108 'disparate in voice, sympathetic in direction': gendered political blackness and the politics of solidarity

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abstract

While political blackness seems to be making quite a comeback, this resurgence has also met with frustration and ambivalence. This paper aims to make sense of why this mobilising concept is accepted in some contemporary black feminist circles and outright rejected in others. It unpicks the diasporic dimensions of political blackness, reflecting on the issues that converged to foreground 'black' as the basis for mobilising women of African and Asian decent to engage in collective activism. Attention is given to the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent, a national network that linked black women's organisations and expressed and projected what the author defines as gendered political blackness. Interrogating its implications and the tendency towards ideological policing, the author argues that political blackness must be viewed as a politics of solidarity. If it is to maintain its viability, political blackness needs reframing, contextualising and further analysis. A retelling of its ideological underpinnings, and crucially the tensions and contradictions inherent in political blackness, offers a critical lens through which to rethink how we use it as a mobilising tactic in the present.

keywords

activism; diaspora consciousness; gender; politically black; solidarity

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introduction

For women who were active during the heyday of the black women's movement in Britain, the recovery of political blackness must be exciting to witness. Black women's organisations that were formed in the last five years, among them the London-based collective BlackFeminists and Manchester Black Feminists, have consciously chosen to invoke black in the political sense, using it to denote women who originate from or have ancestry in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, as well as women of indigenous and bi-racial backgrounds. Meanwhile, black feminist writer-activists are referencing political blackness in journalistic contexts (Nagarajan, 2013; Okolosie, 2013; Riaz, 2013). In April 2013, founder and curator of The Body Narratives, Hana Riaz, published an impassioned piece on *The Feminist Wire* stating that '[as] a South Asian, in an attempt to challenge the anti-blackness that is present in [her] communities even when [she is] organizing around anti-racism, sexism, or imperialism, has forced [her] to identify as politically black'. Within hours of its being published, three colleagues and one of my supervisors had sent me the link to Riaz's article, and I watched in awe as it was posted and reposted on blogs, Facebook and Twitter, with many of the sharers noting that they themselves identify as politically black.

While political blackness seems to be making quite a comeback, this resurgence has also met with frustration and ambivalence. On more than one occasion, I have found myself in heated debates about whether or not political blackness is still, or if it ever was, a useful strategy and thus worthy of consideration. Black feminist allies have also told stories of feeling challenged or frowned upon for using black in the political sense. Not surprisingly, these kinds of conversations are also taking place online. In response to a Facebook announcement for the Black Women's Conference 2014 by the conference organisers, Black Women's Forum UK, one woman asked, 'Can you please tell me what qualifies as Black? It's fairly vague, and I'm guessing [it] doesn't include all WoC [women of colour], but I'm curious as to what the definition of black is for this event'.[1] Similarly, when Ella Achola from BlackFeminists publicised her intention to run for 'Black Students Officer' at the School for African and Oriental Studies, University of London, one of her Facebook friends queried 'why don't you then use the term PoC [people of colour]?' Two women of Asian descent readily came to Achola's defence, with one asserting, 'I think the term politically black was coined in the 1970s by [Ambalavaner] Sivanandan'.[2] Although she did not hit the nail squarely on the head, this young woman was drawing upon an important historical reference point, shedding light on a much more complicated and nuanced subject. As I understand it, there has always been contestation surrounding the meaning of 'black' and who qualifies, and in some cases who deserves to qualify, as such. Still, in reading this exchange, I was reminded of the striking disconnect between the political ideologies and processes of the past, and that of present black British feminisms.

1 Black Women's Forum UK, 'Black Women's Conference 2014', 2 April 2014. Available from *https://www.facebook.com/events/1477157875829967/*, last accessed 2 June 2014.

2 Ella Achola, Facebook post, 2 March 2014. Available from *https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10202521433973890&set=t.1136717098&type=3&theater*, last accessed 2 June 2014.

The aim of this paper is to make sense of political blackness—why it is accepted in some contemporary black feminist circles, and outright rejected in others. My discussion is organised around four themes and divided into corresponding sections. First, I unpick *the diasporic dimensions of political blackness,* reflecting on the issues that converged to foreground black as the basis for mobilising women of African and Asian decent to engage in collective activism. In doing so, I illustrate that as both a negatively and positively articulated diaspora consciousness, political blackness is performative and dialogic.

Drawing on oral history collections, newsletters, flyers and other ephemera, in the second section I outline how organisations that were formed in the late 1970s expressed and projected what I have come to describe as *gendered political blackness*. To do this, I briefly examine the organising features of the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD), a national network that linked black women's organisations and put the black British women's movement on the political map. Given that the aforementioned, recently initiated black women's collectives are using an even more inclusive definition of black, the ideological underpinnings of gendered political blackness and how it was put into practice seem especially timely and relevant.

The third section of the paper interrogates *the implications of gendered political blackness*, crosscutting the ways in which difference both increased the effectiveness of and undermined OWAAD. My discussion turns over the implicit hetero-normativity of the manner in which OWAAD organised, as a challenge to how we go about deploying political blackness in a way that is inclusive and intersectional. I will also address the tendency towards what Heidi Mirza refers to as the 'ideological policing' of who counts as 'black', Black or black, which shuts down possibilities for self-definition and political engagement (Mirza, 1997: 15). In light of the resistance I have witnessed to women of non-African descent identifying as 'black', it is worth considering that divisive practices, which are indeed rooted in the divide and conquer tactics of our colonial oppressors, have invaded our own thinking.

Finally, to conclude the paper, I will argue that *political blackness is a politics of solidarity*; nothing more, nothing less. If we are attuned to the ways in which blackness is experienced and conceptualised, such a political praxis need not necessarily silence or erase difference. And though I am an advocate for black in the political sense, I do not seek to reify this concept as though it is, in and of itself, an ontological truth. Rather, I hope to show that if it is to maintain its viability, political blackness needs reframing, contextualising and further analysis. A retelling of its history, and crucially the tensions and contradictions inherent within the term, might offer a critical lens through which to rethink how we use it as a mobilising tactic in the present.

the diasporic dimensions of political blackness

I situate my analysis of the diasporic dimensions of political blackness within Clifford's (1994) theorisation of diaspora consciousness. For Clifford, diaspora consciousness is constituted negatively through experiences of discrimination and exclusion, and positively through shared historical forces and political aims and objectives. Located in this framework, political blackness provides a sharp example of a negatively articulated diaspora consciousness, in that 'black' was an exclusionist term appropriated to form political alliances (Clifford, 1994) between migrants from Africa, Asia (specifically the Indian sub-continent) and the Caribbean who settled in Britain during the post-war period. Commonly described in mainstream and academic discourses as 'coloured commonwealth migrants', they found themselves occupying a broadly similar structural position, as workers performing menial labour (Brah, 1996), which offered little room for economic advancement. They also faced stigmatisation in areas such as immigration services, education, housing, the criminal justice system and health services. Nevertheless, their marginalisation was not identical, with 'skin colour', 'religion' and 'place of origin' playing a significant role in modalities of discrimination. Still, as Brah (1996) explains, these migrants collectively experienced the racialisation of their gendered class positioning through a rhetoric that underscored 'non-whiteness' as a common thematic in the discourse of 'coloured'. Such negatively articulated relations of equivalence—relational histories of voluntary and involuntary migration, resulting from a long and complex relationship with the British Empire, and the socioeconomic situation in Britain—created the ideal conditions under which a new politics of solidarity became possible.

Conversely, as Clifford (1994) points out in his treatment of Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, blackness is constituted positively in the struggle for political and social emancipation. Indeed, through the process of networking, interacting and collaborating with each other, these different and yet overlapping migrant communities stimulated a positively articulated diaspora consciousness and subsequently a political mobilisation aimed at re-inscribing subjectivity through appeals to a collective experience (Brah, 1996). Emphasising a common experience as the basis for mobilisation required constant dialogue and negotiation about what it means to be black in Britain. It is important to stress, however, that for these migrants, adopting a black identity did not denote ascribing to a descriptive category. Rather, it symbolised a commitment to resisting the oppression of diasporic populations. Thus, the ultimate outcome, political blackness as a mobilising strategy, can be understood as a positively articulated diaspora consciousness, in that it galvanised seemingly disparate migrant communities to engage in collective activism.

The concept of diaspora consciousness, then, functions on many levels throughout my analysis of historical and contemporary articulations of political blackness. First, diaspora consciousness highlights the ways in which political blackness is the product of relational histories of enslavement and colonisation, modern forms of racist and gendered subordination, and economic exclusion. Second, the diasporic aspect underscores that political blackness is about being settled or dwelling in Britain differently and strategies to overcome the fall out of that difference. And finally, the notion of consciousness brings to mind that political blackness operates to decentre the power and privilege distinctive to whiteness, and historically that of white Englishness.

gendered political blackness

The notion of a specifically gendered political blackness arises from my reading of key black British feminist texts (see *Feminist Review* Issue 17 *Many Voices, One Chant*, 1984; Bryan *et al.*, 1985; Grewal *et al.*, 1988; Parmar, 1990; Southall Black Sisters (SBS), 1990; Mirza, 1997; Young, 2000; Samantrai, 2002; Wilson, 2006), alongside archival material that documents the history of the black women's movement in Britain (see *Heart of the Race Oral History Collection*; The Papers of Jan McKenley; The Papers of Stella Dadzie). Enlivened by the strength and depth of the archives in particular, I propose that gendered political blackness is an analytic sensibility that informed how women of African and Asian descent living in postcolonial Britain collectively responded to the experience of gendered racialisation, economic discrimination and unfavourable immigration policies, and the political links they made between these intersecting struggles. Situating gendered political blackness within the framework of diaspora consciousness fits neatly with Brah's 'cartographies of intersectionality', in that the black women's movement, and thus black British feminism, emerged from a wide range of diasporic experiences in conversation with a number of political interventions (Brah, 1996: 10–16). Each and every one of the black women's collectives that were formed in the 1970s, from Brixton Black Women's Group, to Awaz—Asian Women's Organisation, to SBS, to East London Black Women's Organisation (ELBWO), strived towards a political praxis aimed at challenging the intersecting oppressions of black people in general, and black women in particular. Set up in 1979, OWAAD, an umbrella organisation that brought together all of the aforementioned groups and more, is a robust example of how gendered political blackness was deployed both in theory and in praxis. A review of how the organisation conceptualised black, and reinforced this definition to existing and potential members, might begin to unsettle some of the confusion regarding the present-day usage of 'black in the political sense'.

Initially launched in February 1978 as the Organisation of Women of *Africa and African* Descent by members of Brixton Black Women's Group, the African Students' Union, the Eritrean Women's Study Group and the Black Women's Alliance of South Africa, six months later the group changed its name to reflect the continued project of Afro-Asian unity (OWAAD Draft Constitution, nd). Furthermore, with respect to this literal transformation was an important political one, in that blackness was OWAAD's central organising metaphor. An analysis of OWAAD's chosen eponym, alongside that of its political philosophy, underscores the ways in which the organisation deployed gendered political blackness as both a positive and negative diasporic articulation. The explicit use of 'Asian *and* African', for example, points to blackness as the site of multiple displacements and re-articulations, without privilege to one ethnic or cultural tradition (Clifford, 1994). On the other hand, because the success of the organisation was contingent on finding ways to engage in collective practice, members had to transgress the limits of their own heterogeneity (Brah, 1996) by continuously reinforcing and critiquing their shared axes of oppression. OWAAD thus expressed gendered political blackness in such a way that members felt empowered to take on not only the similarities in their lived experience, but also the particular nuances of gendered racism that African and Asian women were subjected to.

For OWAAD, then, blackness was, as Rogers Brubaker theorises diaspora, 'an idiom, a stance, a claim', and a 'category of practice' (Brubaker, 2005: 12) that challenged specific forms of oppression faced by different categories of black women. In this sense, OWAAD deployed gendered political blackness to make certain claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations and to mobilise energies (Brubaker, 2005), which called for constant dialogue about the role of colonialism and imperialism, and that of contemporary economic and ideological processes in creating racialised, classed and gendered hierarchies and reinforcing divisions within these groups of women. At the same time, this required sensitivity to one another's ethnic specificities, while constructing shared political strategies to confront inequality (Brah, 1996). What was needed, however, was a forum in which OWAAD members could talk about the broader aims of the network, as well as interrogate what it means to be a diasporised woman living in Britain.

A key site for the negotiation of gendered political blackness was OWAAD's National Black Women's Conferences. Between 1979 and 1982, the organisation hosted its annual conference at four different London-based community centres. Hosted at the Abeng Centre in Brixton, South London on 18 March 1979, the objective of the first conference was, simply put, to bring affiliated organisations and like-minded women under one roof to discuss their thoughts, hopes and dreams about the social, economic and political future of all black women. Subsequent conferences were organised around specific themes—Black Women Fighting Back (1980), Black Women in Struggle (1981) and Black Feminism (1982). However, the first

conference was undeniably the catalyst for publicising the model of blackness OWAAD aimed to build. This is best exemplified in a keynote speech given at the beginning of the conference (Black Women in Britain, nd).

It is not entirely clear who gave this introductory talk, but Gail Lewis recalled that founding members wrote the speech together, and may well have given the speech *together*. This kind of collaborative work would come to define much of the organisation's activities, which intimates that for OWAAD, the category of practice centred on mobilising a diasporic community held together by a distinctive, active solidarity, as well as by an ongoing, intimate working relationship. Furthermore, this speech is pivotal to understanding the diasporic roots and routes of OWAAD, and thus those of gendered political blackness.

Founding members used this introductory speech to explain how the organisation conceptualised blackness, noting that they were using 'black' to refer to people from the Indian subcontinent, many of whom came to Britain by way of East Africa; to people with origins in Africa; and to those who, as a result of slavery and indentured servitude, had immediate origins in a number of Caribbean countries. Then they mapped their complex and overlapping historical trajectories, foregrounding the ways in which peoples from Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent had been central to the British Empire and, crucially, that their arrival to Britain was upon invitation. 'This fact has been consistently ignored by and hidden from the British people, to the extent that they actually believe that we are here to take away their jobs and swamp their culture', the unknown speaker said. 'These racist assumptions often serve to hide the far more dangerous and insidious racism of the British State, which only brought us here to do shit work, and would be very happy if we would now all quietly leave!' (*ibid.*) Next, the speech criticised the 1968 and 1971 Immigration Acts, which according to the speaker were clear examples that the state was inherently racist because, ultimately, the aim was 'to keep ALL [black people] out, to keep Britain predominantly white at all costs' (*ibid*.).

Considering that founding members openly condemned Britain's immigration policies while declaring a commitment to combatting the racist state, it is apparent that for OWAAD, political blackness was the project of 'dwelling differently'; it was an ambivalent refusal to return or an indefinite deferral of return (Clifford, 1994). Here is where the speech really hones in on 'gendering blackness' and the ways in which immigration policies explicitly affected black women, especially those whose arrival to Britain was contingent upon black men. The most salient example provided was virginity testing, which was a crucial issue for South Asian women. Immigration law of the time stipulated that Indian women coming to Britain to meet a fiancé did not need to have a visa. However, immigration officials stationed at the airport could order a vaginal examination, if they suspected a woman was already married or if she was travelling with a

male companion (Wilson, 2006). Though this issue did not directly affect all black women, for OWAAD, virginity testing was part and parcel of Britain's highly racialised and gendered immigration policies targeted at dividing black families and subjugating black women.

Retaining its focus on gendered racialisation, the speech then outlined the myriad of ways black women were marginalised in the workplace, misrepresented in the media and discriminated against in the world at large. However, it was also made clear that 'black women have not simply been passive victims in the face of the oppression [they] have confronted since [arriving] in Britain. [Black women] have fought back on many fronts .... In every single area where black women have been exploited and oppressed, [they] have gotten together to fight back ...' (Black Women in Britain, nd). The speech was concluded with a powerful call to unity:

> In the discussion we are about to have, we hope that sisters here will talk about their experiences, and tell us about the different ways in which they have been organizing to fight back, so that we can learn from each other, exchange ideas, and in the order of the day, genuinely attempt to increase the unity among black sisters here, out of the recognition of the undeniable fact that our unity is our strength! (*ibid.*)

OWAAD's use of the term black was a way of stressing unity, and founding members hoped that a politics of solidarity would eventually exist among all black people in Britain, leading towards a better, and perhaps a utopian, future. Unfortunately, this utopic diasporism, a diasporic consciousness that, as Clifford (1994: 312) phrases it, 'makes the best of a bad situation ... lives loss and hope as a defining tension', could not be sustained in the long term.

While I do not want to oversimplify the points of contention that undermined OWAAD, resulting in its collapse sometime in 1983, ultimately the overarching issue was how to deploy gendered political blackness in a way that prioritised the needs and concerns of individual members and affiliated organisations. As I will show in the next section, even the project of dwelling differently is, itself, crosscut by difference, which in the case of OWAAD proved impossible to overcome. Still, it is important to note that at least for a short time, the organisation was incredibly successful. As a direct result of OWAAD's influence, the number of black women's organisations increased significantly, not only in London, where it was based, but also in black communities in other parts of Britain. Additionally, in collaboration with organisations in its expanding network, OWAAD launched campaigns against the aforementioned immigration policies, the forced sterilisation of black women, and for the repeal of stop and search laws, which disproportionately affected young black men of African Caribbean descent. It also succeeded in publishing a pamphlet that included speeches given at the first conference, and released *FOWAAD!*, a bi-monthly newsletter that proved to be the most effective way to publicise gendered political blackness.

the implications of gendered political blackness

From a conceptual standpoint, gendered political blackness is profoundly intersectional. Yet, when I review the archival material, namely, OWAAD's draft constitution and bi-monthly newsletter, in tandem with relevant oral history interviews, and black British feminist scholarship, I am struck by how difficult it is to actually put into practice. In what follows, I sketch out the implications of gendered political blackness, looking specifically at the ways in which difference played out within OWAAD and shaped the development of black British feminism. If political blackness is to have any contemporary traction, there are several lessons to be learned from recalling this history, lessons that are, by my estimation, applicable in a wide range of present-day struggles.

As I have shown in the previous section, one of the distinctive features of gendered political blackness is its call to unity by foregrounding both similarity and difference. That is, gendered political blackness was only made possible through the recognition that black women were not only divided by ethnicity, but also by the ways in which they experience oppression, and when necessary, how they chose to mobilise. Such differing political approaches had interesting outcomes for OWAAD. Though members and affiliated organisations were, for the most part, in agreement regarding the broader aims of the network, there were times when it was difficult, if not impossible, to come to any kind of consensus. For example, members conceded that racism was crucial to understanding the system of oppression in Britain, but they disagreed on how to address racism within the mainstream women's liberation movement. Leading up to the Socialist Feminist Conference of 1980, which focused on fighting British imperialism, members drafted an open letter with the hopes of using it as a basis for a joint discussion on structural racism. However, an impromptu lunchtime meeting indicated that a session for black women only might be more useful, primarily because there were so many differing opinions on how best to approach the discussion, making it difficult to decide on a strategy that accommodated them all. A summation of events printed in the November 1980 issue of *FOWAAD!* made clear that in the end, the black women-only workshop further reinforced differing political perspectives because, as they were preparing a collective statement to present at the closing plenary session, participants could not decide on a shared definition of imperialism, or the extent to which it was adequately addressed during the conference.

After some discussion, the women decided that a brief and fairly general statement to the organisers was all OWAAD could produce because they 'did not wish to give the impression that all black women who attended the conference were of a single opinion' (OWAAD, 1980: 12).

Clearly, black women are not, nor could we ever be, of one opinion; as intersectional beings, our lived experience clearly shapes our values and politics. For OWAAD, the issue was not so much coming to a consensus, in that the network was built upon the idea that each and every individual member and affiliated organisation had the right to their specific political strategies, aims and objectives. Initially, highlighting the plurality of voices within OWAAD and acknowledging the moments of discord seemingly increased the effectiveness of the organisation. Over time, however, tensions between the compelling project of unity, and the equal but sometimes contradictory desire to focus on issues that, ultimately, members could not agree upon, transformed into deep fissures that were impossible to close.

Tensions over sexuality within OWAAD have been discussed at great length (see Brixton Black Women's Group, 1984; Carmen *et al.*, 1984; Grewal *et al.*, 1988; Mason-John and Khambatta, 1993; Williams, 1993; Dadzie, 2009; Lewis, 2009, 2011; Lockhart, 2009; Wilson, 2011), and the third National Black Women's Conference is often described as the moment when all the trouble began. Organised around the theme 'Black Women in Struggle' (1981), at this conference, as the story goes, lesbian and bisexual participants struggled to have their voices heard. Before the conference a decision was made to relegate sexuality to the private realm (Brixton Black Women's Group, 1984; Williams, 1993). The reasoning was that 'sexual activity … was too sensitive to be discussed publicly' (Brixton Black Women's Group, 1984: 87). Nevertheless, while the conference was taking place, several women expressed a desire to have an autonomous workshop dedicated to black women's sexuality. Unfortunately, this request was met with hostility and, in some cases, overt disgust. Former OWAAD member, Shaila, recalled that the third conference was 'really painful', stating that she felt 'exposed in a terrible way' and 'under attack' (Carmen *et al.*, 1984: 55). For Shaila, at a time when black women should have 'experienced a feeling of togetherness', black lesbians were instead met with a 'hostility coming towards' them (Carmen *et al.*, 1984: 55). Instead of using the conference as an opportunity to address sexuality as central to the experience of gendered racialisation, it was as though, according to black lesbian feminists Valerie Mason-John and Ann Khambatta, certain identities were being 'pared down or silenced in the name of black unity' (Mason-John and Khambatta, 1993: 36).

With regard to the overt homophobia present at the third conference, it is difficult to imagine that that was the first time sexuality was ever an issue. Moreover, upon reading the draft constitution, it is clear that from the outset, OWAAD expressed gendered political blackness in a way that could not account for certain kinds of internal differences. A summary on 'the need for a black women's movement' affirms that 'any group of people who suffer a specific type of oppression' has the right to organise autonomously, and that for OWAAD, the freedom to do so applied to 'people who are gay, handicapped, or in prison' (OWAAD Draft Constitution, nd). Gendered political blackness is, of course, constituted in conversation with gay and

lesbian politics, and therefore it is reasonable to assume that those who drafted the constitution were aware that sexuality clearly marks black women's subjectivity and identity.

Be that as it may, asserting within the text that black women 'suffer a triple oppression—based on [their] race, [their] class, and [their] sex' set the precedent that sexuality was not a primary area of concern for the organisation (OWAAD Draft Constitution, nd). Furthermore, one could surmise that if black lesbians wanted to address this issue, they were free to do so, albeit independently. Likewise, dis/ability seems to have received nothing more than lip service; there is little evidence to suggest it was ever raised in the same manner as sexuality. Here we see that for OWAAD, gendered political blackness had its limits, in the case of sexuality, potentially constraining public expression.

Towards the end of OWAAD, and without question in the years that followed, the narrowing of gendered political blackness evolved beyond sexuality, to that of the meaning of blackness in and of itself, a fact that has been critiqued in black British feminist scholarship and rehashed in several oral history interviews (see Grewal *et al.*, 1988; Brah, 1996; Mirza, 1997; Lewis, 2009; Lockhart, 2009; Wilson, 2011). However, resistance to deploying black, politically or otherwise, was an issue even in the founding days of the organisation. Speaking on the formation of OWAAD and, in particular, the naming of the National Black Women's Conference, Lewis (2009) remembered that black was not something many of the earliest members could sign up to: '[For] some of the sisters from the African Continent "black" had no meaning for them, because they were Kenyan, or they were Eritrean, or they were Zimbabwean or you know, Nigerian or whatever, black was for them ... a white people's name for a whole mass of people who had mixed ethnic heritages'. Given that women from Africa were, at least within OWAAD, the first to express a resistance to being characterised as black, it is curious that in due course, the ideological policing of blackness hinged on the preservation of 'black-Africanness'.

While mixed-raced women, not to mention black women who had a white partner, felt they had to prove or defend their blackness, much of the hostility appeared to be directed towards Asian women. Judith Lockhart remembered that time and time again, both publicly and privately, women debated the meaning of blackness to the point that she felt harassed out of meetings. 'We spent God knows how much time talking about who is black and who isn't black and I'm sure it was important at the time,' she said. But in the end, according to Lockhart (2009), 'you wouldn't go anymore because we'd get stuck on this broken record of who is black and who isn't black'. These conversations continued well into the 1980s and seem to have evolved into heated arguments. For instance, in her report-back from the We are Here Black Feminist Conference held in 1984, a Guyanese woman of Chinese descent described feelings of resentment, stating that as a result of all the infighting, she was starting to forget why she called herself a black woman in

the first place. 'I feel this because I find us still arguing about who is black, and the introduction of the term "women of colour". I don't expect us to work out a definitive statement on black,' she said. '[B]ut I feel frustrated because we've gone back to defining in terms of race and skin color … Any situation like this is going to be divisive and we finish with a hierarchy of oppression.' (We Are Here! Black Feminist Newsletter, 1984).

Contestation surrounding the meaning of blackness impacted OWAAD's affiliated groups as well. Within SBS, for example, there were conflicts regarding the feasibility of political blackness, and in later years the group had to fight tooth and nail for the retention of 'black' in its name, especially in the years just after OWAAD's fragmentation (Gupta, 2003). Yet, for more than thirty years, SBS has deployed gendered political blackness, helping thousands of women facing domestic and other forms of gender-based violence, providing welfare services and support at its Southall-based black women's centre, and running campaigns and producing reports that highlight the social, political and cultural conditions impacting their service users (see also Dhaliwal, this issue). However, ELBWO, another longstanding collective that originated at the first National Black Women's Conference, opted to distance itself from political blackness altogether, attributing the ineffectiveness of gendered political blackness as the driving force behind OWAAD's downfall (ELBWO, nd). In an undated, unsigned memo, a founding member insisted that, because there was a predominance of African Caribbean women at the conference and they were the main speakers during the various keynotes, the inclusion of Asian women in the title and the poster was a 'political mistake'. Moreover, she argued, there was 'discontent' about the way the organisation had conceptualised black 'from both sides' (*ibid.*). Apparently, those who raised concerns were ignored and thus the problem was never really resolved. To deal with this issue, members decided that ELBWO would be a group explicitly for 'Afro-Caribbean' women, which, according to a memo, did not mean their politics were 'anti-Asian', nor were they inclined towards any form of 'pigmentation politics or politics of division' (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, to ensure that the organisation could tackle issues of specific importance to African Caribbean women, ELBWO intentionally excluded Asian women from its membership.

To be sure, the end of OWAAD demonstrates that the utopic vision of mobilising diasporic women under the category black has a number of implications, in that from the very beginning, the organisation struggled to be as intersectional and inclusive as it wanted and needed to be. In addition to the internal and external pressures at the organisational level, black as a political category might, perhaps unintentionally, further marginalise those who do not see themselves inside this particular frame of reference. For example, in her research on Filipina and Chinese women, Magdalene Ang-Lygate found that several of the women she interviewed did not identify as black, and yet their lived experience was quite clearly that of a diasporic, 'unlocated struggle' (Ang-Lygate, 1997). Only one

of the women she interviewed, a Malaysian woman who happened to be an anti-racism activist, described herself as black. To this end, Ang-Lygate rightly challenges that the 'politically correct language' of political blackness further silences diasporic women who do not identify as either white or black. Still, inasmuch as gendered political blackness is bounded by how it is made to appeal to certain loyalties, in other words, how it is both put into practice and negotiated as a category of experience, it produces innumerable possibilities for mobilising solidarities.

gendered political blackness as a politics of solidarity

It has been suggested that 'black' is either 'too wide or too narrow a category' (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983: 63) to define black British feminist struggles, and that perhaps, in its present-day manifestation, 'women of colour' is better suited for the role. The latter point certainly has legitimacy. However, if emerging feminist groups choose to continue mobilising around gendered political blackness, who is to tell them otherwise? Rather, what is needed is a reframing of gendered political blackness that takes into account both its potentiality and limits. In light of the fact that black feminist groups are using 'black' to denote an increasing number of diasporic women, and yet not all migrant women, the justification for this needs further contextualisation and analysis, and more than a complete listing of those identified as politically black as a stand-alone. Detractors have rightfully questioned why, given that this was historically the case, people of Irish decent are no longer categorised as politically black. Additionally, if we take into consideration recent discourses around Bulgarians and Romanians, as the unwanted migrant other who poses a threat to constructions of the nation, who is to say they are not also experiencing a racialised and gendered class positioning that is also black? These are exactly the kinds of questions that self-identified politically black women *and* men should be asking themselves, and should be prepared to defend and answer.

When understood first as a politics of dwelling differently, and second as a strategy for addressing the ways in which racism, sexism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia and xenophobia collude to exclude certain segments of society from spaces where power resides, gendered political blackness could be the most pointed way to decentre whiteness, not only in Britain, but more globally. In this sense, gendered political blackness is, to draw on the work of several different scholars interested in the formation of diasporas, a vital overlapping (Patterson and Kelley, 2000), countercultural (Gilroy, 1993), metaphorical (Hall, 1990) and resistance (Brah, 1996) diasporic articulation. Viewed from this perspective, I am reminded that diaspora discourses articulate or blend together both roots and routes to construct new forms of community consciousness and solidarities

(Clifford, 1994: 308). Gendered political blackness was entirely the product of articulating histories of enslavement and colonisation, modern forms of racist subordination, and gendered discrimination, which formed the basis for political alliances between African, Asian and Caribbean women. OWAAD may have fractured, but the solidarities it engendered reinforces the notion that black women can be disparate not only in voice, but also in experience, and yet sympathetic in direction.[3] What needs constant dialogue, then, is the direction in which we are headed, and why gendered political blackness is a mobilising strategy that can take us there.

3 This line and the title of my paper is inspired by the preface to *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* (1988: 2–3) in which editors Shabnam Grewal, Jackie Kay, Liliane Landor, Gail Lewis and Pratibha Parmar share that in their 'struggle to redefine the idea of "blackness" and "black womanhood" ' they were 'creating a movement [that], though disparate in voice, was sympathetic in direction'.

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