

James Procter

Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing

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In the introduction to his anthology, *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998* (2000), James Procter refers to postwar writing by African, Asian and Caribbean artists in Britain as 'one of the most critically neglected cultural formations in Britain today'. In spite of articles in journals and anthologies, there have admittedly been no book-length studies looking at this body of writing as a whole. This silence can be ascribed to the relative newness of this literary tradition or, more problematically perhaps, to its inherent lack of unity, apart from the colonial past and the pigmentation of its representatives. This would explain the continuing relevance of a regional approach, exemplified in such volumes as Susheila Nasta's *Home Truths: Fiction of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain* (2002).

Recently, however, there have been commendable, pioneering attempts to fill this critical gap. One of them is James Procter's *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British writing*. Its main argument is that, in addition to being analysed piecemeal, black British literature has so far been read through the lens of fashionable diasporic theory, at the expense of its sedentary dimensions. To Procter, diasporic poetics and its focus on placelessness can tend to erase the 'increasingly diverse, contradictory articulations of black Britain'. His book therefore aims to examine the various locations attached to the black culture produced in Britain in the last fifty years. This approach makes for an original, cohesive, and wide-ranging analysis that, not only includes literary and non-literary material (like film, painting and photography), but combines literary and cultural criticism in a fruitful way. Opening with an overview of the complexities surrounding the label 'black British', viewed in a mostly political sense, as well as the process of 'dwelling', the book is organized both chronologically and spatially with each chapter corresponding to a specific period and focusing on specific locations. It follows an outward and devolving movement that, starting from Central London and the 'dwelling places' of the first postwar migrants, makes its way through the streets that witnessed the urban riots and resistance of the 1970s and early 1980s to the suburbs and the north in the 1980s and 1990s.

This exclusive focus on place yields fresh insights into modes of

representation, and gives rise to catchy formulas (for example 'from basement to pavement', which describes the shift from the domestic in George Lamming's *The Emigrants* to the 'pedestrian rhetoric' at work in Linton Kwesi Johnson's poetry). At the same time, it tends to generate occasional redundancies and, more importantly, to polarize diasporic and locative discourses when these could have been made to interact more visibly. Procter is aware of the complementarity of the notions of travel and dwelling, and of the ambiguity attached to the simultaneous feelings of belonging and unbelonging that affect people with colonial backgrounds, as suggested in his reading of Sam Selvon or Hanif Kureishi, as well as in his comments on Amrit and Rabindra Singh's canvases. Nevertheless, his distrust of diasporic discourse and its apparent deterritorializing agenda prevents him from accommodating some important texts in his corpus, like the novels of Fred D'Aguiar, David Dabydeen, and Caryl Phillips, which are set in the eighteenth century and which, in spite of their international locales, aim to ground the black presence in today's Britain, and to include slavery in the national narrative. History, too, is a form of dwelling.

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