



S c a t t e r e d

B e l o n g i n g s

Cultural
Paradoxes of
"Race," Nation and
Gender

a y n e O . I f e k w u n i g w e

SCATTERED BELONGINGS

Cultural Paradoxes of "Race," Nation
and Gender

Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe



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SCATTERED BELONGINGS

This is a book about ordinary lives faced with the dilemmas of belonging and not belonging and of people who find themselves to be strangers in two cultures. It is a book about how the often painful experiences of being of "mixed race" in a world perceived in terms of "Black" and "White" can instead be something to name and celebrate.

Scattered Belongings presents personal and political testimonies and analyzes "mixed race" theories. The book takes a rigorous critique of "race" and "mixed race" as its starting point. The following section includes the moving narratives of six women of both continental African/African Caribbean and European parentage. Collectively, their testimonies illustrate the ways in which identities are shaped not only by "race," but also by ethnicity, gender, class, and locality. Finally, Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe demonstrates how the lived experiences of "mixed race" individuals can help us to understand the dynamic construction of identities in a globalizing world.

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Scattered Belongings

I am the descended daughter of both and neither
My forefathers are the so-called intrepid explorers of the
dark continent who stole kisses and cultures
The rusty and the dusty dealers in the Triangular Trade
The hyper-zealots who hopped the fence during the
Missionary Crusades – adding a bit of cream to the coffee
And of course – the chocolate brown Africans who were there

At the same time, the distant drones of my fertile
foremothers in Africa, Europe and the Caribbean lull me
to sleep, but never unconscious

(Copyright: Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe, Berkeley,
California, USA, September 9, 1992)

For my Geordie gran (1904–1997)
and my LeGuan grandad (1893–1983)

They will stay together and play together now that they both have
legs strong enough to run



Plate 1 Author's maternal grandparents, Lionel Freeman and Mary Freeman, South Shields, England. Date and photographer unknown.

PROLOGUE

We must remember so that others will not
forget

If race lives on today, it does not live on because we have inherited it from our forebears of the seventeenth century or the eighteenth or nineteenth, but because we continue to create it today.¹

The recent bag of re-poetics (recuperate, rewrite, transport, transform and so forth) proffers the opportunity to confront many of the assumptions and confusions of identity I feel compelled to “reconfigure.” The site of this poetics for me, and many other multi-racial and multi-cultural writers, is the hyphen, that marked (or unmarked) space that both binds and divides...a crucial location for working out the ambivalences of hybridity....In order to actualize this hybridity...the hybrid writer must necessarily develop instruments of disturbance, dislocation and displacement.²

In the past six years or so, Wah’s literary summons has been answered by a virtual flourishing of North American (Canada and the United States) texts in the forms of websites, fiction, poetry, autobiographies, biographies, and academic texts by “mixed race” writers who are often of “Black and White” parentage, middle class and/or academics and students.³ On the other hand, in England, during that same time period, there have been relatively few books written by “mixed race” authors about “mixed race” identity politics.⁴ These countries’ different historical legacies *vis-à-vis* immigrant and indigenous communities might explain this discrepancy:

While the United States (and Canada) is a country of immigrants where ethnic diversity is constitutive of the society, British society has aspired and continues to aspire to monoculturalism: the people of the empire have no claim on British territory.⁵

In a more profound way than in the United States and Canada, the rigidity of the class structure in Britain also limits the extent to which “hybrid” writers are recognized, published, marketed and received. However, Friedman would argue that on both sides of the Atlantic, a “hybrid” identity is not accessible to the poor:

PROLOGUE

The urban poor, ethnically mixed ghetto is an arena that does not immediately cater to the construction of explicitly new hybrid identities. In periods of global stability and/or expansion, the problems of survival are more closely related to territory and to creating secure life spaces.⁶

Scattered Belongings is a book with two major objectives. First, this text begins to redress the imbalance in British literature on "mixed race" theories and identities. Second, this book centralizes the everyday words of working-class and middle-class "mixed race" people in England. As sociocultural and political critiques of "race," gender, class and belonging, fluid contemporary "mixed race" narratives of identities engage with, challenge and yet have been muffled by two competing racialized, essentialized and oppositional dominant discourses in England. The first is the territorialized discourse of "English" nationalism, which is based on indigeneity and mythical purity. That is, "Englishness" is synonymous with "Whiteness." The second is the deterritorialized discourse of the English-African Diaspora, which is predicated on (mis)placement and the one drop rule. That is, all Africans have been dispersed and one known African ancestor designates a person as "Black." Through the personal testimonies of ordinary people, I will illustrate the ways in which, as we hobble toward the new millennium, "mixed race" de/territorialized declarations delimit and transgress bi-racialized discourses and point the way toward a profound re-alignment of thinking about belonging. As such, this book critically engages with the notions of biological and cultural hybridities as they are articulated in nineteenth- and twentieth-century theories of "race," "mixed race" and social identities.

This book is structured as a critical dialogue between cultural theories and personal/political testimonies. The main theory chapter traces the origins of the term "hybridity" back to its problematic beginnings in nineteenth-century "race" science and especially evolutionary anthropology and critiques contemporary cultural theorizing on "hybridities" which reframes "race" as difference(s). Drawing on personal narratives as both testimonies and performances of resistance, I also show how, as storytellers, six contemporary "mixed race" women tangle with the twin torments of "Englishness" being exclusively associated with "Whiteness" as well as the presumption that one's designated "Blackness" automatically inflicts one with a (mis)placed African diasporic condition. Never does "White English" birth parentage nor full-time English residence enable these women to carve out territorialized spaces that reflect both the realities of cultural upbringing and the complexities of de-territorialized ancestries. Their critiques also confront racialized obstructions whereby "Whiteness" is deemed the normative and naturalized signifier by which deviations of "Blackness" are determined as well as the presumption that "Englishness" is synonymous with "Whiteness." In the de/territorialized places, which "mixed race"

cartographers map, the idea of “home” has, by definition, multilayered, multitextual and contradictory meanings. By virtue of both “White” English maternal and “Black” paternal continental African or African Caribbean parentage, “home” represents an ambivalent “Black and White” sense of both place (England) and misplaced longings (continental Africa, the Caribbean, and what Paul Gilroy would refer to as the Black Atlantic). Their family histories are braided from the gendered, bi-racialized and sexualized residues of imperial domination and colonized submission.

Notes

- 1 Barbara Fields (1990) “Slavery, race and ideology in the United States of America,” *New Left Review*, p. 181, as cited in Rose Brewer (1993) “Theorizing race, class and gender: the new scholarship of Black feminist intellectuals and Black women’s labor,” in S. James and A. Busia (eds.) *Theorizing Black Feminisms*, London: Routledge, pp. 13–30.
- 2 Fred Wah (1996) “Half-bred poetics,” *Absinthe*, Hyphenation: A Mixed Race Issue, 9 (2): 60–5.
- 3 For examples, see Maria Root (ed.) (1992) *Racially Mixed People in America*, London: Sage.; No Press Collective (1992) *Voices of Identity, Rage and Deliverance: An Anthology of Writings by People of Mixed Descent*, Berkeley: No Press.; Naomi Zack (1993) *Race and Mixed Race*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.; Lisa Jones (1994) *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex and Hair*, New York: Doubleday; Lise Funderburg (1994) *Black, White, Other: Biracial Americans Talk About Race and Identity*, New York: William and Morrow; Shirlee Taylor Haizlip (1994) *The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Memoir in Black and White*, London: Simon and Schuster; Carol Camper (ed.) (1994) *Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women*, Toronto: Sister Vision; Maria Root (ed.) (1996) *The Multiracial Experience*, London: Sage; Naomi Zack (ed.) (1995) *American Mixed Race*, London: Rowman and Littlefield; Judy Scales-Trent, (1995) *Notes of a White Black Woman*, University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University; James McBride (1996) *The Color of Water: A Black Man’s Tribute to His White Mother*, New York: Riverhead Books; Marsha Hunt (1996) *Repossessing Ernestine*, London: Flamingo; Toi Derricotte (1997) *The Black Notebooks*, London: W. W. Norton. Also see *Inter-racial Voice*, the largest website edited by and about “mixed race” people, founded by Charles Byrd: <http://www.webcom.com/intvoice/>
- 4 See *New Mixed Culture*, a website founded and maintained by Sabu, the first artist in Britain to put his work on the web: <http://www.love.com>
- 5 Marie Hélène LaForest (1996) “Black cultures in difference,” in I. Chambers and L. Curti (eds.) *The Postcolonial Question*, London: Routledge, pp. 115–22.
- 6 Jonathan Friedman (1997) “Global crises, the struggle for cultural identity and intellectual porkbarrelling: cosmopolitans versus locals, ethnics and nationals in an era of de-hegemonisation,” in P. Werbner and T. Moddod (eds.) *Debating Cultural Hybridity*, London: Zed, pp. 70–89.

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I would like to thank everyone I have ever met in my life.

Upon acceptance of the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress in the film *L. A. Confidential*, Kim Basinger uttered such words.¹ The understood rituals associated with book acknowledgements are quite similar. In fact, Ben-Ari has written a provocative analysis entitled, “On acknowledgements in ethnography,” which problematizes, deconstructs, and demystifies this time-honored tradition of paying homage to those who have directly or indirectly helped one to “get over”:

Acknowledgements are part of the processes of “management of meaning” within anthropology. They may, in other words be devised to do a whole range of things like show, report, camouflage, hide, command, beg, maintain, reason, qualify, or inform about a certain order or state.²

Reading this piece forced me to question the taken-for-granted form, function and personal/professional/political motivations underlying the expressions of gratitude that accompany most publications. Hence, may Basinger’s all-encompassing “thank you” function as a collective thank you to all of the individuals who have helped me, supported me and challenged me across time and disparate spaces.

Having said that, I would like to extend special and boundless gratitude to particular individuals who have played pivotal roles in my life these past eight years:

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Last, to both present and future generations of *métis(se)* individuals and their families as well as emerging “critical mixed-race” scholars, may your personal and intellectual journeys be less arduous than mine and those with whom I have worked.

Notes

- 1 March 24 1998, *Barry Norman's Highlights of the Seventieth Annual Academy Awards Presentation*, BBC1.
- 2 Ben-Ari, Eyal (1995) “On acknowledgements in ethnography,” in J. Van Maanen (ed.) *Representation in Ethnography*, London: Sage, pp. 130–64.

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CRACKING THE COCONUT

Resisting popular folk discourses on “race,”
“mixed race” and social hierarchies¹

It is Tuesday evening in Thatchapee.² I have walked the few short blocks from my flat on the main road to the Mandela Community Center, where I am a voluntary youth worker.³ Although lately, the youth are scarce and it's usually Irie, the local Jamaican *griot*,⁴ with natty dread,⁵ whom many in Thatchapee have dismissed as “mad,” who is holding court. We are all assembled in the community hall where one has to shout to be heard over the pulse of the ragamuffin reggae coming from the sound system. Irie and his disciples – all White English women and men – are having a reasoning session. I gather that part of Irie's lure is his “mad” mystique. I remember going over to the table around which they were all sitting. Irie was completely engrossed in his role as *griot* – rolling his eyes, frothing a little at the mouth. His disciples were loving it. At one stage, he looked over at me and winked, as if to say, “I and I know.”⁶

On another occasion, I was talking with Irie about my involvement in the field of anthropology, and in particular about the concept of culture. Sitting upright in his chair, legs crossed, leaning forward slightly, right index finger pointed, he exclaimed: “Culture – there's no culture left in this world. They are all dirty.”

“Race” as science fiction

In Irie's estimation, once “pure” cultures have now been sullied. Similarly, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain and North America, the false presumption held by evolutionary theorists that “races” existed as discrete, bounded, biological and ultimately “pure” entities was the dominant