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JULIA SUDBURY

En-gendering Anti-racism: Towards a Politics of Social Transformation

As we approach the new millennium, African, Asian and Caribbean activists in Britain appear to be poised at the proverbial fork in the road. Do we march into a future marked by a pluralism of ethnicities, identities and interests? Or do we continue to hark back to the golden days of black struggle—when the movement was united in deed, action and purpose—in the frail hope that outdated or failed notions of black unity will be revitalized?

The need for a new strategy for anti-racist struggle is evident. Increasing social stratification in black communities and the emergence of Afro-Saxon conservatives and Asian millionaires mock the idea that the colour of one's skin will determine the content of one's politics. The rise of new faces of racism, especially Islamophobia, suggests the need for a more sophisticated and encompassing anti-oppressive language. And the failure of certain forms of state anti-racism, such as occurred at Burnage,¹ invites us to re-examine our existing practices and to reject those that reify rigid notions of predestined racial behaviour. While there is an evident need to re-assess understandings of where we are, where we need to go and how to get there, the terms of the debate as so far stated may in fact be too narrow and unimaginative to answer the challenge.

Locating anti-racist scholars

Before I add my voice to those of the reknowned scholars who have made recommendations about new directions for the anti-racist struggle, I would like to digress briefly by considering who 'we' are to make these recommendations. Why should statements made by such scholars be taken as any more relevant to activists and professionals in the field than the words of the average woman in the street? What is the power of the academic to convince her or his audience that what she or he has to say is worth listening to? We might point to our 'superior' education, evidenced by an array of qualifications, the

1 The report into the murder of a black schoolchild by a white peer on the grounds of Burnage High School in Manchester concluded that an insensitive and 'simplistic' anti-racism programme at the school was a significant contributory factor; see I. Macdonald, R. Bhavnani, L. Khan and G. John, *Murder in the Playground: The Report of the Macdonald Inquiry into Racism and Racial Violence in Manchester Schools* (London: Longsight Press 1989).

sociological training which enables us to see beyond the surface, or simply the number of articles and books which we list on our *curriculum vitae*. This credentialist approach appeals to those who believe in the need for an impartial researcher adhering to rules of ethics, good practice and methodological soundness in a search for The Truth. Certain scholars support this view; seen as bearers of quiet, reasoned thought, clear concepts and rational argument, such scholars offer a reassuring sense of calm and objectivity to professionals who are often caught between the competing demands and impassioned claims of community activists. Michael Banton's critique of arguments that originate in 'the observer's personal philosophy, not in social science' relies on such a conceptualization,² as do the works of many other scholars who have made significant contributions to the field of 'race relations' over the past several decades.

When the subjects of this objective social scientific research turned their eye on the researcher, such claims were jeopardized. Black activists pointed to the close relations between research institutions specializing in 'race' issues and local authorities, and questioned to what extent the findings of researchers, who relied for their next contract on the very authority which was in many cases the object of community concern, could be expected to reflect harsh criticisms and make meaningful interventions. Such activists also pointed to the ways in which institutions such as local authorities and the police utilized research as a 'holding strategy' to avoid having to commit current funds to addressing serious problems in black communities, and questioned the integrity of academics who would accept a contract under such conditions. Finally, they criticized the misleading use of (usually) junior black researchers as interviewers in research projects defined and governed by white scholars. Relations between mainstream academics and black communities have therefore been marked by tension and suspicion. In many cases black communities have identified 'impartial' researchers as another cog in the wheel of systematic institutional exclusion.

In other words scholars engaged in anti-racist debates are precisely that: *engaged*. We cannot be conceived of as impartial bystanders offering friendly insights as the game proceeds unaffected by our presence. Rather we actively shape debates, engage with actors—schoolteachers, pupils, community activists, local government officers—fight for resources and promote allies. Like the anthropologist who finds his safari hat and white face adorning a character in the 'authentic' African masquerade, we have become a part of the field of study. Furthermore, while we may hide behind the mask of objectivity, it is no more than a comforting myth. We scholars bring to every research situation our own personal and political philosophy as well as our own professional agenda and possibly our own financial needs. What we see is shaped by the lens of our own political education and socialization. The understanding

2 Michael Banton, 'What's the question?', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1996, 13-15 (15).

that every research project is shaped by political perspectives, and not just those of self-professed activist-intellectuals, enables us to 'read' the writer into the text. It is this, I suggest, that we must do with Tariq Modood's highly influential interventions into anti-racist territory.³

Cumulative oppressions and model minorities

If we reconceptualize Modood as an active participant in struggles within the anti-racist movement for recognition and resources, we may gain some insights into his interventions. Kalbir Shukra's insightful analysis can certainly help us here.⁴ As she points out, Modood selectively presents a review of British racism in the 1990s to highlight the particular hardships facing South Asian and, in particular, Muslim communities. In foregrounding attitudinal surveys and employment statistics Modood masks the high levels of incarceration and police brutality faced by African Caribbean communities, and ignores the complex web of immigration legislation, racism and exclusion facing African migrants and asylum-seekers. In so doing he creates a hierarchy of oppression which places Asian Muslims in the firing-line for their subjection to multiple forms of oppression: cultural racism, colour racism and religious hatred.

Black feminist interventions in the late 1980s engaged in a critique of the use of hierarchies of oppression.⁵ This critique pointed to the limitation of simplistic cumulative models of oppression which defined black women as always already triply oppressed due to race plus class plus gender. The cumulative model suggests that each form of dominance is fixed and does not interact with the others. In fact, as the members of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies pointed out all those years ago, racism, class exploitation and sexism, in articulation, make new and often unpredictable interventions in the lives of black men and women.⁶

Modood's theorization of the state of contemporary British race relations can therefore be read as part of the battle between black communities for an ever-shrinking pot of ethnic monies. As such it replicates a discourse of divide-and-rule which has been observed by black community organizations in their dealings with the state. How then should we read the extensive research project into the ethnic self-identification of black individuals recently carried out by Modood *et alia*?⁷ Does this research provide objective evi-

3 See T. Modood, '“Black”, racial equality and Asian identity', *New Community*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1988, 397-404, and T. Modood, 'The changing context of “race” in Britain', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1996, 3-13.

4 K. Shukra, 'A scramble for the British pie', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1996, 28-36.

5 S. Grewal *et al.*, *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* (London: Sheba Press 1988).

6 Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (London: Hutchinson 1982).

7 T. Modood, S. Beishon and S. Virdee, *Changing Ethnic Identities* (London: Policy Studies Institute 1994).

dence reinforcing the recommendation that the notion of political blackness be replaced by a plurality of identities?

Individual and collective: theorizing the connections

The seventy-four respondents of the survey claimed three primary forms of identification: a) pan-Caribbean/black; b) national and regional South Asian; c) non-Christian religious identities. An inclusive definition of 'black' was claimed by only a small number of Asian respondents. Modood *et al.* interpret this finding as prima-facie evidence for the claim that an anti-racist movement which identifies its constituents as 'black' is enacting a coercive fiction on the majority of South Asians. While the research data are not in dispute the authors' theorization of them is problematic. In taking the plurality of individual identities as evidence that political strategies should be based on multiple and diverse identification, Modood *et al.* blur the distinctions between three complex but distinct phenomena: individual identities, collective identities and collective action. The relationship between individual identities and social movements is unfortunately not quite so straightforward.

Since the late 1980s, social movement theorists have acknowledged the centrality of collective identity to the emergence and maintenance of green, peace, feminist and civil rights struggles.⁸ These theorists carried out detailed examinations of movements for social change in order to identify how structural inequalities are translated into the collective identities which in turn underpin collective action. That is, observing that the existence of socio-political disadvantage did not always result in the emergence of vital and thriving oppositional movements, they suggested that a better understanding was needed of the conditions that would lead to the emergence and success of such movements. What processes are needed to enable disadvantaged individuals to identify their commonalities and come together as a group with shared concerns and a common agenda for change?

Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier identified two such processes.⁹ The first is the establishment of boundary markers between 'us' and 'them', the in-group and those being opposed. In the case of the radical feminist movement, the in-group was defined through essentialist notions of 'female' traits such as egalitarianism, pacifism, co-operation and an ethic of care. The out-group was in turn constructed through the vilification of essentialized 'male' characteristics which were utilized to reinforce a belief in fundamental differences between men's and women's cultures.

The second is the creation of an oppositional consciousness which enables individuals to attribute their discontent to structural, cultural and sys-

8 A. Melucci, *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society* (London: Hutchinson Radius 1989).

9 V. Taylor and N. Whittier, 'Collective identity in social movement communities', in A. Morris and C. McClurg Mueller (eds), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1992).

temic causes rather than to personal failure. Aldon Morris defines oppositional consciousness as 'that set of insurgent ideas and beliefs constructed and developed by an oppressed group for the purpose of guiding its struggle to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of domination'.¹⁰ The development and dissemination of this alternative belief system is a fundamental part of any movement's strategy since it conveys the 'cognitive liberation' which is a necessary precursor to political activism. Consciousness-raising occurred in the feminist movement through groups eponymously named, in the civil rights movement through 'rap' sessions and in the anti-racist movement through 'reasoning' sessions and other consciousness-raising events. 'Organic' or popular intellectuals frequently play a crucial role in the creation of oppositional consciousness, since they deploy intellectual and institutional resources to reconceptualize group problems, provide historical perspectives on contemporary events and challenge hegemonic representations of social relations.

Modood's self-proclaimed desire to usher in the end of anti-racist orthodoxy suggests that he perceives himself in the role of the organic intellectual shaping group-consciousness and laying the foundations of a new Asian/Muslim perspective. However, if the hegemonic ideas of a society are dominant because they are rooted in and supported by the most powerful institutional formations, then Modood is off-target in seeking liberation from black/African leadership rather than from the dominant structures of society. In seeking to challenge black/African hegemony Modood sets about marking the boundaries between Asian- and African-origin communities. In keeping with the need to create a belief that the two groups are fundamentally different he creates an idealized and essentialist picture of Asian communities that can trace a pure line back to Hindustan, and share a culture of self-help and family coherence. He thus minimizes the commonalties created by colonial legacies and contemporary racialized discrimination.

If we re-examine the history of black struggle in the light of a clearer understanding of how collective identities are formed, the attempts by black activists from the 1970s onwards to encourage Africans, Asians and Caribbeans to embrace a black political consciousness can be seen as a part of the process of 'cognitive liberation'. Creating an oppositional consciousness which embraced diverse and often antagonistic constituencies was always difficult, but the discussions and debates that accompanied the process were important. During these discussions, and in shared political action, stereotypical beliefs about 'the other' were challenged: Asians were challenged to shake off beliefs that Caribbeans were aggressive or preferred having a party to political struggle; Africans were challenged to transcend the suspicion of South Asians created by their structural position as the middle layer in the 'colonial sandwich';¹¹

10 A. Morris, 'Political consciousness and collective action', in Morris and McClurg Mueller (eds), 363.

11 A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London and New York: Routledge 1996).

Jamaicans were challenged to give up stereotypes about 'small islanders' and so on. Since these beliefs are reinforced by hegemonic representations of black people in British politics, the media and popular culture, the task of building an oppositional unity could never be 'complete'; it is, rather, an ongoing site of struggle.

Political blackness was never where the majority of the people were at. By its very nature it was oppositional and therefore embraced only by those who were actively engaged in their everyday lives in challenging racism, colonial legacies and other interlocking forms of domination. At the peak of black struggle—during the strikes of the 1970s, for example, or the rise of the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD)—blackness might be embraced by a larger constituency. At other times, when the energies of black communities are taken up with sheer survival, it becomes submerged in local networks of activists and community organizations.¹² While identifying how the majority of black people identify themselves might therefore be useful in creating workable census categories, it hardly helps us in determining the most effective strategy for building an oppositional consciousness which can underpin collective action for social change.

Beyond two-dimensional models of oppression

A further problem with much of the current debate is that it continues to theorize the anti-racist struggle as being located at the intersection of 'race' and class. In this conceptualization the anti-racist struggle, which addresses the position of working-class and under-class Blacks, is entirely distinct from feminist activism, which addresses the concerns of (white) women. Black women's concerns are assumed to mirror those of black men and their strategies are subsumed under black male political activism. This approach cannot begin to encapsulate the political locations, theorization or activism of African, Asian and Caribbean women. Since the black women's movement emerged in the late 1970s it has refused to emphasize one form of oppression over another, and has systematically illustrated the ways in which gender articulates with 'race' and class, sometimes resulting in conflicts of interest between black men and women. We therefore need 'to examine how "race", class and gender are structured in relation to one another. How do they combine with and/or cut across one another?'¹³

Women developed black feminism/womanism as a distinct body of theory and praxis. They called for a shift from a narrow anti-racism to a more holistic black struggle against multiple and interlocking forms of dominance. In practical terms they demanded that anti-racists tackle domestic as well as racial violence, dowry deaths as well as deportations, and brutal medical in-

¹² Melucci.

¹³ K. Bhavnani and M. Coulson, 'Transforming socialist-feminism: the challenge of racism', *Feminist Review*, no. 23, 1985, 81-92 (89).

terventions performed on black women's bodies as well as police brutality against black men. Above all they refuted the myth that ethnic communities were cohesive units with common interests, and demonstrated that black women's concerns were often stifled or silenced by black male leaderships. While more visible forms of black women's activism declined with the demise of OWAAD in the mid-1980s, the network of local black women's groups spawned in the heat of the early part of the decade continue to make significant contributions to the redefining of anti-racism at the local level. However, while references to early black women's organizations are not uncommon, their continuing interventions and those of black women activist-intellectuals who emerged out of this period have largely been ignored by male scholars.

What additional insight can a gendered lens offer to the current situation? I can offer two examples of very different ways of knowing which emerge when gender divisions are made transparent. First, we might ask more rigorous questions about who benefits from the promotion of ethnic identities. Kalbir Shukra makes a convincing argument that such identities are being used as the basis for competition between ethnic groups for the limited resources and political representation offered to black communities.¹⁴ A cursory survey of consultative committees and grant recipients will reveal that the beneficiaries are predominantly male community leaders. In their guise as representatives of a united ethnic or religious community, these male leaders, whether religious leaders or other senior figures, set the agenda for resource deployment and political intervention.¹⁵ While black women may receive some of the benefits in a trickle-down manner, they are seldom able to get critical issues such as domestic violence, homeworking or childcare on to the group's political agenda. In my research into black women's organizations, interviewees pointed to the role of male leaders in the establishment of lobbying groups based on ethnic allegiances. For black women activists, holding on to a political definition of blackness was an oppositional task which challenged the collusion of such figures in local divide-and-rule politics. While not all women actively supported the politics of black unity, reminding us that essentialist notions about women's tendencies towards co-operation and flexibility have no place here, it is possible to theorize women's exclusion from the benefits of a politics of ethnicity as a reason for their sometimes passionate involvement in redefining black struggle in more inclusive ways.

The second example of the difference a gendered lens makes can be found in the groundbreaking work of researchers and activists in the arena of homeworking and low-waged labour in the garment industry. These research-

14 Shukra.

15 This is captured in the slogan 'Religious leaders don't speak for us'; see H. Siddiqui, 'A woman's banner for doubt and dissent', in Southall Black Sisters, *Against the Grain: A Celebration of Survival and Struggle, Southall Black Sisters, 1979-1989* (London: Southall Black Sisters 1989).

ers have illuminated the inadequate pay that primarily Asian women are receiving for piecework in the West Midlands, London and the Yorkshire/Humberside region. More significantly these researchers have revealed the ways in which notions of familial and kinship responsibilities in the context of declining local economies and a racially segregated labour force position women as an easily exploitable workforce. In her research into Asian women homeworkers Annie Phizacklea concludes that, while scholars have pointed to the existence of credit rotation systems, an ethic of hard work, deferred gratification and self-help as the basis for successful ethnic enterprise, it is the availability of a cheap, malleable female labour force which determines their viability.¹⁶ Where scholars point to 'self-help among kinsfolk' as a key to success, we should pay attention to who is being helped and who is profiting. While predominantly male entrepreneurs justify the exploitative wages, poor working conditions, lack of national insurance payments and lack of union representation by reference to kin helping one another, it is women's exploited labour that provides the basis for the emergence of the Indian millionaires whom Modood uses as examples of Asian social mobility and resourcefulness.¹⁷ When women's labour is made visible, rather than being obscured in euphemistic references to kin, this method of community uplift becomes rather more problematic.

While calls for ethnic pluralism and cultural autonomy claim to be based on notions of differentiation and diversity, experience suggests that public ethnicities have little space for internal dissent. Defining the in-group in terms of apparently immutable characteristics such as history, culture and religion inevitably promotes a rigid understanding of what it means to be Muslim, Sikh, West African and so on. Black women's voices calling for an end to violence or challenging male-dominated religious leaderships and political agendas have been a threat to such ethnic cohesion. There have therefore been consistent attempts at a local level to silence black women's organizations—such as Southall Black Sisters, Panahghar and Shakti—by attacking their grant aid, blaming them for the splitting of families, accusing them of inauthenticity as well as by means of physical intimidation.

Since the rise of public ethnicities and religious identities has been predicated on a return to narrow and restrictive gender roles there has been an inevitable conflict between black women's organizations with an analysis of 'race', class and gender, and the newly constructed ethnicities. As groups revive ethnic boundaries, control over women and girls as bearers of culture and *izzat* becomes a symbol of the group's cultural autonomy.¹⁸ Southall Black

16 A. Phizacklea, *Unpacking the Fashion Industry: Gender, Racism and Class in Production* (London and New York: Routledge 1990).

17 Modood, 'The changing context of "race" in Britain', 4.

18 *Izzat* is a Muslim concept incorporating family reputation, male pride and community standing and is frequently determined by the behaviour of female family members. Non-conformism to a conservative norm by a girl or woman is seen not only as shaming the 'offender' but also

Sisters has been vocal in drawing attention to the restrictions on women and girls being promoted by Sikh and Muslim male leaderships, including demands for single-sex schools that promote 'traditional' roles, uncritical support for arranged marriages and demands that social workers and police officers do not interfere in Asian family disputes. For young Asian men who are attracted to revivalist religious identities, activism in defence of the community is as likely to involve hunting down 'wayward' women and girls as challenging neo-Nazis.¹⁹ For this reason the uncritical return to cultural traditions is vociferously opposed by many black women activists.

Towards a strategic black unity

While the increasing importance of ethnic and religious individual and collective identities should not be uncritically welcomed it is nevertheless evidence of a pressing need to reconceive oppositional politics. Social movement theory reminds us of the importance of the creation of an oppositional group-consciousness as the foundation for collective action. Promoting a plurality of ethnic identities with religious and national perspectives at their core has been put forward as one strategy. However, this tactic prevents us from undertaking a rigorous re-examination of the intersection of gender with other forms of dominance, and flies in the face of black women's critiques. Some black women's organizations are engaged in the construction of an alternative approach. Utilizing rigorous self-criticism they have developed an anti-essentialist notion of 'blackness' based not on the erasure of difference and dissent, or on the misguided assumption that all black people will automatically see eye-to-eye, but on the need to create a strategic alliance. This strategic black unity lies alongside other identities—whether religious, national or cultural—and enables its advocates to identify as 'black and Tamil' or 'black and Nigerian'. In keeping with the contextual nature of identities 'black' will be utilized during shared political struggles and in forming alliances, where 'Tamil' or 'Nigerian' will be used in cultural contexts.

What is the basis of this black unity? Rather than relying on a one-dimensional approach which reduces black people to a skin colour or a common experience of racism, the new strategic blackness moves beyond essentialist notions of black identity.²⁰ In the following section, drawing on my research into black women's organizations in Britain, I will illustrate the complex process of building an oppositional black identity.²¹

as damaging to the family's social networks, business contacts and marriage prospects; see A. Wilson, *Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain* (London: Virago 1978).

19 P. Patel, 'Third wave feminism and black women's activism', in H. S. Mirza (ed.), *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (London and New York: Routledge 1997).

20 H. S. Mirza, 'Mapping a genealogy of black British feminism', in Mirza (ed.), *Black British Feminism*.

21 J. Sudbury, 'Other Kinds of Dreams': *Black Women's Organisations and the Politics of Transformation* (London and New York: Routledge 1998).

Renegotiating political blackness

In the context of historical and contemporary hostilities between women of diverse racialized origins the project of creating and maintaining an inclusive notion of 'blackness' as the basis for common struggles against racism is a highly oppositional one. Many of the organizations studied were involved in the struggle to build unity in spite of, and in celebration of, women's diversity. These organizations perceived part of their role as the breaking down of barriers between African, Caribbean and Asian women in order to create meaningful alliances. The co-ordinator of an Asian women's project described her role thus:

It's about making those links and, okay, people might be a bit wary to start off with, but then they'll get into it and they will get used to it. And then the awareness and education process begins (Manjit, Asian, Asian organization).

Interviewees saw the process as the development of an oppositional political consciousness. The shift in thinking involved three factors. First, women learned about the history of their own group—the legacies 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 in which books were discussed and alternative ways of knowing shared. Here a 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.²² Thus the creation of black unity was constructed as an oppositional act, refuting the colonial legacy of division.

Second, women learned to see beyond stereotypical representations of 'the other'. Through shared political struggles and social events women began to see one another in all their diversity rather than through the homogenizing lens of the white gaze. One interviewee asserted that her changing consciousness had both challenged stereotyped views of 'the other' and cre-

22 The indentured Indian labourers who were shipped to South Africa, the Caribbean and East Africa to replace enslaved African labour initially suffered similar inhuman conditions. Their descendants and subsequent immigrants were gradually formed into a middle-class buffer layer who would protect the white minority from the discontent of the African majority. The strategy of divide-and-rule is summarized by Captain Lugard, the 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 [the 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, 31).

ated 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 learned 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).

This organization allocated each Saturday morning to informal social events designed to 'create the opportunity for the building of trans-cultural relations, in terms of enabling women to have a better understanding of each other's cultural background and heritage—to ensure a genuinely cross-cultural resource for Black women' (organizational progress report, dated 24 June 1994). Building cross-cultural understanding and refuting stereotypical representations was conceptualized as an ongoing task.

Third, 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—education, for example—the shape of struggles may vary. While Asian women were more concerned with bilingual teachers and school meals that cater for halal or vegetarian diets, Caribbean women were more concerned with exclusions or the labelling of Caribbean children as educationally sub-normal. But both were interested in the creation of policies to eliminate racial harassment and abuse in the classroom and playground. Women worked to create common understandings of the system which creates these diverse problems, and to highlight shared concerns. These discussions often took place in the context of debates over the meaning and nature of collective identities. Workshop participants at a conference on black women's policy strategy (London, September 1992) started proceedings by defining the in-group as:

- people originating from Africa, Asia, the Americas and the Pacific;
- people who are over-represented in the penal system and the mental health system, the people whose entry to Britain is challenged at airports;
- people who are oppressed because of the colour of their skin.²³

This definition combines a racialized notion of origin and phenotype with contemporary issues of exclusion. By including the reference to immigration the workshop alluded to the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s when African, Asian and Caribbean communities were united in fighting against immigration controls that targetted 'coloured Commonwealth citizens'. This legislation did not make distinctions by country of origin, and thus contributed to

23 Conference report, *Transitions* (newsletter of the National Black Women's Network Planning Group), 1994.

an oppositional 'black' identity. Implicitly this in-group definition reminds the reader that all black women in Britain can potentially be challenged, that they all carry their passports on their faces. Statements which assert the basis for collective identification are often by necessity partial; and, in this case, differential treatment received at British immigration controls by black women with British citizenship and by those seeking to enter as dependants, migrant workers or asylum-seekers was glossed over. Indeed the conference participants were wary of any discussion which might lead to a challenge to this carefully constructed collective identity: 'We also concluded that the process of "defining" Black women was usually counterproductive to Black women's needs because it facilitated the fragmentation rather than the development of Black communities and encouraged us to focus on our differences rather than our common experiences.'²⁴ Hesitations such as this reveal the fragility of inclusive definitions of blackness in the context of divisive strategies and discourses.

Building unity, affirming difference

When women establishing a new group in Sheffield discussed the scope of their prospective membership, they addressed the issue of difference 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 emphasised 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* [my emphasis].²⁵

Thus highlighting common experiences of racism did not always involve the elision of differences along other axes. Another interviewee explored the delicate balance between the need to retain and celebrate cultural differences while maintaining the ability to organize together politically:

I think African Caribbean communities, get on with your work and how you perceive it to be and the best way to be delivered; Asian communities you get on with that. There's no harm with differences, there's no harm with doing things separately, but I think at a certain level, things should be done jointly. And that is the only way to move forward (Manjit, Asian, Asian organization).

This organization limited membership to Asian women, but embraced a black identity as a basis for shared struggles with other organizations, at both the local and national level. The co-ordinator was also on the management committee of a national black advocacy group. The group also created opportuni-

²⁴ Ibid., 2.

²⁵ 'Progress Report', Sheffield Black Women's Resource Centre, 1995, 3 (unpublished).

ties for shared social and cultural experiences which went beyond resistance to gendered racism as a way of breaking down barriers and building community.

Organizations which had a membership of African, Caribbean and Asian women particularly emphasized the creation of a diverse and open conception of 'blackness'. These organizations encouraged women to view their historical and current struggles against racism and imperialism as the basis for a shared collective identity:

I have a long experience of colonialism which is an experience that I can share with a lot of African women, a lot of Somali women, Yemeni women in terms of experience of colonialism and imperialism. That's my starting point in terms of solidarity (Mona, Palestinian, black organization).

Yet this awareness of common experiences did not translate into an erasure of cultural difference. In this sense the women interviewed did not adhere to an either/or dichotomy. Many of them identified themselves as 'black and Asian', 'black and Somali', 'black and Tamil' and so on. This enabled them both to celebrate their specific cultural and historical legacies, and to share a sense of 'sisterhood' arising from resistance to gendered racism:

I'm quite proud of the fact that I'm a Tamil person, in myself. But that does not cast a big shadow over everything else. I have to look at the reality of where I'm living, where I am. And Blackness and Black people and living in a white society which is racist, so it [Blackness] is quite important for me (Misa, Asian, black organization).

Gendering anti-racism

Black women have come together to explore shared experiences of gendered racism and class exploitation, and have created a new politics which does not demand the artificial separation of integral threads in the web of their oppression. In etching gender into the body of anti-racist theory and praxis, black feminists/womanists have made a fundamental challenge to unidimensional analyses of social exclusion.²⁶ Using a gendered lens to interrogate anti-racist debates throws new issues to the fore. It forces us to look at oppression in a complex way that recognizes that a given group (Muslim young men) can be both oppressed (by Islamophobia) and oppressor (to Muslim women fleeing domestic violence).²⁷

If oppression is not the property of any given group in any consistent way, then it makes little sense to engage in a competition to identify which group is most oppressed. Instead we need to identify the ways in which 'race', class, gender and sexuality interface with specific social contexts to create particular types of exclusion. We need also to build a politics of resistance which has a heightened sensitivity to its own tendencies to create new marginal sub-

26 Mirza.

27 Patel.

jects. A womanist lens enables us to analyse the impact of fractures within black communities, not just of ethnicity and religion, but of gender, class and sexuality. Such an analysis might lead us to concur with June Jordan, when she states that gender/race identity politics 'may be enough to get started on something, but I doubt very much whether it's enough to get anything finished',²⁸ but it would also remind us that a religious or ethnic identity is no more a guarantor of a progressive political perspective than a black identity. Or, rather, it would remind us that embracing a black political identity (as opposed to a racial one) arises out of a radicalizing process which may indeed lead to a more alert and critical politics.

Finally, a womanist lens reminds us that complex or multiple identities are not a thing of the 1990s. Black women have been grappling with multiple identities and allegiances—around 'race', gender and, in particular, sexuality—since the early days of the black women's movement. Forming a collective black identity was, for many women, a conscious choice which expressed an important aspect of their politics without erasing other allegiances. As a new generation of young black people make choices about their identifications and allegiances, it is essential that engaged scholars provide nuanced and historically accurate accounts of anti-racist legacies, so that the emergent politics is informed by important interventions from the margins of black subjectivity.

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28 Cited in P. Parmar, 'Black feminism: the politics of articulation', in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1990).