

Other Voices and the British Literary Canon

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Book fairs, like anthologies, have always played a significant role in literary canonisation, which, Roy Sommer reminds us, is a matter of inclusion as well as exclusion¹ Illustrations of this statement abound in relation to Black British writing. From 1982 to 1995 the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books -- initiated through a collective led by John La Rose -- contributed to positioning emerging black authors as part of the British literary scene, while also showcasing the international character and the radicalism usually associated with the Black literary tradition.² Today, however, in the context of book fairs, Black writing from Britain seems to have become relatively less noticeable. The 2014 Brussels Book Fair, whose guest of honour was the UK, might be taken as a measure of this development. It is indeed striking that of the twenty-three top British authors present (the most famous being Jonathan Coe), none had roots in Africa, Asia or the Caribbean, with the exception of two white writers born respectively in Zambia and Tunisia, A. C. Grayling and Patrick McGuinness. When one considers that the event had been put together by the British Council, the British Embassy and the bookseller Waterstones, and that the theme was History, in all its aspects ... notably, the Centenary Commemoration of the First World War³ this all-white line up does not bode well for the way Britain sees her past and, more worryingly, how she represents herself culturally in the heart of Europe. Even though books by Zadie Smith and Monica Ali were for sale in the Fair's Waterstones bookshop, the Britain showcased that week was, to say the least, misleading in ignoring the considerable contributions made by black and Asian writers to British literary history and heritage.

Although an anecdotal observation of one European book fair only, it is symptomatic of what is perceived informally as a decreasing visibility of British Black and Asian writing in non-academic contexts, in media coverage, in Britain's cultural institutions and in places of cultural dissemination. Whereas from the 1990s and into the 2000s, the British Council actively promoted contemporary literature by non-white British writers, nationally and

internationally, this organisation is now less prominent on the literary stage, and when it is, as at the Brussels book fair, it seems to be less attentive than in the past to Britain's cultural diversity.⁴

When Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* was published in 2000, it was greeted by many as the celebration of multicultural Britain *par excellence*, through its cast of characters from different backgrounds -- British, but also South Asian and Caribbean. Smith's novel portrays an idealised image of what liberal minds wanted contemporary London to look like. One could have imagined at the time that this novel, by giving confidence to writers and publishers alike, was heralding the beginning of an era -- augured by the 1998 *Windrush* celebrations and the 'Reinventing Britain' project -- whereby writing by British citizens of African or Asian descent could be more easily and officially recognised.⁵ This optimistic mood seems to have culminated in the literary activities marking the 2007 Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, including the nationwide distribution in schools of Andrea Levy's novel *Small Island* (2004), which was included in the '100 Books of the Decade' (2000-2010) drawn up by the popular Richard and Judy bookclub,⁶ and projects like Malorie Blackman's anthology *Unheard Voices*, Caryl Phillips's stage adaptation of Simon Schama's *Rough Crossings* (2005) and Lemn Sissay's City of London-commissioned poem, 'The Gilt of Cain'⁷ Since then, however, the turn-of-the-century optimism has evaporated, and, in the context of rapidly changing publishing and media worlds, less seems to have taken place in terms of presenting Black British writing as part of the national narrative -- as if promotional efforts in this direction were now felt to be no longer necessary. This abdication could be a result of the disenchantment with multiculturalism in the wake of the 7/7 London bombings, which, in Susie Thomas's assessment, 'exposed the fatuousness of Smith's cute celebration of cultural hybridity'⁸ a disenchantment that may have contributed to reducing public and private endeavours towards literary diversity, as exemplified by the Arts Council's 2006 'Race Equality Scheme'⁹ Paradoxically, this reluctance to view the literary scene in terms of plurality could also be linked to a complacent view of British society as being now free from discrimination, and therefore not requiring any special intercessions for fairer arts representativeness. Paul Gilroy argues that such a position is not without danger as it 'feeds the illusion that Britain has been or can be disconnected from its imperial past'¹⁰ a form of convenient amnesia that also underlies the interventions of imperial apologists like Niall Ferguson.¹¹ Nonetheless, institutionalised racism is still very much present in Britain. As Joan Anim-Addo and Les Back point out, 'the legacy of Empire is still in evidence' in British

universities, both in terms of the absence of black British texts from the curriculum and of black academics, especially female ones.¹² Nathan E. Richards highlights the persistence of racial discrimination in the academic world, causing a form of 'brain drain' whereby such authors as Fred DøAguiar, Aminatta Forna, Caryl Phillips and Zadie Smith have left the UK to take up academic appointments in the US.¹³ Apart from possibly affecting the way these writers are perceived from the UK, this phenomenon reminds us, as Alison Donnell also points out, that any combined discussion of culture and canonicity in today's Britain is not credible without paying due attention to the politics of race and its consequences for literary heritages.¹⁴

The current state of British letters not only means that 'Black' writing is no longer as much in the cultural spotlight as it was, but that when it is, it comes more often than not from outside the UK -- whether it is written by British writers who have moved abroad or by writers whose links to Britain are tenuous, as in the case of the yearly Caine Prize for African Fiction, or of such international literary stars as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie or Taiye Selasi. As Ireosen Okoje observes:

Britain doesn't champion the voices of its female writers of colour enough, preferring to fawn over international writers. Some will wheel out names of the usual suspects, Zadie Smith and Monica Ali. Yes, I know about them, but they are just two writers from the past 15 years, and are by no means a barometer to measure the typical representation of women of colour in the industry. Both studied at Oxbridge, and both are of mixed race. What does this say to black and Asian writers: do you have to have an elite education and a white parent for the publishing industry to be interested?¹⁵

This provocative question raises important points. It suggests that there is a malaise concerning the British literary scene which relates to the fluctuating canonisation of black and Asian writers, and points to the existence of racial, but also gender and class, criteria, influencing the way such writers are published, publicised and positioned as either mainstream or marginal. At any given time in literary history, there have been differing levels of membership of the British literary club. Some black British writers have been regarded as more British than others, and this has nothing to do with their race or ethnicity, nor even, strictly speaking, with the quality of their writing, but rather with their class, their political stances and their general attitude to the British literary system. Canon formation in Britain, perhaps more than elsewhere, follows a variable geometry of unwritten rules, whereby some

writers are more easily granted insider status than their peers.

Cornell West argues in relation to African American literature that any debate about canon formation needs to rely on an historical reading of the 'cultural crisis which prompts, guides, and regulates the canonizing efforts'¹⁶ In the case of British Black and Asian writing, too, a backward glance is necessary to better understand the present situation. What can be said, without any doubt, is that since the second half of the twentieth century writers from what was then called 'Commonwealth Literature' have significantly contributed, through their thematic and formal originality, to the wealth of British culture and literature, but that their inclusion under the British banner has not been easily achievable in any period. In the late 1980s, the Arts Council of Great Britain's literature officer, Alistair Niven, argued that 'a major category of Commonwealth writing, that is produced in Britain by writers of non-European immigrant origin or descent, is being under-recognised both internationally and at home'¹⁷ Admittedly, things improved from the 1990s and into the 2000s, notably under the auspices of the British Council. Yet, for all their talent and the awards they received, non-white artists were often viewed by the British public and literary establishment through the lens of their assumed otherness, be it racial or cultural. Their origins justified subcategorisation: 'Black British' or 'Asian British' which suggested that they could not be granted full, let alone automatic, admission to the literary mainstream, and therefore led to some dissatisfaction on their part, as exemplified by Mike Phillips, who has consistently expressed his disapproval of such taxonomy.¹⁸ This difficult incorporation has been compounded by the fact that several of these 'other' voices of English literature live only periodically in Britain, which prevents exclusive cultural ownership, and implies that these writers need to be 'shared' with different literary traditions, whether African, Caribbean or South Asian, but also North American. Thus, almost twenty-five years after Niven's inclusionary claims for Commonwealth writing, there remain uncertainties about the nature, or even the existence, of a black British canon, problematised in the interrogative title of Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies's edited volume, *A Black British Canon?* (2006). As its contributors testify, it is a complex task to delineate the exact contours of what is, in Donnell's words, a 'rich and increasingly diverse archive'¹⁹ Furthermore, they confirm that the idea of a canon is best used as 'an agent of cultural interrogation and dialogue rather than authority and closure'²⁰ One of the main sources of tension in this collection, and a key critical question in the field, is whether Black British writing should be viewed from a transnational perspective -- for John McLeod, the best way of paying tribute to the wide-

ranging achievement of this body of work²¹ -- or whether, as Donnell maintains, it is better to privilege a national paradigm, inclusive of regional identities. For Donnell, this would allow us to see Black literature as rooted in a specifically British cultural location, which she regards as a welcome alternative to the popular diasporic perspectives.²² These two competing standpoints -- which highlight the centrality of spatial politics in exploring matters of literary inclusion and exclusion -- are by no means irreconcilable, and perhaps not even dissociable, as their interaction in this chapter will demonstrate.

In matters of canonicity, it is almost impossible to establish universally valid criteria.²³ A potential approach is a pragmatic, case-by-case one, beginning with a comparison between two sets of writers with complex backgrounds and trying to determine what accounts for their insiderness or not, keeping in mind that such categories are porous: Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul, in spite of their Indian and Trinidadian origins, can be viewed as 'insiders' of the British literary establishment, whereas Jackie Kay, Fred D'Aguiar and Caryl Phillips, even if they were born or brought up in Britain, can to some extent be regarded as 'outsiders'. Confronting these writers' respective careers, and measuring them against other artists when necessary, will inevitably lead to Manichean simplifications. For all its crudeness, such an exercise, which is meant more as a springboard for reflection than as an attempt at definite categorisation, can indeed indicate the complex symbolic stakes and the often arcane mechanisms that underlie canon-making in Britain, particularly when considering writers with a transnational profile, or further strands of 'other' minority voices.

Niven's plea for the recognition of Black British writing concludes optimistically, stating that the 'process has already begun', that the most likely recipients of such acknowledgement are Rushdie and Naipaul, who, even if 'they are not easily placed in national terms', deserve to be distinguished, for 'Salman Rushdie is widely considered the most innovative novelist and V. S. Naipaul perhaps the greatest stylist in Britain today'.²⁴ Time has proved Niven right, and his justification of the two writers' inclusion still holds. Nevertheless, with hindsight one could add that these authors also owe their peculiar status, both in England and in the wider world, as 'honorary' British writers (and not necessarily black ones) to factors other than the excellence of their work or the popularity of South East Asian literature in English. Their politics and, more generally, their pedigrees also seem to have played a role.

James Procter has commented on Rushdie's 'uneasy or unsettling "black British"

status²⁵ an inclusion into the black British canon that might be difficult to reconcile with what Aijaz Ahmad describes as the Indian-born author's aloofness from the everyday politics of the black community²⁶ The same conclusion could be reached about the Trinidadian-born Naipaul. However, unlike Rushdie, who displayed some radicalism in his early career in such non-fiction as *The Jaguar Smile* (1987), in which he takes sides with the Sandinistas from Nicaragua, Naipaul's political impotency cannot be ascribed to his abandonment of realism in favour of (post)modernism²⁷ as is the case for Rushdie, but simply to Naipaul's own political agenda, which comes across most provocatively in numerous interviews and non-fiction pieces, where he gives free rein to his reactionary opinions.

The two foreign-born writers' conservative political stances -- at odds with the values of resistance to discrimination usually conveyed by Black writing in Britain -- could have contributed to their apparently smooth inclusion into the British literary pantheon. But they share other features that might have facilitated their assimilation, even if cause and effect tend to overlap here. In any case, it is intriguing to consider that both authors, through their education, have forged strong links to the establishment -- Rushdie studied at Rugby and Cambridge, and Naipaul, from a poor background but with Brahmin roots, won a scholarship to study in Oxford. Both were knighted by the Queen for services to literature, Naipaul in 1989 and Rushdie in 2007. They have fully embraced the culture of literary celebrity and have participated actively in the construction of the myth that has developed around them: either as the colonial outcast who made it to the centre or as the threatened intellectual protected by the West. Naipaul did this by authorising Patrick French's sensationalist biography, *The World is What It is* (2008), and Rushdie by publishing his own gossipy memoirs, *Joseph Anton* (2012) -- two controversial books that insist on the sacrifices made by their subjects to reach world-wide fame. Finally, both writers' sense of allegiance to England cannot be separated from the gratitude that they, as former colonials, have expressed towards the nation that has welcomed them and, in a sense, allowed their talents to flourish. Rushdie thanked Margaret Thatcher for the state protection he received during the fatwa following the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (1988), a book in which he had nevertheless caricatured the Iron Lady as 'Mrs Torture' Naipaul, the only Caribbean writer of his generation to have been 'indigenised' as it were, expressed his own appreciation of England in his autobiographical novel, *The Enigma of Arrival*, published in 1987, two years before his knighthood, and also in an essay significantly entitled 'Our Universal Civilization' where he gives a clear indication of his own sense of allegiance to, and communion with, England and the world to which it has given

birth:

I always recognized, in England in the 1950s, that as someone with a writing vocation, there was nowhere else for me to go. And if I have to describe the universal civilization I would say it is the civilization that both gave the prompting and the idea of the literary vocation; and also gave the means to fulfill that prompting; the civilization that enables me to make that journey from the periphery to the centre.²⁸

Rushdie and Naipaul are without any doubt the best-known representatives of this insidersness, but they are not the only writers who have made an effort, or even a compromise, consciously or not, to access the literary centre. Ali represents an extreme example here. Not wishing to be pigeonholed as Asian on the publication of her novel *Brick Lane* (2003), she refused an interview with Maya Jaggi as, according to her publicist, Ali feels that black and Asian writers are often talked about and presented solely in terms of their race, whereas she would like to be seen as a writer who is naturally concerned about issues surrounding race, but who would also just like to be seen and judged as an interesting writer too.²⁹ Insidersness can also be measured in terms of visibility, sales and literary prizes. In this respect, it is surely no coincidence that both Naipaul and Rushdie were recipients of the Booker Prize (now the Man Booker Prize) -- Naipaul in 1971 for *In a Free State* and Rushdie in 1981 for *Midnight's Children* (in addition to being awarded the Booker of Bookers in 1993 and 2008 respectively). The Granta List of 20 Best of Young British Novelists, which has been produced every decade since 1983, could also be regarded as an indicator, though not fully reliable, of who matters in British letters. Significantly, both Smith and Ali, the usual suspects mentioned in the chapter's opening, the insiders of the newer generation, were listed by Granta in 2003. Smith, who has a higher international standing than Ali, appeared again on the 2013 roll, which notably contains a majority of women, several of Asian or African descent, and might in a sense be the exception that proves the rule of a general Black absence from the British literary scene.

If Rushdie's and Naipaul's belonging to the British canon remains undisputed, there are many other writers whose literary Britishness (Black or otherwise) has been more problematic, even if they were born or raised in Britain. The main reason for this reluctance to unproblematically admit these other voices into the heart of British culture is that, unlike the so-called insiders, they refuse to fit the mould of grateful member of such a prestigious club. This might be one of the reasons British literature may appear increasingly white-dominated

once more. For, at a time of radical changes in literary culture, publishing houses tend to choose books in terms of pre-established market trends or niches and are less likely to make politically daring choices. The role of publishing houses in the canonisation of transnational-profile writers is exemplified in Timothy Mo, who, like Rushdie, was prominent in the 1980s, yet disappeared off the literary radar when he chose self-publishing.³⁰ While resistance to compromise or assimilation can take many forms -- here too, it is difficult to establish a definitive list of criteria -- it does not systematically lead to exclusion from the canon, as shown by Jamaican-born poet Linton Kwesi Johnson. With his radical politics and poetry, he is surely not known for having attempted to ingratiate himself with the literary establishment. Yet, in 2002, he became the only living black poet to be published in the Penguin Classics series which might be taken as a sign of literary canonisation, even as his outlook rejects elitism.

Phillips, DøAguiar and Kay are the authors who could be grouped as 'outsider-writers' whose canonisation in Britain has been less smooth than Rushdie's and Naipaul's. The three authors' outsidersness relates in the first place to their proclaimed geographical identity, which is multiple in Phillips's and DøAguiar's cases, and decentralised in Kay's, and in the second to their ensuing resistance to the allure of London as literary epicentre. Phillips has very strong bonds to Leeds, the northern city where he was brought up. In addition to claiming a northern identity, he is also known as a 'truly global operator'³¹ and has expressed allegiance to the different regions that have made him: the Caribbean of his birth, England where he was raised, the Africa of his ancestors and the US where he now resides.³¹ English-born DøAguiar lived in Guyana until he was 12, returning to England to complete his schooling, psychiatric nursing training and university degrees, but has lived in the US for many years. His writing foregrounds his Guyanese familial and cultural affinities, and he feels British 'under the rubric of a racial and cultural difference' that shaped his expressivity: 'my tongue forked ... I became Hydra-headed, speaking from multiple selves to multiple constituencies'³³ Kay, on the other hand, has generally defined herself in terms of her Scottishness, even if a recent investigation of her Nigerian roots in her memoir *Red Dust Road* (2010) has further complicated this.

Contrary to Rushdie's and Naipaul's examples, Phillips's, DøAguiar's and Kay's trajectories did not take them from the margins to the centre, but rather they have frequently and voluntarily gravitated towards the sidelines, a position that they have extensively

metaphoricised in their writing. There is also the sense that these authors, who have working-class roots, have repeatedly taken non-conformist political positions. One might object, of course, that Phillips could have been easily integrated into the mainstream: like Naipaul, he was educated at Oxford, and, like Rushdie, he was on the famous Granta List (in 1993). Similarly, DøAguiar embarked on a PhD at the University of Warwick and was Judith E. Wilson Fellow, University of Cambridge (1989-90). Jackie Kay was granted an MBE in 2006 for services to literature. She was not alone among her contemporaries, where other notable recipients include: (OBE) Malorie Blackman, Margaret Busby, Kwame Kwei-Armah, SuAndi, Roy Williams; (MBE) Bernardine Evaristo, Lemn Sissay, Alex Wheatle. Benjamin Zephaniah publically rejected an OBE in 2003, denouncing it as white supremacist.

Yet, far from neutralising so-called outsider writers, these experiences of the centre have seen them develop uncompromising standpoints in opposing the class, race and gender prejudices rooted in the British social system. Whereas Oxford for Naipaul represented the epitome of civilisation to which he was granted acceptance, for Phillips attending this prestigious university meant primarily a 'powerful encounter with class prejudice'³⁴ which was decisive to his becoming a writer. Unlike Naipaul, who has directed most of his acerbic social criticism towards the Caribbean of his birth or the India of his ancestors, thereby confirming many of the clichés entertained by the West about these far-flung places, Phillips targeted his criticism rather at Europe's and England's pervasive racism in *The European Tribe* (1987), which a reviewer described as a 'vengeful scrawl designed to spoil his 'hostess's breakfast'³⁵ Phillips, who collaborated with the radical Race Today Collective in the 1980s, has repeatedly expressed his refusal to become 'an exotic adjunct to English literature'³⁶ He was accused again of lacking gratitude in refusing to meet the Queen after he was awarded the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2004 for *A Distant Shore* (2003). In quoting him, Maya Jaggi explains this decision as follows. For him, the Royal family represents: 'õa deep conservatism; a rigid, orthodox sense of what constitutes Britain. People cling to that for safety against immigrants, Gypsies or asylum seekers ...ö The royal family, in his view, helps perpetuate the 'mythology of European 'purity of blood' that buried millions of people in the 20th century.'³⁷ Like Phillips, DøAguiar and Kay have had oppositional agendas. Committed to the 1970s anti-racism movement, DøAguiar confirmed its influences on his writing: 'The death of Blair Peach at a demonstration I attended shocked and outraged me... I was politicised by it. I became aware of the fact that my skin was a magnet for hate and derision. The antagonism made me inordinately proud to be black.'³⁸ Kay's political

commitment can be linked to her family background -- she is the adoptive daughter of communist activists. A feminist and lesbian, Kay has an open and refreshing take on questions of gender and sexuality, and also on racism and discrimination in general, whatever its targets. The difference from Phillips, however, is that her subversiveness is expressed in a less straightforward manner, notably through poetry, and with an inimitable sense of humour. This tends to make her radicalism, which has been described as 'the ordinary subversive' look softer than it actually is.³⁹

Unsurprisingly, Phillips's and Kay's writing is replete with ostracised others who can be regarded as the embodiment of their own status as artists in a society that tends to reject the individuals who are outside the norm, be it in terms of race, class, gender or age. The characters in Phillips's *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007) come immediately to mind, especially the Nigerian immigrant David Oluwale, who, in 1965, was killed by Leeds police after refusing the compliant role expected of him. The protagonist of Kay's novel *Trumpet* (1998), Joss Moody, a female jazz musician who passes for male for most of her life, is another striking example of someone who resists conforming to what they refuse to be.

Writing on the state of the post-1979 English novel, Rebecca L. Walkowitz divides the field of English fiction into three categories: the novel of minority culture, the novel of multiculturalism and the novel of transnational comparison.⁴⁰ Her tripartite grouping echoes the division between insiders and outsiders to British literature. What she describes as the novel of multiculturalism is, in the majority, associated with the writers who have made it to the centre of the literary scene. Rushdie, Naipaul, Smith and Ali have all written multicultural novels. This type of fiction 'privileges mixing, which it presents both as a spur to divisiveness and as an occasion for new collectivities'⁴¹ even if it is essential to distinguish these writers' widely different brands of multiculturalism. For example, Naipaul's could be accurately described as 'anti-multiculturalism'⁴², since the encounters he depicts are often sterile, while Rushdie's could be labelled as exuberant multiculturalism, because of his playful approach to the very serious concerns he tackles. But what is crucial to observe is that all of these writers deal with what is expected of them as artists with an immigrant background: they address the mix and clash of cultures which came together in the wake of the British empire in such a way as to enable the West, in Tabish Khair's words, 'to think of itself as radical without being really inconvenienced'⁴³ Like other critics, Walkowitz points out the indebtedness to Rushdie of Smith's *White Teeth*, the novel that earned her canonisation, as arguably facilitated by

Rushdie's endorsement of her book, a fact that highlights the role played by networks in matters of canonisation.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, it is important to signal that Smith's writing has evolved since her debut, and that her latest novel, *NW* (2012), is more critical of British society and produces a subtler anatomy of its dysfunction.

Walkowitz's two further novelistic categories do not possess the same exoticising intent. They either focus on the alienation of individuals in Britain (the novel of minority culture) or they adopt a comparative historical approach to British history (the novel of transnational comparison), to provide a challenging picture of Britain, which might explain why their authors are not granted the same canonical visibility as the representatives of multiculturalism. Appropriately, Phillips's novels traverse both categories. As Walkowitz explains, 'novels of minority culture tend to emphasize difficult experiences of separateness, prejudice, and "making do" rather than "conviviality," a term Gilroy employs to describe the fluid, heterogeneous sociability we find in the novel of multiculturalism.'⁴⁵ To illustrate this trend, Walkowitz chooses Phillips's *A Distant Shore* (2003), which addresses the changing face of England through the tentative friendship between an African refugee and a retired Englishwoman. Rather than celebrating cultural diversity, the novel indicts various types of discrimination common in Britain, and dwells on individual isolation and suffering. Phillips's social criticism is of the disturbing kind. This might explain why some reviewers queried his use of English in *In the Falling Snow* (2009), by criticising prose that 'slips inappropriately into American English'⁴⁶ and stating that 'the author has been based in America for many years and it shows'⁴⁷ thereby inferring that his residence in the US calls into question the validity and legitimacy of his analysis of Britain, and by default his location within its literary canon. Walkowitz also includes Hanif Kureishi in the minority culture category through his representation of non-normative sexuality, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), which, much like Bernardine Evaristo's work, has not been canonised in the same way as Smith's. As Thomas points out, in relation to the influence that Kureishi's film adaptation *My Son the Fanatic* (1997) might have had on Smith's first novel, 'there is a crucial difference between Smith and Kureishi: his work has never ducked the painful and complex questions about what kind of society we want to live in, nor resorted to ... the catchy anthems of multiculturalism that have made Smith's so popular'⁴⁸ Kureishi's own take on canonisation can perhaps be seen in *The Last Word* (2014), a humoristic novel portraying a British writer of Indian descent, reminiscent of Naipaul, who wants to have his biography written to counter his dwindling fame.

Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* (1997) could exemplify Walkowitz's 'novel of transnational comparison', a genre often adopted by writers who 'divide their time between Britain and other places'⁴⁹ and which typically brings together lives divided by time and space, notably to chart the consequences of past suffering. His *Crossing the River* (1993),⁵⁰ like D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), would fall into this category too, focusing as they do on the aftermath of Britain's involvement in the slave trade. As Abigail Ward concludes in her analysis of D'Aguiar's enslavement novels and poems, slavery's consequences are inescapable for the writer, as though only a nihilistic underpinning is possible for any human relations played out in post-abolitionist times via racism.⁵¹ In spite of their strong political potential, the significance for the nation of such works can be more easily dismissed than that of feel-good multicultural fiction, for they participate in 'the project of historicizing multiculturalism'⁵² and, as such, not only prevent Britain from forgetting about her own, not always heroic, past but also undermine the grand idea of a 'universal civilization' that secured Naipaul's place in the pantheon.

Mapping a contemporary literary field is notably difficult, not only because of the number of possible factors that can be taken into account to pinpoint the major actors and events on the scene, but also because patterns of canonisation only become obvious with the passing of time. The future will tell whether this chapter's tentative analysis will be confirmed or not. But one thing is certain at this stage: that, in a matter of six decades, the literature by writers of African, Caribbean and Asian heritage in Britain, canonised or not, has changed the face of the national literary tradition forever.

NOTES

1 Roy Sommer, 'Black British Literary Studies and the Emergence of a New Canon: A Review Article', *Orbis Litterarum*, 66:3 (2011): 238-48, 246.

2 Sarah White, Roxy Harris and Sharmilla Beezmohun (eds.), *A Meeting of the Continents: History, Memories, Organisation, and Programmes 1982-1995* (London: New Beacon, 2005).

3 www.gov.uk/government/world-location-news/great-britain-guest-of-honour-at-brussels-book-fair

4 Clive J. Christie describes the mid-1980s ambassadorial role of the British Council in decolonising the curricula in former imperial spaces in 'A Preliminary Survey of British Literature on South-East Asia in the Era of Colonial Decline and Decolonisation', *Bibliography and Literature*, 3 (1986): 1-54, 48.

5 Stuart Hall, 'Reinventing Britain: A Forum', *Wasafiri*, 29 (spring 1999): 37-44.

6 www.richardandjudy.co.uk/book-club-news/100-Books-of-the-decade/80

7 Malorie Blackman (ed.), *Unheard Voices: An Anthology of Stories and Poems to Commemorate the Bicentenary Anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London: Corgi Books, 2007); Caryl Phillips, *Rough Crossings by Simon Schama, Adapted for the Stage by Caryl Phillips* (London: Oberon, 2007); Lemn Sissay, 'Gilt of Cain' set in Michael Visocchi's sculpture, www.londonremembers.com/memorials/gilt-of-cain-slave-trade

8 Susie Thomas, 'Zadie Smith's False Teeth: The Marketing of Multiculturalism' *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London*, 4:1 (2006): paragraph 6 of 17, www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2006/thomas.html

9 Naseem Khan, 'Arts Council England and Diversity: Striving for Change' in Heather Maitland (ed.), *Navigating Difference: Cultural Diversity and Audience Development* (London: Arts Council of England, 2006), 21-6, www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/downloads/toolkits/ace_toolkits_doc.pdf

10 Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.

11 Priyamvada Gopal, 'The Story Peddled by Imperial Apologists is a Poisonous Fairy Tale' *Guardian*, 28 June (2006), www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/jun/28/comment.britishidentity

12 Joan Anim-Addo and Les Back, 'Black British Literature in British Universities: A 21st-century Reality?' www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/newsletters/newsissue15/joanback.htm

13 Nathan E. Richards, 'Absent from the Academy: The Lack of Black Academics in the UK Limits the Wider Impact of Universities' <http://vimeo.com/76725812>; Robbie Shilliam, 'Black Academia in Britain' <http://thedisorderofthings.com/2014/07/28/black-academia-in-britain/>; however, creative writers like Jackie Kay, Benjamin Zephaniah and Bernardine Evaristo have been appointed at senior levels in British universities.

14 Alison Donnell, 'Afterword: In Praise of a Black British Canon and the Possibilities of Representing the Nation' *Otherwise* in Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies (eds.), *A Black British Canon?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 189-204, 201.

15 Irenosen Okojie, 'Black British Writers: We're More Than Just Zadie Smith and Monica Ali' *Guardian*, 23 March (2014), www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/23/black-british-writers-more-than-zadie-smith-monica-ali

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