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Making a bad ting good: Hybridity and Authenticity in the BBC's *Rastamouse* children's series

On February 17, 2011, **[SLIDE]** the *Daily Mirror* published an article online called: 'Rastamouse kids TV show sparks racism row.' The unnamed journalist described the eponymous character as a "patois-speaking puppet, who fights crime and spreads love and respect," adding that "he has dreadlocks, a Rasta Tam [which was glossed as a "woolly hat"], rides a skateboard and uses words like 'irie' [which was mistranslated to "happy"] and 'wagwan' [which was glossed to "what's going on?"]."

Rastamouse is an animated stop-motion children's TV series, aired for the first time on 31 January 2011, on CBeebies. The eponymous Rastamouse and Da East Crew (comprised of Scratchy – the girl – on the bass and Zoomer on the Bongos) split their time between solving mysteries for President Wensleydale of Mouseland and playing music at Nuff Song studios.

[CLIP – Da Missing Masterpiece]

The journalist went on to describe the "hundreds of complaints" the series sparked, from parents who feared the programme was "racist and encourage[d] the use of slang." One Mumsnet user was quoted as saying:

> I'm most worried about [my child] saying words like 'Rasta.' [M]y child is white and I feel if she [were] to say this to another child who was not that it would be seen as her insulting the other child.

Calling someone a Rasta is not necessarily offensive, but what this user's concern highlights is that, if these complaints are anything to go by, the British multicultural dream has yet to be fulfilled. Ignorance of black (in this case Rastafari) culture is still widespread and racism, as Salman Rushdie argued some 30 years ago, "is not a side-issue in contemporary Britain…it's not a peripheral minority affair."

In contemporary Britain, cultural difference sells; what appeals to BBC bosses and, apparently, to their young viewers, is Rastamouse's *difference*. "Capital has fallen in love with difference," argued Jonathan Rutherford, and "in the commodification of language and culture, objects and images are torn free of their original referents and their meanings become a spectacle open to almost infinite translation." Translation, as we know, is fraught with difficulties, and it

goes without saying that some meaning has been lost here – perhaps intentionally.

Which makes the following statement (from an unnamed BBC spokesman quoted in the *Daily Telegraph* on February 12, 2011) all the more puzzling. The *Rastamouse* books, he claimed **[SLIDE]**,

> are written in Afro-Caribbean Patois rhyme and this *authentic voice* has been transferred to the TV series to retain its heart, integrity and distinctive quality. […] Although *Rastamouse* has a particular appeal to young Afro-Caribbean children [it is] intended to be enjoyed by all our young viewers, regardless of their backgrounds.

I am uncertain of this spokesman's authority to proclaim *Rastamouse*'s authenticity, or even its 'particular appeal' to young black children. 'Authentic,' as I understand it, is supposed to mean original, first-hand, prototypical. *Rastamouse*, by any stretch of the imagination, is none of these things. In calling it so, the BBC spokesman reflects what Gareth Griffiths called "a larger practice within colonialist discourse [in which] the possibilities of subaltern speech are contained by the discourse of the oppressor, and in which [the] sign of 'authenticity' is an act of 'liberal' discursive violence." This

paper aims to identify how the controversy surrounding *Rastamouse* exposes this discursive violence, by highlighting the manner in which it sustains it.

Levi Roots **[SLIDE]**, the creator of the infamous 'Reggae Reggae Sauce,' refused to voice Rastamouse when asked, because as a practising Rasta he objected to the portrayal of a Rasta as a mouse as "a matter of integrity." Neither would he want to portray a Rasta as a pig, he stated in the *Mirror* (Rastas, like Jews, see pigs as unclean), as he didn't feel either option would serve the values of Rastafari. Were the character a lion, he said, "that would be very different, a lion is a strong symbol in Rastafarianism." While he agreed that, as Rastas do need representation on television, *Rastamouse* should be "given a chance," he maintained that he would not allow any of his children to watch it.

Poet Benjamin Zephaniah was less critical. He conceded in the *Mirror* article that, while it was "not the greatest representation of the community [which community he was referring to is unclear]," "on the whole, I'd rather have Rastamouse that not."

Delroy Constantine-Simms, a self-described 'black occupational therapist' and author of a study of homosexuality in black communities, is perhaps the most searing of professional commentators: "Rastamouse," he said, "is no better than the new sambo – golliwog in drag. No other ethnic group in Britain would allow their religion to be represented by a rodent […] it just would not happen."

Many, including Davina Hamilton, the entertainment editor of *The Voice* newspaper, London (a black Briton of Jamaican parentage), argued that Rastamouse's mission of 'making a bad ting good' is "wholly positive," and should be used as

> an opportunity to encourage broadcasters to create other programmes and dramas that reflect elements of black culture.

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Personally, I do not see black culture (whatever that is) when I see *Rastamouse*. I see the perpetuation of the same lazy and ignorant stereotypes that non-black people have of black culture, recycled and repackaged for children.

The two points of inauthenticity that I would like to outline regarding *Rastamouse* are as follows:

Firstly, speech: this is probably the chief determinant of the characters' 'ethinicity' in the series. While it is obvious that they are mice, not people, and therefore cannot technically have a 'race,' it is also obvious from the online furore that all viewers identify them as 'black.' His language, apparently, is 'black speech' (which, even more problematically, has been associated with 'the street' or 'urbanity' in the minds of most adult viewers), yet simultaneously 'slang' (according to the producers), again implying that it is low, vulgar, and un-English. Neither, of course, is Rastamouse's speech very Jamaican. Zephaniah seems to believe that this is "probably because people wouldn't understand a real [Jamaican accent]" – which would support Constantine-Simms 'golliwog in drag' hypothesis. Whatever this 'slang' is, it is no way an 'authentic voice' (as the BBC would have us believe); it's not English, not Jamaican – it's not even a convincing mixture of the two. **[SLIDE]** Reggie Yates (who now voices Rastamouse) is a Briton of Ghanaian descent, and there is no indication that he underwent any special speech training for the role. Furthermore, there is no shortage of Britons of Jamaican descent in this country – nor of Jamaicans for that matter – from whom the producers could

have selected. Especially in light of Levi Roots' refusal, the failure (or refusal) to find an actual 'authentic voice' is truly baffling.

Secondly, there's religion: while *Rastamouse*'s supporters may argue that the characters make it their mission to spread peace and love and sprinkle their speech profusely with the word 'irie,' this does not Rastafarians make. First and foremost, as we've already discussed, no self-respecting Rasta would portray him or herself as a mouse (given the powerful symbolism of the lion in Rastafari); it just would not be done. Furthermore, without digressing too much, Rastas have, historically, had quite fraught relations with law and order. **[SLIDE]** The creator of the *Rastamouse* books is himself a practising Rasta, who was born in Trinidad; I fail to understand how these two most salient points could have escaped him.

[SLIDE] It could be (and has been) argued that Rastamouse provides a new racial/cultural/linguistic hybrid, which should be celebrated as the future of British culture. I am less optimistic. Hybridity, argue Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, can provide "a means of evading the replication of the binary categories of the past and developing new anti-monolithic modes of cultural exchange

and growth"; if this was the BBC's mission, we still have some way to go. The hybridisation of *Rastamouse* is only partial, one-sided – which is no hybridisation at all. Neither is it multiculturalism.

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"Mainstream Britain," wrote Paul Gilroy in 2002, "has been required to become more fluent in the [idiom] of official multiculturalism, and all parties to this conflict – in spite of their opposed political positions – have come to share an interest in magnifying racial, culture and ethnic differences so that a special transgressive pleasure can be discovered in their spectacular overcoming;" overcoming does not necessarily mean defeating or solving. This 'myth of authenticity' (a phrase I've borrowed from Gareth Griffiths) that *Rastamouse* seeks to perpetuate is a set of processes by which white systems of representation "disavow the possibilities for the hybridised subjects of the colonising process to *legitimise themselves* or to speak in ways which menace the authority of the dominant culture." Nothing is challenged by *Rastamouse*, nothing changed; I doubt there was much consultation with (or consideration for) these 'hybridised subjects,' and the dominant discourse has hardly noticed their presence. True hybridisation is a mutual process, in which all parties have an equal stake; the BBC's *Rastamouse* series is an exercise in domination.

Edward Said argued that "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to cultural imperialism;" in the new national narration of Britain, cultural difference is being elided, not embraced. Stereotyping (camouflaged as 'peace and love') masks the ethnocentricity of liberal universalism, which suggests that, as the Other can never truly be known, we should not bother about his difference; we're all the same now, apparently, but whose same is it? The stereotypes have come to suffice – how 'we' see (and speak) 'them' has become what 'they' *are.*

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So where, you can be forgiven for asking, is the Other in all this? Very few official complaints (in fact, very few responses full-stop) came from black viewers. Among some of the strongest (at least, most recurring) arguments pro *Rastamouse* (including from Reggie Yates himself) is that, before it, there weren't any black characters on children's TV at all, much less positive ones. Saying 'it's better than nothing,' however, can never be enough; instead this speaks to decades if not centuries of disenfranchisement of black people in British discourse. Being legally British still does not guarantee full and active

citizenship[1]. As Amy Gutmann wrote, "we mustn't only be equal under the law, we must also be able to understand ourselves as the authors of the laws that bind us." A troubling trend amongst black commentators in support of *Rastamouse* was that those black viewers who oppose it do so out of shame; Davina Hamilton, in a separate article for *The Voice*, expressed her "sadness" at

> An element of snobbery amongst some black people – particularly Jamaicans – [who] have jumped on the bandwagon of thinking that Jamaican dialect is something to be ashamed of. [S]uddenly, many black viewers started acting as if they'd rather die than be associated with patois.

The debate surrounding whether Jamaican Patois is a 'dialect' or a 'language' notwithstanding, this embarrassment on hearing one's native language shows that the multicultural ideal has not yet been reached. Furthermore, what viewers hear when they watch *Rastamouse* is *not* Jamaican Patois – it is a mockery, a pastiche thereof. I put it to you again that this is not an 'authentic voice' – neither is it a true hybrid.

[SLIDE]

[1] OED: "A member of a state, an enfranchised inhabitant of a country, as opposed to an alien."

The producers of *Rastamouse*, it would appear, have very few misgivings about – or sensitivities to – this systematic under- and mis-representation; likewise their viewers. Pertinent questions, such as 'Who decides what goes on TV?' 'By what criteria?' and 'What or whom do they reflect?' are not being asked (at least not enough). Every artistic product conveys a particular aesthetic (possibly social) vision, and those of *Rastamouse* are not being sufficiently interrogated. If we're all supposed to be the same, or at least full hybrids, why is difference so fervently maintained and so frequently abused?

Most of what we know is not genetic, but comes from the stories we're told. In that case, media and communication technology has much to answer for regarding the formation of social and cultural identity – a responsibility the BBC appears once again to be taking too lightly. Salman Rushdie's argument of 1982 still stands: "British society," he wrote, "has never been cleansed of the filth of imperialism. It's still there, breeding lice and vermin [like *Rastamouse*], waiting for unscrupulous people to exploit it for their own ends." As long as this imperialist attitude prevails, the multicultural ideal is in danger. **[SLIDE]**

‘Multiculturalism’ as an official concept was a product of 1970s Canada and Australia, postcolonial societies that had only recently abandoned their ‘whites only’ immigration policies to consider the racial diversity of their populations. Christian Joppke and Steven Lukes argue that it has two “opposite” versions: the ’Hodgepodge’ version, in which different cultures intermingle and fuse (which is messy, complex, and often occurs within one individual); and the ‘Mosaic’ version, in which distinct cultures simply coexist in structured isolation. Mosaic multiculturalism, they maintain, replicates the “demarcation of modern societies into sharply bounded blocs, each couched in its own monochrome national (or cultural) colour” – this, I would argue, is Britain’s state multiculturalism today.

Closely linked to the concept of multiculturalism (and heavily dependent on media representation) is the ideology of globalisation. Borrowing largely from the economic model, Daniele Conversi places the advent of *cultural* globalisation in the post-war period, but stresses the 1980s as “a time when deregulation of the entertainment industry rapidly accelerated,” and became increasingly dependent on foreign markets for its survival. **[SLIDE]** Representation is vital to the spread of culture, and it would appear in this case to be used as yet another tool of declining empires, sustaining themselves on

overseas markets. For the ideologue, Conversi continues, “globalisation’s largely an integrative process, leading to convergence, efficiency, development and, generally, more harmony.” In reality, however, “the ideology underpins and legitimates the expansion of mega-corporations without any possible restraints except from other, more powerful, mega-corporations,” like the BBC. Globalisation, therefore, has become the new Liberalism, serving to “legitimise the global spread of inequalities and instability.” It has no time for locality, and is yet another exercise in power. As before, how the Other sees himself is of no import – just how the Other is seen by ‘Us.’

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Multiculturalism, at its most radical, appeals to the minority to shake off the shackles of the oppressive majority; it does this while simultaneously appealing to the majority to recognise the minority, so is often unstable. Hybridity (like globalisation) perhaps, is a better cultural model, but can only be a true success when all constituents play on a level field. *Rastamouse* may preach redemption over retribution, but its producers have their hands firmly on the handle, not the blade – one wonders who is redeeming whom.

All of these cultural models, however, as does imperialism, hinge on the notion of authenticity. I see no problem with an appreciation of authenticity, as the 'objective approach,' which would seek to disavow partiality, it also disavows cultural specificity. This approach, argued Orlando Patterson, "is the least objective, because it is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of its object. [It] denies the object which it is supposed to approach objectively." There can be no hybridisation without authenticity; perhaps this should be the new approach of multiculturalism.