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SARAH LAWSON WELSH

Black British Poetry

'Mekin Histri': Black British Poetry from the Windrush to the Twenty-First Century

The arrival in 1948 of the SS Windrush, a ship carrying more than 280 Jamaicans to Britain marks a foundational, if also a fetishized¹ place in any understanding of post-1945 Black British poetry. Whilst Windrush was not strictly the 'beginning' of black migration to Britain, the 1948 British Nationality Act did enable New Commonwealth and Pakistani citizens to enter and settle in Britain with greater freedom than ever before, and Windrush has become a convenient label for this first post-1945 generation of black migrant writers in Britain. This generation's 'arrival', the accelerating endgame of empire, the rise of anti-colonial independence movements and the cultural activity and confidence which accompanied them, created the conditions for an extraordinary period of literary creativity in Britain, as black and Asian writers came to England to work, to study and to be published. Mainstream presses showed unprecedented interest in publishing Black migrant writers and the beginnings of organized association between writers from different territories in Britain can be also traced to this time. An early forum was the BBC radio programme, *Caribbean Voices*, conceived by Una Marson in 1943 and subsequently edited by Henry Swanzy (and later V. S. Naipaul) between 1946 and 1958. *Caribbean Voices* broadcast weekly, live from London to the Caribbean and enabled regular cultural exchanges between Britain and the Caribbean, as well as forging a sense of common black literary endeavour in Britain.

The next generation of writers (of the late 1960s and 1970s)² had different experiences, affiliations and concerns. The term 'Black British' was first used in this era within intersecting public debates about race and immigration, education, unemployment and crime, nationalism, citizenship and the multicultural policies of the period; from the start 'Black British' was a volatile and much contested term. Much Black British writing from this time

reflects the wider cultural, social and political debates of the time and frequently needs to be read in terms of specific events, such as the race-related disturbances in parts of British cities in 1981 and 1985. It was often grassroots or activist in nature, located outside of the canonical, the institutional and the academic.³ Groundbreaking collections such as Linton Kwesi Johnson's *Dread Beat and Blood* (1976) can thus be usefully read as 'textual uprisings'⁴: deeply imbricated within the often racist politics and policies of the time regarding multiculturalism, policing, nationalism and citizenship but ultimately never purely determined or defined by them.

Indeed, Black British poetry has never been purely and simply about 'Black British' issues, despite criticism which sometimes seems to suggest otherwise. As John McLeod usefully points out: 'Black writers do not speak for black Britain, of course; but neither do they write necessarily for black Britain first and foremost ... contemporary writers talk of 'discrimination and stuff' but not exclusively so; there are 'other things' to speak of too, which are inseparable from Britain's ongoing racial predicaments but not confined to them, and in which all are involved.'⁵ It's especially important to recognize this, given that the prevalent public stereotype of Black British poetry since the 1970s has been that it's limited to political themes and weakened by its primarily performative mode. Famously, in an entry in *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry*, edited by Ian Hamilton, Mario Relich defined dub poetry as 'over-compensation for deprivation.'⁶

If 'Black British' had originally been used as a marker of alliance between different minority ethnic groups and their own experiences of, and struggles against, a racist and often-exclusionary mainstream society in 1960s and 1970s Britain, in the 1980s the term began to be adopted to signify a new generation of writers, born or based in Britain.⁷ The 1980s saw the publication of some groundbreaking anthologies of Black British writing, further experimentation with new poetic forms and with creole or 'Nation language'⁸ and a greater visibility for black British women's writing in particular. In the 1990s multicultural policies, new funding streams⁹ and the opening up of spaces for Black and minority ethnic artists proved particularly conducive to the wider publication of Black British writing. It also saw the development of what Lauri Ramey (2004) and Sarah Broom (2006) have termed new 'tribes' of poetry,¹⁰ often with a strong performance aesthetic, and continued literary experimentation with dub, rap, hip-hop and other primarily black musical forms. By the millennium, Black British writing was altogether more established, with a lively performance scene, new national and regional initiatives starting to support new Black British writers and visible signs of public recognition of this as a rich and diverse body of writing.

'Black British' or 'British'?

'Here comes a black Englishman with a brolly
To forget either would indeed be folly.'¹¹

By the early 2000s, the term 'Black British' was also being used in a much more confident, nuanced and historicized sense to refer to an identifiable body of literature,¹² a Black British aesthetic¹³ and even a Black British canon¹⁴ although not always in an unqualified or unproblematic way. Whilst some have distanced themselves from the term as reductive¹⁵ or in favour of a more transnational approach to Black British writing,¹⁶ others have sought to 'privilege "black"', not as a biological or racial category (although it signifies on both these levels) but as a political signifier which first became valent in Britain in the late 1960s and 1970s¹⁷ and which continues to be relevant.

Indeed, the very commissioning of this chapter in a Cambridge Companion to post-1945 British poetry may suggest a greater acceptance of the term and a recognition that the poetry itself has grown in confidence, diversity and sophistication, as well as visibility. In her introduction to *Write Black Write British* (2005), poet, critic and editor Kadija Sesay argues for a move away from the use of the more generic 'postcolonial' to describe Black British writers, in line with the specificity of their experiences and the 'shift away from this canon to a development of a new one ... for many emerging writers'.¹⁸ Sesay's formulation constitutes a kind of 'benign model of black British influence and tradition'¹⁹ and she, like others, makes a claim for generationalism as a way of navigating Black British poetry in the post-1945 period but what is striking here is the idea of a separate tradition or canon of writing.

Sesay's words here and in her introduction to *IC3: The Penguin Book of New Black Writing in Britain* (2000), are good examples of this impetus towards confident specificity (or perhaps a new separatism) in the development of a 'new' Black British 'canon'. However, a powerful counter impulse has been to simply see such poetry as 'British'. This is a major tension or fault line in the landscape of contemporary Black British poetry. Certainly, for every poet, anthologist or editor who prefers to speak of 'British poetry' as an inclusive, perhaps even post-racial, category which transcends the dangers of ghettoization²⁰ and the hierarchies of value implicit in 'Black British poetry', or the problematic 'lumping together' of African, Caribbean, Black British and British Asian writers under the one term,²¹ or which seeks to frame Black British writing in terms of all those transnational forces, influences and cultural exchanges which have made it what it is,²² there is another who argues for the continued need for the category of 'Black British poetry'.

One such is poet, novelist and anthologist, Bernadine Evaristo, in her preface to the recent *Ten New Poets Spread the Word* anthology, co-edited with Daljit Nagra (2010). Quite legitimately Evaristo points to the continued marginalisation of black and Asian poets in Britain in terms of their under-representation within the lists of major British poetry publishers (Nagra is only the second black poet to be published by Faber in its eighty-year publishing history), their selective inclusion in poetry anthologies and the recurrent problem of asymmetric representation and tokenism experienced by Black British and British Asian poets in relation to the Poetry Society's 'Generations' or the receipt of major literary prizes. Reflecting on the findings of a 2005 Arts Council Report²³ (which she helped to initiate), Evaristo argues that the use of the terms 'Black' and 'Asian' poet are still necessary, important and politically urgent.²⁴ Likewise, Kwame Dawes argues, that the term is valuable precisely because it historicises 'a black British presence in Britain [which younger writers often forget or disavow] and [because it reminds us of] the more complicated connectedness between what we call British writing (read white) and colonial/postcolonial writing' as one which is not one-sided.²⁵

The continued use of 'Black British' then, captures a profound 'historical forgetfulness' of specific black histories in Britain, what British-Jamaican cultural critic Stuart Hall famously called 'a kind of historical amnesia [in] the British people that has only increased over the postwar period.'²⁶ The publication of deeply affecting collections such as Dorothea Smartt's *Ship Shape* (2008), which recover Black Atlantic histories and historicise the black presence in Britain as one which, importantly, pre-dates the migrant arrivals of the mid twentieth century, goes some way to addressing this amnesia²⁷ but there is still a general lack of awareness of Black British writing beyond a few stellar and canonically acceptable figures. A few poets, such as Zephaniah and Kay, are relatively well known, but for most poetry readers (as opposed to those who attend community events, poetry slams and other live performance events, especially in the regions), Black British poetry is still very much a hidden, marginalised affair. Moreover, the current 'poster boys and girls' for Black British writing – Salman Rushdie, Andrea Levy, Monica Ali, Zadie Smith – are almost exclusively novelists rather than poets. As Dawes argued in 2005: 'the publishing world [still] does not reflect the kind of activity that is going on in poetry among Black British writers.'²⁸

To divide the last seventy years of Black British poetry into three main 'generations': Windrush, second generation, millennial, is to oversimplify what is undoubtedly a cultural history of 'partial discontinuity'.²⁹ However, such a structure allows one to trace the main contours of the poetry in terms of political and aesthetic differences between the different generations of

Black British poets, different configurations of ethnic identity and identifications with or against the nation, and different notions of the relationship between Black British and British poetry.

Generation One: Windrush: 'But Let Me Tell You How This Business Begin'

For the first 'Windrush' generation of writers, identification to the nation was primarily to the countries from which they had migrated rather than the 'motherland' itself.³⁰ They saw themselves first and foremost as exiles and only gradually as West Indian or Caribbean, a collective identity which was largely engendered in Britain.³¹ Nor did they generally use the term 'Black writer' in any coherent or nuanced way at this stage. This generation, often posited as the starting point of a Black British canon, were mostly Caribbean, overwhelmingly male and publishing mainly prose fiction rather than poetry. The very visibility of a small number of mainly male Caribbean writers tended to overshadow other black writing of the period and the contribution of women and poets in particular. Later generations of Black British writers such as Nichols and Evaristo have spoken of the lack of formative influence from these male 'Windrush writers'.

Una Marson: Literary Foremother

Jamaican poet and activist Una Marson was a key figure of the time whose cultural and political contribution to this period has only been recovered and reappraised in the last twenty years.³² Marson is fascinating in terms of her transnational networks in this early period (for example, she met Abyssinian emperor Haile Selassie in London shortly after the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, and, as his personal secretary, accompanied him to Geneva in 1936) but the significance of her creative and artistic contribution has often been overlooked, as it was in her own time. Her poems explore the intersecting politics of race and gender in a colonial context but also offer a fascinating response to the English poetic canon in the form of some wonderfully subversive, rather than purely imitative, experiments with European poetic forms such as the sonnet.³³ Thus in her earlier poem, 'If', she writes with an intertextual nod to Kipling's famous poem of the same name: 'If you can love and not make love your master / If you can serve yet do not be his slave. / If you can hear bright tales and quit them faster; / And, for your peace of mind, think him no knave'.³⁴

However, Marson's 'If' explores the 'master' and 'slave' dynamic of the heterosexual love relationship in a new and unsettling context of colonial

histories and gender roles.³⁵ In this way, terms which are assured and relatively unproblematic within a canonical tradition of English love poetry, become freighted with new and complex meanings and reroute our reading of Kipling's original whilst illuminating both poems. Marson's aesthetic is subtly subversive rather than radically oppositional but she is nonetheless an important figure who, in this and in her use of Nation language voice portraits, deserves to be seen as a poetic foremother.

James Berry: Pioneer Poet

James Berry arrived in Britain in the 'Windrush' year of 1948. Although he did not become a full-time writer until 1977, he was to be foundational to the story of Black British poetry as a poet, a mentor and an editor. Early Berry poems such as 'On an Afternoon Train from Purley to Victoria, 1955'³⁶ perfectly capture the cultural confusions of the host society in encountering the new black settlers in Britain: 'Where are you from? She said. / Jamaica I said. / What part of Africa is Jamaica?' she said. / Where Ireland is near Lapland I said. Hard to see why you leave / Such sunny country she said. / Snow falls elsewhere I said. / So sincere she was beautiful / As people sat down around us.'³⁷ Berry's first collections³⁸ reflect upon the differences and tensions between a Jamaican boyhood, a West Indian migrant's experience of Britain, the encounter with Africa, firstly as a mythic and colonially disavowed place and then as key to the poet's growing sense of global connection in a world where race remains a major fault line. Some of Berry's earliest poems from the 1950s were collected in two ground-breaking anthologies he edited in the late 1970s and early 1980s.³⁹ Berry's early poetic experimentation with Nation language and with forms such the haiku, the oral proverb, the love lyric and particularly the 'letter home' creole voice portrait created poems which challenged stereotypical notions that early Black British poetry was overwhelmingly public rather than personal, a voice of protest and rage rather than of reflective lyricism.

New Beacons: Radical Politics and Small Black Presses

Berry was also one of the first poets to benefit from the establishment of small independent black presses in Britain in the mid-1960s and 1970s. A shift towards a more radical ideology and aesthetics in Black British poetry during this period can be directly traced to a number of global and transnational movements. Firstly, the growth of nationalist movements in the lead-up to independence in certain African and Caribbean countries

during this period provided very visible models for confident and intensified cultural activity amongst Black writers in Britain. Secondly the civil rights movement in America in the 1960s provided another model of resistance politics. Specific to a Caribbean context also was the cultural nationalism associated with the short-lived political union of the West Indian Federation (1958–62). Amongst those influenced were Kamau Brathwaite, a young Barbadian poet and postgraduate student at Cambridge University, and Trinidadian journalist, poet and cultural activist John La Rose who, after a period in Venezuela, had settled in Britain in 1961. Four years later in London, La Rose established New Beacon Books, with the aim of publishing and distributing radical works by pan-African, Caribbean and black diasporic writers.⁴⁰ In London the year after (1966), La Rose and Brathwaite founded CAM, the *Caribbean Artist's Movement*. CAM would provide a vital, if short-lived, forum of critical and cultural exchange for black writers and artists in Britain much as *Caribbean Voices* had done for writers in the 1950s. CAM folded in 1971 and Brathwaite returned to Jamaica. Indeed, many of the black writers in Britain in this period still saw themselves as Caribbean rather than British.⁴¹ The possibility of return 'home' made them 'sojourners' rather than 'settlers', figures who in the long term did little to sustain black literary creativity in Britain.⁴²

Second Generation

'It Dread Inna Ingran': The Poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson

The radical ideologies of Pan-Africanism, Black Power and a growing interest in Third World politics, writing and resistance, all influenced the development of Black British poetry in the late 1960s and 1970s.⁴³ The International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books, the alternative face of writing and publishing at the time, provided a much needed network for transnational association and exchange between black writers. Johnson, the singular black British poetic voice of the 1970s, emerged through this grassroots activist route, his earliest work developing out of poetry workshops which he and others organised within the Black Panther movement. He was also closely affiliated with the Race Today Collective, established in 1972, which published his early collections and those of other Black British poets, such as Jean Binta Breeze's *Riddym Ravings and Other Poems* (London, 1988).

As Johnson's early poetry charts, the 1970s were a difficult decade for many young black Britons, with growing unemployment, racist attacks and discriminatory policies such as the notorious SUS law which allowed the police to stop and search any youth (in practice overwhelmingly any black

youth) under suspicion of unlawful possession or activity. This is the world of *Dread Beat and Blood* (1975) and *Inglan is a Bitch* (1981), with ‘Sonny’s Lettah’ arguably the most important poem of this decade.⁴⁴ Johnson’s is a reggae aesthetic: his poetry often references reggae artists and is set within sound system culture but it is also, more importantly, ‘under sprung’ with reggae rhythms and uses reggae techniques.⁴⁵ Johnson coined the term ‘dub poetry’ to define this new, primarily voice-based form which originated in Jamaica but which, like reggae, became a global phenomenon.

The subjects of Johnson’s highly politicised poetry, his striking use of Nation language and his unique performance style quickly ensured him a high profile in Britain. Not only did Johnson’s poetry present a coruscating challenge to the manifold exclusions and racisms of British society but his vision for Britain’s black and working class populations was a thoroughly radicalising one, grounded in demotic language, solidarity and community action.

Johnson’s ‘incendiary poetics’⁴⁶ are often read as primarily oppositional in their critique of Britain and Britishness, vis-à-vis the racism, oppressive policing and Thatcherite politics of the era; indeed, his name is synonymous with the ‘development of a distinctly black political consciousness in the 1970s’.⁴⁷ However, he has always identified himself as a Black British poet first and foremost, and this marked an important shift from the Windrush generation. Johnson’s legacy has been immense, as both a poetic forerunner and mentor figure. His influence can be clearly seen in the early poems of Merle Collins, Valerie Bloom and Grace Nichols, and although there were predecessors, in both a Caribbean and Black British context, Johnson has been a crucial Nation language pioneer.

Anthologizing Black British Writing: Bluefoot Traveller

The activity and process of anthologisation, both specialist and mainstream, provides one means to trace the early construction of poetic agendas and ‘manifestos’ for Black British poetry, as part of a more concerted effort to define a black British literary aesthetic. Indeed, the paratextual frames of key anthologies of the period can tell us much about the ideological, political and aesthetic concerns of this generation of writers. In his 1976 introduction to *Bluefoot Traveller*, Berry compared ‘Westindians’ in Britain with their African-American counterparts: ‘Westindians here are a long way away from the dynamic cultural activities of American blacks or their fellow Westindians at home. They are grossly underexplored, underexpressed, underproduced and undercontributing’.⁴⁸ Indeed, SuAndi and Nichols have since spoken about looking to African-American poets such as Leroi Jones,

Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez or Ntozake Shange as their only available models in the absence of accessible or visible Black British ones.⁴⁹ More optimistically, A 1974 *Savacou* special issue (9/10), edited by La Rose and Salkey 'cite[d]s a wealth of cultural activity among people of Caribbean descent in Britain, mostly London, at this time'. However, crucially, it 'represent[ed] the cultural identity of these people as explicitly and unproblematically expatriate, "away from home"'.⁵⁰ 'Home' in Fred D'Aguiar's phrase, was 'always elsewhere'.⁵¹ By 1981 and the second, revised edition of *Bluefoot Traveller* Berry was slightly more optimistic: 'Since the first *Bluefoot Traveller* ... new developments have called for a fresh selection of poems. Britain's Caribbean community ... involves itself much more intensely in expressing its cultural background. It has become more active in writing and publishing and in the opening of local bookshops'.⁵² He also noted that although 'Suitable work from women writers had not been submitted or found ... in the original anthology ... That situation has changed here'.⁵³

'The Power to Be What I Am': Black British Poetry and Feminism

Many of the key Black British poets of the 1980s were women.⁵⁴ The increased publication and visibility of a range of Black British women's writing owed much to two factors: new national and local funding streams for 'ethnic minority arts' and growing networks of black feminist association.⁵⁵ These were to nurture a number of new writers and facilitate some of the most promising publications by black women in Britain in the early 1980s⁵⁶ as well as the beginnings of a critical tradition of Black British women's writing.⁵⁷ Bernadine Evaristo has recently referred to this time as 'a sisterhood, warts and all ... which allowed us to produce literature on our own terms. It has rarely been so since'.⁵⁸

Amongst the women poets who benefited from feminist publishing in this period were Grace Nichols and Maud Sulter. Nichols's remarkable first poem cycle, *I Is a Long Memoried Woman* (1983) was published by a small black press (Karnak), but her next four collections were all, significantly, published in London by the foremost feminist press of the decade: Virago.⁵⁹ What links the disparate poems in these collections is a central focus on the black woman's body and voice, the links between female sexuality and creativity, an interest in recovering and reworking black histories and revisiting European and gender myths in some highly or inventive ways.⁶⁰ Nichols is particularly interested in the intersecting racial and gender politics of representations of the black female body (in both historical and contemporary contexts) and latterly, has written a series of poems inspired by or

addressed to well-known paintings.⁶¹ Although she has always eschewed the term ‘feminist’ her poetry is unashamedly woman-centred and empowering: ‘From dih pout / Of mih mouth / From dih/ Treacherous / Calm of mih / Smile / You can tell / I is a long memoried woman.’⁶²

In comparison, Sulter’s *As a Black Woman* (1985) now reads as perhaps impossibly remote in its poems of radical black feminist separatism, but it was extremely important in and of its time. The poem ‘Thirteen Stanzas’ stands out in the collection in its form and linguistic experimentation and is an important reminder that Black British women writers can also be Scots, an identity (and disruption of Britishness) Jackie Kay has also explored in her poetry.⁶³

Anthologising Black British Poetry in the 1980s and 1990s

The 1980s saw a shift toward the more inclusive, if rather flawed, ideology of multiculturalism, and the encouragement of ‘ethnic minority’ arts. Many anthologies from this period reflect this new agenda of representing diversity. The most important of these was the influential *News for Babylon: The Chatto Book of Westindian-British Poetry*, edited by Berry (1984). Not only did it raise the profile of Black British poetry but it launched the careers of a number of younger poets. Four years later the much touted and reviewed *The New British Poetry* appeared, edited by Gillian Allnutt, D’Aguiar, Ken Edwards and Eric Mottram. In it, Black British and women poets were each allocated a separate editor and section of their own, a controversial move which was seen by some as reductive and unhelpfully divisive. The title of E. A. Markham’s influential *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and Britain* (1989), is completely in keeping with this period when the dominant ideology of multiculturalism seems to have encouraged the emphasis on cultural difference and diversity rather than ‘Britishness’. The categorising (and marketing) of black writers in Britain clearly continued to exercise and unsettle a number of critics and anthologists and the admission of Black British poets to mainstream collections was slow.⁶⁴ It wasn’t until the 1990s that Black British poets were admitted to these more generic collections, initially often along gender lines.⁶⁵

Nineties Poets: Revisiting Windrush, Rewriting the Nation

Some really provocative collections from this period⁶⁶ are notable for their problematising of black poets’ identification with the nation (whether home or elsewhere) and their rewriting of the map of Britishness from a new perspective. As these poets critiqued notions of a singular, monocultural

Britishness they reminded us that Britain and its 'elsewheres' are as much imagined places, or 'imaginary homelands', as a physical spaces or geo-political entities. As suggested by the title poem of Pakistan-born Moniza Alvi's first collection, *The Country at My Shoulder* (1993), Black British and British Asian writers often have 'a country at their shoulder ... one which is fit to burst'; their versions of 'Britishness' are multiple, whether contingent or counter to dominant versions of the 'nation'. This sense of 'Britishness remapped' and the shift away from 'roots' to 'routes' as an organising principle for the anthology is particularly well captured in *Out of Bounds: British Black and Asian Poets* with its organisation of poems by the regions within the British Isles to which they refer, rather than ethnic or cultural origins of the writer.⁶⁷

In Jackie Kay's first collection, *The Adoption Papers* (1991) such tensions between multiple belongings are explored within the context of transnational adoption. In her long poem sequence, Kay uses different typefaces to signify the intercutting, antiphonal and sometime overlapping voices of daughter, adoptive mother and birth mother as they come to term with their individual and collective histories, in a moving and powerful exploration of the politics and experiences of transracial adoption: 'After mammy tell me she wisnae my real mammy / I was scared to death she was gonnie melt / or something or mibbe disappear in the dead / of night ...'⁶⁸

By 1998, Kay was obviously a well-established enough 'name' for poet-anthologist Lemn Sissay to declare the obvious names of Black poetry in Britain are not here. There is no Zephaniah, no Agard and no Nichols. With the exception of ... Johnson and ... Kay, I want to bring you something else. I want to bring to you the new generation of poets who are knocking on the doors of the houses ... who are putting their words to music ... the raw, the fresh Black and British poets.⁶⁹

Indeed, the 1990s were notable for the emergence, in print and performance, of a range of new poetic voices, many of which were included in Sissay's collection, *The Fire People*, as well as the creation of a range of new, small but significant, independent presses publishing Black British writing, such as Bloodaxe, Mango Publishing (1995-), SAKS (1996-) Hansib, Aark Arts (late 1990s-) and Peepal Tree Press (1986-).

The fiftieth anniversary of Windrush in 1998 generated much visibility for contemporary Black British writing, with, for example, John Agard as poet in residence at the BBC. Roy Sommer argues that the late 1990s were 'accompanied by a historical turn in black British literary studies [which] not only helped to turn the anniversary into a media event, but also initiated a process of canon formation ...'⁷⁰ However, arguably such short-term media interest in the anniversary continued to mask a longer-term neglect

and lack of a critical tradition for Black British writers. As Caryl Phillips has reflected: ‘in the 1970s there was not what we might term a black British critical tradition.’⁷¹ Similarly, Johnson observed as late as 1996: ‘In terms of my own work, I could have benefited from a critical tradition. We didn’t have one at that time and we’re only beginning to scratch at one in this country now’.⁷² Nasta has called for ‘an attempt to move beyond what I call ‘apprenticeship criticism’ in terms of black women’s writing in this country, pieces which celebrate the new voices of black writers, their startling experimentation with language and so on and [the need to] attempt to consolidate and excavate more fully’.⁷³ Crucially, this means historicising Black British writing and developing a Black British critical tradition, a call which was to some extent answered by the wider lens and substantial scholarship of a range of critical texts at the end of the century.

Millennial Poets

In 2014 there are many signs that Black British poetry is thriving. Daljit Nagra’s, *Look We Have Coming to Dover* (2007), is an extraordinary first collection in which Punjabi family histories, migrant dreams and the language and political ideologies surrounding UK immigration are mapped onto a British poetic landscape which is both familiar and startlingly defamiliarised. One of the striking features of this collection is its complex dialogue with English poets such as Matthew Arnold, as well as Nagra’s forging of a highly original poetic voice and a ‘jazzed hybrid language’. In the title poem of the collection, Nagra returns to Arnold’s most famous poem ‘Dover Beach’, registering both the town’s iconic place in British cultural nationalism (‘The White Cliffs of Dover’) and its centrality as a site of border-crossing for more recent migrant histories: ‘Swarms of us, grafting in ... / banking on the miracle of sun- / ... passport us to life. Only then / can it be human to hoick ourselves, bare-faced for the clear. / Imagine my love and I, / our sundry others, Blair’d in the cash / of our beeswax’d cars, our crash clothes, free, / we raise our charged glasses over unparasol’d tables / East, babbling our lingoos, flecked by the chalk of Britannia!’⁷⁴

Nagra’s ‘Kabba Questions the Ontology of Representation, the Catch 22 for ‘Black’ Writers’⁷⁵ is a kind of ‘meta-poem’ which examines the politics of representation and reception for Black British and British Asian poets, the role of colonial education and the continuing power of the English canon and canonical processes with particular reference to the category ‘Poets from Other Cultures’ in the UK National Curriculum for English. A Punjabi father asks, in exasperated and crowded demotic, on behalf of

his school-aged son: ‘Vy giv my boy / dis freebie of silky blue / GCSE anthology with its three poets / from three parts of Briten – yor HBC / of Eaney, Blak / Clarke, showing us how / to tink and feel? For Part 2, us / as a bunch of Gunga Dins ju group, ‘Poems / from Udder Cultures / and Traditions.’ ‘Udder’ is all / vee are to yoo, to dis cuntry- / ‘Udder’? To my son’s kabbadi posseee, all / Yor poets are ‘Udder!’⁷⁶

Agbabi’s *Telling Tales* (2014) takes on a similar dialogue with a canonical tradition of English poets but to very different ends, as Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* is turned upside down and voiced by a gleeful cast of modern-day Black British poets and would-be poets, fully imagined speakers who satirically capture the zeitgeist of the contemporary British poetry scene. Indeed, the inclusion of short fictionalised biographies at the end of the text can make them seem even more convincing than Chaucer’s originals and in this way, Agbabi encourages us to read both texts in dialogue in new and provocative ways. Thus Harry Bailey, the host of Chaucer’s original poem becomes Harry ‘Bells’ Bailey who ‘worked as a bouncer when studying at London Guildhall Uni. Ended up managing pub. Now owns five gastropubs, including the legendary Tabard Inn in Southwark. There hosts monthly storytelling night, *Plain Speaking*, which mixes live performance with Skype’. (*Telling Tales*, p. 115).

His is the Prologue, as is appropriate, and it is breathtaking: a contemporary mix or ‘mashup’ of Chaucer’s most famous lines and Eliot’s reworking in the opening to ‘The Waste Land’ (1922) with a nod to other canonical poets such as Percy Shelley⁷⁷:

When my April showers me with kisses
I could make her my missus or my mistress
But I’m happily hitched – sorry home girls –
Said my vows to the sound of Bow Bells
Yet her breath is as fresh as the west wind,
When I breathe her, I know we’re predestined
To make music; my muse, she inspires me,
Though my mind’s overtaxed, April fires me,
How she pierces my heart to the fond root
Till I bleed sweet cherry blossom en route
To our bliss trip ...⁷⁸

Two current collections which show the richness and diversity of contemporary Black British poetry are Dean Atta’s 2013 collection *I Am Nobody’s Nigger* and Karen McCarthy-Woolf’s *An Aviary of Small Birds* (2014). Atta’s collection combines both angry and reflective poems which deal with race, queer sexuality and life in London. The title poem is a coruscating attack on the use of ‘nigger’ in a post-racial, popular cultural context and

reminds of the contexts of power and specific histories of oppression which this racist term still evokes. By way of contrast, McCarthy-Woolf's collection pieces together the aftermath of a much-wanted first child dying during childbirth, in poems freighted with the unbearable and minute details of living with this loss but which also reaffirm the redemptive power of poetry and of the natural world.

McCarthy-Woolf is one of the poets to have benefited from national initiatives such as the 'The Complete Works' poet-mentoring project, which led to a number of new first collections as well as high-profile anthologies such as *Ten Poets Spread the Word* (2010), its sequel, *Ten: the New Wave* (2014) which she edited.⁷⁹ Formal and informal association (such as the writing groups Malika's Kitchen [2000–] and Kwame Dawes's Afro-Poets school) and regional initiatives (such as Yorkshire's 'Inscribe', directed by Smartt and Sesay, 'Commonword Cultureword', 'TangleRoots' on mixed race narratives and 'Identity on Tyne' in the northeast) have also supported the emergence of other new Black British poetic voices. In 2015 Black British poets' affiliations to the nation are mainly British but importantly, they *work* internationally, borrowing from other cultures and literary traditions not just British ones. Similarly, their subjects are global, such as the important work and poetry on trauma and torture of Sri Lankan-born Sene Senetrivatne.

Red, Kwame Dawes's 2010 anthology of contemporary Black British poetry includes more than eighty poets, established and new, a far cry from Berry's situation in the 1970s. Perhaps, as Dawes suggests, we should be optimistic about the 'exciting future' for Black British poetry, 'given the remarkable number of gifted poets emerging in the UK today, and given the work being done by many articulate and proactive advocates for Black British writing in general and poetry in particular'.⁸⁰ And yet, as Evaristo points out, Black British poetry collections still comprise only 1 percent of all those published in Britain. Her 'Why it Matters' is nothing less than a manifesto and a provocation, not just to poetry readers but to the UK publishing industry as a whole:

What if poetry publishers, nearly all of whom are white and male, used their position of power and privilege to be more proactive in actively seeking out new voices away from the usual networks? It might mean publishing beyond personal taste. It might mean nurturing talent when it's found, rather than dismissing it as not good enough – yet. It might mean being open to poetry that comes out of unfamiliar cultures and traditions. It might mean being aware that including more diverse voices on a poetry list can only enrich and strengthen it... Editors are the ones with the power to make a difference. The ball is in their court.⁸¹

In 2014 at least, the public face of Black British poetry is very different from its first-generation beginnings, having successfully ‘breached’ the gates of some major institutions, including the literary ‘establishment’ and academia. Poetry by Agard, Nichols, Imtiaz Dharker and Alvi has long been integrated into the National Curriculum for English (albeit often under the guise of ‘Poems from Other Cultures and Traditions’, as Alvi and Nagra have noted) and these poets are some of the most sought-after participants in workshops for British secondary school pupils. Black British writing is recognised as an important area of study on a growing number of university curricula in the UK (as well as in the States and parts of Europe) and in 2012, an international conference at Cambridge University was devoted to the teaching of Caribbean and Black British poetry. Anthologies of Black British poetry abound, weighty volumes of Black British poets’ *Selected Poems* are published by mainstream publishers such as Bloodaxe and the even more peerlessly canonical Penguin, although specialist independent presses such as Peepal Tree or Flipped Eye are still a lifeline for most new Black British poets. Black British poets such as Kay, Kei Miller, D’Aguiar and Dawes are professors of creative writing at British or American universities, others have residencies at major institutions such as the Tate Gallery, the South Bank Centre, the BBC and the Royal Shakespeare Company and Black British poets win prestigious prizes such as the Forward Prize for Poetry and Somerset Maugham Prize. Since the Poetry Society launched its ‘New Generation Poets’ list in 1994, at least five Black British poets have been included. The controversial shortlisting of Benjamin Zephaniah for a chair in poetry at Cambridge University in 1991 is still widely remembered and he, Agard and Nichols are all well-respected writers for children as well as adults. There is also, for the first time, a black British Children’s Laureate: Malorie Blackman. Johnson, arguably the most significant Black British poet of the last forty years, is regarded affectionately as a kind of ‘national treasure’ alongside others such as Zephaniah and Kay, and his *Selected Poems* was published in no less than the Penguin Classic series in 2002, the first black poet and only the second living poet to be included in the series. Poetry in both printed and performed form is more visible than ever and Black British poets are at the very heart of this renaissance.

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NOTES

- 1 The quote 'Mekin Histri' has been taken from Linton Kwesi Johnson, 'Mekin Histri', in *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002), pp. 64–66. This process of fetishization reached its apotheosis when a giant model of the Windrush ship and its Caribbean passengers was featured in the national pageant which was the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics.
- 2 In *IC3: the Penguin Book of New Black Writing in Britain* (Harmondsworth, Penguin: 2000), editors Courtia Newland and Kadija Sesay divide their contributors into three phases or generations: the settlers, the explorers and the crusaders. I add to these the millennial generation.
- 3 Susheila Nasta, 'Beyond the Millennium: Black Women's Writing', *Women: A Cultural Review* 11:1/2 (2000): 72–73.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.73.
- 5 'Extra Dimensions, New Routines', *Wasafiri* 25:4 (2010): 51.
- 6 Ian Hamilton, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 258.
- 7 Courtland and Sesay call these 'Explorers'.
- 8 See Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice* (London: New Beacon, 1984) for a more detailed study of the history and use of this linguistic term.
- 9 Such as MAAS, the Minority Arts Advisory Service, originally set up in 1976 as a result of an Arts Council report designed to survey and to encourage ethnic minority arts in Britain.
- 10 For example, Ramey discusses 'urban griots' and 'trickster figures' in R. Victoria Arana and Lauri Ramey, eds., *Black British Writing* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2004), p. 110. See also Sarah Broom, *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 251–57.
- 11 John Agard, 'True Grit', in *We Brits* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2006), p. 10.
- 12 See Alison Donnell, ed., *Companion to Black British Culture* (London: Routledge, 2002), James Procter, ed., *Writing Black Britain: 1948–1998* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), Arana and Ramey, eds., *Black British Writing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
- 13 See Arana, ed., *'Black' British Aesthetics Today* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).
- 14 See Gail Low and Marion Wynne Davies, eds., *A Black British Canon?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), John McLeod, 'Some Problems with "British" in a "Black British Canon"', *Wasafiri* 17:36 (2002): 56–59.
- 15 See Fred D'Aguiar 'Against Black British Literature' [1988] in Maggie Butcher ed., *Tibisiri* (Dangaroo Press: 1989), pp. 106–114.
- 16 See McLeod 2002.
- 17 Procter, *Writing Black Britain*, p. 5.
- 18 *Write Black Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature* (Hertford: Hansib, 2005), p. 5.
- 19 McLeod, 2002, p. 57.
- 20 See for example, D'Aguiar, 1988, Ramey, 1994.
- 21 For example, Low and Wynne Davies, eds., 2006. The subsuming of 'British Asian' or more recently, 'British Muslim' into 'Black British' is especially

- problematic, and a number of writers have remarked on this. However, for the purpose of this chapter, I use the term 'Black British' to refer to poets and poetry by Black *and* Asian poets, born or based in Britain.
- 22 See Caryl Phillips, 'Following On: the Legacy of Lamming and Selvon', in *A New World Order: Selected Essays* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001), pp. 232–38 and McLeod, 2010.
 - 23 'The Spread the Word Writer Development Agency was commissioned to look into why so few black and Asian poets were being published ... the final report, *Free Verse* (2005) ... revealed that less than 1% of poetry books published in Britain are by black and Asian poets', 'Why it Matters', *Ten Poets Spread the Word* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2010), p. 11.
 - 24 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
 - 25 Kwame Dawes, 'Negotiating the Ship on the Head: Black British Fiction', in *Write Black Write British*, p. 280.
 - 26 Stuart Hall [1976], 'Racism and Reaction', in *Five Views of Multi-Cultural Britain* (London: Commission for Racial Equality, 1978), p. 11.
 - 27 Dorothea Smartt, *Ship Shape* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2008). See also Moniza Alvi's 'Arrival 1946' or Agard's 'The Ship', Grace Nichols', *I Is a Long Memored Woman* (London: Karnak, 1983) and *Startling the Flying Fish* (London: Virago, 2005), Sheree Mack's *Family Album* (Newcastle: Flambard Press, 2011) and Sesay's *Irki* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2013).
 - 28 Dawes, 2005, p. 290.
 - 29 McLeod, 2010, p. 46.
 - 30 The quote 'But Let Me Tell You How This Business Begin' taken from Derek Walcott, 'The Schooner Flight', in Edward Baugh, ed., *Selected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007), p. 129.
 - 31 Trinidadian writer Sam Selvon acknowledged this in his seminal essay 'Finding West Indian Identity in Britain', *Kunapipi* IX:3 (1987): 34–38.
 - 32 See Delia Jarrett-Macaulay, *The Life of Una Marson: 1905–65* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998) and Una Marson, *Selected Poems*, ed. Alison Donnell (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2011).
 - 33 See also Patience Agbabi's experimentation with the sonnet form in 'Problem Pages' (2008) which stages the imagined literary and other 'problems' of English and American writers and, most recently in her reworking of *The Canterbury Tales*, *Telling Tales* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014).
 - 34 Una Marson, 'If', in Donnell and Lawson Welsh, eds. (1996), p. 129.
 - 35 See Donnell's introduction to Marson, *Selected Poems* (2011) for more detailed discussion of this.
 - 36 In Berry, ed., *News for Babylon* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), p. 190.
 - 37 *Ibid.*
 - 38 *Fractured Circles* (London: New Beacon Books, 1979) and *Lucy's Letters and Loving* (London: New Beacon Books, 1982).
 - 39 Berry, ed., *Bluefoot Traveller* (London: Limehouse Publications, 1976, and London: Nelson Educational, 1981) and *News for Babylon* (1984).
 - 40 See Ruth Bush's recent study of New Beacon as 'the first independent publisher for Caribbean and Black interest [writing] in the UK'. (<http://www.georgepadmore-institute.org/launch-online-publication-new-beacon-books-pioneering-years>, accessed 15 December, 2014).

- 41 For example in his preface to *Breaklight: An Anthology of Caribbean Poetry* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1971), p. xv, Jamaican writer Andrew Salkey referred to ‘a mere handful living in voluntary exile in London.’
- 42 Bernadine Evaristo, ‘Black British Women’s Writing’, Keynote address to First International Conference on Black British Women Writers, Brighton University, July 2014.
- 43 The quote ‘It Dread Inna Innglan’ taken from Linton Kwesi Johnson, ‘It Dread Inna Innglan’, in *Innglan is a Bitch* (London: Race Today, 1980), pp. 19–20.
- 44 ‘Sonny’s Lettah’, often known as the anti-SUS law poem, takes the form of a moving letter from a son to his mother whilst he is Brixton jail.
- 45 See Kwame Dawes, *Natural Mysticism: Towards a New Reggae Aesthetic in Caribbean Writing* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1999) for a more detailed examination of this.
- 46 Hengameh Saroukhani, ‘Penguinizing Dub: Paratextual Frames for Transnational Protest in Linton Kwesi Johnson’s Mi Revalueshanary Fren’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 2014: 1.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 48 Introduction to *Bluefoot Traveller*, p. 9.
- 49 See Arana and Ramey, eds. (2004), p. 116.
- 50 Alison Donnell, ‘Nation and Contestation: Black British Literature’, *Wasafiri* 17:36 (2002): 13.
- 51 Fred D’Aguiar, ‘Home’, in *British Subjects* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993), pp. 14–15.
- 52 Berry, Introduction to *Bluefoot Traveller*, p. 6.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 54 The quote ‘The Power to Be What I Am’ taken from Grace Nichols, ‘Holding my Beads’ in *I Is a Long Memored Woman* (London: Karnak, 1983), p. 86.
- 55 For example, groups such as the Brixton Black Women’s Group (BBWG) and the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) were founded in 1973 and 1978, and the Asian Women Writers’ Collective in 1984. Nasta (2000) and Evaristo (2014) both acknowledge that much black British women’s writing has ‘traditionally existed outside the academy ... in the world of community writing workshops, performance arts and organized groups such as the Asian Woman writers’ alliance ...’ (Nasta 2000, p. 72).
- 56 See Barbara Burford’s, *A Dangerous Knowing: Four Black Women Poets* (London: Sheba Feminist Press, 1984), *Watchers and Seekers: Creative Writing by Black Women in Britain* (London: The Women’s Press, 1987), ed. Rhonda Cobham and Merle Collins and the international collection, *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* (London: Sheba Feminist Press, 1988), ed. S. Grewal, Jackie Kay, Liliane Landor, Gail Lewis and Pratibha Parma.
- 57 See Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe’s seminal essay collection: *The Heart of the Race* (London: Virago, 1985) and Laretta Ngcobo’s *Let It Be Told: Black Women in Britain*, (London: Virago, 1987), which included both autobiographical essays and poems.
- 58 Evaristo Keynote (Brighton, 2014).
- 59 See *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* (1984), *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (1989), *Sunris* (1996) and *Startling the Flying Fish* (2005).
- 60 See ‘Eve’ in *Lazy Thoughts* (1998), p. 14, and ‘Icons’ in *Sunris* (1996), pp. 29–30.

- 61 See Picasso, *I Want my Face Back* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2009) and *Paint Me a Poem: New Poems Inspired by Art in the Tate* (London: A & C Black, 2004).
- 62 *I Is a Long Memored Woman* (London: Karnak, 1983), p. 3.
- 63 See 'In My Country' in *Out of Bounds* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2012), p. 71.
- 64 Having been excluded from *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, edited by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion in 1982, Black British poets gradually found themselves admitted to the pages of a range of more mainstream anthologies in the 1980s, from a single poem (by Johnson) in Tom Paulin's *The Faber Book of Political Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986) to the rather more generous selection in Sylvia Paskin et al., *Angels of Fire – An Anthology of Radical Poetry in the '80s* (London: Random House, 1986).
- 65 See Judith Kinsman's, *Six Woman Poets* (1992), Linda France's *Sixty Woman Poets* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993), Margaret Busby's international collection, *Daughters of Africa* (London: Vintage, 1992) and most significantly *Bittersweet* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998), edited by Karen McCarthy-Woolf. In 1996 a volume dedicated to Kay, Nichols and Merle Collins appeared in the Penguin Modern Poets Series. Black British poetry also featured in more generic collections such as Michael Horowitz's *Grandchildren of Albion: Voices and Visions of Younger Poets in Britain* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: New Departures, 1992) as well as arts and poetry magazines such as *Poetry Review* and *Artrage* (1992–95), the magazine outlet of MAAS.
- 66 For example, D'Aguiar's *British Subjects* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993), Alvi's *The Country at My Shoulder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Agard's *Half-Caste* (London: Hodder, 2004) and *We Brits* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2006).
- 67 Jackie Kay, James Procter and Gemma Robinson, eds., *Out of Bounds: British Black and Asian Poets* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2012). See also Sarah Lawson Welsh, '(Un)belonging Citizens, Unmapped Territory: Black Immigration and British Identity in the Post-1945 Period', in Stuart Murray, ed., *Not on Any Map: Essays on Postcoloniality and Cultural Nationalism* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1997), pp. 43–66.
- 68 Jackie Kay, *Darling* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2007), p. 27.
- 69 Introduction to *The Fire People*, (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1998), p. 8.
- 70 'Black' British Literary Studies and the Emergence of a New Canon', *Orbis Litterarum* 66:3 (2011): 246.
- 71 Phillips, 2001, p. 233.
- 72 Interview: LKJ Talks to Burt Caesar, *Critical Quarterly*, 38:4 (1996): 72.
- 73 Nasta, 2000, p. 78.
- 74 *Look We Have Coming to Dover* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), pp. 32–33.
- 75 *Ibid.*, pp. 42–43.
- 76 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 77 See also Ramey, 'Black British Poetry', in Arana and Ramey (2004), pp. 130–31.
- 78 Agbabi, *Telling Tales*, p. 1.
- 79 Lesser known but important anthologies include: Debjani Chatterjee, ed., *The Redbeck Anthology of British Asian Writing* (Bradford: Redbeck, 2000) and Asher Hoyles and Martin Hoyles, eds., *Moving Voices: Black Performance Poetry* (Hertford: Hansib, 2002).
- 80 Introduction to *Red* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2010), p. 20.
- 81 Evaristo, *Ten New Poets*, p. 14.