Bodies and Voices: Reflections on 'Collisions, Coalitions and Riotous Subjects: The Riots One Year On'

by Harriet Cooper
Birkbeck, University of London

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Introduction

1.1 As soon as I saw the email promoting the conference, 'Collisions, Coalitions and Riotous Subjects: The Riots One Year On', I knew I wanted to attend. I think it was the term 'riotous subjects' that caught my eye: it made me ask, who gets framed as the riotous subject, and who gets away without this epithet? At some level, aren't we all riotous subjects? As Freud tells us, 'men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved [...]; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness' (Freud 1964 [1930]: 111). Yet only some of us are cast as riotous: as Leah Bassel identified in her paper on 'Speaking and Listening: The 2011 English Riots', public debate about the riots has been characterised by the 'binaries of "Us and Them"' (2013). The reflections I offer here will seek to destabilise the rigidity of these binaries through discussion of two key themes from the conference: bodies and voices. I begin by explaining, briefly, how the themes of the conference intersected with my own research interests. Then, comparing the experience of the riotous subject with that of the disabled subject, I will suggest that we need to attend to the ways in which power acts differently on different marginal bodies, polarising them in particular ways. Finally, reflecting on papers presented at the conference by Bassel, Hammersley and others, I consider how, whilst voices can be instrumental in setting up binaries, and in preventing other voices from being heard (Rogers 2013), they can also choose to try to probe, or collapse binaries. But if this is to happen, first of all they have 'to stop talking' (Bassel 2013).

Who gets framed as the riotous subject?

2.1 I was interested in the conference because it promised to discuss marginal subjects, subjects who do not – ordinarily – hold power. It was in this sense that the themes of the conference fitted with my own research. My PhD thesis explores another marginal subject of contemporary culture – the figure of the disabled child. It draws on a wide range of cultural objects and texts, as well as on my own experience of growing up with a physical impairment. At first glance my research topic might appear to be only tangentially related to the themes of the conference. However, as an interdisciplinary researcher who enjoys juxtaposing ideas which do not seem to belong together, I often find that the chance to reflect on events and discourses which are slightly outside of my research area can inject new life into my thinking.

2.2 The first injection of new life came from a series of reflections which the conference provoked about the body and subjectivity. There are major differences in the way in which neoliberal discourse constructs the riotous subject and the disabled subject. The stereotypical rioter is not disabled; the stereotypical disabled person is not a rioter. During the conference I found myself pondering questions including, 'how does power act differently on the body of the rioter and on the body of the disabled child?', 'what is similar and different about these two experiences of being "at the edge"?' and 'what makes one marginal subject a subject of pity, and another a subject of suspicion?'.

2.3 It is a given of neoliberal discourse that to be unable to walk is to be in need. Associated with vulnerability and lacking in agency, the wheelchair user is seen as being at the opposite end of the spectrum from the riotous subject, who is, conversely, one who walks, who acts, who *does*. Where do disabled subjects, who come to enact the stereotype of 'the ones-who-are-unable-to-do', as society expects, put their riotous feelings, for surely they have these kinds of feelings too? By riotous feelings, I mean the feelings of rage and frustration which arise out of the experience of inhabiting a body which is framed, socially and structurally (by the organisation of the built environment, for example), as non-normative. How is it that riotousness only comes to be visible in certain individuals? And why do we prefer to see vulnerability in some people and not in others?

2.4 The psychoanalytic notion of 'splitting' developed by Melanie Klein offers a framework through which

to think these questions: Klein proposes that in early infantile experience, 'good' and 'bad' are located in separate objects (1980 [1946]: 2). Through the Kleinian mechanism of projection, the infant seeks to rid himself of his own angry and destructive feelings, perceiving them instead in another person or object which is then experienced as attacking him (1980 [1946]: 5). When such processes dominate our collective psychic life, certain subjects come to be associated with suspicion and others with pity. This can mean that, as Lisa McKenzie movingly put it at the conference, 'there is a particular person, who, on a particular night, *cannot go out*' (McKenzie 2012; see also Silvestri 2013 and Rogers 2013). McKenzie was referring to the experience of the young black male who is always already 'othered' as criminal. This is a different kind of 'cannot' from that experienced by the wheelchair user who cannot walk: this is the insidious, socially imposed 'cannot' of suspicion which removes the agency of certain raced, classed bodies. We might say that in certain contexts, then, it is far more disabling to inhabit a particular raced, classed body than a physically impaired body. Yet, if we see the process of splitting as responsible for this disablement, we must, by the same token, recognise that the physically impaired subject has been deprived of his 'riotousness'.

Confronting the 'scariness' of difference

3.1 A nuanced identity politics therefore needs to explore how the inscription of difference on the body plays a role in creating different experiences of being peripheral to power. Following Sara Ahmed (2012), we might see this as the uncomfortable work that a term like 'diversity' – adopted by many institutions in recent years (see also Taylor 2012b) – allows us to evade. In her book *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Ahmed explores the discontents of the contemporary cultural attachment to 'diversity', a term which, she suggests, allows institutions to feel comfortable about uncomfortable issues (Ahmed 2012: 66). As Yvette Taylor points out, the "diversity story" of an individual may be of interest to an institution 'for the purposes of [...] marketing' and not in its own right: diversity stories generate revenue (2012a: 258; see also Ahmed 2012). Chandra Mohanty, whom Ahmed quotes, argues that '[d]ifference seen as benign variation [...] bypasses power as well as history to suggest a harmonious, empty pluralism' (Mohanty 2003: 193). The fact that the term 'diversity' is benign is, on the one hand, Ahmed suggests, what makes it palatable to universities and what gives it the power to get 'through people's defenses' (2012: 65–6).

3.2 Yet for Ahmed 'the fact that diversity is not a scary word is part of the problem: if it is detached from scary issues, such as power and inequality, it is harder for diversity to do anything in its travels' (2012: 66). To think about race and disability firstly as markers of divergent embodied experiences, and secondly as signifiers which do different kinds of cultural work in the contemporary world, is scary. And yet it strikes me that this is precisely the kind of 'scariness' that we need to be confronting when we reflect on the riots of August 2011. If, as Ahmed contends, the concept of diversity leads to 'the aestheticization of color' [sic] and the aestheticisation of difference more generally, we need to respond with a return to politics, by invoking power and history, as Mohanty does (Ahmed 2012: 69).

Seeing bodies, hearing voices

4.1 By attending to voices, we can re-introduce a political dimension into diversity's rather flattened, 'benign' representation of embodied difference. Bodies are a starting point, but not necessarily an end point. The voices which reside inside bodies might say something different – something unexpected. My body, for example, might seem to say, at first glance, 'yes, I'm able-bodied, like you'. My voice, however, could tell you that 'I have a physical impairment, but I'm quite good at disguising it'. I'm neither one thing, nor the other – these binaries do not really work for me. Except, of course, that whatever my embodiment, I have been shaped by the binary thinking of the dominant order, so the binaries still operate *on* me whilst not working *for* me. Ahmed's description of 'inhabiting whiteness' as a person of colour captures how it feels not to be physically represented within the dominant order, and how it becomes necessary to close off from the painful knowledge that one is not represented: you 'learn not to see how you are not reflected back by what is around' (2012: 35). If we want to challenge binary thinking, we need to be able to speak about the particularity of embodied experience, and we need to be able to listen to others when they tell us how it feels 'not to be reflected back'.

The labour of listening

5.1 The conference provoked thought about voices, and about speaking and listening. Who gets to contribute to the public discourse about the riots? Which voices get heard? What kinds of binaries are reinstated when we fail to listen? As many of the speakers observed, everyone has wanted to have their say about how we 'read' the riots. What is the role of the academic in this debate? In his paper, Martyn Hammersley posed helpful questions in relation to this thorny issue: '[w]hat differences are there between the contributions of social scientists and those of *non*-social scientists, including politicians, to public discussion of the riots?', he asked. In a world in which the boundary between the social sciences and the public sphere is 'porous' or even 'non-existent', what claim can sociology make to provide authoritative explanations (Hammersley 2012)? Hammersley's paper left us with a fascinating proposition – that there may be a difference between social science contributions and those from politicians and others, but that it is 'lost in translation, as social science findings are turned into public discourse'. Hammersley asked whether this was 'inevitable, or produced by distortion of the public sphere'. His question reminded me of Les Back's observation in *The Art of Listening*, that

[i]n the world of reality TV, tough moral certainties produce a kind of auction of authoritarianism that is pervasive not only in popular media but also in political debates. In a sense, one of the values of the kind of sociological listening I want to argue for is the importance of living with doubt in the service of understanding, of trying to grapple with moral complexity (Back 2007: 14–15).

If academics have a role to play in 'reading the riots' it seems to me that theirs is to practise 'attentive listening' (Back 2007: 19). Academia seeks to get behind and beyond the "sound bite", to avoid reductionism and to manage the anxiety associated with complexity and multiplicity of meaning (Back 2007: 16).

5.2 Further reflections on listening emerged in Leah Bassel's paper. Reporting on the outcomes of a conference in November 2011 to discuss the media's representation of the riots, Bassel spoke with conviction about the potential for 'political listening' which this event had facilitated, whilst simultaneously warning against 'starry-eyed optimism' (Bassel 2013). Bassel was clear that we must not underestimate how demanding this kind of listening can be. To emphasise this, Bassel invoked the work of Susan Bickford, whose characterisation of political listening distinguishes it from other kinds of listening, which are often associated with 'empathy and compassion' (Bickford 1996: 2). For Bickford, '[p]olitical listening is not primarily a caring or amicable practice', given its 'conflictual context' (1996: 2). Nevertheless, political listening is based on a fundamental respect for the positions of both self and other: Bickford mobilises Merleau-Ponty's notion that the perception of a foreground figure necessarily takes place against a background, to argue that in 'active listening' the self is never erased, but momentarily becomes part of the background (1996: 21, see also 22–4 and Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1962]).

5.3 In a fascinating paper which explored the tendency of public discourse to position rather than to 'listen' to the riots, Heather Nunn and Anita Biressi observed that the riots have been cast as a-political, as the 'lifestyle choice' of a so-called 'feral underclass' (see also Tyler 2013). The events of August 2011 have been constructed in opposition to earlier moments of civil unrest, such as the Brixton riots, which can safely be described as political now that they are unthreateningly historical (Nunn & Biressi 2012). The 2011 riots, however, are not allowed to be anything other than 'meaningless' (Nunn & Biressi 2012). Nunn and Biressi's paper, as well as subsequent discussions with others on this theme, led me to consider the following questions: how do we define the 'political' and the 'a-political'? How are these terms policed? And what are the ethics of speech acts which attribute meaning, or meaninglessness, to events?

Conclusion: speaking, listening and holding different voices in mind

6.1 In order to guard against committing this kind of ethical violence, I think we need a conception of listening as 'difficult' (Bickford 1996: 3). Listening must be regarded as a form of *labour*: a labour of juggling the foreground and the background, a labour of keeping all voices in play and erasing none. I suspect, furthermore, that before we begin to do this kind of listening in the public sphere, we need to be able to do it in the psychic realm too – we need to be able to listen to the parts of ourselves that we find most objectionable, rather than 'splitting' these off from conscious awareness and recognising them only when we hear them in the voice of the other (Klein 1980 [1946]).

6.2 At the conference I felt very conscious of wanting to listen, and this desire remains. I felt, moreover, very conscious of being a privileged, white middle class woman. It seemed – and still seems – that, from my position of privilege, it would be inauthentic of me to 'speak', to claim to know about the events of August 2011. The question of who speaks, and for what purpose, is an important one. As Bassel observed, it is vital that the riots do 'not generate a "land grab" mentality where academics – including myself – scramble to appropriate these events' (2013). To what extent are we all – myself included – spinning academic capital for ourselves by speaking about the events of August 2011 (Bassel 2013)? A repugnant and sobering thought! This is not to say, however, that what we say has no value if it is also bound up in a process of academic advancement – as such processes are inevitable for anyone who publishes their work. It is rather that we must not be complacent about what we do: Ahmed reminds us that 'the presumption of our own criticality can be a way of protecting ourselves from complicity' (2012: 5). We must examine ourselves as we speak, know our motives for speaking and the position from which we speak. We must know both what we are able to say, and what we are not. I know that I can speak of the oppression which follows from the cultural framing of particular bodies, and particular voices, in binary terms. I know that I want to explore strategies for unpicking these binaries. However I also know that I cannot speak authoritatively about the English riots of August 2011. It is for these reasons that, although in this paper I have offered some reflections on bodies and voices, I still feel that in the context of this Special Issue, I must remain primarily a listener rather than a speaker.

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