

Black British Literature

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In 1983, Salman Rushdie observed (in an essay on 'Commonwealth Literature') that black British literature does not exist, that "the category is a chimera" comprising different traditions united only by their proponents' pigmentation alongside their British citizenship or residence. The label 'black British' has often been seen as reductive and divisive, notably by literary practitioners; yet it has had wide currency since the 1980s. Writers cast as 'black British' frequently object that, despite the challenge implied in combining these two adjectives, the phrase suggests a marginalization in its relation to what might be called 'white British literature' – a much less common tag. Some resent being seen as an appendage to mainstream literature, or complain, like Fred D'Aguiar in a 1986 piece entitled "Against Black British Literature", that the assumptions of authenticity underlying the label confine their creative imagination which should "[know] no boundaries". These questions are far-reaching. Other European nations, with imperial histories of their own, are confronted with comparable issues. But the complexities of colonial and postcolonial history have given them particular resonance in relation to our understanding of British literature.

When the term 'black British literature' became current in the 1970s, it was designed to describe writing by authors based in Britain but with origins in former British colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. It was at that time a political rather than a purely racial label, pointing to a common experience of postcolonial migration, alienation, and discrimination, combined with an oblique yet potentially subversive assertion of attachment to Britain. This explains why writers of Asian origin such as Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi, both of Indian heritage, or even Kazuo Ishiguro with roots in Japan, were in the 1980s and 1990s unproblematically included in a wide-ranging category which also involved artists more obviously 'black' like Ben Okri, born in Nigeria, or Linton Kwesi Johnson, born in Jamaica. However, the term has lost some of its early scope, and now conventionally refers to authors of African and Caribbean descent. Writers with Asian roots are today often subsumed under the 'British Asian or Asian British' banner, which is the case for a younger writer like Monica Ali, whose best-selling debut novel *Brick Lane* (2003) is set in London's Bangladeshi community. This does not mean that the ethnic delineations of 'black British' writing have

become neater – as illustrated, for example, by the presence in the 'black British' category of an author like Guyana-born Pauline Melville, who is of Caribbean heritage but ethnically white, or of David Dabydeen, also born in Guyana but of East Indian descent. The shift in the limits of the term suggests changing relationships between so-called ethnic minorities in Britain and a growing gap between communities once bound by a shared status as racial and cultural outsiders, yet now increasingly divided, often along religious lines – in particular after 9/11 and 7/7.

While the term 'black' can lead to diverging though sometimes overlapping interpretations, 'British' might seem less problematic, referring as it does to either citizenship or residence, two criteria possibly less elusive than race or culture. The Britishness of some 'black British' writers has nonetheless been questioned on the ground that they display a plural sense of belonging. This has for example been the case of Chris Abani, a poet and novelist born in Nigeria but who spent several years in Britain before moving to the United States. Another notable instance of multiple cultural allegiances is Caryl Phillips, a British writer born in St Kitts who lives in the United States. He has claimed a multi-faceted, Atlantic identity which he describes in *A New World Order* (2001) as encompassing the Africa of his ancestors, the Caribbean of his birth, and Britain where he was brought up and educated and which had a crucially formative effect on his world-view. It is not surprising that his writing provides an extensive reflection on the meaning of Britishness, even more than blackness, and explores various ways in which Britain has been shaped as a consequence of the arrival of migrants on its territories. While Abani's and Phillips's examples, which are not unique, testify to the inability of national labels to fully capture the complexities of literature in a global age, they also confirm the need to redefine existing tags, and even more importantly to see what each individual writer has to say and how she or he does it.

It is often assumed that 'black British literature' refers to a literary tradition which developed only after the Second World War, in the wake of the arrival of the *Empire Windrush*, the ship that in 1948 brought Jamaican immigrants to London and was therefore assumed to be the starting point of the black presence in Britain. It may be convenient to give a literary tradition such a precise starting point, but it should not be forgotten that there had been a sizeable body of texts pre-dating the work of pioneer figures like Samuel Selvon or George Lamming, two writers from the Caribbean who started to publish after their arrival in London in 1950, and had a major impact on the subsequent generations of writers coming from the former empire. An exclusive focus on this post-war period obliterates black contributions to British literature from earlier generations – such as Olaudah Equiano's

Interesting Narrative (1789), or Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857).

Similarly, the role played in the 1930s by literary figures like C.L.R. James from Trinidad or Una Marson from Jamaica, who both spent a part of their lives in England and actively participated in intellectual debates in English radical circles, should not be underestimated. 'Black British literature' viewed as a time-limited phenomenon attached to post-war migration to England is likely to become irrelevant to a younger generation of writers born in England, some of whom are of mixed parentage, like Anglo-Jamaican Zadie Smith or Anglo-Nigerian Diana Evans, and whose allegiance might for these reasons be more domestic than was the case for their predecessors. It will become difficult to view 'black British' literature as marked only by displacement and migration, as its representatives are increasingly born and bred Britons, more interested in the here and now than in their ancestral culture.

Generational expectations are, however, not the only ones to plague 'black British' writing. It also suffers from generic preconceptions. It is often thought to locate itself exclusively in fiction, the most popular and the most publicized contemporary genre, or in poetry, especially when it is performative, for this form is usually associated with artists coming from cultures with a strong oral tradition, like many African societies, and those of the Caribbean. It is true that most of the best performance poets in Britain today are from the black community. Famous names include John Agard, Patience Agbabi, Lemn Sissay, Benjamin Zephaniah, and particularly Linton Kwesi Johnson, who reads his politically committed poems to a reggae rhythm and is the second living poet, after Polish Czeslaw Milosz, to have his work published in the famous Penguin Classics series. Yet performance poetry is by no means the only field in which 'black British' poets excel. Though the difference between oral and written verse is not at all clear-cut, many of them have also written pieces intended to be read on the page, like David Dabydeen's *Turner* (1994), a long lyrical poem inspired by J.M.W. Turner's painting *The Slave Ship*, or Fred D'Aguiar's *Bill of Rights* (1998), a narrative poem about the 1978 Jonestown massacre in Guyana. In the field of drama too, 'black British' writing has had several outstanding ambassadors, like Michael Abbensetts (1938-), Mustapha Matura (1939-), or Winsome Pinnock (1961-), though their plays have been performed in fringe theatres, and have therefore not been very visible. Only recently, with a new generation of playwrights, has 'black British' theatrical production been given the recognition it deserves, particularly through the work of young dramatists like Roy Williams, Courttia Newland, or Kwame Kwei Armah (1967-), whose best-known play,

Elmina's Kitchen (2003), was staged in the West End in 2004. Interestingly, 'black British' writing is rarely associated by the general reader with non-fiction, especially essay writing. However, many 'black British' writers, most of whom are university graduates, have used non-fictional forms to explore their ambiguous sense of belonging to Britain. Examples include George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), Caryl Phillips's *The European Tribe* (1987), Mike Phillips's *London Crossings: A Biography of Black Britain* (2001), and more recently Ekow Eshun's *Black Gold of the Sun: Searching for Home in England and Africa* (2005). 'Black British' writers have also produced challenging journalism, notably around issues of identity but also on more general political or cultural questions. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, who has written for the major British dailies and is also the author of an autobiography called *No Place Like Home* (1995), is one of the most prominent instances of the 'black British' contribution to the debates that have interested the nation in recent times. So are Maya Jaggi and Gary Younge, both writing for the *Guardian*.

'Black British' literature is still associated with generational and generic pre-conceptions, but these may recede as the originality and vigour of the writing continues to promote its popularity. A measure of its growing reputation is the number of literary prizes awarded in the last ten years or so to British writers with roots in the Caribbean and Africa, whether it is the Nobel Prize to V.S. Naipaul in 2001, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize to Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore* in 2004, or the numerous awards garnered by Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) or by Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004), two novels which concentrate on how British society has been changed by the immigration of Jamaicans and other citizens from the former empire. Also significant is the recognition that 'black British' writing has earned in academic circles, both in Britain and abroad, demonstrated by several significant publications on the topic in the last few years, such as Lyn Innes's *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain, 1700-2000* (2002), Mark Stein's *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (2004), *A Black British Canon?*, a collection of critical essays edited by Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies (2006), and *'Black' British Aesthetics Today*, another collection edited by R. Victoria Arana (2007).

The current visibility of 'black British' literature owes much to the dynamism of cultural facilitators who have devoted their energy to promoting writing by black Britons and whose activism has, to some extent, compensated for the under-representation of 'black British' interests in the mainstream publishing industry. The cultural theorist Stuart Hall produced a major body of theoretical work at the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and at the Open University, and he was widely influential in

establishing the parameters of the debate. Paul Gilroy, who began his career as Hall's doctoral student at Birmingham, has also had an impact, and his works, including *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), *Small Acts* (1993), *The Black Atlantic* (1993), *Between Camps* (2000), and *After Empire: Multiculture or Postcolonial Melancholia* (2004), have been pivotal as reference points in these debates.

John La Rose, a poet and essayist from Trinidad who died in 2006, was also an active presence. He is celebrated for founding New Beacon Books in 1966, one of the first black publishing houses and bookshops in Britain, and for organizing the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books, held in London from 1982 to 1995. La Rose made an important contribution to the circulation of black writing in Britain and abroad. So did other well-known public figures like Margaret Busby, the co-founder of the publishing house Allison & Busby in 1967, and Kadija Sesay, the editor of several anthologies and of the literary magazine *Sable*. But it is probably Susheila Nasta, academic and editor, who has been most instrumental in advancing black letters in recent years. In 1984 she founded *Wasafiri*, a journal that is internationally known for its balanced mix of high-quality creative writing and literary criticism and is determined, to use its founder's own words, to open up "previously marginalised spaces for artists and writers to be properly represented in Britain" and to work "at the cutting edge of contemporary debates concerning the composite and diverse character of [today's] Britain". Journals like *Wasafiri* have made 'black British' writing accessible to an international and not exclusively black readership, demonstrating by their judicious editorial choices that this literature should not be seen as sociological documentation to teach or convert the reader, but as art, conveying a unique message, and with its own distinctive language and form.

'Black British' writing is characterized by its variety and originality, qualities which have contributed to the invigorating effect it has had on English literature. It has played a decisive role in the thematic and formal renewal of a variety of literary traditions. It would be impossible to pin down a typical 'black British' fiction, a genre which displays notable versatility. It includes crime fiction (like Mike Phillips's *The Late Candidate*, 1990), children's fiction (Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy*, 2001), fantasy fiction (Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, 1991), or horror fiction (Courtia Newland, *Music for the Off-Key: Twelve Macabre Short Stories*, 2006). However, there are clearly recurrent preoccupations in 'black British' fictional writing which are part of its specificity – such as a keen interest in history, often combined with a special concern for 'otherness', not only racial, but also sexual and sometimes religious. These themes obviously have their origin in the writers' attempts to

come to terms with their own complex cultural background and with their identity as individuals who do belong to Britain yet have been made to feel that they are not fully part of it. With a limited number of exceptions – for example Joan Riley's London-based novels written in the 1980s – this sense of exclusion has not given rise to a literature of victimization or retaliation, simply reproducing the binaries of the colonial past and viewing the world as rigidly divided between black and white. Rather it has led to a tradition of writing that promotes complexity and heterogeneity, while remaining alert to the politics of culture, race, and gender.

This is illustrated by several novels dealing with transatlantic slavery published in the 1990s by British writers of Caribbean descent. Fred D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* (1994) and *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* (1999), and Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991) and *Crossing the River* (1993), all revisit the history of slavery through the complex fate of several individuals, both black and white, many of whom are cultural hybrids needing to negotiate an identity marked by multiple allegiances. These novels are timely reminders of a painful episode in history which was long left uncharted, not to say obliterated, though it was the source of much of Britain's wealth and could to some extent be seen as establishing the black presence on British territory. They also establish a link between the exploitation of the past and continuing discrimination, racial or economic, in the present. As D'Aguiar puts it at the very beginning of *The Longest Memory*, "the future is just more of the past waiting to happen". In spite of this apparent fatalism, however, these texts are hopeful, for they also concentrate on the often ambiguous interactions between blacks and whites, slaves and masters, suggesting that they might share more than meets the eye, starting with their humanity. In that sense they encourage empathy, without offering easy remedies for suffering rooted in what happened centuries ago. To quote *The Longest Memory* again, "Too much has happened to put right. I would need another life. No, several lives. Another hundred years. No, more, to unravel this knotted mess.... Maybe what's done is done. It cannot now be undone, only understood".

These slavery novels are by no means the only ones that tackle the importance of history, both for the individual and the community. The epigraph from *The Tempest* which opens Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) – "What's past is prologue" – could well be used for many other recent 'black British' fictions which address the past in different ways. Leone Ross's *Orange Laughter* (1999) does so through a haunting story set in the United States and touching upon the mental problems caused by the suppression of traumatic memories. Other novels explore former times by establishing a link between Britain and the ancestral

homeland, in many cases Africa. Helen Oyeyemi's *The Opposite House* (2007), for example, revisits Yoruba mythology through Cuba, the place of origin of the parents of the London-based protagonist, while Biyi Bandele's *Burma Boy* (2007) focuses on a young Nigerian soldier who, like many other West Africans, fought on the British side in Burma during the Second World War. Bandele's dark humour is definitely his own, but he shares with many other 'black British' writers the impulse to give a voice to those who have been left out of history books and have for this reason remained unheard, be it a child soldier in this novel, a transvestite jazz trumpeter in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998), or an asylum seeker from Zanzibar in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001). Complex ideas of otherness have been explored in recent novels such as Diana Evans's *26a* (2005) and Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005) through their use of mixed-race twin characters, symbols of the ambiguity and inbetweenness that is part and parcel of 'black British' identity. This focus on the other as a means of identifying oneself also finds expression in intertextuality. This is sometimes viewed as a means of disrupting the English canon, but is often also a way for the writer to express multiple cultural affiliations, as in David Dabydeen's *The Intended* (1991), which echoes Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" (1902), or Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005), which can be read as a transposition of E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910).

The novelty of 'black British' fiction is not just thematic. It is also formal, marked by linguistic and structural inventiveness that is sometimes radical. In 1956, Samuel Selvon published *The Lonely Londoners*, an episodic novel that traces the lives of black immigrants in London and has now become a classic of the genre. Apart from a sensitive and humorous take on the hardships of displacement, this novel stands out for being written, both in its dialogue and its narration, in an artistic re-creation of Trinidadian English, a mongrel speech which was for Selvon a means of breaking the representational mould that had till then captured the 'black British' experience. Selvon's daring use of non-standard English has had a direct influence on the contemporary generation – on Diran Adebayo and Courttia Newland, among others – but it might also have had a more general effect on these younger writers, in helping to liberate their style from the notion of a norm, leading to a type of linguistic transgression which, as John Agard humorously suggests in his well-known poem "Listen Mr Oxford Don", has become synonymous with empowerment rather than inferiority. It is not surprising that 'black British' writing has become a field of linguistic ingenuity, as shown for example by Salman Rushdie's and Zadie Smith's often playfully inventive prose.

The formal disruption typical of 'black British' fiction goes well beyond vocabulary and grammar. It concerns the shape of the narrative itself, as well as the way the text often

fundamentally transgresses generic or other conventions. 'Black British' fictions tend to display a fragmented narrative, developing the innovative models of modernism in order to express the discontinuity and the ambiguity at the heart of the 'black British' condition, but also reflecting the post-imperial nation. Significantly, some of these novels travel in time and space and are almost epic in scope, like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), which sweeps over the history of India, or Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* (1997), which brings together the Holocaust and the predicament of black people in the West. This tendency to cross narrative and other boundaries sometimes accompanies a fundamental questioning of the novel as a genre. Bernardine Evaristo's books offer a striking illustration of this. Her first novels, *Lara* (1997) and *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), are both written in verse, a hybrid form which matches the identity of her protagonists, Lara, of mixed Nigerian and British descent, and Zuleika, a girl of Sudanese origin living in Roman London. Evaristo's more recent book, *Soul Tourists* (2005), is again stylistically bold. Comprising verse sections as well as many passages in prose (including letters, lists, and other types of documents), this unclassifiable book follows the European tour of two protagonists who come across the ghosts of significant African figures in European history, such as Shakespeare's 'Dark Lady' or the Chevalier de Saint Georges.

This reconciliatory and creative pattern is also apparent in other genres, and is especially visible among writers of the new generation. But it has a noteworthy precursor in Wilson Harris, a writer of Guyanese origin settled in England for almost 50 years, who, from his first novel *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), has relentlessly worked at an alternative world vision which he calls 'cross-cultural'. In his 24 visionary novels to date, and also in his essays, he has developed a highly metaphorical style to further a renewal of the imagination, which he regards as a saving virtue that can redeem the modern world.

One of the writers whose work best exemplifies the major thematic and formal characteristics of 'black British' writing, and has also repeatedly addressed the changing meaning of Britishness, is Caryl Phillips, at once playwright, novelist, and essayist. His *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007) seems to crystallize the concern for the past and the 'other', as well as the formal innovativeness that has characterized the 'black British' tradition, while also providing subtle thoughts on identity. Each of the book's three sections focuses on a black man who lived in England and led an English life, yet was made to feel a foreigner, a disturbing paradox encapsulated in the title. The first part, "Dr Johnson's Watch", is devoted to Samuel Johnson's black servant, Francis Barber, of Jamaican origin, who retired to the countryside after his master's death in 1784 and died a pauper in spite of a generous bequest

from his benefactor. The second, "Made in Wales", concentrates on Randolph Turpin, a British-born mixed-race boxer, who in 1951 became Britain's first black world champion and eventually committed suicide. "Northern Lights", the third part, is devoted to David Oluwale, a Nigerian who arrived as an illegal immigrant in England in 1949 and died at the hands of Leeds policemen twenty years later. By telling the lives of these three men, and chronicling their successes and ensuing downfalls, Phillips in a sense allegorizes several of the issues that are likely to affect 'black British' writers, who are sometimes also viewed as literary foreigners. The book notably touches upon the question of categorization (who belongs, and who does not?), the status of the outsider, especially when he or she is a public figure, the potential danger of fame and of being co-opted into the mainstream, as well as the expectation to conform that comes with otherness, racial or otherwise. Significantly, this hymn to difference is written in a composite, unpredictable form that combines true facts about these actual historical figures with a fictional exploration of their aspirations and flaws. It is a book at the interface between non-fiction and fiction, hard to pigeonhole. The three men are not allowed to speak for themselves, with the brief exception of Barber in the first piece. Yet each story is told in a distinctive way, using a specific language and a special narrative perspective that ranges from the distant (for Turpin) to the intimate (for Oluwale). One of the messages behind this unusual literary shape is that singularity should be recognized, giving each individual a chance to be understood and recover some lost dignity.

The tripartite structure of *Foreigners* is a reminder that, for all the undoubted changes that have transformed the opportunities available to blacks in contemporary Britain, they can still be seen as outsiders, with all the psychological consequences that can be imagined. At the same time, however, by enabling us to enter these three men's lives, the book suggests the capacity of the literary imagination to make us view the world from a different angle, or, as Phillips himself said in a recent lecture, "to wrench us out of our ideological burrows and force us to engage with a world that is clumsily transforming itself, a world that is peopled with individuals we might otherwise never meet in our daily lives".

The British literary tradition dates back to over a thousand years and has played a predominant role in shaping the development of English literature on the international scenario. The 14th century writer Geoffrey Chaucer is considered by many to be the Father of English Literature and the greatest poet of the Middle Ages. He was instrumental in developing the use of the vernacular Middle English. The most famous writer of all time is probably William Shakespeare.