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A Reflective Narrative on *Panorama: Let's Talk About Race*

Nearly a year after Black Lives Matter protests dominated the summer of 2020, the BBC released *Panorama: Let's Talk About Race*, exploring the nuances of racialised experiences in modern Britain. I remember the feelings of shock, anger, and shame that preceded, surrounded, and followed the Black Lives Matter protests incredibly vividly, and can pinpoint the variety of moments that, rather ashamedly, I became further privy to the insidious nature of racism and racial discrimination in Britain. This documentary evoked a similar response in me and is peppered with the same themes that surrounded the Black Lives Matter protests nearly two years ago. By interviewing people of colour from all across the UK, the documentary holds space for the conversation and confronts the viewer with how racism and racial discrimination manifests in contemporary Britain. While the episode covers a variety of experiences from both Black and Asian individuals, this documentary predominantly prompted me to reflect upon whiteness, white privilege, the Black-British experience, racism, and my own positionality within this reflective narrative.

In a broad sense, the documentary caused me to think about my own racial identity, and its various interactions with the surrounding themes. Therefore, it would be remiss to not begin by acknowledging my own positionality in the context of writing this reflective narrative. A quote from the documentary moved me to think of how, because of my identity, an intellectual and emotional engagement with racism and racial discrimination is the upper limit of my understanding. In the documentary, Jason - an Afro-Caribbean man from East London - states 'there's no way you can feel or live my life unless you have that shade of skin'. With this in mind, Maher and Tetreault discuss how one's racial identity often effects the concepts, ideas, and narratives engaged with by the individual, and that often, for White scholars, racial reflexivity is rarely present (1993). The conjunction of both reminds me that, as a White woman and a non-immigrant, there are several ways my identity may have impacted the themes, reflections, and ideas I pull from the documentary.

Building upon reflexivity, additional reflection upon my positionality reminded me that the system that is affecting the lives of those in the documentary exists both around me and *through* me (Coleman, et al., 2021). Drawing on Critical Race Theory, whiteness is the social construct that seeks to 'other' any group outside of itself for the purpose of subjugation, oppression, or exploitation (Hartlep, 2009). In a world where the consequences of this construct still affect those situated outside of it, some thinkers may suggest I could passively enable the system by virtue of my racial identity and a lack of reflexivity (Milner, 2007).

This is a complex and often uncomfortable experience to navigate and can often cause an initial reaction of defence or offence in many – something that American scholar Robin DiAngelo refers to as 'White fragility' (2011; 2018). It often arises when White people are confronted with the notion of White privilege (DiAngelo, 2018), but it is critical to push past such emotions in order to formally interrogate contemporary racism (Resane, 2021). In short, I believe that this interrogation of my positionality was critical before beginning an analysis of the documentary, due to the fact that it may interact differently with a White viewer as opposed to a Black or Asian audience.

Honing in more specifically on the documentary, Naga Munchetty's own identity and experiences as the presenter of this programme evoked ideas about racism, stereotyping, and whiteness. For context, the documentary begins with Munchetty speaking of her experiences as a woman of colour, and the barrage of complaints she received following her live response on a BBC news programme to Donald Trump's racist comments towards four congresswomen in 2019¹. In the clip, Munchetty goes on to express how she has heard familiar comments throughout her life and career, stating 'every time I have been told, as a woman of colour, to go back to where I came from, that was embedded in racism'. However, after an onslaught of OFCOM complaints, Munchetty alone was placed under review by BBC's ECU, despite the original allegation also being directed to Dan Walker, her White co-host (Waterson, 2019).

¹ 'Trump Tells Congresswomen to 'Go Back' to the Countries They Came From', <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/14/us/politics/trump-twitter-squad-congress.html>

For me, the sole focus on Munchetty for disciplinary action is incredibly indicative of the association between people of colour and hyper-aggression, and the equal and opposite notion of white fragility. This part of the documentary prompted me to think about how people of colour are often perceived to be more aggressive, criminal, or negligent (Oliver, 2003), a phenomenon is directly linked to essentialist tropes generated by whiteness and white normativity (Omi & Winant, 1994). In a similar vein, Frankie, a young Black woman from East London, describes the necessity to ignore and remain complacent with acts of racial discrimination out of fear of being perceived as the aggressor.

Outside of the documentary, I can't help but think of the recent case of Child Q, a 15-year old Black girl from Hackney who was unlawfully strip searched by police officers in her school upon suspicion of having cannabis on her person; her racial identity is strongly suspected to be a contributing factor to how this abhorrent breach of rights was allowed to go ahead (Dodd & Quinn, 2022). Acknowledging the intersectionality between race and gender, Jones and Norwood refer to how women of colour (though, particularly Black women in America) can be seen as dramatic, excessive, or threatening when expressing themselves (2016). With this in mind, it would be remiss to not reconsider the racial undertones of the ECU's decision to discipline Manchetty alone and encouraged me to reflect on the need for self-policing of behaviour required by many of women of colour in the UK and beyond.

This notion of self-regulation is also articulated by many of the young Black men in the documentary. For example, Jason and his 14-year old son Ezra live in East London and discuss racial discrimination in the stop and search practices of the police. For context, in the year 2019-2020, a Black person was 9 times more likely to be stop-and-searched compared to their White counterpart (Home Office, 2021). Jason discusses the need to interfere with his son's clothing, friendship group, after-school plans and beyond in order to protect him from being unnecessarily stop-and-searched by police officers; a particularly harrowing moment for me involved the pair describing how Ezra has to wear a jumper, trousers, and shoes of different colours, in order to not fit a wanted description as easily. Similarly, Vernon Samuels describes how he ingrains the need to assimilate into his two young, Black sons. As a result of the hypercriminalisation of young Black men (Oliver, 2003; Entman & Rojecki, 2021),

seminal sociologist Du Bois described this assimilation and self-regulation as part of a 'double consciousness' that all Black people experience in a society that vilifies them by nature of their race (1903). Coalescing all of these experiences serves as a particularly potent reminder of the extent to which the lives of Black British men and women are dictated by racism and racial discrimination in the UK.

As a whole, these various dimensions forced me to confront how insidious racism in Britain truly is. When describing his experiences of racism as a young Black man in Britain, Jason simply states 'you can't see it'. Building on this, the documentary interviews academic Kalwant Bhopal, who describes the 'changing face' of racism from explicit and overt to a much more indiscriminate, covert discrimination. However, for many people (especially those from White communities) tend to associate racism with slurs, abuse, attacks, and all of the significantly more visible forms of discrimination (Archer, 2013). Isaac suggests that by thinking of racism as only one thing, we begin to fail to see how it operates in other forms as it emerges (2006). Similarly, we can draw on the work of Stuart Hall, who concludes that despite the absence of specific language or behaviour, the underlying culture does not shift, and instead manipulates itself into a different form (1997). As the documentary explores, a plethora of microaggressions and systemic practices that have taken over the more overt forms of racism from the 20th century and before; despite a barrage of legislation and protections in place, it is clear that racism and racial discrimination now manifests in systemic and insidious ways.

Panorama: Let's Talk About Race was rich with the stories and experiences of Black and Asian individuals from across the UK. Just like the Black Lives Matter movement, it centres the voices of people of colour and prompted me to reflect on the ways that racism and racial discrimination articulates itself in contemporary Britain, forcing me to confront my own positionality and racial identity in interaction with both the documentary and the themes it explored.

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