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Contemporary Black British Literature: A Guide

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Introduction

Why have we produced a guide to Contemporary Black British Literature?

Changes in the school curriculum at KS4, and their impacts on the texts that students study throughout their school literary lives, have put an increasing emphasis on literary heritage. As much as canonical authors are the creators of some of our greatest works of British literature, and rightly studied and celebrated, they also become imbued with more significance than that. They personify a defining quality of what 'greatness' and 'literature' mean, and ultimately what 'Britishness' means.

The cultural commentator Raymond Williams stated that the content of any education 'expresses, both consciously and unconsciously, certain basic elements in the culture, what is thought of as "an education" being in fact a particular selection, a set of emphases and omissions'. So if we think about how ideas of Britishness are constructed through our education, including by the books we read and study, we hope this *Guide* will broaden the content from which you and your students can choose to study for coursework, to address the current omissions in the A level specification, and to attempt to better reflect contemporary British culture.

Highlighting the significance of these issues in contemporary British culture, in March 2017 the *Guardian* website reported on a survey conducted for the Royal Society of Literature, which found that when 2000 people were asked to name people they regarded as 'writers of literature', only 7 per cent of the 400 writers named were from black, Asian or minority ethnic (known as BAME) backgrounds. In each example, where a BAME writer *was* named it was by only one respondent, whereas 210 people named Shakespeare. You might wonder how this selection could ever change if students of literature are rarely introduced to texts by authors from BAME backgrounds.

Exposure to a wide and diverse range of literary voices can disavow us, as readers of literature, of the notion that there is a unique, singular experience of literary Britishness through broadening our exposure to subject positions both within and outside our personal spheres of experience. We know that students are often interested in pursuing these areas in their English study, and with the free choice of texts in the coursework component we have a real opportunity to support them in this. However, we also know from our conversations with teachers that it can be difficult to know where to begin supporting students in their text selections.

This is why we developed this guide to Contemporary Black British Literature.

Of course, we are not presenting this as a definitive list, or by any means a resolution to the important and ongoing debates around diversity in the curriculum. But we hope that it is a

helpful starting point in supporting you, and your students, to explore texts outside of the traditional mainstays of the syllabus.

So we might pose questions about the value of representation. Perhaps your students no more see themselves in the story of transman Joss Moody, the black Scottish jazz musician in Jackie Kay's novel *Trumpet* than in young, white Pip, the nineteenth-century orphan boy at the centre of Dickens' *Great Expectations*. So is it just about seeing ourselves represented? What are the benefits of self-representation in the literature we read? Does wider representation disrupt normative narratives? Does it challenge presumed objectivity? Does it provoke empathy? Does it offer validation? These are questions you may like to discuss with your students – or perhaps you already have started these conversations.

In this guide, Dr Deirdre Osborne, co-founder of the first ever degree course in the world in Black British Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London, introduces you to a handful of influential texts and writers covering the genres of prose, drama and poetry as well as a wide range of contexts, settings, forms and themes. As she outlines, ' "Black British literature" indicates a range of late-twentieth-century and contemporary work in the context of literary history, rather than as projecting racial restrictions upon the many possible identities that can comprise any individual, and to which they might subscribe personally and collectively. As a literary term, Black British can be asserted, disputed and problematized in turn. Nonetheless, it is an important strand within British literature that needs to be woven into educational curricula and its value recognised by current and future generations.'

As well as this guide, we have also produced *Contemporary Black British Literature: An Introduction for Students*, in which leading academics, educators and commentators in the field introduce each of the suggested texts. We have also developed *Contemporary Black British Literature: Teaching Activities* to incorporate some of these texts into your classroom teaching of the coursework component. We plan to supplement these resources with case studies as well as a CPD offer. If you are interested in either of these further activities, please do get in touch with the English team at Pearson and let us know.

We also plan to expand on the suggested texts, with subsequent materials including British Asian Literature and Queer Literature.

We hope that you enjoy these resources, and would be delighted to hear from you about your experiences of using any of these ideas in your own teaching.

Happy reading!

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Historical context

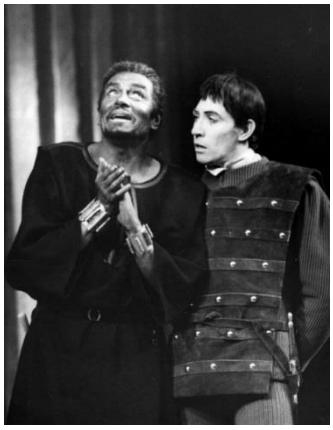
This guide consists of a selection of novels, poetry and drama by contemporary writers of African descent who were born and raised in Britain and who represent the generation who have been described (and importantly, who self-term) as Black British writers.

African descent people have lived in the British Isles since the Roman Empire, when Britannia was simply a dominion. However, the traces of these presences have become obscured in the dominance of the British Empire many centuries later. People, cultures and commerce circulated between Africa and Europe well before the systems of enslavement and colonization. Literature plays a vital role in correcting this imbalance in historical representation.

Sixteenth–nineteenth centuries

Until the eighteenth century in Britain, black people were represented primarily through white (and in the majority male) writers' works, and predominantly through the medium of plays. However, black characters were not played by black actors. Blackness was represented through prosthetics (black gloves, stockings, wigs) and the darkening of white performers' skin. This continued into twentieth-century film adaptations.

English pageants and morality plays evolved in the Middle Ages, when Christian iconography portrayed devils and pagans as black. In the Renaissance (the beginnings of England's imperial expansion) the term 'Moor' was used to describe African, Chinese, Indian, Arab and non-Christian people. The most famous of these depictions is the eponymous tragic hero of *Othello* (1604). Others include Niger in Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* (1605), Toto in Thomas Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the West* (1600–03?), and Zanche in John Webster's *The White Devil* (1611).



Laurence Olivier as Othello

A noteworthy step in these white cultural representations of blackness occurred when Restoration playwright Aphra Behn, the first English woman to earn her living as a writer, penned her prose fiction *Oroonoko: or The Royal Slave, a True Story* (1688). Albeit without challenging white Europeans' assumption of racial superiority, Behn employs a female narrative voice in what was then a rare account of the horrors of British colonisation and enslavement.

The earliest known pre-twentieth-century writing by black and mixed-race (but not necessarily British-born) people in Britain is exemplified in works by eighteenth-century figures such as Phyllis Wheatley, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho, and in the nineteenth century, by Robert Wedderburn, Mary Prince, and Mary Seacole.

Mary Seacole

Prior to World War II

In the port cities of the United Kingdom, communities of black and mixed heritage families have been, incontestably, a longstanding presence throughout British history. However, there is no identifiable body of creative literature that was written by these British born citizens. What survives extends to letters, diaries, memoir, song lyrics, political pamphlets and journalism. Authors who might be described as pioneers of Black British writing prior to World War II were invariably from abroad. Figures of note who resided in Britain (ostensibly London) for various periods of time in the 1930s and 40s include the Trinidadians C.L.R. James and George Padmore, and Jamaican Una Marson, who, with fellow colonial intellectuals, circulated in Britain's elite cultural circles. The trio individually and with a collective activism provided vital cultural platforms, which were to remain influential antecedents for the post-war émigré writers – although until recent decades, their presence was ignored or marginalised in British literary histories.

Post-war

Male passengers disembarking from the Empire Windrush *after travelling from the Caribbean*

A flashpoint in British national memory has become fixed at the docking of the *Empire Windrush* at Tilbury in 1948. This moment now serves to identify mass migration from former colonies in the Caribbean and other regions as Britain embarked on rebuilding its war-damaged cities and infrastructure.

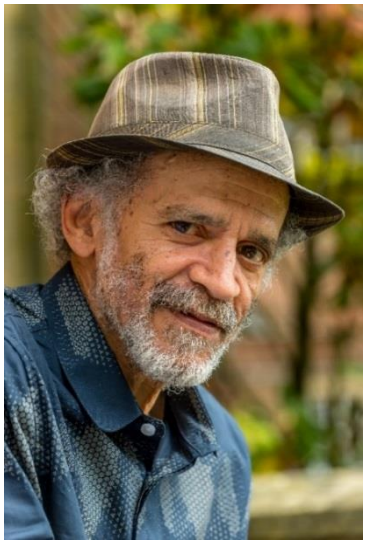
The immediate post-war decades were marked by the racist hostility that migrant generations faced daily, when it became evident that the Motherland did not permanently embrace their presence, even as it sought to benefit from their labour. This situation was fuelled by increasingly restrictive immigration policies concerning nationality, citizenship and the racist rhetoric of right-wing MPs such as Enoch Powell throughout the 1960s and 70s.

The uprisings of the 1980s in many urban locations emerged from the intolerable racism and disenfranchisement young black people experienced in the education system, poor employment prospects, and the second-class social and cultural citizenship this produced for both first- and second-generations.

The Brixton riots, early 1980s

The migratory-settler generation's works can be sampled in a range of writers who moved to Britain as adults after 1945, or came as children with their parents. This includes novels by Beryl Gilroy, Joan Riley, Buchi Emecheta, Abdulrazak Gurnah, David Dabydeen, Lauretta Ngcobo, Caryl Phillips; poetry by James Berry, E.A. Markham, Grace Nichols, John Agard, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Valerie Bloom; plays by Barry Reckord, Mustapha Matura, Alfred Fagon, Jacqueline Rudet, and Zindika.

Black British writing emerged as a literary category from the mid-1990s, and is a term that distinguishes second- and third-generation literary voices and their British-born perspectives, from the migratory and settler sensibilities that had so transformed post-war anglophone literature. Parental and grandparental homelands were geographically alien to this indigene generation, even as cultural practices provided a powerful legacy in surviving a context of racism and rejection by white-dominant British society and its institutions.


John Agard

These writers sought to explore identities that had evolved from being born and raised in Britain, and in the main, city environments such as London, Bristol, Liverpool, Manchester, Cardiff, Glasgow, Sheffield, Derby and Leicester. Without any forerunners, some black British writers such as Caryl Phillips turned to US black-heritage models of cultural politics to seek comparable ways of rendering unique British-born diasporic inheritances. A number of black American women writers, including Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Ntozake Shange and Audre Lorde are acknowledged inspirations for many of the contemporary black British writers, such as Andrea Levy, Zadie Smith, Laura Fish, Jackie Kay, SuAndi, Dorothea Smartt, Winsome Pinnock and debbie tucker green.

Maya Angelou

In this reading guide, ‘Black British literature’ indicates a range of late-twentieth-century and contemporary work in the context of literary history, rather than projecting racial restrictions upon the many possible identities that can comprise any individual, and to which they might subscribe personally and collectively. As a literary term, ‘Black British’ can be asserted, disputed and problematised in turn. Nonetheless, it is an important strand within British literature that needs to be woven into educational curricula and to have its value recognised by current and future generations.

PROSE

PROSE

Incomparable World by S.I. Martin (1996)
Strange Music by Laura Fish (2008)
Trumpet by Jackie Kay (1998)
NW by Zadie Smith (2012)

These four novels cover a lineage of historical experiences that centralise black people's perspectives across a period that begins before World War II and runs through the post-war mass migration from the former British colonies (the Commonwealth from 1949), and into the new millennium. Their settings offer a breadth of time and place: late-eighteenth-century and present-day London, post-war Glasgow, mid-nineteenth-century Torquay in southwest England, and Jamaica. Such a range confirms a literary continuum of black people's historical presences, even though at earlier points in history black writers were not the authors of their own representations.

The novels' authors were born, raised and educated in Britain. Martin, Fish, Kay and Smith recalibrate the missing elements of black lives in literature with imaginative flair – and sometimes challenging subject matter. They employ tragic elements as well as offering comic or satiric narrative voices in rollicking, gripping stories of adventure, tender love stories, mysteries, 'tales of the unexpected' and above all a wide spectrum of human experiences to which all readers can relate in a variety of ways.

Incomparable World by S.I. Martin

The eighteenth-century English artist William Hogarth produced a vivid series of eight paintings entitled *The Rake's Progress*. These represent the financial and sexual misadventures of one individual, showing his fall from innocence to immorality and debt in eighteenth-century London. In another image, 'Four Times of the Day – Noon' (1738) Hogarth depicts a street scene showing black figures incorporated into everyday London life. Martin's novel plants the reader in just such a context. In the 'picaresque' fiction tradition, the protagonist Buckram is a sympathetic rogue who keeps his cards close to his chest in order to survive the harsh realities of life as a black man in late eighteenth-century London. From his reversals in fortune, to triumphs, the reader follows his helter-skelter passage from penniless ex-slave, ex-soldier, ex-convict, to finally, loving family man. With his comrades Neville Franklin and William Supple (all formerly American plantation slaves, then soldiers fleeing the American Revolution after Britain's defeat), they reinvent themselves in London.

Black people's vulnerability to re-enslavement is an ever-present possibility that shadows the plot, yet Martin also offers moments of retribution for his characters. Buckram's Britishness is seen as taking precedence over his blackness when the London mob cheer him on as he publicly beats a racist American plantation owner. He also encounters and holds to account his British commanding officer in the war who had ordered the massacre of 'rebel' women and children.

Martin's canvas is luridly painted in depictions of the destitute and violent, semi-criminal world Buckram inhabits, but it is also punctuated by poignant episodes: his illiteracy and social awkwardness, his insecurity when he unexpectedly finds himself in the world of black intellectuals. For Martin (see interview with Campbell and Kamali 2005) it was important to construct his novel's histories and happenings via characters that can be valiant, admirable, sympathetic and morally flawed in turn. With a nod to Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett, he has crafted a social sweep through a chaotic and hostile world where London is both a melting pot of internationalism (America, Africa, Europe) as well as a portrait of local life (bounded by St Giles, Oxford Street, Charing Cross, Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens) viewed across the classes from the Prince of Wales to Georgie George and his gang of criminal associates.

One technique Martin employs is to use real historical figures (Francis Barber, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, Olaudah Equiano) as refreshingly far-from-perfect heroes. He also evokes Dido Elizabeth Belle, Lord Mansfield's great-niece, in the character of Charlotte Tell.

A collection of reviews has been gathered online here.

The reverberations between the late eighteenth century and Martin's own mid-1990s cultural context are unmistakable. Enoch Powell's call to repatriate black migrants, and the Thatcher government's anti-immigration policies can be viewed alongside the late-eighteenth-century repatriation of formerly enslaved Africans to Sierra Leone and Nova Scotia. The question of where an eighteenth-century displaced black person can truly call home resonates with Martin's generation's assertions of belonging in Britain. Ultimately (without spoiling the twists and turns of this bawdy, bold and uplifting narrative), the clue lies in Buckram's tantalising portrayal as 'a black man on a black horse' riding through the snow, 'ready to claim whatever present the heart of England holds for him'.

Strange Music by Laura Fish

This book is a classic example of inter-textuality (notable popular examples include Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which tells the story of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* through the eyes of Bertha Mason, Rochester's Creole first wife). An inter-text is an act of interpretation and transformation of a pre-existing creative work that speaks back to the original and develops new perspectives in inventive ways. In this case, Fish takes the poem 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' by Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett (before her marriage to Robert Browning), which is reprinted in full at the end of the novel. Fish uses the defiant persona's declaration, 'I am black, I am black', to reinsert a creole and black woman's perspective of nineteenth-century Caribbean plantation heritage. The plantation, Cinnamon Hill Estate, belongs to the Barrett family. Post-1837 Abolition reparations were paid to plantation owners but not to the people they had 'owned' and barbarically exploited.

See Elizabeth Barrett's drafting of the poem here.

We also glimpse the social constraints for a woman in mid-Victorian England (Elizabeth is sent to Torquay to convalesce in the sea air) and her means of maintaining communication. While the narrative is focalised through Elizabeth and her dawning abolitionist consciousness (her poem was first published in 1848 in an American anti-slavery pamphlet), it is crucially interspersed with the vivid narratives in Jamaican creole of two fictional women: Sam Barrett's house servant Kadiya and the ex-slave, now indentured field worker, Sheba. Using extracts from some of Elizabeth's actual letters, Fish also constructs a narrative persona in between Elizabeth's letters (written when she is forbidden to compose poetry due to her poor health), and fictional diary entries that record family life: her father's rages, and her brothers Sam and Bro, whose violence and sexual exploitation of women such as Kadiya and Sheba are the hidden horror of Caribbean life.

A first-person narrative method for each woman enhances the 'truth' of the experience, in a beguiling act of pseudo-autobiography. The novel makes sense of how the poem came into being, but not at the expense of the black women's stories. Chapters from Kadiya's viewpoint open and close the novel, making Elizabeth's poem an adjunct, almost an explanatory after-note. Through this mosaic technique each standalone chapter (alternating geographically between Jamaica and Torquay) is implicated with every other. The only characters who meet even briefly are Sheba and Kadiya. Fish takes up the challenge of how we can know the experiences of black voices unheard in history except through white penmanship. Elizabeth's trajectory to writing the poem 'Runaway Slave' is worked through as she becomes increasingly aware of her family's barbarous and cruel treatment of chattel slaves and

attempts to understand the black woman's subjection in a life defined by violence: rape (that produces mixed children), unremitting toil, and oppression only escapable by death.

Fish undertakes what Toni Morrison's *Beloved* inaugurated: the act of 're-memory' as a literary recalibration where the imagination steps in to flesh out the full capacity of histories erased in the enslavement system and its aftermath, racism and indentured labour. In imaginatively vivifying black women's experiences, Fish's novel also signals the effects that this heritage (as relayed through stories, letters and conversations) had on Elizabeth's literary gifts, implying her privileged debt to them.

Fish's novel testifies to the colonial shockwaves that still shape Britain – as Jamaican-born founder of British Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall, famously encompassed it, 'I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea'.

Trumpet by Jackie Kay

Jackie Kay is an acclaimed and award-winning poet – her distinctive poetic voice combines Scots and English idioms. Appointed as Scots Makar in 2016, she is at the forefront of contemporary British literature with highly praised volumes of short stories, novels, a memoir, and plays. Her work offers probing observations on gender relationships, motherhood and race in present contexts and retrievals of the past, across national identities and spaces.

The birth-child of a white Scottish woman and black Nigerian father, Kay was born in an era when children conceived out of wedlock (and who crossed racial boundaries) were customarily put up for adoption. Even today, mixed children are left longer in the care system waiting for adoption than any other group (Peters, 2016). Her first prize-winning poetry collection, *The Adoption Papers* vividly represents (through its three typographically differentiated speakers: birth mother, adoptive mother and daughter), Kay's upbringing by loving adoptive parents, white Glaswegian communists. The surrounding social context is one in which her persona's skin colour, hair and sexuality were met with bigotry that shocks the reader with its crude injuriousness to a young woman's evolving self-esteem.

In *Trumpet* Kay again combines the theme of mixedness[1]and adoption, but with another dimension. With its Glaswegian jazz scene setting, the novel is uniquely distinctive as it celebrates and renders the ordinariness of transgender lives, lived 'normally' through the family of virtuoso jazz trumpeter Joss Moody (who we later learn was born Josephine Moore, daughter of an African man and a white Scottish woman), a woman who dresses and passes as a man. Joss is husband to Millicent and father to Colman, their adopted son. Kay was inspired by the real-life Billie Tipton, a female-born American jazz musician who lived as a man. Joss Moody's biological identity is not publicly known until his death, and the reassessments this produces range from the coroner, who must cross out 'man' and write 'woman' on the death certificate, and Colman, who looks back over his relationship with his father from changed angles. These shifting sands of identity are noted from Colman's early observation: 'It's a tall order when you are expected to be somebody just because your father is somebody' (p.45) when unbeknown to him, his father's 'body' is female.

You can find out more about Billie Tipton here.

[1] Mixedness refers to multi-racial identity. It aims to undo the suggestion that there is a pure race as conveyed by the term mixed-race, but of course is in itself imperfect as a descriptor.

The book is narrated from every perspective except Joss's, until the penultimate section, where in a letter to be read by Colman after his death, Joss recalls his own father in a tribute to the reach of diasporic history and their paternal line. It is a sweeping love story where the fluidity of identity is taken apart and reassembled, mirroring the improvisational qualities of jazz and its reconfiguring of sounds and rhythms. The characters' fidelity to each other weathers the storms of judgement and prejudice, and ultimately produces acceptance, as Kay creates an understanding and admiration of the characters' lives on their own terms.

Trumpet was adapted into a play for the Citizens Theatre Glasgow (2005) featuring Cathy Tyson as Joss. It then toured nationally. Attending rehearsals, Kay commented, 'It was particularly strange because the person playing Joss looks exactly as I imagined her in my head when I was writing the book. I was really scared to talk to her', demonstrating how the powers of performance are key in imaginatively fashioning a self – be it on page or stage.

You can read the full article here.

NW by Zadie Smith

Zadie Smith had a sensational introduction to Britain's reading public through the media attention given to her reputed publisher's advance of £250,000 for her first novel *White Teeth* (2000) just after she graduated in English from Cambridge University. She has written five acclaimed novels, short stories and volumes of collected essays, and is a regular contributor to the *New York Times*. *NW* can be seen as a companion-piece to *White Teeth* where many of its thematic preoccupations concerning Britain's multicultural melting pot in a pre-July 2007 bombing era ('hysterical realism' was one critical charge) are given a more melancholic and socially accountable turn.

NW's urban culture and geography is a step on from *White Teeth*. Its North London is an area where wealth and deprivation doorstep each other rather than celebrating a post-war multicultural melange. The four protagonists: Natalie (formerly Keisha), a barrister, Leah, 'always trying to save somebody', Felix, a recovering addict and Nathan, a homeless drug addict and pimp, are all in their thirties and grew up on the Caldwell Housing Estate. They represent a spectrum of lost dreams, drugs, despondency, aspiration and social mobility of variously moving up, out and downwards. This is Britain in decline, where ordinary, unremarked-upon people are offered compelling attention in Smith's narrative.

You can read the negative review written by Hugh Montgomery here.

Smith's formal experimentation with focalisation in *NW* creates simultaneous inner and externalised angles for the reader, through dialogue that at times suggests a playscript format. Through the technique of ellipsis, her prose gestures to what lies beyond the words that can be spoken – in the tradition of late nineteenth-century women's experimental writing (by George Egerton or Dorothy Richardson, who pre-date James Joyce's stream-of-consciousness style). Leah embodies what Egerton noted was woman's last unknown: 'the terra incognita of herself', as her perspectives shift as a result of her attempts to understand those around her. This also signals Smith's textual verve, overstepping of the rules of genre and possibilities for individual self-fashioning.

It is an epic work of a local London location in which morality tale and neo-millennial modernity shape a consequentialist narrative, leading readers to the shock of the final tragic event. Like *White Teeth*, the book was adapted for television; it aired on 14 November 2016 to mixed reviews. Her latest novel *Swing Time* is on the Man Booker Prize 2017 longlist.

You can read the positive review written by Jasper Rees here.

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DRAMA

DRAMA

nut by debbie tucker green (2013)
The Story of M by SuAndi (2002)
Something Dark by Lemn Sissay [2004] (2008)
Fallout by Roy Williams (2003)

This list profiles examples of drama by SuAndi, Roy Williams, Lemn Sissay and debbie tucker green, who also have profiles variously as poets, live artists, screenwriters, producers and directors. Their work dramatises voices and perspectives that until the late twentieth century have been only sporadically present on mainstream British stages, and in related performance media such as television and film. The selection highlights the writers' innovativeness: in uses of language (tucker green, SuAndi); in traditional genres such as social realism (Williams) and mystery/thriller (Sissay, Williams and tucker green); in crossovers between poetry and drama in monodrama, confessional and auto/biography (SuAndi and Sissay); in their staging of subjects that are rarely represented in British drama (transracial fostering, self-harming, mixed-race families, lone mothers), as well as the drama of human lives in situations of love, death, happiness, grief, loyalty, betrayal, belonging, rejection, to name a few themes – as seen from black writers' perspectives.

More information about the contexts for contemporary black writers' plays in British theatre can be found in Appendix 1.

Monodrama

The term and form 'monodrama' requires definition. It draws on the legacy of the dramatic monologue, which became a virtuoso genre in nineteenth-century English literature at a time when drama in the theatre was generally melodrama, music hall or revivals from previous centuries' classics. A first-person ('I') filtering is activated by the dramatic monologue form. The writer removes themselves from the frame of comprehension by creating a speaker, but does not necessarily aim for the reader to align themselves with the speaker, or even the auditor (the assumed listener). Contrastingly, the performer of the monodrama relies upon the audience member's alignment of identification with them. Both the dramatic monologue and the monodrama share the suspension of disbelief where the reader/audience is to believe that the named speaker speaks. While a dramatic monologue invites a reader to imagine an audience, a monodramatic play assumes one.

Families are fertile territory in literature and drama, and yet representations of looked-after children remain peripheral or absent. The spectre of the care system features profoundly in the work of many prominent black British and mixed-heritage writers such as Jackie Kay, Lemn Sissay, Lennie James, Valerie Mason-John, Joanna Traynor, Alex Wheatle and Mojisola Adebayo, who directly experienced the care system through being adopted, fostered

or raised in care homes in the UK and have produced drama, poetry, films and prose fiction about the subject.

The areas concerning issues around mixedness (SuAndi) and adoption and fostering (Sissay) dramatised in their monodramas represent new perspectives that have emerged in British cultural heritage from the late twentieth century onwards. As a result, they have yet to receive comprehensive critical attention in humanities scholarship, while in the social sciences, (as would be expected due to the applications of social work and sociology) there are many studies that can be referenced.

nut by debbie tucker green

The opening scene reveals Elayne's planned eulogy for her envisaged funeral as discussed with another character, Aimee. It could be a game, it could augur that Elayne might be dying, it could be a test of friendship. From this point, the plot signals that the play is a mystery in which the audience follow clues – and also encounter red herrings. Nothing is known about either character, except that Elayne is a 'Black female' and Aimee is a 'White female'. tucker green's plays always specify that the characters are black or white, and generally stipulate 'black actors', thus revealing how her work offers roles for black actors, in an industry where the politics of racial casting figure in terms of black actors' opportunities to sustain their careers.

What readers and audiences will immediately notice about debbie tucker green's use of language is that it forces an unfamiliar kind of engagement both in how to read the text on the page, and in listening to a character's words uttered aloud and acted in performance. From the opening scene '*In ELAYNE'S place*', *nut* immediately signals this distinctive idiom through the uncompromisingly antagonistic (at times maliciously so), tense and colloquial register of Elayne's and Aimee's discussion. tucker green's dialogue has been described in terms of artillery, as though the characters' words are missiles. The vocabulary is spare, frequently comprised of words of one or two syllables, and repetition is a key part of its delivery. The recycling effect of a limited vocabulary draws attention to the many meanings one word can possess at once (polysemy) as read on the page, *and* as uttered where meaning can change according to tone, volume, pacing and shifts in stress in pronunciation.

Read a positive review of *nut* here.

In this first scene the reader / audience is required to glean anything they can from the dialogue's content, its verbal rhythm, and in the perceivable shifting attitudes of each character towards the other. Sacha Wares, who directed two of tucker green's plays, describes the process as: 'the rhythm of the dialogue is really, really, communicated to you through the page layout and punctuation. So a huge amount of the rehearsal time was spent literally on analysing that punctuation and on accuracy' (Sierz 2008). The forward slash between phrases was invented by pioneering British playwright Caryl Churchill to indicate one character interrupting another. tucker green has embraced this technique as well as using ellipsis (punctuation which alerts us to the unspoken, or that which exists beyond words), and develops Harold Pinter's signature dramatic 'pause'.

The technique of dynamic silences used by African-American Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist Suzan Lori-Parks is also employed by tucker green. The dynamic silence is provoked where there is no dialogue written for the characters, but blank space is left on the page. While actors can use a physical interpretation of this, a reader is faced with a different imaginative task. This is exemplified in the play's final scene, when Elayne and her sister,

'Ex-Wife', engage in what we by now understand to be the familiar emotional struggle about Elayne's self-harming, to which her sister has become impervious. Themes regarding mental health and isolation and the onus upon families to provide support can be viewed in this play by considering Britain's meta-context of a downsized, under-funded social-care system, and its particular treatment of black citizens (Goodchild, 2013).

Read a negative review of *nut* here.

You might also notice tucker green's use of lower-case letters in her name and her play titles. This choice has its roots in a number of women writers' resistance to the authority of Standard English (a heritage line that reaches back to American women writers from the poet Emily Dickinson to poet, playwright, librettist Gertrude Stein, to playwright Ntozake Shange, to novelist and polemicist bell hooks). Capital letters first emerged in the English language in mediaeval manuscripts, and have come to stand for 'proper nouns' as well as correct style. For those people challenging a subordinate status, experimenting with and changing fixed forms of language such as punctuation and grammar has been an important dimension. Using language as fitted to one's own artistic purpose has a reinvention capacity that moves readers out of the comfort zones of both reading strategies and expectations.

Read an interview with debbie tucker green here.

From her first unpublished play *Two Women* (available in manuscript form to read in the British Library), tucker green has not stepped away from taboo or uncompromising subject matter and epic themes which include: revelations of sexual abuse, the AIDS crisis, child soldiers, capital punishment, domestic violence, sex tourism, knife crime and the process of truth and reconciliation. While the topics may seem grim, the buoyancy and punch of her dramatic-poetic language create a soundscape of wit, parody, tragedy and satire, and a dramatic signature that has refreshed and refashioned contemporary drama.

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The Story of M by SuAndi

The Story of M flexes notions of racial determiners as being skin-deep. As the work demonstrates, such identities are not fixed, but *mixed*. SuAndi, a spoken-word poet and live art performer, creates a poignant and feisty character – M – who is direct, caustic, compassionate, working-class, a loving mother and dying of cancer. The text becomes a landscape of a recollected life lived determinedly, at times against social expectations, but always with generosity, a strong spirit and vulnerability.

M is a Liverpudlian woman who was raised in an orphanage after her parents died. She witnesses the nuns giving up unmarried women's babies for adoption. As a mother who eventually divorces her African husband, she brings up her children in Manchester in the 1960s, facing racism and economic hardship.

The form of the work creates cross-talk between theatre and spoken-word poetry, and as SuAndi has noted:

> *In this show I retell the life of a white woman, my mother, and her experience of raising her two Black children [...] As a Black woman playing my white mother, I 'colour' the audience's view of M. The book is judged by the cover. [...] But M is not Black [...] In crossing racial lines M, a white working-class mother, is 'writing' her children's future histories into Africa.* (2006)

M's life resonates with the impact and engagement of events, from Enoch Powell, to Malcolm X's assassination, to Moors murder victim (Lesley-Anne Downey's mother having been M's neighbour), to the Black Power salutes at the Mexico Olympic Games. She is an Everywoman for her times and a rare portrait of lives lived that have been disregarded or consigned to the borders of cultural memory.

By the play's ending it becomes apparent that the first-person delivery has in fact been a third-person perspective all along, as SuAndi has been narrating her mother's biography. The figure of M as acted is also contoured by a mixed-media technique of various slides as a backdrop to reinforce the text's content. Until this penultimate moment, when a slide shows M to be a white woman, the audience have generally assumed M was black, as SuAndi the author-performer is biracial. In the closing moments of the performance, SuAndi steps apart from this 'staged' mother to state, 'I am SuAndi', to destabilise the role-playing of the piece. Is SuAndi the speaker, the author, the performer or the chronicler? She definitively signposts the proper names: 'M' stands for 'Margaret', 'Mother', and 'Me'.

As the speaker and actor, SuAndi employs theatre's staging paraphernalia: costume, lighting, props, set and a mixed-media backdrop, the slides of which form a border around the published version of the monodrama. Through her M persona, the past catches up with the

immediate present. We are aware that M is already long dead, (the piece is a eulogy and tribute to her) as SuAndi becomes just herself on the stage in front of her audience. The performance gives life to her mother's memory, as her mother gave life to her.

Read more about lone mothers of mixed children here.

The conscious matrilineality of this monodrama's power restores women's experiences, still so often marginalised in public life and records throughout Britain's institutions and social bodies. Representations of mixedness furthermore challenge the fixity of 'black' and 'white' in radical ways that provide a route through racism and its tenacious duration in politics and culture. As SuAndi monumentalises 'one woman', in a deeply personalised piece that also reaches into a universal celebration of determined motherhood, how will the monodrama remain live as performed? To date, SuAndi has been its only performer. While it has been the subject of scholarship and will continue to be a 'read' text, this performable dimension invites discussion about the relationship between page and stage and the longevity of cultural works that change in their intended initial form.

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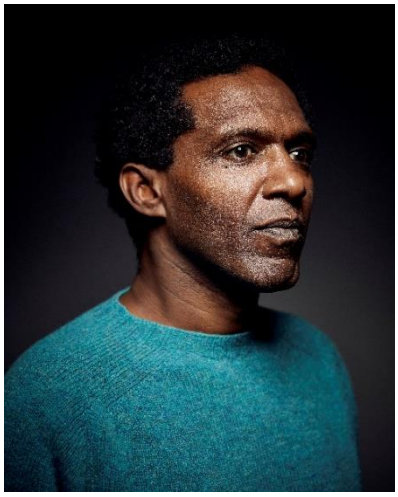
Something Dark by Lemn Sissay



Families are fertile territory in literature and drama, and yet representations of looked-after children remain peripheral or absent. The spectre of the care system features profoundly in the work of many prominent British black and mixed-heritage writers such as Jackie Kay, Lemn Sissay, Lennie James, Valerie Mason-John, Joanna Traynor, Alex Wheatle and Mojisola Adebayo, who directly experienced the care system through being adopted, fostered or raised in care homes in the UK and have produced drama, poetry, films and prose fiction about the subject.

In *Something Dark*, Sissay dramatises aspects of his own life through the form of a poetic odyssey to find his Ethiopian mother who gave him up to foster care in England when he was a baby. As tucker green's play *nut* produces twists and turns that undermine any satisfying conclusions or solutions, the surprises that the protagonist 'Lemn' encounters in searching for his mother climax in a coup-de-théâtre of consequences that prove to be painfully irresolvable.

The racist hostility Sissay experienced while growing up in the 1970s, where he did not meet another black person until he was a teenager, is first compounded by his fostering into a zealous white Baptist family. When he is 12 years old they return him to the care of social services, and he lives in a children's home until he is 16, then is moved to a secure unit – not because he committed any crime, but because there is nowhere else for him to go. Sissay has been outspoken in his poetry about the innapropriacy of the word 'care' in the care system (in the anthologies *Tender Fingers in a Clenched Fist* and *Mourning Breaks in the Elevator*) and in the unpublished monodrama *Why I Don't Hate White People* (2009).

The monodrama possesses a self-awareness throughout, of both the challenge to spot where Lemn Sissay the writer, and 'Lemn' the subject, begin and end as, to date, only Sissay himself has ever acted the piece. This ambiguousness at the seams of the narrative disrupts attempts to pin down truth. Truth is revealed as being contingent upon multiple viewpoints. The 'I' that is staged in this text is one of self-fashioning and confessional and self-declaration, a technique shared with SuAndi's dramatic vehicle for 'delivering' her mother's life in *The Story of M*.

The idea of 'self' as being derived from (taken-for-granted) family-related celebrations such as birthdays, Christmas, landmark achievements, is a bare landscape for Sissay. Throughout the piece, he plays with the opposites and their potential frictions: light and heavy, light and dark, inclusion and marginalisation, by positioning his life within the broader context of late

twentieth-century England – and as a spoken-word poet who has chosen theatre as the medium through which to realise this work.

Listen to Lemn Sissay on Desert Island Discs, where he touches on many of these themes, here.

Although he may fall outside familial narratives, he also makes it clear that the national narrative did not allow him to belong either. His need to find his mother is the overwhelming drive that propels him towards familial and social belonging. This solving of the enigma of who he actually is creates watershed moments that combine exhilaration and despair. The disturbing dissociation he dramatises of tattooing 'Chalky' into his hand in response to being called 'Chalky White' in the children's home, reinforces a character cast adrift from personal care.

However, the text avoids nihilism as the figure of Sissay has survived annihilation through creating poetry. The monodrama ends in a combination of self-parody, acknowledgement – even acceptance of impossibility – but most importantly, an extract from a poem. This reminds us of the complexities that might be unmanageable for any one individual, but through the power of the arts, how connections and relevance can be created to sustain people against the odds – as poetry has served Sissay the writer, the actor and the person behind his work, the weight of personal suffering in *Something Dark* becomes lighter.

Read a review of Lemn Sissay's recent performance here.

Fallout by Roy Williams

Roy Williams is one of Britain's most prolific contemporary playwrights. He is a Londoner and his plays respond to the city's multicultural and multiracial realities, especially those of young people whose worlds he has focused on dramatising. As he explains, the genesis of his early play, *Lift Off*, was derived from observing the powerful imprint of black people's influences on everyday interactions.

> *... before the likes of Ali G came along, I used to see white kids, all around Ladbroke Grove talking and acting like black kids. They were not being rude, or offensive, they were absolutely genuine, reacting and responding to the world they were living in. I knew there was a play there. That was Lift Off.* (Deirdre Osborne, personal interview with Roy Williams, 2005)

Fallout (2003), staged in the Royal Court's main theatre and directed by Ian Rickson, definitively marked Williams' presence as a leading (mainstream) playwright of the new millennium, and Williams received the 2003 *Evening Standard* nomination for Best Play and the South Bank Arts Council's Decibel Award.

While Charles Spencer's review was headlined 'Estate of the Nation' and exemplifies how white critics might have recognised Williams' powerful articulation of certain experiences in society, British Asian critic Yasmin Alibhai-Brown pointed out the tendency for their misguided acclaim of the culturally unfamiliar – praising and rewarding stereotyping rather than encouraging artistic experimentation. Indeed, in *Fallout,* it could be argued that Williams charts a difficult course between offering racism and social dispossession as justifications for the black male characters' volatility and paradoxically reproducing the media-driven negative stereotypes. The youths – Dwayne, Emile, Clinton and Perry – are socially alienated and lack aspiration in education. While this arguably drives their compensatory macho bonding, the play implies that it is also their way of protecting themselves from exposure to intimacy and feelings of inadequacy or vulnerability. The murder (in the offstage/diegetic space) of the character Kwame, in the shocking opening moments of the play, is an act that recalls the stoning of the baby scene in Edward Bond's *Saved* nearly 40 years before.

Read Charles Spencer's positive review here.

The play shows a generation of young black people of Caribbean descent who are trapped in a brutalising micro-world of estate life. Kwame is presumably of Ghanaian descent, and the youths distinguish themselves from him by using the referent 'African'. In this stage world, women are trophies to acquire (Shanice) or to be discarded and derided (Ronnie). Even the black policeman Joe, the post-Macpherson Report poster boy in a neo-liberal era who is brought in to help the investigation into Kwame's murder, is similarly unpredictable. These black male characters exhibit limited self-knowledge and self-control as they resort to violence when feelings or situations become unmanageable for them and thus the play provides what the Trinidadian British activist and commentator Darcus Howe observed of the Royal Court production, 'not a slice of real life, but of low life sketched by the playwright for the delectation of whites'.

Or access Yasmin Alibhai-Brown's contrasting opinions here.

In having been commissioned for the white-majority theatre audience that the Royal Court attracts, even as the theatre programmes a couple of black writers' plays annually, there is a danger of audiences looking at, rather than feeling implicated in, the social issues that *Fallout* dramatises. Williams also includes an example of the absent father figure which has become a trope of black masculinity in contemporary Britain. Williams' play implies that having received no respect from, nor being able to respect his father, Dwayne easily transposes his damage and aggression onto the surrounding world. This includes Emile's girlfriend Shanice, towards whom the youths display a predatory and unsparing sexism. The implicit threat of rape of the young women functions as a controlling mechanism towards a young female character, or as a revenge upon the man whose girlfriend she is. This disturbingly contours the sex-gender representations in this play.

Kwame's murderers are not caught, as Ronnie the sole witness is coached by Joe, and her potential testimony thus discredited – echoing the female witness for the Damilola Taylor case on which Williams based *Fallout*. The play provokes discussion about neo-liberalism preventing justice when race becomes an issue at the heart of a crime, where young black men are both its victims and its perpetrators – unlike the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence by white males. In both fictional and real-life examples, police procedural evidence collection was flawed, as were the investigations. While a subsequent re-trial resulted in convictions of some of Lawrence's murderers due to new DNA-testing techniques, the themes of *Fallout* still resonate as an example of a criminal justice play, but also as an example of the adversity-driven plots that black British dramatists are commissioned to write by primarily white-male-dominated theatres.

POETRY

Poetry

Fred D'Aguiar
Ship Shape by Dorothea Smartt (2011)
Telling Tales by Patience Agbabi (2015)
Benjamin Zephaniah

Poetry is arguably the genre upon which black writers in Britain have made their most innovative mark in post-war anglophone literature. Their work has not only transformed and re-vitalised the English language itself, but also the expectations of what listening to, reading and experiencing poetry in performance entails. The liveness of spoken-word poetry alters traditional Euro-American conceptions of poetry as a process of interiority, to that of an interactive medium where, for both poet and audience, the expression and experience can be as much off the page as on it.

Fred D'Aguiar, Dorothea Smartt, Patience Agbabi and Benjamin Zephaniah exemplify a generation of British-born poets whose work has continued the impact of earlier poets of the migratory-settler generation such as John LaRose, Andrew Salkey, James Berry, E.A. Markham, Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Grace Nichols, John Agard, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Amryl Johnson, Merle Collins and Valerie Bloom. They offer distinctive poetic profiles that shape the medium itself with their original aesthetics, and are prepared to embrace a range of provocative social and political standpoints.

While they were all born in Britain, these four poets experientially traverse multiple geographical and cultural zones. This mixture is formed of distinctive writer-in-residencies, for example in the UK Agbabi was poet-in-residence at Eton College and Smartt at Brixton Market, London. Their poetry can draw on classical European poetic models, which might then be intertwined with a variety of African-inflected influences that also reminds its readers and listeners of non-Eurocentric ancestral traces and traditions. Poetry's temporal borderlessness as a highly stylised form of writing is as much a feature of D'Aguiar's, Smartt's, Agbabi's and Zephaniah's work as the specific political and ethical issues they can render which also function as a form of record-keeping for posterity.

These four writers winnow the repository of the English language, asserting cultural accountability through their representations of history and distinctive perspectives on canonical traditions. The graft (in the sense of combining or integrating traditions and the slang term for hard work) of their craft enlarges a literary system of expression and communication that has *always* been open to invention.

For the purpose of the following discussions, the selected poems are placed in three cultural and aesthetic categories: **Landmark poetics**, **Retelling the poetic canon** and **Didactic poetics**. See Appendix 2 for more information on these categories.

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Fred D'Aguiar

Discussed poem: 'At the Grave of the Unknown African, Henbury Parish Church' in *Callaloo*, 15:4 (1992): 894–8.

Fred D'Aguiar is an activist writer-scholar, whose artistic responsibility has been to contest and reconfigure history and politics by imaginatively retrieving and rendering voices smothered by past oppressions, as they reverberate through to the present. In his prolific and diverse literary *oeuvre* he targets a collective consciousness – be it that of forgetting or remembering. D'Aguiar has won plaudits for his poetry collections and his novels/novellas, and his polemical essays have provided milestones in literary debates, the most prominent of these being 'Against Black British Literature' (1989) (see Further reading).

In particular D'Aguiar returns to the topic of enslavement in his poetry, prose essays and fiction writing, as a means of naming and (re)locating the consequences of its inhumanity for – as he articulates this – 'its offspring, Racism, still breeds' (*Bloodlines*, p.150).

In 'At the Grave of the Unknown African, Henbury Parish', D'Aguiar registers the gravestone of 'Scipio Africanus', the name that was imposed on a black servant who died aged 18 in 1720, but the poem's focus is concerned with the headstone facing it, a headstone erected to an unknown person to whom D'Aguiar ascribes his inspiration for this poem.

You can read the newspaper form of this poem here.

> *My immediate impulse was to name the slave. I was outraged by the fact that he had no name and yet seemed to be a person of distinction. He reminded me of the countless nameless dead enslaved Africans and of the contemporary artist project of recuperation from anonymity (and a return of dignity) by a process of naming and a conjuring of imagined biographies for those marvellous dead.* (Email to Deirdre Osborne, 1 October 2016)

Like many writers of African descent, D'Aguiar tries to render his poetic voice against the restriction of the English language's colonising iambic pentameter. To prevent the iambic pentameter's auto-application, D'Aguiar disallows the comfort of a conclusive end rhyme throughout his poem, maintaining heterometric rhyme through near-rhyming line endings.

As he explains it:

> *I wrote the poem as rhyming couplets (modeled roughly on alexandrines to show how early slavery had an impact on the island, that is, before the iambic pentameters of Shakespeare (5 stresses of ten syllables) which succeeded the 12-syllable line).* (ibid. Email to Osborne)

The alexandrine technique in English maintains a tension between anticipating the predictable rhythm and rhyme of a couplet – and coping with not having this expectation met, as the poem does not quite provide it. In D'Aguiar's poem this reinforces how the poem's subject matter gives voice to alternatives to 'given' (dominant) history and its familiar or known narratives. There is a further uneasy quality to the poem, as its metre does not always subscribe to a uniform 12- or 14-syllable line; it is syllabic but not uniformly so. Thus the poetic feet intervene into any sure-footed default re-treading of history.

It is also worth investigating D'Aguiar's range of possible addresses, auditors and interlocutors across the temporality of the poem, as these relate to the material headstone in space: from 'then' (the eighteenth century) to the 'now' of the ever-advancing present day, in which post-war migration from the Commonwealth has transformed Britain forever. The auditor or imagined external viewer in D'Aguiar's poem could be any citizen implicated in the history of this space, whether as descendants of enslaved people or not. The sacred, religious location of a Christian churchyard in a contemporary and more secular era, testifies to less pious and sanctified understandings for use of the graveyard, in providing a location for sexual activity, drinking alcohol, vandalism, and other irreligious pursuits.

Images of eighteenth-century gravestones erected for black people in Britain can be seen here.

In Part 1, D'Aguiar's poetic voice oscillates between evoking the Unknown African, the master/owners, and the present day passers-by. His use of the second-person pronoun 'you' to the 'Unknown African' aims barbs that can simultaneously include and distance the speaker from a reader according to where they might be positioned in relation to black histories, be these of: enslavement heritage; contemporary urban uprisings; a subject for conservationists or knowledge. Readers should note the clues to how the speaker of Part 1 aligns themselves with this headstone and its history.

In this poem D'Aguiar invokes a crossroads of connections to European poetic traditions and a conversational style, mediating between moral complexity and the commonplace, to represent the conceptual, the cerebral and the visceral. The effects of the triangular trade that reverberate through to the present are evoked: in mixedness, both demographically in place names, and implicitly, people, in geography, and in the evidence of American neo-imperial capitalist influences in the image of the cherub's puffed cheeks, 'chewing gum' and 'a solid dark we share/with our darkest continent, cloaked in stripes and stars'. The headstone voice refuses the assumption that as 'Unknown' it should be named. 'Don't name

me' it declares, to lay claim to a universal identity that the speaker of Part 1 does not fathom. The headstone persona requests that the speaker (who is now the auditor 'black Englishman') carve his own path, 'your name to this poem/ is my resurrection. Now be off with you, I'm whacked'. This is a consequentialist poem that raises issues of culpability but also of inheritance, where a conundrum exists between recovering lost life stories then filtering them through the concerns of the present. The poem problematises who and what purpose this serves.

D'Aguiar's poem, together with Smartt's 'Bilal' sequence of poems dedicated to 'Samboo's Grave' in Sunderland Point, Lancaster, restore and acknowledge those people embedded in Britain's historical past who were anonymised or renamed, and how for present-day inheritors of black history they generate fresh meanings and relevance in these acts of fabulous poetic fabulation.

If you are now interested in reading a full collection of D'Aguiar's poetry for your coursework, *The Rose of Toulouse* is currently in print.

Ship shape by Dorothea Smartt

When her mentor Kamau Brathwaite called Dorothea Smartt the 'Brit-born Bajan international', he captured perfectly the threads of Smartt's personal profile and her poetic voices as plaited by a number of transnational heritages.

Smartt describes how she was 'originally commissioned by Lancaster Litfest in 2003, to write a contemporary elegy for Samboo of Samboo's Grave.' (*Ship shape* p.15) Like D'Aguiar's Unknown African, Samboo had been brought forcibly to Britain in the 1700s, but shortly afterwards appears to have been abandoned by his master and apparently starved himself to death. Sailors buried him at Sunderland Point, and his grave is a much-visited tourist site. In the eighteenth century, Lancaster was a major port for ships that had delivered enslaved people to British colonies in the Caribbean and America (until 1783) in exchange for the goods they then brought to Britain. The parameters for Smartt's original commission were extended into a sequence of thirty-five poems for publication.

For Smartt, the re-memoralising of Samboo meant that it was necessary to find a name more respect-worthy of her subject and to also embroider the rich imagined tapestry of his life, to repair the threadbare evidence from history's traces. Not only does the sequence of thirty-five poems render substance, complexity and consequences of the mesh of relationships and directions that led to this young black man dying in Lancaster, England, but the poet also offers a range of poetic styles and techniques that evoke, articulate and engage the reader with their literary qualities. The sequence offers a rich variety of poetic traditions and forms, often within a single poem. In 'bilal's daydream or tales of ibn bilal' the call-and-response evocation captures the Fulani heritage that Smartt bestows on Bilal earlier in the sequence with the poem '99 names of the Samboo'. The techniques of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry and Concrete poetry are identifiable influences for instance, in the typography of the poem, 'pillars of the community'. The dialogic epistolary form of 'the present arrives' and the two cinquain poems, demonstrate Smartt's experimental techniques and the various ways in which this resuscitation of suppressed histories can be approached, to undo notions of fixed or essential ways of accessing or comprehending them.

Thomas Gray's poem, 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', can be read here.

The elegy written on Samboo's gravestone derives from and imitates a source text which exemplifies the elegiac stanza, a quatrain (four lines) in iambic pentameter, rhyming abab. An elegy is a lyric poem that commemorates a person's life and laments their death, usually providing a broader sense of reflection on mortality. The imitative epitaph on Samboo's

Grave, 'Written in the style of Thomas Gray', acknowledges Samboo's humanity through an artistic medium even as the poem's subject (Samboo) had been denied this as a captured and enslaved person.

In writing the elegy as an epitaph, the unknown poet honours his subject and offers him a transcendence of the times in which Samboo lived. Smartt's stimulus was drawn from this decorated headstone for which at these two points earlier in history, Samboo was given distinction: by those who buried him, and by the elegy's composer. The effect is to celebrate Bilal's imagined origins, personality and relationships (his mother's memory, his home) to add another humanising dimension to his history, as well as elevating him in her art.

See Sambo's grave here.

Her sequence begins with two poems regarding the memories of Samboo's identity that is, 'cut off and submerged/under waning facts' ('on sunderland point of the lune estuary', p.17). She evokes the sailors who buried him, the crew of ships who 'ensured cargo made the crossing,/keeping Africans tamed and able/for sale.' ('shipshape & Lancaster-fashion', p.18). Smartt's questioning poetic voice muses on whether or not the effects of this brutality ever surfaced in these men's lives, for what led them to bury Samboo?

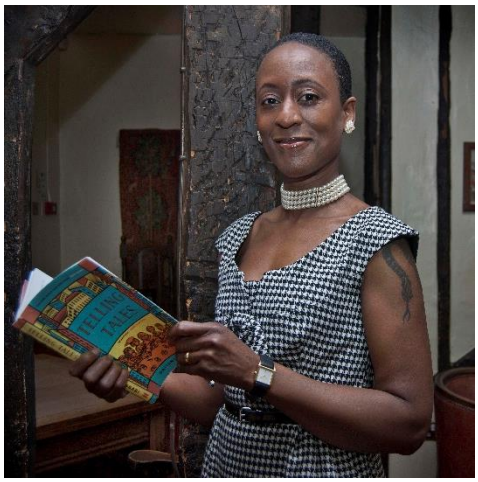
While Poems 1 and 2 set the tone of her project to respond to the tremors of history's after-shock, this is most explicitly explored in poem 7, 'samboo's elegy: no rhyme or reason' pp.23–4) through four stanzas of asymmetrical length and nine-syllable lines. Smartt's poetic voice resonates with Hirsch's post-memory as, like D'Aguiar's 'black Englishman' poet addressee, Smartt's persona similarly makes a pilgrimage to recover a voice buried long ago in England's earth, as an act of communion with collective ancestors, but one which overwrites the present.

As in Part 2 of D'Aguiar's poem, in stanza two, Samboo responds to the contemporary invocation to answer, 'I'm held here at Lune River's estuary'. The polysemy of 'held' is striking, as the reader knows, it signifies imprisonment, not comfort. Rather than anger as the driving emotion, Smartt immerses the reader in Bilal's sensibility as he endures the horrors of the passage, and as the title grimly puns, without 'rhyme or reason'. Using a repetition of the opening stanza for the third stanza, Smartt conveys the futility of the project.

The speaker is revealed as a poet as the end of stanza three. The line ending 'through me' provides enjambment into stanza four to reinforce the conduit of a reading 'through me, / poet'. An ambivalent chord is struck here, for the poet persona is 'reluctant to reconnect, I', which, while confirming that a trans-generational intuitive inheritance exists, it is not actively sought.

Reflecting on how media interface in Smartt's work might also be extended into considering how black poets in Britain have been primarily viewed by critics in terms of a performance context. The printed and live performed versions of any poem can have distinct attributes that offer different meanings and interpretations of the same work. However, as Danuta Kean (2005) and with Mel Larsen (2015) have proven in their reports, the opportunities for black writers in Britain to achieve publication are limited, and it has been argued (Dawes 2005) that the whole critical and publishing ring-fencing of their work as performed contributes to this.

Telling Tales by Patience Agbabi



In her author statement on the British Council's Literature webpage, Patience Agbabi states that she is a 'poetical activist' and that she writes 'because my ink must flow like blood. The written must be spoken. The chasm between page and stage must be healed.'

On a number of fronts, Agbabi's work achieves distinction. Lauri Ramey has remarked that 'Most of Agbabi's literary models are neither Black nor avant-garde' which debunks the expectation that 'Black poets, British or otherwise, must draw from a restricted range of common influences and use diction associated with the vernacular and themes of social realism' (2011, p.203). Agbabi's particular remixes feature varieties of popular cultural modes, and yet entwined with this is a deep anchorage to both high and low cultural traditions, which she frequently combines through her poetic experimentation, to produce voices, vernaculars and forms that resonate with multiple source heritages.

Agbabi was introduced to Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* at secondary school and notes in an interview with Ramey, 'It blew my mind. The characters, the rhymes, the fact it was so old, the language' (2009a, pp.316–17). Set a piece of homework to write in the same style, Agbabi took 'The General Prologue' and wrote 'the Colwyn Bay Tales' and left her parody 'prologue' with the tutors who interviewed her for a place to read English Language and Literature at Pembroke College, University of Oxford. Through her subsequent Oxford literature degree, she was further immersed in white-foundational literary texts, especially those of the Middle English and Early Modern periods. This influence is apparent in two key ways: in her preferred form of the corona; and in her intertextuality through rewriting or rather reapplying Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to a contemporary globalised context.

Agbabi aligns Chaucer's geographical mobility (and the original Canterbury pilgrims' various provenances) with those of the multiple diasporic routes from former colonies to Britain in the post-war period. Her witty updating of the means of travel in *Telling Tales* to public transport (specifically an iconic London Routemaster bus), enshrines the part that many post-war migrants played in building Britain's infrastructure and in particular, London Transport. Most importantly, *Telling Tales* is designed to be performed live, to travel as medieval acting troupes and troubadours did.

Most recently she has pertinently and poignantly extended the vision of the Tales' mobility through disseminating the experiences of today's refugee groups and the new wave of anti-immigrant hostilities they face throughout Europe, to devise the Refugee Tales Walk.

Agbabi discusses her Refugee Tales Walk here.

In terms of how Agbabi approaches her experimentation with Chaucer's source text, there are traces of Chaucer's 'like endings' of lines rather than the pure rhyme of his couplets. This technique testifies to the fluidity between verse and prose that Agbabi's poem shares with Chaucer, especially noticeable in 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue'. The rhyme on endings is seen in one example from Chaucer's 'Alisoun',

To wedde a pove woman, for costage;

And if that she be riche, of heigh parage,

Thanne seistow that it is a tormentrie

To suffer hire pride and hire malencolie.

(ll.249–52)

By comparison, Agbabi writes the tale as focalised solely through Mrs Alice Ebi Bafa's viewpoint in opening in the first person, to create a sweeping dramatic monologue without adhering to the rhyming couplets.

I come from Nigeria.

I'm very fine, isn't it?

My nex' birthday I'll be … twenty-nine.

I'm business woman.

Would you like to buy some cloth?

Both poets voice the stereotyping of women through the device of the characters relating their own lives, and these two characters can be read as appropriating and subverting the male prerogative of authority in the patriarchal social ordering. While not overturning the systems in which they survive, both wives' representations demonstrate (albeit via a male medieval poet and a female new millennial poet) that they flex as much autonomy as they can to defy containment within male-serving social expectations. Marriage offers both figures an opportunity to maintain a degree of assertiveness, enjoy a sexual voracity and even deliver a payback to patriarchal control.

In contrast, 'The Physician's Tale' is typographically redolent of Concrete and dadist poetry techniques. While not strictly pattern poetry, the fictitious Dr Kiranjeet Singh, a physician with a passion for poetry, reconstructs a newspaper report as a bricolage of references that evoke classic ransom notes, as well as crime reportage – while also clearly applying her former cosmetic-surgery skills to reshaping texts – to poetic purposes. Thus Agbabi nods implicitly to her own meta-textual, poetic, reconstructive processes through a persona's persona. The annexe of the 'Author Biographies' at the end *Telling Tales* plays with how far the reader will believe or take as true her inventive capacities. This strategy furthermore prevents any problematisation of the originality of her project as she invites totally new engagements with Chaucer's work from a postcolonial critical standpoint, while augmenting the infinite possibilities for evolving and using English through poetic innovation.

Benjamin Zephaniah

Discussed poems:
'Lesson Number Wan' (pp.1–2 & 3–4) in *School's Out: Poems Not For School* (Edinburgh; San Francisco: AK Press, 1997).
'Black Whole' (p.37) in *City Psalms* (Tarset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 1992).
'The Death of Joy Gardner' (pp.11–12) in *Propa Propaganda* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 1996).

Benjamin Zephaniah's own school experience was one of being stereotyped and excluded, both for being black and also in having non-diagnosed dyslexia, which meant that he struggled with reading and writing. Memorably, he constructs a poem referencing the situation facing many children of Caribbean origin in the British school system, 'Lesson Number Wan' using Jamaican patois and destandardised spelling and grammar, 'Me English waz African/ Me British waz Black/ Me name waz problem child'. In an article for the *Guardian* newspaper he recalled how he evolved his poetry from these experiences and through remaining faithful to his need for authentic expression amid the pigeonholing.

Read the full *Guardian* article here.

Zephaniah uses an explanatory register at times to establish an alternative understanding of who and what experts are, and encourages the deconstruction of accepted ways of thinking. He teases apart the notion of nation and language as entwined in 'Lesson Number Wan' by rejecting the white canon, and ends the poem with a three-line stanza and his oft-used anaphora technique that pulses out the question (without a question mark) and activates the performativity of this work as read aloud:

How English I am

How English is me history,

How English is Irish?

As Ireland was England's first colony, Zephaniah links the speaker's rejection of a short-term history of post-war black people's presence to a 400-year trajectory in the imperial enterprise in what he terms 'dis long strong song'.

Zephaniah's school poems offer a vision and recognition of a wider reality than in is projected in the school system and metatextually, the daily social environment of late-twentieth-century Britain. In 'Black Whole', Zephaniah's persona alerts the reader to the negation processes involved in the use of 'non' to mark off those people and populations who are not white European males. It is an ode to minority groups and the assertion of agency to name oneself, 'I am whole / No Non'. Fears of protection against infiltration that underpin imperial history at the European epicentre (even as these nations invaded countries across the globe), remain a contemporary issue.

This is no better represented than in Zephaniah's haunting and unsparing ode to Joy Gardner, who was killed by immigration officers trying to deport her. This poem remains a timeless memorial to all people facing illegal immigrant status in the face of hostility from the societies to which they have often fled for sanctuary. The first stanza's threading of 'her' keeps the reader aware of the desensitised viewpoint of the immigration officers, with a rhythmic grimness, 'They put a leather belt around her/ 13 feet of tape and bound her' – where all actions are wholly out of proportion to any semblance of humanity. Zephaniah's reminder of how people in migratory history have a tenuous claim to belonging is captured in 'She's illegal, so deport her / Said the Empire that brought her'. It underscores the refusal of the inheritors of this Empire's power systems to accept the consequences of history. While not strictly about school, this poem places itself in defiance of the kind of history that has been taught on curricula that have valorised British feats and associated them with advancing civilisation. Although challenges have begun to emerge (most notably the new Migration History module for GCSE), empire apologists such as Niall Ferguson still exert remarkable influence.

While the majority of Zephaniah's education poems are very much products of a late-twentieth-century context, they link directly into the salient question of today, 'Why is my curriculum white?' which corresponds with interrogating the imbalance of a curriculum still dominated by white male writers from school to college to university contexts. Thus, these poems can be read as an instruction to history and legacy-making, which have contemporary and on-going relevance.

If you are now interested in reading a full collection of Zephaniah's poetry for your coursework, *Too Black Too Strong* is currently in print.

Appendix 1: Contexts for contemporary black writers' plays in British theatre

Casting

In post-war British theatre history, black artists have repeatedly faced the argument that there are not enough black actors in Britain to merit all-black companies or productions. This became the (paradoxical) rationale for employing African American actors (rather than their black British counterparts), as it was presumed no black British actor would have the experience to undertake a major acting role. The proliferation of societal or non-traditional casting (black casts performing white cultural classics) by the 1990s was impelled by the need for talented black actors to be able to work and to demonstrate their expertise without racialised ring-fencing. Solo performance and monodrama, a genre to which black writers have contributed innovatively, is also responsive to the lack of casting opportunities that remain traceable from drama school training onwards. Industry hypocrisy in casting was further confirmed when black British actors began achieving widespread success and international fame in the 2000s (if anything reversing the earlier situation) via employment in the American film and television industry (Marianne Jean-Baptiste, David Harewood, Idris Alba, Sophie Okonado, David Oyelowo). Continued inequality in the British sector reflects the wider social situation of post-war experience (outlined in Background) and still prompts challenges from now established figures (such as Lenny Henry) concerning the cultural whitewashing processes that black artists in Britain encounter.

Companies

Even though, during earlier decades, black writers born outside the UK, such as the Jamaican Una Marson in the 1930s, the Nigerian Wole Soyinka and the Jamaican Barry Reckord in the 1950s, the Trinidadian Mustapha Matura in the 1970s, did have plays staged to acclaim, the institution of British theatre offered little sex-gender or ethnic diversity in its programming apart from imported American classics (by playwrights such as Lorraine Hansberry, James Baldwin, August Wilson). White male producers, directors, commissioners, programmers and critics dominated the institution of theatre and ostensibly, still do. Black-led theatre companies were formed to intentionally redress this lack of prospects across the whole spectrum: actors, directors, producers, designers, technicians, stage managers and administrators. Examples of these pioneering companies include: TEMBA, founded by Alton Kualo (1972–92), Black Theatre Co-operative by Mustapha Matura and Charlie Hanson (1978), (which latterly became NITRO under the direction of Felix Cross 1996–2015, now NitroBEAT resident company at London's Soho Theatre under Diane Morgan), Carib Theatre Company, established by Anton Phillips and Yvonne Brewster (1980, now defunct), Theatre of Black Women by Patricia Hilaire, Paulette Randall and Bernardine Evaristo (1982–88), Imani-Faith by Jacqueline Rudet (1983, now non-operational), Umoja Theatre Company, founded by Gloria Hamilton (1983–97), Black Mime Theatre by David Boxer and Sarah Cahn (1984–98) and Talawa by Yvonne Brewster, Carmen Munroe, Mona Hammond and Inigo Espejel (1986–present).

As recipients of Arts Council of England subsidies, many of these companies operated in community to middle-scale touring capacities rather than gaining traction in mainstream cultural venues. Many faced financial ruin as a result of Conservative government arts funding cuts in the mid-1980s, a situation Meenakshi Ponnuswami describes as the racial politics of subsidy (2000: 221). To this day minority arts organisations remain particularly vulnerable to disinvestment, and this of course affects the possibilities of effective archiving and consistent reviving of black playwrights' work in cultural memory, as well as the hopes for consolidating and developing a trajectory for mid-career and emerging playwrights.

Cultural politics

Late-twentieth-century black dramatists equalled their prose-fiction-writing contemporaries through producing work that spoke to a British-born generation who claimed Britain as their rightful homeland geographically and culturally – even as they also faced establishment prejudice about which Sukhdev Sandhu observes, 'Those who grew up in the 1980s hoping to assert their Englishness knew that, as far as Margaret Thatcher was concerned, they were a threat to national cohesion' (2003:284). The combination of race politics *and* class disenfranchisement shadows the commissioning and staging of a black playwright's work. Roland Rees, the artistic director of Foco Novo, a company known for nurturing black writers and actors (1971–88), described the theatre as 'a middle-class playground' (1992: 123) – an assessment NITRO's former director Felix Cross echoes in Vanessa Thorpe's article in 2016. She writes, 'whose stories are being told, who is listening to them and who is in charge of telling them? This will only change, he [Cross] said, when "theatre in England stops being about the middle classes at play"'.

Yet further aspects should be noted to this backdrop. Black women have been central not only to sustaining the companies but also in making inroads as longstanding directors and as writers – a fact that is generally downplayed in theatre historiography. Directors Yvonne Brewster, Paulette Randall, Josette Bushell-Mingo, Dawn Reid and Dawn Walton, actors Joan Ann Maynard, Carmen Munroe, Mona Hammond, Dona Kroll, Angela Wynter, and Claire Benedict, playwrights Winsome Pinnock, Trish Cooke and Jackie Kay are such examples (although Kay has been primarily a poet and fiction writer for the past quarter century). Additionally, women editors in general have spearheaded the publishing of many original plays (Micheline Wandor, Yvonne Brewster, Frances Gray, Kadija George, SuAndi, Deirdre Osborne) and women academics have been the trailblazers in developing the critical discourse on black British drama (Gabriele Griffin, Elaine Aston, Lisbeth Goodman, Lynette Goddard, Deirdre Osborne).

It should also be remembered that the London-centric conception of Britain's theatre heritage frequently overlooks the vital role of regional venues in supporting work by black dramatists (such as Black Arts Alliance, Eclipse Theatre Sheffield, West Yorkshire Playhouse, Derby Playhouse, Liverpool Playhouse, Contact Theatre Manchester). Furthermore, black play-writing in the UK, like the poetry scene, was particularly dominated by the post-war Caribbean migratory heritage and its after-effects. This aspect of black diasporic experience is captured in work by the new millennium playwrights Kwame Kwei-Armah and Roy Williams (through the genre of social realism) while debbie tucker green works with experimental poetic-dramatic techniques. These three playwrights achieved some permeation of mainstream British theatre with seasons at the Royal National Theatre, Royal Court and Young Vic, and international recognition in productions of their plays in Spain, Italy, the United States, Australia and Germany. It should not be forgotten that influential fringe companies such as Tiata Fahodzi, founded by Femi Elufowoju in 1997 and still active, provide a correspondent development of British African (Nigerian) rather than Caribbean heritage plays, and have nurtured playwrights such as Bola Agbaje and Oladipo Agboluaje, to herald a distinctive new millennial British Nigerian dramatic tradition.

The question of just who is represented in the 'nation' of the Royal National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company became an increasing preoccupation from the late 1990s in relation to attracting younger audiences for the future. Government arts funding was made contingent on admitting and fostering a more diverse group of playwrights through 'new writing initiatives' and outreach programmes, in order to counter the charges of elitism and gerontocracy, and to ensure future financial viability.

However, the complex issues surrounding the evolution and sustainability of authentic black-centred perspectives in British theatre remain current. The entrance and foothold in mainstream circles can lead to a sense of compromise or dilution – while continuing in the margins can prevent widespread cultural recognition. Both positions are necessary to achieve legitimation and are the conditions that contour any black dramatist's vision and its realisation.

Appendix 2: Landmark poetics, Retelling the poetic canon and Didactic poetics

Landmark poetics

I have coined the category 'Landmark poetics' to distinguish the poems that are inscribed on material surfaces other than paper – especially those that have a commemorative function. This concrete memorialising of black people's presence in poetic history was first located on gravestones and plaques dedicated to Africans who were either anonymous or renamed by Europeans as a result of enslavement or service.

At a time of enslavement's relentless commercial and territorial expansion, Joseph Priestley (1788) paralleled 'visible monuments' and 'historical poems' as a means of 'perpetuating memory' to prevent the 'loss of history' (Priestley 74–76). Priestley also argued that the book was a superior medium to the monument, as the 'imperfection of monuments, even with inscriptions, is, that they [...] record only a few events [...], and ..., the materials would in time moulder away, and the inscription become effaced' (80). This effacement process was similarly accorded to captured African people's identities during their enslavement, through being classed as disposable assets or through being renamed and denied any right to personhood and (self)worth.

The catalyst for D'Aguiar's poem 'At the Grave of the Unknown African, Henbury Parish Church' is one such individual record. Both D'Aguiar and Dorothea Smartt respond to the need for retrieving the generically 'unknown' African person's possible life (literally and literarily) from the grave, to prove that dead men do tell tales.

Other writers featured in this guide whose poems might also be housed under Landmark poetics are those writers whose poems are actually inscribed into or constitute a physical landmark: Lemn Sissay's 'Gilt of Cain' in Fen Court, London, (set in Michael Visocchi's sculpture and also as a plaque) SuAndi's 'Poetry on Discs' for the Centenary Walk, Salford Quay and Patience Agbabi's corona 'Chains' as commissioned by the Historic Dockyard, Chatham, Kent. Through their literature, these Landmark poets hear echoes that reverberate throughout history and (re)imagine the lives of the people devalued or overlooked by national record-keeping, in more respect-worthy terms. However, the significance of remembering, commemorating and not forgetting must be balanced against ensuring that a heritage of adversity does not become the unilateral mould that shapes this reclamation.

The topic of how to discuss a legacy sourced in trauma, in such a way that it does not constitute the all-defining viewpoint in history for the descendants of survivors, is tackled from two different but complementary contexts by the social-work researcher and clinical psychologist Joy DeGruy Leary and by the literary, gender and sexuality scholar Marianne Hirsch. DeGruy Leary has developed Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome that she articulates as

> *a condition that exists as a consequence of multigenerational oppression of Africans and their descendants resulting from centuries of chattel slavery. A form of slavery which was predicated on the belief that African Americans were inherently/genetically inferior to whites. This was then followed by institutionalised racism which continues to perpetuate injury.*

Hirsch's model of 'postmemory' derived from Holocaust experiences, but one that she perceives as applicable to a wider context, similarly maps how trauma is transmitted across generations in ways that keep it forever in the present, even to the extent of overwriting the identifications that the

generations removed from the original experience might claim. Hirsch's work is useful for exploring the connection that is sought with the past in both D'Aguiar's and Smartt's memorialising poetry. In many respects then, while the legacy of enslavement and its consequences is refashioned by the contemporary context, it exists also in an infinite act of reverberation back to the past. It is the writer's and their readers' possible stances towards the subject that are significant in D'Aguiar's and Smartt's reworked forms of history – through exerting the power of poetic licence and in response to landmarks of black presences in Britain's past.

Read more about postmemory here.

Retelling the poetic canon

Canonicity, or the elevation of certain texts as judged by critical literary consensus to represent exemplary quality, has ensured the cultural legitimation and hence trans-historical continuity of certain works produced by the majority cultural group. The literary canon is shaped by the various national, social, political, educational and economic factors that position people's identities according to intersectional categories of sex-gender, race, and class. For the majority of British literary history, white males' works have dominated the canon and at various points, such as F.R. Leavis's inclusions in *The Great Tradition*, this is influentially reinforced and becomes the benchmark for what gets taught in school and university curricula in Britain and abroad. Post-colonial literary theorists (through approaches that drew on feminism, psychoanalysis, postmodernism, new historicism) challenged and reworked the canon to include more women and ethnicities in the arena of anglophone literature, and reconfigured English literature to encompassing 'literature written in English'.

While the narrowness of publishing opportunities still prevails, for a number of decades, black presses established by the post-war generations onwards (by people such as John LaRose, Jessica and Eric Huntley, Margaret Busby, Verna Wilkins, Rosemary Hudson, Desrie Thomson-George), did address the imbalance of accessing works that fell outside the white canonical mainstream. Today their legacy exerts diminishing influence and presence in determining the knowledge about and critical and cultural value of these works in the globalised and digitalised arena. In terms of black British writers' cultural prominence, it remains true that certain authors' works are taught again and again, and that the most sustained recognition is still achieved by writers who can be most closely aligned with European literary traditions and aesthetics. The necessity for the intervention made by this guide is therefore to directly interrupt the foreclosure of opportunities for students to explore a broader reach of works than those that are perennially taught and examined, and to thereby engage in contemporary canon re-formation.

Didactic poetics

While poetry has always been a fixture on school curricula from primary education onwards through reading, hearing, performing and creatively writing it, poetry *about* the experience of school and education is also a compelling topic. Written from the perspective of the teacher, D.H. Lawrence's persona in 'Afternoon in School – The Last Lesson' sits demoralised, exhausted and wishing for the end of the school day. Simon Armitage's 'The Shout' ruminates over the divergent paths taken by individuals from the school ground to adult life, whereas Roger McGough's 'First Day at School' oscillates its focalisation through the adult appraisal of the architecture, school's function and effect, and the disorientation and vulnerability of the young child deposited in such an environment. This selection is of course poems by white male writers who, by virtue of their class and geographical regionalism diverge from the Oxbridge elitist poetry traditions. However, while their work celebrates working-class perspectives, it has also been canonised in various periods of literary history and included on educational curricula. Notably, Armitage has been Oxford University's Professor of Poetry since being elected in 2015 – in contrast to Benjamin Zephaniah, who in 1989 was not.

As the subject of a poem, school becomes a vehicle to transport a speaker's ideas about the consequences of school experiences, as well as forming an alternative playground for ideas about the values projected in education systems and the influence this exerts on forming young people's futures. Education systems in Britain – and abroad in British colonies – aimed to reinforce the might of the Empire and to valorise Britain (and specifically England) over any indigenous cultural heritage of the countries that had been colonised.

The extent of the educational patriotism as it was perceived through a British child's eyes is captured in Esmé Wingfield-Stratford's recollection, 'that empire on which, as we were constantly reminded, the sun never set.' (1939)

The colonial education system was the cornerstone of the post-war migratory generations' experiences of Britain. Challenging its propaganda was part of the anti-colonialist struggles for independent nation states. The settler generations were also mindful of its effects on their children's lives, children increasingly born in Britain and educated in a system that ignored (or even denigrated the value of) the plethora of Commonwealth heritages. Second-generation children bore the brunt of the narrowness of expectations and the racism of school experiences, which were factors in the low achievements of many black children during the 1960s–1980s. Such factors this generation named and tackled as adults, refusing the subjection of second-class citizenship with which their parents had been labelled.

A landmark pamphlet written by Bernard Coard and published by New Beacon Books in 1971, *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System: the Scandal of a Black Child in Schools in Britain*, sets out the full extent of the neglect and disenfranchisement of black children in the 1970s British education system. Three decades later, Brian Richardson edited *Tell It Like It Is: How Our Schools Fail Black Children* (2005), a collection of perspectives in the form of poems, essays, memoirs and manifestos that testify to the power and clarity of Coard's legacy, but also that its urgency in challenging policy-making remains current.

One contributor to Richardson's edited book is Benjamin Zephaniah who, more than any other British poet, has produced poems throughout his career from school pupils' standpoints, and where pupils are addressees and auditors. These poems unswervingly contest the narrowness of the curricula, explore the consequences of ignoring the multiple cultural heritages that a multi-ethnic population brings to the classroom, and represent poetically the effects of restricted views of history on a young person's sense of themselves in the world.

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nut

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