

Ca Plus Change-- How the Black British IVF Mix-Up Twins Became Mixed Race Thanks to the 2001 Census

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Introduction

This paper provides a brief overview of two benchmark events in the public sphere that foregrounded the narratives of difference that organize British society—the birth of mixed race IVF mixup twins and the 2001 census. Media coverage of both these cases, I will argue, was characterized by the connoted exclusion of ethnic minority members of the national community, even where their specific inclusion was the explicit purpose of the reports.

Furthermore analysis of reportage in both cases suggests that the national narratives of difference conforms to a proscriptive formula that both arises from and contributes to the repertoire of folk knowledge and cultural memory that provides the framework for the interrelationship of the nation's ethnic communities.

Below, I deconstruct media representations of the custody battle by the twins white mother and black father and the first ever British census to record the nation's mixed-race population. My objective is to suggest that the development of cultural knowledges of difference, specifically here of ethnicity, is a dialogical and cyclical process. It is also, often, the product of state-sponsored discourses, as much as any actual event, to the extent that state has the resources to forcefully imply to its citizens that there have been changes to the terms of its discourses where none have in fact occurred. The result of the factors that I have just outlined is that while racial denotations may change, connotation rarely does, and the positions on race of the reporters that we see below are always interested, never stable, and depend for the most part on the social context in which the claim to knowledge is being made. (Memmi, 1982).

This becomes a major challenge to the generation of anti-racist counter-discourses since the form that racism will take varies from moment to moment and cannot be logically predicted except from the inside. The irrational tendencies of racist discourse, both conscious and unconscious, are primarily evinced in the clear anxieties, conflicts and outright paradoxes that characterize society's response to race relations—which is a polite and somewhat dated term for the struggle for social and political space. Consequently, no matter how well intentioned, or well accredited the individual, no matter their race, they often fail to see past the outlines of what they have traditionally been taught to think of as “different.”

Furthermore the silences, slippages and tensions obvious in the news reports below suggest the sites of resistance against racial integration have not disappeared but merely relocated some distance beyond their previous position. Assessing the context in which these sites exist offers the best means of effectively locating and overcoming dominant representational practices.

White Mother Gives Birth to Black Twins

In summer 2002, it came to the attention of the media that a white woman and a black man, married to other people, had gone to court to claim sole custody of their biological children, twins born as a result of an *in vitro* fertilization treatment mix-up.

Perhaps the most striking development during the coverage of this case was the sudden and uniform shift in media descriptions of IVF mix-up babies YA and ZA, from “black” to “mixed race.”

When news of the “blunder”, was first released to the media in July, all outlets without exception, and without any apparent sense of paradox, announced that a white woman had given birth to black twins. This pattern was repeated in related news stories in September and when the mother won full custody in November. Yet on February 26, when the court recognized the biological father as the children's legal father, for the first time all media outlets referred to the twins as mixed race. The closest that any

organization came to breaking ranks in reporting this development was the *Daily Mail*, a tabloid, which referred to them in the first instance as “a black man’s babies.”

The *Mail* was one of only two organizations to make an outright play of the race card outside the main body of the article. Its strapline read “White couple in IVF mix-up are told black man is twins’ legal father”. A broadsheet, the liberal-leaning *Independent*, followed suit with a headline that stated “Black man is legal father to IVF twins born to white woman.”

Highlighting the role of the media as gatekeepers of the dominant narratives of identity, and hence sameness and difference, in both cases here, “black man” is constructed as a dangerous external other, in sharp contrast to the benign passivity of “white couple” and “white woman.”

Of course the notion of the black man, or “other” man, as a danger to white femininity and white heredity is of course an old one (Gabriel, 1998) (Stoler, 1997).

Gabriel even establishes a genealogy of the motivation behind such tropes in relation to the widespread allegations by the British media, more than a century apart, that Jack the Ripper was Jewish and that former black American football star OJ Simpson was guilty of the murder of his white wife, before he was even brought to trial.

Historically, policing has played the role of last resort, when all appeals to morality, common sense, religion etc. fail. In the case of whiteness, policing has not just been about the defence of material privileges built around the property laws, etc., but also about the defence of a more symbolic order, one to do with identities both (masculine and feminine), values and borders. The perceived threats to both material and symbolic orders have been simultaneously racialised and underpinned by sexual fears, as illustrated by the Ripper and OJ cases. Hence the murdered prostitutes stood for wayward white femininity in the Ripper story whilst Nicole Brown Simpson embodied the risks associated with interracial sexual relations. (1998: 131)

Knowledge of the Simpson case is just some of the background that white British readers would bring to an interpretation of the news that the courts had given a black man some foothold into a white family.

It is productive to consider the images of black men in the news during the time the custody case was on the media front-burner. To name just a few there were the Washington sniper and his young accomplice, various rap and hip-hop stars refuting/encouraging the dangers of gun culture, a Jamaican “yardie” killed in a gun siege, the black suspects arrested for the murder of two teenage girls over the Christmas holidays.

Psychoanalytical theory tells us, and the media are well aware of this, that within the narratives of identity, the role of the self is to protect the same and punish the other.

Were the *Mail* and the *Independent* effectively summarizing the news for their readers, or being deliberately provocative, in direct contravention of the Press Complaints Commission guidelines? The answer to this question lies in the fact that every other national news outlet opted for a low key approach. Even the *Sun*, arguably Britain’s most notorious tabloid, said simply “Judge rules in IVF mix-up,” and the *Mirror*: “Biological dad is father of IVF mix-up twins.”

Unfortunately in most cases this restraint lasted only until the lead paragraph. “The black biological father of mixed-race twins born to a white mother after an IVF sperm mix-up is the children’s legal father,” stated the *Express*. This sentence was repeated almost uniformly across the news houses although ITV and the *Sun* described the mix-up as a “blunder,” while the *Sun* and the *Evening Standard* carefully echoed the judge’s ruling, noting the “trauma” and “tragedy” of events.

An apparently almost unconscious need to reinforce racial difference was particularly marked in the July 8, 2002 stories that broke news of the mixup. *The Guardian* made a total of nine distinct references to race. The BBC introduced race eight times and the

Evening Standard made 18 different references. This was still the case in February, with papers making between four to eight references to subjects' colour. Interestingly the broadsheets, excluding the *Telegraph* (which did not run the story), led the pack with a total of 21 references between three papers. The tabloids, excluding *News of the World*, accounted for 16.

While such quantitative analysis may seem like nitpicking, it also indicates that the modern media, of all political persuasions, are perfectly capable of playing up racial prejudice to sell newspapers. Hence the self-congratulatory mood, across the media, when the judge announced she had no plans to uproot the children from their happy home with the white family. Hence also the universal emphasis that despite granting the black man's legal rights the judge had recognized the white man as the social and psychological father. Would a Jamaican "yardie" have been treated as generously by the judge or the media? We can only guess. It is telling that reports could not even agree over the question of exactly when the white parents noticed their children were black.

The conscious/unconscious level of conflict and tension that racial representation entails for self-appointed monitors like the media becomes readily apparent when even a liberal newspaper like the *Guardian* can begin an article claiming:

It is the miracle that can become a nightmare. A slip-up with a sperm- or an accident with the eggs- and a white woman gives birth to black twins. A black couple wishes to claim the twins; the woman who gave birth to them wants to keep them. The story is terrifying, its legal and ethical implications hard to entangle. (The Guardian 14/7/02)

No matter how happy and well-loved YA and ZA grow up to be, when they are old enough to want to learn more about the *furor* that surrounded their birth, and what people thought, it seems that they will not have to look far to find the terror, the anxiety and the hysteria.

2001 Census

Nor are they alone. For the last half of this paper I will look briefly at reportage of Britain's 2001 census, the first to enumerate the countries mixed race population. I will argue that, as with the twins' case, media response to this census sheds additional light on the process whereby the language of race relations changes but signification and attitudes remain the same.

Certainly even the media acknowledged that the twins are part of a growing trend. Half of all black men have mixed race partners, a third of black women, and 20 percent of Asian men. The figure falls to five percent, for Asian women.

News that persons of mixed race were the fastest growing ethnic population in Britain was officially confirmed by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) while the custody case was ongoing, and generated a flurry of print articles from all sides including members of the mixed race population, more than a few of which discussed the drawbacks of occupying a position unaccounted for by social categorization, and so ultimately unrepresentable to and unimaginable by society.

These stories appeared in the media shortly after the white mother was granted temporary custody of black twins, but just over two months before the black man was recognized as the legal father of mixed-race children, across the board, by the same media who had previously without exception identified the same toddlers as black. Leaving aside the commercial benefits of wringing the maximum sensation possible from the event, something, somewhere, had authorized new terms for the discourse. The circumstantial evidence of its timing suggests the census. Yet what prompted the census itself to acknowledge the inadequacy of the state's approach of enumerating its citizens, at just that moment, when similar proposals had been in existence for some 40 years but were never introduced.

While the previous census ten years earlier had been the first to ask people to identify themselves by ethnic group, i.e. black, white, Asian or other, statisticians were reportedly unable to identify trends from the numbers ticking the so-called 'other' category. Following consultation with pollsters, the number of ethnic categories included in the most recent form jumped from nine in 1991 to 16 in 2002, with the Welsh apparently the only group to be effectively excluded.

For the first time the ONS acknowledged that it was possible to be British and non-white, specifically Asian or black, as well as mixed, as long as part of the mix was Asian and British. It also added the new categories of white and black Caribbean, white and black African, white and black Asian, and an "any other mixed background" category.

This is a clear example of what Bourdieu, and other critics, describe as the assimilation of new categories by official discourse, only after social categorisation has reached a clear crisis stage and the expansion of its vocabulary appears necessary to the running of the country (1991,48) (Foucault, 1970). In this fashion the centre defuses the power of discourses of resistance, by incorporating them within the framework of its own narratives. Needless to say this improves the possibility of policing, although some sense of the danger of the unknowable remains in the inevitable description of these new categories as different from, and so less empowered within the framework of the social hierarchy.

Changes do not indicate a change in attitude so much as the bureaucracy's recognition that it can function more efficiently by acknowledging the right to exist of persons of mixed origins and cultures. It is therefore interesting to note the dialectical black/white focus of the change, as represented both by the ONS and by the media. The Caribbean's sizeable Chinese and East Indian populations are omitted, as is that of Africa. Many of these persons are resident in London, and presently included on the equal employment opportunity forms distributed by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE). In addition the sizeable mixed-race populations of all three regions are lumped together in the "any other mixed background category," in much the same manner that the many races of Asia

are fitted into one category. This leads us to two unanswerable questions, when one is a non-British citizen of the Caribbean, Africa, or Asia, what does it matter if one is white, black, Asian or mixed race, even if resident in Britain? Furthermore why are these categories limited to these geographical areas, all of which were formerly part of the British Empire? By disclaiming responsibility for the hybrids that were the result of Empire, do they believe they can disclaim any responsibility for the present-day condition of former colonies? Why no space for black Americans and white Americans, black and white Canadians, black and white French?

It is telling that of the persons of mixed race cited by the *Evening Standard*, a tabloid, in an article commenting on the census changes, were under 35 and had one white English parent (18/04/01). The third, in his 20s, apparently had a white English grandparent. What about the nearly 60-year-old products of miscegenation, who lived through race riots rooted in rumours of interracial sexual relations, and were having their mixed race status acknowledged for the first time? To me that would have been a human interest story worth reading. It would also have gone some way towards acknowledging the fact that hybridity is both historical and complicated.

The reason these historical complications remain unacknowledged is a simple one; classification, as we have already seen, requires exclusion, which it presents as absence. “Black” people had lived in England for sufficiently long that in 1601, Queen Elizabeth I, concerned by the size of their numbers, issued two orders years apart expelling them from the kingdom (Gabriel, 1998; 99). She was invariably unsuccessful.

Yet there is little or no public awareness of this long history of interaction to be discerned judging from the choice of language and presentation of media reportage in representations of present-day interactions and complicities whether in the 2001 census or the IVF twins case. Surely some sense that similar incidents had happened in the past, and repeatedly, if not quite in the same context, would go a long way towards lessening the “trauma” and the “nightmare” for the parents involved, for the media and their

readers, for the experts so ready to give their opinions on the results and most importantly for the children already born, and those to come.

The role of anti-racist discourse then, it seems, must be to fill in the representational gaps in culture that otherwise foster the exclusions we have just seen above; the objective of policymakers must be to systematically represent and disseminate historical facts, such as the impact of the millennia-old black presence in Britain and white presence in the colonies, as knowledge that is of universal value to the identity of both blacks and whites within the nation. For as representation of the growing mixed race population makes clear, the races may be increasingly implicated in and aware of the most intimate routines of each other's existence, yet representation of this involvement will always fall over the stumbling block that such knowledge is not authorized by history and hence by collective memory. The development of the language of race has still to be matched by the development of a language of racial interaction.

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