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Douglas, Kitrina (2023) “There Was An Old Lady, She’s Dead”: Reflections on Britishness,
Englishness, and What We Do Well. *Cultural Studies: Critical Methodologies*, 23 (6).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/15327086231196306>

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“There Was An Old Lady, She’s Dead”: Reflections on Britishness, Englishness, and What We Do Well

Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies
2023, Vol. 23(6) 520–523
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DOI: 10.1177/15327086231196306
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Kitrina Douglas¹ 

Abstract

Disturbed and distanced by the media’s entrenched narrative that a funeral and pageantry is what we do well (in the United Kingdom), this performance uses the framing of the children’s rhyme, *I know an old lady who swallowed a fly* to interrogate social identities through aspects of culture that cements a vision of Britain that is archaic, hegemonic, elitist, and upholds a class system alongside lesser well-known values that tell a different story.

Keywords

Britishness, social identities, Queen Elizabeth II funeral

I. Coffee Shop, Champaign Urbana, USA 2023

I like coffee first thing in the morning and space to write so I stop at the nearest coffee shop. It has just opened, and I’m the only customer.

“What you having honey?”

“Small coffee, no milk please”

I watch her inserts the porta filter into the espresso machine and press a button. As the coffee begins to drip, she turns and asks,

“Where are you from?”

“Portishead” I say, recognising the devil in me is trying to confuse her.

“No! I mean what country are you from?”

“England” I offer. I could have said the United Kingdom (but is it?) or Great Britain (but have come to question assumptions of greatness)

“Oh I love London” She says.

I don’t, and decide to keep quiet.

“I’m from Scotland” she offers. Now I smile and think, no you’re not.

In the everydayness of life, and the micro conversational snippets that bring people together, I am placed and displaced by the expectations others hold about my country and by the pills I and others swallow about who we are and what it means.

Seldom is there ever any animosity directed toward me by for *being* English (while in the United States at least), but the expectations people seem to hold (here) about “Englishness” often raises the prickly dimensions of my being. I feel am not what I am assumed to be. My country, as other’s know it, doesn’t seem to fit with my experiences. My prejudices, in turn, are brought to the fore when others claim their right to *be* from, for example, Scotland or Ireland, as I wonder which bits of “being” from there, are they are claiming?

In Scotland, people have a lovely turn of phrase when enquiring about where someone is from, they ask, “where do you stay.” Hidden for me in “Where do you stay” is the possibility of ancestors who have moved.

Typically, conversations are all pleasant, but they are just snippets, all finished in 60 seconds. This makes it difficult to have a deeper conversation, or gain a more complex understanding or have time to disagree in ways that aren’t offensive or oppositional.

This year, however, I’m writing my piece for Bryant’s panel based on the old lady who swallowed a fly, and the niceties of a morning conversation provoke me. Ah yes, I know an old lady who swallowed [. . .]

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2. Consequences

I know an old lady who swallowed a birth right,
 I don't know why she swallowed that right, perhaps she'll die
 I know an old lady who swallowed tradition,
 that wriggled, ensnared and entwined inside her,
 She swallowed tradition to keep the birth right,
 But I don't know why she swallowed that right, perhaps she'll
 die
 I know an old lady who swallowed duty, it comes with booty,
 and folks who are snooty,
 She swallowed her duty to go with tradition
 She swallowed tradition to keep her birth right
 But I don't know why she swallowed a birth right

We interrupt this rhyme: She's dead
 Died last year, you may have known her, or thought you did.

3. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Is what it reads on my passport
 Who are we anyway?

Another childhood rhyme
 England Ireland Scotland and Wales
 all tied up in the donkey's tails
 if we are so tied up
 why so much talk about division

The women making me coffee knew a lot about England,
 the weather, London, and she was so enthusiastic when she
 said,

"I loved your Queen"

I'm not sure I did, although over time, I have found myself
 respecting this woman who was 96 years of age when she
 died. And with Bryant's call, I'm thinking about what she
 would have swallowed across her life time. Possibly her
 pride? Hope of privacy? The chance of being out of the
 spotlight? Tradition? I'm not sure what else she swallowed,
 but it was probably a hell of a lot because she lived for a
 long time.

We interrupt this programme
 It is always serious when the BBC THE British Broadcasting
 Corporation
 interrupt a programme, the
 Monarch, Head of State, Head of the Commonwealth
 has died

Six days of lying-in-state followed the announcement of
 her death, with her children keeping vigil by the coffin.
 When I heard what they were doing I thought wow, keep-
 ing vigil. I wonder, should I have done that for my
 mother?

4. You English are so fair

Snaking its way along Albert Embankment, Southwark
 Park, Belvedere Road, passing the London Eye, the National
 Theater, the Tate Modern, HMS Belfast, and along the
 River Thames, was the line. An orderly queue to walk past
 the coffin.

Why do we British always form an orderly queue?

Perhaps this is where our Britishness (or is it Englishness)
 comes out, our fairness barometer. We form an orderly queue
 because it is fair to everyone, wealthy, poor, well known,
 less well known, and fairness is important. But seldom does
 anyone I order coffee from say, "Oh you English are so fair,
 always rooting for the underdog." Strangers most often men-
 tion the Queen and the royal family, or the fog.

There were some reports in the news about a few politi-
 cians using their privilege to queue jump. But alongside
 these exposés were stories about well-known people stand-
 ing in line with ordinary folk. Like David Beckham, whose
 net worth (by the way) from playing football, modeling
 underpants, and waxing the inside of his thigh, is £450 mil-
 lion. He was among those waiting 12 hours in line, and in
 the process having a joke and a laugh with everyone around
 him. When asked why he was waiting he said, "it brings
 people together, we are eating Pringles, sherbert lemons,
 sandwiches, coffee and doughnuts." The group appeared to
 be having a great time, like they were queuing for the cup
 final or a party, rather than to file past a coffin. Maybe this
 is also what being British or English is too, we never waste
 an opportunity to make people laugh, to bring out the com-
 edy while creating a social response.

5. To watch or not to watch

To my sister: Are you watching?
 No, are you?
 NO!

To my niece: Are you watching
 No, are you?

Following vigils, the lying in state, lines, and queues, there
 was the funeral. I wondered, can I not watch? I speak with
 my sister, her daughter, friends, no one is interested in the
 funeral.

I am in France when the funeral takes place, where the
 coverage takes center stage in all the main news media who
 carry front cover and double page spreads and live coverage
 on French TV.

But, it's a sunny day and I want to be outside. Like many
 people from the United Kingdom, I have no love of monar-
 chy. We wonder, do they anchor us to a United Kingdom
 that is out of step, and out of date, that doesn't reflect 21st-
 century England, or the diverse people within it?

My curiosity about the event and those who are watching and attending is provoked though, and aware of the different narratives that clash about monarchy, I begin to read some of the newspaper reports too. 750,000 people were predicted to travel to London for the state funeral with 3,000 military being in attendance. In London, 1 million people were reported to have watched the funeral on TV, but that leaves 7 million Londoners who didn't. Reportedly, across the United Kingdom, 29 million people watched the funeral on TV, which meant 50 million chose to do something else. The way it was reported, in contrast, made it seem as if everyone watched, didn't it? Did you think everyone was watching?

This wasn't just a U.K.G.B. phenomenon; 5.1 billion people were reported to have watched the funeral worldwide, so Elizabeth must have done something right, RIGHT? I wonder how does what these 5 billion people saw, as they watched the coverage, cement a vision of us that is archaic, hegemonic, elitist, and upholds a class system?

As I switch on the TV the French journalist says, "l'adieu" [goodbye]. The camera pans to arriving dignitaries

Boris Johnson
David Cameron
Gordon Brown
Tony Blair
John Major

They are scheduled in batches with more French conversation in between, filling the space. Then comes our disastrous Prime Minister for 49 days, Liz Truss.

The camera moves on to family, dukes, and duchesses and other faces I don't know; I barely know the names of the children of the old lady, and don't know the names of the future King's children, what do we have in common?

The camera takes a broad view and along with the black demeanour and clothing I notice color, red tunics and uniforms, and medals on chests.

6. United or Divided?

The woman serving me coffee, like many people outside the United Kingdom, failed to grasp how different England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales are, or the depth of hate that exists in some places for the English.

For the record, Scotland is not part of England, folk music is not Scottish or Irish.

Already before Elizabeth II died, questions were festering about the commonwealth and colonialism.

Many Scots and Welsh would like nothing more than to be separate from England, stung by a feeling that the English are still meddling in their way of life and their right to choose what laws to pass in their countries. A few weeks before the funeral, the British Government vetoed the Scottish Government's Gender Reform Bill, which would have reduced the age a person could apply for a gender recognition certificate and would have removed the need for a medical diagnosis and evidence of having lived for 2 years in their acquired identity.

7. "No! That is not what we do well"

The pipes start, and I'm moved
The drums roll
Movement
A slow pace
Flat hats on ratings
Royal navy blue
Sombre
The burkas in red
A flag
A coffin wit crown on a purple cushion
Gold hats
Highlanders in kilts
One two
One two

I switch channels and pick up the English commentary
"This is what we do well" the commentator says. REALLY? I think.
Eight Grenadier Guards pick up the lead lined coffin
It's heavy
A bead of sweat
Forms, and traces the brow,
The bearer's face is mute

There is a sadness to death
That calls respect
And I am drawn to watch
Just for a bit,
Is this my duty?

What comfort in music I know, and dislike
Choral, high pitched notes
That only the few can reach
Well, that's not strictly true, is it?
That only the special are called on to voice

I notice it's all men choristers
Still all, and
Young boys,
Beautiful white skin
The other side of tradition,
The church, Monarchy
Perhaps

Can you cry
 Shed a tear
 Are we still holding back, is the famous stiff upper lip
 quivering?
 I wonder should I opt out of this bit of my country because I
 don't believe in Monarchy?
 Because I have nothing in common with this particular old
 lady, or her family and the stuff they have been swallowing

Forgive me
 My dubious and drastic measures
 This family are not the cure

If this is what we do well, then this is not only what we do well,
 Pomp
 Glory
 Weddings & Funerals
 They are not the antidote

We do music
 Drama
 We do Culture
 We do Art
 We tell Stories
 All undervalued in current climate
 We stand in queues because its fair
 Share pringles with strangers while making jokes
 Create a National Health Service
 We support the underdog
 This is the Britain, I know

8. And then, a moment of reprieve

In with all that I feel is different, and all that I feel conveys
 the wrong message about our country; and in with all that I
 dislike about monarchy, suddenly, I find common ground
 with the old lady. It arrives in a moment of sentimentality.

She didn't swallow a horse, like the woman in the original
 rhyme had; she rode them. For the past 15 years, it was
 one particular animal that would take her across Windsor
 Great Park, a pony called Emma. Their final ride together
 took place in July, only a couple of months before Elizabeth's
 death.

A lone man stands with Emma watching the funeral cortege
 pass by.

It's Terence Pendry, the Queen's groom, holding the
 reins of the pony. Elizabeth had worried that Emma would
 miss her, or wonder where she had gone. So, 15 years after
 they first began hacking out together, she asked that after
 her death, Emma be brought out to watch her pass by en
 route to her final resting place. She believed the pony would
 understand death, and why she would never return. She
 believed the pony would understand and sense what was
 happening, and she cared about it.

Sensitivity, emotional connection, and concern for the
 living, concern that extends to a little pony. This is what we
 do well.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Bryant Keith Alexander for his provocation
 and support for both the panel and my contribution.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with
 respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this
 article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research,
 authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Kitrina Douglas is a video/ethnographer, storyteller, songwriter,
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