What is Black British Feminism?

How might the terms 'black' and 'feminism' work effectively together in the context of a contemporary society working hard to brand itself the New Britain? I will attempt to contribute to current debates about black feminism in Britain prompted by the publication in the late 1990s of three books concerned with the subject: Avtar Brah's essays, gathered together in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996), the contributions of several writers edited by Delia Jarrett-Macauley (1996) in *Reconstructing Womanhood, Reconstructing Feminism: Writings on Black Women*, and by Heidi Safia Mirza in *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (1997). These texts necessarily (and often usefully) refer to events and debates which have taken place over the last twenty or so years in articles and essays in journals and books in both Britain and North America. I am not, however, offering a detailed critique of these works and their accounts of that history: my intention is to draw on some of the ideas and points of contention and to pose some questions for contemporary, self-identified black and white feminists based in Britain.

Identity formation, the sense of being an embodied, located individual, does not occur in isolation from within a mono-logic of cultural development and formation. Along with many other black people I experience that insider/outsider position in relation to both 'here' and 'back there', although 'back there' is not always synonymous with 'a place called home'. These perspectives can be a productive resource for black British feminist theory, particularly in view of the class positions and allegiances, and oppositional lifestyles which set many people of African and Asian descent against the

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political establishment and sometimes their families 'back there'. How might these combinations of experiences be used to think about politics and culture here *and* there, keeping us mindful of the ways in which we can connect the local to the global, and of the flow between the two?

There is a diversity of possible modes of articulating what it means to be black and female in Britain at the end of the century. Anecdotal evidence seems to suggest a mood of confidence and creative opportunism amongst *some* black, professional Britons as the possibility of being able to claim a distinctive and simultaneous blackness and Britishness is beginning to emerge. The fiftieth anniversary of the landing of the *Empire Windrush* with its 500 hopeful settlers was commemorated in 1998. Not only did the anniversary for many give rise to ambivalence about the notion of 'celebration', it also raised questions about, for example, who is included in, and who excluded from, this 'celebration' of 'black settlement', what is an appropriate year from which to date the history of black immigration, and how would women's experiences be woven into the account? The figure of Averilly Wauchope, a woman clothes-maker from Kingston, Jamaica who stowed away on the *Windrush*, is significant as—without wishing to trivialize the hardship of that experience, or belabour the metaphor—her act of infiltration is symbolic of black British women's attempts to create spaces for themselves from which to speak. For black feminists striving to embed themselves, often by stealth, in academia, this image of the stowaway, with all its connotations of being a non-legitimate passenger, is particularly resonant.

The Whiteness of Feminism and the Academy

In her important essay, 'Difference, Diversity, Differentiation', Avtar Brah argues that

> 'white' feminism or 'black' feminism in Britain are not essentialist categories but rather [that] they are fields of contestation inscribed within discursive and material processes and practices in a post-colonial terrain. They represent struggles over political frameworks for analysis . . . But they should not, in my view, be understood as constructing 'white' and 'black' women as 'essentially' fixed oppositional categories (Brah 1996:111).

Whilst I welcome the reiteration of an anti-essentialist critique of static, biologically determined forms of categorization, Brah's points signal some of the difficulties involved in navigating our way through what often appear to be unresolvable contradictions. The recognition of contradictions, and attempts either to resolve them or to live with the *frisson* accorded by the tension they produce, is something which underpins much current critical

intellectual work around 'race' (see, for example, Appiah 1985; Hall 1986; Mercer 1994; Brah 1996).

Before discussing black women's circumscribed presence in academic circles in Britain, I would like to signal my discomfort about using the term 'postcolonial' when debating issues of racism and feminism (or indeed, in any circumstances). Interesting in the context of this discussion is Helen Carr's essay, 'Post-It Notes at the *fin de siècle*' (Carr 1997) and its summary of critiques of postcoloniality. Carr's essay seems to me to imply an assimilation of opposition to racialized discourses into the category of the postcolonial which is somewhat misleading since not all of those who adopt what might broadly be described as an anti-imperialist, anti-racist position would be described as 'postcolonial writers': nor would many of them wish to be. 'Postcolonial' does not simply refer to a period of history (and that usage is hotly contested in itself): it is as often used to delineate a certain kind of methodology, a disciplinary procedure, frequently aligned with the post-modern, poststructural turn in theory construction. As there are so many lacunae surrounding the notion of the 'postcolonial', I avoid using the term, unlike Carr, since I find it difficult to think of a productive way of deploying it. I am particularly concerned with what kind of work is subsumed under this category—and since Postcolonial Studies is still in the ascendancy, to be included is to be legitimated in a particular way—and what is obscured by it. Thus the 'postcolonial terrain' is a rough one indeed, and much fought over.

Because the limitations of much of what goes on under the rubric of 'the postcolonial' in academic settings—and I am thinking especially of literary and cultural studies university departments in Britain and North America—increasingly perceived as unhelpfully protean and ahistorical, it is becoming more difficult to co-opt 'postcolonial' as a signifier of political engagement or activity. As Sara Suleri argues: 'The concept of the postcolonial [itself] is too frequently robbed of historical specificity in order to function as a preapproved allegory for any mode of discursive contestation' (Suleri 1992:758–9). Especially relevant here is the perception of a lack of analysis of the considerations which inform notions of taste and value in postcolonial literatures, and the marginalization of black women in general. More specifically, black British feminists and writers are largely absent in postcolonial literary canons developed in Anglo-American academies. Any attempt to use 'postcolonial' as a way of aligning racial issues with those of gender is therefore fraught with conceptual and methodological problems.

It is important to scrutinize our theory-making practice. Helen Carr makes a significant point when she writes:

> I don't think we can in an obscurantist way abandon the effort to theorize our practice: what we need to do is to think through and analyse our theoretical concepts with as much suspicion and sense of history as

> we would bring to any kind of discourse. Theories are fictions, metaphors, sometimes enabling, sometimes imprisoning; they are always political, always part of processes of empowerment and disempowerment, sites of power struggles even when they concern struggles for power. They are not immutable, abstract truths (Carr 1997:203).

Somehow, though, recognition of the importance of self-interrogation, the necessity for cogent analyses of the vectors of power embedded in *doing* theory/practice and the political implications of theory-making, is frequently not apparent in either the critical work published or the professional and social relations enacted in the academy. How are white feminist colleagues assisting or hindering—or to use Carr's terms 'enabling' or 'imprisoning'—black feminists and others with a desire to work towards developing liberatory strategies to fulfil our aims? Where is the recognition and acknowledgement of our work both inside and outside of the academy? I am not suggesting that such support does not take place at all, but where enabling and empowerment does exist, it is far too fragile for most of us to feel secure about the reliability and quality of support offered. I do not mean to imply that black feminists are so downtrodden that all we can do is wait for white colleagues to give us a helping hand. However, there are so many difficult and painful issues left unspoken that it is sometimes hard to envisage the possibilities for partnerships, based on equality, working towards transforming the deeply inequitable environment in which we live and work. I do feel though that this is what we have to keep in our sights, and that we have to devise ways of sustaining such a project.

Meanwhile, black British women have found a rich source of intellectual sustenance and networks for support and debate in African-American feminist scholarship and literature. A point worth considering here is the extent to which black American feminism is applicable in a British context. This is partly dependent on how far it is possible to generalize from the particular predicaments of African-American women to black women elsewhere (this is also a point at which 'postcolonial' collapses and serves to obscure rather than clarify the specificities of diverse experiences). There is an increasing recognition of the differences in our situations: for example, historically, the way in which social and sexual relations and hierarchies under slavery were organized differed in significant ways, and clearly the class system in Britain is far more institutionalized than it is in the United States, and were closely connected to notions of community and national identity. I am not advocating a rejection of African-American scholarship and analysis of the interconnections of 'race', gender and class, since to do so would be to deny any sense of a 'diaspora' consciousness, the continuities in discourses on 'race' and sex in North America and Britain and the historical

connectedness of each of those discourses. However, there needs to be much more by way of encouragement, awareness and validation of the work, experiences and opinions of black women in Britain.

This point about recognition and acknowledgement is one in which the situation for African-American feminists in the academy is very different to that of black British feminists. Ann DuCille opens the third chapter of her book *Skin Trade* with the following statement: 'Within the modern academy, racial and gender alterity has become a hot commodity that has claimed black women as its principal signifier' (DuCille 1996:81). Of course, the extent to which this is true for the majority of African-American women in the academy in the United States is open to question. But with regard to the British context I doubt whether many black female intellectuals would echo Heidi Safia Mirza's assertion: 'Once our problem was invisibility in white feminism now it's recognition in the white male academy!' (Safia Mirza 1997:20). The implication here is that problems of the invisibility of 'race' in white feminist discourse have diminished to such an extent that they have been superseded by what passes for 'recognition' of black feminist issues by the white male-dominated academy: without supporting evidence, I find it hard to understand how it is possible to make such a statement. For one thing, the small number of black academic staff militates against anything like a significant numerical force in British universities: latest figures suggest that under 2 per cent of university teaching staff are from the so-called 'ethnic minorities', and clearly the number of black women in senior positions and able to influence policy, promote curricular change and so on is even smaller.

Furthermore, in Britain, most white women academics and intellectuals have not experienced the same intensity of economic, intellectual or professional imperatives that have driven a significant proportion of white North American feminists to confront issues of racism and their white privilege in their professional and social lives as conducted on the campus. There is little sense of urgency about their own implication in racist structures in the academy for most white British lecturers. Although many white feminists now recognize that somehow, somewhere their awareness of 'race' as an issue ought to be signalled in their intellectual work—whether that is through reference to postcolonialism, identity or citing the odd black critic or scholar—there is still an air of tentativeness, even reluctance about *fully* engaging in a *sustained* discussion/argument about how racial identities interact with the processes of class and gender socialization, and thus power relations, in our intellectual and professional lives on- and off-campus. There is still a sense that to raise the issue of racial discrimination and the operationalization of historically determined patterns of power and privilege in the academy, amongst and between colleagues—whether related to employment practices, promotion procedures, syllabi and curricula

development or social/professional interaction in the common room, corridor or library—is to provoke 'embarrassment'. Failure to recognize the depth and complexity of these concerns leads to an erasure of black people's concerns. Where black women academics are addressed directly about racial issues, it is often in the mode of 'native informant': what do you think is the problem with this black student from department xyz, whether they are studying in a cognate area or not. My main fear regarding black British feminism is not anxiety about the problems of excessive attention in the academy: rather, it is that because there are so few black women teaching and researching at present in higher education—and let us not forget that current trends in employment in the sector and the post-Dearing drive towards vocationalism in all but an elite group of universities do not seem to indicate that there will be vacancies to fill in the areas in which we are involved—black academic feminism may be severely limited before it has had a chance to evolve more fully.

Many of the advances that have led to the claim for a certain amount of visibility for African-American feminist academics have been based on the excavation and analysis of literary works by black women in fictional, political and autobiographical genres. From slavery and emancipation, through the Harlem Renaissance to the civil rights era and beyond, black academic feminism has foregrounded black women's writing. This is not to say that the recovery and discovery of black female-oriented literary cultures has been the sole preoccupation of African-American feminists but it has certainly been a major feature. In Britain, however, although there is a substantial body of work from recent times, and more emerging from earlier periods, it is still the case that very few institutions offer comprehensive programmes of study for those with a developed interest in black British women's cultural production. Even though courses in post-colonial studies have been introduced in a number of universities at under-graduate and postgraduate level, as I have previously indicated, black British women artists and writers have not fared particularly well under this heading.

To return to Avtar Brah's comments about the non-essential character of 'white' and 'black' feminisms. Within a logic of binary oppositionality, it is difficult to know how to proceed without some kind of 'provisional essentialism' coming into play: how else are we to construe the use of the sign-categories 'black' and 'white'? Brah's vision is especially difficult to realize when feminism is only ever prefixed by 'white' when it is being problematized as such: most of the time its whiteness is rendered invisible by its universalist pretensions. Indeed I am sure many of our white academic colleagues would be deeply disturbed if they were called upon to identify themselves as 'white feminists'. That descriptor 'white' coupled with femin-ism connotes something similar to the supremacist 'white' in 'white power',

and does not suggest emancipatory, progressive politics concerned with equality and social justice.

The End of Feminism?

I have written elsewhere of a renegotiation of racial terminology which has seen the singular 'racism' shift to multiple 'racisms' and the fragmenting of the transracial/transnational solidarity implied by the politically inclusive use of 'black' (Young forthcoming): arguably 'feminism' has been subjected to similar processes which relate to the changing political landscape of the past twenty or so years both within Britain and globally. As Helen Carr notes, the prefixing of 'feminism' with 'post' has not been embraced in the academy with anything like the same vigour as it has by the media. At the same time, although the term 'postfeminism' has not been adopted in the academy in the same way that 'postmodern' and 'postcolonial' have, there is a hesitation about admitting to being a feminist. Significantly, none of the five feminist journals launched in Britain in the ten year period between 1988 and 1998 has placed 'feminist' in their titles (Carr 1997:197).

The end of feminism has been announced on numerous occasions in the press; since the recent development of what appears to be a full-blown panic about poor levels of achievement amongst white schoolboys, and the high suicide rates and poor self-esteem of young men, there have been calls to switch attention to 'equal opportunities' policies and programmes from girls and women to young males. Inevitably, the rhetoric of much of the broadsheet and tabloid coverage has sought to place the blame on feminism. Polemics citing feminism's role in boys' under-achievement and poor sense of self-worth have come from within the feminist movement as well as from the rather more predictable critics in the right-wing press. I am drawing attention to this in order to illustrate how in one sense feminism is neither dead nor marginal, as it is often invoked as an influential movement—for better or worse—and attributed with all kinds of power. It is also the case that several of the media's leading columnists—especially on the broadsheet newspapers—would identify with something recognizable as feminism. However, what has passed into the national press is a weak form of feminism which engages with 'women's issues' and the plight of the individual: commentary is passed from a highly personalized, insular perspective which is unable to develop extended critiques of much that falls outside of the subjective experience of the writer.

Issues relating to 'race', if approached at all, tend to be either about the particulars of an individual case, or a celebration of New Britain's cultural inclusiveness. Virtually all these women seem only able to speak from and to the white, middle-class concerns of feminism which have been so heavily

criticized, particularly by black feminists, over the years. Within this weak feminist discourse, black feminists are still largely rendered invisible both as subjects and objects of the discourse. An example of this, from the pages of the *Guardian*, was Maureen Freely's article 'Talking Heads'. This feature started with a list of influential North American feminists and proceeded to discuss something which was called 'new feminism'—although, frankly, the newness of it escaped me—without managing to name a single black feminist or mention the critiques made by black feminists such as Angela Davis, bell hooks, Toni Morrison and so on (Freely 1998:4). Whatever might be happening in the academy in terms of debates about the interconnections of constructions of 'race', ethnicity, class and gender these discussions have not permeated the media with any consistency.

The problems of white working-class schoolboys are pressing and deserve rather more considered strategies than simply increasing the numbers of male teachers in primary schools. I find the coverage being given to the problems of boys and men instructive: the 'underachievement' of black schoolchildren has been subjected to scrutiny on countless occasions and it strikes me that an analysis informed by the problems with, and challenges posed by, that body of research, together with an examination of similar issues raised by research on working-class girls and boys, might be able to develop a more convincing account of the problems than placing the blame on feminism.

Questions for British Feminism, 'Black' and 'White'

> There are strong emotional investments in 'spaces', and thus in particular national and local landscapes, architecture, forms of spatial organization and so forth, around which identities are constructed and valorized by temporal and spatial narratives and representations. The places, and the individual and collective identities involved in these narratives, representations and processes, are in crucial senses 'imaginary' in form. They are sites of fantasy, pleasure, ambivalence, anxiety and paranoia (Rattansi 1994:32).

Evidence of elements of these 'sites of fantasy, pleasure, ambivalence, anxiety and paranoia' may be seen in much of the writings and expressive creativity of black diaspora women. This is not intended as a negative comment: these expressions are often part of a strategy for survival and relative mental health. Certainly, in reading the work to which I have referred in this paper, and trying to think about what the components and political orientation of a black British feminist project or projects might be, I have experienced a good deal of ambivalence. This is partly because many women of my age-group

lived with and through these arguments in one way or another, whether through active participation in one or other of the key or minor groups, or through reading newsletters, arguing with friends or family, or trying to keep as low a profile as possible in order not to be called to account.

Although I would question the declaration contained in Beverley Bryan, Suzanne Scafe and Stella Dadzie's *The Heart of the Race*, that 'if you're a black woman, you've got to begin with racism. It's not a choice, it's a necessity' (Bryan *et al.* 1985:174), I would argue that it would be very difficult for a black female writer based in Britain and concerned with politics, society or culture to work without reference to, or analysis of, the ways in which racial discourses are implicated in those areas. Often, for black women academics, questions of 'race' do not seem like optional extras, to be discussed in one essay and ignored elsewhere: they are part of the fabric of our lives and to choose not to engage with them would require an excessive amount of intellectual and emotional energy, given the numerous ways in which our position is that of the racialized—as well as the sexualized—subject in British society.

However, maintaining what I think of as an 'additive, deficiency model', whereby we remind white female colleagues of the *added* burden of being black *and* female, provides a limited framework for debate: it is based on a kind of point-scoring system, familiar within a certain type of identity politics which sees the accumulation of characteristics of an oppressed group as an end in itself. It was always a shallow form of identity affirmation, one encouraged by funding bodies and a particular kind of leftist local authority politics which seemed incapable of getting to grips with the fundamental structural and institutional transformations required in order to improve the conditions of people's lives. Avtar Brah argues that the adoption of such politics was one of several factors contributing to the demise of the pioneering national black women's organization in Britain, OWAAD (Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent) which meant that:

> Instead of embarking on the complex and necessary task of identifying the specificities of particular oppressions, understanding their interconnections with other oppressions, and building a politics of solidarity, some women were beginning to differentiate these oppressions into hierarchies of oppression. The mere act of naming oneself as a member of an oppressed group was assumed to vest one with moral authority . . . Assertions about authenticity of personal experience could be presented as if they were an unproblematic guide to an understanding of the processes of subordination and domination (Brah 1996:108).

A difficulty here, though, is that white people are often so resistant to arguments raised by black feminists, in relation to the interconnectedness of gender, racial and class oppression, and gender, racial and class privilege, that there is a compulsion on our part to resort to the experiential. This situation

is exacerbated by the lack of informed commentary and analysis circulating in the media which is where a good number of us, after all, gain a large part of our 'knowledge' and information about the world around us: as I have already indicated, the media offer very little by way of documentation of black women's experiences and perspectives. Thus, although the postmodern side of our brain might wish to eschew the notion of authenticity and a hierarchy of oppression, at times that is what we may invoke in order to gain some sort of acknowledgement of our predicaments and pleasures, as flawed and contradictory as that strategy may be.

Another contradiction arises from the rejection of essentialism and the desire for communitarian identity politics founded on mutually recognized points of connection in the experience of racism and sexism. Avtar Brah maintains:

> Our gender is constituted and represented differently according to our differential location within the global relations of power. Our insertion into these global relations of power is realised through a myriad of economic, political and ideological processes. Within these structures of social relations we do not exist simply as women but as differentiated categories, such as 'working-class women', 'peasant women' or 'migrant women'. Each description references a specificity of social condition. Real lives are forged out of a complex articulation of these dimensions (Brah 1996:102).

It is this complexity which makes it so difficult, if not impossible, to identify with any precision whether race or gender or class is being privileged at a particular moment in time: it also gives rise to more contradictory positionings, particularly for black women.

Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis claimed in 1983 that 'the notion of "black women" as delineating the boundaries of the alternative feminist movement to white feminism leaves non-British, non-black women . . . unaccounted for politically' (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983:63). So can black feminism be inclusive? Is it merely an adjunct of black, as in black *African* struggle? Is the 'black' merely adjectival, or severely delimiting? To rework Stuart Hall's question regarding black popular culture, what is the 'black' in black British feminism? And if we are contesting the construction of ourselves as objects within racialized and gendered discursive regimes, why would we wish to retain that position from which to speak? In her critique of identity politics, Safia Mirza insists:

> The political concept of blackness does not convey belonging and community, but instils a false sense of national identity that sets those with dark black skin colour apart, while silencing those who are lighter than black. It consorts with the colonialist imperialist categorization of

> immigrant as outsiders, alien, different . . . constructions of unidimensional black identity can only reinforce white supremacy by the logics of duality (Safia Mirza 1997:15).

If blackness is invoked in an exclusionary discourse within communities of colour, the distinction is often made between those of African descent as opposed to any other ethnic or, most crucially, what is labelled as a *racial* grouping. The relationship between 'black' and skin colouring is rather more complex than its rendering as a distinction based on *national* belonging suggests. But a 'political concept of blackness' means little if it is not grounded in opposition to the assumption being made here. It is fundamentally about recognizing oppression and struggle read *against* an essential notion of blackness related to the gradation of skin colour or 'racial' origins: 'black' as used in its inclusive term could refer to a range of ethnic and national groups. If the political use of 'black' is eschewed or diverted, we are back with an unitary vision of blackness defined by ancestral proximity to and identification with sub-Saharan African origins: hopefully, that is not where we are currently headed.

In any case, as I have suggested elsewhere, 'black' is always already political, even when its usage is rooted in biological pretensions. If the 'black' in black feminism is not a political construct, then what is it? As soon as we discuss anything in terms of black we are in the 'politics and logics of duality' and thus are equally implicated as 'consorts' of colonialism. Safia Mirza's argument is that 'to refuse such limited racialized constructions and create over and over again our difference is to disrupt and so subvert neo-colonialist paradigms' (Safia Mirza 1997:15). But actually 'difference', in the way that it is articulated in contemporary racially stratified societies, *is* a neo-colonialist paradigm and, certainly in some instances, invoking 'our difference'—I am thinking of certain kinds of black nationalist discourse here—does little to undermine the framework although it might cause some sort of a commotion within it.

Making Connections

How might a feminist historical reading of the last fifty years link women's experiences across racial boundaries? First, it is crucial to acknowledge that, whether the subject is community self-sufficiency built through the church or blues parties, work or education, formalized politics or community activism, black women have been initiators and not just marginal, nameless bystanders in the transformations of British society and culture which have taken place during that period. Whilst noting that white working-class women have been differentially 'liberated' by paid work outside of the

home to white middle-class women, black women's entry into the labour market under, for example, slavery or indentured labour, or in low-paid, low-status work for the NHS, London Transport and the public sector, has not always represented liberation for her either. Often, black women's family position—whether as matriarch, or single mother, or passive reproducer of culture—has not always been seen as emancipatory or as undermining patriarchal heterosexist capitalism. Instead, the position of black women in the family has been identified by white—and some black—sociologists as the source of what is characterized as the pathological, dysfunctional and deviant black family, still perceived as a primary locus for the development of 'racial problems'.

A feminist account of Britain since the 1940s should document changes in the status of black workers in Britain—from 'new' immigrants to established settlers—through close examination of the ways in which black women have been positioned, and positioned themselves, in debates, policies and practices, and legislative discourses on immigration, education, housing, welfare, health, racial harassment, employment and labour relations, crime and so on. The important point to make here, however, is that the areas of social experience suggested have not only affected black people: whatever was being worked through in black communities had to be working through white communities, albeit differentially. For example, in the 1960s there was a paradoxical situation whereby black women of South Asian descent were stereotyped as passive, illiterate (in English at any rate and that was all that mattered) and simultaneously as being capable of threatening the stability and imagined homogeneity of white Britishness through their (supposed) hyperfertility. Thus in one set of discourses these black women were invisible and unimportant and, in another, complementary set, they were powerful symbols of the fragility of whiteness and its tenous grip on 'civilization'. Their migration into Britain had to be stringently controlled and the British government infamously used virginity tests to ascertain whether the wives of South Asian men already settled here had the right of entry into Britain. How then did the preoccupations of white women—especially feminists—connect with or glance off these experiences? What—if any—levels of identification were possible across racial and ethnic borders? To what extent were conceptualizations of the white female liberated-self predicated on an opposition to black female migrants? Were links made between the experiences of white women involved in political movements like the trades union movement, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), the anti-apartheid movement and so on, and the treatment meted out to black women in this country? And what about national belonging in 'Swinging Britain': as 'they' were clearly identifiable by their skin colour, did that help to develop an explicit notion of 'we' white British/English women?

Black Women's Work in the Cultural Sphere

Footage of settlers arriving in England aboard the *Empire Windrush* in June 1948 represent the familiar, the official record of black arrivals on British soil. The mainly male faces smile and pose for the camera in a way which comes back to haunt us every now and then when we think about what those people had to confront in the 'motherland'. In the telling—and numerous retellings that were heard during 1998—of that narrative, the stories of the women who came before, the mothers, daughters and sisters who joined later, the women left behind, and the women who stowed away should be seen as integral to the communal act of re-memory.

Laying claim to a history and a literary tradition is particularly important for black people in racially stratified societies such as Britain and North America where the acquisition of a certain kind of skill with the written word and an identifiable historical and intellectual trajectory are seen as key markers of a civilized culture. Although the struggle to gain literary credibility is by no means over in the United States, as indicated earlier, significant gains have been made, in terms of institutional recognition, by African-American women. This is not to deny that there are problems with some types of media and academic popularity. Inevitably there is a fear of containment and incorporation of that which is considered to be dangerous: thus embedded in Ann DuCille's comment about black women being 'hot property' in the North American academy is the anxiety about what kind of loss of integrity that may entail. Audre Lorde articulates the anxiety thus: 'Of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger' (quoted in Hill Collins 1990:98). Nonetheless, I am not currently overly concerned about the dangers of overexposure in the academy or elsewhere for black feminist critics, black women writers, filmmakers and artists in Britain: rather I am arguing for more attention, more recognition and more debate. At the moment, if the term 'black feminism' resonates at all, it invariably calls forth a roster of African-American academics, critics and writers, and bell hooks is more likely to be called on for her observations about black culture in Britain by the BBC than any of the authors who have contributed to *The Heart of the Race, Charting the Journey, Reconstructing Womanhood, Reconstructing Feminism* or *Black British Feminism*.

There are repeated attempts to silence, to render invisible, black British women and their perspectives, insights and experiences, but this has not been uniformly or seamlessly successful because we have spoken, written and made images. Carole Boyce Davies, writing with reference to black women's literary accounts of their lives, notes:

> The mystified notions of home and family are removed from their romantic, idealized moorings, to speak of pain, movement, difficulty, learning and love in complex ways. Thus, the complicated notion of home mirrors the problematising of community/nation/identity that one finds in Black women's writing from a variety of communities (Boyce Davies 1994:21).

Black British women who paint, write, photograph, make films and television programmes and so on are exploring the contradictions and problems indicated in this paper in their work, which deserves critical attention from black and white scholars. I am not suggesting here a simple celebration of black women's creativity but a critical evaluative project along the lines of that suggested by Cornel West. If we look at how West articulates what he terms the New Cultural Politics of Difference we can begin to glimpse how to embrace the notion of difference and identity through a critical theoretical eclecticism, and to develop intellectual projects within which black cultural workers and critics seek to

> constitute and sustain discursive and institutional networks that deconstruct earlier modern Black strategies for identity-formation, demystify power relations that incorporate class, patriarchal and homophobic biases, and construct more multi-valent and multi-dimensional responses that articulate complexity and diversity of Black practices in the modern and postmodern world . . . Furthermore, Black cultural workers must investigate and interrogate the other of Blackness—Whiteness. One cannot deconstruct the binary oppositional logic of images of Blackness without extending it to the contrary condition of Blackness/Whiteness itself (West 1991:29).

West's notion of demystificatory criticism maintains that

> it is partisan, partial, engaged and crisis-centred, yet always keeps open a skeptical eye to avoid dogmatic traps, premature closures, formulaic formulations or rigid conclusions. In addition to social structural analyses, moral and political judgements, and shear critical consciousness, there indeed is evaluation (West 1991:31).

Black feminist academics, in seeking to understand, document, analyse and demystify the complex determinants of oppression and privilege in political, psychological, cultural, educational and social spheres, and producing more nuanced, multiperspectival negotiations of 'difference', are also seeking to undermine the paradigm that produces it. The writing may be unsettling, disturbing, provocative, and, although the meaning and significance may not be immediately transparent, it should indicate the significance of its political project in order that its potential use may be properly

assessed. There needs to be a recognition of the necessity for diasporic connections at the same time as an acknowledgement that the victim and oppressor are not always clearly identifiable and may be both inside and outside what seem to be unified communities of interest. The theoretical and critical investigations should not be static or reified or seen as a substitute for reflexive praxis, and we need genealogies which adopt a critical stance in relation to our heterogeneous histories and voices. Such genealogical enterprises can help us to develop the tools for untangling the complex and diverse trajectories of the operations of power in the new millennium. We need to write about challenging work which engages with the contemporary and has a firm grasp on the historical, and which helps us to understand more clearly the violence and the injustices, as well as the desires and pleasures, of contemporary life. But we also need to engage with work which gives no political comfort and represents a counter-discourse, constructed in opposition to anti-essentialist positions.

What is important is the attempt to articulate a coherent, political project based in the realm of culture for black cultural producers, critics and academics which goes beyond documenting and celebrating and seeks to analyse critically and rigorously black styles, texts and representations in history and in contemporary society. With some hard work, it is perfectly possible to envisage this critical interrogation of the processes of 'race', gender, sexual and class hierarchical constructions being undertaken by *anyone* who is prepared to identify with the political and intellectual project being struggled with, and to debate sometimes painful and troubling ideas and strategies with those who traditionally have not been seen as allies. That is a challenge for white feminists, for as long as 'race' is seen as 'black woman's thing' or something to be dipped into occasionally, progress will be minimal, and we will have to insist on a specifically 'black', provisionally essentialist, exclusivist feminism.

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