

# Black Pupils in a White Landscape: reclaiming the countryside for enriched learning experiences

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**ABSTRACT** This article focuses on the accepted identity of the countryside as a hegemonic, idyllic and stable environment. Making use of the experiences of a group of 25 15-year-old London students on a recent residential trip to the Dorset coast, it seeks to understand whether or not the countryside is seen as a 'welcoming place' for inner-city children.

## **Introduction: 'race', rural space and representation**

Britain's 'national identity' relies heavily on the construct of the rural idyll. Accordingly, the countryside is frequently evoked as a harmonious and traditional space: a refuge from the problems associated with the (post)modernity of urban life. Such nationalist ideals are inherently infused with conservative politics, which have serious implications for feelings of 'belonging' or exclusion in the countryside. Rural Britain is popularly perceived as a 'white landscape' predominantly inhabited by white people. This hides both the growing living presence and the increasing educational and recreational participation of people from other ethnic backgrounds. In recent years, however, the sub-discipline of rural geography has broadened its horizons and started to consider rural spaces from a range of 'alternative' perspectives and subjectivities. Central to this research has been the study of 'other rurals'. A deconstruction of the identity of rural space as a hegemonic, idyllic and stable environment has begun. Debates surrounding issues of marginalization and exclusion in the countryside have begun to address the experiences of women, ethnic minorities, those living in poverty, the elderly, and the disabled – and how these different groups negotiate rural space. Emerging research suggests that the countryside is, in fact, a highly contested space; one which merits much more discussion and consideration than has previously been the case.

Representations of the British countryside are largely controlled by white (generally male and middle-class) people. They construct images reflecting a concern with the reproduction of a nostalgic white heritage. In turn, 'Others'

who are potentially threatening to the integrity of this representation are excluded, and so 'the rural' becomes a culturally contested landscape (Hall, 1990). Racist attitudes exist in and about the countryside and these affect the lives of non-white people, both as residents and as (potential) visitors. Rural space demarcates a boundary between ethnicities and offers conditions conducive to the construction of distorted and stereotyped cultural representations (Anderson, 1988). One frequently cited example is that for rural people, the 'inner city' has become a coded term for the imagined deviance of black people – a place of fear and a place to avoid. For many rural people 'ethnicity' is seen as being 'out of place' in the countryside, reflecting the 'otherness' of non-white people (Agyeman, 1990, p. 233). In the rural imagination, black people become confined to towns and cities, representing an 'alien' urban environment, and the white landscape of rurality is aligned with 'nativeness'. This process effectively disenfranchises black people, denying them access to the countryside.

In this investigation, I aim to assess the availability of the British countryside to black and minority ethnic children as an educational resource. In light of the theory that the countryside is a predominantly white landscape, I wish to investigate the extent to which black pupils are welcomed, understood, and provided for in the rural areas that they visit as part of their geography (and also often history and English) curricula. I also plan to observe the pupils' interactions with local people, and their feelings about race representation in the countryside. This investigation will assess the preconceptions, opinions and experiences of a group of African, black Caribbean, Asian, mixed race and white female, 15-year-old students before, during and after a five-day residential trip to the Dorset coast in April 2007. I believe that the countryside can be a vital learning and recreational resource for children, and that access should be granted to them unreservedly. As a teacher of geography in an inner London school, I see it as my duty to advocate this case in the hope of enriching the learning and life experiences of as many black and ethnic minority children as possible, and in doing so, work towards combating racial prejudice in rural areas.

### **Rationale**

This investigation is timely and dovetails with debates that are currently taking place in British politics and the media. Questions of diversity, integration, multiculturalism and nationalism in Britain have never been so pertinent. The report published last year by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE, 2006) states that an increased focus on the drivers of religious extremism, debates surrounding multiculturalism, UK foreign policy, involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, immigration from European Union accession countries, and the 'war on terror' have put diversity and integration high up on the political agenda. The media has lately been dominated by the increase in gun and knife crime involving urban black teenagers. Additionally, recent debates

surrounding the negative effects of immigration on the United Kingdom's economy and infrastructure are expected to have a damaging impact on the general acceptance of, and service provision for, minority ethnic people in rural areas.

It is in this context that a small but growing body of literature has begun to address the experiences of minority ethnic groups in rural areas of the United Kingdom (see Jay, 1992; Agyeman & Spooner, 1997; Neal & Agyeman, 2006; Commission for Racial Equality, 2006). This research has made important headway in addressing specifically rural racisms, and it has begun to suggest ways in which racial discrimination in the countryside may be combated and overcome. As the study of rural geographies is a relatively new and underdeveloped discipline, it is unsurprising that there are many gaps in the existing literature. One such gap of particular interest here is the right of Britain's black youth to stake a claim on the British countryside in an attempt to reclaim what is rightfully theirs as an important educational and leisure resource.

Numerous organizations such as CHICKS (Countryside Holidays for Inner City Kids) and schools themselves strongly advocate the importance for young, black, ethnic minority, and underprivileged inner-city children to visit the countryside for valuable learning experiences. However, I contend that such excursions not only provide young black children with important learning opportunities, but that their presence in the countryside plays an important role in heightening the visibility of non-white people in rural areas, and claiming their right to rural space not just as visitors, but as British citizens and school children – the future of Britain.

### Research Questions

The sample of students upon whom this study is based is a group of 25 female year 10 students from a comprehensive school in south-east London. I will accompany them on a five-day residential trip to the Dorset coast where they will collect their own data as part of their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) geography coursework. During the visit, the school group will be based in Swanage where they will carry out some research and spend much of their free time. The demographics of Swanage are of interest here. Statistics from Swanage Town Council show that 97.3% of inhabitants are white, and 2.7% are non-white (this 2.7% is not broken down into sub-categories) ([www.swanage.gov.uk](http://www.swanage.gov.uk)). The ethnic composition of Swanage certainly reflects the idea that the countryside is a predominantly white landscape, and my research will investigate how this affects the students' experiences here.

My initial questions are related to the students' understanding of the countryside in terms of 'whiteness' and multi-ethnicity, and whether they believe that the countryside is a welcoming place for inner-city children. I seek to uncover the black and ethnic minority pupils' feelings about the British

countryside and whether a visit to Dorset evokes any feelings of isolation or heightened visibility as expressed by Ingrid Pollard (1989), who explored these questions through the medium of photography. Pollard, in her series 'Pastoral Interludes', seeks to challenge her personal sense of exclusion from the countryside, and the idea that it is not part of the experience of 'people of colour in Britain' (1989, p. 43). In turn, my investigation seeks to judge the students' experiences of the countryside, their expectations and fears, and the treatment that they receive from local people during their stay in a small Dorset coastal town.

## **Methodologies**

### *Quantitative Data*

I am interested to know how many of the girls have visited the British countryside before, and if so, how many times? Where have they been, and what were their experiences of particular places? This background information will be obtained through a questionnaire prior to the visit to Dorset. It will serve to contextualize my findings, and allow me to understand a little more about their preconceptions, experiences, hopes, and fears about rural Britain.

I will compile two (almost identical) questionnaires; one which will be distributed to the white students and one to the non-white students and those from mixed-race backgrounds (data on students' ethnic origin will be sought before the questionnaires are distributed). A follow-up questionnaire will be distributed after the trip to judge whether the girls' opinions change, having experienced the Dorset countryside first-hand. The girls will complete a section at the end of the second survey to state their ethnic origin.

Specific questions will relate to whether the students felt particularly conspicuous or uncomfortable in any particular locations, whether the local people were friendly towards them, and whether they felt that the area was ethnically diverse or whether the population was predominantly white. The students will also be asked whether they would consider visiting the area again with their family or friends. The purpose of these questions is to ascertain whether they experienced the same feelings of exclusion and isolation as expressed by Ingrid Pollard (1989), or the extent to which they felt welcomed into the locality.

### *Qualitative Data*

In addition to this quantitative data, I seek to collect qualitative data in the form of informal interviews/discussions with individual students related to the countryside, and their feelings regarding race and representation in rural areas. These discussions will be held in a casual manner whereby the students feel able to communicate their feelings openly and in depth. I expect that these conversations will shed more light on the girls' opinions related to the

countryside, race and representation than the questionnaires, though fewer samples will be taken.

I plan to pre-prepare some initial questions for this research, but I do not wish them to be too leading, structured, or 'interrogative'. The aim is to allow the students to talk at their leisure about their experiences and feelings. The conversations will remain casual and unstructured, which will avoid the need to obtain parental consent for more structured interviews.

### **Results/Interpretation**

Results from the initial questionnaire show that of the non-white students, 86% had visited the British countryside before and 14% had not. However, on closer inspection of those who had visited the countryside before, 83% of those visits had been on school trips. It is fair to suggest, therefore, that the majority of the black and ethnic minority students' experiences of the countryside were limited to excursions arranged by the school. There are a number of reasons for why these students have limited experience of the British countryside. Indeed, Agyeman (1989) contends that there are four key factors which explain why people from ethnic minorities are infrequent users of the countryside: culture, economics, time and racism. Firstly, having friends and relatives in the countryside is one key cultural factor that ethnic minority groups often lack (none of the non-white students in this investigation had friends or family in the countryside). In terms of economics, getting out of the city is often difficult for families, and extremely costly. In common with other working-class groups, black and ethnic minority individuals may have little 'free time' to visit the countryside even if they wanted to and, moreover, 'free time' for many urban black and ethnic minority people is devoted to 'intra-community' activities. Finally, racism: many would-be visitors to the countryside are fearful of the potential reaction from local white people (as expressed by a student later in this article).

The students were asked whether or not they felt that the countryside is a welcoming place for people from London. The discrepancy between the answers of the white and non-white groups here is extremely stark. 14% of non-white students compared with 56% of white students thought that the countryside was a welcoming place for them. Some 57% of non-white students felt that it was not welcoming compared with 33% of white students, and 29% of non-white students and 11% of white students answered that they were not sure. There is a pronounced difference between the number of non-white and white students who feel that the countryside is a welcoming place for them. One non-white student answered: 'No [it is not welcoming], they stare at you a lot'. This response demonstrates her discomfort at being considered a 'spectacle' in rural areas – that she is somehow seen as 'out of place'.

The results relating to students' perceptions of the ethnic make-up of rural areas was less conclusive. Of the non-white students, 21% considered the countryside to be more white than ethnically diverse, 14% thought it was more

ethnically diverse than white, and 57% thought that there was an even balance. Of the white respondents, 50% felt that rural areas are more 'white' than ethnically diverse, while 11% thought the opposite was true and 39% believed that there was an even balance. These varied results may be explained by the students' relative lack of experience of the countryside. It is likely that if the students' experiences of the countryside were limited to school trips, they may not have paid undue attention to the people who populated the locality.

However, issues that arose from the informal interviews with a number of students began to shed more light on individual students' feelings related to race and representation in the countryside. On the day of arrival, the students began to take photographs of the local scenery and of each other on the beach. One student, Gabrielle (all names have been changed), refused to join in. Her friends attempted to persuade her to pose in their photograph, to which she responded, 'What? So you can see that I'm the only black person on this beach?' Gabrielle clearly felt a heightened sense of visibility in this landscape away from her familiar urban environment. Later, I asked Gabrielle about how she felt earlier and why she did not want to pose with her school friends in the photograph.

*Interviewer:* Earlier you said to the girls that you stood out as the only black person on the beach.

*Gabrielle:* Yeah, there's no other black people here. They're all white and old.

*Interviewer:* But in the end you did go and join them in the photo.

*Gabrielle:* Yeah.

*Interviewer:* What made you decide to go and join them in the end?

*Gabrielle:* (shrugs)

*Interviewer:* Why do you think that there are not many black people here in this town?

*Gabrielle:* Dunno. I guess you have to be rich to live here innit?

*Interviewer:* I'm not sure.

*Interviewer:* Being one of the few black people here isn't something to be embarrassed about or ashamed about.

*Gabrielle:* I know but they just stare at you.

Gabrielle clearly felt discomfort at being the only black person on the beach at that time and felt embarrassed and unsettled by the local people's undue interest in her. Later in the discussion we talked about how important it was for black and minority ethnic people to stake their claim on the countryside; that she has a right to be there as much as anybody else. Gabrielle suggested that the reason that people stare at her is because there are few non-white people in the area, and that to overcome this, black and minority ethnic groups should be encouraged to visit the countryside.

In the follow-up questionnaire, the data suggests that many of the non-white students felt conspicuous or that they 'stood out' from the rest of the people in Swanage. Some 86% of non-white compared with 54% of white

students said that they felt that they stood out in some way from other people there. Interestingly, however, 100% of the non-white students who spoke to local people as part of their geography research said that residents were friendly and happy to answer their questions. This demonstrates a huge shift in opinion since before the trip; when asked if the countryside is a welcoming place for them, 57% of non-white students answered 'no'.

### **Evaluation/Reflection**

Our surroundings have an important effect on our lives and on our identities and subjectivities. Through culture, customs and language, environments help to shape society as a whole and to mould the individual (Murray, 1995, p. 47). Accordingly, the rural landscape is not merely an aesthetic background to life in the United Kingdom; rather, it is a setting that both expresses and conditions cultural attitudes and activities (Neal & Agyeman, 2006). Rural landscapes act as persuasive vehicles for ideas of inclusion and exclusion; and as such, the landscape becomes a social and cultural product – a set of beliefs projected onto the land.

Prior to the visit, only 14% of the non-white students considered the countryside to be a welcoming place for them. And after the visit 86% of the non-white students felt that they stood out in some way from the rest of the people in Swanage. However, the data shows that this was for a number of reasons – not just 'race' or ethnicity – including accents, 'dressing differently', walking around in large groups, carrying clipboards and cameras; factors associated with being a tourist.

All of the students who spoke to local people during the visit said that the residents were friendly towards them, and happy to answer their questions. Yet, the students still felt that they 'stood out'. This suggests that the non-white students' discomfort was not necessarily based on how local people treated them (except perhaps for being stared at, as cited by Gabrielle). Rather, there is a sense of an overarching assumption that there is some kind of opposition between urban and rural; that the people who live these diametric lifestyles are somehow different. And although the tourist and service industries are the largest sources of income-generation in Swanage, the non-white students felt a strong sense of difference or 'otherness' in this white landscape.

Although people's attitudes towards the students may display increasing tolerance of black and minority ethnic people in the area, some students felt discomfort, suggesting that the visibility of black and minority ethnic people in the area is still extremely low. Nonetheless, this field trip and others like it provide vital learning experiences for inner-city black and ethnic minority children in terms of experiencing hands-on learning, visiting areas outside of their locality, team- and friendship-building, and also relaxing and unwinding (McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993). In the feedback, almost all students said that they enjoyed the scenery and 'peaceful' surroundings. It is important that school groups and students continue to visit rural areas in order to stake a claim on the

countryside as a rightful learning and recreational resource for them. While rural racism is deeply rooted in nationalist and far-right politics, the continued and increasing visibility of non-white students in rural areas will hopefully help to make the countryside a less intimidating space for black and ethnic minority people – and less of a ‘white landscape’.

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