Ethnicity, Gender and Social Change

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11 When the Mirror Speaks: The Poetics and Problematics of Identity Construction for Métisse Women in Bristol

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We can try to deprive ourselves of our realities but in the darkest hour of the night, when no one else is around and we have gone to the loo to spend a penny, we must look in the mirror. Eventually that moment comes when we look in the mirror and we see a Black woman...

Sharon

Sharon is a woman in her thirties who grew up in racial isolation in care in the north of England without either her White English mother or her Black Ghanaian father. In an English society which codes its citizens on the basis of their colour, Sharon must reconcile the psychic split between a genealogical sense of herself which is Ghanaian and English and a racialized self which is Black and White. As her statement reveals, the psychological struggle begins when she realizes that bi-racialized[1] English society dictates that she embrace her Blackness and deny her Whiteness.

Her sentiments reflect the profound existential paradox facing individuals whose lineages historically situate them as grandchildren of both the colonizers and the colonized. I refer to such individuals as *métis(se)*. In England, the multiplicity of terms in circulation to describe individuals who straddle Black and White racial borders drove me in search of a new formulation. More often than not, received terminology either privileges presumed 'racial' differences ('mixed race') or obscures the complex ways in which being *métis(se)* involves both the negotiation of constructed 'Black'/'White' racial categories as well as the celebration of converging cultures, continuities of generations and overlapping historical traditions. The lack of consensus as to which term to use as well as the limitations of this discursive privileging of 'race' at the expense of

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generational, ethnic, and cultural concerns, led me to *métis(se)* and *métissage*.

In the French African (Senegalese) context, in its conventional masculine (*métis*) and feminine (*métisse*) forms, *métis(se)* refers to someone who, by virtue of parentage, embodies two or more world views, for example, French mother and Black Senegalese father (Diop, 1992; Koubaka, 1993). However, it is not exclusively a 'racial' term used to differentiate individuals with one Black parent and one White parent from those with two Black or White parents. *Métis(se)* also pertains to people with parents from different ethnic/cultural groups within a country, for example in Nigeria, Ibo and Yoruba, or in Britain, Scottish and English. By extension, *métissage* is a mind set or a shorthand way to describe the theorizing associated with *métis(se)* subjectivities: oscillation, contradiction, paradox, hybridity, polyethnicities, multiple reference points, 'belonging nowhere and everywhere'. *Métissage* also signals the process of opening up hybrid spaces and looking at the sociocultural dynamics of 'race', gender, ethnicity, nation, class, sexuality, and generation and their relationship to the mechanics of power.

Sharon is one of twenty five *métis(se)* individuals who were participants in my two-year-long ethnographic study based in Bristol, England.[2] Their individual and collective voices represent the significant part of a greater multigenerational whole comprising people in England with Black continental African or African Caribbean fathers and White British or European mothers. By virtue of the aforementioned contradictory bi-racialized classification in Britain, *métis(se)* individuals' narratives of self and identity both reflect the gender, generational, racial and ethnic tensions of English society and are located outside it in an imagined but not imaginary 'grey' space. That is, the ways in which the women and men I worked with tell their stories are as newfangled *gri-ot(te)s*.[3] They simultaneously construct dual narratives, which embody individual and collective historical consciousness. They tell their own lived stories. At the same time, their memories preserve and reinterpret past senses of past interwoven cultures. In his essay, 'The Choices of Identity,' Denis-Constant Martin talks about identity as narrative (1995, pp. 7–8):

The narrative borrows from history as well as from fiction and treats the person as a character in a plot. The person as a character is not separable from its life experiences, but the plot allows for the re-organization of the events which provide the ground for the experiences of the person/character...Narrative identity, being at the same time

fictitious and real, leaves room for variations on the past – a plot can always be revised – and also for initiatives in the future.

These *métis(se)* narratives of identity provide scathing sociopolitical commentaries and cultural critiques of contemporary English African Diasporic[4] life and its manifest bi-racialized problematics.

However, the specific focus of this chapter is the differents ways in which cultural memories shape contradictory meanings of 'race',[5] self and identity for six women who by virtue of birth transgress boundaries and challenge essentialized constructions of self, identity, place and belonging. Their specific lived realities epitomize psychosocial struggles to make sense of explicit epistemological tensions between subjectivity and alterity. In particular, drawing on their testimonies, I will address the ways in which six *métisse* women confront problematic tensions between being *métisse* and becoming Black. English and Ghanaian philosopher Anthony Appiah (1992, p. 178) formulates an ethos of identities politics which reflects this complexity:

identities are complex and multiple and grow out of a history of changing responses to economic, political, and cultural forces, almost always in opposition to other identities. . . . that they flourish despite what I earlier called our 'misrecognition' of their origins; despite that is, their roots in myths and lies . . . there is, in consequence, no large place for reason in the construction – as opposed to the study and management of identities.

The principal narrators are: Similola who has a White German mother and a Black Tanzanian father and Ruby, whose mother is middle class White English and her father middle class Black Nigerian, both of whom were brought up in children's homes; Yemi and Bisi, who are sisters, grew up in a middle class family in Ibadan, Nigeria with both their White Northumberland English mother and their Black Yoruba-Nigerian father; and another set of sisters, Akousa and Sarah who came of age in a working class, predominantly Black African Caribbean community in Liverpool, with their orphaned White Irish mother and without their Black Bajan (from Barbados) father. Each woman's mother is at once White and Irish, English or German. Their fathers are both Black and either Bajan, Nigerian or Tanzanian.

Accordingly, as their stories reveal, most of their identities work concerns the management and negotiation of polyethnicity[6] in social and cultural contexts which frequently demand that they choose an essentialized Black identity. This is despite the fact that by virtue of lineage,

they can and do situate themselves within at least two specific and yet over-lapping historical narratives.

SETTING THE STAGE

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Jewish sociologist Erving Goffman's seminal work on self-formation and presentation as performance, he uses the analogy of the theatre to describe the ways in which individuals manage their identities in social milieux. Accordingly, there is 'front stage' behaviour and 'backstage' behaviour. In the equally important treatise *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), Martinican psychiatrist Frantz Fanon exposes the psychic blurring of self and other as Black ('Negro') identities are distorted by the lenses of the White imperialist gaze. Similarly, in *Shadow and Act*, Ralph Ellison (1953, p. 47) describes the ways in which African American entertainers, 'in order to enact a symbolic role basic to the underlying drama of American society, assume a ritual mask'. Many years later English and Jamaican cultural historian Becky Hall (1996, p. 164) re-enacts a similar feminist psychodrama: 'Fascinated by the materiality of black skin and the discursive production of "race", it is through my own body that I investigate the fantasies of blackness and whiteness troubling the English cultural imagination that is also my own'. I incorporate all of these voices and argue that as social actresses the six *griottes* perform different dialectical dramas within the private domain among their immediate and extended polyethnic and polyracial families and in the realm of the public amid the essentializing and homogenizing gazes of society writ large.

IS ENGLISH SYNONYMOUS WITH ESSENTIAL WHITENESS?

While I was in the midst of conducting the initial research between 1990–92, there was an advertising campaign for the sweets 'Smarties'. Billboards and sweets wrappers read: 'Find out the real secret to the white Smarties.' The answer was: 'They are white all the way through . . . they are made with white chocolate'. An analogous assumption would be that only people fitting the limited prototypic phenotypic description of a White person can be English. Everyone else will have to make do with British. In addition, the former is a citizen and the latter a mere subject. For example, artist and cultural critic Olu Oguibe (1994, p. xvii) states: 'That one is born in Hackney, London of parents born in

Hackney, London themselves, is never sufficient proof of belonging for people of African descent in Britain'.

In the same way as Black sons and daughters of the English-African Diaspora are denied English citizenship *métis(se)* people are denied access to an English identity which they can rightfully claim on the basis of ancestry. The ongoing and unresolved political debates are: first, should British-born Black people, *métis(se)* or with both parents from either continental Africa or the Caribbean, demand to be included under the pre-existing English umbrella? Alternatively, as children of a global African Diaspora, should we carve out a separate space wherein we acknowledge links and foster social, cultural and political allegiances with other Diasporic constituents in the United States, Canada, Brazil, the Caribbean among other points on the globe? From the vantage point of agency and not victimization, is there some way of reconciling our subjugated connections with former empire which will then enable us, whether *métis(se)* or not, to wear proudly the badge of belonging to/in England? Most importantly, are White English citizens prepared to redefine what it means to be English in order to include on equal footing both *métis(se)* as well as citizen children of so-called immigrant parents, whose natal origins are South Asian, Caribbean, or continental African? As we approach the year 2000, we as a nation have yet to crack these conundrums.

AKOUSA: IS BEING DARK-SKINNED THE PRIMARY CRITERION FOR ESSENTIAL BLACKNESS?

Akousa is Irish-Bajan and grew up in Liverpool amid a strong working class Black African Caribbean community and with her White Irish mother and her brother and sister. She is a Rasta⁷ and yet not everyone sees her as a Rasta. She sees herself as a 'light-skinned' Black woman, and yet not everyone sees her as Black. In testimony number one, Akousa relives the psychological trauma brought on by the differential meanings and politicized rankings of skin colour in White and Black communities:

when I was younger it hurt. I used to wish, God why didn't you make me darker? Why couldn't I have been dark like my sister? When I go out in the sun, I don't go dark like my sister, I go a nice golden brown. My sister goes dark. She goes black and there's me. It was a bad problem when I was in my late teens, middle twenties, tryin' to come to

terms with bein' a light-skinned Black person. Some people are goin' to point that fact out to me a lot more. I thought frigg it man, I am who I am. I am light, so what, look at Africa. From the North to the South, you're going to find people of many shades. We come in many shades. Some are sallow lookin', some are dark lookin', some are white like milk bottles. Whereas, Black people have different shades, why can't I be a different shade?

At the end of the day, I am who I am. That's the way Jah made me. Why should I try and change because people want to define who I am and what colour I should be? Now, I don't care. It doesn't bother me as it did. I think I've become stronger about who I am. As I get older, I get firmer. As I read more and gather more knowledge about myself, I become a lot stronger. If a White person starts tryin', I can answer them back.

If there's a Black person who has a problem with me being light-skinned, me I just raise my head up in the air, straighten my back up and I walk proudly down the street. I don't hang my head no more, which I used to do. Especially in the seventies when it went from bein' light is the in ting to bein' if you weren't as dark as ebony you had no chance bein' Black basically. It was goin' from one extreme to the other. There were other Black people where to them I was too light-lookin' and to them I was White. Also the fact that I had a White mother. I think with a lot of Black people who have both Black parents, in a sense you have to prove yourself that you are Black. That you are not, one, sittin' on the fence and two, don't think you are White. Once you get that across to them, Black people tend to accept you more because they then realize where you are comin' from.

I do know people myself who have one White parent and considered themselves to be White. I also know Black people who have both Black parents who considered themselves to be more White. I know other Black kids who were adopted into White families and consider themselves to be White. I think at the end of the day, when you look at it, Black is a state of consciousness. It's got nothing to do with how light or how dark your skin is. It's got to do with what you are inside, and that's what Blackness is about.

Akousa's commentary brings to the forefront what I refer to as the social chameleon phenomenon (Ifekwunigwe, forthcoming). *Métis(se)* people with so-called 'ambiguous' phenotypes, that is, very fair complexions; blue, green or hazel eyes; more 'pointed/sharp' facial features; light coloured or straight hair can 'change colour' from one social

context to the next (Russell *et al.*, 1992; hooks, 1992). Here Akousa has described herself or has been described as *métis(se)*, White, and Black. Her testimony builds a strong case for a new theory of identities formation and transformation for *métis(se)* people which takes into account the frequently overlooked and infinitely complex impress of circumstances, for example, growing up in isolation, lived tensions between phenotype and genotype, growing-up with or without one's Black or White parent, and so on (Gilroy, 1992).

SARAH: NARRATIVES OF SPACE, PLACE, AND BELONGINGS

Irish-Bajan Sarah is Akousa's younger sister and her memories of her childhood and adolescence in Liverpool are remarkably different from Akousa's. Akousa frames her experiences in terms of the important people who passed through her life as well as the psychosocial and political trajectories she follows on the never-ending journey towards selfdefinition. On the other hand, Sarah's recollections of her life are interwoven with numerous vivid descriptions of the houses she and her family lived in and they become veritable sign posts along her journey:

When I was small, I grew up in one house with my Mum and my sister and my brother. I have no real memories of that. But I remember me Mum talkin' 'bout that period. Saying that every Wednesday she used to have to decide what to spend the pennies on. Whether to go out and buy a few cigarettes or to buy a little extra food. She said that Wednesdays she used to always resort to makin' dumplins with flour and water and cookin' them on the fire. Then after that, we went to live with my Aunt and Uncle which wasn't far. I'm talkin' mainly about houses that we lived in. 'Cause this is the period of my kind of growin' up in Liverpool. I suppose we moved about five times from the time I was born until the time I was fourteen. So, those periods of movin' kind of brought in a lot of changes, and with each move, materially we became a lot better off as well. So, we went to live with my Auntie and Uncle. My Auntie and Uncle are from Guyana.

I remember that Mama used to live over the road. She was from Jamaica. She used to smoke a pipe, and she used to wear a wig. But it was more like a hat,' cause she used to wear it on the side of her head, like this. It was never on in the right way. She had chickens in the back yard. She was a big woman that's why everyone called her Mama. 'Cause that's what people used to call big women. She used to beat the

children with a strap. She had about seven children, and they were from babies up to twenty years old. She used to give them licks when they were bad, but we all used to get licks when we were bad. It wasn't a matter of, oh you don't beat your children. That's just what you did. You beat them when they were bad.

I could never understand her husband, 'cause he spoke in patois. And it was really strong. It was really difficult to understand when he used to talk to me. I think that was quite a nice time in my life. Just like runnin' and playin' with their children and comin' back and bein' in the house.

Most of the *griottes*' identity narratives are constructed in terms of turning points – leaving school, first love relationship, getting married, having children, and so on. However, in light of what I refer to as Additive Blackness[8] the awakening of Black consciousness is also a milestone that each of the women reaches at different stages and in remarkably different ways. How they articulate and contextualize their first encounters with Black consciousness is most significant.

In the case of the two sisters from Liverpool, Akousa links her own burgeoning politics to her struggle as 'a light-skinned Black person' to find a place in social contexts and political movements which, at times, seem to exclude her. Both Akousa and her sister point to both fictive Black African Caribbean kin in their community and two Black women, who functioned as cultural surrogates for them during their adolescence, as the major conduits for instilling positive cultural views about Blackness. Here Sarah talks about Akousa's sighting in their corner shop which triggered the beginnings of their emergent Black identity:

At home, Black Power was just comin' in and my sister went to the corner shop and seen her first afro and came home and said, 'Oh, I've seen some afros in the shop. Oh, they're really brilliant.' These group of women with afros, she's sayin' how brilliant they were. At home, we were startin' this awareness of Black power and Black identity. We always related to bein' Black, because all of the signals we got from when we were growin' up, we were nothin' else. We definitely were not White. Even when we were growin' up, my Mum would get angry with us, she always used to call us 'Black bastards' It was always that we were 'Black' this or 'Black' that. When the Black Power started comin' along and all the positiveness that brought at that time was like brilliant. Like somethin' we could really feel good about.

RUBY: ACCEPTING BLACKNESS WHEN PRAYING DOESN'T MAKE ONE WHITE

A 'race': 'a compact homogeneous population of one blood ancestry and lineage' (Crummell, 1862). English Guyanese cultural theorist Paul Gilroy (1993a, pp. 195–7) refers to 'race' as 'kinship where ... the family is the approved natural site where ethnicity and racial culture are reproduced ... and in this authoritarian pastoral patriarch, women are usually identified as the agents and means of this process of cultural reproduction.' These two definitions serve my analytical purposes well although operationalizing them within the familial contexts I researched produces a major paradox: apparently, White English women are mothering Black British children.

As previously mentioned, many factors influence the ways in which women accomplish this task – for example, the circumstances surrounding the birth of the *métis(se)* child, the prevailing attitudes towards mixed relationship, class background, and so on. Even though both her birth mother and other blood relatives were alive, Ruby, who is Black, Nigerian and White English was brought up in a children's home outside London until she left at age sixteen. Their rationale for placing her there was they wanted her to 'have a proper growing up experience'. The overwhelming shame surrounding her birth – her father was married and Black continental African – made it impossible for both Ruby's birth mother and grandmother to fully accept her. Here, Ruby recounts some of the memories associated with growing up politically Black and socially and culturally English in a White English children's home:

In terms of 'race', gender and all that sort of thing, the home that I went to was a girls only home so it was a total female environment; the staff were female the kids were female and they were from two to eighteen. It was a very large place. I suppose there were about thirty five kids there. I think my memory is that I was the first Black child there, and when I went there I was obviously the youngest child. I was much petted to the extent that my first bedroom was to share the Deputy Matron's room. I had my cot in her room and she was a sort of substitute Mum person. That was until I was nearly four. I stayed in her bedroom until as it happened two other children came who were also Black. They weren't mixed race, and they were there because both of their parents were studying. In fact, eventually they left. One was two, one was four. I was very, very, very cross with them. They usurped me. I was

quickly out of the matron's bedroom and into the usual dormitory, and the younger of these two children took my place in the cot in the matron's room. They were much darker than me, much tighter hair and people thought they were much more authentic than I was.

Ruby's description of the two Nigerian girls who are placed in the home because their parents are studying is a good example of the different kinds of mirroring that take place when *métis(se)* people are describing themselves in relation to other people. Ruby refers to herself as Black. However, over the years, she has internalized many of the racist stereotypes about Black people. For example, in describing the two Nigerian girls, one of whom 'usurped' her place in the coveted Deputy Matron's bedroom, she points to their 'darker' skin and their 'tighter' hair as markers of their more than her 'authenticity'. Given that the two girls are Nigerian, Ruby has collapsed notions of Blackness and Africanness. Authentic, meaning they are much closer to racialist and essentialist notions of what Black/African people should look like. Hence, she perceives them as being more acceptable and appropriate in a conditional and objectified sense. By internalizing the narrow possibilities for Africanness/Blackness, she has also cancelled herself out. She has then forced herself into the corners of marginality and difference. Ruby continues:

So, I won't say that I hated them, but I certainly looked askance at them. Of course, the three of us were still the only Black people in the place and it was around that time I do remember thinking I would rather be White. I'd had enough of being Black. I certainly didn't get into the disturbed scrubbing my skin in the bath with bleach or soap behavior, but I used to go to my bedroom at night and pray the Lord to turn me White. In the morning, I used to look and see and I wasn't. So, I don't know, that didn't last for very long, but I can remember it so it must have gone on at some point around that time.

When these other little kids came and usurped me, after some time I decided, well I've had enough of being Black. The White kids seem to have a much nicer time. Us Black ones are always singled out. I went through that little period and then came to the realization very quickly that my skin was black. There was no point praying to the bloody Lord to take it away. 'Cause there was nothing to be done, that was the way it was. I think that was my first lesson in racial awareness. From that time, there was a sense in which I always accepted that I was Black.

With the same results as métis(se) children who rub themselves raw in the bath hoping to turn White, Ruby prayed before going to bed each night that she would become White. She would wake up the next morning only to discover that her prayers had not been answered. Both 'White-washing' attempts stem from the same destructive source. Circulating in a métis(se) child's mind from a very early age are public negative messages about Blackness and implicitly and explicitly positive ones about elusive Whiteness. These all often shame the child or adolescent into self-destruction – a psychologist colleague recounted her experience working with a young métis man who had literally painted himself white with rage – one of the métis griot participants attacked all the White nurses in the psychiatric hospital where he was involuntarily detained.

Over time, these forces eat away at the psyche. Without ample space for (self) intervention, self-reclamation or redemption, these wounds cannot heal. The number of métis(se) project participants who at some point have attempted suicide, battled with alcohol or substance abuse, have been admitted involuntarily or voluntarily to psychiatric facilities, or who have simply been in crisis tells me that the seeds of self-hate and confusion planted in childhood bear bountiful fruits of despair and anger in adulthood.

SIMILOLA: DRESSING 'THE PART'

Black Tanzanian and White German Similola grew up in a Welsh children's home wherein she was made to feel that being White and Whiteness itself were the ideal standards by which she should measure her self worth. In the long run, she knew she could never be completely White and being White-identified always seemed to lead to disappointment and rejection for her. Here she describes a strategy she devised for coping with her ambivalence associated with Blackness and Whiteness:

I decided, I'm going to have a Black day or a White day. My White day I was ... I'd dress differently for starters. I'd usually wear jeans on my White days. I used to wear jeans because I thought it's more acceptable amongst White students to wear jeans. It seemed like kind of a White uniform in a way and you didn't see many Black girls wearing jeans at that time. So, I'd wear jeans, and whatever else – the bits and pieces that go with it – tee shirts, whatever. Then, on my Black days,

I'd wear flowery skirts and very bright clothes and people used to say, 'God' and I actually got to quite enjoy it. It sounds very silly at that time. I'm not sure if it affected my behaviour in any way. At that phase, I was more outgoing and I tended to be a bit more – to let more of myself show, and not be so self-conscious. Because it was my Black day and I'd think: Oh, I can get away with these things in front of White people because they don't expect Black people to act like them so I can be a bit more outrageous than I normally would. In the end, I couldn't cope with both of these identities. I'd decide the night before. Not necessarily one day ... sometimes it would be like, I'd enjoy my Black day so much on one Monday and I'd think ... it must have been all psychological, I don't think so totally, but I used to notice people treated me differently as well and they reacted towards me in a different way.

To me it was something to do with acknowledging my Blackness. To me, I thought, I can't be Black if I don't wear bright coloured clothes. I had this period of going round dressed all in black coloured clothes. I thought if I wore black clothes all the time, I wouldn't be noticed. It wasn't like now where people wear black clothes all the time. It was the time when black wasn't even vaguely fashionable. It was only worn for funerals and that was it. I got into this wearing black clothes thing thinking I'd be totally unnoticed. My whole wardrobe was full of black clothes. To me, it was an even greater step to suddenly switch into really bright – 'cause I'd got so comfortable with black. Even though people do notice you it's what you yourself feel. I used to feel that when I wore black I was totally insignificant and totally unnoticed. It suited me at that time to be like that and to just fade into the background and not be noticed for any reason.

The giant leap into brightness for me was so huge that I used to dare myself. I'd go into shops and buy very, very bright coloured clothing and then dare myself in the evening to put it on the next day. I'd say, 'God, are you gonna wear that tomorrow or not?' Sometimes I would sometimes I wouldn't. Now, I don't even, I don't want to try and dress in a Black way, just because I want to identify with being Black. 'Cause to me now that's so superficial anyway, there is so much more to it than that and I don't feel the need for that kind of thing anymore. People have to accept me for what I am and if they don't it's just tough.

The way Similola describes her 'Black days/White days' scheme is similar to the ways in which métis(se) people who are 'trying-on' being

Black for the first time oscillate uncomfortably between the two. Clothes supposedly being an extension or reflection of one's inner self this binary dress scheme points to the notion that one's appearances determine the way one is categorized and there are essentialized 'Black' and 'White' ways of dressing/being.

YEMI: RE-DEFINING 'THE ISSUES'

A popular assumption and one that is reinforced in much of the primarily American psychological and sociological literature on identity formation is that being *métis(se)* is a tragic condition requiring lots of sympathy and pathologizing.[9] Much of the content of the *griottes'* testimonies does support the notion that being *métis(se)* in a racially polarized society is a painful, challenging, and frequently contradictory existence. Yemi, whose mother is White English and father Black Yoruba from Nigeria grew up in Ibadan, Nigeria in a middle class family where both her White English and Black Nigerian relations accepted her. What Yemi has to say about her family of origin does not really differ from family dynamics which play themselves out in contexts which are not *métis(se)*. As such, Yemi succeeds in normalizing *métis(se)* family life and strife. However, her narratives are also in keeping with a prevailing theme which is the impress of the White mother or the White mother surrogate in the transmission of White English culture, in all its variations. Even if the Black father is physically present, as was the case in Yemi's family, White English cultural codes are frequently reified at the expense of Black continental African or African Caribbean referents in all their complex manifestations. From linguistic silences to dietary omissions, more often than not it is Black/African/Caribbean cultures which are subverted. Back to my Additive Blackness model, if *métis(se)* individuals have been denied access to this aspect of their heritage they may compensate by going through a 'super-Black', 'super-continental African' or 'super-African Caribbean' phase. Until they can effectively merge these disparate identities, their performances of self may simply be caricatures of racialized externally imposed, essentialized and media manufactured representations of Black/continental African/African Caribbean people.

In Yemi's case, as an adolescent a serious argument with her mother made Yemi attempt suicide. At that point, her Nigerian father intervened and took over the exclusive parenting role. Consequently, Yemi was now in a position wherein she had access to her father's Yoruba

culture which had previously been perceived as male and from which she had been excluded. In fact, in kinship terms, Yemi refers to herself as 'her father's son.' Nevertheless, one cannot always assume that as *métis(se)* individuals pass through various life stages their only significant issues relate to racial, ethnic and cultural identity. Here, Yemi's expressed discomfort with the size of her breasts serves as a powerful critique of one-dimensional approaches to very complex sociocultural phenomena – identities politics:

The only thing I wished for was my bust to be smaller. That was all I ever worried about. If I could just have a smaller bust, I'd be fine. But that never happened so I guess it's not going to. That was my terrible thing as a teenager. I was like everybody else. My breasts started to grow at eleven. They just didn't stop. Everybody else's breasts stopped growing at eleven and a half. Mine went on growing. When I was thirteen, I was thirty eight inches in a D cup. I didn't know anyone with a bust this big that was a grown-up. It was really really terrible. My mother didn't understand. She would say things like: 'When you get older it will settle down.' Settle down to what? My mother wasn't large-breasted; not as big as I was. She's a fatter person and I was thin with this bust. Just a bust and some glasses. You'd see me coming. You'd see the boobs, the glasses on top. Finish. That's me. The only good thing was that the hips were wide. So that thirty eight was thirty eight also in hips.

All the things you can't imagine that I couldn't wear. You cannot go without a bra on. The funny little skimpy tops with just a little strap that every teenager had on. I couldn't wear them because I'd have this massive bra strap. The fact that my older sister Kemi had a large bust didn't really help because hers wasn't as big as mine. She was thirty six, which is still human. I was thirty eight. This could have been the reason why I got a lot of unwelcome attention. At least that what my friends, my really catty friends at university used to say to me: 'It's the boobs'.

BISI: RACISM IN OUR FAMILIES OF ORIGIN OR NOWHERE TO HIDE

Racism is most difficult to swallow when it is dished out by members of one's own family. Here, Bisi, who is Yemi's younger sister, talks about how she coped with her own White English mother's racism:

A lot of the modern consciousness I have of being African and being Black, which is not the same thing, is probably in spite of my mother. Being Black in the sense that I feel now, that would be in spite of her. It's not something she agrees with. But you must remember that when she went to Nigeria she was in her twenties. She spent her formative years there, not here. She has very little knowledge of how racism operates and how it affects people – American, Caribbean, and African. The sort of feeling that there is the unity there, consciousness. One can get something from it and one owes something to it. She would say things like, 'Why do you want to put yourself on the side of those who are feeling victimized? Put yourself on the winning side.' She would stress this to us very much that we have an English family and English roots, and some heritage from them as well which is bannered. It's funny though, when I started relaxing about it and owning up with that admission, then that's almost when I started making Mbari.[10] And really finding that, yes, there is a lot of English, but there is also a lot of African.

BEGINNINGS BY WAY OF CONCLUDING REMARKS

Overall, the six *métisse griottes'* rememberances, located in both colonial and postcolonial contexts, shed light on the complexities of African and African Caribbean Diasporic social and cultural life too often distorted by historians. They also successfully re-frame much of the racially polarized and essentialized negativity which usually dominates most depictions of our lived experiences. Their transnational identities represent both their family constellations as well as their individual experiences. These transnationalities challenge the very notion of the English-African Diaspora as a static and unitary formation, one which obviates cultural, national, ethnic, regional, and class differences, among others and, of course, ignores inter-racial collaborations.

By naming their gendered, class-bound, regionally specific and generation-centred experiences as those of *métisse* women, the *griottes'* personal stories become political testimonies. They re-insert themselves as active subjects, creating their own place in the re-telling of English-African Diaspora histories. A mosaic of cultures and histories is emblematic of their multiple reference points. This multicultural and diachronic scheme reflects and cannot be separated from the complex realities of all postcolonial, transnational people in the English-African Diaspora.

Akousa, Sarah, Ruby, Similola, Yemi and Bisi are all products of history, the by-products of colonialism and imperialism. Their Black fathers are from Nigeria, and Barbados formerly under British colonial rule, as well as Tanzania, formerly under the auspices of Germany. Their White mothers are Irish, English, and German. The unresolved postcolonial struggles between Africa and Europe, Blackness and Whiteness, Black man and White woman are all permanently inscribed on the faces of these *métisse* daughters.

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NOTES

1. The irrational principle underpinning racial classification in England wherein one is subjectively codified as either 'Black' or 'White' and never the twain shall meet.

2. Using 'ethnic' categories, the 1991 government census attempted to quantify the number of 'non-White' people in Britain. According to 1991 figures from the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, in Bristol, out of a total population of 376,146 'ethnic minorities' constitute 3.6 per cent and the 'Other' category, which may include *métis(se)* people, comprises 1.6 per cent. However, the categorization scheme was flawed in its conflation of race, ethnicity, and nationality and discriminatory in its homogenization of peoples from continental Africa and the Caribbean. This classification system is even more problematic and thus inaccurate in its attempt to quantify multiple generations of *métis(se)* people in Britain. With specific reference to *métis(se)* individuals, see Ifekwunigwe (1997a) for a full discussion of the 1991 census's failed attempts to make objective what is ostensibly a subjective signifier. Also, see Phoenix and Owen (1996) and Owen (1996) for additional critiques of the 1991 census in relation to the *métis(se)* community. Incidentally, as a postcript, the year 2001 census is said to include two new categories 'Black British' and 'Mixed Ethnic'. In the United

States, *métis(se)* individuals are lobbying for a 'Multiethnic' category on their year 2000 census.

3. A textual strategy which enables me to acknowledge and work with inherent tensions in ethnography between the spoken and the written word. *Griot(te) – griot* (m) and *griotte* (f) is a West African term which describes someone who functions in traditional society, these individuals were part of a caste and learned their craft on an apprenticeship basis. Social change has impacted this institution.

4. The English-African Diaspora conventionally comprises post-Columbian African constituents from the Caribbean, North and Latin America, and continental Africa who find themselves in England for labour, schooling, political asylum and frequently by birth. See Jones, L. (1994) *Bulletproof Diva*, New York: Doubleday; Camper, C. (ed.) (1994) *Miscegenation Blues*, Toronto: Sister Vision; No Collective (1992) *Voices of Rage, Identity and Deliverance*, Berkeley, California: No Press; Maja-Pearce, A. (1990) *How Many Miles to Babylon*, London: Heinemann; Opitz, M. (1991) *Showing Our Colours*, Amherst: Univ. of Mass. Press for examples of *métis(se)* narratives of identities as cultural critique and sociopolitical commentary.

5. In keeping with Gates (1985) among others, I have placed 'race' in quotations to acknowledge the fact that it is a fictional and problematic social and cultural construction and not a biological concept.

6. This signals the complex cultural identities of *métis(se)* people, myself – us with access to multiple and over-lapping ethnic affiliations.

7. A Rastafarian – members of a religious group (often referred to as a 'cult') which originated in Jamaica and who reject western ideas and values ('Babylon') and regard Haile Selassie the former emperor of Ethiopia as divine.

8. That is coming to terms with one's Blackness in a way that the *métis(se)* person starts with her or his cultural foundations and builds forward without having to sever ties with their often White English roots.

9. For the British context, see Tizard and Phoenix (1993) *Black White, or Mixed Race?*, London: Routledge; Alibhai-Brown and Montague (1992) *The Colour of Love*, London: Virago; Wilson, A. (1987) *Mixed Race Children*, London: Allen and Unwin; Benson, S. (1981) *Ambiguous Ethnicity*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press. For comparative American examples, see Root, M. (ed.) (1992) *Racially Mixed People in America*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage; Spickard, P. (1989) *Mixed Blood*, Madison, WI, Univ. of Wisconsin; Zack, N. (1993) *Race and Mixed Race*, Philadelphia: Temple Univ; Funderburg, L. (1994) *Black, White, Other*, New York: William and Morrow.

10. An Ibo art form primarily practiced in Eastern Nigeria. The artist erects shrines to placate the Earth goddess.

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