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ARTICLES

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Talking of Taste: A Discourse Analytic Exploration of Young Women's Gendered and Racialized Subjectivities in British Urban, Multicultural Contexts

This article presents an analysis of interviews conducted with young Asian and white women living in urban, 'multicultural' areas in the UK. Specifically, the article explores how these young women constitute their own and others' differently gendered, sexualized and racialized identities and subjectivities through their talk about styles of appearance and tastes in, for example, clothing, clothing labels, hairstyles and cosmetics. In so doing, the article aims to elucidate, first, some of the complex intertwinings of gender and ethnicity in these young women's accounts and, second, the equally complex and shifting politics of gender and ethnicity, which are simultaneously constituted, subverted and reconstituted in these young women's talk about styles of appearance.

Key Words: *appearance, discourse, ethnicity, multiculturalism, taste, young women*

INTRODUCTION

There is already a considerable body of feminist and non-feminist work exploring young women's identities from a variety of perspectives, both within and outside psychology. Researchers have, for example, elucidated the particular challenges, dilemmas and inequalities faced by young women compared with young men as they engage with, conform to, resist and subvert the normative 'femininities' endorsed and promulgated in contemporary cultures. Feminist researchers have explored a wide range of issues including employment (Griffin, 1986; Marshall and Wetherell, 1989; Wager, 1998), menarche (Lovering, 1994) and menstruation (Ussher, 1989; Oxley, 1998), reproduction (Phoenix et al., 1991; Marshall and Woollett, 2000a; Morell, 2000), sexual orientation and rela-

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tionships (Dryden, 1999; Mooney-Summers and Ussher, 2000; Segal, 2000; Stephenson et al., 2000), body image (Wetherell, 1996; Malson, 1998) and dress (Craik, 1994; Gleeson and Frith, 2000) which are specific to young women or which impact on young women in gender-specific and/or age-specific ways. Other feminist researchers such as McRobbie (1978, 1989), Pini (2000) and Bakari-Yusuf (1997) have explored the specificities of the subcultural contexts in which young women's identities are constituted while still others have elucidated some of the complex articulations of gendered identities with other categories of subjectivity such as ethnicity (Fine, 1994; Brah, 1996), class (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989; Skeggs, 1997), dis/ability (Morris, 1992), age (Gannon, 2000) and sexual orientation (Kitzinger, 1987; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1993).

Indeed, in critical feminist psychologies and elsewhere, essentialist, unitary and homogenizing notions of 'woman' have been thoroughly critiqued for their failure to recognize that:

the category 'women' includes within it a variety of other social positions including black/white, lesbian/heterosexual and disabled/able-bodied. . . . Any individual woman may be the subject of multiple, perhaps contradictory, positions in wider society. Consequently identity . . . is probably best described as plural, fragmented and with a propensity to shift contextually and over time (Henwood, 1994: 42).

Thus, in line with a wider deconstruction of modernist notions of identity (for example, Foucault, 1977; Hall 1996a), 'women' have been retheorized as a shifting multiplicity of discursively constituted and regulated subjectivities (Wetherell, 1986; Poovey, 1988; Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989). That is, the modernist notion of an essential unitary (gender) 'identity' originating within 'the individual' has been replaced by a retheorization of 'identities' as shifting and uncertain collectivities (Riley, 1988) of sometimes contradictory positions in discourse.

Gendered identity then is conceptualized as fictionalized, pluralized, fragmented, context-specific and always-already articulated in relation to various other equally uncertain and shifting categories of subjectivity and in/equality (Bhavnani and Phoenix, 1994; Fine, 1994; Brah, 1996; Marshall and Woollett, 2000b). This article seeks to engage with some of those shifting complexities by exploring how young women construct and negotiate their own and others' subjectivities in the contexts of 'multicultural' urban areas in the UK in which they live. In particular, our aim is to explore how the intersecting of subject positions and power-relations of gender and ethnicity are articulated in these young women's talk about styles and tastes in appearance.

GENDERED/RACIALIZED SUBJECTIVITIES AND THE POLITICS OF APPEARANCE

Feminist psychologists and others have given considerable attention to the subject of physical appearance; to the ways in which femininities are produced, regulated and oppressed through cultural prescriptions about 'feminine beauty' and various aspects of women's appearances. These approaches to appearance, however, tend to focus on issues of bodily appearance; on cultural prescriptions about 'ideal' female body size, weight and shape and on the largely negative consequences of these prescriptions for girls' and women's health and well-being. Thus feminist researchers (for example, Chernin, 1981; Woolf, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Orbach, 1993; Malson, 1998) have identified the prevalence and cultural dominance of idealized thin female bodies and concomitant endorsements of 'dieting' and food restriction as alleged means of attaining this 'ideal'. Numerous feminist researchers and others in the field have explored and critiqued the potential consequences of these cultural messages about the female body in terms of the prevalence of body dissatisfaction, 'dieting' and 'eating disorders' among girls and women (for example, Polivy and Herman, 1987; Orbach, 1993; Shaw, 1995) and the oppressive sexist politics embedded within these messages (for example, Chernin, 1981; Bordo, 1993; Orbach, 1993; Wetherell, 1996; Malson, 1998).

Given the prevalence of food restriction and body dissatisfaction among girls and women (Hill and Robinson, 1991; Wardle et al., 1993) and the serious, even life-threatening, consequences of eating disorders (Touyz and Beaumont, 2001), this focus on eating practices and body weight/shape is both understandable and necessary. There has, however, been less attention paid to other aspects of appearance such as the 'skilled' use of cosmetics (see, however, Smith, 1990; Woolf, 1990) or the wearing of particular articles or styles of clothing (see, however, Evans and Thornton, 1991; Ussher, 1991; Craik, 1994; Gleeson and Frith, 2000; Guy et al., 2001). The main focus of attention here has also been on gender, very often to the exclusion of other politics and power-relations that are articulated in cultural prescriptions and 'ideals' about appearance (see Smith, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Malson and Swann, 1999).

Yet, as with any other aspect of gender, cultural 'ideals' of feminine appearance are also inscribed, implicitly or explicitly, by racial politics that very often privilege 'whiteness' and construct white 'feminine beauty' as a deracialized universal (Collins, 1990; Weekes, 1997). Thus, feminist researchers have also argued that racist as well as sexist politics are embedded within numerous 'beauty ideals'. They are, for example, inscribed in dominant cultural idealizations of blonde hair and blue eyes (Smith, 1990; Bordo, 1993). And, similarly, feminists have explored how clothing and styles of dress are significant in producing and regulating racialized as well as gendered and sexualized identities (Woollett et al., 1994; Sherwell, 1996; Nasser, 1999).

In her research with young people in a school in Durban in post-Apartheid

South Africa, Dolby (2000) similarly explored how racialized identities were constituted and regulated through 'a discourse of taste' (see Bourdieu, 1992). She explored how this 'discourse of taste' drew on global icons, labels and fashions in ways that gave them particular locally specific inflections. Thus, for example, post-Apartheid categories of ethnicity and post-Apartheid politics were translated into a discourse of tastes in fashions, brand names and music that were vigilantly policed along racialized boundaries. Thus, she found that, for example, African girls chose European 'designer label' jeans whereas those girls who identified as 'coloured' were more likely to wear American labels and white girls wore cheaper non-designer jeans. For both girls and boys in Dolby's study racialized subjectivities were constituted and regulated through the adoption of particular tastes such that, for example:

You know if you meet a coloured boy because he wears a certain type of pants, a certain type of shoes, he dresses in a certain way, he acts a certain way . . . He'll either wear Levis or Collies or Dickys, instead of wearing school pants. Shoes, you'd see a lot of the coloured boys wear All-stars, Converse, Nike, Reebok, Sebago, like that (Dolby, 2000: 13).

In this interview extract from Dolby's (2000) study, 'you know if you meet a coloured boy' because of his tastes in clothing and the particular labels that he 'chooses' to wear just as the girls' ethnicities are signified by the brand and cost of the jeans they wear. Thus, tastes were made to signify particular subjectivities in which gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status cross-cut each other and in which post-Apartheid racial politics were rearticulated. In this way, Dolby argued, 'taste' became 'a springboard for white resentment' of African students seen as 'trying to act better than whites' and failure or refusal to adhere to the tastes of one's own ethnically defined position was almost always deemed unacceptable (Dolby, 2000: 15). Appearance and tastes in clothing thus figured as a 'way for students to imagine and produce race', as a way of consolidating locally specific racialized subject positions and of policing the boundaries between those positions. But also, more rarely, it opened up ways of transgressing those boundaries and producing new subjectivities which, in their adoption of (some of) the tastes of differently racialized groups, might be seen as 'hybrid' identities (Dolby, 2000: 14).

STYLE AND MULTICULTURALISM

Other researchers have further examined the significances of tastes and styles of clothing for young people. For example, Widdicombe (1993) explored how the adoption of a particular subcultural ('gothic') youth style may be framed as 'an expression of true self' and a personal preference which marks a resistance to 'mainstream' culture and local norms. Gleeson and Frith (2000) examined how choice of clothing may be used by young women to assert 'feminine' subjectivi-

ties that resist as well as conform to patriarchally defined feminine sexualities. And Dwyer (1998) and Marshall and Woollett (2000b) considered how tastes for particular clothes, jewellery or music may signify plural, shifting, indeterminate and hybridized identifications with, for example, Asian, British and US/globalized cultures. That is, styles of appearance can be understood as constructing and framing the wearer's 'identity' in a variety of different ways and, because different styles can be combined in new ways, some styles may be understood as signifying new 'hybrid' identities in which different identities are combined, fused and reconfigured. For some (for example, Gilroy, 1993; Dolby, 2000) this creation of these new hybrid identities represents a potentially radical politics that refuses the confines of more traditional categories of identity and challenges commonsense notions of difference. Others (for example, hooks, 1991), however, are more cautious. As Marshall and Woollett (2000b: 120) argue:

Hybrid identities, taken as emanating from globalisation, can be conceptualised in different ways, including as mixtures or fusions, and are themselves matters of debate. Some writers have emphasised fusions of cultures as creative and enabling new identities. This is Salman Rushdie's position in his characterisation of *The Satanic Verses* as celebrating 'hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure' (Rushdie, 1991, 394). Conversely, others take up Rushdie's terms of hybridity as 'impurity' and 'mongrelization' to argue its dangers and to call for a return to traditional cultural coherence. Others advance more cautious criticisms that to celebrate hybridity is to underestimate the power relations at stake in cultural differences (hooks, 1991).

In this article, an exploration of talk about styles and tastes in clothing and appearance was chosen as the main focus for an analysis of interviews with young women living in contemporary 'multicultural' urban areas in the UK. The rationale for this decision included the well-documented significance of 'appearance' in constructions and regulations of gender and ethnicity and the potential for 'appearance' and style of dress both to consolidate *and* to transgress, subvert or hybridize existing subjectivities and the power-relations embedded therein (see Dolby, 2000). That is, styles of dress may rearticulate wider political *status quos* and consolidate culturally dominant gendered or racialized subject positions. And at the same time dress and appearance can also be seen as subverting dominant power-relations and challenging the seeming naturalness of gendered and racialized identities.

Young women's styles of appearance might then be seen as paralleling recent interpretations of youth cultures as 'no longer belong[ing] to any one place or location'; as 'increasingly inhabit[ing] shifting cultural and social spheres marked by a plurality of languages and cultures' (Giroux, 1994: 288; cited in Dolby, 2000); and as 'sites for contesting ideas of nationalism, racial exclusivism, subjectivity and identification' (Bakari-Yusuf, 1997: 91). As Gilroy (1993: 6; cited in Bakari-Yusuf, 1997: 91) has argued:

I think it is possible to show that youth cultures are essentially hybrid social and political forms . . . their transnational and international character points to new conceptions of subjectivity and identification that articulate the local and the global in novel and exciting patterns.

Thus, Gilroy (1993), Dolby (2000), Bakari-Yusuf (1997) and many others working in the field of cultural theory and youth studies, have theorized youth cultures as 'hybrid social and political forms' combining, fusing and thereby reconfiguring styles and values from diverse cultures and, like Rushdie (1991), they have argued that this hybridity is, at least potentially, positive.

In this sense, like youth cultures (Gilroy, 1993), young women's styles of appearance can be read as opening up possibilities for producing politically creative, fluid, indeterminate and hybridized subjectivities. And such subjectivities might transgress the boundaries between seemingly separate subject positions and thereby challenge the either/or logics and politics of modernist notions of (gendered and racialized) 'identity'. Recent research with, for example, British Asian young women (Brah, 1996; Archer, 1998; Dwyer, 1998; Marshall and Yazdani, 1999) might be read as illustrating this potential as it moves beyond notions of a 'culture clash' (see Marshall and Woollett [2000b] for a more detailed critique). This research explores instead the multiple, shifting and dynamic ways in which young women construct and negotiate their 'identities' as Asian, as British and as young women. Rather than espousing a model of, for example, psychological trauma created by the alleged impossibility of reconciling two separate, fixed and incompatible identities, this more recent research with young women has focused on an exploration of the multiplicity, fluidity and hybridity of subjectivities. This article seeks to build on that work through a discourse analytic exploration of how young Asian¹ and white women, living in urban, 'multicultural' areas in the UK, constitute their own and others' subjectivities in their talk about tastes and styles of appearance.

METHOD

The project from which this article arises was conducted within a feminist critical psychological framework using a discourse analytic methodology to analyse a series of interviews conducted with 15 young people. The term 'discourse analysis' covers a number of qualitative, language-oriented approaches which, broadly speaking, are concerned with analysing talk, text and other signifying practices (see Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Burman and Parker, 1993; Banister et al., 1994). Discourse analysts do not see discourse as a transparent medium that could unproblematically reflect some underlying reality. Rather, discourse is understood to be constitutive of reality (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Burman and Parker, 1993) such that discourses systematically constitute objects, events, identities and experiences in particular socio-historically specific ways (see Foucault,

1972: 49). And by thus constructing particular 'versions of reality' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) discourses also thereby produce particular 'regimes of truth' and power relations (Foucault, 1972). Thus, in line with other discourse analytic studies, it is the discourses themselves rather than some putative reality 'behind' the discourse that is our object of investigation.

The interviews that were analysed for this article form part of a larger ongoing project involving, to date, 15 young people, both men and women from diverse backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, age (between 15 and 19 years old) and sexuality, all living in the UK and predominantly in urban environments. Each participant took part in a series of three to eight interviews to discuss themselves, their lives, their relationships, their families and their views on and engagements with such fields as popular culture, fashion and politics (see Marshall and Woollett [2000b] for further discussion of the project as a whole). Participants were also asked to produce a video diary and/or a series of photographs about themselves and their lives. This process of multiple interviewing allowed for greater exploration of complexity, variation and contradiction in views, values and identifications than would have been permitted in a single interview. However, the project also therefore involves considerable investment of time and energy from participants and researchers. In part for pragmatic reasons therefore the project has been designed such that it involves a team of research assistants, each of whom has worked with a research participant over a number of months.

The researchers (young women and men in their 20s) who have worked on the study were close in age to the participants and from diverse backgrounds. Engaging this team of research assistants in the project also enabled us to include participants of diverse backgrounds since participants were recruited through research assistants' personal contacts. Although there are problems with notions of 'matching' participants and researchers, and matching interviewers with interviewees cannot be said to eliminate hierarchical power-relations (Bhavnani, 1990; Griffin and Phoenix, 1994; Marshall et al., 1998; Archer, 2001), this method of recruitment was useful in producing less 'naive' interviewing and in maintaining researcher-researched relationships over a period of several months. Because the research process involved repeated interviews it may have enabled participants to develop a greater familiarity with the research process, a more relaxed relationship with the research assistant and hence a greater input into the direction and focus of their interviews and video diaries. The use of repeated interviews also allowed the three project leaders (Harriette Marshall, Anne Woollett and Helen Malson) and the research assistants to engage in a more reflexive and iterative approach towards the research, allowing a knowledge of earlier interviews to shape the foci or emphases of subsequent interviews and production of video diaries. Research assistants also took part in regular meetings with project leaders during the project in order to discuss interview material and issues arising from the interviews. However, because the first author moved to Australia part-way through the project, the particular analysis reported in this article was conducted independently of project group meetings by email commu-

nication between the three authors. Research assistants' participation in the process of analysis for this article was therefore not feasible.

As noted above, like other discourse analytic studies, this article takes discourse to be the object of study and views discourses as constitutive, rather than reflective, of 'reality': of objects, experiences and subjectivities (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Burman and Parker, 1993). Thus, rather than viewing the interview transcripts as providing access to some underlying putative reality about, for example, these young women's appearances, 'attitudes' or 'identities', our concern is with the ways in which these young women's subjectivities are constituted within, framed by and regulated through discursive constructions of tastes and styles of appearance, and with the ways in which power-relations are simultaneously constituted and reconstituted, consolidated or subverted (see Foucault, 1977) within such constructions. In practice the process of analysis involved a close and repeated reading of the interview transcripts in order to identify the themes and issues that emerged in the interviews. Having chosen the particular themes and issues on which we would focus in this article, we then re-read the transcripts to identify the quotes that illustrate these themes. These selected extracts were then repeatedly re-read in order to explore the discursive resources articulated in each category of quotes.

The material produced during the project covered a wide range of issues and includes visual as well as textual materials. This article will, however, be concerned only with an analysis of interviews conducted with the four Asian and two white young women who took part in the project and with a further four interviews with young Asian British women, conducted by Naina Patel for an undergraduate project (Patel, 1999), following up some of the key ideas and issues arising from the project. In analysing these transcripts our aim is to elucidate the ways in which these young women, living in urban, 'multicultural' areas in the UK, constitute their own and others' subjectivities in their talk about tastes and styles.

ANALYSIS

Taste and the production of subjectivity

As noted above, 'taste' or 'style' in appearance is often discursively construed as a means of expressing one's 'true self' or as a means of framing 'identity' by marking one's identification with a particular group and one's difference from other groups (Widdicombe, 1993; Miles et al, 1998; Dolby, 2000; see also Bourdieu, 1992). Similarly, talk about tastes in appearance often functioned in the interview transcripts as a means of signifying particular subjectivities. In the following extract, for example, Alia constitutes herself as having a particular gendered and racialized subjectivity.

I: How would you describe yourself?

Alia: Original and I'm not like a TP [typical Paki/stani] or anything. /I: what's a TP?/ just you know a Sharon-y Indian girl with perms and attitude problems (laughs).

In talking about her style of appearance, Alia, a middle-class, Asian grammar school girl, articulates a particular construction of herself in which gender, ethnicity and class cross-cut each other (see Fine, 1994; Brah, 1996) in context-specific ways. By describing (some) other Indian girls as 'Sharon-y', Alia implies that their tastes are unsophisticated, mainstream and 'downmarket'. Thus, by framing her tastes as 'not being like a TP . . . [or] a Sharon-y Indian girl', Alia positions herself as 'Indian' and as 'original', *not* like 'Sharon-y Indian girl[s]' who are, we would argue, implicitly derided for their less sophisticated (less than middle-class) 'Sharon-y' tastes. Her positioning of herself is also context-specific insofar as it might not work outside a contemporary British context in which 'Sharons' and 'Traceys' connote a stereotyped working-class femininity (see also Skeggs, 1997). In this next extract, Mary too is discursively constituted in her talk about her tastes:

Mary: Well I'm more of a bargain girl myself. I've always managed to find loads of bargains. Ten pounds Adidas trousers from the market. Real, I might add . . . I'll tell you what I love. You know those dresses well they could even be tops that come low but they're all (.) it's like loose material there /I: Oh yeah/ They just sort of hang, and the skirts that come up to about your knee. That sort of stuff . . . I love the glamour, yeah, glamour. Bung on a bit of red lippy. And wear all that hair.

Mary, a white young woman who positions herself sometimes as working class, sometimes as middle class, gives an account that evokes a different style of appearance to Alia's. But the extract again illustrates how talk about taste or style can function to signify a particular subject position. And, like Alia's extract above, it also illustrates an inseparability and cross-cutting of gendered subject positions with other categories of 'identity'. By positioning herself as 'a bargain girl' who shops at the market, wears high-street high fashion, and 'love[s] the glamour', Mary constitutes herself as feminine in what might be read as a class-specific way. Although bargain hunting and shopping in markets are hardly exclusively working-class activities, the pursuit of cheap, value-for-money clothes, perhaps particularly when combined with a love of glamour (and hence a caring about one's appearance), certainly suggests limited financial resources (see also Skeggs, 1997). Mary points out that her 'Adidas trousers' are both real and cheap and her wearing of lipstick is framed as 'bung[ing] on a bit of red lippy'. Talk about taste thus functions here as a site in which subjectivities are constituted in ways that illustrate, first, the cross-cuttings and mutual articulations of multiple categories of subjectivity and, second, the heterogeneity of any one category of subjectivity (see Hall, 1996b).

While gender and, arguably, class are marked in Alia and Mary's extracts,

Mary's tastes, unlike Alia's, do not seem to be explicitly racialized. This may be because this is one of a series of interviews conducted with Mary by a white interviewer and analysed by three white researchers. But it may also be because mainstream, high-street fashion is presented through advertising and shop mannequins as white fashion (for example, Franklin, 2001) and hence *might* be viewed as the preference of any young woman. Yet, the absence of an explicit marker of her white ethnicity might also, we would argue, be read as rearticulating the privileged normativity of whiteness in British culture. As Laclau (1990: 33; cited in Hall, 1996a: 5; see also Hall, 1996b) has argued, the construction of a particular subjectivity always involves the simultaneous construction of particular power relations based on the exclusion of an Other:

Derrida has shown how an identity's constitution is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles – man/woman, etc. . . . It is the same with the black-white relationship, in which white, of course, is equivalent to 'human being'. 'Woman' and 'black' are thus 'marks' (i.e. marked terms) in contrast to the unmarked terms of 'man' and 'white' (Laclau, 1990: 33).

The absence of any explicit marking of Mary's tastes as 'white tastes' might then be read as an expression of a discursively constituted racialized hierarchy in which 'white tastes' are constituted as a universalized norm and thus remain unmarked.

PERSONAL PREFERENCE, POLITICS AND THE POLICING OF TASTE

In the following extract from Nina, an Asian Muslim young woman living in East London, the possible 'whiteness' of certain tastes is made more explicit even while those tastes are universalized:

- Nina: I've seen a lot of white girls wearing the same clothes I would wear as well. /I: yeah/ Like long dresses or whatever. It's just like the area you're living in, the fashion that you see around you. Like you know you might see something on another person and you (know) it's come from the high street and cos you could look nice in them you would go out and buy it . . .
- I: So, I mean, what, what do you think is your image if you could describe to someone, like say someone was describing the way that you look, you know . . .
- Nina: That depends on the day they see me (laughs) cos like I mean one day I'll probably be wearing trainers, jogging bottoms, whatever /I: mmm/ Next day I'll be like, in like dresses /I: mmm/ One day I might be in Indian clothes /I: mmm/ I'm just a mix and match of everything really.

In this extract Nina frames particular tastes as (potentially) 'white' or 'Indian' and thus articulates a racializing of tastes (see Dolby, 2000) which, in contrast with Mary's extract above, explicitly racializes 'white' as well as 'Indian' tastes.

But Nina also frames her tastes as a multicultural 'mix and match of everything', crossing racialized borders of taste, incorporating both 'white' and 'Asian' tastes so that her style of appearance 'depends on the day they see me'. It is presented as being shaped by 'the fashion that you see around you' and 'what you could look nice in' and often coincides with what 'a lot of white girls' might wear. (Indeed, like Mary in the extract above, Nina too wears 'jogging bottoms'.) Like Widdicombe's (1993) 'goths' who construed their taste as a personal choice and an expression of an individual's 'true self', Nina seems to construe her tastes as an apolitical matter of personal preference and 'self-expression'.

In contrast, however, with this common construction of appearance being a personal preference, there were also numerous instances in the interviews where tastes and styles of appearance were constituted as political. Young women's appearance is articulated as 'a field of surveillance' (Foucault, 1977), policed in ways that reinscribe dominant power-relations of gender, ethnicity and class. Thus, for example, in these next two extracts, styles of appearance are discussed in ways that clearly function to regulate gendered and racialized subjectivities:

Rekha: like they're [other girls at school] like proper tarts and, skirts up to there and like make-up every single day, every single, I mean they wake up early just to do their hair and make-up and (.) /I: mmm/ (.) they all got boyfriends and stuff, and always talking about boys and: oh what we're gonna do tonight and are we gonna go to a disco.

Nina: I think Asian people are more restricted, well the girls really are anyway /I: mm/ in what they do /I: mmm/ how they walk about, how, what they look like. /I: mmm/ I think that's the main things really . . . cos we're Muslim I'll have to like, I mean even though I'm meant to be covered from head to toe /I: mmm/ like you know, I don't. But as long as my parents are like: 'As long as you're covered, not showing your legs or whatever'. That's th, their worst worry, like you know, going round with little short skirts on, they're fine about it. /I: mmm/ And like it's just religion comes a lot into it, cos like there's Hindu girls out there, they can, they wear what they want, basically walk around with hardly anything on, whatever /I: mmm/ whereas I have to be covered all the time.

Thus, for example, Rekha constitutes other girls at her school as 'proper tarts' largely through an account of their appearance, their 'skirts up to there' and 'their hair and make-up' which they allegedly have to wake up early 'to do'. She thus rearticulates a familiar set of discursive resources which serves to reinscribe hetero-patriarchal power relations and regulate women through a derogatory discursive construction of a particular style of 'feminine appearances' as 'tarty'. Nina's extract also draws on familiar discursive resources, in this case to frame dress in terms of gender-specific cultural/religious significances which constitute her as an Asian young woman and as Muslim rather than Hindu. The extract again illustrates both the cross-cuttings of multiple categories of subjectivity and the heterogeneity within any such category and also evidences a construction of

tastes not as freely chosen but as regulated in gender-specific and culture-specific ways.

Like the two extracts above, Ravinder's extract below constitutes styles of appearance not in terms of personal preference but as a field that is subject to surveillance. In this extract 'Asian tastes' are marginalized and excluded by 'English attitudes':

- I: Would you wear Asian clothes to work?
 Ravinder: You must be JOKING!
 I: Why not?
 Ravinder: It's uncomfortable. A sari, it'd be unprofessional, not for law I mean we're talking stiff collars here, d'you know what I mean. Like we're talking very English attitudes.

Asian clothes are construed here as 'unprofessional, not for law' and are contrasted with 'stiff collars' that signify 'very English attitudes' which are by implication the only attitudes deemed appropriate in a legal professional workplace. 'Asian' tastes are excluded from 'professional' and 'English' tastes in a way that precisely reinscribes racist, postcolonialist politics (see Bhabha, 1996) into a discourse about styles of appearance. In the following extract there is, similarly, a policing of Asian clothing through a construction of these clothes as derisive and alien:

- Nina: Before it was like (.) in the school I went to it was mostly white people . . . I used to hang around with them. Put it this way, I wouldn't be seen dead in an Indian suit before . . . I wouldn't walk out my house in it even if it were just going to the shop. I'll have to put on my trousers on, just in case someone saw me. /I: yeah/ It's like cos when we were together, like all my own mates and that, they'll be like all having a joke like: Oh did you see that funny, that girl had a sari on . . . Put it this way, it was like alien to them. /I: yeah/ And if I was to wear something like, they'll be: Oh my gosh, what is she on.

Style of appearance is thus constituted here as a highly regulated discursive field in which racist and sexist politics are very apparent.

HYBRIDIZING SUBJECTIVITIES AND SUBVERTING THE BORDERS OF STYLE

However, at the same time as gendered and racialized subject positions are constituted and regulated through the discursive framings of tastes and styles of appearance, their discursive constructions also produce the possibility of disrupting these subjectivities and the power-relations embedded therein. By subverting and transgressing boundaries and creating transitional culturally in-between spaces (see Bhabha, 1996) new hybridized subjectivities can be constituted (Gilroy, 1993; Brah, 1996; Bakari-Yusuf, 1997; Archer, 1998; Dolby, 2000;

Marshall and Woollett, 2000b). Thus, for instance, in Nina's extracts earlier, she constitutes her tastes as crossing racialized borders of taste or style so that she is 'just a mix and match of everything really'. In Ravinder's extract below this disruption and hybridization works in more subtle ways. By buying her 'Indian looking' skirt from French Connection (a mainstream high street store) she subverts the ways in which taste is made to signify racialized subjectivities:

Ravinder: I have ethnic-y clothes like um this skirt, a very ethnic skirt and it looks like it's from India but you know knowing me it's from French Connection, you know what I'm like. And this girl at work, Elaine, she's from Malaysia and she said to me: oh that's from India isn't it? And I said: no, it's from French Connection. It cost me 40 quid [pounds] not two quid. . . . So you do buy ethnic stuff but which is, like with me I would buy ethnic stuff which is quite ethnic stuff. You know I like tie-dye, which I think is partly ethnic but it's still you know, you can combine it.

The discursive construction here of the 'very ethnic skirt . . . from French Connection' might be interpreted in a variety of ways. For example, that Ravinder paid '40 quid' for a skirt 'from French Connection' rather than the 'two quid' she could have paid for a skirt 'from India', might signify Ravinder's subject position as an 'ideal consumer' who has acquiesced to the values of global capitalism and is willing to pay more for the 'right' label. More positively, however, the skirt might be read as a challenge to racist equations of anything 'ethnic' with 'cheapness' and poor quality: the skirt is '40 quid not two quid'. And yet conversely it might also signify the persistence of Eurocentric racist power-relations in which the Indian skirt is rendered acceptable only when it has been appropriated by and re-created within a 'white' framework which here is guaranteed by its 'mainstream' label and relatively high price.

Ravinder's construction of the skirt can thus be read as keeping in place the hierarchical boundaries between the 'white/mainstream' and the 'ethnic/Indian/Asian' and, simultaneously, as also challenging and unsettling these hierarchies. Moreover, we would argue that this construction of the 'very ethnic skirt' can also be read as producing a hybridized subjectivity that challenges rather than conforms to dominant notions of gender and ethnic 'identity' and thus unsettles the power-relations within which such subject positions – white/norm versus Asian/other – are constituted. The signifying relationship between a racialized subject position and the 'very ethnic skirt' is disrupted by the skirt's label (and relatively high price) to signify the wearer's indeterminate and hybridized subjectivity which refuses any easy categorization as either 'Indian' or 'white'/ 'mainstream'.

Yet although this skirt appears (to us and presumably to Ravinder) to refuse any easy categorization and to thus signify a hybridized identity, to Elaine the skirt is simply 'from India' until she is told otherwise. For the skirt to signify a hybridized identity is thus premised on *knowing* that it is 'from French Connection' and that it 'cost . . . 40 quid not two quid'. The skirt may thus sig-

nify quite differently to Ravinder (who knows) than it does to Elaine and others who have no such knowledge about the skirt's label or price. Certainly, the significance of this knowledge and this difference between a '40 quid . . . French Connection' skirt and a 'two quid' skirt 'from India' may be quite different for Ravinder than they would be for, say, a white middle-class young woman.

Gendered and racialized subjectivities are constituted and regulated through the discursive framing of tastes and styles of appearance. However, the adoption of styles that cross racialized and gendered borders allow the possibility of disrupting the seeming fixity of modernist notions of (gendered and racialized) 'identities'. Insofar as they combine styles, values and icons from different 'cultures' (see Giroux, 1994), young women's accounts of their tastes and choices in dress point to the indeterminate and hybridized nature of style (Gilroy, 1993). In transgressing borders to produce hybridized styles and subject positions that resist any easy categorization, these young women's talk might be read as producing a 'multiculturalism' that avoids some of the problematic politics of difference that have been identified in the liberal construction of 'multiculturalism' (see Bhabha, 1996)

Bhabha (1996), among others, problematizes commonplace and liberal understandings of culture as definable, contained, unitary and relatively stable. He argues that such a conceptualization of culture is not only fallacious but is also politically suspect in that it casts minority cultures as partial (and therefore lesser) cultures in contrast with the alleged wholeness of a dominant culture. Bhabha (1996) also thereby problematizes the liberal conception of multiculturalism as a notion that, he argues, is about diversity and 'equal respect for difference' but that is simultaneously predicated on a set of historical and political conditions and perspectives that inevitably problematize difference:

The partial, minority culture emphasizes the internal differentiation, the 'foreign bodies', in the midst of the nation – the interstices of its uneven and unequal development, which give the lie to its self-containedness. . . . The double inscription of the part-in-the-whole, or the minority position as the outside of the inside, is disavowed (Bhabha: 1996: 57).

Bhabha (1996) thus provides a powerful critique of the liberal notions of culture and multiculturalism through his insistence on the inevitability of culture's hybridity and his elucidation of how, in denying this hybridity, liberal concepts of 'multiculturalism' simultaneously affirm and disavow difference *within* culture. In place of these liberal concepts Bhabha (1996) then offers an alternative retheorization of 'culture' not as whole but as inevitably hybrid, in-between, unhomely and indeterminate – as something that is always located outside as well as inside itself. The examples given earlier of young women's discursive constructions of hybridized and indeterminate styles of appearance might be read as *explicit* cultural expressions (rather than disavowals) of this theorized hybridity and indeterminacy (see also Brah, 1996; Bakari-Yusuf, 1997; Marshall and Woollett, 2000b).

The increasing popularity of ‘Asian Cool’ – for example, of an Asian influence in high-street and designer fashion and of musicians like Talvin Singh and Nitin Sawney whose contemporary ‘underground’ dance music features Asian influences, instruments and voices – might similarly be read as expressive of a more progressive ‘multiculturalism’ in which hybridity, indeterminacy and difference *within* culture and subjectivity are made explicit and celebrated (see also Sharma et al., 1996). Nitin Sawney, for example, states on his album *‘Beyond Skin’* (1999):

I am Indian. To be more accurate, I was raised in England, but my parents came from India – land, people, government or self, ‘Indian’ – what does that mean? At this time the government of India is testing nuclear weapons – Am I less Indian if I don’t defend their actions? . . . Less Indian for being born and raised in Britain? – For not speaking Hindi? Am I not English because of my cultural heritage? – Or the colour of my skin? Who decides?

Sawney thus explicitly locates himself and his music within a highly complex postcolonial, ‘multicultural’ context in which the exclusionary and oppressive logic of discrete racialized/nationalized ‘identities’ are problematized and replaced by hybridity. Yet, as the following two extracts, the first conducted with two sisters together, illustrate, the politics that are inscribed here are not unproblematic.

Rekha: And I like Madonna’s ‘Frozen’, that’s nice I like that.

I: Yeah I know she’s got Mehndi on her hands as well.

Shamani: Is it Mehndi or is it some black felt tip thing?

I: It looks like Mehndi.

Shazia: Now I don’t mind listening to the new younger Asian style stuff.

I: like the East and West fusion stuff

Shazia: hmm, like at the clubs and stuff, but even then it can get a bit weird, just full of Asian people, just going there because it’s cool at the moment, and of course, all the English girls trying to look good in their bindis and dodgy henna tattoos. It’s really bad but I get kind of, well um sort of, I feel like I don’t want them to be wearing these things but then I know that’s stupid because all the time I’m in my jeans and trainers . . . say 10 years ago people would glare at you in the street if you wore a bindi . . . I know that some of these people would be slagging us off if they saw us wearing them and it wasn’t trendy or cool or whatever. They don’t know what the fuck a bindi means anyway.

Madonna’s ‘Asian look’ or ‘the East and West fusion stuff’ could be read positively as creative productions of hybridized subjectivities located in the transitional and indeterminate spaces of culture’s in-between that Bhabha (1996; see also Gilroy, 1993) discusses. They certainly seem to illustrate a construction of cultures that ‘no longer belong to any one place or location’ and that ‘increasingly inhabit shifting cultural and social spheres’ (Giroux, 1994: 288). They can also be read as illustrating how globalized items and icons are discursively framed in

localized ways (see Gilroy, 1993; Dolby, 2000) so that, for example, 'Madonna', usually read as an icon of US/global culture, is discursively reconfigured as an icon of US/global/Asian fusion (see also Marshall and Woollett, 2000b). Yet Rekha and Shamani's extract also questions 'Madonna's' authenticity: 'Is it Mehndi [that she is wearing] or is it some black felt tip thing?' The question about Madonna's appearance seems also to question the possibility of any *meaningful* fusion and to constitute Madonna's 'Asian look' as inauthentic, superficial and a little laughable.

Shazia's extract similarly problematizes this hybridizing incorporation of an 'Asian' style of appearance by 'English girls' by describing them as '*trying to look good* in their bindis and dodgy henna tattoos' (emphasis added). She thus implies both that their wearing of bindis and Mehndi is *only* a superficial and cosmetic exercise and that their attempts to look good might have failed. Their attempts might also be construed as risible here not only because they may have 'failed' to look good but also because, like Madonna's wearing of Mehndi, they are implicitly framed as 'inauthentic'.

It is not, however, only 'English girls' engagement with 'the new younger Asian style stuff' that is problematized in Shazia's extract. The extract also problematizes the popularity of 'the new younger Asian style stuff' among Asian British youth. By framing this popularity as 'a bit weird' and as occurring 'just . . . because it's cool at the moment', the extract also suggests that their engagements with this hybridized cultural style are also superficial. At the same time, however, Shazia also construes her own objections as 'really bad' and 'stupid'. She equates 'English girls . . . in their bindis and dodgy henna tattoos' with herself 'in my jeans and trainers', an equation that seems to sideline the significances of the racialized hierarchies involved in Asian and English appropriations of one another's styles. Yet, as Shazia's final comment in this extract indicates, this hybridizing of styles and subjectivities is created within a political framework of entitlements, authenticities and unspoken histories of oppression where different styles might be appropriated into a 'hybridized' space only once they have been reframed as fashion commodities, detached from their meanings, history and politics. As Shazia argues, 'some of these people would be slagging us off if they saw us wearing them and it wasn't trendy or cool or whatever. They don't know what the fuck a bindi means anyway'.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have sought to explore some ways in which Asian and white young women's subjectivities are constituted in their talk about their own tastes and styles of appearance and those of others. As other researchers have argued, clothes and appearance are salient for young women and constitute an important basis for constructing their identities and subjectivities. Their talk points to tensions between the ways in which taste and appearance have fixed but also vari-

able meanings. They switch from style to style in ways that relate to their gendered, racialized and classed subjectivities, ways that are implicitly and explicitly politicized but that are often at the same time construed as personal preferences and as indicators of 'real' or 'authentic' selves. Their talk indicates some of the diversity of ways in which they relate to and consume fashion, style and appearance. But, we would argue, more importantly, their talk also indicates the complexities of the ways in which they constitute their own subjectivities in relation to 'same' and 'other' young women and in relation to the culturally sanctioned and politically hierarchical boundaries between these differently gendered and racialized subject positions.

Talk about tastes and styles of appearance, we have argued, functions as a discursive site in which these young women constitute their own and others' subjectivities in ways that are linked to dominant discourses and power relations. The young women's accounts function as sites in which a complex and shifting 'micro-physics of power' (Foucault, 1977) is articulated, and which variously consolidate, subvert and/or reconfigure the politics of both gender and ethnicity. Discursive constructions of taste and styles of appearance, we have argued, can serve both to consolidate particular subject positions and culturally dominant power-relations. But they can also function to challenge culturally dominant 'ideas of nationalism, racial exclusivism, subjectivity and identification' (Bakari-Yusuf, 1997: 91) and to problematize the either/or logics of difference on which modernist concepts of (racialized and gendered) 'identity' are founded (Hall, 1996a). As Bhabha (1996) has argued, theorizing difference in non-marginalizing ways requires a retheorizing of culture in terms of in-betweens, hybridity and indeterminacy. Such constructions of hybridized subjectivities were evident in the interviews in this study. These discursive constructions of hybridized subjectivity might 'point to new conceptions of subjectivity and identification that articulate the local and the global in novel and exciting patterns' (Gilroy, 1993: 6; cited in Bakari-Yusuf, 1997: 91) and make for more radicalized, dynamic and creative subjectivities (see Archer, 1998; Marshall and Woollett, 2000b). Yet, as the final two extracts illustrate, there is also the possibility for these subjectivities to express a disavowal of difference at the same time as difference is appropriated in the production of hybridized cultural spaces, styles and subjectivities.

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NOTE

1. The term 'Asian' signals a wide diversity of cultural, religious and geographical affiliations. In the UK context in which this study is conducted, however, 'Asian' refers predominantly to people of Indian-subcontinental extraction and heritage.

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