

The problem of political blackness: lessons from the
Black Supplementary School Movement
Kehinde Andrews

ABSTRACT: The Black Supplementary School Movement has a fifty-year tradition of resisting racism in Britain. Central to the movement is a construction of African Diasporic Blackness that is marginalized in British scholarship. ‘Political blackness’, based on the unity ethnic minority groups, is an important frame of reference in Britain. This article will examine the limitations of ‘political blackness’ in relation to research carried out in the Black Supplementary School Movement that involved interviews with key activists and an archival analysis of documents at the George Padmore Institute. Political blackness is based on an inaccurate understanding of the relationship between multiculturalism and anti-racism; a misreading of the complex and global nature of racism and a non-strategic essentialism. The concept also creates a form non-whiteism, which disempowers ethnic minority communities and works to delegitimize African Diasporic Blackness, which has a tradition of resisting racist oppression.

The Black Supplementary School Movement is an example of grassroots activism resisting racism in the British school system (Andrews 2013; Mirza and Reay 2000). The movement started in the mid-sixties and emerged from the African Caribbean community due to the failures of the school system (Chevannes and Reeves 1989; Reay and Mirza 1997). Concerned parents, teachers, church groups, community organizations and members of the public set up educational provision on the weekends or evenings in order to provide black young people with basic school curricula and black history (Dove 1993). Due to the grassroots nature of the movement, it is impossible to get any accurate picture of the amount of schools, or number of children who have been taught in them. The overall trend is that there was a peak in the movement from the early eighties to mid-nineties, and that the numbers have now significantly declined (Andrews 2014b). Central to the work of the supplementary school movement is the role of Blackness, which underpins the purpose and activism that has taken place (Andrews 2013). This Blackness is rooted in a connection to the African Diaspora and is the glue which holds the movement together. However, in the British sociology of race and ethnicity, blackness is often defined in ways that run contrary to that embraced by the Black Supplementary School Movement and other grassroots activism.

‘Political blackness’ is commonly used in British sociology, which is defined as a term to include ‘African, African-Caribbean, Asian and other visible minority ethnic communities who are oppressed by racism’ (Maylor 2009, 373). When the term itself is not explicit, the concept of political blackness is evident across different theoretical orientations. For example, Delgado and Stefancic (2012, 171) explain that Critical Race Theory is founded on the premise that ‘racial progress is sporadic, and people of color are doomed to experience on infrequent peaks followed by regressions’. Whilst Marxism, in the British context, has understood ethnic minorities to be a racialized class fraction within the wider working class (Miles 1982; Phizacklea and Miles 1980). In British sociology, ethnic minorities have been perceived as the ‘racialised outsider’ (Virdee 2014, 9).

Political blackness has also been historically adopted in professional associations and there has been a recent growth of such organizations (Phillips 2007). Political blackness has been bound up in what Winant (2001, 284) calls an ‘anti-racist solidarity’ which is ‘politically indispensable’. This powerful notion of solidarity has meant that there is often pressure to embrace the politically black perspective and ‘avoid disunity’ amongst minority communities (Phillips 2007, 381). However, the concept of political blackness is limited in both theoretical and practical terms and this paper argues that it is necessary to move beyond the notion.

Drawing on research conducted in the Black Supplementary School Movement, this paper will explore the limitations of political blackness. The legitimacy of African Diasporic Blackness will first be outlined and connected into the work of the supplementary school movement. The paper then considers how the rejection of African Diasporic Blackness in the academy was rooted in part in a disavowal of multiculturalism, which was seen as incommensurate with anti-racist practice. The Black Supplementary School Movement is used as an example of anti-racist work, funded by multiculturalism. Political blackness creates a non-strategic essentialism that is based on connecting people into a political project on the basis of not being white. In order to resist racism it is necessary to build an international conception of racism, which is beyond the scope of political blackness. Blackness, rooted in a connection to the African Diaspora, has produced a politics of resistance that is embodied in the tradition of Black Supplementary Schooling in Britain.

Method

The research in the Black Supplementary School Movement informing this paper involved conducting semi-structured interviews with fourteen people involved in the movement. The participants were based in either London or Birmingham and had to have had a leading role in the running or establishing of a supplementary school. The two cities were chosen as sites of the research partly as a convenience sample with most major cities in Britain having a significant history of supplementary schooling. However, the two cities also contain the longest running supplementary school projects and participants in the study were chosen who could speak to the historical as well as the contemporary picture of the movement. All of the participants were given pseudonyms, which are listed here (Andrews 2011; Andrews 2013, 19–20):

Menelik directed a long running programme on a self-help basis, based in a radical political organisation.

Gloria was a mainstream teacher who taught in a Saturday school and arranged summer school projects.

Kwame founded the summer school programme with a community group.

Jason organised a Saturday school project linked to a local cultural association. Errol was part of a national organisation linked to a church group.

Rose organised a weekend supplementary school that was also linked to a church.

Henry taught at Rose’s project.

Angela ran a supplementary evening school in the 1980s.

Clive was the co-ordinator of a Saturday school until 2005.

Lorraine had been involved in setting up supplementary schools since the 1990s and was interested in setting up full time independent schools.

Carlton ran supplementary school located in a Black-led church.

Sonia had been involved in the movement for over 20 years.

Palsent was involved in the running of a supplementary school that started in the 1970s.

Sarah worked for a university and organised a Saturday school for African Caribbean boys as part of the widening participation agenda.

The data from the interviews was transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis to identify the patterns and themes emerging from the data.

In addition to the data from the semi-structured interviews, this paper also draws on research conducted at the George Padmore Institute in London, which is above the New Beacon Bookshop. The archive contains a collection on the Black Education Movement, with hundreds of documents relating to the supplementary schools that emerged out of the New Beacon Bookshop collective and the broader movements for educational equality in the Haringey area of London. Analysis from the interviews and archival work is drawn on to discuss the limits of political blackness, specifically in relation to the Black Supplementary School Movement.

African Diasporic Blackness

Blackness defined in African ancestry is central to the Black Supplementary School Movement; however, a politically black perspective argues that such a definition is exclusionary to other minorities and the aim should be to ‘avoid disunity’ (Phillips 2007, 381). A primary reason that the embrace of Blackness is critiqued in academia is because it is seen to engage in a discourse of race that is necessarily regressive. From this perspective the ‘racial categorisation of human beings was a European invention’ in order to dominate and control the dark masses of the globe (Winant 2000, 172). Certainly the Western view of race, with its biological underpinnings and history of justifying unspeakable atrocities needed to be abandoned (Leach 2005). The danger in this perspective is that seeing race becomes equated with being racist, with difference itself being seen as the problem. However, this argument denies agency to groups who are not white. It is well documented that the people Europeans encountered on their travels also drew categories based on phenotypical differences (Kilcup 2000; Mutwa 1998). The difference between these categorizations is that in America the native population embraced the settlers (Mohawk 1992) and in Africa trade links were formed and whites welcomed (Rodney 1972). In return the native populations received genocide, enslavement and colonialism from their encounters with Europeans. However, just because the West has used difference to dominate, control and slaughter, this does not make difference itself the problem.

Even those who see race conscious activism as legitimate, often preface this support with caveats and limitations. Winant (2001, 312) defends race conscious organization but warns that as well as liberatory elements it includes ‘potentially chauvinistic and even fascist ones’. Vargas (2006, 480) embraces the concept of the African Diasporic Blackness and collective action but then concludes that ‘if race thinking is part and parcel of the hegemonic apparatus ... the victories that it generates can only be partial’. The message is clear that race is a Western and ultimately regressive concept that needs to be overcome.

The problem of this logic of race being produced by Western society is emblematic in Bashi’s (1998, 966) argument that ‘even as black immigrants from the West Indies and other parts of the Caribbean may not know their new American racialized identity, they learn it soon after their arrival’. For Bashi, ethnic identities become subsumed under the American racialized system. However, this argument ignores the connections between the Caribbean and the United States, which are well documented and both form part of a larger African Diaspora with interconnections in cultural forms and identity (Wright 2004). Blackness is not a construction of whiteness but is a political construct tied into liberatory movements for social justice.

Before the Black Power movement, people of African ancestry in the West were referred to using various epithets including Negro, Coloured and Nigger (Andrews 2014a; Martin 1991). Following on from Marcus Garvey’s pronouncement that the ‘Black skin is not a badge of shame, but rather a glorious symbol of national greatness’ (Cronon 1969, 4), Malcolm X (1971, 91, emphasis added) declared, ‘there is a new type of Negro on the scene. This type doesn’t

call himself a Negro. He calls himself a Black man. He doesn't make any apology for his Black skin'.

Blackness, the physical manifestation of African ancestry, the difference used to oppress and belittle was taken on as the mantle of resistance. Reclaiming Blackness was a hugely significant psychological step for black people in the West because of the legacy of enslavement in de-Africanizing its removed descendants (Cross 1991; Hutton and Murrell 1998). Carmichael (1971) argued that unlike other minority groups who may have language or religion to rally behind, black people only have the physical marks of Africa, as the cultural and religious base has been stripped away. The embrace and pride taken in Blackness in the supplementary school movement is evident in Clive's remarks about being black:

We actively encourage them [the students] to travel, to see, Black people in the Caribbean and Africa. See, that Black people aren't scratching around with dirt with flies in their eyes and are into some serious, tangible stuff out there. See that they should not be not to be ashamed of our culture, and who we are, and our language. I love the fact that I'm Black, I mean I just I love it. I love our culture, I love our food I love our language, I'll even love some of the things that aren't brilliant, I love that as well. Some of it makes me laugh, some of it makes me cry, but I love being Black.

Blackness underlies the purpose and core of the movement, it is what unites it and motivates the people involved into action. This is what makes the idea of political blackness so dangerous: it undermines the core concept of the movement, that is, African Diasporic Blackness.

Anti-racism and political blackness

In Britain, political blackness grew out of the anti-racist movement and was a specific response to the problems of racism that people faced in the country (Maylor 2009; Sudbury 2001). Cole (1993, 671) explained the need therefore 'to make explicit the racist divide within society by the use of an all-embracing term'. The use of the catch-all term was meant to bring together those who experienced discrimination to battle against oppression. As Hall (1991, 55) explained:

Caribbean, East Africa, the Asian subcontinent, Pakistan, Bangladesh, from different parts of India, [who] all identified themselves politically as black. What they said was, 'We may be different [in terms of] actual color of skins but vis-a-vis the social system, vis-a-vis the political system of racism, there is more that unites us than what divides us.'

This embrace of 'blackness' was explicitly strategic and drawn in stark contrast to the politics of difference represented in multiculturalism.

State multiculturalism has been critiqued for focusing on cultural displays rather than a systemic attack on racist practices (Bhattacharyya 1998). This perspective is most famously captured in Troyna and Williams' (1986, 24) denunciation of multiculturalist education consisting of 'saris, steel bands and samosas'. The more fundamental critique for the discussion of political blackness is that anti-racism rejects the notion of 'groups bounded in ethnically defined communities and essentialist cultures' (Nagle 2008, 179). Therefore officially recognizing and supporting different ethnic minority community groups is seen to be misguided. Worse still, state multiculturalism is said to actually make the problems facing the minority population worse because it works to divide the communities into ethnic enclaves and incentivizes competition between groups (Warmington and Afridi 2009). Political blackness should therefore be seen as a direct counter to the embrace of difference in multiculturalism. The concept represents a strategic essentialism of those who experience racism and is used to connote the necessary unity between these groups. It is not meant as a statement of sameness

per se between ethnic minority populations. However, there are serious limitations to this argument.

Far too much credit is given to state multiculturalism for sustaining ethnic minority communities based on different cultures. The logic of the anti-racist argument in Britain appears to be that before the state multiculturalism there was harmony between all the different ethnic minority groups who unified around political blackness. The history of cross-ethnic groups collaborating should not be underestimated or dismissed; pragmatic alliances against racism have a long tradition in Britain. However, the basis of this unity has not been solely or even primarily predicated on an embrace of political blackness. Collective work has often been done through different ethnic minority group organizations working together. For example, the West Indian Standing Conference and the Indian Workers Association historically collaborated (Shukra 1998). Even Warmington and Afridi (2009), who assail against the way the state has divided the ethnic minority population, when citing examples of positive community organizations rely mostly on groups who represent a specific ethnic minority community.

It is also a mistake to assume that anti-racism and multiculturalism are mutually exclusive. One of the key features of state multiculturalism was the funding of ethnic minority groups (Modood 2007). A critique has been levelled that this money was used to promote conservative community leaders, embracing cultural difference at the expense of a more critical antiracist politics (Malik 2001). This feature of state management of ethnic minorities is certainly reminiscent of the policy in colonial times of promoting regressive tribal leaders. However, the money from multiculturalism also went into funding grassroots movements that were clearly anti-racist in nature, with the Black Supplementary School Movement being an excellent example.

One of the most common complaints from participants in the study who had recently been working in the supplementary school movement is the lack of funding available. Palsent, who has been part of a supplementary school programme in London for over thirty years, captured the significant changes in state funding since 2002:

We have to change up a lot of things and cut down on some of the services we offered, we even lost our special needs teacher. It made a big impact on us, we had to fight to keep a tiny little grant, which was like a twentieth of what we used to get from them. We got real proper funding. Teachers were paid like mainstream teachers. So the climate has changed in terms of finances for supplementary schools, everybody has found it hard.

The peak of the supplementary school movement, from the eighties to the early nineties, coincided with the funding that was made available through state multiculturalism. During the interviews it became clear that a number of other anti-racist, African Diasporic projects were funded through either national funds, like Urban Aid, or money from local councils. One African Caribbean organization in Birmingham managed to start a hostel for young men, a nursery and a bookshop with support from the state. These kinds of grassroots initiatives are clearly anti-racist in nature and simply would not have existed without state support through multiculturalism. This highlights one of the major problems with the anti-racist rejection of multiculturalism, which is that it denies agency to ethnic minority communities. The state may well have had the same nefarious objectives as in colonial policy when providing these funds to communities; some took the bait and produced a regressive cultural politics; however, a significant number of activists used the funds to start and maintain progressive anti-racist movements like supplementary schools.

Racism is also far more nuanced and people have much more agency than to assume that divisions between ethnic minority communities are caused by the funding carousel of state multiculturalism. The 2005 riots in Birmingham, UK, which was a case of South Asian and African Caribbean communities clashing, are an example of this (Andrews 2015). This crisis

point had been boiling over the years, and the location of the ignition being a South Asian owned black hair care shop should come as no surprise. South Asians dominate the black hair product market locally and this has been a source of frustration in the Caribbean community for decades (John 2005). We can see similar tensions between African American and Korean communities in the United States (Cheung and Espiritu 1989). In the specific case of economic control of communities, not only are the interests of different ethnic minority groups not merely unaligned, they are diametrically opposed in a manner that has nothing to do with the state or multiculturalism. A catchall term for ethnic minorities ignores the genuine tensions and complexities that exist.

Non-strategic essentialism

Central to any construct aiming to unite a diverse range of groups would be terminology that the majority could embrace. However, Modood (1994) argued that the term 'black' marginalizes British Asians because of its association to those of African ancestry. He explained that very few British Asians embraced political blackness as an identity and he felt that using the term reified the black/white dualism and made Asians less visible. Maylor (2009) attempted to study political blackness with a sample of ethnic minority staff in further education and found that she could not complete the study because her potential participants rejected the use of the term. She concluded that 'the political category "black" remains problematic ... this research has underlined the complexity of the different discourses associated with being "black" and the need to problematize "catch all" categories' (384). There is no evidence that political blackness has ever been adopted by the range of people it is meant to represent. As Anthias (1992, 427) explained:

black identity has foundered indeed on the failure to ground an ethnic commonality in a distinct origin (and it may also be argued on a different experience of racism) for Afro-Caribbeans and Asians in Britain.

During the research participants made efforts to distance themselves from political blackness. One of the first comments that Henry, who ran Saturday schools in Birmingham for two decades, made was 'when I say Black population I'm talking about the African Caribbean or African population'. Errol, who had started a national programme, made clear that:

We define Black specifically. So we don't do this whole BME [Black and Minority ethnic] thing that gets messed up, we don't do all of that you know. Black is African and Caribbean as far as we're concerned, and that's it you know, and dual heritage.

The rejection of political blackness was based not on disunity in a broad ethnic minority community, but based on the purpose of the movement to resist racism in the mainstream school system. To examine racial inequality is to see that different groups disproportionately succeed and are held back in society. Attainment in the British school system is an excellent example of this. Indian and Chinese students outperform whites, whilst Pakistani, Black Caribbean, Black Other, Black Mixed and Gypsy/Traveller achieve significantly lower grades at GCSE level (Department for Education 2014). On top of this African Caribbean students have consistently been significantly overrepresented in school exclusions (Parsons 2009). There is simply no evidence of any discrimination based on political blackness in British schools.

When discussing the issues facing African and Caribbean children in the schools the participants were keen to stress the differences in regard to how groups are treated. Jason, who is currently running a longstanding supplementary school programme was keen to stress he was talking about the African Caribbean community, because as he explained:

There's differences between what's happening in the Sikh community as opposed to what's happening in the Pakistani community; what's happening in the African Caribbean community what's happening in the African community. So, there are distinctions and that's why I talk in the way that I talk so that you're clear about who I'm talking about as a community.

Gloria, who worked in the movement from the nineties also stressed the differences that black children face:

The reality is, take some responsibility quite early, and I tell them, 'you're not the same as other children, you're not the same as, you know British White children you're not the same as Indian Asian children'.

An example of a key difference that the African Caribbean community has faced in Britain has been how Caribbean vernacular language has been deemed inferior, whereas languages from the Indian subcontinent are seen as 'authentic' and the children have therefore received less biased treatment (Coard 1971). For example, Angela, who taught in a supplementary school in the seventies, explained that:

In Wolverhampton, there were certain rules in education about teaching English as a second language and this was seen as more appropriate for Asian children but it was never seen as an issue for Black Caribbean children. A number of Black parents were extremely embarrassed at the idea that either they or their children were not speaking English properly because we'd all come from English speaking countries.

Errol also explained that the refusal to accept Caribbean vernacular English as a second language meant that African Caribbean children did not have access to funds that were there to support Teaching English as a Second Language:

Black people are pushed to the back of the queue again because we've still got the language issue. The reason why the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities weren't doing well was supposedly because of language. You've got the other individuals coming in and their issue is language as well, so yet again we get put to the back of the queue in terms of Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant funding, we know of a number of schools who frozen out Black children from the funding.

When racism impacts different ethnic minority groups in varied ways then discrimination itself is not a rallying point, rendering the strategic essentialism of political blackness unworkable. We may expect Asian minorities, for instance, to support the fight for equality for African Caribbean students because it is morally correct; however, it would be incorrect to assume unity because they are Asian.

Non-whiteism

The major flaw in the strategic essentialism of political blackness is that it draws people together on the basis of not being white, which is ontologically disempowering.¹ What is created is a form of non-whiteism where whiteness is placed in a normatively dominant position and naturalized. As Aspinall (2002, 806) explains, "'non-white' is the least satisfactory [term for minorities], both semantically and conceptually It defines the ethnic minority population in negative terms and as a residual population. Also it sets "white" as the standard, making the term openly ethnocentric'. It would be difficult to find any contemporary sociologist who utilized or legitimized the term 'non-white' for these very reasons. However, political blackness is based on a strategic essentialism synonymous with non-whiteness.

We can see the danger of this logic in Phoenix's (1998, 870) argument that 'since "race" and ethnicity are relational, experienced most clearly at the boundaries, blackness is only comprehensible in relation to whiteness and vice versa'. This argument is fundamentally

trapped by the black/white dualism and misses the reality that difference is constructed in a wide variety of forms. Even if we accept that race and ethnicity are relational it does not necessarily follow that the dominant relationship has whiteness at its core. There is no need or utility in defining blackness solely in relation to whiteness and to do so disempowers minority groups by placing whiteness at the centre of meaning and also confines the struggle for freedom in a framework created by the dominant. Following Stokely Carmichael, 'the first need of a free people is define their own terms' (Tucker 2004, 79).

Although political blackness rejects the essentialisms of multiculturalism it creates a much more dangerous essentialism of non-whiteism assuming that dark skin ties people into a political project. The politically black assumption that there is an innate connection between all ethnic minorities transforms the strategic essentialism into an ontological experience of non-whiteness. The theory and practice emanating from this perspective is therefore produced and framed by whiteness. It is for this reason that scholarship on racism in Britain has in the main focused on school reform and at the critical edge an examination of how whiteness operates in the system (Gillborn 2008). Both of these are important to study; however, radical alternatives to schooling in Britain have been neglected in scholarship. The Black Supplementary School Movement has a 50-year history of activism creating alternative spaces of education, which explicitly rejects political blackness, and yet has received very little attention from the academy (Andrews 2013).

In reality, the strategic essentialism of political blackness in the UK was based on a misunderstanding of the complex nature of racism that faced migrant communities in the post war setting. A catch-all term to capture all minorities is only necessary if it is assumed that the nature of the racism faced by all groups in the UK would be the same. However, the overt racial discrimination that faced (and continues to face) migrant communities was not the most insidious or intractable problem facing the various migrant communities. Though there were signs reading 'no blacks, no Irish, no dogs' (Wray 2003, 52), this clearly does not indicate that all three groups were subject to the same forms of discrimination. The fundamental issue that needed to be addressed was structural racism, which determined the extent to which different groups were incorporated into society and produced very different outcomes for the various ethnic minority groups in the country. To conceptualize structural racism is impossible on the national level, as racism is a global system that is rooted in the continuing history of Western imperialism (Winant 2001).

National myopia

A central problem with political blackness is that it commits what Beck (2007) refers to as 'methodological nationalism' and draws its concepts and practice from understandings isolated in the national context. Winant (2001, 285, emphasis added) explains that what justifies political blackness for minority groups is that:

What brings these communities together, what can build political unity among them – and even within them – is not their positive qualities, not who they are; rather it is there negative qualities, who they are not. They are not white, not 'native', often not citizens

Political blackness is, therefore, based on the reactive response to migrant and migrant descended communities to the nation state. This national framing of the issue fundamentally limits the politics that emerges because the focus on the national picture is necessarily reformist in nature. As Malcolm X (1964) critiqued the liberal politics of civil rights: 'whenever you are in a civil-rights struggle, whether you know it or not, you are confining yourself to the jurisdiction of Uncle Sam', it is essential that any struggle against imperialism is an international one.

The construction of Blackness drawn on in the supplementary school movement is based on a Diasporic politics that connects the students and teachers into an international politics and identity. The teaching of Black history in the movement drew on figures from the United States, the Caribbean, Africa and Britain. An example of such teaching was a reading comprehension exercise that was given as an activity at the George Padmore Supplementary School in Haringey in the early 1970s. The activity asked the students to read an extract from Soledad Brother, which is a collection of prison letters written by the American Black Panther George Jackson who was killed in a prison riot. The questions that were asked are indicative of the politics of the programme:

- (1) Jackson wonders why so many white men have had the wish to rule over other people's countries and control their lives. Why do you think they have done this?
- (2) Give some examples of countries which English people have ruled over
- (3) How important is it to have flashy clothes and plenty of money?
- (4) Why does Jackson have no time for people who think flashy clothes and money are important?
- (5) Why were prisoners forced to march everywhere?

During the research it was clear that the general teaching of Black history was focused on the global Diaspora and how those experiences influenced Britain, with figures such as the Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Nelson and Winnie Mandela being key staples of what was taught. The international nature of the transatlantic slave trade was also a key part of the teaching of history and was explained in a narrative that connected all parts of the Diaspora. There has obviously been a lot of variety throughout the movement in the curriculum relating to Black history, but what is certain is that it has always been taught in an international and Diasporic manner.

A Diasporic construction of Blackness was also true of how participants in the interviews talked about the struggles facing black communities today. There was a general awareness and connection to the struggles of the wider Diaspora, best exemplified by Errol who explained that:

We also do some research, internationally on what has worked in America for example. We're also doing some work in South Africa, that's slightly different because that's dealing with the issues facing South African Black girls and the lessons that can be learnt in the UK.

Political blackness can also be constructed internationally, with even Malcolm X (1964) embracing a global struggle against oppression and for unity with 'all of our African brothers and our Asian brothers and our Latin-American brothers'. However, Malcolm's commitment to political blackness should not be overstated. His final project was the creation of the Organization of Afro-American Unity, which was only open to those of African descent and called for the African Diaspora to unite together arguing that for Black people in the West 'Africa will go forward any faster than we will and will not go forward any faster than Africa' (X 1970, 40).

There is a tradition of an international call for the 'Third World' to unite against imperialism (Clemons and Jones 1999; Prashard 2007). The Bandung Conference in 1956 between twenty-nine 'militant' African and Asian states intent on creating a bloc to remain independent from the West is an example of such politics (Wright 1954). However, embracing political blackness was never a key ingredient to this politics and it was very much done in the form of leaders of different countries or regions coming together to organize strategically. A major contributor to Bandung was Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, who was one of the principal architects of Pan-Africanism and committed to Blackness rooted in the African Diaspora (Nkrumah [1963] 1998). Malcolm referred to his Asian and Latin American brothers, not his Black brothers in Asia and Latin America. This is a small distinction but an important one. Central to the

international politics being constructed was that though there were alliances on certain issues to do with the West, it was essential that each region build self-sustainability, or as Nkrumah put it ‘Africa can no longer trust anybody but herself and her resources’ (120).

Kelley and Esch (1999) explained that the sentiments of political blackness certainly extended to the revolutionary period of the 1950s–1970s when there was faith that the leaders and nations in the developing world would behave better to each other than the white nations had. China in particular was viewed as potential ally in the liberation of Africa, for instance. However, the authors also note how this optimism disappeared with China’s tacit approval of apartheid, and given the increasingly neo-colonial role that China is now playing in Africa it is difficult to see the nation as a positive force on the continent (Carmody 2011). The reality is that as with the political blackness paradigm on the national level the assumption of non-white unity on the global stage oversimplifies power relations. In fact, it is even more problematic on the global level to expect that the interests of the majority of the world will be aligned simply on the basis of people not being white. It is perhaps for this reason that political blackness typically concerns itself with organizing within the nation state.

The paradox within political blackness of defining minority groups in relation to the nation is that the communities in question are migrant ones drawn from across the globe. Once people cross the border they are expected to shed their identity and experiences from their homelands and become a unified group against nation state racism. This ignores the very different circumstances from which people arrive in the nation; for example, expecting wealthy Hindu migrants from India to embrace the struggle of poor Muslim migrants from Pakistan. That is not to say that religion, class or nationality prevents unity across different groups or that such unity is undesirable; however, it is unreasonable to expect it based on non-whiteness and differential experiences of racism. Global or Diasporic ties and experiences can be equally, and sometimes more, important than the local ones for migrant and migrant descended communities.

An international example that illustrates both the power and limitations of political blackness is the battle against apartheid in South Africa. This case is particularly important as it served as inspiration to those embracing political blackness in Britain. Sonia, who taught in supplementary schools for over two decades, recounted a story from an encounter in the early nineties she had with an anti-racist activist:

I was at a conference on racism, cannot remember which one there were so many. I did a talk about the Saturday school we had organised, focusing on the Black-led nature of it and the success that led to. After the talk someone confronted me about how I had used Black, and excluded the Asian and other communities. She pointed to how Black had been used in South Africa to encompass all minorities and had brought down apartheid.

A close examination of the South African case shows that there were numerous groups fighting against the system, including the Pan African Congress and South African Indian Congress; class-based groups like the Communist Party; and tribal groupings like the Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party (Mandela 1996). However, the group that eventually led South Africa out of apartheid was the African National Congress (ANC), a multi-racial party that embraced principles similar to that of political blackness in Britain. The power of uniting the different groups and bringing in sympathetic whites was central to the victory of the ANC against apartheid. In the South African case, even the more radical Black Consciousness Movement of Biko (1978) embraced a form of political blackness, being open to those categorized as Indians and Coloureds.

It should, however, be remembered that the coalition of political blackness in South Africa was based on the pragmatic alliance of different groups acting together. The ANC, though multi-racial, was founded and led, in the main, by black Africans and this was essential to its

identity and legitimacy. Mandela (1996) recalls the fears that the ANC would be co-opted by whites, Indians or Coloureds. The ANC started as an Africanist party and much of its legitimacy was taken from it being the voice of the African majority. During the fight against apartheid the ANC connected with the South African Indian Congress as well as the Coloured People's Congress and other groups to form the Congress Alliance to battle apartheid, but these were separate groups coming together under a common goal.

Political blackness was never embraced in South Africa at the expense of intra-ethnic group solidarity. Separate groups came together to act and embracing a politically black identity was not an essential component in the fight against apartheid. The concept of Blackness, rooted in African ancestry, thrived in South Africa and played a key part in anti-apartheid politics. In Britain, political blackness is used as an alternative to the Blackness in African ancestry and works to delegitimize such solidarity.

The political system in South Africa was also very different from that of the UK. Apartheid literally pitted the white settler population against the rest. It was, therefore, necessary for all who were not white to unite to bring down the apartheid system. This is truly the definition of a strategic essentialism and in post-Apartheid South Africa politically black politics does not have the same purchase (Winant 2001). Reflecting back on that exchange at conference, Sonia pointed to the decline of political blackness in South Africa:

At the time they were all raving about the success of political blackness, and the unity that we needed to fight racism over here. But look at South Africa now that apartheid over. You see a very unfair and unequal society with the black Africans at the bottom and the Indians and Coloureds doing well to different degrees. Now the bogeyman of apartheid is gone, you don't hear all these groups clamouring for non-white unity ... It's just like in the UK, really, now that the open racism has gone back a bit and some groups are doing well, we're not hearing these calls for unity as much.

Conclusion

Political blackness was meant to be a strategic essentialism that united those who experienced racial discrimination. However, the concept was flawed from the outset, misunderstanding the complex nature of racism and rooted in a perspective of non-whiteism that normalized whiteness. The concept is also rooted in a methodological nationalism that frames the resistance to racism in the borders of the nation state. This is not an argument for abandoning collaboration in the struggles of different ethnic minority groups; rather it is a case against the unnecessary and counterproductive mobilization of a catch-all term that is incapable of building the widespread, grassroots unity it desires. Perhaps the most serious flaw in the British context is that the wish to avoid disunity between ethnic minority groups has meant that political blackness has delegitimized Blackness rooted in a connection to the African Diaspora.

African Diasporic Blackness has produced a politics of resistance with an historical tradition that has heavily impacted on Britain. The critique of Blackness as 'reductionist; reducing individuals to all-encompassing categories' (Phoenix 1998, 872) is based on a misreading of the concepts history and the perspective it has produced. Rather than being an ultimately repressive and restrictive construct, Blackness works to connect black populations in Britain into a wider Diaspora and to challenge racist oppression at home.

The Black Supplementary School Movement is an embodiment of the importance of mobilization around the concept of Blackness. The movement has a fifty-year history of grassroots, community-led activism, which is clearly antiracist in nature. It is essential that the role of Blackness in the movement is given more consideration along with how the concept has been mobilized in Britain and the scope for future manifestations. The focus on political blackness in the academy has been to the detriment of understanding African Diasporic

Blackness and it is necessary to reorient the focus in British scholarship. Blackness has been central to resistance to oppression for centuries globally, and decades nationally, and offer a connection to grassroots political mobilizations, which are much needed in the academy.

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