

Sometimes antagonistic, sometimes ardently sympathetic: Contradictory responses to migrants in postwar Britain

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Abstract

Most sociological and anthropological studies of UK race relations produced in 1950s stress the wide spectrum of British reactions to new migrants. Yet, recent historians have tended to focus on the racism and xenophobia of the research and period, on the 'antagonisms'. The 'ardently sympathetic' responses referred to by Ruth Glass in 1960, which were evident also in 1950s fiction, film and radical political movements, have often been ignored or misrepresented in order to construct a more dystopian picture. This article examines the cultural and sociopolitical context of the time and argues that the mood was more critical of British insularity and more anti-racist than many recent historians of 1950s Englishness and race relations research allow. This was, in part, the influence of dislocated intellectuals from postwar continental Europe and the common-wealth, white and black, who, radicalised by anti-fascism and decolonisation, contributed to a growing cosmopolitanism.

Keywords

1950s British race-relations research, racism, anti-racism, cosmopolitanism, Ruth Glass, Sheila Patterson

The distinctiveness ... [of dark skinned newcomers] often causes antagonism; but it also frequently evokes ardent sympathy. Whatever the reasons for these contradictory responses, there is no doubt at all that the colour question does produce vehement reactions, negative and positive (Ruth Glass, 1960: 3)

The issues

I argue in this paper that most of the sociological and anthropological studies of UK race relations produced during the 1950s and early 1960s stress the wide spectrum of British responses to the new migrants. Yet the heterogeneity of the social mood, which Ruth Glass so eloquently highlights in the quote above taken from her 1960 study *Newcomers: The West Indians in London*, has often been overlooked by recent (turn-of-the century) historians of the period whose tendency has been to focus on the more dystopian,

bleaker, aspects of the picture: on the legacy of Empire; on the injuries of ‘racial prejudice’ and xenophobia; in short, on the antagonisms. The more sympathetic accounts of the decades following the Second World War – of the 1950s and 1960s – which include a number produced by novelists and filmmakers as well as social scientists, and which were explicitly articulated by many of the contemporary social movements, have not only often been ignored by today’s historians, they have even sometimes been misrepresented in order to make an argument that emphasises the racism and conservatism of the period and hence seems more appropriate to the more racially conscious political climate of the last two decades.

It goes without saying these days that all representation is interpretation. Historical narratives, like all accounts, inevitably prioritise and highlight certain moments, events and discourses while neglecting others. We all have agendas based on politics and personal history that, in complex and only semi-conscious ways, influence how we select our materials and tell our stories. Sometimes these interactions between biography and the intellectual work we produce have themselves been subjected to scrutiny (see e.g. Eley, 2005; Nava, 2007; Steedman, 1986; Tosh, 2006). But to acknowledge that history is always about the reworking of the present in relation to the past does not mean that we should not challenge particular emphases and omissions, or ask why historians have chosen to inflect their accounts in a particular way.

So the purpose of this article is to examine some recent representations, and in some cases misrepresentations, of 1950s social science texts and their socio-political context in order to sharpen our understanding of that moment while at the same time exploring certain historiographical tendencies of the present. My reading of this mid-century period and the work of race relations social investigators suggests a more contradictory and nuanced structure of feeling and attitude, one more critical of English insularity, more anti-racist, international and forward-looking than many of the recent (white) historians of 1950s’ Englishness allow.

The context

The responses of the indigenous British population to the new waves of immigrants during the two decades following WW2, as well as to foreigners more generally, varied considerably, though not consistently, according to a range of factors, among them political affiliation, region, class position, psychic formation and national origin of migrant.¹ Less predictably, they also varied according to gender. The difference between British men and women in their responses to outside groups is taken up in *Visceral Cosmopolitanism* (Nava, 2007) which confirms the view of Caribbean intellectual, CLR James, who stated pithily in one of his letters home on his first visit to London in 1932:

The average English girl in London has little colour prejudice, and in fact were it not for the English men I doubt if she would have any at all... it is the [English] men who are responsible for a great deal of the trouble... I have met many instances of English women ... who have gone out of their way to help in every way they could young men of colour in London (James, 2003 [1932]: 102).

Two decades later, Jamaican sociologist Sydney Collins based in Edinburgh makes a similar point: ‘Coloured men ... believe that understanding and assistance can invariably be obtained from white women whereas the men are unsympathetic and unhelpful’ (Collins, 1951: 801). Another twenty years later, Fernando Henriques, social anthropologist at Sussex and also of Jamaican origin, makes the argument again (1974). So women were on the whole, in the British context, a good deal more ‘tolerant’ and indeed welcoming towards the postwar ‘coloured’ migrants from the former colonies, than were men. Landladies (in a climate of severe housing shortage) were a notorious exception (Carey, 1956).

Although there were no simple class or regional divisions between people who were ‘antagonistic’ and those who were ‘ardently sympathetic’, they could nevertheless be

located in a broad political landscape with features that are familiar today. Its rough contours will remind readers of the range and inconsistency in attitudes towards racial others and foreigners as well as the more general lineaments of the intellectual and political counter-cultures of the 1950s – a decade whose radical impulse has been often overlooked.

At one end of the spectrum were the anti-colonial modernisers who embraced the postwar post-imperial shift to humanism and the left and who supported the growing cosmopolitanisation of British life. Some of these were themselves rooted in, or associated with, the pre-war European anti-fascist left and the Communist Party or the left wing of Labour.² Others had a closer connection to decolonising organisations such as Movement for Colonial Freedom and the Anti-Apartheid and US Civil Rights movements. Quakers fitted into this general category as well, as of course did supporters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The term used to describe the mood at this end of the spectrum in the two decades following World War II was often ‘tolerant’ rather than ‘anti-racist’, which today sounds bland.³ However, this was not the case in the 1950s. Ruth Glass, whom I shall return to frequently, said that she regarded ‘the concept of tolerance not in a passive but in an active sense, in keeping with the traditions of European thought and politics’ (Glass, 1960: xiii). This was a radical defence. There were many left-wingers like her who would have used the term, who similarly had been deeply marked by the war and felt passionately committed to the abolition of empire and all domination or discrimination based on the spurious concept of ‘race’.

The larger, more contradictory and unevenly demarcated, middle ground was occupied by, among others, civil servants from the Colonial Office (later to become the British Council) who were keen for decolonising countries to develop a strong anti-communist line so put an effort into welcoming and ‘integrating’ colonial students whom they expected to be future leaders of Commonwealth countries. It also included middle-of-the-road politicians who, then as now, were scared of antagonising an imagined xenophobic middle England, as well as powerful foreign allies such as the USA and South Africa with their notorious legally enshrined racial privilege and segregation (Rich, 1990, 1994); yet in this middle group there were many who, at the same time, adhered to the view that it was un-British and moreover un-Christian to discriminate (Hill, 1965). The centre was also occupied by social modernisers and egalitarians who, nevertheless, felt that immigrants should ‘assimilate’. This was also the attitude towards Jewish refugees in late 1930s and early 1940s who, for instance, were advised to speak English in public places – even ‘halting’ English – rather than their native languages (Grenville, 2010: 24). So, the middle ground (which included a surprising number of Tories) was, as Glass put it, characterised by ambivalence and muddle, by ‘a benevolent prejudice’ in which goodwill was ‘sluggish’ and tolerance ‘timid’ (Glass, 1960: 218). In general however, what most positions across the spectrum of politics and media held in common during this period of relative consensus – with the exception of extreme right-wing fringes – was the conviction that ‘racial discrimination is un-British’ (Glass, 1960: 149).

On the extreme right were the more predictable hostile conservative traditionalists, the xenophobes and outright racists of all classes. According to Glass (1960) and other contemporary accounts, and more recently Bill Schwarz (2011), this was a relatively small grouping: ‘Unequivocal hostility... is comparatively rare’ (Glass, 1960: 217). Yet these people and these ideas, embedded in a legacy of Empire, national chauvinism and racial supremacy, among whom were the ‘Keep Britain White’ activists and fellow travellers, have often been the focus of the cultural historians of the last decades. This is the picture that tends to circulate at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is, of course, very important that the dark and shameful aspects of British history be exposed. But it is also important to recognise that then, as now, the extremely ‘prejudiced’ did not constitute a majority. As Tony Kushner, author of *We Europeans: Mass Observation, ‘Race’ and British Identity in the Twentieth Century*, has put it:

The media, academics, and research and policy institutes alike [have] tended to

... focus ... on the minority of the population that is violently opposed to newcomers and ethnic pluralism... There is an absolute failure to engage with those who are positively inclined. There is ... an extensive literature on racism and discrimination in Britain but a dearth of material on those who have fought prejudice or worked systematically with immigrant and minority groups. (Kushner, 2004: 5).

Kushner's claim that there has been an 'absolute failure' to address these issues is somewhat overstated. This was not the case during the 1950s and 1960s; nor has it been in the ensuing years. The more 'positively inclined' have been represented in fictional and biographical accounts as well as in more academic work (Nava, 2007). Notwithstanding, Kushner is right to draw attention to the absences in the more recent accounts of the past.

It is one of the paradoxes of contemporary anti-racism – particularly the anti-racism of white academics in Britain and the US – that its power and moral authority have developed out of the perception that racism and nostalgia for Britain's imperial past were not only pervasive and perhaps hegemonic, but practically total; that an oppositional political culture did not really exist. In the pursuit of injustice, hypocrisy and denial, struggles against discrimination as well as the more mundane experiences of daily 'conviviality' – of rubbing along with your neighbours – are marginalised.⁴

Bill Schwarz's work has provided a framework that has often contributed to the development of historical accounts focusing on the persistence and pervasiveness of 'racial prejudice'. His article "The only white man in there": the re-racialisation of England 1956–68' offers a compelling argument about Britain and its colonial cultures in the 1940s and 50s:

With immigration [in the 1950s], the colonial frontier [of white rule in Africa] came 'home'. When this happened, the language of the colonies was reworked and came with it ... critically drawing from the historic experiences of the Afrikaners in South Africa and the whites in the southern states of the USA (Schwarz, 1996: 73).⁵

This thesis, developed further in his recent magisterial volume (2011) has been very influential and has sometimes been used to justify the general tenor of a number of more recent articles about Britain in the 1950s. The quote is specifically cited by Wendy Webster (2001, 2007) and Frank Mort (2010). It appears also to have had an impact on the arguments of Chris Waters (1997) and Marcus Collins (2001), as I will go on to show.⁶ Yet Schwarz, in the two pages in the essay which he devotes to the evocative idea of bringing the ideas of the colonial frontier 'home', is more tentative than some of those who draw on his framework. He says: 'My purpose here simply is to indicate some possible lines of investigation: I want to understand how the end of empire impacted on English life (Schwarz, 1996a: 65). The main focus of his essay is on Africa and a small extreme-right grouping in the UK. Unlike some of his followers, his claim about the growth of racialised thinking during this period does not homogenise the nation. Importantly he refers to 'a battle between two irreconcilable Englands' (Schwarz, 1996a: 71) – although without providing us with detail. The empirical research, he says, has still to be done.

Recent historians of the 1950s

Chris Waters, in his 1997 article "Dark strangers" in our midst: discourses of race and nation in Britain, 1947–1963' (one of the most downloaded article from the *Journal of British Studies*⁷) makes a similar general argument to Schwarz about the politics of the period, though locates the principal source of the 'racialisation' not in the reworking of the language of the colonies but, rather surprisingly, in the discourse of race relations sociologists and anthropologists in the UK. This, he argues, despite the liberal intentions of its authors, focuses on the *difference* and *strangeness* of new migrants from the Caribbean

and in this way works to reinforce ‘the racialization of national identity and the consolidation of the equation of whiteness and Britishness’ during this period (Waters, 1997: 217). His main point is that ‘the representation of black migrants to Britain as un-British helped to reconfigure and secure the imagined community of the nation during a period of rapid change and great uncertainty’ (Waters, 1997: 208). His reading of the period and the literature, which is viewed in part through the lens advanced by Alison Light about 1930s ‘conservative modernity’ (Light, 1991)⁸ and combined idiosyncratically with the influence of Marxist critics of ‘race relations’ sociology such as Bourne and Sivanandan (1980) and Miles (1993), has a tendency to homogenise the cultural climate of the postwar years and to exaggerate British insularity and racism.⁹ He thus underestimates the fissures in political attitudes to newcomers and overestimates the significance of the ‘dark stranger problem’ (as he puts it quoting some of the contemporary accounts) both in British society and the race relations literature.

The race scholars of the 1950s and early 1960s whose work he focuses on in order to make his argument are Kenneth Little (1972 [1948]), Anthony Richmond (1954, 1955), Michael Banton (1955, 1959), and Sheila Patterson (1963). Although Joyce Egginton (1957), Ruth Glass (1960) and Judith Henderson (1960) are included in the bibliography, their work is not discussed.¹⁰ The contributions of non-white sociologists and anthropologists such as St Clair Drake (1955) and Sydney Collins (1951, 1957) are altogether overlooked.¹¹

Waters acknowledges that, on the whole, the race relations social scientists distanced themselves from the most conservative expressions of national identity, yet, in order to make his argument, he nevertheless attributes to them statements about the antagonistic national mood and the foreignness of the migrants – what he calls the ‘host/stranger opposition’ – as though they were in agreement with them, as though they too were antagonistic. Yet the contrary was almost always the case. Thus, for example, Waters says: ‘These writers were compelled to search for the defining characteristics that marked the *difference* of the [strangers]: “Primitiveness, savagery, violence, sexuality, general lack of control, sloth, irresponsibility – all these are part of the image,” wrote Patterson’ (Waters, 1997: 227). Sheila Patterson does indeed say this (1963: 234)¹² but Waters has decontextualised her statement and therefore seriously misrepresents her meaning. The quote appears in a discussion of what Patterson describes as the ‘usual British insularity and antipathy to outsiders (which) seem to be intensified by the newcomers’ visible alienness’ (1963: 230). She goes on to refer to ‘the formidable ignorance’ of most Britons ‘about the Commonwealth and its peoples’, and, more specifically, ‘the pathologically prejudiced handful’ of those with a ‘“wog complex”’ to be found mainly among some former white colonials (1963: 233–4). It is in this context that the clichés of primitiveness are invoked. Patterson is referring to the views of the people she disagrees with. Waters writes as though they were *her* views.

These are errors of detail, but Waters’ more general representation of the nature and preoccupations of British society in the 1950s is also misjudged in my view. Central to his argument is the very controversial claim that in the postwar period, ‘the “Condition of England question” ... revolved more around issues of race than class’ (Waters, 1997:227). This surprising privileging of race, which would appear to be refracted through a US lens, goes against the grain of the thinking of British scholars of the period. Race in Britain in the 1950s was (as it remains) relatively insignificant compared with issues of inequalities of income, cultural capital and ‘accent’. Hoggart, whose 1957 analysis of the embeddedness in Britain of ‘them and us’ ideology is cited by Waters (1997: 221), was certainly talking about class not race. Kenneth Little, the pioneer of British race relations research, argued that ‘The degree of respect and esteem given to an individual’ [in the UK context] ‘has its basis in “class” as much as “race”’, (Little, 1972: x). Ruth Glass also makes the point that class was as significant as skin colour in positioning people socially (1960: 108) and sometimes more so, as does Henriques (himself non-white of Jamaica origin, as I have already pointed out) (1974: 145–6).

In fact class as a social and economic category over-rode all other defining characteristics and social issues in British sociology, as well as British society, until at least the 1970s when questions of gender, nation, race and 'identity' were haltingly acknowledged. During the 1950s and 60s almost all 'serious' male sociologists worked within the frame of social mobility, class conflict and social stratification. Race and migration were not considered very interesting. See, for example, Halsey's *History of Sociology in Britain* (2004), which has barely any references to race sociology and none at all to the work of women in that field or any other during the 1950s. Stuart Hall confirms this in his interview with St Jhally (2012). The low status of the sociology and anthropology of race is probably why the proportion of women scholars in the field was relatively high. At a time when only 10% of students at the London School of Economics were women, they constituted about 75% of those working in the field of race relations.

But Waters misreads the relative weighting of race and class in the culture. He seems to have transposed the meaning of these issues from the US to the UK context. His article is insufficiently attuned to the ruptures and variations – the lack of fixity -- in English consciousness about migrants from abroad and the former colonies. He also overstates the cultural distancing in the sociological texts in order to make his argument about 'the imagined community of the nation' and underestimates the changes that took place in the course of that decade.

I have singled him out as one of the most influential of the recent historians making this type of argument but there are others who, in the last ten years or so, have adopted a broadly similar and sometimes far more sensationalist view about the darkness of this period.

Marcus Collins (2001) is the most extreme in this respect. His 'Pride and prejudice: West Indian men in mid-twentieth century Britain', which, like Waters' article, was also published in the *Journal of British Studies*, starts out by saying in an astonishingly cavalier fashion, without supporting evidence or qualification, that: 'In the late 1950s and 1960s ... whites customarily regarded [West Indian men] as vicious, indolent, violent, licentious and antifamilial.' (Collins, 2001: 391). All whites? All West Indian men? This crude generalisation and projection is not only, in psychoanalytical terms, 'non-rational',¹³ it also displays a remarkable ignorance about the numerous social science, cinematic and fictional accounts of the period authored by members of the indigenous UK population which represent Caribbean migrants in a sympathetic light – as well as the work of Caribbean men themselves.¹⁴ Moreover, like Waters, Collins seriously misrepresents Sheila Patterson's text in order to support his argument. He says: 'Patterson identified "slowness, laziness ... irresponsibility and a disinclination to regard ... a job as more than a source of wages" as widespread among the whole West Indian population' (Collins, 2001: 399). In fact Patterson says this:

During my interviews with ... employment agencies ... I found that certain ... attitudes to work were ... mentioned as being characteristically West Indian *although it was recognized that they ... were by no means absent in the local labour force as a whole*. They included slowness; laziness; ... irresponsibility; and a disinclination to regard ... a job as more than a source of wages. *Such attitudes to work, as we have said, are by no means confined to West Indians.* (Patterson, 1963: 81, my italics)

Collins similarly misquotes and decontextualises comments made by Joyce Egginton in her book *They Seek a Living* (1957) (and also misspells her name). For instance, he distorts Egginton's meaning by truncating a passage written by her and bracketing her observations with racist and sexist statements allegedly made by members of the BNP ten years later about white women in mixed relationships as 'misfits' and 'perverts' (Collins, 2001: 407). In fact, Egginton's purpose in the indicated passage is to contest derogatory views about the nature of relationships between white women and black men, and to stress on the contrary that: 'many white wives of coloured men are of

fine character, immensely courageous. Many mixed marriages are successful.' (Egginton, 1957: 114). In the same paragraph Collins cites Foot (1965) and appears to attribute to him a similar argument and similar quotes about attitudes to 'interracial sex'. But the discussion on the cited pages in Foot is mainly about community opposition to the BNP (Foot, 1965: 43, 45).

Collins' general purpose here as elsewhere seems to be to exaggerate and dramatise the racist tone of white social science research of the 1950s and 60s as well as social prejudice against interracial relations. But his misrepresentation of texts is not confined to those written at the time. He also traduces the work of Chris Waters (1997) and Sonya Rose (1998):

Chris Waters and Sonya Rose describe how white women who engaged in interracial sex in mid-twentieth-century Britain were ritually expelled from mainstream society in order to maintain a cohesive model of national identity.... [so] only women indifferent to or without a reputation to maintain would dare date a man of a different race.... (Collins, 2001:407).

It is not clear what this alleged 'ritual expulsion' might consist of since neither Waters nor Rose makes statements of this kind on the cited pages, or anywhere else in their articles, so there is no supporting evidence.

In fact of course, contrary to Collins' claim, there were quite a few women with what he calls 'a reputation to maintain' who married or had relationships with men 'of a different race' during the 1950s, as Egginton among others pointed out. The most well-known was probably Margaret (Peggy) Cripps, Oxford-educated, political activist, member of Racial Unity and daughter of former diplomat Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Stafford Cripps, whose 1953 wedding to Joseph Appiah, lawyer and Ashanti chief, was attended by Labour Party leader Hugh Gaitskell, MPs Aneurin Bevan and Michael Foot, and Trinidadian Pan-Africanist George Padmore, among others. Kwame Nkrumah, a good friend of the groom and later president of Ghana, was 'unavoidably detained'.¹⁵ Political, well-educated women like Peggy Appiah appear as key characters – as comrades and lovers – in the powerful fictional account of exiled African students in London, *A Wreath for Udomo* (1956), by 'coloured' South African, Peter Abrahams.

The tendency to depict women who went with black men as 'without a reputation' was advanced predominantly by the sociologist Michael Banton who described such women over many pages as 'social outcasts', 'mentally and educationally subnormal', 'liars and thieves', 'rotten to the core' (Banton, 1955: 153, 158, 160). Marcus Collins seems to assume that Banton's views were also those of other writers in the field and, moreover, that they accurately depicted the climate of the time, when this was not the case. Some of the contrary evidence is reviewed below. See also Nava (2007) for an extended discussion of the range of social science, cinematic and literary examples of the period which contest the views of Banton and Collins.

Yet the appetite for sensationalising the period, for focusing predominantly on the racist and transgressive elements of the decade, persists. Frank Mort's recent book *Capital Affairs: London and the Making of the Permissive Society* (2010) is another text which contributes to the homogenisation of attitudes to racial others in 1950s and 60s. His broad argument is that the growth of the 'permissive society' in the 1960s and 70s has its roots in Victorian attitudes and the sleazy climate of the 1950s, rather than, as others would argue (e.g. Hobsbawm, 1994), also in the growth of a progressive left critique and the 'sexual revolution'. 'Race themes' are ubiquitous in the 1950s' sexual discourse Mort argues, and goes on to say that this is, in part, the result of the geographical proximity of Notting Hill, an area of Caribbean settlement, to the site of John Christie's notorious mass murders.

Although a provocative and sometimes brilliant book, Mort has not always been very careful in his selection of sources or timeline. For instance his notion of Notting Hill as 'a major racialised conflict zone' in the late 1950s and early 60s is founded in part on a misreading of the work of Kenneth Little, whose 1947 book was based largely on

research done in Cardiff and London in the 1930s and who, contrary to Mort's claim, did *not* conclude that 'north Kensington ... had the highest percentage of "aversion" among whites to accepting coloured people' (Mort, 2010: 132; Little, 1972: 302).

But it suits Mort's argument to depict Notting Hill in this way. He uses it as underpinning for his more general assertion about what he describes as 'the miscegenist fantasies of urban everyday life... the idea of white women as victims of the sexual urges of Caribbean men' (Mort, 2010: 18). To support this claim he draws on Bill Schwarz's 1996 essay 'The only white man in there':

As Schwarz has noted, two interrelated sentiments cohered around the rituals of everyday life: the fantasised figure of the white man as victim, and, commensurably, a conception of white womanhood as prey to the rapacious and uncontrolled appetites of black men. (Mort, 2010: 133)¹⁶

But Schwarz is more cautious than Mort's account suggests. For a start he does not say 'everyday'. In fact Schwarz quite carefully qualifies his remarks: he says: 'two inter-related sentiments *slowly* cohered, *unevenly and partially*' (Schwarz, 1996: 73, my italics). He is more careful not to generalise.

Mort refers to a surprisingly narrow range of authors in support of his assertions about what he claims were the widespread anxieties generated by sexual relations between black men and white women. He cites four sources (Mort, 2010: 133, 392). The first is Rev Clifford Hill, a white clergyman and prolific author (not a sociologist) whose contradictory rambling books include pages of insulting quotes taken from letters sent him by Keep Britain White supporters about mixed-race relationships, which despite being intended by Hill as examples of unacceptable abuse, were more likely to have fuelled racial antagonisms (Hill, 1958, 1965). Yet Hill cannot be entirely dismissed. He was a complicated figure who publicly confronted prejudice by declaring on the radio in 1961 that he would be 'happy' for his daughter 'to marry a coloured man ... provided that they were in other ways compatible' (Hill, 1965: 218) and who was optimistic (albeit patronising) about the growing 'harmony' between the indigenous population and West Indian migrants (Hill, 1958:). So it is not clear how Mort intends this work to be understood.

Mort's second source is Majbritt Morrison (1964), a young Swedish woman who wrote a sensational account of her life as a small-time 'hemp' dealer and prostitute in Notting Hill while married to a Jamaican artist whom she had met on a visit to improve her English. The two were caught up in the 1958 Notting Hill riots and she was attacked by a white mob with bottles and called 'nigger lover'. This terrifying pivotal experience contributed to her celebrity as well as to the ensuing days of violent disorder. As part of its promotion, Morrison's book was published with all the writing errors of the original manuscript, in which even her husband's name was sometimes misspelled, in order (it was stated on the frontispiece) 'to verify' its 'authenticity' (Morrison, 1964). This is not a very scientific source though it may have provided a flavour of what a section of the reading public liked in 1964.

Mort's third reference is to British journalist Edward Pilkington whose 1988 book *Beyond the Mother Country* about the Notting Hill riots was based on interviews conducted thirty years after they occurred. Although Pilkington gives due attention to the racism of the extreme right and the horrors of the attacks on the Caribbean population, his emphasis in the pages cited by Mort (Pilkington, 1988: 64–66) is in fact, on the *welcome* extended to West Indian men by white women. In particular, Pilkington quotes middle-class Trinidadian filmmaker Horace Ove remembering the 1950s: 'White women ... were curious and despite pressure from their parents and friends they helped us by reaching out to us. They had understanding for us' (Ove quoted in Pilkington, 1988: 64–65). On the following page, also cited by Mort as evidence for his argument, Pilkington says that 'among the mixture of social classes and trades' in the Notting Hill 'community' 'racial distinctions seemed to lose their significance' (Pilkington, 1988: 66). So here Mort misrepresents, not only the context but the text itself, in order to advance his thesis. The

cited pages in Pilkington's book are evidence of social interaction rather than anxiety about sexual relations between white women and black men. Mort's fourth reference in support of his argument about miscegenation anxiety is to Marcus Collins' unreliable and distasteful 2001 article, which I have already discussed.

There is no doubt that the riots in 1958, and the unsolved racist murder of Antiguan Kelso Cochrane in Notting Hill the following year, constituted particularly ugly episodes in postwar British history and are striking evidence of the hostility of a small section of white marginal young men, many of them Oswald Mosley supporters, as well as members of the police, towards black men in that part of London (Olden, 2011).¹⁷ But that was not the only story to be told about race relations in Notting Hill, or more generally. Olden also quotes news reports of white Notting Hill residents who protected black neighbours from the rioters. One outcome of the murder was the formation of the 'Inter-racial Friendship Co-ordinating Council'¹⁸ which included the Trinidadian-born Claudia Jones, (founding editor of the *West Indian Gazette* and one of the key organisers of the Notting Hill Carnival). The evening after the murder 500 people, black and white, attended a 'We Mourn Cochrane' meeting in St Pancras Town Hall. The funeral the following week was attended by over 1000 people of all backgrounds and was reported by the full spectrum of the press. The *News of the World* offered £2,500 for the capture of the killers (Olden, 2011) (approximately £50,000 at today's rates). The *Telegraph* was also more critical than today's readers might expect: 'There is no "colour problem" in this country... What there is is a *British* problem, and it is a very grave one indeed ... There was no "Jewish problem" in Germany. There was a German problem' (from *The Daily Telegraph*, no date, quoted in Jacobson, 1958: 8).

Ruth Glass gives a sense of the range of responses in the press and parliament following the riots:

As the debates ... continued, there was ... a polarisation of opinion. There were those who regarded the problem of racial tension as a British responsibility, and who said that new measures were needed to counteract it ... more housing ... improved education ... a better mutual exchange of information ... [and] legislation against racial discrimination and group defamation. But there were others who argued that it was a 'colour problem' ... aggravated by the growth of the coloured minority, and ... 'undesirable' coloured immigrants. They demanded that immigration ... should be controlled [and] that migrants convicted of criminal offences be deported. (Glass, 1960: 151).

But despite these differences there was a general view among MPs from across the spectrum that Britain should at all costs avoid the segregationist politics of the US and South Africa.¹⁹ Labour at that point considered that all restrictions on immigration were wrong and would be 'disastrous' to Britain's standing in the Commonwealth (Glass, 1960: 154).

A contrapuntal account

So what emerges is a much more complex account than recent historians of 1950s' race relations research such as Waters, Collins and Mort allow. In pursuit of their own arguments, their tendency has been to neglect or misrepresent the more fissured and multilayered picture provided by the social investigators themselves. Why this should have happened will be explored below. But it seems clear to me that a close reading of the 1950s' sociological work itself and a registering of the authors' biographical details combined with a contextual reading of the more general culture of the 1950s provide evidence of a much more diverse political landscape.

For a start, most of the 1950s anthropologists and sociologists were determined and outspoken critics of what was then conceptualised as 'racial discrimination' and 'prejudice'. At a time when social science was particularly constrained by the idea of scientific rigour and notions of value-free knowledge and objectivity, they did not hold back in asserting their political views. Kenneth Little, author of the pioneering text

Negroes in Britain (1948) and head of the Department of Social Anthropology at Edinburgh University, who had spent a sabbatical year at Fisk University in the US²⁰ and was married to a Jamaican, was one of the many researchers in the field to make his political commitment unequivocally clear:

As a human being and a private citizen I am personally humiliated and shamed by the indignities to which West Indians are sometimes subjected, but my belief as a social anthropologist is that race relations research has a contribution to make to the general understanding of society. (Little, 1972 [1948]: viii-ix).

Some of the sociologists were themselves non-white. This is often overlooked. Sydney Collins, author of *Coloured Minorities in Britain* (1957) and a colleague of Little's, who argued that 'the racially mixed family is an essential feature of race relations in Britain' (1957: 23) and whose book concludes with the phrase 'there are good reasons for optimism' (1957: 249) was also Jamaican, as I have already pointed out. Eyo Bassey N'dem, author of an often cited but unpublished MA entitled 'Negro Immigrants in Manchester' (1953) was from West Africa; and John St Clair Drake (1955) was a black scholar from Chicago. Drake, who did his PhD in Cardiff (and whose white wife, Elizabeth Johns Drake, was also a sociologist) wrote in 1955 that: 'The activity of British social scientists who are speaking and writing about race relations seems to function primarily to lend scientific support to anti-colour-bar evaluations' (Drake, 1955: 213). This was a way of saying that social investigators do not come to a subject without preconceptions, and that the political 'bias' of British race-relations research was anti-racist.

This political standpoint was not concealed. Anthony Richmond, another well-respected researcher in the field, declared in the author's note for his book *Colour Prejudice in Britain* (1954) that he had been inspired by the Quaker 'concern for social justice and human right, irrespective of colour, class or creed'. Ruth Glass, a Jewish refugee from Berlin and described by her biographer as 'a Marxist and atheist all her life' (Pimlott Baker, 2004; Clapson, 2006) spelled out her unequivocal political commitment in the introduction of her *Newcomers* (see also Glass, 1989):

I am not dispassionate on this subject. I share the very definite opinion ... [that] discrimination because of race, colour or religion is an intolerable insult to the dignity of an individual ... and to the society in which it is practiced. This is my premise (Glass, 1960: xi).

Sheila Patterson (who, as we have seen, was targeted by Chris Waters and Marcus Collins)²¹ talks about the 'negrophile and anti-white bias' of most of the sociological work on race – and implicitly includes herself in this category (1963: 35). Her anthropological work prior to *Dark Strangers* included a study of the Polish exile community in London and she was married to a Polish refugee, so was sensitive to the experience of being 'foreign'. She has also done extensive fieldwork on 'colour' and culture in South Africa, which is why she always emphasised the specificity of UK situation and contrasted it with what she called the 'institutionalised pigmentocracies' of South Africa and the southern states of the USA. Britain was in her view characterised more by xenophobia, by a general antipathy to outsiders, which varied often, but not always, according to skin colour.

Ruth Landes (1952, 1959), Violaine Junod (1952), Sheila Webster (later Kitzinger) (1955), Joyce Egginton (1957), Judith Henderson (1960), Marie Jahoda (1960), and Joan Maizels (1960) who all contributed to race relations research in Britain and are discussed in more detail in Nava (2007)²² all had radical political histories, either as participants in pre-war anti-fascist organisations in Europe or as members of the Communist Party or the left-wing of the Labour Party or CND or as civil-rights activists in the US or South Africa. Some were contributors to the wartime Mass Observation project. Others were Jewish or married to Jewish refugees, which was relevant during the period immediately following the war. So the 1950s sociologists and anthropologists of race relations, of

whom a surprisingly high proportion were women, were for the most part committed anti-racists. This does not mean of course that their work should escape criticism. Some of it is dated and 'liberal' by the political and conceptual standards of today.

Nevertheless, in terms of both their work and lives, these activist researchers were part of a substantial oppositional culture that did not subscribe to an uncontested version of Waters's 'imagined community of the nation' or to a simple notion of host/stranger adaptation in which, immigrants were expected to 'adapt' to the 'host society' (Waters, 1997: 232). In fact, how this relationship was to be worked out had been a subject of discussion for some time, and not only by academics.

For instance in 1949, the mass-circulation illustrated news magazine, *Picture Post*²³ published a piece entitled 'Is there a British Colour Bar?' about the new 'colonial' population, which concluded with some passion:

The problem] can only be solved by a true integration of white and coloured people in one society. And for that to take place there must be some sort of revolution inside every individual mind – coloured and white – where prejudices based on bitterness, ignorance and patronage have been established (Kee, 1949: 28).

This cannot be read -- as for instance Waters would have it -- as advocating a one-sided process in which the newcomers are expected to 'adapt' to the host society. This is about everyone changing. Glass returns to this point a decade later. She writes:

Equally important is the contribution which the presence of coloured people in this country can make to our own [sic] society and ideology. They can introduce a new element of variety and vivacity. They can help us remove some of our blinkers to the realities of the outside world and to develop a contemporary sense of citizenship.

So far the advantages of migration – especially to ourselves [sic] – have hardly been mentioned. On the contrary, in all discussions on the topic the emphasis is always on the 'accommodation', 'adaptation' and 'assimilation' of the newcomers to the 'host society'. It is always they who are asked to conform ... [but] adaptation is a two-way process ... it seems to have occurred to very few people that the 'host society', in turn, could acquire some new interests and aptitudes from the migrants (Glass, 1960: 231).

Glass's unqualified inclusion of her self in the 'host society' in these excerpts – her use of 'our' and 'us' – is surprising given that she, too, had been an immigrant (or perhaps an *émigrée*) only fifteen years earlier. The contradiction is especially apparent if we consider the following carefully argued section in the introduction to the book:

Many of the words which have to be used because no others are available are highly ambiguous, emotionally loaded or simply wrong. They tend to have a dichotomous, 'we' and 'they' connotation. The word 'colour' is an obvious example. The word 'British' has to be used when we mean 'local' people, though of course the West Indians are British too. 'Migrant' is a defective substitute for the even less suitable word 'immigrant'. The terms 'race', 'racial' or 'race relations' are worst of all: 'race' is not a scientifically valid category; 'race relations' are not discrete phenomena.... I have avoided such words as much as possible (Glass, 1960: xiii).

These inconsistencies are understandable in that Glass started her book before the riots and finished it in their wake, hence adding to her conviction about the complexity of the situation and to her 'inconclusive conclusion'. In her Preface she says: 'I started from the assumption that optimism was justified ... The picture looks far gloomier when we watch it closely. Even then it is much brighter than in some other parts of the world' (Glass, 1960: xi).

Glass's book is really exceptionally good, especially in its attention to the contrasting moods of the moment, its detailed descriptions of the responses of the media and politicians to the 1958 riots, its analysis of migrant settlement and in its careful definition of terms. It is also evocatively and incisively written. Moreover, according to Clapson (2006) it was the most widely read and reviewed study of its kind at the time. Yet none of the recent historians I have referred to give it any attention.²⁴ I suspect that to have focused on her work rather than Patterson's would have diminished the force of their argument.

Glass's research assistant for the book was Harold Pollins, who also wrote an article entitled 'Coloured People in Post-War English Literature' published in *Race Class* in 1959. In this interesting piece Pollins argues, again against the grain of the more recent accounts referred to above, for the *complexity* of race relations in the decade. He emphasises the shift in attitudes over the course of the 1950s and the distinctive social contexts and origins of Caribbeans and Africans. These variations are looked at through the prism of a dozen novels and a few films and plays produced by both black and white authors:

Race relations in Britain are not a simple matter of in-groups and out-groups. They are a subtle complex of attitudes and actions in which facile generalization is dangerous and rightly suspect. Future academic studies and works of social reportage will presumably throw light on these and other matters. The information to be won from fictional works will assist the process by descriptions at once more lively and more specific than those found in the straight-jacket of theoretical systems (Pollins, 1959: 4–5).

As evidence of the changes Pollins mentions the 1957 *Observer* play competition in which many of the entries (in the words of the judge and well-known critic, Ken Tynan) 'tackled the colour problem as it affects African and West Indian immigrants' (Pollins, 1959: 3) and in which the first prize was awarded to the work of Trinidadian Errol John, *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*. (The play was revived to great acclaim at the National Theatre in 2012.) All the fictional texts cited by Pollins reflect on the fluidity and unpredictability of the experience of non-white men in Britain, while a good number also describe their encounters and love affairs with white women. Pollins concludes:

the approach of the writers is invariably liberal. Coloured people in the novels are treated as human beings, not as 'coons' or inferiors. Prejudiced people get no support. Where authors have offended coloured people it is probably through inadvertence rather than malice (Pollins, 1959: 12).

The 'ardent sympathy' Glass refers to is also evident in the broader political climate of the decade. When describing Britain in the 1950s, historians (not just those I have been looking at above) have tended to stress a retrenchment of the right, the privatisation and restrictions of the domestic sphere, the declining class-consciousness of workers, widespread racism and a conservative nostalgia for loss of empire. This picture is often assumed to shift only after 1964, in the years following the return of Labour and (more frivolously) the advent of the Beatles. But in fact a far more radical reading of the 1950s political and cultural mood can easily be made. A brief list of critical political events and organisations, some of which have already been mentioned, might include the following:

- 1952: Racial Unity is founded. The inaugural meeting was held in Central Hall Westminster and attended by over 2,000 people (Rich, 1990).
- 1954: The Movement for Colonial Freedom is founded – later called Liberation. The main activists were on the left of the Labour Party and included Fenner Brockway, Barbara Castle and Tony Benn. It had a sizeable membership and millions of affiliates through the TUC.
- 1955: CP publishes *No Colour Bar for Britain* (Bolsover, 1955).

- 1956: Suez crisis: an estimated 30,000 people demonstrate in Trafalgar Square against British colonial policy, the biggest national demonstration since the 1930s.
- 1956: The Hungarian uprising is crushed by the Soviet Union: thousands leave the Communist Party and form alternative left groups.
- 1956: John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court Theatre.
- 1958: The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) has its first Aldermaston protest march and grows immeasurably over the following five years (Hinton 1989).
- 1958: Claudia Jones founds the *West Indian Gazette*.
- 1958: Partisan Coffee House, Soho, a socialist coffee house and the 'spiritual home of the New Left' was founded by Raphael Samuel and frequented by, among others, Stuart Hall, Eric Hobsbawm, John Berger and Doris Lessing (Berlin, 2012).
- 1958: Keep Britain Tolerant groups are formed to contest the Keep Britain White rioters in Notting Hill (Glass, 1960).
- 1959: First London Carnival is organised in St Pancras Town Hall and thereafter held annually in Notting Hill in the late summer.
- 1959: South Africa Boycott Movement is founded which, after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, becomes the Anti-Apartheid Movement. In March 1960 *Boycott News* sells an astonishing 250,000 copies. Twenty-two local councils vote to boycott South African produce during Boycott Month. Even Gaitskell, at that point leader of the Labour Party, supported Boycott Month (although not CND) (Gurney, 2000).
- 1960: *New Left Review* is founded. The first editorial was written by Stuart Hall. For his account of the origins see Hall (2010).

All these movements and events are evidence of a new grass-roots political and cultural activism which went on to sustain, albeit unevenly, the developing internationalist and anti-racist consciousness of the ensuing decades and, in turn, to lay the groundwork for the extraordinarily mixed and often cosmopolitan culture of today.

Anti-racism and historiography

So, to conclude: it must first of all be reiterated that this is not an attempt to diminish the injuries of racism and xenophobia in Britain in the 1950s and the complex ways in which exclusion and prejudice permeated many aspects of the cultural formation. It is, however, an attempt to destabilise the now too-pervasive myths about the 1950s. Although 'myth' in Barthes's sense serves to maintain the status quo, in this instance, the recent historical narratives about the period that I have looked at here have tended to flatten out the contradictions, in part, it seems, as a consequence of wanting to demonstrate that the race scholars of the past were more unreliable – more racist and antagonistic towards outsiders – than those of the present. I hope to have shown that this was largely not the case. Although the 1950s were conservative in many respects, the decade also saw the emergence and consolidation of radical oppositional cultures that had, as a central concern, issues of social equality in the broadest sense. So British society, as well as British 'race relations' research, was much less monolithic than historians such as Waters, Collins, Webster and Mort imply. The spectrum of responses to newcomers, then as now, ranged from hostility, rejection and denial at one end, to hospitality, solidarity, identification and desire at the other; elements which sometimes coexisted in contradictory and unconscious ways.²⁵

The sources of the emerging anti-racism varied. They were not always rooted in the process of decolonisation itself. During the period following the war the influence of dislocated intellectuals from both continental Europe and the commonwealth, white and black, contributed to the already-existing British left and the growing rift between, on the

one hand, traditionalists embedded in a history of empire and Englishness who were fearful about impending change, and on the other, cosmopolitan modernisers, who had been radicalised by fascism, anti-semitism, the war, decolonisation, and race politics in the US and South Africa, and who welcomed a more inclusive future.²⁶ Britain's ideological communities were increasingly diverse. Although variations in the response to foreigners and epidermal difference were already evident in the 1930s, they were boosted by the mid-century upheavals. 'Strangeness' was becoming universal, as Kristeva put it, and moreover, as the race relations literature presented here suggests, women in particular seem to have been 'world oriented' (Kristeva, 1993). They were, on the whole, more ready than men to identify with and be attracted to 'alterity' (Nava, 2007).

This leaves us with a historiographical question. The reasons that scholars take up the positions they/we do in the humanities and social sciences are complicated and largely beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless it is pertinent to remind ourselves that what we choose to research and the arguments we make are rooted partially in our personal biographies: in our histories, memories and current politics. It is therefore appropriate to ask, even if we get no answers, what might have prompted the white historians I have singled out here to construct a narrative which often exaggerates – or even invents – the racism of the social researchers of the 1950s? It is only possible to speculate in the broadest terms. The answers must be excavated by the authors themselves. But could their arguments be, in part, a projection and rejection of a remembered parental culture?

The same question could be asked of me. Why am I here attempting a contrapuntal account? Why am I defending these 1950s women intellectuals? Why do I feel compelled to rescue Patterson and the others from 'the condescension of posterity' (to echo EP Thompson (1968)? Well, it is in part because I identify with them. My parents were of the same provenance and generation as Ruth Glass and Marie Jahoda. Indeed Jahoda introduced them to each other in a Vienna coffee house in 1933. My father and mother (one Jewish, the other not) were also socialists and later refugees in the UK from fascist Europe who in the 1950s supported 'racial unity' and 'tolerance', albeit in a fashion that might seem dated today. And in 1960 I was one of the young white women who partnered a man 'of colour'. So these are the factors that have mobilised my interest in these issues. They are relevant.

But although personal factors tip the picture and prompt a different set of questions and a different reading, corroborating evidence is also needed. In this case it is the present. Despite anxieties about new immigrants, London today is, as Kwame Kwei Armeh put it, a city 'at ease with itself', 'proud of its diversity' (2010). Moreover, London is not simply diverse; it is also the most mixed city in the western world. An astonishing 10% of all children born in Britain (not just London) across the class spectrum come from a 'mixed' family (Platt, 2009). Only 6% in a recent national poll thought that 'being white' was important for being British.²⁷ If the racism, xenophobia and myopia of the 1950s had been the only story, if the race sociologists and anthropologists had indeed represented it thus, how could we explain the astonishing transformations of the last half-century? Yet despite the cautious optimism at the time, even the most 'ardently sympathetic' and utopian social scientists of the 1950s could not have imagined the extraordinary degree to which anti-racism would become hegemonic, that is to say, widely enshrined in law, discourse and public consciousness. This has in part been a consequence of political mobilisation and participation (Modood, 2005) and does not mean that racialisation no longer exists. But difference based on 'race' and ethnic origins has become utterly commonplace. This huge shift from 'alterity' (a term which expresses the provoking quality of the unknown other) to *mere* difference could not have been anticipated.

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Notes

¹ Psychological theories about the origins of 'racial prejudice' were a feature of much of the work of the 1940s and 50s and were linked to the concern to understand the extreme events of World War Two (e.g. Richmond, 1954; Carey, 1956; and Jahoda, 1960).

² Following the 1958 race riots in Notting Hill, Labour issued a policy statement 'utterly abhorring every manifestation of racial prejudice' (Glass, 1960: 148).

³ The term seems to have made a comeback recently, see *Observer* 13 January 2013.

⁴ Conviviality is the term used by Gilroy (2004).

⁵ Paul Rich makes a similar point about the movement of ideas about 'race' from the periphery of empire to the metropolis during the postwar period (Rich, 1990: 91).

⁶ The articles of Waters (1997) Webster (2001) and Collins (2001) were all published in the *Journal of British Studies*, journal of the 'North American Conference on British Studies', whose executive committee, editors and associate editors are all based in North America.

⁷ Personal communication with Chris Waters 2012.

⁸ For reservations about Light's thesis, see Nava (2007) chapters 4 and 5.

⁹ Bourne and Sivanandan's 1980 article is a polemical and often inaccurate critique of the 1950s race relations literature.

¹⁰ According to Clapson (2006) Glass's book had the greatest impact at the time and was widely reviewed in the national media.

¹¹ Collins was often assumed to be white. See e.g. Bourne and Sivanandan (1980). I discovered he was black and Jamaican when I bought a second-hand copy with an intact cover that included a photo and bio note.

¹² Patterson's study *Dark Strangers: A Sociological Study of the Absorption of a Recent West Indian Migrant Group in Brixton, South London* (1963) was republished in an abridged version as *Dark Strangers: a study of West Indians in London* in 1965.

¹³ There have been many psychoanalytic explorations of racism, see e.g. Rustin (1991).

¹⁴ Published Caribbean authors of fiction and social science in UK during the mid-twentieth century include Samuel Selvon, Andrew Salkey, VS Naipaul, ER Braithwaite, George Lamming, Errol John, Sydney Collins, Fernando Henriques (elected President of the Oxford Student Union in 1940s), Stuart Hall (Rhodes Scholar at Oxford in 1950s, editor of *New Left Review* in 1960s and one of the founders of British Cultural Studies). See Nava (2007) for a discussion of the range of

representations, which include not only social science texts and fiction but also films, such as *Pool of London* (1951), *Taste of Honey* (1961), *Flame in the Streets* (1961), and *L-Shaped Room* (1962).

¹⁵ Peggy Appiah is the mother of postcolonial theorist and Yale professor, Kwame Anthony Appiah.

¹⁶ Wendy Webster (2001, 2007) is another historian who similarly uses this passage from Schwarz as the armature on which to build her argument about representations of Englishness and Empire.

¹⁷ Olden (2011) points to the police failure to acknowledge the murder as a racist crime and thus to the similarities in the policing of the Stephen Lawrence murder 34 years later.

¹⁸ Their memo to the Home Secretary, Rab Butler, stated that ‘the good name of Britain as a democratic nation, in which all can live in mutual respect, equality and dignity, is in danger of being smirched by the actions of a small minority of thugs holding a fascist ideology’ (Olden, 2011: 7)

¹⁹ These discussions were happening concurrently with the notorious exclusion of black children from segregated schools in Little Rock, Arkansas.

²⁰ This is where he met US anthropologist Ruth Landes who was later to join the race relations research unit at Edinburgh University. Fisk, in Tennessee, is one of the oldest and most esteemed US universities founded specifically for African Americans.

²¹ This was perhaps partly a result of her sometimes clumsy writing style and the lack of clarity about whose speech she was reporting. She was also over-reliant on the views of Brixton’s ‘moral welfare officers’.

²² The work of Landes, Junod, Webster (later Kitzinger) and Maizels, although cited in the literature of the period, remained unpublished. See References.

²³ *Picture Post* was founded in the late 1930s by left-wing Jewish émigré Stefan Lorant and edited subsequently by Tom Hopkinson, also on the left, though owned by conservative Edward Hulton.

²⁴ Mort and Waters cite her but don’t use her. Mort refers to her theory of zones.

²⁵ See Nava (2007) chapter 4 for psychoanalytic accounts of anti-racism.

²⁶ White women Commonwealth authors who critiqued colonialism included Phyllis Shand Allfrey (1991[1953]), Dymphna Cusack (1955) and Doris Lessing (e.g. 1957).

²⁷ *British Future: The State of the Nation 2013*.