

Postcolonial Poetry of Great Britain: a poetics of contradictory affinity

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Abstract

This chapter develops a way to examine twentieth-century and contemporary poetry in terms of Great Britain's postcoloniality. Beginning with Stuart Hall's call to understand the ramifications of the British Empire within its center's "home", I trace a chronology of counter-discourses of identification and disidentification that move from the imperial concept of "Britisher" to an ambivalently devolved poetry of Britishness. The work of Claude McKay, Una Marson, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jackie Kay, Imtiaz Dharker, Patience Agbabi and their contemporaries offers a remapping of poetry, migration and ethnicity in Britain, articulating how poetic vocabularies can unravel notions of standardising English, and how in-placeness can be performed within landscapes unevenly naturalized through centuries of settlement. What emerges in this chapter is a poetics of contradictory affinity, a poetry that disavows shared identity and refuses recognition just as often as it demands them.

Key words

British identities, poetry of place, postcolonial poetics, black Britishness, varieties of English, national poetics

Celebrated letter-writer and occasional poet Ignatius Sancho recognized his conditional status living on the Atlantic island of Britain: "I am only a lodger—and hardly that."¹ But there is artful disingenuity here. Eighteenth-century Sancho (born on a slaving ship, raised and resident in England as a slave, butler, and grocer) is a sharp guide to postcoloniality in Britain. Part of a counter-discourse of belonging, Sancho's words help us to focus on the ironic recognition that the empire had always been at "home": "the outside history inside the history of the English," as Stuart Hall calls it.² If a postcolonial poetry of global and diasporic connection can be said to develop out of the histories of empires, then part of this story must be told through the poets who have turned their attention to travelling through, staying in, or simply being in "Great Britain." What emerges in this chapter is a poetics of contradictory affinity, a poetry that disavows shared identity and refuses recognition just as often as it demands them.

Part of the complexity of this affinity derives from the internal contradictions of Britishness. Since at least the early modern period, the creation and hopes of a "Great Britain" have been entwined with the development of empires. Witness Scotland's James VI's Westminster proclamation in 1604, in which he adopts a new title as King of "Great Brittainne," combining the crowns of England, Wales, and Scotland with claims to France and Ireland.³ The differing names for this "Atlantic archipelago"⁴ cast a light that is both far-reaching and blurring, and at times what is most notable are the ambiguities and paradoxes. Refusals of reframed identities follow the changing political status of the islands, such as in Dafydd Ab

¹ Ignatius Sancho, Letter 38 to Mr. R, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho*, 2 vols. (London: J. Nichols, 1782), vol. 2, p. 92.

² Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities" (1991), in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, ed. Anthony D. King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 49.

³ Paul H. Hughes and James L. Larkin (eds.), *Royal Stuart Proclamations*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), p. 97.

⁴ J. G. A. Pocock, "British History: A plea for a new subject," *The Journal of Modern History* 47.4 (1975), 601–21.

Edmwnd's fifteenth-century eulogy for the executed harpist Sïon Eos. Eos's death becomes emblematic of Welsh responses to English conquest. Although defeated by "the fullness of London's law," he remains forever resistant: "it's he who'll go to life."⁵ For Robert Burns in the eighteenth century, the 1707 union rendered Scotland as "England's province," and his choric lines stoutly conclude, "We're bought and sold for English gold / Such a parcel of rogues in a nation."⁶ The blow might be aimed at Scottish signatories, but Burns's identification of a "rogue" nation looks both ways across the border at old and new formations (the *OED* notes that in the period "rogue" suggests lack of both principle and settled home). It is too much of a stretch for Burns, but we might see in this roguish expansion a sign of "Greater Britain," J. R. Seeley's term for the "ethnological unity" of expanding white (English, Scottish, and Welsh) colonial settlement across the globe.

London's status as the center of this expansion is important for testing the possibility and ambiguities of a postcolonial poetry of Great Britain. Writing to William Rothenstein about the reception of his English translations in 1912, Rabindranath Tagore reveals: "Of course, at that time I could never imagine that anything that I could write would find its place in your literature."⁷ Literary "place," however, is not straightforwardly mappable, and for Tagore (whose *Gitanjali* was published by the India Society in London) it is secured through the nebulous space of a metropolitan literary scene. A disparate habitus of correspondence, dinners, shared readerships, and transnational affiliations, literary London in this context appears more like a diasporic space than a fixed national location. For some, London and its presses are bit players in a story taking place elsewhere, as with W. B. Rubusana's monumental collection of Xhosa oral poetry in *Zemk'inkoma magwalandini (Defend Your Heritage)* that was printed privately in London in 1906 by Butler & Tanner while Rubusana oversaw the printing of the Xhosa version of the Bible.⁸ Similarly, the founding of the Progressive Writers Group at the Nanking restaurant in London in 1935 was quickly overtaken by a proliferation of groups in the Progressive Writers Association working across Hindi- and Urdu-speaking regions in pre-independence India.

For others, London was one among many metropolitan cities through which a writing career was pursued. Claude McKay's sonnet "London" recalls the capital: "The fog prevails above all in my mind." Pointedly McKay's figurative cover provides only an ephemeral shield: "Oh blessed was the fog that veiled me blind!" The stretched rhyme scheme of McKay's sonnet, rhyming the first and last lines of the octave, helps reinforce both the enclosure of the fog and the fleeting but welcome erasure of London. Employing the same technique in the sestet, McKay finds a long rhyme for his "tropical African." The poetic voice questions the possibility of a shared home, concluding that he can "bear / A little while, but surely not admire / The civilization of the Englishman."⁹ If London acts as the metonym for Englishness, Englishness in turn guarantees what it means to be British. Kobina Sekyi charts this shift between English and British in his satiric dramatic monologue: "And so you see how loyal a Britisher I've grown / [. . .] And there I'll try my hardest to learn the English life, / And I will

⁵ Dafydd Ab Edmwnd, "The Death of Sion Eos," in *Welsh Poems: Sixth Century to 1600*, trans. Gwyn Williams (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 74, 75.

⁶ Robert Burns, "Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation," *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), vol. 1, p. 233.

⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, Letter to William Rothenstein, 4 April 1915, in *Imperfect Encounters: Letters of William Rothenstein and Rabindranath Tagore 1911-1941*, ed. Mary M. Lago (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 195.

⁸ See Jeff Opland, *Xhosa Poets and Poetry* (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 1998), p. 229.

⁹ Claude McKay, "London" (circa 1934), *Complete Poems*, ed. William J. Maxwell (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 232.

try to marry a real English wife!”¹⁰ In the context of the caricatured Gold Coast would-be emigrant (Sekyi studied in London and was admitted to the bar in 1918), to be a “Britisher” is to learn “the English life” and vice versa: here Englishness offers the core, coveted cultural practices that are then extended as people perform as “Britishers” across the imperial world. The *OED* suggests the morphology of this now rare word might mimic “foreigner,” and if so it offers a further stress to Sekyi’s comic timing. The speaker’s efforts to become a “Britisher” are at the expense of African religious beliefs: “All customs superstitions, that rule the savage mind,” says the anglophile voice, constructing in the words of Derek Walcott a devastating colonial binary: “the gorilla wrestles with the superman.”¹¹

The terms “Britisher” and “English” register and obfuscate how ethnicities play out in colonial and postcolonial Britain. Una Marson, relocated from Jamaica, reflects on racism in a poem published in the first issue of *The Keys*:

They called me “Nigger”
Those little white urchins
They laughed and shouted
As I passed along the street,
They flung it at me:
“Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!”¹²

Appearing in the official magazine of The League of Coloured Peoples, Marson’s poem is powerful because it is voiced within a publication aimed at overturning racism, but it is also compelling because it works by phrasal extensions that mimic the articulation of disturbing memories. Cited thirteen times, the racial insult is an unwanted yet anticipated beat, a stress pattern that in Marson’s words “strike[s] like a dagger.”¹³ The need to confront this language and its effects was urgent, and creates the focus for a struggle in both politics and poetry. Sylvia Lowe, another member of the LCP, writes in the second issue of *The Keys* as a new generation of “proud Britishers,” arriving optimistically but concluding that they will be “For ever broken by our welcome here, / And all the bitter insults that we meet.”¹⁴ Lowe’s repeated use of “we,” “our,” and “us” throughout the poem stresses the collective experience of imperial subjects. As “Britisher” disappears as a noun in the poem, the pronouns accentuate how Britishness recedes as a possible identity, and by the end is a status denied to “we [who] are barred by colour in this land.”¹⁵

If the idea of “Britisher” marks both inclusion and exclusion, post-war decolonization created further conditions for examining belonging in Britain. The 1948 British Nationality Act enshrined a conjoined citizenry within the United Kingdom and its colonies, and initiated the larger-scale migration that Louise Bennett describes as “Colonizin in reverse.”¹⁶ Bennett’s satire bites hard, celebrating and criticizing the social circumstances that lead Jamaicans to

¹⁰ See Kobina Sekyi, *The Blinkards* (1915), with an introduction by J. Ayo Langley (London: Heinemann, 1974), p. 45.

¹¹ Derek Walcott, “A Far Cry from Africa,” *Collected Poems 1948-1984* (London: Faber, 1984), p. 17.

¹² Una Marson, “Nigger,” *The Keys* 1.1 (1933), 8.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Sylvia Lowe, “Disillusionment (After seeing the Trooping of the Colours),” *The Keys* 1.2 (1933), 28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Louise Bennett, “Colonization in Reverse,” *Selected Poems*, ed. Mervyn Morris (Kingston: Sangster’s, 1982), p. 107.

“Jussa pack dem bag an baggage / An tun history upside dung!”¹⁷ James Berry’s retrospective *Windrush Songs* collection works by a similar ambivalence. “Wanting to Hear Big Ben” engages with a spectacle of imperial power as it “echo[es] roun the Whole Worl.” But Berry’s framing of the poem disallows any easy center and periphery perspectives, or fixed positioning of authority. Here is one traveller’s tale among many:

Another traveller said: Man,
Me, miself, I wahn go to Englan.
[. . .]
I just wahn to stan-up
unda that striking Big Ben

an man, jus test out
how that vibration work – inside-a-me.¹⁸

The lines are arresting because they do not avoid the overpowering, penetrating context of the British Empire: Berry plays with the notions of a person surrendering to the dominant cultural sound and size of England. However, despite the emphatic placing of the person under Big Ben, the poem hardly voices submission. The traveller is simultaneously subject, object, and agent. What emerges is a wish to experiment, to refocus a set of feelings, and in this respect the traveller, Big Ben, and England embody a site of cultural self-fashioning, each potentially made new in this repositioning.

Following H. Adlai Murdoch, the poetic work of the *Windrush* generation could be seen as the practice of “creolizing the metropole,” where creolization evokes both the linguistic and cultural transformations that take place when multiple cultures come into traumatic contact.¹⁹ For Édouard Glissant creolization is “not merely an encounter, a shock [. . .], a *métissage*, but a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and errantry [*en accord et en errance*].”²⁰ This “dimension” operates paradoxically: as a culturally entangled and unencumbered space, and as a place and identity that is measurable, but also radically displaced. Such a cultural “dimension” seems exactly the type of multivalent space that is shaped in poetry facing the contradictions of the British Empire and its afterlives in Britain. John Lyons’s “Home is Weyever Yuh Is” plays arrival as bathos: “Well, ah lan up in Englan, / Victoria Station / D I S M A L !”²¹ London is lived – the immigrant steps out at a major train station – but London also is spelled out, stretched out for a different kind of inspection, one that knowingly produces anti-climax and a reversal of triumphant colonial exploration for a different kind of poetic achievement. By the close of the poem “Mama eart” is invoked for protection and “home” is liberatingly post-national, but how can the eye not return to the concrete formation of “D I S M A L !” as the focus of the poem? Its transformational critique

¹⁷ Ibid., 106.

¹⁸ James Berry, “Wanting to Hear Big Ben,” *Windrush Songs* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2007), p. 64.

¹⁹ H. Adlai Murdoch, *Creolizing the Metropole: Migrant Caribbean Identities in Literature and Film* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012).

²⁰ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 34.

²¹ John Lyons, “Home is Weyever Yuh Is,” *Lure of the Cascadura* (London: Bogle L’Ouverture, 1989), p. 21.

is animated by the somber mood it denotes and the accusation of disgrace it voices, while the literal breaking apart of letters on the page construct a paradoxical dimension from which to contemplate a new life of migration.

In thinking about a poetry borne out of dismal contact we might revisit Peter Blackman's largely forgotten *My Song is for all Men*, as it blasts the lethal logic of capitalism and plots a global reckoning of imperialism's reach: "I had heard this hunger sobbing before in the wide weary eyes of children / In Oldham West Indies Africa London wreathing dead skins round high harvest."²² We might also consider the intimate encounters and sensory shocks in Wole Soyinka's "Telephone Conversation," where the hope of living is translated into the language of "passing" in an unnamed London: "ARE YOU LIGHT / OR VERY DARK?"²³ Rendered always in capitals, the questions of the landlady operate as stark signs of racist reasoning and power, but in Soyinka's poem they are also constructed as the lines of a stooge playing opposite the comically agile, "wave-length adjusted" answers of the African male tenant: "'West African sepia' – and as afterthought, / 'Down in my passport.'" To be sure, this imaginative space does not undo the real world encounters of other kinds of capitalized texts ("NO BLACKS, NO IRISH, NO DOGS"), or Soyinka's memory of the poem's subject: his own relocation from Leeds to London in mid-1957.²⁴ "Windrush" or immigration poems cannot easily praise a London or a country that is newly transformed. What is achieved are conjunctive languages of "there and elsewhere" that seek a way to write out of a connected if not united world. If creolization offers a potential space that is innovative and "*en accord et en errance*," these poems also register powerfully what determines to remain unchanged and in discord, reminding us that creolizing the metropole will not be evenly experienced or celebrated.

It seems fitting then that Kamau Brathwaite would title his New World Trilogy *The Arrivants*, a noun that eludes particularized space, time, race, class, and gender even as it forces reflection on them. Recalling the French for a thing or person who arrives, we might invoke Jacques Derrida and note the ontologically radical nature of the "absolute arrivant" who "does not yet have a name or an identity" and whose "place of arrival is also de-identified: one does not yet know or one no longer knows which is the country, the place, the nation, the family, the language, and the home in general that welcomes the absolute *arrivant*."²⁵ The conceptual demandingness of the term can be read alongside Brathwaite's more literal brokering of community. Writing in 1966 to Bryan King, Brathwaite notes: "The more I stay in England, the more it seems to me that our writers and artists are missing a wonderful opportunity to communicate with themselves and with British and Commonwealth artists around them."²⁶ The Caribbean Artists' Movement, founded in London by Brathwaite, John La Rose, and Andrew Salkey, was active between 1966 and 1972 and incorporated a cross-section of artists working between the Caribbean and Britain. While not focused solely on poetry, its activities advanced some of the enduring aesthetic and political questions concerning the postcoloniality of poetry in Britain: the role of performance and the significance of an emergent black Britishness. Anne Walmsley documents how Brathwaite's performance of *Rites of Passage* in 1967 at the Jeannetta Cochrane Theatre in London launched CAM to a wide-ranging public, staging a work that challenged its audience to consider the rhythmic range of poetry in English and its postcolonial condition as it traversed the Atlantic from the Caribbean, Europe, and the U.S.

²² Peter Blackman, *My Song is for all Men* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1952), p. 16.

²³ Wole Soyinka, "Telephone Conversation," *Modern Poetry from Africa*, ed. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 111.

²⁴ Wole Soyinka, email correspondence with Gemma Robinson, 11 January 2012.

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press), p. 34.

²⁶ Edward Brathwaite, Letter to Bryan King, 30 November 1966. Caribbean Artists' Movement Archive, George Padmore Institute. Archive reference: GB 2904 CAM/3/1.

and back to the Caribbean.²⁷ Salkey remembers it as “electrifying” and for West Indians living away from the Caribbean he viewed it as marking a change “for us culturally in England.”²⁸

However, only a year later CAM was making sense of Enoch Powell’s infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech as it captured another generation of racist fears about the threat of immigration, the diminishing purity of Englishness, and (in the words of Powell) a prospective “total transformation to which there is no parallel in a thousand years of English history.”²⁹ In a reversal of his optimistic sense of artistic community, Brathwaite acerbically asked a CAM audience meeting in May 1968 to hold a minute’s silence “to mark the passing of the British liberal conscience.”³⁰ Within this context Stuart Hall’s contribution to CAM’s second conference in 1968 was timely. The “Epilogue” in *Rites of Passage* ends with the lines “There is no / turning back.”³¹ Voiced in the Jeannetta Cochrane Theatre, this statement of facing the diasporic future must have reverberated powerfully. Now Stuart Hall’s lecture squarely faced the cultural futures for second and third generations: “The task of any intellectual and any writer in relation to that group of people in Britain now [is] pre-eminently to help them see, clarify, speak, understand and name the process that they’re going through.”³²

Some of the boldest poetic voicings of these new generations belong to Linton Kwesi Johnson, his work anticipating Stuart Hall’s claim that “third generation young Black men and women know that they come from the Caribbean, know that they are Black, know that they are British. They want to speak from all three identities.”³³ These three broad epistemological claims are nuanced in Johnson’s work by the varieties of language he adopts, the precision of vocabulary that these require, and the performances that he enacts. In his 1980 collection, *Inglan is a Bitch*, Johnson opens with “Sonny’s Lettah,” a narrative poem that combines the oral and the written, as Sonny writes to his mother from “Brixton Prison, / Jebb Avenue” to tell the story of “lickle Jim” and his arrest.³⁴ Here, and in all the poems in the collection, we find work that acts as uncompromisingly transformative testimony, offering texts that shape a language to attack the standardizing and brutalizing practices of politics, community, and representation in 1970s and 1980s England. This language demands the right to name and be placed within the precise worlds of post-war twentieth-century postcolonial experience in England, with its raced, classed, and gendered inflections. “Sonny’s Lettah” is a self-declared “Anti-Sus poem” written against the police use of stop-and-search powers on mostly young black men suspected of criminal intent. Across Johnson’s work in *Inglan is a Bitch* is a detailed vocabulary that speaks of rooted community, however embattled: the BPM (Black Parents Movement), Race Today Renegades, Carnival Development Committee, Railton Youth Club, the names of George Lindo, Darcus Howe, and Olive Morris.

Johnson voices these worlds and the people within them as a radical topography composed against and beyond a powerful but narrow vision of England:

Dem frame up George Lindo up in Bradford town
but de Bradford blaks dem a rally round
[. . .]
Maggi Tatcha on di go

²⁷ Anne Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists’ Movement* (London: New Beacon, 1993), pp. 59-61.

²⁸ Andrew Salkey, interviewed by Walmsley, *ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁹ Enoch Powell, speech to Conservative Association meeting, Birmingham, 20 April 1968. For transcript and recording see <<http://www.channel4.com/news/articles/dispatches/rivers+of+blood+speech/1934152.html>>.

³⁰ See Walmsley, *Caribbean Artists’ Movement*, p. 147.

³¹ Edward Brathwaite, “Epilogue,” *Rites of Passage in The Arrivants* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 84.

³² See Walmsley, *Caribbean Artists’ Movement*, p. 164.

³³ Hall, “Old and New Identities,” p. 59.

³⁴ Linton Kwesi Johnson, “Sonny’s Lettah,” *Inglan is a Bitch* (1980), 2nd ed. (London: Race Today, 1981), p. 11.

wid a racist show
but a she haffi go.³⁵

Here in “It Dread inna Ingran (for George Lindo),” Thatcher’s “show” is just that, and the racism and racial exclusivity of a xenophobic version of Englishness is reimagined by Johnson as a performance that cannot last. Protesting against the wrongful conviction of George Lindo in 1978, Johnson calls out his resistance from within multiple groups that cross England’s north and south: as part of the Race Today Collective and the successful organized campaign to free Lindo; under his band name, “Poet and the Roots,” in the dub reggae album *Dread Beat an’ Blood* (1978); and as poet and *Race Today* author Linton Kwesi Johnson in *Ingran is a Bitch*. These different kinds of authorships and audiences suggest the centrality of performativity for thinking about postcolonial poetics in Britain. Johnson’s performance of a “dread beat” to describe a “dread” “Ingran” resonates along the Creole continuum. “Dread” is part of a shifting twentieth-century vocabulary that emerges out of the African diaspora. It points to Rastafarianism’s attention to “apocalyptic exultation and denunciation,”³⁶ as well as to the material concerns of black communities living in England. As an adjective, Johnson’s “dread” modifies both rhythm and nationality, and in doing so pushes for a new reckoning of their meanings, meanings that retain a Rastafarian-inflected apocalyptic vision, and also hold in tension dread’s positive and negative connotations in “Ingran” of seriousness, faith, fear, resistance, community, deprivation, and exploitation.³⁷

Embedded in “It Dread inna Ingran” was a slogan that the Race Today Collective shared: “come wat may / we are here to stay.”³⁸ This campaigning, political slogan sounds out the call for civil rights and social justice from within the borders of Britain. In a 1980 interview Johnson had described his retrospective poem of immigration, “Ingran is a Bitch,” as a poem of “my parents’ generation,” reminding his readers of the contemporary history of black presence in Britain. He went further, declaring the poem “my patriotic bit really. It’s me making my contribution to British patriotism.”³⁹ Ending the poem, “Ingran is a bitch fi true / is whey wi a goh dhu ’bout it?,” Johnson gives us a sense of his “patriotism” with his final question, asking what action is going to be taken in response, and its “whey” formulation is instructive for thinking about how patriotism might be reimagined and how Creole might articulate it. The interrogative “whey” has widely varying pronunciations and spellings across the Caribbean and its diaspora (wha, what, wa, wah, wat, we, weh, whah, whay, whe, whey⁴⁰); it has not been standardized by writers, nor by Johnson internally to his work where “wat” is often used, as in “come wat may.” This mode of working within non-standard formulations and varieties seems a crucial part of the 1970s and 1980s struggles to tackle the traps of authenticity and singularity concerning “what” British and English identities are, and the xenophobia that questioned who might legitimately belong to them. Johnson’s linguistic varieties, along with those used by his contemporaries such as Marsha Prescod or Desmond Johnson, push to show how words resist standardization, and how linguistic varieties can insist on an attention to specific formulations of experience. In “Ole Charlie Boy” Desmond Johnson’s characters declare “we bruck in ingran,” while in “Community Policing!” Marsha Prescod translates an institutionalized claim

³⁵ Linton Kwesi Johnson, “It Dread inna Ingran,” *Ingran is a Bitch*, p. 19.

³⁶ Joseph Owens, *Dread: The Rastafarians of Jamaica* (London: Heineman, 1979), p. vii.

³⁷ See Velma Pollard, *Dread Talk: The Language of Rastafari*, rev. ed. (Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 2000), pp. 41-42.

³⁸ Linton Kwesi Johnson, “It Dread inna Ingran,” p. 19. See Robin Bunce and Paul Field, *Darcus Howe: A Political Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 153.

³⁹ Kris Needs, “Hour of the Electric Rebel” [Interview with Linton Kwesi Johnson], *Zig Zag* (May 1980), 12.

⁴⁰ See Richard Allsopp, *Caribbean Dictionary of English Usage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 597-598.

that “we have a tradition of / Justice” into the ironic word play “(trust us),” exposing the serious failure of justice and trust among black communities.⁴¹

Johnson has since described 1981 as “the most significant date in the history of the black experience in Britain during the second half of the twentieth century.”⁴² The radical vernacular poetry of this extended period is part reportage, part revelation, representing and forewarning the injustices of the New Cross Massacre, as well as the powerful expressions of solidarity during the New Cross Massacre Black Peoples Day of Action on March 2, 1981, followed by the police’s repressive anti-crime Operation Swamp and the 1981 riots around England. The resisting registers of the 1981 generation voice traumatic breaks in belonging and identity even as they articulate that they are “here to stay.” Questions of how to write about inclusion, community, fear, and hate have not disappeared from the poetics of postcolonial Britain since then, but rather have proliferated as definitions of Britain have been tested by devolution and globalization. Like Johnson, Fred D’Aguiar in *British Subjects* (1993) and John Agard in *We Brits* (2006) address the meaning of nation across entire collections, proposing the divergent modernity of Britishness. More recently Patience Agbabi’s *Telling Tales* approaches the diversity of nation, reimagining Chaucer through a contemporary set of pilgrims: “on this Routemaster bus, get cerebral / Tabard Inn to Canterbury Cathedral.”⁴³ But we should not mistake any of this poetry as assuring us of a settled notion of Britishness. John Agard’s poem “How Aunty Nansi Singularly Widened the Debate on Plural Identity” tracks apparently random cultural connections in the name of making identities:

What a high-brow-knitting controversy
when Aunty Nansi on topical TV show
presented herself as proof of plurality
Dressed in a side-splitting sari
a red and green necklace for Selassie
and snazzy tartan shawl for the cold.⁴⁴

Here the Caribbean Aunty Nansi (the West African Akan-Ashante “spider-spirit trickster-transfigurer”⁴⁵ turned woman) puts on an outfit that has traveled from the Indian subcontinent, Ethiopia via Jamaica, and Scotland, asking, “Now Mr Kilroy, you tell me / Am I Afro-Celto-Euro-Indo / or just beautiful byproduct of cosmos?”⁴⁶ With a similarly pointed comic sensibility, Jackie Kay’s 1998 “skipping rhyme” (her words) enlarges the Scottish comic strip family, *The Broons*: “Scotland is having a heart attack / Scotland is having a heart attack / The Broons’ Bairn’s Black.”⁴⁷ Cultural plurality speaks of hyphenated, interconnected existence, but the attending celebrations and controversies in Agard and Kay’s poems keep us focused on social critique. Aunty Nansi – “byproduct” of cosmic (historical, imperial, random) forces – knows that tartan worn outside the borders of Scotland, like the sari outside of the Indian subcontinent, is necessarily refashioned. Specifically, tartan, worn on the couch of Robert Kilroy-Silk’s British TV chat show, and within the context of a transfiguring Caribbean, can speak of histories of belonging, of journeys and families that have been slow to come into public focus. Kay, in a confrontational joke on past and present racism, finds another relative

⁴¹ Desmond Johnson, “Ole Charlie Boy,” *Deadly Ending Season* (London: Akira, 1984), p. 17; Marsha Prescod, “Community Policing!,” *Land of Rope and Tory* (London: Akira, 1985), p. 31.

⁴² Linton Kwesi Johnson, Preface to *The New Cross Massacre Story* (London: New Beacon, 2011).

⁴³ Patience Agbabi, *Telling Tales* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014), p. 2.

⁴⁴ John Agard, “How Aunty Nansi Singularly Widened the Debate on Plural Identity,” *Weblines* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2000), p. 75.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁴⁷ Jackie Kay, “The Broons’ Bairn’s Black,” *Off Colour* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 61.

for the Broons. Here the skipping rhyme moniker might signal a pleasure in comic repetition, but it also looks askance at belonging through playground games and their cycles of inclusion and exclusion. “And out goes you” could be the implied final beats.

Imtiaz Dharker’s “Campsie Fells” internalizes the challenge of inclusion in a landscape naturalized as specifically Scottish. Her opening question (“What were we like, on that / Scottish field, up in the hills, / navigating cow pats”⁴⁸) is not really a question at all, but the occasion for navigating the at-homeness of this divergent “caravan” of family members as they move literally and imaginatively between house, field, stream, picnic, and departed Pakistani village. Jackie Kay remembers a more human challenge from a white Glaswegian in London. When Kay commented that she was also from Glasgow the woman replied, “You’re not are you? You foreign looking bugger!” The frequency of these encounters led Kay to “write a poem about being black and Scottish.”⁴⁹ The resulting poem, however, evokes the beguiling, emptied out geographies and subjectivities of a folktale. Its concluding lines:

so when she finally spoke
her words spliced into bars
of an old wheel. A segment of air.
Where do you come from?
“Here,” I said. “Here. These parts.”⁵⁰

This form of deictic poetry points to belonging, but refuses to name it in the terms that the question demands. “Here” might be read as an inclusive word, regrouping the two women as one community, but the words “spliced,” “bars,” “segment,” and “parts” all speak of division, marking the contested territory of where people could and should belong. We could read Kay’s poem as a forceful articulation of Paul Gilroy’s claim that “the figure of the migrant must be made part of Europe’s history.”⁵¹ Both Kay and Gilroy insist on the importance of being acknowledged as present and visible within a culture, but Kay’s voice also insists on the ambiguity of belonging. We know that the determination of “here” and “these parts” depends on who says these words and where they are when they say them. Indeed, Gilroy goes on to worry about the consequences of singling out the migrant as we try to reconfigure European history, asking if “the figure of the immigrant is part of the very intellectual mechanism that holds us – postcolonial Europeans, black and white – hostage?”⁵² Kay’s deictic poem enables us to undo some of this “intellectual mechanism”: her italics seem to signal that it is the woman’s question that is the aberration, a misplaced, ill-fitting moment (“a segment of air”). The final claiming of “here” has the power to remind us to read vertically, and then potentially (but only potentially) realign the two women to Kay’s opening topography: “walking by the waters / down where an honest river / shakes hands with the sea.” Dharker too, conjuring a demotic ritual, finds that a more powerful nature offers an alternative way into the country: “Afterwards we washed the cups. / Our names splashed in the stream / no questions asked.”⁵³

The crafting of in-placeness through literal and figurative turns is continued in Patience Agbabi’s “North(West)ern” as it breaks down an attachment to Britain into a series of regional ties and musical metaphors: “I was twelve, as in the twelve-bar blues, sick / for the Southeast,

⁴⁸ Imtiaz Dharker, “Campsie Fells,” *The terrorist at my table* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2006), p. 30.

⁴⁹ Jackie Kay, Poem Introduction to “In My Country,” *The Poetry Archive*, <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/my-country>.

⁵⁰ Jackie Kay, “In my country,” *Other Lovers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1993), p. 24.

⁵¹ Paul Gilroy, “Migrancy, Culture and a New Map of Europe,” in *Blackening Europe*, ed. Heike Raphael-Hernandez (London: Routledge, 2004), p. xxi.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Dharker, *The terrorist at my table*, p. 30.

marooned on the North Wales coast / a crotchet.” Styled as an out of place note and spinning through the country’s compass points, Agbabi’s twelve-year-old finds the alternative home of music and ethnicity in the almost magnetic pull of Northern Soul. Colwyn Bay pier in north Wales becomes an incongruous site of identity:

when I heard that tune,
named it in one. Soul. My heart was break

dancing on the road to Wigan Casino,
Northern Soul Mecca where transatlantic bass
beat blacker than blue in glittering mono.⁵⁴

Now situated in a place of imaginative musical attachments, Agbabi’s adolescent charts a journey out of the blues and into a powerful “blackness” that is at once performed in Detroit and Chicago and reinterpreted and embodied on the dancefloors of the mega-nightclubs of northern Britain. As an extended metaphor the poem offers another kind of bassline or foundation for being “North(West)ern,” no less in place than other roads to Wigan in English literature. “Let us make our own map of the sprawl / its life and ours,” writes John Siddique in “A Map of Rochdale.”⁵⁵ To describe a postcolonial poetry of Britain is to make a new poetic map. But if it is a map, a reading of its poems will only show the ambiguous exactitude of “the sprawl” made in the artistic space between Britisher and Britishness. While Britain’s past has made it one of the world’s rogue nations, its postcoloniality offers the conditions for repudiating chauvinistic Britain and imagining divergent identities, places, and poetics that are constantly in the making.

Citation

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⁵⁴ Patience Agbabi, “North(West)ern,” *Bloodshot Monochrome* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008), p. 13.

⁵⁵ John Siddique, “A Map of Rochdale,” *Poems from a Northern Soul* (Manchester: Crocus, 2007), p. 16.