

# **Diana and Race: Romance and the Reconfiguration of the Nation<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

Every now and again there are cultural events which freeze frame the transformed and transformative elements of a historical period. Princess Diana's death and the week which followed exposed to the world the lineaments of a new British nation which bore no resemblance to the conventional heritage images disseminated around the globe in travel posters, films and BBC dramas over the decades since world war two and the decline of empire. The lead role, it is true, still belonged to a princess, but the supporting cast – the metropolitan populace – was composed to a remarkable extent of the visibly-different dark-skinned children and grandchildren of Britain's former colonies, bolstered by a cosmopolitan ragbag of migrant physiognomies from around the world. And more striking still: in this new scenario the lover of the golden haired princess was dark-skinned and from somewhere else as well. The public face of Britain was no longer white. This new picture of the nation, captured and played back on the endless hours of television footage, was transmitted not only to the world outside. It registered and was constitutive of a transformation in the domestic consciousness as well.

Something analogous happened in France in the summer of 1998. Again a single much publicised event – the victory in the World Cup of France's multi-racial football team – re-imaged and reconfigured for the global eye as well as for the French themselves the meaning of Frenchness. Like the death of Diana, the incident served to reveal and consolidate – albeit more contentiously than in the case of Britain, given the strength of the racist right in France – a new set of national identifications. In common, both events represent the largely unanticipated consequences of the dissolution and diaspora of former imperial populations. They are in this sense specific to the

late twentieth century. Though inevitably rooted in Europe's colonial past, they constitute a historical break – a new beginning.

But these major shifts in national identifications require a catalyst and in Britain it was the death of Diana that served to define the new mood. The media accounts of her public recognition of racial others in her renowned charity work and her public romance with Dodi al Fayed captured the imagination of a modernising culture, still basking in the climate of optimism and anti-traditionalism generated by the Labour victory earlier in the year, and projected onto the screens and consciousness of the world during the course of that one intense week a new British rainbow nation. Although a sexual relationship between an aristocratic cosmopolitan English woman and a racially other man has not been without historical precedent in this century,<sup>2</sup> and thus is not specific to the post colonial period, what was remarkable and new in this instance was the exposure of the affair in the public domain and its favourable popular reception. This can be attributed partly to the decline in deference towards royalty among the media in the period since the war, leading to the mass circulation of information about hitherto unpublicised events, and partly - and importantly – to the transformation in sexual politics with the associated increase in personal freedom for women which has meant that Diana was less constrained by the need to protect her sexual 'reputation'.<sup>3</sup> In a context in which revelations about the private lives of celebrities have become routine and confessional practices are increasingly commonplace, one of the features which in the end seems to have contradictorily defined Diana and Dodi's modern inter-racial romance was its place in the gallery of everyday mass culture and hence, despite its high profile and the feverish fascination that it elicited world-wide, its surprising ordinariness.

### **The Week After It Happened**

Within hours of Diana's death on 31 August 1997, British television and press coverage of her life and the mode of her dying was intercut with accounts and images of public mourning. The widespread and uninhibited demonstrations of grief following the news of the fatal accident were initially as much of a surprise as the death itself, but, before the day was out, these emotional displays had been established as a key feature of the Diana phenomenon. So the sense of national and then international loss, the style of mourning and the mourners themselves, all became objects of media interest. The focus of attention was widened to include not only Diana and the circumstances of her death but also the response of the people. And from the start, as was noted by journalists, camera operators and spectators alike, the many thousands of mourners included a remarkably large number of black, brown and non-Anglo-

Celtic faces. Among those captured on our screens leaving tributes at the different shrines and waiting in line for many hours to sign condolence books, or just hanging out, racial and cultural diversity was far more visible than is usually the case in British media representations of public events.<sup>4</sup>

As the bouquets of flowers accumulated there emerged a growing sense of surprised pride in this new inclusive nationhood, even among the conservative press. There was also a recognition that the new multi-cultural Britain may have contributed to the new symbols and style of mourning. Emotional display, flowers, candles and incense at public shrines are not part of the history of British funereal practice. Although initially there seemed to be some trepidation about speaking of racial difference<sup>5</sup> within a day or two, most of the newspapers were commenting on the 'multi-ethnic' mourning:

Young, old, black and white, they came to pay their respects... Prince Naseem Hamed<sup>6</sup> was among the earliest... Mourners of all creeds prayed according to their faith... Catholics, Moslems and Sikhs... A Nigerian woman read a poem of lament for 'My Beautiful Diana, My Sister'(Pukas and Gallagher 1997)<sup>7</sup>.

Some of the papers made clear their celebration of this new nationhood and unity: 'In our grief for Diana, there is none of that old British reserve. We are united as never before... It is the new British spirit, the spirit of Diana, proclaimed proudly throughout the land' (*Mirror* 1997). These phrases are from an editorial illustrated by a cartoon entitled 'United Kingdom' depicting mourners of different race, class, religion and age – 'a rainbow coalition' as Littlejohn put it in the *Mail* - linking hands in front of a flag at half mast and encircling the landscape of the nation.

The unity of emotion and sense of collective loss was sufficiently flexible to permit the coexistence of a range of identifications and in London differences of allegiance solidified over the week of mourning so that by the funeral itself, the principal shrines had developed their own distinct symbolic associations: Buckingham Palace was for middle-Englanders and the tourists; Kensington Palace, the most densely packed with flowers and other offerings, provided, as Diana's home, the gravitational pull for her supporters and the critics of the royal family; and the department store Harrods was for those who celebrated the coupledom of Diana and Dodi and wanted to commiserate with the Al Fayed family, (or perhaps were just in need of refreshment: Harrods had a stall which served free food and drinks to those waiting to sign their books of condolence)<sup>8</sup>. Of course not everyone was aware of these distinctions; many stayed at home and watched the whole thing on the television and many of those who trekked into town admitted only to curiosity and the need to witness for themselves the seismic transformation in British culture, so visited all three. But informal canvassing as well as the inferences of reporters suggest

that blacks, Asians, gays, single mothers and others who located themselves outside mainstream British culture and identified in some way with the oppressed and vulnerable, were more likely to visit Kensington Palace and Harrods than Buckingham Palace, and some of the written tributes left with the flowers confirm this. For instance among the many thousands at Kensington Palace were the following evocative and moving messages:

Queen of the Coloured Hearts  
Queen of the Devastated  
Queen of the Unloved Ones  
Queen of the Unknown  
Love from the Unknown (Daily Mail 4.9.97)

and:

Dear Diana  
Thank you for treating us like human beings not criminals  
From the lads at HM Prison Dartmoor (Daily Mail 4.9.97)<sup>9</sup>

So what was rendered visible in the days following the fatal accident in Paris and Diana's death, was evidence of her astonishingly wide appeal and her ability to unify people from across the social spectrum. Most striking of all was her ability to speak to and recruit into her orbit those groups who considered themselves marginalised from the more orthodox political processes. Even the Labour Party in its most euphoric and victorious moment, after its May 1997 victory, could boast relatively little support from the young, the unemployed and ethnic minorities. In the days following the '97 election landslide, the Labour Party's publicists issued press releases and photos celebrating its one-hundred women MPs, but there was no similar promotion for the handful of non-white and ethnic minority MPs. Many on the left were struck by Blair's failure in this respect and were disappointed that the Labour party was not making a greater effort - or was too afraid of middle-England - to win the confidence of blacks and Asians and recruit them as supporters and participants in the new political project.

In contrast, Diana effortlessly captured the support and the imagination of those groups<sup>10</sup> without losing the constituencies of the centre. In this sense she became, as Martin Jacques has put it, 'a new kind of public person, a new kind of leader'. She was a unique 'representative of cultural modernity' who exposed: the chasm between the traditional institutions of governance - Westminster and Buckingham Palace - and the culture and concerns of the people... Tradition, deference, protocol, hypocrisy, men in suits... were progressively besieged by authenticity, emotion, informality, the female... Diana's appeal was quintessentially of our time (Jacques 1997: 6-7).

Her style of being in the public world - her spontaneity, warmth and vulnerability, her in-touchness - showed up the limitations not only of formal political processes - even of the left - but also of the old-fashioned, emotionally constrained and out-of-touch royal family. Her treatment at their hands, her visible disappointment with her life and her sensate longing for something better is partly what mobilised the extraordinary process of mutual recognition and identification between herself and the people. Her friend Rosa Monckton offered an insight into the texture of this process:

Diana had a huge capacity for unhappiness, which is why she responded so well to the suffering of humanity. She felt real pain... she had a unique ability to spot the broken hearted and could zero in on them. She was relentless in her ability to give.' (Monckton 1997).

Diana's life experience, her own traumas and humiliations, led her to identify with the marginalised and needy. And they in turn identified with her.

Among those with whom she identified at this intuitive level were people with AIDS, the young urban homeless, the victims of landmines, the socially marginalised and excluded. Her passionate determination to make a difference led her to radical political positions not easily tolerated by governments and what she called 'the establishment'. Thus for instance, she believed in a transfer of resources from rich countries to poor (Hencke 1997); she intervened with considerable effect in global politics on the question of landmines (despite being accused of being 'a loose cannon' by leading Tories) and had meetings planned with Labour party women MPs. So her charitable impulse went beyond the parameters of conventional philanthropy. She was prepared to engage politically (although she insisted that what she was doing was not political) and endured criticism and even ridicule in order to change things. Unlike most other members of her class involved in charitable work, her practice was fuelled by more than just a sense of duty and some compassion.<sup>11</sup>

Her psychic formation rooted partly in the experiences of her childhood, her powerful identification with outsiders, extended beyond charity to her friendships and the people she dealt with in her professional life, and of course finally also to her lovers.<sup>12</sup> Although surprisingly overlooked - or at least uncommented upon - in the endless media portrayals of her, after her separation from the royal family she made a series of both formal and personal contacts with foreigners and racially-'other' first-generation British. At one level these relationships confirm the analysis of her as an icon of the modern more open and more fluid Britain. Paradoxically it is the very lack of attention to racial and cultural difference in these interpersonal exchanges that signals cultural modernity. The taken-for-grantedness of the transracial transcultural social encounters suggests a kind of post anti-racism, and marks a significant - if uneven - British cultural transformation that was reflected in the

composition of her mourners after her death. Yet, at the same time, these relationships with outsiders also signalled her awareness of the history of social exclusion in Britain and can also be read in part both as a marker of her own sense of not belonging and as a challenge to the traditionalists - whether in Buckingham Palace or the Clapham omnibus.

There were a number of such encounters or friendships, some of them more publicised and notable than others. Her firm of solicitors was Jewish, as was her psychotherapist, and one of her closest women-friends was Brazilian. For the first high-profile media event instigated and controlled entirely by her, the Panorama interview, considered by the BBC its coup of the year, she selected (or accepted) as her interviewer not a Dimbleby or any of the other established mandarins of the BBC but a relatively unknown journalist, Martin Bashir, of Indian Muslim origin.<sup>13</sup> About the same time she seems to have been introduced to the Egyptian heart surgeon Magdi Yacoub at a charitable event organised by Mohamed al Fayed (Fayed had been a friend and associate of her father's for ten years and she maintained contact after her father's death). Through Yacoub, Diana met Hasnat Khan, a heart surgeon of Pakistani origin, described as 'dashing' by the Mail, with whom she seems to have had an affair (or was 'romantically linked' as the newspapers put it coyly). During this same period she made several private visits and at least one on behalf of charity to her friends Jemima and Imran Khan in Pakistan. Whether she met up with Hasnat Khan in Pakistan was not reported in the press. However Imran Khan is reputed to have said that 'there was hardly any non-Muslim who worked in a Muslim country with as much devotion and dedication as Diana demonstrated for the sick and poor in Pakistan' (Streeter 1997). The claim was grandiose; notwithstanding, the photos of her cradling a dying child in Imran Khan's cancer hospital in Lahore received world-wide coverage and enhanced her compassionate reputation.<sup>14</sup> At the same she took advantage of her convenient geographical location and 'slipped her bodyguards' to pay a social visit to Hasnat Khan's family. (Daily Mail 1.9.97). All this certainly made an impact on the Islamic world. Diana's multifaceted and respectful relationship with Muslims was noted by the countries of the Middle East and Asia as well as Britain and was raised again in the conspiracy allegations which circulated after her death.

The British press was low key about Diana's romance with Hasnat perhaps because she made little of it herself. And besides he wasn't famous. Dodi Fayed was a different matter. The relationship was considered serious almost immediately because so little effort was made to hide it. It was public from the start and newspapers and apparently her friends spoke of love, passion and happiness. Yet Dodi was an unexpected and transgressive choice. This was partly because his father, Mohamed al Fayed, was loathed by the Tory party

and considered rather disreputable by most sectors of the British public, even those who were Harrods' customers. As an Egyptian in pursuit of British citizenship (which was twice refused) he had offered cash to Conservative MPs to ask questions in Parliament and then exposed their corruption, so although his actions had contributed to the May 1997 Labour victory, his complicity meant that he had few public defenders.<sup>15</sup> Dodi, his oldest son, was, like his father, an Egyptian, a Muslim, and a multi-millionaire, and in addition had a reputation as a playboy.<sup>16</sup> Moreover the family wealth was no more than a generation old, made in trade rather than inherited. So for Diana to have a highly visible affair with Dodi was certainly a rebellious act. She was challenging the conventional loyalties and snobbery of significant sections of her own class and also of a good part of the traditional body politic of the nation. In taking up with a Muslim, she was also embracing (in the view of most white British) the least favoured exogenous cultural and religious group.<sup>17</sup> Yet despite all this the press were remarkably kind to Dodi and the al Fayed family, particularly in the days immediately following the accident.

During that first week many of the papers compared the al Fayed family favourably with the royal family. They were represented as warm, welcoming, authentic, informal, generous and cosmopolitan (breakfast consisted of coffee and croissants), all qualities considered absent in the royal family. 'They made Diana feel wanted and loved' (*Express* 1.9.97). Although references were made to Dodi's previous love affairs with glamorous women, he was depicted as caring and sensitive: 'Women liked, trusted and confided in him' (Cunningham 1997). His ex-lovers remained his friends and one of them is quoted as saying 'He was the kindest, gentlest man who took infinite care about his friendships' (Roberts 1997) Unlike Charles, Dodi was described as 'having nothing remotely pompous about him'.<sup>18</sup> Like Diana, he'd had a difficult childhood with separated and warring parents. Additionally he seems to have had a special and populist touch with Diana's sons: he hired a private disco for them and his young half siblings during their holiday in St Tropez. (Hall 1997). His partial residence outside Britain, in Paris and California – his cosmopolitanism – must also have appealed to Diana. But perhaps finally, as the *Express* succinctly put it 'Dodi's role as an outsider to the establishment which Diana felt had so badly let her down during her 15-year marriage, may have been just what attracted the princess to him' (Crosbie 1997). There was something modern, different and satisfyingly political about her choice of Dodi. Although extremely wealthy, his social marginality made her relationship with him an act of protest against the rigid protocols and emotional constraint – the traditionalism – of the monarchy.<sup>19</sup> Like the Panorama interview, the affair with Dodi was a public retaliation against her former husband and his relatives. It was a defiant Romeo-and-Juliet romance and was recognised as such by the hundreds of thousands who left messages of support and remembrance to

them both together - to Di and Dodi - and who projected onto her their own fantasies of insurrection against parental prohibition and their desire for something emotionally fulfilling and different.<sup>20</sup>

This fantasy seems to have been so powerful that in the end even Diana's critics and opponents in the press seem to have been won over and expressed support for her relationship with Dodi.<sup>21</sup> Although this might have been no more than courteous and contingent, given that the two were now dead, it could also be interpreted as an attempt to reflect public sentiment, to stay in the mainstream. It is also likely to have been an act of reparation for the harassment of the past and in part a response to the refusal of the Queen to participate publicly in the mourning. What is clear is that during the period immediately following Diana's death, the British nation was reconfigured and a different mood prevailed. There was a sense of popular unity, of generosity, pride, perhaps even virtue, and a racial inclusiveness which permeated the country and was celebrated. The fact that this inclusivity was achieved partly by projecting onto the Queen and royal family the nation's discontent is not relevant here. What is significant is that at its heart lay the acknowledgement and acceptance of the love affair and likely marriage of Diana, the people's princess, with a foreigner: an Arab and a Muslim no less. In this instance, British xenophobia seemed as much in decline and out of favour as the royal family. Dodi was made welcome - was even loved - by the people because he made Diana happy.

The tragedy is that there was no opportunity to consolidate this racial reconfiguration. A child of Diana and Dodi, a mixed-race half-sibling to the future king, might have done the trick. It would certainly have confirmed Britain's new sense of self and would have made internationally manifest changes that are already increasingly visible in every conurbation in the country. The modern rainbow nation, with Diana as its queen, would have been not just a multi-cultural nation where different groups exist side-by-side, but a post colonial one where the descendants of the colonisers can no longer be distinguished from the descendants of the colonised, where cultural and racial differences are transformed by their interaction and merger with each other: where sexual desire and intermarriage produce a new generation of racially indeterminate Britons. It is precisely because this utopian vision – this fantasy - is so appealing, and yet at the same time so subversive, that the conspiracy theories, which have continued to circulate in the West as well as in the Arab world, have had such an extensive reach. The rumours have contained different details and arguments and some have been more plausible than others. The recurring claims have been that Diana was pregnant and that she and Dodi were about to marry; that Diana, like her friend Jemima Khan, was considering conversion to Islam (this one has been particularly widespread

in the Middle East); and (most far fetched) that because all this was so intolerable for 'the establishment', Diana and Dodi were murdered by secret agents (Fisk 1997). Underlying all of them was the fantasy of union and the reconciliation of cultural difference.

Diana and Dodi may be dead, but they have not been eliminated from the popular imagination. What we saw played out in the brief and intense period following their death was a scenario in which racial difference was both highly visible and at the same time part of the taken-for-granted face of modern Britain. In this context a serious romance between a white English princess and a north African millionaire was noted as a controversial step, yet at the same time was widely accepted as part of the everyday life of the end-of-the-century cosmopolitan nation. A cynic could argue, that, like Barthes's photo of the Negro soldier saluting the French tricolour (Barthes 1972) the visibility of blackness in Britain today merely confirms the whiteness of the national consciousness. On the other hand it may also signal a much more radical transformation in the cultural identifications of the people.

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<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this article 'Diana, Princess of Others: The Politics and Romance of "Race"' was

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Cunard, daughter of London society figure Lady Emerald Cunard, had a long relationship with Afro-American Henry Crowder during the late 1920s and early 1930s (and other blacks also it is alleged) but because of the social disapproval of her mother and the British public, she and Crowder lived mainly in France and New York (Chisholm 1981). Edwina Mountbatten, granddaughter of Jewish financier Ernest Cassell and wife of the King's cousin Lord Louis Mountbatten, is supposed to have had a brief affair with the celebrated American actor Paul Robeson in the 1930s (though their respective biographers disagree about this, see Morgan 1992, Mountbatten's official biographer who says there is no evidence for the allegation, and Duberman 1989 who argues that Edwina was under pressure from the royal family to deny the incident) and a much longer one with Jawaharlal Nehru in the 1940s and 1950s (though again there is disagreement between biographers). The point is that until very recently, although affairs are likely to have been known about and even countenanced within the immediate social circles of those involved, public denial was required in order to protect status and respectability. For a longer discussion of the romance of difference and cosmopolitan modernity at the beginning of the century, which bears on these issues, see Nava (1998).

<sup>3</sup> Both Nancy Cunard and Edwina Mountbatten had large numbers of lovers but this information was not in the public domain during their lives.

<sup>4</sup> There was also an astonishingly high proportion of black and brown faces among the crowd of people waiting outside the hospital in Paris to which Diana was taken. It would seem that there also she had made an impact on those who experienced themselves as outsiders.

<sup>5</sup> On the evening of the death the BBC reporter Margaret Gilmore at Kensington Palace referred several times to the astonishing response of the public and the fact that 'people from all sorts of walks of life, of all ages, from all over the country, even from abroad – so many ordinary people' were there. Although the camera lingered on black faces the reporter could not quite bring herself to single out racial difference for comment.

<sup>6</sup> The British boxing champion and celebrity of Yemeni origin. The name Prince was adopted by deed poll.

<sup>7</sup> The sympathetic tone is marred somewhat by the use of 'Moslem' rather than Muslim, the preferred term among British Muslims.

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- <sup>8</sup> Mohamed al Fayed, Dodi's father and owner of Harrods, received, according to his spokesman, 60,000 messages of condolence, though it seems reasonable to be sceptical about these claims. However visible evidence of the widespread popular sympathy was provided by the bouquets left outside Harrods.
- <sup>9</sup> Despite the tendency for Kensington Palace and Harrods to recruit the more dissenting supporters, it must not be assumed that those outside Buckingham Palace were straightforwardly monarchist and deferential. They appear as much as any other sector to have contributed to the ground swell of discontent about the failure of the Queen to speak to the people.
- <sup>10</sup> An articulate young black woman interviewed by TV reporters outside Kensington Palace on the day after the accident expressed her support in the following terms: 'Diana meant a lot to me. She was one of the members of royalty that the nation identified with most. The fact that she did a lot of work for charities really touched my heart. Although I'm not really a royalist I felt compelled to come here this morning to leave these flowers for her. I'm just completely shocked. It's just so absurd that the best one of the lot had to go first'.
- <sup>11</sup> Edwina Mountbatten's commitment to the independent state of India also exceeded the conventions of her role as Vicereine.
- <sup>12</sup> Stories of her abandonment by her mother when she was a child have circulated widely and are assumed to have had an impact on her adult life. Similar patterns of relative motherlessness as well as identification with the marginalised were experienced by the historical figures referred to earlier, Nancy Cunard and Edwina Mountbatten, but one must of course be wary of reducing their adult identifications to these childhood events.
- <sup>13</sup> On the programme, Bashir seemed to be of Afro-Caribbean origin. His appearance was significant because most viewers had not seen or heard of him before.
- <sup>14</sup> She declared these her favourite photos of herself in her interview with *Le Monde* the week before she died.
- <sup>15</sup> In the months after the death, and especially after his public confrontation with Diana's mother in Paris, his reputation declined still further – but that story cannot be embarked on here.
- <sup>16</sup> Four months after the accident the American magazine *Vanity Fair*, already being sued for libel by Mohamed al Fayed, published a detailed portrait of Dodi from which he emerges as an insecure man with a fragile identity and an alleged coke habit who 'spent recklessly in pursuit of love and status'. The author argues that the portrait of Dodi which emerged in the press on days after his death bore little relation to the 'reality' she uncovered in the course of her researches (Bedell Smith 1997).
- <sup>17</sup> Dodi's lifestyle suggests that he was not devout. Mohamed is married to a Finnish woman and there is no evidence that she has converted to Islam.
- <sup>18</sup> This description is Michael Cole's, Mohamed al Fayed's spokesman.
- <sup>19</sup> There is a longer tradition of defiance against the protocols of society, as I have already pointed out. Divisions within the aristocracy during the first world war between xenophobic conservative Tories and cosmopolitan modernising Liberals who were relatively unconstrained in their sexual behaviour – or 'decadent' as they were described at the time – have been documented by Hoare in his account of the Maud Allan 'cult of the clitoris' trial (Hoare 1997). See also Bland 1998.
- <sup>20</sup> This mood was even reflected in the BBC's re-scheduling: on the day after the crash a programme considered unsuitable during a period of mourning was replaced by the 1960 American film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* about the romance between a black man and a white woman.
- <sup>21</sup> See eg Littlejohn in the *Daily Mail* 4.9.97.

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