

## Race, Gender, and National Identity in the American and British Telephone Industries\*

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**SUMMARY:** This article compares the racially heterogeneous, privately-owned American telephone industry, and the relatively homogeneous, publicly-owned British system, to examine how race and gender constructions implicit in the national identities of the two countries influence employment opportunities. For all the differences in the histories of the two telephone industries and variations in the construction of racial, national, and gender identities, blacks in the United States and Britain had remarkably similar experiences in obtaining employment as telephone operators. This leads to the conclusion that the power of national identity in the workplace is strongly based on “whiteness”. Despite their limited access to national identity, white women experienced advantages that were denied to black women, which illustrates how race modified the impact of gender on the privileges of national identity.

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Scholarly debates about national identity and nationalism generally explore definitions; ethnic, religious, political, or economic origins; perpetuation; state relations, and contributions to armed conflicts.<sup>1</sup> When gender is considered, often these writings analyze the association of men with political and economic power and women with tradition, moral, and spiritual matters.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, studies of women in the workplace evaluate the number of male jobs women assume during wartime, and/or

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1. For examples, see Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY, 1983); E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990); Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (New York, 1990); Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London, 1991); Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* (New York, 1993); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edn (London, 1995).

2. For example, Anne McClintock, *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Post Colonial Perspectives* (Minneapolis, MN, 1997); Cynthia Cockburn, *The Space Between Us* (London, 1998); Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London, 1997); Fiona Wilson, *Ethnicity, Gender, and the Subversion of Nationalism* (London, 1995); Margaret Randolph Higonnet et al. (eds), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven, CT, 1987).

how workplace segregation contributes to building the nation.<sup>3</sup> Usually, these discussions conclude in widespread agreement over the idea that national identity is both gendered and racialized.<sup>4</sup> My larger investigation of telephone workers in the American Bell System and my preliminary examination of British records support this conclusion.<sup>5</sup> The research has revealed that race and gender constructions implicit in national identity significantly influence employment opportunity in telephone industry workplaces. The concept of “whiteness” has emerged as a significant tool of analysis for the study of multiple identities in labor history.<sup>6</sup> Theoretically, “whiteness” is a system of privileges and advantages based on socially-constructed definitions of gender and race which place people of color at the bottom of social, political, and economic structures of Western societies. In the workplace, managers are better able to control white workers by appealing to their common backgrounds, and threatening to include the excluded groups if there is labor unrest. Hypothetically, white workers accept and perpetuate these socially-constructed identities in exchange for higher positions in the occupational hierarchy, and the “psychological” and economic rewards they receive as a consequence of racial exclusivity.<sup>7</sup> Without addressing workers’ direct participation in this schema, I would like to interrogate this paradigm by comparing the impact of national identity on employment in the racially heterogeneous,

3. See Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War* (London, 1981); Arthur Marwick, *Women at War* (London, 1977); Maurine Weiner Greenwald, *Women, War, and Work: The Impact of World War I on Women Workers in the United States* (Westport, CT, 1981); Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Urbana, IL, 1987); Paul V. Kellogg and Arthur Gleason, *British Labor and the War* (New York, 1972).

4. Examples are Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London, 1995); Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Male Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (Chicago, IL, 1996); Susan Kent Kingsley, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton, NJ, 1993); Nicole Ann Dombrowski, *Women and War in the 20th Century: Enlisted With or Without Consent* (New York, 1999); Ruth Roach Pierson and Nupur Chaudhuri (eds), *Nation, Empire, Colony* (Bloomington, IN, 1998); Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era* (Ithaca, NY, 1997); Kenneth Lunn (ed.), *Race and Labour in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 1985).

5. Venus Green, *Race on the Line: Gender, Labor and Technology in the Bell System, 1880–1980* (Durham, NC, 2001). The Bell System included the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, Western Electric, Bell Laboratories and twenty-two associated companies until the government forced it to divest in 1984.

6. Albeit subtle, I want to make a distinction between racism, a term used to denote disadvantage and denial of privilege, and “whiteness” as a system that grants privileges and advantages as I outline below. These terms are not used interchangeably.

7. W.E.B. DuBois first outlined this theory in *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York, 1935). In the last decade, David R. Roediger has reinvigorated the discussion of this theory. See Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991), and *idem, Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London, 1994).

privately-owned American telephone industry, and the relatively homogeneous, publicly-owned British system.<sup>8</sup> Essentially, I will explore how “whiteness” can function as a dimension of national identity, and as an autonomous variable interacting with and shaping multiple identities.

Telephone operators are an excellent group for this kind of study because business and state imperatives have often necessitated a restructuring of their public image, employment qualifications, and wages. The American and British telephone industries have a history of government/private ownership and gender-segregated work which makes them ideal for an analysis of the feminization and/or masculinization of work; how state control and war policies affect employment opportunities; and, the dynamism among multiple identities. For example, during the first years of telephony, American and British male operators experienced the integration of women into the operating forces. American managers transformed their operator workforce from rambunctious young boys to gracious young women as a method of defeating the competition. British sources point to wages as the most important explanation for hiring women in the British system, whereas the American system paid men and women the same low wages. Unlike the British, the maintenance of low wages for American telephone operators became a managerial priority after the ascendance of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T) monopoly. Males continued as operators in the British system well after World War II, but American telephone operators were virtually all women by World War I. Americans constructed a specific racial “identity” around the native-born white female operators, whereas the British operators’ identity incorporated both racial and national identities for men and women. The American “white lady” operator identity excluded the employment of African Americans for nearly three generations. In Britain, people from the colonized world were either completely barred or segregated into sections of the workplace that required foreign languages. However, strong national identity permitted a male model among the British “telephonists” and neutralized any threat to their masculinity.

It is not my intent to enter here the debate over the nature, theory and origins of nationalism, nor to offer a definitive theory about the interaction between “whiteness” and national identity. Nevertheless, I will posit that for black people, “whiteness” further constricts the already narrow boundaries inherent in racialized national identities. Indeed, “whiteness” significantly alters the meanings and benefits of national identity for people of color regardless of how color is defined, configured, or reconfigured over time. American and British racial designations amply illustrate this point.

8. Although several private companies provided telephone services in Britain, they received their licenses from the Post Office. In 1912, the entire system was nationalized. The 1984 Telecommunications Bill began the process of reprivatizing the British telephone service.

Most observers agree that “black” as a racial description in the United States is confined to people of African descent, whereas in Britain “black” designates both people of African and Asian descent. African-American citizenship has not been a question since the addition of the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution in 1868. However, citizenship for former British subjects from the West Indies (Indo-Caribbeans and Afro-Caribbeans), India, Pakistan and Africa has been a hotly contested status, especially since mass immigration into Britain from these places after World War II. The 1914 British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act and the 1948 British Nationality Act confirmed the status of these groups as part of the British nation (subjects of the Crown), but they did not confer “Britishness” or “whiteness” upon them. Kathleen Paul argues that “in the case of the British Empire, racialization produced a hierarchy whereby British and European populations or races were regarded as superior to African and Asian”.<sup>9</sup> And, even more important, class, gender, and race divisions “within a theoretically universal subjecthood suggest competing definitions and communities of Britishness which reflect separate spheres of nationality: an inclusive formal nationality policy and an exclusive informal national identity”. Finally, evoking Benedict Anderson, she asserts that “the informal national identity imagined a [...] community of ‘Britishness’ which included only white residents of the United Kingdom and privileged middle- and upper-class men within that”.<sup>10</sup>

This line of reasoning has enormous merit, but I would add that it is not merely the exclusion of black people from the entitlements of national identity, but the advantages and privileges conferred by and expected from “whiteness” (which follows no class distinctions) that makes a larger difference for people of color wherever they happen to reside. It is the inability of blacks to access “whiteness” that most profoundly affects their employment opportunities. Nuances in the construction of ethnic/racial/national/gender identities are important for the study of the complexity of human existence, and in building alliances for making social change. Recognition of competition and antagonisms among excluded groups does not necessarily undermine united action directed toward the goal of “economic justice” for everyone.<sup>11</sup>

9. Paul, *Whitewashing Britain*, p. 13.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

11. See the introduction by Valentine M. Moghadam and other essays in *idem* (ed.), *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective* (Boulder, CO, 1994) for a summary of the theories about identities in competition and the relegation of “questions of economic justice, [...] to the background”, p. 3. The essays show how economic conflict is often at the core of “identity politics” in a number of countries. Winston James has argued that British racism contributed to breaking down intraracial hostilities. Antagonisms between blacks of African and Asian descent have been more difficult to resolve; see Winston James, “Migration, Racism and Identity Formation: The Caribbean Experience in Britain”, in Winston James and Clive Harris (eds), *Inside Babylon: The Caribbean Diaspora in Britain* (London, 1993).

However, as we look for differentiation, we must be careful to avoid false distinctions that can result from becoming too occupied with difference and variation. A return to the study of outcome beckons. Literally, as well as figuratively, skin color (white and black) continues to have significance, despite variation and/or discontinuity in definitions of gender, race and national identity. Obviously, exclusion results, but in this article I intend to go beyond labor-market segmentation explanations to query the leverage of appeals to national identity on demands for employment rights. The workplace is a dynamic site where shifting notions of national identity constantly transform and are transformed by race and gender. Different identities can shape the outcome of claims for employment rights. Simultaneously, “whiteness” can independently influence the responses to such demands. For instance, European immigrants to the United States and to Britain obtained unique employment opportunities based on their ability to attain “whiteness”, even when they could not achieve the respective national identities. Governments are not merely observers of the labor market, they establish and administer policies that modify the impact of multiple identities and “whiteness” in the workplace. The World Wars and the interwar years were periods of audacious nationalism when workers fought for their countries and assumed that there would be rights and privileges for doing so. This paper evaluates whether or not this was an appropriate assumption by focusing on access to the telephone operator’s job in the United States and Britain.

#### THE OPERATOR’S IMAGE

During the early years of the telephone industry, when equipment was unreliable and service poor, American telephone executives replaced boys with young women who were expected to deliver helpful, efficient, confidential, and above all, courteous service. Known for beer drinking, boy operators had cursed and on occasion physically fought with customers. According to one AT&T chief engineer, these boy operators “were not old enough to be talked to like men [...] not young enough to be spanked like children” and were “but a little lower than the wild Indian!”<sup>12</sup> Katherine M. Schmitt, one of the first women operators, concurred: “As I listened to them I used to think that all the Indians had not yet left Manhattan.”<sup>13</sup> The feminization of telephone operating

12. John J. Carty, quoted by R.T. Barrett in Cecil W. MacKenzie, “Early Days of Telephone in Buffalo, 1878–1926”, typescript, p. 29, AT&T Archives, Box 1127.

13. Katherine M. Schmitt, “I Was Your Old ‘Hello’ Girl”, *The Saturday Evening Post*, 12 July 1930, p. 121.

required a shift from this near savage nonwhite male image to a civilized, white female ideal.<sup>14</sup>

Drawing on contemporary racial ideology, managers constructed the ideal telephone operator as a woman who conformed to nineteenth-century notions of virtue and piety: a “lady”. B.E. Sunny, General Superintendent at the Chicago Telephone Company, thought it especially important “to get girls of the right character”, and “to keep the standard of intelligence and morality high”.<sup>15</sup> In conformity with these goals, one large telephone company rejected 2,229 of 6,152 applicants in 1910. Among those found unacceptable were eleven Jews who refused to work holidays, ninety women with accents, and seven “colored” women.<sup>16</sup> English, Irish, and Canadian immigrants often found employment in the Bell System, but unacceptable accents banished other foreigners. This highly selective personnel policy reinforced the carefully cultivated image of the telephone operator and insured the selection of specific white women as operators up to the World War II era.

Even though race was the “defining” characteristic, rigorous written and physical examinations ensured that the “lady” operator possessed other qualifications as well. The majority of operators were young, single, native-born white women who lived with their parents.<sup>17</sup> Other necessary

14. For the feminization of telephone operating as a method of winning over subscribers, see Venus Green, “The Impact of Technology Upon Women’s Work in the Telephone Industry, 1880–1980” (Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, NY, 1990) and *idem*, *Race on the Line*. Other studies of telephone operators include Greenwald, *Women, War, and Work*; Stephen H. Norwood, *Labor’s Flaming Youth: Telephone Operators and Worker Militancy, 1878–1923* (Urbana, IL, 1990); and Michele Martin, “Hello Central?”: *Gender, Technology, and Culture in the Formation of Telephone Systems* (Montreal, 1990).

15. E. Sunny at the 1887 Switchboard Conference, p. 207.

16. US Congress, Senate, *Investigation of Telephone Companies*. S. Doc. 380, 61st Congress, 2nd session, 1910, p. 20. The largest groups of women rejected included those who were too small (544), too old (53), too young (436), insufficient education (519), and poor appearance (169). Doctors only refused one for hearing but excluded 151 for poor sight, and 43 for physical defects. Six applicants refused vaccination, eighty-two had poor voices, seven refused night work, thirty-six were not willing to wait, and seventy-four others were rejected for miscellaneous reasons.

17. In 1900, 93.7 per cent of the 21,980 telegraph and telephone operators were native white women with native born parents (54.6 per cent) or foreign-born parents (39.1 per cent). Over two-thirds (71.7 per cent) of them were between sixteen and twenty-four years old. Another 22.2 per cent were between twenty-five and thirty-four years of age. Single women (92.7 per cent), who lived with one or both parents or some other relative, were most likely to be telegraph and telephone operators. The 1900 census gives family living arrangements by selected cities, not by national numbers. Of 506 operators (480 single) employed in Boston, one of the largest cities, 421 lived with a parent or some other relative, seventy-nine were boarding or living with their employers, and only six were heads of families living alone. This pattern was followed in other places as well; US Bureau of the Census, *Statistics of Women at Work* (Washington DC: GPO, 1907), pp. 34, 168, 222. Although telegraph operators are included with telephone operators, women telegraph operators were really very few in number at this time. The census data is used to show trends not exact numbers.

attributes included ordinary intelligence, a pleasant English speaking voice, clear handwriting, an attractive clean appearance, good health, hearing and eyesight, an even temperament, and a minimum five-foot height requirement.<sup>18</sup> Company literature emphasized that operators were sometimes the only contact subscribers had with the company. Therefore, operators' training focused on "pleasing", "obliging", and courteous "voice expression".<sup>19</sup> American telephone industry managers went to great lengths to guarantee that telephone operators matched the social as well as the physical characteristics of the "white lady" image.

I have not found evidence of British efforts to create the "white lady" image. During the early years of the British telephone service, the racial aspect of the model telephone operator image was insignificant because so few nonwhites lived in Britain, there was a "national" origin requirement, and foreign accents purged many white and black immigrants.<sup>20</sup> British subjects (including Irish, Scottish and Welsh) who were not eliminated by these qualifications worked in the postal service in their respective countries and in England.

However, there is an abundance of evidence to support the proposition that the British wanted their operators to possess characteristics remarkably similar to those of Americans. In an article entitled "The Selection and Training of Operators", a central office matron described how she selected a potential operator: "Girls who speak clearly and distinctly, with a well-modulated voice, who are well educated, and have a bright, pleasant manner and smart appearance should be satisfactory, and much may be gathered as to character and disposition by a few questions at a personal interview."<sup>21</sup> She also preferred young "applicants from sixteen to eighteen years of age" for "it is better that they should have had no previous business experience or training, as they are more adaptable and more easily moulded into what is required of an operator, and this is more likely at sixteen than seventeen"<sup>22</sup> Instructions in "patience" and "civility" abound, especially with regard to the importance of building a first-rate service in Britain. Notice for example, the glaring nationalism in the following attempt to encourage a spirit of competition among operators:

Is there any reason, I ask, why England, a country so far advanced in commercial enterprise, should be behind any other country in the matter of telephone

18. McBride, quoted at the Traffic Conference, 1905, pp. 40–41.

19. J.L. Turner, "The Art of Expression as Applied to the Work of the Telephone Operator", *Telephone Review*, 2 (1911), pp. 236–238.

20. During the 1910s, application forms asked if one's father was a "natural born" British subject, whereas after World War II, the applicant could be a "naturalized" British citizen.

21. Mrs. B.M. Peters (Matron, Glasgow), "The Selection and Training of Operators", *The National Telephone Journal*, 1 (1907), p. 134.

22. *Ibid.*

service? The practical answer to this question, I feel sure, lies very largely in the hands of our operators. I do not hesitate to say that if the telephone is to be, it must be the aim of every operator individually, and of the whole operating staff collectively, to instill in each subscriber such implicit confidence in those upon whom he depends for his telephone service, that in any time of need or doubt he can safely fly to his telephone, assured that if help can come from that source it will be promptly forthcoming.<sup>23</sup>

As in America, in Britain, there was an assumption that women were responsible for delivering the world's best telephone service, and that they would deliver it to men. Although the service was delivered in the "public sphere", women workers achieved their national identity by supporting and serving men, as they did through marriage in the "domestic sphere". On the other hand, men embodied and defined national identity by their power to make political and economic decisions and most of all through military defense of their nations. Regardless of how they obtained it, men and women believed that their national identity entitled them to certain rights as workers and as citizens. Frequently, they evoked these rights when they made demands in the workplace. The success of such demands are complicated by the race and gender constructions encompassed in national identity.

#### NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE WORKPLACE

The American and British telephone industries sought to sell service based upon the idea that courteous and competent white "ladies" would provide it. Indeed, it was a widespread belief among managers in both countries that only white women possessed the innate qualities that could deliver efficient service. Naturally, other people would seek to change the qualifications upon which this exclusive workplace identity was constructed. Different groups of workers used the crisis atmosphere and their sacrifices as citizens during the two World Wars to legitimize their demands for inclusion.

In America, where the telephone system had been a privately-owned monopoly, workers sought to use World War I state ownership as a means to transform the "white" and the "lady" construction of the telephone operator.<sup>24</sup> Arousing nationalist sentiments, unionists urged operators to shed their "feminine" fears to join the unions, while blacks urged the telephone industry to hire them as operators. Using nationalism as an

23. Emily E. Nichols (Hop Exchange), "A Plea to Operators", *The National Telephone Journal*, 1 (1906), p. 92.

24. Alarmed at the potential disruption of wartime communication services, the federal government nationalized the telephone and telegraph industries from 1 August 1918 to 31 July 1919.



organizing tool, the Chicago Federation of Labor passed out cards in October 1918 which read:

“HELLO GIRLS” Be One Hundred Per Cent Americans. Join in a Union of the AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR, by becoming members of the ELECTRICAL WORKERS’ INTERNATIONAL UNION. The telephones of this country are now under the control of the United States Government. They will be glad to meet you, their employees, to adjust any grievances or wage demands that you may make, but you should have a good, strong Union to present your side of the case, [...].<sup>25</sup>

A representative of the Commercial Telegraphers’ Union of America went even further when he assured a Miss Walby, Evening Chief Operator at the Arkansas City, Kansas, office, that “There is nothing to fear. Officials are not allowed by the government to interfere with employees organizing.”<sup>26</sup> Union propaganda implied that “one hundred per cent Americans joined unions and unions were 100 per cent American”. Even a “lady” operator could be a unionist and a patriot. Inspired by these ideas and angry over their working conditions, thousands of operators organized and struck the Bell System throughout the war period.<sup>27</sup> By connecting the national identity to the workplace, the union leaders transformed the definition of gender and national identity.

Black workers, however, were less successful in linking their demands for jobs to their citizenship status. None other than W.E.B. Du Bois had called upon blacks to “not hesitate” in responding to patriotism. He urged “Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy.”<sup>28</sup> Even in a climate of disenfranchisement and lynching, African Americans heeded the call by fighting overseas, buying war bonds, and contributing to the war effort by working wherever they could gain employment. Yet, Bell System companies advertised operators’ jobs as “an opportunity of doing your Patriotic Duty”, and as work essential to “winning the war”, but refused to hire African Americans as anything other than the most menial laborers.<sup>29</sup> This policy was absolutely incomprehensible to one black woman whose application for an operator’s job went unanswered. The Cleveland native questioned, “Does it make any difference [...] what nationality helps to bring this most awful war to an end?” She believed that black women should not be denied their right to wartime jobs or to contribute to the war

25. See cards in AT&T Archives, Box 14.

26. See letters in AT&T Archives, Box 14.

27. See Green, *Race on the Line*, and Norwood, *Labor’s Flaming Youth*.

28. “Close Ranks”, *Crisis*, July 1918.

29. See at least four advertisements for operators’ positions in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 4 November 1918, p. 14.

effort, especially because “our girls have brothers, sweethearts, and husbands over there fighting for democracy for all nationalities”.<sup>30</sup>

Similar appeals had been effective in opening doors to low-level positions in other workplaces, but it failed to change the telephone industry’s hiring policies, even under government ownership. At the same time that the federal government had called upon African Americans to fight in a war for democracy, it had segregated army units, drafted black men at higher percentages than white by denying them exemptions, banned them from the marines, provided few opportunities for promotion, confined the already limited participation of black women to the United States, and generally discriminated against blacks in work assignments and training. Under the banner of national identity, the United States government required African Americans to recognize their obligations as citizens while it continued to honor “whiteness”.

From World War I through World War II, African Americans challenged this system of privileges by fighting to change telephone industry employment practices. Invoking the ideal of justice, they participated in boycotts, all-night vigils, mass bill pay-ins (sometimes in pennies), mass phone-ins to tie up the equipment, protest stickers attached to phone bills, demonstrations, and legal complaints to various government agencies.<sup>31</sup> Their protests were national in scope, and included men and women from all sectors of the community. Protesters based their demands on the fundamental principle of equality, their rights as citizens who fought in US wars, and who paid thousands of dollars in public utility bills to companies licensed by their governments.<sup>32</sup>

When the telephone industry suffered a postwar labor shortage in 1920, the New York Telephone Company advertised for 1,000 operators, but refused an offer to supply it with “neat and intelligent [...] colored girls”, free of charge.<sup>33</sup> To this offer of “100 per cent American” girls who would “prove competent and loyal”, E.J. Anderson, the employment manager, replied that “while” the company had “given consideration to employing

30. *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, “Colored Girls Can Help”, 4 November 1918, p. 7. This woman’s usage of nationality is provocative but beyond the analysis of this paper.

31. For examples, see the March on Washington press releases and newspaper clippings: *The St Louis American*, 27 May 1943, 17 June 1943, 5 August 1943, 2 September 1943; *The Chicago Defender*, 19 June 1943, 25 September 1943; *The St Louis Argus*, 28 May 1943, 2 June 1943, 6 August 1943; *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 5 June 1943; all in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Scrapbook located in the Chicago Historical Society. Complaints to the FEPC (Record Group 228) and the EEOC (Record Group 403) can be found in the National Archives.

32. See, for example, Henry Winfield Wheeler, “The Spiders Web”: “Why demand jobs of the Public Utilities? Because they are corporations granted their franchises by the state and the government and we are citizens. Because 10,000 users of telephones have demanded it; because we are right and we will be heard”. Clipping from *St Louis American*, 20 May 1943; Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Scrapbook, p. 93. Chicago Historical Society.

33. “Phone Co. Won’t Hire Negroes to Meet Shortage”, *New York Call*, March 1920, p. 2.

colored girls as telephone operators”, it was “not in a position to do so at the present time”.<sup>34</sup>

During World War II, African Americans escalated their attack on the Bell System as an industry that denied them their rights as citizens. In the summer of 1943, when Southwestern Bell Telephone advertised widely for operators but refused to hire qualified black applicants, the St Louis, Missouri chapter of the March on Washington Movement launched a protest campaign.<sup>35</sup> They called upon all citizens to place a sticker in the corner of their telephone bills or their mailing envelopes. The sticker read: “Discrimination in employment is undemocratic – *I protest it!* Hire Negroes now!”<sup>36</sup> Leaders appealed to black and white organizations, churches and individuals to support them in their fight against the company’s “undemocratic, un-American and pro-Hitler employment policy”.<sup>37</sup> On 12 June 1943, after company officials had “ignored registered letters [...] requesting interviews” to discuss hiring black women, more than 300 African Americans marched to the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company building carrying placards and banners which demanded: “How Can We Die Freely for Democracy Abroad if We Can’t Work Equally for Democracy at Home?”<sup>38</sup>

In a rather scurrilous attempt to evade President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802, the Bell System denied that the telecommunications industry was a defense industry and that they were subject to the antidiscrimination mandate.<sup>39</sup> Insulted by this ploy, African Americans appealed directly to President Roosevelt, who affirmed that communications were vital to the war effort and therefore the order was applicable to the telephone industry. Subsequently, complaints about Bell System companies bombarded the Fair Employment Practices Committee. Finally, AT&T management opened the operator’s job to a few black women in 1944,

34. Quoted in article noted above.

35. A spokesman for the March on Washington Movement affirmed that of the black women who had applied, “several” were “graduates of leading American Universities and that all of them have had experience in business which would fully qualify them for most any position the Telephone Company has to fill”. *St Louis American*, “M.O.W.M. to Stage March on Bell Telephone Company”, 27 May 1943; found in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Scrapbook, p. 19, Chicago Historical Society.

36. *St Louis American*, “March Movement Campaign of Protest Against Telephone Company Discrimination”, 5 August 1943. Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Scrapbook, p. 165, Chicago Historical Association.

37. T.D. McNeal, Director, March On Washington Committee, “Statement of Facts” (leaflet); Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Scrapbook, p. 108, Chicago Historical Society.

38. *Pittsburgh Courier*, “Seek Conference For Better Jobs”, 26 June 1943; Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Scrapbook, p. 143, Chicago Historical Society.

39. Issued on 25 June 1941, this order barred discrimination in the defense industry and the government. It established a Fair Employment Practices Committee to investigate claims of discrimination and it ordered the inclusion of anti-discrimination clauses in all defense contracts.

but it was another twenty years before the position became fully available to them. By that time, telephone operating faced technological redundancy and had become identified almost exclusively with black females. Social protest and wartime emergencies had forced the United States government to extend limited support to African Americans' claims under national identity. Unfortunately, this support was neither sustained nor the kind of commitment required to dismantle "whiteness".<sup>40</sup>

The experiences of white British men during World War I contrasts sharply with those of African Americans. Few questioned that young women were the best qualified to give daytime telephone service, but to "protect" the women, most of the night work was reserved for men in nearly all of Britain. Due to the light traffic, night-time operating had been performed haphazardly by male sorters, telegraphists, and other technicians until 1901. In the aftermath of the Boer War, the National Telephone Company created the grade of "night telephonist", and established the policy of hiring exsoldiers and exsailors into that position. Labor disputes during the 1912 nationalization process, World-War-I labor shortages, and increased night hours among women eroded the stability of the "night telephonist" title. The return of the disabled veterans created the conditions for a renewal of the effort to define the job as exclusively male, based on rights gained in military service.

For different reasons, Post Office officials and the exservicemen required a clear distinction between the categories of "night telephonist" (male) and the "lady" or girl operator. In 1919, when the Ministry of Labour inquired about the availability of work for disabled veterans who had not formerly worked in the Post Office, the Postmaster General replied that night telephone work and other "lighter" duties had been reserved for these men but:

Day telephone operating in the Post Office has always been performed by women and the employment of men on this work is not in contemplation. There is a general consensus of opinion that the work is essentially more suitable for women than men and that the substitution even of able bodied men on the work might result in a serious reduction of efficiency of the service.<sup>41</sup>

As in the United States, war conditions had seriously disrupted the telephone service and the Postmaster General did not want to see any further deterioration. The Deputy Controller agreed that "a male operating staff – even of men possessed of all their faculties, physical and mental – does not reach the degree of efficiency possible to a female

40. The Fair Employment Practices Committee had no enforcement power. Congress stopped funding it after the war and it was completely defunct by 1950.

41. A.H. Norway, under the instruction of the Postmaster General, to the Controller, Training Department, Ministry of Labour, 21 August 1919, British Telecom Archives, Post 30/3299.

staff”, but since the war emergency had passed, “Government Departments might be disposed to allow patriotic considerations to outweigh those of an abstract efficiency”.<sup>42</sup> Telephone work in government private branch exchanges, and at night in public exchanges, would be retained for disabled soldiers and sailors in acknowledgement of their war service. However, it was equally clear that officials would not permit this entitlement to override objective standards of efficiency and budgetary realities.

Contesting the official policy, disabled veterans sought to expand their rights as they simultaneously distinguished themselves from female operators. In September 1919 a sympathetic newspaper article connected the “poor state of service and disorganization in the London Telephone Service” to the parsimonious practices of the Post Office and frivolous girls. It asks:

Would it not be more economical to promote efficiency by offering a decent wage in place of the existing miserable pittance upon which men are expected to exist? Irresponsible girls in their early teens are still prominent, and actually receiving a higher rate of pay than disabled men employed on similar work. The replacement of these “flappers” by common sense ex-Servicemen, who should receive adequate remuneration, would speedily reconstruct what is now considered by most subscribers to be an instrument of the Devil.<sup>43</sup>

While this writer’s opinion of women operators dramatically conflicts with those of Post Office officials, it does reflect the widespread postwar sentiment that women should leave the workplace to provide opportunities for returning servicemen.<sup>44</sup>

Several issues are paramount here. The language used to describe women (irresponsible girls, “flappers”) is designed to devalue the female characteristics connected with telephone operating. In Britain, many believed that the war had “loosened female morality and “marked not only the appearance of the ‘flapper’ and the ‘amateur girl’, but the allegedly overpaid and uncontrollable new female war worker”.<sup>45</sup> In the aftermath of WWI, there was a re-emergence of the separate spheres philosophy

42. The Deputy Controller to the Secretary, 15 September 1919, British Telecom Archives, Post 30/4384C.

43. Clipping from the *Territorial Service Gazette*, 6 September 1919, entitled “The Telephone Scandal”; British Telecom Archive, Post 30/4346B.

44. Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War*, pp. 188, 196. Braybon argues that women were told to go back to laundry and domestic work out of the mistaken idea that women were still in men’s jobs or that the majority of women had taken such jobs in the first place.

45. Susan Grayzel, “The Enemy Within: The Problem of British Women’s Sexuality During the First World War”, in Dombrowski, *Women and War in the Twentieth Century*, p. 83.

(domesticity) as a method of refeminizing women.<sup>46</sup> Consequently, veterans did not want their disabilities, or assignment to work so closely with women, to connote effeminacy. In order to guarantee the proper distance from women and respect for men, the title of “night telephonist” (male) needed to import maturity, commitment and, most important, masculinity. After all, they were the real men who had sacrificed for their country and therefore deserved all of the rewards and privileges due to virile men.<sup>47</sup> They felt that military service had earned them the right to be economically independent which included the “male right to maintain a wife and family”.<sup>48</sup>

Masculinization of telephone operators’ workplace identity commanded the full benefits of national identity. In addition to the right to jobs, exservicemen felt that higher wages and improved working conditions constituted part of their entitlements. Quick to argue that they were disabled in defense of their country and should not be “treated in this manner”, veterans complained bitterly over their pay and fully expected to be paid more than women.<sup>49</sup> Night telephonists (male) fought the Post Office over hours and extra pay for Christmas and Bank Holidays, while they also objected to having to work excessive hours. They protested that “No other body of postal workers ha[d] a 54 hour week”.<sup>50</sup>

The Post Office granted small wage increases, “sleeping time allowances”, and minuscule reductions in working hours, but for the most part night telephonists and their unions protested against the deterioration in their conditions throughout the interwar period. In an attempt to highlight the differences between male and female operators, and disappointed in the results obtained by the Union of Post Office Workers and its predecessors, night telephonists formed the National Guild of Telephonists in 1929 to represent their specific grievances. Women were not barred from membership, but they never joined in large numbers because the Guild failed

46. Susan Kent Kingsley, “Love and Death: War and Gender in Britain, 1914–1918”, in Frans Coetzee and Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee (eds), *Authority, Identity and the Social History of the Great War* (Oxford [etc.], 1995), p. 156. See also Kent Kingsley, *Making Peace*.

47. Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, pp. 58–59.

48. Susan Pedersen, “Gender, Welfare, and Citizenship in Britain during the Great War”, *The American Historical Review*, 95 (1990), p. 989.

49. Clipping from the *Territorial Service Gazette*, 6 September 1919, entitled “The Telephone Scandal”. The article claims that exservice men only received 6d per hour. However, notes from Post Office officials attached to this clipping say that this is wrong and does not include “the war bonus [...] in fact rate was from 9d–101/2d for those under twenty-two and 1(s) for those over twenty-two per hour [...] during training, and 9d–111/2d for under twenty-two, to 1(s)/3d for those over twenty-two who were qualified”; British Telecom Archive, Post 30/4346B.

50. Clipping from *Daily Herald*, 27 December 1919.

adequately to address their most pressing demand for equal pay, and because most of the Guild's demands were made at women's expense.<sup>51</sup>

Departmental private branch exchanges discontinued the practice of hiring disabled service men after 1923–1924, due to departments' opposition to paying the extra wages for disabled men when they could have more efficient women for less. Agitation for the disabled veterans continued, but the government was less inclined to appease them as the war memory faded. Nevertheless, veterans had been able to masculinize the telephone operator's work identity and for a short time exservicemen had been able to extract employment privileges and economic gains from the Post Office, based on gender and national identity.

Colonized people of color (African and Asians), designated as black or colored, were less successful in obtaining entitlements based on national identity even though they had fought on the battlefield. During the war, there were over 98,000 Chinese, 82,000 Egyptians, 20,000 Indians, 9,000 British West Indians and 2,000 Mauritians, Maltese and Fijians in the forces, in addition to nearly 122,000 other locally raised "natives" and 35,000 natives, employed in substitution for British personnel, working for the British army in labour corps.<sup>52</sup> First of all, these men and their widows "received significantly lower pensions" than the "white British" "alongside" whom they had fought.<sup>53</sup> Some 20,000 black people lived in Britain at this time, many of whom were war disabled, but their employment in the Civil Service did not become a major issue. A very few were dispersed throughout the Post Office in low-level jobs. For the most part during this period, blacks, and sometimes white immigrants, were barred from working as telephonists because of their accents or their inability to meet the "natural born" requirements for employment in the Post Office. In rare instances, the Post Office employed immigrants on international lines that required knowledge of a foreign language.

Despite the absence of an explicit policy of discrimination, Post Office records indicate that black men and women were often rejected simply for having dark skin.<sup>54</sup> For example, in November 1929, when a Mr. U. Roachford of Biggleswade applied for employment in the London Post Office Stores Department, the Controller confidentially inquired of the Head Postmaster in Hitchin if Mr. Roachford was "actually of black colour or only dusky". The Head Postmaster replied that "Mr. Roachford is actually of black colour, [and] he appears to be a steady, respectable man and, it is believed, bears a good character".<sup>55</sup> Roachford was still not hired.

51. Alan Clinton, *Post Office Workers: A Trade Union and Social History* (London, 1984), pp. 374–380.

52. Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, p. 148.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

54. See files in British Telecom Archives, Post TCB 2/124.

55. See correspondence in British Telecom Archives, Post TCB2/124.

An un-named Indian man was denied employment as a probationary assistant engineer in 1933 when the Department objected to him.

Miss K.E.F. Smith-Kaye, daughter of an English mother and a West African father, claimed British nationality through her father and applied for a position as a telephonist in 1935. Although the London Telephone Service “considered [her] suitable on all other points”, the Controller thought it was “unfortunate” that she favored her father “in that she ha[d] the dark skin, negroid hair and thick lips”. Her case was complicated even more by the fact that the London office “already [had] one woman of this type”, and “it was known that some of the Staff did not take kindly to her supervision”. “In her own interests the situation was met by employing her on special duties which [removed] her from the exchange.” Even though Miss Smith-Kaye had a secondary education, having left school “with [an] Oxford School Certificate and had knowledge of French and a little German”, she was denied employment. The fact that she and her father had been “natural-born British subjects” failed to entitle her to the privileges of British national identity.<sup>56</sup>

Black people’s contribution to the fight against Nazi racism during World War II highlighted the injustice of denying them full employment opportunities. The nationalist rhetoric that embraced all British subjects made it incumbent upon the Post Office to open positions to black people. Officials stated that “the Post Office is pledged to give first consideration for employment to ex-servicemen, [...] coloured British subjects who are ex-service men may register for employment [...] and will be considered in their turn with other ex-servicemen”.<sup>57</sup> The experiences of black women and men applicants for telephonists’ positions reveal that the process was not so straightforward.

For example, Mrs Sarah Tagoe “stated that she had the permission of the Ministry of Labour to apply for the post of telephonist” when she approached the Post Office for a job in 1944. Mrs Tagoe produced her British identity card, took the required tests, and passed them. The general remarks made on her interview record stated that she was “of dark colour with frizzy hair and thick lips [...] very nice type of girl – well educated”. The interviewer decided that “in view of her colour, [...] it was considered advisable to refer her case and she was informed that she was not within the age limits mentioned in the Broadcast and that a further communication would be sent to her”.<sup>58</sup> Mrs Tagoe did not wait for this

56. See files in British Telecom Archives, Post TCB2/124.

57. See Len Johnson, Secretary, The New International Society, to the General Post Office, 24 October 1949, and the Post Office reply, 4 November 1949, in British Telecom Archives, Post TCB 2/124.

58. See Regional Director, LTR, to the Personnel Department, SB, 28 April 1944, British Telecom Archives, Post TCB 2/124.



communication. She called the Welfare Officer of the Colonial Office and “complained of being rejected for Post Office employment because of her colour although [...] she had passed the telephonist test”. The Post Office “explained” to the Welfare Officer that Mrs Tagoe “had not been rejected and that there must have been some misunderstanding”. The Welfare Officer suggested that the Post Office “see its way to employ Mrs Tagoe” and reminded officials that “it was a matter of policy that there should be no discrimination in the employment of British Nationals whatever their colour”.<sup>59</sup> Fully prepared to take on this fight, Mrs Tagoe had asked the interviewer “if she could not be accepted because of colour”. She was one of the few people who successfully forced the Post Office to acknowledge her rights under the national identity.

Others believed that this process would become less difficult when Parliament passed the 1948 Nationality Act which “granted United Kingdom citizenship to citizens of Britain’s colonies and former colonies”.<sup>60</sup> Within ten years 125,000 West Indians and 55,000 Indians and Pakistanis had immigrated to Britain to fill the jobs that they believed they had earned in recognition of the black contribution to winning World War II.<sup>61</sup> Again, they were horribly disappointed. In 1952 black Post Office workers were so rare that only 175 were permanently employed in a Post Office staff of 250,000.<sup>62</sup>

Correspondence between various regional offices and the Post Office Personnel Department attributed the scarcity of colored workers to such reasons as:

An “Un-English” appearance (in public jobs or as representatives of the UK to foreigners), thick accents, poor knowledge of English, objections to their presence by white women, problems because unemployment was already high and whites did not want to see blacks hired when they did not have jobs, objections by the public, objections to blacks being in any supervisory position over whites, the engineering grades would be where most coloured applicants would be suitable but those grades were already suffering from “an inferiority complex” [...], and if any recruitment of coloured staff meant that the bulk of this labour went to the external side, the existing external members would regard it as a sign that they were being degraded.<sup>63</sup>

59. *Ibid.*

60. Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London, 1984), p. 373.

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 372–373.

62. There were 300–400 temporary employees. Most were from “India, Nigeria, the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone; Uganda and Mauritius, the West Indies and British Guiana, Ceylon and Malaya”. See Cabinet, “Employment of Coloured Workers by the Post Office: Memorandum by the Postmaster General”; marked Confidential c (52), December 1952.

63. Telephone Manager, Liverpool Area, to the Regional Director, (Staff and Building Branch), 12 April 1949; and “Memorandum by the Civil Service Commissioners for the Information and guidance of all Chairmen of Selection Boards”, 3 January 1951, marked Confidential.

More candidly, the Welsh and Border Counties Regional Director stated:

In theory, there is, or should be, no discrimination between “coloured” and “white” colonials. They are British subjects and their services were gratefully accepted during the two World Wars. Nevertheless there is still a strong racial prejudice in the public mind in regard to coloured persons and the elimination of this prejudice will inevitably take a long time. [...] the claims of coloured persons of British nationality to employment under the Crown cannot fairly be resisted and [...] the Post Office must take a fair share of such persons in its service.<sup>64</sup>

This ideal was not achieved. The Civil Service Commission estimated in 1951 that “among the 80,000 to 100,00 candidates who took part in their competitions [...], about six coloured persons were successful in competitions involving an interview”, and it reported that it had “no reason to believe” that the “number was much larger” for those who were in competitions not involving an interview.<sup>65</sup> Commissioners’ “rules [...] in dealing with candidates who [were], or appear[ed] to be, coloured” had effectively screened out the very people they were supposed to protect.<sup>66</sup> Blacks never obtained a significant number of telephonists’ positions because their rights under national identity never exceeded the disadvantage of being unable to attain “whiteness”.

Even though the actual number of blacks in Britain and in Post Office employ were small, they were still perceived as foreign and unwanted. Moves to restrict their immigration were almost immediate. Eleven Members of Parliament called for limiting black immigration only two days after the first large group arrived by ship (the *Empire Windrush*) in 1948. More alarmed in 1950, the government established a Cabinet Committee to consider “further means which might be adopted to check the immigration into the country of coloured people from the British Colonial Territories”.<sup>67</sup> Reflecting a desire to impede employment opportunities, the Cabinet “invited” the Home Secretary “to arrange for an examination of the possibility of preventing any further increase in the number of coloured people seeking employment in this country”, and, simultaneously “invited the Chancellor of the Exchequer to arrange for

64. Letter from the Regional Director (Welsh and Border Counties Region), 14 May 1949, to the Personnel Department, (Staff Branch), British Telecom Archives, Post TCB 2/124.

65. Post Office, “Recruitment of Coloured Persons to the Civil Service”; marked Secret, this document is a summary of reports by the Home Secretary (C.(54) 34) and the Chancellor of the Exchequer (C.(54) 37) “on the possibility of restricting the number of coloured people seeking employment in this country and on the particular question of their employment in the public service”, p. 2, British Telecom Archives, Post TCB 2/124.

66. “Memorandum by the Civil Service Commissioners for the Information and Guidance of all Chairmen of Selection Boards”, 3 January 1951 (revised October, 1951), p. 1, British Telecom Archives, Post TCB 2/124.

67. Bob Carter, Clive Harris and Shirley Joshi, “The 1951–55 Conservative Government and the Racialization of Black Immigration”, in James and Harris (eds), *Inside Babylon*, pp. 55–71.

concurrent examination of the possibility of restricting the number of coloured people obtaining admission to the Civil Service” in 1952.<sup>68</sup>

Fears of “adverse” publicity, the cost of enforcement of such a ban, and the fact that “no serious difficulties [...] had arisen from the employment of coloured persons in the Civil Service”, convinced the Cabinet to abandon the proposition at that time.<sup>69</sup> By 1954 the Cabinet had initiated another unsuccessful investigation to consider if there was “a case for assuming a power to deport from this country British subjects from overseas”.<sup>70</sup> Thereafter, the government increasingly defined national identity in racial terms.<sup>71</sup> Immigration policy became a racialized debate over exclusion and culminated in the enactment of laws (1962, 1968, 1971, 1981) that progressively restricted black entry to England.<sup>72</sup> The state, in the form of both the Post Office/Civil Service and Parliament, actively participated in depriving blacks of their national identity and employment rights. Like the American government, the British Parliament honored “whiteness”.

People from many parts of Europe had a very different experience with the British government from black people. After World War II, the government activated policies to facilitate immigration into Britain, based on the desire to not only gain workers but to replenish the British population. For example, the Irish, who were often discriminated against in England, could at least pass the “unwritten test of potential Britishness measured according to a racialized conception of the world’s population”.<sup>73</sup> Consequently, the 1948 British Nationality Act created a special status to allow the Irish to migrate freely into England, whereas migration from the West Indies, India, and Pakistan was quickly restricted when authorities feared that black migrants would become too numerous. On the other hand, government officials recruited 345,000 “European aliens [...] for work and life in Britain”.<sup>74</sup> A variety of industries employed Poles, Germans, Austrians, Italians, and other Europeans. In most cases, these foreigners were provided with language instruction and temporary housing. Agreements between the government and the Trades Union Congress ensured that these potential citizens would receive wages at

68. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

69. *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

70. Post Office, “Extract from Cabinet Conclusions C.C.(54) 7th Wednesday 3rd February”, p. 2, marked Secret, under double cover, British Telecom Archives, Post TCB 2/124.

71. For a thorough description of this process, see Paul, *Whitewashing Britain*, and Carter, Harris, and Joshi, “The 1951–55 Conservative Government and the Racialization of Black Immigration”, in James and Harris (eds), *Inside Babylon*, pp. 55–71.

72. See John Solomos, “The Politics of Immigration Since 1945”, in Peter Braham *et al*, *Racism and Anti-Racism: Inequalities, Opportunities and Policies* (London, 1992).

73. See Paul, *Whitewashing Britain*, pp. 90–91. Also see Chapter 3 for British recruitment practices.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

prevailing rates, and “equal access to social insurance, health care, and pensions”. Europeans received these employment incentives without the benefit of British national identity. The government encouraged them to “naturalize as British subjects, to marry British men and women, and ultimately to produce British children”.<sup>75</sup> Black people, who were already British subjects and who in many cases had heeded the patriotic call to arms for the mother country, could not avail themselves to this “whiteness”.

### CONCLUSION

I have argued that, despite different histories, blacks in the United States and Britain have had remarkably similar experiences in obtaining employment as telephone operators. Contrary to my expectations, variations in the construction of racial, national, or gender identities appear to have had little effect on outcome for black people. State ownership hardly made an impact in opening employment opportunities to blacks or in changing women’s roles. Hence, I have concluded that the power of national identity in the workplace is intensely circumscribed by “whiteness”. In America and Britain, Europeans and people of European descent could evoke “whiteness” to obtain employment when they did not possess national identity. For black people, however defined, this was not an option, because the limits of national identity were not simply exclusion but the unavailability of “whiteness”, over time and in different nations, that severely restricted their employment prospects.

Aware of their dissimilar realities, black and white workers sought to expand their citizenship rights in the context of constantly shifting constructions of race, gender and national identity, particularly in the context of war. In the United States, white workers used state ownership of the telephone industry to unionize and win wage increases and changes in working conditions. African-American workers unsuccessfully pushed for employment inclusion using the same rhetoric of 100 per cent Americanism. English war veterans demanded and received jobs based on their service to nation. Ironically, both temporary (US) and permanent (British) state ownership of the industry reinforced race and gender inequalities.

Historically, women acquired their privileges of national identity through serving and supporting men. American and British law codified these roles in marriage and “protective” legislation forbidding women to work at night or to lift heavy loads. As workers they could not obtain the same rights as men. Although women’s gender construction during wartime allowed them to perform “men’s” work, they were quickly

75. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

shepherded back to the “protection” of men at the war’s end. Indeed, they were expected to yield their jobs to returning exservicemen and return to their domestic roles. Telephone operating and the workplace identity constructed for it conformed to this model perfectly. Despite their limited access to national identity, white women could experience advantages that were denied to black women. This fact, and the postwar ordeals of black veterans, illustrate how race modified the impact of gender on the privileges of national identity.

Gender under different circumstances had a comparable effect. White male telephonists transformed an occupation closely associated with women into one that did not threaten their masculinity when they performed it. By appealing to their rights as veterans, not only were they able to carve out a position for themselves, they were able to obtain many of the benefits normally associated with men’s work. Returning soldiers and sailors often found jobs and other services waiting for them, but this was a temporary heyday. Economic and political considerations limited the rewards of national identity even for white male workers. Ultimately, in the labor market “whiteness” also has boundaries.