'Multicultures', 'multiracisms' and young people

Contradictory legacies of Windrush

Anne Phoenix

Anne Phoenix *looks at the complex approaches both black and white people adopt in making sense of their identities and identifications.*

The fiftieth anniversary of the arrival in Britain, in 1948, of the troopship *Empire Windrush* inspired both celebrations of, and reflections on, the meanings and experiences of Caribbean migration to Britain. The very attention given to the *Windrush* in the British media underlined a crucial change in British society over the last 50 years: from the assumption of monoethnicity to being undeniably and inextricably 'multiracial' and 'multiethnic'. Those who were, in the 1960s (and even in the 1970s), constructed as 'dark strangers' are now represented throughout British society and make crucial contributions both economically and culturally. It is the beneficial nature of these contributions that was a major impetus for the coining of the term 'Cool Britannia' as a new and more useful way to characterise British national identity while giving recognition to its multiethnicity. Alongside

changes in media and cultural representations, there have also been changes (although less marked) in research representations. In the last decade, there have also been challenges to research constructions of British African Caribbean people as 'newcomers' and 'outsiders' whose difference from the white majority is inevitably problematic. While such constructions are still common, there are an increasing number of research projects which treat inclusion of people from a variety of ethnic groups as 'normal'.

Yet, while the fiftieth anniversary of the *Windrush* is appropriately cause for celebration and recognition of the dynamism of British society and peoples, it also allows an engagement with the contradictions in this optimistic and romantic story. For the children, grandchildren (and great-grandchildren) of the Windrush generation have not been engaged in straightforward progress from exclusion and being the objects of racism to inclusion and multiculturalism and celebration. Instead, their experiences are, and have been, riven with contradictions of what Phil Cohen has termed 'multicultures' and 'multiracisms'.'

This article identifies some of these contradictions as they relate to young people. It argues that, while the pervasiveness of racisms does not constitute an optimistic story, the contradictions between multicultures and multiracisms both open space for disruption of racisms and create a sometimes uneasy and sometimes productive tension between young people's desire for ownership, or sharing, of particular forms of cultural expression and syncretism.

'Multicultures' and 'Multiracisms'

It has long been established that the current dynamism and vitality of British cultures have been fuelled by diaspora experience, and the consequences which this has in terms of setting in train processes which unsettle, recombine, hybridise and 'cut-and-mix'. At the same time many who write on culture and racialisation also engage with the theoretical implications of the contradictions between the vibrancy of hybridisation and the pervasiveness of racism. It is, however, less clear how this contradiction is lived out in practice? How do multicultures and multiracisms coexist in young people's daily lives?

1.   R Cohen, 'Perversions of Inheritance: studies in the making of multi-racist Britain'. In Cohen, P and Bains, H. (eds) *Multi-Racist Britain,* Macmillan, London 1988.

Avtar Brah's notion of 'diaspora space' is potentially helpful to the addressing of these questions in relation to the Windrush descendants. As a concept, 'diaspora space' foregrounds both ethnicised and gendered identities. According to Brah, it constitutes the space in which all our genealogies are entangled - those with known histories of migration and those without. It articulates with difference and is the site where diaspora, border and the politics of location intersect. It is, therefore, in 'diaspora space' that the contradictions of multicultures and multiracisms are played out and where binarised categories of racialised and ethnicised belonging and outsider status are reproduced *and* disrupted.[2] These contradictions are an inherent part of 'diaspora space', are part of young people's social geographies and everyday practices.

'Cool Britannia' as ethnically plural and racialised exclusion

Mark Leonard, who coined the term Cool Britannia (once beloved of Tony Blair and other members of the British Labour government), argued that there is a pressing need to renew British identity, and the stagnant image of Britain held in many other countries. Just as British identity was (re)constructed by the Victorians on the basis of its strengths at the time, so, at the end of the twentieth century, Britain needs once more to self-consciously rework British identity. According to Leonard, the current strengths around which a new British identity can be forged include multiculturalism and the major contributions made to the economy and culture by 'minorities'. It would appear, then, that the fiftieth anniversary of *Windrush* finds an indisputable acceptance that the cultural contributions of black and Asian people to British society are now indivisible from British culture - a cultural confirmation of the 1970s slogan 'Come what may, we are here to stay!' Indeed, the economic as well as gastronomic importance of the 'Indian take-away', the 'mainstreaming' of Carnival and of 'black music', are evidence that British identities and cultures are now plural and syncretic.

Yet, whatever the rhetoric of 'multicultures', it still is the case that, when asked, many of the 'British public' give responses which indicate that they do

2. A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora,* Routledge, London 1996.
3. See, for example, the surveys commissioned by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (on schoolchildren) reported in June 1998 and by Operation Black Vote and published in September 1998.

not see British society as indisputably multiethnic.' While opinion polls are, in many ways, unsatisfactory measures of attitudes, it does seem that, in practice, it is perfectly possible for 'multicultures' to serve as resources in everyday life while at the same time those who are from ethnic groups other than the white majority continue to be constructed as 'outsiders'. In a study of the identities of young Londoners undertaken by Barbara Tizard and myself, young people gave a variety of accounts about syncretism in youth styles.[4] Some white young people asserted that there were no racialised differences in music or dress:

> I don't think it's directly colour, but I think it's the things, the following and the things that go on - like the way you act and the kind of music you listen to. It's not because you are black, you're white. It's the things that - I mean it's all to do with - it's there for your culture. (Young white woman in group interview).

Others considered that there were racially marked differences in youth style - some of these said that they had, at times, wished to be black in order to be allowed fully to participate in these styles.

> I do sort of remember wishing I was black, so I could sort of be in with the crowd, 'cos I used to sort of be hanging around with a lot of black friends and I was white and sometimes they left me out of it (white young woman).

From most black young people's viewpoints, there were distinctive black and white cultural styles. For some, shared music and dress symbolised unity with other black people and was a powerful focus for identification with blackness as well as a marker of difference from white young people and opposition to racism. Some expressed hostility to white young people who wanted to be part of 'black styles'. This was particularly the case if they considered white entry to black cultural forms to be exploitive appropriation. This tension could be productive in that it spurred on some black young people constantly to create new dance or clothes styles in order to stay 'ahead of, and maintain valued differences

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4. The study of the Social Identities of 14-18 year old Young Londoners was funded by the Department of Health and conducted at the Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education.

from, those white young people who wanted to be like them.

Similar contradictions were evident in relation to discourses of racialised exclusion from, or inclusion within, the British nation. For while the young people did not express unitary views, and most black young people considered that they were British, discourses which constructed whiteness as synonymous with Englishness or Britishness were common. Some young people, both black and white, considered that blackness and Englishness were mutually exclusive.

Contradictions of racialised practices

Old ideas do not disappear but, rather, continue to be part of 'accepted wisdom', even as new ideas gain currency; so this contradictory complex of 'multicultures' and 'multiracisms' is hardly surprising. Indeed, work within psychology[7] which focuses on language (e.g. discourse analysis or a rhetorical approach) indicates how readily reconcilable are contradictory racialised practices in everybody's subjectivities. The following example from Michael Billig's work provides a graphic, racialised example of this:

> Immediately after the interview, conducted at school, this young supporter of a racist party, and of compelling all of 'them' to leave 'our country', was to be seen walking arm in arm with a young Asian girl, chatting and laughing in easy friendship.[3]

Billig's example provides an indication that 'multicultures' and 'multiracisms' can simultaneously operate in 'diaspora space' without, apparently, producing any uncomfortable feelings of inconsistency. This fits with the findings of a study of younger children in mainly white primary schools. Troyna and Hatcher concluded that children routinely use both 'hot' (strategic) and 'cold' (non-strategic) interactional strategies, and sometimes deliberately include racist material in their talk with the interactional goal of hurting and, hence, scoring a point. According to Troyna and Hatcher, this 'hot' name-calling occurs regardless of whether children hold racist or actively anti-racist thematic ideologies.[6]

5. M. Billig, S. Condor, D. Edwards, M. Gane, D. Middleton and A. Radley, Ideological *Dilemmas: A Social Psychology of Everyday Thinking,* Sage, London 1988, p. 106.
6. B. Troyna and R. Hatcher, *Racism in Children's Lives:* A *study of mainly-white primary schools,* Routledge, London 1992.

This ability to sustain contradiction in racialised practices was repeatedly evident in the Social Identities study. Almost all the young people interviewed espoused a strongly egalitarian discourse, in which they argued that everybody was equal and should be treated equally, regardless of 'race', gender and social class. However, many also recognised that there was informal segregation in their schools, as is evident in the quote below from a group interview with ethnically mixed 16- and 17-year-old young women attending an all girls' school.

Q. *Can I ask now about friendships... and whether you have a wide range of friends* ?
A1.   It doesn't matter what colour, race or religion your friends are. I mean you should be friends with them for what they are, not what they look like or (inaudible).

Q. *So what colour are your friends in school?*
A1.   Everything. Someone's colour doesn't matter to me...
A2.   Everyone has said that everyone has got black friends, they've got Turkish friends, they've got all sorts of friends, but when it comes down to it - when you are sitting in assembly, when you're sitting in a big room, there's always the people that stick together. There's the black people. There's the white people.
A3.   Especially in school.
A4.   That is true.

All speak simultaneously - loud and heated but not clear.
A.   Like even in that room outside, there's like all one group sitting on one side and all the others sitting on the other side. I mean they'll talk to each other and they're friends. I'm not saying they don't talk to each other and ignore each other, but it's just there.

Given that young people are differentiated by the 'youth styles' they occupy, it is perhaps not surprising that there is some informal racialised segregation in most schools simply on that basis. In a study of the masculinities of 11-14 year old boys,'

7. This study is currently being conducted by Stephen Frosh, Ann Phoenix and Rob Pattman and is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, grant number L129251015.

some boys claimed that there is more racism among the 11-year-olds who have just started secondary school than among the 14-year-olds. At the same time, they argued that there is 'less mixing' among the 14-year-olds. According to these narratives, 11-year-olds mix more because they are finding their place in school hierarchies; whereas 14-year-olds have established their hierarchies and can, therefore, be egalitarian, while only mixing with those with whom they feel a degree of shared cultural style.

It is not however the case that informal segregation (which is commonly reported in London schools) solely results from differences in youth styles. Indeed, informal segregation is itself contradictory. It limits the syncretism possible, since it reduces opportunities for joint cultural production. And it also allows racisms and mutual suspicion quietly to flourish. Yet, in an atmosphere where some white young people and black young people are mutually wary of each other, they are also reflexive about the contradictions, and pervasiveness, of racialisation. Their accounts provided rationalisations of informal segregation which varied according to their racialised positions:

Q. *Why are you more comfortable with black people?*
A.　　Well I have got a lot more in common with black people because I don't know anything about the whites... and what I do know I don't like, so I wouldn't really be comfortable.

Q.　　*What do you know that you don't like?*
A.　　Well you know - about the racism that is going on, so you know I wouldn't really be comfortable going - because when you go into a room and it is full of white people you don't personally know which one of them is racist or if they are racist. There is a doubt in your mind whether they are going to be racist or not, so you know, until you get to - until I get to know a person, a white person, I don't really - so it takes that bit of time. So I wouldn't really be comfortable unless I know what they are like or how they are (black young woman).

Q.　　*Do you feel more comfortable with white people or black people or does it make no difference?*
A.　　It makes no difference. But when there are a group of black people I do

feci, they seem to, they like, I do feel pressurised. I feel very uncomfortable because they seem to resent - not you being white, but I just think if they're in a group then they must feel pressurised, or I think to myself why do they all go round in a group.' And sometimes I feel slightly threatened because they must be angry that they feel an outcast. I mean surely they must think of themselves and go - you know- go in a group with all black people and I resent that. And if you walk past you think, oh you know - I don't know ' you just - you get vibes from them and you do feel threatened slightly (white young woman).

Informal segregation is not, of course, the only story to be told about racialisation in schools. A feature of 'multicultures' in Britain and the US is the marked increase there has been in the numbers of people of 'mixed-parentage' and in 'mixed' relationships and friendships - some of which are forged at school. However, informal segregation serves to highlight the differentiation of young people's racialised experiences. It also confirms that mixed schooling is not guaranteed to produce any more familiarity and understanding between different ethnicities than it has done between genders.

'Multicultures' and 'multiracisms': so what?

From all the above examples, it seems clear that understandings of the contradictions of'multicultures' and multiracisms' can only be advanced through an engagement with people's own subjective understandings, constructed through their racialised narratives. Simply knowing whether they are white or black, or which schools they go to, tells us little about their positioning within 'diaspora space'.

It might be argued that the contradictions discussed above may be interesting, but they are hardly consequential. After all, social life is riven with contradictions and the Windrush legacy has allowed young people (black and white) to create plural identities, drawing on a range of cultures to do so. However, the 50 years since the *Windrush* arrived in Britain have also been marked by a proliferation of racisms. The repercussions of this are most evident in racist murders such as that of the 18-year-old black young man, Stephen Lawrence, in 1994. More prosaically, they are also evident in the proliferation of racist discourses, and in the ease with which racist name-calling is evoked as

a powerful weapon among children and young people. For example, the working-class white young people (particularly young men) studied by Roger Hewitt produced unashamedly racist discourses, which blamed black people for the economically impoverished circumstances in which the white participants in the study lived.[8]

There has been a backlash against antiracism (on the grounds that it is a dictatorial form of political correctness); and recognition of the complexity of racisms, and the difficulties posed by essentialist conceptions of 'race' and racisms, has made some anti-racist positions untenable; but it continues to be important to confront racisms, while recognising the contradictions and the dynamism of racialisation, and that these contradictions are always expressed through subjectivities.

It may well be that the very contradictions of 'multicultures' and 'multiracisms' can allow space for the disruption of multiracisms. Antaki and Widdicombe argue that social life is 'a continuous display of people's local understandings of what is going on', and that ... 'identity is used in talk: something that is part and parcel of the routines of everyday life, brought off in the fine detail of everyday interaction.'[9]

However, identities are not simply resources to be used in talk; they are also produced through talk - in the narratives we tell ourselves and others:

> We achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use
> of the narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole
> by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing
> story. We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will
> end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to
> our lives. Self, then, is not a static thing or a substance, but a configuring of
> personal events into an historical unity which includes not only what one has
> been but also anticipations of what one will be.[10]

8. R. Hewitt, *Routes of Racism,* Centre for Multicultural Education, Institute of Education, London 1996.
9. C. Antaki and S. Widdicombe, 'Identity as an achievement and as a tool', C. Antaki and S. Widdicombe (eds), Identities *in Talk,* Sage, London 1998.
10. D.Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human* Sciences, State University of New York, Albany 1988, 150.

It is therefore crucially important that local understandings, produced in the narratives of everyday talk, are engaged with as the site in which it is possible to disrupt racisms.

Phil Cohen argues that the young white working-class people he studied attributed the deterioration of their circumstances and neighbourhoods to the black people who had increasingly come to live in the same neighbourhoods:

> It is possible to glimpse here how autobiographies are re-written according to a racist grammar in contexts where the links between growing-up-working-class are getting harder and harder to make in any real terms."

That it is possible to re-write autobiographical narratives lends support to the idea that it is not helpful to think of people in terms as fixed and polarised as racist or not racist; instead attention should be given to racist or anti-racist discourses. The quote from Phil Cohen is, arguably, an optimistic one, since, if it is possible to rewrite autobiographical narratives in a more racist direction, it must also be possible to rewrite them in an anti-racist direction. But the ways in which it might be possible to provide the resources for children and young people to do this are not straightforwardly clear. Nevertheless, as Roger Hewitt argues in *Routes of Racism,* engagement with what young people actually say when expressing racist discourses is likely to be a first step. At the same time, opposition to racism is also crucially important, as this quote from a secondary school teacher illustrates:

> I have always thought that my white liberalism was emblazoned all over me, but I will never forget the response of a black girl, whom I had taught for two years, to an outburst of mine condemning racists. She simply said 'I never knew you were one of us miss', because she had missed all the subtle responses and statements I had ever made concerning prejudice.[12]

As a descendant of the Windrush generation, I have welcomed the media's

11. R Cohen, *Rethinking the Youth Question,* MacMillan, London 1997, p. 162.
12. B. Hunter, M. Simons and J. Stephens, Teaching against racism: literature and knowledge', *The English Magazine,* 13, 5-11, 1984, p. 10.

marking *of* the event as one of celebration, and the representation of black British people as multifaceted, and as having agency, rather than as passive victims or incomprehensible outsiders. However, the fiftieth anniversary is also quietly commemorated by those who seek new ways of representing the ways in which we are all connected in 'diaspora space' because of the Windrush event (and the historic relations which fashioned it). The representations which result from analysis of the contradictions and complexities of multicultures and multiracisms are a notable legacy of the *Windrush*. More such representations are needed to disrupt multiracisms and to celebrate multicultures as both shift and change, in ways we cannot yet imagine, over the next fifty years.

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