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The Public Identities of the Black Middle Classes: Managing Race in Public Spaces

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Abstract

Drawing on data from a two-year ESRC-funded project into *The Educational Strategies of the Black Middle Classes*,[1] this article examines how middle class blacks negotiate survival in a society marked by race and class discrimination. It considers respondents' school experiences, marked as they are by incidents of Othering and racism and explores both the processes by which they came to an awareness of their status as racially minoritized and how they made sense of and managed such incidents. The majority of our respondents have made the transition from working class to middle class during their lifetimes. It is argued that these early formative experiences of racism *and* this class transition have facilitated the development of a complex set of capitals upon which middle class blacks are able to draw in order to signal their class identity to white others therefore minimizing the probability of racial discrimination.

Keywords

black middle classes, cultural capital, double-consciousness, public identities, racism

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Introduction

> …the Negro is (…) born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this (…) world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (DuBois, 1996: 5)

At the start of 2010, Democratic Senator Harry Reid was reported to have made reference to the United States as ready to embrace Barack Obama as president especially as he was a 'light-skinned' African American with 'no Negro dialect unless he wanted to have one' (MacAskill, 2010; Preston, 2010). In making this statement Senator Reid was drawing, possibly unintentionally, on historic forms of race and class categorization that continue to inform and shape the experiences of many black people in contemporary society (Hill, 2002; Hunter, 2005). Incidents of violent and explicit acts of racism remain part of daily life for many black and minority ethnic groups. However, the existence of equalities legislation making race (and other forms of) discrimination illegal and the political shift away from 'racism' and 'race equality' to more publicly palatable terms such as 'diversity' means that general public awareness of and attention to more frequent but subtle manifestations of racism is lacking. While it took, for example, a 2009 report by the Department for Work and Pensions to reveal the difficulties facing black and minority applicants in securing a job interview compared with their white counterparts,[2] the findings will come as little surprise to many from black and minority ethnic backgrounds themselves. Stereotypical views and expectations about the behaviour, actions, intellect and competence of black and minority ethnic groups remain commonplace within British (and American) society. Senator Reid's remarks speak to some of these complexities. Even though he has achieved one of the most powerful positions in the world, Obama's accent and not just his skin colour but his skin-*tone* remain subject to inspection. The judgement is not simply whether or not he is suitably qualified and experienced for the job in question but also centres on perceived markers of black identity upon which he, in this regard, is seen to have scored favourably. We maintain that such 'assessments' are commonplace and can be viewed as part of an historical trajectory that continues to position black bodies negatively.

Representing the Black Body

Popular representations of the black body reveal how it has been positioned and treated as a site of ridicule, hyper-sexuality and intellectual inferiority in comparison to whites throughout history. Gilman (1992) for example details the association of the black body with concupiscence as far back as the 12th century. Denigratory images of black Africans as only suited to physical activity and partial to wild, debauched merriment are evident across a range of sources throughout 15th, 16th and 17th century literature, paintings, sculpture and other documents. Central to this early thinking was the perceived connection between outer appearance and inner character and morality so that the perception of white skin as beautiful or 'fair' and black skin as deformed or ugly was regarded to reflect an individual's inner worth. The positioning of black skin as deviant was further

reinforced through other normative judgements. In dominant Christian ideology, for example, the devil and other evil spirits were characterized as black-bodied, sinful and to be feared (Korhonen, 2005).

The notion of 'scientific race' which served, in part, as justification for the Transatlantic Slave Trade of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries continued to give license to a scaling of black bodies as subhuman, as chattel, as property with physiognomic markers such as hair, lips and nose deployed as signifiers of African heritage and blackness. In this context, lighter skinned slaves (usually born following the rape by white owners of black female slaves) gained a limited degree of higher status or material privilege and were worth more when sold. Curiosity and speculation about the black body remained prevalent into the 19th century as exemplified by the tragic story of Saartjie Bartman. Better known as the 'Hottentot Venus', Bartman's physicality in terms of her large posterior made her the doomed spectacle of a sexualized white fixation (Hobson, 2003).[3]

While late 20th and 21st century legislation and social mores insist on a commitment to equality including, but not solely, on the grounds of 'race', leading black commentators such as Stuart Hall and bell hooks continue to offer powerful analyses of how stereotypical representations of the black body persist in contemporary formations of popular culture and the mass media, as a vehicle of mystical strength, hyper-criminality and heightened curiosity (Hall, 1997; hooks, 1992). These modern cultural depictions both resist and restrict the possibility of fluid, diverse black identit*ies* and in so doing set the criteria by which a notion of a narrow and unsophisticated alleged 'blackness' is assessed:

> The rational subject does not merely observe, passing from one sight to another like a tourist. In accordance with the logic of identity the scientific subject measures objects according to scales that reduce the plurality of attributes to unity. Forced to line up on calibrations that measure degrees of some general attribute, some of the particulars are devalued, defined as deviant in relation to the norm. (Young, 1990:125)

Borrowing from Young, we contend that there are particular perceived norms associated with the black body that persist in contemporary society. In this sense, objects that are read as deviating from the norm require closer inspection or indeed interrogation precisely to make sense of and account for their 'deviance'. If then, in line with historic and contemporary readings of the black body, we understand it to be devalued, positioned as working class, uneducated, and capable only of conversing using colloquialisms or 'Negro dialect' we can better understand Senator Reid's remarks pertaining to Barack Obama. Obama stimulates curiosity and intrigue not simply because he is the first black President of the United States but because he also is seen as an aberration, an oddity in terms of stereotypical representations of black identity.

In this article, we extend examination of these issues by considering how black British middle classes navigate the public terrain, marked as it is by class and race discrimination. We are especially concerned with how they are able to construct strategies and forms of being in light of the perceived normative constructions of blackness that were outlined above. In carrying out this analysis, we draw on the work of Lacy (2007) whose examination of the identity construction processes of middle class African Americans in three different communities in Washington DC, is particularly pertinent. Lacy skillfully demonstrates how middle class blacks have at their disposal a range of resources – a 'cultural toolkit' (Moore, 2008: 498) - including

language, mannerisms, clothing and credentials that allow them to create what she terms public identities to minimize or mediate against discriminatory treatment:

> Public identities are (…) purposeful, instrumental strategies that either reduce the probability of discrimination or curtail the extent of discrimination middle-class blacks face in their public interactions with white strangers (…) [Middle-class blacks] assert public identities in order to convince others that they are legitimate members of the middle class. (Lacy, 2007: 73)

These public identities provide a useful framework through which to explore and understand how our black middle class respondents are able to elicit some degree of agency against the discriminations they face in their interactions with white others generally and with education establishments in particular.

Methodology

A series of qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with 62 parents who self-defined as black Caribbean. This group is particularly relevant as a focus of study since available research evidence continues to indicate that black Caribbean pupils experience some of the lowest academic attainment compared with other ethnic groups. We also know that black Caribbean pupils from non-manual backgrounds are the lowest attaining of the middle class groups (Gillborn, 2008; Strand, 2008).

Aware of the increasing number black Caribbeans who have a partner outside of their ethnic group families have been included where both or just one of the parents is black Caribbean.[4] Participants were recruited through a range of sources that included family and education websites; black professional networks and social groups as well as through extensive use of snow-balling via existing contacts within the professional black community. Participants were selected following completion of a brief filter questionnaire that asked about their ethnic group identification; the age of their children and for information about their occupation. For the overarching project on which this article is based, we were interested in speaking with parents with at least one child between eight and 18 years, age groups which encompass key transistion points in their school careers and which would therefore yield potentially useful information about the process of school selection, choice and decision-making. With regard to class categorization, we identified parents, in professional or managerial occupations (i.e. NS-SEC 1 and 2) using government Standard Occuaptional Classfication manuals. Sensitive to debates that centre on the absence of black men as fathers (Reynolds, 2009) we have carried out interviews with 13 black Caribbean fathers.

This article focuses primarily on the experiences of the respondents and how they navigate wider white society. Issues relating to their role as parents, their children and schooling are discussed elsewhere (Vincent et al., forthcoming).

Findings

In understanding the development of public identities amongst the black middle class, it has been helpful and necessary to contextualize how these identities have developed.

This section begins by examining respondents' school experiences characterised as they were by isolation and racial discrimination. It is suggested that school (and other public spaces in which they were a racialized minority) served as a potential learning ground, serving as the basis for the formation of the public identities upon which they later draw as adults.

Coming to Race Awareness: The Childhood Experiences of the Black Middle Classes

We asked respondents to describe their experiences of secondary school. Few accounts were entirely positive. Most highlighted the challenges, isolation and pain of being the only or one of few black children in the pupil population; sentiment that was heightened for those living in rural or less urban areas. School represented, for our participants, a site where they came to learn exactly how they were viewed by white peers and school staff. In the following example, Vanessa describes memories of when, aged 13 years, she began attending a secondary comprehensive shortly after her arrival to the UK from Jamaica:

> I remember children coming up to me to find out if my bottom was white or black because they just had no idea at all (…) I couldn't believe that anyone could be so ignorant as to not know (…) they were shocked about my hair not being the same as theirs. (…) they were just intrigued about me as a person and in turn I was intrigued that they didn't know about…because I don't think I (…) was that conscious of this difference between white and black children [*pauses*] even though I know that I missed (…) my family surroundings of Jamaica. I was shocked at how little they knew (…) and had to ask (…). I just couldn't understand (…) because I don't think I had that sort of consciousness and it wasn't until later on that I developed the realisation of, [*pauses*] of the fact that this difference was actually maintained in (…) society. (Vanessa, Community Development Officer)

The first point to note from Vanessa's recollection of her school experience is that clearly in relation to the proportion of white children to black within the school she is in a minority (as stated later in the interview). This alone, however, does not automatically indicate racial difference and subjugation. It is the assumption on the part of the white children of the role of inspector and moreover, the reason for their approach, vis a vis Vanessa's relatively powerless role of the inspected that is of pertinence. Vanessa is an object of curiosity. She is fixed as subject. That her white peers proceed to exhibit curiosity about her bottom, as opposed to any other less sexualized parts of her anatomy that are also hidden from sight, reveals, we contend, a racialized preoccupation with the black form that is steeped in a historical classification and 'scaling of bodies' (Cooper, 2005; Young, 1990). This 'negating activity' (Fanon, 1967: 83) to which Vanessa is subjected contributes to a relational identity formation. In other words she begins to understand and examine her raced identity *in relation* to those aspects of her otherness that are picked out and met with intrigue by white peers. She becomes intrigued at their intrigue, shocked at their questions and confused by their lack of understanding. However, even though she states that she, as a child, is lacking the race awareness she later develops as an adult, it is likely

that this negative experience, coming as it does after growing up around a majority black community in Jamaica, has a different impact on her than her British-born black counterparts who do not have this similar grounding. This *zoologizing* of the black body,[5] that is subjecting it to dehumanizing acts of curiosity and inspection, also extended to a fascination with black hair. Brenda, another respondent, recalls 'everyone [white children] wanting to feel your hair' and how this constant singling out treatment as being somehow different, as being spectacle (Hall, 1997), impacted on her capacity to learn. This was a sentiment shared by Monica who had spent some of her schooling overseas:

> They were fascinated with your hair. They were fascinated with your skin. (…) they'd literally come up and touch you [laughs]. It was funny and the teachers didn't quite know what you were about. It was that surreal. They really and truly did not know that you were the same (…) [that] it was just the colour of your skin that was different and maybe your hair. (…) then [in] upper school where I was the only black [pupil] I remember getting into an argument with a teacher. It was a geography class and they wanted us to go away and do research on where we'd come from and of course, I come from England so I went away and did my research, presented it to the class and he said, 'Oh that's all very well and good Monica, but (…) we all know that black people don't live in England' (…). I said, 'Well somebody needs to go back over there and tell all the black people that I left there to get out because that's where I was born'. He didn't believe me. My mum had to send my birth certificate in; he really and truly did not believe me. (Monica, teacher)

Monica's experience, even though not within the English education system, mirrors the experiences of respondents discussed earlier. This extract reveals how the regime of Othering, of colonial curiosity, is not limited to simply her peers. The adamant refusal on the part of the teacher to accept Monica's account of her own origins as valid not only reinforces a notion of whiteness as privilege and 'expert' but simultaneously trivializes and invalidates her knowledge and specifically, her knowledge about her own identity, as legitimate. It speaks both of the *invisibility* of blackness through the teacher's lack of awareness that black people can and do reside in England – all the more troubling because of his role as educator – and, without contradiction, draws attention to Monica's simultaneous *visibility*; she is only allowed to exist in an identity that *he* perceives appropriate for black-skinned persons. The sheer evocativeness of this example is yet magnified when Monica proceeds to describe that the incident was drawn out over several weeks with the teacher threatening to issue her with a fail. It is only the production by her mother of Monica's birth certificate that sees the teacher appeased and the situation finally resolved. This account powerfully demonstrates that not only is there a denial of her identity and experience in the playground, as it were, as white peers touch and poke at her with intrigue and confusion but that she is not safe even within the teaching and learning confines of the classroom. A similar incident is recounted, with emotional candour, by Gabriel (Education consultant) who, when he was finally allowed to sit in for an absent team mate in a chess competition, was told, by his teacher upon winning 'I didn't think you people played chess… were any good at chess'.

Clearly, school represented a site of constant battle for survival in terms of gaining recognition of one's racial identity as legitimate, let alone as a place to learn. In terms of context, it is important to remember that our respondents were attending school in the

seventies and early eighties. This was a period in British popular culture marked by infrequent yet stereotypical depictions of black people. A popular television sit-com of the time, *Mind Your Language*,[6] to which one interviewee refers, reflected much of the type of racist stereotyping with which many of our respondents had to contend. Being called 'nigger' or 'wog' was commonplace along with denigratory references to being or being like monkeys. Interviewees spoke of the hurt that such experiences caused leading them to want to give up or to leave the education system altogether. Those who recounted such events to their parents were reminded of the fact that in order to succeed at school, in employment and elsewhere in white British society they had to work twice as hard or harder than their white counterparts simply because they were black.

> Both parents (…) would just say, you've got be strong (…) and answer back and tell them [white pupils] what for. And that is what I did but you couldn't do that all the time but that is what I did actually and I had to become quite aggressive - not aggressive but really assertive, otherwise you would be trampled on.… So it [school] was really not a pleasant experience. (Paulette, Psychologist)

Paulette's comment serves as a useful point at which to draw attention to the fraught relationship between agency (on the part of the interviewees as children) and the power and privilege imbued within the acts of white peers and teachers and the institutions in which their practices are performed. As children, our black middle class respondents are developing an understanding of an identity which is minoritized and which is wholly distinct from their parents, whose racialized identities were mainly formed under a geographical, temporal and post-colonial context very different from theirs. These retrospective glimpses into interviewees' childhoods, while revealing the challenges they endured at school, also provide an insight into some of the mechanisms which acted as sources of support or of the incidents which enhanced positively their black identity and illustrate how they began to develop strategies to negotiate a less fraught minoritized existence. The television series *Roots*,[7] aired during 1977, lends useful illustration of such mechanisms:

> (…) we are talking about my secondary education when *Roots* came out and how people then responded to that film and the injustice that you saw in that film. And how I responded was to say that I can have it. That black people have gone before me and have died before me so that I can have what I have today. And I don't want to throw it away. I refuse to throw that away what has gone before me. So that is my defining moment. (…) Others I remember (…) responded by saying that I am not going to work for no white man (…) but I chose to respond in a different way. I said I was going to go out and get what is mine and I know what I am capable of earning and what I am capable of doing. (Joan, Education Training Manager)

Several interviewees make reference to *Roots* and its significance to their childhood identity. As a programme, it was seen to offer a powerful historical depiction of a collective reality as black people subjugated at the hands of whites that resonated strongly with their public lives as experienced beyond the safety of their homes. Commenting on the racism prevalent in the schools of her youth, Eleanor states 'there was no understanding (…) of who you are, of promoting who you are, and I think the first sort of any sort of

understanding we had of us as black people in society was when *Roots* the film came on'. Eleanor's comment echoes the sentiment expressed by Joan. It is through this childhood lens and the powerful story depicted in the series that both women are able to formulate an understanding of a collective black identity which for Joan becomes an extension of those who have died and 'gone before'. They have paid the ultimate sacrifice upon which she now feels responsible to build. A similar sense of what might be conceptualized as an agency of determination is shared by Patricia (Resources Manager):

> [I was] ten [years old] (…) when *Roots* came out. And so [that was] what my mum was saying to me [about working hard]. I've seen this here *Roots* and we're doing history and I'm learning about Elephantiasis and African people in mud huts and things like that in school. So I'm panicking 'cos I'm thinking 'I can't miss [lessons]' and I just could not talk. I could not play with these [white] people and I'd bring my book and at playtime you'd see me sitting there with the book.

Even though her mother has reminded her constantly about 'studying her books', it is the fear generated by watching *Roots* – a stark representation of race inequality – that galvanises Patricia into what we might understand as a form of 'racial resistance' (Moore, 2008: 497). We argue, however, that if as Moore states the 'boundaries and content of racial and class identities (…) vary according to the context, particularly the social, economic and cultural resources that groups have available to them' (Moore, 2008: 495) then as our black middle class respondents experience the transition from working class to middle class status the forms of this racial resistance become informed by the codes, practices and acts of their wider environment. In other words, through their encounters of middle class spaces – including the formal terrain of universities, their places of occupation – they are able to deploy forms of cultural capital that they have learnt have status and legitimacy within the context of a dominant white middle class society (Bourdieu, 1986).

Playing the Game: Deployment of Cultural Capital to Survive WhiteWorld[8]

We have argued that for our respondents school acted as a formative space of learning in terms of developing a racial identity imbued with minoritized status. While in some cases their parents advised about how to navigate and survive these enduring moments of tension such guidance tended to be perfunctory, lacking in sufficient tactical detail to enable respondents to successfully manoeuvre through the raced complexities of daily British life. It is only through the gradual process of assessing and testing out a range of responses themselves that respondents have been able to begin to forge a path for surviving WhiteWorld. In this section, we demonstrate how the experience of being a racialized minority along with acquiring middle class status (albeit resisted as a self-definition by the majority)[9] has enabled our interviewees to use their class position to signal status and hence a degree of legitimacy (though fragile and subject to interrogation) to their white counterparts.[10] In making this argument, we continue to borrow from Bourdieu to set out the weight given to the social value of 'secondary characteristics' which though they

often remain unnamed 'function as tacit requirements' to access social spaces or membership or inclusion to elite groups (Bourdieu, 1986: 102). In this case, the groups and spaces mainly refer to educational establishments, that is schools and further and higher education institutions, but also include and draw on references to wider fields the rules of entry to which are closely policed by a dominant white middle class majority. The following comment from Miles provides a useful starting point from which it is possible to begin to set out the distinction between primary/explicit characteristics (qualifications, hard work) and those which are secondary in nature. We have been discussing the level of support and encouragement he received, as a child, from his parents:

> My mum, her line to me always was (…) 'If you work hard enough you can get anything you want to, all you need to do is work hard enough'. (…) There [was] only one thing that [was] said. There is a style of walking if you want to be a bad man walking down the street, you kind of hop and draw your leg along, and I do remember mum saying , 'If you ever walk like that I really will break your leg!' (…) I'm talking about my grandparents as well, they always want the best for you. They always want you to speak properly, to act properly and to have good values. (Miles, Senior Personnel Manager)

The adults around Miles when he was growing up clearly articulate that merely working harder than your white counterparts, while important, is not sufficient to succeed. Adopting particular forms of embodied capital, in this case not walking like he is from the street, accent and values are seen to further distinguish desirable from unwanted forms of being. Asked to expand on this statement, Miles refers to different 'cultural styles' or personas that are seen as appropriate to given contexts. Indeed comments about speech, accent and being 'articulate' featured frequently in discussions with interviewees, especially in relation to questions about class identification. Of importance here are not simply the values attributed to these various capitals but the simultaneous (mis)recognition of judgements assigned to alternative forms of the same property (Bourdieu, 1986). For example, Miles, in extolling the importance of speaking 'properly' does so relationally, denouncing the value of Patois, a Jamaican colloquial form of verbal exchange: 'Yeah [speaking properly means] not speaking in Patois. Speaking clearly, and being able to be understood really (…), no street talk or anything along those lines, just as I'm speaking now.' We use this particular example as means of introducing the thesis that being 'racially salient' (Carbado and Gulati, 2004: 1658), that is 'performing' and embodying aspects of cultural capital seen to be racially defined, are not only undesirable within WhiteWorld but also, as a result, become repositioned and uncritically accepted as undesirable by some black middle classes themselves. This is a subject to which we return later.

Language and accent were regarded as central tools that enabled black middle class respondents to signal their class status to white others. In these quite sophisticated ways they were able to facilitate the creation of an invisible demarcation between themselves as middle class and other black people from working class backgrounds. Cassandra (Training Company Director) reveals the benefits of deploying her accent in this way:

> I get that reaction [of surprise] (…) a lot when people meet me (…) You can see (…) the wheels are going 'Ah she is a black woman' because I don't necessarily unless I want to sound like a black person, I don't necessarily sound like a black person (…) I'm very proud of being a black

woman but I think well, what is important is that people begin to listen to you and hear the way that you speak. Hear that you might have a level of education. So [for] example, I go into a shop and I am not happy with the way that I have been treated and I perhaps will tell the person that (…), they might try to fob me off and I insist to speak to the manager and you can very quickly see the realization that I am actually not perhaps just dealing with somebody that does not know how to handle themselves. (…) And so I find that when the manager will come out and I am speaking and (…) not raising my voice but (…) just (…) putting my point across that usually I will get what I want. (…) I think that sometimes people categorize you, they expect you to be whatever stereotypical kind of screeching not able to be articulate (…) black female ….

This is a particularly interesting comment that exemplifies some of the nuanced complexities of raced and classed identity politics and stereotypes. 'Sounding black', to borrow Cassandra's terminology, operates to denote a certain lack of education – there may be similarities here with Miles' reading of Patois – but also conveys more than this. Accent is conflated with comportment, in this case composure and politeness as an embodied form of capital, along with persistence and knowledge that enables her to take her complaint to the highest channels and obtain the outcome she seeks. This is the first point to note about Cassandra's statement. Second, her comment exposes how gender intersects with race and class resulting in a reading of the black female working class body as uneducated and lacking in verbal and physical restraint. By making use of accent as a signifier of her middle class status, Cassandra works to position herself as distinct from her black female working class counterparts. She is engaging in what Lacy (2007:75) terms *exclusionary boundary work* in order to make known her class status and hence decrease the likelihood that she will be treated in a discriminatory way on account of her race. In order to do this successfully the black middle classes must have awareness of the politics of both black and white identity so they are able to access and deploy their capital appropriately. This is certainly evident with Cassandra. That she recognises her actions as part of the requirement to assert a public identity in a dominant white society is evidenced when she explains that when with her black team, she code-switches with her speech marked instead by the use of Patois.[11]

There is, however, a third point to be made. While she correctly identifies her actions as part of the unspoken[12] *rules of racial engagement* (Rollock, 2011) she also becomes complicit in *mis*recognising this form of capital (accent) as legitimate when, on meeting me she expresses surprise that I too am black[13]. The arbitrary criteria of WhiteWorld that she recognizes and deploys to her advantage, therefore, become the very basis by which she assesses my raced and classed identity. In other words, in a perverse reformulation of DuBois' notion of double consciousness, Cassandra is not merely looking at herself through the eyes of (white) others (necessary to allow her the insight to use her middle class accent in appropriate settings) but she has 'forgotten' that she is doing so and it is from this very position that she then assesses me.

In addition to exclusionary work, the black middle classes also carry out *inclusionary boundary work* that is, emphasizing similarities (perhaps in values or pastimes) and shared experience with the white middle classes, in an attempt to minimise the distinction between the two groups. In the following extract, for example, Jean (College Lecturer) reveals how she enacts this:

Cos I don't know if they [teachers] forget when they're (…) in the school (…) that there's actually two parents sitting [t]here [at the governors' meeting]. So we're all sort of speaking the language, *I call it the language of whiteness. It's like you've got to be part of that in order to communicate in certain situations.* So the governing body communicates in a very white middle class language. So they forget themselves and start making these derogatory remarks about parents and (…) [I] sort of [sit] there thinking 'Oh, so this is it'. [You] see very much what their core beliefs are. …the parents… that they serve (…) [are from] a deprived community; [the] majority of parents are English as an additional language. [Emphasis added]

Here we observe that it is not merely accent and comportment but the acquisition of a particular style of communication that facilitates inclusion into white middle class spaces – here conversations at governors' meetings.[15] This dual role (she is a minority playing at the language of a majority group) enables her to gain a 'perspective advantage' that those excluded from the centre or the 'norm' can experience as their analysis becomes multi-layered, becomes 'both' 'and', 'beyond the normative boundary of the conception of Self/Other' (King, 1995 cited in Ladson-Billings and Donnor, 2008: 373).

There is a further complexity to this analysis. Middle class blacks also carry out *authenticity signalling work* to let other blacks know that even though they are sending one set of messages to WhiteWorld (to gain acceptance and inclusion and to indicate their difference from working class blacks) they recognize many of these performances as a set of quite deliberate strategies.[16] They have not been entirely subsumed by this dominant ideology (and their enactments of it) and hence forgotten their black roots and identity. In carrying out authenticity signalling work, middle class blacks are *speaking back* to other blacks to let them know they are playing the game of survival in WhiteWorld. Therefore, we contend that the black middle classes are living through not a double consciousness (as DuBois has famously theorized) but instead through a set of multiple consciousnesses as they move back and forth the class and race divides within different social spheres populated by audiences and actors of varying race and class backgrounds. Richard's experience neatly exemplifies this multi-perspective:

And then I've got the black professional me almost [so] that when I'm around other black professionals there is almost signals you have to send out to other black professionals to let them know that you are for real, that you are here to work, you are not a joker. You are not someone who is just in there to make up the quota as another black guy (…). You didn't get on [simply] because you are black (…) you have to let them know that because other black professionals are sometimes a bit wary of you because they've worked really hard to get where they've got and they think well who are you? What are you about? Where are you coming from? Are you one of those or one of us? And so you have to negotiate that a lot of the time which is strange. You have to do that and sometimes you have to do that with white professionals as well. You have to say, hey look you know I'm not just here, I didn't just get here, I know what I'm talking about, so you are constantly having to prove yourself all the time on a number of levels… . (Richard, Charity Director) [emphasis added]

Of course, as Jean's earlier remarks indicate, the performance of these public identities includes the site of the school where although as parents they engage in similar acts of monitoring and surveillance as white middle class parents, specific concerns about their raced identities and racism modulate the nature of their interactions differently (Vincent

and Ball, forthcoming). We have sought here to attend specifically to the processes through which the black middle classes develop public identities. There is a final point to be made. Constantly assessing and navigating these various public terrains can be exhausting and while we have detailed the resilience and agency exercised by many of our interviewees, there were some who spoke of the pain and challenge of witnessing and attempting to manoeuvre through such relentless inequity both personally and for future generations of black Caribbean children:

> I have always held the view that had I received my formative education in the UK at that time then my potential would not have been 30 percent realised because I came from a situation where there were no barriers. There were no ceilings placed on my ambition. The prime minister of Jamaica was black. The governor general of Jamaica was black and as a child it never occurred to me that I couldn't become governor general or Prime Minister. However, once I got here, I realised that were I to express similar ambition about the political systems and positions in the UK they would think I was a prime candidate for the loony bin. So the ambitions were never fashioned here and I felt that I somewhat escaped the low expectations that existed in the society then and to a degree now about the performance and possible achievement of the African-Caribbean youngsters, in particular men. (Ray, Senior Management, Local Council)

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the complex ways in which black middle class respondents both come to an understanding of their status as racially minoritized and how their middle classness enables them to access a set of capitals to perform a unique, classed form of racial resistance. The black middle classes strategically make use of a range of resources including accent, language and comportment to signal their class status to white others to ultimately minimize the effects of racial discrimination. In reaching this conclusion, the aim has not been to lay claim to the primacy of race over class or vice versa but to understand how these particular forms of constructed identities operate in relation to one another. The findings described in this article indicate that it is evident that racism persists as part of British society albeit often in subtle, everyday forms and that even middle class blacks remain judged based on the colour of their skin. However, as we have argued, they have at their disposal relative power and privilege to help them mediate racial injustice in a way that, on account of differences in access to and deployment of cultural capital, is not available to their black working class counterparts (hooks, 2000). While this can help provide some insight into the nuances of racisms and its various manifestations, it should not obfuscate the pain and damaging consequences that racism causes. Of further research interest is how middle class blacks work both to protect their children from these incidents of racial Othering and how they engage in the process of teaching and preparing their children to use such strategies themselves. When and how do middle class blacks feel it is appropriate to engage in such teaching? While one can theorize about the age at which children should be introduced to these public identities and this strategizing, does the extent of preparation vary according to the child's gender, the type of school the child attends or residential area in which the family

live? Certainly the answers to these and other questions would lend further insight into the identity formation and lived experiences not just of the black middle classes but how they manage and reformulate their experiences for their children.

Yet, there is a broader point to be made. The very need for the performance of public identities demands questions about the notion of social justice. First, it raises fundamental questions about what we understand and really mean by the notion of race equality if (even) middle class blacks are obliged to carry out forms of extra work in order to gain some level of legitimacy and acceptance within white society. Second, does the notion of 'inclusion' for blacks really mean becoming 'racially palatable' and hence 'peripherally or unstereotypically nonwhite' (Carbado and Gulati, 2005: 1658)? If so, this represents not an advancement of equality but a maintenance of a racially imbalanced status quo the rules of which are determined by WhiteWorld. Finally, that mainstream white society is oblivious to or refuses to recognize and attempt to minimize the extra work and movement between identities required by the black middle classes speaks clearly both to the comfort and luxury of power and, moreover, to the countless privileges embedded in whiteness.

Notes

1 ESRC RES-062-23-1880.
2 Researchers found that minority ethnic candidates had to send 74 percent more job applications in order to obtain the same level of success (i.e. called for an interview) as their white counterparts. The report concludes that it is 'hard to avoid the conclusion that racial discrimination accounts for a proportion of the 'ethnic penalty' in labour market outcomes' for minority ethnic groups (Wood, Hales, Purdon, Sejersen and Hayllar, 2009: 47).
3 The public exhibition of Baartman in London, 1810, caused a 'public scandal' not just due to the law abolishing slavery three years earlier but due to the semi-naked manner in which she was 'displayed' (Gilman, 1992). Hobson (2003:90) notes that 'by virtue of skin color (sic), femaleness and body shape - Baartman became a 'freak' in Europe [enabling] Westerners [to further] prescribe racial and cultural differences and, hence, their 'superiority' as Europeans in comparison with African people and cultures'.
4 Nearly half (48%) of black Caribbean men in Britain have a partner from a different ethnic group; the highest inter-ethnic relationship rate with the exception of those of mixed heritage backgrounds. The figure for black Caribbean women is 34 percent (Platt, 2009).
5 In using this metaphor, we seek to emphasize the way in which the black subject is made unhuman. Like caged animals they are met with fear and intrigue as they are caught under a perpetual 'imperial gaze' that positions them as Other (hooks, 1992:7).
6 Running from 1977 to the mid-eighties, the television sit-com *Mind Your Language* focused on adult students of an English as a Foreign Language evening class. The programme and its humour centred on the misunderstandings of the foreign students' engagement with the English language and drew heavily on cultural stereotypes of their individual countries of origin.
7 Based on the novel of the same name by Alex Haley, *Roots* charts the life of African born Kunta Kinte who was captured in his teens and taken to the 'New World' where he was sold into slavery. The story reveals the pain and challenges of slavery and proceeds to follow subsequent generations of Kinte's family through the abolition of slavery and into modern times.

8   Gillborn (2008:162) uses 'WhiteWorld' (after McKenley, 2005) to encapsulate the various normalized layers of White Supremacy as it oscillates, without warning between named, explicit and aggressive acts and those which are more subtle and hidden.

9   Rollock, Vincent, Gillborn and Ball (under review)

10   Of course, we are not suggesting that these 'class acts' are always conscious or deliberate. In many instances our respondents embody and perform 'middle classness' as a fundamental element of their habitus.

11   'Code-switching' denotes the ability to switch from one dialect or vernacular to another (Hewitt, 1986). Here we suggest that this is informed by signifiers of class and cultural background.

12   Unspoken, that is, within wider society. In 'safe' company many black middle classes often switch between forms of parlance and colloquialisms not to delineate class position but to lend nuance and dramatic effect to story-telling or, in some conditions, to signal 'authenticity' to black strangers.

13   First-named author.

14   Our previous communication had been by email and on the telephone. It is entirely feasible that her surprise may be informed by the (accurate) perception that academic researchers tend to be white. However, as with all interviewees she was aware there were both black and white researchers on the project team.

15   See Rollock (2006).

16   See footnote 10.

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