of African origins. Two of the organizations interviewed had not defined their use of the phrase ‘black woman’, but nevertheless had very few active Asian women members. In several organizations, the relationship between African,
Asian and Caribbean women was described by interviewees as a source of tension:

I think African Caribbeans have a strong love hate relationship with the Asian community generally, you know there’s the whole thing about how . . . black people used to be treated and in some cases still are in some Asian businesses. Mind you at Osaba, when they had a fete and went to some of the local businesses, they got money from some of the Asian shops (Lynette, Caribbean, African Caribbean organization).

Of course, there are these stereotypes within our own communities: “oh no, we can’t go near African women, they’ll probably beat us up” (Manjit, Asian, Asian organization).

African, Asian and Caribbean women are clearly not immune to stereotyped representations of each other prevalent in the host community. The European civilizing mission was predicated on gendered notions of African and Asian pathology and the imperative of ‘saving’ black women from immorality and inappropriate forms of patriarchal control (McClintock 1995). The resulting construction of a unitary ‘African woman’ in the white colonial imagination, bearing little resemblance to the great variety of African women encountered by Europeans has been well documented (Mama 1995). The African woman was perceived as hypersexual, aggressive, dangerous and diseased. These images persist in cinematic images, media representations of black single mothers as ‘babymakers’ and the criminalization and incarceration of African Caribbean women. Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women with diverse cultural, religious and class backgrounds have, in turn, been represented as a homogeneous ‘Asian woman’, the passive and veiled object of European masculine desire. The South Asian woman’s assumed compliance and unassertiveness, symbolized by purdah, precludes her ability to participate in resistance of any form (Brah 1996, p. 81). Similarly, Southeast Asian women, redefined in exotic terms as ‘dragon lady’ and ‘lotus blossom’, have been marketed as sexually available picture brides and objects of sex tourism (Ang-Lygate 1997, p. 174). When African Caribbean women claim that Asian women are not committed to political ‘black’ struggle and are therefore ‘not black enough’, they are influenced by these stereotypes of passive and compliant women. Similarly, Asian women who express fears about working with African Caribbean women have internalized dominant images.

Stereotyped images of African, Caribbean and Asian women are not solid or permanent. Their maintenance relies on ongoing reinforcement of colonial conceptions of ‘the Other’. The primary source of this affirmation is the projection of hegemonic consciousness (Morris 1992). Hegemony presents itself as the ‘common sense’ of a given society.
Constructions of African and Asian womanhood, rooted in colonial history, are manifested in contemporary institutions such as media, schools and government. These ideas are then reproduced by black communities through discourse and practice. Thus, in the absence of the active dissemination of oppositional ideas, hegemonic constructions maintain psychological and social distance between women of African and Asian descent, and serve to dismantle the often fragile collective identification which enables common political struggles. Instead of focusing on shared experiences of colonial domination and contemporary gendered racism, factors which point towards the usefulness of multi-racial coalitions, dominant postcolonial representations emphasize and reify borders between black women. Taylor and Whittier point to the importance of marking boundaries demarcating the oppressed-oppressor diad in the formation of social movements: ‘Boundary markers are . . . central to the formation of collective identity because they promote a heightened awareness of the group’s commonalities and frame interaction between members of the in-group and the out-group’ (Taylor and Whittier 1992, pp. 111–112). When the border between African Caribbean and Asian women is reified, the possibilities for collective mobilization against gendered racism are severely restricted.

While racialized mistrust and hostility play a role in the maintenance of group borders, these boundaries may be subverted where other axes of differentiation create alternative alliances. One interviewee described an incident which occurred in the late 1980s. African and Caribbean members who formed the majority in one organization decided that an Asian woman who had joined the group had become too dominant and voted to eject her on the ground that she was not really black. This incident highlights the way in which blackness was seen by some African Caribbean women as an exclusive commodity:

There are a few women who say well “Asians say they are not black” and of course a lot of Asians say they are not black. Black is a political term. I tried hard to get the women to use the word “women of colour”, meaning if you identify as black, then yes you are part of the group (Natalie, Caribbean, Caribbean organization).

In this case, there were clear signs that some of the African Caribbean women identified the Asian woman as an ambiguous black. Their acceptance of her while she took a backseat role, quickly turned into intolerance when she became more assertive. However, while the dominant grouping within the organization at that time refused to acknowledge the Asian woman’s entitlement to full membership, it is notable that many of the members, not least the Asian woman herself, attempted to defend a much broader definition, resulting in a significant split in the organization:
All the young women resigned, they left en masse... because they said: “We have been brought up in this country, we have gone to school with them, we have fought with them against racism in schools, we don’t want you bringing the history from other continents and transferring them here and making that history determine our history here” (Hilda, African, African Caribbean organization).

This incident reveals the limitations of arguments which seek unidimensional explanations based on racialized group membership. The division here was not simply between African Caribbean and Asian women, but became one between younger and older African Caribbean women. Whittier has developed the concept of generational politics to explain the differences in outlook, strategy and ideology which mark groups of feminists who come of age in different periods (Whittier 1995, p. 4). She notes that women in the US who formed their political consciousness during the 1980s had sharply different experiences to those who came of age during the radical feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. These different experiences led younger women to redefine priorities and reconceptualize the meaning of feminism. The young black women in this study were also redefining oppositional politics. The overt racist hostility and covert racialized discrimination faced by the British-born children of black immigrants in British schools have been well documented (Stone 1981; Troy and Stone 1986). Children of African and Asian descent shared experiences of racist name-calling, physical violence, streaming in lower levels and exclusion from classrooms. These shared experiences formed the basis of solidarity between the younger generation of black women. Claiming the term ‘black’ for all women who had experienced racism constituted an important statement in defining their allegiances and politics.

While the younger women’s political consciousness emerged out of the sites and discourse of British anti-racism, the older generation, many of whom had migrated to Britain as adults, held ideas shaped by the struggles for national liberation in Africa and the Caribbean of the 1960s and seventies. Some of the leading women activists in this group had come as adults to Britain from Southern and East African countries in which Asian communities had been placed in the middle of the ‘colonial sandwich’ in order to facilitate white minority rule (Brah 1996). Histories of bitter antagonism between African and Asian communities therefore shaped the older women’s view of the impossibility of real multiracial solidarity. The younger generation displayed impatience towards what they perceived as a refusal to move forward and embrace the contemporary and localized conditions of black struggle. The older women believed that the younger generation would later regret their unwillingness to learn from the lessons of the past. What appears at cursory view
to be a solely racialized conflict, emerges on examination as a site of intractable generational politics.

Political differences also emerge when we analyse the experiences of women whose experiences differ from the dominant patterns of post-war migration from Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent. Ang-Lygate points out that for Chinese and Filipina women, many of whom have settled in areas outside large black populations, the term ‘black’ may have little resonance:

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 (Ang-Lygate 1997, p. 176).

An interviewee from a Chinese women’s organization in Manchester confirmed her members’ unease with the term ‘black’ and expressed relief that the black-white binary was beginning to unravel in policy arenas: ‘In the past, equal opportunities policies just had black and white, now people prefer to be classified by origins’ (Mai, Chinese). However, she also highlighted the need to create a basis for a shared platform with other black organizations: ‘I would like to link up with other black organizations. In the past we . . . may not have recognized the common experiences of others. Some of us were afraid to expand. The second generation are more open’ (Mai, Chinese). Mai’s comment reminds us that generational differences intersect in complex ways with ethnicity and national origins to shape political strategies. Ang-Lygate argues that Chinese and Filipina women have at times been excluded from black groups for not ‘being “black” enough’ (Ang-Lygate 1997, p. 176) and found only one respondent who identified as black, a woman who had migrated from Malaysia as a teenager and was an anti-racist activist (Ang-Lygate 1997, p. 175). Adoption of ‘black’ as a multiracial identifier is closely connected to such experiences of politicization within the framework of British anti-racist discourse. For women with complex diasporic histories, this identification is contrary to the ‘common-sense’ definitions which originate in other postcolonial sites and is learnt as part of a specific politics of location.

**Renegotiating political blackness**

In the context of historical and contemporary hostilities and divergences between women, the project of creating and maintaining an inclusive notion of blackness as the basis for common struggles against
gendered racism is complex and challenging. Many of the organizations studied perceived their remit to include breaking down barriers between African, Caribbean and Asian women and encouraging a shared identification. Interviewees viewed this process as the development of an oppositional political consciousness which involved three components. Firstly, women learnt about the history of their own group, the legacy of colonialism, slavery and indentured labour and made connections with the histories of other black groups. In the organizations studied, black history classes for both women and children were considered an essential part of countering the Oxford examination version of Britain’s civilizing colonial mission. Where formal history classes were not convened, women nevertheless held informal ‘reasoning’ or ‘rap’ sessions where books were discussed and alternative ways of knowing explored. Here the shared location as former British colonial subjects and the common histories of anti-imperialist struggles were emphasized. The colonial strategy of divide and rule, whereby Asians were afforded superior status was also discussed in the retelling of these histories. Thus, the creation of black unity was constructed as an oppositional act, refuting the colonial legacy of division.

Secondly, women learnt to see beyond the hegemonic representations of ‘the Other’. Through shared political struggles and social events, women began to see one another as ‘sisters in struggle’ rather than through the pathologizing lens of the white gaze. One interviewee asserted that her changing consciousness had both challenged stereotyped views and created a more optimistic outlook on the possibility of building alliances for social change:

> It’s changed me. Before, I had a narrow view about different communities and since then I’ve learnt a great deal. You know, I was suffering silently in what I was going through, in my community, as a Somali person. Now I know that my other brothers and sisters suffered the same. I think if we work together we can do a lot more (Umme, African, black organization).

Fostering cross-cultural alliances and refuting stereotyped representations was conceptualized as an ongoing task and important achievement.

Thirdly, women identified common contemporary experiences of racism. Gendered racisms take many different forms and often impact on diverse groups of black women in distinct ways. Where the site of struggle may be shared, for example, education, the shape of struggles may vary. While Asian women were more concerned with bilingual teachers and school meals which cater for halal or vegetarian diets, Caribbean women were more concerned with exclusions or the labelling of Caribbean children as educationally subnormal. But both were interested in the
creation of policies to deal with racial harassment and abuse in the classroom and playground. Women worked to create common understandings of the system which creates these diverse problems. These discussions often took place in the context of debates on the meaning and nature of collective identities. When women establishing a new group-in had a discussion about the scope of their membership, they addressed the issue of collective identity head on:

When the question arose of who the project should cater for a debate on a political perspective took place which resulted in a firm decision that the centre should be for all Black women in view of their common experience of racism and discrimination. This decision emphasized the need for a centre open to all Black women, whatever ethnic group they come from, but in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect for all the differences and things in common among all Black women (Sheffield Black Women’s Resource Centre 1995, p. 3).

Women involved in these organizations were clearly aware of the need to establish a multiracial oppositional identity and the dangers of succumbing to inter-ethnic hostilities. The explicit activities which these groups carried out in forging a multiracial collectivity highlight the importance of subjective notions of identity to the effective mobilization of participants in the black women’s movement.

**Constructing black womanhood**

For black women, the body was an important site upon which collective identity was inscribed. A number of women had experiences of being considered ‘not quite black enough’ and were excluded from essentialist notions of gendered racialized identities by virtue of their skin colour, dress, affiliations, sexuality or regional location. Respondents involved in organizing in the 1970s and early 1980s indicated that contestation over what constituted authentic black womanhood was an integral part of their experience:

There were those who felt that to be black was a rather pure and narrow definition and I didn’t experience those women any differently in a way to that which I felt towards the white women, they had a very narrow definition of what it meant to be a feminist. Although I felt more love toward the black women. And in some senses the pain was worse as well (Faith, African, black organization).

Women participated in the gendered construction of black authenticity by creating a hierarchy of characteristics and behaviour including skin
colour, hair texture, non-European attire, modest sexual conduct and food choices. The collective policing of blackness occurred in multiple ways. During participation in black women’s organizations in the early 1990s, I heard frequent messages about what was considered appropriate behaviour and appearance for black women embedded in conversations, derogatory statements and jokes. They also arose in arguments as a means of silencing women, through the use of epithets such as ‘red’ (light-skinned) or ‘Westernized’. Women utilized social ostracism to convey disapproval. Authenticity was also affirmed through daily performance. Women would often change their appearance over a period of months or years. This included growing dreadlocks or braids instead of using hair relaxer, wearing less revealing clothing, African dress, a shalwar kamiz or sari, speaking patois or Asian languages rather than standard English and cooking traditional foods.

For African Caribbean women, the ‘pure and narrow definition’ of blackness (see Faith above) was personified through the figure of the ‘conscious’ or ‘I-tal’ black woman. The ‘I-tal’ woman was a direct refutation of hegemonic constructions of beauty and thus established an alternative ideal of womanhood. She was assumed to have dark skin, unprocessed hair and African phenotype features. In seeking to revalorize these denigrated characteristics, black women activists reified a rigid conceptualization of distinct ‘races’. One unintentional outcome of this approach is the marginalization of mixed race women (Ifekwunigwe 1997). Exclusionary notions of belonging and community were therefore inherent in women’s oppositional constructions of beauty.

Similar processes characterized a whole array of characteristics and behaviours as black or non-black. A prime area of contestation was that of sexual relationships. Few of the interviewees appeared to view ‘mixed’ relationships as a valid family structure. It was assumed that women who were politically aware would engage in black on black relationships. Accordingly, women who had a white partner were held in suspicion. For example where a woman brought a picture of her new fiancé to a centre, she was at first surrounded by excited women. On seeing the photograph of a white man, the crowds quickly dissipated and women subsequently ignored her. The policing of sexual behaviour was nowhere so apparent as the treatment of lesbian women, particularly in the early days of black women’s autonomous organizing. Black lesbian women faced ostracism and overt hostility (Mason-John and Kambatta 1993, p. 13). This treatment can be seen within the context of narratives of authenticity which place heterosexuality at the centre of black womanhood. Heterosexism in black women’s organizations draws heavily on notions of homosexuality as a disease which infused early twentieth-century European medical science. This medical discourse is given a nationalist twist by suggesting that homosexuality is an affliction which originates in European cultures:
There were women in OWAAD, for example, who expressed the view that to be a lesbian was effectively a white woman’s disease, that sort of unprogressive view (Faith, African, black organization).

Discomfort with an ‘out’ lesbian presence was therefore justified through an appeal to pre-colonial societies which were supposedly free of undesirable European forms of behaviour. This narrative asserts that homosexuality was imported to Africa and Asia in much the same way that syphilis and smallpox accompanied the European invaders. Authenticity claims therefore defined acceptable behaviour, appearance and characteristics in narrow and restrictive ways.

De/reconstructing collective identities

While early organizing attempted to obscure and police differences between women in the name of ‘black unity’, by the late 1980s more differentiated definitions of black womanhood began to emerge. This can be seen, in part, as a result of regional differences which were becoming increasingly evident as black women in Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester began forming organizations and giving voice to their unique perspectives. The experiences of black women from outside London varied from those in the capital in a number of ways. Firstly, they had not benefited from the large-scale allocation of grants under the Greater London Council which had a policy of funding black, women’s and gay and lesbian organizations in the mid 1980s. Thus, regional organizations had had to develop survival strategies which did not rely on state funding or support from local authorities. Secondly, they lived in much smaller black communities and as a result had less access to political power and elected representation. Finally, they had developed notions of black womanhood which melded British regional accents and experiences with African, Caribbean or Asian cultural forms (Small 1991; Roy 1995). Black women interviewees from Liverpool therefore identified as LBBs [Liverpool Born Blacks] and identified the struggle against southern hegemony as part of their social agenda. Similarly, women from Edinburgh had some allegiances to Scottish nationalist ideologies which emphasized the injustice of rule from a London-based parliament. Regional black women were therefore less wedded to consultation with the state and felt that their priorities, strategies and regional identities had been marginalized by London-based black women. The assertion of regional agency took the form of a critique of national groups for their ‘London-centricity’ and was a profound challenge to essentializing discourses on black women.

Within London-based organizations, the demise of OWAAD in 1982 due to an inability to contain a diversity of political perspectives, including those of lesbians, played a key role in awakening women to the
constraints of an authentic black womanhood. As black women mourned the implosion of the formal national network of autonomous activism, they began to subject processes of collective action and identification to intense interrogation (Brixton Black Women’s Group 1984; Grewal et al. 1988). Women developed an analysis of the damaging potential of narrow definitions of authenticity, both to individuals and in creating divisions within organizations. By the mid nineties, black women activists were highly critical of previous attempts to erase difference:

One of the things that we have tended to overlook as black women organizing as black women and that is that we are going to have differences . . . and we need to acknowledge differences and respect them. We’ve tended to want to unify in a way . . . to create a uniform organization. You cannot do that with such diverse histories coming from such different places (Hilda, African, African Caribbean organization).

Interviewees emphasized the need to replace unity based on the assumption of homogeneity with solidarity based on an open, fluid and differentiated notion of black women’s concerns and priorities:

And so in these organizations, if people recognize first of all that you’re a black woman and I’m a black woman and we have potential areas of solidarity but then we have different concerns, different needs, different requirements, different ambitious ideas and those are valid in their own right, but they’re not necessarily going to be all the same as mine. And I must allow you those differences (Lynette, Caribbean, African Caribbean organization).

In challenging authoritarian notions of blackness, these women contributed towards the construction of a strategic black unity, based not on sameness but on a shared agenda for change. The emergence of a more nuanced and differentiated notion of black identity has explicit implications for black women’s activism. While most commentators have identified the fragmentation of the black women’s movement in the early 1980s with the end of effective and unified black women’s activism in Britain (Grewal et al. 1988; Parmar 1990), this research points in a different direction. We can identify the late 1980s as a moment in which intense reflexivity about the subjective nature of black women’s identification led to the blossoming of more inclusive forms of collectivity and a decisive stride away from the destructive possibilities of a narrow politics of authenticity. In the nineties, organizations, conferences and books reflecting black women’s struggles have illustrated more awareness of dissenting and complex identities at the margins of black identity. A diverse face of black womanhood is now frequently portrayed, including Chinese and Filipina women, women of mixed parentage and women
in rural areas, and exploring notions of hybrid, diasporic and globalized cultures (Brah 1996; Mirza 1997). Thus, the shift in collective identity has brought about a significant change in the strategies which black women use to mobilize supporters and increase their effectiveness in sustaining a broad based, internally differentiated movement.

The shift away from limiting narratives of authenticity and purity towards more nuanced understandings of gendered and racialized identities does not constitute a ‘master narrative’ of linear progress over time from simplistic to more complex understandings. While voices of dissent can be identified from the late eighties onward, the pull of essentialist, less complex identifications remains powerful. This research points to the coexistence of contradictory and shifting discourses as women seek to balance the need for unity with the recognition of diversity. These perspectives are constantly redefined in the light of shifting public discourse and political necessities.

Conclusion

The process of constructing a strategic black unity by black women’s organizations in Britain holds two important lessons which expand on previous developments in social movement theory. Firstly, the process of dismantling boundaries between black women and debunking dominant representations of ‘the Other’ is a model for heterogeneous groups seeking to build alliances. This process has been an important oppositional tool in going beyond hegemonic gendered constructions of ‘race’ and difference. As such, it enables women (and men) with diverse histories, cultures and experiences to emphasize their commonalities and build a united movement against interlocking systems of oppression. The findings of this research indicate that efforts to build coalitions between racialized communities will founder if they are not based on sustained efforts to construct a common political identity and unpack alienating hegemonic representations. At a time when feminist and other social movements have been criticized for an exaggerated and introspective focus on ‘identity politics’ (Bourne 1987; Parmar 1990), this research goes against the grain in arguing that far from fostering divisive fragmentation, explicit explorations of identity may be a prerequisite for the mass mobilization of diverse groups into a sustainable movement.

Secondly, this research illustrates that gendered and racialized identities are tightly entwined. Gendered stereotypes, exclusion and violence are central to the collective identities forged by black women, as are colonial legacies and contemporary experiences of racism and class exploitation. My analysis suggests that an anti-racist movement which fails to acknowledge the centrality of gender as it structures black women’s experiences of racism, will fail to engage the energies and theorizing of black women activists. Similarly, attempts to build a
feminist collective identity on the basis of a common ‘women’s culture’ or unidimensional opposition to patriarchy will inevitably remain peripheral to black women’s definitions of themselves and their struggles. Any analysis of collective identity which seeks to map the terrain of anti-racist, – sexist and – homophobic organizing must therefore incorporate rigorous interrogations of the ways in which women (and men) construct themselves in relation to interlocking gendered racialized ideologies, representations and institutional practices. This finding has implications not only for studies of social movements involving black women; white women are also racialized and as such access to white privilege and cultural norms forms an important part of boundary formation in feminist organizing. Similarly, ‘queer’ politics involve issues of racialization as well as sexuality and gender. An intersectional approach is critical if collective identity analyses are to avoid unidimensional analyses of identity formation.

This research also has implications for the British debate on anti-racist terminology. Recent scholarship has shifted the focus of research from relations between ‘races’ to processes of racialization (Omi and Winant 1994; Small 1994). The numerous scholars and policy-makers who have rejected ‘black’ in favour of phrases like ‘black and ethnic minority’, ‘black and Asian’ continue to rely heavily on quasi-biological notions of difference. It is the investment in the notion of an African ‘race’ which leads such writers to ignore the question of how people of African descent come to define themselves as ‘black’. These scholars utilize a unidimensional frame to view collective identities and assume that people of African descent map neatly on to the signifier ‘black’, whereas Asians do not. My research has shown that this is not the case (see also Sudbury 1998). Many of the battles over the turf of blackness in Britain have been among those who share African descent, over issues of generational politics, sexuality and regional variation. And the commonly used term ‘Asian’, far from being preferable, is considered equally problematic by some people to whom it is supposed to refer (Mason 1990; Brah 1992). Indeed, the use of ‘Asian’ to describe people of Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi origins is a product not only of diasporic conditions, but of social relations within a specifically British context. In the United States, of course, the same term refers to those of Chinese, Korean and Japanese descent (Takaki 1989).

It has become a commonplace to state that political blackness is an unacceptably homogenizing term which has been little more than a form of ‘ideological policing’ for many of Britain’s racialized communities (Modood 1988; Ang-Lygate 1997, p. 170). Modood’s influential intervention in the late eighties has been readily accepted by policy-makers and scholars to the extent that ‘black and ethnic minority’ or ‘black and Asian’ have become common terms in the social policy arena, and attention has increasingly shifted from racialized to religious communities.
Scholars and activists who continue to utilize ‘black’ to describe groups other than Africans and Caribbeans risk the accusation of being outdated and out of touch with the realities of multiracial Europe. However, recent work on ethnic identities, which concludes that the term ‘black’ is of little relevance to the majority of Asian respondents, fails to distinguish between individual and collective identities, between identities which state who persons consider they are, and identities which declare the shape of their politics, actions and solidarities. Placing the debate on blackness in Britain in the context of social movement theory helps us to see multiracial blackness as a collective identity which has been painstakingly nurtured and maintained by activists as a basis for collective action. Political blackness was never a description of how the majority of people viewed themselves; it was and continues to be oppositional and flies in the face of hegemonic constructions. As such, it is used as a strategic component of multiracial resistance to dominant gendered racialized formations and definitions.

This study has revealed that blackness is not the natural preserve of any set of actors. Neither is it likely to be embraced by all sectors of the varied and diverse communities of African and Asian descent in Britain. Indeed, at times, it has been used as the basis for the construction of limiting authenticity codes which have been both coercive and divisive. However, using black as a term to convey a common struggle against racism does not necessarily imply an essentializing process, nor does it reduce group identity to a homogeneous response to colour-racism. Rather, it is its very oppositionality, its insistence on discussion and explanation, which makes ‘black’ a useful sign. The process of constructing black identity, involving debate, discussion and critique of dominant representations of self and other, has played an important role in shaping black women’s political consciousness. By insisting on using ‘black’ to refer to two groups which have been defined as distinct ‘races’ and today masquerade as ethnic groups with distinct and immutable boundaries, we create a dissonance which throws up contradictions in otherwise unquestioned social scientific categorization. The multiracial usage of blackness therefore serves as a sharp reminder of the social construction of taken-for-granted gendered racialized identities and forces us to question how and why the boundaries to such categories are created and maintained.

Notes

1. Throughout this article, ‘black’ is used as a political and cultural signifier specific to the British context which references African, Caribbean, Asian and Middle Eastern communities. The social construction of blackness in the British context is discussed at length. Where people of African descent, with national origins in Africa or the Caribbean, are referred to as a group, I use the term ‘African Caribbean’.

2. In 1963, for example, a march in solidarity with Martin Luther King’s March on...
Washington had been convened in London by the Confederation of Afro-Asian-Caribbean Organisations.

3. British films such as Peter’s Friends and Mona Lisa link African Caribbean women to hypersexuality, crime, prostitution and violence (see Young 1996).

4. The strategy of divide and rule is summarized by Captain Lugard, architect of British colonial rule in Africa as follows: ‘Being unaffected by the climate, much cheaper than Europeans and in closer touch with the daily lives of the natives than is possible for a white man to be, they [Asians] would form an admirable connecting link (under the close supervision of British officers), their status being nearly on a par with the natives, while their interests are entirely dependent on the Europeans’ (quoted in Brah 1996, p. 31).

5. ‘I-tal’ is a Rastafarian word which ‘means the essence of things, things that are in their natural states’ (Barrett 1977, p. 141) and is commonly used to refer to foods which have not been contaminated with items forbidden by the Old Testament, including pork, fruits of the vine and shellfish.

6. For further discussion of the notion of strategic unity see Spivak 1987.

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