

# WHERE ARE YOU FROM?

Hazel V. Carby

I write and teach in North America where I dwell but am unable to feel at home. Uneasy and anxious, I fight to calm a growing sense of panic by taking measured, increasingly slow, intakes of breath. I feel I'm going to suffocate in the increasingly toxic atmosphere. My nostrils are congested with the stinking exhalations of nationalist and authoritarian ultimatums; spiteful threats that "the wells of tolerance" are "running dry" resonate in my head. Ghastly apparitions of politicians with vacuous minds for whom no level of threat has yet been allocated rise from their aeries, shrieking and spitting with each dawn: armed with drones they circle like demons over the carcass of rights and reason; and from their gaping maws issues racist and misogynistic hatred. I have spent a lifetime breathing through a mask and toughening my skin of (un) belonging, for I have heard all this before. I am an immigrant too and always have been, even in the land of my birth, where I and my family were targets of racist rhetoric and violence long after the anti-fascist war was supposedly won.

In the aftermath of World War II in Britain, I was confronted by a bewildering array of contesting national and racialized definitions of self and subject. I had to exercise caution as I sought to find a way through that maze. The biggest challenge was finding a response that satisfied those who questioned my origins, because I was deceived by the apparent simplicity of the answer. I was born in England. My declaration of belonging rendered me paradoxical; being rebuffed taught me to hold their definitions in contempt.

Apparently innocuous, "Where are you from?" is a question I came to dread as a child because "where" and "from" did not reference geography or location but the fictions of a racialized national heritage. "Where are you from?" emerged as what I think of now as *The Question!* (capped, in italics, with an exclamation mark). *The Question!* remained to haunt the woman the girl became. It is still posed whenever I am regarded as being out of place, seen as an enigma, an incongruity, and a curiosity.

In elementary school I was disconcerted by constant cross-examinations, by increasingly insistent demands to explain where I came from. Over time I realized

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that *The Question!* demanded a more detailed response than my current address, so I offered the name of the village in Devon where I was born, embellished with stories of Exmoor extracted from the novel *Lorna Doone*. This information confirmed the fears and anxiety that prompted *The Question!* in the first place. The mere suggestion that I was a native was received as a deliberate provocation. I was being asked to provide a reason for my being which I did not have. I learned to regard my emerging self as not accountable to those demanding that an account of myself was imperative; but when I was too young to imagine, let alone assert, that I was not accountable to anyone, I invented alternative figures of authority to whom I would account for myself. Facts failed me so I turned to fiction.

Classmates grew bored with my petulant refusal to speak, which their pinches and punches couldn't break. My body reddened and bruised under fingers poking and squeezing as if unraveling a dense series of knots; knuckles vented frustration at the inability to expose my difference. I refused to let them make me cry. Tears were suppressed until back at my desk, face concealed by a book, they trickled in silence down my cheeks. Books were my refuge and the source for the many selves I wanted to become.

Far more fearsome than leaving classmates dissatisfied was irritating teachers, or any curious adult in authority, who asked *The Question!*, for they interpreted silence and shrugs as deliberate perversity, an outright refusal to cooperate. I discovered that adopting a posture of timidity, with a hint of speech impairment, was an attitude more likely to put an end to the interrogation. Answers were mumbled incoherently with eyes lowered to feet neatly encased in white cotton socks and brown leather Clarks T-bar sandals. Honesty about the place of my birth was best avoided with figures of authority and/or strangers: muttering about being born in England condemned me to their utter disapproval and the exasperated demand, "but *where* did you come from *before* that?" Some were convinced I was not telling the truth; others believed me, an outcome which was far, far worse because then I was exposed as a monstrosity born of a sexual and racial perversion, a black father and a white mother.

I lived in Mitcham, part of the county of Surrey, most of which lies in the metropolitan green belt. Surrey was famous for the beauty of its North Downs, had more woods than any other county in the UK, and was home to the wealthiest population in Britain. Mitcham was a part of Surrey in name only; our neighborhood was actually the last gasp of the working-class estates of South London, the boundary *before* gracious living began. It was crowded: there were forty-eight children in my elementary school classroom. It was ugly and soulless and, as with similar South London estates, a nursery for white supremacist hatred. I was regarded as a national and racial aberration, a half-caste.

When the boy who sat at the desk to my right, the boy who used to pinch my arm whenever the teacher's head was turned toward the blackboard, when he finished talking about heat and flies and deserts and driving tanks across Egypt, he looked at

me smugly as if to say, “beat that.” It was my turn to describe the contribution of my father to the war effort. I stood and stated clearly that my father served in the RAF. On the piano at home stood a photograph of a young man sporting a mustache, in an RAF uniform, cap at the conventional slightly rakish and daredevil angle, holding a pipe in his hand. In my eyes my father was the epitome of wartime heroic British manhood.

Before I could describe the photograph to my classmates, I was abruptly interrupted by the teacher. In a loud, sharp voice I was told to sit back down before I said another word and listen carefully. I sat. The entire class was stunned. Silenced by their teacher’s angry glare, they stared at me cowering in shock and humiliation while I was scolded and warned about the dire consequences of telling lies. The teacher insisted that there were no “colored” people in Britain during the war, that no colored people served in any of the armed services, and certainly not in the RAF, the most elite and heroic branch of the British war machine. Her head turned left and right, sweeping like a searchlight across the rows of desks behind which we children sat rigid. There was nowhere to hide. Speaking in the slow and deliberate tone of voice that she adopted when she would brook no interruption or opposition, the teacher declared that *colored people were not British* but came as immigrants who arrived “on these shores” years after the war had been fought and won. All children shifted back in their seats. This was my formal introduction to British history, which began in the 1950s in my elementary school. I had previously absorbed the fact that I was a “nigger,” “a wog,” “colored,” and “half-caste”; this lesson taught me that I was not considered British.

My college education is and isn’t a product of the “disorderly year” of 1968, a year fissured by contradictions that have long since been paved under a seamless cultural mythology of student rebellion. I was an undergraduate between 1967 and 1970, reading for a degree in English and history, steeped in Marxist theory, from a talented, progressive faculty at what was then Portsmouth Polytechnic and is now Portsmouth University. I was an eager student in 1967, a successful student, if exam results are the measure of success, but my schooling so far had filled me with questions that were not answered. I was remarkably unaware that most of what I thought I already knew, information I could regurgitate at a moment’s notice, I was going to have to unlearn if I was going to know anything.

The city of Portsmouth did not conform to the image of a university town; it suffered from neglect; it was decaying. In the late sixties bomb damage from World War II was still evident, and unexploded ordinance was uncovered whenever repairs to buildings or roads were undertaken. Portsmouth could not survive on the paltry commerce produced by the seasonal cycle of poverty-stricken renters and tourists: students who arrived each October were replaced each July by coachloads of octogenarians in floral prints hoping for an inexpensive holiday by the sea. During the last three weeks of each spring term our landladies would be eager for us to be gone, willing us away with uncharacteristic impatience because the senior citizens paid twice as much for each room as we did.

Portsmouth was dependent for its economic health and employment of its residents upon the Portsmouth Naval Base, which had been an integral part of the city since 1194. The Navy eventually occupied three miles of its waterfront and more than 296 acres of the city center. From the windows of our lecture halls we could cast our minds adrift and gaze across the acres of destroyers, frigates, and minesweepers of Her Majesty's Royal Navy. I saw the ships; I saw the city; but I did not see anything. As Jamaica Kincaid puts it, "I did not yet know the history of events, I did not know their antecedents."<sup>1</sup>

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I had been schooled in the history of the heroes of the Royal Navy. I knew that Sir Francis Drake, ca. 1540–1596, born, as I was, in the county of Devon, was a revered British hero, a "founding father" of British naval might, the most famous vice admiral of the British fleet who led the attack on the Spanish Armada in 1588. I knew nothing about the Francis Drake who, along with Sir John Hawkins, led the first slave-trading expeditions and later supplemented his wealth through acts of piracy, plundering throughout the West Indies and South America. Both were knighted for their exploits. I did not know that at least eight slave ships left Portsmouth between 1699 and 1711.

While I studied literature and history in a city whose history I could not access, my education took place on streets that became very familiar to me. I learned about the power of the state, not in my college classrooms, but in confrontation with the British riot police sent to guard 24 Grosvenor Square. I was the first in my family to go to college, or to regard the United States as anything other than the saviors of the "free" world. However, what I was learning during the protests against the Vietnam War had little, if anything, to do with American power and everything to do with confronting the friendly British "bobby" whose mission was smiling and helping lost children, dogs, and the elderly, or so I had been taught.

My brother and I were very young when we learned that bobbies did not help "nigger kids," "black bastards," or "half-caste scum." But my parents did not know this, my parents could not imagine that anyone, leave alone bobbies, saw my brother and me as "half-caste scum." My respectable parents believed in teaching their respectable children, "If you are ever lost, or in trouble, find a policeman." Anyone who was afraid of the police, in their eyes, was not respectable and must have a reason to fear authority, presumably because they misbehaved. My parents had never witnessed a riot squad of bobbies on horseback unleashed on people taking part in a peaceful protest. But if they had witnessed this, if they had seen the swinging batons breaking heads, I do not know that they would have thought the police action wrong. My parents regarded what they called my "antics" outside the American Embassy as more than foolish. My mother, in particular, felt that I was being disloyal and that I was disloyal because my education was sorely lacking. I did not know, she said, what the British nation (and, by implication, I as an individual) owed to the people of the United States of America. "The Americans didn't have to come all the way over here and put their lives at risk to help us during the war," she repeated over and over again. These words were more

than a reminder; they were issued as a warning, as if to say that when “we” needed the Americans again they might not come next time because of the behavior of ungrateful people like me. When I was in college, I actually worried about this.

Persecuted and ostracized as a “multiracial” couple and having only meager financial resources, my parents saw education as the primary investment to provide a material legacy for their two children. Education was not just a path to financial security and social mobility; it was armor: “Sticks and stones will break your bones but words will never harm you,” and “Just be the best, be the first in your class and they will leave you alone,” were the phrases that resonated in the background of our school years. Did these words originate from the depths of my parents’ bewilderment and frustration, from a profound ignorance of what to do? Or do these words, offered as wisdom, signal denial, a denial of how deeply racism was shaping postwar Britain?

My brother and I knew from firsthand experience the limited value of these offerings, of course: words of hatred signaled imminent danger, often immediately preceding the sticks and stones that broke bones, or in my case teeth. But when we were hurt, we told our parents that we had had an “accident,” for admitting that we had been beaten meant that we were not trying hard enough, were not good enough and, thus, had let them down in some unfathomable way. My brother and I were always having “accidents.”

Education, in my family, demanded endless sacrifice. We were removed from the local schools and sent to private schools. Was this move an unspoken recognition that we were suffering more than accidents? I do not know. My brother had a partial scholarship to his school but my mother still had to work multiple jobs, day and night, for years to pay the fees. I am convinced that my parents’ belief in the promise and transformative power of a British education was a measure of the depth of their faith in Britishness. My brother and I never witnessed the wavering of this faith, not even when my father had to go to the Tottenham Court Road police station to obtain the release of my Dulwich Prep- and Alleyn’s-educated brother, who had been arrested and detained under the notorious “sus” law for walking along Oxford Street with a checkbook (assumed stolen but actually his own) in his hand.

You could say that I inherited an obsession with education but translated it into an entirely different political and intellectual agenda. Or did I? I certainly didn’t have faith, but I retained my grasp on an endless list of questions. I registered for a postgraduate degree in education at the Institute of Education, University College London, because I wanted to understand why the British educational system, instead of challenging inequalities of class, gender, and race, actually preserved, reproduced, and promoted institutional racism, alongside class and gender divisions. At the end of the year, in my final examination, instead of responding to the questions asked, I wrote what I considered to be a devastating analysis of the institute’s postgraduate program, as it completely ignored the issue of institutional racism. I graduated with even more questions about the education system than when I had begun, but now I was certified as an integral part of it.

Who knows what happened to that paper after I literally stormed out of the exam room, but the next thing I knew I was contacted by the chief education officer of the London Borough of Newham, who had read my work and recruited me to be part of an educational experiment in a newly formed high school: a single-sex school system was going coed for the first time. Neo-Nazi gangs and the Kray twins ruled the streets, and the area had a substantial Afro-Caribbean and black British population. As I prepared for my first teaching job in August 1972, Idi Amin expelled British Asians from Uganda. Shocked and stunned, many of them found themselves in Newham, and I met their traumatized teenage sons and daughters in my classroom.

My mother drove me to my first teaching job at Eastlea Comprehensive in the East End of London, and she wept copious tears as she helped me move into what she regarded as the “slums.” If this was the result of private schools and college degrees, if the fruit of her sacrifice was depositing me in an area of even deeper poverty than the poverty she had struggled so hard to climb out of, my mother wanted no part of it. I had accepted the position as an English teacher in Newham because I naively thought I could be part of fixing what was so obviously broken. I guess going to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University was another step in the same direction.

I arrived at CCCS, an obnoxiously self-righteous, anti-racist activist, in my seventh year as a high school teacher of English on a fully paid sabbatical paid for by Newham. Into the corridors of CCCS I carried the baggage of those years: a politics of the classroom forged in defense of the tenets and practices of progressive education against the insidious incursions of the Department of Education under the direction of “Maggie Thatcher the Milk Snatcher,”<sup>2</sup> and a politics of the street honed in anti-racist battles waged against fascist gangs and their racist cousins in police uniform who patrolled our neighborhood. I riffed upon these struggles brazenly, elaborating them as “street cred,” to disguise how terrified and insecure I actually felt about being back and black in graduate school.

I had worked in the vibrant and turbulent multiracial, multiethnic, unstreamed classrooms of a comprehensive school where a handful of us worked collectively in the hope that our pupils could be equal partners in the learning process. I saw how young minds and bodies opened under progressive, creative, and imaginative educational practices supported by generous resources. But, in the midst of possibility, I also saw my black and brown students terrorized by violence and the threat of violence: bricks were thrown through their windows as they slept; feces and flaming bottles full of petrol were pushed through their letter boxes; and to get to and from school, or the shops, they were pushed and shoved, or punched and beaten as they passed by the racist slogans daubed all over the walls, doors, and streets of our neighborhood. At any hour of any day they could be subject to physical and mental abuse, in or out of school, from their peers, from shopkeepers, from the police, and from the social service workers appointed to assist them. To be of any use to these students my classroom had

to be transformed into a safe place: a laboratory for the forensic examination of racist encounters and for the translation of analysis into practical strategies for countering and overcoming the effects of institutional racism.

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When I applied to CCCS I had a much thumbed copy of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* on my bedside table, a text that informed my practice in my high school and in the adult literacy program that I ran two evenings a week in the same building. I had also assembled a growing library of books and papers published by CCCS, including *Resistance through Rituals* and *On Ideology*. Exhausted at the end of the day, in moments stolen from grading papers or working on lesson plans, or during a weekend when I wasn't taking my class on a camping trip, or to the theater, I read with diligence and care what was being written at CCCS.

Before I met any of the members of CCCS, I regarded them as allies in the fight against the increasingly authoritarian and conservative forces being mobilized against the poor, the working class, the black, and the immigrant, in short, against everyone in my world. I devoured the insights that addressed our condition in an area with high levels of unemployment, imprisonment, immigration, and racism; inadequate housing; and very low income. CCCS publications, I thought, contained analyses with which one could begin to develop defensive strategies and to imagine the construction of paths to a just and equitable world. The interview, which followed my application, terrified me, but the letter offering me a place terrified me even more. I was afraid that I would be unable to translate the knowledge I carried with me into what I regarded as the theoretically sophisticated world of CCCS.

Before I left Newham, I carefully explained to my students that I was going to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies for a year to study and get a master's degree, and they all seemed to understand and applaud my reasons and motives, which gratified me as a sign that they had absorbed my instructions to value education. When, after my first term at Birmingham University, I met five or six of them outside the butcher's shop around the corner from my flat in Forest Gate, they were very pleased to see me and we chatted for ages. Gradually, they revealed doubts about my rate of progress, were curious as to exactly how hard I had been studying, and asked if I was sure that I could pass my exams at the end of the year. It dawned on me that the cause of their concern derived from the fact that my manner of speaking had not "improved" in their eyes, despite the months that had been spent studying culture. Only gradually did I understand the terms of their equation: for my students, "cultural studies" translated into becoming "cultured," and being "cultured" meant sounding like a BBC broadcaster. Culture, then, was the means by which I was to acquire class mobility, class position in Britain being recognized and confirmed through accent. My failure to make "progress" was registered in my voice because I still sounded like a Londoner, and much was at stake in my evident lack of success. If I hadn't learned to speak "properly" how on earth was I going to be able to return and teach them, or their children, how to be cultured and thus upwardly mobile. If I didn't make it, they didn't either.

The year before this conversation, during my last year as their teacher, we had taken a class trip, not one of our major expeditions, just a walk down the road to the office of the London Docklands Development Corporation in the last class period of the day. There we walked around and between tables on which lay detailed models of the future of the area in which we lived. Gone were the familiar shabby streets, decaying high rises, and council flats. The voices of my pupils, usually loud, energetic, and buoyant, were hushed, their almost whispers a measure of a certain awe and respect, if not of comprehension. I stood apart from them, leaning against the wall, strictly an observer, for I had visited this office before, I had seen the display, and I was aware of what the development plans meant for the residents of the area. I didn't have the heart to translate it for them; I wanted them to see and understand for themselves what was coming. One conversation will stay with me always: "It's beautiful," I heard one say, followed by,

"Which of these houses do you want?"

"I want this one right on this canal."

"I don't, it's too close to the water."

Pause....

"Why does the water go right under the side of these houses?"

"So you can keep your boat in there, stupid."

"But my mum doesn't have a boat."

Silence was followed by gradual realization. First, they understood that these houses were not for people who didn't have boats, especially not for people who couldn't even imagine owning a boat. Then they saw that redevelopment was not for them, that people like them were not to be included in the rosy images of the future docklands. How many of them knew that people like them were expendable and would, inevitably, be displaced, I don't know. The volume of their voices rose to their normal levels, they glanced out of the corner of their eyes, trying not to read in my face explanations they didn't want to hear. Without being prompted they collectively turned their backs on the tables, gathered their jackets and bags, and moved to the door ready to leave. In a discordant chorus of voices each of them announced other places they had to be. A year later, outside the butcher's, as my students searched my face, another hope, the one they had eagerly placed in their teacher, bit the dust.

The years I was associated with CCCS, 1978–1984, completing first an M.A. and then the Ph.D., which produced the study *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, were years of seemingly inexhaustible intellectual energy, passionate commitment, and political vision. Pessimism of the intellect—a response to a rapidly increasing state authoritarianism, the brutal effects of everyday racism and gender inequality, and what appeared to be the continual defeat of left and progressive agendas—was countered by an optimism of the will exercised in intellectual activity in the service of social, political, and economic transformation. To this day I am haunted by the loss of the students I left behind.



As an adult, living in the United States, when I am asked, “Where are you from?” I find that unexpressed assumptions determine the terms, conditions, and boundaries within which any answer provided will be accepted or dismissed. *The Question!* arises from speculation about the shades of brown in skin; it is posed not to elicit information but to test a hypothesis. It is imperative to recognize each and every nuance of this script, as it requires the performance of a designated role, the perception of what is really at stake, even though the information being sought is not evident from the words being spoken.

When I wish to be agreeable, I expend effort analyzing which conjectures are in play and attempt to provide an answer that satisfies expectations and avoids a miserable sense of failure, a hapless scrabbling for supplementary explanations. Any disregard of convention—by design, or weariness, or misreading of cues—creates fallout, exasperation, embarrassment, and irritation. Failure to be satisfyingly *read* places the interrogator in the awkward position of having to repeat *The Question!*, which is then patiently and painstakingly rearticulated with a change of emphasis in a louder and more forceful tone of voice, as if I were hard of hearing: “*Where are you from?*” Meaning, of course, are you black or white?

I am armed with a series of suitable explanations for my various selves. I have fictional and factual justifications for the when, where, and why of my being and carry a potted history for all occasions, like when a distinguished black professor at Yale asked, “How did a nice white girl like you come to study African American literature?” As a woman, a writer, and an academic, I am assumed to be out of place: too black to be British, too white, or too West Indian, to be a professor of African American Studies. *The Question!* of course is the wrong question. If I am asked to identify the origin of the selves I have become, without hesitation I describe the various libraries in which the girl I no longer recognize, the girl I have long since left behind, the girl I discarded and rejected, found sanctuary.

Thank you.

## Notes

- 1 Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 15.
- 2 I was a post-World War II boom baby and in 1948 the National Health Service was instituted, and although our parents were hungry, children were given everything: free juice, free milk, free everything. That’s why as a teacher in the seventies we called Thatcher the milk snatcher. She was the one who took free milk away from schools. But in the years of my growing up, there was a consensus across the board of maintaining a welfare state. That consensus is completely gone and many aspects of the welfare state have been dismantled. What is dramatically different today from the Britain in which I grew up is that poverty is much worse, it’s extraordinary. It’s incredibly visible, present everywhere.