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**The Caribbean and Britain**   
        

The Caribbean is both a geographical place, centered around the Caribbean Sea, and a radically decentred diasporic domain mapped by the migratory routes taken by its peoples, as well as an imagined space, constructed and challenged through the many narratives. While Caribbean writers and writings remain informed by historical post/colonial ties to and between places, they also exceed definition in relation to a singular place as a crucial element of their Caribbeanness. When Antonio Benitez-Rojo famously termed the Caribbean ‘The Repeating Island’ (1996) he theorized a fluid space of plurality, difference and discontinuity which is paradoxically united by certain “endlessly repeating” experiences, practices and phenomena. Building upon Benitez-Rojo’s idea of the Caribbean as a “cultural meta-archipelago without center and without limits”[[1]](#endnote-1) this chapter reads Caribbean writing in Britain in the context of the shifts and transitions that Caribbean writers have gone through in the long relationship between Britain and the region.

Dominant narratives of Caribbean writing in Britain still often start with the arrival of the SS Windrush in 1948, a foundational if overdetermined moment in understanding post-1945 British Caribbean migration and the emergence of a Caribbean literary canon alongside an overlapping Black British one. Whilst Windrush was not the ‘beginning’ of Caribbean migration to Britain, its ‘arrival’, the accelerating endgame of empire, the rise of anti-colonial independence movements and of cultural nationalisms globally, all created the conditions for an extraordinary period of literary creativity in Britain, as Caribbean 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 an organized association between writers from different Caribbean territories can be also traced to this time in Britain. Whilst writers of the Windrush generation mainly came to Britain as adults, including Selvon, Lamming and Salkey, the second generation of British Caribbean writers, born in the 1950s and 60s, most often migrated to Britain as children or young adults, including David Dabydeen, John Agard, Grace Nichols, Caryl Phillips and Fred D’Aguiar. This generation who wrote and published in the late 1960s and 1970s[[2]](#endnote-2) expressed different experiences, affiliations and concerns in relation to Caribbean British life. Much writing from this time was deeply rooted in wider cultural, social and political debates, often grassroots or activist in orientation, and consciously oppositional to canonical, institutional formations.[[3]](#endnote-3) Writers of this generation also commonly built or joined organisations and saw themselves a part of a wider global struggle against colonialism as well as intersecting race and class oppressions. John La Rose’s London-based New Beacon Bookshop (1966-), CAM: the Caribbean Arts Movement founded by La Rose and Kamau Brathwaite (1966-72), and the activities of the Race Today Collective in the 1970s are some important examples. Indeed, La Rose is important in any genealogy of black Caribbean British connections as an activist as well as a publisher. He established the Black Parents Movement in 1975, joining the New Cross Massacre Action Committee in 1981 and, with an eye on education and legacy, creating the George Padmore Institute in 1991. Influenced by the international ideologies of Pan-Africanism and Black Power, both La Rose and his fellow Trinidadian George Padmore made crucial transnational connections between Third World politics, writing and activism. La Rose went on to head an annual International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books (1982-1995), which provided a much needed network for transnational association and exchange between black writers globally.

Another key foundational figure in Caribbean-British writing of this period was Jamaican-born Linton Kwesi Johnson whose early poetry in *Dread Beat an’ Blood* (1976) can be usefully read as “textual uprisings”[[4]](#endnote-4): deeply imbricated within the often-racist politics and policies of the time. . The legitimate ‘poster boy’ for Caribbean British writing and activism in the 1970s and 1980s, Johnson’s poems of protest and outrage chart not just black history (‘a hurting black story’) but a wider British history. From his earliest poems (‘Sonny’s Letta’, ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’, ‘Inglan is a Bitch’ through to his iconic poems of the 1980s (‘New Craas Massakah’, ‘Di Great Insohreckshan’), Johnson charts an alternative and, largely unwritten history. Johnson’s activism and encouragement of other Caribbean British writers, together with early advocates of black British writing such as James Berry, helped to establish a new black British aesthetic which later writer-mentors such as Kwame Dawes have continued to shape.

Groundbreaking anthologies of “British Westindian” writing such as James Berry’s *News From Babylon* (1984) or E.A. Markham’s influential *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and Britain* (1989) also played a key role in the 1980s in creating a sense of new voices breaking through and differentiating themselves from an earlier generation of writers in terms of form, subject and language. Caryl Phillips’ well received novels have been adapted to film and TV, including his 1985 *The Final Passage.* Yet his most recent writings navigate the complexities of some of the English literary tradition’s most canonical texts. In *The Lost Child* (2015) Philips returns to Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* to focus on parallel stories of family dysfunction, orphanhood, alienation and the issues of race, il/legitimacy and ‘outsidership’ originally explored Bronte’s most infamous and iconic protagonist, Heathcliff. In *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018) Philips explores the life of Jean Rhys as a transgressive and canon-unsettling literary ancestor. For other writers, aesthetic confrontation was met with critical hostility, from the establishment distrust of the dub poetry of the 1970s and 80s and the controversy surrounding Benjamin Zephaniah’s 1988 shortlisting for an honorary Professorship in Poetry at Oxford University, to critical unease about the spoken-word scene and ‘Instagram poets’ of the current moment. [[5]](#endnote-5) In the 1990s, multicultural policies, new funding streams[[6]](#endnote-6)and the opening up of spaces for BAME artists proved conducive to the publication of a much wider range of Caribbean British writing. This decade also witnessed the development of new modes of poetry,[[7]](#endnote-7) often with a strong performance aesthetic, and continued literary experimentation with dub, rap, grime, hip-hop and other primarily black musical forms. As this essay explores, later generations born in the 1980s and millennial writers such as Kei Miller, Vahni Capildeo, Raymond Antrobus or Roger Robinson, have also crafted a more dynamic sense of their transnational belonging as writers who move and write between Britain and the Caribbean.

While generational shifts do mark transitions in terms of articulating cultural affiliations and attachments to both the Caribbean and Britain, writing by Caribbean writers in Britain across the generations is consistently marked by issues of un/belonging to the national project. Caribbean British writing has a long tradition of expressing and interrogating these discordant and sometimes discrepant attachments to Britain and ‘Britishness’. Starting with migrant writers of the 1950s and 1960s such as Sam Selvon, George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul, E.R Brathwaite and Donald Hind, it is possible to trace a trajectory of Caribbean British writers who have explored the complex axes of un/belonging. Extended beyond the orthodox male canon, this grouping includes Beryl Gilroy’s semi-autobiographical work *Black Teacher* (1974) with its fictional exploration of a young woman’s arrival and struggle for recognition in post-war Britain, and *In Praise of Love and Children* (written in 1959 but not published until 1996), as well as Joan Riley’s classic narrative *The Unbelonging* (1985). It continues in the poetry of James Berry, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Benjamin Zephaniah, David Dabydeen, Jean Binta Breeze, John Agard, Merle Collins, Joan Anim-Addo, Grace Nichols, Dorothea Smartt and Fred D’Aguiar, the novels and non-fictional writings of Kerry Young, Zadie Smith, Monique Roffey, Caryl Phillips, Kei Miller and Andrea Levy, the genre fiction of Mike Phillips, Victor Headley, Jacob Ross, Alex Wheatle, continuing with younger writers such as Candice Carty-Williams and Adam Lowe. In the twenty-first century, Caribbean British poetry has flourished to great acclaim through works by Raymond Antrobus, Dean Atta, Jay Bernard, Malika Booker, Vahni Capildeo, Kadijah Ibrahiim, Hannah Lowe and Roger Robinson.

Across these transitions, the question of generations is both interesting to explore and important to complicate. British-Jamaican Antrobus’s ‘Maybe I Could Love a Man’ movingly reflects on male family dynamics and generational differences, as well as the bittersweet experiences of un/belonging in both Britain and the Caribbean. An uncle tells of the speaker’s father’s active resistance to the National Front in Britain, whilst the speaker reflects on his own experience of othering and exclusion in Jamaica:

the host on ‘Smile Jamaica’ […] said to me on live TV

*If you’ve never lived in Jamaica you’re not Jamaican,*I said, *my father born here, he brought me back every year*

*wanting to keep something of his home in me*and the host sneered. I imagine my father laughing

at all the TVs in heaven. He knew this kind of question,  
being gone ten years, people said *you from foreign now*.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The poem ends with the contrast between three generations of men: the grandfathers who stayed, their sons who migrated and their sons’ more complex sense of un/belonging in both Britain and the Caribbean.

New manifestations of exclusion and ‘unbelonging’ have emerged in the mid twenty-first century ‘hostile environment’ of the UK, endorsed by the immigration policy of successive Conservative governments and the wider contexts of ‘Austerity’ Britain and Brexit. Indeed, more than seventy years after the SS Windrush sparked public and governmental concerns about West Indian migration, black British citizens of Caribbean heritage are again the subject of intense media and government focus. The term ‘Windrush generation’ has been newly mobilised in relation to the widely reported, ongoing national scandal in which Caribbean migrants arriving in the post-1948 period have been denied healthcare, social benefits and other rights which are properly theirs as British citizens, because they were never fully issued with or the Home Office destroyed or lost records of their immigration documents.

British-St Lucian, Janice Cheddie’s essay “Windrush Notes to my Younger Self” (2018) traces the longer history of Caribbean immigration to Britain and the overarching narrative of a “broken social contract between the British government and its colonial subjects,” usefully historicising the current moment in terms of shifts in immigration policy which began under Margaret Thatcher. Cheddie writes eloquently of the differing experiences of her mother’s generation (arriving from St Lucia in 1960 on the SS Ascania), and her own arrival in 1981. Looking back, Cheddie recognises her application for the “flimsy document” of British registration, “the gossamer veil between legal/illegal rights” was precipitated by a desire to:

keep […] rights and privileges that you have long taken for granted and paid into – the right to a roof over your head, access to healthcare – and in the future will ensure that your British-born child can claim a British passport. You will in time become a good immigrant. Documented, educated and resilient. The postcolonial condition you will spend your adult life writing about – displacement, doubleness, and loss - will in 2018 become an embodied physical crisis. You will be un-homed within the only place that you have known as home. [[9]](#endnote-9)

For Cheddie, her mother’s increasing frailty and vulnerability, as her dementia worsens, throws into focus shifts in British attitudes to immigration and brings to Windrush new inflections of un/belonging:

A day will come, unimaginable in 1981, when Windrush is no longer the fading cinema reel of the romantic cliché of postwar immigration, of stylish young men and the dulcet tones of Lord Kitchener singing impromptu, ‘London is the place for me’. Celebrated in the opening of the 2012 London Olympics, to represent Britain’s progress as a modern inclusive nation, Empire Windrush becomes six years later the Windrush scandal, a potent omen of a future Brexit Britain, with hard, unrelenting hostility towards migrants and selective historical amnesia, even in London... [[10]](#endnote-10)

As Cheddie and others articulate, in such a volatile climate of exclusionary nationalism, racism and xenophobia, claiming and defining cultural affiliations and attachments as a Caribbean British citizen remains a complicated matter.

The organising structure of a generational framework has been a powerful one within the field and can be seen in a number of editorial and critical projects exploring Caribbean British writings. At the turn of the millennium, Penguin’s ground-breaking cross-genre collection of black British writing, *IC3*, edited by Courtia Newland(2000) historicized the literature along explicitly generational lines and foregrounded the contribution of younger writers. For New Millennial and twenty-first-century writers, such as Jay Bernard, the question of generations appears both as a means to ground oneself and ‘dialogue’ with earlier writings and a way to reframe transitions and differences. In contrast, in other recent anthologies, including Kwame Dawes’ *Red* (2010) and Jacob Ross’ *Closure* (2015), generational differences and a focus on being Black in Britain are expressly eschewed as selection criteria or organizing principles in favour of thematic concerns. Indeed,one of the risks of a generational perspective is that the shifts across the terms ‘Caribbean British’ or ‘Caribbean diasporic’ and ‘Black British’ can be reductively viewed as a progressive transitioning toward identification as ‘British’. ‘Black British’ is importantly a more expansive characterisation that includes writers who are not of Caribbean heritage and one that also inevitably foregrounds writings by black writers while ‘Caribbean British’ includes and acknowledges the multiple and creolised ancestries of writers from a region populated by people of Indian, Chinese and European as well as African descent.

As a critical formulation, ‘Caribbean British’ also foregrounds the significance of place, connection and diaspora. Rhys’ presence in Britain before 1948 importantly unsettles any easy narrative of Windrush as an originary moment for Caribbean British writing as well as the notion that all British Caribbean writers were easily accommodated within an emergent Black British canon. It is interesting to observe how whilst many Caribbean writers have been seamlessly incorporated into the narrative of Black British writing, others have not. Both Wilson Harris and Roy Heath from the earlier generation and contemporary writer Kei Miller are not named or claimed as Black British, possibly because their creative worlds remain Caribbean-centred. The omission of Indo-Trinidadian, Vahni Capildeo’s writing is particularly interesting since her work directly challenges the exclusions of a British canon to claim her place. In poems such as ‘Four Departures from “Wulf and Eadwacer”’ Capildeo’s academic training as a medievalist is evident whilst her third and fourth collections, *Dark & Unaccustomed Words* (2012) and *Utter* (2013), arose from her experience working in Etymology and Revision at the Oxford English Dictionary. The knowing precision of ‘On Not Writing as a Caribbean Woman’ also usefully challenges the use of essentialised and stereotypical tropes of race and gender that can limit understandings of Caribbean British writing:

She—  
not containing oceans,  
nor a spice triangle,  
won’t boast that cinnamon  
could launch femme announcements  
over the bounding main:  
*set course for my rich shores*.  
No allure for sailors…

She—  
hasn’t cooked cassava,  
nor become a mother;  
might gatecrash Carnival  
flaunting last year’s costume  
and fall down in the dance;[[11]](#endnote-11)

The challenge to such stereotyping remains an important one, especially given that the prevalent view of Caribbean British writing from the 1970s onwards has been that it is limited by its primarily social and political ‘Black’ themes and performative modes, both of which have been leveraged to argue that it is not properly literature.

As well as challenging conventional ideas of the literary, throughout the generations British Caribbean writers in the UK have offered an important revisionary perspective on British history and the lives of Caribbean British communities by bringing attention to defining events such as the 1981 Brixton Riots, the 1981 New Cross Massacre and the multi-dimensional multicultural experience of the metropolis. In doing so they challenge post-imperial amnesia about Caribbean, often black, histories which is still sedimented in many areas of British life, including its education system, and write into being a more inclusive and globally-connected British historical narrative. Alex Wheatle, who served time in prison for his involvement in the 1981 Brixton riots, wrote his first, semi-autobiographical novel, *Brixton Rock* (1999), about a sixteen-year-old boy in care trying to make new relationships with his birthmother and sister and caught up in bigger historical events than himself. Wheatle wrote the novel partly to document this period of British history from a black British perspective, something he had been unable to discover elsewhere. [[12]](#endnote-12)Wheatle’s sequel, *East of Acton Lane* (2001), returns to this flashpoint in black British history with a sense of writing as witness, this time using the real-life oral histories of three friends who were in Brixton at this time to explore the catalyst for the uprising and the fallout from the police brutality surrounding the riot. That Wheatle recircles and returns to this earlier event suggests its continued inscription as an iconic (if also traumatic) moment in Caribbean British, black British and British history as well as the sense of a marginalised experience to which literary forms can give voice and visibility.

This might also be argued of Jay Bernard’s recent writing on the New Cross Fire, a notorious arson attack on 439 New Cross Road, London on 18 January 1981 which claimed the lives of thirteen young black people who were enjoying a sixteenth birthday party and the trauma of which was exacerbated by the incompetent police investigation which followed. Bernard’s ‘Surge: Side A’, a stunning multi-media performance, was published in *Surge* (2019), an award-winning collection supported by a Writer’s Residence at the George Padmore Institute in London that allowed Bernard access their archives relating to the New Cross Fire and black activism in its aftermath. Influenced by earlier British-Caribbean writers such as Linton Kwesi Johnson and the reggae deejays (which her title ‘Side A’ references), as well as younger writers such as Marlon James, Bernard connects the New Cross and Grenfell (2017) fires in London in subtle and moving ways to trace the wider ‘vexed…relationship between public narration and private truths’.[[13]](#endnote-13) This work also mediates on the nature of memory and historical elision, the role of the archive and the wider invisibility of black histories in and of Britain, as well as the potential of literature to recover and to unsettle historical narratives. As Bernard reflects:

Many questions emerged not only about memory and history, but about my place in Britain as a queer black person. This opened out into a final sense of coherence: I am from here, I am specific to this place, I am haunted by this history but I also haunt it back.[[14]](#endnote-14)

In ‘Arrival’ Bernard sensitively excavates the different historical journeys made by the ancestors of the dead, and points to the terrible inevitability - and cost - of repeatedly treating black people as statistics, from numbered slaves to the numbered dead in a London fire. Their poem ‘ma[kes] visible’ the dead as individual human beings and provides a fitting legacy:

Remember we were brought here from the

Clear waters of our dreams

That we might be named, numbered

And forgotten

That we were made visible that we might

Be looked on with contempt

That they gave us their first and last names

That we might be called wogs

And to their minds made flesh that it might

Be stripped from our backs…

Close our smokey mouths around

Their dream

Swallow them as they gaze upon us

Never to be full-

Snap, crackle

Amen [[15]](#endnote-15)

Earlier examples of this important humanistic revisionary strain in Caribbean British writing include Linton Kwesi Johnson’s poem ‘New Crass Massakah’ and La Rose’s interviews in *The New Cross Massacre* (both of which *Surge* writes back to).

Whilst the thirtieth anniversary of the New Cross Fire in 2011 was marked with a series of events and publications including the republication of La Rose’s text with a new introduction by LKJ Johnson, it was the fiftieth anniversary of Windrush in 1998 which generated the most visibility for Caribbean British writing, with, for example, John Agard in a high-profile poetry residency at the BBC. This very public moment perhaps constituted the most radical historicization of Caribbean-British writing as ‘black British’ literature, an articulation which was both short-lived and unsatisfactory as Roy Sommer argues when he characterises the late 1990s as “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…”[[16]](#endnote-16) However, such short-term media interest in this anniversary (its renewed acknowledgement in the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics notwithstanding) continued to mask a longer-term neglect and lack of a critical recognition for Caribbean British writers.

One important moment for raising public awareness of Caribbean British writing and history in Britain came in 2018 with the BBC’s adaptation of Andrea Levy’s *The Long Song* and accompanying programmes profiling her work, which garnered both popular readership and critical praise. These television programmes usefully reminded many in Britain of the much longer history of interconnections between Britain and the Caribbean. Levy’s fictions interrogate the human experience of migration to and from the Caribbean in different periods. In *Small Island* (2004) she explores the ways in which Caribbean people were racially ‘othered’ and made to feel unwelcome outsiders in Britain in the post-war period, despite being invited here as British subjects. Her earlier novels, *Every Light in the House Burning* (1994) set in 1960s London, *Never far from Nowhere* (1996) set on a North London council estate in the 1970s and *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999)set in the Thatcherite Britain of the 1980s (as well as Jamaica), document domestic experiences of Caribbean British life and the particular manifestations of racism (National Front attacks, skinhead violence etc) prominent in these periods. Her narratives are all underpinned by a strong ethical imperative to tell stories of Caribbean arrival in Britain, of later generations ‘Growing up black under the Union Jack’ and to address Britain’s widespread amnesia about its colonial history and the relative silence about Caribbean slavery in British institutions. The ‘Small Island’ of Levy’s title is, of course, both Jamaica and Britain: two islands intimately and often violently yoked together in over four hundred years of shared history, culture and global connection. Indeed, Levy always framed her focus on the long historical connection between Britain and the Caribbean as a profoundly British concern, rather than seeing it as a niche area of interest only relevant to those of Caribbean heritage like herself.

Two poets whose works explore these complex, sometimes contradictory attachments and affiliations to Britain felt by Britons of Caribbean heritage are Fred D’Aguiar and John Agard. ‘Home’ first appeared in D’Aguiar's punningly titled 1993 collection *British Subjects*, the cover of which declares the poet's impeccable post-colonial credentials as transnational journeyer: “born in Britain, brought up in Guyana, and now living in London and America...being and feeling British but not being made to feel at home.” [[17]](#endnote-17) ‘Home’ focuses on the ambivalences attendant on traversing of continents and cultures and on the complexities of being Caribbean British:

at Heathrow. H.M. Customs...

I resign to the usual inquisition,

telling me with Surrey loam caked

on the tongue, home is always elsewhere,

my passport photo's too open-faced

haircut wrong (an afro) for the decade;

the stamp, british citizen not bold enough

for my liking and too much for theirs.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Here the national collectivity of Britain, metonymically rendered as "soil", invokes all the resonances of a much-contested and revered territory as it raises intertextual echoes of Shakespeare's "sceptred isle”."[[19]](#endnote-19)However, the literalized images of clogging, caking and a more parochial "Surrey loam" ironically undermine any idealized construction of nation as this key symbol of nationhood is deconstructed. A further irony is that the *ius soli* or ancient right of the soil, entitling all those born on British soil to claim British Citizenship, is no longer a reality: since the 1981 Nationality Act, British Citizenship has effectively been a gift of government and for many, an increasingly elusive one. As Cheddie provocatively asks, distinguishing between her mother’s “Windrush Generation” and her own “mask of black Britishness”, “If we are not British, what are we?” In ‘Home’ D’Aguiar's observation that being perceived as fully or ‘properly’ a British Citizen is intimately connected to one’s race and ethnicity resonates powerfully even 26 years later, as the 2018 poem ‘Jamaican British’ by British-born Raymond Antrobus suggests.[[20]](#endnote-20) Indeed, the policing of cultural constructions of ‘Britishness’, based on the unspoken or more open privileging of white ethnicities as normative, extends well beyond Immigration Border Control.

In contrast to D’Aguiar, Agard has been labelled as an ‘insider-outsider’, a ‘Guyanese-born…poet subverting British poetry’ [[21]](#endnote-21)rather than a black British or British voice, despite having lived in Britain for over forty years. In *We Brits*, Agard takes a different approach to defining Britishness, describing it as a shared performance rallied around a preoccupation with queuing, tea, umbrellas and the weather. However, the way in which the poems in this collection are viewed through an ‘insider-outsider’ lens complicates their meaning. Indeed, the larger ironies attendant on the Caribbean Briton’s peculiar sense of what W.B. DuBois termed ‘double consciousness’ are not lost on the poet and remain as disquieting traces in many of the poems. ‘Feeling the Whirlwind’ describes an elderly black Briton in London as: “the griot-eye man/with the picong tongue/ and head full of back-a-yard politics”, “a tall piece of Caribbean/rounding a corner of Brixton”. Here Agard sensitively maps the dual affiliations and attachments which still infuse and perhaps define his sensibility, noting sympathetically: “Still, touching an exiled mango/In a busy metropolis/Does bring home an archipelago”.[[22]](#endnote-22) Like Guyanese-British Grace Nichols’ ‘Black Men in Leicester Square’ and ‘Island Man’ or the subtler cadences of the poems in Roger Robinson’s *The Butterfly Hotel* (2013), which moves between Brixton and Trinidad, ‘Feeling the Whirlwind’ is an elegiac poem which looks back to cherished Caribbean connections and memories with a sense of loss.

However, for other – often younger generation– Caribbean British writers the sense of rupture or loss is no longer central as their Britishness is taken as a ‘given’. Such are the British-set novels of British-born Zadie Smith, in which North London is characterised as home. Although Smith’s fiction depicts this city space as emphatically multi-ethnic, polyglot and cosmopolitan, her black British characters tend to be portrayed as living contiguous but quite ordinary lives. Moreover, Smith’s focus is often on a younger generation who, unlike their parents and grandparents have had no need to “travel part of the journey into Britishness’.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Alongside the urgency of contesting racism, and claiming a space within national narratives, Caribbean British narratives also articulate intersectional identities informed by class, gender and sexuality as it is experienced within and across the UK and the Caribbean. In the younger generation there is a transition to exploring sexuality – and especially queer sexualities - in their writings. In ‘Reader, I Married him’ British-born Bajan heritage writer Dorothea Smartt contrasts the prominent homophobia and problematic retention of colonial-era legislation Section 51 in Jamaica with the relatively liberal situation in Britain, critiquing not just Jamaican homophobia but also the heteronormativity of the British canonical tradition. When Smartt plays upon this final line of *Jane Eyre* to suggest new permutations of the transnational dynamics in the original relationship of Jane- Rochester- Bertha in Bronte’s text, she also queers and extends a dialogue with this canon that Rhys engaged in decades earlier. The direction of the journey is also reversed. Whereas Rochester is free to reside in the Caribbean and to marry into its wealth, the question of what it means to come to Britain is signified. In Smartt’s poem, a black British lesbian marries a black Jamaican man “so he could lef outta Ja [Jamaica]. Take refuge/in my British citizenship/my redundant heterosex right/ to marry any man.” [[24]](#endnote-24)  The third person in this reconfigured relationship is the man’s lover who acts as ‘best man…wedding planner, witness/ and his wedding night delight.” [[25]](#endnote-25)

Jay Bernard’s first collection *Your Sign is Cuckoo, Girl* (2008) offers sensual celebrations of queer sex and the female body, whereas Kei Miller’s poems in Part Two of *A Light Song of Light* (2010 ) remind us of the of the homophobia, brutality of the lived realities of being Jamaican and queer (‘A Smaller Song’) as well as the pleasures of same-sex intimacy (‘A Short History of Beds We Have Slept in Together’). Dean Atta’s 2013 collection *I am Nobody’s Nigger* combines both angry and reflective poems which explore the intersectionality of 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 readers of the contexts of power and specific histories of oppression which this racist term still evokes. In ‘Young, Black and Gay’ Atta riffs intertextually on Nina Simone’s ‘Young Gifted and Black’ (written in memory of Lorraine Hansberry), and affirms a confident voice for such intersectional identities:

My people are many and few

Subdivisions of me and you

Substantial people sometimes called subhuman

Negroes, faggots and all the youts dem

Don’t think your rights came overnight

So many people had to fight

To gain anything like equality

We ain’t there yet but we’re gonna be.[[26]](#endnote-26)

As this younger generation of Caribbean British writers reflect upon their own experiences in local as well as global contexts, some connect to the groundswell of global LGBT activism which characterizes our present moment as in the work of Dorothea Smartt and Dean Atta. Arguably, all of this generation owe much to the foundational role of early Caribbean diasporic writers in Britain, but Andrew Salkey’s 1960 novel *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* is particularly important as one of the earliest post-war explorations of diasporic queer desire that has only recently been fully appraised as such. [[27]](#endnote-27)

Like Caribbean diasporic literature in the US and Canada, contemporary Caribbean British literature is very much connected, conceptually and poetically, with regional and global cultures and perspectives as well as with national ones. From LKJ Johnson’s mobilisation of Jamaican reggae to the contemporary poetic use of hip hop, rap and spoken word, Caribbean British writers’ work across borders borrows from global cultures and literary traditions, as illustrated in the thoroughly transnational reach of the poems in Malika Booker’s *Pepper Seed* (2013) or Roger Robinson’s *The Butterfly Hotel* (2013). In genre fiction too, texts such as Alex Wheatle’s *Brixton Rock* (1999), Victor Headley’s *Yardie,* the detective writing of Mike Phillips and the prize-winning crime thriller *The Bone People* by Jacob Ross have brought Caribbean British writing into the global spotlight. Like the hybrid music/ performance style of many young artists with Caribbean heritage, such as Akala, it is important to consider these more popular genres alongside works which more comfortably fit the contours of a Caribbean British literary canon. Some of the most exciting recent Caribbean British writing centres around the short story, as in *Closure* (2015) or speculative writing and science fiction, such as Adam Lowe’s *Troglodyte Rose* (2009), signalling the renaissance of a form that was at the beginnings of Caribbean British writing and the mainstay of the 1950s from the BBC Caribbean Voices radio broadcast and the little magazines of that period.

There are also signs that the latest generation of new young Caribbean British writers are claiming popular and commercial fiction genres such as the coming-of-age novel or romance as their own. The wide critical interest in Candice Carty-Williams’ hugely successful novel, *Queenie* (2019), is significant given that commercial fiction by British Caribbean writers is still often overlooked. *Queenie* is distinctive in using the conventions of the popular romance genre in order to take an unflinching look at some of the less visible (and less palatable) experiences of its young female Caribbean British protagonist, from daily microaggressions, to racial stereotyping in work, health services, relationships, generational difference, loss and mental illness. Indeed, there is every sign that contemporary Caribbean British writing is moving in new and exciting directions, as writers such as Akala and Bernard explore hybrid or mixed-media formats, or new platforms as such as ‘Instagram poetry’[[28]](#endnote-28) and a resurgence of genres of writing such as ecocritical, Afro-futurist and speculative fictions which have arguably always been part of the Caribbean tradition. [[29]](#endnote-29)

Caribbean writing in Britain has come a long way from the publication of largely male West Indian novelists in London-based establishment presses such as Michael Joseph, Allan Wingate, Longman, Macmillan and Penguin in the 1950s and 1960s. The emergence of key independent presses dedicated to publishing Caribbean British and Black British writers such as New Beacon, Race Today or Karnak and the longstanding support for Caribbean and British writers provided by northern-based presses such as Peepal Tree, Bloodaxe and Carcanet has ensured that Caribbean British writing has made an enduring contribution to the British and Caribbean literatures, as well as to global literary landscapes as it continues to launch creatively challenging and accomplished writers.

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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. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Susheila Nasta, ‘Beyond the Millennium: Black Women's Writing’, *Women: A Cultural Review,* 11.1/2 (2000), pp.72-73. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
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6. 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
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13. Ibid, p. xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid, p. xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Bernard ‘Arrival’, *Surge* (London, Chatto & Windus: 2019), p.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. ‘” Black” British Literary Studies and the Emergence of a New Canon’, *Orbis Litterarum* 66:3, 2011, p.246. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *British Subjects* (Newcastle, Bloodaxe: 1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *British Subjects*, p. XX [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, Act Two, Scene One. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
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22. *We Brits,* p.40. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ferdinand Dennis, ‘The Prince and I’, in *London: The Lives of the City*, *Granta* 65, Spring 1999, p.315. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Smartt, *Reader I,* p.12. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid, p.12. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Atta, *I am Nobody’s Nigger* (London, Westbourne Press: 2013), pp.11-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. See Thomas Glave, ‘Andrew Salkey’s *Escape to An Autumn Pavement*’ in *Among the Bloodpeople* (New York, Akashic Books: 2013: 109-116), Kate Houlden ‘Andrew Salkey, the British Home and the Intimacies in-Between’, *Interventions*, 15:1 (2013), 95-109, David Ellis ‘Playing Fiona and being happy with Dick’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 49.2 (2013), pp222-33 and Nadia Ellis, ‘Andrew Salkey and the Queer Diasporic’ in *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press: 2015), pp. 95-146 Ronald Cummings ‘Johnnie’s Letters’, *sx salon* 29, October 2018, http://smallaxe.net/sxsalon/discussions/johnnies-letters [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Yrsa Daley-Ward and Vanessa Kisuule are notable in bringing new African-Caribbean British inflections to a growing body of ‘Instagram poetry’. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. See the writings of Kamau Brathwaite for example. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)