

## **DANGEROUS LIAISONS: A DIALOGUE ABOUT TIES THAT BIND AND LINES THAT DIVIDE**

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### **Abstract.**

*This article offers a dialogical exploration of “race” and national identity. The argument is developed along three trajectories: 1) theoretical, drawing on the insights of Anderson, Appiah, Gilroy, Mama, Nussbaum, Ratele and others; 2) empirical, drawing on narrative interviews with black participants of different national origin, and on practical development work with South African youth; 3) personal, reflecting dynamism and oscillation in our individual positions in dialogue with one another. Bradbury’s initial position that in a society like South Africa, the “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) of the nation may serve to undercut divisions based on “race” (and class), is challenged by the emergence of xenophobic difference. Ndlovu’s initial position that black identity is fragmented and multiple, is challenged by the possibilities for identifications based on “race” to overcome lines of difference drawn by national or other dimensions of identity. By juxtaposing our positions, we argue that neither “race” nor national identity can be simply erased and that, although there are both theoretical difficulties and political dangers entailed in these identifications, fluid and contingent interpretations may offer emancipatory possibilities.*

### **Keywords.**

Identity, race, nationality, cosmopolitanism, blackness, xenophobia, imagined communities

### **CONTEXTUALISING THE CONVERSATION.**

This article is based on a paper first written away from home, for a British audience and presented at a seminar at the Manchester Metropolitan University in 2009. We wrote it “together” in the sense that although we wrote different parts of the paper independently, we wrote most of it in the same space, across a kitchen table from one another and interspersed our writing with much talk, dialogue that shifted and destabilized our positions rather than making them more certain. Broadly speaking, these shifts relate to questions of strategic essentialism and fragmentation in the

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<sup>1</sup> Siyanda Ndlovu died on 5 April 2010, just after his 28<sup>th</sup> birthday (See **PINS 39**, 54-55, 2010).

articulation of our identities; for Bradbury, from the idea of national identity as unifying, to increasing fragmentation and uncertainty; for Ndlovu, from multiplicity to strategic essentialism or singularity in black identity.

We subsequently presented a version of this work at the Centre for Critical Research in Race and Identity at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa. In the process of this rewriting, we had further conversations across a different table overlooking our hometown of Durban. These conversations included reflections on how talk about “race” and nationality is critically impacted upon by audience and context and a recognition that both aspects of our identities are rendered strange in different ways by being at home or away. We recognized that the context of writing and saying was important when we first presented these ideas in England but the significance of context became even more apparent as we prepared to re-present these ideas to our “home” audience, as the dialogue continued between us. As we anticipated different forms of (mis)interpretations, we became aware that some things can and can’t be said in different places. Can we talk about “race” or does this inevitably feed into racist discourses? Is it time to move to a post-race position? Can we talk about “national identity” beyond clichés such as rainbow-ism or is such talk inevitably reliant upon colonial demarcations and necessarily fodder for xenophobia? We felt that the experience of these constraints on what it is possible / impossible to say, who can say what to whom, was in itself informative, provoking us to be reflexive and preventing fixity in our positions. So, we decided to talk rather than be silent, although we were *very* tempted to retreat into not speaking!

In both contexts, our audiences engaged us vigorously and we are grateful to all those voices that further complicated our subsequent conversations. We were in the process of reflecting on these exchanges in preparing this paper for **PINS**, when one voice of the dialogue was tragically silenced forever. Siyanda Ndlovu died in a drowning accident on 5 April 2010. This means that his position is unfinished but it also makes it imperative to capture and inscribe his voice on these critical issues. Siyanda’s engagement with the question of identity, particularly black identity, was passionate and personal but was tempered by intellectual doubt in the best possible sense. The complexity and nuances of his position will speak into contexts of future conversations for which he cannot be physically present.

**Jill Bradbury:** Our purpose in this paper is to think about whether identifications of “race” and “national identity” can be deployed “progressively” in the service of more equal relations between people by creating “ties that bind” or whether they are *necessarily* implicated in the reproduction of power and difference, as “lines that divide”. Of course, we recognize the social construction of such categories and accept the implication that “there is no such thing” as either “race” or nationality, however, we are not willing to dismiss them as irrelevant or un-real in the narration of our-selves. For both of us, at the moment, we have no option but to continue to use these terms “under erasure” problematising them, unravelling them and fraying the edges of their meanings. Perhaps this is simply a matter of strategy, an inadequate and transitional strategy but with emancipatory possibilities. Featherstone (2005: 21) refers to such strategic, political deployment of what he calls “... earlier sources of anti-colonial resistance – religious-derived thought, for example, nationalism and pan-Africanism – both as components in a common history of anti-colonialism and as themselves valid theoretical practices.” And Appiah (2005: 141) points to the potential for identity politics

to entail their own ends, linking this possibility to a reassertion of persons at the centre of any such theoretical / political struggles: “There is no shortage of liberation movements that call for the erasure or, anyway, transformation, of the very identities they serve – as appears to be the case with some versions of radical gay politics ... To make sense of such politics, we must see it as advancing the interests of its constituents as persons, in the first instance, not as identity holders. A movement for poor people does not seek to affirm their identity as poor people. Here the object isn’t preservation but cultural or socioeconomic change.”

However, while this invocation of strategy may allow us to wriggle off the hook of essentialism, we have to admit that our sense of ambivalence about the erasure of both “race” and nation is less instrumental and far more fraught with emotion than this argument sounds. For both of us, although perhaps in quite different ways, these identities do not feel complete, finished-with or dispensable and do not feel able to align ourselves with calls to “go beyond race” (e.g. Gilroy, 1995), or for a cosmopolitan negation of nationality (e.g. Nussbaum, 2002). We feel that Mama (2001: 9) eloquently expresses our protest: “We are being asked to think ‘beyond identity’, when for many of us identity remains a quest, something in-the-making.” Although we come from the discipline base of psychology, neither of us are “mainstream” psychologists and we don’t always sit comfortably in our own disciplinary space; this displacement is evident in resources on which we draw to formulate our positions, we have to cross multiple disciplinary boundaries to talk about what we do! However, in this instance, perhaps what we are trying to do is to restore a psychological dimension to “identity”, to take seriously the lived and felt dimensions of our own sense of our-selves. In Nussbaum’s (2002) provocative edited collection **For love of country?**, we find passionate responses to her call for a cosmopolitan ethos and an end to nationalisms. In a wonderfully titled piece, *Eros against Esperanto*, Pinsky (2002: 85) says: “The patriotic and the cosmopolitan: these are not mere ideas, they are feelings, indeed they are forms of love, with all the terror that word should imply.”

The possibilities and terrors of the love of home, of nation, may be related to how a particular nation is situated in the order of things, globally and to how we as individuals are situated within a particular nation. We take for granted an understanding of the historical emergence of nations as the products of war and conquest and, particularly, of the quest for empire and the colonial project. However, in the postcolonial territory of the 21<sup>st</sup> century these lines on the maps of war that divide and the ties that bind are complicated. Perhaps those in powerful nations with commitments to social justice or a more equal world are obliged to negate their belonging to a particular nation or place because of the others from whom this would separate them. However, conversely, perhaps where the birth of nations is not yet “history” but intertwined with living, personal memory, the same lines of identification may be effected by the converse process, that is, by identifying with the “new” nation, separating ourselves from our various histories of colonialism and pre-colonial formations of difference. South Africa is a peculiar amalgam of a state that is both powerful and disempowered, relative to different “others” in the global map, and exemplifying the complexity of lines that divide within. Moments of disavowal or identification may serve quite different functions in different contexts, and for individuals differently situated in these contexts. Claiming or stating one’s identity as “South African” may mean quite different things when the “other” identity to which this is counterposed is Moçambican, Kenyan or British ... or Black or White, or Zulu or Sotho. Likewise, asserting strong ties of identification on the

basis of blackness must surely have very different connotations to asserting identification on the basis of “whiteness” or when such identification is juxtaposed with more narrowly defined specificities of “blacknesses” that rupture this unitary notion.

**Siyanda Ndlovu:** When I began this work and, in particular, writing this paper I was clear about the theoretical and political shortcomings of the notion of a totalizing singular blackness grounded in the history of oppression. As the working title of my doctoral thesis, **There is No-one Black**, suggests, my aim has been to explore the fractures and ambiguities in the social constitution of black subjectivities. As Ratele, (1998: 60) whose own project is an exploration of the ambiguities of black masculinities in post-apartheid South Africa, argues, “[t]he identity labelled black is being contested. It is becoming increasingly difficult to hold blackness as a political community together because of the changes in the politics of bodies and identities, as well as the opening up of and reconfigurations of material and psychological spaces.” He asserts that “a breaking up of sameness” (Ibid.) is a political imperative because blackness is teeming with “differing personal histories, personalities, desires, and class positions” (Ratele, 2003: 237). Following this line, I have argued for different ways of being, doing, narrating and performing *blacknesses* that are articulated, realized and lived out in the messy, intricate and entangled networks of “race”, class, nationality and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, generational and religious affiliations, embodied in everyday practices and in our encounters with one another. I was convinced that thinking of blackness in this *plural* sense was politically more progressive and theoretically more productive, than the singularity of blackness invoked by the positions of some African-American (e.g. Gates, 1997, 1999, 2000) and Afrocentric (e.g. Asante, 2003, 2007) writers. These positions seem to uncritically appeal to the discourse and rhetoric of black authenticity, asserting blackness in the singular in theoretically limited and dangerously essentialist and homogenized terms.

However, in writing this paper in dialogue with Jill, I have become less certain about formulating this objective as simply to replace singularity with a more fluid, pluralized and fragmented notion of blackness. I am no longer entirely convinced of the move to talk about *blacknesses* because it seems that the fragmentation and difference entailed in *post-modern blackness* may unwittingly (re)produce and (re)inscribe, “a new resurgence” (Stevens, Swart & Franchi, 2006: 4) of racialisation; the culturalisation of race; the racialisation of culture; of ethnic forms of Othering; of xenophobia and more recently, Islamophobia. Similarly, Bulmer and Solomos (2004: 7-8) argue that, “[w]hat seems to characterize the contemporary period is, on the one hand, a complex spectrum of racisms, and, on the other, the fragmentation of the definition of blackness as a political identity in favour of a resurgence of ethnic, cultural and religious differentiation.” In this paper, I seek to ask of both conceptions of blackness the following questions: what are the contexts where singular or plural conceptions of blackness serve more progressive and equitable relations between people? And in what contexts do these conceptions of blackness serve violent and conservative political aims? What connections between people can be forged through singular or plural conceptions of identity based on “race” or nationality? And what divisions might these conceptions (re)produce?

**JILL BRADBURY.**

**NATIONHOOD – TIES THAT BIND.**

Anderson (1991) makes his claim for the “imagined community” of the nation as a vital “good” on the basis that these imagined connections create the possibility for the inclusion of otherness or difference, offering the means by which the circle of human concern can be extended beyond those who are immediately known to me, making it possible for me to imagine that their experiences are in certain important respects like mine. From this perspective, the nation “is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson, 1991: 7, emphasis added).

In his conceptualisation of what he terms “rooted cosmopolitanism” Appiah (2005: 239) too refers to the ways in which national identity can serve to cross boundaries of difference and connect people suggesting that this can be a mechanism for widening rather than narrowing the circle of belonging:

“National partiality is, of course, what the concept of cosmopolitanism is usually assumed to oppose, and yet the connection between the two is more complicated than this. Nationalism itself has much in common with its putative antithesis, cosmopolitanism: for nationalism, too, exhorts quite a loftily abstract level of allegiance – a vast, encompassing project that extends far beyond ourselves and our families. (For Ghanaians of my father’s generation, national feeling was a hard-won achievement, one enabled by political principle and dispassion: though it did not supplant the special obligations one had with respect to one’s *ethnie*, matriline, and family, it did, in some sense, demote them.) That’s what makes the contrast between cosmopolitanism and nationalism so vexed. Nations, if they aren’t universal enough for the universalist, certainly aren’t local enough for the localist”.

By contrast with Appiah and Anderson’s arguments for national identity as effecting unity between people who would be otherwise divided, Nussbaum (2002) argues against recent appeals to reinvent the American narrative of nationalism (this, prior to Obama, who has of course re-invoked, reworked and retold a great American national story) and is virulently dismissive of any potential for national identity to unite. In this regard, she takes on those who seem to think that “the alternative to a politics based on patriotism and national identity is what he [Rorty] calls a ‘politics of difference’, one based on internal divisions among America’s ethnic, racial, religious, and other subgroups” (Nussbaum, 2002: 4). Given that these “subgroups” exist both within and beyond national boundaries, appeals to unity by invoking a supranational identification may conceal antagonisms and subvert struggles for equality rather than invigorating them. Differences within national boundaries are best confronted and changed by engaging a cosmopolitan conception of an inclusive human solidarity, universal justice and equality. Nussbaum thus argues for the imagination of community beyond or without borders and a universal humanism.

However, as we well know, even at the very local, immediate level of those nearest and dearest to us, imagining the life of others is not an easy task and may often slip into mere projections of the self. The abstraction of the universal “person” may not in fact take us very far at all in the task of understanding others or even ourselves. Scarry

(2002: 102) alerts us to the great difficulties associated with imagining other people, to the interpretive work that this entails and argues that this conundrum “*is both the cause of, and the problem displayed by, the action of injuring*”.

She points us in two different directions towards solving this difficulty, both discursive and both linked to nationhood, one deeper into the world of the imagination and the other away from it:

- 1) Works of art that inscribe narratives and textualise stories that *work* the imagination, create routes into new, other worlds for readers;
- 2) Institutionalization of rights. In this sense the nation is not that which is imagined (or experienced emotively) but that which is circumscribed by law and in constitutional values.

### **NARRATING THE NATION: THE WORK OF INSCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION.**

Homi Bhabha’s (1990) idea that the nation is narrated or discursively produced derives from Anderson’s earlier assertion that the imagination of the nation is only possible in a textual world, where readers are anonymous rather than embodied interlocutors. For Anderson, these textual others belong to a “community” by virtue of shared language and in this standardized print version of the language, commonly accessible representations of the nation become possible, recruiting individual “readers” to this hypothesized social world. Critically, chronological forms of representation (specifically he suggests the novel and the newspaper), generate continuities and connections across time as well as territorially in space. In this way, the private act of reading connects individuals to unknown (and unknowable) others – dead or alive, near or far – creating a sense of simultaneity. However, the fixity of text and its apparent authority belies its active construction and Bhabha (1990: 2) reminds us that the story of a nation is always a “transitional history” characterized by “conceptual indeterminacy” and a “wavering between vocabularies”. Here, a deconstructivist reading follows the cracks and slippages of language, rendering the narratives of nation open and uncertain.

Appiah (2005: 297) suggests that our understandings of the nation and our sense of ourselves in terms of national identity, rely both on a reading of such inscribed texts and symbols and on the performance or enactment of such interpretations:

“The scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*”.

I find this coupling of the pedagogic (drawing on heritage, and the more stylized representations of the nation, having a trajectory or historical sense) and the performative (in the recurrences of daily life, not least in our language, in our talk) very productive for thinking about continuities and discontinuities in the ways in which collective identities play themselves out and are made and remade in individual stories. An experience of a pedagogic performance of national identity that Siyanda and I shared with a group of young South Africans serves to highlight the ambivalences and ambiguities entailed in national identification and difference. For a number of years we

have collaborated on a project, the **Fast Forward Programme**, in which we work with young people to explore questions of identity. In 2005, we met via video-conference with a group of British youth. At some point in the conversation, someone asked the British group to sing their national anthem. The request was met with bemusement and, after some awkward shuffling, someone blurted out, “We don’t know it!” The South Africans reacted with disbelief and loud laughter, and then we rose to our feet to sing “Nkosi Sikele”. The performance asserted our identification with one another, our difference from our interlocutors. However, the recording reveals splinters and schisms within this apparent unity. While the young people confidently sing their way through the multilingual amalgam that is the “new” South African anthem, Siyanda and I stop singing and exchange amused glances at the point where the old apartheid anthem “Die Stem” is grafted into the song. This reflects our generational straddling of two versions of South African national identity and, for me, the ways in which my racialised position makes my national identity ambiguous and possibly even precarious.

However, despite the obvious discomfitures, textual fissures, ambiguities and ambivalences entailed in the performance and narration of the nation, I have to say that I remain hopeful that patriotism, or the love of place and of a particular people, of home, and nationalism (in the usual militarized sense entailing notions of superiority) need not be equated. Is it possible to invent a kind of nationhood which embraces difference in which the national “character”, as it were, is about openness to the experience of others, to creating new narratives drawing on the threads of others? If the nation defines itself as multilingual, multicultural perhaps identifications with this story may enhance personal and collective agency and challenge monolithic structures or monological identities. In interesting ways, some versions of the South African national identity make our borders elastic, stretching to fit the continent – the representation of home in my imagination is the whole continent – perhaps this is what Appiah (2005, 2006) means by rooted cosmopolitanism. Perhaps because I am a “white” South African and in attempts to refute certain positionings entailed by that label, I want to claim my Africanness as primary rather than the specific national identity of being South African. This is of course contested, and many would deny my right to that identity and perhaps that is why I feel compelled to claim it, to articulate it. (Interestingly, in our preparations for this paper, Siyanda vehemently asserted the converse prioritizing of identities in his sense of self, highlighting what can be taken-for-granted and what needs to be agentically claimed.) This stretching, however, is not easy and entails the “work” of imagination, the confrontation of what Steyn (2009) has called “active ignorance”. To engage this “ignorance” imaginatively entails crossing boundaries, not only the physical boundaries of Apartheid spaces, but also those symbolically erected and entrenched by schooling and public discourses. The imperative is to imagine alternatives to the histories of ties that bind us to the north-west corner of the globe as if that were “the world” and separate us from those both within our national borders and beyond them on the continent.

### **BEYOND IMAGINATION.**

In order to do this, to harness the most progressive potentials of a national identity, I am sure that we will need to combine imaginative acts with institutional and political authority, developing what Barber (2002) has called a “constitutional faith” whereby it may be possible to link patriotism or identification with national narratives to commitments to values of justice and equality.

I am suggesting that the idea of the nation, and our individual shifting moments of identification and disavowal, remains a significant dimension for understanding human life. Attempts to simply negate this seem both theoretically and politically futile. In particular, while acknowledging the dangerously exclusionary effects that appeals to nationhood may have, in some contexts, narratives of nationhood may serve progressive purposes. For example, national identity can be, and has been in the South African context, an antiracist move and a move to counter the multiplicity of ethnic and linguistic divisions similar to those that Appiah describes in his home country of Ghana and that the Apartheid government entrenched and intensified in the spatially divisive mapping of the homeland system. At this moment in narrating the nation, the appeal to commonalities across “race” or for the disavowal of the inherited apartheid racial classifications, serves to redirect the trajectory of the story in very important ways. National commitments to constitutional values have also produced the implementation of institutional mechanisms for equality in other spheres, e.g. gender and sexual orientation, that are undermined by more localized cultural particularities (Ironically and sadly, reactionary politics in relation to gender and sexuality creates bridges between people divided along racial and “cultural” lines: both Christian colonial traditions and those of Africa are invoked as grounds for discrimination.) By creating constitutional “rights” to which all citizens have recourse, the legal framework of the state may both protect minorities and enhance collective action. As Gutman (2002: 271) points out, “Democratic citizens have institutional means at their disposal that solitary individuals, or citizens of the world only, do not.” The hopeful potential is that the institutional resources of the state may serve to harness, legitimise (and perhaps even provoke?) new versions of our selves. However, I have to soberly acknowledge that in South Africa, national identity has served only the most superficial unifying purposes, typically around sporting events such as the World Cup and has *not* been a mechanism for mobilizing struggles for greater socioeconomic equality and most recently in particular has also produced (or at least underpinned) the devastating xenophobic dynamics in relation to “foreign” Africans among us, leaving patriots only the somewhat plaintive appeal beyond national identity to the Freedom Charter’s assertion that South Africa belongs to “all who live in it”.

The contrast between historical formations of nationalism in South Africa reveals that the conflation of national identifications with power is misleading. But this distinction simultaneously alerts us to the mutation of nationalism as resistance and struggle into a form of oppression or domination. When our national stories take such violent and oppressive turns, we can disavow our belonging, we can rewrite our histories to conceal these abuses in our names, or we can confront and incorporate these moments of shame as part of who we are, part of our process of becoming. Appiah (2006: 26) argues that national identification evokes shame as much as pride; “the patriot is surely also the first to suffer his or her country’s shame: it is the patriot who suffers when a country elects the wrong leaders, or when those leaders prevaricate, bluster, pantomime, or betray ‘our’ principles”.

Where nationhood is premised on the “horizontal comradeship” that Anderson hopes for and where those equal relations are inscribed in constitutional law, it may be paradoxically possible to mobilize commitments to universal human equality by appeals to national identity, through “the idea that the principles of their national identity [are] betrayed by violations of human right” (McConnell, 2002: 81). I do think that in South Africa the constitution has served, and can still be recruited to serve this purpose,



providing a potentially equalizing language through which we can understand ourselves, and others. However, fluency in such language and access to the resources of the constitution may itself be uneven. Habermas (1994) warns that, what he terms “constitutional patriotism” can only work where people understand themselves as co-authors of the very system of rights to which they might appeal. He argues that national identifications of this kind cannot be sustained unless there is a link between the constitutional system and the “historical context” and motivations and commitments of citizens, a version of democracy that entails joint authorship and shared meanings, rather than simply equal consumption of benefits. This link cannot be taken-for-granted where the invented nation means that people are “unequally yoked” coming together as “one nation” from oppositional and conflictual positions in history. The gaps or disjunctures between constitutional values and lived life are acutely evident in contemporary South Africa which continues to be criss-crossed by “lines that divide” and in particular, by the writhing live-wire of “race”.

## **SIYANDA NDLOVU.**

### **BLACKNESS BEYOND BORDERS.**

While national identification may be used to counter divisions based on “race”, “race” and specifically blackness, can conversely be used to counter lines that divide such as nationality and ethnicity, creating ties that bind. I make this argument cautiously, recognizing again that, like national identity, homogenizing “race” can operate to conceal important divisions. While we recognize that “race” as a concept operates “under erasure”, as “a concept that cannot be thought of in the ‘old way’ as representing essential, discrete differences between groups, but which we still need in order to address and dismantle racism” (Gunaratnum, 2003: 31). This speaks to the dangers of the “treacherous bind” in doing research on “race”. While I find that I still want to talk about blackness despite discourses of non-racialism and calls to move beyond “race”, perhaps this talk takes new forms and directions that are discontinuous with past conceptualisations. Although “race” might appear “to be stable, transparent and visibly embodied, the very authority of the colour line must also give rise to the possibilities of racial transgression, or crossing the line” (Wald, 2000: 5). Rewriting and reconfiguring racial identities seems premised on talk rather than silence, on recognising the realities of racialised experience while simultaneously acknowledging the unreality of the concept of “race”.

More specifically, the definition of *blackness* is problematic. I am apprehensive about defining blackness as primarily and exclusively tied to oppression by “the white colonial Other”. Mama (1995) suggests that blackness is synonymous with “struggle”, a black struggle for autonomy, for freedom and for self-definition. Like Mama (1995), blackness for Manganyi (1973: 19) tells a narrative of suffering and exploitation in that “black people share the experience of having been abused and exploited” and he goes further to suggest that “[t]his is part of [their] consciousness”. Both Mama and Manganyi locate the basis for black solidarity within a shared history of racial oppression. However, this does not seem an adequate basis for explaining the ties that bind me to other black bodies in the world. I am resistant to the political and psychological implications of restricting blackness to histories of oppression and exploitation. Ratele (2003: 238) asks the provocative question, “who are black [people] when they are no longer victims of oppression?” Such unity is not sustainable and cannot provide adequate ground for

human connections and relationships in the future. It is not sustainable because it is, for lack of a better word, a pathological connection. If nothing else lies beyond our black skin, than the history of victimhood, that connection will break in the face of new political struggles and new divisive forms of (particularly economic) postcolonial power. And it did break in May of 2008 in South Africa with the outburst of brutal xenophobic violence. It is in such a context of the unintended consequences and expression of nationality that I want to argue for strategic essentialism based on “race” (specifically *blackness*) as a means to counter xenophobia and divisions based on national, cultural and ethnic lines. However, in this very context of xenophobic violence, I struggled to theorise the links with fellow Africans in terms of our shared blackness, questioning the roots of this identification as defined by a shared history of oppression. If *all* that connects *all* black peoples of the world is their history of oppression and their “shared hatred” of “white” people then we are in trouble both politically and theoretically. Questions about what it means to be black in the world “in the present” and “in the future” are less clear than what it has meant “in the past”. I argue that we need to attend to the discursive spaces where blackness is constantly “invented, policed, transgressed, contested” (Favor, 1999: 2). We need to craft new narratives to live by that destabilize racial hegemony not by ignoring or erasing “race” but by finding the cracks and slippages in our discourse that will allow us to remake and rearticulate what it means to be black in the world.

However, I do first want to consider the instrumentality and politics of mobilising around an essentialised and homogenised notion of blackness. Under unequal conditions of power and overt forms of oppression, the idea of the singular, fixed black identity may be a useful and necessary political strategy. This call for solidarity, and “desire for unity” (Ratele, 2003: 238) forms the basis for collective political identification and action. History abounds with examples of political activism, mobilisation and action in challenging hegemonic and oppressive regimes of power under the rubric of legitimized *manufactured* (I like this word from Gilroy) sameness and essentialised unity. Social movements for “racial emancipation, liberation and autonomy” (Gilroy, 1995: 18) in the US, Britain, South Africa, Africa and other parts of the world have invoked such a strategy as progressive for emancipatory mass political action. Black identity in the singular may homogenise racial identification for collective political gains. To essentialise “is to posit a timeless continuity, a discreteness or boundedness in space, and an organic unity. It is to imply an internal sameness and external difference or otherness” (Werbner, 1997, cited in Gunaratnum, 2000: 29). Black identity, in the singular, effectively constructs racial connections and racial identifications from fragmentation; emphasizing racial sameness and coherence while foreclosing individual or collective particularities and intersections of class, gender and sexuality, nationality and ethnicity. This is of course, what Spivak (1993) has coined “strategic essentialism”: mobilizing around a singular, fixed and essentialised notion of identity, that is both unified and coherent across all other forms of social difference for particular collective political purposes. But in making this move we must remain mindful of the ideological construction of sameness and its corollary, the erasure of difference and particularity.

Let me now turn my attention to an empirical example to illustrate how people lay claim to certain identities for particular political action and collective identifications. Dina, a British participant in my PhD study, uses a strategic essentialised and singular notion of blackness in confronting the history of oppression and racism that *all* black people of

the world have been subjected to and have suffered at the hands of their white counterparts. Here, Dina uses the pronoun “us” as a political rallying call for, as Ratele (2003: 238) suggests, “a united front, for unity at all costs” and a kind of solidarity to stand together as one black group:

**Dina:** “... and then you had a whole generation of black British that aren’t grateful anymore and watching **Roots** anybody who watched **Roots** back in the day ended up with an attitude. That film revolutionized everything, it’s like, “THEY DID WHAT TO US!”

**Siyanda:** (Laughs).

**Dina:** “Everybody who was black I don’t care where you come from ‘now it’s an us, there’s us and there’s them’.”

**Both:** (Laugh loudly).

It is in the face of racial oppression visually represented and revealed in the iconic film, **Roots**, that Dina mobilizes a singular black identity as constituted by shared oppression. It is the realization expressed in the cry “what *they* did to *us*” that articulates an essentialised and homogenized “us” and that relationally fixes and objectifies the “them”. Invoking the notion of black solidarity and singularity erases and transcends internal differences that would otherwise undermine such unity. Dina *manufactures* (that word again) this unity and solidarity on behalf of and between black people regardless of what Riley (1988) calls “individual temporalities” lived through in class, nationality and ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Indeed Dina “does not care where you come from”, “who you are” whether you are female or male, homosexual or heterosexual, working class or middle class, citizen or immigrant, the most salient identity marker is your *blackness*. What is important is your co-option into this marginal community with a history of oppression and not your own individual particularity. What is less crucial here is the idiosyncratic “I” that gives way to the “us” cast in sameness and coherence in response to the fixed Other, the white “them” out there. Ratele (2003: 247-248) has something instructive to say about the deployment of ‘we’ and ‘us’ as a wish for an imagined community with an imagined shared history:

“‘We’ [and ‘us’] is always an indication of, and often, a wish for unity, rather than an accomplished fact. There is a certain pull to claim a commonality when one writes or speaks – saying *we* feel this or that, this is *our* heritage, this is how *we* do it, it comes down to *us*. But often the speaker or writer cannot really know how his or her auditors feel, how a particular reader stands in relation to such and such an historical event, let alone what she or he inherits ... and whether indeed the person wants to be part of the assumed group. Rather, words are always intended to do something. They are infused with all kinds of motives, among them the motive for unity and power. Thus when their author lays claim to *unity*, *oneness*, *solidarity*, in the best of circumstance he or she hopes that there is a shared community of interests with those in his or her mind. The community might seem to arise out of a shared history, a feeling brought about by a certain legacy. Perhaps more appropriately though, one speaks or writes to cultivate a community, a way of looking at society and history. One writes [or speaks] not merely to say something about oneself, but to produce an ‘us’” (emphases added).

What I am cautiously arguing here, using insights from Dina’s use of strategic essentialism, is that invoking a notion of racial singularity and homogeneity may be strategically necessary to counter the divisive effects of nationality and ethnicity.

Invoking (Black) sameness as a political strategy against different kinds of oppression is a way to “initiate a powerful political language of agency, personhood, self ... congruent with demands for racial emancipation, citizenship and autonomy” (Gilroy, 1995: 19). This notion of a universal singular and homogenised Black identity can connect all black people of the world in their struggles against oppression, transcending all boundaries and all borders, whether real or imagined, whether national or religious or “ethnic”. Ratele (2003: 238) concurs that “one must note that in the face of ongoing xenophobia, increasing racism, racial and cultural ‘incidents’ the world over, this desire for unity among those on the sharp end of these practices is understandable, perhaps even necessary.”

However, while such a theorization of blackness in the singular can be a progressive political move, it can also serve to conceal other kinds of struggles and inequalities that exist and intersect with other dimensions of identity and social formation. The particularities of struggles in different times and places and intersecting with divisive lines of power, may be obscured. Solidarity based on the concept of “race” assumes that “race” is the *only* critical signifier, foreclosing all forms of difference, and can be deployed progressively to counter xenophobia or ethnic assertions of “cultural” superiority. While I have some sympathy for this position, if we leave the notion of black singularity un-interrogated we run the grave danger of reproducing problematic, hegemonic and subverted notions of power that lie in class, gender, nationality and ethnicity that divide people one from one another.

### **BORDERS WITHIN BACKNESS.**

This returns me to a position that theorizes blackness in pluralized and fractured ways rather than as an essentialised, homogenised singularity; in ways that embrace the complicated and varied ways of being black in the world; in ways that are not about mythical past glories or forced unities for a hypothetical future but in ways that allow for fractured and divergent political and social realities in black people’s everyday lives and practices. Gilroy (1993: 1) argues that there is “no single way of living, thinking and being black [that] is able to claim automatic priority over all the others”. Let me illustrate this idea of blackness as fractured by extending Dina’s interview excerpt I used above. Dina first appeals to a singular notion of blackness that effectively ties all black people together as having been oppressed and enslaved by the white Other. She then proceeds to account for her life not only as black, but specifically as *West Indian* black. And in doing so, she reveals different generational struggles and national inequalities that are in fact masked and concealed by the singular essentialised notion of blackness. The “us” she now deploys is a different, more particular, “us”. This new “us” no longer refers to all black people but rather it refers only to “West Indian black” as a particular kind of black with a particular kind of history and culture:

**Dina:** *“It was at looking at the gratitude that my family had and the subservience that they had versus the generation that I was part of who would watch things like **Roots** who were starting to get more militant who had gone out and faced racism on the streets. There is a new level of anger because we didn’t have we don’t have this whole gratitude ... We didn’t come from there we were born here ... We’re not grateful anymore do you see what I mean we’re just not grateful anymore so it’s not good enough. So some of us got angry some of us got focused and for each generation there’s more of us that are getting focused but there’s still a helluva lot that are getting angry cause if I look at the population of*

*universities now I know back when I was a kid there weren't this many black people in university... if there were black people guaranteed they were from Nigeria because they were from a well-to-do enough family where they sent their children over here to be educated...except for we didn't come from the same place we didn't come from the same starting point. You take yourself away from any form of cultural identity put yourself in a foreign land be made to work under the colonial British rule then be taken from that poverty to come over here poor to subservient parents and then see how far you get then ... which is why I look at where West Indian black people are now and I am bloody proud of us because in a very short space of time we doing alright or more and more of us each generation are doing alright".*

Dina talks here about different ways of being and performing blackness cross-generationally in Britain, revealing the first fracture in blackness. Dina constructs the older black generation as "grateful", "subservient" and complicit in a white racist society that continues to subjugate and discriminate against them. However, the younger black generation born *in* Britain are, unlike their parents who are born elsewhere, and are constructed as "angry", "militant" occupying a radical agentic space precisely because they personally confront racism on daily basis. As a result, the younger black generation is "not and cannot be grateful anymore" as they are not *the immigrant black Other*, like their parents, born outside Britain. Rather, the younger black generation, as racialised subjects, afforded the cultural capital of citizenship, attempt to "undermine, question, or threaten [racial] power through practices that mobilise race for various self-authorised ends" (Wald, 2000: 5). "Some of [them] got angry" at the status quo and "some of them got focused" through education and class mobility in their attempts to appropriate and remake blackness in Britain. So, we get a different version of being and doing blackness when we look across generations that is otherwise concealed by the discourse of a singular blackness or simple reference to a homogenised concept (and hypothesised experience) of oppression.

The second kind of fracture in the singular conception of blackness revealed in Dina's talk is along national lines. Dina's explanation of the lack of West Indian black people at British universities immediately demands a focus on differences between being "black here" and "black there"; between being black in Africa and being black in the Diaspora. Extending this interview excerpt sharply draws lines that divide the experience of being and doing blackness as lived through broadly-defined "national" lines, revealing different struggles and histories shaping the imagination, articulation and construction of different kinds of blackness.

**Dina:** *"To be black British it's really hard to have a sense of the identity to be West Indian black British we don't have our own language we don't have our own names there's not much that we really have ... all you've got is your customs that you have inherited from your parents ... you know you could say where your name comes from and this part from here and this tribe is related to this ... we don't get seen by the black African people over here as being black African and because, because we kinda looked down on cause we were just like the slaves that got cast off to the West Indies and now we are nobody we just got slave names no sense of education the people the black West Indians people coming over here didn't come here for an education they weren't sent here to come and study, the parents came here because there was no job*

*opportunities where they were so you didn't have the crème de la crème of West Indian people coming over here so we are not starting at the same start-point so even though being black gets you stigmatised here and you are a minority here being black West Indian means not only are you a minority you are minority of no status."*

It is in relation to different kinds of blacknesses that are imagined, produced and articulated in relation to being *black British*, *West Indian black British* (her own term) and *black African*, that Dina tells an emotional story, **Once we were slaves**, about what her own diasporic blackness means, in juxtaposition to African blackness. Being black in Britain is a marginalised position but being black West Indian entails a further marginalisation, defined by a slave history, born to poor subservient parents, without a distinct language or cultural identity.

Another one of my participants, Bili, a Botswana national, studying in South Africa, presents another instance where lines of national and racial identity intersect, marking her as belonging and not belonging at the same time. She says, "I have never felt so black and yet not so black at the same time as I have in South Africa ... I have been qualified as black but then disqualified at the same time". Bili occupies a very interesting liminal space in the highly racialised South African context, of always being in-between. Though black, which means she is "just like them" [her fellow black South African students], she is nonetheless "the foreigner", "the Other", "the outsider". Here is how Bili reflects on her position in the context of the 2008 xenophobic violence in South Africa:

**Bili:** *".... you become, you begin to feel, very foreign, you begin to feel very alone within South Africa. And the recent xenophobic attacks, it didn't help a lot. You know, I thought I had accepted my being in South Africa and my being part of South Africa and then when that happened I felt very foreign, I felt very out of this place. It didn't happen in [brief pause] on campus like, we didn't, I didn't personally experience it, I just see it happening on TV and the newspapers but every person that I talked to that was a foreigner, it was we felt very out of place we felt threatened we were all shaken up and [brief pause] it amazed me because we did not confront it, we, but because we are foreigners we just felt it. I felt for those guys that were being burnt and you know their homes being burnt down and I was, it was, like me, you know but it was not me. I think it's a fact that we are all foreigners, just, you know."*

In such a context, the notion of nationalism or, in particular, the idea of a South African national identity, though it may be instrumental in countering racism, devastatingly fails us in the project of creating "imagined communities". I want to cautiously argue that notion of racial and/or African singularity and homogeneity may be strategically necessary to counter exclusionary notions of national identity. Invoking (Black and/or African) sameness is a way to "initiate a powerful political language of agency, personhood, self ... congruent with demands for racial emancipation, citizenship and autonomy" (Gilroy, 1995: 19). Perhaps a universal singular and homogenised Black identity can be deployed to create solidarity that transcends boundaries or borders, whether real or imagined, whether national or religious or "ethnic". The question is whether "race" is the *only* available unifier to counter xenophobia and whether the oscillation between "race" and nationality can create progressive movement.

## **SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCE AT THE SAME TIME?**

My own vacillation in response to this question indicates the imperative to find new discursive and methodological resources that will enable us to recognize multiplicity without dissolving completely into fragmentation. We need analytic tools, as Gilroy (1995: 27) suggests, “to think sameness and differentiation at the same time without privileging either term. That is, to consider the differentiation within sameness and the sameness within differentiation”. And perhaps we need to ask different questions rather than binary formulations that prioritize either singularity or fragmentation in blackness. It seems more productive to ask questions of contingency; what are the discursive contexts and spaces when and where “race” or blackness specifically can be deployed progressively to create ties that bind, and to challenge the contexts and spaces when and where blackness creates lines that divide.

In working with South African youth on the **Fast Forward Programme** that Jill referred to earlier, the shifting contextual political terrain has alerted us to counter-productive consequences to the project of national unity. In one of the tasks, we gave the participants a map of Africa and asked them to identify and locate as many African countries as they know. Their responses were interesting ... and alarming! In general, learners can only successfully locate South Africa and one or two other African countries; usually southern African neighbours, although even these may not be accurately placed. Further, many maps of Africa include the United States of America, Australia, China or Britain, suggesting the dominance of these distal reference points in the mental mapping of young people’s worlds. This reflects a simultaneous parochial nationalism and a skewed global “cosmopolitanism” that eclipses the African continent. Though national identity can be used to counter racist and racial divisions between people, it can work problematically to reinstate difference and forge a deep chasm between us, and the rest of Africa. So, in this context, it might be more progressive to break boundaries between different African countries and reconnect to the broader idea of a Pan-Africanism, identification that most would argue necessarily implicates a singularity of shared “blackness”.

In 2004 I attended the opening night of **Poetry Africa**, an annual Poetry Festival held in Durban. The festival brought together over 30 poets from 12 different countries all over the world. We were treated to an electrifying performance of praise poetry to open the festival. As we sat in the cover of darkness in the auditorium of the Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre, our eyes fixed on the stage, we heard the beat of “the African drum” as if it were summoning ancestral spirits to embrace us with their divine presence. A peculiar sense seemed to connect all of us in the room to some romantic and mythical idea of Africa, a nostalgia that transcends all reason. It was as if a kind of sentimental and spiritual tie descended onto and connected us all: black, white and brown; young and old; South African citizens and foreign nationals. My body was covered in goose bumps as the sound of “the African drum” filled the room. And then a succession of *izimbongi* representing different cultural and linguistic communities in South Africa, recited praise poetry in their native tongues, in *isiZulu*, *isiXhosa*, *isiNdebele*, *seTswana*, *Sesotho* and *tshiVenda*. The whole performance was deeply moving and despite the possible exclusionary effects of the languages that not all of the audience could understand, functioned at the emotional level to forge a sense of connection regardless of “race”, ethnicity or nationality. Our task theoretically and politically is to harness such

performative effects, in which sameness and difference are simultaneously acknowledged, and work to create ties that bind rather than lines that divide.

*Jill Bradbury and Siyanda Ndlovu.*

### **CONCLUDING THIS CONVERSATION AND OPENING LINES FOR FUTURE TALK: BEYOND RACE / NATION – IMAGINING OTHER CONNECTIONS?**

Appiah (2005, 2006) suggests that it is not sameness or agreement that should provide the basis for our connections with others but rather, the quest is to develop a common language through which to debate, negotiate and disagree. Of course this is no easy matter – to speak the “same language” is of course to agree at some quite fundamental level. He argues for a kind of interpretive work, and imaginative engagement that attends to the meanings of others in their own terms:

“Conversations across boundaries of identity – whether national, religious, or something else – begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place other than your own. So I’m using the word ‘conversation’ not only for literal talk but also as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and ideas of others. And I stress the role of the imagination here because the encounters, properly conducted, are valuable in themselves. Conversation doesn’t have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it’s enough that it helps people get used to one another” (Appiah, 2005: 85).

Can the constitutional values of “human rights” provide a language for conversation across difference? Can we use this language of the abstract, individualized human “person” to think about, debate, argue and fight about the rights of particular groups or collectives to recognition? (Taylor, 1994). Can the stories of race or nationhood contribute to this conversation or are they incompatible languages, creating a kind of noise that drowns rather than amplifies the debate? Are we doomed not only to misunderstand or misread each other but also to misrepresent or misspeak our-selves? We are uncertain of the answers to these questions – and our uncertainty has increased rather than diminished in the very writing of this paper and the conversations that we have had with each other about these issues. Perhaps what we need is a kind of multilingualism, crossing between different discourses depending on the context of conversation, remaining alert to the problems of translation. “What is needed ... is not to learn that we are citizens of the world, but that we occupy particular niches in an unequal world, and that being disinterested and global on one hand and defending one’s narrow interests on the other are not opposites but positions combined in complicated ways. Some combinations are desirable, others are not. Some are desirable here but not there, now but not then” (Wallerstein, 2002: 124).

We conclude that liaisons of “race” and nation are certainly “invented” and may even be “dangerous” as McClintock (1995) has argued, but they nonetheless seduce us into passionate responses and perhaps even potentially great love affairs with one another.



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